

YU OPERA AND THE PIANO AS CULTURAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN CHINESE MUSIC

Wang Wenjia,¹ Thipsita Chalermksanyakorn²
Faculty of Music, Bangkokthonburi University¹⁻²
China,¹ Thailand²

Email: pingnaping@gmail.com,¹ thipsita.cha@bkkthon.ac.th²

Received: July 27, 2025; **Revised:** January 17, 2026; **Accepted:**
January 17, 2026

Abstract

This article explores how Yu Opera, a representative form of traditional Chinese theatre, is reinterpreted through piano compositions as a means of cultural dialogue between tradition and modernity. By tracing the historical evolution of Chinese piano music across four key periods—from early nationalistic attempts to the flourishing innovations post-reform and opening-up—the research highlights how composers have integrated the vocal colors, tonal language, and rhythmic patterns of Yu Opera into Western pianistic frameworks. Drawing on key works by Chen Yi, Ma Shuhao, Zhu Xiaoyu, and others, this paper examines how Yu Opera elements such as Bangzi rhythms, Henan dialect tone inflections, and expressive melodic lines are translated into piano idioms without compromising their regional integrity. This synthesis not only enriches the expressive palette of the piano but also serves as a powerful method of preserving and revitalizing local operatic heritage. Through this process, the piano becomes a cultural bridge, fostering a dynamic interplay between historical identity and contemporary innovation in Chinese music.

Keywords: Yu opera; Piano; Cultural dialogue; Tradition and modernity; Chinese music

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of Chinese music, the fusion of traditional operatic elements with Western classical instruments has become a significant trend reflecting the country's broader cultural transformation. Among the various forms of regional opera, Yu Opera—originating from Henan Province—holds a special place due to its powerful vocalization, bold melodic style, and deep emotional resonance. As one of the five major Chinese operatic forms, Yu Opera embodies the artistic spirit and cultural identity of central China.

The piano, introduced into China in the early 20th century, was once regarded as a foreign instrument. Over time, however, it has become a central medium for expressing Chinese national sentiment. The integration of Yu Opera into piano music marks a unique cultural dialogue between the old and the new, between local tradition and global modernity. This paper investigates the artistic motivations, historical background, and compositional strategies that shaped this fusion, focusing on how Yu Opera's distinctive musical elements are creatively transformed and preserved in piano compositions. By examining representative works and the composers' personal experiences, this research aims to demonstrate how this intercultural synthesis contributes to both the nationalization of piano music and the preservation of regional cultural heritage.

Overview of Piano Works Created by Yu Opera Elements Context

Early twentieth century: "Nurture and Growth": At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the advancement of the New Culture Movement, China's social, political, economic and cultural changes were constantly undergoing, and the piano, as a western imported product, really took root in China, and the "School Music Song" in the new school opened the curtain of Chinese piano music creation. In the early days, composers such as Zhao Yuanren and Xiao Youmei made preliminary explorations, and in 1921, Mr Li Rongshou published a piano work "Sawing a Vat" in the first issue of the Music Magazine, combining the melody of the folk opera "Wang Daniang Mending a Vat" in Henan Province with the western traditional harmony. These works were short, single-minded and attempted to incorporate elements of

traditional folk music, but the way they were composed was still a copy of western compositional styles and learning, but it pointed out the right direction for further exploration of the nationalization of Chinese piano music. By 1934, Chinese piano music had risen rapidly, thanks in large part to the "Competition for the Composition of Piano Pieces of Chinese Flavour" funded by the famous Russian-American composer Zilpin, in which He Luting's *Piccolo for Shepherd Boys*, Lao Zhicheng's *Music for Shepherd Boys* and other outstanding works were featured, distinguishing these works from their Western counterparts, and making them a unique and distinctive piece of music. These compositions are distinguished from Western music by the combination of traditional Chinese musical characteristics and Western compositional techniques, which is a milestone in the nationalization of Chinese piano music (Yang, 2017).

During this period of Chinese-style piano music creation, although specific works on Yu opera elements have not yet been produced, in 1921, in Mr. Li Rongshou's *Sawing a Vat*, traditional Henan folk music entered the composer's vision, providing an important compositional idea for piano works with Yu opera elements.

