

Summary of the Ph. D. thesis *The Success of the Opera 'Savage Land' and Future Prospects of Chinese Opera* by Chengzu Li, M.A.

Introduction

1. Choice of topic and its significance

1.1 Introduction to the Chinese opera *Savage Land*

In this chapter, the author briefly describes the historical context and general features and characteristics of the opera *Savage Land*. He also mentions his personal experience regarding production and performance of the work (the author gathered, organized and oversaw multiple aspects of a performance of *Savage Land* in the summer of 2016, in which he also performed as Chou Hu, the main character).

1.2 The inspiration and the purpose of this thesis

The author defines the goal of his thesis as writing the first academic paper to fully analyze *Savage Land* regarding its plot, historical context and musical features, drawing from his personal production and performance experience. The author mentions that he was inspired to choose this particular subject for his thesis by the lack of comprehensive studies researching the work and his desire to further introduce one of the best works of modern Chinese opera in Europe. The promulgatory aspect of the thesis would also serve to reinforce the interest in modern Chinese opera internationally, which should contribute to overall development of Chinese opera in the future.

1.3 Research methodology

The author describes the respective aspects of *Savage Land* that he is going to analyze further in his thesis: the background and creation process of the opera from its initial conception to its premiere, its plot, the psychology of its characters, its musical style and the elements of national Chinese music used in the opera. The author also informs that although there are exist few academic papers researching *Savage Land* – and the ones that exist analyze individual aspects of the opera, f. in. selected arias – he will be using extant research papers concerning *Savage Land*, the comments of the opera's creators on their own work, articles found in the press and studies in modern Chinese opera in general, and – above all else – his personal experiences with the opera in the course of his study.

Chapter 1 – About the Chinese opera *Savage Land*

1. The creation of the opera *Savage Land*

In this chapter, the author introduces the creators of the opera (and author of the drama on which it is based) and the general concepts that they adhered to when working on the opera.

1.1 The author of the drama *Savage Land* – Yu Cao

In this sub-chapter the author introduces the author of the drama *Savage Land* which was later adapted for the operatic stage. The author focuses on the historical context of the Second Sino-Japanese War, during which the work had its premiere in 1936. Yu Cao is known as „the Chinese Shakespeare”.

1.2 The adapter – Fang Wan

In this sub-chapter the author introduces Fang Wan who adapted the text of the play and is the daughter of Yu Cao. She began working on the script of the opera in 1984, jointly with the composer and the director of its first production. The author mentions the historical context of Fang Wan's forced stay of 16 years in a rural region during the Cultural Revolution. He also outlines the

changes which the adapter made to the plot of the drama *Savage Land* when adjusting it for the need of an opera.

1.3 The composer – Xiang Jin

In this subchapter the author introduces the composer and the initiator of the creation process of the opera, Xiang Jin. The author specifically mentions that Xiang Jin began gathering his team and the conceptual work on *Savage Land* after a 21-year long period of „rehabilitation” spent in the Akesu province during the Cultural Revolution. The author also highlights Xiang Jin's experience as an operatic conductor, including working abroad. The composer was drawn to adapting *Savage Land* as an opera due to its focus on stagnation of feudal societal structures, social and historical injustice and the drive for revenge which arise from them. After *Savage Land* had its American premiere, Xiang Jin was hailed as „Oriental Puccini”.

1.4 The director – Dao-Chuan Li

In this sub-chapter the author introduces Dao-Chuan Li, the operatic and dramatic director who prepared the premiere of *Savage Land* in cooperation with the composer and the librettist. The author highlights Dao-Chuan Li's experience as an opera singer, both in the areas of Beijing opera and Western opera (she has performed f. in. in Italy). The opera *Savage Land* was first performed in 1987 in Beijing.

2. The story of the opera *Savage Land*

In this sub-chapter the author outlines the plot of the opera act by act. The opera tells the story of the farmer Chou Hu who – upon spending 7 years unjustly imprisoned on the accusation of banditry – escapes from prison to find vengeance on the feudal warlord known as Devil Jiao who has murdered his family, taken his land, unjustly imprisoned him, and also wed his fiancée, Jin Zi, to his son, Da Xing (who was – interestingly enough – Chou Hu's childhood companion and even visited him in prison). Having returned to his homeland, he learns that Devil Jiao is dead. Chou Hu decides to avenge his crimes by killing Devil Jiao's closest relative – his son, Da Xing. He also renews his romantic involvement with Jin Zi who is unhappy as Da Xing's wife. His plans are being thwarted by Mother Jiao, the head of the family and Devil Jiao's widow. Ultimately Chou Hu kills Da Xing and causes the death of Mother Jiao's infant grandson (Da Xing's son from his first marriage), running away together with Jin Zi afterwards. Mother Jiao organizes a posse. Finally Chou Hu and Jin Zi find themselves surrounded. Chou Hu tells Jin Zi to go on without him and to give birth to his son who will avenge him in the future. Chou Hu commits suicide to avoid going back to prison and to give Jin Zi time to escape.

