

# The Decline of Traditional Chinese Opera

Peilun Liu\*

*Faculty of Social Sciences & Law, The University of Bristol, Bristol, England*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: at21680@bristol.ac.uk*

## ABSTRACT

With the flourishing of Chinese pop culture, the music market of traditional Chinese opera has suffered audience loss and is gradually fading out of the public eye under the effect of pop music. This paper uses literature and China Central Television rating surveys to compare Chinese opera and pop music, in terms of the difficulty of interpretation, music market, and performance content. The results show that Chinese opera is more difficult to interpret and has more rigid requirements for the performers compared with pop music. Regarding the music market, due to the commercialization of music, pop music has replaced Chinese opera as mainstream music. Moreover, Chinese opera is increasingly related to political propaganda while pop music aims to entertain people.

**Keywords:** *Chinese opera, Pop music, Performance requirement, Music market, Political propaganda.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has become an indispensable part of people's lives since its rapid development in the 1990s. Traditional operas have centuries of history in China. Beijing, Henan, Yueju, Huangmei, and Pingju represent the five major Chinese opera genres, reflecting different styles and art forms. They are the national treasures of China. The characteristics of traditional Chinese opera, such as small stages, programmed performances, and finely crafted texts, have become the most significant obstacles limiting the development of opera. After the reform and opening up, the art of Kunqu, which is regarded as the "ancestor of all operas," has also suffered a crisis of inheritance.

This paper compares Chinese opera with pop music in terms of singing styles, music markets, and musical connotations and analyzes why the popularity of opera has declined with the times. Some scholars believe that the decline of opera is due to an archaic style that is very different from the modern way of life [1]. Other scholars point to the rapid growth of popular music in China, which has replaced the musical status of opera [2].

This paper will use TV rating statistic from the China Central Television and secondary literature. China Central Television created the independent opera channel China Central Television opera in 2011 and the pop music channel China Central Television 15 in 2004 [3]. However, according to a comparison of ratings for the National Day holiday in 2021, the highest rating for an

opera channel program was 0.0630, while the highest rating for a music channel was 0.2236 [3]. The considerable difference in ratings reflects that people pay much less attention to Chinese opera than to pop music. With its long history and deep ethnic, cultural heritage, Chinese opera is gradually fading out of people's attention under the impact of pop music. It demonstrates that the main reasons for are: as Chinese opera has a rigid requirement for singers' interpretation skills, pop music is more popular and can be enjoyed by the general public; pop music is rapidly developing as a commodity music and is more widely publicized through mass media, replacing opera in the Chinese music market; the content expressed in Chinese opera has been given a national mission in the 21st century and is associated with Chinese politics and culture, while the entertainment content of pop music is more appealing to listeners.

## 2. THE DIFFICULTY IN MASTERING THE SINGING SKILLS OF CHINESE OPERA

### 2.1. Clear Words, Pure Cadence, and Correct Board

Chinese opera demands specific singing skills which needs to be learned systematically. Popular music, on the other hand, is much easier for the public to understand. Take Kunqu, one of the four traditional Chinese operas, as an example. In the Qu Rhythm written by its originator Wei Liangfu, it is mentioned that "there are three

perfections in a song: first is clear words, second is pure cadence, and third a correct board,” which means that the pronunciation should be clear and error-free [4]. The bite should be complete and free of murmurs. In the case of The Peony Pavilion, under the essential bite and pronunciation, the southern style of the song slows down the tempo. It requires the flowery voice to be sung in perfect harmony with the tune so that the vocal tones can be politely and distantly attached to the music. Therefore, Kunqu requires a broader range and extraordinary singing voice and singing skills. In contrast pop music singers, represented by China's most famous pop singer Jay Chou, do not require specific singing skills. Despite having a mature, complete singing system, pop music has a higher upper limit and a lower low limit for interpretation skills in comparison. Moreover, pop music is short in structure and highly adaptable. Pop music is not overly concerned with bite. Even in Chou’s music, it is difficult for listeners to discern the lyrics due to Chou’s very frivolous acidity and more emphasis on attaching the vocals to the melody [5]. Since pop music has many different styles, it has specific requirements for rhythm and pitch. Otherwise, it will be out of tune and slow beat. To sing pop music, there should be a natural tone and falsetto, potent mix, weak mix, whistle, etc. In most cases, only professional singers will be required; ordinary people only need to vocalize and not be out of tune.

