

The Fusion of Tradition and Modernity: Reviewing the Lyrics and Vocal Style of Chinese Art Songs

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Keywords:

Chinese Art Songs,
Yishu Gequ,
Chinese Ancient Poetry,
Vocal Style,
Mandarin Tonality

Received: March 2025

Accepted: May 2025

Published: June 2025

Abstract

This study explores the characteristics of Chinese art songs, with a particular focus on their lyrics and vocal style, through a literature review approach. Chinese art songs (yishu gequ) emerged during the May Fourth Movement as a fusion of Western compositional techniques and traditional Chinese cultural elements. The lyrics are deeply rooted in Chinese ancient poetry, drawing on classical themes such as nature, emotions, and philosophy, while maintaining structural integrity through poetic forms like shi (詩) and ci (詞). The linguistic complexities of Mandarin Chinese, a tonal language, present unique challenges for composers in balancing melodic expression with tonal accuracy. Additionally, the vocal style integrates Western operatic traditions with elements from traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics, such as those found in Peking opera and folk music. Performers face interpretative challenges due to the hybrid nature of the genre, requiring technical mastery and cultural sensitivity. The findings highlight the cultural and artistic significance of Chinese art songs as a unique genre that bridges traditional Chinese heritage and modernity. This research underscores the importance of further study on the lyrics and vocal styles to enrich understanding and appreciation of this musical form.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24114/grenek.v14i1.64501>

INTRODUCTION

Chinese art songs, known as *yishu gequ* (藝術歌曲), represent a quintessential form of New Music *Xin yinyue* (新音樂) that emerged during the May Fourth Movement. They were largely written by Chinese composers who had studied in Europe or the United States and drew inspiration from European Romantic art songs, particularly nineteenth-century German lieder. Existing Western scholarship on this repertoire predominantly highlights the ties between twentieth-century Chinese art songs and European Romantic works, without addressing their links to indigenous Chinese musical traditions (Chaloupková, 2021). Meanwhile, Chinese-language studies also tend not to explore in depth how these songs connect to domestic cultural or conceptual frameworks.

Chinese art songs have existed for more than a century, defined as compositions arranged for a solo voice with piano accompaniment. According to Yan (2023) Between the 1920s and 1940s (specifically 1920–1948), these songs experienced their birth and formative phase, considered the first golden age of Chinese art song development. This period can be viewed as a moment of musical enlightenment in modern Chinese music history, significantly influencing the rise of Chinese art songs. The Chinese art song has evolved in an overall progressive manner, but its development was disrupted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when composing these songs was prohibited. Although this broke the previously continuous trajectory of the genre, its revival in the late 1970s occurred somewhat abruptly, leading to the emergence of the modern Chinese art song, which has now been flourishing for about 45 years. Within the broader historical framework, this modern phase is recognized as a logical and integral stage in the unified evolution of the genre.

Generally speaking, the century-long development of Chinese art songs can be divided into several phases: first, the gradual evolution from 1920 to 1965 – referred to as the “first golden age” – which itself can be split at 1949 (the founding of the People’s Republic of China); second, a disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); and third, a revolutionary resurgence in the late 1970s, following the end of the “Gang of Four,” which gave birth to the modern form of this genre. From the second half of the 1970s onward, the

modern Chinese art song has continued on a renewed evolutionary path, often regarded as the “second golden age,” spanning more than four decades.

The founding and consolidation of Chinese art songs (1920–1965), followed by the break in continuity (1966–1976), altered the genre’s diversification. However, once the modern Chinese art song emerged, it effectively restored the cyclical progression in the history of the genre’s archetype. The modern Chinese art song, therefore, stands out as one of the most significant accomplishments of the “second golden age” in the genre’s overall development. Inspired by the May Fourth New Culture Movement, a number of composers—including Xiao Youmei and Qingzhu—returned to China after overseas studies. They merged Western compositional methods with traditional Chinese musical elements, producing art songs that embodied a distinctive Chinese aesthetic. Many scholars (Cui, 2021; Lihui, 2020; Chang, 2018; Tyan, 2003). believe Qingzhu’s piece, “The Eastward Journey of the Great River,” was a pioneering work that combined poetry, voice, and piano, laying an important foundation for Chinese art songs. Examples of prominent pieces from this era include “Ask” by Xiao Youmei; “How Can I Not Think of Him” and “Ballad of Selling Cloth” by Zhao Yuanren; and “Homesickness,” “Spring Nostalgia,” and “Three Wishes for Roses” by Huang Zi.