The early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China: "Vibrant: From the 1940s to the 1960s, the nationalization of Chinese piano music entered another important historical stage. With the victory of the Anti-Japanese War and the founding of the new China, composers incorporated contemporary and national elements into their Chinese piano music compositions, and they began to explore and collect traditional folk music materials from various regions of China, such as Qu Wei's *Flower Drums*, which absorbed the folk tones of the Fengyang Flower Drums of Huaibei, Ding Shande's *Variations on the Theme of Chinese Folk Songs*, which was based on the main theme of the Sichuan Tibetan String Dance, and Guo Zurong's *15 Selections from the Min Opera*, which utilized the folk melodies of the Min Opera, and the Chinese Folk Music Theatre. *15 Selected Songs*" uses the elements of Fujian Min Opera Songs, etc., as well as Wang Lisan's "Orchid Flower", Sang Tong's "Seven Piano Pieces for Inner Mongolia Folk Songs", Huang Huwei's "Painting of Ba Shu", Guo Zhihong's "Xinjiang Dance", etc., which utilise the characteristics of each region's musical style. The works of this period have a wide range of styles of composition and diverse contents, and the

material is taken from the folk and is closer to the masses' lives, which is a way to get rid of the constraints of the early piano works. The works of this period were composed in a wide range of styles and with various contents, the materials were taken from the folk and closer to the life of the masses, and they got rid of the constraints of the early piano works, and created a large number of works with Chinese national characteristics by innovatively applying the pianistic national style creation method, which created a prosperous period of piano music creation in China (Zhu, 2021).

At this stage, the creation of Chinese-style piano music in the true sense of the word was on the right track, and countless works were born. Composers boldly explored and collected the elements of ethnic and folk music from various regions of China, and the number of works related to the elements of the Yu Opera during this period was still relatively small, and the influence of the Yu Opera was not great, for example, Guo Zu Rong's "Minor Sonata "May Song"", which was composed in 1960, the first movement of which is a piece that has been written by Guo Zu Rong, and the first movement of which has been written by Guo Zu Rong. For example, Guo Zurong's "Minor Sonata "May Song"", composed in 1960, absorbed representative pieces of Yu opera tunes in its first movement (Zhang, 2018).

Cultural Revolution: "Twists and Turns": With the special period starting from the Cultural Revolution, the piano, as a product of western capital culture, was severely damaged and suppressed, and the development of Chinese piano music fell into a difficult situation. However, through the difficult thinking of composers who were not willing to give up, they opened up a new path for the creation of Chinese style piano music, i.e., through the adaption of Chinese operas, folk songs, instrumental pieces, etc., which was the only form of creation at that time, the most representative of which were The most representative example is Yin Chengzong's combination of Peking Opera tunes and piano music to create the then widely recognized "The Tale of the Red Lanterns" for piano accompaniment, which not only conformed to the background of the times, but also demonstrated the new flavor and value of this kind of adapted creation. In the late Cultural Revolution, composers continued to explore and create high-quality piano arrangements, such as traditional folk instrumental pieces: Wang Jianzhong's "Hundred Birds Towards the Phoenix",

Lai Yinghai's "Sunset Whistling and Drumming", and Chu Wanghua's "Reflecting the Moon in the Two Springs", etc., as well as classical operas and traditional folk songs, such as Ni Hongjin's "Four Exercises for the Peking Opera Songs", Wang Jianzhong's "Four Exercises for the Northern Shaanxi Opera", and Wang Jianzhong's "Four Exercises for the Northern Shaanxi Opera Songs". Adaptations of classical operas and traditional folk songs include Ni Hongjin's Four Exercises for Peking Opera, Wang Jianzhong's Four Pieces for Piano Solo of Folk Songs from the North of Shaanxi, and Yin Chengzong's Blowing in the North. During this period, the works were mainly in the form of adaptations. Although the form of creation was single, the composers kept pursuing the organic combination of the colors of Chinese traditional music and piano music, which showed a strong Chinese national style and was loved by both domestic and foreign audiences, and can be regarded as classics nowadays, which undoubtedly strengthened the development path of Chinese piano music nationalization.

