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## The Necessity of Integrating Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs into the Vocal Music Curriculum

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**Abstract:** *Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs have recently gained new vitality, blending classical literary traditions with modern musical aesthetics. Despite their artistic and cultural importance, they remain marginal in formal vocal pedagogy, where Western bel canto dominates. This study investigates the necessity of integrating these works into vocal music curricula in higher education. Using literature review, historical analysis, and case illustration, it examines how the repertoire strengthens technical skills, particularly diction, articulation, breath control, and timbre shaping, while simultaneously cultivating students' cultural identity and aesthetic literacy. Representative works, such as Prelude to Water Melody, Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night, and Bring in the Wine, are analysed to demonstrate how artistic conception (意境) is achieved through the synergy of poetry and music. Findings highlight that this repertoire provides irreplaceable pedagogical value and serves as a complementary counterpart to Western art songs, broadening students' interpretive frameworks and intercultural perspectives. The paper proposes feasible strategies for curriculum integration, teaching methodologies, and teacher training. It concludes that systematically incorporating Ancient Poetry Art Songs into vocal pedagogy is essential for cultivating well-rounded vocal artists who are technically proficient, aesthetically sensitive, and culturally grounded.*

**Keywords:** *Ancient Poetry Art Songs, Vocal Pedagogy, Aesthetic Education, Curriculum Integration, Chinese Ethnic Singing*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Motivation

In recent years, the field of Chinese ancient poetry art songs has experienced a creative boom. Not only have classic poems (such as Tang and Song poetry) been reinterpreted through new musical compositions, but many composers have also used modern musical language to explore the artistic connotations of lesser-known classical poems, giving rise to a large number of new works that blend traditional charm with contemporary aesthetic qualities. These works, through a deep symbiosis of “poetry and music”—which preserves the literary beauty and artistic conception of the poems while conveying emotional tension that resonates with modern aesthetics through melody and harmony—have not only frequently appeared on professional music stages but have also reached broader audiences through new media platforms, becoming important vehicles for showcasing the charm of China’s excellent traditional culture (Li, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Huang, 2025).

However, in stark contrast to the prosperity in creation, these culturally significant art songs have not yet been systematically integrated into China’s formal vocal music education system: their proportion in vocal music curricula at universities is far lower than that of Western bel canto repertoire; teaching often focuses on scattered piecemeal performance practice without a comprehensive pedagogical logic covering poetic interpretation, musical style analysis, and adapted vocal techniques; and some institutions’ vocal textbooks include very few relevant works, resulting in students’ understanding of this native art form remaining superficial (Zhang & Chonprirot, 2024; Zhao, 2023).

### 1.2 The Development and Characteristics of Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs

#### 1.2.1 Definition of Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs

“The Chinese ancient poetry art songs” is a comprehensive art form that sets classical Chinese poetry (including *shi*, *ci*, *qu*, *fu*, etc.) as its lyrical text, integrating it with musical composition. It is not a simple reproduction of traditional ancient tunes but rather uses vocal music as its core vehicle to achieve an auditory expression of the poetic artistic conception and emotion through musical languages such as melody, harmony, and orchestration. It embodies literariness, musicality, and artistry, constituting an important component of the Chinese national vocal music system (Li & Dai, 2024; Hu, 2023; Shen et al., 2025).

#### 1.2.2 Brief description of development history

The modern development of Chinese ancient poetry art songs began in the early 20th century during the period of musical enlightenment. Qing Zhu’s “The Great River Flows Eastward,” composed in 1920 using Su Shi’s “Charm of a Maiden Singer - Memories of the Ancient Red Cliff” as the text, marked the inception of the genre by integrating Western art song composition techniques with Chinese classical poetry for the first time. Subsequently, composers such as Huang Zi and Zhao Yuanren continued this exploration, forming an early peak of development.

