**Tradition and Innovation: The Contemporary Translation and Cultural Transmission of National Elements in the Creation of Chinese Art Songs**

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the contemporary reinterpretation and cultural transmission of ethnic elements in Chinese art song composition. It first examines the application of traditional folk music elements in early art songs, including the integration of folk songs, operatic traditions, and musical instruments, along with representative works by notable composers. Subsequently, it analyzes new manifestations of ethnic elements in modern art songs under contemporary socio-cultural contexts, such as multisensory presentations and cross-genre collaborations, alongside composers' innovative practices. Finally, the paper explores effective methods for cultural transmission of ethnic elements through successful case studies, summarizes practical approaches for translating ethnic elements in contemporary compositions, and reveals the developmental patterns of art songs in inheriting national culture while adapting to modern aesthetic trends.

Key words: ethnic elements; art song; contemporary translation; cultural communication

 **foreword**

In today's globalized and culturally diverse world, Chinese art song composition faces dual missions: preserving national heritage while achieving contemporary expression. Ethnic elements serve as the fundamental foundation of art songs, with their traditional application adding unique charm to works. However, in modern contexts, there is a need to transcend formal constraints. The government's advocacy for cultural confidence and evolving public aesthetic demands have driven the reinterpretation and innovation of ethnic elements. This paper explores pathways for translating ethnic elements from tradition to modernity, analyzes their mechanisms and practices in cultural communication, and provides insights for balancing national identity with contemporary relevance in art song creation.

**I. Traditional application of ethnic elements in Chinese art songs**

**(1) Overview of traditional ethnic music elements**

Traditional ethnic musical elements form the cornerstone of Chinese art songs, embodying profound cultural richness. These elements encompass diverse folk melodies across regions: Northern Shaanxi folk songs feature soaring, resonant tones, while Jiangnan folk tunes showcase delicate, melodic qualities. Ethnic instruments possess distinctive timbres—erhu (erhu) produces soulful melodies, pipa (pipa) creates fluid rhythms, and traditional opera vocal styles—particularly Peking Opera's rhythmic variations and Yue Opera's lyrical elegance—serve as musical foundations for art songs[1]. The pentatonic and heptatonic scales of ethnic music, combined with rhythmic patterns from folk traditions like the lively Yangge dance and the graceful tea-picking tune, collectively construct a distinctive system of traditional ethnic music elements that infuse art songs with vivid national character.

| **Traditional ethnic music elements** |  **main features**  | **Example of substitution** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Folk song style | High and clear or delicate | Shaanxi folk songs, Jiangnan folk songs |
| Ethnic instrument timbre | Unique timbre, simulated melodic lines | Hulusi (deep feeling), pipa (flexible) |
| The flavor of opera singing | The board changes or is lyrical | Peking Opera, Yue Opera |
|  national mode  | The pentatonic scale and the heptatonic scale | The palace, merchant, horn, and yu modes |
| Folk music rhythm | Cheerful or light | Yangge and tea-picking tunes |

Table 1 Traditional ethnic music elements

1. **The embodiment of national elements in early art songs**

Early Chinese art songs emphasized the integration of ethnic elements during their creation, showcasing a distinct national style. In terms of lyrics, they predominantly adopted classical poetry or folk literature with ethnic characteristics. For instance, "The Great River Flows East" draws from Su Shi's ci poetry, featuring concise language rich in cultural depth[2]. Melodically, most compositions were based on traditional Chinese modes, incorporating folk songs and opera tunes. Zhao Yuanren's "How Can I Not Think of Him" exemplifies this approach, featuring graceful melodic lines with strong ethnic flavor. While blending Western compositional techniques, the work maintains traditional characteristics while demonstrating artistic innovation. This synthesis effectively presented early art songs with their distinctive ethnic elements.

