

A Study on the Application of Chinese *XiQu* Vocal Techniques in the Opera "Daughter of the Party"

Li Xuemei, Yap Jin Hin*

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjong Malim,
Perak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The opera "Daughter of the Party", a masterpiece meticulously created by the Chinese General Political Department Opera Troupe in 1991 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, boasts profound artistic value and rich ideological connotations. This opera achieves a profound integration of ethnic musical elements and Chinese *XiQu* (Chinese traditional opera) vocal techniques, endowing the work with a strong local flavor and a rustic texture. Such integration significantly enhances the expressiveness of dramatic conflicts and emotional tension, successfully shaping vivid and multi-dimensional character portrayals. In terms of vocal techniques, it is manifested through the application of trill, *KuQiang*, and other vocal techniques of Chinese *XiQu*. This study uses practice-based research method and takes classic arias from this opera as examples to analyze the utilization of Chinese *XiQu* within the work and summarizes its vocal techniques, thereby providing opera enthusiasts with richer references for vocal performance.

Keywords: Chinese *XiQu*; "Daughter of the Party"; Application

INTRODUCTION

The story of the opera "Daughter of the Party" takes place in Jiangxi, China, during the Red Army's Long March resistance against enemy forces. Amidst the turmoil, a traitor emerges within the Communist Party, leading to the capture of Tian Yumei and seven other Communist Party members. A village elder heroically sacrifices himself to help Tian Yumei escape. After narrowly surviving, Tian Yumei fearlessly engages in a battle of wits and strength against the traitor, overcoming numerous hardships before ultimately eliminating the enemy. Later, while carrying out a mission to cover the retreat of guerrilla couriers, she bravely sacrifices herself to buy time for her comrades. Captured by the enemy, Tian Yumei remains resolute and unyielding, demonstrating unwavering revolutionary spirit. She meets her heroic end with the firm belief that the Communist revolution will prevail. Despite the significant differences in content and themes between Chinese *XiQu* (here referring to modern Chinese-style opera as distinct from traditional Chinese *XiQu*) and traditional Chinese *XiQu*, when it comes to vocal techniques, the performance of arias in Chinese opera has drawn upon the unique skills of traditional Chinese *XiQu*. The distinctive charm inherent in *XiQu*'s vocal techniques constitutes an advantage that other musical forms do not possess. Chinese opera extensively employs the vocal techniques of Chinese *XiQu* to portray characters, resulting in vivid and highly distinctive character depictions. This study adopts a practice-based research methodology to explore the application of traditional Chinese

XiQu elements and vocal techniques in the opera "Daughter of the Party".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wu (2021) points out that with the deepening of cultural exchanges between the East and the West, the vocal techniques of Western operas have also had a profound influence on Chinese opera arias. In terms of vocal, Chinese opera aria absorbed the breathing control, voice use and resonance techniques of Western opera, making the singing more scientific and standardized. The vocal techniques and performance styles in traditional Chinese *XiQu*, folk songs and other art forms provide rich artistic nourishment for opera arias. Based on the inheritance of tradition, opera aria focuses on the use of voice and the expression of emotion, showing the inner world and emotional changes of the characters through delicate musical treatment and tense vocal techniques. Huang (2022) thought that during the development of Chinese opera, composers have incorporated Chinese *XiQu* elements into opera compositions to enrich and express the story lines and emotions of the characters, and the absorption and utilization of Chinese *XiQu* vocal techniques in opera arias have enriched the expression of the works and provided unique styles. Ju (2006) views that Chinese opera absorbs Chinese *XiQu* techniques and styles in line with the aesthetic habits of Chinese audiences, and at the same time, the use, absorption of Chinese *XiQu* art has also made Chinese national opera gain great success and development. Li (2019) said that Chinese *XiQu* has a history of several hundred years and has a high status in China's music and culture system, and the charm of *Chinese XiQu* is incomparable to any form of music. In the art of Chinese *XiQu*, singing and acting are the most important basic skills. At the same time, when the audience appreciates the Chinese *XiQu* works, they will also focus on the singing and acting, so in the art of Xi Qu, the vocal has a high artistic status.

