

A Collapse of Musical Categories?

A Closer Look at Ethnic Chinese Music within the Chinese Conservatory Tradition Today

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I will examine in detail what constitutes ethnic Chinese music within the conservatory tradition today, and attempt to argue that the formal categories used to differentiate between various musical traditions are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

When one speaks of ethnic Chinese music within the conservatory tradition in the context of mainland China today, it is understood that one is typically referring to *min yue*¹ 民乐².

¹ All Chinese terms and names referred to within this paper will be romanized based on the *hanyu pinyin* system.

² The use of the term *min yue* 民乐 is primarily found in mainland China. What is known as *min yue* in mainland China is typically referred to as *zhong yue* 中乐 in Hong Kong and Macau, *guo yue* 国乐 in Taiwan, and *hua yue* 华乐 in Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore and Malaysia. For the purposes of standardization in this paper, I will use the term *min yue* 民乐.

Despite the fact that Chinese ethnic music has taken its own course of development in various countries, I will center my discussion primarily around its development in mainland China, as that is where the beginnings of the conservatory tradition of Chinese music are rooted.

However, it should be noted that the use of the term “conservatory tradition” refers to a tradition of music derived from but yet not limited to the conservatory setting. This term extends well beyond the conservatory context to apply to professional orchestras and ensembles, as well as to amateur practitioners who have not studied in a music school or conservatory, but are trained under a system that has originated from conservatory culture. Musically and socially speaking, ethnic Chinese music from the conservatory tradition might be thought of as being analogous to what is known as “concert music” in the Western classical tradition, except that it has arisen from its own unique set of circumstances.

Currently, conservatory disciplines in mainland China are broadly divided into the *min yue* and *xi yue* 西乐 categories. The former broadly refers to ethnic Chinese music (rooted in the use of ethnic Chinese instruments), whereas the latter refers to the Western classical music tradition. The term *min yue* is a diminution of “*min zu yin yue* 民族音乐,” which literally means “ethnic music,” and is not to be confused with *min jian yin yue* 民间音乐, which would be a clear reference to folk music³. With the rise of conservatory culture, performance technique was pedagogically formalized, instruments were standardized in terms of structure, tuning and temperament, and concert pieces and études were composed.

³ Though the same character “*min* 民” is present in both the terms “*min yue* 民乐” and “*min jian yin yue* 民间音乐,” the former is not derived from the latter. “*Min yue* 民乐” is actually a diminution of the term “*min zu yin yue* 民族音乐,” which translates to ethnic music.

2. Key Historical Developments within the *Min Yue* tradition

In the early part of the twentieth century, many important developments took place, drastically changing the nature of music in mainland China. Due to many historical factors in the larger social context, many foreign influences were assimilated into ethnic Chinese music. Many progressive intellectuals who had received a Western education were instrumental to the development of the music scene in mainland China.

2.1 Instrumental Innovations

One of the earliest Chinese folk instruments to undergo standardization was the *erhu* 二胡, a two-stringed bowed fiddle. Early predecessors of the *erhu*, such as various folk fiddles, have been used in folk operas, and still continue to be in use today. Between 1918 to 1932, Chinese musician Liu Tian Hua 刘天华 worked extensively on refining the structure and acoustical abilities of the *erhu*⁴. Liu was proficient on Western instruments such as the piano and the violin, as well as various brass instruments⁵, hence it is reasonable to infer that his exposure to music of the Western classical tradition might have influenced his musical thinking to some extent. The two strings of the *erhu* were standardized to a tuning of D4-A4, in addition to other developments. Liu also revamped the structure of the traditional *pipa* 琵琶, a four-stringed lute, and standardized the tuning of the frets according to an equal-tempered chromatic system,

⁴ Don Michael Randel (ed.), *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4th ed., s.v. "East Asia", (Harvard University Press, 2003), 266.

⁵ Yuan Jing Fang 袁静芳, "Liu Tian Hua 刘天华". *Encyclopedia of China* 中国大百科全书, 28 June, 2006. Accessed 29 December, 2014.

http://www.pep.com.cn/yinyue/xsyz/zwyj/201106/t20110608_1048483.htm.

with other structural changes⁶. These key developments in terms of standardizations of tunings and temperament were borrowed from the Western classical music tradition, and had important implications on the way music to be played on these instruments was to be conceptualized.

