

Musical Composition and Artistic Expression of Contemporary Cantonese Songs with Ancient Poetry — An Example of the Works of Guangdong Musician Chen Huiquan

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Abstract: Cantonese songs of ancient poems refer to songs of ancient poems sung in Cantonese, which have both the style of Cantonese songs and the characteristics of songs of ancient poems, and their history can be traced back to the last century. Nowadays, Cantonese songs with ancient poems are gradually coming into people's view and being popularized. This paper takes Chen Huiquan, a Cantonese musician, as the object of study, and through online interviews to learn about his biographical experience and artistic achievements. The study analyzed his creative characteristics, singing art, and the cultural aesthetics of Cantonese songs with ancient poems. The first-hand information related is collated and analyzed for this study to provide more references and theoretical basis for the development of ancient poems and Cantonese songs.

Keywords: Cantonese songs with ancient poetry; Chen Huiquan; Music composition; Artistic expression

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1. Current situation of Cantonese songs with ancient poems and lyrics

In 2017, the Chairman of the CCP proposed in the report of the 19th National Congress to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese outstanding traditional culture, and a variety of shows related to ancient poems, such as "Chinese Poetry Congress" and Classics Wing Liu Lei", carry out the spirit of the 19th National Congress, and the programs were widely welcomed as soon as they started broadcasting, especially "Classics Wing Liu Lei", which caused a great sensation in the first season because of the ancient poetic song sung by Alan Tam. In 2019, the Outline of the Plan for the Development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area puts forward the need to strengthen the construction of a national music industry base to enhance cultural self-confidence and to make full use of the geographic location and historical origins of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, as well as the use of Cantonese by all three places, which is

an ancient language that has preserved many features of the ancient Chinese language to date. Even individual ancient poems are more catchy when read aloud in Cantonese. This shows that Cantonese is very suitable for singing songs of classical poems, and the dissemination of Cantonese songs of classical poems is conducive to strengthening cultural exchanges among Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao in the Greater Bay Area.

In the era of advanced technology, people who want to listen to or understand ancient poems and popular songs can find them on a variety of software, such as Bilibili, Kugou Music, and other software. On Bilibili, the author searched for “Classic Songs”, as shown below in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Classic songs

Artist	Tracks	Played
Legend of the Phoenix	Invitation to Wine	3179k
Xu Song	Last night's book	5875k
Alan Tam	Calming the waves (Cantonese language)	2125k

From the data, many people like the Cantonese version of “Ding Feng Bo”, sung by Alan Tam, which is very distinctive, coupled with the promotion of the large platform “Classics Wing Shui Chuan”, which has made the cold subject matter of Cantonese songs with ancient poems “red” for once. The author inquired about Cantonese songs with ancient poems and lyrics and found a local Guangdong composer Chen Huiquan who is committed to creating songs with this kind of subject matter. He has been persistently composing songs since he started his work in 2017 with the song “On the Pond”, and has composed more than a dozen Cantonese songs with ancient poems and lyrics, and the most recent Cantonese song with ancient poems and lyrics, “Touring in the Mountain Villages”, was released on the 5th of April, 2024, which is a great example of the Cantonese songs with ancient poems and lyrics.

2. Characteristics of Cantonese songwriting of ancient poems

2.1. Composing songs according to the tonal trend

According to Wang Liming, “Scholars engaged in the study of classical Chinese literature, when they mention the representative works of each era, they will give the following four literary genres, namely, Lefu, Tang poetry, Song lyrics, and Yuanqu. After analyzing the literature and studying the historical records, I believe that these four literary genres are in fact the ‘songs’ of each era”^[1]. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the development of the three genres of poetry, lyrics, and songs led to the gradual formation of the ancient Chinese vocal music system, thus constituting the ancient Chinese singing arts of “song” and lyric singing.” After the Tang and Song dynasties, there were two kinds of singing: one was to fill in the lyrics by leaning on the voice, and the other was to compose according to the lyrics.

Cantonese songs with ancient poems have both the style of Cantonese songs and the characteristics of ancient poems. At present, Cantonese songs with ancient poems are still using the compositional technique of composing according to the words, for example, “Who Knows My Feelings at This Time” from Teresa Teng’s “Faint Feelings” album, which naturally transforms the four tones of Cantonese, yin and yang, and nine tones, into a musical melody. In addition, Chan Fai Kuen has composed several Cantonese songs with ancient poems, such as the song “When Will the Bright Moon Appear?” (**Example 1**).

