



References, Imitation, and Innovation: On the Influence of Traditional Chinese Music Culture on Western Musical Composition

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Abstract. Since the nineteenth century, the West has gradually become interested in the unique charm of traditional Chinese music culture. It can be seen through a chronological lineage that the Western musicians have cited, imitated, and innovated Chinese music and culture over the past century. Entering the new century, Chinese music culture will continue to have a positive impact on the development of world music culture.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Music · Taoism Thought · History of Western Music · John Milton Cage

1 Introduction

From the process of western absorption of Chinese music and culture since the 19th century, we can see the process of western musicians quoting, imitating and innovating Chinese music and culture over the past century. Entering the new century, Chinese music and culture will have a positive impact on the world music culture development.

2 Shaping and Collapse of China and Its Culture in Western Civilization from the 13th to 19th Century

In 1298, when the image of the empire of the Yuan Dynasty boasting vast territory, great power, and abundant resources depicted in the *Travels of Marco Polo* was first unveiled to European civilization, the Western society began to imagine and explore Eastern civilization. Throughout the 15th to 17th century, the Age of Exploration in the West, China symbolized wealth, civilization, and wisdom in Western's hazy fantasy. From the second half of the 17th century to the 18th century, when the Western society entered the Enlightenment period, the classical Chinese philosophical works represented by *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Philippe Couplet, 1687) became recognized by the Western society with the successive translations by missionaries in China [1]. The image of China in the Western consciousness thus rose from the material level of imagination

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to the philosophical level of shaping. A number of Western philosophers elaborated on what they understood as “Chinese philosophy” one after another. For example, Hegel concluded the philosophical view of reason as “an idea held by the East” (Hegel; Translated by Wang Z.S., *The Philosophy of History*, 1963:18–20) [2]; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) regarded that “the greatest civilization and the most refined culture of mankind are finally converging at the two ends of our continent, namely, Europe and the other end-Tschina (that is, the pronunciation of the word “China”) resembling “Eastern Europe.” [3] Voltaire even bravely broke through the Western Christian view of history following the *Bible* and boldly wrote that it was in China that the history of the world was staged (Wang Y.S., 2009:559) [4]. It can be said that it was the translation and interpretation of Chinese philosophy by Western intellectuals that promoted the “Sino-mania” in Western society in the first half of the 18th century, driving and influencing the creation of Western art. The image of Chinese people in the plays popular in England and France in the first half of the 18th century and the “Chinese-like” architecture and decorative style in European palaces are two examples.

In terms of music, the first Chinese music introduced to Europe was *Wan Nian Huan*, a Chinese folk song included in the *Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, together with the Kingdoms of Korea and Tibet* by the French missionary Jean Baptiste du Halde (1674–1743) in 1735. The song was later included in the *Dictionary of Music* (1768) by the French literary giant J.J. Rousseau [5]. Despite the fact that some of the musical notes were wrongly transcribed, the song was still widely cited and convinced Western audiences.

Circumstances changed with the passage of time. In the 19th century, when the strong Western military attack blew open the closed door of the Qing court, the real image of China was exposed to the West without cover. The so-called “state of wealth and civilization” descended into a feudal and backward semi-colony. The idealized image of China that had been imagined and rumored to be utopian by Westerners was shattered by reality. And the ancient Chinese philosophical ideas were the only thing that was still recognized by the Western intellectual class and continued to wield their influence on the Western cultural trend in the 19th century. Among them includes the influence of traditional Chinese music and culture on contemporary Western musical composition.

3 From Carl Maria Von Weber to Giacomo Puccini: The References and Imitations of Chinese Music and Culture by Western Composers

Eastern characteristic items like silk, tea, and spices were initially considered “priceless treasures” by Western society. Likewise, Chinese music was initially introduced as a highly exotic “sound” in Western music culture in the late 18th and 19th centuries. At that time, the use of Chinese musical elements by Western composers was only limited to the stage of “reference,” i.e., adding harmony and orchestration to Chinese music in the way how homophony is created to amplify the imagination of Western audiences toward the mysterious East. When it came to the first half of the 20th century, Western composers expanded their focus from the Western world to the world at large, and Chinese culture and Chinese music became all the rage. With several Western musicians consciously

incorporating the tonal and melodic characteristics of Chinese music, “imitation” prevailed as the main means by which Western composers composed Chinese-style musical works.

