

THE SINGING TECHNIQUE OF LI DONGPING IN GUANGXI'S NIU GE FOLK OPERA: A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Qiuyan Zhu¹, Tawanchai Suanmonta²

College of Music, Mahasarakham University¹⁻²
China,¹ Thailand²

Email: qiuyan.zhu.msu@gmail.com,¹ tawanchai.s@msu.ac.th²

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Abstract

Niu Ge Folk Opera, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Guangxi province, serves as a vibrant tapestry of local narratives, customs, and beliefs. Ms. Li Dongping, a luminary within this tradition, captivates audiences with her emotive delivery and profound musicality. This study investigates Li Dongping's singing technique in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances within the cultural and historical context of Guangxi, shedding light on her contributions' profound cultural and historical significance. Through a multidisciplinary research approach drawing upon cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, this research elucidates Ms. Li's mastery of traditional singing techniques and the enduring relevance of Niu Ge Folk Opera as a vital component of Guangxi's cultural identity. Field observations, interviews, and document analysis form the basis of data collection, providing valuable insights into Ms. Li's artistry and the context of Niu Ge Folk Opera. Thematic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) facilitate the interpretation of data, revealing Ms. Li's nuanced approach to breath control, vocalization, and character portrayal. The findings underscore the importance of preserving traditional art forms and celebrating the role of individual performers in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By fostering dialogue and collaboration between practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts, this research promotes cultural diversity and exchange while enriching our understanding of Guangxi's cultural landscape.

Keywords: Chinese Opera; Singing technique; Guangxi; Cultural heritage

Introduction

Niu Ge Folk Opera, a venerable tradition steeped in the cultural heritage of Guangxi province in southern China, serves as a vibrant tapestry of local narratives, customs, and beliefs (Cai & Dunn, 2020; Zhang, 2024). Within this rich artistic landscape, the singing prowess of performers like Ms. Li Dongping shines brightly, captivating audiences with her emotive delivery and profound musicality. In this article, we embark on a scholarly exploration of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique within the broader cultural and historical milieu of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition. Through a meticulous analysis of her vocal performance, we aim to unravel the intricacies of her artistry, shedding light on the profound significance of her contributions to this esteemed art form (Li'an & Yodwised, 2022; Xin & Roongruang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhao & Sornyai, 2024).

Nestled amidst verdant landscapes and vibrant cultural diversity, Guangxi province has long been a crucible of traditional arts and folk expressions. At the heart of its cultural tapestry lies Niu Ge Folk Opera, a distinctive form of performing arts that reflects the rhythms of rural life, the ethos of community, and the spirit of resilience ingrained in the region's collective consciousness. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, Niu Ge Folk Opera has evolved as a living repository of Guangxi's cultural heritage, serving as a platform for storytelling, moral instruction, and communal celebration (Leong, 2016; Head, 2022).

Ms. Li Dongping emerges as a luminary within the constellation of Niu Ge Folk Opera performers, renowned for her exceptional vocal prowess and nuanced interpretation of traditional repertoire. With a decade-long career, Li has honed her craft through dedicated practice, mentorship under esteemed masters, and a deep immersion in the cultural milieu of Guangxi. Her performances, marked by exquisite tonal control, emotional depth, and stylistic versatility, have garnered acclaim from audiences and scholars alike, positioning her as a custodian of Guangxi's intangible cultural heritage.

Despite the recognition accorded to Ms. Li Dongping as a preeminent figure in Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition, there remains a gap in scholarly understanding regarding the specific dimensions of her singing technique. While existing research has examined broader aspects of Niu Ge Folk Opera and its cultural significance, there is a dearth of focused inquiry into the nuances of individual performers' vocal performances (Stock, 2003). As such, a pressing need arises for a comprehensive analysis that delves into Ms. Li Dongping's vocal technique, elucidating the intricacies of her artistry and its

broader implications for the preservation and revitalization of Niu Ge Folk Opera.

This study holds significant implications for traditional Chinese opera scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts. By elucidating the intricacies of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique, researchers can gain valuable insights into the aesthetic principles, performance conventions, and cultural resonances inherent in Niu Ge Folk Opera (Wu et al., 2019; Chung, 2022). Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation by highlighting the role of individual performers in safeguarding and transmitting traditional art forms across generations. Ultimately, a comprehensive analysis of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique pays homage to her artistic contributions and underscores the enduring relevance of Niu Ge Folk Opera as a vital component of Guangxi's cultural identity (Luo, 2021).

Research Objectives

1.To investigate the singing technique of Li Dongping in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances within the cultural and historical context of Guangxi.

Literature Reviews

Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera has been extensively studied in scholarly literature, providing insights into its cultural significance and historical development. Li's work (2014) explores the characteristics and value of Pingnan Niu Ge Folk Opera, offering foundational knowledge about the art form's unique attributes. Dongliang Ma's research (2010) delves into the influence of traditional social culture on the contemporary dissemination of Niu Ge Folk Opera, shedding light on its evolving relevance in modern society.