3. The overall characteristics and style of the opera *Savage Land*

In this sub-chapter the author outlines the general stylistic character of the opera, both in its musical and dramatic aspects. He emphasizes the innovative elements, inspired by Western operatic traditions, the elements taken from traditional Chinese opera and folk music, as well as the work's qualities as a classical Chinese tragedy (which is similar in many aspects to traditional European tragedy, but with some differences apparent in the terminology used by the author – f. in. instead of the term catharsis he uses the term 'tragic beauty').

3.1 The integration of music and drama

In this sub-chapter the author outlines the innovative, in the field of Chinese opera, method used by Xiang Jin whose aim is the integration of music with drama. The author classifies *Savage Land* as a work representative of modern neoromanticism in opera due to that.

3.2 The novel concept of vocal and instrumental music

In this sub-chapter the author further analyzes the innovative methods used in *Savage Land*, focusing on the relation between vocal and instrumental music. Xiang Jin was mostly inspired by great Italian composers of the romantic period on the bel canto school of singing. The author also highlights traditional Chinese elements which the composer integrated into the score – including vocal techniques used in Beijing opera and traditional Chinese instruments.

3.3 The link between „aria” and „recitative”

In this sub-chapter the author analyzes the way in which Xiang Jin uses the Western concepts of „aria” and „recitative” - with arias serving as a means of emotional expression of particular characters, and recitatives mostly moving the plot forward.

Chapter 2 – *Savage Land's* Character Analysis

In this chapter the author analyzes the most important character traits of the protagonists of the opera (Chou Hu, Jin Zi, Da Xing and Mother Jiao), based mostly on examples from the libretto. He also performs a detailed analysis of their actions throughout the plot. He specifies a succession of character traits, described in following sub-chapters.

1. Chou Hu's characteristics and psychological evolution

- 1.1 Revenge cannot be prevented**
- 1.2 Human kindness and conscience**
- 1.3 Using his wits**
- 1.4 Ambivalence after revenge**
- 1.5 The beauty of tragic sadness**

2. Psychological analysis and development of Jin Zi

- 2.1 The desire for freedom**
- 2.2 The strong rebellious drive**
- 2.3 The beauty of goodness, evil and suffering**
- 2.4 The sincerity of love**

3. The character features and the end of Da Xing

- 3.1 Weak, cowardly, and kind**
- 3.2 The victim**

4. The character features and evolution of Mother Jiao

- 4.1 The duality of character**
- 4.2 Responsibility, cunning, evil and good**

Chapter 3 – Musical analysis of the opera *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author performs a detailed musical and textual analysis of all the arias found in *Savage Land*, additionally describing issues relating to their performance and the difficulties which performers may face when working on these parts (he goes into most detail in this regard when it comes to Chou Hu, as the author has performed the part personally). Author uses numerous examples from the vocal score of the opera which are attached to the thesis.

The author also performs a detailed musical analysis of selected ensembles from the opera: the final duet of Jin Zi and Chou Hu and the duet of Jin Zi and Da Xing from the end of the second act.

1. Analysis of Chou Hu's arias

The author specifies the voice for which this part was written as „a dramatic baritone with power and fluency in the high vocal register”.

1.1 „Devil Jiao, why did you die?”

1.2 „It is now the depths of night”

1.3 „Ah, old friends”

2. Analysis of Jin Zi's arias

The author specifies the voice for which this part was written as „a high soprano with dramatic qualities and vocal agility”.

2.1 „Ah, the sky grows dark!”

2.2 „Oh, my dear Hu Zi”

3. Duets (Chou Hu & Jin Zi and Da Xing & Jin Zi)

3.1 Chou Hu and Jin Zi: „You are me, I am you”

3.2 Da Xing and Jin Zi: „A man lives but once”

4. Mother Jiao's and Da Xing's arias

The author specifies the voice type of the part of Da Xing as a lyric tenor, and that of Mother Jiao as a mezzosoprano.

