

# Broadway to Beijing: Training Musical Theatre Singers in China

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**ABSTRACT:** In China, musical theatre is a relatively recent art form that continues to gain wide ranging popularity. Beyond a growing audience for blockbuster productions, a major flow-on effect has seen the rapid rise in, and development of, tertiary level training programs where in addition to traditional “legit” voice production, teachers and singers are challenged to meet an industry demand for proficiency across a wide range of mainstream contemporary style repertoire. This paper presents the historical context for a current and ongoing research study in which elements of Beijing opera are proposed as cross-training tools to assist female singers to access a healthy and style-efficient voice production for modern musical theatre repertoire. Drawing from past and present singing voice training practices, early indications are that this research may be developed into a constructive reference for a new pedagogical framework for female musical theatre singers.

**KEYWORDS:** Singing voice, cross-training, vocal pedagogy, musical theatre, belt, Beijing opera

## INTRODUCTION

Musical theatre is a Western art form that continues to gain popularity in China with blockbuster productions performed widely in major cities. Along with the rising number of productions and a growing audience appreciation for the genre, a major flow-on effect can be seen in the emergence of tertiary level musical theatre programs where Chinese singers are challenged to manage the modern musical theatre industry’s demand for style-related vocal proficiency across a wide range of repertoire (legit to mainstream contemporary belt styles). With a global industry shift from traditional

“legit” music theatre productions to those heavily focused on contemporary belt styles, the issue of singing voice teachers’ own training has emerged as a matter of concern. This is especially so with regards to singers’ vocal health where the repertoire incorporates contemporary belt styles. In this paper, emerging issues are discussed through a lens of historical context regarding the development of musical theatre in China.

To contextualise the issues currently in pedagogical practices in university-based musical theatre training programs in China, some preliminary findings from an ongoing research project are reported. The aim of the research is to test the efficacy of a culture-based, vocal cross-training approach for musical theatre singers in China. The study has been designed to investigate a potential for elements of Chinese cultural music (Beijing opera) to assist female musical theatre singers develop a strategic and sustainable approach to modern musical theatre repertoire.

A mixed methods design within a qualitative framework has been chosen to test the efficacy of this culture-based, vocal cross-training approach, applying techniques from Beijing opera to assist the development of an effective musical theatre singing voice pedagogy in China. The research is driven by the key question: How might a cross-genre training approach using complementary singing techniques from Beijing opera assist the development of style authenticity and vocal efficiency for a Chinese female musical theatre singer?

## MUSICAL THEATRE PERFORMANCE “BROADWAY TO BEIJING” - A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Western musical theatre performance is a relatively new phenomenon in China. As reported in the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper, the first Western produced musical to be introduced to Chinese audiences was *The Music Man* staged in Beijing in 1987:

In an old-fashioned production of the 1957 Broadway show *The Music Man*, “Seventy-Six Trombones” rang through Beijing’s Tianchao theatre as the all-Chinese cast of 60, many of them in blond, red and light brown wigs, danced and sang to Meredith Willson’s score. The lyrics were translated into Chinese, and the audience applauded loudly (L.A. Times Archives, 1987).

This hallmark event heralded a period of increasing activity and interest in the genre, with musicals such as *The Fantasticks*, *Westside Story*, *Romeo and Juliet* introduced in rapid succession. In 2002, *Les Misérables* became the first modern “Broadway” musical to be staged in Shanghai (Jin, 2024) quickly followed by British theatre company productions of *Mamma Mia!* and *Cats* (Lu, 2021). Lu (2021) reported on the large number of musical theatre productions that were being produced across China:

Statistics from local press: *Mamma Mia!* has been staged more than 400 times (HAIBAO News, 2014, as cited in Lu, 2021); *Cats* had been presented to Chinese audiences more than 200 times by 2018 (Sohu News, 2018, as cited in Lu, 2021); and *The Lion King* had staged 200 shows in 2016 (Li, 2016, as cited in Lu, 2021). ... as entertainment behemoth *Nederlander* states: “China will be a very dynamic market for musicals and the company will continue to enhance the exchange of quality productions between China and the world (Zhang, as cited in Lu, 2021).

