The Influence of Xiqu on Chinese Rap Music

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Abstract. This article focuses on the influence of Xiqu on Chines rap music, exploring its developmental trajectory and cultural impact. Through literature review and case studies on selected musicians and their works, the article identifies three key stages in the field of Chinese Rap: the 1990s, the early 21st century, and the period from 2010 to the present. Today, Xiqu-infused rap has become an important vehicle for youth cultural identity in China. The vitality of traditional Xiqu is being revived in contemporary musical practices. Creators incorporate traditional elements to enhance the localization and cultural depth of rap music. Meanwhile, elements of Chinese traditional music and Xiqu have also appeared in the works of musicians outside of China. This cross-cultural fusion is not only an artistic innovation but also an effective pathway for the modern transformation of traditional culture. However, its sustainable development still requires attention to differing musical interpretations across cultures.

Keywords: Xiqu elements, Rap music, Popular music, Chinese culture.

1 Introduction

1.1 Current Research on the Integration of Chinese Xiqu Elements in Chinese Popular Music

In recent years, the integration of Xiqu elements into Chinese popular music has gradually become a new musical trend, drawing increasing attention from the academic community. Many studies focus on how the incorporation of Xiqu elements in pop music promotes both the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture. For instance, elements such as Xiqu singing styles, arias, instruments, and lyrics are used in pop music, and researchers explore how such integration revitalizes traditional Xiqu in modern music. An increasing number of young music creators are drawn to the charm of traditional Xiqu elements and boldly incorporate these traditional musical symbols into modern pop music in various ways [1]. Some studies focus on the reasons behind this integration of Xiqu and popular music [2-4].

These studies often analyze specific musical works to explore how creators maintain the characteristics of Xiqu while adapting to the aesthetic needs of modern popular music. For instance, lyrics may mimic classical Chinese poetry, while compositions

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A. Y. M. A. Islam et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2025 4th International Conference on Science Education and Art Appreciation (SEAA 2025)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 952,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-452-5_37

remain rooted in popular music frameworks with the addition of Xiqu vocal techniques, making the songs more appealing and distinctive [5].

From a market and audience perspective, some researchers examine public acceptance of Xiqu elements in pop music. Against the backdrop of the "Guofeng" (national style) music trend, the fusion of traditional Xiqu and popular music has quickly captured public attention and recognition [6]. This paper explores how the use of Xiqu elements in Chinese rap music influences listeners' recognition and acceptance of traditional Xiqu, and whether such integration aids the transmission and innovation of traditional culture. The research employs the following methods:

Literature analysis: Reviewing existing literature to understand the history, current state, and trends of integrating Xiqu elements in pop music.

Music analysis: Selecting representative music pieces to analyze Xiqu elements such as vocal techniques, instruments, rhythm, and lyrics.

Case studies: Choosing several musicians who have successfully integrated Xiqu elements into their work to examine their creative processes, motivations, and outcomes. The selected songs for analysis include *Hometown is Beijing*, *Shuo Chang Lian Pu*, *By the Plum Tree* (*Zai Mei Bian*), *Susan Says*, *The Ballad of the Returning Dragon*, *ABC*, *Chinatown War*, and *Miss Chang*. The criteria of the selection is based on the chronological development of Chinese rap.

1.2 Research Questions and Methods

This paper explores how the use of xiqu elements in Mandarin pop music influences listeners' recognition and acceptance of traditional Xiqu, and whether such integration aids the transmission and innovation of traditional culture. The research employs the following methods: Literature analysis: reviewing existing literature to understand the history, current state, and trends of integrating Xiqu elements in pop music. music analysis: selecting representative music pieces to analyze Xiqu elements such as vocal techniques, instruments, rhythm, and lyrics. Case studies: choosing several musicians who have successfully integrated Xiqu elements into their work to examine their creative processes, motivations, and outcomes.

2 The Integration of Chinese Xiqu and Rap Music before the 21st Century

2.1 The Initial Integration of Xiqu and Chinese Pop

In the 1980s, as China deepened its reform and opening-up, the music industry began exploring ways to fuse traditional music with modern pop. The 1989 release of *Hometown is Beijing* marked the beginning of Xiqu's integration into pop music [7]. The song, performed by Li Guyi, is one of the earliest examples of "Jing-ge" (Peking-Opera-style songs). Its melody features obvious Peking Opera influences, and the vocal and instrumental arrangements adopt the "tight and slow" performance style of Xiqu, laying the groundwork for future musical integrations.

