

- “Sichuan opera” (川劇, Chuānjù) includes rapid changes in pitch and tone, often to enhance its famous “face-changing” performances, creating an exaggerated and highly expressive vocal style.

Chinese opera singers undergo rigorous training to develop the strength, control, and precision required for operatic singing. This training includes:

- “breath control”: Mastery of breath is crucial in Chinese opera, as singers must sustain long, drawn-out phrases while maintaining clarity and projection;
- “projection”: Since traditional Chinese opera performances were often held in large outdoor spaces without amplification, singers are trained to project their voices with great force and clarity;
- “character portrayal”: Singing is closely tied to the portrayal of specific characters, so the voice must reflect the personality and emotional state of the role being played.

The vocal techniques of China are diverse, shaped by the various forms of traditional music and regional styles. Whether in the highly stylized world of Chinese opera or the more natural expressions of folk singing, Chinese vocal techniques emphasize clarity, precision, and emotional expression. From the piercing falsetto of Peking opera to the nasal, straight-toned delivery of folk songs, these techniques reflect Chinese music’s deep cultural traditions and aesthetic values.

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КУЛЬТУРНЕ РОЗМАЇТТЯ ВОКАЛЬНИХ ШКІЛ КИТАЮ

Its diverse cultural history and regional distinctions shape China’s rich vocal traditions, giving rise to various “vocal schools” across its vast territory. These schools, particularly within Chinese opera and folk music, reflect unique styles, techniques, and approaches to vocal performance.

We present a detailed overview of famous vocal schools in China that specialize in opera and traditional singing.

“Peking Opera (京劇, Jīngjù) Vocal School”.

“Peking Opera” is the most famous form of Chinese opera, and its vocal schools are divided according to different role types. Each role has a distinct singing style and vocal technique, and prominent performers have often founded their own schools or styles (流派, liúpài). Some of the main vocal schools in Peking Opera are:

1. “Mei School” (梅派, Méipài) was founded by Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳), one of the most famous Chinese opera performers. He created this school based on his performances of “Dan” (female characters). Mei’s style is characterized by “elegance, grace, and subtlety” in both singing and movement. His voice was clear and melodious, often using “falsetto” to depict young female characters. The “Mei School” focuses on “lyricism” and “emotional depth”, using soft and controlled vocal tones that convey inner feelings with delicacy.

2. “Cheng School” (程派, Chéngpài) was founded by Cheng Yanqiu (程硯秋). He was another master of the “Dan” role. His school is known for its “tragic intensity” and a more “melancholic” tone compared to the “Mei School”. Cheng’s vocal style features slower tempos, “heavy vibrato”, and “deep emotion”, often focusing on roles that portray suffering

or sorrowful characters. The school emphasizes “emotional weight” and “pathos”, making it distinct in the portrayal of dramatic and tragic figures.

3. “Qi School” (麒派, Qípài) was founded by Qi Lintong (麒麟童). He was known for playing “Lao Sheng” (old male roles), and his style focuses on “strength, nobility, and dignity” in vocal delivery. The “Qi School” is marked by a “rich, resonant voice” that conveys wisdom and authority, with powerful yet controlled singing, often using the “chest voice”.

4. “Tan School” (谭派, Tánpài) was founded by Tan Xinpei (谭鑫培). The “Tan School” is known for its distinctive “Sheng” (male role) vocal techniques, specifically in the portrayal of dignified characters like officials, scholars, and warriors. Tan Xinpei’s style emphasizes “crisp articulation”, “forceful projection”, and “clear enunciation”, focusing on projecting a strong and heroic image. This school is also recognized for its “precise rhythm” and “structured phrasing”, making the voice a key instrument for conveying authority.

“Kunqu (昆曲) Vocal Schools”.

“Kunqu opera”, one of China’s oldest forms of traditional opera, is known for its “soft, lyrical” style and “elegant melodies”. Kunqu emphasizes a more delicate and refined singing technique compared to Peking Opera. Some of the major vocal schools in Kunqu include:

1. “Wei School” (魏派, Wèipài) was founded by Wei Liangfu (魏良辅). He is often credited with transforming Kunqu opera into its modern form during the Ming Dynasty. His style is known for its “lyricism”, “graceful ornamentation”, and “soft tone”.

The “Wei School” focuses on “smooth transitions between notes”, “clear articulation”, and the use of “vocal ornaments” like trills and slides.

