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The Landscape of Russian Opera Scholarship within China across the Last Ten Years

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Abstract. This paper reviews the research achievements of Chinese scholars on Russian opera over the past decade, drawn from academic journals and master's and doctoral theses. First, concerning research presented in academic journals: studies encompass multiple dimensions, including the historical evolution of Russian opera, pivotal composers, the profound influence of folk music, distinctive vocal characteristics, Sino-Russian musical exchanges, and innovations in stage art. Among these, investigations into core figures like Tchaikovsky and Glinka delve profoundly into their seminal innovations in musical techniques and dramatic structure. Research on folk music explores the seamless integration of folk songs and religious choruses within opera, highlighting the very essence of the Russian national spirit. Vocal art research focuses sharply on the unique qualities of the Russian vocal school and the integration of dramatic singing with bel canto traditions. Studies on Sino-Russian musical exchanges examine the pivotal role of Russian expatriate musical activities in shaping Chinese portrayals within Russian opera. Second, master's and doctoral dissertations reveal three major characteristics: interpretations of classic works; a focus centered on the musical ontology; and an increasing scholarly focus toward topics related to Sino-Russian cultural exchanges. Among these, vocal performance research constitutes nearly half of all dissertations; music theory research concentrates on harmonic and formal analysis; while musicology research emphasizes the exploration of works' rich cultural connotations. Looking ahead, future research on Russian opera in China still requires crucial breakthroughs in several key areas: conducting deeper investigations into music skills; bolstering the application of interdisciplinary research methods; addressing the scarcity of philosophical profundity and aesthetic discernment; expanding the scope of references to Russian literature; enhancing the exploration of historical context; and fostering greater engagement in international academic dialogue.

Keywords: Russian opera, Chinese academic journals, Chinese music master's/doctoral theses, music theory, Sino-Russian cultural exchanges

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Исследование русской оперы в Китае за последнее десятилетие

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются достижения китайских учёных в исследовании русской оперы за последнее десятилетие. Обзор основан на материалах академических журналов, а также магистерских и докторских диссертаций. Исследования, представленные в академических журналах, охватывают несколько аспектов, включая историческое развитие русской оперы, фигуры композиторов, влияние народной музыки, особенности вокала, русско-китайские музыкальные связи и инновации в сценическом искусстве. В работах, посвящённых таким ключевым авторам, как Чайковский и Глинка, анализируются значимые достижения этих композиторов в области музыкальной техники и драматургии. Исследования народной музыки фокусируются на органичном слиянии народных песен и религиозных хоров в опере, подчёркивая суть русского национального духа. В статьях, затрагивающих проблемы вокального искусства, акцент делается на уникальных особенностях русской вокальной школы и интеграции драматического пения с традициями бельканто. Исследования, касающиеся русско-китайских музыкальных связей, сосредоточены на роли музыкальной деятельности русских эмигрантов в формировании китайских образов в русской опере. Обзор магистерских и докторских диссертаций выявляет три ведущих тематических направления: фокусирование на интерпретации классических произведений; акцент на музыкальной онтологии; растущий интерес к темам, связанным с культурным обменом между Китаем и Россией. Из рассмотренных диссертаций почти половина посвящена исследованию вокального исполнения; работы в области музыкальной теории сосредоточены на анализе гармонии и формы; в целом ряде трудов уделяется внимание изучению культурных коннотаций произведений. В будущем исследования русской оперы в Китае требуют значительных прорывов в нескольких ключевых областях: углублённого исследования музыкального мастерства; усиления применения междисциплинарных методов исследования; преодоления дефицита философской глубины и эстетической проницательности; расширения ссылок на русскую литературу; более глубокого изучения исторического контекста и стимулирования активного участия в международном академическом диалоге.

