



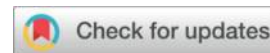
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ANALYSIS OF CHINESE ELEMENTS IN THE MUSIC OF

OVERSEAS CHINESE COMPOSERS



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Abstracts: From the perspective of regional area studies, there has been a notable shift among scholars toward focusing on various domains such as world ethnic music, cross-border ethnic music, and the ethnomusicology of diasporic communities. Within this context, overseas Chinese composers stand out due to their unique cross-cultural identities, which significantly influence their musical creations. These composers often produce works that diverge considerably from those of their counterparts who do not share similar cultural backgrounds. A pivotal question that resonates among all overseas Chinese composers concerns how their music can be understood by audiences beyond China and how they can effectively communicate Chinese stylistic elements within their compositions.

This paper aims to address this question by selecting three representative composers from the community of overseas Chinese composers, along with an examination of their notable works. The analysis is structured around three critical dimensions: instrumentation, musical content, and sonic effects. Through this framework, the paper investigates the ways in which Chinese elements are manifested in their music. Ultimately, the findings of this study will illuminate the presence of these Chinese elements within the works of overseas Chinese composers and will delve into the methods by which these elements are articulated and integrated with the diverse cultures of the countries in which these composers reside. This exploration not only enhances our understanding of cross-cultural musical expression but also contributes to the broader discourse on global music practices.

Keywords: Overseas Chinese composers, Chinese elements, compositional techniques

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "overseas Chinese composers" refers to a group of composers who were born, raised, and often trained in mainland China before relocating abroad to continue their musical careers. These individuals bring a unique perspective to the global music scene, as their compositions reflect a fusion of traditional Chinese musical elements with contemporary and Western compositional techniques. Their dual cultural

background enables them to navigate and merge vastly different musical traditions, resulting in works that resonate with diverse audiences.

One of the defining characteristics of overseas Chinese composers is their deliberate engagement with Chinese cultural heritage in their compositions. By incorporating elements such as traditional Chinese instruments, ancient poetry, calligraphy-inspired musical gestures, and folk dance rhythms, these composers create a dialogue between Chinese and Western musical traditions. This paper explores how such techniques are employed by prominent overseas Chinese composers to preserve and transform Chinese cultural identity in contemporary music. Through analyses of works by Zhou Long, Chen Yi, and Chou Wen-chung, it examines the integration of traditional Chinese aesthetics into modern compositional practices, highlighting how these artists bridge cultural divides and contribute to a global musical dialogue.

2. COLLABORATION WITH TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Traditional Chinese music refers to the music passed down from ancient China, encompassing folk music, scholar music, religious music, court music, and other forms (Wang & Chang, 2017). The instruments used to perform traditional Chinese music are known as traditional Chinese instruments. These instruments are numerous and include the guzheng, pipa, erhu, guqin, suona, among others. Over time, these instruments have accumulated distinct characteristics in terms of pitch, harmony, melody, and timbre, all of which reflect the unique cultural flavor of China. As a result, the sound of traditional Chinese instruments is easily recognizable to listeners, who can immediately discern the Chinese characteristics embedded in their timbre. Many overseas composers, in their works, place traditional Chinese instruments alongside Western instruments on the same stage, aiming to create a sound that more distinctly represents Chinese musical identity.

For example, composer Zhou Long proposed the creative concept of "two types of instruments," which refers to the combination of traditional Chinese instruments and Western instruments. This concept is exemplified in his 2005 composition *Pianogongs*, which employs the idea of "two types of instruments." The piece is performed using a piano and a pair of Beijing gongs, one large and one small. Although two instruments are used, the performance requires only a single performer. The musician plays the piano with one hand while striking the gongs with the other. In the score, Zhou represents the large and small gongs with two distinct pitches: the higher pitch corresponds to the small gong, while the lower pitch represents the large gong, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The big gong and small gongs in *Piangongs*



Zhou Long's approach to this composition stems from his perception of the piano and Beijing gongs as percussion instruments, aiming to create a sound reminiscent of the gong-and-drum ensemble often heard in Peking opera (Zhou, 2006). In this piece, although the piano is a Western instrument, it assumes roles beyond its traditional function, representing the bangu (a small drum) and dagu (a large drum) commonly used in Peking opera. For instance, as shown in Figure 2, in the first measure of the piece, the piano part appears in the middle register with staccato notes, performed with a dynamic decrease from forte to piano. This imitates the characteristics of a large drum being struck. By the third measure, the piano part shifts from the middle register to the upper register, transitioning from the deep, resonant tone of the large drum to the crisp, agile timbre of the bangu.

