



From Small Figure to Epochal Microcosm: An Analysis of the Expressionist Narrative in *Wang Er's Long March*

Baihan Lu*

School of Theater, Film and Television, Communication University of China, Beijing, China

*Corresponding author: 2208812860@qq.com

Abstract. The localization and modern expression of "Red-themed" musicals is a vital research topic in contemporary stage arts. The musical *Wang Er's Long March* reimagines the narrative of the Long March through the eyes of an ordinary person. By moving away from traditional "heroic" or "epic" styles, the production combines personal experiences with the broader revolutionary spirit. This approach brings "small characters" to life, creating multi-dimensional figures that successfully bridge historical themes with stage performance. This paper uses Expressionist Theatre Theory and the framework of the Concept Musical to systematically analyze how the protagonist, Wang Er, is developed. The study examines specific musical elements, including form, tonality, harmony, orchestration, and choral arrangements. The production employs several key artistic techniques to portray the protagonist's psychological growth. Ultimately, this paper explains how an ordinary individual can represent the collective experience of an era, and how personal awakening can reflect larger revolutionary themes. These findings provide valuable insights for the creation and theoretical development of original Chinese Red-themed musicals.

Keywords: *Wang Er's Long March*; musicals; expressionist; small characters; red-themed

1 Introduction

The localization and modern expression of "Red-themed" musicals are important topics in contemporary stage arts. The musical *Wang Er's Long March* reconstructs the story of the Long March from the perspective of an ordinary person. This approach moves away from the traditional style that focuses only on epic stories and heroes. Instead, it combines individual life experiences with the great revolutionary spirit.

This paper uses both Expressionist Theatre Theory and Concept Musical Theory as its main framework. The core of Expressionist Theatre is "externalizing the spirit"—this means turning a character's invisible feelings into art that the audience can see and feel. Concept Musical Theory, on the other hand, uses a central idea or theme to guide the whole show. It focuses less on a simple timeline of events and more on making the

characters' lives represent the spirit of the era. These two theories work together: Expressionism explains "how music shows the inner world," while Concept Musical Theory explains "why characters become symbols"^[1].

Since its first performance, scholarship on this musical has mainly focused on its new ways of creating characters and its storytelling style. However, detailed analysis of the music itself is still limited. There is a lack of deep research into how core musical elements—such as form, tonality, chords, orchestration, and choral singing—help build the drama and express the characters' inner feelings. Although some researchers have used the Expressionist perspective, they have not yet successfully linked it with a detailed analysis of the music^[2].

This paper attempts to answer one central question: How does musical language systematically shape the character of Wang Er and make him a symbol of the spirit of the era? By combining musical analysis with theatre theory, this study aims to reveal the artistic value and theoretical importance of this musical within the context of "Red-themed" creations.

2 Musical Language and the Presentation of Wang Er's Inner World

Wang Er's Long March is one of the landmark works of original Chinese "Red-themed" musicals. It reinterprets the spirit of the Long March through a unique perspective, blending historical depth with the simplicity of life to achieve a modern translation of this revolutionary theme^[3]. The musical focuses its narrative on Wang Er, an ordinary man from the lower class who initially joins the march only to survive. His original motivation is survival rather than political belief. His character follows a progressive path: from an "ordinary person," to a "traveler," then an "awakened individual," and finally a "symbolic figure".

Throughout the musical, Wang Er is the only character who remains on stage from beginning to end. All other characters appear randomly, which leads to loose relationships between them. The performance uses a "distancing effect" to minimize Wang Er's direct contact with other characters, thus undermining traditional dramatic conflict.^[4] However, this structure provides space for the use of Expressionism and the Concept Musical framework. Wang Er's spiritual awakening does not depend on external conflict; Instead, it is achieved through the externalization of his inner world. Music becomes the core method of this process, where changes in melody, tonality, and choral parts directly correspond to his psychological growth.

On stage, the image of Wang Er is created through a combination of performance, music, and body language. The music uses changes in melody, rhythm, and vocal styles to match his psychological state: the music is low and deep when he is lost, warm when he is moved, and uplifting when he is determined. Music is no longer just a support for the story; instead, it is a direct expression of his inner world. This method of character building allows Wang Er to move beyond being just a specific individual. He becomes a relatable figure who reflects the spirit of the era.