Their works preserved the aesthetic beauty of poetic metrical patterns while incorporating Western harmonic thinking (Huang, 2025).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the creation of these art songs presented a diversified trend: on one hand, continuing the tradition of “poetry-music integration” and strengthening the use of national musical elements; on the other hand, experimenting with integration with traditional Chinese instruments in orchestration, thereby enriching expressive layers. In the contemporary era, the creation of ancient poetry art songs has experienced new prosperity. Composers not only delve deeply into traditional aesthetics with an emphasis on "creating artistic conception," but also absorb modern musical techniques, demonstrating greater innovation in thematic selection and musical language, ultimately forming a developmental pattern interwoven with tradition and modernity (Xiao et al., 2025; Chaloupková, 2022).

### **1.2.3 Characteristics of “Sino-Western fusion”**

“Sino-Western fusion” stands as the defining characteristic that permeates the entire tradition of ancient poetry art songs. In terms of compositional technique, it draws on the Western art song concept of “poetry-music symbiosis,” incorporating structural elements such as harmony and musical form. For instance, the equal relationship between the piano accompaniment and the vocal part in early works derives directly from the German and Austrian art song tradition. Simultaneously, it remains firmly grounded in the Chinese cultural core, crafting melodies that adhere to the tonal patterns of the Chinese language and continuing the vocal tradition of “integrating vocal delivery with poetic rhythm” (腔韵结合), thereby ensuring the literary essence of the poetry is not overshadowed by the music (Mao, 2025; Deng & Loo, 2024).

This fusion is not a mere superimposition but achieves an organic unity of Western technique and Chinese aesthetics. It utilizes the structural framework of Western music to convey the aesthetic beauty of Chinese poetic conception, while infusing Western techniques with a humanistic warmth through traditional Chinese lyrical logic. The ultimate result is an art form that possesses both distinct national character and international expressiveness, establishing itself as a significant musical vehicle for Sino-Western cultural exchange (Feng, 2023; Winzenburg, 2018).

### **1.3 Research Purpose and Significance**

This study addresses the imbalance in Chinese vocal education, where Western *bel canto* practices often dominate while local traditions remain underrepresented. It focuses on Chinese ancient poetry art songs—characterized by their “poetry–music symbiosis”—as a necessary means to bridge gaps between technical training, cultural transmission, and aesthetic education. Their integration is not a superficial supplement but a crucial reform supported by perspectives from musicology and education, offering practical directions for curriculum design, teaching strategies, and resource development.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive orientation, emphasizing the theoretical integration of ancient poetry art songs within modern vocal education. As a conceptual investigation, it synthesizes existing scholarship, theoretical perspectives, and pedagogical frameworks rather than collecting empirical data. Its primary aim is to construct a coherent conceptual model and theoretical rationale that can guide future empirical research and practical implementation in vocal pedagogy. This methodological stance ensures that the framework developed in this paper serves as both a pedagogical guide and a foundation for subsequent evidence-based studies.

In vocal education, these songs refine diction, tonal accuracy, articulation, and breath management—adaptations better suited to Chinese vocal expression (Zhang & Chonprirot, 2024). In cultural transmission, they act as “living carriers” of tradition, embedding historical allusions and humanistic spirit, and enabling students to actively inherit Chinese heritage. In aesthetic education, their qualities of subtle resonance, fusion of emotion and scene, and artistic conception (意境) complement the direct expressivity of Western art songs, broadening aesthetic horizons and enhancing discernment. Collectively, they cultivate artists with technical skill, cultural literacy, and pluralistic vision.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs has shifted in the past two decades toward interdisciplinary and pedagogical concerns. Foundational stylistic studies by Li (2022) and Liu, Yap, and Song (2022) show how new-era works fuse national aesthetics with modern composition, using tonal prosody and imagery-led structures to enact a “poetry–music symbiosis.” From a developmental lens, Hu (2023) charts the genre from early 20th-century explorations to contemporary practice, while Chaloupková (2022) and Mao (2025) frame it “between tradition and modernity,” arguing that Chinese tonal prosody interfacing with Western forms both spurs innovation and advances intercultural dialogue.