This illustrates Zhou Long's ability to explore the full potential of the piano, moving beyond its conventional tonal characteristics. He leverages the piano's versatility to

blend it with traditional Chinese instruments, ultimately showcasing the collision of musical cultures and the universality of music through instruments from entirely different cultural backgrounds.

Figure 2 Zhou Long Pianogongs m.1-3



3. MUSICAL CONTENT PRESENTATION

Given their cross-cultural identity, overseas Chinese composers often draw creative inspiration from ancient Chinese traditional culture, such as poetry, ethnic minority cultures, calligraphy, Chinese painting, and ancient Chinese philosophical thought. These rich cultural elements are typically transformed into sonic forms by composers, resulting in organized pitches, logical tonal progressions, and expressive timbres, gradually establishing compositional techniques imbued with the spirit of Chinese culture. These elements constitute the core of a musical work, embodying the specific ideas that composers seek to express through their music.

This section will highlight several types of musical content frequently employed by these composers and provide illustrative explanations.

3.1 Poetry

Chinese classical poetry has been an integrated art form of literature and music since its inception. As recorded in the ancient Chinese text *Preface to the Book of Songs*: "Emotion is expressed through sound, sound organized into patterns is called music. Reciting the words is poetry, singing the sounds is song" (Cheng, 2024). This

illustrates that ancient Chinese poetic culture inherently combined classical poetry with melodic elements suitable for chanting.

Chinese classical poetry is characterized by its elegant phrasing and symmetrical structure. Many composers have drawn inspiration from these attributes, leveraging the richness of ancient poetic culture as a foundation for their musical creations.

The Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-chung composed the orchestral work *How Many Flowers Fall* in 1954. According to Chou himself, this piece was created during the pinnacle of his musical development (Zhou, 2006). The work draws inspiration from two poems by Tang Dynasty poets: *Spring Dawn* by Meng Haoran (689–740) and *On the Youzhou Terrace* by Chen Zi'ang (659–700). The title is taken from the closing line of *Spring Dawn*: “Night rain falls with gusts of wind; how many flowers have fallen?”

However, Chou's use of classical Chinese poetry goes far beyond merely borrowing a title. Instead, he places greater emphasis on interpreting and incorporating the poetic essence into the musical content of the piece.

As shown in Figure 3, measures 1–17 form the introductory section of the piece. In this section, the thematic melody consists of four phrases. From the perspective of melodic progression, the first, second, and fourth phrases are developed through sequential variation, reflecting the "qi-cheng-zhuan-he" (introduction, development, transition, and conclusion) structural principles of classical Chinese poetry.

Moreover, classical Chinese poetry adheres to a specific principle: the third phrase must introduce a contrast, while the fourth phrase resolves and returns to the initial structure. This characteristic is vividly apparent in the four phrases of the musical introduction, where the phrasing clearly conveys the poetic flavor of Chinese classical poetry.

For example, in the poem *Spring Dawn* referenced by Chou Wen-chung in this work, the ending characters of the first, second, and fourth lines ("xiao," "niao," and "shao") are in oblique tones (rising or departing), forming a rhyme scheme. In contrast, the third line ends with a character in a level tone ("sheng"), creating a deliberate tonal shift. This is a hallmark of Chinese poetic metrics. Similarly, in the thematic material that appears four times in the introduction, the final notes of the first, second, and fourth phrases consistently resolve to B $\flat$, while the third phrase concludes uniquely on F. This mirrors the structural and tonal contrasts typical of classical Chinese poetry.

Figure 3 Zhou Wenzhong *How Many Flowers Fall* m.1-17

The image displays a musical score for measures 1 through 17 of Zhou Wenzhong's *How Many Flowers Fall*. The score is written for three woodwind instruments: Flute (FL.), Oboe (Ob.), and Clarinet (CL.). The time signature is 6/8, and the tempo is marked 'Molto tranquillo' with a quarter note equal to 88. The key signature has one flat (B $\flat$). The score is divided into four systems. The first system (measures 1-4) features the Flute part with a 'solo' marking, a 'p' (piano) dynamic, and a 'legatissimo' phrasing. The second system (measures 5-8) features the Oboe part with a 'solo' marking, a 'p' dynamic, and a 'legatissimo' phrasing. The third system (measures 9-12) features the Flute part with a 'solo' marking, a 'p' dynamic, and a 'legatissimo' phrasing. The fourth system (measures 13-17) features the Clarinet part with a 'solo' marking, a 'p' dynamic, and a 'legatissimo' phrasing. The Clarinet part also includes a 'ten.' (tension) marking and a 'poco f' (poco forte) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like 'smorz.' (smorzando) and 'poco' (poco). Red boxes highlight specific notes in the Flute and Oboe parts, and a red box highlights a note in the Clarinet part.

