

Tibetan Opera Tune — Analysis of the Current Research Status of "Mgran Khug"

Yan Zhu¹

¹ School of Music and Dance, Xihua University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

¹ Corresponding author. Email: 0120000025@mail.xhu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

"Mgran khug" is the most representative singing technique in Tibetan opera and Tibetan ethnic songs, and it is also one of the very prominent characteristics in Tibetan music. This article attempts to summarize the current research status and inheritance of "mgran khug" by analyzing its current research status, clarifying its ideas, identifying blind spots and shortcomings, in order to attract more attention from the academic community and promote research in this field.

Keywords: *Mgran khug, Tibetan opera singing tune, Tibetan traditional folk songs, Inheritance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the singing of Tibetan opera tunes (and even the entire Tibetan song), there is a special and difficult singing technique called "mgran khug". This is a unique singing technique and music style of the Tibetan ethnic group, not only used in the singing of Tibetan opera, but also widely used in the singing of multiple Tibetan folk song genres, including harmonic qin and wine songs. It is one of the important basic elements of Tibetan vocal singing.¹

"Mgran khug" is a transliteration of Tibetan language. "Mgran" in Tibetan refers to the throat, "khug" in Tibetan means turning, and "mgran khug" refers to the sound produced by turning the throat. It is a unique and difficult singing technique commonly used in Tibetan opera singing and Tibetan songs. By utilizing this singing technique, a vibrato sound effect with pitch, uniformity, and naturalness can be produced. As early as 1216 AD, the prominent monk of the Sakya sect, Sakya Panzhida Gonggajianzan, recorded "mgran khug" in his book "On Music" and referred to it as the "transformer of changes". In this book, the tones are divided into: the singer starts, turns due to bending, changes due to transformation, and low turns due to lowering. The bending and turning point is the

"mgran khug" singing method. The original text says: "There are single and repeated inflections, as well as various inflections such as two, three, and four." "Changes include changes in throat, tongue, and nasal sounds, which use long and short sounds respectively". The formation of "mgran khug" is not only related to the unique natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau, but also closely related to the unique way of life and habits of the Tibetan Plateau people. Since the establishment of New China, many Tibetan singers, represented by the famous Tibetan singer Caidan Zhuoma, have extensively used the "mgran khug" technique to sing Tibetan ethnic songs. With the popularity of these Tibetan songs nationwide, the singing method of "mgran khug" has also attracted more and more attention from audiences, scholars, singers, vocal teachers, and other groups. This article analyzes the current research status, inheritance and development of "mgran khug" by sorting and organizing the research literature of "mgran khug", in order to provide reference and reference for subsequent research on "mgran khug".

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study mainly adopts literature review and field research methods.

1. Ciren Langjie, Wei Ying, A Brief Discussion on the Singing Art of Tibetan Opera's Singing Tune (Nangda)

2.1 Literature Review Method

This study first used literature research method to search for information in relevant databases, and conducted literature collection, organization, and analysis on the Tibetan vocal music skill "mgran khug". These literature materials provide important reference value for the preliminary research of the article. In response to these limited research materials and achievements, this article has conducted a detailed sorting and organization, and further research will be conducted based on the study of previous research results.

2.2 Field Interviews and Field Sampling Method

In August 2019, an interview was conducted with Bandian Wangjiu, the leader of the Tibetan Opera Troupe, and Ciren Langjie, a doctoral student in art from the Central Conservatory of Music and a master's supervisor from Tibet University, at the School of Music of Sichuan Normal University. Bandian Wangjiu, the leader of the band, said, "'mgran khug' is the most important singing skill of Tibetan opera 'nangda', and it is also a unique vocal singing technique for Tibetan folk songs." Tibetan opera — the singing style of Ajiram's Baoda is different from the traditional Tibetan folk songs and has unique characteristics. When singing "mgran khug", it is necessary to control and apply the vocal cords freely through breathing. The vocal cords are relaxed and cannot be used with force... The leader of Bandian Wangjiu also conducted multiple demonstration performances on site. Teacher Ciren Langjie gave a detailed introduction to the "mgran khug" singing techniques in Tibetan opera "Ajiram". The text of these interviews was organized.

