

ทฤษฎีเบลคั่นโตของจีนจากสถาบันวิจัยโอเปร่าแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยปักกิ่ง:  
กรณีศึกษาของโอเปร่าเจียงเจี๋ย

The Chinese Bel Canto Theory of Peking University's Opera  
Research Institute: A Case Study of the Opera Jiang Jie

ชุย เยว<sup>1\*</sup> / ชุตินา มณีวัฒนา<sup>2</sup>

Cui Yue / Chutima Maneewattana

<sup>1,2</sup> คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสวนสุนันทา

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

\*Corresponding Author

ได้รับบทความ: 11 กุมภาพันธ์ 2568

ปรับปรุงแก้ไข: 18 เมษายน 2568

ตอบรับตีพิมพ์: 15 พฤษภาคม 2568

### บทคัดย่อ

โอเปร่าเจียงเจี๋ยเป็นโอเปร่าจีนที่โดดเด่นซึ่งเล่าถึงชีวิตและการต่อสู้ของเจียงเจี๋ย นักปฏิวัติหญิงในช่วงสงครามกลางเมืองจีน โอเปร่านี้มีเนื้อเรื่องเกี่ยวกับความจงรักภักดี การเสียสละ และความกล้าหาญ โดยมุ่งเน้นไปที่ความมุ่งมั่นของเจียงเจี๋ย ต่อเหตุผลของเธอและความวุ่นวายทางอารมณ์ที่เธอต้องเผชิญในการต่อสู้กับการกดขี่

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ใช้วิธีการวิจัยโดยการทบทวนวรรณกรรมและควบคู่กับการวิจัยภาคสนามเพื่อวิเคราะห์ทฤษฎีเบลคั่นโตของจีนจากสถาบันวิจัยโอเปร่าแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยปักกิ่ง กรณีศึกษาของโอเปร่าเจียงเจี๋ย

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ทฤษฎีเบลคันโตของจีนที่นำไปใช้โดยจากสถาบันวิจัยโอเปร่าแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยปักกิ่ง การศึกษาของโอเปร่าเจียงเจี๋ยเผยให้เห็นถึงการรวมกันของเทคนิคการร้องเพลงและภาษากายอันมีบทบาทสำคัญในการเสริมสร้างความลึกซึ้งทางอารมณ์และการแสดงของตัวละคร โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งการควบคุมพลศาสตร์เสียงอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ เช่น การเปลี่ยนแปลงในความเข้ม เสียง และจังหวะ ช่วยให้นักแสดงสามารถถ่ายทอดสถานะอารมณ์ที่ซับซ้อนได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ซึ่งสะท้อนถึงโลกภายในของตัวละคร นอกจากนี้ การศึกษานี้ยังชี้ให้เห็นถึงวิธีการประสานระหว่างการแสดงออกทางเสียงและการเคลื่อนไหวทางกายภาพสร้างการแสดงที่มีชีวิตชีวาและน่าสนใจมากขึ้น งานวิจัยนี้ยังถึงความสำคัญของหลักการเบลคันโตในการสร้างโอเปร่าปฏิวัติ ซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นถึงประสิทธิภาพในการบรรลุความสอดคล้องทางอารมณ์ที่ลึกซึ้งและผลกระทบทางศิลปะ

**คำสำคัญ :** ทฤษฎีเบลคันโตจีน, สถาบันวิจัยโอเปร่า, มหาวิทยาลัยปักกิ่ง, โอเปร่าเจียงเจี๋ย

## Abstract

Opera Jiang Jie is a distinguished Chinese opera that portrays the life and struggle of Jiang Jie, a female revolutionist during the Chinese Civil War. The opera centers on themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and courage, emphasizing Jiang Jie's commitment to her cause and the emotional turbulence which she endures in the face of oppression.

This research is qualitative research employs both a literature review and fieldwork to analyze the Chinese Bel Canto Theory developed by the Opera Research Institute of Peking University, using Jiang Jie as a case study.

