

The Construction of a Mezzo-Soprano Pedagogical Framework from a Cultural Adaptation Perspective-A Grounded Theory Analysis Based on the Experiences of Mezzo-Soprano Educators and Students from China and the West

Ying Zheng*

College of Music, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, 73170. Art Teaching and Research Office, Youth League Committee, Hebei University of Technology, Tianjin, China, 300130.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0014-8618>

Email: zhengyinglx@126.com

Joseph Bowman

College of Music, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, 73170.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9546-0939>

Email: joseph.bow@mahidol.ac.th

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of deepening global integration in music education, how to scientifically introduce and effectively integrate Western bel canto mezzo-soprano pedagogy into China's indigenous vocal system has become a significant academic concern. Differences between Western training and Chinese vocal traditions—in vocal techniques, aesthetic orientations, and pedagogical philosophies—generate challenges in localization, aesthetic conflict, and the balance between national identity and international standards. Existing studies often rely on technical transplantation or experiential discussion, lacking solid theoretical grounding and systematic empirical evidence. This study therefore adopts acculturation theory as its core lens to reveal the mechanisms underlying Sino-Western integration in mezzo-soprano teaching. It aims to construct a scientific cross-cultural pedagogical framework, offer theoretical and practical guidance for mezzo-soprano training in China, and provide an empirical case that challenges the long-standing assumption of “one-way technical borrowing.” The study applies acculturation theory as its theoretical foundation and employs grounded theory as its primary methodological approach to avoid bias caused by pre-established assumptions. The research involves eight participants: four vocal educators (two European and two Chinese) and four students with educational experience in both Chinese and Western conservatories. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on teaching philosophy, technical adaptation, aesthetic cognition, and cross-cultural learning experiences. Data analysis followed grounded theory's three-stage coding procedure. Open coding generated initial concepts; axial coding established relationships among categories; and selective coding identified the core category and integrated it into a coherent theoretical model. This process ensures both systematic analysis and the rigor required for inductive theory building. The research yields a “cross-cultural mezzo-soprano teaching framework” comprising three interrelated dimensions. First, Technical Creative Transformation emphasizes that Western vocal techniques must undergo creative adaptation when applied in the Chinese context. Adjustments should consider Mandarin phonetic features, Chinese vocal aesthetics, and the demands of local repertoire rather than relying on mechanical transplantation. Second, Aesthetic Negotiation Dialogue captures the dynamic process through which Western and Chinese vocal aesthetics move from conflict to coexistence. Through continuous negotiation, teachers and students gradually develop a pluralistic vocal identity and aesthetic orientation. Third, Practical Synergistic Circulation demonstrates that effective integration is not a one-time action but a cyclical process formed by “practice–feedback–teaching,” allowing pedagogical ideas and technical strategies to evolve through sustained interaction. Overall, the findings reveal that Sino-Western

pedagogical integration is essentially a process of co-construction between the two systems, rather than unilateral input from the West. The study concludes that cross-cultural vocal pedagogy must be grounded in two-way adaptation and continuous interaction. The proposed three-dimensional framework effectively addresses long-standing challenges related to the localization of Western technique and aesthetic divergence, offering a systematic and operable model for mezzo-soprano teaching in China. Theoretically, the study fills a notable gap in cross-cultural vocal pedagogy; practically, it provides actionable strategies for educators and supports students in forming a cross-cultural vocal identity. By presenting an empirical case, the study advances cross-cultural music education from conceptual discussion toward evidence-based research, offering new insights and directions for future exploration of Sino-Western vocal integration.

Keywords: Mezzo-soprano, Vocal Pedagogy, Cultural Adaptation, Grounded Theory, Cross-Cultural Studies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

The wave of globalization has profoundly impacted the field of arts education, driving continuous exchange and integration between music education systems across different cultural contexts. In this process, the Western-based bel canto singing technique and its pedagogical system have engaged in a dialogue with China's traditional vocal arts, becoming a topic of significant academic and practical value. Among various vocal genres, the mezzo-soprano voice, due to its unique timbre, dramatic expressiveness, and its richness in Western operatic literature, serves as an ideal lens to examine this cross-cultural integration process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). The mezzo's cross-role complexity (Mother, Witch, Hosenrolle, dramatic heroine) makes aesthetic negotiation more complex than a soprano, whose aesthetic ideal is narrower or more stable. However, compared to the soprano or tenor voices, specialized research focusing on mezzo-soprano vocal education, particularly the migration and adaptation of its pedagogical methods between the Chinese and Western cultural contexts, remains insufficient.