4.1 Da Xing's aria: „Ah, women”

4.2 Mother Jiao's arias: „The black lullaby” and „Chou Hu, Heaven has sealed your fate!”

5. The elements of national musical form and Buddhist culture in *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author describes the elements of folk music from various regions of China, buddhist sacred music and vocal techniques derived from traditional singing methods of Beijing opera that can be found in the vocal and orchestral parts of *Savage Land*. Moreover, the author analyzes the element of Buddhist religion found in the libretto which he is able to discern thanks to his own faith in Buddhism and a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies.

5.1 National music elements

5.1.1 Chou Hu's aria „Twice each month the temple's door open”

The author mentions that Chou Hu sings this short aria during a duet with Mother Jiao. The author analyzes the elements of Buddhist sacred music in the aria, and other references to Buddhist religious rituals found in the text of the aria and the duet.

5.1.2 Jin Zi's folk song (with Chou Hu): „Barley growing higher day by day”

The author analyzes the way in which the composer adapted a traditional Chinese folk song and weaved it into the opera.

5.2 Profound elements of Buddhist culture in *Savage Land*

In this chapter, the author sets out to prove that plot-wise *Savage Land* is based on the idea of causationism (more widely known in Europe under its Hindu name: *karma*): evil breeds evil, good breeds good. He also analyzes the elements of traditional Buddhist prayers found in the utterances of Chou Hu and Mother Jiao.

Chapter 4 – *Savage Land* and the Development of Chinese Opera

In this chapter the author describes in detail the history of the development of modern Chinese opera, divided into periods, introducing the most important works of selected Chinese composers. The author does not go into much detail on Beijing opera (which he usually calls „traditional Chinese opera” and often notes that it is not treated in China as a form of opera in itself, but rather a form of performance art with elements of music, singing and dancing), but he does often refer to its particular elements that have been adapted and used in modern Chinese opera.

The 1st Period (the Beginning of Chinese Opera) – 1919 – 1948

1. The development of Chinese opera

1.1 Introduction of Western opera to China

The author describes the fashion in which Western opera made its appearance in China. It first began making itself known on Chinese soil in Shanghai after the Opium Wars in 1845 which resulted in it becoming an international trading port – and attracting numerous immigrant, mostly Russian and Jewish.

They brought their own music with them, including opera.

In 1919 the first institute of music in China was opened at the Beijing University.

1.2 The contact with Chinese opera

Western opera was first performed by Chinese musicians and singers in 1927, after the first national conservatory of music was opened in Shanghai which offered vocal instruction in bel canto.

The author mentions that at the time opera was an elite art form with very limited social reach due to the social and economical structure of China at the time and the cultural divide.

The author also specifies Xi Qu – the traditional form of Chinese drama, usually called „Chinese opera” or „Beijing opera” in the West. The author mentions that Xi Qu was in its nature a mass art. The author claims that due to the significant production costs of imported Western opera, Chinese opera started the search for its very own alternative.

2. The buds of Chinese opera – musical drama for children

2.1 From to school to musical drama for children

The author specifies the composer Jin-Hui Li as one of the first Chinese musicians to create original Chinese operatic forms as a means of educating children.

2.1.1 „The Moon Concert”

2.1.2 Jin-Hu Li's „singing expression” and „the children show song”

In this chapter the author outlines further ideas of Jin-Hu Li.

2.2 Jin Hu-Li and the musical drama for children „The sparrow and the children”

In this chapter the author describes the most well-known musical drama for children by Jin Hu-Li, „The Sparrow and the Children.

He also mentions that all of the musical dramas for children by Jin Hu-Li were published as a collection in 1926 and attained significant popularity.

2.3 The accomplishments of Jin Hu Li

3. The exploration of early Chinese opera

In this chapter the author outlines early works whose creators aimed to develop musical drama in China, based on Beijing opera whilst adding further elements of Western opera.

The author introduces the biographies of their creators, and also describes the plots and the musical forms of works created in this period.

3.1 Improved opera: „Jin Lian-Pan”

3.2 Shu Shi Yan and his lyric opera

3.2.1 „High mountains and running water”

3.2.2 „The dream world”

3.2.3 „Tears of a madman” and „Bells on a lonely island”

3.2.4 „The Storm from the East”

In this particular case the author mentions that it is the first modern Chinese opera regarding the topic of China's national independence.

