

# The Origin and Development of Traditional Chinese Vocal Music

Yan Yiru

College of Music, Longdong University, Qingyang, Gansu, 745000, China

**Abstract:** Human voice is the most mysterious and beautiful instrument that none natural sound can compare with. Singing songs can be regarded as the best way to show human emotions artistically. Each singing style has its own characteristics and charm. This essay which subject is the Traditional Chinese Vocal Music is divided. The Origin and Development of Traditional Chinese vocal music-introduce vocal music in ancient times, salve society and feudal society.

**Keywords:** traditional Chinese Vocal Music; origin and development; ancient times; salve society; feudal society

## 1. Introduction

As a very important part of musical culture of mankind, special way of vocal music in conveying emotions and expressing meanings cannot be replaced by any subject. More and more representational traditional Chinese vocal music emerges on the international stage, which embodies the quality and artistry of this style. Besides, the traditional Chinese vocal music speech is neither abstract nor philosophical. To inherit and develop the traditional Chinese vocal music art, we must study its history and development.

## 2. The origin and development of traditional Chinese vocal music in ancient times

Singing derived from vocal imitation. People got inspirations from natural sounds, like those from animals, water and wind, and according to which music was created.

Singing deprived from laboring. According to Huáinán Zi (The Huáinán Zi -Philosophers of Huainan is a 2nd century BC Chinese philosophical classic. The Huáinán Zi was the first Chinese classic text which mentioned about the “Pythagorean comma”-twelve tone system and the “Pythagorean temperament”-five notes in Chinese music.)written by Liu An(Liu An is the Han dynasty emperor Liu Che's uncle.): “When people lifted big woods, persons in the front shouting slogan were followed by the others, so as to motivate simultaneous power to lift the heavy woods.” In other words, shouting slogan help people to gather strength to lift the heavy woods. This was known as “labor song”.



Figure 1: Huáinán Zi

There existed some fixed pitches and simple music scales (do, re, mi, la, xi) in ancient times, even though complete singing form did not appear. Singing was the one with accompaniment of dance and instrument playing in that period. Dances were mostly witchcraft-related or some simple laboring behaviors. Instrument, also simple, had some examples like blowpipe instruments - bone whistle, stone

whistle; percussion instrument - resonator. Songs in that period were mostly relative to hunting, husbandry, religion, love, marriage, war. People showed their cognitions on agriculture, husbandry and natural principles in the songs. Rhythms of songs were clear and distinctive. As to forms of ancient songs, one can refer to *Lu Shi Chun Qiu* (Historical writings compiled by Lu Buwei) in which a song named "Hou Ren Ge" was composed by the daughter of Tu Shan Shi (wife of Dayu). This song about love, with only four words "hou ren xi yi", had its meaning in the first two words "hou ren (waiting for you)". It was considered as the origin of Chinese music, an underdeveloped language.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 3. The formation and development of traditional vocal music in slave society - "times of ancient song"

China entered slave society in 21st Century BC. According to research, vocal music was mainly "singing" in this period though initial form of music had been existed. Hence the name of this period is "times of ancient song".

People from all walks of life took singing as a hobby in this period. According to research, there were lyrics of 305 songs in *The Book of Songs* (Is a collection of poetry, also called Poem, These poetries were added notes for singing). These songs were divided into three categories: Feng (ballads), Ya (festival odes), Song (sacrificial songs). It could be seen as four categories if Ya was divided into two sections of Daya and Xiaoya.<sup>[2]</sup>



Figure 2: *The Book of Songs*

Feng - the quintessence of *The Book of Songs*, also known as Guofeng (folk songs). Feng, a general term of musical composition, includes 160 folk songs and most of them were from the north of China. Theme of these songs was abundant, like love, farming, customs, satire, faire tale. Singing forms includes solo, antiphonal style or vocal accompaniment. Feng was divided into 15 groups: Zhou Nan, Zhao Nan, Bei, Yong, Wei, Wang, Zheng, Hui, Qi, Wei, Tang, Qin, Bin, Chen and Cao. These groups refer 15 districts rather than 15 countries. These songs were prevailing in Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, and north of Hubei and east of Sichuan.

Ya - Ya including 105 odes, 31 of them belong to Daya and the rest are Xiaoya. They were mostly works from officials, noblemen, and literati. Thus, Ya can be considered as a poetry anthology of the officials and the noble; however, a small part of them are folk songs manifesting social reality, sympathy for the laboring people, internal conflicts of the ruling class.