Ключевые слова: русская опера, китайские академические журналы, китайские магистерские и докторские диссертации по музыке, музыкальная теория, русско-китайские культурные связи

Introduction

On the contemporary global cultural stage, Russian opera and musical theatre hold a position of profound significance. In recent years, the evolution of Russian musical theatre has prompted not only artistic innovation but also dynamic shifts in market demands, evolving audience demographics, and burgeoning potential for international expansion. The development of Russian opera itself, evolved from its nascent imitations of Western models into a uniquely national artistic tradition, resonates not only with legendary brilliance and enduring legacy but has also exerted a profound and far-reaching influence on the world stage through its remarkable achievements.

Since the dawn of the twentieth century, cultural exchanges between China and Russia have flourished with ever-increasing frequency, like countless babbling streams converging into a mighty river. Russian opera has gracefully flowed into the view of Chinese audiences through vibrant concerts, captivating stage performances, and insightful academic seminars. The Russian operas is known to more people in China and its dramatic performance techniques unfold with the power of a masterful play, captivating Chinese music lovers and professionals alike. Beloved classics such as *Eugene Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, and *Prince Igor* now frequently grace the stages of China's grand theatres, where tickets vanish instantly and audience applause swells like thunderous waves. Simultaneously, music conservatories across the nation have cultivated dedicated courses, nurturing generations of professionals intimately familiar with Russian opera art — much like diligent gardeners tending precious seedlings — infusing continuous, vibrant new life into the inheritance and flourishing development of Russian opera within China.

Since the dawn of the 21st century, Russian opera performances in China have surged in frequency, showcasing increasingly diverse and rich content. During the early years (2000–2008), the focus lay primarily on sporadic introductions and performances scattered across the nation. Examples include the Mariinsky Theatre's initial visits and small-scale productions by local troupes, which remained relatively modest in scale. Following the completion of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (2008–2015), the introduction and co-production of Russian opera entered a new phase of regularity. The Mariinsky Theatre returned, bringing timeless masterpieces like *Prince Igor* and *Eugene Onegin* to Chinese audiences. A landmark performance was the Mariinsky Theatre's production of Borodin's *Prince Igor*, which inaugurated the National Centre for the Performing Arts in 2007. Russian opera performances have since graced multiple cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Harbin (Table 1). Sino-Russian co-productions have multiplied, Chinese music troupes have significantly strengthened their independent staging capabilities, and mechanisms like the "China-Russia Year of Culture" have fostered deeper cultural collaboration.

With the proliferation of related performances, a corresponding surge of academic studies has emerged. Russian opera scholarship has consistently remained a focal point within the Chinese academic community. This investigation centers on Russian opera research papers published in China over the past decade, primarily encompassing dissertations and academic journal articles. Through a systematic review of these two literature categories, we have yielded valuable insights into the research trajectory and developmental trends of Russian opera studies among Chinese scholars.

Table 1. Important performance information of Russian opera in China over the past two decades

A Particular Year	Opera Title	Composer	City	Theatre	Version / Partner	Key Highlights
2007	*Prince Igor*	Borodin	Beijing	National Grand Theatre	Original import (Mariinsky Theatre)	The National Centre for the Performing Arts opens with a full cast of Russia's national epic
2010	*The Queen of Spades*	Tchaikovsky	Beijing	National Grand Theatre	Local production (with a Russian conductor invited)	The National Centre for the Performing Arts' first Russian opera produced independently becomes a repertoire
2014	*Eugene Onegin*	Tchaikovsky	Beijing	National Grand Theatre	Joint production (National Centre for the Performing Arts + Mariinsky Theatre)	Chinese and Russian co-creators share actors and production resources, balancing art and localization
2016	*War and Peace*	Prokofiev	Harbin	Harbin Grand Theatre	Original import (Mariinsky Theatre)	Gergiev at the helm, a 600-strong lineup, China's debut
2018	*War and Peace*	Prokofiev	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Grand Theatre	Original import (Mariinsky Theatre)	Directed by Konchalovsky and conducted by Gergiev, the epic masterpiece is presented again
2019	*Snow Maiden*	Rimsky-Korsakov	Beijing	National Grand Theatre	Joint production (National Centre for the Performing Arts + Russian director team)	The characteristics of fairy tale opera and the cooperation between Chinese and Russian stage design and music teams
2025	*Eugene Onegin*	Tchaikovsky	Beijing	Central Opera House Theatre	Joint production (Central Opera House + Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Yaroslavl Region, Russia, etc.)	The China-Russia Cultural Year project, featuring a reverse narrative and multimedia stage design, showcases joint performances by actors from both countries, organized by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

