

Governing Banshi for Emotional Expression : A Study on the Reform of Banshi and Stylistic Formation in Xie Tao's Jinju Vocal Art

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Abstract: Jinju (a major local opera originating in Shanxi Province, northern China), as a representative genre of the northern Chinese Bangzhiqiang (a unique vocal-operatic system specific to traditional Chinese local opera) system, features a well-developed Banshi (a unique rhythmic-metered structure system of Chinese opera) system that serves as the core carrier of its vocal art. However, with the evolution of the contemporary local opera ecology, the traditional logic of programmatic transformation has constrained performers' stylistic breakthroughs and artistic innovation. Taking the banshi innovative practice of Jinju xusheng (male-role specialist) performer Xie Tao in classic repertoire such as *Fushan Enters the Capital* and *Under Mount Lankeshan* as the research object, this paper, within the theoretical framework of traditional Jinju Banshi, analyzes at a technical level her individualized strategies in Banshi transition order, transitional methods, and cross-role integration. From an artistic perspective, it reveals Xie Tao's expansion of the functional boundaries of traditional Jinju Banshi and the role-type adaptation rules, clarifying the core role of Banshi reform in shaping her vocal style characterized by "combining rigidity and flexibility, and governing ban with emotion." This study aims to provide reference for programmatic innovation and school development in the contemporary inheritance of Jinju.

Keywords: Jinju; Banshi reform; Xie Tao; vocal style; governing ban with emotion

1. Introduction

Jinju, as an important representative of the northern Bangzhiqiang tradition in China, constructs the core framework of its theatrical music through a distinctive Banshi system. Banshi is not only an organizational norm of rhythm, tempo, and melody, but also an artistic carrier that conveys emotion, shapes characters, and embodies regional culture. Over more than two hundred years of development, the four major schools—"Ding, Niu, Guo, and Ji"—have formed distinctive artistic styles through individualized applications of Banshi, becoming key lineages in the transmission of Jinju. However, with changes in the contemporary opera ecology, the inheritance of Banshi has fallen into a dual predicament of "programmatic rigidity" and "lack of innovation." How to achieve the modern transformation of Banshi art while preserving its traditional genetic core has become an urgent issue in the inheritance of Jinju.

As a leading figure in the contemporary transmission of Jinju, Xie Tao has endowed this ancient genre with a modern aesthetic through her performance art, representing a peak of contemporary Jinju performance (Xu Fen, 2019). The most essential breakthrough in her vocal art lies in the systematic reform of traditional Jinju Banshi. In representative works such as *Fushan Enters the Capital* and *Under Mount Lankeshan*, she breaks away from the mechanical application of rigid programmatic structures in opera Banshi, transforming them into flexible carriers adapted to the emotional expression of characters. In doing so, she forms a distinctive vocal style characterized by "combining hardness and softness, and governing ban with emotion." Her practice not only continues the vigorous essence of the Ding school wusheng tradition, but also incorporates the gentle expressiveness of the Niu school dan (female role), creatively expanding the emotional expressive space of Banshi transitions, and thus becoming a typical innovative model of traditional opera adapting to contemporary aesthetics.

At present, academic research on Jinju Banshi mainly focuses on systematic classification and historical textual studies (Su Zenglin, 2019; Hao Jie, 2016), while case studies of performers tend to emphasize descriptive accounts of performance techniques (Bi Xian, 2023). There is still a lack of research revealing the intrinsic relationship between "Banshi transition" and the formation of an artist's vocal style. Xie Tao's artistic practice demonstrates that Banshi transition is not merely a technical operation; it embodies the performer's understanding of operatic conventions, interpretation of character emotion, and response to contemporary aesthetics. Based on this, this study takes Xie Tao's vocal practice in classic repertoire as the research object. Through literature review, aria analysis, and case-based textual examination, and grounded in the theoretical framework of Jinju Banshi, it analyzes her strategies of Banshi transition, reveals how "governing ban with emotion" contributes to the formation of artistic style, and further explores viable paths of "preserving the essence while pursuing innovation" in the contemporary inheritance of traditional Chinese opera.

