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The Dilemma and the Resolution: A Study of the Compatibility between Traditional Chinese Musical Elements and Western Music Systems

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Abstract. This article explores the compatibility between traditional Chinese musical elements and Western art-music systems within a comparative theoretical framework. Focusing on representative Sino-Western fusion works from different historical periods, the study examines this issue from multiple dimensions, including musical structure, Chinese phonetics, timbre, and performance techniques. Particular attention is given to the relationship between traditional Chinese music and the two principal systems of Western art music: tonality and atonality. Through systematic comparison, the article argues that the core elements of traditional Chinese music, rooted in *Han* cultural and aesthetic traditions, demonstrate only limited compatibility with the Western classical tonal system. Fundamental differences in pitch organization, melodic construction, vocal inflection, polyphony, and the underlying concept of sound itself significantly constrain their integration. By contrast, Western modern and contemporary music, largely based on atonal or post-tonal principles, exhibits a higher degree of compatibility with traditional Chinese musical elements. Shared characteristics such as non-hierarchical pitch organization, flexible rhythm, curvilinear melodic motion, and an emphasis on the intrinsic qualities of sound facilitate a more organic interaction between the two traditions. On this basis, the article proceeds to investigate the criteria for evaluating the artistic value of cross-cultural compositions and reflects on the historical and contemporary issues in Chinese art music.

Keywords: traditional Chinese music, Western music, music theory, Chinese phonetics, compatibility

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Дилемма и ее решение: исследование совместимости традиционных китайских музыкальных элементов с западными музыкальными системами

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается совместимость традиционных китайских музыкальных элементов с западными системами академической музыки в рамках сравнительно-теоретического подхода. На примере репрезентативных произведений, объединяющих китайские и западные музыкальные традиции и относящихся к разным периодам времени, этот вопрос изучается в различных аспектах, включая музыкальную структуру, китайскую фонетику, тембр и исполнительские техники. Особое внимание уделяется соотношению традиционной китайской музыки с двумя основными системами западной академической музыки — тональностью и атональностью. На основе систематического сравнения автор приходит к выводу, что основные элементы традиционной китайской музыки, уходящие корнями в культурные и эстетические традиции Хань, демонстрируют лишь ограниченную совместимость с западной классической тональной системой. Существенные различия в высотной организации, мелодической структуре, вокальной интонации, полифонии и самом понятии звука значительно ограничивают их интеграцию. Напротив, западная современная музыка, основанная на атональных или посттональных принципах, демонстрирует более высокую степень совместимости с традиционными китайскими музыкальными элементами. Общие характеристики, такие как неиерархическая высотная организация, гибкий ритм, извилистое мелодическое движение и акцент на внутренних качествах звука, способствуют более органичному взаимодействию двух традиций. На этой основе в статье рассматриваются критерии оценки художественной ценности межкультурных композиций и анализируются исторические и современные проблемы китайской академической музыки.

Ключевые слова: традиционная китайская музыка, западная музыка, теория музыки, китайская фонетика, совместимость

Финансирование: Данное исследование было поддержано Фондом фундаментальных исследований центральных университетов на 2026 год (грант № 1301032922) и Программой поддержки молодых талантов Школы музыки Педагогического университета Шэньси на 2026 год.

Introduction

Both Chinese and Western art music possess distinct theoretical and practical systems. In the realm of contemporary art music, the question of how to effectively integrate elements of traditional Chinese music into the Western musical system — while avoiding simplistic categorization and excessive polarization — has remained a core issue for Chinese and East Asian composers, as well as an attractive subject of exploration for a select few Western composers.

Traditional Chinese music, shaped by historical, ethnic, and regional factors, exhibits a broad spectrum of stylistic forms. Its core musical elements are rooted in *Han* cultural foundations, characterized by theoretical depth,

practical adaptability, and universal relevance. These elements span multiple dimensions, including musical theory (modes, rhythm, form, and notation), melody and phonetics (especially the phonetic features of traditional Chinese music), timbre and performance techniques. Western art music encompasses two principal systems: "tonal music" and "atonal music." This paper proposes to explore the aforementioned topics within this framework.

The article first conducts a comparative study of the structural elements of traditional Chinese and Western music, followed by an analysis of selected Sino-Western fusion works from different historical periods. Through perspectives of music theory, Chinese phonetics, timbre, and performance practice, the study examines the theoretical basis and aesthetic implications of cross-cultural synthesis and, furthermore, discusses the artistic evaluation, historical development, as well as contemporary issues in the creation of Chinese art music.

Core Elements of Traditional Chinese Music and Their Comparison with Western Musical Elements

The core elements of traditional Chinese music encompass multiple aspects including musical theory, melodies and vocal techniques, timbre and performance techniques. Examining their distinctive characteristics and comparing their similarities and differences with Western musical elements serves as a crucial prerequisite for exploring the compatibility between traditional Chinese musical elements and the Western musical systems.

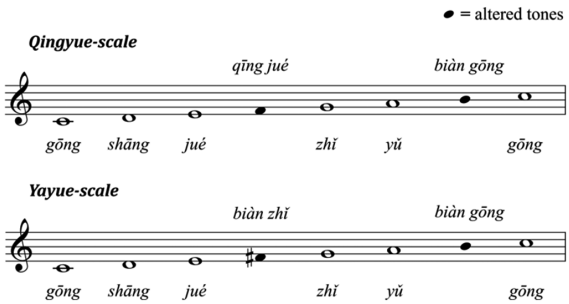
The term "traditional Chinese musical elements" in this paper refers to the core elements of traditional music that are rooted in *Han* Chinese culture and possess both theoretical and practical universality. The unique musical phenomena of individual ethnic minorities are not included in the scope of this study.

Music Theory

1. Modal System

The modal system of traditional Chinese music is centered on the *five tones* (五声) framework. Upon this foundation, *altered tones* (偏音) are added to multi-tone scales such as the *six-tone* (六律) and the *seven-tone* (七音), among which the seven-tone scale is the most typical and widely employed. Structurally, the traditional Chinese seven-tone scale resembles the early Western church modes. For instance, the Qingyue-scale (清乐音阶) is identical to the Ionian mode, while the Yayue-scale (雅乐音阶) shares the same interval structure as Lydian mode (Example No. 1).

Example No. 1 Traditional Chinese Qingyue-scale and Yayue-scale



Substantial differences nevertheless remain in structural tones, modal function, and melodic characteristics. The notions of *changing gōng* (旋宫) and *transiting mode* (犯调) are roughly analogous to Western modulation and transposition — or, more precisely, to broadly defined modal transformation. [1, p. 442] However, since traditional Chinese music lacks the modern concept of "tonality," interpreting these phenomena through such system is inappropriate. A more accurate analogy would be the transformation of Western church modes within twelve-tone equal temperament. For example: 1) Changing gōng: C-gōng → D-gōng ≈ C-Ionian → D-Ionian; 2) Transiting mode: C-gōng → G-zhǐ ≈ C-Ionian → G-Mixolydian.

2. Rhythm and Meter

The concept corresponding to rhythm and meter in traditional Chinese music is known as *bǎnyǎn* (板眼). Its emergence and standardization underwent a lengthy historical evolution. The structural patterns of *bǎnyǎn* are referred to as *bǎnshì* (板式), which may be roughly compared to "meter" in Western music theory. Among these, the *sǎnbǎn* (散板, free rhythm) — also called *wúbǎn wúyǎn* (无板无眼, unmeasured) and marked with the symbol サ — is one of the most distinctive meter in Chinese traditional music. *Sǎnbǎn* does not specify precise meter; instead, only a final beat marker *dǐbǎn* (底板) is placed at the end of a phrase to signify closure. [2, p. 44] Within this framework, performers interpret the rhythm freely according to the musical context, creating a highly flexible, irregular and non-isochronous rhythmic flow.

In the Western classical system, there is no direct metrical equivalent to *sǎnbǎn*. However, tempo or expression markings such as *ad libitum* and *rubato* perform an analogous role, though they are relatively brief and serve as auxiliary or ornamental devices rather than governing an entire musical section — and this is precisely what characterizes *sǎnbǎn*. By contrast, in Western contemporary music, the concept of "ametric music" closely parallels *sǎnbǎn* in function and performing effect, as both deliberately abandon fixed meter and are applied comprehensively throughout entire works or substantial sections.