From August 2019 to August 2020, the author visited Duorang Village, Jiulong County, Danba County, Pengbuxi Township, Kangding City, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, as well as Manai Township, Jinchuan County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, and Gouerguang Village, Wanlin Township to witness Tibetan folk songs and dances such as Muya Guozhuang, Manai Guozhuang, and Jingshanqiang Guozhuang. Recordings and text were collected and organized during these on-site wind harvesting activities. These large amounts of first-hand data provide strong guarantees for the smooth development of this study.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF MGRAN KHUG RESEARCH IN CHINA

Based on the existing research data, field collection and investigation data, the current situation of the research on "mgran khug" in the Chinese academia is organized and analyzed, and is concluded as follows:

3.1 Researchers and Quantity

By querying online databases such as CNKI and inputting the keyword "mgran khug", eleven articles related to "mgran khug" were found. The earliest one was "Exploration of Tibetan Folk Song Vocal Music" published by Mi Ruoru, a vocal music professor at the Minzu University of China, in 1987, and the latest one was "Analysis of the Singing Characteristics of Tibetan Song Decorative Tones" published by Huang Wanma from the School of Art at Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics in 2021. Using the keyword "Tibetan opera tune", the author found 15 master's and doctoral theses related to Zhen Gu, as well as over 100 journal papers. Based on the information collected from online databases such as CNKI and various libraries at all levels, it can be seen that mgran khug research is still relatively niche. In organizing the literature on "mgran khug", it was found that the current research on "mgran khug" in the academic community is mostly in the form of an overview, with general records and descriptions of "mgran khug", without delving into detailed research.

3.2 Research Content and Scope

Based on the collected data, researchers mainly conduct research on "mgran khug" from two aspects: singing techniques and charm, as well as theoretical research on the classification and application rules of "mgran khug".

3.2.1 Research on Singing Skills and Charm

There are many articles exploring singing skills and charm. Among them, Mi Ruoru provided a detailed introduction to the "mgran khug" singing method in five articles, including "Exploration of Tibetan Vocal Music Teaching" ("Art Research Trends", 1987, 04), "Exploration of Tibetan Folk Vocal Music" ("Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music", 1989, 04), and "Exploration of the

Teaching Rules of Minority Vocal Music" ("Journal of the Minzu University of China", 1996, 05). He believes that the standard for Tibetan people to evaluate a singer's singing is how well they sing with "mgran khug" technique. Generally, "mgran khug" uses vowel transitions such as "la" and "ah", and the melody of "mgran khug" is rarely accompanied by words, often used in the weak beat of the phrase. At the same time, emphasizing the "mgran khug" singing technique of exerting force on the throat is a wrong statement. When singing "mgran khug", it is necessary to have sufficient breath control and a stable and relaxed throat. The sound is emitted from above the throat to the center of the eyebrows, giving people a clear and high-pitched feeling of the head sound.² Yang Shuguang pointed out in "The Position and Development of Vocal Music of Minority Groups in China" ("Music Research", Issue 03, 2001), Zhu Lingyun in "Exploration of Wang Pinsu's Vocal Music Teaching" ("Music Research", Issue 04, 1998), and Wang Linglan in "The Natural Sound of Love and Nature: The Singing Art of Caidan Zhuoma" ("Designs", Issue 01, 2008) that "mgran khug" is a Tibetan name for jumping singing skills. But this kind of jumping note is different from bel canto and ethnic bouncing note singing. The jumping notes in the "mgran khug" singing method rely on the support of the breath during singing, combined with the stable force of the diaphragm and the throat, to produce a darker, seemingly discontinuous, and connected sound effect on the throat.³

3.2.2 *Theoretical Research on the Classification and Application Rules of "Mgran Khug"*