1.2. Literature Critique and Research Gap

Existing literature on the comparative study of Chinese and Western vocal education typically follows two main paths: first, a historical overview that outlines the broad trajectory of the introduction of Western bel canto techniques to China; second, a focused analysis of specific vocal techniques in comparison. While these studies have laid important foundations, they often present two key limitations:

1. **Unidirectional Input Perspective:** They tend to simplify the integration process as the introduction of Western techniques and a response from Chinese techniques, failing to delve into the underlying, dynamic "cultural adaptation" mechanisms.
2. **Lack of Micro-Level Experience:** Most existing studies approach the subject from external observations by educators or historical texts. They lack an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by the teaching methods, the adaptations made, and the innovations that arise, particularly from the micro-level experiences and practices of core educational participants—veteran educators and professional students (Elliott, 2006).

1.3. Theoretical Perspective

To address these research gaps, this study introduces acculturation theory as the core analytical framework. This theory provides a perspective beyond "technical

transplantation,” conceptualizing the cross-cultural migration of vocal pedagogy as a complex, ongoing process of interaction, negotiation, and reconstruction across multiple levels—technical, aesthetic, and pedagogical.

1.4. Research Objectives and Structure

The primary goal of this study is to systematically reveal the cultural adaptation paths of Western pedagogical methods in the Chinese context through the practices of Chinese mezzo-soprano educators and students, ultimately constructing a pedagogical framework that points towards integration and innovation. Cultural adaptation is a process of integration and mutual development. To achieve this goal, the paper first outlines the acculturation theory and its application in this study. Next, using qualitative research methods, the study conducts semi-structured interviews with eight key participants, applying grounded theory analysis to identify the core elements and underlying logic of the integration process. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion sections, the study interprets the theoretical implications of the findings and offer specific recommendations for the internationalization of Chinese vocal education.

2. Research Objectives

2.1. The Evolution of Mezzo-Soprano Vocal Art and Pedagogical Philosophy

The development of the mezzo-soprano voice in the history of Western opera not only reflects the evolution of musical styles but also profoundly influences the core issues in vocal pedagogy. Understanding this historical progression is a crucial prerequisite for comprehending the potential cultural tensions during the integration of Chinese and Western vocal pedagogues (Li, 2021).

In the Baroque and Classical periods, the mezzo-soprano was often assigned to secondary roles such as mothers, witches, or aristocrats. Although these roles were not extensive, the warm and dignified tonal quality of the mezzo-soprano voice helped establish the artistic identity of this voice type. During this time, vocal pedagogy focused on ornamental control of sound and the smoothness of melodic flow, laying the foundation for the *bel canto* system (Mabry, 2002).

By the Romantic period, the status of the mezzo-soprano on stage significantly improved. Composers like Verdi and Wagner gave the mezzo-soprano voice deeper emotional depth and dramatic tension, elevating it from a secondary character to a central dramatic role. This transformation increased the demands on singers' vocal range, volume, and endurance, prompting vocal pedagogy to develop more systematic training methods in breath support, resonance adjustment, and unified registers (Bigler & Osborne, 2021).

Entering the 20th century, with the diversification of opera themes and musical language, mezzo-soprano roles began to emphasize psychological characterization and individual expression. The pedagogical philosophy also shifted from emphasizing a unified ideal vocal tone to focusing more on the individual characteristics of the singer, vocal health, and their artistic adaptability in modern repertoires (Festeu, 2023).

Thus, the pedagogical philosophy of mezzo-soprano singing has always aligned with the artistic demands of different eras. When this Western operatic pedagogical

system enters the Chinese context, its technical methods, aesthetic orientations, and role interpretations inevitably engage in a creative dialogue and integration with Chinese vocal aesthetics and educational systems. This research is conducted in the historical and cultural intersection of these two traditions.

2.2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to systematically review and summarize the exemplary pedagogical methods in Western mezzo-soprano vocal teaching, analyzing its unique teaching models and practical experiences. Through interview analysis, this study compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western mezzo-soprano vocal education, exploring advanced practices in Western pedagogy that can be adapted into Chinese mezzo-soprano teaching.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, systematically employing grounded theory methodology and procedures. The aim is to build theory inductively from empirical data to explore the cultural adaptation process of Western mezzo-soprano pedagogy in the Chinese context.