Despite the century-long history of Chinese art songs, much of the existing scholarship has predominantly highlighted Western musical influences, particularly those stemming from European Romantic traditions. While this perspective is certainly valuable, it tends to overlook the wealth of indigenous Chinese cultural and musical practices embedded in these compositions. Lyrics, for instance, often draw upon classical Chinese poetry or contemporary Chinese literature, reflecting linguistic nuances that can only be fully understood within their cultural context. Exploring how composers manipulate poetic structures, tonal inflection, and cultural symbolism in their texts therefore becomes essential to uncovering deeper dimensions of the repertoire.

Additionally, the vocal style of Chinese art songs merits closer scrutiny. It is shaped not only by Western compositional techniques but also by traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics, such as those found in regional operas. Singers must negotiate distinctive tonal contours of the Chinese language and incorporate subtle stylistic inflections that evoke the essence of national identity. Studying these vocal approaches can illuminate the ways in which ancient performance traditions merge with modern compositional methods, resulting in a uniquely hybrid genre. Consequently, a focused investigation into Chinese art song lyrics and vocal style is indispensable for appreciating the music’s cultural authenticity and its ongoing evolution.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based analytical approach to examine the fusion of traditional and modern elements in the lyrics and vocal style of Chinese art songs (*yishu gequ*). Rooted in the interdisciplinary fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, the methodology integrates textual analysis, cultural-historical contextualization, and stylistic review. For the lyrical dimension, a thematic content analysis was conducted on selected representative Chinese art songs from the 1920s to the present, focusing on how lyrics reflect elements of classical Chinese poetry (e.g., *shi*, *ci*) and how they articulate modern sentiments. This analysis pays particular attention to metaphors of nature, emotional introspection, and national identity, mapping these themes onto sociopolitical contexts such as the May Fourth Movement, the Cultural Revolution, and post-reform China. Special emphasis was placed on the challenges of setting tonal Mandarin to music, with close reading of the interaction between prosody, semantics, and melodic line.

To assess vocal style, the study adopts descriptive performance analysis, drawing on archival recordings and scholarly interpretations. The investigation focuses on how performers synthesize Western vocal techniques (e.g., *bel canto*, legato phrasing) with Chinese vocal aesthetics (e.g., timbral restraint, ornamentation from traditional opera). Particular attention is given to works by composers such as Huang Zi and Zhao Yuanren, whose pieces exemplify this stylistic fusion. This multi-method analysis is supported by an extensive review of relevant Chinese and Western academic sources. The methodological design enables the uncovering of cultural and musical hybridity embedded in Chinese art songs, offering a nuanced understanding of how tradition and modernity co-exist in this repertoire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is no secret that Chinese music has been globalizing in Chinese ways. The Chinese music itself thus performed and discourse is composite and changing, as China is heterogeneous and transformative. Performances and interpretations of the Chinese music will continue as long as they remain current and

relevant to Chinese realities and imaginations (Lam, 2008). The very notions of 'nation' as 'national identity' and 'nationalism' in the Chinese context began to attract widespread attention in the late nineteenth century and became an important issue of debate after China's last empire of the Qing Dynasty (Gorfinkel, 2018).

In the context of Chinese traditional music, ever since the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, China's traditional music has always had its own rules and styles in the form of traditional opera (*xiqu*) and literati music (*wenren yinyue*). This musical culture, born and nurtured on China's central plains, developed its own system of notation, methods of performance and aesthetic criteria (Lau, 2013). Historically, there are two phases in the reconstruction of indigenous in the Chinese music. The first phase occurred before nineteenth century. The first period was marked by two important historical occasions which was marked by two important historical occasions. In the eighth century, historical manuscript reveals that Christian music from Europe was brought to China by missionaries during the Tang dynasty. In the subsequent Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties European priests continued to be sent to China to disseminate Christianity. The consequently European religious music and musical instruments also found their way there. However, the ordinary people of China had little exposure to them and continued to enjoy their folksongs and traditional operas (Jiang, 1982). Meanwhile, the mid nineteenth century, the Opium Wars of the mid nineteenth century marked the beginning of a period when the Qing regime suffered a string of defeats in conflicts with foreign powers, and was each time forced to pay reparations and surrender territory.

