

Music for the Long Term: A Study on the Construction and Development Pathways of a Full-Chain Ecosystem for Domestic Musicals

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Abstract

Over the course of several decades, original Chinese musicals have consistently faced a central challenge: how to achieve a deep integration of Chinese and Western aesthetics. This paper adopts Fei Xiaotong's theory of cultural self-awareness—"Appreciate one's own beauty, appreciate the beauty of others, share beauty together, and achieve universal harmony"—as an analytical framework. By analyzing four representative works—*Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Piano in a Factory*, *Cao Xueqin*, and *The Splendor of the Guoyun Lou* to examine the aesthetic pathways and operational mechanisms formed in the practice of East-West integration within Chinese musical theater. The analysis reveals that Chinese musical theater has accumulated a systematic set of integration strategies across four dimensions: musical narrative, physical expression, stage design, and narrative structure. The underlying logic supporting the effective operation of these strategies can be summarized as three mechanisms: the Aesthetic Transformation Mechanism (primarily manifested in three aspects: impressionistic aesthetic, the use of negative space, and the reinvention of symbols); the Narrative-Driven Mechanism (centered on narrative, anchored by character alignment, and linked by emotional logic); and the Cultural Adaptation Mechanism (involving the activation of collective memory, the creation of a sense of the times, and the transformation of universal values). This study concludes that the fusion of Eastern and Western elements in Chinese musicals has evolved from a cultural self-consciousness of "each appreciating its own beauty" and an open-minded acceptance of "appreciating the beauty of others" toward a deep integration of "shared beauty," and may, through the concept of "Harmony For All," evoke a shared emotional resonance among people of different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords

Chinese musical theater, Beauty in Harmony, East-West integration, aesthetic pathways, integration mechanisms.

1. Introduction

For decades, the process of localizing original Chinese musicals has been marked by the question of how to fuse Chinese and Western elements. Persistent issues within the industry include formulaic remakes and failed cultural "grafting." These challenges stem from an inability to identify a solid foundation for the deep integration of Chinese and Western cultures (Xiao & Zhang, 2023). The key to breaking this deadlock lies in linking artistic forms of expression to local aesthetics, thereby providing a solid foundation for the content of domestic musicals.

Fei Xiaotong's sixteen-character maxim—"Appreciate the beauty of one's own culture, appreciate the beauty of others' cultures, share in the beauty together, and achieve universal harmony"—provides a theoretical perspective on "how to integrate" (Chu & Zhang, 2023). Cultural self-consciousness "requires recognizing one's own culture while also appreciating the

beauty of other cultures” (Zhang & Liu, 2008). “Sharing beauty in harmony” overcomes the binary opposition between retro-style and Westernization (Zhang, 2021). This paper treats “sharing beauty in harmony” as its core framework, dividing it into two layers: the first layer consists of “appreciating one’s own beauty” and “appreciating the beauty of others,” while the second layer covers the pathways and mechanisms for realizing “sharing beauty in harmony.” The “full-chain ecosystem” referred to in this paper does not refer to external industry links, but rather to the organic integration of four dimensions within a work: musical narrative, physical expression, stage design, and narrative structure. Therefore, the “full-chain ecosystem” is composed of the artistic ecosystem within the work and the developmental ecosystem outside the industry.

Taking the four works *Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Piano in a Factory*, *Cao Xueqin*, and *The Splendor of the Cloud Tower* as examples, this paper examines them from the perspectives of both aesthetic pathways and integration mechanisms. The former involves a four-dimensional strategy encompassing music, physical expression, stage design, and narrative structure, while the latter comprises a threefold logic of aesthetic transformation, narrative-driven development, and cultural adaptation.

2. “Appreciating One’s Own Beauty” and “Appreciating the Beauty of Others”: The Dual Prerequisites for Integration

Deep integration based on “shared beauty” relies on two indispensable prerequisites: a thorough understanding of and confidence in one’s own aesthetic traditions (“appreciating one’s own beauty”), and an open attitude toward and willingness to learn from other cultures (“appreciating the beauty of others”). Together, these two form the foundation for Chinese musicals to achieve deep integration.

