

THEORY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/2592-8813-2024-1-17>

HARMONIZING TRADITIONS: CULTURAL SYNTHESIS THROUGH PIANO ADAPTATIONS OF CHINESE FOLK SONGS

Dan Enyi,

*Postgraduate Student, Sumy State Pedagogical University
named after A. S. Makarenko (Sumy, Ukraine)*

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0489-0707

liyutz@ukr.net

Abstract. The field of processing and arrangement of folk songs has been notably captivating for composers, as it unveils unexplored possibilities through piano, introducing new tonal expressions for well-known folk tunes. This research synthesizes methods from philosophy, cultural studies, history, and musicology. The dominant creative trend among Chinese composers is the adaptation and arrangement of their national art, diversifying the portrayal of musical content and promoting the global popularity of beloved national melodies. The works in arrangements, orchestrations, and transcriptions serve adaptive, enlightening, didactic, and concert functions in Chinese culture. The classification of these genres follows the European musicological tradition, as there is no precise definition in Chinese musicology. The analysis of piano arrangements reveals an inseparable connection to national musical traditions in terms of genre, form, tonality, timbre, and rhythm. The growing interest of European composers and performers in incorporating Chinese professional music genres opens avenues for studying new relationships and assimilating expressive elements of Chinese musical language within the European music context.

Key words: folk songs, adaptation, piano arrangements, cultural synthesis.

Introduction. Piano art is an integral part of Chinese culture and emerges as a late branch of world musical traditions. The formation of piano composer creativity began only at the beginning of the 20th century with the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. Despite the fact that the first keyboard instrument, the clavichord, appeared in China as early as the 16th century, there was a long-held belief that the piano was only suitable for composing European music.

In the voluminous, multi-genre piano heritage of Chinese composers from the very beginning of its formation, special attention is drawn to the tendency to turn to national folklore and create compositions based on its material through treatments, arrangements, and transcriptions. The development of folklore samples turned out to be one of the most widely represented branches of the piano composer's heritage.

A real phenomenon of Chinese civilization, folk song, and instrumental creativity, which reflects the everyday life of people, their thoughts, customs, rites, the history of the country, heroic feats of the past, and the poetics of the beauty of natural landscapes, served as a source of inspiration for composers in finding themes for musical works and ways of embodying images and plots in creative practice.

Due to the achievement of the perfection of musical forms, the utilization of the wealth of sonorous-coloristic, dynamic, and textural possibilities of the piano, the renewal of the tonal-harmonic sphere in combination with the preservation of the peculiarities of the Chinese musical vocabulary, in many cases, the authors' treatments, arrangements, and transcriptions significantly exceed the artistic level of the originals.

Understanding Chinese piano creativity as a holistic phenomenon is impossible without studying the specificity and systematization of treatments, arrangements, and transcriptions in the creative works of Chinese composers.

Main part. The basis for the study of this issue was the scientific explorations, primarily conducted by Chinese researchers. This is explained, firstly, by the popularization of Chinese scientific thought and its introduction into the world scientific circulation. Secondly, it is justified by the development of scientific thought in China, reflecting an increase in the level from the position of musicology. The appeal to world studies mainly belongs to the group of studies devoted to the examination of code sublimation in cultural and artistic objects. The research conducted in the process of forming the goal and performing the research tasks can be conditionally divided into three groups: the main stages of the development of Chinese piano music of the 20th century, which included the works of Chinese researchers, namely Bian Meng (features of the periodization of Chinese piano art), Li Huanzhi (general characteristics of musical culture), Zhang Ming (study of the historical background for the formation of the piano-educational field) Wang Changkuya (national specific features of musical culture); a complete picture of the genre diversity of piano art in modern China, which includes the works of Ei Han (the works of individual contemporary composers), Sun Weibo (polyphonic cycles), Li Xiaoxiao (piano miniatures), Pan Wei (study of sonata genres of piano culture).

According to the analysis of the literature, it can be noted that highlighting the specifics of treatments and arrangements in the work of Chinese composers forms **the purpose of this study**. In accordance with the purpose of the research, a number of tasks were formed, among which to carry out a cultural-artistic analysis of the musical art of China in the context of the traditions of national culture, as well as highlighting the specifics of treatments and arrangements in the work of Chinese composers.

