



Making the Past Serve the Present, and Adapting Foreign Things to Chinese Needs The Idea and Principle of the Creation of the Oratorio “Li Bai”

Chenghong Wang^(✉)

Mianyang Teachers' College, Mianyang 621000, Sichuan, China
wangchenghong2022@gmail.com

Abstract. The oratorio “Li Bai” is guided by a series of important speeches and spirits made by General Secretary Xi Jinping on the literary and artistic career. In order to practice the spirit of the document “Opinions on Implementing the Project of Inheritance and Development of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture” and “Opinions on Implementing the Cultural Inheritance and Innovation Project of Sichuan Historical Celebrities”, this large-scale musical work selected the first batch of historical celebrities in Sichuan as the object of creation. The works are based on Li Bai’s poetry, guided by the concept of creative transformation, adhere to the creative principle of “making the past serve the present, and adapting foreign things to Chinese needs”, and endows Li Bai’s poetry and its humanistic spirit with a new era of connotation and expression through the method of “collecting poems into dramas, and combining poems into songs”. The creation of the works activates the vigor and vitality of Li Bai’s poetry in the contemporary inheritance and development, which has realized the nurturing and guidance of the patriotic spirit to the social style, and played an exemplary role in promoting the cultural inheritance and innovation of Sichuan historical celebrities.

Keywords: Li Bai · Oratorio · Creative transformation · Making the past serve the present · Adapting foreign things to Chinese needs

1 Introduction: An Overview of the Creation of Oratorio “Li Bai”

Oratorio “Li Bai” is a large scale musical work created by taking the series of important speeches and spirits made by General Secretary Xi Jinping on the cause of literature and art as the guide, thoroughly studying the “Opinions on Implementing the Project of Inheriting and Developing Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture” issued by the General

Fund: Phased results of the 2020 key project (LB20—A05) of the Li Bai Culture Research Center of the Sichuan Provincial Key Research Base of Philosophy and Social Sciences; Phased results of the 2020 General Project (XNYY2020034) of the Southwest Music Research Center of the Key Research Base of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Sichuan Province; Phased results of Provincial Curriculum Ideological and Political Demonstration Course (MNU-JY2083) of Sichuan Education Department; Phased results of First-class Course of Mianyang Normal University (MNU-JY220005).

© The Author(s) 2023

Y. Pogrebnyak and R. Hou (Eds.): ICLCCS 2022, ASSEHR 689, pp. 370–378, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-27-5_40

Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, and the related documents of “Opinions on Implementing the Cultural Inheritance and Innovation Project of Sichuan Historical Celebrities” jointly issued by the Propaganda Department of the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee, the Department of Culture, and the Provincial Bureau of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, and then choosing Li Bai as the object, one of the first batch of historical celebrities in Sichuan. The works adhere to the creative principle of using the past for the present and the foreign for the Chinese, and look for poetry works with the theme and values of patriotism and serving the country, freedom and equality, positivity, optimism and self-confidence contained in Li Bai’s poetry. Li Bai’s poetry and drama structure is given to Li Bai’s poetry and drama in the way of screenwriting, and the music creation is carried out with the musical genre of oratorio “with poetry and poetry, eulogizing the spirit of poetry”, giving it a new connotation and expression form of the times, activating the vitality of Li Bai’s poetry, making Traditional culture has been reborn in the contemporary era, realizing the creative transformation of Li Bai’s poetry and humanistic spirit in the new era [1].

Li Bai is the leading figure of the dazzling Tang poetry, known as the “Shixian (poet-immortal)”. He created countless classic poems in his life, left a splendid chapter in the history of Chinese poetry, and his artistic achievements have been praised by the world. The poet “Shisheng (poet-sage)” of the same generation, Du Fu, expressed his praise to him, “when Li Bai starting to write a poem, it could shock the wind and rain, and when the poem is finished, it can make the ghost and god cry”. With a sword qi, the embroidered mouth spit out half the Tang Dynasty.” He spoke highly of him. Yu Guangzhong, the “Bright Multicolored Pen” in the contemporary literary circles, spoke highly of Li Bai with “the wine entered his herotic body, seventy percentage turned into moonlight, the remaining thirty percentage screamed into sword energy, and the embroidered mouth spit out half of the prosperous Tang Dynasty”. By reciting his poems, people can appreciate the feeling of homesickness in “举头望明月，低头思故乡 [2] (looking up at the bright moon and bowing your head to think of hometown)”, feel the love of friends in “桃花潭水深千尺，不及汪伦送我情 [2] (peach Blossom Lake is a thousand feet deep, not as deep as Wang Lun’s love)”, and appreciate the magnificence of the rivers and mountains in the vast expanse in “登高壮观天地间，大江茫茫去不还 [3] (climbing high and spectacular between heaven and earth, the vast river will not return)”, and establish a lofty ambition in the “大鹏一日同风起，扶摇直上九万里 [3] (Roc rises with the wind in one day, soaring to 90,000 miles)”. Li Bai’s poems can evoke the inner feelings of the world and resonate with them both in the past and in the present. The feelings of patriotism and serving the country, the views of freedom and equality, the concept of positivity and optimism and self-confidence displayed in his poems are the most basic cultural genes of the Chinese nation and an important source of the fashion of the times. In the new era, it is necessary to excavate, elucidate and disseminate these thematic ideas and values that transcend the times and time and space.