The growing audience enthusiasm for blockbuster productions was quickly followed by a rapid growth in student demand for specific training in musical theatre performance. In turn, this led to the emergence of a range of musical theatre training programs, with the first offered in 1992 at Wuhan Municipal Arts School in Hubei Province. Since that time, university-based undergraduate and master’s level musical theatre programs have been developed at prestigious institutions such as, The Central Academy of Drama (Beijing), Beijing Dancing Academy (Beijing), Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Shenyang Conservatory of

Music, Communication University of China (Beijing), Nanjing University of the Arts, and Sichuan Conservatory of Music. And while singing voice teachers recruited to teach in these musical theatre programs were, and are, well equipped to train singers in classically grounded “legit” styles, it appears that they do not have the necessary skillset to teach modern musical theatre repertoire heavily influenced by contemporary music styles (Luo, 2019).

## THE ISSUE OF MUSICAL THEATRE SINGING VOICE TEACHERS’ TRAINING BACKGROUNDS

The efficacy of musical theatre singing voice teachers’ training backgrounds has been widely discussed in the literature of singing voice globally, with a growing consensus that while training based in classical technique is useful for Golden Age productions (such as *Showboat* and *Carousel*), it leads to gaps in style-specific vocal technical proficiency as well as knowledge required to meet the needs of contemporary musical theatre belt repertoire and performance expectations (Bartlett, 2020; Edwin, 2000; Edwards & Hoch, 2018; Leborgne & Rosenberg, 2019; LoVetri & Weekly, 2003; Spivey & Barton, 2018). Similarly, Luo Yi (associate professor and teacher of acting in the music theatre department at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music) drew attention to the issue of the training backgrounds of university-based singing voice teachers in China, highlighting the fact that their training was not in musical theatre but in the Western classical music tradition (Luo, 2019). She questioned the effectiveness of a “one size fits all” model of classical technique, suggesting that Chinese teachers’ training backgrounds left them ill-equipped to deliver the style-appropriate instruction needed for modern musical theatre repertoire:

The largest group of singing pedagogues [in China] is from a classical background: they trained students in classical technique and have attached great importance to training the upper register in such a way that students usually have difficulty balancing the requisite conversational vocal quality in their lower range. This leads to singers having two different voice qualities bordered by the *passaggio*. (p.104)

Luo (2019) also identified that in addition to Western classical training, a smaller group of musical theatre teachers in China had personal training backgrounds in traditional folk singing or pop, which she found equally problematic for

effective training of musical theatre singers. In the case of those with traditional folk singing backgrounds, Luo observed that “their [the students] voices show less plasticity with always overly sweet, beauty, and bright tone”, and for those with training in pop singing, she observed that their singing was created by “more intensity in the throat” concluding that, “such unresonant sound is less expressive and leads easier to unhealthy singing” (p. 104). Earlier, another Chinese academic, Zi (2011) had voiced her concerns about possible correlations between inappropriate training approaches offered to musical theatre singers in China and their development of vocal health issues: “Students appeared to spend most of their time remediating vocal problems, rather than being able to engage in the acquisition of new repertoire” (Zi, 2011, p. 82). Luo (2019) also raised the issue of musical theatre students’ vocal health. She suggested that without a working knowledge and understanding of the contemporary and commercial (CCM) style elements present in much of the modern musical theatre repertoire, musical theatre teachers in China were leaving their students on their own to produce a belt voice production without efficient registration adjustments to support and maintain a healthy and sustainable singing voice: “Such unbalanced manipulation of chest-dominant voice gradually becomes a negative psychological cue blocking the flexibility of singing and leading to voice limitations” (Luo, 2019, p. 104–105). While consideration of belt singing is a recent concern for Chinese musical theatre teachers, it is a matter of past and ongoing discussion in the Western literature.