The methodological foundation of the research is grounded in a synthesis of general scientific methods from philosophy, cultural studies, history, and musicology. The research methodology encompasses a range of methods, including historical-dialectical analysis to examine the dynamics of cultural-historical processes in the evolution of Chinese musical art. Cultural methods are employed to comprehend the dynamics of overarching cultural processes in Chinese piano art. Musicological methods are utilized for genre-style analysis of piano arrangements, compositions, and transcriptions in the works of Chinese composers, focusing on their developmental trends. Systematic methods are applied for the systematic categorization of typological features in the domain of treatments, arrangements, and transcriptions by Chinese composers. Chronological methods help in understanding the sequential relationship of events. Biographical methods are employed to explore the creative journeys of individual composers within the broader context of genre development. Lastly, theoretical generalization is employed to summarize the outcomes of the research.

Work in the field of arrangements and arrangements of folk songs extremely attracted and inspired composers, as they were presented with hitherto unknown horizons – the possibility of finding, using the capabilities of the piano, new timbre ways of presenting the musical material of well-known, beloved and widely performed folk songs. In connection with this, the problem arose of finding new means of artistic expression, and most importantly, musical styles that would correspond to the disclosure of the multifaceted and complex plots with their diverse characters and many situations. Through the assimilation of certain European musical styles, the possibility of musical filling with deep life and philosophical content of long and complicated song plots opened up.

Romanticism and impressionism had the most noticeable influence on the stylistics of Chinese composers. Romantic trends manifested themselves primarily in the increased interest in folklore material, in the programming of piano arrangements and arrangements of folk songs, in the individualization of images and increased attention to the sensual world, in the tendency to use forms (miniature preludes and program cycles, one-part concert pieces of the poetic type), as well as in the individualization of means of musical expressiveness. The tendency towards impressionistic means of musical expressiveness, the most consonant with the mentality of the Chinese, can be observed in many arrangements of folk songs, starting from the early author's works and throughout the

20th century and in ways of harmonic or textural presentation; this is also indicated by the subjects of many miniatures – landscape sketches, genre scenes, depictions of unreal fantastic images. In most of them, attention is drawn to the influence of the impressionistic technique, manifested, in particular, in the variety of the author's remarks about tempo changes, dynamic shades, and agogic instructions. Their composers write out in detail and offer the performers barely noticeable deviations from the main tempo or rhythm in order to achieve more precise nuances and artistic expressiveness in the creation of impressionistic pictures of nature. The influence of the aesthetics of romanticism and impressionism is also reflected in the choice of forms of arrangements – a small prelude, a concert piece, variations with variant development of the theme of the song (Barnard, 2000: 60–62).

In the arrangement of the Guangdong folk song “Thunder in the Dry Season” by Chen Pei Xun (1959), which is perceived as a small concert piece, we observe characteristic textural techniques – multi-planning, the use of light, as if “shadowed” passages flying through the upper layers), as well as sequences of harmonic combinations – unresolved dissonant consonances that are perceived as smears of blurred colors, an unexpected change of distant tonalities. The piece contains a large number of performance instructions: *leggiero*, *marcato*, *agitato*, *brillante*, *dolce*, *rallentando*, *toucher* (as a way of coloring the sound), etc. A characteristic feature of the arrangements of folk songs is the attempt to recreate the wealth of poetic pictures of Chinese nature, against the background of which various plots unfold, using the piano (Barnard, 2000: 65). At the same time, the nuances of literary stylistics are preserved. Wang Jianzhong's arrangement of the song “A Cloud Haunting the Moon” (1932) can serve as the earliest example of the reproduction of picturesque and symbolic pictures of nature by means of the piano, in which the composer convincingly demonstrates the method of achieving impressionistic color impressions and static dramaturgy.