Liu composed ten solo concert pieces and forty-seven *études* for the *erhu*, as well as three solo concert pieces and fifteen *études* for the *pipa*.⁷ Though the musical material of many of these pieces had been derived from or influenced by Chinese folk idiom in terms of tonality and rhythmic character, particularly that of Southern Chinese folk music, he incorporated structural forms borrowed from the Western classical tradition as well as playing techniques adapted from the violin⁸.

Following in Liu's example, Zheng Jin Wen 郑覲文, a musician and music educator, revamped 164 other ethnic Chinese instruments during the 1930s⁹. In the late 1930s, with the rise of the Chinese orchestra (see section 2.4), it was necessary to standardize the structure of the various orchestral instruments to order to attain consistency. The Central Broadcasting Station National Orchestra 中央广播电台国乐团, the first professional Chinese orchestra comprising of ethnic instruments in large instrumental groups, undertook the revamping of instruments by increasing their range and volume, expanding the pitch collection available on the *yangqin* 扬琴 (a dulcimer), *pipa* 琵琶 and *dizi* 笛子 (Chinese bamboo flute) to include chromatic notes as

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Liu Ching-Chih (trans. Caroline Mason), *A Critical History of New Music in China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010), 337.

⁹ Ibid.

opposed to the previously diatonic tunings, establishing the note A as a standard for tuning, and emphasizing the use of equal-tempered tuning. In addition, new instruments based upon the model of existing ethnic instruments were invented to cover different registral ranges, establishing instrumental families within the orchestra, such as the *huqin* 胡琴 family, the *ruan* 阮 family, the *sheng* 笙 family, the *dizi* 笛子 family etc.¹⁰.

2.2 The Use of *Jianpu* 简谱 Notation

In the early 1900s, the use of the *jianpu* or number notation system (also known as the *Galin-Paris-Chevé* system or the *Ziffersystem*) had found its way into mainland China. It is believed that this system had been directly borrowed from Japan, though it did not originate from there. The earliest appearance of *jianpu* notation in China is often associated with Chinese music theorist and educator Zeng Zhi Min 曾志忞, who was educated in the Tokyo School of Music. In 1903, he published a set of six songs presented in both staff notation as well as *jianpu* notation¹¹, forming one of the earliest examples of the use of *jianpu* notation in Chinese music history¹².

The *jianpu* system of notation is based upon the numbers 1 to 7, each representing a scale degree within the Western diatonic major scale. Prior to the use of *jianpu* or Western staff

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These songs, together with his article “The Rudiments of Music Theory 乐理大意,” were published in the sixth and seventh issue of a Tokyo-based Chinese journal “Jiangsu 江苏.”

¹² “Contemporary Chinese Youth Music Education Pioneer - Zeng Zhi Min 中国近代少年音乐教育先驱-曾志忞”, *Chinese Music Online* 中音在线, 25 July, 2012. Accessed 5 January, 2015.
<http://www.musiceol.com/news/html/2012-7/20127251146754565712.html>.

notation, Chinese music had mostly been notated by *gongche* 工尺 notation. A possible reason for the widespread popularity of *jianpu* notation could be that like *gongche* notation, pitches were represented by characters instead of spatially over a staff, making it much easier to adapt to than staff notation. Another reason was that of practicality; staff paper was not always readily available, especially during times of social and political turmoil, hence it was much more convenient to notate music using *jianpu* notation¹³.

However, there are numerous differences between the *gongche* and *jianpu* systems of notation that represent significant differences in musical thinking. In *gongche* notation, rhythm is not clearly indicated and is usually inferred from the playing technique. The pitches are also not divided into metrical units or measures¹⁴. In contrast, *jianpu* notation employs the same rhythmic and metrical organization as Western staff notation, with subtle notational differences. Furthermore, while *gongche* notation primarily contains five different characters for the different musical notes¹⁵, implying that the system is based upon five core notes, i.e. the pentatonic scale. On the other hand, *jianpu* notation is essentially modelled after Western musical thinking, and hence contains seven numbers representing the seven scale degrees of the Western diatonic major scale¹⁶.

¹³ In Hon-Lun Yang's article "The Making of a National Musical Icon: Xian Xinghai and his *Yellow River Cantata*," Yang notes that the score of the cantata was initially notated in *jianpu* notation as "staff paper was short in supply and not many of the cadets at the [Lu Xun Arts Academy] (for whom the cantata was intended) were able to read Western notation."

¹⁴ In *gongchi* notation, there would be an indication of the note upon which the pulse falls, which might be akin to being the first beat of a measure, but the pitches are not rhythmically nor metrically organized.

