

A study on the modernity and nationality of Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949

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Abstract. In 1919, with the outbreak of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Luting He and Yuanren Zhao began to adapt and create piano music with Chinese musical characteristics. Therefore, this article divided the development of Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949 into the embryonic stage (1900-1919), the exploration stage (1920-1935), and the development stage (1936-1949). Taking piano works from different stages as cases, it summarizes the characteristics of Chinese piano composition in various periods, aiming to illustrate how Chinese musicians embraced, adapted Western musical elements, and utilized local musical elements. Furthermore, it explores the modernity and nationality of Chinese piano composition from 1900 to 1949.

Keywords: Chinese piano creation; nationality, modernity.

1. Introduction

The clavichord was introduced into China in 1600. Modern piano was introduced into China during the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, but its influence was small and weak at that time [1]. In the early 20th century, Western music, represented by piano music, began to be widely introduced into China, and a group of cultural elites who studied in Japan and Europe actively engaged in music education. They combined Western traditional creative techniques with Chinese folk tones, promoted the occurrence and development of modern Chinese music, and made Chinese music experience tremendous changes. Chinese traditional music and Western music elements began to merge, which enriched the forms of music expression and promoted the change of music creation [2]. Taking Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949 as the research object, this paper divides Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949 into embryonic stage, exploratory stage and arduous vigorous development stage through literature review method and case analysis method, and explores the music works of piano creators in different stages and analyzes their creative characteristics. This article summarizes the characteristics of Chinese piano creation in different periods, tries to explain the absorption and acceptance of Chinese piano music to western music and the adaptation of Chinese piano music in combination with the characteristics of Chinese national music, and explains the modernity and nationality of Chinese piano creation.

2. Literature review

The research on Chinese piano creation focuses on a certain type or a specific period of time. For example, the research on the creative techniques of Chinese folk song piano works focuses on the application of nationalized harmony and the structural layout of works. In the article *Form and State of Piano Music on Chinese Folk Songs*, the common stylistic forms, melodic texture and harmonic technique characteristics of piano adaptations on Chinese folk songs are studied [3]. In *A Preliminary Exploration of the Polyphony in Chinese Folk Song Piano Arrangements*, the application of polyphonic techniques and elements such as polyphonic bagatelle, variations, inventions, fugue, and overtures in folk song piano works is discussed [4]. The article *Research on the Creation of Chinese Style Piano Music Adapted from Folk Songs* examines the creative characteristics of multi-voice instrumentalization in piano adaptations of folk songs, the melodic structure of folk songs, and imitative creative techniques [5]. Through the reading of these articles, this paper concludes that the

folk piano works in the first half of the 20th century adopted a trilateral structure, drawing lessons from the Western classical period, the romantic period of the genre, the creative characteristics of variation techniques, and the harmonic texture of the imitation of national instruments. These literatures provide a reference for the case study in this paper.

Furthermore, some scholars delve into the various facets of piano culture across different stages of the 20th century. For instance, Feng Xiaogang explores the forms and characteristics of Chinese piano music culture, including piano culture, piano performance, piano art, and piano education, during the early 20th century [6]. Wang Yidan's *The Creation and Development of Chinese Piano Music in the First 17 Years After the Founding of the People's Republic of China* [7], and Mou Jingjing's *A Study of Chinese Piano Arrangements in the Early Years After the Founding of the People's Republic of China* [8] employ case analysis to discuss the historical phenomena, musical structures, and other aspects of Chinese piano arrangements in the latter half of the 20th century, while also analyzing the causes of this phenomenon. Chen Lili's *An Analysis of the Representative Works and Characteristics of Chinese Piano Music in the First 17 Years After the Founding of the People's Republic of China* provides an in-depth look into the musical techniques and characteristics of piano composition during this period [9]. However, most of the articles above take music culture as their starting point, devoting extensive space to discussing the confrontation and fusion between Chinese and Western music cultures. Additionally, there are fewer articles that study Chinese piano composition before the founding of the People's Republic of China. Therefore, this paper, focusing on the creative overview and characteristics, aims to outline the features of Chinese piano composition from 1900 to 1949.