2. The Theoretical Framework and Artistic Features of the Jinju Banshi System

2.1 Classification System and Functions of Jinju Banshi

The vocal music of Jinju takes “Luantan” as its principal melodic system, forming a comprehensive Banshi structure characterized by a “seven main and seven auxiliary” functional system. The seven basic banshi respectively undertake core functions such as lyric expression, narration, and dramatic conflict articulation, with clearly defined artistic and technical boundaries (Jing Jing, 2018). The “Pingban” (slow ban) follows a 4/4 meter with a relatively slow tempo of approximately 40–60 beats per minute. Its melody is smooth and sustained. Structurally, it is mainly in a call-and-response phrase form, where the first phrase often cadences on “re” and the second on “la,” forming a stable modal resolution. It is well suited for delicate emotional expression. The “Jiaban” (fast narration ban) is in 2/4 meter with a moderate tempo of approximately 80–100 beats per minute and has strong narrative capacity. Compared with Pingban, its melody is more concise, with tighter syllabic placement, making it suitable for unfolding plot developments or presenting dialogue between characters. The “Er-xing” ban can flexibly alternate between 2/4 and 1/4 meters, with tempo variations typically ranging from 100–120 beats per minute. It integrates both “slow beat with fast singing” and “fast beat with slow singing” forms. The former expresses deep emotion, while the latter intensifies dramatic tension and produces strong theatrical effects. The “Liushui” (flowing ban) is in 1/4 meter with a rapid tempo reaching 140–160 beats per minute. Its vocal characteristic is “many words with minimal melodic extension,” often starting directly on the beat (“ding ban qi chang”), with compact and continuous rhythm, creating a seamless flow. It is particularly effective in expressing intense emotions or dramatic conflict. The “Gunbai” belongs to the free rhythm category without a fixed meter. Its rhythm is flexible, and its lyrics often adopt irregular long-and-short sentence structures, frequently carrying a sobbing tone or strong exclamatory expression. It is a powerful means in Jinju for expressing extreme emotions such as grief and accusation. The “Jieban,” also a free-rhythm form, features flexible tempo and a clearly defined modal direction. It functions as a transitional “bridge” between different banshi, primarily used to connect modulations and transitions. The “Daoban” is likewise a free-rhythm form, typically used at the opening of a singing section. It is often accompanied by physical movements such as beard shaking and sleeve flicking, employing a high-pitched and forceful sustained tone to create an immediately striking dramatic presence.

In addition to the seven basic banshi, auxiliary banshi such as Zhuanban, Raoban, and Liuban further supplement the functional system of Banshi expression. “Zhuanban” follows the principle of “tonal modulation within the same gong system” (tong gong fan diao), achieving direct transitions between principal banshi through changes in meter or tempo. “Raoban” adds free melodic extension at the cadential notes of phrases within a main Banshi, thereby prolonging emotional expression and is typically used in climactic sections of arias. “Liuban” is a “beat-without-eye” rapid narrative Banshi characterized by densely packed syllabic placement similar to recitative (“shuban”), and is used to depict urgent or fast-paced narrative situations.

The emotional expression of Jinju Banshi is inseparable from the coordination between the civil and martial instrumental ensembles (wenchang and wuchang). In the wenchang, the Huhu, characterized by its rich and mellow timbre, serves as the principal melodic instrument, working together with the erxian, sanxian, and sixian to construct the melodic framework. In the wuchang, rhythmic structures are reinforced through the banzi (clapper), the drum board (guban) for conducting, and the horse gong (maluo), which together produce a strong rhythmic drive and strengthen the rhythmic patterns of the Banshi. For example, in the “Liushui” Banshi, the wuchang must adopt a “tight beating” (jin da) to match its rapid tempo. In contrast, the “Pingban” requires a slower and gentler rhythmic support (man da) from the wuchang. In this way, an artistic unity is achieved in which “the ban follows the melody, and the melody arises from the ban.”

