The Chinese Ruan: A Transcultural Mediator

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Abstract. This article takes the ruan as the research object and explores the dual impacts of the transplantation of Western music and the trend of popularization on the development of Chinese traditional music. Through the analysis of the transplantation of Western musical pieces, technical transplantation, and Feng Mantian's "ruan rock", the article reveals the innovative practices of Chinese traditional music in aspects such as the improvement of instruments and performance techniques. The article shows that Western musical elements not only promote the modern transformation of Chinese traditional music but also trigger disputes over cultural subjectivity. Meanwhile, the popularization of ruan through cross-genre technical application and cultural reconstruction makes the ruan a musical medium connecting tradition and modernity. Finally, it points out that the sustainable development of Chinese traditional music requires creative transformation under the principle of "rooted in tradition, maintaining integrity and innovation", so that the Chinese musical voice can truly participate in the global music dialogue.

Keywords: Ruan, Western Music Transplantation, Popularization, Cross-cultural Communication.

1 Introduction

In the context of globalization, with the in-depth development of cultural exchanges, the combination of traditional music and popular music is irresistible. As a Chinese traditional instrument, the ruan has great potential for fusion. Although the guzheng and pipa dominate the research on Chinese musical instruments, the cross-cultural potential of the ruan remains underexplored.

As a typical representative of traditional instruments, the ruan, from the finalization of its form as "ruan xian" in the Tang Dynasty to the innovative experiments of contemporary electric ruan, its evolutionary trajectory vividly illustrates the complex process of the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western musical cultures. Since the 20th century, Western music has continuously influenced the development path of Chinese traditional music through means such as the transplantation from Western pieces, the borrowing of techniques, and the improvement of traditional instruments. This influence seems to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it promotes the progressive

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development of Chinese music; on the other hand, it also triggers concerns about the "loss of traditional aesthetics".

Entering the 21st century, musicians represented by Feng Mantian have created new paradigms such as "ruan rock", marking the deepening of the trend of popularization. Through means such as electroacoustic transformation, cross-genre performances, and international cooperation, the ruan has gradually broken through the stereotypical impression of being a "museum art", and has obtained the ability to express itself in a modern way while maintaining its traditional charm.

This article focuses on the ruan, an instrument with both historical heritage and innovative potential. By analyzing its musical transplantation, popularization practices, and international dissemination cases, it explores three core questions: How do Western musical elements reshape the performance system of Chinese folk music? How does the popularization transformation balance the needs of cultural inheritance and innovation? How do traditional instruments establish their subjectivity in the modern musical ecology? The article will reveal that the modernization process of the ruan is essentially a microcosm of how Chinese musicians respond to the challenges of globalization. This can provide important inspiration for the creative transformation of traditional cultural resources. In the era of civilized dialogue where "Each country has its own beauty, and together we can achieve common beauty", Chinese folk music is sounding the harmony of cultural self-awareness and self-confidence through the vibration of the ruan strings.

2 The Transplantation of Western Music in the Field of Chinese Folk Music

2.1 Case Studies

The Transplanted Piece *Flight of the Bumble-bee*. The *Flight of the Bumble-bee* is an orchestral piece composed by the Russian composer Nikolai Andreivitch Rimsky-Korsakov [1]. It was transplanted as a ruan piece by Zhu Xincheng. The whole piece makes extensive use of chromatic scales. The piece starts with a chromatic scale descending two octaves and ends with a chromatic scale ascending two octaves, and the overall rhythm is compact and fast.

The sharp and rapid "buzzing" timbre of the original piece highly matches the metallic texture of the violin's high register. However, the nylon strings and the resonance box structure of the ruan naturally tend to be warm and mellow. To meet the requirements of the piece, the performer needs to adjust the string contact point. By plucking near the bridge, sharp and bright overtones can be produced to simulate the "buzzing" sound effect of the swarm of bees flapping their wings. When plucking near the fingerboard, it returns to the traditional soft and beautiful timbre, creating a dynamic contrast. The performer deliberately retains the unique tremolo of the ruan during the high-speed performance, allowing the Western melodic lines to be infused with an oriental charm.

