An Imaginary Taiwan From a Composer in China

—A Case Study of Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera

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Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera is a branch of Henan *Bangzi* Opera in Henan, which was transmitted from China to Taiwan within the armies under a political and historical circumstance around 1947. As the trend of localisation in these ten years becomes obvious, several localised performances are created; however, the composers in China do not understand the music culture in Taiwan, so some interesting phenomenon can be found between an imaginary Taiwan from their viewpoints and the real culture in Taiwan. The Sorceress Bride is a performance which adapted so-called the aboriginal tune in 2012, and it arises several issues for further discussion.

Keywords: Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera, Sorceress Bride, localisation, Evergreen Mountains, Dancing to the Moon

Introduction

This paper is going to discuss about an imaginary Taiwan from the viewpoint of a Chinese composer in a performance of Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera from two aspects through a comparison. These two aspects are the purposes and reflections from this tune used in this performance. The first aspect focuses on the two main purposes of this tune from the viewpoint of this Chinese composer (Zuo Qi-wei) and the second aspect discusses the three reflections from the tune used in this performance through a comparison, including the real tune in the indigenous culture in Taiwan, and the analysis of the discrepancy between the putative and real music in the minority groups in Taiwan. Each aspect will be supported with relevant music examples.

Background Knowledge

Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera is a branch of Henan *Bangzi* Opera (a genre of Chinese operas), which was transmitted from Henan Province in Mainland China under a historical circumstance within the armies during 1947-1949. Before the trend of localisation of Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera in these ten years, this genre had been called Henan *Bangzi* Opera in Taiwan for more than fifty years. Recently, the official name of this genre is renamed as Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera. In order to develop new style of Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera compared to Henan *Bangzi* Opera in China, this performing group will commission some composers to create some new programmes to demonstrate its ability in development in Taiwan. Among these compositions, all of them are from China, because there is no professional education institution for composer in *Bangzi* Opera in Taiwan; however, the scripts can be native stories in Taiwan or some adaptations from other programmes.

Discussion and Purposes

The Sorceress Bride (2012) is one of these localised performances in Taiwan (see Figure 1). In order to localise this opera, the Chinese composer (Zuo Qi-wei) intended to use a widespread Taiwanese tune both in China and Taiwan to establish the suitable atmosphere in this performance. According to the interview with her, she selected this so-called popular tune about aboriginal music in Taiwan for two purposes: setting up the atmosphere of a putative aboriginal tribe and localising this performance.

Figure 1. The poster of the Sorceress Bride.

The story of this opera describes a love story in an imaginary minority group (see Figure 2). In order to fulfill the demands of this story, the composer decided to utilise a tune in aboriginal tribes in Taiwan based on her knowledge. Furthermore, the usage of this tune in Taiwan can help localise this opera originated from China.

Figure 2. The costume of the Sorceress Bride on the stage.

While analysing how the composer utilises this tune in this opera, three methods can be found: prelude, interlude, and introductory or ending phrases. According to the interview with this Chinese composer, she used one popular indigenous tune to construct a putative environment on the stage, projecting her imaginary Taiwan in this performance. When it comes to music she arranged, it works effectively to establish this suitable atmosphere. The original tune she used is the phrases in Evergreen Mountains, and this film song describes the environment in the village and the appearance of one aboriginal tribe (Tsou Tribe) in Ali Mountains in Taiwan (see Figure 3).

Figure 4. Music example 2: The prelude in the Sorceress Bride.²

Music example 3 is another example to illustrate how this composer used this tune as an introductory section in 2/4 and connected to traditional singing section in 4/4. From bar 1 to 23, it is the rearrangement of this tune and the section from bar 24 is the traditional introductory section in Taiwan *Bangzi* (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Music example 3: Introductory section with traditional singing section.³

In music example 4, it is evident that this tune is applied as the introduction and ending sections in a singing section in a free tempo, which reveals a contemporary hybrid style in Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera (see Figure 6).

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxvgVzCqx4o>.

³ For other live performance clips and interviews, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3Yw92aHu24>.

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNucMwoDUCY>.

See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlmNgiVmA_c.

Figure 6. Music example 4: The introduction and ending sections in a singing section.

In addition to these arrangements above, this tune is used as the interlude (ending phrase) between Act Five and Six (music example 5) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Music example 5: Interlude in the performance.

In music examples 6, 7 and 8, it is strikingly obvious that before the singing section, the introductory part can be divided into two small parts (bar 1 & 2, bar 3 & 4). The phrase from bar 1 to 2 is the fragment phrase from the tune, while the motive from bar 3 to 4 is the traditional introductory phrase in Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera (see Figures 8, 9 and 10).

Figure 8. Music example 6: An introductory phrase.

Figure 9. Music example 7: An introductory phrase.

Figure 10. Music example 8: An introductory phrase.

From the demonstration of these music examples, it is evident that the composing skills by this composer are quite mature, because she can integrate another tune into traditional singing smoothly to fulfill the main goal she intends to achieve. By listening to these arrangements in this performance, the audience can be aware of the tune, which functions as the connection between their experience in the recognition of tune in Taiwan and the imaginary story of a minority group in the performance.

Discussion and Reflections

Although this composer can arrange this tune by her professional skills in composition, some issues can be addressed by scrutinising the melody she used in the performance, and these issues reveal that some misunderstanding about the aboriginal music in Taiwan resulted from insufficient information by the division between Taiwan and Mainland China under a historical and political condition and the influence of the media and propaganda.