3. Research on Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949

3.1. Overview of Chinese piano creation from 1900 to 1949

In 1673, Portuguese missionary Thomas Pereira (1645-1708) taught Emperor Kangxi musical staff notation and the clavichord, and played music with Chinese melodies on the clavichord [10]. After the First Opium War in 1840, with the opening of China's treaty ports, Western culture, thoughts, arts, and other elements began to spread into China. Due to the establishment of churches and the rise of new schools, the piano began to be promoted in China. Xingong Shen, Zhimin Zeng, Shutong Li, Youmei Xiao, Yuanshen Zhao, and others successively studied abroad in Japan, Germany, and the United States. They introduced foreign piano music textbooks to China, enabling young Chinese students and the general public to gain a preliminary understanding of Western piano music. In 1914, Yuanshen Zhao composed *March of Peace*, which was the first Chinese piano piece to have its score officially published in a publication [11]. During this period, most composers of piano music had overseas study experiences and were heavily influenced by Western compositional techniques. Their piano compositions mostly adopted purely Western musical language and were mostly imitative and experimental. Shutong Li and Xingong Shen emphasized absorbing the tonality and artistic achievements of European and American music, and used multi-part harmony in their school song creations, such as the two-part chorus *Farewell*. However, among these mostly experimental piano works, there were also some works that combined Chinese melodies with Western musical language. For example, Yuanshen Zhao's *Combination of Eight Beats and Xiangjiang Waves* in 1913 and *Ou Cheng* in 1917 were both piano works that employed folk melodies accompanied by Western classical harmony. Therefore, from the early 20th century to 1919, it was the embryonic stage of piano composition in China.

In 1919, the May Fourth new Culture Movement broke out. With the active advocacy of Yuanpei Cai and others, Chinese piano art continued to develop and entered the exploratory stage of piano creation from 1920 to 1935. During this period, the number of Chinese piano works gradually increased. These piano music works have short melodies, simple musical forms, concentrated musical areas and concise playing techniques. Piano works are mainly medium and small works, such as invention, fugue, berceuse, variations, preludes, suites, dance music, but also began to appear concerto and other large piano works, the piano body from the single to diversified. Xiaokong Chen, Wangxiang Qiu,

Jundian Qian, and others have carried out beneficial exploration in the composition of piano texture, not only paying attention to the fusion of Chinese and Western musical cultures but also paying attention to the creation and exploration of Chinese-style piano music. The piano piece *New Ni Shang Yuyi Dance* created by Youmei Xiao in 1923 is the first large-scale piano music in the history of Chinese music with the theme of national history. The work adopts the traditional Chinese *pentatonic scale* to perform the music of the Tang Dynasty, adopts the multi-voice music writing technique, and adopts the national style in melody and harmony configuration, demonstrating the professional creation of piano works. During this period, Chinese composers filled in the framework of Western forms with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, from 1920 to 1935, Chinese piano music creation experienced a period of rapid growth. When composers created Chinese-style works, they began to develop from deliberate description to natural revelation in music. The creative methods have also gradually become more complicated and diversified from simple variations on the melody at the beginning, and simple Chinese style processing such as adding sixth and parallel fourth and fifth to the harmony. The composer absorbs nutrients from traditional music to create melodies with strong charm, and applies Western Polyphonic creation techniques (polyphony, fugue) to works to create a variety of harmonic textures.

On May 21, 1934, Erpin Qi organized a self-funded competition for Chinese musicians called *Seeking Piano Works with Chinese Flavor*, which raised the composer's attention to the creation of Chinese national-style music. In 1937, The outbreak of War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. During this period, the piano creation was relatively small, but the level of work has been significantly improved, the creation of Chinese piano music along with the outbreak of The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the War of Liberation, in the difficult creative environment to the stage of vigorous development, and continue to show the charm of Chinese music. The exposition of the piano sonata *Carnival Day* composed by Xuan Liu uses the musical material of the northern Shaanxi folk song Lan Huahua. Huabai Lu explored the potential natural harmony from the melody of folk songs, and created the piano music Xunyang Ancient Tune, Donglan Bronze Drum Music, Lan Huahua, and Chinese folk song piano Collection. Wenye Jiang also explores and tries to adapt piano works with traditional Chinese instrumental music. During this period, Chinese musicians no longer blindly imitated the writing techniques of Western music style, and began to transform to their national music style. The composers absorbed the rich nourishment of Chinese folk music, and combined it with Western harmony writing techniques, which made the Chinese piano creation at this stage show the national characteristics.

3.2. Research on the characteristics of Chinese piano creation in different stages

3.2.1. The embryonic stage of Chinese piano creation: 1900-1919

In 1840, with the outbreak of the Opium War, China was forced to open the gateway of a country, and Western religious propaganda activities gained legal status in China [12]. Missionaries used the piano to accompany the Bible in the church, bringing the art of piano to China and training some piano accompanists, but these people could only play the Bible and simple ditty and lacked the correct and systematic training of playing methods. In the early 20th century, with the development of modern education in China, the "New School" was set up, and the piano was widely accepted by the Chinese people. At this stage, Shutong Li and others devoted themselves to teaching Western piano playing techniques and acoustics. School songs accompanied by piano became the cultural fashion of the new school. School songs were originally taken from Japanese songs, and then gradually changed to choose European and American songs to fill in the lyrics. By 1911, the school songs had a small chorus. There are very few school songs with their tune melodies created by the creators, such as Shutong Li's *Farewell*, which took the tune from *dreaming of home*.