The transplantation of *Flight of the Bumble-bee* is not a simple "technical replication". Instead, it is a practice for the ruan to establish its own musical language in a cross-cultural context. Through the dual breakthroughs in speed and timbre, it breaks

the stereotype that "traditional instruments are only suitable for traditional pieces" and demonstrates its ability to handle complex music.

The Composition *The First Ruan Concerto - Memories of Yunnan.* With the continuous deepening of the influence of Western music on Chinese traditional music, Chinese composers have begun to compose pieces in the concerto form. Take *The First Ruan Concerto - Memories of Yunnan* composed by Liu Xing as an example. This piece makes extensive use of elements of popular music, such as the application of syncopation, non-traditional harmonic progressions, the continuous repetition of short musical phrases, and the application of techniques similar to those of an electric guitar, etc. It also incorporates elements of Peking Opera music and the style of the guqin [2]. It places extremely high demands on the performing techniques of the performers, which leads the performers to excessively pursue technical difficulties and neglect the understanding and exploration of the style and rhythm of traditional Chinese music.

2.2 The Influence of the Emergence of Transplanted Western Pieces on the Development of Chinese Traditional Music

Positive Influences. The requirements of Western music for harmony, polyphony, and musical form structure have promoted the improvement of Chinese traditional musical instruments. Since the "Datong Yulehui" in the 1920s, China has had a history of a hundred years in exploring the symphonization of Chinese folk music. The original ruan had no sound holes, insufficient resonance, and a low volume. To meet the performance needs, the modern ruan has significantly improved its volume and timbre penetration by expanding the resonance box and adding sound hole designs [3]. In the 6th National Symposium on Musical musical instruments, the middle-sized ruan in six strings was improved. The six-string design expands the range of middle-sized ruan, which makes it be able to play both the chords of Chinese folk music and the chords of the Western system [4]. With the development of the times, variants such as the electric ruan have also emerged for the ruan.

Influenced by Western compositions, the performing techniques of Chinese traditional musical instruments have been further enriched. For example, traditionally, the ruan mainly uses plucking and flicking techniques, resulting in a single expressive power. Influenced by the tremolo and strumming techniques of the guitar, modern ruan playing has developed techniques such as multi-finger tremolo plucking and cross-string strumming, which greatly enriches the dynamic levels. Ruan virtuoso Liu Xing has used these techniques many times in *Memories of Yunnan*.

Some performers use the electric ruan, absorbing techniques such as string bending and slapping the guitar body from the electric guitar, and combining with effectors (such as reverb and delay), enabling the ruan to blend into modern music styles such as pop and rock. Transplanting Western pieces allows Chinese folk music to break through the limitations of traditional music cards and explore dramatic and symphonic expressions, providing inspiration for the modern creation of Chinese folk music. With the deepening of the influence, composers have begun to try to create works that combine Chinese and Western elements. For example, *The Butterfly Lovers* (violin concerto)

reflects a good combination of the melody of traditional Chinese folk songs and the Western tonal system [5].

The emergence of transplanted pieces is like a "cultural bridge" connecting audiences in the East and the West, enabling the mutual integration of Chinese traditional culture and Western culture and enhancing the international visibility of Chinese traditional music.

Controversies and Challenges. Over the past hundred years, Chinese traditional music has been constantly learning from the West. With the deepening of the Westernization of Chinese folk music, some people believe that excessive reliance on Western performing techniques may lead to Chinese folk music becoming a "timbre substitute" for Western music, weakening the uniqueness of traditional aesthetics. For example, there is a tendency of the erhu to be "violinized" [6-8]. Chinese folk music should not only pursue "symphonization" or "technical difficulty" but also adhere to its own system. During the transplantation process, some traditional performing methods have been simplified, resulting in the loss of musical artistic conception. Some transplanted works, in order to cater to Western aesthetics or the market, neglect the local cultural context, causing a disconnection between the "internationalization" and "localization" of Chinese folk music.

The Balance between Integration and Innovation. Many important changes have taken place in the reality of Chinese music from the beginning of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century. The practice over the past hundred years has proved that learning from the West and injecting fresh blood into the ancient Chinese culture to facilitate its rejuvenation is a historical necessity. However, the inappropriate "direct adoption" of transplanted Western pieces and musical techniques has cost a great deal in learning from the West. However, as Professor Li Xi'an said, "It is necessary to pay these costs. It is unthinkable that the historical evolution is straight, and it is even more impossible to let yesterday's history start all over again according to the ideal model we designed today" [9].