Pedagogically, Zhao (2023) evidences gains in diction, tonal precision, and cultural awareness when curricula include this repertoire; Zhang and Chonprirot (2024) demonstrate improved musical literacy through alignment of phonetic accuracy and expressive phrasing; Yu and Abdullah (2024) further contend that undergraduate adoption strengthens aesthetic education and cultural confidence. At the aesthetic core, Huang (2025) and Li & Shafizan bin Sabri (2025) stress “inheritance and innovation,” calling for teaching that preserves 意境 while embracing stylistic diversification. Performance pedagogy grounded in “emotion–scene unity” requires internalizing poetic meaning before rendering it as timbre and tone—an approach exemplified by Yang (2021) and Jiao (2022) that links cultural comprehension to expressive mastery.

In sum, scholarship converges on three claims: a distinctive poetry–music structural fusion; the necessity of curricular integration to balance Western and Chinese vocal traditions; and a role as carriers of aesthetic and national identity. Yet empirical measurement of learning outcomes and rigorous cross-cultural comparisons remain limited, inviting classroom-based studies to consolidate the repertoire’s educational value.

### 3. The Multifaceted Educational Value of Ancient Poetry Art Songs

#### 3.1 Deepening Vocal Technique

##### 3.1.1 Linguistic Training

Ancient poetry art songs align closely with the phonetic rules of Chinese, making them ideal for developing precision in singing, a value Western repertoire cannot replace. As a tonal language, Chinese requires accurate rendering of the four tones (阴平, 阳平, 上声, 去声), which directly shape melodic naturalness and emotional expression. For example, in *Su Shi's* Prelude to Water Melody, “明” (阳平) demands a rising pitch for clarity, while “月” (去声) requires a descending tone to convey tranquillity; tonal errors cause semantic and emotional dissonance (Shen, 2025; Li et al., 2022).

Equally important is adherence to rhyme schemes such as the “Thirteen Rhyme Groups” (十三辙). In Zhang Ji's Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night- “愁眠 (mián)” and “客船 (chuán)” - both in the “言前辙,” singers must articulate consonants and maintain consistent tongue and mouth positions to achieve smooth rhyme resolution (Yang, 2020).

This pursuit of “zi zheng qiang yuan” (字正腔圆), perfect articulation and resonant tone compensate for the limits of Western vocal training, which emphasizes vowels but neglects tonal prosody, and equips singers with the technical foundation essential for Chinese vocal performance (Liu et al., 2022).

##### 3.1.2 Breath control

The structure of ancient poetry art songs, designed to convey artistic conception (意境), places high demands on breath management requiring depth, smoothness, flexibility, and stability beyond conventional repertoire.

For depth and stability, extended phrases call for sustained support. In Zhao Jiping's Autumn Twilight in the Mountains, the line “空山新雨后, 天气晚来秋” spans eight beats, requiring slow inhalation and exhalation (慢吸慢呼) with steady diaphragmatic control to maintain endurance (Yang, 2015).

For flexibility, emotional shifts demand agile breathing. Li Bai's Bring in the Wine requires quick inhalation and exhalation (急吸急呼) to capture its heroic spirit. In contrast, Li Qingzhao's *Slow Slow Song* calls for shallow inhalation and slow exhalation (浅吸慢呼) to express desolation (McCoy, 2005).

By adapting breath to poetic emotion, singers progress beyond a single “breath mode,” gaining versatility and a strong foundation for nuanced emotional expression.

### 3.1.3 Timbre Shaping

Ancient poetry art songs follow the principle that “poetic conception dictates musical conception” (诗境决定乐境), requiring singers to adjust timbre according to the poem’s emotion. Heroic poems (豪放派), such as Su Shi’s *Charm of a Maiden Singer - Memories of the Ancient Red Cliff*, call for a bright and powerful timbre achieved through strong chest resonance and vocal intensity. In contrast, delicate poems (婉约派), like Liu Yong’s *Bells Ringing in the Rain*, require a soft and introverted timbre shaped by refined head resonance and reduced volume to express melancholy (Liu & Wallmark, 2024).