## **2.2. The Popularity of Popular Music**

Compared to the basic skills of Kunqu, popular music is more acceptable to the public because in Karaoke TV or folk music venues, the vast majority of people can sing a Jay Chou song. Still, it is not easy to sing a song about the Peony Pavilion. This also creates significant difficulties for the spread of Kunqu and other operas. This also reflects the difference in culture in terms of artistic level. Most widespread understanding is a range of intellectual & artistic activities and overtones expanded to the popular culture of working/lower-middle classes in the 20th century facilitated through mass media [6]. Popular music is a product of popular culture. At the same time, national opera is a national culture representing Chinese history. It is not popular or commercial. It cannot be passed on orally, so its circulation among the people becomes very difficult.

## **3. THE ENCROACHMENT OF THE MUSIC MARKET OF CHINESE OPERA**

Chinese opera has a long history, and the earliest opera appeared in the Qin and Han dynasties. However, it has gradually lost its music market and audiences after the birth of pop music. Throughout pop music history, Chinese pop music has been directly influenced by European and American pop music. In the early 1920s, the record industry began to emerge in Shanghai. The French company Baidai, which specialized in film

records, set up a branch in Shanghai, which provided the fastest way to spread European and American pop music [2]. For example, Chinese soprano Li Guyi's *Unforgettable Tonight* still belongs to pop music, despite the incorporation of American singing.

In the 20th century, the European and American pop music flowed into the mainland China through dance halls, movies, radio, and other media [2]. The most inseparable aspect of popular music is its commercialization, distributed through movies, television series, or short videos that are now popular worldwide. Popular culture comes from people, produced by industry, and if a film is successful, there will be a second season because it brings economic profit [6]. In the same way, the success of popular music can bring economic profits that capitalists are compelled to seek, so there will be copies of the same type of music, adaptations, covers, etc., to maximize the profit.

However, as a cultural heritage, Chinese opera has lost its music market under the impact of the pop music. Even though some people may lament the decline of Chinese opera, it is undeniable that Chinese opera is no longer suitable for the preferences of modern youth. At the same time, Chinese opera has suffered a huge setback in terms of promotion. Before the 20th century, the dissemination of Kunqu relied mainly on performances, recordings, broadcasts, and, to a lesser extent, film shoots. Entering the 21st century, the rise of the Internet, cell phones, film, and television industries, with wider channels, more content, and faster information transmission, forced the stage art into a low development period. The stage art of opera began to wither for this reason [1]. Chinese opera is not only about singing, but also the interpretation of the stages. However, opera is not so catchy as pop music in terms of listening, and few people are willing to find offline or online opera stages. Capitalist society is a one-way society, and people in a capitalist society have become one-way people, in which the economic system, the political system or science, craft, art or philosophy, and everyday thinking all tend towards one dimension, one tone, one sound [7]. Popular music, a product of capital, has unified people's aesthetics from the mid-to-late 20th century to the present. The short video software TikTok is the most widely distributed platform for music, with similar melodies and lyrics accompanying the content of some videos transmitted to the cell phone screens of people around the world, and pop music as background music has reaped a lot of attention. Irrespective of the quality of music and artistic cultivation, winning economic benefits at the fastest speed is the main reason why pop music can flourish. People's obedience to the capitalist society is also the main reason contributing to the rapid development of popular culture. Chinese opera, which sticks to the national art, has gradually left the public's view, and it is difficult to have significant cultural output in the international arena when the language and culture

are incompatible. It is the reason for the decline of Chinese opera in the 21st century. China's CCTV opera channel and China's CCTV music channel can stark contrast to each other. On October 1, 2021, the National Day, a significant holiday in China, many people relaxed at home and watched TV programs. The highest rating of the China Central Television Music channel was 0.1563, while the highest rating of China Central Television Opera was 0.0630 [3]. Also, using TV, one of the mass media, as a means of communication, today's opera has a much smaller audience for Chinese people is also much less than popular music.