3. Form

Traditional Chinese music shares many structural similarities with Western musical forms and may be broadly classified into three principal categories: *jùshì form* (句式体), *qǔpái form* (曲牌体), and *bǎnqiāng form* (板腔体).

The *jùshì form* originates from the structure and prosody of Chinese poetry. It represents a fundamental musical form akin to the "Liedform" in Western tradition. The *qǔpái form* — built upon the concept of the *qǔpái* (曲牌), meaning "tune-title" or "labeled tune" — is one of the most crucial concept in traditional Chinese musical form. [3, p. 6] The *qǔpái* functions both as an independent composition and as an organized structure. In terms of musical form, it generally refers to an existing fixed melody, serving a role similar to that of the "cantus firmus" in early Western music.

The *bǎnqiāng form*, which means "metric change form," constitutes a unique compositional structure, primarily formed through the combination and variation of various *bǎnshì* and *bǎnqiāng* (板腔, melodic patterns). A typical *bǎnqiāng form* manifests as a *Bǎnshì Variational Form*, internally organized by a sequence of rhythmic patterns derived from multiple *bǎnsh* patterns. The most representative sequence is "sǎn–màn–zhōng–kuài–sǎn" (散—慢—中—快—散), [4, p. 368] meaning "free–slow–moderate–fast–free."

Distinct from the large-scale musical forms in Western classical tradition, traditional Chinese formal counterparts rarely incorporate the concept of "recapitulation." Instead, they emphasize contrast and structural variation, predominantly adopting a "free multi-sectional form." This musical structure is quite common in modern and contemporary Western music, exemplified by forms like "sequential form" and "collage," though it currently lacks a unified term to describe such compositional principle.

4. Harmony and Polyphony

Traditional Chinese music, rooted in *Han* culture, is predominantly monophonic. While the harmony in a broad sense (the combination of tones of different pitches) can be found in operatic music, ensemble performances, certain *Han* folk music, and the music of ethnic minorities, it is not in the sense of Western

functional harmony. In contrast, polyphony has been more widely applied in traditional Chinese musical practices, though it mainly appears as an auxiliary form known as "heterophony."

5. Notation

Traditional Chinese musical notation originated early and encompasses a wide variety of systems. From the perspective of notation format, it can be broadly divided into two categories: *Chinese character notation* (文字谱) and *symbolic notation* (符号谱).

Chinese character notation includes several classifications, the most representative being *qín notation* (琴谱), *jiǎnzì notation* (减字谱), and *gōngchě notation* (工尺谱). The written symbols in these systems are not always standard Chinese characters in their literal sense; rather, they are derived or modified forms of Chinese characters — simplified, compounded, or altered components such as radicals — endowed with specific musical meanings. Their function is to indicate pitch and finger position, performing techniques, or in some cases to provide comprehensive textual descriptions of actual performance.

Symbolic notation refers to systems in which the notational signs are visually distinct from Chinese characters. The most typical example is *curve notation* (曲线谱), also known as *shēng qǔzhé* (声曲折), [2, p. 188] which employs curved or winding lines to indicate the approximate melodic contour of musical pieces, typically songs. In attribute and function, it corresponds closely to Western "Neume notation," while in visual form, it bears a stronger resemblance to "graphical notation" that emerged in Western music during the twentieth century.

In contrast to the precisely measured Western staff notation, nearly all traditional Chinese musical notations do not aim for "precision." Musical knowledge and performance practice were transmitted primarily through oral instruction and imitation, leaving performers considerable interpretative freedom and resulting in a degree of improvisation during actual performance. Moreover, traditional Chinese performance practice places great emphasis on performing from memory. Playing directly from a score was often regarded as rigid and limited, hindering the expression of musical emotion and artistic atmosphere; consequently, the concept of "sight-reading" was virtually absent from traditional Chinese musical performance.

Melody, Tune and Tone

The melody and tune of traditional Chinese music — both vocal and instrumental — are fundamentally determined by the phonetic characteristics of the Chinese language and its dialects. Two phonetic features are most prominent in Chinese: "monosyllabism" and "polytone." Among these, *tone* (声调, language tone) plays a crucial role in shaping the melodic essence of Chinese traditional music.

Dialects of the Central Plains and northern regions in China predominantly feature "four tones" with pronounced tone fluctuations, resulting in vigorous and dynamic musical styles with curvy and jagged melodic lines. In contrast, southern dialects often possess more than four tones (ranging from five to nine), with less tone fluctuations, resulting in softer, more lyrical musical styles with winding and undulating melodies. Even modern Mandarin retains phonetic traits and musical potential distinctly different from Western languages and many others worldwide.

The vast majority of Western languages are polysyllabic, with only a few monosyllabic words. They emphasize *intonation* rather than *tone*. In fact, the Western linguistic system lacks the concept of "tone" in the Chinese language sense. The so-called "intonation" in Western languages pertains only to the pitch of sounds produced in a language at the phonetic

level. The essential difference lies in semantic function: Chinese tone is meaning-bearing, whereas Western intonation is non-semantic.

Timbre and Performance Techniques

Sound (声) is an essential concept in traditional Chinese music. Traditional Chinese musicians have long emphasized the equal importance of normal sound and musical tone — or, in some theoretical interpretations, the inseparability of sound and music — a conception that differs from the Western analytical division of "sound" into categories such as musical tone, noise, and microtone, etc. "Noise" and "microtone" are the most distinctive features of traditional Chinese music in terms of timbre. These timbral attributes are found abundantly across various genres of traditional Chinese instrumental and vocal music.

The most explicit manifestation of noise in traditional Chinese instrumental music appears in *gong and drum music* (锣鼓乐) — a form of percussion ensemble that relies primarily on gongs and drums, performed independently without reliance on melodic instruments. *Bitter notes* (苦音), [2, p. 138] which are prevalent in the folk music of Northwest China, represent a characteristic microtonal phenomenon in traditional Chinese vocal music. Within the modal framework, these are characterized by a slightly raised fourth degree (↑F) and a slightly lowered seventh degree (↓B).

The unique Chinese musical performing concept rooted in noise and microtones is *yáoshēng* (摇声, *changing tone*, this concept was proposed by the Chinese music theorist Du Yaxiong (for related content, see: [Ibid., p. 18–22])) — a self-contained theoretical and performative notion derived from the interaction of noise and microtones. More precisely, *yáoshēng* refers to the intentional alteration of pitch and timbre through specific techniques, applicable to both instrumental and vocal performance (though more common in instrumental practice). As of now, Chinese musicologists have not established a clear academic definition for this term.

The closest Western equivalent to *yáoshēng* might be *glissando*, widely used in orchestral and plucked-string instruments. While similar in form, they differ significantly in musical concept and performing system. In traditional Chinese music, *yáoshēng* is not merely ornamental, but an integral component of the instrumental performance — in certain instruments, such as the *gǔqín* (古琴), it is even more crucial than conventional techniques. Furthermore, *yáoshēng* has developed into a systematic hierarchy of technical types within traditional Chinese musical performance. For instance, the *gǔqín* technique *yín* (吟) — a rapid, oscillating slide motion on a sounding string, typically executed downward then upward with the left hand — has several subcategories, including *cháng yín* (长吟), *xì yín* (细吟), *fēi yín* (飞吟), *yóu yín* (游吟), and *dìng yín* (定吟), [Ibid., p. 19] which exhibit the variety and nuance of performance.

By contrast, in Western classical music, *glissando* remains a decorative or expressive device applied sparingly and occasionally. In Western contemporary music, however, techniques functionally and acoustically analogous to *yáoshēng* have become widespread — a consequence of the twentieth century's so-called "timbre revolution," which fundamentally reshaped the conception of sound in Western musical world.

Traditional Chinese Musical Elements and the Western Classical Music System

The foundation of Western classical music — referring to the "common practice period" — lies in the tonal system and functional harmony, collectively known as "tonal harmony." In this tradition, melodies are generally derived from harmony, while polyphony also possesses an inherent harmonic logic, with multiple and

simultaneous voices forming vertical harmonic sonorities. By contrast, traditional Chinese music is rooted in the pentatonic modal system and the phonetic characteristics of the Chinese language — the latter often exerting an influence even stronger than the former. Elements such as melody and tune, rhythm and meter, phonetics and timbre are all deeply grounded in the tone and prosodic nature of Chinese language.