¹⁵ Alterations of these notes are indicated by modifications to these characters, functioning in a similar fashion to accidentals within the staff notation system.

¹⁶ Similar to staff notation, *jianpu* notation also uses accidentals to indicate chromatic notes.

It is debatable as to whether it was a change in musical thinking that led to the need for a change in notational systems, or if it was a shift in the use of notational systems that influenced and shaped musical thinking. In any case, the rise in the use of *jianpu* notation did indeed go hand-in-hand with the introduction of Western theoretical frameworks into Chinese musical thinking.

2.3 The Establishment of Chinese Conservatories

Music conservatories began to be established in mainland China in the earlier half of the twentieth century. One of the earliest formal institutes for higher musical education was the Peking University Institute of Music 北京大学音乐传习所, which was established in 1922 and had been based upon the Peking University Music Research Society 北京大学音乐研究会, a group that had initially started off as an extracurricular club in the university in 1919¹⁷. The society started many classes, ranging from Western music theory to ethnic Chinese instrumental performance, and gradually expanded in scale to form an institute of music¹⁸.

When the institute was closed down in 1927 following the structural reorganization of the Peking University, its founders Cai Yuan Pei 蔡元培 and Xiao You Mei 萧友梅 went on to establish the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai 上海国立音乐院 (now known as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music 上海音乐院) in the same year. It was modelled after the

¹⁷ Liu (trans. Mason), *Critical History*, 87.

¹⁸ During this period of time, the Peking University Chinese Orchestra 北京大学民乐团 was also formed, but it was mostly based upon the *guqin* and *pipa* instrumental groups and *kunqu* 昆曲 music (one of the most ancient genres of Chinese opera), and hence was not the model upon which the modern Chinese orchestra was founded. See Section 2.4 for a discussion on the rise of the modern Chinese orchestra.

Western music conservatory system, notably the German system, as Xiao had been educated in the Leipzig College of Music, now known as the University of Music and Theatre Leipzig. However, the conservatory also included ethnic instrumental performance as major areas of study¹⁹. Education for ethnic Chinese instruments thus took a new path of institutionalization and pedagogical formalization.

As more and more *min yue* musicians received a conservatory education, they began to adopt a systematic manner of teaching their own students, with some emphasis on music theory as well, a large part of which was very much shaped by the conceptual framework prevalent within the Western classical tradition. This particular vein of musical practice can be referred to as *xue yuan pai* 学院派, or the conservatory tradition, which places the focus on learning composed pieces in a pedagogically systematic and consistent way. It stands in contrast to *min jian yin yue*, or the folk tradition, which is characterized more by learning through the aural tradition, and with the emphasis being more on improvisation and/or learning pieces that allow some latitude in freedom of presentation and style from one performance to another²⁰.

2.4 The Rise of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

Prior to the establishment of the modern large-scale Chinese orchestra, ethnic Chinese instruments were only mainly played as solo instruments or in small instrumental ensembles.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87, 91.

²⁰ This distinction was made clear to me in my conversations with a number of Chinese musicians, including Mr. Li Bao Shun 李宝顺, the current concertmaster of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra 新加坡华乐团..

Ancient Chinese music²¹, folk opera and other folk music genres usually employ the use of small ensembles that consisted of different individual instruments, rather than instrumental sections with more than one of the same instrument playing the same part in unison. It is believed that the model of the modern Chinese orchestra is based upon a combination of the concept of the *jiangnan sizhu* 江南丝竹 ensemble²² in terms of instrumentation, as well as the Western symphonic orchestra of the late Romantic period²³. Two of the earliest Chinese orchestras were the *Da Tong* Musical Association 大同乐会, which was founded by Zheng Jin Wen in 1920, and the Central Broadcasting Station National Orchestra 中央广播电台国乐团, which was founded in 1935.

The *Da Tong* Musical Association started with a strength of thirty-two musicians, forming a large ensemble with four main instrumental groups, namely, the winds section, the bowed strings section, the plucked strings section, and the percussion section. It is an early example of a conductorless Chinese orchestra that was also not yet fully developed. The ensemble was a fully amateur group with variable membership from time to time, and was thus unable to standardize the number of instruments in each instrumental group²⁴. The group also played

²¹ Throughout this paper, any reference to “ancient Chinese music” connotes music in the context of the dynastic era of China, that is, 1912 and before.