3.3 Early operatic explorations in Shanghai

4. Chinese opera during the Second Anti-Japanese War (1937 – 1945)

In this chapter the author outlines the most important center's of operatic development during the anti-Japanese war, and also introduces the various and numerous operatic works which were created in that time period.

4.1 The cradle of new opera, the LuXun Art Institute in Yan'an

Yan'an was the main point of cultural opposition against Japanese aggression.

4.2 Operatic activities in Shanghai

In 1937 Japan invaded Shanghai which became an „isolated island”. This did not stop creative activities in the field of opera, however.

4.3 Operatic activities in Chongqing

4.3.1 National Opera in Shi'Yan and the opera „Akiko”

The author mentions the opera „Akiko” as the first opera to take up a contemporary subject matter in a realistic manner, based on the romantic style of verisimo.

4.3.2 Ancient costume drama „Mulan joins the army”

The author mentions that the opera was the first to use both a classical orchestra and a traditional Chinese orchestra.

5. The opera „The White-Haired Girl”, the New Milestone of Opera

In this chapter, the author undertakes a detailed analysis of the genesis, plot and musical form of the opera „The White-Haired Girl” which is to this day renown as one of the most important works of modern Chinese opera. It first premiered in 1945 and was a huge, large-scale accomplishment. The author claims that the opera „attracted millions of the working class” and allowed them to feel like they are an actual force of history.

5.1 Creation of the opera „The White-Haired Girl”

5.1.1 The libretto

5.1.2 The music

5.1.3 Set design

5.2 The premiere in Ya'An

5.3 After the victory in the anti-Japanese war: Chinese opera facing the entire country and the world

The author mentions that „The White-Haired Girl” was performed over 50 times in various countries of the Easter Block, including Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.) were it met with a very warm welcome.

5.4 The achievements of the opera „The White-Haired Girl”

The author analyzes the ways in which „The White-Haired Girl” was revolutionary in Chinese opera as well as its social influence, especially regarding the working class and rural communities.

Second Period (Chienese Opera's Ascent to Prosperity) – 1949 – 1966

The author describes the development of Chinese opera in the early stages of the existence of the People's Republic of China, highlighting its intensity: over 66 full-scale operatic works were created in that period, including many outstanding masterpieces.

1. The founding of the early opera

The author mentions that opera as an art form had great support from the government and the people of the People's Republic of China.

2. The development of the new opera

The author describes the process of professionalization of opera companies thanks to the governments involvement. He also outlines the most important works and performances that took place in the 50.

3. The fusion of Western opera and the music of ethnic minorities

The author introduces the most important operatic works which were inspired by the folklore and folk music of ethnic minorities which were part of the People's Republic of China and which were created in the time period.

4. National opera's period of prosperity

In this chapter the author outlines all operas created in the years 1958 – 1966 with a national character.

5. Musical dramas based on folk stories and legends

In this chapter the author outlines selected operatic works based in folklore of particular regions of ethnic minorities of China.

Ten years of catastrophe – opera desolate

The author briefly describes the lot of Chinese opera during the Cultural Revolution which began in 1966. Throughout its course (1966 – 1976) the development of Chinese opera slowed down to a halt, as opera was treated with hostility. No new operatic works premiered during that time and operatic composers faced repressions.

The 3rd period – recovering opera's magnificence (1976 – 1987)

1. Opera's radical recovery

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Chinese opera began its rebirth: the recovery period is outlined as the years 1976 – 1981. The author outlines the general selection of topics, the increasing number of new operatic works and their improving quality during that time.

1.1 Rapidly increasing number of plays

1.2 Main subjects

The author mentions that opera was no longer „art for art's sake“, but slowly changed into „the theater of emotions and thought“.

1.3 Diversified exploration

2. Luo Bin-Wang and his national opera

3. Opera of the 80s

3.1 The rise of new dramas

The author specifies that a creative boom took place in the operatic world of the 80s, resulting from the dampening of creative activity during the Cultural Revolution. About three times as many new works were created in the 80s than during the recovery period.

3.2 Multiple, mature explorations

The author states that the artistic explorations and experimentation in the 80s were much wider in scope than in previous years. He also highlights the return of revolutionary subject matter in opera: the works which fit that mold are known as „The Red Operas”.