The poetics of nature is often combined with pictures of historical events and heroic deeds that took place in the history of China. Many works are devoted to this topic. One of the most common historical songs is “Red flowers bloomed on the mountain”, recorded during one of the folklore expeditions in the Shaanxi-Hansu region (Byan' Men, 1996: 32). The song belongs to the “shan ge – son tian you” genre. Shan ge are peasant songs from the mountainous regions of China. Xing tian yō is the name of the three-part form A – B – A, characteristic of historical songs, in which the form and character of the performance of each section are clearly defined: “A” is performed very softly, lyrically, mournfully and widely; dramatic section “B” – very fast; the final “A” is an exact reprise of the first section.

The song “Red Flowers Bloomed on the Mountain” originated during the Sino-Japanese War and depicts the events of the heroic liberation campaign of the Red Army of China in 1934–1936, which ended in a painful but unconditional victory. It glorifies the historical exploits of the Chinese Red Army, which in continuous battles covered hundreds of thousands of kilometers, liberating the Chinese people everywhere from the invaders. During the liberation journey, the army had to cross the territory of 12 provinces, overcome 18 high mountain ranges and ford 24 large rivers and many viscous swamps (Byan' Men, 1996: 38). In the autumn of 1936, in the course of fierce fighting, the troops of the Chinese Red Army managed to break into the Shaanxi-Hansu region, where its campaign ended victoriously, and the war itself ended. Before taking the last line, the fighters “saw a mountain strewn with red solemnly blooming poppies, which joyfully seemed to foretell victory” (the quote is from the text of the song). This song was arranged by Wang Jianzhong (1974). Before presenting the author's text, the composer provides a digital version of her recording with subtitles and a deciphered text of the melody. Wang Jianzhong's arrangement is an unparalleled example of the reproduction of a picture of nature, against the background of which recent but very difficult historical events ended.

According to Chinese aesthetics, the depiction of paintings of blooming nature always has an important symbolic meaning. Blooming poppies witnessed the heroism of Chinese soldiers and seemed to predict the victorious end of the struggle of the enslaved people. The composer, deeply

understanding the meaning of the song's text, concentrates his attention not on the detailed reproduction of the historical events themselves, the sufferings of the people and the final victory. His task was to reproduce not the very picture of nature and heroic deeds, but the feeling of the people's faith in victory after seeing the riot of blooming poppies. The interpretation of the blooming of different flowers and their colors in Chinese culture always has a symbolic meaning when creating certain characters of people or events (Li Tsziti, 2004, 265). For example, red poppies symbolize victory, fearlessness, a sense of hope; bamboo – resistance to strong winds, stability and strength of the character, flexibility of his character and great self-sacrifice; chrysanthemums are a symbol of solitude; plum blossoms are a symbol of stability, inviolability, purity and nobility.

The arrangement of the song “Red flowers bloomed on the mountain”, turning into a romantic piece, became for the composer (with the absolute preservation of the folk melody) a way of philosophical understanding of the poetics and symbolism of a specific picture of nature. He achieves this by means of texture and harmonious coloring (Li Tsziti, 2004, 220). When comprehending the intonation features of the literary basis of the folk song and the philosophical reproduction of nature paintings, Liu Feng synthesizes romantic and impressionistic writing techniques. Impressionist features are revealed in the arrangement in the weakening of functional harmonic connections, which creates the effect of static; in the method of repeatedly using repetitions of the same intonation, which acquire the importance of the most important element in the creation of a form, and at the same time are one of the characteristic features of the impressionist prelude genre. Among other stylistic devices that indicate a tendency towards impressionistic techniques – the “scattering” of the climax of the work, which is often achieved by means of fading dynamics during the upward movement of the melodic line; veiling of harmonious coloristics; the use of a textured approach involving the extreme registers of the piano and a very light, contoured filling of the middle register; the great importance of the pedal, the function of which is to combine several textured layers; the richness of the use of soft ink as a special way of touch and the force of pressing the keys. According to the method of elaboration of a traditional melody (preserving the form of the original and basing on the originally given compositional structure), this work belongs to the genre of arrangements (Byan' Men, 1996: 56). This work also serves as an example of the trend developed in the work of Chinese composers to achieve a connection between Chinese national songwriting and European instrumental compositions of the “music for listening” type.