²² Han Kuo-Huang and Judith Gray, “The Modern Chinese Orchestra,” *Asian Music*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1979). Accessed 22 Dec, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833965>: 14.

²³ Han & Gray, “The Modern Chinese Orchestra”, 16 & 18.

²⁴ Xu Guang Yi 许光毅, “*Da Tong* Musical Association 大同乐会”. In *Forever a Servant of Music 永做琴台孺子牛*. (中国音乐家协会, 2000). Published online on 24 September, 2014. Accessed 5 January, 2015. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_3fbc9da50102v28b.html.

mainly ancient Chinese repertoire which was mostly heterophonic²⁵, with each instrument playing a version or variation of the main melody line that is idiomatic to it.

The Central Broadcasting Station National Orchestra was a professional 35-member Chinese orchestra. The model²⁶ upon which this orchestra was founded forms the basis of the modern Chinese orchestra today. As pointed out in Section 2.1, the rise of the orchestra greatly propelled the need for instrumental reform, and resulted in the revamping of many traditional ethnic instruments as well as the creation of new instruments. Moreover, the texture of the music also began to depart from heterophony and started moving into more differentiated multipart textures.

Some Chinese orchestras today also include the cello and double bass sections as a standard instrumental group within their make-up²⁷, but there are also other orchestras that opt to use the *gehu* 革胡 and the bass *gehu* 倍革胡 to take on the role of the bass section²⁸. These two instruments were developed between the 1950s to the 1970s by Chinese musician Yang Yu Sen 杨雨森, to broaden the acoustic range of the modern Chinese orchestra²⁹.

²⁵ The ensemble was known for playing pieces adapted from ancient Chinese music, such as 《春江花月夜》 and 《月儿高》, and these pieces were heterophonic in texture. Ibid.

²⁶ The translation of the Western symphonic model to this model for the Chinese orchestra is as follows: the *gaohu* 高胡 (also known as the *yuehu* 粤胡) or *erhu* I takes on the role of the the first violins, the *erhu* II of the second violins, the *zhonghu* 中胡 of the violas, the *dahu* 大胡 of the cellos, the *dihu* 低胡 of the double basses, the *yangqin* of the piano, the 11-hole *xindi* 新笛 of the flute, the *xiao* 箫 of the clarinet, the *bangdi* 梆笛 of the piccolo, the *haidi* 海笛 of the oboe, the large *guan* 管 of the trombone, the *suona* 唢呐 of the trumpet, the *muqin* 木琴 of the xylophone, the *dagu* 大鼓 of the timpani, the *xiaogu* 小鼓 of the snare drum, the *diaobo* 吊钹 of the suspended cymbals, and the *pengling* 碰铃 of the triangle. Ibid., 16.

²⁷ Examples of Chinese orchestras who do this are the China Central Chinese Orchestra 中央民族乐团 and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra 新加坡华乐团, two of the leading Chinese orchestras in the world.

²⁸ An famous example would be the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra 香港中乐团, also one of the renowned Chinese orchestras of today.

²⁹ “Ethnic Instrument *Gehu* 民族乐器革胡”, *Beijing Instrumental Professional Institute of Technology* 中器声鉴北京器乐专业技术研究院, 26 October, 2009. Accessed 5th January, 2015.

2.5 Compositions with Mixed Instrumentation

Instrumental reforms and innovations stimulated greater interest in composing new music. Apart from composing music for the newly-formed Chinese orchestral genre, many Chinese composers who had received their musical training in Western conservatories were also drawn to experimenting with composing pieces using both Western instruments as well as Chinese instruments. For example, Ma Ke's 马可 *Northern Shaanxi Suite* 陕北组曲 (1949) is a work for solo *banhu* 板胡 (a bowed string fiddle often used in Northern folk music), Chinese percussion, and Western symphonic orchestra. Shi Yong Kang's 施咏康 Symphonic Poem *The Story of the Yellow Crane* 黄鹤的故事 (1955) also includes the use of the solo *dizi* 笛子 against the full Western symphonic orchestra. Both pieces employ the use of Chinese folk music idiom, but also draw upon compositional forms, harmonic treatment, and orchestrational techniques borrowed from the Western classical tradition³⁰.

