

Bridging East and West: A Literature Review of Chinese Art Song Studies in the Global Context

Yangyi Mao^{1,2}

¹*Institute of Research, Royal Northern College of Music, 124 Oxford Road, Manchester, United Kingdom*

²*Department of Vocal Performance, Zhejiang University of Media and Communications, 998 Xueyuan Street, Hangzhou, China*

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Abstract: The Chinese Art Song (CAS) is a genre of vocal music that blends Chinese cultural heritage with Western musical techniques. It arises from cultural exchange, incorporating classical and modern Chinese poetry, and traditional musical elements like pentatonic scales and folk melodies, alongside Western harmonic and structural practices, such as piano accompaniment. This fusion reflects a balance between Eastern and Western influences, creating a form that embodies literary expression, emotional depth, and cultural identity. In this document, we review works to draw the relationship between music and poetry in Chinese Art Song from history, the composers' biographies, art characteristics, and interpretation of major elements in it. Thus, I divide them into four categories: the historical evolution of Chinese Art Song; studies of specific composers or poets; analyses of the musical and literary characteristics; exploration of vocal interpretation.

1. Introduction

The art song is a genre whose roots can be traced back to Germany in the late 18th century, and is defined as a harmonious fusion of poetry and music, predominantly composed for voice and piano. It found its way to China in the 1920s(Tyan, 2003)[1]. In this review, we focus on Chinese Art Song from historical, political, literary, and musical perspectives between 1920 and 1989, discussing the challenges and pointing out some promising future work.

In the past thirty years, Chinese Art Song have garnered increasing attention within both academic and musical communities. As a genre that combines traditional Chinese poetry with modern musical forms, it reflects both the preservation of cultural heritage and the pursuit of artistic innovation. Several sources discussing Chinese Art Song have been published in the West, with over twenty doctoral dissertations written in non-Chinese languages over the past three decades. In this document, we review works to draw the relationship between music and poetry in Chinese Art Song from history, the composers' biographies, art characteristics, and interpretation of major elements in it. Thus, I divide them into four categories: the historical evolution of Chinese Art Song; studies of specific composers or poets; analyses of the musical and literary characteristics; exploration of vocal interpretation.

In the review, I consider Chinese Art Song to denote songs composed for voice and piano with

settings of classical Chinese poetry. The deliberate use of classical Chinese poetry in their art songs, as it signifies a conscious effort to revive an aspect of China's cultural heritage.

2. Historical Evolution of Chinese Art Songs

The first category primarily investigates the historical evolution of Chinese art songs, including analyses of their positioning and developmental direction, historical tracing of development, and studies of their origins.

2.1 Positioning and Developmental Direction

Peng Genfa (2007) provides insights into the broad and narrow definitions of Chinese Art Song, with a particular focus on distinguishing them from other vocal genres [2]. Wang Yuhui (2023) defines Chinese Art Song as a musical form that reflects the diversity of Chinese culture and national artistry [3]. By broadening its scope, the author emphasises its role in expressing cultural identity, national sentiment, and poetic aesthetics. Additionally, Liu Lihui (2020) positions modern Chinese Art Song as a genre that blends "innovation and tradition" by retaining classical elements such as philosophical symbolism, lyrical expression, and the principle of musical poetry, while integrating the style of Chinese classical poetry with Western musical styles and introducing new structural patterns and expressive techniques, which illustrates this genre's characteristics [4].