A typical feature in the practice of Chinese composers is the trend towards piano processing of songs from different provinces. Among the most performed and most revealing examples are Wang Lishan's arrangement of the popular Shanxi folk song “Lanhuahua” (1947); Ding Shande's “Dances of Xinjiang” (1950) and “Variations on the Themes of Chinese Folk Songs” (1948), which were based on the themes of the songs of the peoples of Tibet; Zhu Peibing's arrangement of Hebei folk song “Jasmine” (1952); “Piano Translations of Folk Songs of Shanxi Province” by Zhou Guan Zhen (1953); arrangement of the song “Thunder in the Dry Season” by Chen Pei Xun (1959), which uses the themes of Guangdong folk songs and “Autumn Moon over the Quiet Lake” (1975) – based on songs from Zhejiang province about the picturesque nature of its rural areas, etc. When arranging and processing folk songs of different provinces, composers often combined them into cycles. These include “Blue Flower” by Wang Lishan (1947), “Seven Pieces on the Themes of Mongolian Folk Melodies” by San Ton (1952)³⁷. The cycle included arrangements of folk songs from the northern region of China – Inner Mongolia. Thanks to the subtle and expressive reincarnation of national musical features, the cycle was named “Wreath of Semi-Mongolian Flowers”.

For the creation of arrangements and the possibility of reproducing the interweaving of plot lines in them, composers mostly chose the cyclical form of the variation cycle. This quickly took root in practice and became a tradition. The choice of the variation form was determined primarily by the literary basis of folk songs, many of which have a long unfolding plot that develops very slowly. The

variational form corresponded to the intention of the composers to reveal it in a number of individual variations, similar to individual episodes in the lives of the main characters. In the theme, the image and character of the main character was usually reproduced, in variations – stages and events from his life, and in the finale, a summary of the development of the plot was summarized with a pronounced philosophical conclusion (Byan' Men, 1996: 101). An example of such variation cycles can be the arrangement of the song “Blue Flower” by Wang Lisan (1947), created on the basis of a favorite ancient Chinese plot. Wang Lisan is the author of works of various genres, among which a significant place is occupied by piano arrangements of melodies of folk songs and dances. Among the works of Chinese composers, his arrangements are among the most famous and popular. The song “Blue Flower” tells about the fate of a beautiful girl with the poetic name Xintianyu (translated as Blue Flower) (Li Tsziti, 2004: 23).

She was considered the most beautiful and smartest in the entire Celestial Empire, but in the conditions of feudal lawlessness and the laws of her village about the undisputed fulfillment of the requirements of the will of her parents, she had to marry an ugly grandfather who looked like a “monkey and a grave”. Xintianyu did not submit to her fate and, wanting to change it, decided to fight against feudal dogmas, go against the will of her parents and find her own happiness, but during a long and exhausting struggle, she died. Wang Lisan's piano arrangement is based on one of the versions of the Northern Shaanxi folk song (shan ge) “Xintianyu”, which is one of the most widespread and beloved in Shaanxi province (located in the center of China, far from the sea, in the middle course of the Yellow River). In the compositional aspect, the quality and professionalism of Wang Lisan's piano arrangement of the song “Blue Flower” played a decisive role in the process of its further popularization among performers, as well as among listeners – residents of China, who very slowly accepted the performance of their favorite traditional melodies on a foreign instrument.

This work is important in other aspects as well: in the use in the arrangements for this kind of traditional songs of the form of variations, in which the composer reveals his own fantasy in the reproduction of the event plot; the performer's ability to perform a perfect interpretation, to vividly reproduce the pictoriality of the sound recording, which visualizes the unfolding of the vicissitudes of the song text by means of the piano. Among the cycles of arrangements of traditional songs and instrumental melodies, Zhu Peibing's “24 Pieces on the Theme of Chinese Folk Melodies” (1991) stands out, which included arrangements of songs from various provinces: Hebei (the songs “Little Shepherd”, “Jasmine”), Yunnan (“Song about the drovers”, “The river flows”), Shanxi (“Sophora”, “Blue flower”), Sichuan (“Happy sunrise”, wedding song “Embroidered bag”, “Rocking chair”), Jiangsu (“The nature of Wusi”, “Willow”), the Northeast (“Feast of Lanterns”, “Western Gate”, “Mount Yange”) and others. The song “Cabbage Leaves”, which tells about the plight of a girl who lost her mother, is very popular in several provinces: Shanxi, Hebei and Inner Mongolia.