During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese piano music creation was difficult, but the influence of the "Model Operas" prompted the formation and development of Chinese piano music nationalization, and the Yu opera slowly emerged in this stage of development, and composers began to absorb the characteristics of the Yu opera, such as Li Qifang's "Henan Operatic Songs" in 1969, and Wang Jianzhong's "A Hundred Songs" in 1973, In 1973, Wang Jianzhong's Hundred Birds Towards the Phoenix was composed (Yang, 2023).

Reform and Opening Up: "Prosperity and Flourishing": After the 1980s, the stable political environment and open-mindedness provided unprecedented opportunities and space for the development of Chinese piano music. Composers got rid of the previous single creative limitations in terms of compositional techniques, theme development and musical style, and boldly carried out innovations and explorations, adhering to the basis of the traditional Chinese modal tonality, and giving diversified compositional techniques and complex and changeable material weaves, so as to carry out deeper creations, thus revealing a diversified development situation. The works created in this period are numerous and of different styles, such as Zhao Xiaosheng's "Taiji", which uses his own "Taiji Composition System" to break through the creation and adaptation of "traditional folk songs plus harmony", Wang Lisan's

"Heavenly Question", Zhu Tramp's "Five Yunnan Folk Songs", Chen Yi's "Duoye", and Zhu Tramp's "Five Yunnan Folk Songs". There are also Wang Lisan's "Heavenly Question", Zhu Xian'er's "Five Yunnan Folk Songs", Chen Yi's "Doyle", Wang Jianzhong's "Chasing the Moon with Colorful Clouds", and Sun Yiqiang's "Spring Dance".

During this period, the Chinese style piano music creation can be said to be brilliant, the absorption of traditional music elements from all over the world is also gradually more extensive, its opera as a traditional Chinese cultural treasure, Yu opera as one of the five major types of theatre, the composers continue to try to absorb its unique flavor, and has given birth to a number of Yu opera elements of the piano works, such as Chen Yi's "Yu Tune" Yu Opera Bangkang Cavity tunes for the creation of the melodic development of the technique of using repetition, echo, addition, and so forth. In the melodic development method, the use of repetition, echo, add flowers, etc.; Zhu Xiaoyu's "Opera Suite No. 3: Yu Opera small section" highlights the Yu Opera singing tone of the bold and high-pitched characteristics: Ma Shuhao's "Yu Shahe" according to the melodic and rhythmic characteristics of the Yu Opera Shahe tune, and the novel harmonic language for embodiment; there are also Liang Fayong's "Yu Tune" (a small creative piece), Chunlong's "Mulan Women" and other works. These works are created on the basis of Yu opera elements using different compositional techniques, all of which highlight the characteristics of Yu opera and fully reflect its elegance and rhythm (Zhao, 2008).

Piano is a polyphonic instrument, which presents the single-line melody of Yu Opera in a fuller way without changing the characteristics of Yu Opera, and presents it to the public in a new form. Through the combing of its development history, it is found that the number of Piano works of Yu Opera elements is not much, but this way of creation not only opens up an innovative form of inheritance for traditional Yu Opera, but also broadens the development path of Chinese piano music nationalization, and this kind of complementary and innovative way is obviously worth advocating and promoting.

Background of Artistic Creation

Henan has experienced the historical changes of the ancient capitals of many dynasties, and has deposited a profound traditional Chinese culture, which is rich in traditional culture, led by the Yu Opera. According to the previous vein, before the 1980s, there had been fewer composers paying attention to the Yu Opera, the reasons for which can be summed up as several points: firstly, Henan is situated in the hinterland of the Central Plains, and occupies a geographic location that has become a place for the blending of cultures of various regions. Firstly, Henan is located in the hinterland of the Central Plains, occupying a geographical position that has become a place of cultural fusion of various regions, and its music culture is convergent with that of other regions, and its musical characteristics are similar to the traditional Western modal style, lacking the uniqueness of Western music; secondly, Henan did not occupy a unique political position during the course of China's revolutionary history, and composers were deeply influenced by the revolutionary ideology at that time, so they did not excavate the Yu Opera as the first folk music in Henan in depth. With the implementation of the policy of reform and opening up and the vigorous development of all kinds of art forms, Yu Opera has gradually developed into China's largest local theatre, with its resonant and atmospheric singing and bold and unrestrained tunes, and is known as the "top of the list" of the Three Tripods of Chinese Opera. "The influence and spread of Chinese piano music are broad. The development of the nationalization of Chinese piano music relies mainly on the absorption of Chinese folk music materials, and in such an environment, composers are prompted to apply the uniqueness and plasticity of Yu opera in their piano music compositions.