As might be expected, the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966-1976) had a profound effect on the history of modern Chinese music. During this period, a great deal of music from the Western classical tradition as well as aspects of Chinese art which were deemed to be feudalistic were banned, as these were considered *bourgeois* and degenerate. The communist government took over all control over the arts, and promoted the rise of revolutionary model operas 样板戏. These operas were based upon the musical language of traditional Peking

³⁰ Liu (trans. Mason), *Critical History*, 339.

opera and featured folk opera instruments, but also employed the use of large-scale Western symphonic orchestras and musical structures borrowed from the Western classical tradition, and departed from traditional Peking opera in terms of content and aesthetic. They were centred around patriotic themes, embodying the political and social ideals of the time, and also emphasized realism rather than symbolic representation³¹. The Eight Model Works 八个样板戏, consisting of six operas and two ballets, were the representative works of this period, and were widely known and sung all over China³².

The instrumentation of these model operas were for mixed orchestras consisting of both Western symphonic instruments and ethnic Chinese instruments, resulting in a combination of vastly different acoustical properties. The opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* 智取威虎山 for instance, was scored for a mixture of thirty-eight Chinese and Western instruments³³. During this period there was a great deal of experimentation with this kind of mixed orchestration.

³¹ Ibid., 380-383

³² Ibid., 390.

³³ The instrumentation included the *jinghu* 京胡, *erhu* 二胡, *yueqin* 月琴, *banhu* 板胡, *pipa* 琵琶, *paisheng* 排笙, *qudi* 曲笛, *haidi* 海笛, *suona* 唢呐, *zhuguan* 竹管, *bangu* 板鼓, *xiao tang gu* 小堂鼓, *wuluo* 武锣, soprano *daluo* 大锣, alto *daluo*, bass *daluo*, *xiaoluo* 小锣, *da shailuo* 大筛锣, *xiaobo* 小钹, *yabo* 压钹 and *da maobo* 大帽钹, as well as the piccolo, flute, oboe, French horn, trumpet, trombone, glockenspiel, timpani, cymbals, hanging cymbals, violin, viola, cello, and double bass.
Ibid., 395.

3. Compositional Trends in *Min Yue* over the Past Few Decades

3.1 Études and Transcribed Pieces

Following the trend of pedagogical formalization of instrumental technique, *min yue* instrumentalists became increasingly interested in expanding the range of technical ability on their instruments. Music educators wrote publications on instrumental technique and composed etudes and exercises. Composers also composed pieces of increasing technical difficulty, pushing the technical abilities of performers to their limits. Another emerging trend was to transcribe well-known virtuosic pieces from Western concert music repertoire to be performed on ethnic Chinese instruments as a way to constantly create technical challenges. For example, Pablo de Sarasate's virtuosic work for solo violin *Zigeunerweisen* was first transcribed and performed on the erhu by *erhu* player George Gao 高韶青 in 1988. Today, it has been incorporated into standard *erhu* repertoire, and is on the list of pieces for the diploma examination conducted by the Central Conservatory of Music in China³⁴.

3.2 The Increasing Use of Staff Notation

As chromaticism and atonality became increasingly incorporated into the musical language of modern *min yue* compositions, *jianpu* notation proved to be unsuitable and confusing at times,

³⁴ Liu Chang Fu (ed.) 刘长福(主编), *Central Conservatory of Music Local and International Grading Exams Repertoire - Erhu Grades 7-9 and Diploma* 中央音乐学院海内外考级曲目 二胡 7-9级 演奏级. (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music Printing Press 北京: 中央音乐学院出版社, 2004).

mainly due to the fact that the system is primarily rooted in diatonic thinking. As a result, many musicians turned to using Western staff notation for the sake of clarity and greater accuracy. In addition, a common understanding of staff notation allowed for greater interaction between *min yue* musicians and composers who were trained in the Western classical tradition. Today, most *min yue* musicians trained under the conservatory system are expected to be able to read music in staff notation.

3.3 The Incorporation of the Piano into Standard Repertoire

During the time of the Cultural Revolution, the piano had already been used in conjunction with traditional Peking opera melodies. A famous example is the setting of twelve selected arias from the Revolutionary Model Opera *The Legend of the Red Lantern* 红灯记 to a piano accompaniment, along with a few traditional Peking opera percussion instruments.

The *Three Gorges Capriccio* 三门峡畅想曲 was composed for *erhu* and piano by Liu Wen Jin 刘文金 in 1960, and is often hailed as the representative work showcasing the collaboration between these two instruments³⁵. Following the popularity of this piece, there was a proliferation of compositions for *erhu* and piano, and subsequently, for other solo Chinese instruments and piano as well. Today, the piano is regarded as a common partner to solo

³⁵ Peng Li 彭丽, "The Birth of 'Yubei Ballad' and 'The Three Gorges Capriccio'《豫北叙事曲》与《三门峡畅想曲》的诞生", *People's Music* 人民音乐(2006): 05, Beijing: People's Music Printing Press 北京: 人民音乐出版社, 2006.