3.1. Participants and Sampling

The study utilizes a combined strategy of purposive and theoretical sampling. We selected eight key participants, including four seasoned mezzo-soprano educators (two from Europe and two from China) and four mezzo-soprano students with backgrounds in both Chinese and Western music conservatories. As the interviews and analysis progressed, we dynamically adjusted the focus of the interviews based on emerging concepts, such as “aesthetic conflict” and “technical adaptation,” until subsequent data no longer yielded new theoretical insights, achieving theoretical saturation.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Guo, 2024). A flexible interview guide was designed, with the core focus on participants’ personal experiences with and perceptions of Western pedagogy, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they employed for integration. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with early interview analyses directly informing the refinement of the focus and depth of subsequent interviews (Nelson & Berezin, 2020).

3.3. Data Analysis

All interview transcripts were systematically analyzed using a three-stage coding process, supported by constant comparative methods (Peng, 2024).

Open Coding: We conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, breaking down the data and assigning conceptual labels. In total, 24 initial concepts were extracted, strictly using the participants’ own words to ensure that the theory was grounded in the data.

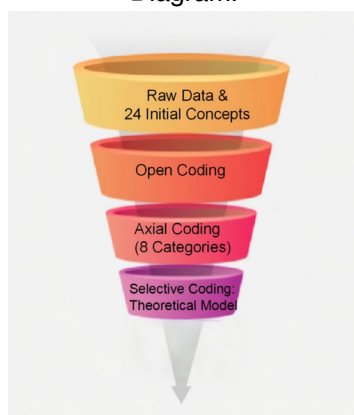
Axial Coding: At this stage, the discrete concepts formed during open coding were clustered and related to each other based on their intrinsic logical connections (e.g., causal, contextual). These concepts were integrated into eight core categories, from which three main dimensions of the cultural adaptation process were identified.

Selective Coding: We identified the “bidirectional construction of cultural adaptation” as the central storyline that governed all categories. We systematically linked the remaining categories to this central storyline, ultimately consolidating and refining them into the theoretical model of the study.

4. Results

Through the systematic three-stage coding of interview data, this study gradually refined 3 core categories from the 24 initial concepts and ultimately aggregated them into three core dimensions that constitute the cultural adaptation process. These dimensions are interrelated and together form a dynamic framework for understanding how mezzo-soprano vocal pedagogy integrates between Chinese and Western cultures. The complete coding process and theoretical construction are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Grounded Theory Coding Process and Theoretical Model Generation Diagram.



Source: by author

4.1. Creative Transformation at the Technical Level

The migration of techniques is the most superficial manifestation of cultural adaptation. However, this study found that participants generally transcended mechanical imitation and entered a phase of “creative transformation.”

From Systematic to Personalized: European educators (e.g., P1) introduced highly systematic techniques in breath support and resonance adjustment, emphasizing their universal principles. However, Chinese educators (e.g., P2) sharply pointed out that they must become “detectives of the students’ voices, not photocopiers” and that these techniques should be fine-tuned and reshaped based on Chinese students’ physiological structure and native language pronunciation habits. One student who had been trained in both Chinese and Western systems (P5) confirmed this: “Directly applying my teacher’s Italian vowel training methods made my diction unnatural

when singing Chinese pieces.” This shift from “universally applicable” to “individually adaptable” is a key step in the technical-level cultural adaptation process.

Stimulating Intrinsic Motivation: Data analysis showed that the effective transmission of techniques strongly depends on the learner’s intrinsic motivation. Students generally favored “fun practice methods” (P5) and “reflective vocal tasks” (P5), indicating that monotonous repetitive training had limited effectiveness. The teaching designs that stimulated a desire for autonomous exploration were found to be the catalysts for the internalization of techniques.

4.2. Aesthetic Negotiation at the Aesthetic Level

The study found that the deepest challenges and the most profound innovations in cultural adaptation occur at the aesthetic level. This is a process that moves from conflict and confusion to active negotiation and the construction of a pluralistic identity (Preston Weber, n.d.).

Aesthetic Conflict and the “Secondary Transmission” Dilemma: Chinese educators (P1) profoundly revealed the core challenge brought by cultural barriers. They often feel like “secondary cultural transmitters,” struggling to explain the aesthetic intentions behind certain techniques to students without the Western operatic cultural context. This dilemma directly led to aesthetic conflicts in the early stages of teaching (Creswell & Creswell, 2009).