Most often, composers chose songs from their native province for their own arrangements. However, there are a number of examples of addressing the same song by several composers born in different provinces. Of course, this is explained by the special beauty of the melody and the popularity of a particular folk song among the various nationalities of China. Such examples can be, for example, the song “Jasmine”, arranged by Zheng Lu, Xu Zhipin and Zhu Peibin; “Bamboo Flute Melody” – Bao Yuankai and Zhao Jiping; “Butterfly in love with flowers” – Zhu Peibin and Liu Tian Hua, “Blue flower” – Wang Lisan, Zhang Xiaolu and Zhu Peibin) and others.

The folk song “Flowing River” (1991) from the cycle “24 compositions on the theme of Chinese folk melodies” by Zhu Peibing is widely used in the territory of Midu County (Yunnan Province) and is a vivid example of peasant songs. Thanks to the composer's picturesque piano arrangement, not only the song itself has become very popular throughout China, but also a piano piece that ranks first among the most loved and performed. In the text of the song, the following scene is very picturesquely and poetically subtly depicted: in complete silence, where only the gurgling of the

stream can be heard, a young girl admires the silver moon, the night landscape and tells nature about her sad love for a young boy. Zhu Peibing's arrangement of the folk song "The Flowing River" vividly testifies to the stylistic features of the piano works of Chinese composers characteristic of this genre. Here we do not mean the use of attributes typical for Chinese traditional music (pentatonics, odd strophic structure, reproduction of a state of reflection against the background of nature), but broader concepts – programming and correlation of poetic features (as a synthesis of poetic and musical arts) with romantic aesthetics. On the example of this work, we can also see an appeal to impressionistic sound-imaging techniques, when by means of sound recording on the piano (rhythm, "flightiness" of passages, the use of second-quarter constructions of altered chords, like strokes of paint), the impression is reproduced not only of the night landscape, but also of a subtle psychological image of a girl in love. Zhu Peibing's work is created in the form of variations, in which the composer reveals his own imagination in reproducing the event plot of the plot. The performer needs to achieve the ability to perform a perfect interpretation, as well as a bright pictorial sound recording that visualizes the unfolding of the song's plot vicissitudes.

Yang Jia San especially turned to the arrangements of Hebei folk songs. In the cycle "Folk Songs of Hebei Province" (1991), the composer, preserving the abundant melismatics of the traditional melodies of the province and too frequent metrorhythmic and tempo changes, very subtly reproduces the specifics of the color of rural nature and the emotions of joy from work. The arrangement of city songs ("xiao diao") is another, but no less important area of Chinese composer creativity. Similar to European romantic music, arrangements of urban songs can be compared to short preludes, which embody one, sometimes very laconic, but vivid musical image. An example of this is Bao Yuankai's translation of the wedding song "Embroidering a Hanging Purse" for symphony orchestra (1991). The work immediately gained immense popularity not only among the Chinese population. Contemporary German pianist Alexander Bildau, who is considered one of the best interpreters of romantic music, translated several of Bao Yuankai's particularly picturesque symphonic compositions for the piano. Wanting to make the song "Embroidery Hanging Purse" even more accessible to listen to, Bildau's example inspired Zhu Peibing (Bao Yuankai's composition teacher) to make a piano arrangement (2007) of its symphonic version. Since then, this play, which began to be played constantly on the concert stage, gained even more popularity.