In a two-part article, Spivey (2008) identified two distinct vocal pedagogical “camps”, each with opposing views on technique and perceived health implications for singers of belt styles. He proposed that while one group,

...argue that belting is both aesthetically offensive and deleterious to the vocal mechanism [and]... emphatically believes belting to be an abusive behavior that compromises the voice and ultimately leads to its demise... the other group promotes belting as an altogether viable mode that is nothing more than an organic outgrowth of energized speech. (Spivey, 2008, p. 607-609)

Spivey attributed the “abuse” opinion to singing voice teachers with classical training backgrounds, noting that those who held this view appeared to have little personal experience of belt (as either performance style or technique). In a recent doctoral study, Cox (2020) investigated the issue from the perspective of a population of U.S. based teachers concluding that, “Singing teachers

moving from a classical music background to working in music theatre must transition from enculturation in the aesthetic of the classical voice pedagogy to a working knowledge of musical theatre and CCM singing” (p. ii). Importantly for this paper, Cox’s participants expressed a view that their “...classically based academic training left them ill-equipped [to] make this transition” (p. ii).

### **BRIDGING THE GREAT PEDAGOGICAL DIVIDE – A GLOBAL ISSUE**

Today, the challenge for female singers to manage their vocal health while achieving the high tessitura, speech-related belt styles and extremes of vocal range remains a divisive topic within the singing voice community. Leborgne & Rosenberg (2019) encapsulated the task by suggesting that musical theatre singers require the flexibility and stamina of “vocal athletes”.

In keeping with this view, Western contemporary singing voice pedagogues have voiced a clear consensus that musical theatre singers need to be proficient in a wide range of styles from traditional “legit” repertoire (based in classical technique) to a belt voice production across a range of CCM styles (Edwards & Hoch, 2018; Edwin, 2009; Flynn, 2022; Leborgne & Rosenberg, 2019; LoVetri, Saunders-Barton & Means-Weekly, 2014; Young, 2019). LoVetri et al., (2014) expanded on this need for style proficiency stating that “one character can be required to sing equally well in multiple styles within the same show” (p. 57). All agree that ‘belt’ singing has become an essential tool in the musical theatre singer’s skillset and that the vocal tract configuration needed to produce contemporary style elements is very different to that needed for classical singing voice. All agree that, in terms of vocal characteristics, the emergence of belt style singing brought about a dramatic change to accepted female sound production.

Lebowitz & Baken (2011) described belt as a “vocal posture” where to sustain speech quality in the upper range of a female voice, adjustments of vocal tract configurations require a necessarily neutral to higher larynx and a narrow pharynx (rather than the lower larynx setting required for classical singing). Others use a range of descriptors such as an extremely bright, sustained forward resonance, little-to-no vibrato and speechlike with articulatory clarity (for example: DeLeo LeBorgne et al., 2010; Estill, 1988; Sundberg, 2012).

Beyond comparisons of classical and contemporary singing, Edwards and Hoch (2018) highlighted differences in female singing for “traditional” and “contemporary” musical productions:

Whereas the highest belt notes in traditional musicals were usually B4 and C5 (with an occasional D5), contemporary musicals often push the belt voice to F#5 and higher. Examples include “Defying Gravity” from *Wicked*, “Once upon a Time” from *BKLYN*, and “I’m Here” from *The Color Purple*. (p. 185)

Similarly, White (in Roll, 2016) noted that the traditional female belt range, “exemplified by singers like Ethel Merman and Patti LuPone, typically extended to a C5”, whereas women are now required to sound like rock/pop singers. Researchers such as Cuny (2018) and Green, Freeman, Edwards, & Meyer (2014) write that this trend continues to challenge female musical theatre singers to maintain a speaking voice production ever higher in their vocal range to meet musical theatre industry expectations for the sound and effects of CCM styles.