Research Trends in Academic Journals

China's academic journals encompass distinguished publications from music academies, leading industry organizations, and established publishers. Representative examples prominently feature:

1. Journals founded by prestigious music academies and research institutions, such as the *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music* (中央音乐学院学报), *Chinese Music* (中国音乐), *China Musicology* (中国音乐学), *Shanghai Conservatory of Music Journal (Music Art)* (音乐艺术—上海音乐学院学报), *Huangzhong* (黄钟), *Tianjin Conservatory of Music Journal (Tianlai)* (天籁—天津音乐学院学报), *Xinghai Conservatory of Music Journal* (星海音乐学院学报), *Northern Music* (北方音乐), *New Tunes of the Music Bureau (Shenyang Conservatory of Music Journal)* (乐府新声—沈阳音乐学院学报), *Music Life* (音乐生活) and *Dramatic Literature* (戏剧文学).

2. Journals sponsored by major industry bodies and publishers, notably *People's Music* (人民音乐, sponsored by the Chinese Musicians Association of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles), *Music Research* (音乐研究), and *Singing Art* (歌唱艺术, sponsored by People's Music Publishing House), *Art Hundred Families* (艺术百家, sponsored by Jiangsu Provincial Academy of Culture and Arts), *The Voice of the Yellow River* (黄河之声, sponsored by Shanxi Federation of Literary and Art Circles).

Predominantly quarterly publications, these journals vividly reflect China's academic currents and research hotspots through rigorous scholarly discourse. Our analysis has specifically examined articles addressing Russian opera and music culture within these music academic journals over the past decade, covering the following content:

1. The history and development of Russian opera.
2. Research on important composers and representative works.
3. The influence of national music and folk culture on opera creation.
4. Russian vocal art and performance tradition.
5. Chinese and Russian music cultural exchange and influence.
6. The study of opera stage art and modern interpretation.

The literature chronicling Russian opera's history and evolution predominantly centers on the 18th–20th centuries, detailing the nation's remarkable journey from assimilating Western European traditions to forging a distinct national style. This profound transformation was deeply shaped by Italian influences, with foundational giants like Glinka and Dargomyzhsky playing pivotal roles in sculpting Russian national opera. Glinka's masterworks, for instance, extensively wove local materials and traditional instruments into their fabric, masterfully blending ethnic elements with Western forms to create music imbued with unmistakable Russian character. Chinese scholars dissected 17th–19th century Russian musical culture through four critical dimensions:

1. Embracing comprehensive learning and exploration.
2. Undergoing secularization and professionalization.
3. Igniting national consciousness.
4. Exerting widespread and profound influence.

Russian composers and their iconic works have been profoundly explored, encompassing figures like Tchaikovsky, Glinka, and the "Mighty Handful," with particular emphasis on their compositional techniques, dramatic architecture, and character portrayal. Concerning Tchaikovsky, Sun Zhaorun and Wang Fei's research [1] illuminates his choral style and achievements through dual lenses — religious and secular works — scrutinizing his