2.1. “Appreciating One’s Own Beauty”: The Roots of Local Aesthetics

The localization of Chinese musicals is not a direct transplantation of Western art forms, but is rooted in the *liyue* (ritual-music) tradition (Zhang & Liu, 2008). The ancient Chinese artistic tradition of “conveying the Dao through music and educating people through ritual” established a unique paradigm for music to serve society and enrich the human spirit. The symbiotic relationship between ritual and music—where ritual takes the lead and music serves as a complement—intrinsically possesses the dual attributes of “ritual narrative” and “musical lyricism,” which aligns with the inherent logic of musical theater: “narrating through music and expressing meaning through drama.” The ancients held that “the way of sound is interconnected with governance,” viewing music as a reflection of social reality. This tradition of emphasizing humanism and narrative has shaped the unique character of Chinese music, distinguishing it from the purely aesthetic and entertaining nature of Western music.

Chinese classical fine arts, literature, and music—which encompass the integration of music, dance, visual arts, and the stylized performance of traditional opera—constitute the most precious and valuable classical sources of inspiration for the creation of national-level musicals. Both musicals and Chinese opera are complex performing arts that fuse multiple elements to tell stories and create atmosphere (Yuan, 2022; Zhou, 2015). Based on the aesthetics of free creation, Chinese opera regards “conveying the spirit through form, and the interaction between the tangible and the intangible” as its primary principle; Chinese opera does not aim to depict the real world realistically, but rather conveys its intrinsic essence through minimalist stage sets and virtual scenes. At the same time, the pentatonic scale, linear melodies, and the unique timbres of traditional Chinese instruments provide a rich musical foundation for the localization of musical theater. When classical elements are transformed through modern

techniques, an aesthetic significance emerges that is both traditional and modern—a characteristic that distinguishes local musical theater from Western works.

2.2. “Appreciating the Beauty of Others”: The Introduction and Assimilation of Western Aesthetics

The localization of Chinese musicals is not only a product of the tradition of ritual and music, but also emerged alongside the contemporary aesthetic education movement that arose following the “New Culture Movement” (Zhang & Liu, 2008). In the early 20th century, these ideas spurred a modernization of Chinese literature and art, breaking free from the constraints of traditional ritual and music, giving rise to new forms of aesthetic education, and bringing about a comprehensive transformation in literature and art. Influenced by these ideas on aesthetic education, contemporary musicians such as Xiao Yumei, Zhao Yuanjie, and Li Jinhui drew upon the concept of creatively fusing Eastern and Western cultures and began composing new musical works, laying the foundation for the formation of a comprehensive stage art form that integrates music, narrative, dance, and performance.

In the 1980s, alongside the ideological liberalization and the Reform and Opening-Up policies, musical theater—as a mature, comprehensive Western performing art form—officially entered China. At that time, performance formats were diverse, ranging from full-length touring productions to one-act concerts featuring songs and dance excerpts. These “abridged” performances allowed Chinese audiences and creators to gain a deeper understanding of the composition, choreographic language, and narrative techniques of Western musical theater. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the scale and formats of musicals have continued to expand. However, drawing inspiration does not mean blindly copying. Early attempts at localization took many detours: some directly transplanted Western models into China, losing their own cultural identity, while others clung rigidly to traditional forms, lacking the vitality of the modern stage. How to strike a balance between borrowing and originality—and how to truly move from “appreciating the beauty of others” to “sharing in the beauty of all”—is the question this article will address next.

3. Convergence and Symbiosis: The Aesthetic Path of East-West Integration

The fusion of Chinese and Western elements in Chinese musicals is not merely the advocacy of an abstract concept, but rather a concrete and tangible creative practice manifested across four dimensions: music, movement, stage design, and narrative. Drawing on four major case studies, this chapter systematically presents this aesthetic approach. Together, these four dimensions form a complete ecosystem within domestic musical productions—encompassing the auditory, the visual, the dynamic, the static, the particular, and the whole—with each artistic element working in harmony within a single work

3.1. The Fusion of Eastern and Western Elements in Musical Narrative

Musicals use music to tell stories and shape characters. The creation of *Big Red Lantern* was based on this logic, establishing a musical narrative system that is “rooted in tradition yet flexibly modern.” The principle guiding this approach was not to be confined to any particular style; whether jazz, rock, or traditional Chinese music, any genre could be used as long as it suits the characters and serves the plot. At the same time, an Eastern aesthetic sensibility ran throughout the production, ensuring consistency in the overall tone.

The musical language in the production is exceptionally rich, encompassing jazz, rock, rap, bel canto, and traditional Chinese instrumental music. The butler’s entrance is heralded by rap accompanied by the crisp sound of a small gong—a scene that appears lively on the surface but is, in fact, satirical. The love duet “It Rained One Autumn Day” follows the style of old-school

jazz, with a gentle, flowing melody that evokes the atmosphere of Old Shanghai from that era. This segment uses traditional Chinese percussion to drive emotional shifts; as the drumbeat accelerates, the tension on stage builds layer by layer (Li, 2014).