The result of research found out that the application of the Chinese Bel Canto Theory in the opera Jiang Jie demonstrates a fusion of vocal techniques and expressive physical gestures that significantly enhance the

emotional depth and character performance. In particular, the skillful control of vocal dynamics—such as variations in volume, tone, and rhythm—enables the performers to effectively convey complex emotional states, reflecting the inner worlds of the characters. Moreover, the study emphasizes how the synchronization of vocal expression and physical movement contributes to a vivid and engaging performance. This research highlights the importance of Bel Canto principles in shaping revolutionary opera, illustrating their effectiveness in achieving profound emotional resonance and artistic expression.

**Keywords:** The Chinese Bel Canto Theory, Opera Research Institute, Peking University, The Opera Jiang Jie

## Introduction

Opera is regarded as one of the highest accomplishments in classical music, acclaimed globally for its fusion of vocal and instrumental talents. This esteemed status arises from its complex combination of various musical components, theatrical performance, and narrative elements, underscoring opera's significance as a hallmark of artistic culture (Gao, 2017: 67). Bel Canto, an important facet of Western vocal tradition, began to influence Chinese culture in modern times, largely due to the efforts of Christian missionaries. The historical exchange between China and the West can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty in the 8th century, a pivotal era when Eastern and Western influences started to intermingle. This initial interaction laid the groundwork for subsequent developments, including

the adoption of Bel Canto techniques in China (Tao, 1994: 1-18). As Bel Canto established itself in China, it engaged profoundly with traditional Chinese music, resulting in significant changes within the nation's vocal music scene. Scholars have observed that this interplay enriched China's national vocal traditions, fostering innovation while maintaining essential aspects of native musical forms (Luo, 2019: 98).

In recent years, the market for Chinese opera has seen substantial growth, marked by an increase in new productions being staged. This expansion is largely due to supportive policies and enhanced financial investment, which have helped position opera as a refined art form that expresses cultural aspirations. There is also growing demand from Chinese musical companies, artists, and audiences for original opera works (Jiang, 2017: 70). Within this context, the opera "Jiang Jie," first performed in 19, has maintained enduring popularity, appealing to audiences of various age groups and repeatedly featuring on opera stages across different historical settings. The Peking University Opera Research Institute has taken initiatives to rejuvenate this work by re-staging it with a contemporary interpretation, including a performance at the National Centre for the Performing Arts. This effort reflects ongoing endeavors to innovate and promote the evolution of Chinese opera (Wang, 2024: 155).

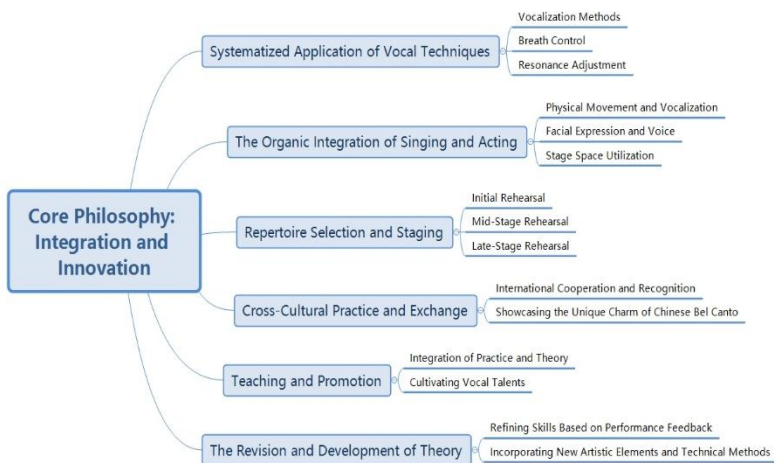
The adaptation of "Jiang Jie" by the Peking University Opera Research Institute addresses the critical challenge of merging "Chinese language with Bel Canto technique." This focus deals with the distinct linguistic features of Mandarin, such as its four tones, rhyme, articulation,

and phrasing, all of which are essential for adapting Bel Canto methods to Chinese vocal practices.