In the expansive realm of piano adaptations based on national song material, it is noteworthy to highlight the considerable focus bestowed by Chinese composers upon patriotic songs. The 20th century witnessed a distinctive evolution of patriotic songs in China, particularly following the historic National Movement initiated by Beijing students on May 4, 1919. This movement marked a pivotal turning point, instigating fervent efforts for China's independence and resistance against imperialist forces. The subsequent surge of patriotic fervor profoundly influenced the musical landscape, leading to a specialized development of patriotic songs within the context of piano arrangements. The revolutionary movement quickly covered the territory of the entire country, and the Chinese proletariat became a new great force on the world stage. Mao Zedong announced the beginning of the national liberation and anti-imperialist struggle of the Chinese people and refuted the legend of "sleeping China" in front of the whole world. The legend was spread all over the world by the famous saying of Napoleon: "Let China sleep! When he wakes up, the world will be amazed" (Li Tsziti, 2004: 43). Among the first best songs "Let us not forget the twenty-fifth year" and "March of the Salvation of the Motherland" by Xian Xinghai, his cantata "Huanghe" (created from the materials of patriotic chants about the history of the centuries-old struggle of the Chinese people against foreign invaders) for a male choir, soloists, a reader and an orchestra of folk instruments. Among the most popular songs by other composers are "March of the Volunteers" by Nie Er, which became the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, "The Drum Beats the Alarm" by Zhang Shu, "Song of the Fishermen" by Zhen Huang, "March of the Eighth Army"

by Zheng Lizhang, “Transition to a New Era” by Wang Jian Zhong, “The Song of Changbaishan Mountain” by Zheng Zhenyu and others.

During the years of the Cultural Revolution, the piano arrangements of the best patriotic songs, created both in ancient times and in today's conditions, received special development unexpectedly, but logically. Thanks to these arrangements, the revolutionary-victorious character and figurative structure of which particularly corresponded to the spirit of the time, the piano managed to remain on the instrumental horizon of China. Individual works with the participation of the piano of just such an ideological direction: elevating the patriotic and revolutionary sentiments of the people, glorifying the heroic deeds of the past and present, praising and glorifying the ideas of the Communist Party and its leader, were the only ones allowed in this period. During the years of the Cultural Revolution in the genre of piano arrangements.

All composers who remained among the few allowed by party government officials worked on patriotic songs. The work of one of China's most famous composers, Wang Jianzhong, “Embroidery of Letters on a Banner with Gold Threads” (1974) was recognized as one of the best. Among the most revealing in the genre of work with patriotic songs, we should note two other works – piano arrangements of the songs “Being a Man Like Him” by Yin Chenzong (1976) and “Lake Honghu” by Han Minxiao (1977). The material for both arrangements was songs from traditional national operas.

Conclusions. Turning to arrangements and arrangements of folk songs in the piano music of Chinese composers is seen as a dominant creative tendency, manifested in the great attachment of Chinese composers to their national art; in the ways of diversifying the transfer of the figurative content of the works and their performance, strengthening the popularization of favorite national melodies in China and the world, understanding the expressive possibilities of the piano and faster introduction of it into the cultural space of China. It was revealed that works in the genres of arrangements, arrangements and transcriptions performed adaptive, educational, didactic and concert functions in Chinese culture. Attempts to systematize genres derived from the original source in the writings of Chinese researchers are studied. Since there is still no clear definition of treatments, arrangements and transcriptions in Chinese musicology, they are systematized according to the genre division of European musicology. The analysis of piano works, arrangements and Chinese composers made it possible to reveal an inseparable connection with national musical traditions in the aspects of genre, form-creating, mode, timbre and metrorhythmic thinking. The increased interest of European composers and performers in embodying the patterns of professional musical genres of China is noted, which opens up prospects for studying a new type of connections – the interaction of different types of musical thinking and the assimilation of expressive means of the Chinese musical language in the genre context of European music.

References:

1. Barnard, Alan. (2000) *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [in English]
2. Bian Meng. (1996). *The Formation and Development of Chinese Piano Culture*, Beijing: "Chinese Music" Publishing House, 1996. [in Chinese].
3. Li Tsziti. (2004) *An introduction to the analysis of structure in Chinese music*. Beijing: Publishing House of the Central Conservatory, 588 p. [in Chinese].
4. Wāng, Yùhé. (2005) *History of modern Chinese music*. Beijing. 377 p. [in Chinese]