Historical records such as the "Chinese Opera Records: Guangxi Volume" (Editorial Group of Tengxian Niu Ge Folk Opera Journal, 1986) provide valuable context for understanding the evolution of Niu Ge Folk Opera over time. Jie Quan's study (2015) focuses on preserving and transmitting Niu Ge Folk Opera as an intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the challenges practitioners face in safeguarding this tradition. Additionally, Mingming Wang's exploration of anthropology (2002) offers a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural dynamics underlying the practice of Niu Ge Folk Opera singing techniques.

While these studies offer valuable insights into the broader landscape of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera, there remains a notable gap in research focusing

specifically on the singing technique of individual performers within this tradition. This research addresses this gap by conducting a focused analysis of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique within the cultural and historical context of Guangxi.

Drawing upon theories of cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, this research employs a multidisciplinary approach to analyze Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique in Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus informs our understanding of how Li's embodied experiences and cultural background shape her performance style and vocal expression (Bourdieu, 1986).

Additionally, Richard Schechner's performance theory provides insights into the performative dimensions of Li's singing technique, considering how her interactions with audiences and fellow performers influence her expressive choices on stage (Schechner, 1988). Moreover, Merriam's anthropological perspective on music offers a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural meanings embedded within Niu Ge Folk Opera singing techniques (Merriam, 1964).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research aims to comprehensively analyze Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique, illuminating her performance's cultural and historical significance within the broader context of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances within the cultural and historical context of Guangxi. Qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring complex phenomena such as performing arts, allowing for in-depth analysis of individual experiences and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. Data Collection: The data collection process takes center stage as we unravel the intricacies of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique in Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera. Through various methods such as field observation, interviews, and document analysis, we seek to capture the essence of her performance, gathering invaluable insights into her vocal expression and stage presence, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Data Collection

Data Collection Method	Description
Field Observation	Extensive field observations of Niu Ge Folk Opera performances featuring Ms. Li Dongping as a lead performer to gather insights into her singing technique and stage presence.
Interviews	Conducting semi-structured interviews with Ms. Li Dongping to explore her perspectives on singing technique, artistic influences, and experiences as a performer in Guangxi's opera scene.
Document Analysis	Analyzing historical documents, scholarly articles, and archival materials related to Niu Ge Folk Opera and Ms. Li Dongping's career to contextualize her performance within cultural frameworks.

2. **Data Analysis:** With a wealth of data gathered through meticulous collection methods, the next crucial step in our investigation is data analysis. Through thematic analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and historical contextualization, we aim to distill the raw information into meaningful patterns and interpretations, shedding light on the nuances of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Data Analysis

Data Analysis Method	Description
Thematic Analysis	Analyzing data from observations and interviews to identify recurring patterns and themes related to Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique, including vocal timbre and emotional expression.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Employing IPA to interpret the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique by herself and other performers.
Historical Contextualization	Contextualizing findings within the historical and cultural context of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition to elucidate influences on Ms. Li Dongping's performance style.

3. **Ethical Consideration:** In our pursuit of understanding Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique, it is essential to navigate the research process with integrity and respect for ethical principles. This section outlines the ethical considerations that underpin our study, including informed consent,

confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, ensuring that the rights and dignity of all involved are upheld throughout the research journey, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Ethical Consideration

Ethical Consideration	Description
Informed Consent	Providing participants with informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose and procedures, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw.
Confidentiality	Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants by anonymizing data and reporting aggregate findings to protect privacy.
Respect for Cultural Sensitivities	Conducting research with sensitivity to the cultural values and traditions of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera community, maintaining respectful engagement with participants.

Results

The Niu Ge Folk Opera, a vibrant expression of local traditions and customs in Guangxi, has evolved. Originating from the ritualistic practice of "dance spring cow," the opera focuses on symbolic portrayals of labor and agricultural rituals. During the early decades of the Republic of China, Niu Ge Folk Opera experienced significant growth and diversification, incorporating folk songs, historical tales, and local anecdotes. The Cultural Revolution threatened traditional art forms like Niu Ge Folk Opera, leading to disbandment and performances. However, Niu Ge Opera experienced a resurgence in the late 20th century with the dawn of reform and opening. Economic reforms and renewed cultural appreciation contributed to its revival.

In the 21st century, Niu Ge Folk Opera has entered a new phase of revitalization and adaptation. Technological advancements and changing audience preferences have led to novel modes of dissemination, including digital recordings and online platforms. Increased government support and cultural recognition have fostered a renewed interest in safeguarding and promoting Niu Ge Opera as an intangible cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the historical journey of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, resilience, and adaptation. As custodians of this cultural legacy, it is crucial to celebrate its heritage while embracing innovation to ensure its continued flourishing as a cherished expression of Guangxi's cultural identity.