Towards Aesthetic Pluralism and Identity Construction: In response, both educators and students demonstrated a strong desire to construct a pluralistic aesthetic framework. A Chinese educator (P3) emphasized the need to “break through rigid aesthetic frameworks and pursue a more diverse artistic identity.” This marks a shift in teaching goals from “singing like the Westerners” to cultivating the ability to master different styles and establish one’s own artistic identity in the process. This shift was vividly reflected in the aspirations of a student (P8), who clearly expressed the expectation of “vocal identity construction” and a desire to learn in a “more open, creative, and diversified environment,” rather than adhering to the rigid “teacher teaches, student learns” model. A student who had studied in Europe (P7) also commented: “When I stopped obsessing over whether my voice was ‘more Chinese’ or ‘more Western,’ and started thinking about how it could better serve the music itself, I truly began to sing freely.” Their experiences collectively depict the transformative path of cultural adaptation from passive acceptance to active creation (Morgan, 2023).

4.3. Synergistic Circulation at the Practical Level

One of the key findings of this study is that the effective integration of technique and aesthetics can only be realized within an enhanced field of practice. The pedagogical system needs to shift from the notion that “the stage is the final test” to “the stage is the central component.”

Practice Feedback Driving Pedagogical Iteration: Students (e.g., P6) strongly advocated for “providing performance opportunities as early as possible to break through the limitations of traditional classroom training.” Their experiences indicated that many technical bottlenecks and stylistic confusions that remain hidden in the practice room only surface under the real pressure of performing before an audience.

Such immediate and authentic feedback from the stage provides teachers with invaluable insights for adjusting instructional strategies (Chafe, 2008).

Repertoire Expansion and Identity Construction: The lack of practice opportunities is reflected not only in the quantity of performances but also in the diversity of repertoire. One student (P7) proposed “innovative thinking in vocal repertoire,” calling for “Chinese composers to create new works that suit the mezzo-soprano voice type.” This reflects the new generation of singers’ dissatisfaction with merely interpreting Western classics (Classical 947). Instead, they aspire to promote the creation of indigenous works, thereby actively constructing their own cultural identity on stage and achieving a transformation from “performers” to “co-creators.”

The three dimensions discussed above do not exist in isolation but together form an organic and dynamic theoretical model. As illustrated in Figure 2, they are closely connected through a continuous feedback loop between pedagogical input and performance output.

Figure 2: Theoretical Model of Mezzo-Soprano Pedagogy Framework from the Perspective of Cultural Adaptation.



Source: by author

5. Discussion

This study, grounded in in-depth interviews with mezzo-soprano educators and students from both China and the West, constructs a culturally adaptive pedagogical framework for this vocal category. The discussion aims to elucidate how this framework, emerging from the distinctive characteristics of the mezzo-soprano voice, unveils the inner mechanisms of cross-cultural integration and provides new perspectives for both pedagogy and research on this voice type.

5.1. The Mezzo-Soprano Voice as a Lens for Cultural Adaptation Tension

The value of this study lies in revealing how the challenges of cultural adaptation are intensified and concentrated through the artistic particularities of the mezzo-

soprano voice. With its wide tessitura—from a rich lower register to a bright upper range—and its frequent assumption of dramatically complex operatic roles (from Carmen to Suor Angelica), the mezzo-soprano serves as an ideal lens through which to examine cultural hybridization. This is a necessary next step to solve the “Repertoire Expansion” challenge and complete the “Theoretical-to-practical Continuum”.

Conflict and Reconciliation of Technical Systems: The Western pedagogical system for the mezzo-soprano encompasses a full spectrum of techniques—from the agility required for Rossini’s coloratura passages to the dramatic power characteristic of Verdi’s heroines (Qi, 2021). When transplanted to China, however, this system demands a higher degree of personalized adaptation than in other voice types. As one Chinese educator (P2) emphasized, the teacher must act as a “vocal detective,” whose primary task is to reconcile the technical breadth demanded by Western vocalism with the physiological and resonance structures of Chinese students, while remaining faithful to the aesthetic principle of *zi zheng qiang yuan* (clarity of diction and roundness of tone) valued in Chinese vocal art. This process represents not mere technical replication but a creative transformation.

Aesthetic Identity: Dilemma and Construction: In Western opera, mezzo-sopranos often embody women who defy convention and convey complex emotional depth. Chinese students interpreting these roles encounter a natural aesthetic gap between their own cultural sensibilities and the characters’ intrinsic meanings. This accentuates what educator P1 described as the predicament of the “secondary cultural transmitter”—the difficulty of fully conveying the cultural codes underlying these roles. Consequently, student P8’s emphasis on “vocal identity construction” becomes particularly salient and fundamental. For Chinese mezzo-sopranos, the central challenge extends beyond how to sing; it encompasses the existential questions of “How, as a Chinese singer, do I understand and embody these Western characters?” and “What, ultimately, constitutes my vocal identity?”