A consumerist perspective on the prevalence of pop music will reveal that pop music in the 21st century is driven by the pop singers themselves. For example, a popular singer because of his tone and songs is seen as an iconic presence by fans. This consumer value has even multiplied into an idol culture. Fans consume the values attached to the singer rather than the music itself and are willing to buy the album regardless of whether the song is good or not. As for the idol culture, it is a vulgar view of consumption. Fans pay for the albums of the singers in an organized and scaled manner. In China, digital albums are popular, cheap, and easy to play. Some singers as "fan leaders" then call on all fans to buy multiple copies of the digital album, creating the illusion of a high level of heat. This is also one of ways in which music companies benefit. They commercialize the singers as well as their songs, by TV shows, movie theme songs. The profound spiritual connotation and artistic truth in opera is often something that people need a certain level of cultivation to comprehend, so it filters out many people in the audience.

## **4. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINESE OPERA**

### ***4.1. Politicization of Music***

Chinese opera has political overtones, while today's people (late twentieth to the twenty-first century) put entertainment first. The melodies and lyrics of pop music are more prevalent among people. Chinese opera is a treasure of Chinese culture. In ancient times Chinese theater was often presented as a drama troupe. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, old books contain many records of the activities of old Chinese theater troupes, which performed for royal family and nobility. On the other hand, modern Chinese theater is a national cultural heritage with a new meaning. The great transformation of Chinese society and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation require most of the theater communities to devote its passion to writing, which is an important opportunity and responsibility for the development of opera. The creation of opera is not only quantitative but also qualitative. Many excellent works such as *The Forever Ballad*, *The Xi'an Incident*, *Mother*, *Jiao Yulu*, *The Town*,

*and Li Baoguo* vividly demonstrate the cultural achievements made by the opera sector under the leadership of the Communist Party of China [8]. The content of all these theatrical works promotes Chinese culture and represents Chinese theatre's celebration of Chinese historical events and Chinese society. Chinese opera has been given a national mission that brings its content closer to politics. Nowadays, Chinese opera needs to be supported by the state because it has lost its mass market. Still, it also inevitably needs to combine its content with core socialist values and promote the spirit of socialism with national unity as its starting point. However, people do not want to carry profound political ideas in their lives in peaceful times, and music is for most people to cultivate themselves. Therefore, pop music is more acceptable to people because of its popular and entertaining nature.

### ***4.2. The Different of Contents***

Chinese opera and pop music are very different in terms of their expressive content. The Peony Pavilion focuses on the rich inner world, thoughts, and feelings. Tang Xianzu an opera singer of the Ming Dynasty wrote about life through the dramatic plot of Du Liniang's transition from life to death and then back to life again, showing his sense of self. In his works, the writer dares to face death, use it and even transcend it, conveying his unique and complex view of life and death between "life and death" [8]. On the other hand, pop music is more relevant to the lives of people. Many of Jay Chou's songs focus on personal emotions, including *Seven Miles of Fragrance*, which is about love and affection, *Fragrance of Rice*, which is written for disaster areas and to soothe those who are suffering; and *Nunchaku*, which depicts Chinese martial arts. Although pop music is far shallower than Chinese opera in terms of cultural connotation, the easy-to-understand lyrics can make listeners gain more resonance. In an entertainment-oriented society, people's lives are filled with addictive entertainment and products full of sensory stimulation, diverting their attention and discontent and causing them to lose their ability to think about reality while immersed in pleasure [10]. The theory of titty music also explains part of the prevalence of pop music and the decline of Chinese opera. People are flooded with entertainment and are constantly marginalized, weakening their thinking and attitudes towards society, not to mention their inability to reach profound art and appreciate Chinese opera as a national treasure.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, according to the comparison between Chinese opera and pop music, three reasons for the decline of Chinese opera are unearthed. First Chinese opera is difficult to sing and has more rigid requirements for singers. Second, the development of pop music has

occupied the music market of Chinese opera and popular culture makes people more submissive. Third, compared to Chinese opera which carries political significance, pop music is more acceptable due to its entertainment nature.

Chinese opera faces tremendous challenges regarding its development and inheritance, but as a national treasure, it is still a piece of valuable music that the Chinese people should not neglect. In the present time, when entertainment is paramount, there is still a need to maintain a critical mind and not to be marginalized by popular culture. Amid the uniform popular culture, there is a greater need for works with unique styles and high artistic attainments to appear in people's eyes. This paper hopes to find how Chinese opera words can be passed on to the next generation by examining the reasons for the decline of Chinese opera in modern times. Through this article, one can try to find ways to develop in the music market without giving up the essential artistic value, after summarizing the shortcomings of the current transmission.

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