Song - Song mainly includes ancient sacrificial song. They were sung when the noble held fete or praised the rulers for their political devotion.

#### 3.1 Evolution of traditional vocal music in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771B.C.)

There appeared music agency and music education in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771B.C) in China. The oldest conservatory in the world was Da Si Le (a music agency) appeared in the Western Zhou Dynasty of China. Da Si Le is a joint name of music administrative agency (equal to Ministry of culture in the present), music education agency (including conservatory and administrative agency of music education), and music performance agency (professional performance groups and theater).

Specific requirements on singing breath, song and student selection were made in this period, leading to initial formation of vocal theories. As the *Shih Chi* recorded "singers should be those who can master his voice according to rhythms of songs. The voice should be as straight as dashing, as

point-blank as snapping a branch, as quiet as withered woods, as prompt as fold line, as soft as a curve, as smooth as a ring of pearls.”This comes from Chapter Shi Yi of Shih Chi. Shih Chi was a historical work of Si ma Qian, who was a historian of the Western Han Dynasty. Shih Chi was the first biographic history of China and one of the best-known classical works. It recorded history of more than 3000 years between the ancient times -ruled by Yellow Emperor and Han Dynasty -ruled by Emperor Wu of Han. It has more than 526,500 words, 130 pieces of writing, among which 12 are Imperial biographies, 30 are Shi Jia -biographies of noble family, 70 were Lie Zhuan -collated biographies, 10 were Biao -historical chronology, and 8 were Shu -history of science. [3]Singing style of traditional vocal music had made progress as what could be seen from these requirements above. Smooth breath and a soft, graceful voice were required.

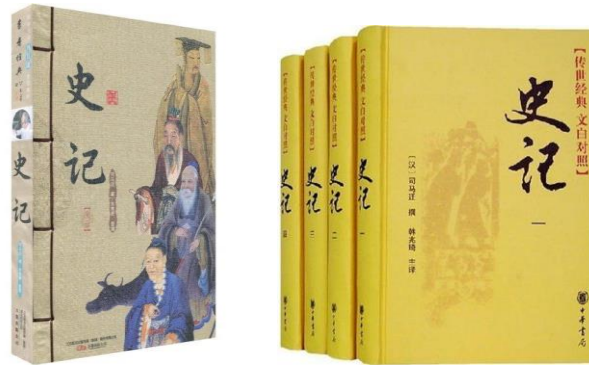


Figure 3: Shih Chi (Records of the Grand Historian)

### 3.2 The evolution of traditional vocal music in Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period

There appeared a large group of singers and vocal music teachers in Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period (770—221B.C.). Famous singers were Wang Diao, Mian Ju, Han Er and others, while famous teachers included for instance Qin Qing. According to Lie Zi·Tang Wen: “Qin Qing was a music teacher of a student named Xue Tan learned music. One day, the student thought he had already learned enough and decided to leave. Qin Qing let him go but sung a song with a voice vibrating the woods and dashing up to the sky on Xue Tan’s way back. After listening to the song, the student changed his mind and asked for staying for further learning.” This comes from a fable in chapter 5 of Tang Wen of Lie Zi. Lie Zi, a very important work of Taoists, was written in Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Periods. It was divided into 8 chapters: Tian Rui, Huang Di, Emperor Zhou Mu, Zhong Ni, Tang W en, Li Ming, yang Zhu, Shuo Fu. Each chapter consisted of several fables. From this story, two cues could be traced: one was that Qin Qing excelled in singing and had distinctive teaching methods; the other was that education on traditional vocal music had formed systematic methods.

## 4. The mature period and evolution of traditional vocal music in feudal society

### 4.1 Times of ancient song and dance - evolution of traditional vocal music in Qin and Han Dynasties, the Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasty

Traditional Chinese vocal music and folk music reached a peak in feudal society (from 221 B.C.). A musical agency named Rueful with more than 1000 musicians emerged in Han Dynasty. It functioned in organizing musicians to collect folk songs, compose songs, perform and make instrument. The establishment of this musical agency indicated that traditional vocal music of China had entered into a systematic and professional period. Traditional vocal music in this period was performed with accompaniment of dance, hence named as “times of dance and song”. [4]

#### 4.1.1 Traditional vocal music in Qin and Han Dynasty

Large-scale performance of song and dance was form of traditional vocal music in Qin and Han Dynasties (221-220B.C.). A singing style appeared in this period named “Xiang He Song”.