In addition to the unique charm of the Yu Opera, some composers also have a certain affinity with opera music and the Henan region in their work and life. For example, Chen Yi, the creator of "Yu Tune", worked at the Guangzhou Peking Opera House in 1970 before she entered the Central Conservatory of Music and spent eight years as the band's chief violinist and composer, during which time she became familiar with the artistic characteristics of opera, such as "singing, reciting, performing and playing". During this period, she was familiar with the artistic characteristics of opera, and often wrote opera music such as interludes, together with her own unique love for Chinese folk music, these

experiences accumulated a wealth of material for the creation of her subsequent works for the piano, classics: "Little Jingluo", "Doyle", "Guessing the Tune", and so on. And the creator of "Yusha River", Ma Shuhao, describes through an interview with him: "I personally like traditional Chinese theatre culture, and I worked in Zhoukou City, Henan Province for two years from 2010 to 2023, during which time I often had the opportunity to enjoy the local Yu Opera, and I collected relevant materials and exchanged ideas with some artists, which provided a very good foundation for me to create this work. foundation for me to create this work." The work is based on the rough and bold melody of the Yu Opera "Shahe Tunes", and the combination of dynamic rhythmic characteristics and novel harmonic vocabulary to complete the final composition (Song, 2015). By examining the life backgrounds and experiences of some of the composers, they took the initiative to learn and absorb the characteristics of Yu Opera, combined with their own skillful professional compositional techniques, and incorporated their own emotions and understanding, which led to the birth of the piano work with elements of Yu Opera.

Use of Yu Opera Elements in Current Piano Works

As the core representative of Henan culture, Yu Opera is based on Henan dialect, and its singing language is very strong and heroic, showing strong regional characteristics. To study the use of Yu opera elements in piano works, first of all, we need to analyze the vocal characteristics of Henan dialect in Yu opera and its artistic features, so as to better understand the connotation characteristics of piano works integrating Yu opera elements, and secondly, we will analyze the Yu opera elements embodied in the representative piano works collated in this chapter, and explore how they are used in the piano works.

Characteristics of Tones in Henan Dialect: Henan (abbreviated as "Yu"), anciently known as "Zhongzhou", is located in the central-eastern part of China, south of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, and through the evolution and development of successive dynasties and unique geographical location, it has the name of "the hinterland of the nine states and the thoroughfare of ten provinces". It is also known as "the hinterland of nine states and the thoroughfare of ten provinces". As the birthplace of the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization, it contains a rich and unique regional culture, to which

its local language also belongs. The Henan dialect, with the Central Plains Official Dialect as its core, belongs to the northern dialect, which was once used as a common language in ancient times. Each word in its dialect consists of a tone and rhyme, with rounded pronunciation and a steady, clear rhythm, while the modern language, dominated by the standard Putonghua dialect, is more similar to the Henan dialect in terms of sound and rhyme than the Henan dialect, with the main difference being in terms of the tone and rhyme. In modern Chinese linguistics, tone refers to the pitch or word tone, embodied in the relative height between syllables, but also embodied in the change of height within the syllable, the pitch of a syllable can be raised or lowered or lowered first and then raised and so on. Such changes in pitch are instantaneous and gradual, like the upward or downward glissando of a musical note. In order to fully reflect the unique tonal characteristics of the Henan dialect, the tones were compared with those of standard Mandarin (Zhang, 2018).