In response to musical theatre singers’ needs over the past four decades, contemporary singing voice pedagogues have continued to propose a range of methods for the training of belt voice. For example: Jo Estill (1988, *Estill Voice Training, EVT*), Cathrine Sadolin (2005, *Compete Vocal Technique, CVT*) and Jeannette LoVetri (2009, *Somatic Voicework*). Other pedagogues such as Mary Saunders-Barton (2018), Robert Edwin (1998-2008), Karen Hall (2014), and voice scientists such as Ingo Titze, (1997-2023) Johan Sundberg (1989-2019) and Kenneth Bozeman (2008-2022) have all have written about specific pedagogical and physiological requirements of belt as a singing voice style and, in terms of vocal characteristics, that the emergence of belt singing brought about a dramatic change to accepted female sound production. Hall (2014) suggested that this change occurred in response to developing needs of Broadway theatrical productions and associated musical compositions (for unamplified, speech-like female voice in middle and lower ranges to be audible throughout the theatre) and a growing musical theatre industry move to cater to a growing popularity for singers’ voices to reflect social issues of the time (Hall, 2014; Salzman & Desi, 2008). Willis-Lynam (2015) proposed that “to bring style specific authenticity to their performances”, singers and their teachers must first recognise that belt style singing originated from African American music. Bonin (2020) describes belt as constituting “American musical theatre’s main characteristic for

vocal expression originating from African American traditional vocal music ... described as ‘ring shouts’, ‘work and holler songs’, ‘spirituals’, ‘gospel’, and ‘blues’” (Bonin, 2020, p.37–40). Bonin goes on to recognise early female African American exponents of the style, including Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (the “mother of blues”) and Bessie Smith (the “Empress of the blues”). In terms of musical theatre productions, Roll (2014) reported that the advent of belt style singing on the musical theatre stage is often attributed to Ethel Merman in the 1930 Gershwin production of *Girl Crazy* (Roll, 2014, p. 21), while Wintz and Finkelman (in Bonin, 2020) point to Bert Williams as the first African American to appear in a lead role on a Broadway stage (p. 36).

Some form of belt singing is present in many classic musical theatre shows (such as *Sweet Charity*, *42nd Street*, *Les Misérables*, *Chicago*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Aida*, *Rent*), as they appear alongside pop/rock and Juke box productions (such as, *Jersey Boys*, *We Will Rock You*, *Kinky Boots*, *Dream Girls*, *The Bodyguard*, *Wicked*, *Frozen*, *In the Heights*, *Hamilton*, *SIX*, and *Shucked*). In all of these shows, the common feature is belt singing with the female singers “expected to be proficient in producing a style-specific belt as a vital indicator for their marketability in today’s entertainment industry” (Lebowitz & Baken, 2011, p. 160).

## THE CHINESE VOICE - BACKGROUND TO THE CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT

As musical theatre performance is a relatively new art form in China, it is not unexpected that, to date, little academic study or empirical research exists to guide Chinese practitioners working to progress the field of musical theatre singing performance. However, the literature does contain commentary from Chinese observers and concerned academics; one narrative of the “lived experience” is from famous musical theatre actress Dang Yunwei, who adds a real-world perspective to the existing commentary. In her master’s thesis, Dang (2013) reported her concerns as a student of musical theatre conservatoire training in China noting that, “...having watched almost all musicals starring local actors in six years before I graduated, I was aware of ongoing problems with the singers’ ability to sing musical theatre repertoire with authentic style” (p. 2). She went on to relate a significant gap between what she had been taught in her musical theatre singing training at a major conservatory of music in China and what she actually needed to

achieve and maintain her professional work in the musical theatre industry post-graduation: “[my] classical training made it difficult to achieve the most basic principle of musical theatre singing to seamlessly connect speaking and singing”. She claims that “long-term classical training as a soprano only prepared singers to sing high-pitched songs making us feel weak in our natural voice range”. She continued, “I’m not the only one who experienced this issue, many singers like me who trained in classical singing all have this problem, their lines and singing are separately presented in phonation” (Dang, 2013, p. 2). According to Passeggi (2017), the strength of such autobiographical research lies in the narrative:

The narrator elaborates their own story and projects themselves in it, at the same time, as a character and author of the reflection conducted ... subsequently, the events are organized into a plot with a clear introduction, development, and conclusion through a process of textualization. (p. 306)