2.2 The Artistic Logic of Banshi Transitions

Banshi transitions in Jinju strictly follow the core principle of “emotion-driven development,” forming a “Qi-cheng-zhuan-he” (a four-stage structural principle specific to traditional Chinese opera, referring to the four logical links of initiation, continuation, transition and closure of dramatic and vocal structure) structural logic that is deeply integrated with plot and character development, representing an organic unity of technical norms and artistic expression.

Banshi transitions are fundamentally based on the psychological changes of characters and the emotional progression of the storyline. For instance, when expressing grief and indignation, a performance often begins with “Gunbai” to release intense sorrow, then transitions into “Liushui” to enhance dramatic tension, and concludes with “Jieban” to create a powerful emotional impact. When expressing joy, the structure typically begins with “Pingban” for lyrical expression, then shifts to “Er-xing” to drive emotional progression through rhythmic acceleration, and finally culminates in “Raoban” to elevate and complete the emotional climax.

From a structural perspective, the “Qi-cheng-zhuan-he” framework is clearly layered and functionally defined. The “qi”

(opening) section typically employs “Daoban” or “Pingban” to establish the tonal center and create the dramatic atmosphere and situational context. The “cheng” (development) section is carried by “Jiaban” or “Erxing,” which unfolds the narrative and lays the groundwork for subsequent conflicts. The “zhuan” (turning point) section relies on “Liushui” and “Jieban” to intensify dramatic conflict and push emotional expression toward its climax. Finally, the “he” (conclusion) section is achieved through “Raoban” or “Cheban,” completing emotional resolution and, in coordination with the performer’s concluding stage posture, forms a lingering dramatic tableau that strengthens the audience’s emotional memory.

Jinju follows the core performance principle of Chang-zuo-yi-ti (a core aesthetic of traditional Chinese opera requiring the organic integration of vocal singing and physical acting). In this framework, transitions of Banshi are closely integrated with performers’ staged physical movements and recited lines. Slow Banshi are often paired with relatively static movements such as zhengguan (adjusting the official headdress) and lüan (stroking the beard), allowing vocal expression to serve as the primary carrier of emotion. In contrast, fast banshi require dynamic movements such as shuifa (hair-swinging stage stunt) and guibu (knee-walking stage step), enabling a synchronized resonance between voice and movement, thereby allowing the audience to perceive character emotions more directly.

In addition, Jinju Banshi transitions incorporate regional cultural elements such as Shanxi dialect and folk songs. For example, the entering-tone syllables in the Shanxi dialect are pronounced briefly and sharply, forming a distinctive syncopated rhythm in the “Liushui” Banshi, thereby enriching its rhythmic texture. The downward glide of cadential tones in the “Gunbai” Banshi reflects the “lamenting tone” tradition of Shanxi folk songs. These regional features collectively constitute the cultural identity markers of Jinju Banshi.

3. Individualized Application of Banshi Transitions in Xie Tao’s Vocal Art

3.1 Restructuring the Transition Sequence and Expanding the Psychological Portrayal Function of Banshi

Traditional Jinju Banshi transitions follow the principle of mutual interchange between fast and slow tempos, typically shifting from slow to fast. When a transition from a fast rhythm to another Banshi is required, it must rely on “Liuban” and “Daoban,” and use musical techniques such as push, pause, light, and heavy articulation to avoid discontinuity (Hao Jie, 2016). In Xie Tao’s performance of the core aria “Cold crickets intermittently urging the late night” (Han qing duanxu cu geng can) in *Jinju Fushan Enters the Capital*, she breaks through the traditional functional boundary that “Gunbai is only used for emotional lamentation,” reconstructs the sequence of Banshi transitions, and greatly expands the psychological portrayal function of Jinju Banshi.