The Sound-Quality Singing Technique of Li Dongping

During interviews conducted with key informant Li Dongping regarding sound quality issues, it was revealed that her approach to studying vocal technique primarily involved oral instruction from predecessors, emphasizing constant imitation. Historically, scripts for Niu Ge Folk Opera performances often provided only a basic plot outline, leaving considerable room for interpretation by actors. Character traits were conveyed through lyrics and intonation, with each role requiring a distinct vocal portrayal. For instance, Wen Sheng's characters were characterized by gentle, smooth tones with minimal tonal fluctuation, while Dan's characters exhibited reservedness and employed intricate melodies to convey emotional nuances. The portrayal of military generals, officials, and wealthy businessmen featured powerful and stable vocals, whereas miscellaneous characters, clowns, and traitorous individuals expressed themselves with less confidence and directness. The emotional depth of each character was conveyed through vocal strength and intonation, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Sound Quality

Sound Quality Phase	Description
Phase 1: Breath Practice	Li Dongping's vocal training regimen commenced with breath control exercises aimed at enhancing lung capacity and developing a foundation for vocal projection. Techniques included deep inhalation through the nose, with emphasis on abdominal breathing and controlled exhalation through the mouth. Practice routines focused on gradually extending exhalation periods while maintaining vocal clarity and stability. Special attention was given to avoiding throat strain and promoting natural, relaxed vocal production.
Phase 2: Qi, Sound, Character Practice	The second stage of training emphasized the integration of breath control, vocalization, and character portrayal. Rather than rushing to achieve high pitches, emphasis was placed on achieving vocal clarity and precision through deliberate and methodical practice. Exercises included enunciating Chinese pinyin with exaggerated pronunciation, lip, dental, tongue, and throat exercises to improve articulation and control.
Phase 3: Poetry, Chanting Practice	Poetry and chanting exercises aimed to refine vocal quality and expressiveness, focusing on achieving a balanced and resonant vocal timbre. Practice materials were selected to reflect the emotional depth and

	dramatic intensity required in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances. Chanting exercises involved a blend of singing and spoken word, challenging performers to convey emotion and rhythm through vocal modulation and expression.
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Conclusion: Li Dongping's approach to vocal technique in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances exemplifies a nuanced understanding of breath control, vocalization, and character portrayal. Through disciplined practice and attention to detail, she demonstrates a mastery of traditional singing techniques while infusing each performance with emotional depth and authenticity.

The Breathing Technique Singing Technique of Li Dongping

Breathing is a fundamental aspect of vocal technique, crucial for achieving sustained and controlled sound production. In the context of singing, breath control entails a deeper, more intentional form of inhalation and exhalation compared to everyday breathing patterns. Singers employ abdominal breathing, drawing air deep into the lungs and utilizing the diaphragm to regulate airflow. This technique enables singers to sustain prolonged notes and vary vocal dynamics flexibly, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 1.

Table 5: Breathing Technique

Breathing Technique	Description
Inhalation	Effective inhalation involves deepening the breath by imagining the inhalation process akin to savoring the fragrance of flowers in a garden. Singers strive for a stable, light, and soft inhalation, avoiding excessive force or tension. The breath should be directed towards the lower abdomen, with a brief pause at the end of inhalation to experience the expansion around the waist, which is essential for proper breath support during singing.
Exhalation	Exhalation is controlled by engaging the diaphragm to maintain the feeling of expansion in the waist and abdomen. Singers visualize exhaling as pouring sesame oil from a large bottle into a smaller one, emphasizing even and smooth exhalation. Practice exercises such as blowing air to prevent a thin piece of paper from falling or maintaining a candle flame upright help develop breath control and stability.

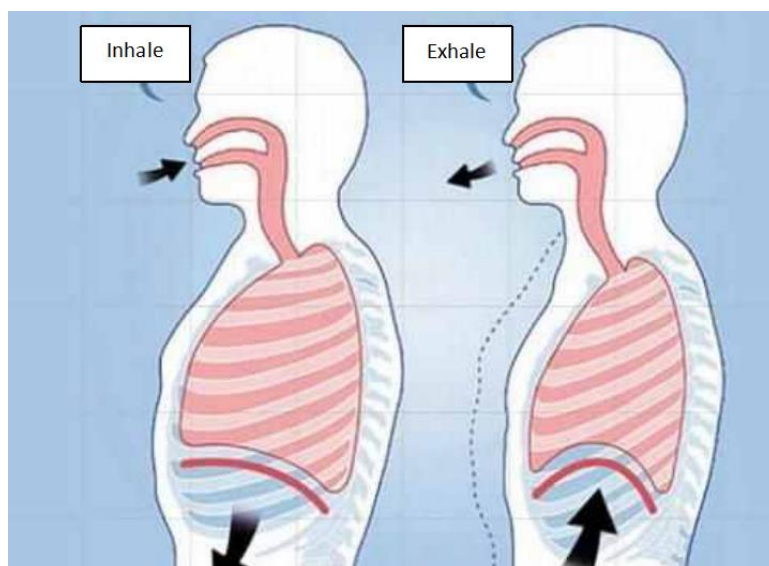


Figure 1: Visualization of Breathing Technique in Niu Ge Folk Opera.