This principle of “one poem, one timbre” pushes singers to move beyond a single vocal colour. For example, a singer trained in the bright timbre of bel canto must adjust resonance placement when performing more delicate works, reducing chest resonance and refining head resonance to achieve flexible transitions. Some songs also integrate traditional elements such as Kunqu’s “water-polished tune” (水磨腔) or the guqin’s overtone texture, requiring imitation of these timbral qualities and expanding the expressive range of vocal performance (Wang et al., 2024; Wang, 2019).

## 3.2 Enhancing Literary and Aesthetic Cultivation through Ancient Poetry Art Songs

### 3.2.1 Interdisciplinary Integration: A Multi-dimensional Bridge for Comprehensive Quality Development

Ancient poetry art songs are inherently interdisciplinary, combining music, literature, history, and philosophy to foster students’ comprehensive development. From the literary dimension, texts drawn from classical poems require analysis of meter, rhetoric, and emotion. Li Bai’s *The waters of the Yellow River flow from heaven* exemplifies the heroic style, while Li Qingzhao’s *Seeking, seeking, searching, searching* reflects delicate lyricism. Su Shi’s *Prelude to Water Melody – How Long Has the Moon Been Here?* further illustrates the “questioning–lyrical expression–philosophical reflection” structure typical of the Heroic School (豪放派) of Song poetry (Huang, 2010). From the historical dimension, works embody their era’s cultural imprint. *Three Variations of the Yang Pass* reflects Tang frontier hardship and the willow-branch farewell custom, while *Slow Song of Yangzhou – Famous City on the Left of the Huai* connects to Southern Song warfare and Jiang Kui’s patriotic spirit (Shen, 2025).

From the philosophical dimension, the repertoire conveys traditional ideas. *Three Stanzas of Mume Blossoms* echoes the Daoist balance of strength and flexibility, and *Dialogue between the Fisherman and the Woodcutter* expresses the Confucian ideal of public service versus personal integrity. Music binds these dimensions: melodic contour mirrors textual rhythm, harmony reflects historical atmosphere, and vocal performance embodies philosophical thought. Thus, ancient poetry art songs achieve holistic cultivation by “using music to promote

literature, using literature to understand history, and using history to comprehend philosophy” (Tan & Lu, 2018; Wang, 2022; Li & Shafizan bin Sabri, 2025).

### **3.2.2 Interpretation of Artistic Conception: Cultivating the Core Competence of Artistic Expression**

The performance of ancient poetry art songs centers on the auditory interpretation of “artistic conception” (意境) - the aesthetic state where "emotion and scene blend" (情景交融) emphasized in classical Chinese poetics. Through musical language, such as the evocative piano accompaniment in “Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night” or the vocal phrasing conveying the tranquility in "Autumn Twilight in the Mountains," these songs deepen and materialize the poetic imagery. Performers must first comprehend the poem's emotional core and situational atmosphere, then translate this understanding into expressive vocal techniques-breath control, nuanced articulation, and appropriate timbre - to achieve harmony between meaning and scene (意与境偕). This process not only enhances literary-aesthetic appreciation but also refines artistic expression, forming the essence of interpreting ancient poetry through song (Yang, 2021; Jiao, 2022; Wu, 2024).

### **3.2.3 Aesthetic Cultivation: Tangible Perception of Traditional Aesthetic Qualities**

Ancient poetry art songs vividly embody core Chinese aesthetic principles- “subtlety,” “elegance,” and “harmonious balance”- transforming abstract cultural concepts into tangible artistic expression. Through restrained melodic phrasing and nuanced emotional delivery, as exemplified in works like "Song of the Red Bean" and “Jasmine Flower,” these songs demonstrate how profound meaning can be conveyed implicitly, emotional extremes moderated, and artistic refinement achieved. By engaging with these compositions, learners internalize traditional aesthetics, gradually developing a culturally grounded artistic sensibility that shapes both their vocal expression and value orientation (Ho, 1997; Christ, 2024; Yu & Abdullah, 2024).