When Will the Bright Moon Appear

(Cantonese Version)

Shi Su (Lyrics)
Huiquan Chen (Composition)

$\text{♩} = 140$

When will the bright moon appear? I raise my glass to ask the azure
sky. Un certain of the heavens above, What year it is tonight or high.
I long to ride the wind and return, Yet fear the jade towers and crystal
balls, for their heights are too cold to endure. Dancing with the moon's
pure glow, How much better it is stay below.
It circles crimson pavilions, glides past carved windows, Shining upon the sleepless below.
Should it bear no grudge, Why does it often wax when parting brings woe?
Marked by joy and sorrow, parting and reunion, The moon has its phases, full
and dim. Such imperfections are eternal truths.
I only hope for enduring lives. To share the moon's beauty, no matter

Example 1. When Will the Bright Moon Appear?

The highest note of the song, do (1), has two words, “sad” (in yin-flat key) and “long” (in yin-upper key), while the lowest note, sol (5), has four words, all in yang-flat key: “time”, “明”, “何” and “年.” In the first half of the first line of “When will the bright moon appear?” in “When Will the Bright Moon Appear?”, the musical direction is first upward, then downward, and then upward, which is the same as that on the simple score.

The second half of the first line “I raise my glass to ask the azure sky” was analyzed by the author who found that the whole song is basically composed according to the “singing style according to the sound of the characters.”

The last line of the song, “I only hope for enduring lives”, does not follow this compositional technique, and its corresponding tonal names are yangdaotong, yangdaotong, yangpingtong, yinpingtong, yinshangtong, and its corresponding tonal values are 22, 22, 11, 11, and 35, and the musical direction of the last line should be downward and then upward. It is understood that Chen Huiquan deliberately designed the music to go upwards, and he felt that if the whole song was composed “according to the words”, it would be as boring and tedious as chanting, and the author believed that the music would go upwards to bring out the strong emotion that the song was trying to express: Su Shi’s infinite longing for his younger brother, Su Zhe, and his wishes, and the ending line would be treated with a sense of closure and push the atmosphere to the extreme.

The song “A Wanderer’s Song” is composed by Chen Huiquan and divided into 6 phrases (including repetitions), as shown in **Example 2**.

A Wanderer's song

Cantonese Version 【Tang Dynasty】Jiao Meng (Lyrics)
Huiquan Chen (Composition)

$\text{♩} = 86$

From a loving mother's hand, the thread is drawn, To clothe her child, who travels on.

4 She stitches each seam with tender care, Fearing the long delay of his return, unaware.

8 Fearing the long delay of his return, unaware.

12 Who says a heart as small as grass, Can ever repay the springtime sun so vast?

16 Who say a heart as small as grass, Can ever repay the springtime sun so vast?

Example 2. A Wanderer's Song

The framework of this song shows that it also adopts the compositional method of following the words, and is modified and optimized based on this method. Firstly, the lowest tone sol (5) corresponds to the words “慈” and “迟”, both of which are in the Yang-flat tone, while the highest tone do (1) corresponds to the words “恐” and “得”, both of which are in the Yang-flat tone. The highest tone do (1) corresponds to the words “恐” and “得”, and the corresponding tones are yin-upper tone and yin-into tone. Secondly, yinping tone, yinshangtone, yininto into the key of the highest value, that is, the highest tone, in the first line of “Youzi yin”, “hand” and “in the” tone name is yinshangtone and yinping tone, so in the whole phrase of the highest tone, the second line “body” is yinping tone and also the highest tone, “body” is yinping tone and also the highest tone. The second line “body” is also the highest tone of the entire phrase, followed by several lines are the same pattern; the Yangping tone value is the lowest, that is, the lowest tone, “Youzi Yin” in the second line “swim” is Yangping tone, the lowest tone in the entire phrase, the third line “Lin In the third line”, “Lin”, “Xing”, and “Sew” are all in the Yang-flat key, which is also the lowest tone in the whole phrase, and the same is true for the following lines. Looking at the musical direction of each phrase, and then according to the word “line”, it is not difficult to see that the two basically correspond to each other.