The musical elements themselves are the core foundation for character development and dramatic expression^[1]. In terms of musical composition, Wang Er's Long March is simple, sincere, and stays close to the character. By using concise musical language, the production successfully externalizes the character's inner world and communicates its themes. This approach fully reflects the artistic goals of both Expressionism and Concept Musical.

2.1 The Dramatic Functions of Musical Form, Tonality, and Harmony

The musical structure of specific songs highlights how these theories are applied in practice. Song No. 19, titled "Go," is a core piece that portrays Wang Er's psychology during his escape and moves the plot from "confusion and avoidance" to "awakening and struggle." Its structure uses a ternary form (A-B-A) as a framework and incorporates the "fragmented development" characteristic of Expressionist music. This allows the music to show a progression of psychological layers within a short period. The leading motif is built around a "descending fourth and dotted rhythm" (for example, the melody: 5 - 1 - 3 | 2 - i -), which repeats throughout the section. This motif represents both the physical movement of "walking" and the downward pull of fate through the descending intervals. Meanwhile, the dotted rhythm emphasizes his heavy and hesitant steps, acting as a link between the musical form and the character's psychology.

The harmonic and structural design of "Go" presents a complete psychological arc: starting with hidden repression, moving to visible conflict, and ending with spiritual elevation. The overall structure is rigorous and full of dramatic tension. In Section A, the music is based in D minor. By using a brief modulation to G major within a classical functional harmony framework, it creates an auditory experience that is calm on the surface but full of hidden tension. In terms of harmony, the use of a diminished seventh chord in measures 7–8 does not break the overall logic; however, its dissonant intervals cleverly disrupt the sense of traditional harmonic resolution. This accurately metaphors Wang Er's hidden fear and sets the "hidden" Expressionist tone for the entire section.

Upon entering Section B, the music officially moves into a zone of emotional explosion. A sharp shift in totality from B-flat major to A minor creates a powerful tonal conflict. In terms of harmony, the stacking of consecutive seventh chords and the introduction of half-diminished seventh chords fully escalate the dissonant tension. Regarding compositional techniques, the fragmentation of the core motif and the stretching of the rhythm create a progressive structure: "melodic breaking – harmonic collision – psychological explosion." This pushes the character's inner struggle and sense of being torn apart to the extreme.

Finally, Section A' (the Recapitulation) returns to D minor but introduces creative variations. By using a temporary modulation to F-sharp minor and an open ending with a major sixth chord, it breaks the sense of completeness found in traditional recapitulations. The use of extended ninth and eleventh chords in the harmonic texture not only enriches the sound color but also symbolizes Wang Er's spiritual elevation—from simple avoidance to deep awakening. Overall, through subtle tonal shifts, layered harmonic progression, and precise structural design, this section achieves a high degree of unity between musical form and character psychology. This piece clearly demonstrates the

main purpose of Expressionist music, which is to express feelings of worry through dissonance and use difficult harmonies to show deep spiritual meaning.

The musical design of this section achieves a seamless integration of technical skill and dramatic intent. Rather than being merely accompanied, tonality and harmony function as a psychological map for the character. By shifting from stable classical frameworks to dissonant chromaticism, the music directly externalizes Wang Er's journey from repression to awakening. Ultimately, the deliberate manipulation of harmonic pace drives the narrative forward, proving that the music is not just supporting the story, it is the primary force telling it.

2.2 Orchestration and the Externalization of Expressionist Spirit

The orchestration choices in specifically serve as a powerful vehicle for the protagonist's emotional shifts. Song No. 17, *Home*, features a highly distinctive instrumental arrangement centered on the electric guitar, supported by the drum kit and the traditional Chinese plucked instrument, the Pipa. This creates a "minimalist but profound" instrumental layout that aligns with the Expressionist principle: instrumentation must serve spiritual expression and reject meaningless virtuosity^[1].

