

Musical Analysis of The Song Homesickness

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Abstract. In 1979, with the broadcast of the televised scenic documentary *The Legend of the Three Gorges*, the featured song *Homesickness* emerged as a representative work of the period. Its innovative artistic expression sparked widespread discussion. While existing research has largely focused on the cultural implications of the piece, systematic analyses of its musical structure remain rare. This paper explores *Homesickness* from three dimensions—musical form, vocal techniques, and cultural connotations—to examine how it integrates contemporary elements into traditional compositional frameworks. The aim is to provide insights for future scholarly inquiry and creative practice. The study reveals that the song employs a parallel tripartite structure, fusing Western functional modal harmony with narrative melodies rooted in Chinese folk traditions. Rhythmic displacement, accent shifts, and modern instrumentation such as the electric guitar disrupt conventional rhythmic patterns, enhancing dramatic expression. The vocalist, Li Guyi, pioneered the “semi-voiced singing technique,” blending ornamental elements from Hunan flower-drum opera with *bel canto* breath control, thereby achieving a personalized mode of emotional delivery. The cultural significance of *Homesickness* lies not only in its pioneering role as the first popular song after China’s Reform and Opening-Up but also in its innovative combination of musical form and ideological transformation. It serves as both a technical model and an aesthetic reference for the development of contemporary Chinese popular music.

Keywords: Homesickness; musical innovation; integration of Chinese and Western music; semi-voiced singing technique.

1. Introduction

In 1979, with the broadcast of the television landscape film *The Legend of the Three Gorges*, the interlude song *Homesickness* (Xianglian) emerged as a representative work of that period. With its innovative artistic expression, the song sparked widespread discussion. While most existing studies have focused on the cultural connotations and extended meanings of the song, systematic analysis of its musical substance remains scarce. Therefore, this paper analyzes *Homesickness* from three aspects—musical structure, vocal performance techniques, and cultural connotations—to explore how it integrates new-era expression into traditional compositional frameworks. It aims to provide valuable insights for subsequent academic research and creative practice.

2. Background of Creation

2.1. Introduction to the Lyricist and Composer

Zhang Piji, born in December 1937 in Wuchang County, Heilongjiang Province, passed away in November 2021 in Beijing. A first-class national composer, he was a recipient of the State Council Special Government Allowance and held posts such as council member of the Chinese Musicians’ Association, executive council member of the China Music Copyright Association, and executive member of the Television Music Research Association. His notable works include instrumental pieces such as the symphonic suite *Northward Journey of the Xiang River* and the symphonic overture *Boatmen of the Yellow River*, and vocal works such as the song cycle *Love for the Motherland* and solo songs like *Homesickness* and *Sunset Glow*. Many of these works received awards in national competitions and attracted wide acclaim.



Ma Jinghua, born in November 1943 in Beijing, is a lyricist and director in the Arts Department of China Central Television. Her major works include the large-scale music TV production Gezhouba Symphonic Tone Picture, the televised concert Kyushu Landscape, the landscape film The Legend of the Three Gorges, and the TV feature Friends of Humanity. As a lyricist, her notable songs include Hello, Gorge River and Homesickness among others.

2.2. The Creative Process

In 1979, China Central Television initiated the production of the landscape film The Legend of the Three Gorges, intended to showcase the natural and cultural features of the Yangtze River. The film documented the region's scenery and introduced relevant geographical, historical, and cultural knowledge. Composer Zhang Piji and lyricist Ma Jinghua were invited to compose the interlude. The initially completed piece, titled Homesick Melody, was rejected due to excessive vocal difficulty and its disconnection from public aesthetics. According to archival materials: “Later, under the advocacy of Song Peifu, director of the production department, the team abandoned the original plan, pivoting toward a historically narrative and emotionally symbolic expression. Drawing inspiration from the story of Wang Zhaojun's departure to the frontier, Ma Jinghua transformed historical metaphor into a universal expression of homesickness. This fusion of historical reference and modern sentiment became the key innovation of the song.”

2.3. Influence and Significance

Since its release at the end of 1979, Homesickness was initially criticized as “decadent music” for its novel compositional style, sparking fierce debate between traditional and emerging aesthetic views. In 1983, when Li Guyi performed the song at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, it marked the beginning of its full public acceptance. This performance had a profound influence on the trajectory of contemporary Chinese music. As the first pop song of the “new era” in mainland China, Homesickness integrated modern expressive techniques into traditional structures, providing a model for the development of contemporary pop music. Its success demonstrated that artistic creation could simultaneously retain national characteristics and align with modern aesthetic standards, thus inspiring future artistic innovation.