As shown in Table 1, apart from certain rhythmic or formal similarities, there are no identical or significantly analogous features between traditional Chinese and Western classical music. Instead, they tend to exhibit a series of contrasting paradigms, such as: "monophonic vs. polyphonic," "equal vs. unequal," "irregular vs. regular," and "curvy vs. steady," etc. Each possesses intensely distinct core musical characteristics that resist mutual compatibility. In light of this, the study selects four representative Sino-Western fusion works for analytical demonstration and discussion.

Anton Arensky. Étude in G-flat Major, Op. 25 No. 3

The Russian composer Anton Arensky is renowned for the lyricism and technical refinement of his musical style. His Piano Étude, composed in 1893 as part of the collection *4 Morceaux*, exemplifies these qualities through the idiom of Romantic expressivity with a five-part rando form. This piece is distinguished by the fusion of a thematic quotation from the Chinese folk song *Jasmine Flower* (*茉莉花*) in its contrasting section.

This Étude, however, cannot be regarded as an authentic Sino-Western fusion work. Arensky did not intend to compose a "Chinese-style" piano piece; rather, he directly quoted a Chinese folk melody, a practice typical of musical exoticism. The main sections are built in *G-flat major*, with the left-hand melody and right-hand accompaniment frequently featuring numerous chromatic alterations

Table 1. Comparison of the Core Elements of Chinese Traditional Music and Western Classical Music

Musical Elements	**China**	**Western**
Mode and Tonality	Pentatonic modal system	Heptatonic tonal system
Rhythm and Meter	Free and irregular rhythm, limited meter types	Equal and regular rhythm, diverse meter types
Musical Form	Mainly free multi-sectional form	Mainly A-B-A form
Harmony and Texture	Heterophony	Functional harmony, polyphony
Notation	Chinese character and symbolic notation (more interpretive flexibility)	Staff notation (limited interpretive flexibility)
Melody and Tune	Based on Chinese phonetics, varied melodic contour	Based on functional harmony, arched melodic contour
Phonetic Features	Monosyllable and polytone	Polysyllable and non-tone
Timbre	Emphasis on sound	Emphasis on overtone theory

(see Example No. 2). The contrasting section retains the same texture but modulates to *B-flat major*, where the theme of *Jasmine Flower* is introduced (see Example No. 3). This work demonstrates that juxtaposing Chinese and Western musical elements creates stark stylistic contrast and musical tension — precisely the aesthetic effect that the exoticism aims to achieve.

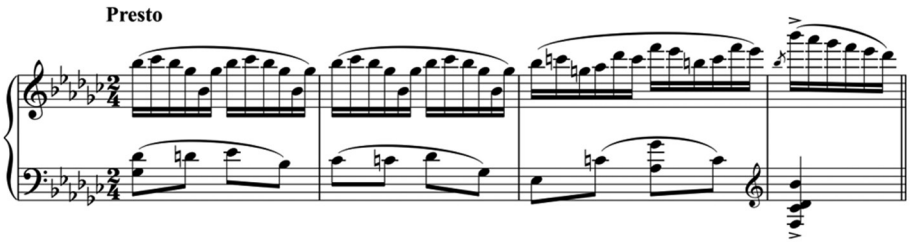
Charles Tomlinson Griffes. So-fei Gathering Flowers, Op. 10 No. 1

The art song *So-fei Gathering Flowers*, as part of the vocal cycle *Five Poems of Ancient China and Japan*, composed in 1917 by American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes. The lyrics may be drawn from Tang dynasty poet Wang Changling's poems *Song of Lotus Gathering* (*采莲曲*) or *Autumn Lament in the Palace* (*西宫秋怨*). This piece takes Chinese pentatonic mode as its compositional foundation, reflecting Griffes's personal interpretation of Chinese musical idioms. Compared with works that merely quote melodies from traditional Chinese music, it represents a step forward, as it attempts to internalize stylistic characteristics rather than reproduce surface details. Nevertheless, the piece still falls within the realm of musical exoticism. Apart from the Chinese pentatonic mode, all other compositional elements remain firmly grounded in the Western Romantic tradition.

As shown in Example No. 4, both the vocal line and piano accompaniment employ characteristically Romantic gestures: expressive melodic contour, chromatic harmony, and textural density. Were it not for the typical pentatonic scale, this piece would be virtually indistinguishable from Western art song of the same period. In essence, therefore, *So-fei Gathering Flowers* is an atypical Western art song written in a typical eastern pentatonic mode — a Westernized interpretation created by a Western composer based on his personal understanding of traditional Chinese musical style.

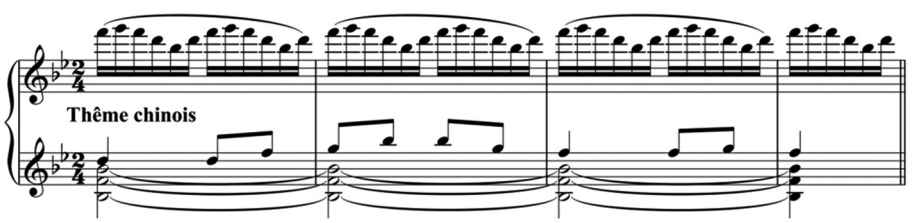
Example No. 2

Anton Arensky. *Étude, op. 25 No. 3*, mm. 1–4, the main theme

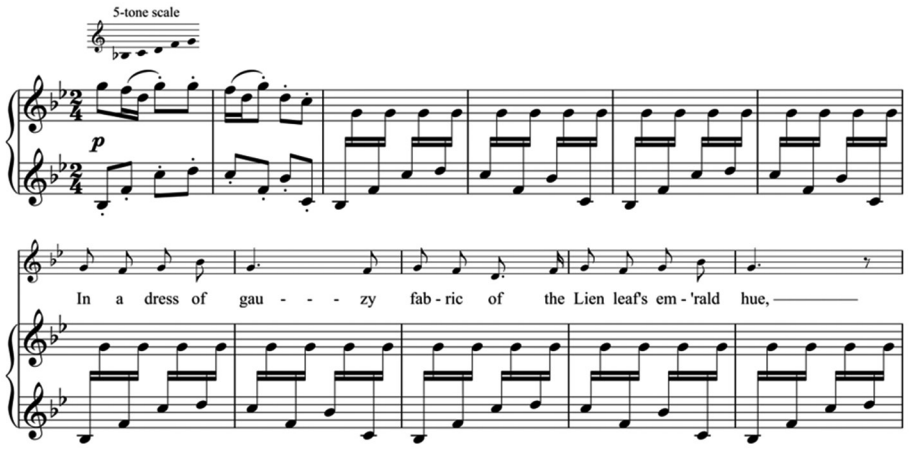


Example No. 3

Anton Arensky. *Étude, op. 25 No. 3*, mm. 49–52, the theme of *Jasmine Flower*



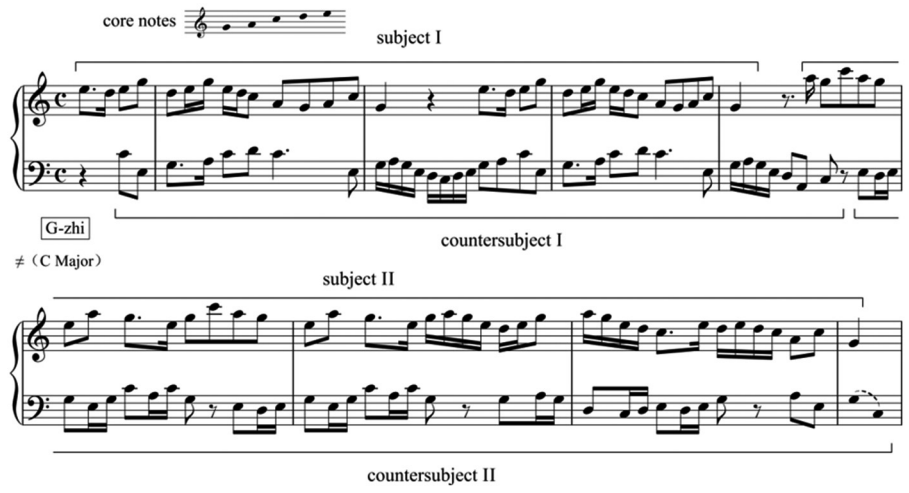
Example No. 4 Charles Griffes. *So-fei Gathering Flowers*, mm. 3–13