2 The Creative Concept of Oratorio “Li Bai”

Creative transformation is “to transform those connotations and outdated forms of expression that still have reference value to this day in accordance with the characteristics and requirements of the times, and give them new connotations and forms of expression of the times”¹. Here, it is necessary to explain the connotation of creative transformation. The core of creative transformation is “creative”. The understanding of “creative” cannot be equal to being different from “create”, and the connotations of the two are different. “Create” is the autonomous behavior of human beings to produce or manufacture new things, and ‘creative’ refers to the ability of people to produce new things with social value” [4]. Activating the vitality of traditional culture is the purpose of “creative transformation”. There are many ways to activate the vitality of traditional culture, such as, retaining the basic spirit and give new ideas, continuing the cultural lifeline and transforming the old form, tapping the contemporary value and expand the connotation, and integrating other cultures to supplement and enrich the content, and so on. To activate the vitality of traditional culture, there is a must to activate the valuable and positive factors in traditional culture, so that traditional cultural resources can be reborn and developed in the contemporary era.

The creation of the oratorio “Li Bai” is guided by the concept of creative transformation. The concept of creative transformation is reflected in two aspects in the process of creation of works. The first is to give Li Bai’s poetry a new era connotation. The theme and connotation of most of Li Bai’s poems are relatively unified. For example, “Bid Farewell to Children in Nanling to Head to the Capital” shows the poet’s impassioned and enterprising spirit, “Qing Ping Diao” shows the atmosphere of the prosperous Tang Dynasty from the side, and “Moon on Guan Mountain” shows the poet’s concern on people’s livelihood, and the sentiments of compassion for the heaven and the people, “Under the Border-fortress” praises the spirit of loyal soldiers serving the country, and “The Road Is Difficult” expresses the anguish of underappreciated talents, and so on. By analyzing the theme ideas of these poems, extracting the connotation of the poems, clarifying the core of the theme, connecting its branches, and deriving the drama plot, a certain story outline is formed, which becomes the story outline of the oratorio. The oratorio “Li Bai” uses this method to select more than ten poems for structural layout, including, “The Road Is Difficult” (1), “Bid Farewell to Children in Nanling to Head to the Capital”, “Qing Ping Diao”, “Drinking Alone Under the Moon” (1), “Bringing in the Wine”, “Moon on Guan Mountain”, “Chang Xiang Si”, “Under the Border-fortress” (1) (3) (5), “Bei Ge Xing”, “Being Drunk and Speaking out Ambitions in Spring”, “The Road Is Difficult” (3). It uses four poems to establish a main story line of patriotism and serving the country, including “The Road Is Difficult”, “Moon on Guan Mountain”, “Chang Xiang Si”, and “Under the Border-fortress”. It expresses the poet’s enterprising spirit with “Bid Farewell to Children in Nanling to Head to the Capital”. It uses “Qing Ping Diao” to show the poet’s swaying talent. It expresses the emotion of life with “Drinking Alone Under the Moon”, “Bringing in the Wine” and “Bei Ge Xing”.

¹ General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Series of Important Speeches Reader. Beijing: Learning Publishing House, People’s Publishing House, July, 2014, ver.1.

The oratorio “Li Bai” collects poems into a play, expressing the poet’s political ambition to serve the country and his unparalleled poetic talent. It reproduces the image of the poet in the classic singing and forms the main theme of the play—reflecting the poet’s patriotism feelings.