3.2 Calligraphy

In addition to ancient poetry, drawing inspiration from the art of calligraphy is another approach frequently explored by composers. For instance, the influence of calligraphy can be observed in the previously discussed orchestral work *How Many Flowers Fall*. Similarly, Chou Wen-chung's 1996 composition, *Clouds*, his first string quartet, finds parallels between the flowing brushstrokes of cursive script (*caoshu*) and musical expression.

This section will explore the relationship between calligraphy and music using composer Chen Yi's pipa solo piece *Dian (Dots)* as a case study.

The composer Chen Yi offered the following explanation of her piece *Dian (Dots)*: “The structure of the composition was inspired by the imagined movements associated with the eight strokes of the Chinese calligraphic character *Yong* (永) in regular script: ce, le, nu, gou, ce, lüe, zhuo, and zhe” (Gao, 2018).

The "Eight Principles of Yong" (*Yongzi Bafa*) form the foundational rules of brushwork in Chinese calligraphy. They illustrate the techniques for crafting regular script strokes, using the sequence of the eight strokes in the character *Yong* as a teaching method:

- **Ce (Dot):** Start with a slanted stroke, firm and decisive, spreading the brush hairs evenly to create a strong finish.
- **Le (Horizontal):** Begin with a reverse stroke before moving steadily, transitioning from slow to swift, avoiding a flat and straight motion.
- **Nu (Vertical):** The stroke should not be overly rigid or stiff; rather, it should contain a subtle curve to convey flexibility and vitality.
- **Gou (Hook):** Pause with the tip of the brush, gathering force into the tip before executing a sharp, concise turn.
- **Ce (Upward Horizontal):** Similar to the vertical stroke at the start, the force is concentrated toward the end of the stroke.
- **Lüe (Long Leftward Slash):** Begin like a vertical stroke, but taper the end slightly, ensuring the stroke conveys strength throughout.
- **Zhuo (Short Leftward Slash):** A quick and sharp stroke that starts boldly, projecting strength and precision.
- **Zhe (Rightward Pressing Stroke):** Begin lightly with a reverse stroke, shift direction deliberately, and finish with a reserved yet forceful flourish.

Chen Yi's *Dian* translates these calligraphic principles into music, mirroring the dynamic brush movements and rhythmic energy of the strokes in the phrasing, articulation, and timbral variety of the pipa performance.

The introduction of the piece (Figure 4: measures 1–13) represents the first stroke of the character *Yong* (永), known as "ce" (side). It begins with a strong accent, followed by a gradual increase in tempo. In the latter part, sixteenth-note rhythms are introduced, with techniques such as glissando, strumming, and push-pull vibrato employed to connect the rapid chord progressions. The performer controls the dynamics with the left and right hands, creating a dramatic crescendo. When the music reaches its peak, there is a sudden decrescendo, highlighting the calligraphic motion of "side stroke with sharp fall, laying down the brush" and "strong finish with a contained tip." The musical phrasing thus mirrors the energetic and controlled movement of the brush in calligraphy.

Figure 4 Chen Yi *Dian* m.1-13



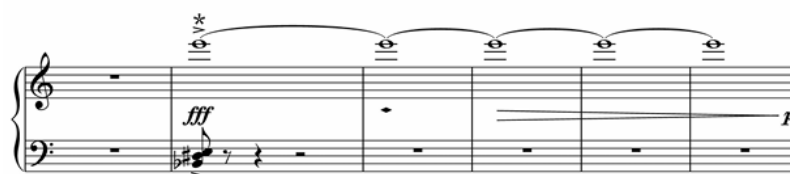
In measures 46–60 (Figure 5), the music vividly portrays the dynamic of the brushstroke “起笔同直划，得力在划末” ("start with a straight stroke, gathering strength at the end of the stroke"). The composer uses the delicate timbre of single notes on the pipa and the instrument's vibrato to evoke the graceful flow of the long leftward slash in the "Eight Strokes of Yong." The range of the music is quite expansive, with a rich polyphonic texture as the high and low voices alternately weave in and out. The passage culminates in a powerful strumming technique, creating a dramatic increase in volume from soft to loud, embodying the calligraphic principle “起笔同直划，出锋要稍肥，力要送到” ("begin with a straight stroke, the tip should be slightly broader, and the force must be fully conveyed").