He Luting. The Cowherd's Flute, for Solo Piano

The Cowherd's Flute (*牧童短笛*), composed in 1934 by the Chinese composer He Luting (贺绿汀), stands as one of the earliest Chinese-style piano works employing Western compositional techniques while retaining a distinct Chinese folk style. It is regarded as a successful example of the early exploration of Sino-Western fusion composition in Chinese modern music history. The piece adopts a simple ternary form within a typical recapitulation (A–B–A_1). The outer sections (A and A_1) are composed in *G-zhǐ* mode (G徵调) and feature two-part contrapuntal technique, while the middle section (B) shifts to *D-zhǐ* mode (D徵调) with harmonic texture. In section A, both voices are based on the *G-zhǐ* pentatonic scale without "altered tones." The melodic contour and developmental patterns closely resemble those of traditional Chinese instrumental music, particularly the folk music performed by the bamboo flute. The contrapuntal texture also parallels the heterophony characteristic of traditional Chinese ensemble music. Thus, although Western counterpoint is employed, the overall stylistic impression remains distinctly Chinese (Example No. 5).

Example No. 5 He Luting. *The Cowherd's Flute*, mm. 1–8



The B section introduces a tonal harmonic texture, employing typical Western piano accompaniment. As shown in Example No. 6, the upper voice presents a pentatonic melody in *D-zhǐ* mode, while the lower part employs the tonic pedal point of *G major* with brief harmonic progressions, with a short modulatory sequence appearing in the second phrase. Structurally, the juxtaposition of pentatonic melody and Western harmonic accompaniment generates a potential stylistic contrast. However, this section moves at a faster tempo, and the accompaniment centers primarily around tonic pedal point without extended functional harmonic progression, the resulting fusion feels natural and unobtrusive.

In summary, the success of *The Cowherd's Flute* lies in He Luting's careful and deliberate selection of Chinese and Western musical elements and his artistic handling of their inherent contrasts. By employing measured compositional restraint and stylistic sensitivity, he achieved a balanced and organic fusion in which the two traditions complement rather than conflict with each other.

Li Yingha. Spring Dawn, Art Song

Chinese contemporary composer Li Yinghai's art song *Spring Dawn* (*春晓*), based on the poem of the same title by Meng Haoran of the Tang dynasty, is part of his vocal suite *Three Tang Poems* (1982) and also one of his most representative works. This piece is founded on the traditional Chinese seven-tone scales and adopts the parallel binary form typical of Western Romantic art songs. It integrates coloristic harmony and piano accompaniment textures derived from the late-Romantic musical tradition. The noteworthy feature of *Spring Dawn* is the composer's intentional imitation of the rhythmic prosody of classical Chinese poetry. This approach lends the vocal melody an expressive quality akin to poetic recitation, capturing the speech-like inflection and contour of the Chinese language. This is demonstrated in Table 2 and Example No. 7.

In all sections featuring vocals, the bass line of the piano accompaniment consists solely of intervals or single tones, while in the upper voice occasionally occur superimposed thirds forming weakly functional chords that serve primarily

Example No. 6 He Luting. *The Cowherd's Flute*, mm. 25–33

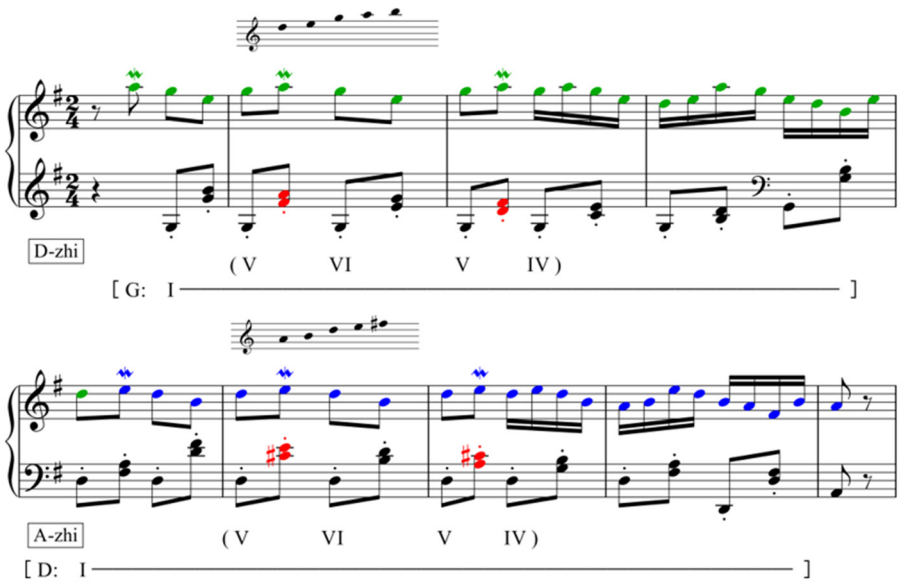


Table 2. Li Yinghai. *Spring Dawn*. Musical Form

Binary Form					
Period	Pre.	A	Tra.	B	Coda
Measure	1–8	9–16	17–20	21–28	29–36 （37–45）
Key	*B ♭-yu*	*F-yu—B ♭-yu*	*B ♭-yu*	*C-yu—B ♭-yu—F-yu*	*F-yu*

Example No. 7 Li Yinghai. *Spring Dawn*, mm. 9–16
[A Comparison of Poetic and Musical Rhythms in *Spring Dawn*]

as ornamental sonorities rather than elements of harmonic progression. This approach ensures the preservation of the traditional Chinese heptatonic modal character of the vocal line. As illustrated in Example No. 8, the first vocal phrase centers on the tones *F–G–A ♭–B ♭–C–E ♭*, which, together with the *D ♭* in the piano accompaniment support, indicate an *F-yǔ Qingyue* mode — where *A ♭* functions as *gōng* (宫音, primary tone ≈ tonic), and the two altered notes are *D ♭* (as *qīngjué*, 清角) and *G* (as *biàn gōng*, 变宫). Since the main tones of the scale form a pentatonic core, it cannot be interpreted as belonging to the Western *F-Aeolian mode*. The second vocal phrase modulates to the *B ♭-yǔ Yayue* mode, similarly not interpretable as the *B ♭-Dorian* mode in Western terms.

Examination of the score reveals that the bass line of the piano accompaniment frequently alternates between the perfect fifth interval of *B ♭* and *F*, both of which serve as *gōng* (primary tone) of the *F-yǔ Qingyue* and *B ♭-yǔ Yayue* modes, respectively. Although the two modes differ in *gōng*, they share an identical scale. In light of the limited role of functional harmony in this work, and the bass line constructed primarily from intervallic support rather than harmonic progression, the transition

Example No. 8 Li Yinghai. *Spring Dawn*, mm. 9–16

between the two modes does not evoke a strong sense of tonal modulation. This approach successfully preserves the ethnic identity of the traditional heptatonic mode. Thus, it is evident that Li Yinghai was acutely aware of the "incompatibility" between traditional Chinese seven-tone mode and Western tonal harmony, and therefore adopted this compositional strategy to achieve a delicate reconciliation between Chinese traditional musical elements and the Western classical system.

From a stylistic standpoint, *Spring Dawn* does not exhibit the same degree of national stylistic character as the second song of *Three Tang Poems — Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* (*枫桥夜泊*). The two works share a number of structural and stylistic similarities — for instance, the traditional Chinese heptatonic scales, the piano bass line primarily consisting of intervals, as well as the coloristic harmony. Their principal distinction lies in the fact that *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* draws explicitly upon vocal articulation and melodic inflection from traditional Chinese opera, with an emphasis on *yáoshēng* (摇声, changing tone) and ornamented, undulating melodic lines. In more precise terms, the composition leaves intentional interpretive space for performers to employ specialized vocal techniques derived from Chinese operatic singing (Example No. 9).