Yue Li (2015) highlights challenges in Chinese Art Song, including the decrease in the quantity of composition, limited dissemination, and a disconnect from traditional roots [5]. Dai (1998) attributes these issues to conceptual confusion, simplistic accompaniment, and inadequate understanding of vocal and linguistic nuances [6]. The scarcity of Chinese Art Song compositions is debated, with limited dissemination and public unfamiliarity contributing to this perception despite a substantial repertoire. Yue proposes that guiding public aesthetic preferences can enhance the acceptance of art songs [5]. This can be achieved by incorporating new musical elements and diverse creative styles to reflect contemporary artistic trends, alongside enhancing the integration of lyrics, melody, and accompaniment. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of lyrical content is emphasised as essential for improving both the quality and innovative potential of compositions. While existing literature primarily analyses the direction and innovation of art songs, Yue's framework distinguishes itself by providing actionable strategies for their modernisation. However, the claim of scarcity in Chinese Art Song compositions remains debatable, as the number of new compositions has been significant in recent years. I believe that, despite an extensive repertoire, unfamiliarity among the public due to limited dissemination has led to an inaccurate impression that there are only a few songs composed as opposed to the actual substantial volume of works.

In *Four Reflections on the Development Direction of Chinese Art Songs*, Cheng Long (2014) takes the view that composing Chinese Art Song with lyrics based on classical poetry and cultivating a distinctive "national style" can enhance cultural influence [7]. Promoting national artistic achievements and fostering cultural confidence on an international stage is recognized as a significant developmental strategy for Chinese Art Song, emphasising their role in showcasing China's cultural heritage to the world.

2.2 Historical Tracing of Development

From the emergence of arguably the first art song in 1920 to the present day, Chinese Art Song have a history of over one hundred years. Academic studies encompass both the entire developmental span up to the present day while establishing specific epochs within this roughly 100-year period. Zeng Guanghai (2014) identifies three phases in the development of Chinese Art

Song from the 1920s onward, based on creation context, stylistic characteristics, and artistic impact [8]. He analysed those representative works that reflect the essence of their era through musical expression and influenced future generations to trace changes in compositional and stylistic elements. Zhang Jinli(2006) explores the origins and evolution of Chinese Art Song through historical records and folkloric materials, offering insights into their contemporary revival [9].

Zhang Tieyi's (2019) article *The First Generation of Chinese Art Song* analyses the evolution of Chinese Art Song, focusing on the first generation of composers, their styles, cultural backgrounds, and impact on the genre [10]. Chaloupkov a Lenka(2020) considers the period from 1919 to 1937, a period marked by the emergence of a national style, even though influenced by Western Art Song through cultural traditions and social changes [11]. Chen Yong's (2023) thesis, *A Brief History of Modern Chinese Art Song*, reviews the development and characteristics of early Chinese Art Song from the 1920s to the 1940s, suggesting that historical insights could guide further development of the genre for composers of today [12].

2.3 The Origins

Most scholars trace the origins of art songs to late 18th-century Germany, noting that the genre only developed a Chinese national style after its introduction in the early 20th century through the efforts of pioneering composers such as Xiao Youmei, Qing Zhu, and Zhao Yuanren, who received Western education. This development, driven by the transformative May Fourth Movement of 1919 heightened the fervour among young Chinese to study Western music, and can be traced further back to Chinese elites' earlier exposure to Western music in Treaty Ports, missionary schools, and social gatherings. Gradually, the genre merged with local culture and societal influences, eventually evolving into what is now recognized as Chinese Art Song. An alternative view by some scholars such as Chi Mei-Fung Agnes Kang (1996) and Hu Zhe(2023) suggests that Chinese Art Song originated much earlier, as poetry and music were combined in China over 3,000 years ago [13][14]. To accurately define and further investigate these songs' development, I argue here that research should explore both ancient Chinese poetic-musical traditions as well as the more recent Western influences while distinguishing Chinese Art Song theoretically from Western Art Song.

Both Chi (1996) and Hu(2023) tend to consider Chinese Art Song to be rooted in ancient musical culture, analyzing the relationship between music and poetry in early Chinese music, which, they argue, established a profound cultural and artistic foundation for the genre [13][14]. The *Oxford Handbook of Music in China and the Chinese Diaspora*, edited by Yu Hui and Jonathan P. J. Stock(2023), is a valuable resource for the study of Chinese Art Song as it describes the evolution of ancient Chinese music and it covers the development of key historical, philosophical, and musical sources [15].