The second phase occurred around the beginning of the 20th century through European music which gave a wider influence in the form of notation, performance methods, aesthetic criteria, and texture. Chingchih (2010) a well-known Chinese historian and musicologist in his book a critical History of New Music in China (Translated by Caroline Mason), divides the second or modern phase of Chinese music into 6 eras as follows:

1. The Origins of New Music (1885–1919): The Westernization of Military Music and the Birth of Schoolsong.
2. New Music in the May Fourth Period (1919–1937)
3. The Mass Singing Movement and Musical Creation in the Anti-Japanese War Period (1937–1945)
4. New Music Education and Creation during the Civil War (1946–1949) and in the Seventeen Years after the Founding of the People's Republic of China (1949–1966)
5. Yangbanxi and the Music of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976): Revolutionary Modern Peking Opera, Ballet, Symphonic Music and Songs.
6. Musical Creation after the Cultural Revolution and New Wave Music

In the term of compositional works, the reconstruction of indigenous in the Chinese music with Western classical music can be found in a number of compositional works such as Zhao Yuanren's solo song *Jiaowo ruhe buxiang ta*, Huang Zi's cantata *Changhen ge*, and orchestral overture *Huaijiu* or Ma Sicong's violin piece *Menggu zuqu*. These works employ the composition techniques that represented the Western classical style in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century.

Lyric of Chinese art songs

Chinese art songs, also known as *yishu gequ* (藝術歌曲), represent a fusion of Chinese musical traditions and Western compositional techniques, embodying cultural and historical significance (Wu, 2022). The lyrical content of these songs holds a critical role in shaping their artistic identity, drawing heavily from Chinese ancient poetry, which carries profound cultural and literary value. This discussion explores the characteristics of Chinese art song lyrics, emphasizing their thematic depth, linguistic nuance, and relationship to both Chinese tradition and Western influences (Hu, 2023). The lyrics of Chinese art songs represent a fascinating intersection of traditional Chinese poetry and modern musical expression, embodying both cultural preservation and artistic innovation. Through careful analysis of the development of Chinese art songs from their emergence in the 1920s through contemporary times, several significant characteristics and patterns emerge regarding their lyrical content and structure.

A distinctive feature of Chinese art song lyrics is their strong foundation in classical Chinese poetry and contemporary Chinese literature (Sun, 2022). This connection to traditional poetic forms creates a unique bridge between China's rich literary heritage and modern musical composition. The composers of these art songs deliberately chose to set ancient poetry to Western-influenced musical structures, creating a hybrid form that honors both traditions. This choice reflects the broader cultural dynamics of early 20th-century China, particularly during the May Fourth Movement, when artists and intellectuals sought to modernize Chinese

culture while maintaining its essential character (Yan, 2023). The lyrics of Chinese art songs are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese poetry, often reflecting themes of nature, human emotions, and philosophical musings. These themes align closely with classical Chinese literary traditions, where nature serves as a metaphor for emotional expression, and personal introspection often conveys universal truths. According to Lin (2020) pieces such as Huang Zi's "Homesickness" and "Spring Nostalgia" highlight the natural world's interplay with longing and memory, a motif prevalent in Chinese poetry. These lyrics serve as more than just textual content; they are intricately connected to the cultural and emotional resonance of the songs. By drawing from ancient poetry, the lyrics maintain a strong connection to Chinese cultural heritage, offering listeners a sense of nostalgia and continuity while bridging the gap between past and present.

The linguistic complexity of Chinese art song lyrics presents unique challenges and opportunities for composers. Unlike Western languages, Mandarin Chinese is tonal, meaning that pitch variations carry semantic meaning in everyday speech (Shang & Styles, 2017). This characteristic requires composers to carefully consider the relationship between linguistic tones and musical melody, ensuring that the musical setting does not distort the meaning of the text. This delicate balance between preserving tonal integrity and creating compelling melodic lines distinguishes Chinese art songs from their Western counterparts and demonstrates the sophisticated understanding required of composers working in this genre. Chinese is a tonal language, meaning that the pitch contours of words are essential to their meaning. Composers must carefully balance musical phrasing with linguistic integrity, ensuring that the melody does not distort the intended meaning of the text. This intricate relationship between melody and language is a defining feature of Chinese art songs.

The structural characteristics of Chinese art song lyrics often reflect the formal patterns of classical Chinese poetry. According to Dashchenko (2022) and Kuang (2023) traditional Chinese poetic forms such as shi (詩) and ci (詞) frequently serve as the textual basis for these songs, with their inherent rhythmic patterns and structural rules influencing the musical setting. These forms often have strict tonal and rhythmic patterns that must be respected in musical settings. Composers like Zhao Yuanren and Xiao Youmei skillfully adapted these forms, preserving their linguistic beauty while integrating them seamlessly into Western-style musical frameworks (Zhang, 2024; Liu, 2019).

Lau (2008) states that the cultural revolution (1966-1976) significantly impacted the development of art song lyrics, as the composition of these songs was prohibited during this period. This interruption in the genre's development led to a fascinating phenomenon in the post-1976 period, when composers began to re-engage with traditional poetic texts while simultaneously incorporating more contemporary themes and linguistic expressions. This period of revival demonstrated the resilience of the art song tradition and its ability to adapt to changing cultural circumstances while maintaining its essential characteristics.