Chinese *XiQu* has developed over a long period of time with rich and unique styles. During the development of Chinese opera, composers have incorporated Chinese *XiQu* elements into their opera compositions to enrich and express the storylines and emotions of the characters. Chinese *XiQu* vocal techniques are absorbed and utilized in operatic arias, which enriches the expression of the work and provides a unique vocal technique. In the selected arias within "Daughter of the Party" use the Chinese *XiQu* vocal techniques, such as trill, *Ku Qiang* and so on.

RESEARCH METHOD

Silvia Gherardi (2009) expression that the theoretical proposal that knowledge should be defined as an activity, as a collective and distributed 'doing', led to its consideration as an activity situated in time and space, and therefore as taking place in work practices. Such practices therefore constituted the locus of learning, working and innovating; and these in their turn could be conceptualized as practical activities, as a collective bricolage enacted by those participating in a practice, mobilizing resources, using instruments, and employing a contingent and goal-directed rationality. The studies on these matters developed in the USA around the work of Wanda Orlikowski have been inspired by the concept of practice introduced by Giddens (1984). The appropriation of the concept of practice has continued in the intent to provide a theoretical lens through which to view knowledge in non-mentalist and anti-cognitive terms. In fact, practices do not stop at the boundaries of the organization, and they become a fruitful arena for empirical analysis of knowing-in-practice in pluralistic organizations, i.e. those with multiple objectives, diffused power and knowledge-based work (Denis et al. 2007).

Aziz, T. (2009) A valid starting point for delineating a model for practice-based research is to examine the nature of activities or processes undertaken as part of creative arts practice. Furthermore, the reflective process enabled me to shift my creative arts practice into the domain of practice-based research by providing a

mechanism for identifying and delineating specific dimensions of the art making process that could be articulated as academic research. Not all changes or innovations can be explained in practice-based terms; rather, there is a dynamic of innovation which is intrinsic to practices and consists in the constant refinement of the practice by its practitioners. This process is generated by the institutional work and by the normative accountability of practices. Someone people may say that practice is not simply situated action, nor is it only a system of activity, but something more multi-faceted; it answers questions like how people achieve the reproduction of intelligent action over and over again, and how good solutions became habits, how habits are sustained, how a normative orientation is maintained, and how attachment to practice is achieved.

Candy (2006) posits: “if research process is primarily based around making an artefact, the research could be said to be practice-based. In other words, Borgdorff (2012) describes the key in practice-based as the relationship between the practice (what can be shown, displayed, demonstrated, made) and the theoretical, verbal aspects. Some scholars regard the artistic component as sufficient proof of ability and degree of competence. In practice-based research, the researcher has to adapt to what his or her project needs. Unlike the Qualitative Methodology, there is no universal methodology. The methodology or strategy applied, depends on the choice of subject, the framing of the question and the goal.

From the aforementioned perspective on practice-based research, we can distill several key pieces of information: experience, practice, reflection, and (further) practice. Drawing on the viewpoints of multiple scholars and considering the actual circumstances of this study, the researcher posits that practice-based research is a form of practical inquiry grounded in experience. It involves continuous reflection during the course of practice, transforming issues from an unstable state to a stable one through a creative process. Consequently, it is evident that practice holds greater significance than theory and serves as the primary mode of employing practice-based research methods. The researcher in this study is a doctoral candidate in music with a certain degree of expertise in the vocal styles of Chinese *XiQu*. By building upon experience and practice, the researcher has summarized the vocal techniques of classic arias in "Daughter of the Party" through performance, thereby exemplifying a practice-based research approach. Continuous reflection and summarization have been undertaken to underscore the notion of deriving insights from practice.