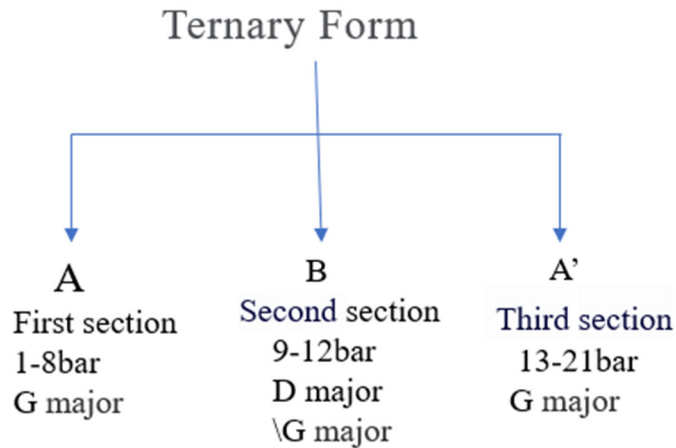


Figure 1. the musical structure of *the March of Peace*

The creators continue to learn the creative skills of Western piano works, combined with Chinese folk music tunes. Yuanren Zhao believed that the beauty of Western music was due to harmony [13], so he devoted himself to the study and exploration of harmony. In 1913, Yuanren Zhao created and composed an organ tune *Combination of Eight Beats and Xiangjiang Waves* based on Chinese folk music tunes, which for the first time used bass line harmony techniques, combined with fioritura and variations in Chinese folk music. In 1915, Mr. Zhao Yuanren created *The March of Peace*. The structure of this piano work is Ternary Form of A, B, A', and the end phrase repeats the theme part, making the whole work perfect and regular, with the characteristics of Western composition techniques. (shown in Figure 1). The first section begins with a bright major chord, and the secondary dominant chord in G major in bar 2 gives the melody a lot of drama. The second section is structured in a three-part form, with heterophonic texture elements. This section features one voice remaining static while the other two voices move. Initially, the two voices move in the same direction, but then they diverge, with one voice producing double tones and the other producing single tones. The single-tone melody line persists throughout the end of the piece, imbuing the latter half of the section with a heterophonic texture. The second section commences with a clever transition that modulates the tonality to D major. In the 10th bar, with the notes Re, sharp Fa, and Do, the dominant seventh chord in G is smoothly resolved back to G major, allowing the third phrase to enter smoothly. In the third section, the content of the 4th measure of the first section is reproduced an octave higher. Starting from the 14th bar to the 17th bar is the lengthening and deformation of the musical material of the first section, making the melody longer and more dynamic. Additionally, the bass and treble parts in the third section exhibit polyphonic elements, primarily in the form of a Counterpoint relationship, with a focus on one-to-one and one-to-two counterpoint. The whole work is based on the harmony system of Western major and minor keys, which fully reflects the influence of Chinese piano music by Western composing techniques in the early 20th century. The harmonic basis of the work is "Westernized" and the musical form is rigorous. Composed in 1917, *Ou Cheng* is a composition composed by the composer of pentatonic Gong Diao, with a ternary form bagatelle. The melody is smooth and natural, and the style is close to Jiangnan minor. It can be seen that at this stage, the creative method is to carry out simple variations on the melody, and most of the art song works use a combination of folk tunes and harmony system of Western major and minor keys. The composer not only draws on Western creative techniques, but also consciously combines Chinese folk tones.

3.2.2. Exploratory stage of Chinese piano creation: 1920-1935

After the May 4th new culture movement in 1919, the new culture and new fashion gradually formed, and the piano creation also increased. The number of Chinese piano pieces created during this period is about 50 pieces. Piano creators imitated different styles of Western music. For example, in 1928, Huang Zi's *Two-part Invention*, the whole piece is constructed in the structure of the classical binary form, using a very regular 6/8 rhythm layout. All downbeats of the piece are composed of consonant