2.2 *Shuo Chang Lian Pu*: A Pioneering Work in the Integration of Xiqu and Chinese Rap

In the 1990s, the song *Shuo Chang Lian Pu* became a trailblazer in merging Xiqu with rap. This song blends Peking Opera elements with rap music, achieving innovation in musical form while showcasing the charm of traditional Chinese culture. The success of *Shuo Chang Lian Pu* lies in its ability to balance tradition and modernity — preserving the essence of Xiqu while infusing it with contemporary characteristics. The opening lines alone integrate Xiqu-style vocalization into a pop-friendly melody [8].

From all perspectives, *Shuo Chang Lian Pu* holds significant innovative value. It created a brand-new musical expression that revitalized traditional Xiqu, infused rap music with localized Chinese elements, and had a broad impact at the public level. This new "genre" fuses traditional culture with modern music, creating works that offer both deep cultural resonance and a fashionable vibe — earning popularity among young listeners [9].

The performance of *Shuo Chang Lian Pu* during the *1993 CCTV Spring Festival Gala* caused a sensation and was well received by audiences, once again drawing attention to Xiqu. However, during this stage, such fusion music remained rare and was mostly limited to the Chinese-language music scene. A broader trend or movement had not yet formed.

3 The Integration of Xiqu and Rap Music in the Early 21st Century

3.1 Diversified Development of Xiqu-Rap Fusion in the Chinese Popular Music Scene

In the early 21st century, the Mando-Pop scene experienced an unprecedented trend of diversification. More mainstream artists began incorporating elements of Xiqu and rap into their work. This period of musical fusion not only reflected innovation in musical genre but also a deeper exploration of cultural meaning.

A typical example is Leehom Wang's 2005 release *By the Plum Tree* (*Zai Mei Bian*). This piece skillfully integrates the melody and arias from the Peking Opera *The Drunken Beauty* (*Guifei Zuijiu*) with rap, using Xiqu elements to heighten emotional expression and enhance the song's character, creating a unique musical charm. The lyrics draw on traditional Xiqu lines, giving the song a classical Chinese poetic feel while enriching its cultural content [10].

The success of *By the Plum Tree* lies in its achievement of both formal and cultural integration — fusing Xiqu with rap and establishing a dialogue between tradition and modernity. It helped more people become familiar with Xiqu, even attracting younger listeners who had never been exposed to it. The incorporation of Peking Opera recitative into pop songs provided a new perspective for many [11].

Another successful example is David Tao's *Susan Says* (*Su San Shuo*), which blends Peking Opera vocal techniques with R&B and rap, delivering a refreshing listening

experience. The innovation of *Susan Says* lies in its breaking of genre boundaries, creating an entirely new musical language and contributing significantly to the diversification of Chinese popular music. In the rap segment of Susan Says, David Tao incorporates famous lines from the Peking Opera *Su San Is Taken to Prison* (*Su San Qi Jie*).

Other well-known songs that employ Peking Opera elements include Leehom Wang's *Mistake in the Flower Field* (*Hua Tian Cuo*), Jay Chou's *Fearless* (*Huo Yuanjia*), and Li Yugang's *The New Drunken Beauty* (*Xin Guifei Zuijiu*). These tracks provided innovative pathways for the evolution of Chinese popular music [12].

3.2 Cross-Cultural Attempts by Musicians Outside of China

In the context of globalization of 21th Century, some musicians with background of Chinese culture have begun experimenting with the integration of Xiqu elements into rap music. A representative work is MC Jin's *ABC*, which attempts to incorporate traditional Chinese music elements, reflecting the artist's exploration and expression of cultural identity.

However, due to factors such as cultural differences and market positioning, the reach and impact of these works have been relatively limited. Despite facing many challenges, the cross-genre efforts of diaspora musicians offer new possibilities for the global dissemination of Chinese traditional music culture. The cross-cultural fusion of Xiqu not only contributes to the innovation and development of the art form itself but also helps strengthen global recognition and appreciation of Chinese cultural arts [13].