FINDING

Through practical research, it has been discovered that the Chinese *XiQu* vocal ornamentation techniques, known as "*RunQiang*" (referring to the embellishments and subtle nuances in singing), are predominantly featured in this opera. *RunQiang* is a unique technique in Chinese *XiQu*, aimed at embellishing and polishing the vocal passages to render the performance more melodious and captivating, thereby enhancing the artistic expressiveness and emotional appeal of Chinese *XiQu* (Guo, 2019). Most *RunQiang* are not explicitly notated on the musical score; instead, they require performers to incorporate them based on their interpretation of the song and their professional expertise. This study adopts such an approach by marking the sections in the musical score where *RunQiang* should be added and performing them in concerts. Common types of *RunQiang* include trill, *Ku Qiang*, vibratos, and so on. In the classic aria studied in this research, the primarily employed vocal techniques are trill, *KuQiang*.

The Application of *Ku Qiang* Vocal Technique in Opera "Daughter of the Party"

Ku Qiang vocal technique is one of the most important and commonly used in Chinese *XiQu*. It enhances vocal expressiveness, allowing for more delicate and emotional expression. The use of *Ku Qiang* not only reveals the

character's profound inner feelings but also enriches the vocal timbre, making it fuller and more resonant. Similarly, in the opera *Daughter of the Party*, the aria :

Reborn in Blood and Fire (血里火里又还魂)

This aria is one of the classic excerpts in the opera, sung by soprano Tian Yumei. Yumei's complex emotions of exhilaration and determination after surviving a life-threatening ordeal. The incorporation of *Ku Qiang* vocal technique in high-pitched or forte sections enhances vocal penetration and dynamic layering, further emphasizing the character's intense emotional fluctuations. This excerpt is extremely rich in emotional expression; this excerpt appears at the end of the first scene of the whole play. It is the first aria of the protagonist Tian Yumei in the play. This excerpt expresses her grief for her dead comrades and also contains her cherishment and love for life. After a brief reflection, she is more convinced of her beliefs and is determined to contribute her strength to her comrades, comrades and the people. Tian Yumei cleverly used a lot of *Ku Qiang* in this aria.

The aria uses multiple *Ku Qiang* in a word with multiple sounds. where the composer sings multiple notes in one word mimics the effect of crying, to portray Tian Yumei's deep sorrow over the loss of her loved ones, applied of *Ku Qiang* here can further express the character's emotions. For example, the lyric "恩" (*en*) in mm.26-27, the lyric "人" (*ren*) in mm.43-46, the lyric "啊" (*a*) in mm.61-65, and the lyric "啊" (*a*) in mm.89-97 are all integrated with *Ku Qiang*, imitating the feeling of crying in the character's heart to express the grief in Tian Yumei's heart.

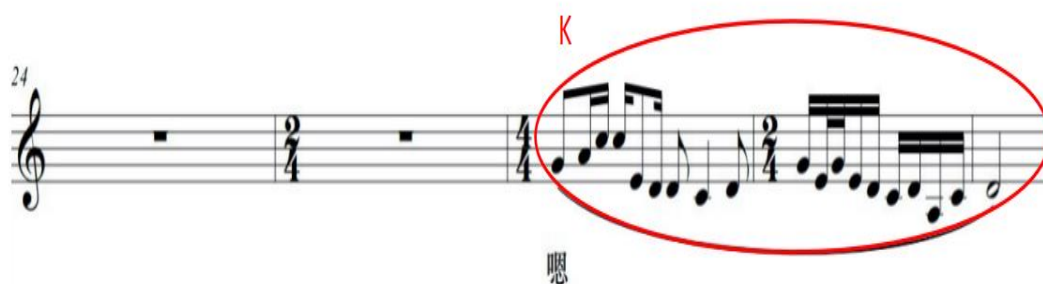


Figure 4.10 Reborn in Blood and Fire, mm.24-27. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in mm.26-27.



Figure 1 Reborn in Blood and Fire, mm.41-46. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in mm.43-46.



Figure 2 Reborn in Blood and Fire, mm.57-68. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in mm.61-65.