dissonance. It also uses the development means of imitating polyphony commonly used in the *Two-part Invention* of J.S.Bach. The first section of the "Two-Part Invention" is in G major (as shown in Figure 2), while the second section modulates to its dominant key of D major. This modulation between the tonic and dominant keys was a commonly used technique in Baroque music. The second section utilizes the materials from the first section and expands upon them through the technique of inversion and imitation. The left hand in the second section is a compound counterpoint of the right hand in the first section, without introducing any new material. The logical accents in both sections are mostly placed on the downbeats. This is an imitation of the Baroque musical style. Furthermore, the creator imitates both Western classical and romantic music styles. The harmonic techniques of Western classical music are characterized by their systematic and universal nature. As a result, Chinese piano compositions primarily mimic the harmonic language of the Vienna Classical School and early Romanticism, with the basic framework often consisting of harmonic vocabulary within the natural diatonic system in terms of chord usage. In terms of musical texture, a homophonic texture with a melody accompanied by harmonies, common during the Classical period, predominates. The melodies often conform to the clear and simple secular music style of the Classical period. In terms of musical form, Chinese composers have gradually been able to adopt the reproductive instrumental music structure of the Classical period. For example, Shuhua Li 's "In the Woods," was composed in 1930. Example 3 is a section from Li Shuhua's *In the Woods*. Its musical texture is a typical combination of melody played by the right hand and broken chord accompaniment played by the left hand. The broken chord accompaniment by the left hand follows the progression of T-D in C major, which is a typical harmonic vocabulary of classicalism with positive progression. The accompaniment texture and fioritura of Ying Shangneng's *Memories* are similar to the style of F.F.Chopin's *Nocturne*. It is evident that Western compositional techniques, such as harmony, polyphony, rhythm, and musical form structure, have played a pivotal role in Chinese music creation.



Figure 2.The first paragraph of *Two-Part Invention*



Figure 3. *In the Woods*

Chinese piano composers are not content with imitating Western musical works. Chinese composers have infused elements with Chinese characteristics into the framework of Western musical forms. After deeply studying Western harmony, Yuanren Zhao continuously explored Chinese-style harmony. His works often employ harmony with an added sixth interval, and he has also

experimented with parallel chords. *Crossing the Indian Ocean* and *A Little Poem* employ minor seventh chords, diminished seventh chords, altered chords, and various modulations. The melody of *Listening to the Rain* employs the tone and rhythm of Changzhou's poetry recitation, *The Song of the Western Clock* and *The Almighty Sky* utilize the melodies of folk rap. Furthermore, his compositions deliberately incorporate the pentatonic scale. The pentatonic harmonic structure appeared in piano accompaniments such as *Xiangjiang Wave*, Wang Lang Gui and Chun Chao and Xiu Chao [14]. During this period, the nationalized style of Chinese piano music was in its initial stage. Therefore, the creators mostly choose the material from folk songs and ethnic instrumental music in traditional Chinese music. In 1936, Xu'an Liu 's "Chinese Suite" was the first piano *Cycle* in China. It uses traditional European techniques and the playing skills of the national instrument pipa [15]. Luting He's *Shepherd Boy's Piccolo* and Zhicheng Lao's *Shepherd Boy's Music* started the nationalization process of Chinese piano music, and they used nationalization mode to create independently. *Shepherd Boy's Piccolo* is based on the C-scale pentatonic melody, utilizing the technique of polyphonic texture to present the nationalized piano music. *Shepherd Boy's Piccolo* is divided into three sections, similar to the ternary form in Western music. The first section begins with a two-voice polyphonic. The second section continues to employ a bright major key style to express the joy and liveliness of the melody. The melody played by the right hand is the author's imitation of the sound of a flute, with syncopation expressing the shepherd boy happily playing in the field. The main section of the music incorporates a large number of harmony and polyphony. The third section is essentially a recapitulation, repeating the melody of the first section. It adds embellishments and variations to the first part of the main section, making the ending more vivid [16].

It is clear that during this stage, Chinese piano composers were not only proficient in applying Western compositional techniques, but were also exploring the path of creating nationalized piano works. This resulted in an increase in both the quantity and quality of piano compositions, as well as a diversification of themes and subjects in piano music.

3.2.3. Arduous and vigorous development stage: 1936 - 1949

From 1937 to 1949, China experienced the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the War of Liberation. The outbreak of the war reduced the number of piano compositions, but the length of the works was longer, and the sonatas and concertos gradually increased. Such as Wenye Jiang's *First Piano Concerto*, and Sicong Ma's *bB Minor Piano Sonata*. *bB Minor Piano Sonata* is a traditional sonata-type structure (as shown in Figure 4). Example 5 is the beginning of the sonata, accompanied by the romantic style and lyric melody. This bass and block chord accompaniment is quite similar to the romantic style of Beethoven and Chopin. Example 6 is a virtuosity piece in exposition. The chromatic double tone texture (A) and the long span of the two-voice accompanied melody (B) are similar to Liszt. The composer has been able to skillfully use Western piano techniques.