The Practice Method of Niu Ge Folk Opera Breath: The strength of the diaphragm is vital for maintaining breath and sound intensity, necessitating various methods to train abdominal breathing:

2.1 Extended Deep Breathing and Slow Exhalation Control: Focus on "storing gas" through gentle inhalation and slow, steady exhalation. Repeat this process to enhance breath control and endurance.

2.2 Deep Breathing and Slow Breathing Digital Exercise: Incorporate breath extension exercises while silently counting or reciting phrases. This helps improve breath control and stamina.

2.3 Deep Breathing, Slow Breathing, and Long Sound Practice: Integrate sound production with breath control, focusing on low and middle vocal ranges. Hold sounds in one breath and practice repeatedly to enhance vocal resilience.

2.4 Holding Qi and Stopping Sound Exercise: Combine breath and sound exercises, utilizing abdominal and diaphragmatic forces to produce elastic, controlled sounds. Practice variations of breath-holding and sound production to strengthen breath support.

In summary, effective breathing in Niu Ge Folk Opera involves vertical inhalation, chest expansion, and controlled exhalation. Singers must avoid tension in the throat and facial muscles while utilizing abdominal and intercostal muscles to manipulate breath. Proper breath control enhances vocal resonance and endurance, which is crucial for delivering compelling performances in Niu Ge Folk Opera.

Discussions

The exploration of Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique within the context of Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition yields valuable insights into the intricacies of her artistry and the broader cultural significance of this traditional art form. Our findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of breath control, vocalization, and character portrayal in traditional Chinese opera (Bourdieu, 1986; Dongliang, 2010). Ms. Li's approach to vocal technique aligns with theoretical principles of performance studies, particularly Richard Schechner's concept of the performer's interaction with audiences and fellow performers influencing expressive choices on stage (Schechner, 1988).

Through our qualitative research methodology, including field observations, interviews, and document analysis, we comprehensively understood Ms. Li's singing technique. Thematic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allowed us to interpret the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique by herself and other performers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, historical contextualization provided insights into the evolution of Niu Ge Folk Opera and its enduring cultural significance (Editorial Group of Tengxian Niu Ge Folk Opera Journal, 1986).

Our research results highlight Ms. Li Dongping's nuanced approach to breath control, vocalization, and character portrayal in Niu Ge Folk Opera performances. By integrating theoretical perspectives from cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, we elucidate the cultural and historical significance of her contributions to Guangxi's cultural heritage (Merriam, 1964). Ms. Li's mastery of traditional singing techniques, emotive delivery, and profound musicality reaffirms the enduring relevance of Niu Ge Folk Opera as a cherished expression of Guangxi's cultural identity (Li, 2014).

New Knowledges

Through meticulous analysis drawing upon cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, this study illuminates the enduring relevance of Niu Ge Folk Opera as a vital component of Guangxi's cultural identity. By celebrating Ms. Li's artistry and emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional art forms, this research underscores the role of individual performers in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and promoting cultural diversity and exchange.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our study comprehensively analyzes Ms. Li Dongping's singing technique in Guangxi's Niu Ge Folk Opera tradition. By unraveling the intricacies of her artistry within the broader cultural and historical context, we shed light on the profound significance of her contributions to this esteemed art form. Through meticulous research methods and interdisciplinary approaches, we provide valuable insights into the aesthetic principles, performance conventions, and cultural resonances inherent in Niu Ge Folk Opera (Wu et al., 2019).

Our findings underscore the enduring relevance of traditional Chinese opera as a vital component of Guangxi's cultural identity. Ms. Li Dongping's vocal prowess is a testament to the rich heritage of Niu Ge Folk Opera, highlighting the role of individual performers in safeguarding and transmitting traditional art forms across generations (Luo, 2021). By celebrating Ms. Li's artistic contributions, we honor her legacy as a custodian of Guangxi's intangible cultural heritage and reaffirm the importance of preserving and revitalizing traditional art forms for future generations (Chung, 2022).

We can further deepen our understanding of Niu Ge Folk Opera and its enduring significance in contemporary society through continued scholarly inquiry and cultural exchange. By fostering dialogue and collaboration between practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts, we can ensure the continued flourishing of Guangxi's cultural heritage for generations to come (Zhang et al., 2022).

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