In considering Passagi’s views (along with other researchers’ such as Marques & Mateiro, 2024) and to highlight the current and ongoing pedagogical challenges for musical theatre singing voice students in China, what follows is a snapshot of the “lived experience” of Chuting Huang, singer, teacher, current DMA candidate, and the first author of this paper:

From 2016–2019, I was a student at Shanghai Conservatory of Music undertaking a Master of Musical Theatre. At that time, the pedagogical approach to singing in contemporary musical theatre styles did not offer any specific belt training; this was particularly problematic when we [musical theatre students] were required to produce a sustained belt voice quality to meet the needs of the modern musical theatre repertoire. At the time, I reported to my teacher that I was confused about how to sing the modern musical theatre repertoire without vocal strain. I observed that my peers were experiencing similar difficulties. With no training or background in modern musical theatre or belt singing techniques, the teacher addressed my concerns by drawing on her knowledge of cultural singing in the Chinese opera tradition. She suggested that we practice songs from Chinese opera to help find the forward resonance in high speech quality singing required for the belt repertoire; however, no training was offered. Other students in my university cohort could not see any relevance in traditional Chinese opera singing voice techniques, as it was so different from contemporary Western singing that they heard in pop and musical theatre recordings. I was struggling to find a healthy and reliable way to belt, so I was interested to explore this approach as I

remembered my grandmother singing Beijing opera songs to me when I was young.

With the little knowledge I had about Beijing opera technique, I listened to recordings and copied the sounds of Beijing opera singers to see if it would help me find a healthier and more style authentic musical theatre sound. When I sang for my teacher using the Beijing opera techniques (speech sounds with focused, bright resonance and strong vocal projections in the female singer’s upper range), she said, “That is a more acceptable sound for musical theatre”. The problem was that I still did not understand why it worked for me and how it could be taught to other students. I decided I needed to do further study to understand how the sounds were made so that I could research the possible relationships of techniques from both genres. As there were no doctoral degree programs in musical theatre singing available to me in China, I applied and was accepted into the DMA program at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. My aim is to return to China more confident in my own musical theatre singing and with the tools to teach my musical theatre students to sing authentic musical theatre belt styles without straining their voices.

## BACKGROUND TO THE CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT

As reported earlier in this paper, it is generally accepted that to be employable in the modern musical theatre industry, singers need the vocal flexibility and stamina to sing across a wide range of styles (Green, Freeman, Edwards & Meyer, 2014; Hall, 2014; Leborgne & Rosenberg, 2019; LoVetri, Saunders-Barton & Weekly, 2014; Lu, 2021; Roll, 2016). However, it appears that in China university training is not equipping student/singers with effective techniques to manage modern musical theatre repertoire styles, especially where belt voice production is required. To address this issue, the current research project has been designed to investigate the potential for a cross-training protocol using elements of Beijing opera training to build and inform a relevant pedagogy for female musical theatre singers in China. The primary question guiding the research is: How might a cross-genre training approach using complementary singing techniques from Beijing opera assist the development of style authenticity and vocal efficiency for a Chinese female musical theatre singer?

An in-depth search of the literature has revealed that the training of musical theatre singing voice teachers on the efficacy of pedagogical approaches commonly used in university-based

musical theatre programs is of global concern (for example: in the U.S., Meyer & Edwards, 2014 and Cox, 2020 and in China, Luo, 2019). As there are few existing reports about the musical theatre pedagogical practices in China, Luo’s (2019) is important. It was tacit in her report that, at the time of writing, the majority of singing voice teachers in Chinese university-based musical theatre programs lacked any specific training in musical theatre.

To test the current status, a recent audit (2024) of four major Chinese university websites was conducted to provide an updated picture of the training backgrounds of the teachers currently listed as delivering musical theatre training in Chinese tertiary programs.