In contrast, *Spring Dawn* is characterized by greater Western Romantic influence in both its textural and vocal formulation. Beyond the Romantic piano accompaniment, the vocal phrasing and articulation are entirely Westernized — a reflection not merely of performance style but of compositional design,

Example No. 9 Li Yinghai. *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*, mm. 6–8

since *chàngqiāng* (唱腔, vocal tune/vocal style)[1] is itself a compositional parameter as well as a performative one. The overall musical texture of *Spring Dawn* presents a relatively static rhythmic flow, leaving little room for interpretive flexibility or free rhythmic treatment. This limitation stems not solely from the vocal line but also from the piano accompaniment, which maintains a harmonic and metric regularity that limits expressive elasticity. Consequently, in the absence of other distinctive traditional elements — such as operatic inflection or idiomatic timbral color — the features of the traditional seven-tone mode tend to be overshadowed by the harmonic texture.

In summary, while both songs demonstrate Li Yinghai's adept fusion of Chinese tradition and Western formation, *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* achieves a more authentic synthesis of ethnic idiom, whereas *Spring Dawn* remains more aligned with Western Romantic lyricism in both structure and style.

Traditional Chinese Musical Elements and the Western Modern and Contemporary Music System of the 20th and 21st Centuries

As Western music entered the 20th century, the tonal system gradually disintegrated, and atonality emerged as a major approach to pitch organization. Functional harmony ceased to exist or was significantly weakened, and melody was no longer necessarily derived from harmony. Instead, in some compositional approaches, it was constructed from tone rows composed of selected pitches, or shaped according to the phonetic features of Western languages, producing inflected and undulating melodic contours. This tendency, however, does not imply that all 20th–21st century music is atonal; rather, it reflects one significant direction within Western modern and contemporary compositional practice. Polyphonic thought and texture were further developed, granting music a higher degree of compositional freedom. Musical form became more flexible, while

[1] "Chàngqiāng" refers to the particular vocal tune or singing style associated with a role or genre in traditional Chinese opera. It forms the core of operatic performance and varies across regional traditions and role types.

rhythm began to emphasize non-isochrony and irregularity, simultaneously, clear and constant meter gradually lost its crucial significance. In terms of timbre, both noise and microtones were elevated to unprecedented prominence, leading to the emergence of entirely new performance techniques and notation systems. Nevertheless, from a comparative perspective, elements and characteristics of Western modern and contemporary music evoke a sense of *déjà vu* for artists well-versed in traditional Chinese music.

As shown in Table 3, although traditional Chinese music and the Western modern-contemporary musical system still exhibit significant differences in mode, tonality, and phonetic characteristics, most of their musical elements and features reveal a considerable degree of correspondence. Their similarities are particularly evident in aspects such as rhythm, form, melody, and timbre. To examine whether the aforementioned theoretical observations hold practical validity, this paper will analyze two contemporary compositions that integrate elements of traditional Chinese music.

Mo Wuping. Fan I [Chamber Music, 1991]

Fan I (for voice and instruments), composed in 1991 by the contemporary Chinese composer Mo Wuping (莫五平),[2] was commissioned by the "Nieuw Ensemble" of the Netherlands and

Table 3. Comparison of the core elements of Chinese traditional music and Western modern and contemporary music

Musical Elements	China	Western
Mode and Tonality	Pentatonic modal system	Mainly Atonality
Rhythm and Meter	Free and irregular rhythm, limited meter types	Free and irregular rhythm, diverse meter types or non-meter
Musical Form	Mainly free multi-sectional form	Mainly free multi-sectional form
Harmony and Texture	Heterophony	Non-functional harmony, polyphony
Notation	Chinese character and symbolic notation (more interpretive flexibility)	Staff notation and graphical notation (more interpretive flexibility)
Melody and Tune	Based on Chinese phonetics, varied melodic contour	Based on pitch sequences or phonetics of Western languages, varied melodic contour
Phonetic Features	Monosyllable and polytone	Polysyllable and non-tone
Timbre	Emphasis on sound	Emphasis on sound

[2] Mo Wuping (1958–1993) was renowned for his compositions that seamlessly integrated vocal and instrumental elements. He graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music in 1988 and pursued advanced studies at the École Normale de Musique de Paris in 1990. Mo passed away from cancer in Beijing in 1993.

received the Composition Award at the "1992 Asian Music Festival" in Japan. This piece takes the northern Shaanxi folk song *Thirty Mile Shop* (*三十里铺*)[3] as its musical source material, incorporating varying degrees of quotation, adaptation, and abstraction throughout.

In terms of musical form, *Fan I* appears to follow the "free multi-sectional form" commonly used in Western contemporary music. In reality, however, its structural logic is rooted in the traditional Chinese musical concept of the *bǎnshì variational form* (板式变奏体). As illustrated in Table 4, the piece consists of five sections with the following tempo sequence: "free – medium – slow – fast – free." Despite not the archetypal "free – slow – medium – fast – free" pattern, its overall progression aligns closely with the *bǎnshì* sequence principle, which typically follows the sequence "free – slow – fast – slow – faster – free." [4, p. 387]

Therefore, the form of *Fan I* shall be regarded as a non-typical *bǎnshì variation form*, functionally analogous to the "sequential form" in Western modern and contemporary music. The first free section *sǎnbǎn* serves a role similar to that of an introduction in Western music, while the final free section constitutes a genuine *sǎnbǎn*, marked by dotted bar lines and occasional alternation between the vocal and instrumental parts, emphasizing a free and flexible rhythmic flow characteristic of Chinese traditional music.

Overall, the most distinctive artistic feature of *Fan I* lies in its highly expressive treatment of microtonal inflections in both the vocal and instrumental parts. However, it is not an intentional imitation of Western 20th-century techniques such as microtone or glissando, but rather stems directly from the inherent qualities of traditional Chinese vocal and instrumental music. The vocal part,

Table 4. Mo Wuping. *Fan I.* Musical Form

Banshi Variational Form ≈ Sequential Form					
Period	Free	Medium	Slow	Fast	Free
Measure	1–15	16–31	32–41	42–75	76–84
Tempo	♩= 35–40	♩= 58/72/62	♩= 40/58	♩= 62	♩= 35–40
Traditional elements	Folk Song Vocal Style and Ethnic Instrumental Timbre	Folk Song Vocal Style And Ethnic Instrumental Timbre	Ethnic Instrumental Timbre	Folk Song Vocal Style And Ethnic Instrumental Timbre	Folk Song Thirty Mile Shop
Special technique	microtone	microtone	microtone	microtone micropolyphony	quotation collage

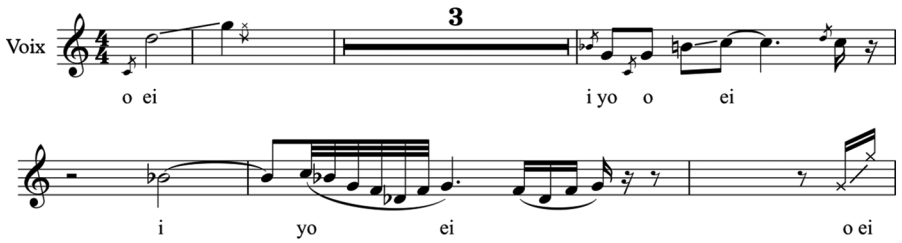
[3] *Thirty Mile Shop* was composed during the Chinese Civil War period. Its melody originates from the Shaanbei folk genre *Xintianyou* (*信天游*) — a traditional form of folk song popular in northwest China, sung in Jin-dialect Chinese, featuring a strophic structure, expansive melodic contour, and the frequent use of microtones.

in particular, is characterized by its unmistakable "authenticity" — unaffected by any Westernized embellishments, it preserves the complete melodies and the inflectional singing style of northern Shaanxi folk songs (*Xintianyou*). For instance, as shown in Example No. 10, the piece opens with a powerful mountain-song-style "call shout" (吆喝). After a brief three-measure instrumental introduction, the voice unfolds a winding, ornamented mountain-song melody rich in ascending and descending glides, with syllables that are non-semantic — serving purely phonetic and musical purposes. Objectively speaking, this nearly "primitive" musical material aligns seamlessly with Western modern and contemporary compositional techniques, achieving a remarkable degree of expressive intensity and artistic cohesion.