The use of traditional opera elements is the most striking aspect of this production. When the Third Concubine enters, she sings the “Diving into the River” segment from the Peking Opera *Du Shiniang*, again performed as unaccompanied a cappella. With almost no sound on stage, only the actress’s voice echoes through the vast space, instantly highlighting her loneliness and helplessness (Zhang, 2023).

If *Big Red Lantern* is a collage of diverse styles, then *The Piano in a Factory* systematically transforms regional folk music into its own musical language. Errenzhuan, Northeastern folk tunes, revolutionary songs, and old Soviet songs are all incorporated and rearranged into original musical styles suited to the plot’s needs. Act II, “The First Day of Piano-Making,” opens directly with an Errenzhuan melody, using humor to lighten the weight of the industrial theme; throughout the play, the eighteen musical numbers consistently maintain the unadorned spirit of workers’ songs (Liu, 2015). *The Splendor of Guoyun Tower* takes the musical resources of the Jiangnan region to the next level, blending Kunqu opera, Suzhou Pingtan, Jiangnan silk and bamboo music, and southern Jiangsu folk songs. The lyrics mimic the style of Song Dynasty poetry, and the vocal style carries a recitative quality, thus unfolding the distinctive charm of Jiangnan (Jiang, 2014).



Figure 1. Stage still from *The Piano in a Factory*, 2020 graduating class production of the Musical Theater Department at the Central Academy of Drama, 2024.

3.2. The Coexistence of Ancient and Modern Physical Expression

Early domestic productions mostly directly transplanted Broadway’s physical vocabulary or simply replicated traditional opera movements without achieving an organic fusion. *Red Lantern* deconstructed and classical dance, ethnic dance, traditional opera movements, and modern dance based on the principles of “drama first” and “narrative-centered.” The creative team hired professional folk dancers to participate, and the lead actors all possessed strong foundational skills.

Most early local productions either directly copied Broadway’s physical language or simply imitated the movements of traditional Chinese opera, failing to achieve an organic fusion. *Red Lanterns*, guided by the principles of “drama-first” and “narrative-centered,” entrusted the primary performance tasks to professional folk dancers, and the lead actors all possessed the necessary foundational skills.

The opening ensemble dance, “Money Makes the Devil Grind the Mill,” embodies the spirit of modern Broadway musicals, with its passionate and exuberant movements forming a stark contrast to the solemn and solemn atmosphere of the Chen family’s wedding procession, using the juxtaposition of ancient and modern movement to create subtle satire (Li, 2014). The “I Am a Well” segment uses a minimalist stage and spotlights to create an impressionistic atmosphere. Dancers, dressed in plain white long dresses, mimic the image of an ancient well through the opening and closing of their bodies, organically combining traditional impressionistic aesthetics with modern abstract dance. The “Mask Dance” segment uses abstract, rhythmic modern movements to express a woman’s inner conflicts. The dancers, dressed in dark attire and wearing white masks, perform to a melody-less piece, relying entirely on the progression of rhythm to build tension. At the conclusion, a pair of 1.6-meter-long white theatrical sleeves appears, fusing traditional movements with modern dance. The fluttering sleeves both echo the tragic fates of the “Three Ladies” and serve as an outward manifestation of Song Lian’s mental breakdown. The intricate emotional entanglements between Fei Pu and Master Gu are conveyed through silent body language, while Song Lian’s movement design employs the restrained techniques of classical dance to symbolize confinement, convey emotion and advance narrative through physical expression.

3.3. The Impressionistic Interpretation of Stage Space

The staging of *The Red Lantern* did not follow the Western realist model but instead returned to traditional Chinese freehand aesthetic principles, prioritizing the creation of artistic atmosphere. The stage featured virtually no complex physical sets, relying instead on a limited number of visual symbols—such as eaves, a well platform, lotus flowers, chrysanthemums, and candlelight—to suggest the setting. In Act I, “Flowers,” the backdrop features a freehand-style painting of chrysanthemums rendered in a technique reminiscent of splashed-ink wash; only a few props are placed at key points. The interplay between the tangible and the intangible creates the effect of using negative space to evoke a poetic atmosphere.