3.3 Chinese opera reaches a new level

In this chapter the author outlines the most important and the best operas of the 80s. *Savage Land* is one of them.

4. The success of the opera *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author performs a detail analysis of the innovative nature of *Savage Land* in the development of modern Chinese opera. He claims that it is one of the most important works regarding its evolution.

He highlights the modern, innovative methods used by the opera's creators. The author also highlights the composer's, the adapter's and the director's awareness of their work's place in the history of Chinese opera and the new developments it was about to bring.

The 4th period – post-1989

1. The success of Chinese opera

The author mentions that Chinese opera of the 90s maintained its diversity as well as its drive towards merging the Western and Chinese operatic traditions. He lists the most important and best-received works of modern Chinese opera, representative of the particular sub-genres which arose during the development of Chinese opera (revolutionary, national, ethnic and historical).

The author states that Chinese opera has gone a long and difficult way, but it has only served to give it great prospects for future growth and conquering the international stage.

Chapter 5 – The beauty of tragedy in the opera *Savage Land*

=In this chapter the author analyzes *Savage Land* as a tragedy, outlining how the tragic effect was achieved through its plot, characters and music.

1. *Savage Land* as a tragic drama

In this chapter the author sets out to prove that *Savage Land* qualifies formally as a tragic drama.

1.1 The background for the selection of topic in *Savage Land*

1.2 Plot structure and development

2. Tragic figures in *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author sets out to analyze and prove how the characters of *Savage Land* have been shaped to be tragic figures.

2.1 Chou Hu's tragedy

2.2 Jin Zi's tragic love

2.3 Da Xing's tragic end

2.4 The tragedy of Mother Jiao

3. Tragic music in *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author analyzes how the music in *Savage Land* serves to highlight and develop the tragic nature of the story. The author concludes that there are three main musical themes used by the composer to achieve this effect.

3.1 The wilderness theme

3.2 The love theme

3.3 The darkness theme

4. Analysis of tragic aesthetics in *Savage Land*

In this chapter the author analyzes how *Savage Land* aesthetically affects the audience as a tragedy, through means of tragic beauty (catharsis).

4.1 The tragic characteristics of *Savage Land*

4.2 The impact of *Savage Land* as a tragedy

Chapter 6 – The success of the opera *Savage Land* and its Influence

The author outlines and introduces the „opera thinking” concept formulated by Jin Xiang. Its aim is to approach opera as a complete, total form of art with elements of various other performance arts, yet uniform in its own way. The author highlights the innovative way in which Jin Xiang translated the neoromantic concept of operatic creation to Chinese opera. The author also highlights the fact that thanks to Jin Xiang's „opera thinking” method, modern Chinese composers now have „a manual” on how to approach operatic creation in this modern fashion.

1. Jin Xiang's 'Opera Thinking' Method as the Foundation of Success

In this chapter the author analyzes how Jin Xiang used his own method in the creation process of *Savage Land*

1.1 The general concept of operatic creation

1.2 The integration of music and drama

1.3 Vocal and instrumental music achieving a symphonic effect

1.4 Merging the elements of national and Western music

2. Jin Xiang's 'Opera Thinking' methods and the impact of the opera

In this chapter the author analyzes how the use of 'Opera Thinking' in *Savage Land* influenced the development of modern Chinese opera. He also highlights the very high praise which the opera received internationally and its service in the popularization of Chinese opera abroad.

2.1 Furthering the development of Chinese opera

2.2 International reception and influence

3. Future prospects of Chinese opera

In this chapter the author outlines how *Savage Land* and Jin Xiang's Opera Thinking method positively influenced – and still influence – the prospects of Chinese opera, both artistically and economically (which – as the author points out – was caused by the international success of Jin Xiang's work).

3.1 The merging of international standards and original Chinese opera

3.2 Operas merging the bel canto tradition with national languages

In this sub-chapter the author outlines how *Savage Land* furthered the integration of European bel canto with traditional vocal techniques and style of Beijing opera and ethnic minorities, and how is this subject currently approached in Chinese opera companies.

3.3 Diversification of the opera market and international communication

Conclusion

The author summarizes his findings and conclusions in the course of his research in *Savage Land*,

focusing on four aspects, especially important for the future prospects of Chinese opera.

Savage Land at the time of its creation

The place of Savage Land in the history of Chinese opera

Savage Land and operatic creation

The importance of Savage Land for future operas

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