Teachers from Tibet University, such as Tse Ren Langjie and Wei Ying, provided a comprehensive and detailed introduction to the basic form, function, application rules, and basic types of "mgran khug" from the perspective of Tibetan opera singing in their "A Brief Discussion on the Singing Art of Tibetan Opera's Singing Tune (Nangda)" and "Tibetan Art Research" (2009, 01). In the application rules, it is proposed that the use of "mgran khug" is closely related to the sound, rhyme, and tone of Tibetan vowels, and the law of inflection and rhyme is an important basis for the

singing method of "mgran khug". Tian Liantao's "A Study on the Regional Characteristics and Music Color Zones of Tibetan Music" (Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, Issue 04, 2014) divides the color regions of Tibetan folk music into three major color regions: Anduo, Kangse, and Weizang, based on the principle of basic consistency between the three major Tibetan dialect regions and the spread of Tibetan folk music. Due to the differences in dialects and regions, the term "mgran khug" varies in different color areas. In the Weizang color area, it is called "mgran khug", in the Kang color area, it is called "angdie", and in the Anduo color area, it is called "anghe". The late Dr. Jiayong Qiongpei from the China Conservatory of Music introduced the types and usage instructions of angdie in his works "On the 'Angdie' in Tibetan Kangba Mountain Songs" (Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, 1997, Issue 03) and "The Charm of Kangba Tibetan Mountain Songs" (China's Tibet, 2004, Issue 04). Angdie can be divided into three categories: colorful, continuous beat, and decorative; It has the characteristics of improvisation, variability, and comprehensiveness in use. Dr. Yin Zhuoma from the Central Conservatory of Music conducted research and analysis on the definition, vocal principles, musical characteristics, and changes in "anghe" in the "A Study on the Characteristic Singing Method of Tibetan 'Laiyi' - 'Anghe'" (Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, 2014, Issue 2). Due to the different ecological environments and lifestyles in agricultural and pastoral areas, anghe also presents different musical characteristics. The trend and decoration of the anghe melody in rural areas are slightly introverted; The anghe in the pastoral areas is more free and relaxed.

3.3 *The Significance of Studying "Mgran Khug"*

Although "mgran khug" is only a singing method for Tibetan opera and songs, as an important component of Tibetan music, its emergence and development are closely related to the entire Tibetan music and even Tibetan customs and traditions. With the development of new media, the singing method of "mgran khug" has been applied and promoted by many Tibetan pop singers. However, the lack of relevant theories has led people outside the Tibetan region to have little understanding of it, and they do not even know its specific name. They only know that there is a voice in the Tibetan region that trembles their throat and hair. Starting from a small aspect, it is particularly

2. Mi Ruoru, Exploration of the Teaching Rules of Ethnic Vocal Music [J]. Journal of Minzu University of China, 1996, 05. (in Chinese)

3. Yang Shuguang, The Position and Development of Vocal Music of Minority Groups in China

important to explore the aesthetic concepts in "mgran khug" and fill the current gap in this field in the academic community, starting from the small to the big.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTING PROBLEMS IN THE CURRENT ACADEMIC RESEARCH OF "MGRAN KHUG"

By organizing existing research materials, it was found that there are still the following issues with mgran khug research:

4.1 *Insufficient Research on System Theory*

"Mgran khug" is the most representative singing method in Tibetan opera and Tibetan folk songs, which has been passed down in Tibetan areas and is often performed by indigenous Tibetans. Therefore, its dissemination area and audience are limited to the Tibetan region, which greatly affects the development and research of "mgran khug". The earliest record of "mgran khug" singing method appeared in the "On Music" written by Tibetan Buddhism's highly hated Sakya Panzhida Gongga Jianzan. Since the 1980s, vocal educators such as Mi Ruoru, Chang Liuzhu, and Meng Xinyang, who have been working in Tibet for more than a decade, have conducted research on the singing techniques of "mgran khug". The three singers have played a certain academic foundation by defining the singing techniques and analyzing the singing techniques. From the 1980s to present, according to the relevant literature and materials published, a few scholars such as Ciren Langjie, Wei Ying, Juega, Tian Liantao, Gao Xiang, etc. have been involved in their research content. Due to factors such as language and geography, there are currently few research articles in the academic community on the theoretical system of "mgran khug". These studies for "mgran khug" still appear scattered and scattered, unable to form an effective theoretical research system, and the depth and breadth of research are not enough.