The Artistic Value of Piano Works Created by Yu Opera Music

As a foreign musical instrument, the piano has to be distinguished from traditional Chinese folk music in music teaching, performance and theoretical research. Because the experience of Chinese piano music composition, performance and teaching is copied from the West, the creative thinking and listening aesthetic habits are different from those of the West. How to utilize this western harmonic instrument to present Chinese folk traditional music is a problem that Chinese composers have been thinking and exploring. Chinese piano works carry, intertwine and merge the different cultural traditions of China and the West. While the Western tradition emphasizes on rationality and thinking, Chinese traditional music emphasizes more on the integration of the human spirit with nature, and the harmony with all things, giving people a kind of neutral beauty. Harmony is a prominent feature of Chinese psychology. Influenced by the thinking of farming culture, Chinese people pay more attention to emphasize the emotional factor, which is reflected in piano music as subtle, introverted, gentle and generous. Chinese piano works are also characterized by looseness, freedom, sadness and gentleness. Western classical music pursues rich harmony, varied weave, rigorous structure, and three-dimensional thinking. Therefore, in order to play and teach Chinese piano works, it is necessary to integrate the charm of oriental music with the rigor and

rationality of western music, so as to interpret and understand Chinese piano works in an all-round and accurate way (Guo, 2020).

With cultural pluralism and social modernization, every nation is facing a "revolution" to reconcile modernization with its traditional culture. Rejecting modernization will lead to national retrogression and poverty, while abandoning traditional culture will lead to the demise of the nation. Correctly handling the relationship between the two will promote the development of the nation, which requires thinking about the inheritance and protection of traditional culture in the process of modernization. Yu opera is a kind of folk art with a long history in China, which is the carrier of the spirit and emotion of the Chinese nation, and the embodiment of the industriousness and wisdom of the laboring people of the Han nationality, and exudes a rich local flavor. Global integration and cultural diversity have slowed the pace of development of Yu opera, and the inheritance and protection of the work is imminent and urgent. Piano compositions created from the musical elements of Yu opera epitomize the combination of traditional Chinese music and Western music, and such a development model has become one of the forms of traditional Chinese music in the context of the new era (Huang, 2019).

New Knowledges



Figure 1: New Knowledges Diagram of Yu Opera and the Piano as Cultural Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity in Chinese Music.

Conclusions

The incorporation of Yu Opera elements into piano compositions exemplifies a meaningful artistic response to the dual demands of preserving cultural heritage and embracing modern expression. Through the efforts of composers who deeply understand both the structure of Chinese traditional music and the expressive power of the piano, works inspired by Yu Opera have expanded the language of Chinese piano music and deepened its cultural depth. By adapting Yu Opera's melodic structures, tonalities, and expressive gestures within pianistic frameworks, composers have crafted music that resonates with both native familiarity and cosmopolitan sophistication. This not only offers a new form for audiences to experience regional theatre, but also contributes to the broader dialogue on cultural sustainability in contemporary music. The piano, in this context, acts as both a preserver and a transformer—honoring the roots of Yu Opera while providing a platform for its renewal in the modern era. Such practices not only enrich China's national musical identity but also offer valuable insight into how traditional and modern elements can coexist and thrive through creative reimagining.

References

- Guo, H. (2020). **Creative Transformation of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture Education Content.** Journal of Educational Science of Hunan Normal University, (1), pp. 2-3.
- Huang, Z. (2019). **The effective integration of traditional Chinese folk music and piano teaching in colleges and universities.** Peony, (6), pp. 3-5.
- Song, Y. (2015). **Research on the Application of Henan Opera Music Elements in Chinese Piano Works.** Music Time and Space, (2), pp. 7-8.
- Yang, Q. (2017). **Discussion on the feasibility of establishing a Chinese piano playing and teaching system.** Journal of Heihe College, (4), pp. 5-7.
- Yang, Y. (2023). **Research on Piano Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges under the Background of Internet + Education.** Drama House, (4), pp. 9-11.
- Zhang, X. (2018). **The Value Orientation and Cultural Identity of Chinese Piano Music Culture.** Music Creation, (4), pp. 8-10.
- Zhao, L. (2008). **Integration of traditional music culture education into piano teaching reform.** Art Review, (1), pp. 56-57.
- Zhu, Y. (2021). **On Oriental Music Cultural Identity under the Background of Belt and Road.** Research on Music Culture, (4), pp. 7-9.