The research results of the renowned scholar Mr. Gong Hongyu indicated (all works not annotated below are from Mr. Gong Hongyu’s lecture *Chinese Music in Western Works: Propaganda, Evolution, and Research (1735–1998)* at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music on October 11th, 2019) that the first Western composer to cite Chinese musical elements in his works was the German composer Carl Maria von Weber in the 19th century. In 1804, he composed the *Overtura Chinesa* (now lost) on the theme of *Wan Nian Huan* (also known as *Liu Ye Jin*), a Chinese folk song recorded in Rousseau’s *Dictionary of Music* (1768). The same tune was later also adopted when he composed the overture to the play *Turandot* translated by the German poet Schiller. Weber’s *Turandot* overture was a hit in Europe, exerting a certain impact on musicians of the future generations. For example, in 1911, the English composer Eugen Goossens drew on this work to create *Symphony on Chinese Themes*; and in 1940, Pual Hindemith, a leading figure in neoclassical music of the 20th century, reintroduced this work’s theme into the second movement of his *Symphony on Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*.

According to Mr. Gong Hongyu, the folk song *Jasmine Flower* was first introduced to Europe around 1796 and initially appeared as salon music to Western audiences. In 1797, the English composer William Ouseley also included the song in his book *The Oriental collections*. In 1804, the Englishman John Barrow published *Jasmine Flower* collected in China with the pronunciation of Chinese lyrics in his *Travels in China*. In 1807, the famous English musician William Croch recorded the melody of *Jasmine Flower* in his lecture notes of *Samples of Various Musical Styles* at Oxford and London Universities, further promoting the dissemination of the song. In terms of musical composition, some musicians in the 19th century consciously cited this folk song theme in their works for various purposes. For example, in 1862, the Austrian composer Johann Strauss composed the *Japanesischer Marsch* with the theme of *Jasmine Flower*. In 1890, the Russian composer Anton Arensky cited the theme of *Jasmine Flower* in the middle section of his piano work *Etudes on Chinese Themes*. In 1935, the Australian composer Percy Grainger composed the piano piece *Beautiful Flowers* with the theme of the folk song. However, among all the Western composers who cited *Jasmine Flower* in the 19th century, the most famous was the renowned Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. In 1920 when Puccini came across a music box from China at the home of his diplomat friend E. Fassini-camossi, he heard the melody of *Jasmine Flower* and cited it in his legendary play *Turandot* (1924). From that moment, *Jasmine Flower* became not only the most familiar Chinese melody in the Western world but even the most internationally-known musical symbol representing the image of China.

Not only did Puccini cite the melody of *Jasmine Flower*, but he also consciously imitated the characteristics of Chinese music to create pentatonic melodies in *Turandot*. For example, the music of the prince’s rejection of King Otto in Act 2, Scene 2 was created by Puccini himself. Although this act of self-composition belongs to imitation, it is believed that this change from reference to imitation already reflected the Western composers’ open-mindedness and positive attitudes toward Chinese music (eastern music) at the end of the 19th century.

Throughout the 19th century, there were a number of composers who featured Chinese musical styles in their imitations. Take two representative figures of French impressionist music, Achille-Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel as examples. Debussy composed *Rondel Chinois* in 1880, while Ravel adopted the pentatonic melody in *Laideronette*, the sixth song of *Suite, Ma mere l'oye* created in 1908. Among others included *Chinese Dance* from Act 2 of the ballet the *Nutcracker* by Russian composer Tchaikovsky in 1892; *Tambourin chinois* by Austrian-American violinist Kreisler published in 1910; the fantasia *In a Chinese Temple Garden* by English composer Albert W. Keteolbey in 1923; *Chinoiserie* by the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla y Matheu in 1909; *the Nightingale and Chinese March* by Stravinsky created from 1908 to 1914.

It is easy to see from these works that in the first half of the 19th century, Western composers began to consciously surpass their predecessors' practice of citing Chinese musical elements to imitate the tonal and melodic characteristics of Chinese music for brand-new compositions. However, this kind of imitation remained at the formal level, whose essence was still confined to "curious thinking" and "eastern imagination."