Cui Canjingjing(2021) argues that through historical processes and examples of cultural integration, Chinese Art Song demonstrates a clear influence from Western music in its form, harmony, and content, supporting the view that the genre's origins are significantly rooted in Western influences [16]. Xu Jing (2023) studies the impact of German composer Ellinor Valesby (1894-1969) on Qing Zhu, considered the founder of Chinese Art Song, by analyzing how Valesby's works integrate both Chinese and Western elements in text setting, form, and musical texture [17]. Valesby's approach introduced new musical expression for Chinese poetry, exemplifying a fusion of Eastern and Western music and laying a crucial foundation for the development of the Chinese Art Song genre.

3. Literature about Specific Composers or Particular Poets

3.1 Selected Composers and their Works

Notable literature includes Chu Katherine, and Petrus Juliet's groundbreaking book *Singing in Mandarin* (2020), which references 50 composers and their works from Chinese mainland, Taiwan China, and Hong Kong China from 1920 onwards [18]. This work covers a broad range of compositions and composers, as well as diction, pronunciation, tone, and translation of the poetry, all of which serve as a valuable reference tool.

In her article, *The Art Songs of Huang Zi: A Selective Study*, Lin Yanyan (2020) introduced ten works by Huang Zi to Western singers through text translation, Pinyin annotation, and textual analysis, highlighting Huang's alignment of melody with poetic meaning and his fusion of Western techniques with Chinese elements [19]. However, her study focuses more on text interpretation and lacks in-depth analysis of musical structure, harmonic language, and the interplay between music and poetry, limiting its overall analytical depth. Izquierdo Arturo Irisarri and Yang Hon-Lun's (2023) study on Tan Xiaolin's art songs reveals how Tan integrated elements of personal and national identity into his compositions [20]. He aimed to develop a distinct musical voice that merged Chinese and Western musical styles, which reflected his commitment to cultural authenticity while innovating within the art song genre.

3.2 Pieces based on the work of specific Poets

Chinese Art Song composers often draw on works by particular poets from the Tang and Song dynasties. Jin and Ma (2014) analyze works inspired by Tang and Song dynasty poets, particularly Li Bai, revealing the influence of classical Chinese poetry on artistic expression [21]. Additionally, there is research on art songs inspired by the works of the Song poet Su Shi. Chen Ying's (2021) doctoral study focuses on art songs from the 1920s to the 1940s based on Su Shi's poetry, outlining their characteristics, contexts, and artistic expression [22]. Deng Haipeng(2024) further analyses how these compositions convey the emotions and imagery of Su Shi's poetry through music and discusses how performers can express the poet's sentiments through their interpretation of the lyrics and music [23]. More research on individual composers and their poetic inspirations is needed which could reveal how Chinese Art Song blends personal, cultural, and national identities.

4. Analysis of the Musical and Literary Characteristics

The third category involves analysing the musical and literary elements of works, including musical characteristics, the interplay between poetry and music, and the integration of Chinese and Western musical and cultural elements.

4.1 Analysis of Musical Characteristics

Relevant references include Cui (2021), which provides an in-depth musical analysis of early composers' works, with a particular focus on structure and accompaniment to reveal their compositional styles [16]. Tyan Jaan-Ay (2003) studies 15 selected works, investigating aspects such as melody, rhythm, harmonic structure, form, and accompaniment [1]. Chu and Petrus (2020) also analyze musical characteristics, however, due to the large number of works covered, they provide a more selective analysis, focusing on key excerpts from each piece [18].

4.2 Analysis of Poetry-Music Culture

Hu Dongzhi's groundbreaking dissertation *The Research on Chinese Lieder Singing from the Perspective of Chinese Poetics* (2019), offers a poetic perspective on art songs that utilises various ancient poems [24]. He analyses imagery, artistic conception, and poetic meter in Chinese Art Song, illustrating how composers integrate poetic elements into musical form, rhythm, and melody [24]. I have drawn much inspiration from this work for my own study. Hu's goal is to provide vocal performers with a more systematic approach to interpreting songs, enhancing the national character and cultural depth of Chinese Art Song in musical expression.