Chinese instruments, and is often seen in concert halls and competitions featuring ethnic Chinese music³⁶.

3.4 Extended Variety of Stylistic Influences

Though most of the standard repertoire for *min yue* instruments today still draw on material or a musical language associated with ancient Chinese music³⁷, traditional folk music, or music reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution era, there are also many new compositions which have departed from these stylistic influences. This is especially true of newer works which have been composed within the last decade or so. In this category of compositions, there is a sense in which *min yue* instruments are primarily viewed in terms of their acoustical and idiomatic properties while more or less ignoring their musico-cultural origins. Though these compositions are composed for instruments originating from the *min yue* tradition, they can hardly be called “Chinese” as the musical language and material do not necessarily contain any explicit Chinese association.

³⁶ For instance, the rules of one of the biggest *min yue* competitions in the world, the CCTV Chinese Instrumental Competition CCTV 民族器乐电视大赛 (last held in 2012)--telecast live on national television in mainland China--states that a piano will be provided at the competition venue, but that competitors are required to bring their own accompanists. From “2012 CCTV Ethnic Instrumental Performance Television Competition Rules 2012 CCTV 民族器乐电视大赛评选章程”, China Central Broadcasting Station 中国中央电视台, 8 June 2012. Accessed 5 January 2015.

http://music.cntv.cn/2012/06/08/ART11339161563327905_4.shtml.

³⁷ See footnote 21.

3.5 Compositions with Mixed Instrumentation

In the last decade or so, there has been an increasing emergence of pieces which draw on the use of various instruments from different cultural traditions and feature a variety of stylistic influences. In contrast to the examples of pieces mentioned in section 2.5 of this paper, these newer works defy categorization not only in terms of instrumentation, but also in terms of musical style and language. This is true not just within the *min yue* circle, but also within recent Western art music. Should these works then be classified as belonging to the *min yue* or *xi yue* category? For example, Tan Dun's 谭盾 *Ghost Opera* (1995) is scored for *pipa* and string quartet, and alludes to a variety of musical influences ranging from Northern Chinese folksong to J.S. Bach. Even though the work uses an instrument from the *min yue* tradition, contains material derived from Chinese folk music, and is composed by an American-Chinese composer, to call it "Chinese music" would be a gross oversimplification of what the work represents in its entirety.

4. Evolution or Devolution?

Amidst all these developments within Chinese instrumental music today, the question often arises as to whether these "innovations" are really just an imposition of musical frameworks stemming from the Western classical tradition. If this is the case, does this represent progress, or a distortion of the features of traditional Chinese music?

4.1 The Distortion of Traditional Concepts

It has been argued that the adopting of conceptual frameworks from the Western classical tradition has distorted the concept of pitch space in ancient Chinese music. Shen Sin Yan, a Chinese music scholar and composer, has pointed out that modern orchestrations of ancient Chinese repertoire³⁸ have reduced the significance of the intervallic contour of the octave³⁹. Shen argues that taking “octaves [to be] equal in musical space” is “an oversimplification of [Chinese musical] thought”. He quotes the example of the ancient work *Three Variations on the Theme of the Plum Blossom* 梅花三弄, suggesting that various arrangements of the work for the modern Chinese orchestra/ensemble have obscured the gestural clarity of the octave leaps within the piece, as these arrangements operate within a different musical space as compared the original version on the *guqin* 古琴⁴⁰. In my view, this is due to a difference in musical thought which was introduced by the concept of a modern Chinese orchestra, that diverges from the melodically linear musical thought that was prevalent in ancient Chinese music.

Where pitch syntax is concerned, Western theoretical concepts of diatonicism and chromaticism are not always adequate nor relevant in the context of ancient Chinese music or of certain genres of folk music. Taking Northwestern *qinqiang* 秦腔 folk music for instance, from a Western theoretical perspective, one might understand a specific mode from this music as being based upon an altered version of the Western diatonic major tonality, with a slightly

³⁸ See footnote 21.