First, before this Chinese composer used this tune, she did not go to Taiwan for her fieldwork to understand aboriginal music in Taiwan. What she can find is a popular film song in a song book for folksongs in China, and the name of the tune is Evergreen Mountains; however, the main melody she used in the performance is not the main theme in this film song, but rather a connective phrase between two sections. Furthermore, this song (Evergreen Mountains) is not the original music in an aboriginal tribe in Taiwan while comparing the description of this aboriginal tribe in Evergreen Mountains with the real songs in Tsou Tribe in Ali Mountains. Music example 9 (see Figure 11) is the original tune of Evergreen Mountains and the connective phrase is music example 1. With the help of the promotion by mass media, Evergreen Mountains becomes the most popular song about aboriginal music in China and Taiwan. By using this tune in the performance, it can fulfill the demand of establishing the atmosphere of an imaginary aboriginal tribe.

高 山 青 澗 水 藍
Gao Shan Qing Jan Shui Lan

阿 里 山 的 姑 娘 美 如 水 呀 阿 里 山 的 少 年
A Li Shan Di Gu Niang Mei Ru Shui Ya A Li Shan Di Shao Nian

壯 如 山 啊 啊 歐 啊
Zhuang Ru Shan A A O A

啊 啊 阿 里 山 的 姑 娘 美 如 水 啊
A A A Li Shan Di Gu Niang Mei Ru Shui Ya

阿 里 山 的 少 年 壯 如 山 啊
A Li Shan Di Shao Nian Zhuang Ru Shan A

Figure 11. Music example 9: Evergreen Mountains and the connective phrase.⁴

Music example 10 (see Figure 12) is a common tune of Tsou tribe in Ali Mountains, and it is different from the tune of Evergreen Mountains in terms of music characteristic, although the song was composed by another composer for a film based on his impression when he travelled to Ali Mountains. From a comparison, it is evident that there is no strong connection between these two tunes. Because of this discrepancy between these two songs about the aboriginal music in Taiwan, this Chinese composer used her misunderstanding to construct an imaginary Taiwan atmosphere in this performance. In music example 9, it is clear that the phrase is a pentatonic scale and this is the main musical characteristic; while in music example 10, the interval of the fourth (E-A, Mi-La) is the main music characteristic. As a result, there is obvious and persuasive relationship between these two music examples in terms of the music characteristics.

e ya yo no yu ya fo yo feo no meo i o yo no ti ki ca co lu ku na no co no na no co no

Figure 12. Music example 10: A song of catching crabs in Tsou Tribe.⁵

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZOovTyNQ1Q>.

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9tTF09-nms>.

Second, while scrutinising the tune in terms of the motive and music characteristic, more similarities can be found between this melody arranged by this Chinese composer and a song (Dancing to the moon) from another aboriginal group in Taiwan—Amis. Music example 11 (see Figure 13) is the whole tune of this song (Dancing to the moon). In this music example, it is easy to divide this melody into two parts (bar 1~6 and bar 7~12), and in these two parts, the first two bars are variations and last four bars are the same. In addition, the usage of vocable (ho, hai, ya) in the connective phrase in Evergreen Mountains is widespread in the music in Amis. The lyrics are below:

na lu wan to i ya na ya ho hay i yan
 na lu wa an to i ya nay ya ho hay i yan
 hoy na lu wa an to i ya nay ya ho hay yan
 na lu wan to i ya nay ya ho hay i yan
 na lu wan an to i ya nay ya ho hay i yan
 hoy na lu wa an to i ya nay ya ho hay yan

Figure 13. Music example 11: Dancing to the moon in Amis Tribe.⁶

Third, this unfamiliarity results in the remoteness of this putative minority group in this performance. This Chinese composer just can learn a little bit aboriginal music in Taiwan from a songbook released more than 40 years ago, so this unfamiliarity can help her set up a putative minority group in a remote area. The main reason for this is because she just can acquire little information about Taiwanese culture, in particular aboriginal music, under a historical circumstance from 1949. Furthermore, what she can learn is the reinterpretation by others, rather than the real investigation and fieldwork in Taiwan. As a result, Taiwan is replete with her imagination in her mind and the Taiwanese atmosphere she intended to set up in the performance is partly based on her imagination and misunderstanding.

Consequently, this usage of this tune in this performance reflects three points for discussion. On the one hand, she utilised her misunderstanding about aboriginal music in Taiwan to set up her imaginary Taiwan on the stage, and on the other hand, the division and distance between Mainland China and Taiwan provide her with an opportunity to extend her chimerical performance in the performance.

⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC_U1KrZGTU.

Conclusion

From the discussions and reflections above, it is strikingly evident that the two main purposes from this Chinese composer (Zuo Qi-wei) were achieved by her professional skills in composition: setting up relevant atmosphere about a putative aboriginal tribe in the performance and localising this performance. Moreover, three points of the imaginary Taiwan established by this Chinese composer can be reflected by scrutinising the tune in this performance through a comparison with the extant aboriginal music in Taiwan: misunderstanding about aboriginal music, differences and similarities between this tune and some tunes in aboriginal music in Taiwan, and political division between China and Taiwan over an extended period of time.

This localised performance reveals some issues about the process of localisation from a Henan *Bangzi* Opera to Taiwan *Bangzi* Opera and the reflections from a viewpoint of a Chinese composer about Taiwan is one of this issues for discussion.

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