## Research Objective(s)

The main aim of this study was to analyze the Chinese Bel Canto Theory of Peking University's Opera Research Institute: using a case study of the opera Jiang Jie

## Research Framework



**Figure 1** Peking University Framework for the Theory and Practice Path of Chinese Bel Canto

## Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative study, the researcher uses the literature review and field research.

### 1) Literature review

The literature review in this study employs analysis as a method to systematically organize and examine existing scholarship, enabling the formation of research perspectives on Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory and its application in the opera Jiang Jie within contemporary Chinese opera. The literature sources are categorized into three main areas. Firstly, academic papers and monographs relevant to Peking University Chinese Bel Canto theory, Jiang Jie, and comparative studies between Chinese and Western vocal traditions have been gathered from databases such as CNKI, Wanfang Data, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These resources provide a solid theoretical foundation for the research. Secondly, historical documents pertaining to the early development of Chinese opera and literature on Chinese vocal education were collected, which aid in tracing the evolution of the Peking University Chinese Bel Canto theory and its contemporary relevance. Lastly, extensive reports, reviews, and audience feedback regarding the performances of Jiang Jie were searched from libraries, the internet, newspapers, and magazines. These materials not only enhance the understanding of Jiang Jie but also serve as crucial references for analyzing the practical implementation of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory in the opera.

## 2) Field Research

Field research serves as a vital method for gathering firsthand data through on-site interview and observation, and it was utilized in this study to explore the relationship between Peking University's opera Jiang Jie and its Chinese Bel Canto theory, with a focus on practical application and performance in actual productions. To fulfill the research objectives, the

study engaged with key informants, including influential figures in the Chinese opera community who possess unique insights into the application of the Peking University Chinese Bel Canto theory. Among informants interviewed are as follows.

Jin Man: A renowned opera performer, opera educator, and vocal educator.

Dai Yuqiang: A famous tenor, opera performer, and vocal educator, Dai Yuqiang is a professor at Peking University Opera Research Institute and the dean of the Henan Music Academy at Zhengzhou University.

Li Hong: A soprano and Ph.D. holder who studied in Russia, Li Hong is the deputy director of Peking University Opera Research Institute, an associate professor, and a vocal instructor.

## Research Results

Opera Jiang Jie" is a notable Chinese opera that revolves around the life and struggles of Jiang Jie, a female revolutionary heroine during the Chinese Civil War. The opera depicts themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and heroism, focusing on Jiang Jie's dedication to her cause and the emotional turmoil she faces in her struggle against oppression.

In the research method section, we employed systematic research techniques that were essential for gathering comprehensive data. This included conducting field investigations, expert interviews, and surveys. Specifically, our study involved engaging with 30 actors, 5 vocal coaches, and 390 audience members to gain diverse insights into the subject matter, this chapter comprehensively examines how the theory was integrated into

vocal techniques, stage performance, emotional expression, and character development. The analysis emphasizes the innovative practices derived from the theory, showcasing its role in enhancing artistic expression and emotional resonance in the performance. Specifically, this section is structured into four key aspects: the selection and application of vocal techniques, the design of movements and stage presentation, the interplay of emotional expression and character portrayal, and the innovative implementation of Chinese Bel Canto in Jiang Jie. The findings highlight the theory's contribution to improving vocal precision, enhancing stagecraft, and deepening the emotional depth of performances.