At the beginning of the aria, Xie Tao employs “Sanban” and “Daoban” with sustained vocalization (extending note values by $32\% \pm 5\%$) to construct a “midnight solitude” soundscape. Through precise control of high-frequency overtone density in the 2000–4000 Hz range, she objectifies Fu Shan’s nocturnal melancholy, creating a desolate and lonely atmosphere (Gao Xuan, 2018). The performance then shifts into a moderate “Jiaban” (♩ = 72), forming a polyphonic narrative of “contradiction and entanglement” with a regular textual structure. Combined with increased vocal intensity and denser syllabic placement (6.2 characters per measure ± 0.5), it reflects Fu Shan’s conflicted psychological state of concern for national destiny and being torn between advance and retreat. When reaching the line “Sighing that so many things in the world are reversed between right and wrong,” the “Jiaban” naturally transitions into “Erxing,” with a 22% increase in tempo and an expansion of melodic interval span to an average of a perfect fourth. This rhythmic transformation completes a dramatic turn, expressing Fu Shan’s indignation and critique of social injustice. The conclusion accelerates into the “Liushui” Banshi, combined with “spit articulation singing” (pensong changfa), enhancing syllabic density and forceful enunciation, thereby elevating Fu Shan’s righteous integrity embodied in the line “Rather be a jade buried in mud than a flower flattering the green bank” to its emotional climax.

Xie Tao breaks the fixed paradigm of traditional Banshi transitions. Within the progression of “Sanban–Jiaban–Erxing–Liushui,” she achieves seamless emotional continuity through adjustments in tempo, rhythm, density, breath control, and phrasing, weakening the fragmentation caused by instrumental interludes. This allows the character’s psychological transformation to unfold in one continuous flow, constructing a modern Jinju vocal expression imbued with literati integrity and spirit.

3.2 Optimizing Transitional Techniques and Dissolving the Rigid Boundaries of Programmatic Conventions

Xie Tao’s innovation in Jinju Banshi transition methods centers on breaking through fixed programmatic conventions such as “hard cuts” and “Jieban transitions.” She adopts a “gradual-rate transition” approach to achieve seamless integration

between different banshi, thereby dissolving rigid structural boundaries and allowing transitions themselves to function as carriers of emotional progression, fully serving character portrayal.

In the “Refusing Official Position” (Ju Guan) aria from *Fushan Enters the Capital*, the transition from “Erxing” to “Liushui” does not employ the traditional “Jieban” bridge. Instead, it gradually compresses the inter-phrase pauses of “Erxing” and accelerates the rhythmic beating of the bangzi, completing a natural transformation from 2/4-meter “Erxing” to 1/4-meter “Liushui” within eight lines of lyrics. The entire Banshi transition is fully embedded within emotional progression, making the shift in formal structure almost imperceptible to the audience and smoothly achieving an emotional escalation from “gentle narration” to “impassioned declaration.”

In the aria “Returning in a Dazed State to the Past Years” (Shi cai jian shenzhi huanghuo hui dangnian) from *Under Mount Lankeshan*, the performance begins with the “Gunbai” free rhythm, using vibrato and distinctive breath control techniques to vividly simulate the character’s dazed mental state. This is followed by a three-measure flexible, non-metric transitional passage leading into “Pingban,” which expresses a calm recollection of past beautiful memories. When reaching the line “It turns out that the Yellow Millet Dream has already awakened,” Xie Tao abruptly shifts into “Jieban” free singing to highlight the painful rupture between dream and reality. The piece concludes with “Raoban,” which resolves the line “Only a lingering sorrow remains facing the slanting sun,” settling the emotion into despair. These four Banshi transitions achieve a state of “transitioning without visible transitions.” The logic of the transitions is fully aligned with the character’s psychological progression, greatly enhancing both the narrative strength and emotional impact of Jinju vocal performance.

3.3 Cross-role Innovation in Banshi Integration

An important direction in Xie Tao’s innovation in Jinju Banshi is the breakthrough of rigid role-type boundaries and the exploration of cross-role integration.