## **3.3 Complementing the Western Repertoire**

### **3.3.1 Poetry-Music Relationship: Complementary Approaches**

The integration of poetry and music fundamentally distinguishes Chinese and Western art songs while enabling their complementarity. German and Austrian art songs exhibit “music-led poetic extension,” where composers like Schubert creatively reinterpret poems through musical structure. In “Erlkönig,” the piano's triplets and varied vocal timbres drive the narrative, forming a "music-as-skeleton" relationship. Conversely, Chinese ancient poetry art songs follow “poetry-guided, music-assisted” creation. Composers respect poetic literary qualities—strict tonal patterns and rhythmic structures—by aligning melodies with word tones. Huang Zi's “Flower Non-Flower” preserves Bai Juyi's misty concept through undulating melodies, while Zhao Yuanren's “How Can I Not Think of Her?” achieves perfect word-tone coordination. These seemingly opposite approaches complement each other: Western songs demonstrate

music’s creative reconstruction of poetry, while Chinese songs exemplify literature's normative role over music, together building a two-way interactive cognitive system (Convergence Association, 2025).

**Table 1**

*Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs & Western Art Song*

<b>Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs</b>	<b>Western Art Song</b>
<p><b>Text source:</b> Classical poems by Li Bai, Du Fu, etc.</p> <p><b>Musical language:</b> Pentatonic + Western harmony, piano/ethnic instrument accompaniment</p> <p><b>Aesthetic pursuit:</b> the artistic conception of “symbiosis of poetry and music”</p>	<p><b>Text source:</b> poetry by Goethe, Heine, etc.</p> <p><b>Musical language:</b> and minor system, piano dominant</p> <p><b>Aesthetic pursuit:</b> rendering of poetic emotions</p>

**3.3.2 Emotional Expression: Cultural Paradigms**

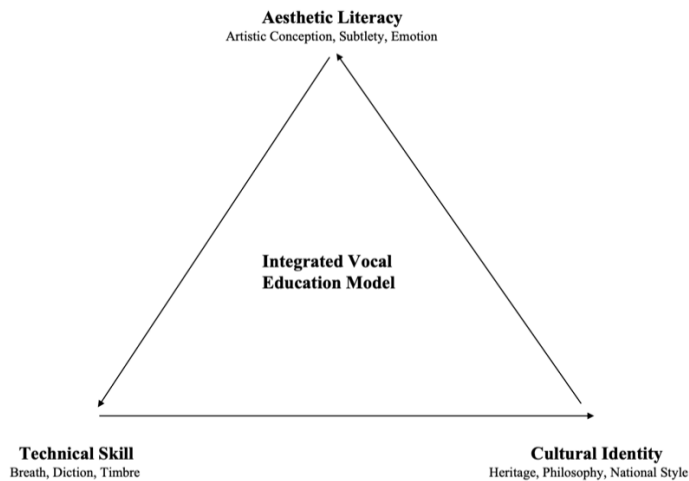
Emotional expression in art songs reflects cultural values, jointly enriching students' emotional perception. German/Austrian songs feature “rational restraint and profound expression,” with musical elements precisely matching emotional logic. Wolf’s harmonic shifts in “Auf einer Wanderung” transition from recollection to nostalgia, while Schubert's “Ständchen” encapsulates passionate love within structured form. Chinese songs emphasize “subtle suggestion and artistic conception,” conveying implicit emotions through musical restraint. “Three Variations of the Yang Pass” expresses complex farewell emotions via repetitive melodies and breath control, and “Song of the Red Bean” transforms longing into aesthetic experience through winding chromatic passages, embodying the principle of “joyful but not indulgent, sorrowful but not heartrending.” These paradigms complement each other: Western songs train logical emotional capture, Chinese songs hone subtle emotional perception, together broadening students' cross-cultural artistic understanding (Hao, 2023).