The second aspect of the concept of creative transformation in the creation of works is to endow Li Bai’s poetry with a new form of expression. Oratorio is a large-scale vocal set between opera and cantata. It is presented in the form of concert, and the performance includes solo, duet, and chorus. It does not have the luxurious stage setting of the opera. It emphasizes the logic and integrity of the story more than the chorus, attaches great importance to the auditory effect and dramatic structure, and often expresses epic themes. Oratorio is a traditional genre of Western music. With the development of the times, its performance content is constantly expanding and changing. It has evolved from a small religious drama that first expressed biblical stories to a secular content. “Messiah” by Handel, “Four Seasons” by Haydn, “Christ on the Mount of Olives” by Beethoven, “Lazarus” by Schubert, “Childhood of Christ” by Berlioz, “Ilya” by Mendelssohn, “Oedipus the King” by Stravinsky, “Hungarian Psalms” by Kodaly, and “Song of the Forest” by Shostakovich, are representative works of the oratorio genre.

“Li Bai” continues the genre attribute of oratorio, and uses Li Bai’s poetry to design the repertoire, showing Li Bai’s patriotic feelings. The whole play is dominated by chorus, with tenor solo, soprano solo, male duet, male chorus, female chorus, mixed chorus and other singing forms. In the play, characters such as theatrical tenor Li Bai, coloratura soprano Concubine Yang, and strong baritone army officers and soldiers are set to interpret the plot. In the first half, the singing forms are “The Road Is Difficult” (mixed chorus), “Dapeng Yin” (mixed chorus, tenor and mixed chorus), “Qing Ping Diao” (female chorus, coloratura soprano and female chorus), “Drinking Alone Under the Moon” (tenor and mixed chorus), “Bringing in the Wine” (mixed chorus); in the second half, the singing forms are “Moon on Guan Mountain” (mixed chorus), “Chang Xiang Si” (soprano solo), “Under the Border-fortress” (male chorus), “Bei Ge Xing” (tenor solo), and “The Road Is Difficult” (3) (mixed chorus). In the whole play, the singing form is designed while taking into account the content of the plot and the ups and downs of the music, so as to achieve the timbre contrast between the movements and the design arrangement of the timbre of the first half and the second half.

The oratorio “Li Bai” endowed Li Bai’s poetry with a new connotation of the times—patriotism, and a new form of expression—oratorio, and realized the creative transformation of Li Bai’s poetry and its humanistic spirit.

3 The Creation Principles of Oratorio “Li Bai”

The long-term policy and principle advocated by the Chinese government and cultural departments for the inheritance of Chinese excellent traditional culture is to make the past serve the present [5]. Mao Zedong proposed that the development of art needs to “make the past serve the present, and adapt foreign things to Chinese needs”. Deng

Xiaoping proposed to adhere to “let a hundred flowers bloom, bring out the old and bring forth the new, make the past serve the present, and adapt foreign things to Chinese needs”. Jiang Zemin demanded that it is necessary to “adhere to making the past serve the present, getting rid of the stale and bringing forth the fresh, and applying and developing national culture essence under the new historical conditions”. Hu Jintao called for “carrying forward the spirit of the times to keep pace with the times, adhering to making the past serve the present, innovating the old and bringing forth the new, and vigorously promoting the excellent tradition of Chinese culture”. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, “inheriting Chinese culture is by no means simple and retro or blindly xenophobic, but making the past serve the present and adapting foreign things to Chinese needs, making dialectical choice, innovating, abandoning negative factors, inheriting positive thoughts, and ‘using the rules of the ancients to open up our own development’, so as to realize the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture”². In the process of creating the oratorio “Li Bai”, the principle of making the past serve the present and adapting foreign things to Chinese needs has been taking as the guiding principle.

3.1 Making the Past Serve the Present

“Collecting poems into a play” is the concrete expression of the principle of serving the past for the present in the creation of the oratorio “Li Bai”. The oratorio “Li Bai” uses this method to select more than ten poems for structural layout, including, “The Road Is Difficult” (1), “Bid Farewell to Children in Nanling to Head to the Capital”, “Qing Ping Diao”, “Drinking Alone Under the Moon” (1), “Bringing in the Wine”, “Moon on Guan Mountain”, “Chang Xiang Si”, “Under the Border-fortress” (1) (3) (5), “Bei Ge Xing”, “Being Drunk and Speaking out Ambitions in Spring”, “The Road Is Difficult” (3), forming the story logic and presenting the poet’s unparalleled talent and ups and downs in life. This arrangement, for the contemporary audience, does not need to experience the unfamiliarity of the content of the repertoire, and uses the familiar Li Bai poetry to develop associations and imaginations, making it easier to immerse in it and gain more viewing experience. The collection of poems into a play shows the new connotation of Li Bai’s poetry, and it is a vivid practice of the principle of making the past serve the present.