The electric guitar serves as the instrumental core of "Home." Its fluctuating arpeggios create a heavy, lonely atmosphere, functioning as a metaphor for Wang Er's isolation on the Long March and his deep longing for home. In contrast, the drum kit acts as a rebellious sonic symbol; it echoes the vocal melody to convey a spirit of resistance against oppressive forces and suffering. The trumpet, with its bright timbre, symbolizes the revolutionary bugle call, urging unity to find a true "home" and breaking the stillness of the melody. Together, these three instruments represent the conflict between nostalgia, harsh reality, and revolutionary ideals. This perfectly aligns with the Expressionist goal of "facing spiritual truth rather than seeking pure harmony"^[1].

The inclusion of the Pipa is a highlight of the orchestration. As Lang Xi points out, the Pipa solo is perfectly placed; its delicate timbre offers distinct advantages over Western instruments in terms of emotional expression^[5]. Using soft plucking techniques and a slow tempo, the Pipa produces a pure, rich tone that carries the essence of traditional Chinese music. This not only fits the local emotional core of **Home** but also uses minimalist, point-like sounds to break the linear texture of Western and modern instruments. This enriches the layers of Expressionist sound and successfully fuses Western style with Chinese sentiment.

The percussion in *Home* is used with extreme restraint, serving only to heighten the emotional tension^[1]. This aligns with the Expressionist philosophy that rhythm should serve spiritual tension rather than simply keeping time. This innovative arrangement breaks free from traditional musical constraints. By using sound as a medium, it externalizes the character's internal world and emotional needs, prioritizing spiritual essence over realistic representation. Ultimately, the orchestration of "Home" integrates timbre, texture, and expression to align the musical form with the theme of spiritual awakening. It bridges the gap between instrumental structure and inner meaning.

As Zhiy Chen has stated, the musical elements themselves are the core foundation of characterization and dramatic expression in a musical. Wang Er's Long March utilizes a highly expressive instrumental arrangement to transform the music into a literal vessel for the dramatic spirit. Ultimately, this achieves a profound unity between musicality and drama^[1].

2.3 Vocal Layering: Connecting Characters through Chorus

The choral arrangements in *Wang Er's Long March* are categorized into three forms: unison, mixed chorus, and lead-with-chorus. The mixed chorus of the Red Army soldiers features structured harmonies and steady breath control, symbolizing the collective strength of the revolution. In contrast, Wang Er's sections utilize a "lead-with-chorus" technique, where his solo voice is highlighted against a choral background. This creates a sonic dialogue between the individual and the collective^[6].

The choral use in Song No. 18, *Words*, is highly distinctive. Built on the motif of "a letter," the piece defines character images through multi-part layering. The arrangement primarily utilizes lead-with-chorus and round singing (canon), supported by unison passages. By using these vocal textures alongside frequent musical flashbacks, the production reinforces the audience's impression of key characters.

When the characters Art Troupe and Hanyang Made reappear to recall teaching Wang Er to read, each is highlighted through a lead-and-chorus structure. Their sections are meticulously designed to contrast their identities: Art Troupe's singing is melodious and clear, carrying the refined air of an intellectual, whereas Hanyang Made delivers the most dramatic performance. With wide vocal ranges and stark dynamic shifts, her voice captures the grit of the woman who "takes up the gun."

In measures 138–168, the texture shifts to unison, merging all the "teachers" into a massive "sonic wall." At this moment, individual identities dissolve into a single collective force, symbolizing the strength of the revolution. The audience no longer hears a single person, but rather a shared resonance of faith.

The composer differentiates these figures from Wang Er through distinct musical signatures. Their vocal lines are dominated by syncopation, sixteenth-note variations, and elongated dotted rhythms, while the accompaniment maintains a driving eighth-sixteenth texture performed with high intensity. These elements contrast sharply with Wang Er's musical language, mirroring the characters' social identities. As living embodiments of the musical's central themes, Art Troupe, Red Rice, and Hanyang Made act as complex guides, each leading Wang Er through his spiritual "Long March" from a different angle.^[7]