**4. Pedagogical Implementation**

This paper proposes a triadic framework to illustrate how technical skill, aesthetic literacy, and cultural identity interact to form an integrated model for vocal pedagogy.

**Figure 1**

*Triadic Framework for Integrating Ancient Poetry Art Songs in Vocal Pedagogy*



Note. This framework positions technical skill (breath, diction, timbre), aesthetic literacy (artistic conception, subtlety, emotion), and cultural identity (heritage, philosophy, national style) as interdependent dimensions of a holistic vocal education model.

Effective integration of ancient poetry art songs into vocal education requires systematic curriculum design, tailored teaching methods, and comprehensive resource development. In curriculum planning, increasing the proportion of Chinese works in core vocal classes to a 3:7 or 4:6 ratio against Western repertoire ensures balanced technical and cultural training. Establishing dedicated courses like “Performance and Practice of Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs” with modules covering poetic analysis, stylistic origins, and vocal techniques creates an integrated learning structure (Zhang & Chonprirot, 2024).

The conceptual synthesis presented here contributes to cultural pedagogy by proposing a model where artistic conception (意境) functions as both aesthetic and cognitive training. This expands existing theories of aesthetic education in music, which often separate technical skill from cultural content. Future empirical research could test this model in classroom contexts, examining measurable effects on diction accuracy, interpretive sensitivity, and cultural awareness.

Teaching methodology should align with the unique characteristics of these songs through a “text-first approach” where students analyse poems’ background, imagery, and meter before singing. Initial learning can be facilitated through imitation of classic recordings to intuitively experience vocal nuances, followed by strengthened piano collaboration to develop awareness of musical partnership. Learning should culminate in performance opportunities with bilingual subtitles to balance artistic presentation with cultural dissemination.

Resource development must address current limitations of fragmented repertoire and simplified analysis. Systematic teaching materials should categorize works by dynasty and style,

providing detailed poetic explanations, technical guidance, and standard accompaniment recordings. Supplemented with composers' creative insights and musical analysis, these resources will offer comprehensive instructional support for effective pedagogical implementation (Zhao, 2023).

## **5. Limitations and Future Research**

This study is primarily conceptual and relies on secondary sources and case-based analysis. While it offers theoretical justification and pedagogical strategies, it does not include empirical testing in classroom settings. Future research should address this limitation by conducting experimental or quasi-experimental studies that measure student learning outcomes when Ancient Poetry Art Songs are systematically incorporated into the curriculum. Surveys and interviews with students and teachers could provide insights into perceptions, challenges, and effective practices. In addition, cross-cultural comparative studies could examine how similar repertoire integration has been managed in other traditions, such as Japanese *shōka* or Korean *gagok*, thereby broadening the global implications of the findings. Finally, digital resources and emerging technologies (e.g., AI-assisted diction training, virtual performance platforms) should be explored as potential tools for teaching this repertoire in modern classrooms.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study confirms the core value of Chinese ancient poetry art songs in vocal music education: on the technical level, their unique tonal patterns, rhythmic structures, and breath control requirements systematically enhance learners' precision in articulation and breath management; on the artistic level, the profound interpretation of poetry-music integration cultivates students' literary perception and cross-disciplinary artistic expression skills. The study of Chinese art songs enables students to establish a sense of identity and confidence in their native culture during professional training, effectively addressing the issue of “emphasizing technique over culture” in vocal education. To achieve the organic integration of technical inheritance and cultural immersion in vocal pedagogy, it is recommended that educational authorities incorporate these songs into the core curriculum, strengthen the development of teaching materials and teacher training, promote interdisciplinary teaching and research collaborations, and expand their pedagogical influence through performance and exchange platforms, thereby constructing a new model of vocal education with Chinese characteristics.

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