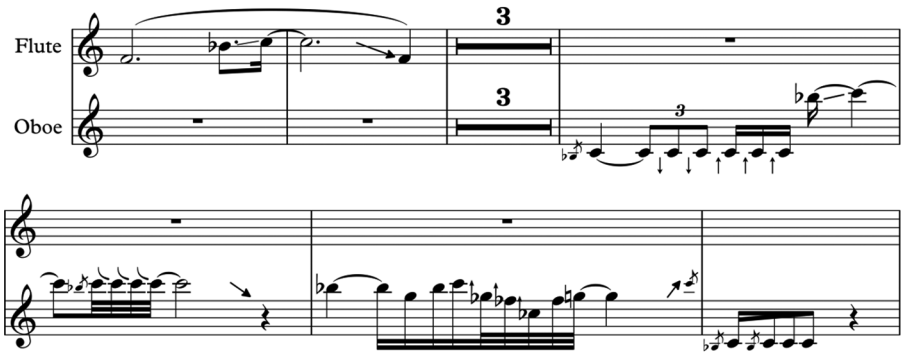
Apart from the human voice, the composer deliberately employs Western instruments to evoke the distinctive timbres and techniques of traditional Chinese instruments. Example No. 11 reveals that the flute clearly imitates *xiāo* (箫, Chinese vertical end-blown flute), while the oboe mirrors the sound and performing style of *suǒnà* (唢呐, double-reeded Chinese wind instrument). Both Western woodwinds utilize *yáoshēng* technique — a significant feature of traditional Chinese instrumental performance — manifested here through varying degrees and types of microtone and glissando. The melodies performed by these instruments, like those of the voice, are stylistically rooted in the folk musical traditions of Northwestern China, demonstrating that the timbral qualities of many mainstream Western and Chinese instruments can, to a certain extent, be mutually resonant.

In the final section of *Fan I*, Mo directly quotes the melody of *Thirty Mile Shop* along with the lyrics from the first section of the folk song. The primary difference between the two lies in notation (compare Example No. 12 and Example No. 13): *Thirty Mile Shop* is notated non-precisely, omitting indications

Example No. 10 Mo Wuping. *Fan I*. Voice, mm. 1–8



Example No. 11 Mo Wuping. *Fan I*. Flute and Oboe, mm. 33–41



of microtone, glissando, and exact rhythm, resulting in significant discrepancies between actual performance and written notation. By contrast, in *Fan I*, the whole range of performing details — microtone, glissando, and subtle rhythmic nuances — are meticulously notated. The composer further introduces slight rhythmic adjustments and modified motivic patterns, integrating them with Western contemporary compositional techniques to create a sense of suspended emotion and lingering expressivity.

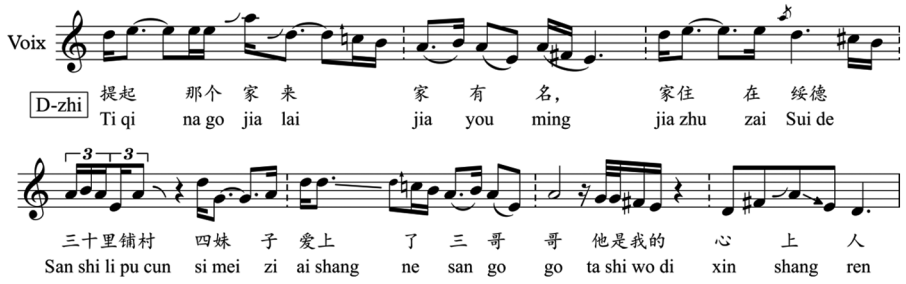
To sum up, the traditional Chinese musical elements in *Fan I* achieve a high degree of compatibility with the Western contemporary musical system. The work embodies the typical characteristics of Western modern-contemporary music while avoiding the "clichés" of exoticism. The result is a balanced and compatible musical idiom — neither wholly Westernized nor narrowly nationalized — that exemplifies an organic realization of Sino-Western musical integration.

Guo Wenjing. Wolf Cub Village, Op. 21

The chamber opera *Wolf Cub Village* (*狂人日记*), created by contemporary Chinese composer Guo Wenjing[4] in 1994, is notable as the first Chinese-language opera commissioned by a European institution and performed entirely by Western singers and instrumentalists. The libretto is adapted from Chinese author Lu Xun's seminal short story *Diary of a Madman* (1918). The opera integrates a wide range of

Example No. 12 Folk song *Thirty Mile Shop*

Example No. 13 Mo Wuping. *Fan I*. Voice, mm. 76–82



[4] Guo Wenjing (b. 1956) is one of the most influential contemporary Chinese composers. Along with Tan Dun, Ye Xiaogang, and Qu Xiaosong, he was among the first generation of composition students admitted to the Central Conservatory of Music after the Cultural Revolution. Guo is renowned for his Chinese-language operas and large-scale symphonic works, which are distinguished by a monumental and tragic expressive character.

traditional Chinese musical elements, including structural, rhythmic and percussive idioms of *xìqǔ* (戏曲, traditional Chinese opera), phonetic inflections of Mandarin, and instrumental timbres and techniques derived from traditional Chinese performance — particularly the *yáoshēng* technique.

In contrast to Mo Wuping's *Fan I*, Guo Wenjing's opera employs a combination of the Western vocal techniques from the traditional *bel canto* and the 20th-century expressionist *Sprechstimme*. Yet the most striking innovation of the opera lies in its sophisticated musical treatment of Mandarin phonetics and tone. In one passage from the first scene (Example No. 14), the protagonist "Madman" delivers a vocal line written in *Sprechstimme* — not a conventional melody, but a speech-like row of sharply inflected tones. Crucially, the contour of this "jagged tone row" does not originate from Western linguistic intonation or emotional emphasis, but directly from the "tone" of the Chinese language itself.

As demonstrated in Example No. 14, the correspondence between lyrics and notes follows a so-called "one-word with one-note" pattern, which forms the basis for the jagged tone row. In the central phrase "jiao tóu jiē ěr / yì" (交头接耳/议, secretly gossiping, *F♯–A–G–F♯–A*), the intervallic range is exceptionally wide, with a progressively intensifying curvature that culminates in the final two notes. Here, *ěr* (耳) is a "third tone" (上声), while *yì* (议) is a "fourth tone" (去声), and the transition of them requires an inflection of tone (*F♯–A*). Guo skillfully utilized this natural feature of the Chinese language to achieve a musical gesture of expressive ascent. The syllable *yì* (议) is placed on both the metric accent and the highest pitch of the phrase, sustained across the bar line, creating a tone row of enormous tension and dramatic power.

It can be said that the Chinese-Sprechstimme passages in *Wolf Cub Village* not only adhere to the intrinsic tone-principal of Mandarin, but also amplify the musical potential of Chinese phonetics within a modern Western compositional framework, ultimately demonstrating the compatibility between Chinese tone and the Western modern-contemporary musical system.

In reality, it is not necessary to rely on linguistic intonation, emotional expression, or even the musical and dramatic context; systematic, logical, and meaningful "tone rows" (pitch sequences) can be constructed from the "tone" of the Chinese language — that is, by assigning compositional "tone rows" according to linguistic "tone rows" of the Chinese lyrics themselves. Since the correspondence between Chinese lyrics and musical notes can be organized on the "one-word with one-note" basis, it allows the number of notes in the pitch sequences to be determined directly by the number of characters in the lyrics. This is something impossible in Western languages. Furthermore, in Mandarin Chinese, the five tones — *yīnpíng* (阴平, first tone), *yángpíng* (阳平, second tone), *shǎngshēng* (上