3. Musical Analysis

Homesickness is based on the A natural major scale and written in 4/4 time, totaling 46 measures. It consists of a prelude, sections a1, a2, a3, and a coda, forming a three-phrase parallel structure. Formal Diagram of the Song :

Phrase	Prelude	a1	a2	a3	Coda
Measure	1-9	10-18	19-27	28-36	37-46
Musical phrase	9	4+4	4+4	4+4	9
		a1+b	a2+c	a2+c	
Key					

Figure 1 Formal Structure Diagram

The piece maintains the melodic elegance of Chinese folk music while incorporating functional harmony from Western tradition during actual performance. This "unity in contrast" structural design preserves the narrative characteristics of traditional Chinese music while enhancing its congruence with the Legend of the Three Gorges storyline. The song's structural and musical techniques vividly

depict the grandeur of the Three Gorges and the homesickness of a wanderer, achieving a high degree of audiovisual integration. This integration primarily reflects two dimensions: musical language innovation and vocal technique breakthroughs.

3.1. Innovation in Musical Language

The musical innovation in *Homesickness* is evident in its rhythmic design, instrumental orchestration, and melodic narration.

3.1.1. Rhythmic Design

The rhythmic innovation lies in the use of syncopation and forward displacement (A characteristic of forward-displaced rhythm is that the rhythmic accent or strong beat falls on the latter part of the note, creating a sense of extension and continuity.). Although set in a 4/4-time signature (strong–weak–medium–weak), syncopated rhythms break this regularity to create suspense, reflecting the literary imagery of “departing and gazing back” associated with Wang Zhaojun. Forward-displaced rhythm is used in the climax, where the extended notes combined with tremolo from the electric guitar evoke a sonic image of tearful longing.

3.1.2. Instrumentation Innovation

The arrangement is pioneering in incorporating electric guitar, drum kit, and other modern instruments into mainstream Chinese music. Such instrumentation was rare in late 1970s China. Their inclusion lent a "modernized" sound to the piece, simplifying the musical structure while making emotional expression more direct. Finger-picked guitar or piano chords, with their rhythmic simplicity, enhanced the emotional depth. The electric guitar's broken chords fill the mid-register with a textured counterpoint to the lyrical melody; the snare hits on weak beats alter traditional accent patterns, introducing modernity; and the synthesizer's arpeggios underpin the harmony, shifting to metallic timbre in the a3 section to simulate mountainous spatial depth.(The discussion on instrumentation in this section is based on personal interpretation of the original accompaniment sound, as the full score could not be located.)

3.1.3. Melodic Narration

The melody is based on a fifth-interval motif (e.g., 5–3–2–1), with a narrow vocal range from small b to small d2. This range lowers the difficulty of singing, allowing broader public participation. The line “How can I forget your deep affection” features a descending sequence mimicking a sigh, enhancing narrative intimacy.

Words like “your,” “forever,” and “my” are rhythmically fragmented due to syncopation, causing intentional breaks in phrases. The stressed syllables— “figure,” “voice,” “engraved,” and “heart”— are accentuated by pitch and rhythm, ultimately highlighting the phrase “your figure and voice remain in my heart,” which aligns with the film's core theme.

3.2. Breakthroughs in Vocal Technique

Vocalist Li Guyi innovatively fused Hunan Flower Drum Opera vocal ornamentation with bel canto singing principles, forming a new technique known as *mezza voce* (“half voice”). Utilizing active vocal cord closure to manage breath, she maintained stable resonance while shaping a “sobbing and pleading” dramatic tone through reduced volume. This blend of “scientific singing and vernacular expression” effectively bridged the divide between classical vocalism and pop aesthetics.

3.2.1. Technical Integration of Breath Voice

Li combined chest resonance of folk singing with breathy vocalization to create a "more air than voice" texture. In the line “Yesterday has passed”, she intentionally weakened vocal cord closure to produce a whisper-like texture. In the high register, such as “forever engraved”, head resonance is employed to preserve brightness. This *mezza voce* approach, derived from bel canto, was creatively localized into a popular vocal style.

3.2.2. Paradigm Shift in Emotional Expression

Whereas traditional Chinese folk songs often emphasized collective sentiment and grand narratives (e.g., Yellow River Cantata), Homesickness conveyed individualized homesickness through breathy singing. In the line “Parting, we may never meet again”, Li’s use of intermittent breath mimicked choking sobs, transforming Zhaojun’s historical sorrow into a universal emotion, establishing a new paradigm for Chinese pop music.