In the “Palace Disturbance” (Nao Gong) section of *The Golden Branch* (Da Jin Zhi), she employs the technique of “same Banshi, different vocal interpretation across roles.” Her practice of having a wusheng performer cross-portray Guo Ai has become a typical example of Xie Tao’s crossover aesthetic of being “both sheng and dan.”

At the beginning of this section, Xie Tao uses “syllabic positional differentiation” to creatively extend the functional scope of the “Jiaban,” transforming it from a purely narrative device into one that also serves character construction. In the Princess’s lines, the Jiaban retains its traditional structure of four syllables per measure, combined with the characteristic descending ornamental glide of the Niu school dan style, highlighting feminine delicacy and coquettish softness. In contrast, in the cross-role portrayal of Guo Ai (a wusheng role), in the line expressing that the crime of deceiving the emperor is extremely serious, the syllabic density is increased to six syllables per measure. Ornamentation is removed, and instead, the direct, sharply contoured melodic leaps associated with the Ding school wusheng style are used to construct a firm and masculine vocal image. This “same Banshi, different sonic substance” approach externalizes the emotional and psychological divide between the “arrogant princess” and the “loyal minister.”

As the dramatic conflict escalates into the “Liushui” Banshi, Xie Tao breaks through the conventional role-based boundary of wusheng vocalization, which is typically characterized by forceful and explosive articulation. In the line “If your father harbors intent to deceive the emperor,” she introduces an unexpected qingshang (airy breath vibrato) associated with the dan (female) style on the syllable “deceive,” allowing a restrained softness to emerge within an otherwise rigid wusheng vocal texture. This “softness within hardness” emotional strategy transcends the fixed character labeling of a single role type.

In the concluding “Jieban” section, Xie Tao presents a radical innovation of “sheng–dan unified tone with differentiated expression.” The Princess maintains the traditional dan vocal style, with ornamented and extended cadential phrases, while Xie Tao, grounded in the true voice of wusheng, incorporates elements of dan falsetto singing in the final line, forming a composite vocal texture of “true voice for narration + falsetto for emotional expression.” This blurring of role boundaries preserves the rich, resonant timbre of the wusheng voice as its core foundation while adding tonal coloration from the dan tradition, thereby concretely embodying the multilayered character of Guo Ai as “externally rigid but internally tender.” When the two melodic lines converge on the scale degree “zhi” (sol), the Banshi transition not only completes the resolution of dramatic conflict but also achieves an aesthetic reconciliation of gendered expressive qualities, revealing an artistic philosophy of the integration of strength and softness.

4. Banshi Transitions and the Formation of Xie Tao’s Artistic Style

4.1 Driving the Ban with Emotion : Construction of the Core Aesthetic Pursuit

“Driving the Ban with Emotion” is the core aesthetic pursuit of Xie Tao’s vocal artistry. She believes that Banshi should serve the emotional expression of characters. In her creative logic, the selection of banshi, the timing of transitions, and the

adjustment of tempo are all entirely subordinated to the needs of character emotion. In the “Refusing Official Position” (Ju Guan) aria from *Fushan Enters the Capital*, she does not adopt the “Liushui” Banshi traditionally used in wusheng performance to express resolute character traits. Instead, she uses the “Erxing” Banshi to unfold the character’s process of contemplation, gradually accelerating the tempo as the plot develops and naturally transitioning into “Liushui.” Combined with physical movements such as sleeve sweeping and beard flicking, this vividly constructs Fu Shan’s image as a literati figure who is “externally gentle yet internally firm” (Bi Xian, 2021). Throughout the entire opera, Xie Tao uses Banshi variation as a structural thread to construct Fu Shan’s emotional trajectory of “contemplation—indignation—rupture—steadfastness.” The loneliness of Daoban, the entanglement of Jiaban, the intense indignation of Erxing, and the resolute force of Liushui—each Banshi transition precisely corresponds to the transformation of the character’s inner spiritual world. Ultimately, through the Liushui aria “Rather be a jade buried in mud,” the spiritual core of “independent personality” is brought to its emotional climax. This approach breaks away from the traditional inertia of fixed programmatic Banshi transitions in opera, transforming Banshi into an artistic medium that carries modern values. It becomes an organic whole that resonates with both the thematic content of the script and the psychological states of the characters.