2.2. Incorporation of Chinese folk instruments into the music

Chen Hui Quan said: “Singing ancient poems in Cantonese songs should maintain the ancient rhythm, because the ancient poems also belong to a component of the national style, singing ancient poems in Cantonese songs to reflect our traditional Chinese culture, music should be reflected, listening to the traditional Chinese culture should also be heard in the flavor, I think the choice of musical instruments cannot be separated from the ethnic musical instruments, which is no more than the silk, bamboo and wind and strings” (from the interviews). Therefore, Chan Fai Kuen’s Cantonese songs with ancient poems are accompanied by traditional Chinese folk instruments.

The bamboo flute, with its emotive and gentle pronunciation. The lyrics of the song “New Year’s Eve” are

taken from “New Year’s Eve” by Dai Fugu of the Southern Song Dynasty and “Watching the Flower Market in Chinese New Year” by Lin Boqu of the modern era. Chan Fai-kuen composes, arranges, and sings the song, and chooses the bamboo flute as the accompaniment instrument. The piece is divided into two sections, in which the introductory section is introduced by the bamboo flute, which is cheerful and melodious, and the bamboo flute also appears in the interlude section at the end of the first section. The two ancient poems chosen for this Cantonese song describe the scenes of New Year’s Eve and the Spring Festival, and Chen Huiquan has set New Year’s Eve as a New Year’s Eve greeting song, with the addition of the bamboo flute to make the whole New Year’s Eve atmosphere even more intense and contagious, and erhu, with a sense of telling and singing. The lyrics of the song “When Will the Bright Moon Appear?” are taken from Su Shi’s “Song of the Water Song — When Will the Bright Moon Appear?” in the Song Dynasty. Chen Huiquan composed, arranged, and sang the song, and chose the erhu as the accompanying instrument. At the beginning of the song, the erhu was used to play a melody with a descending overall scale, to set a sentimental atmosphere, and then directly from the climax part of the song, “People have sorrows and joys, and happiness and reunion.” This part of the erhu accompanies the singer from “Hidden” until “Thousand Miles Together” is finished. From “People with sadness and happiness” to “A thousand miles together with Cindy”, there are erhu appearances, in which the sadness and sorrow of erhu make this song full of sadness.

The Gaohu, commonly known as “Gao Hu”, is adapted from the Erhu, and is extremely rich in Cantonese flavor. The lyrics of the song “Xing Xiang Zi — Trees Surrounding the Village” are taken from the Northern Song Dynasty’s Qin Guan’s “Xing Xiang Zi — Trees Surrounding the Village”, which was composed, arranged, and sung by Chen Huiquan. This ancient poem describes the scenery of a village, and Chen Huiquan’s reading of the poem reminded him of the countryside where he went to sketch when he was young because of his paintings and the environment at that time was pristine and natural. To have a Cantonese flavor, the music is added with Cantonese Opera rhymes and Gao Hu, where Gao Hu appears frequently throughout the whole song, with a strong Cantonese flavor.

The dong xiao, or xiao for short, has a mellow and gentle tone, while the pipa, has a clear and bright pronunciation. The lyrics of the song “Moon Over the West River” are taken from “Moon Over the West River — Night Journey on the Yellow Sand Road” by Xin Qiji of the Southern Song Dynasty, arranged and composed by Chen Huiquan and sung by him and Chen Yunrong, who designed the song as if a father takes his daughter for a walk in the countryside at night and sees the picture depicted by the author. The song begins with the pipa, where the pipa plays two lines in 11 seconds then xiao enters, and these two lines have the “shadow” of Mozart’s “Little Star”, which paves the way for the pipa to play the melody of “Little Star” throughout the whole song, and also tells the listener the picture depicted in this song. Xiao appears four times in the whole song, its mellow and quiet tone creates a quiet atmosphere for the song, and the elegant tone of the xiao enhances the ancient charm.