The music creation of the oratorio “Li Bai” also adheres to the principle of making the past serve the present. The main music material of the work is taken from the famous Guqin song “Moon on Guan Mountain”. “Moon on Guan Mountain” is one of the representative works of the Mei’an Qin School. The original rhyme is simple and majestic. Through the study and analysis of Guqin music, some phrases are selected as the core material, and on this basis, they are condensed, processed, deformed and developed, the artistic conception of poetry and the current aesthetics, cultural trends and acceptance characteristics are combined to create music concepts and create corresponding music themes, which makes the works have both a simple and elegant traditional charm and an

² Xi Jinping: “Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Symposium on Literary and Art Work,” People’s Daily, October 15, 2015.

ingenious contemporary temperament in the presentation of music, showing the lyrical, heroic and tragic image of Li Bai from the perspective of music.

3.2 Adapting Foreign Things to Chinese Needs

The use of Western traditional music oratorio genre to create “Li Bai” is a concrete embodiment of the principle of adapting foreign things to Chinese needs. The oratorio “Li Bai” has a total of ten movements, which are divided into two stages. In the first half, “The Road Is Difficult” (mixed chorus) opened the curtain to clarify the theme of the play, sighing that the world is dangerous. Later, “Dapeng Yin” (mixed chorus, tenor and mixed chorus), “Qing Ping Diao” (female chorus, coloratura soprano and female chorus), “Drinking Alone Under the Moon” (tenor and mixed chorus), “Bringing in the Wine” (mixed chorus) are brought to the audience in sequence, which presents great ambition, prosperous Tang Dynasty, happiness and unrestrained emotion in Li Bai’s poems. The musical mood is gradually broad and clear. In the second half, “Moon on Guan Mountain” (mixed chorus), “Chang Xiang Si” (soprano solo), “Under the Border-fortress” (male chorus), and “Bei Ge Xing” (tenor solo) came out in sequence, outlining the vast thoughts, sorrows, hearts of serving the country, and anguish in Li Bai’s poems. The mood of the music gradually declines. Finally, it ends with “The Road Is Difficult” (2) (mixed chorus), singing the uncompleted ambition in sorrow, and echoes with the beginning of the play. In this way, it shows the poet’s unbridled talent, arrogant and uninhibited personality, depressed and lonely mood, and ambition to make achievements, reflects the poet’s patriotic feelings, and seeks the perfection of content and form in the midst of grief and agitation. The form of oratorio endows Li Bai’s poetry with a new structural form, which is an effective exploration of the fusion of Western music genres and Chinese poetry under the guidance of the principle of “adapting foreign things to Chinese needs”.

The creation of the oratorio “Li Bai” is not a new bottle of old wine, but with Li Bai’s poetry as the content, ancient songs as the music material, and with the help of the musical form of the oratorio, to integrate Li Bai’s poetry, which contains the excellent traditional cultural genes of the Chinese nation, with the times. Making the past serve the present, and adapting foreign things to Chinese needs, it is given with a new era connotation and modern expression. This way of creation makes Li Bai’s patriotism, his ambition to serve the country, his optimism and self-confidence, and his compassion for the world to be presented at the moment. It can arouse people’s continuous thinking about the predicament of life, guide people to establish and adhere to correct concepts of family, history, and culture, and cultivate civilized fashion and social atmosphere, which has reference significance for the inheritance and development of traditional culture.

4 The Era Value of Oratorio “Li Bai”

“Li Bai is a genius, a poet who breaks the norm, is imaginative, and cannot be imitated; he marvelously combines the spirits of Qu Yuan and Zhuangzi; he belongs to both the Chinese nation and the world; like Shakespeare, he is a great poet once in a thousand

years.”³ The patriotic feelings of serving the country, the views of freedom and equality, the concept of positiveness and optimism and self-confidence displayed in Li Bai’s poems reflect the deepest spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation [6]. Deeply cultivating Li Bai’s culture and creating fine literary and artistic works to promote the creation of the oratorio “Li Bai” can meet people’s needs for high-quality cultural products, enhance the image of Sichuan’s city, and prosper the construction of local culture. It is of great value to carry forward Li Bai’s culture and demonstrate the spirit of the times.