1. **Analysis of representative composers and works**

Many representative composers have skillfully incorporated ethnic elements into their works. Huang Zi's "Three Wishes of the Rose" draws on Western musical forms while blending traditional Chinese modal scales into its melodies, achieving a delicate emotional expression that showcases artistic refinement without losing ethnic charm. Qing Zhu's "I Live at the Head of the Yangtze River" uses lyrics from Song Dynasty poet Li Zhiyi's ci poetry. Its melody captures the lyrical essence of traditional music, expressing profound longing through melodic subtlety, seamlessly integrating ethnic emotional expression with art song composition. These works exemplify the successful fusion of ethnic cultural elements with innovative creative concepts, establishing them as exemplary models for the application of ethnic elements in Chinese art songs.

**The contemporary translation of ethnic elements in the creation of Chinese art songs**

**(1) Overview of contemporary social and cultural background**

Contemporary Chinese society and culture exhibit significant characteristics of multicultural integration. The wave of globalization has powerfully propelled intense cultural collisions between China and the West, while the widespread adoption of internet technology has made information dissemination more convenient. The younger generation's understanding of traditional culture maintains both ethnic identity and a strong desire for innovative exploration. The nation's proactive promotion of cultural confidence has made the revitalization of national culture a central theme of our era. Initiatives like intangible cultural heritage protection and the revival of traditional festivals have awakened public awareness of ethnic cultural values. Against this backdrop, cultural consumption shows a trend toward personalization and diversification. People pursue the inheritance of traditional charm while yearning for alignment with modern aesthetics. This complex cultural ecosystem creates fertile ground for translating ethnic elements—requiring adherence to cultural core values while breaking free from traditional constraints—to adapt to contemporary social aesthetic demands and communication methods[3].

1. **New forms of expression of national elements in contemporary art songs**

Contemporary art songs have transcended singular musical dimensions in presenting ethnic elements, establishing a new paradigm termed "multisensory ethnicity." Structurally, they employ the "traditional motif-modern variation" approach, using the core melody of "Jasmine Flower" as the thematic foundation. Through atonal variations and polyphonic textures, they preserve melodic distinctiveness while infusing modern sensibilities. Lyrically, they create "contemporary metaphors for traditional imagery," such as using "family letters in QR codes" to echo traditional letter-writing culture, or connecting agrarian civilization with modern society through "high-speed trains sweeping across terraced fields." Performances achieve "cross-media integration," exemplified by the art song "Silk Road Ballad" which combines holographic projection technology. During performances, dynamic reconstructions of Dunhuang murals appear in the background while the singer wears modern attire incorporating Adelais silk elements, accompanied by Western dance movements. This multidimensional transmission of ethnic elements through auditory, visual, and physical expressions has even spawned "immersive concerts" where audiences experience art songs blended with guqin melodies in antique-style architecture spaces, enhanced by tea aroma to deepen cultural immersion.

1. **The innovative use of national elements by contemporary composers**

Contemporary composers employ "creative transformation" to expand the expressive boundaries of ethnic elements. In his work \*Song of the Earth\*, Ye Xiaogang blends the poetic imagery of Tang poetry with melodic fragments from Tibetan folk songs. Using symphonic orchestras to simulate the plucked texture of the Zhan Nianqin (a traditional Tibetan instrument), he incorporates electronic sound effects to mimic wind sounds, crafting an auditory world that harmonizes "Eastern philosophy with modern resonance". Guo Wenjing's \*The Hardship of the Shu Road\* draws from Li Bai's poetry, extracting the "bangda chang" (acrobatic singing) structure from Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang style. The chorus sections are transformed into choral responses that interact with electronic synthesizers, while preserving Sichuan Opera's "roaring singing" techniques and integrating modern vocal breathing control methods. This approach breathes new life into traditional opera elements within contemporary vocal frameworks. Young composer Gong Tianpeng's \*Variations on Chinese Folk Themes\* reengineers 12 regional folk songs through genetic recombination, weaving together the leaping melodies of Northern Shaanxi's Xintianyou (folk ballads) with the lyrical lines of Jiangnan's silk and bamboo music. By replacing traditional percussion rhythms with jazz drumbeats, he preserves the emotional core of folk songs while endowing them with international musical language, transforming ethnic elements into cultural bridges that transcend boundaries.