3. Artistic performance of singing Cantonese songs with ancient poetry lyrics

3.1. Pronunciation of Cantonese song lyrics

The Cantonese language is complex in sound and rhyme, each sound consists of consonants, rhymes, tones, and intonation, so the Cantonese songs of ancient poems are interrelated with the tonal values of the language’s tones when they are sung, and these words need to be sung with multi-syllabic pitches ^[1-4].

For example, “Spring Day: Village Dwelling” is shown in **Example 3**.

Spring Day: Village Dwelling

[Song Dynasty] Xi Zhi [Qing Dynasty] Ding Guo (Lyrics)
Hanque Chen (Composition)

♩ = 90

On a splendid day by Si River's side, Boundless sights unfold,
fresh and wide. The east wind's face, so easy see,
A thousand blossoms inspire a descent. In Fe-huay's air,
the grass grows high, Or like a lotus beneath the sky. Children from school,

Example 3. Spring Day: Village Dwelling

“etc.” (dang2) is in the yin upper key, with a key value of 35, so two notes need to be sung when singing this word in the middle of the song.

The song “Inscription of the Humble Room” is shown in **Example 4**.

Inscription of the Humble Room

Cantonese version [Tang Dynasty] Yuan Jia (Lyrics)
Hanque Chen (Composition)

♩ = 76

An ancient river not near, if a sage retreats, it earns its fame.
A stream never ceases to creep. If a sage dwells, he builds his name.
This humble room is mine, filled with victor's fragrant stain.
None climbs the steps in snow and green. Through the curtains, the grass is short.
In laughter, scholars of wisdom meet. No idle folk can visit retreat.
Or may I tune plain strings of late, Or read golden scriptures, read it. No
clatter of flutes to disturb the ear, No
burden of paperwork weigh heavy here. The straw hat of Zhang Ji. Naught plain.
The pavilion of Ziyuan in Shi remains. remains. Confucius once said: What lack a
within? What lack a within?

Example 4. Inscription of the Humble Room

The words “have” (jau5) and “go” (wong5) are in the yang upper key, with a tuning value of 13, and “can” (ho2) is in the yin upper key, with a tuning value of 35, so these three words need to be sung with multiple syllables to make the language work. The three characters should be sung in multi-syllables to make the pronunciation of the language more accurate.

For “A Wanderer’s Song” in **Example 2**, “Mu” (mou5) is in the upper yang key, with a tonal value of 13, and it is a multi-syllable character to be sung. Although Chen Huiquan did not mark it on the score, one can listen carefully to hear that “mother” is sung in two tones.

For “Moon Over the West River” in **Example 5**, “Li” (leoi5), “two” (loeng5), and “rain” (jyu5) are all in the upper yang key, with the key value of 13, and “take” (leoi5), “two” (loeng5), and “rain” (jyu5) are all in the upper yang key, with the key value of 13. “Fetch” (ceoi2) is a yin upper key with a tonal value of 35, and all these characters need to be sung polysyllabically.

**Moon Over the West River: Night Journey on
the Yellow Sand Road**
(Song Lyrics) [Bj] Xin (Lyrics)
Haixian Chen (Composition)

The bright moon shakes branches, startling magpies,
In the midnight breeze, cicadas sing their reprise. Amid the fragrance of rice flowers,
they speak of a bountiful year. A chorus of frogs fills the air far and near:
Seven or eight stars glimmer beyond the skies. Two or three drops of rain fall before
the hills arise. The old thatched inn by the woods of the shrine,
D.C.
The road turns, and a stream bridge suddenly aligns. Seven or eight stars glimmer beyond
the skies. Two or three drops of rain fall before the hills arise.
The old thatched inn by the woods of the shrine. The road turns, and a stream bridge
suddenly aligns.

Example 5. Moon Over the West River

3.2. Emotional expression

It is written in the Records of Music: “Emotions are moved in the middle, so they are acted in the voice; the voice becomes the text, which is called the tone.” When singing a song, the singer needs to create a second degree to the song, that is, through his understanding of the song into the singing to show. Among the many Cantonese songs with ancient poems sung by Chan Fai Kuen, there is a wide range of emotional expression, including songs expressing gratitude and lyricism such as “A Wanderer’s Song”, songs expressing sadness such as “When Will the Bright Moon Appear?” and “Autumn Wind Words”, as well as inspirational songs such as “It’s Difficult to Walk” and “Drinking in the Night”, which are sung by Chan Fai Kuen according to the different emotions of the songs.