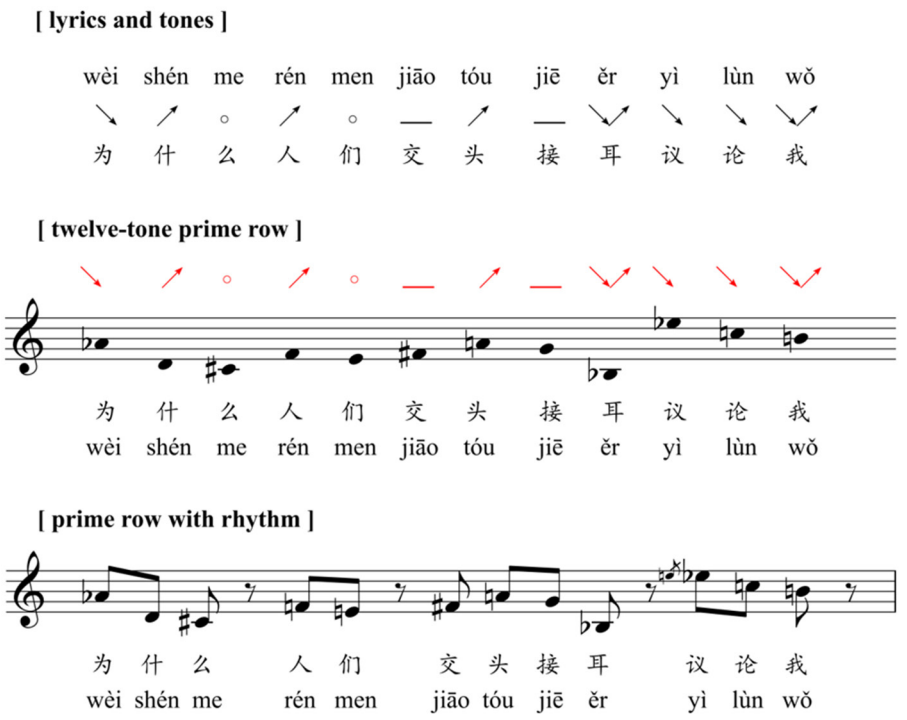
Example No. 14 Excerpt from *Wolf Cub Village*, scene 1, Madman's recitative

声, third tone), *qùshēng* (去声, fourth tone), and *qīngshēng* (轻声, neutral tone) — each possess distinct "tone values"[5] and occur in sentences in an irregular and unpredictable order. This inherent variability naturally generates curved and jagged "Chinese-tone rows," making it especially suitable for Western serial composition.

Example No. 15 illustrates a twelve-tone row devised by the author, based on the selected lyrics and tones of *Wolf Cub Village*. Initially, the tones of each of the twelve characters in the lyrics — *wèi shén me rén men jiāo tóu jiē ěr yì lùn wǒ* (为什么人们交头接耳议论我) — are listed individually (the neutral tone is marked with a dot). Subsequently, a "twelve-tone row" is arranged according to the "Chinses-tone row," based on the criteria and method derived from the phonetic properties of Chinese tone rather than from auxiliary factors such as intonation or emotion. For instance: "first tone" has no contour, suitable for sustained notes or connection; "second tone" has an upward trend, can be expressed by ascending step or leap; "third tone" involves a marked inflection, fitting for wide leap; "fourth tone" descends and is suited for accent or downward leap; "neutral tone" has a function of rest and should not be emphasized.

Once the twelve-tone row is arranged, it can be freely employed according to compositional purpose. As shown in the Example No. 15, the author attempts to highlight the inherent prosody and tension of the lyrics through modifying the rhythm. It should be noted that this method does not constitute a precise notation of actual speech, since tone values in Mandarin represent relative, not absolute pitch. Nevertheless,

Example No. 15 Twelve-tone row based on the twelve-characters lyrics and tones of *Wolf Cub Village*



[5] "Tone value" is a unit of measurement representing the actual pitch, rise and fall, curvature, and duration of Chinese language tone. For related content, see: [5, p. 271–275].

the principles of tone values, ascending or descending direction, and inflection in the Chinese-tone remain constant, allowing the composer to select appropriate relative pitches and organize them within a serial framework that preserves both linguistic logic and musical coherence.

As previously discussed, *Wolf Cub Village* incorporates numerous elements from Chinese opera and traditional instruments, yet Guo Wenjing seldom resorts to direct quotation or imitation. Instead, he fuses traditional elements with Western musical system in a creative and organic manner, achieving a unique artistic effect that transcends stylistic boundaries. A specific example appears in the orchestral introduction to Scene 2 (Example No. 16). The flute unmistakably imitates the timbre and *yáoshēng* technique of the *xiāo* (箫, Chinese vertical end-blown flute) — a treatment reminiscent of Mo Wuping's *Fan I*. The guitar, on the other hand, is explicitly marked by the composer to "imitate the Guqin." After the flute and guitar perform a two measure-phrase rich in Chinese traditional musical idiom, the texture shifts seamlessly into a passage typical of Western contemporary music, built upon single notes or clusters. Particularly striking is Guo's utilization of percussion: the score indicates instruments to be played "with S. D. sticks (standard drumsticks)," yet the instrument in question is not the Western cymbal, but the *Jīng luó* (京锣) — a traditional gong used in Peking Opera and normally struck with a padded mallet.

It is evident that this is a deliberate inversion — Westernizing traditional Chinese instruments while Sinicizing the Western ones. Far from acoustic incongruity, this approach yields a distinct and compelling sonic effect. By allowing timbral hybridity to serve the dramatic context, Guo avoids the superficiality of either purely Westernized modernism or overtly nationalistic pastiche. Instead, he achieves a balanced and expressive synthesis, one that powerfully conveys the emotional tension, musical atmosphere, and dramatic narrative of the opera.

Conclusion and Reflection

Traditional Chinese Musical Elements with Western Classical Music System: Minimal Compatibility

Due to the profound cultural and theoretical differences between Eastern and Western musical traditions, many of the core elements of traditional Chinese music prove hardly compatible with the Western classical system, which is grounded in tonality and functional harmony. Examples of such divergences include: homophonic pentatonic tonal system versus polyphonic harmonic modal system; highly inflected voice and curvilinear melody versus

Example No. 16 *Wolf Cub Village*, Scene 2, "Night: In the Study of the Madman," mm. 1–3, Flute, Guitar, and Jing Luo parts

relatively steady voice and arched melody; and the fundamentally different aesthetic concepts regarding "sound."

However, this conclusion first requires clarification of a crucial question: what does "compatibility" mean exactly? In this context, the term refers to the degree of integration between the original qualities of different elements without excessive modification or transformation. This definition resolves several lingering questions: Why are the "contrasting elements" in most "Sino-Western fusion tonal compositions" modified or weakened? Why do the few successful "Sino-Western fusion tonal compositions" contain a minimal amount of "contrasting elements"? Why are many of the less successful "Sino-Western fusion tonal compositions" still melodious?

The answer lies precisely in the limited compatibility between traditional Chinese musical elements and the Western tonal-harmonic system. Composers, therefore, often select only certain adaptable components — for instance, combining a pentatonic scale with tonal harmony — to create a workable synthesis. In such compositions, the musical features of one side are typically weakened rather than preserved or emphasized, which in itself serves as evidence of their incompatibility.

From a historical perspective, although countless Eastern and Western composers have attempted such cross-cultural integration since the 19th century, truly successful cases — such as *The Cowherd's Flute* or *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* — remain an exception. Most so-called "Sino-Western fusion tonal compositions" would not be real "innovation," but rather "combination" with seemingly novel decorations, namely the exoticism, or exaggerated nationalism, and even descend into "Nationalkitsch."

The minimal compatibility between traditional Chinese music and Western classical music system constitutes a decisive factor. Since the core elements of both music are explicitly distinctive, it ultimately leads to two extreme results — either too difficult or too simple. For the true artist, "Sino-Western fusion tonal composition" is difficult — and never meant to be simple; for those who merely bear the title of "artist," it is simple — but never compelled to be difficult. This, precisely, is the dilemma of the current creative condition.

Traditional Chinese Musical Elements with Western Modern-Contemporary Music System: Optimal Compatibility

Western modern and contemporary music, rooted in atonality, shares striking affinities with certain elements of traditional Chinese music. Both are not based on tonal harmony, often feature free and unstable rhythms, as well as curvilinear melody or jagged tone row. More significantly, they all focus on the intrinsic attribute of sound itself rather than on the hierarchical organization of pitch relationship. These commonalities serve to dissolve the long-standing divide between Eastern and Western musical systems, liberating composers from the shackles of compositional integration of the two systems. This grants them immense creative freedom and imagination, readily facilitating the emergence of "artistic innovation."