In the modern era, particularly from the late 1970s onward, Chinese art song lyrics have continued to evolve while maintaining their connection to traditional poetic forms (Bryant, 2004). Contemporary composers have expanded the range of poetic sources they draw upon, including modern poetry and original texts, while still maintaining the sophisticated literary quality that characterizes the genre. This evolution reflects the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity that has characterized Chinese art songs since their inception. The investigation of Chinese art song lyrics reveals them to be more than mere texts set to music; they are complex cultural artifacts that embody the tensions and synergies between traditional Chinese culture and modern artistic expression. Their successful integration of classical poetic forms with modern musical techniques demonstrates the potential for meaningful cultural synthesis in artistic creation. As Chinese art songs continue to develop, their lyrics remain a vital link between China's rich literary heritage and its contemporary musical culture. Theoretical Approach of Chinese Art Songs as illustrated at figure 1.



Figure 1. Theoretical Approach of Chinese Art Songs

Vocal Style of Chinese art songs

According to Zhang & Chonprirot (2024) the vocal style of Chinese art songs is a defining feature of the genre, reflecting its unique synthesis of Western and Chinese musical traditions. Rooted in traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics and influenced by European Romantic art songs, the vocal delivery in this repertoire demands a nuanced understanding of both styles. The vocal style in Chinese art songs is a product of cultural synthesis, merging Western operatic and lieder traditions with Chinese vocal techniques derived from traditional operas like Peking opera and folk singing. This fusion creates a vocal aesthetic that is both versatile and culturally distinct. For instance, composers such as Huang Zi and Zhao Yuanren incorporated Western bel canto techniques, emphasizing smooth legato lines and dynamic range, while also maintaining the delicate phrasing and tonal sensitivity required for the Chinese language (Zheng & Zhu, 2021). This blend of styles is evident in songs such as "Homesickness" by Huang Zi, where the vocal line mirrors the melodic contours of traditional Chinese folk tunes but is set within a Western harmonic framework. The result is a vocal style that balances expressive clarity with technical sophistication, reflecting the dual heritage of the genre.

A key challenge in the vocal performance of Chinese art songs lies in accommodating the tonal nature of the Chinese language (Guo, 2015). Unlike Western languages, the pitch and intonation of Chinese syllables carry specific meanings (Xu & Wang, 2001). Singers must navigate the fine line between preserving linguistic accuracy and achieving musical expressiveness. This requires precise control of dynamics and articulation, as well as an understanding of how to align the natural tonal inflection of the language with the melodic line (Liu & Xu, 2005). For example, songs like Zhao Yuanren's "How Can I Not Think of Him" demonstrate the intricate interplay between linguistic tones and musical phrasing. Here, the singer must ensure that the tonal meaning of each word is preserved, even as the melody rises and falls in expressive arcs. This challenge makes Chinese art songs a demanding yet rewarding repertoire for vocalists.

According to Carman (2009) the vocal style of Chinese art songs is deeply tied to emotional and cultural expression. Drawing from traditional Chinese aesthetics, which prioritize subtlety and introspection, the delivery often emphasizes restraint and refinement over dramatic display. This is particularly evident in the treatment of poetic texts, where the singer must convey the layered emotions of the lyrics while adhering to the cultural values of balance and harmony (Yuan, 2019). For instance, in works like "Spring Nostalgia," the singer's role is not only to perform the notes accurately but also to evoke the mood and imagery of the poetry (Han, 1978). This requires a sensitivity to cultural symbols and an ability to translate them into vocal color and dynamics, creating a performance that resonates with audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels.

According to Yanxi & Karin, (2019) performing Chinese art songs requires a high degree of technical mastery. The vocal lines often demand agility, as they incorporate melismatic passages reminiscent of traditional Chinese operatic singing. Additionally, the integration of Western techniques such as vibrato, dynamic shading, and legato phrasing places significant demands on the singer's breath control and vocal flexibility (Wang, 2018). Moreover, the balance between voice and piano accompaniment is crucial. Unlike traditional Chinese operas, where the instrumental accompaniment serves a subordinate role, the piano in Chinese art songs is an equal partner, contributing to the narrative and emotional depth of the piece. Singers must therefore develop a collaborative approach, responding to the nuances of the piano part while maintaining vocal prominence.