a cappella choruses, cantatas, [2] and operatic choral segments. [3] Zhang Gui, drawing upon the operas *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, probes Tchaikovsky's compositional essence, examining his creative vision, thematic distinctiveness, and artistic methods. Liu Chang and Zhang Peng's study traces the vital connection between historical [4; 5] traditions and the "psychological drama" permeating Tchaikovsky's oeuvre, linking Russia's "lyric drama" heritage to the "psychological dramatic elements" within his music. Investigations into Glinka's [6] creative priorities similarly center on opera: one article meticulously compares the character construction of Susanin in *A Life for the Tsar*; another interprets the dramatic functions within the "intercalary" scenes of *Ruslan and Liudmila* dialectically, analyzing three core contradictions — the rationality versus abruptness of dramatic roles, the satire versus praise of character emotions, and the universal love versus deep affection in musical expression — thereby uncovering the humanistic spirit embedded in early Russian opera. Shifting focus to Russian comic opera, scholars including Sun Zhaorun and Wang Shutong have also undertaken significant research.

The study of Russian folk music and folk culture delves into the artful adaptation of Russian folk songs, religious choruses, and folk dances within opera and instrumental compositions. The embodiment of national identity in opera is frequently exemplified through meticulous analyses of seminal classic works such as *Ruslan and Liudmila*, *The Tsar's Bride*, and *The Snow Maiden*.

Within the vast realm of vocal art and performance traditions, this research deliberately centers on the seamless fusion of the Russian vocal system, dramatic singing styles, and *bel canto* techniques. This potent synthesis vividly illuminates the unique allure of Russia's vocal education and performance framework. Sun Zhaorun probes the ethnic and religious foundations of the Russian vocal school in his article, emphasizing [7] its profound contributions to vocal methodology and spiritual depth. [8] He demonstrates how the school has forged a distinctive "cultural synthesis phenomenon" by steadfastly preserving its indigenous traditions while masterfully assimilating Western artistic excellence. Simultaneously, Lu Wanru underscores the significant influence of Italian *bel canto* on Russian vocal artistry in her analysis.

Research on Sino-Russian musical and cultural exchanges primarily centers on the profound influence of Russian expatriate musical activities on Chinese opera art, alongside the artful crafting of "Chinese images" within Russian musical compositions. This vividly demonstrates the deep mutual impact and rich cultural integration between Chinese and Russian music. Several significant papers delve into Russian operas featuring Chinese elements, meticulously examining how the materials, characters, and stage effects of the opera *The Mandarin's Son* incorporate and reinterpret these influences. [9] They further elucidate that the late Qing Chinese image portrayed in the opera emerges as a distinct foreign entity viewed through the "other's gaze," mirroring the collective Russian societal imagination of China at that time.

The study of stage art and modern interpretation centers on the dynamic visual and dramatic reinterpretation of opera for contemporary stages. By skillfully integrating literary adaptation techniques with innovative directorial artistry, it deeply probes the narrative structures and rich cultural symbolism embedded within operatic works. [10] Articles such as "Stage Narratives and Cultural Metaphors in the Mariinsky Opera's *The Dead Souls*" [11] delve extensively into the cultural metaphors and profound meanings revealed through the lens of stage performance.

Some important discussions on Russian music studies have also been translated into Chinese, playing a significant role in the study of Russian music in China. Richard Taruskin's article offers a concise historical overview and analysis of the double standards and contradictions inherent in discussing Russian music through the lens of national characteristics. The article urges scholars to abandon the notion of treating Russian music as exotic within musicological discourse. [12] Yulia Medvedeva's article explores the evolution of Russian composers' perceptions of China. [13] It also reveals the characteristics of China and Russian music creation from another perspective.

Overall, this research explores Russian opera and other musical genres with a sweeping scope — delving into historical origins, composing practices, national characteristics, vocal systems, cross-cultural communication, and modern interpretations. This breadth powerfully reflects contemporary scholars' comprehensive engagement with Russian opera, its distinctive national musical language, and the dynamic interplay between Chinese and foreign cultures.