4. Conclusion

The musical practice embodied in Homesickness demonstrates the profound interplay between artistic innovation and its socio-cultural context. At the level of musical substance, the song exhibits multiple dimensions of innovation. Structurally, it employs a parallel three-phrase form that harmoniously integrates the narrative traits of Chinese folk traditions with the principles of Western functional harmony. Its rhythmic design breaks from conventional regularity through the use of syncopation and forward-displaced accents, thereby enhancing dramatic expressiveness. In terms of orchestration, the pioneering incorporation of modern instruments such as electric guitar and drum kit creates an aural space where Eastern and Western timbres engage in dialogue. Melodically, the song adopts descending, speech-like sequences within a narrow vocal range, allowing it to resonate more closely with popular aesthetic sensibilities. Vocally, Li Guyi’s performance features the innovative use of “mezza voce,” blending operatic embellishment techniques from Chinese folk opera with scientifically grounded breath control. Through softened phonation and intermittent breath, her interpretation shifts the expressive paradigm from collective, grand narratives toward an intimate, individualized emotional mode. The significance of Homesickness extends beyond its historical designation as the first pop song of China’s reform era; more importantly, it represents a creative response to the cultural demands of a transforming society. By dismantling conventional compositional formulas and reconstructing musical language logic, the song establishes a nuanced balance between artistry and accessibility. It offers both a technical blueprint and aesthetic inspiration for the development of contemporary Chinese pop music. Moreover, its analytic dissection provides a valuable case study for examining the evolution of artistic ecosystems in the early years of China’s reform and opening-up, offering empirical evidence of the deep linkage between musical form innovation and broader ideological transformations.

References

- [1] Television landscape film: A genre of television art film primarily focused on showcasing beautiful natural scenery and long-standing local customs and traditions. See Wang Liu (Ed.); Wang Zhimin, Chen Shan, Zhang Huijun (Associate Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese and Foreign Films and Television*, Beijing: China Radio and Television Press, 2001, p. 98.
- [2] Zhang Piji. *Homesickness: A Collection of Songs by Zhang Piji*. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2004.
- [3] Television documentary: A type of audiovisual program produced specifically for television broadcasting, primarily focused on the introduction of people, cultural landscapes, or reporting. See: Kang, Shiyong (Ed.). *Dictionary of New Words and Phrases*. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2
- [4] See the Douban entry for "Ma Jinghua", Information on: <https://www.douban.com/personage/30456402/>, accessed May 1, 2025.
- [5] Wang Zhaojun, given name Qiang and courtesy name Zhaojun, was originally from Zigui in Nanjun Commandery of the Western Han Dynasty (modern-day Xingshan County, Hubei Province). Chosen for Emperor Yuan's imperial harem due to her beauty and talent, she was bestowed as a bride to Huhanye Chanyu of the Xiongnu in 33 BCE in a marriage alliance. This historical episode is known as "Zhaojun’s Journey Beyond the Great Wall." See: Xie, Zheng. "The Mystery Behind Wang Zhaojun’s Departure to the Frontier Remains Inconclusive." *China Place Names*, No. 9, 2012, pp. 76–77.
- [6] Chun Zi. "How the Song 'Homesickness' Became Popular After Many Twists and Turns", *Party History Digest*, No. 2, 2021.
- [7] Wu Xiaona. "The Creative Innovation and Significance of 'Homesickness'", *Art Sea*, No. 6, 2019.

- [8] Mezza voce: Mezza voce is a vocal technique in singing. As the name implies, it refers to “half voice,” or half the intensity of full voice. In practice, it requires deep control of breath support, with gentle airflow and consistent diaphragmatic regulation via abdominal and waist muscles. The vocal tone must remain connected across registers, with moderate yet elastic intensity. The singing posture resembles full-voice projection, but the volume remains soft. It is also referred to as a “soft voice in a full singing state.” See: Luo, Wenfeng. "The Importance of Mezza Voce in Vocal Performance." *China Science and Education Innovation Guide*, No. 25, 2012, p. 211.
- [9] Yellow River Cantata: The song was written by Guang Weiran and composed by Xian Xinghai in 1939 in Yan'an. It is a large-scale choral work comprising eight movements. Using the Yellow River as its central theme, the song praises the outstanding culture and glorious history of the Chinese nation over five thousand years, and extols the perseverance and indomitable spirit of the Chinese people. It expresses the profound humiliation and suffering brought upon the Chinese by Japanese aggressors, while also portraying the heroic awakening and unified resistance of the Chinese people. See: Zhang, Shaosi, Tian Ziyu, and Chen Jinan (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of China's War of Resistance Against Japan*. Wuhan: Wuhan Publishing House, 1995, p. 792