#### 1) Practice of Bel Canto Theory

The adaptation of Bel Canto theory in "Jiang Jie" reflects a high degree of synthesis between vocal technique and artistic performance. Unlike conventional bel canto, which often prioritizes sound purity and technical perfection, this version incorporates the specific cultural and contextual elements of Chinese opera. Instruction from the vocal music instructors emphasized the importance of conveying the revolutionary spirit of "Jiang Jie." This focus ensures that performances go beyond mere technical execution to embody emotional depth and narrative urgency. In pivotal scenes, actors utilize their vocal skills to enhance emotional intensity. This dynamic control of sound—manipulating volume and intensity—heightens dramatic tension, particularly during climactic moments.

so as to ensure that the lyrics were clearly conveyed and enhance the expressive power of the voice. For example, in Jiang Jie's solo passage,



the actors use chest resonance to switch with the head cavity resonance, which enriches the emotional level of the role. This innovative technique combines the vocal characteristics of China and the West, making the performance of Jiang Jie not only retain the traditional characteristics of China opera, but also show the technical advantages of Bel Canto theory, forming a unique artistic style.



**Figure 1:** Schematic diagram of vocal skills in the emotional climax part.

In some dramatic scenes with fierce conflicts, the actors explored new ways to apply traditional vocal skills. By adding more emotional colors to the timbre, or by changing the rhythm to enhance the expressive force of the voice, the actors can better meet the needs of the plot development. Five vocal music instructors agreed that this innovative practice has significantly improved the emotional expression in Jiang Jie. For example, when Jiang Jie is threatened by the enemy, the actor shows the emotional

fluctuation of the character through the gradually enhanced timbre (see Figure 1).

Besides, in Jiang Jie, Bel Canto theory insists on the application of natural sound field in western operas, and retains the original charm of opera art. In the performance, the actors completely rely on the natural sound field without using modern public address equipment. This practice not only shows respect for traditional bel canto, but also enhances the natural expressive force of the voice. For example, in some scenes, actors use the acoustic characteristics of the stage to enhance the spatial sense and three-dimensional sense of sound through the interaction between sound and theater space. This treatment not only enhances the audience's auditory experience, but also enables actors to express the pure power of sound more freely.

## 2) Selection and Application of Vocal Music Skills

In the performance of "Jiang Jie", the core skills emphasized by Bel Canto theory of Peking University include resonance, breath control, timbre adjustment and other technical means. These skills not only enhance the penetration and expressiveness of the actors' voices, but also enhance the clarity of articulation and make the language expression more appealing. The music instructors' experts provided detailed feedback, explaining their application of these techniques in actual performances.

Breath control and vocal methods are the basis of Bel Canto singing, especially for such a complex emotional scene as Jiang Jie, a stable breath is very important. According to the observation results, most actors appear to consider that breath control plays a vital role in singing long

sentences and expressing emotions. The unique technique of "crying deep breath" in Bel Canto theory of Peking University is widely used in the performance of "Jiang Jie", which helps the actors to maintain the consistency and stability of their voices in high notes and long vocal passages and ensure the integrity of emotional expression. For example, in Jiang Jie, when his lover, Lao Peng, was killed, long notes and emotional passages (Figure 2) required the actors to maintain the stability and strength of their voices through deep breathing techniques to avoid the interruption of their voices caused by emotional excitement.



**Figure 2:** Jiang Jie's application of crying deep breathing skills in the face of his lover Lao Peng's dead.

The use of resonance skills played a key role in the performance of Jiang Jie. Actors need to show the changes of Jiang Jie's inner feelings through the head-cavity resonance and the transformation of chest resonance. The actors mentioned that they better expressed Jiang Jie's emotional fluctuation in key aria by adjusting the resonance position. In

Jiang Jie's classic aria "Red Plum Praise", the actor uses chest resonance in the bass passage, which shows Jiang Jie's firm revolutionary belief; In the high-pitched paragraph, she turns to head cavity resonance to express her inner tenderness and perseverance. The use of this technique not only enhances the transmission of emotion, but also makes the voice more layered and expressive.