Research Trends in Dissertations

Since the 1980s, China's music discipline has commenced enrolling master's and doctoral students. Presently, doctoral candidates in this field primarily emerge from prestigious institutions like the Central Conservatory of Music, China Conservatory of Music, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and the Chinese National Academy of Arts. Entering the 21st century, China's doctoral music education gradually initiated pilot programs for performance-focused doctorates. A pivotal moment arrived in 2006 when the China Conservatory of Music first enrolled doctoral students specializing in music performance, marking a significant breakthrough within China's music doctoral landscape. This pioneering step held groundbreaking significance for the exploration of performance research doctorates. Research on Russian opera within China's master's and doctoral theses typically exhibits distinct characteristics, including a focus on canonical works, a core emphasis on music analysis, and the increasingly prevalent trends of cultural exchange and localization studies.

This article showcases a curated selection of over fifty master's and doctoral dissertations from the past decade, all dedicated to Russian music. The research findings are systematically categorized into seven key areas: musical styles; cultural significance; compositional techniques; aesthetic theories; performance practices, encompassing vocal, instrumental, and music education; social dimensions; and other related fields. These findings may be further detailed under the following aspects:

– music ontology analysis (60%): composer's style, opera music structure, arias/duets/choruses, orchestration, vocal techniques;

– cultural and historical studies (20%): Russian opera's national identity, literary adaptations, historical context, and Sino-Russian musical exchanges;

– performance and communication studies (accounting for 15%): history of performances in China, rehearsals by Chinese troupes, reception and localization;

– other (5%): character portrayal, aesthetic features, comparative studies.

The distribution of academic papers demonstrates that vocal music performance research constitutes nearly half the total, revealing a highly concentrated focus with a pronounced classicization tendency. These studies predominantly dissect specific arias from Russian opera classics. Notably, research on Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, alongside works like *The Snow Maiden*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Prince Igor* by the "Mighty Handful," dominates

the music field's scholarly output, cementing their undeniable academic influence. The research content primarily falls into two distinct categories: first, delving into character development through musical motifs and thematic evolution, exemplified by studies of the Lensky from *Onegin*, which probe the protagonist's artistic persona through scales, thematic motifs, lyrical tone, and emotional expression; second, concentrating intensely on practical vocal techniques, particularly demanding aspects like Russian phonetic processing and vocal register transitions.

Compared with vocal performance research, studies in music theory and musicology are less voluminous in scholarly output, yet they encompass a diverse array of research angles, with certain fields exhibiting distinctive characteristics.

In music theory, research focuses predominantly on harmonic and formal analysis within Russian operas. For instance, Li Bingjie's "Research on Compositional Techniques and Musical Style of Stravinsky's Opera *The Rake's Progress*" (斯特拉文斯基歌剧〈浪子的历程〉的作曲技法及音乐风格研究) employs a conventional approach, lacking distinctive innovative insights. Conversely, musicology-oriented papers exhibit richer substance; their musical style studies penetrate deeply into the national characteristics of Russian music, exploring its unique cultural DNA. Gong Jue's "A Study on the Nationality of Tchaikovsky's Music" (柴可夫斯基音乐的民族性研究, Nanjing Normal University, 2021) meticulously examines Russian national elements in Tchaikovsky's works, while Hao Qing's "On the Nationality of Glinka's Operas" (论格林卡歌剧的民族性, Northeast Normal University, 2021) systematically analyzes how Glinka's operas richly weave folk music traditions.

Research on the Russian opera's national identity has drawn considerable attention, as evidenced by in-depth examinations of Russian ethnic elements within the works of Glinka, New Russian School, and Tchaikovsky. Scholars have further broadened this inquiry, deploying sociological methodologies as demonstrated in Zhang Qi's "Social Analysis of the 'Kremlin' and Its Musical Creations" (《强力集团》及其音乐创作的社会性分析).