Color plays a crucial narrative role in this play. The three colors—red, white, and black—run throughout the entire production: the warm glow of the red lanterns at the opening contrasts with the pale blue-white of the servants’ clothing, creating a juxtaposition of warmth and coolness that immediately evokes a sense of unease and oppression; during the masked dance sequence, black blankets the stage while white masks float in the center, revealing the scheming and conflict between characters through this interplay of black and white; by the finale, white sleeves, white snowflakes, and a vast expanse of white fill the stage as a bride in a bright red wedding gown slowly walks onto the stage; the cycle of red and white hints at the tragedy of women repeating itself from generation to generation. The spatial arrangement is also carefully crafted: Mei Shan stands on a high platform to sing, while Song Lian hides in the shadows to listen. With one high and one low, one light and one dark, the conflict between the characters is revealed without a single line of dialogue. The stage design for *Cao Xueqin* takes a different approach, using plain gauze curtains to create ink-wash tones, combined with geometric divisions and dynamic changes, fusing classical artistic conception with modern visual language and breaking free from the temporal and spatial constraints of the traditional “three unities.”

3.4. Localized Reconstruction of the Narrative Structure

Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* features a narrative structure where “the author’s life, textual creation, and the cultural context of the era” are interwoven. With “pages filled with absurd words, a handful of bitter tears” as its core, the work fuses the author’s circumstances with the spirit of the text (Chen, 2019). The narrative “white space” in Peking Opera a cappella and mask dance leaves room for audience interpretation on stage, guiding viewers to participate in the construction of the story.

The Piano in a Factory begins with “the resolve to build a piano” and ends with “the piano’s completion,” forming a closed-loop narrative. All scenes take place within the steel mill workshop, with scene transitions achieved through changes in lighting. The work uses satirical storytelling and dark humor to defuse the hardships of the era, creating a unique texture characterized by a comedic exterior and a tragic core (Liu, 2015). Building upon the original work, the musical introduces the plot twist that the daughter is not Chen Guilin’s biological child, elevating Chen Guilin’s tragedy from a personal fate to an inevitability of the transitional era of reform and opening-up (Chen, 2014). In the play, the piano transcends its function as a mere object, becoming a symbol of how ordinary people resist fate and hold fast to their ideals (Chen, 2014).

4. Deep Integration: The Operational Mechanisms of East-West Fusion

The preceding sections have illustrated the visible integration strategies from four perspectives. However, these approaches are merely superficial; what truly merits further inquiry is why they are effective. The mechanisms underpinning the successful implementation of these integration strategies can be summarized in three aspects: the mechanism of aesthetic transformation, narrative driving forces, and cultural compatibility.

4.1. Mechanism of Aesthetic Transformation: How Western Forms Convey Eastern Aesthetic Essence

A fundamental question that cannot be avoided in East-West integration is whether Western modern forms can convey the aesthetic essence of the East. As seen in several successful films, the pathways of transformation can generally be summarized into three categories: stylization, the use of negative space, and the reinvention of symbols.

The use of freehand brushwork is the most significant of these. Western art emphasizes realism and the “image,” while Chinese art emphasizes freehand brushwork and the “spirit.” In the “Flowers” scene from *Red Lantern*, chrysanthemums painted with splashed-ink techniques cover the background, while the actual set on stage features only a few key elements. Through this interplay of the real and the abstract, the stage no longer merely recreates a scene but becomes a realm of artistic conception. It does not concern itself with whether external forms are similar, but rather whether the inner spirit and vitality can resonate with the audience’s hearts. Musically speaking, the Third Concubine’s a cappella aria—though performed without accompaniment—brings the power of tragedy to its peak; this, too, embodies the aesthetic wisdom that “less is more.”

“Leaving space” is a methodological approach to transformation. The a cappella aria from *Red Lantern* uses “emptiness” to triumph over “fullness”; Cao Xueqin’s gauze curtains create a space that blends the real and the imagined; and the mask dance eschews melody in favor of rhythm—all of these employ “leaving space” to mobilize the audience’s imagination to fill in the gaps and construct meaning. The effectiveness of negative space lies in its ability to transform the relationship between the audience and the stage: Western realism pursues immersive illusion, while Chinese freehand painting pursues participatory imagination.

Reinterpreting symbols is a matter of transforming their medium. The water sleeves evolve from mere props into symbolic images of grief; the ancient well serves both as a physical object and a symbol of feudal moral norms; and the red lantern shifts from its original symbolic meaning to become a dual symbol of power and disaster. When traditional symbols fuse with the spirit of modern theater, cultural memory—and the emotions it embodies—resurface.

4.2. Narrative-Driven Mechanism: How to Unify Diverse Styles Within the Dramatic Whole

When multiple styles coexist, disorder becomes the greatest risk. As various elements are layered upon one another, a “mishmash” can result. To avoid this, a story-driven approach is crucial. This means placing the story at the center, with characters serving as anchors and emotional logic acting as the connecting thread that unifies the various styles.