Since the 20th century, the modernization process of Chinese society has prompted the art field to draw on Western experiences, and transplanted pieces are the products of cultural collisions. Just as the pipa absorbed music from the Western Regions and reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty, contemporary integration is also a manifestation of cultural vitality.

Successful cases have proved that the key to the integration of Eastern and Western music lies in taking Chinese aesthetics as the essence, transforming Western elements into expressive tools rather than simply imitating. As early as 1983, the Experimental Orchestra of the China Conservatory of Music put forward the principle of "preserving the purity and being bold in creation" [9]. After years of exploration, the current field of Chinese folk music is presenting a situation where "traditional protection" and "modern experiment" go hand in hand: on the one hand, the protection of intangible cultural heritage quyi places emphasis on the inheritance of the original ecology; on the other hand, avant-garde artists are exploring abstract and international expressions. As one of the currents, transplanted pieces have greatly enriched the diversity of Chinese folk music.

Transplanted Western pieces are a "double-edged sword" in the modernization process of Chinese traditional music, and their value depends on how to carry out creative transformation on the premise of cultural consciousness. True "nationality" is not closed and exclusive but reshapes itself in dialogue, allowing the "overtones" of the guqin and the "chords" of the piano to resonate together in the starry sky of human musical civilization.

3 The Influence of the Popularization of Chinese Traditional Music on the Ruan

3.1 The Integration of Chinese Traditional Music and Popular Music

In today's era of globalization and cultural diversity, the integration of Chinese traditional music and popular music is an inevitable historical trend. The addition of popular elements not only expands the boundaries of traditional music creation but also brings a richer musical experience to both audiences and performers [10]. Although Chinese traditional music contains rich cultural and historical heritages, modern popular music is deeply loved by audiences for its simplicity, briskness, and ease of being sung. The integration of the two not only helps to protect and inherit the cultural heritage of traditional music but also promotes the innovation and development of modern popular music.

The ruan concerto *Cloud Sea and River Cliffs* is a work that combines traditional music and modern music [11]. The ruan combines traditional techniques such as glissando and string vibration with piano chords, and introduces elements of traditional Chinese opera. It not only retains the traditional charm but also gives the work a modern feel.

3.2 A Case of Popularization: Feng Mantian's "Ruan Rock"

As a representative figure of the innovation of the contemporary ruan, Feng Mantian has created a unique style of "ruan rock" by combining rock music with the ruan, promoting the popularization process of the ruan. This innovation not only expands the expressive boundaries of the ruan but also injects new vitality into its inheritance and development.

The Feasibility of Popularization: Technical Integration and Musical Cross-boundary. Feng Mantian draws on the performing techniques of the guitar and rock music, such as strumming, string bending, and rapid plectrum tremolo plucking, endowing the ruan with a strong sense of rhythm and a modern feel. Mr. Feng Mantian has developed the "fretless ruan and its playing method" and pioneered the ruan playing and singing, which has greatly promoted the popularity of the ruan [12]. For example, in the show "Top Chinese Talent", he played the rock classic *Girl in the Flower Room* with the ruan. With the support of electroacoustic amplification and effectors, the traditional timbre exudes a "rebellious" temperament.

The Changes Brought about by Popularization. Taking advantage of the characteristics of wide coverage, fast speed, and high frequency of network communication, Feng Mantian's ruan music art has gained a large number of fans of traditional music, with nearly 200,000 followers. Through the dissemination of TV programs and social media, the ruan has attracted young people and rock music fans [12]. Feng Mantian's performance form (such as the combination of playing and singing) has lowered the threshold for appreciating traditional music, making it closer to the public's aesthetic taste.