**3. Cultural transmission of ethnic elements in the creation of Chinese art songs**

**(I) Definition and importance of cultural transmission**

Cultural transmission is the process of precisely conveying the core essence of specific cultural elements to audiences through creative transformation across different eras and cultural contexts. In artistic creation, this manifests as decoding and reconstructing cultural symbols. For Chinese art songs, the transmission of national elements goes beyond formal imitation—it involves inheriting and disseminating national spirit, aesthetic sensibilities, and life wisdom. This is crucially demonstrated in three dimensions: From a cultural heritage perspective, it enables younger generations to grasp the profound connotations of national culture through art songs, preventing traditional elements from becoming hollow symbols. From an artistic innovation standpoint, it provides spiritual core for compositions, ensuring works maintain both national roots and contemporary vitality. From an international communication perspective, precise cultural transmission allows Chinese art songs to convey unique cultural values on the global stage, avoiding misinterpretations caused by cultural barriers. In the context of globalization, effective cultural transmission serves as the key to balancing national identity with global relevance, thereby enhancing cultural recognition and communicative power.

1. **The cultural transmission method of national elements in art songs**

The cultural expression of ethnic elements in art songs requires multi-faceted approaches to create comprehensive communication channels. First is the Symbolic Refinement Method: Extracting key symbols from ethnic music, literature, and folklore while infusing them with new meanings. For instance, transforming the rhythmic patterns of dragon boat races into percussion motifs in songs to symbolize the nation's spirit of unity and progress. Second is the Emotional Resonance Method: Using ethnic elements to evoke shared emotions. For example, employing the lingering melodies of Mongolian long tunes to express nostalgia for homeland, allowing people from different cultural backgrounds to experience universal homesickness[4]. Third is the Contextual Reconstruction Method: Reinterpreting ethnic elements within modern contexts. For example, incorporating the harmonic structures of Dong Grand Song in art songs to resonate with urban dwellers, building an emotional bridge between tradition and modernity. Finally, the Multimodal Integration Method combines audio, video, and stage performances. For instance, pairing vocal performances with traditional ethnic instruments and dances, enhancing cultural symbols' recognizability and emotional impact through audiovisual integration.

1. **Successful case analysis**

Several contemporary art songs have become classics through ingenious cultural communication strategies. Tan Dun's "The Classic of Tea" centers on tea culture, adopting the Tang Dynasty's tea ceremony philosophy of "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility" as its cultural core. Musically, it draws melodic fragments from Hunan folk song "Tea Picking Tune," while using strings to simulate the sound of a tea whisk stirring the brew. The lyrics blend Lu Yu's original "The Classic of Tea" with modern poetry. During performances at New York's Lincoln Center, the show employed a "tea-boiling ritual + multimedia projection of tea ceremony diagrams" format, enabling Western audiences to grasp China's "harmony between heaven and humanity" philosophy in tea culture. This approach achieved precise communication from the element of "tea" to its profound cultural essence. Lei Lei's "Homesickness" draws inspiration from Taiwan's folk song "Thoughts Rise." While retaining the original melody's nostalgic sentiment, the lyrics replace traditional symbols of homesickness with modern imagery like "stamps" and "ship tickets." Its cross-strait tour performances sparked widespread resonance, successfully elevating the emotional core of regional folk songs into a shared Chinese nostalgia culture—a model for cross-regional cultural communication.