Nevertheless, this does not imply that such fusion compositions are easy to realize. On the contrary, they impose extremely high demands on the composer's own qualifications. In truth, contemporary music — both in China and globally — remains an "elite art," one that the general public and many musicians alike find difficult to access and accept, let alone easily cross the "entry threshold" of this field. The discourse authority of Sino-Western modern-contemporary fusion works thus continues to rest in the hands of a select few composers who possess both artistic sophistication and moral integrity. Therefore, the emergence of successful

cases of Sino-Western fusion compositions ultimately stems from the convergence of two indispensable prerequisites:

1) the inherent compatibility of both music systems;

2) the presence of true artists — those capable of transcending both systems without compromising either.

Reflection: Value Judgment on the Sino-Western Fusion Works

The compatibility between traditional Chinese musical elements and the Western musical systems is not merely an internal phenomenon or issue of music theory, but one that extends into the more pragmatic areas: the value judgment on the Sino-Western fusion works, as well as the historical and contemporary issues of Chinese art music.

Despite the proliferation of works labeled as "Sino-Western fusion" today, the mechanisms and logic for judging their artistic value remain ambiguous. From the author's perspective, the "compatibility" may provide a potential framework for such artistic judgment. When viewed through the lens of compositional outcomes, Sino-Western fusion works can be logically derived into two paradigms: 1) A + B = AB (*Combination* instead of *Innovation*); 2) A + B = C (*Innovation* instead of *Combination*). These two paradigms, in turn, can serve as a sort of evaluation criterion to guide new musical creation. Ultimately, this cyclical process may form a reference system for judging the artistic value of Sino-Western fusion works (Fig. 1).

The "combination" in the "two paradigms" refers to superficial fusion composition, such as musical exoticism, where elements coexist without true integration. "Innovation," by contrast, functions more as a designation and signifies a transformative synthesis that transcends mere juxtaposition — its actual meaning extends beyond the literal term. At the center of this evaluative mechanism lies

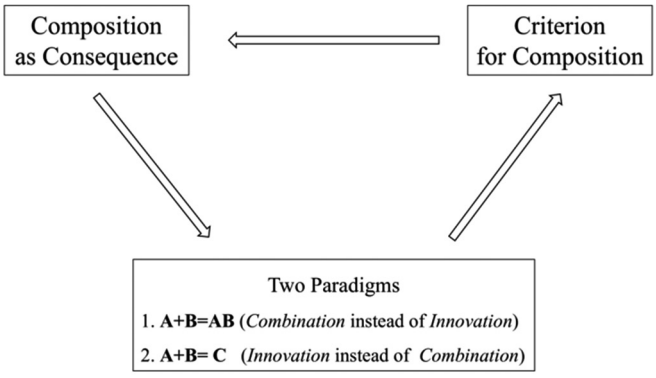


Fig. 1. A Reference System for Judging the Artistic Value of Sino-Western Fusion Works Based on "Two Paradigms"

the "compatibility" between traditional Chinese musical elements and the Western musical systems. This serves as the most essential criterion — grounded in the formal logic of musical organization rather than in variable factors such as individual aesthetic preferences of musicians or critics, or the ideological content of the work itself — establishes a universal and objective framework.

Historical and Contemporary Issues of Chinese Art Music

In the course of modern and contemporary Chinese music history, Western art music was accepted as the dominant paradigm, while Chinese composers — often blindly or unconsciously — followed and internalized Western aesthetic criteria that had, ironically, already been abandoned by the West itself. This process affirmed and reinforced the discursive authority of the West on the musical cultures of China. The concept of the "Chinese pentatonic mode" is, in fact, a constructed label within the Western artistic system — a categorization imposed from the outside, designating it as a component of non-Western, exotic *Other*. "Tonal harmony" functions likewise as a label, though of a different kind: it represents a universal system, a common language rather than a culturally specific construct.

Its dominance rendered it unnecessary to be "constructed" as a label; rather, it emerged and solidified naturally through musical practice.[6] Under these circumstances, two corresponding formulas were gradually established: "Pentatonic mode = Chinese music" and "Tonal harmony = Western music." From this binary emerged the enduring notion that "Chinese music ≠ Western music" — a definition that has long shaped, and indeed confined, creative practice. Decades of compositional activity have unintentionally reinforced this artificial distinction, further entrenching the conceptual and stylistic divide between the two traditions.

Conversely, Western composers have historically engaged with Chinese traditional musical elements in a selective and appropriative manner. The *xìqǔ chàngqiāng* (戏曲唱腔, vocal style of Chinese opera) serves as an illuminating example. From a purely sonic perspective, operatic singing in Chinese tradition possesses a far stronger sense of "exoticism" than the pentatonic mode — its highly ornamented melodic inflection and timbral distinctiveness are instantly recognizable, even to Western listeners with no musical training. Yet, strikingly, Western composers have almost never incorporated the operatic idiom into their "Oriental-style" works — nor even considered it as a means to achieve exoticism. More precisely, *xìqǔ chàngqiāng* has never been included in the category of "exotic elements" available for composition. The reasons are clear: the profound aesthetic divergence between Eastern and Western musical cultures; and the incompatibility between the vocal style of Chinese opera and the Western tonal-harmonic framework. As a result, Western composers either abandoned the attempt altogether or avoided the risk of criticism for introducing what might be perceived as an "inappropriate element."

In the current landscape of Chinese art music, numerous pressing challenges remain unresolved. Among them, perhaps the most prominent and intractable is the mutual estrangement between the spheres of Western-oriented music and traditional Chinese music within China — a situation in which each operates in isolation and without meaningful dialogue. In academic and creative contexts alike, composition and pedagogy in China are overwhelmingly guided by the Western musical system, often with only a superficial engagement with the native traditional system. Conversely, within the realm of traditional Chinese music, there persists a limited — sometimes even distorted — understanding of Western and contemporary music. This situation has led to a result that almost deviates from the nature of art: the "Chinese traditional musical elements" serve merely as an indispensable symbol for validating the concept of "Chinese contemporary music," frequently being exaggerated or overemphasized in composition. In other words, contemporary Chinese composers generally strive for "semblance" (像) — the audible recognizability of traditional musical signs — rather than for "essence" (意), the deeper aesthetic idea long valued in Chinese artistic thought.

This is not to deny the aesthetic legitimacy of "semblance" itself, but rather to point out that the overemphasis on identity has led to an aesthetic imbalance in practice. In its most detrimental form, this tendency risks devolving into what may be called "Nationalkitsch" — an undefined yet widely used term

[6] In reality, the pentatonic mode and tonal harmony are not truly comparable — they differ profoundly in nature, structure and function. To draw an accurate parallel, the Western musical element that most closely corresponds to the pentatonic system is the church modes of the Western pre-tonal tradition. Traditional Chinese music, by contrast, lacks an equivalent to tonal harmony in either conception or function. While it possesses a highly developed and systematic theory of performance, it lacks a corresponding compositional theory in the Western sense.

in German context, combining "national" and "Kitsch." It originally refers to vulgarized or sentimentalized works that simplify or exploit national symbols and cultural motifs in order to evoke or flatter a sense of national identity (the "New National Style" in Chinese popular music falls into this category). In the present context, I extend this term further: a pretentious form of craftsmanship that is superficially adorned with seemingly sophisticated national elements, yet lacks thought (not technique) while claiming to be "art." Such works are now widespread in China's contemporary music scene; the only thing lacking is a precise term to name them.

Contemporary Chinese music composition is by no means a "privilege" exclusive to China or East Asia; by contrast, it is supposed to be a universal artistic form within the broader landscape of global contemporary music. For Western composers, the engagement with Chinese musical elements should not remain confined to superficial formal borrowing. Rather, it ought to involve a deeper exploration of the core aesthetic and musical principles underlying these cultural traditions. The central issue discussed in this paper — the compatibility between traditional Chinese musical elements and the Western musical systems — thus provides a potential reference frame for rethinking compositional practice in this area. Yet it must be emphasized that traditional Chinese musical elements are neither intrinsic "compositional materials" nor "ready-made resources." At most, they could be regarded as one category of creative possibilities among many others. Only by breaking free from the stereotype that "traditional Chinese music = exoticism" and, simultaneously, establishing the concept that "Chinese contemporary music = Western contemporary music" — not in geographical or cultural identity, but in artistic and aesthetic purity — can truly valuable and meaningful masterpieces of Sino-Western fusion music emerge.

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