The development of popularization has not weakened the cultural core of the ruan. Instead, it has achieved a balance between "ancient charm and new sound" through technical integration. Using the ruan as a bridge, Feng Mantian combines Chinese ancient poems and his own understanding and past experiences, and improvises and chants many classic masterpieces that have endured through the ages, such as *Invitation to Wine* and *Hard is the Road of Life* [13]. This novel form of expression injects vivid contemporary connotations into traditional Chinese art. It not only combines poetry culture and traditional musical instruments well but also represents the mutual understanding and communication between traditional and modern civilizations. It allows people to hear ancient poems in the form of music, promoting the dynamic inheritance and development of traditional culture.

Feng Mantian has opened free Ruan Xian study classes in schools, held public welfare lectures on campus, and regularly released performance videos, and held online concerts on self-media platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili. He has broken the single teaching mode of the "academia", attracted more non-professional learners to participate, and promoted the intergenerational inheritance of traditional music [12, 14].

3.3 The Cross-Cultural Significance of the Ruan: Dialogue from Local to Global

The popularization of the ruan is not only an innovation in musical form but also becomes a medium for cross-cultural communication, reflecting the adaptability and vitality of traditional Chinese culture in the global context.

The Attempt of "Reverse Output". Feng Mantian's performance of Western rock music with the ruan challenges the stereotype that "traditional musical instruments can only perform traditional music". He connects the ruan to an electric speaker cabinet, combines the ruan with jazz and electronic music, and cooperates with multiple international music teams and artists, such as the Jin Fo Jazz Band, the piano master Yuja Wang, and the jazz musician Deniss Pashkevichs [15, 16]. This fully demonstrates the compatibility of the ruan and proves that traditional musical instruments can also become carriers of world music expression.

The International Dissemination of Chinese Aesthetics. Feng Mantian's ruan performance has been reported by CGTN's English news on traditional Chinese medicine and included in the research on "music therapy". This scientific interpretation has, to a certain extent, increased the attention of the ruan in the international academic community, sublimating it from a "cultural symbol" to a "research sample" [17].

Another case can be found is the Chinese traditional instrument Duxianqin [18]. Against the backdrop of the digital age, through cooperation with European teams, the Duxianqin breaks through geographical and cultural boundaries, colliding and integrating with other musical cultures.

4 Conclusion

Today, amidst the intertwining of globalization and multiculturalism, Chinese traditional music is in a dialectical development between "tradition" and "modernity", as well as between "locality" and "globality". From the technical transplantation of *Flight of the Bumble-bee* to the rock reconstruction of *Girl in the Flower Room*, from the improvement of the Ruan Xian instrument to Feng Mantian's cross-boundary experiments, every breakthrough in the field of Chinese folk music is not just a superposition of techniques, but also a reaffirmation of cultural subjectivity. The waves of the transplantation of Western music and the trend of popularization are like a mirror, reflecting the adaptability and creativity of Chinese folk music in the process of modernization, and also like a key, opening up the possibility of dialogue between traditional aesthetics and contemporary expressions

The vitality of traditional music precisely stems from this gene of openness and inclusiveness. The true essence of traditional culture does not lie in clinging to a certain "pure" form, but rather in taking its own aesthetics as the foundation and transforming foreign elements into an extension of the local narrative. Just as the ruan can "perform" traditional Xiqu in *Cloud Sea and River Cliffs* and also engage in dialogue with the piano; under Feng Mantian's fingers, it can not only interpret ancient Chinese poems but also perform on the same stage with international musicians. This practice of "harmony without uniformity" is the best implementation of the principle of "preserving the purity and being bold in creation", and it also reveals the deep-seated logic of the development of Chinese folk music: "rooted in tradition, maintaining integrity and innovation". Techniques can cross borders, but the soul must be deeply rooted.

In the future, the challenge for Chinese traditional music may no longer be about how to be heard by the world, but rather about how to participate in the joint construction of music globalization with its unique timbre. When the overtones of the ruan interweave with the distortion of the electric guitar on the same stage, and when the rhythm of ancient Chinese poems meets the rhythm of rock music, what is demonstrated is not just the new life of an instrument, but also the manifestation of a cultural attitude — to adhere to the essence amidst fluidity and to reconstruct identity amidst collisions. The road to the modernization of Chinese traditional music will ultimately be a process without an end, and every pluck of the strings is another answer to the question of "What is the Chinese musical voice".

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