Wang Er's solo journey undergoes a profound three-tiered transformation, evolving from mechanical imitation to total internalisation. Initially, during his "imitation phase," he merely echoes the teachers' melodies an octave or a fifth lower; these shortened note values and weakened dynamics create a hollow "echo effect" that aurally manifests his lack of confidence and comprehension. As the narrative progresses into the "understanding phase," his singing breaks free from simple repetition. He begins to perform thematic variations on the teachers' notes, employing a more flexible rhythm and an expanded vocal range. The introduction of expressive markings, such as

crescendo and *decrescendo*, signals a critical shift from rote memory toward genuine emotional resonance. This development culminates in the "internalization phase" at the end of the *Words* section. As Wang Er connects individual characters into complete sentences, his melody becomes entirely independent, characterized by complex syncopation, dotted rhythms, and a powerful *mezzo-forte* delivery. No longer a mere shadow of his instructors, Wang Er's continuous and full breath control signals the birth of an independent voice, proving that he is finally expressing his own understood truth rather than merely repeating the words of others.

As Pan points out, the seventeen musical numbers in *Wang Er's Long March* form a composite plotline that lacks traditional linear logic; instead, it is this complex, multi-perspective approach that gives the musical its vibrant, "non-linear" vitality. While she notes that the rhythmic chain could be further enriched, the intricate layering of solos, duets, trios, and ensemble choruses creates a remarkably robust musico-dramatic structure^[8]. Ultimately, the layering of choral techniques does more than organize sound—it binds Wang Er to his fellow revolutionaries, transforming the varied vocal textures into a unified, collective symbol of the revolutionary spirit.

Wang Er's Long March establishes music as the primary vessel for characterization and spiritual expression. Within the harmonic and formal dimensions, the "Departure" section utilizes shifting tonalities and the strategic layering of dissonant chords to externalize Wang Er's psychological arc, tracing his journey from oppression and struggle to ultimate awakening. This is complemented by the orchestration in the *Home* section, where the juxtaposition of Western and Chinese instruments provides a tangible form to the triple spiritual dimensions of nostalgia, rebellion, and idealism. Finally, the *Words* section employs sophisticated choral layering and a three-stage vocal evolution to complete a narrative of individual growth, moving from mechanical imitation to deep, personal internalization^{[6][7][8]}.

Tonality, orchestration, and choral layering function as distinct yet interdependent pillars that collectively construct a unified logic between music and drama. Here, music transcends its role as a mere narrative accompaniment to become the direct voice of the character's inner world. This integration fulfills the Expressionist pursuit of externalizing the spirit, embodying the Concept Musical ideal where the individual's journey serves as a powerful symbol for an entire era.

3 Beyond Narrative: The Artistic Function and Expressionist Truth of *Wang Er's Long March*

Building upon the specific musical mechanisms of tonality, orchestration, and vocal structure, this section explores how these technical elements coalesce to fulfill the broader artistic and symbolic functions of the work.

The core value of Expressionist drama lies in its profound excavation of a character's inner truth^[1]. *Wang Er's Long March* utilizes music as a mediation to achieve a dual theoretical synthesis: the Expressionist "externalization of the spirit" and the Concept Musical's "individual as a symbol of the era."

By prioritizing the character's subjective psyche over objective realism, the production transforms Wang Er's personal struggle into a broader reflection of historical momentum. In this framework, the music does not just accompany the story, it serves as the bridge that connects the internal logic of a single soul to the external spirit of an entire age.

Wang Er's spiritual awakening represents the most profoundly Expressionist element of the entire production. The musical's central achievement lies in its ability to translate his internal world into an audible musical language: shifting tonalities externalize his disorientation, the stacking of dissonant chords manifests his struggle, and the warmth of the choral arrangements embodies his ultimate sense of belonging. In this context, music transcends its role as a narrative accompaniment to become the direct vessel for psychological truth. This perfectly encapsulates the Expressionist ideal—that external reality is merely a facade, while the inner truth of the soul remains the ultimate goal of art^[9].

The characters within the production function as conceptual aggregates rather than autonomous individuals. Figures such as Art Troupe, Red Rice, and Hanyang Made are not independent personas but rather the personified symbols of revolutionary concepts: women's liberation, class resistance, and the awakening of the working class. By stripping away personal histories to their barest essentials, the production amplifies the collective traits they represent to their most striking degree. This shift—from "a person" to "a people," and from "an individual" to "a concept"—captures the core essence of the Concept Musical^[10].