2. “Jiang School” (蒋派, Jiǎngpài) was founded by Jiang Chaozong (蒋超宗). This school emphasizes “sophisticated vocal techniques” and “precise articulation”, requiring singers to maintain clarity of tone while delivering highly ornamented melodic lines.

“Jiang School” often credited with transforming Kunqu opera into its modern form during the Ming Dynasty. His style is known for “lyricism”, “sophisticated ornamentation”, “soft tone”.

The “Jiang School” is often associated with more “melodramatic roles”, focusing on the emotional depth and inner conflict of characters.

“Cantonese Opera (粤剧, Yuèjù) Vocal Schools”.

“Cantonese opera” is popular in southern China, especially in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau. The vocal style in Cantonese opera differs from northern opera styles like Peking opera and has its own set of schools and traditions.

1. “Ma School” (马派, Mǎpài) was founded by Ma Shizeng (马师曾). He was a renowned “Sheng” (male role) performer in Cantonese opera, known for his “strong, full voice” and “powerful projection”. The “Ma School” focuses on “heroic” and “noble” characters, with a vocal style that emphasizes “forcefulness” and “emotional clarity”.

2. “Hong School” (红派, Hóngpài) was founded by Hong Xiannü (红线女). She was one of the most famous “Dan” (female role) performers in Cantonese opera. Her style is marked by a “high, clear voice”, with “delicate phrasing” and “emotional depth”. The Hong School emphasizes a more “feminine” and “lyrical” quality, making it distinct from the more heroic Ma School.

“Folk Singing Vocal Schools”.

China has a vast array of regional folk singing traditions, each with its own vocal techniques and styles. These styles are usually connected to specific regions and ethnic groups.

1. “Northern Folk Songs (北方民歌)”. The northern regions of China, such as Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Shaanxi, are known for their “bold, resonant” folk singing styles. Singers use a “strong, chesty voice”, often characterized by “nasality” and “straight tone” without vibrato. This vocal style helps project the voice over long distances, which was historically useful in open-air agricultural settings.

- Examples include the “Shanxi folk songs” and “Inner Mongolian long songs”, which are known for their “sustained notes” and “vocal power”.

2. “Southern Folk Songs (南方民歌)”. Southern Chinese folk songs, particularly from regions like Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Hunan, are characterized by “soft, melodic singing” with “fluid phrasing”. Singers from these regions often employ a “lighter, more nasal tone”, with “graceful ornamentation” and “smooth transitions” between pitches. “Hakka folk songs” from Guangdong, for example, use “falsetto” in a soft, airy way, while “Wu songs” from Jiangsu are more lyrical and understated.

3. “Tibetan and Uyghur Vocal Traditions”. In China’s western regions, ethnic minority groups like Tibetans and Uyghurs have distinct vocal traditions. “Tibetan singing” is known for its “deep, guttural tones” and the use of “overtone singing” (where the singer produces multiple tones simultaneously).

“Uyghur singing” is highly melodic, with “rich ornamentation” and “emotional expressiveness”, often accompanied by plucked string instruments like the “rawap”.

There are other “*regional opera vocal schools*”:

1. “Huangmei Opera (黄梅戏, Huángméixì)”. Originating in Anhui and Hubei provinces, “Huangmei opera” has a much “lighter” and more “folk-like” vocal style compared to Peking or Kunqu opera. The vocal technique emphasizes “naturalness” and “simplicity”, with soft, flowing melodies that are easy to sing and understand.

- The vocal delivery is “less ornamented” than in other opera forms, making it more accessible to common people, and it is often compared to folk singing in its straightforwardness;

2. “Sichuan Opera (川剧, Chuānjù)” from southwestern China, is known for its lively vocal style and “rapid transitions” between different vocal registers. Singers frequently switch between “high-pitched falsetto” and “low, chesty tones”, adding dramatic flair to the performance. Sichuan opera is also famous for its “face-changing” (变脸, biànliǎn) technique, where performers quickly change masks to express different emotions.

China’s vocal schools are a reflection of its vast cultural diversity, with each school rooted in specific regional, historical, and social contexts. Whether through the highly stylized and refined traditions of “Peking” and “Kunqu opera”, the regional folk singing styles, or the emotionally powerful expressions of “Cantonese opera”, these schools represent the depth and richness of Chinese vocal arts.

Each school has developed its techniques for breath control, ornamentation, projection, and emotional expression, ensuring the preservation of China’s vocal heritage for future generations.