Thousands of Miles of Spring Fill our Homes (万里春色满家园)

In the opera, Tian Yumei's aria "Thousand of Miles of Spring fill our Homes" is very important for her vocal technique. This aria appears in act 6, the final scene of the opera. It is the longest and most technically demanding section of the entire production, serving as the emotional and dramatic climax. It portrays Tian Yumei's inner monologue before her sacrifice—facing threats and temptations from the enemy, she remains unwavering, fearless in the face of death. The piece features significant emotional fluctuations and a wide vocal range, requiring the performer to accurately convey the character's evolving emotions while adjusting vocal timbre accordingly. The performance must balance both bright and powerful tones with soft and delicate expressions. Mastery of vocal technique, combined with strong emotional control, is essential to deliver a layered and compelling interpretation.

It not only shapes the deep emotional level of Tian Yumei's character, but also highlights her inner complexity and struggle. Before the music turns to allegro in m.129, she uses *Ku Qiang* in the part where she recalls her beautiful life before she knows she will sacrifice herself. For example, the lyric "边" (*bian*) in m.29, "山" (*shan*) in m.61, and "田" (*tian*) in m.102, it is not difficult to see that the *Ku Qiang* in this aria is mostly integrated into the place where one word has multiple sounds, which deeply expresses the infinite attachment of the protagonist to her relatives and hometown when facing sacrifice, this emotional expression is more deeply sad.



Figure 3 Thousand of Miles of Spring fill our Homes, mm.26-31. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in



Figure 4 thousands of Miles of Spring fill our Homes, mm.60-64. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in m.63

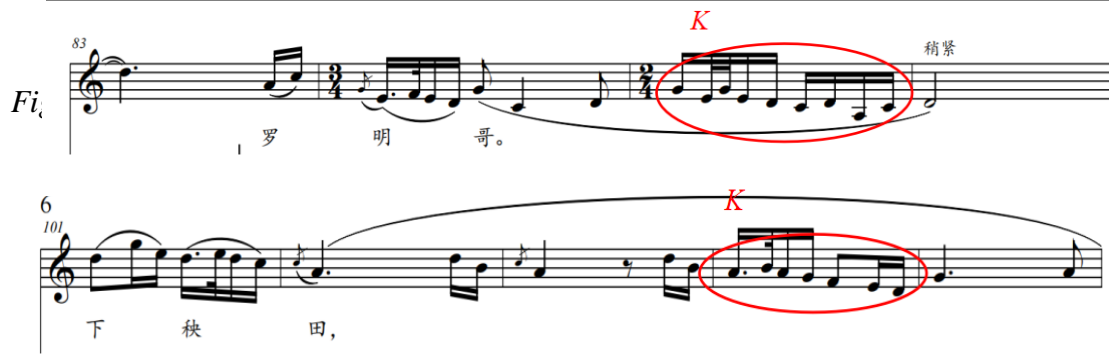


Figure 6 Thousand of Miles of Spring fill our Homes, mm.101-105. The application of "Ku Qiang" (K) in m.104

The Vocal Techniques of *Ku Qiang*

The vocal method of *Ku Qiang*, which is mainly reflected in the interpretation of multiple pronunciations of one word. It deeply expresses Tian Yumei's nostalgia for her past life and her reluctance to leave her hometown and relatives. First, the support and control of breath. Breath is particularly important in crying singing, the singer needs to maintain stable breath support to ensure the continuity and control of the tone. The breath should change naturally with the ups and downs of the melody, such as increasing the support strength in the high notes and incorporating chest resonance in the low notes, so that the voice is both thick and infectious.

The second is the change of timbre. The key to *Ku Qiang* lies in the subtle change of timbre. When singing, need to add slight breath and vibration to make the voice full of emotional tension. It is also necessary to find the resonance point of emotion based on "Heng". When singing, the sound should be concentrated in the nasal cavity and head cavity, and a timbre effect similar to *Ku Qiang* can be created through slight vibration. When speaking, the mouth should be kept loose, and the feeling of yawning should be simulated when inhaling to create sufficient resonance space for the sound. Especially in the part where one word has multiple sounds, each sound should maintain a unified resonance position, while reflecting the progression of emotions, so that the audience can feel the inner fluctuations of the character.