The lyrics of the song “A Wanderer’s Song” are taken from Meng Jiao’s “A Wanderer’s Song.” The tune of the song is serene and soothing because Chen Huiquan sings it with a grateful heart and the whole song does not have many emotional ups and downs. The song starts with a soft and slightly low voice, softly singing “Threads in the hands of a loving mother”, in which the word “mother” has a trill, emphasizing the object of gratitude. In the main part of the song, from “the thread in the hands of a loving mother” to “the fear of returning late” and repeated once, the melody is gentle throughout, with a range in the middle and lower registers, and not much

emotional ups and downs, giving people a feeling of chanting. The chorus is basically kept in the middle register, the singing is strengthened, and the singing style is also continued in the main part of the song, which is bland but speaks of one's heart of gratitude.

The lyrics of the song "Autumn Wind Lyrics" are taken from Li Bai's "Autumn Wind Lyrics", with an upbeat tune, which Chen Hui Quan writes as country rock. In the vocal part, Chen Hui Quan uses "hu" to imitate the sound of the breeze, his voice is cheerful and sad, shaping an autumn atmosphere. He brings his own emotions into the song, conveying his sadness and helplessness to the audience with his voice.

The lyrics of the song "Drinking at Night" are taken from Su Shi's "Linjiang Xian — Drinking at Night in Dongpo Waking Up and Getting Drunk Again", with a lyrical tune. In the vocal part, Chen Huiquan uses a light, intoxicated voice to shape the quiet night expressed in the lyrics. Su Shi returns home drunk, everyone is asleep and no one opens the door, so he can only look at the river to lament his life. The main part of the song is overall bland, telling the scene of returning home with no one to open the door, and the chorus is very "open", a sublimation, expressing the poet, even if he is relegated, but also to positively face the life. In the middle of the main song to the chorus, the poet sings a few lines with "duh", which expresses the river water and also represents the complicated thinking after drunkenness, thus separating the drunkenness in the front and the sublimation of thoughts in the back, and also contrasting the two moods.

4. Conclusion

The Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Literary and Artistic Criticism in the New Era, issued by the Central Propaganda Department and five other departments in August 2021, clearly states that the general requirements for strengthening literary and artistic criticism in the new era are: guided by the chairman of the CCP's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, comprehensively carrying out the direction of the "two for" and the "two hundred" policy, conducting scientific and comprehensive literary and artistic criticism, giving play to value guidance, spiritual guidance, and aesthetic enlightenment, insisting on creative transformation and innovative development, and carrying forward the spirit of Chinese aesthetics. The general requirements for strengthening the work of literary and art criticism in the new era are: to fully implement the "two-for" direction and "two-hundred" policy, to adhere to creative transformation and innovative development, to carry forward the spirit of Chinese aesthetics, to conduct scientific and comprehensive literary and art criticism, to play the roles of value guidance, spiritual leadership, and aesthetic enlightenment, and to promote the healthy and prosperous development of socialist literature and art. The culture of the Chinese nation has a long history, and the art of poetry is a treasure of national culture with a long history; mysterious and melodious ancient music with a faint fragrance, the combination of these two art forms, poetry, and music, evolved into ancient poetic songs. The Cantonese language has a long history and has preserved a lot of ancient vocabulary and grammar as well as the phonetics and tones of ancient Chinese, especially the incoming tones, which makes reciting ancient poems in Cantonese more enjoyable. Cantonese songs of ancient poems fully inherit and carry forward these advantages, which inspires people to enjoy ancient poems and literature and Cantonese more at the same time and is also conducive to the inheritance and development of the traditional literature of the Chinese nation and the enhancement of cultural self-confidence. Chan Fai Kuen has been insisting on the creation of Cantonese songs of ancient poems to carry out the requirements of the Guiding Opinions on the Strengthening of Literary and Artistic Criticism in the New Era published by the Central Publicity Department and other five departments

and has promoted the development, let more people know and understand the ancient poems and Cantonese songs, and contribute to the development of the ancient poems and Cantonese songs. Although the influence is not enough at present, the author believes that as long as people persist in doing it, more people will see it.

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Disclosure statement

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