The primary innovation of *Wang Er's Long March* lies in its departure from the didactic constraints of traditional revolutionary narratives. By synthesizing Expressionist techniques with the Concept Musical framework, the production offers a new methodological model for 'Red' theater. Rather than relying on external plot-driven heroism, it utilizes music as a psychological bridge, allowing the audience to experience historical truth through the protagonist's subjective dissonance. This aesthetic shift—prioritizing the 'individual as a symbol'—transforms the revolutionary spirit from a static historical fact into a dynamic, living resonance, providing a sophisticated blueprint for the future of thematic artistic creation.

4 Conclusion

Wang Er embodies the spiritual temperament of an entire era. His journey—evolving from a member of the marginalized populace struggling for survival into a symbolic figure carrying the weight of revolutionary faith mirrors the broader trajectory of the age. His vocal style, his tonal shifts, and his connection to the chorus all function as auditory symbols of this epochal spirit. Through the populist quality of his music, the production restores the spiritual landscape of the common people during the Long March, ultimately fulfilling three critical artistic functions: the restoration of history, the cohesion of the revolutionary spirit, and the creation of a contemporary resonance.

The success of Wang Er's Long March demonstrates that music is the indispensable core of characterization in the "Red Musical" genre. By integrating Expressionist theory

with the fundamental elements of music, the production liberates mainstream revolutionary narratives from rigid, stereotypical formulas. It prioritizes internal expression over the mere accumulation of plot, asserting that psychological truth is the ultimate artistic reality. By allowing "small figures" to carry grand themes, the production proves that a grassroots perspective possesses a far more authentic and profound emotional resonance, transforming historical abstraction into a living, breathing human experience^[11]. The success of Wang Er's Long March proves that "Red" revolutionary themes can transcend didacticism by channeling spiritual transmission through the fundamental language of art. By utilizing sound to write the heart and melody to write the spirit, the production offers a powerful artistic revelation: the significance of the Long March lies not just in a historical timeline, but in a persistent spirit. It asserts that the value of revolution is found not only in grand ideals, but in the yearning for light and the steadfast endurance of countless ordinary people.

References

1. Chen, Zhiyou (2020). An Analysis of the Primary Creation of the Concept Musical Wang Er's Long March. Nanjing University of the Arts.
2. Du, Siliang. (2024). On the "Interactive" Characteristics of Stage Narrative in Yuri Butusov's Dramatic Works: A Case Study of *The Seagull*. *Sichuan Drama*, (04), 71-75.
3. Huang, Kai. (2022). An Analysis of the Performance Art of the Concept Musical *Wang Er's Long March*. *Art Education*, (01), 99-102.
4. Liu, Zhe. (2024). Exploring the Artistic Characteristics of Contemporary Red-Themed Musicals. *Chinese Theatre*, (8), 85-87.
5. Lang, Xi. (2014, March 31). *Musical "Wang Er's Long March": The "Long March Road" to the Light*. NetEase Entertainment. <https://m.163.com/ent/article/90ONURC200034TAF.html>.
6. Man, Xinying. (2014). A Masterpiece of Expressionist Musical Theater: *Wang Er's Long March*. *Arts Review*, (01), 84-91.
7. Nie, Zaitian. (2021). On the Dramatic Function of the "Chorus" in the Musical Wang Er's Long March. *Home of Drama*, (26), 3-4, 34.
8. Pan, Chao. (2021). On the Artistic and Creative Characteristics of Contemporary Red-Themed Musicals. *Drama Literature*, (3), 68-72.
9. Zhang, X., & Wen, S. (2004). *Introduction to Musicals*. Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House.
10. Huang, Kai. (2021). A Successful Practice of the "Concept Musical" in China: An Analysis of the Creative Concepts and Methods of *Wang Er's Long March*. *China Theatre*, (11), 50-51.
11. Wang, ZuoXin. (2018). *Musical Theatre Performance and Stage Creation*. Shanghai Theatre Academy Press.

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.