5.2. Enriching and Extending Existing Research on Mezzo-Soprano Pedagogy

The framework proposed in this study provides a paradigm that transcends purely technical instruction and deepens the understanding of mezzo-soprano vocal education (Tianye, Khositditsayanon & Kengkaew, 2025).

From Technical Training to Cultural Empowerment: Existing scholarship on mezzo-sopranos tends to focus on role-specific vocal techniques or stylistic analyses of individual singers. This study, through the lens of cultural adaptation, is the first to conceptualize mezzo-soprano pedagogy as a dynamic interplay among technical, aesthetic, and practical dimensions. This invites educators to reconceptualize the training of a Chinese mezzo-soprano not merely as a process of developing vocal mechanism, but as one of cultivating cross-cultural artistic negotiation competence.

Establishing Aesthetic Subjectivity as a Core Objective: The findings reveal a paradigm shift: the measure of success in Chinese mezzo-soprano education should no longer be limited to the ability to perform Western classics with technical perfection (Narayanan et al., 2006). Instead, as educator P3 advocates, it should focus on nurturing artists capable of “transcending rigid aesthetic frameworks,” and as P8 demonstrates, engaging in “vocal identity construction” to assert artistic subjectivity. This redefines the educational goal from technical transmission to cultural creation.

5.3. Practical Implications of the Theoretical Framework: Building a Sustainable Ecosystem for the Mezzo-Soprano Voice

The “bidirectional construction” model developed in this study offers a systemic blueprint for the sustainable development of the mezzo-soprano voice in China.

Repertoire Expansion as a Path to Identity Resolution: Student P7’s call for “Chinese composers to write new works tailored to the mezzo-soprano voice” highlights the core of ecosystem building (Liang, 2011). The study reveals that without a repertoire grounded in its own cultural context—one that can fully display the timbral beauty and expressive range of the mezzo-soprano—the Chinese mezzo-soprano risks remaining an “exceptional interpreter” rather than an “equal interlocutor” on the global stage. Thus, fostering new Chinese repertoire for mezzo-sopranos is a strategic step toward resolving cultural identity anxiety.

Stage-Centered Pedagogical Reconstruction: The model’s “practice-coordinated cycle” emphasizes restructuring the teaching system around stage feedback. For mezzo-sopranos, this entails the design of voice-specific practice modules—such as comparative performance sessions juxtaposing Chinese art songs and Western arias, or role workshops focusing on canonical mezzo-soprano characters. Through authentic artistic expression, these activities expose and address the voice’s distinctive intersections of technical and aesthetic challenges, fostering a self-renewing, mutually reinforcing cycle between teaching and performance.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

The boundaries of this study point directly toward future explorations in mezzo-soprano research.

Comparative Voice-Type Studies: Future research could compare the cultural adaptation pathways of mezzo-sopranos with those of sopranos or other fachs, to delineate the distinct integration patterns across voice types.

Curriculum Development and Action Research: Building upon this framework, specialized curricula and teaching materials that integrate the three dimensions (technical, aesthetic, and cultural) could be developed for Chinese mezzo-soprano students, accompanied by pedagogical action research to refine and validate the model.

Collaboration Between Composition and Performance: Further investigation could explore effective mechanisms for collaboration between composers and mezzo-soprano performers, jointly advancing the creation and performance of new Chinese mezzo-soprano repertoire, thereby completing the theoretical-to-practical continuum.

6. Conclusion

This study, grounded in the practical experiences of mezzo-soprano educators and students from both China and the West, reveals that cultural adaptation to Western pedagogical methods is a dynamic, bidirectional process operating at the technical, aesthetic, and practical levels. The “Culturally Adaptive Pedagogical Framework for the Mezzo-Soprano” constructed in this study indicates that successful integration is far from a mere technical grafting; its core lies in:

1. **Personalized Technical Transformation:** Achieving technical adaptation while respecting the scientific principles of the voice type.

2. Aesthetic Negotiation and Diversification: Promoting the negotiation of diverse aesthetic norms in the face of cultural differences.
3. Stage-Centered Iterative Feedback Loop: Realizing a cyclical, feedback-driven teaching process centered on the stage.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in operationalizing the macro concept of cultural adaptation theory into a practical and actionable analytical model for vocal pedagogy. Furthermore, it underscores the central role of cultivating “aesthetic subjectivity” in mezzo-soprano education.

On a practical level, the study calls for the Chinese vocal education community to focus on the development of local mezzo-soprano repertoires and the systematic training of dual-culturally competent talents, thereby establishing a more dialogical “Chinese voice” on the global operatic stage. Future research could further deepen this inquiry along the lines of voice-type comparison, curriculum development, and collaboration between composition and performance.

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