Jiao Bolin (2023) examines the historical and artistic characteristics of Chinese Art Song based on classical poetry through the lens of poetic and musical culture while tracing the evolution of poetry-music integration in China [25]. Wu Rong(2013) highlights the enduring resonances between poetry and music in Chinese Art Song, shaped by ancient cultural influences. In modern Chinese Art Song, both performers and composers continue to draw from this rich heritage, maintaining the close interplay between poetry and music [26].

However, much of the existing literature overlooks the background of songs and texts, as well as their social and historical contexts. My research addresses these gaps by exploring the intersection of poetic and musical traditions, providing a framework to deepen understanding of Chinese Art Song's evolution and interdisciplinary nature.

4.3 Analysis of the Integration of Chinese-West Musical Elements

Hallis Xiang Chen(1995) investigates Chinese Art Song from 1912 to 1949, analyzing four key musical elements: Chinese folk music, traditional opera, ancient melodies, and Western Art Song influences, in turn revealing how these elements integrate through compositional practice [27]. Huang Ze(2023) highlights Tan Xiaolin's harmonic evolution from pentatonic-based techniques in his early works to later fusions of his teacher Paul Hindemith's methods with national elements, achieving "Modern and Traditional" and "Western and national" expression that advanced the independent development of Chinese music through East-West integration [28].

Hoi-Yan Wong (2011) focuses on how Chinese composer Luo Zhongrong developed and applied twelve-tone techniques in his compositions, analyzing his innovative integration of twelve-tone rows with the pentatonic scale to create works with distinctive Chinese musical characteristics [29]. Zhang Wen (2012) analyzes Chen Yi's fusion of traditional Chinese scales, rhythms, and vocal techniques with Western modern harmonies, achieving a unique blend of Eastern and Western musical elements [30].

5. Exploration of vocal interpretation

The fourth category delves into interpretation, primarily analyzing aspects such as vocal technique, singing style, and interpretive perspective. Tyan (2003) provides vocal guidance for non-Chinese-speaking singers, with a focus on pronunciation techniques, text comprehension, and accurate emotional expression, supported by detailed phonetic symbols and pronunciation guidance [1]. A more frequently cited study, Huang Lu's (2020) doctoral dissertation "A Study of the Performance of Chinese Art Songs Based on Classical Poetry" (2020) from the China Conservatory of Music, explores the relationship between vocal techniques and stylistic expression in classical poetry-based Chinese Art Song [31]. She introduces scientific vocal methods to the traditional Chinese singing style, proposing principles for interpreting Chinese Art Song as " (1) Emphasizing pitch accuracy; (2) Utilizing pharyngeal resonance in singing; (3) Articulating vowels (yùn mǔ) within the pharyngeal space and refining consonants (shēng mǔ) with lip movement for clear

diction and a full, resonant tone.” [31]. Liu Qian (2013) explores vocal techniques for Chinese Art Song which draws from Mandarin phonetics and traditional opera, establishing a special style for singing ancient poetry [32]. Meng Zhuo(2018) proposes innovative performance concepts, which emphasise cultural identity, artistic depth, and tonal richness, offering new theoretical and practical perspectives for the interpretation of Chinese Art Song [33].

6. Conclusions

This review systematically summarises existing research on Chinese Art Song, categorising it into four key areas: historical evolution, composer-specific studies, analysis of musical and literary features, and vocal interpretation. This review provides a foundation for future interdisciplinary research and practical initiatives that could enhance the global visibility and understanding of Chinese Art Song, ultimately contributing to its integration into international vocal stage.

The interplay of historical evolution, composers, musical-poetic integration, and vocal interpretation underscores the Chinese Art Song’s complexity. However, gaps remain in addressing its social and historical contexts, global underrepresentation, and the lack of frameworks for non-Chinese singers. This research will fill these gaps by developing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates historical, cultural, and analytical perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding and broader appreciation of Chinese Art Song.

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