³⁹ Shen Sin Yan, “The Music of the Chinese Orchestras,” in *China: A Journey into Its Musical Art* (Chicago: Chinese Music Society of North America, 2000), 142.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

flattened (less than a half step) 7th degree and a slightly sharpened 4th degree. Such a description can be problematic: the extent of these pitch deviations cannot be exactly specified, as these notes are often (though not always) heavily-ornamented with a sliding vibrato 滑揉 or a pressure vibrato 压揉. This places the pitch in question over a full range of approximately a half step, rather than just on a single point in pitch space. Moreover, the pitches within this mode do not possess the same hierarchical significance within the diatonic major scale. For instance, in such a Chinese mode a phrase can end fully on scale degree 5, though to listeners who are steeped in the Western classical tradition, such phrases might sound like they end on half cadences. This issue is exacerbated by various orchestral/ensemble arrangements of pieces in this genre (or other Chinese folk genres as well), when triadic harmony is introduced into the music, thereby reinforcing ideas of tonality prevalent within the Western classical tradition.

4.2 Value Judgments Concerning Instrumental Timbre

With the rise of the modern Chinese orchestra, the blending of and uniformity of instrumental timbre within instrumental groups became increasingly valued over instrumental timbres which stood out. Prior to the rise of the Chinese orchestra, ethnic Chinese instruments of the same type were seldom, or never, played in unison within a group. Each instrumental timbre could stand out in its uniqueness.

This is not to say that a blend of instrumental timbres was not valued in ancient Chinese music. For instance, *nanyin* 南音 music, which is considered to be one of the oldest forms of Chinese

court music, emphasizes blend amongst the *shangsiguan* 上四管 (the four main instruments within a *nanyin* ensemble), namely the *dongxiao* 洞箫 (bamboo vertical flute), *erxian* 二弦 (two-stringed fiddle), *pipa* 琵琶 (a four-stringed lute, an older form of the modern orchestral pipa), and *sanxian* 三弦 (a long-necked snakeskin lute with three strings). The idea of blend amongst these four instruments is based on the concept of heterophony; the *dongxiao* and *erxian* would each play the given melody in a way that is idiomatic to the instrument, yet, the players are expected to ensure that the timbres are closely interwoven to produce a composite timbre. The same applies to the *pipa-sanxian* combination, in which the *sanxian* functions as a bass accentuating certain notes played by the *pipa*. A highly-skilled *nanyin* ensemble would thus be one in which the timbres within each instrumental pair are tightly woven to produce a unique composite timbre, and the constituent timbres do not stick out⁴¹.

However, the concept of timbral blend within a modern Chinese orchestra differed from this. Uniformity of timbre within an instrumental section was sought after, as opposed to a melange of different timbres. On this view, instruments such as the *suona* was deemed to be overly soloistic due to its dynamic timbre and difficult to blend within its own instrumental group. Hence, in the reforming of Chinese orchestral instruments, there has been an increasing trend towards achieving a “neutral” timbre. In the case of the *suona* 唢呐, a double reed wind instrument, an alto *suona* with keys was developed, with the timbre being less strident and more rounded than the traditional alto range *suona*. Today, it is widely used in the Chinese orchestra. Instruments such as the *yueqin* 月琴 (a three-stringed round lute) have also been

⁴¹ This point on timbral blend amongst the *shangsiguan* was reiterated to me many times over the course of my own study of classical *nanyin* singing with *nanyin* masters Cai Weibiao 蔡维镖 and Cai Yayi 蔡雅艺.

phased out of the orchestra, and the *liuqin* 柳琴 (a pear-shaped lute) is also gradually being replaced by the *gaoyinruan* 高音阮, an instrument in the soprano range which had been developed based upon the model of the *zhongruan* 中阮, as the *gaoyinruan* is deemed to have a rounder tone that is not as strident as that of the *liuqin*.

Hence, instruments with strongly individualistic timbres are either being phased out of the modern Chinese orchestra, or have been altered to achieve more neutral timbres. It may be argued that this represents a devolution of ethnic Chinese instruments, in an age when their unique timbral qualities are coming to be viewed more negatively than positively.

Where performance practice was concerned, the growing emphasis on uniformity of sound also meant that instrumentalists became increasingly less free to add ornamentation as was conventionally common and idiomatic to their various instruments. As a result, many nuances found within ancient Chinese music have been lost in present day conservatory performance traditions, though they still survive within the folk tradition.

4.3 But what is "Chinese" about ethnic Chinese music?

Throughout this paper, I have been consistently using the term "ethnic Chinese instruments" to refer to a specific class of instruments which include instruments like the *erhu*, *pipa*, and *yangqin*. I have also used the terms "ethnic Chinese music" or *min yue* to refer to music associated with the performance of this class of instruments.