4.2 *Weak Research on the Development, Inheritance, and Teaching of "Mgran Khug"*

As a type of singing style in Tibetan opera, "mgran khug" was mainly passed down in Tibetan opera troupes, where the master taught his disciples orally and from the heart. "Mgran khug" is a highly

skilled singing technique, which is generally only practiced by Tibetans who are native and have been influenced by it since childhood. Therefore, most locals start learning it from a young age. With the continuous progress and development of society, the number and scale of Tibetan opera troupes are gradually shrinking, and the number of young people learning Tibetan opera is also gradually decreasing. The inheritance and inheritance of "mgran khug" has also become an urgent problem to be solved, but based on existing research materials, no article has been found on the inheritance and inheritance of "mgran khug". The lack of research content in this area further exacerbates people's neglect of the inheritance of "mgran khug". Without inheritance, there is no development, and the neglect of inheritance also means the neglect of inheritance and development.

4.3 *There Is Too Little Research on "Angdie" and "Anghe"*

With the evolution of Tibetan opera and folk songs in the Kangba and Anduo regions, differences in terms of appellation, singing style, and singing techniques have arisen due to differences in dialects and regions. Among the searchable materials, there are only two or three articles studying "angdie" and "anghe". With such a small number of studies, "angdie" and "anghe" are poorly understood by the outside world and cannot attract more attention and research from the academic community. Whether it is "mgran khug" or "angdie" or "anghe", they are all unique vibrato sound production methods in Tibetan areas. The lack of research on them will inevitably affect people's understanding and understanding of the entire Tibetan music, and cannot fully demonstrate the most distinctive aspect of Tibetan music.

In addition, it was found that there is too little research on the topic of "mgran khug" in the compilation of materials. So far, only one article specifically studying "mgran khug" has been found (Huang Wanma's "Analysis of the Singing Characteristics of Tibetan Decorative Tone 'Mgran Khug'" in *Ethnic Music*, Issue 2, 2021). Although "mgran khug" is only a singing method for Tibetan opera and songs, as an important component of Tibetan music, its emergence and development are closely related to the entire Tibetan music and even the local customs and traditions. With the development of new media, the singing method of "mgran khug" has been applied and promoted by many Tibetan singers. However, the lack of

relevant theories has led people outside of Tibet to have little understanding of it, and they do not even know its specific name. They only know that there is a voice that vibrates their throat during Tibetan song singing. Starting from a small aspect, it is extremely valuable to explore the aesthetic concepts existing in "mgran khug", and then conduct in-depth research on Tibetan opera singing, filling the gap in academic research in this field.

4.4 There Are Few Tibetan Scholars Among the Researchers

In the compilation of mgran khug research materials, it was also found that only a few Tibetan scholars such as Ciren Langjie, Wei Ying, Jiayong Qiongpei, and Yin Zhuoma have conducted such research. Compared to Han scholars, Tibetan scholars have unique advantages in language, religious beliefs, geographical environment, and other aspects. If more Tibetan scholars participate in research, it will inevitably make the "mgran khug" research more in-depth and comprehensive.

5. CONCLUSION

From the literature reviewed in the past two decades, it can be seen that research on "mgran khug" is still in its infancy, with a relatively small number of researchers. Some scholars focus more on the description of singing techniques, with a relatively weak theoretical foundation and insufficient research coverage, resulting in scattered research results and a lack of systematic formation. Of course, the structure of the research system is not an overnight task, and requires a comprehensive theoretical foundation and practical examination from multiple aspects. Without the sedimentation and accumulation of time, it is difficult to achieve.

Here, the author also hopes to appeal to more scholars to enter the study of mgran khug, Tibetan opera, and Tibetan music, and to put forward their own opinions on this issue. It is believed that with everyone's unremitting efforts, the future path of mgran khug research will surely go further.

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