The interpretative challenges of Chinese art songs stem from their hybrid nature. Singers must not only master the technical and stylistic elements of the genre but also bring their own interpretative insights to the performance. This includes understanding the historical and cultural context of the lyrics, the composer's intentions, and the stylistic conventions of both Western and Chinese musical traditions. According to Zhang, (2015) Qingzhu's "The Eastward Journey of the Great River," the singer must convey the grandeur of the river—a metaphor for the passage of time and human resilience—through their vocal delivery. This involves subtle variations in tone, dynamics, and phrasing, as well as an ability to evoke the poetic imagery embedded in the text. Vocal style of Chinese Art Songs as illustrated at figure 2.

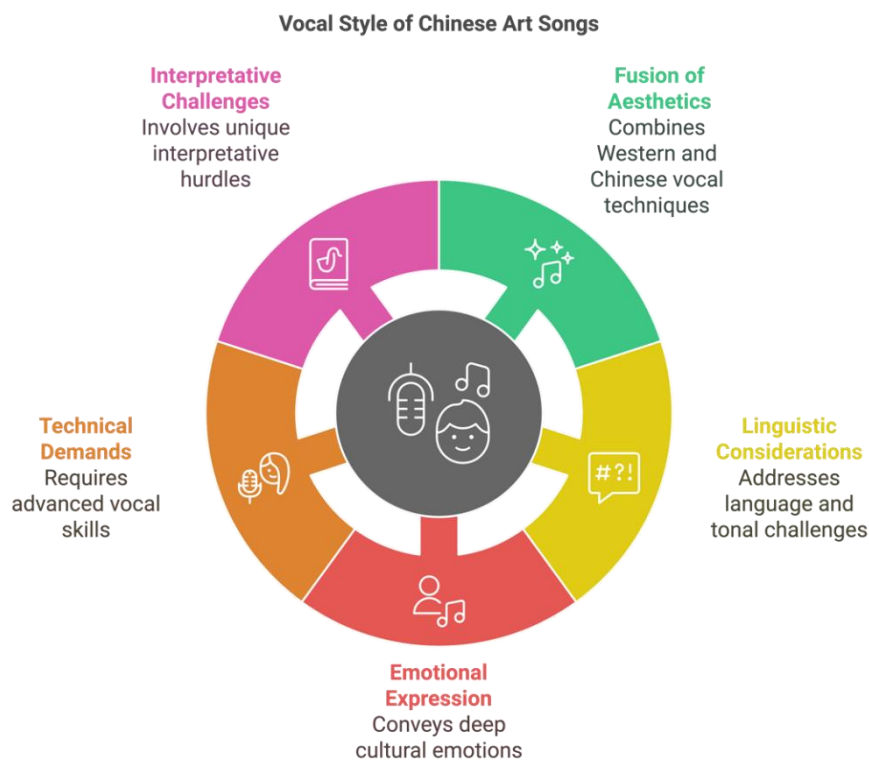


Figure 2. Vocal style of Chinese Art Songs

CONCLUSION

The use of ancient poetry in Chinese art song lyrics adds a layer of interpretative richness for performers. Singers are tasked with not only conveying the textual meaning but also evoking the cultural and emotional undertones embedded within the poetry. This interpretative challenge makes Chinese art songs a unique repertoire that demands both linguistic sensitivity and musical expressiveness. In addition to enhancing the artistic depth of the genre, the poetry also serves as a bridge between literature and music, offering audiences an immersive experience that transcends the boundaries of these two art forms. The lyrics thus play a pivotal role in shaping the genre's identity, offering a window into Chinese aesthetics and cultural philosophy. The vocal style of Chinese art songs is a testament to the genre's rich cultural heritage and innovative spirit. By blending Western and Chinese traditions, it creates a unique platform for artistic expression that is both challenging and rewarding for performers. Through its linguistic sensitivity, emotional depth, and technical demands, the vocal style of Chinese art songs encapsulates the essence of the genre,

offering audiences a profound and multidimensional musical experience. As the repertoire continues to evolve, ongoing study and performance of these works will play a crucial role in preserving and advancing their legacy. Implications for future research: despite their significance, the lyrics of Chinese art songs remain underexplored in academic literature, with most studies focusing on musical elements or Western influences. There is a need for detailed analysis of how lyrics reflect traditional Chinese aesthetics and how they contribute to the unique character of the genre. This research could further explore how linguistic and cultural elements influence the compositional and performative aspects of Chinese art songs. The unique vocal style of Chinese art songs offers valuable insights for vocal pedagogy and performance research. It provides an opportunity for singers to expand their stylistic repertoire and develop a deeper appreciation for the cultural and linguistic nuances of Chinese music. Additionally, further research into the vocal techniques and interpretative practices of Chinese art songs could contribute to a broader understanding of the genre's artistic and cultural significance.

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