It rooted in folk people and was sung originally without accompaniment. Later, it developed into a new form that one sang with accompaniment from other three persons. In addition to accompaniment of instrument, the singer was required to beat irregularly a piece of rhythmical instrument. “Xiang He

Song” changed into “Xiang He Da Qu”, a large-scale performance with song and dance, in Han and Wei Dynasty. There were 15 kinds of “Xiang He Song” that had basic framework of performance with song and dance - three-section “A, B, A”. This indicated that vocal music of China had progressed remarkably and reached a new high, which was shown especially in appearance of narrative songs in Han Dynasty.

Singers at that period excelled in performing long narrative songs like Southeast fly the peacocks which contained 350 musical phrases. They performed with a bright, graceful and soulful voice, the one that voice only be achieved through long-term and tough training.

Besides Xiang He Song and other ballads, there were other musical forms in Han Dynasty, like Rao Song, Jiaojie Song, and Qin Song. Rao song, depriving from the northern folk music introduced by the Silk Road, was performed when there were activities relating to military, ceremony and fete. The requirement that male singers sing in chorus with accompaniment of instrument made it a prototype of large-scale symphony chorus of China, earlier than that (Cantata) of Europe more than 1000 years. Qin Song was sung with singer and instrument player being the same person. Celebrities like Sima Xiangru, Liu Xiang, Huan Tan, Cai Yi all liked to sing Qin Song and finally became musicians.

#### ***4.1.2 Traditional vocal music in the Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty, Southern and Northern Dynasties***

During The Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty, Southern and Northern Dynasty (220-589A.D.), Traditional vocal music was in a transitional period. For combination and exchange of traditional vocal music between different minority groups, some Buddhism songs from the Western Regions prevailed in China. Buddhists sang the song with a peaceful mood and a distinctive voice that was like a bell, leaving a mind and gentle tone lingering in a house. This singing style contributed a durable throat. Buddhism song was enlightenment to education of traditional vocal music of China.

#### ***4.1.3 Traditional vocal music in Sui and Tang Dynasty***

National unity came true when Sui Dynasty established in 581 A.D. From then on, traditional vocal music became remarkably prosperous being in a united nation. However, Sui Dynasty (581-618A.D.), a short period lasted only 37 years was replaced by Tang Dynasty (618-907A.D.) lasted for a long period of 300 years. During this period, especially in the prosperous 100 years of Zhen Guan and Kai Yuan Period, cultural accomplishment of the people reached an unprecedented high since the country laid solid material foundation for cultural development by prospering the whole nation.

As for traditional vocal music, appearances of folk music Quzi and Bianwen stimulated rise of singing arts and musical performance. Quzi and Bianwen were two basic footstones for traditional vocal music of China. Qu Zi referred to poetry before Song Dynasty and from then on, it referred to melody. Qu Zi a kind of rising folk music in Sui and Tang Dynasties, could be added with lyrics randomly, making it colorful in singing style. One example of it was Yang Liu Zhi (willow twig) which prevailed widely when Emperor Suiyang ruled the country. The latter, used for transmission of Buddhism in Buddhist temple, was a kind of zarzuela in which prose and verse came alternately. Usually, a Bianwen began with narration of a prose and then was followed by singing verse. It was a vocal form of Tang Dynasty.

Superior governors of Tang Dynasty loved and advocated music, which contributed a lot in development of musical culture. Hence, music education agencies, Jiao Fang and Li Yuan, were established. Li Yuan provided professional training on traditional vocal music. These musical agencies indicated that students of that period could receive systematic and professional training on traditional vocal music.

Numerous musicians who excelled in singing emerged in Sui and Tang Dynasty. They constituted the most famous group of musicians in history. Musicians, like Yong Xin (autonym: Xu Hezi), Zhang Honghong, Liu Caichun, Li Yin, were pioneers of vocal art in China.

Yong Xin (autonym: Xu Hezi), born in Ji Zhou (present Ji'an City of Jiangxi Province), was the most famous vocal musician. She distinguished herself by touching audiences with her voice and mood when she was singing.