Structure	Exposition		Development	Recapitulation
	First Tonal Area	Second Tonal Area	Spread out in two levels	Reproduce the First Tonal Area and Close
Bar number	1-34	35-64	65-72,73-106	107-145,146-173
Mode	B flat minor	Drift in D major	B flat minor	B flat minor

Figure 4. musical structure of *bB Minor Piano Sonata*



Figure 5. *bB Minor Piano Sonata* bars 1-6



Figure 6. *bB Minor Piano Sonata* bars 45-58

In addition, more and more creators focus on folk themes. Wei Qu 's *flower drum* is based on the Anhui folk song *Fengyang Flower Drum* and the Jiangsu folk song *Jasmine Flower*. Tong Sang's *In the Far Place* is based on the Qinghai folk song and is written in a free atonal harmonic treatment [17]. The creator tries to combine the melody of the Chinese national style with modern harmonic techniques to explore the creation of the Chinese piano. This folk song was originally in the key of A 'Dorian minor. *In the Far Place* follows the strophic form of the folk song for variations. The overall program of tonality entry is as follows: A^b-F-A^b-C-E^b. The use of augmented chords and other dissonant chords and chromatic substitution of atonal harmony made the whole music free from the rule of the harmonic sound at that time. Shande Ding 's *Variations on the Theme of Chinese Folk Songs* (1948) perfectly combines the national pentatonic melodies and heterophony with free counterpoint techniques and a variety of contrasting and imitative polyphony techniques, with a subtle and profound artistic conception and a warm and touching touch. Wenye Jiang also added a large number of Chinese musical elements to *Little Sonata*" in 1940, *No. 3 Piano Sonata (Jiangnan Scenery)* in 1943, and *No. 4 Piano Sonata (Carnival Day)* in 1949 [18]. *The Little Sonata* is a pentatonic work. The first movement is in the key of C, the *secondary* movement is in the key of D flat, the second movement is in the key of G flat, the third movement is in the key of E, maintaining a strong Chinese style and national characteristics. In *the Third Piano Sonata (Jiangnan Scenery)*, he used the piano to imitate the skills of tremolo and strumming of the pipa, which enriched the playing techniques of the piano. The musical form drew inspiration from the Chinese folk free variation form in the traditional pipa music *Moonlit Night in Xunyang*, without adopting the traditional European sonata form. Liang

Maochun commented, "The adaptation of traditional Chinese music into piano compositions by Chinese composers is a viable approach to addressing the issue of national style in Chinese piano works [19]." At this stage, Chinese piano creators continued to explore the nationality of Chinese piano works, which promoted the diversified development of piano music and made piano music accepted by more people.

In summary, the evolution of the musical form structure of Chinese piano works from 1900 to 1949 underwent a process of transitioning from experimental coupled structures, to imitating Western musical form structures, and gradually incorporating the structures of traditional Chinese music on the basis of Western structures. Consequently, it can be argued that the research into nationalized harmony in China is based on the Western harmonic system, combined with the unique characteristics of traditional Chinese music.

4. Conclusion

After the First Opium War, After the First Opium War, China was forced to open the gateway of a country to the outside world and embarked on a pursuit of "modernization" based on Western standards. Western music is seen as "modern" and "idealized". Chinese music culture began to follow the example of the West, constantly learning and imitating Western music, introducing the 12-tone Equal Temperament, major and minor scales, and harmony, this stage is called "Westernization". However, with the awakening of people's national consciousness and the influence of local traditional music, the creators began to pursue the nationality of piano creation in the middle of the 20th century. Therefore, since the 20th century, "nationality" and "modernity" have been the two axes of Chinese piano creation. The creators are constantly looking for a reasonable way to integrate Western music elements with their traditional music culture. Or add the characteristics of traditional music to Western music or integrate traditional materials on the basis of modern musical vocabulary. In other words, since the introduction of Western music composition techniques, the creation of Chinese piano is not a simple acceptance, imitation, or borrowing of Western music culture. It is a creative process. This process of creation reflects the process of influence, exchange and assimilation between Chinese traditional culture and Western music culture. It is the re-creation after the struggle and fusion of Western music and local traditional music, making it a new national music culture. Therefore, for today's piano creation, we should selectively absorb and learn from foreign cultures, interpret and create from our perspective, explore new paths, promote the diversified development of piano music, and form our characteristics

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