Lastly, the expression of emotion can be combined with the technique of *Ku Qiang* in a clip where the effect of sobbing needs to be expressed. Through the intermittent nature of the skipping and the delicate changes in timbre, simulate the emotional state of sobbing. Pay attention to the strength and time allocation of the skipping notes, and keep the same rhythm with the overall melody to avoid being too hard. Real voice and chest resonance in the low register In the bass part of the weeping voice, you can appropriately incorporate chest resonance and add the proportion of true voice. Such treatment can make the voice more heavy and real, especially when expressing the attachment to relatives and hometown, it can naturally pour out the character's grief.

The Application of Trill Vocal Technique in Opera "Daughter of the Party"

In Chinese *Xi Qu*, trill vocal technique is often combined with appoggiaturas to enhance musical expressiveness. Several passages in the selected operatic arias utilize this approach, where the added appoggiaturas are not explicitly marked in the score by the composer but are instead incorporated spontaneously by the singer based on their interpretation of the piece. This practice grants singers greater freedom, allowing them to engage in a secondary level of musical creation, enriching the music with depth and

personalized expression. In practice, singers often introduce single or double appoggiaturas, with the most common approach being the addition of a second or third interval appoggiatura before the main note.

During practice, singers can select a principal note and insert a brief appoggiatura before or after it to improve melodic fluidity and expressiveness. It is crucial to keep the appoggiatura's duration short to avoid disrupting the stability of the main note. Meanwhile, when practicing trill on the main note, the vibratory frequency should remain even and stable, adding depth and emotional nuance to the voice. For example:

Thousands of Miles of Spring Fill our Homes (万里春色满家园)

This aria appears in Act 6, the final scene of the opera. It is the longest and most technically demanding section of the entire production, serving as the emotional and dramatic climax. It portrays Tian Yumei's inner monologue before her sacrifice—facing threats and temptations from the enemy, she remains unwavering, fearless in the face of death. The piece features significant emotional fluctuations and a wide vocal range, requiring the performer to accurately convey the character's evolving emotions while adjusting vocal timbre accordingly. The performance must balance both bright and powerful tones with soft and delicate expressions. Mastery of vocal technique, combined with strong emotional control, is essential to deliver a layered and compelling interpretation.



Figure 7 thousand of Miles of Spring fill our Homes, mm.33-37. The application of trill (T) in m.37

The Principal Roles of Trill Application in the Aria: At the level of emotional expression, the amplitude and velocity of trills function as emotional barometers: trills with heightened intensity are particularly effective in conveying anger and despair. By navigating listeners through the ebbs and flows of sound, trills deepen their engagement with the plot's twists and turns, thereby intensifying the drama's immersive quality and emotional resonance. When Tian Yumei is arrested and incarcerated, her vocal performance is predominantly characterized by restrained trills with a narrow amplitude. Despite the subtle yet unwavering pitch variations, these trills evoke the oppressive weight of iron chains, not only depicting her physical suffering but also underscoring her stoic resilience and unwavering spirit in the face of torture. This makes the tenet that "a Communist's resolve is unbreakable" palpable through the very texture of her voice. In terms of emotional conveyance, trills adeptly capture the nuanced complexities of the character's inner psyche. When Tian Yumei reflects on her fallen husband and frets over her young daughter, her vocal lines are interspersed with delicate,

rapid trills. These mournful undulations mimic the sound of stifled sobbing, translating the revolutionary's blend of steely determination and tender sentiment into tangible auditory symbols. Conversely, when rallying the masses with the exhortation to "take up arms and follow the Party," trills merge with staccato notes to create a rhythmically robust pattern. Each trill resonates like a drumbeat, transforming personal sorrow and indignation into the collective might of resistance and enabling the audience to perceive the inspiring force of revolutionary faith through the vibrations of sound. Furthermore, the fusion of trills with ethnic musical elements enhances the work's historical authenticity. The amalgamation of the sobbing intonations characteristic of Shaanxi folk songs with trills endows Tian Yumei's accusations with a pronounced sense of regional realism.