Chinese music graduate students delve deeply into the cultural essence of Russian opera, concentrating their inquiry on the dramatic music itself, with particular focus on masterpieces like *Boris Godunov* and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. They meticulously examine the interplay between narrative structures and historical contexts, further dissecting musical storytelling strategies through the critical prisms of gender and power dynamics. Research into aesthetic thought demonstrates groundbreaking innovation. This is evident not only in interpreting Russian musical works through the lens of Chinese aesthetics — such as reimagining Prokofiev's epic opera *War and Peace,* based on Leo Tolstoy, using traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts — but also in conducting multi-faceted reexaminations of the works from the perspective of aesthetic psychology. Similarly, for *War and Peace*, they investigate how the music elicits profound emotional resonance and spiritual experiences within the audience. Collectively, these studies significantly broaden the multidimensional perspectives within the academic field of Russian music.

Since 2015, intensified collaborations between the China National Centre for the Performing Arts and Russia's Mariinsky Theatre have sparked a wave of fresh scholarly inquiry: exploring the dissemination and reception of Russian opera within China, examining localized productions by Chinese troupes, analyzing Sino-Russian co-productions, and probing the profound artistic and cultural significance of these performances on Chinese soil. Consequently,

Chinese scholars are devoting heightened attention to researching Sino-Russian artistic exchanges. The dissertation "Historical Narratives and Ethnic Identity: A Cultural Interpretation of Russian Music Activities in Harbin during the First Half of the 20th Century" (历史叙事与族群认同：20世纪上半叶哈尔滨俄侨音乐活动的文化解读, Northeast Normal University, 2024) offers fresh interpretive frameworks for understanding the social resonance and contemporary value of musical works, significantly broadening the horizons and possibilities of academic research. Simultaneously, studies like "Research on 'China Cultural Elements' in Modern and Contemporary Western Music Composition" (近现代西方音乐创作中的《中国文化元素》研究, Jilin Arts University, 2022) and "A Study of Prokofiev's Opera *War and Peace*, Viewed Through the Lens of Chinese 'Fenggu' Theory" (普氏歌剧《战争与和平》研究—以中国《风骨》理论为观照, Fujian Normal University, 2020) meticulously examine the distinct presence and interpretation of Chinese elements within the fabric of Russian opera.

Research on Russian opera within China's music master's and doctoral theses has transcended single-dimensional music analysis, embracing a multi-perspective approach that integrates music, culture, and communication. This evolution resonates profoundly with the 21st-century surge in Russian opera performances across China. Future efforts could broaden the repertoire scope, strengthen interdisciplinary methodologies, deepen localized and exchange history studies, and significantly enhance the research's depth and breadth.

Epilogue

Over the past decade, China's academic community has woven a remarkably dense academic tapestry exploring Russian opera, delving into multifaceted dimensions including historical origins, composer research, ethnic musical characteristics, vocal art practice, and Sino-Russian cultural interaction. This vibrant body of work vividly showcases the field's comprehensive attention and profound engagement with the subject. Specifically, existing research not only delves deep into historical contexts, meticulous analysis of compositional techniques, and insightful interpretation of ethnic cultural characteristics, but also encompasses pioneering explorations of cross-cultural communication pathways and innovative modern stage performances. Together, these studies richly illustrate scholars' intense fascination with Russian opera and its profound cultural resonance.

Despite notable accomplishments, certain fields still demand deeper investigation. For instance, it is imperative to systematically explore innovative compositional techniques or significantly strengthen interdisciplinary integration. Crucially, the vast majority of research concentrates on practical outcomes within contexts like singing, teaching, and rehearsals, offering scant in-depth critique concerning philosophical speculation, aesthetic interpretation, or intellectual history. Overall, the research landscape remains largely applied and practice-driven.

Moreover, existing research still falls short in leveraging literature and historical excavation: scant references are made to Russian-language documents, Soviet-era scholarship, and pertinent Western academic discourse; inadequate investigation exists into the dissemination of Russian opera in China during both the Republican era and the Cold War period; most studies predominantly draw upon Chinese materials and domestic performance cases, while international academic dialogue remains significantly lacking in depth and breadth.

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