4 From Gustav Mahler to John Milton Cage: The Integration and Innovation of Traditional Chinese Culture and Aesthetic Thoughts by Western Composers

It is believed in this paper that the "integration and innovation" stage at which Western composers absorbed and then transformed traditional Chinese culture and aesthetic thoughts into their own musical language began with the songs created by Gustav Mahler and others. In 1908, Gustav Mahler composed the symphonic cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* based on six Tang poems included in *Die chinesische Flöte*, a Chinese poetry translated by Hans Bettger. For this work that neither cited any traditional Chinese musical elements nor extensively imitated the Chinese pentatonic scale, Western scholars argued that "the exoticism of the lyrics is slightly implied by the details of the instrumental colors and the use of the pentatonic scale" (Donald Jay Grout, Claude Victor Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 2010:542). With the aesthetic concepts embedded in Chinese Tang poems inspiring and resonating with him, Mahler gradually found a fulcrum to balance the two sides of the personality, extreme ecstasy, and deadly premonition, during his musical interpretation of Chinese poetry.

Perhaps influenced by Mahler, musicians of the same period also took a keen interest in Chinese poetry. For example, *Song of the Clear Brook*, the first piece in *Nostalgia Songs* composed by Russian composer Petr Volodko in 1916–1917, derived from a poem by Chinese poet Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty; The French composer Albert Roussel created three choral pieces *Deux Poemes Chinois* from 1907–1932. Arnold Schoenberg, a representative of the Twelve-tone system, also referred to *Die chinesische Flöte* to select *The Moon and the Earth* and *The Lover's Wish*, based on which *Mixed Chorus* (op.27) was created. It can be found from these works that these composers had been completely free from the influence of citing and imitating Chinese music, and had progressed to absorb and transform traditional Chinese culture and aesthetic concepts. Such an evolution of composition finally reached the realm of "integration and innovation" in John Milton Cage's musical creation.

As early as the late 1940s, when John Cage was studying Eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhism at Columbia University, his interest in traditional Chinese culture was ignited. Under the great shock of ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts, he studied the Chinese *I-Ching* and figured out the creation of “aleatory music.” He developed 64 musical diagrams according to the 64 divinatory symbols of the I-Ching theory, incorporating timbre, time, and pitch. With three coins tossed, he combined these diagrams and compiled them into *Music of Changes* (1951). Later, the traditional Chinese philosophy integrated itself into John Cage’s creation. And it was in 1952 that he composed the “astounding” aleatory music piece *4'33''*. Without any musical sounds, all the sounds in the concert hall constitute the piece itself. This is undoubtedly the most direct example of the Taoism thought of “The most beautiful voice is silence” in Western contemporary music composition [6]. The release of this work, as believed in this paper, reflected that the “interest” in China in contemporary Western composers had risen from the musical to the philosophical level, and that Chinese culture and its essence had become an important part of the globalized cultural value system accepted, absorbed and integrated by the Western society. At this point, the influence of Chinese music and its culture in the West in the 21st century entered a stage of complete integration and innovation, where both Western composers and Chinese composers in the West cherished Chinese culture as a rich treasure and made new interpretations and compositions from their perspectives.

5 Conclusion

It can be seen throughout the references, imitation, and innovation of Chinese music culture in the West since the 13th century that the West inevitably judged and applied traditional Chinese music culture from the identity and perspective of the “other.” Over the thousand years of history, traditional Chinese music culture, as an element symbolizing Eastern civilization, has not only outlined the Western imagination of a “utopian civilization” in the East but also opened a window for the West to understand Chinese culture. However, it should be made clear that Western musicians, instead of treating traditional Chinese music culture in an equal-footed manner, looked upon Chinese civilization, including music, with a chauvinistic mindset represented by “Euro-centrism.” It was not until the late 20th century that this unequal criticism of cultural values changed. With the continuously growing soft power in China, local Chinese composers, Western composers, and Chinese composers in the West all had their views on the role and influence of Chinese music culture in Western musical contexts. Some Western scholars considered traditional Chinese music culture a historical heritage, which can only be regarded as a cultural relic, while local Chinese composers believed that the creation of contemporary Chinese music necessitated the exploration and innovation of traditional Chinese music culture. In their view, no matter how Chinese music developed, its aesthetic essence was still deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese music culture. Other Chinese composers who had lived in the West for a long time saw traditional Chinese music culture as an important symbol to highlight their cultural attributes. No matter what style of innovation was displayed in their works, the core element of music always originated from traditional Chinese music culture, enjoying a thousand-year history.

All in all, Chinese music and culture in the 21st century no longer exists as a curiosity under “Euro-centralism” but has established itself as a universal culture within the current

development history of music. As the West has gone through the process of citing-imitating-innovating Chinese music and culture, what new styles, ideas, and works will be expected to emerge in the next stage of history?

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