**IV. Translation practice of national elements in contemporary art song creation**

**(1) Overview of contemporary art song creation**

Contemporary art song creation demonstrates diverse explorations and cross-genre integration. In terms of creative philosophy, it breaks away from the traditional "poetry + bel canto" model while maintaining cultural heritage roots, actively embracing global musical trends to form a "national foundation + modern expression" approach. Technologically, the widespread use of digital music production techniques enhances flexibility, with electronic synthesizers, virtual instruments, and traditional ethnic instruments blending harmoniously. Harmonic language expands beyond conventional functional harmony to include atonal and microtonal techniques, preserving the pentatonic scale's ethnic essence. Themes resonate more closely with contemporary life, featuring both reimagined classical literature and real-world subjects like urban emotions and ecological conservation. Performance styles integrate bel canto, ethnic, and pop techniques, even incorporating rap and a cappella elements. The boundaries between creation and dissemination are increasingly blurred, with many works engaging audiences through online crowdfunding and live-streamed premieres. This transformation brings art songs from niche circles to mainstream attention, enhancing their accessibility while maintaining artistic integrity.

1. **Modern deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional tonality**

In contemporary art song composition, the reinterpretation of ethnic elements primarily manifests through innovative melodic approaches. Rather than mechanically adopting complete folk or opera melodies, composers now engage in fragmented extraction and recombination of traditional musical motifs. For instance, they deconstruct the soaring trills from Northern Shaanxi folk songs into chromatic motifs, employing modern harmonic layering to create richer emotional dimensions. This reinterpretation preserves the genetic distinctiveness of ethnic music while breaking free from traditional linear melodic structures. A prime example is the modern adaptation of "Chilechuan" (The Chilai River), where composers extract core melodic intervals from Mongolian long tunes and incorporate twelve-tone technique sequences. This approach amplifies the vastness of the grasslands through dissonant interval tension, endowing ethnic melodies with fresh narrative logic within contemporary contexts.

1. **The imagery transformation of lyrics and cultural symbols**

In the process of translating lyrics and cultural symbols, contemporary art songs focus on extracting spiritual essence from ethnic literature and folk imagery, rather than merely superficially piling up symbols. Composers often use classical poetry or folk tales as templates, employing metaphorical imagery to build bridges of cross-cultural resonance. For instance, the "black-painted boat" imagery from Jiangnan water towns is transformed into arpeggio motifs in piano textures, where flowing notes simulate rippling waters. This approach preserves the poetic essence of regional culture while avoiding literal depiction. In the creation of "Youlan Cao", the composer draws on the metaphorical tradition of the Book of Songs, combining the imagery of "orchids growing in secluded valleys" with free verse from modern poetry. Combined with atonal vocal lines, this fusion elevates the "purity" symbol in traditional culture into a more universal expression.

1. **The integration and innovation of playing and singing techniques**

The translation of ethnic elements is also reflected in the cross-boundary integration of performance and vocal techniques. Contemporary art songs have transcended the boundaries between Chinese and Western instruments, combining the unique playing methods of ethnic instruments with Western vocal techniques to create new acoustic effects. For instance, incorporating Peking Opera's "brain-back sound" technique into vocal performances and adopting the breath control methods of bel canto singing have endowed the voice with both the penetrating resonance of ethnic charm and the fullness of modern vocal artistry. In instrumental arrangements, cello is used to mimic the sliding techniques of the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle), while harmonics from the guzheng create an interwoven space of virtual and real sounds. Such technical translations ensure that the expressiveness of ethnic music remains not confined to traditional instrument acoustic characteristics, yet still highlights the delicate texture of national culture within the grand framework of symphonic architecture.

 epilogue ：

The contemporary reinterpretation and cultural transmission of ethnic elements in Chinese art song composition have achieved dual milestones: preserving the essence of national culture while bridging modern aesthetics. From early experimental applications to today's multidimensional, cross-media innovations, art songs continue to break new ground in their heritage preservation. Successful cases demonstrate that through creative transformation, these elements can serve as timeless bridges connecting cultures across eras. Future creations must persistently explore convergence points between tradition and modernity, enabling art songs to amplify cultural outreach and strengthen national identity, ultimately achieving harmony between artistic excellence and communicative impact.

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