**Table 1:** 2024 Review of university-based musical theatre teachers training backgrounds

Listed musical theatre programs	A	B	C	D
Number of listed musical theatre teachers	8	6	6	2
Training overseas	3	1	0	0
Training in China	3	3	0	1
Training overseas and in China	2	2	6	1
Number with classical training	3	5	2	0
Number with musical theatre training	1	0	0	1
Training in traditional folk or pop	2	1	0	0
Mixed training	2	0	4	1

Of the twenty-two teachers listed within the four musical theatre programs, ten identified their training backgrounds as being in classical singing – within this group, seven had trained overseas (in Europe and in the USA) while the remaining three had completed their voice training in Chinese tertiary institutions. Of the remaining 12 teachers (N=22), ten were described as having background training in musical theatre – within this group,

seven had trained overseas (in Great Britain and in the USA) and three had completed their musical theatre training in Chinese tertiary institutions. From the total group (N=22 teachers), the remaining two teachers identified their backgrounds as based in Chinese traditional folk music.

While these findings point to a recent growth in the number of university-based teachers with some specific background training in musical theatre, it should be noted that all reported their training as focused on musical theatre “singing performance”; none referred to specific training in singing voice pedagogy (either musical theatre or CCM). Additionally, no specific singing voice pedagogy programs could be found listed on a broad search of Chinese university websites.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In the current study, a mixed methods design within a qualitative framework has been chosen to test the efficacy of a culture-based, vocal cross-training approach for musical theatre singers in China. Some general characteristics of qualitative research are that it’s a flexible research process, it uses descriptive and interpretive data analysis, it’s situational, limited to the context and subjective, and there’s mutual interference between the researcher and the research situation (Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2004; Marques & Mateiro, 2024). Phenomenology is being used to bring closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and interpretivist epistemology to gain an “insider” perspective and generate a range of data to illuminate the topic (Adams et al., 2021; Riazi, 2016). This methodological framework allows the research to be situated “within the political, social and cultural context of the researchers, and the reflexivity, or ‘presence’ of the researchers in the accounts they present” (Creswell, 2017). Within the project, an autoethnographic report will seek to complement the existing literature with aspects of Chinese cultural life that other researchers may not have experienced thereby offering “insider” knowledge of cultural experience to the field (Adams et al., 2017).

The study employs four phases of data collection<sup>4</sup>:

- Phase 1: Interviews with four specialist teachers, two in the fields of Chinese musical theatre and two in Beijing opera.

<sup>4</sup> NB\* Griffith University ethical approval was sought and granted for all phases of the study.

- Phase 2: a series of six singing voice lessons with each of the two specialist Australian musical theatre teachers and 12 from a specialist Beijing opera teacher.
- Phase 3: Reflective journaling (video recordings and written reflections) of Author 1's personal experience of pedagogical approaches used by the specialist teachers in the structured singing lessons.
- Phase 4: Solo lecture/recital concert performance with reflections on the practical outcomes and impact of cross training lessons demonstrated in the performance.

While Phase 1 data collection is complete, qualitative data are currently being collected via Phases 2–4 of the project. Phase 2, an autoethnographic case study using Author 1 as the single participant in a series of musical theatre and Beijing opera lessons, is central to the research design. It is a cross-training protocol such as the approach suggested by Saunders-Barton & Spivey (2018).

### WHY CONSIDER CROSS TRAINING?

“Cross-training” is a term borrowed from the field of sports science. It describes a process of adopting the training methods of another discipline as a way to encourage the advancement of skills to complement an individual's primary activity (Millet and Veronica, in Bartlett 2020). Studies have shown that cross training can promote optimum performance levels and mitigate against injury in athletes (Gabbett, 2016). Edwin (2008) suggested that cross training for singers promotes similar results, while Spivey & Barton (2018) recommended techniques from another music genre as tools to develop multifaceted voice function and performance skills in the singer's primary style. There has been some support in China for a cross training pedagogical approach. For example, in 2011, Guo reported that China was beginning to form its own teaching system “in the process of learning from and amalgamating related art disciplines” (p.107) and in 2019, Beijing opera training was offered to musical theatre singing voice students at Shanghai Conservatory of Music (for reasons unknown, this approach was discontinued in 2021). At Zhejiang Conservatory Music, Chinese opera and musical theatre have been integrated into the drama department and teachers encourage their students to create projects that engage both disciplines. More recently, at the

2nd International Music Theatre Festival held at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Wang (2023) advocated for musical theatre student singers to study traditional Chinese vocal arts as a means to enhance current musical theatre singing training systems, proposing that this approach would help musical theatre singers to build vocal proficiency (see reference list for link to this presentation). While the concept of a Chinese culture-based cross training approach appears to be supported by some tertiary institutions and leading Chinese pedagogues such as Wang (2023), prior to the current doctoral research, no empirical studies have been conducted to test the efficacy of applying Beijing opera as a cross-training tool for female musical theatre singers in China.

### RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING BEIJING OPERA

Firstly, Beijing opera is a culture-based music system within the art form of Chinese opera. As such, it has strong cultural significance for the Chinese people and the sounds are highly recognisable. Zhao (2021) described Chinese opera as multifaceted, with more than 360 variations based on individual regional cultures and a history spanning more than four thousand years. He explained that Chinese opera, together with the Greek tragicomedy and Indian Sanskrit drama, is part of the trinity of the world's oldest dramatic art forms, offering performers a rich synthesis of literature, music, dance, visual arts, martial arts, acrobatics and performance arts with which to build their craft (p. 16). Beijing opera, with its relatively short history of just over two hundred years, is one of these variations and is described as representing the highest tier of Chinese opera (Xia, 2010).

Secondly, although the female Beijing opera voice is produced predominantly in the treble range while female musical theatre voice is produced in the lower speech octave, it became apparent during the review of the literature that much of the technique-based language used by Beijing opera teachers aligns with the descriptions of musical theatre belt singing proposed by Western pedagogues and voice scientists (for example, Edwin, 2004; LoVetri, 2008; McGlashan et al., 2017; Roll, 2016; Sundberg et al., 2012).

The similarities include the following elements:

- A spoken voice production from low into high register in the female singing voice.

- Sustained straight tone rather than a consistent vibrato.
- Sustained upper register singing (inherent in female voice Beijing opera singing), mirrors the growing trend (inherent in musical theatre female voice) for higher range speech quality belt singing in modern day musical theatre repertoire.

Similarly to other traditional music forms, Beijing opera is considered an aural tradition, and few documents exist that describe the techniques used within the art form. Additionally, the few historical documents that do exist are written using Chinese dialect rather than Mandarin, which makes them difficult to translate. Despite these difficulties, musicologists Su & Miao (2017) have described the basic principles of Beijing opera singing as heard in their observations of singers:

Speaking and singing share one and the same placement with focused, bright, speech-like and strong vocal projection.

Keeping the voice placed forward; a sensation of the sound striking the upper teeth and hard palate and pushing into the nasal cavities and forehead.

Once singers become more proficient in upper register singing, they practice “speaking” lines at pitch with interchangeable vowels, ensuring the singing voice quality is maintained within the pitch range.

Beijing Opera quality avoids a lowered laryngeal position and is devoid of natural vibrato.

The training involves sustaining a long tone and then a loud sound carried out with the engagement of breath support.

When the sound “naturally falls to the chest voice, it is always closely engaged with breath so that the natural resonance transition from the head register to chest register is built, and the sound is loud and bright”.

Function-based exercises in Beijing Opera are called ‘喊嗓 (han sang)’, meaning to “call and yell” in an established manner. (Su & Miao, 2017, p.156–158)

All these descriptions are reminiscent of musical theatre quality as described by pedagogues and voice scientists in the Western literature (including Edwin, 2004; LoVetri, 2008; Roll, 2016; McGlashan et al., 2017; Sundberg et al., 2012).