The Vocal Technique of Trill

First of all, Singers need strong breath support, slow trill requires a smooth flow of breath, soft and continuous control, pay attention to the delicate control of the breath, so that the vibration of the vocal folds evenly and naturally. When singing, the breath should be like a continuous silk, throughout the whole, for the slow trill to provide stable power, to avoid the sound because of the breath intermittent and lose coherence. Fast trill, the breath needs to be more dynamic, but still need to maintain stability. Higher frequency trill of the vocal cords can be supported by rapid abdominal contraction and relaxation, ensuring tension and fluidity of the sound. When practicing, try glissando on the dominant and its upper and lower semitones to increase breath flexibility and control of pitch changes.

Secondly, the tone of the voice. When singing slow trill, the voice should be soft and ductile, through the use of head resonance, so that the sound is full of warmth and sense of hierarchy. Pay attention to maintain the unity of the tone, so that the trill natural and not hard, especially in the bass, to increase the chest resonance, to ensure that the sound is round and full. When singing fast trill, the voice needs to be light and elastic, by adjusting the tension of the vocal folds to make the trill frequency uniform, while avoiding too much force or too sharp tone. Focus on the flexibility of the voice, to ensure that the fast trill in the speed of the increase at the same time, to maintain clarity and fluency.

Finally, the integration of trill and emotion Although trill vocal technique is centered on technique, the integration of emotion is vital, and this directly affects the way in which the vocal technique is expressed. Singing slow trill expresses the vast natural scenery and the character's inner peace and tenderness through delicate timbre and stable breath. Singing fast trill should be a seamless combination of technique and emotion, so that the trill sounds both natural and infectious. When practicing, you can sing at a slow speed and gradually increase the speed to ensure the precise transmission of pitch and emotion in the fast trill.

When singing, the trill needs to rely on a smooth breath and stable voice position to achieve. Keeping the breath long and stable through abdominal breathing provides strong support for the trill. The feeling of singing should be like drawing out the ripples of fluctuation evenly with the voice, showing delicate and smooth changes. The frequency of the trill should be slow, generally controlled at about 3-5 times per second, in order to highlight the unique lyricism of the song.

In the operatic excerpts selected for this study, the use of Chinese *XiQu* and trill techniques is very common, but basically slow trills are the main ones, so only a few representative ones are selected for illustration, and the basic points of singing can be mastered by practicing them many times as in the examples listed above. However, if any of the techniques of the operatic excerpts are detached from the opera itself, these techniques

will seem to be of little significance. Only when combined with the specific plot, character, background and other factors can these techniques better serve the performance of the operatic roles.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the opera "Daughter of the Party" transcends a mere superficial incorporation of traditional *XiQu* vocal and performance elements into its structure. Instead, it orchestrates a creative metamorphosis firmly rooted in the fundamental tenets of art, culminating in a seamless and profound amalgamation of "national essence" and "dramatic intensity". At the vocal level, the opera ingeniously expands upon *XiQu* vocal techniques, including *KuQiang*, trill, and sustained notes. Sobbing tones, originally confined to the realm of lamentation, undergo a transformation, achieving emotional elevation from sorrow to solemnity through strategic pitch expansion and nuanced breath control, thereby emerging as a quintessential acoustic emblem of revolutionary heroism. Trill, previously relegated to the role of "melodic ornamentation" in Chinese *XiQu*, are reimagined as "auditory narratives" of inner conflict, with their varied forms (smooth or abrupt, ascending or descending) across different characters' arias constructing a musical imagery system that vividly contrasts virtue and vice. By employing Chinese *XiQu* elements as a conduit, "Daughter of the Party" firmly anchors revolutionary historical narratives within the aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese audiences, while simultaneously surmounting the barriers of regional cultural specificity. This approach offers invaluable creative insights for the development of Chinese opera, particularly in striking a harmonious balance between "tradition and modernity", "nationality and universality". It advocates for the extraction of "emotional codes" from the "formal genes" of indigenous art, thereby enabling these elements to resonate with and serve broader human spiritual themes.

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