4.2 Upholding the Tradition While Innovating: A Dialectical Practical Paradigm

Xie Tao’s reform of Banshi is an innovation built upon the foundation of “upholding the orthodox tradition,” rather than a negation or dismantling of tradition. She has mastered the core techniques of Ding school Jieban, Liushui, and Cheban, and all her adjustments strictly adhere to the modal logic of Jinju’s “Tonggong-fandiao” (a unique traditional modal modulation technique in Chinese opera and traditional Chinese music, defined as shifting the mode while retaining the same gong-tonic center). She does not break the fundamental ontological characteristics of Jinju music, all transitional innovations follow the traditional principle of “emotion-driven development,” while only expanding the boundaries and dimensions of emotional expression. On this basis, she boldly breaks through rigid school conventions and incorporates the graceful melodic techniques of the Niu school dan. In the aria “I still remember the newlywed day with red candlelight swaying” (Ceng jide xinhun ri huazhu yaohong) from *Under Mount Lankeshan*, she departs from the traditional resolute style of Xusheng Pingban’s style, and instead uses a softer and more delicate vocal line to express the warmth of memory within a male character’s recollection. This creates a crossover style of being “both sheng and dan,” breaking the fixed perception that “Ding school must be forceful, and Niu school must be gentle.” This innovative approach avoids the formalist trap of “innovation for innovation’s sake,” while also overcoming the rigidity of conservative inheritance. It forms a dialectical practical paradigm of “traditional programmatic form as structure, and modern expression as function,” providing an operable model for addressing the current problem of homogenization in stylistic lineage transmission.

4.3 Dual Coordinates of Regional Culture and Contemporary Aesthetics in Style Construction

Xie Tao’s reform of Banshi is simultaneously anchored in the dual coordinates of “regional culture” and “contemporary aesthetics” (Ji Guoping, 2020). Her treatment of Banshi consistently preserves the articulation characteristics of the Shanxi dialect as well as the melodic genetic elements of Shanxi folk songs. In the “Gunbai” aria of *Fushan Enters the Capital*, she adapts melodic materials from Shanxi folk tunes, and its plain yet bold emotional expression becomes a typical embodiment of regional identity. At the same time, she adapts her style to the aesthetic rhythm of contemporary audiences by compressing redundant melodic extensions in traditional Banshi, accelerating transitional speed, increasing syncopation, and shortening orchestral interludes. These refinements make slow Banshi less dragging and fast Banshi less chaotic. While aligning with the viewing rhythm of modern audiences, they do not sacrifice the artistic charm of traditional Banshi. This creative logic of “regional foundation + contemporary expression” enables her vocal style to gain recognition from long-time opera audiences while also attracting a large number of younger viewers, thereby providing a replicable path for the “cross-boundary expansion” of traditional opera in the contemporary era.

5. Conclusion

Xie Tao’s reform of Banshi, characterized by “Governing Banshi for Emotional Expression and integrating the ancient with the contemporary,” provides valuable reference for the contemporary school construction and inheritance of Jinju and other regional operatic forms. First, at the technical level, it is necessary to firmly ground innovation in tradition, building it upon a systematic mastery of Banshi structures and school techniques, and strictly adhering to the core musical norms of the genre to avoid “pseudo-innovation” that deviates from its essential ontology. Second, it is necessary to overcome the misconception of “emphasizing technique over emotion,” optimizing Banshi from a rigid procedural framework into a narrative carrier of character psychology, ensuring that technique serves emotional expression and character portrayal. Third, at the level of dissemination, it is important to balance regional cultural genes with contemporary aesthetics, achieving cross-gen-

erational and cross-community dissemination of traditional art.

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