In sections 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5, I have pointed out that labelling all music performed by these instruments as "ethnic Chinese music" would be inappropriate in many cases as illustrated. Moreover, though we speak of the *erhu*, *pipa*, *yangqin*, and *suona* as "ethnic Chinese instruments," there was a period of time in history when these instruments (or their predecessors) were considered foreign to Chinese culture. The *erhu* is an instrument borrowed from the *hu* people 胡人, which refers to various Northern and Western peoples of non-Chinese stock⁴², as denoted by the character "hu 胡" in *erhu*. The *pipa* is considered to have been derived from the Persian *barbat*, an influence that entered China via the Silk Road during the Tang dynasty⁴³. Similarly, the *yangqin* is deemed as originating from the Persian *santur*⁴⁴, and the *suona* from the Persian *surna*⁴⁵. Yet, these instruments form a crucial part of the modern Chinese orchestra, and most people today would consider these instruments unambiguously Chinese.

It is perhaps worth considering that there is no intrinsic "essence" to Chinese music, a form of music that is constantly evolving as it absorbs external influences. Throughout the history of

⁴² "Hu" was commonly used to refer to people of Persian, Sogdian, Turkish, Xianbi, Indian and Kushan origin and, occasionally, for the Xiongnu (Huns). From John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, 1st to 2nd Centuries CE*. (Charleston, South Carolina: BookSurge Publishing, 2009), 192.

⁴³ Liu Fang, *Historical development of the pipa, a traditional Chinese music instrument*. Philmultic Management & Productions Inc.. Accessed 30 Dec 2014. <http://www.liufangmusic.net/English/pipa.html>.

⁴⁴ There are a few theories pertaining to the origin of the *yangqin*, but the various theories all point to influences foreign to China. Also, the character "yang 扬" in "yangqin 扬琴" had formerly been written as "洋", with "洋琴" literally meaning "foreign instrument". From William M. Clements, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife: Southeast Asia and India, Central and East Asia, Middle East 2*. (Indiana: Greenwood Press, 2006), 106–110.

⁴⁵ Xiangzi 翔子, "History of the Suona 唢呐历史". *Quanxi Music 全息音乐*, 16 August, 2013. Accessed 30 Dec 2014. <http://music.quanxi.cc/jx/qiyue/muguan/suona/20130816/375785.html>.

Chinese music, musicians, composers, and educators have always been importing ideas from external sources and adapting them in various ways, resulting in an end product that is distinct from its original source. One key defining property of Chinese music as a whole, then, is probably its ever-changing character that has persisted throughout the entire history of its development. And this idea characterizes the Chinese identity in general: over the course of its 5000-year history, the Chinese identity has constantly been redefining itself, and is not confined to being a genetic identity relating specifically to the *Han* tribe. Therefore, the absorption of external influences can be seen as just part of the natural process of evolution of Chinese music, just like the Chinese identity.

5. Conclusion

What then, defines *min yue*? I see it as a tradition of music that is fluid by nature, and hence the constant importing of new influences should not be seen as contributing to its demise. There is, after all, no conflict between embracing the new and celebrating the old. However, incorporating new ideas and influences should not occur at the expense of discarding pre-existing ones. *Erhu* master Jiang Feng Zhi 蒋风之 strongly advocated pedagogical formalization and greater exploration in *erhu* technique, yet he is most remembered for his work in reviving ancient Chinese music and transcribing these ancient works for the *erhu*. Chinese composer Guo Wen Jing 郭文景 believes in using traditional Chinese musical material in its original form within his compositions, while building other contemporary compositional

elements around it, rather than alter the nature of the former by integrating the former into the latter⁴⁶.

Perhaps this view is best summed up in the words of American-Chinese composer Chou Wen-Chung 周文中: "Let us not speak of influence but confluence. Let the different traditions intermingle to bring forth a new mainstream that will integrate all musical concepts and practices into a vast expanse of musical currents. But let us also make sure that each individual culture will preserve its own uniqueness, its own poetry."⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Liu (trans. Mason), *Critical History*, 642.

⁴⁷ Peter Chang, "Tan Dun's String Quartet 'Feng-Ya-Song': Some Ideological Issues," *Asian Music*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Views of Music in China Today (Spring - Summer, 1991). Accessed 29 Dec 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/834310>: 134.

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