Placing the story at the center is the first principle. The composer has always been acutely aware of this, using dramatic conflict to amplify and drive the plot forward; however, this technique must not be employed arbitrarily but must be selected to align with the characters’ personalities.

Character suitability is the key to integration. In *The Piano in a Factory*, all the characters are working-class laborers; their vocal expressions are simple and down-to-earth, without any showmanship. Songlian’s movements blend ancient and modern elements because neither classical nor modern dance alone could convey her conflicting psyche—caught between feudal constraints and a spirit of rebellion. The choice of style always stems from the characters’ identities and inner conflicts.

Emotional logic serves as the thread that connects various styles. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the development of the plot, the emergence of emotions, and the intensification of conflict are all supported by different musical themes; each musical style has its own role and serves a distinct function. The same applies to *Piano Lesson*: Ellen Zhu’an’s sense of humor aligns with the workers’ use of music as a means to alleviate their suffering, while the nostalgic melodies of Soviet songs resonate within the film’s psychological atmosphere.

4.3. Cultural Adaptation Mechanisms: How the Fusion of Chinese and Western Elements Achieves Local Recognition

Ultimately, the success of a work depends on whether the local audience accepts it. Cultural adaptation involves three key elements: evoking collective memory, creating an era-specific atmosphere, and interpreting universal values.

Collective memory serves as the threshold for audiences entering the theater. The Russian folk song performed at the opening of the play *The Piano in a Factory* was not intended to be novel or to forcefully introduce exotic elements, but rather to evoke memories.

Creating a sense of the era determines whether the audience can truly immerse themselves in the performance. Composer Zhou Xueshi believes that even while maintaining intellectual depth, a work must still be pleasing to the ear and visually engaging. In terms of stage design, segmented geometric shapes and dynamic transitions were incorporated into the classical ink-wash aesthetic; in terms of performance, the lead actors did not strictly adhere to traditional opera conventions but instead employed modern dramatic techniques to shape their characters, making them more authentic and lifelike. While the classical spirit remains intact, its mode of expression resonates with contemporary audiences, enabling classical themes to engage in a dialogue with modern viewers.

The extent to which this work can reach a wider audience depends on how effectively it translates “universal values.” *The Splendor of the Cloud Tower* took the stage at the 2014 Edinburgh International Festival; coincidentally, that year’s theme was “War and Peace.” The play tells the story of scholars safeguarding ancient texts and preserving the cultural legacy amid wartime chaos, which perfectly aligned with the festival’s theme—by conveying the universal human themes found in Chinese stories through an internationally accessible artistic language, the regional elements were elevated to a universal level.



Figure 2. Stage photo of *The Splendor of Guoyun Tower* at the Edinburgh International Festival, produced by the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, China News Service, 2014.

5. Conclusion

Chinese musical theater is shifting from the previous approach of “each appreciating its own beauty and joy” to one where “various forms of beauty coexist harmoniously.” Additionally, four distinct systems have emerged: musical narrative, physical expression, stage design, and narrative structure. Musicals such as *Big Red Lanterns Hang High*, *Piano*, *Cao Xueqin*, and *The Splendor of Yunlou* are all representative works of diverse musical integration, the systematization of folk music, the dialogue between ink-wash aesthetics and geometry, and the construction of the Jiangnan musical system. Mechanistically speaking, the fundamental and deep-seated principles of this path can be explained through the logic of aesthetic transformation, narrative orientation, and cultural adaptability. The four-dimensional pathway, together with the three-pronged mechanism, forms the core of the “complete ecological chain” within China’s musical performance framework. At the same time, the experience gained from creating these four distinct components has provided new insights for continuously enriching the “content.” During this period of aesthetic transformation—marked by the pursuit of change through free self-expression, the emergence of comprehensive narrative trends amid stylistic fusion, and the achievement of cultural adaptation within the context of local identity—an optimal environment has been created for the overall creation of domestic musicals. The path to realizing the concept of “music that endures through the ages” lies in establishing a “full-cycle ecosystem” within individual works, culminating in the continuous accumulation of creative concepts and methodologies.

Of course, finding a balance between acknowledging diversity while preventing fragmentation, and reviving classics while transcending mere retro revival, still requires in-depth research. Existing works demonstrate that the fusion of Eastern and Western elements in Chinese musicals has given rise to a new aesthetic form—one that is neither a simple imitation of the West nor a continuation of tradition, but rather a modern aesthetic. This has become the foundation for “music that endures.”

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