At the end of the piece, the composer employs the deep "rolling finger" technique to gradually diminish the sound, eventually leading to silence, mirroring the calligraphic effect of “收锋” ("retracting the tip"). This subtle and refined ending represents the controlled, conclusive motion of the calligraphy brush, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5 Chen Yi *Dian* m.46-60



Figure 6 Chen Yi *Dian* coda



3.3 Folk Dance and Song Materials in China

China, home to 56 ethnic groups, has 55 minority groups, each with its unique cultural characteristics. As a result, many composers draw inspiration from the musical traditions of these minority cultures. This compositional approach is quite common. For instance, Zhou Long's *Wu Kui* is based on Manchu music and dance, while Chen Yi's *Duo Ye* is inspired by the folk songs and dances of the Dong people. This section will focus on *Duo Ye* to demonstrate how Chinese folk music and dance serve as creative material for composers.

In *Duo Ye*, Chen Yi incorporates a segment of a Dong folk song, with the original melody shown in Figure 7. The core interval relationships of Dong music are C-A-D. In Chen Yi's *Duo Ye*, as seen in Figure 8, from measures 1 to 3, she uses the melody E-#C-#F-E, which can be sung in full form as do-la-re-do. This highlights how Chen Yi has adapted the fundamental interval structure of Dong folk music into a new compositional context while maintaining its cultural essence.

Figure 7 Dong folk song *You Come Here and Stay for a Few Days* (侗族大歌《侗族大歌》))



Figure 8 Chen Yi *Duoye* m.1-3



4. MAKING WESTERN INSTRUMENTS SPEAK CHINESE

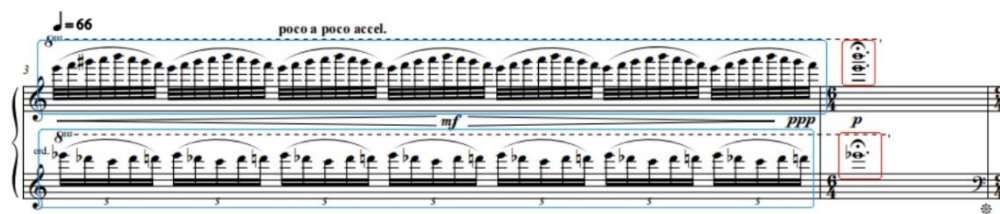
In order to infuse a modern compositional work with a distinct Chinese character, many composers experiment with various techniques for achieving a Chinese sound in the final acoustic presentation. One of the most common methods is to have Western instruments produce sounds that evoke traditional Chinese music through special playing techniques.

An example of this approach can be found in Zhou Long's *Piano Bells* (钢琴钟). This piece, rather than being a typical piano solo, resembles a guqin piece performed on the piano, a quality determined by the unique playing techniques used in the composition. The guqin, one of China's oldest traditional instruments, not only has a rich cultural history but also features several playing techniques unique to the instrument. *Piano Bells* incorporates these guqin techniques into piano performance, resulting in a distinctive sound that differentiates it from traditional piano music.

For example, one of the common guqin techniques is called “rolling and sweeping” (滚 and 拂), which is widely used in guqin compositions. In the guqin piece *Flowing Water* (流水), this technique is used over 60 times to represent the movement of water and mimic the sound of flowing water. When playing “rolling,” the right-hand fingers are used to pluck the strings outward (called 摘), while “sweeping” involves using the right index finger to pluck the strings inward (called 抹). The range of this technique can expand from two strings to the entire set of strings, creating a smooth and continuous sound.

In *Piano Bells*, the “rolling and sweeping” technique appears in measures 3–4, the introductory section of the piece. As shown in Example 4, the right hand plays a scale made up of five continuous thirty-second notes, first ascending and then descending, before landing on a pair of notes formed by the lowest and highest notes of the group. The left hand plays a five-note figure, consisting of five sixteenth notes, moving first downward and then upward, ultimately resolving on the highest note. In this passage, the ascending motion of the right hand represents the “sweeping” technique, while the descending motion represents the “rolling.”

Figure 9 Zhou Long Pianobells m.3-4



5. CONCLUSION

Overseas Chinese composers occupy a unique position in the contemporary music landscape, serving as cultural ambassadors who bridge the gap between East and West. By embedding elements of Chinese traditional music, philosophy, and art into modern compositions, they create works that not only preserve Chinese heritage but also reinterpret it within a globalized context. These compositions often go beyond mere cultural symbolism; they embody profound intercultural dialogues that challenge the boundaries of genre and identity.

The examples discussed in this paper, including Zhou Long's *Piano Bells*, Chen Yi's *Duo Ye*, and Chou Wen-chung's *How Many Flowers Fall*, illustrate the innovative approaches taken by these composers. They reimagine Western instruments to produce distinctly Chinese sounds, draw inspiration from traditional poetry and calligraphy, and incorporate folk dance and music into contemporary frameworks. Such efforts not only enrich the vocabulary of contemporary music but also underscore the universality of artistic expression. In doing so, overseas Chinese composers contribute significantly to a growing understanding of how music can serve as a medium for cultural exchange and synthesis.

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