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINESE MUSICAL THEATRE INDUSTRY

Reports in the literature suggest that along with Chinese cultural influences now used in the staging and performance of Western musicals, the Chinese musical theatre industry is developing its own identity through original compositions and productions. In recent years, the staging of Chinese “home-grown” musicals has flourished with new productions such as *Chinese Orphan* (赵氏孤儿), *Yang Jian* (杨戩), *The Secret* (不能说的秘密), *I Am What I Am* (雄狮少年), and *Rouge* (胭脂扣), offering musical theatre productions based in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, it is becoming more commonplace for Western musicals to be presented with Chinese adaptations and the Chinese originals are facing the “competition” from the world classics (Lu & Xuan, 2024). These developments were a topic of discussion at the 3rd International Music Theatre Festival held at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music 2024, where leading professors and actors from China, UK, Germany, France, and the Netherlands gathered to share their experience of working in the modern musical theatre industry. According to a report in the *People’s Daily*, this event opened “a learning channel, enabling a pedagogical platform with more high-quality educational resources enabling musical theatre students to get more diversified knowledge of the industry” (Cao, 2024). During the event, An Dong (director of the Department of Music and Drama at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music) responded to a discussion point “How can the Chinese ‘home-grown’ musicals make long-term progress?”. An pointed out that “one of the sticking points in the development of China’s musical theatre industry is a shortage of talent!”. He concluded that there are only about 50 to 80 professional actors “currently active on the stage, which is far from meeting the growing market demand”. An went on to say, “There is an urgent need for Chinese musical theatre actors to cultivate themselves, in strengthening the ability, training and quality-oriented improvement of performance talents” (An Dong in Cao, 2024). These are important statements that appear to support the early findings from the current research project that pedagogical approaches employed in musical theatre training programs in China are not assisting the development of a new generation of career professionals.



## CONCLUSIONS

Given that a flourishing musical theatre industry is a positive development for China, pedagogues with insight into the industry report that the demands of modern musical theatre repertoire continue to pose many challenges for singers and the teachers currently engaged in training aspiring musical theatre singers (Dang, 2013; Luo, 2019; Wang, 2023).

While data analysis for the current research project is still in the preliminary stages, one factor has emerged from the review of the literature as highly relevant, and that is that the traditional classical singing voice training backgrounds of those who teach in university musical theatre programs do not equip them to train their students with the necessary skillset for modern musical theatre singing styles (Luo, 2019). Preliminary findings from Phase 1 of the research project (the specialist teacher interviews) align with the reports of a growing recognition among Chinese teachers of the inherent differences in “legit” and belt style singing. However, insider reports tell us that although teachers are aware of the need for a new pedagogical approach, to date there is no evidence of any change as for most teachers their own training continues to be based in the Western classical tradition.

Along with a lack of access to up-to-date, formalised pedagogical training, insider reports suggest that there are inherent difficulties for Chinese teachers and students to access recent research papers and/or pedagogical training either online or through “in person” contact. In instances where access to online Western literature and professional development opportunities is possible, language barriers, academic and scientific language and/or terminology along with global time zone constraints make it difficult for teachers and students in China to process and conceptualise information for meaningful transference to their learning and teaching practices. Therefore, while the market demand for musical theatre training in China continues to grow, many teachers remain under informed and under resourced. This presents a technical and stylistic disconnect between what is being taught and what female musical theatre student-singers’ need, especially so with regards to developing a stylistically authentic belt for musical theatre repertoire.

In response to this challenge, some singing voice teachers and the heads of musical theatre departments have taken action in encouraging new pedagogical thinking (Wang, 2023), with cross training as one option. However, to date, no

consensus has been reached nor could any research projects be identified to inform a unified and style effective pedagogical approach to replace the existing classical model. The current research project has been designed to address this gap through an investigation of cross-training protocol using elements of Beijing opera to strengthen female singers’ musical theatre voice production. While analysis of collected data is in the preliminary stages, there are promising signs from Phase 2 of the research (1-2-1 lessons with Beijing opera and musical theatre teachers) that techniques used to produce the required voice qualities of Beijing opera singing (speech aligned, forward, bright resonance) could be a constructive reference for a new pedagogical framework to assist female singers to access a healthy, efficient “high belt” voice for musical theatre performance.

Reflecting on the words of vocal pedagogue and voice researcher Jeanette LoVetri (2002), “There is more than one way to build a belt voice”, commonalities inherent in Beijing opera and musical theatre belt singing provide an interesting background for the integration of cross genre techniques as a positive and practical addition to musical theatre studio-based training practices in China.

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