**Figure 3:** The Transformation of Resonance Position in Red Plum Zan

in the aspect of timbre adjustment, Bel Canto theory of Peking University emphasizes conveying multi-level emotions through timbre changes. in the paragraphs separated from the comrades, the actor expressed Jiang Jie's revolutionary spirit through bright and firm timbre; In the face of inner emotional fluctuations, actors express their deep feelings for their families and comrades through soft timbre (Figure 3). The indication of strength change in the score further emphasizes the details of timbre

adjustment, and through this contrast between light and shade, the emotional level is richer.



**Figure 4:** The timbre changes in Jiang Jie's different scenes.

### 3) Action Design and Stage Performance

Action design and stage performance are another highlight in the performance of Jiang Jie. Bel canto theory emphasizes the organic combination of voice and body movements, and further enriches the expressive force of the role and the overall effect of the stage through the cooperation of movements and vocal music. In Jiang Jie, action design is not only an auxiliary expression of the role emotion, but also an artistic means closely combined with vocal skills.

The action design in the Peking University Opera Research Institute's interpretation of "Jiang Jie" plays a crucial role in conveying character traits and advancing the plot. This approach ensures that each movement is imbued with emotional significance, enhancing both the performance's visual impact and its emotional depth. The choreography is meticulously crafted to align with the characteristics of each role and the unfolding narrative. This careful consideration allows the actors to embody their characters authentically, making emotional responses more believable and relatable.



**Figure 5:** Jiang Jie's standing posture and gestures in the scene facing the enemy.

In addition, the combination of action design and vocal performance is a great innovation in the performance of Jiang Jie. Bel Canto theory usually emphasizes the independence and purity of voice, but in Jiang Jie, directors and actors explore the synchronization of action and vocal music, making action a part of voice expression. For example, in Jiang Jie's monologue aria, the actor vividly expresses the inner emotional ups and

downs of the role through delicate gesture changes and gradual vocal performance. The combination of this kind of action and vocal music makes the emotional expression more abundant, and the complex emotions in the character's heart are also more completely displayed.

Finally, the visual design of the stage is also an important practical link of Bel Canto theory in Jiang Jie. Through the careful design of the stage scene, the director team created a visual effect that complements vocal music performance. For example, in Jiang Jie's monologue scene, through the clever use of light and shadow, the stage background and the vocal performance of the actors reached a harmonious unity. The design of the stage not only enhances the drama of Jiang Jie's emotional expression, but also further highlights the appeal of vocal performance and the scene atmosphere through the changes of lighting and scenery. This multi-dimensional combination of vision and vocal music makes Bel Canto theory not only stay at the auditory level, but further enhance the expressive force and artistic appeal of the stage through the joint action of stage action and visual design.

#### 4) Emotional Expression and Character Portrayal

Emotional expression depends on the careful control of sound. Bel Canto theory emphasizes the expression of the inner world of the characters in different emotional states through the changes of sound intensity, timbre and rhythm. In "Jiang Jie", the actor shows the turning point of the character's inner feelings by adjusting the sound intensity and gradually changing from soft to powerful. For example, when Jiang Jie expresses her deep affection for her comrades, the actor uses a soft and lyrical voice to convey her tenderness and care; while expressing her anger at the enemy, she shows Jiang Jie's firm

revolutionary will through strong vocal music. In this scene, the actor used the dynamic symbols in the music score to gradually enhance the expressive force of the voice to support the progressive level of emotion.

The role-building not only depends on sound, but also is further strengthened through body language. In the performance of "Jiang Jie", the actors gave the characters more vivid expressive force through the combination of voice and body movements. For example, when Jiang Jie was interrogated by the enemy, the actress created an indestructible revolutionary image through her steady standing posture and firm gestures, combined with her firm and powerful voice. In this regard, the five vocal music instructors agreed that the coordination of action and sound played a vital role in shaping the role. Vocal music and body language complement each other, making the role more stereoscopic and real.