*Figure 4: Yong Xin*

According to Record of Yue Fu, she was born in a farming family, and then was selected to sing in the Imperial Palace for her beauty and excellence in singing. Her singing scale was so broad that one day when Emperor Tangming sent musician Li Mo to flute as accompaniment, the flute broke when performance finished, since scale limitation of the flute was not as broad as that of Yong Xin. There was another story to tell in terms of her excellence in singing. One day when Emperor Xuanzhong held a banquet in the palace, noises of the crowds submerged the music. Emperor Xuanzhong ranged at the noise. Seeing this, eunuch Gao Lishi came over and gave his idea: Only Yong Xin could stop the noise. Having consent of Emperor Xuanzhong, Yong Xin walked elegantly to the stage, and amazingly, the noise stopped immediately. Everyone was lost in her beautiful voice. From this story we could see that mood was stressed in singing 1,500 years ago.

Another famous singer was Nian Nu (Tian Bao Period of Tang Dynasty), whose singing could compared with a chorus of 25 singers. As is recorded in poetry anthology Lianchang Poetry of Yuanzhen: “The emperor sent for Nian Nu, she made up quickly and arrived the palace. When she was singing, chorus of 25 singers could not compete with her voice.” We can judge from this story that skill of sound production was superb at that time. With no public address equipment, a singer without a correct and scientific way to produce resonance by no means could cooperate with a chorus of 25 singers.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### ***4.2 Chinese opera and folk arts - evolution of traditional vocal music in Song Dynasty, Yuan Dynasty, Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty***

Chinese opera refers to Chinese traditional drama. Like European opera and the living theater, Chinese opera tells stories through singing and dancing. As a kind of opera, Chinese opera has basic factors like performer, stage, poetry, dance, music, Daiyanti (refer to works from male author who describe behavior and psychology of a female by imitating the female). As Taiwan Scholar Zeng Yongyi considered: Chinese opera is a process of story telling, in which poetry is the center while music, dance, and acrobatics are added to it. Through telling, singing, making up and using representative prose, Chinese opera show literal and artistic features.<sup>[6]</sup>

Chinese folk art, also known as “zarzuela”, was a special art form that cannot found else where besides China. Zarzuela became mature in a shorter time than Chinese opera. Compared with Chinese opera, zarzuela focuses on telling and singing. A story is told by a central person without reprehensive prose.

##### ***4.2.1 Traditional vocal music in Song and Yuan Dynasties***

Chinese opera and Chinese folk art replaced the dominant position of song and dance in Song and Yuan Dynasty (960-1385A.D.). During the North Song Dynasty, industry and commerce developed rapidly; hence the appearance of city. To meet entertainment requirement of the urban people, a lot amusement buildings were established widely. Music for common citizens began to develop in a rapid speed and a large group of composers and poetry players who composed a great many works emerged. These works were composed according to specific principles and finally a divertimento form Chang Zhuan was created. Chang Zhuan was the most developed form of musical art and the most difficult type to sing. Qu Zi of the same tone consists of a divertimento which is performed by a divertimento player who beats drum privately with others fluting and beating percussion instrument as accompaniment.

Divertimento became mature and large-scale singing form Zhu Gong Diao was created. Zhu Gong Diao was one literal form of divertimento prevailing in Song and Yuan Dynasty. It connected Chang

Zhuan with different tones together to make a long one telling a long story. Zhu Gong Diao is performed by a divertimento player who beats drum privately with others fluting and beating percussion instrument as accompaniment. It created conditions for formation of Chinese folk arts which got closer to true drama for absorbing quintessence of Chang Zhuang and Zhu Gong Diao. Romance of the Western Chamber, one work of the famous Chinese folk arts, was performed with singing and dancing together, contributing a lot in pushing traditional Chinese vocal music to a new high.

In late period of Song Dynasty, Yuan Dynasty replaced it and established a united country. According to research, there appeared music forms like solo, antiphonal, unison and chorus. Famous singers in this period included Zhong Duxiu, Zhang Dehao, Zhu Lianxiu, Shun Shixiu, Mi Lihua (Hui minority).

Literati of Yuan Dynasty were in humble position and lived in villages where Chinese folk arts developed prosperously. Chinese folk arts, including dance, music, comedy and acrobatics, was divided into three parts: the first part Yan Duan was a opening part in which trifles were shown; the second part was the central part including story telling, divertimento, or dance; the third part San Duan, also known as Za Ban, Za Wang, or Ji He, included farce, comedy and sometimes acrobatics.<sup>[7]</sup>The three parts had no connection in content. Although Chinese folk arts inherited quintessence of the Song Dynasty in terms of script framework, system of Gong Diao and performance form, it was superior to that of the Song Dynasty. Chinese folk arts became a singing form like the western drama, a kind of comprehensive arts. Musical theories developed hand in hand with Chinese folk arts in Yuan Dynasty. Works relating to singing techniques like the origin of Ci Yuan from Zhang Yan, theories of singing from Yan Nanzhi'an appeared. Profound discussion on singing skills was shown in these works.