First of all, it can activate the vitality of Li Bai’s poetry and adapt to the needs of the times. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, “It is necessary to explore the ideology, humanistic spirit and moral norms of the excellent traditional Chinese culture, integrate artistic creativity with the value of Chinese culture, combine the spirit of Chinese aesthetics with contemporary aesthetic pursuits, and activate the vitality of Chinese culture”.⁴ The inheritance of excellent traditional culture requires not only the patience of still waters and deep currents, but also closely following the trend of progress of the times and forming a vivid pattern of flowing water. The oratorio “Li Bai” adopts the method of “collecting poems to write the play, and integrating poems with songs” to integrate Li Bai’s poetry and its humanistic spirit into contemporary practice, explore ways to inherit Li Bai’s poetry other than reading poetry, and activate the vitality of Li Bai’s poetry in the contemporary inheritance and dissemination, and realize the research purpose of “living” historical celebrities. In terms of creation, it has focused on melody writing and the integration of poetry and music, paid attention to the overall structure design of the works and the theme motivation throughout the development, and given poetry a new era connotation with contemporary music aesthetics, making the most basic cultural genes of the Chinese nation adapt to the needs of contemporary culture and highlighting the value of the times.

Secondly, it can realize the patriotic spirit and cultural leadership, and preserve the style of the times. Patriotism is the main theme of literary and artistic creation, and it is a theme that is often written and often new in all fields of art at all times, in China and foreign countries. “Among the core socialist values, the deepest, most fundamental, and most eternal is patriotism. Works with family and country feelings can best inspire Chinese sons and daughters to unite and struggle.”⁵ Li Bai’s patriotism and feelings of serving the country displayed in his poems embody the deepest spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation, contain the most fundamental spiritual genes of the Chinese nation, and are the rich nourishment for the continuous growth and development of the Chinese nation, which are important sources of cultivating the core values of socialism. The

³ Zhou Xiaotian: “Li Bai: A Genius Poet Who Breaks the Norms, Unpretentious, and Inimitable”, “Chuanguan News”, July 12, 2017.

⁴ Xi Jinping: “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Tenth Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Writers Association,” People’s Daily, December 1, 2016.

⁵ Xi Jinping: “Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Symposium on Literary and Art Work,” People’s Daily, October 15, 2015.

creation of the oratorio “Li Bai” integrates Li Bai’s patriotic spirit of serving the country into artistic practice, inherits and spreads, realizes cultural leadership, guides the people to establish and adhere to the correct concept of family and country, and preserve the style of the times.

5 Conclusion

Oratorio “Li Bai” is guided by the concept of creative transformation, adheres to the traditional and deeply excavates the cultural connotation of poetry and combines music creation, and uses the creative principle of making the past serve the present, and adapting foreign things to Chinese needs, giving Li Bai’s poetry a new connotation and expression of the times. The creation of the works activates the vigor and vitality of Li Bai’s poetry in the contemporary inheritance and development, realizes the nurturing and guidance of the patriotic spirit to the social style, and plays an exemplary role in promoting the cultural inheritance and innovation of Sichuan historical celebrities. It is believed that the oratorio “Li Bai” will play its due value in the specific practice of inheriting the excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Authors’ Contributions. This paper is independently completed by Chenghong Wang.

References

1. Li Yanping, Research on the Creative Transformation and Innovative Development of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture [M]. Beijing: Culture and Art Press, Oct. 2021, ver.1. (in Chinese)
2. Yu Xianhao, Anthology of Li Bai [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, Dec. 2013, ver.1. (in Chinese)
3. Zhan Ying, An Anthology of Li Taibai’s Complete Works [M]. Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 1996, ver.1. (in Chinese)
4. Fan Peng, Li Xinchao, Definition and Discrimination: Interpretation of the Connotations of “Creative Transformation” and “Innovative Development” [J]. Journal of Lanzhou University, 2021, 2. (in Chinese)
5. Tian Haijian, Tian Yuqing, On Cultivating Traditional Chinese Culture Values and Socialism Core Values [J]. Journal of Hebei University, 2015, 2. (in Chinese)
6. Yang Xusheng, Commentary on “Li Bai Spirit” [J]. Journal of Mianyang Teachers’ College, 2019, 1. (in Chinese)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