The success of emotional expression also benefits from the accurate control of sound details. Actors convey the emotional level of the role through subtle changes in their voices. For example, in the scene of Jiang Jie recalling the past, the actor expresses the deep nostalgia and unyielding of the character through his soft voice. Five vocal music instructors unanimously pointed out during the rehearsal that the delicate sound processing made the emotional expression in this paragraph more infectious. In this scene, the fading sound and subtle timbre changes perfectly show Jiang Jie's complex emotional heart, which makes the character image fuller.

## Concussion and Discussion

The research presented in concussion and discussion highlights several critical areas for further exploration despite the significant findings



of the study. Firstly, it addresses the ongoing challenges in cultural integration, particularly in merging Bel Canto with traditional Chinese vocal techniques. While Jiang Jie exemplifies some success in this area, performers often grapple with balancing technical requirements and emotional expression. This indicates that achieving effective cultural fusion in performances remains a complex issue requiring more attention and practice (Smith, 2020).

Moreover, the study notes a persistent gap between theory and practice. Although the application of Bel Canto theory within Jiang Jie has shown positive outcomes, its broader adoption in other operatic works falls short, especially in productions with strong local traditions. This disparity may stem from limited dissemination of the theory, differing levels of acceptance among performers, and audience preferences favoring traditional techniques (Li & Chen, 2019).

To enrich our understanding of these challenges, it is essential to consider related research that explores similar issues in cross-cultural musical integration. For instance, Johnson (2021) demonstrated that successful cultural fusion often hinges on collaborative approaches, where artists engage deeply with both traditions involved.

## Recommendation

This study presents several key recommendations aimed at enhancing the development and application of Chinese Bel Canto theory. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of localizing Bel Canto theory to align with China's unique linguistic and cultural characteristics. Future research should focus on

exploring vocal techniques and performance styles that resonate with these traits, ultimately contributing to a theoretical framework that enriches Chinese opera and encourages international innovation in Bel Canto. Secondly, there is a call for a stronger integration of theory and practice, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between them. It also suggests that educational efforts should concentrate on case studies and practical applications, facilitating collaboration between theorists and practitioners through events like academic symposiums and workshops. This interaction can provide empirical evidence that enhances both performance quality and theoretical refinement.

## References

- Tao, Y. (1994). *A draft history of Western music exchange*. Beijing Encyclopedia of China Publishing House.
- Wang, X. (2024). Exploration and Development of Original Chinese Operas: Taking Ye Xiaogang's Ode· Farewell as an Example. *Artist*, 7(1), 155-157.
- Luo, Q. (2019). *On the Convergence Tendencies of National Singing and Bel Canto in Vocal Education* [Master's Thesis]. Sichuan Normal University.
- Li, X., & Chen, Y. (2019). *Barriers to Cultural Integration in Vocal Performance: A Study of Traditional and Contemporary Techniques*. Opera Research Review.
- Smith, R. (2020). Emotional Expression in Vocal Techniques: Balancing Tradition and Innovation. *International Journal of Vocal Studies*, 3(2), 112-116.

- Gao, M. (2017). *Attempting to Discuss the Integration of National, Bel Canto, and Pop Singing Methods in Song* [Master's Thesis]. Xi'an Conservatory of Music.
- Jiang, Sh. (2017). The Origins and Development of Bel Canto. *Art Evaluation*, 5(3), 70-72.
- Johnson, A. (2021). Cultural Fusion in Music: Case Studies and Strategies. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Music Studies*, 2(1), 80-97.

## Author

Mr. Dr. Cui Yue

Department of Performing Arts,

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts,

Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

1 U Thong Nok Rd, Dusit, Dusit District, Bangkok 10300

Tel: +86-15640239563 Email: 357861@qq.com

Assist. Prof. Dr.Chutima Maneewattana

Department of Performing Arts,

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts,

Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

1 U Thong Nok Rd, Dusit, Dusit District, Bangkok 10300

Tel: +66 2 160 1023 Email: chutima.ma@ssru.ac.th.