Yuan Qu, also appeared in this period, was easy to understand, for it showed livelihood of the people. Yuan Qu was divided into Za Ju (poetic drama) and Sanqu (a type of verse with tonal patterns modelled on tunes drawn from folk music). The former included Xiao Ling, Tao Qu, and Zhu Gong Diao. Xiao Ling was a single song.

From then on, traditional vocal music of China basically includes two parts: singing and Chinese opera. The establishment and development of Chinese opera marked traditional vocal music of China had entered into a new stage.

#### ***4.2.2 Traditional vocal music in Ming and Qing Dynasty***

China entered into late period of feudal society in Ming and Qing Dynasty. Traditional divertimento, folk song, Chinese opera, dance, and instrument constituted five musical features of Ming and Qing Dynasty. Traditional vocal music of this period had evolved into three forms: Chinese opera, Chinese folk arts and singing.

Drama-Prevailing of Chinese opera made it a popular music form in Ming and Qing Dynasty. Therefore, more performers, musicians of Chinese opera emerged. For instance, Wei Liangfu was a musician of Chinese opera in Ming Dynasty; Shen Jing was a theoretician of Chinese opera in Ming Dynasty; Wei Changsheng was a famous performer of Shaanxi opera. Structure and singing style continued to further development and became mature. Chinese opera was divided into four categories according to their styles and forms: Hai Yan style, Yu Yao style, Ge Yang style, Kun Shan style. Among them, Kun Shan style was the most widely prevailing one with the longest period of being preserved. In the middle of Qing Dynasty, a new opera, Beijing opera came into being. It absorbed quintessence of local opera and developed to be a distinctive one. Beijing opera as also known as Pi Huang style which included Xi Pi style and Er Huang style. Xi Pi style required a smooth and bright voice while Er Huang style a gentle voice.

Chinese folk arts-Divertimento was one of the prevailing forms of vocal music in Ming and Qing Dynasty. It developed to be remarkably perfect and mature. Forms of divertimento included: Gu He, Zi Di Shu, Xi He Da Gu, Li Hua Da Gu, Jing Yun Da Gu and Tan Ci.

Songs-Songs were abundant in Ming and Qing Dynasties, especially in the middle of Ming Dynasty. In terms of singing form, there were solo, antiphonal style and chorus. Literati collected widely and published many folk songs. For example, Gui Zhi Er and Shan Ge of Feng Menglong, collected more than 800 songs. Folk songs collected were abundant; few were with notes, however. These songs had distinctively local feature, and were melodious, making them easy to follow. Many folk songs, however, lost while many were preserved. The lost folk songs included Wei Shi Score (including more than 50 songs) of musician Wei Shuanghou and Dunhuang Music which was court music of Ming Dynasty.

Theories and techniques of traditional vocal music in Ming and Qing Dynasties became mature.

Composed by Xu Dachun of Qing Dynasty, *Yue Fu Chuan Sheng* was a work in which relations between voice and breath was discussed. He wrote: clear words, correct shape of a mouth, smooth breath, mood, and a ease throat are principles of singing.

## 5. Conclusion

If traditional Chinese vocal music and music education go further, we have to understand the culture, do more researches on the history and cherish the traditional essence. At the same time, only if the national vocal speech is professional and universal, it should develop continuously. In this way, the traditional Chinese vocal music will go further and be more scientific, systemic and consummate.

## References

- [1] Sun Jinan, *Concise Edition of General History of Chinese Music*, Shandong Education Press, 1993.
- [2] Xiu Linhai, *Historical Data of Chinese Music in Ancient Times*, World Book Press, 2000.
- [3] Yang Yinliu, *History of Chinese Music*, People's Music Press, 1981.
- [4] Xiu Hailin and Li Ji, *History and Aesthetics of Chinese Music*, Renmin University of China Press, 1999.
- [5] Li Xiaoler, *Singing Art of Chinese traditional vocal music*, Hunan Literature and Art Press, 2000.
- [6] Gao Tiankang, *Musical Knowledge Dictionary*, Gansu People Press, 1981.
- [7] Ding Shouhe, *Chinese Culture Dictionary*, Guangdong People Press, 1989.