4 The Integration of Xiqu and Rap Music after 2010

4.1 Deeper Integration of Xiqu in Chinese Rap

After 2010, many musical works began integrating stories, characters, or cultural elements from Xiqu directly into the lyrics of rap sections, not just focusing on melodic fusion. For example, Jay Chou's *Fearless* (*Huo Yuanjia*) vividly tells the story of the national hero Huo Yuanjia through rap, presenting an ancient historical narrative in a fresh, youth-friendly way. Many songs inspired by traditional Chinese culture reflect the rich heritage of the country [14].

Phoenix Legend's *The Ballad of the Returning Dragon* (*Yulong Guizi Yao*) revolves around themes like ancient warfare and heroism in its rap segments — echoing the historical motifs often found in traditional Xiqu. Through modern rap lyrics, it conveys the essence of Xiqu culture.

After 2010, with the rise of variety shows, Xiqu-infused rap gained more visibility. Shows like *The Rap of China* and *New Rap in China* frequently featured such works, which received widespread praise. Presenting Xiqu-rap on mainstream entertainment platforms marked a significant innovation in show formats and performance styles, drawing greater audience attention [15].

Notable Xiqu-rap pieces emerged from these programs, such as *Celebration Wine* (*Qinggong Jiu*). These songs not only showcased the diversity of Xiqu-rap fusion but

also provided young artists with platforms to demonstrate their creativity. The rap performances in this program exhibit a distinctly Chinese aesthetic, with the unique charm of regional dialects vividly reflected in the lyrical content. Contestants demonstrated their pride in place, whether province, city, or neighborhood. They did so with frequent reference to local cultural markers like Sichuanese hotpot and other Chinese dishes, the common practice of fortune telling (suan ming), drinking local liquors, and the phenomenon of Chinese internet celebrities (wang hong). Assertions of local identity were cemented using local languages along- side the national language of Mandarin. Bars sung in regional languages embody and make claims to locality and invoke the sometimes-fraught politics of language and identity in the PRC [16]. The success of *The Rap of China* and *New Rap in China* lies not only in their innovative formats but also in their role in popularizing and developing Chinese culture.

Through the exposure gained from these shows, more young people began to appreciate and enjoy this hybrid genre, breathing new life into the modernization of traditional Xiqu. The variety show format serves as a game-based framework, while Xiqu content acts as the cultural core. Audiences engage in shared entertainment during game segments, gradually absorbing, accepting, and passing on traditional Xiqu culture [17].

4.2 Cross-Cultural Attempts by International Musicians

As Chinese culture's global influence grows, more foreign musicians have also attempted to incorporate Xiqu elements into rap music. A notable example is *Chinatown Wars* by Ghostface Killah and MF Doom, a song featured in the game *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*. It begins with a sampled Xiqu segment, creating a strong contrast. Throughout the track, Xiqu samples are interwoven with rap, blending the two styles to craft a distinctive atmosphere. And the featured Xiqu performance is part of the larger stylistics of incorporating traditional Chinese cultural elements into hip hop music [18].

Another example is *Miss Chang* by French hip-hop group Chinese Man. The track opens with a sample from an old Shanghai-style song, containing traces of Xiqu music. It feels like a dialogue between East and West. The group's clever use of this sample imbues the song with a unique and captivating charm.

5 Conclusion

This paper analyzed the trend of integrating Xiqu and Chinese Rap, focusing on Xiqu-style vocal techniques, lyrical evolution in rap, and the cultural implications of such musical fusion. The research finds that this integration brings significant changes in vocal style, lyrics, and musical form, enriching musical expression while promoting cultural heritage. In recent years, the use of Xiqu-style vocals in popular music has not only enhanced artistic expressiveness but also advanced the contemporary expression of traditional culture. Meanwhile, rap lyrics have increasingly shifted toward themes of history, culture, and social issues, boosting their intellectual depth and social impact.

This genre-crossing musical fusion expands artistic boundaries, meets diverse aesthetic demands, and facilitates cultural transmission and global musical exchange. In today's era of deepening cultural globalization, Xiqu music — as a vital vehicle of traditional Chinese culture — is stepping onto the world stage in a renewed form.

This cultural export is not a one-way process but a dynamic two-way dialogue and mutual learning. It is worth noting that such cross-cultural musical exchange creates infinite possibilities for artistic fusion, but also brings potential misunderstandings due to cultural differences. Audiences from different backgrounds may interpret the music's meaning in significantly varied ways — a phenomenon that deserves ongoing scholarly attention and in-depth research.

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