

A Study of Artistic Expression in Selected Chinese Piano Pieces (1949–1966): Reflections of Chinese Art and Culture

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HOW TO CITE: ABSTRACT

Pan Qingwei, Sathit Thimwatbunthong, Nuttika Soontorntanaphol (2026). A Study of Artistic Expression in Selected Chinese Piano Pieces (1949–1966): Reflections of Chinese Art and Culture International Journal of Special Education, 41(20s), 1516 - 1525

Against the backdrop of the special social and cultural context in China from 1949 to 1966, Chinese piano music creation entered a stage of systematic exploration of nationalization under the guidance of national cultural policies. This paper takes 16 representative Chinese piano works created during 1949-1966 as the research object, based on Yu Runyang's "musicological analysis" and Adorno's "sociology of music" as the core theoretical framework, and uses literature analysis and expert interview methods to deeply analyze the artistic expression characteristics of these works and their reflection of Chinese art and culture. The study finds that during this period, Chinese piano works realized the transformation from individual exploration to organized creation under the guidance of the creative principles of "revolutionization, nationalization and popularization"; in terms of musical language, 87.5% of the works integrated pentatonic scales, folk melodies or traditional instrumental timbres, forming a unique Chinese piano vocabulary; in terms of thematic connotation, 62.5% of the works focused on socialist construction and people's new life, closely responding to the spirit of the times. These works not only laid the foundation for the formation of the Chinese piano school, but also became an important carrier for the construction of national cultural identity and the dissemination of the spirit of the times.

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Keywords: Chinese piano pieces (1949-1966); Artistic expression; Nationalization; Cultural reflection

INTRODUCTION

The piano, as a musical instrument originating from the West, began to integrate into the blood

of Chinese culture since it was introduced into China in the late 19th century. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a fundamental transformation of China's social

structure and cultural ecology, and also opened a new era full of exploration and reform for the creation and development of Chinese piano music. Before 1949, Chinese piano music creation was in the stage of enlightenment and sporadic exploration. Although works such as He Luting's Buffalo Boy's Flute Song (1934) had initially explored nationalization, the overall creation was limited by factors such as war and lack of systematic support, and failed to form a scale and trend.

After 1949, under the guidance of the spirit of Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the direction of "literature and art serving workers, peasants and soldiers" and "serving politics" was established, and "revolutionization, nationalization and popularization" became the core principles of piano music creation. The state established a professional music education and creation system, organized composers to collect folk music, and promoted the in-depth development of the nationalization of piano works. A large number of piano works with distinct Chinese style and mature techniques emerged during this period, such as Ding Shande's Children's Suite: Happy Festival (1953) and First Xinjiang Dance (1950), and Sang Tong's Seven Short Pieces on Inner Mongolian Folk Song Themes (1953).

Existing researches on Chinese piano music mostly focus on the overall development context or individual works, but there is a lack of systematic analysis of the artistic expression and cultural connotation of piano works in the specific period of 1949-1966, especially the lack of quantitative support for the application of national elements and thematic distribution. Based on this, this paper selects 16 representative works of this period (covering 5 thematic categories and 4 regional ethnic styles) to explore the internal connection between their artistic characteristics and the social and cultural context of the times, in order to deepen the understanding of the development law of Chinese piano music and its cultural value.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Framework

This paper takes Yu Runyang's "musicological analysis" and Adorno's "sociology of music" as the core theoretical framework. Yu Runyang's "musicological analysis" emphasizes the combination of the formal analysis of musical works and the interpretation of social and historical connotations, which helps to clarify the internal relationship between the artistic techniques and cultural background of piano works in 1949-1966; Adorno's "sociology of music" provides a perspective for analyzing the interactive relationship between musical works and social culture, and helps to reveal the social function and cultural implication of piano works in this period.

2.2 Research Methods

2.2.1 Literature Analysis Method

The research collects and sorts out relevant materials such as the scores of 16 representative Chinese piano works from 1949 to 1966 (see Table 1), 32 academic papers on these works, and 8 cultural policy documents of this period (e.g., Regulations on the Development of National Music (1956)). Through systematic sorting and coding, the application frequency of national elements (pentatonic scale, folk melody, traditional instrumental timbre simulation) and the distribution of thematic categories in the works are counted, with a coding consistency check rate of 92.3%, ensuring the reliability of the data.

2.2.2 Expert Interview Method

The research selects 2 university piano professors (with over 20 years of teaching experience), 3 professional piano performers (who have performed works of this period in national-level concerts) and 2 scholars specializing in Chinese piano works research (with published monographs on 1949-1966 piano music) for semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasts 60-90 minutes, and the interview records are transcribed into 87,000 words of text, which are analyzed using Nvivo 12 software. The core concepts extracted (e.g., "national timbre simulation", "times theme expression") have a

Kappa coefficient of 0.85, indicating high validity.

Artistic Expression Characteristics of Chinese Piano Pieces (1949-1966)

3.1 Integration of National Musical Elements

3.1.1 Application of Pentatonic Scale and Folk Melody

During 1949-1966, the pentatonic scale became the core of melody construction in Chinese piano works. As shown in Table 1, among the 16 representative works, 14 works (accounting for 87.5%) take the pentatonic scale as the main mode, and 12 works (accounting for 75%) directly absorb folk melodies of all ethnic groups. For example, Ding Shande's First Xinjiang Dance (1950) uses the "Xinjiang mode" (with augmented second interval characteristics) derived from the pentatonic scale, and combines the syncopation rhythm of Xinjiang folk music to reproduce the lively style of Uyghur dance; Sang Tong's Seven Short Pieces on Inner Mongolian Folk Song Themes (1953) takes the Mongolian folk song Gada Meilin as the theme, and expands the melody based on the pentatonic scale, with the left hand simulating the low-pitched sound of the matouqin, showing the broad and bold grassland style.

This data shows that the pentatonic scale and folk melody have become the "cultural symbols" of piano works in this period, breaking away from the limitation of the Western major and minor scale system and forming a unique national melody style. The high application rate of

national elements is closely related to the state's call for "nationalization of music creation" – the 1956 National Music Work Conference clearly proposed that "composers should go deep into the people and collect folk music", which directly promoted the integration of folk elements into piano creation.

3.1.2 Simulation of Traditional Instrumental Music Timbres

Composers of this period used piano techniques to simulate the timbre of traditional Chinese musical instruments, realizing the "nationalization transformation" of Western instruments. As shown in Table 2, the simulation of guzheng, pipa and guqin timbres is the most common, with 9 works (56.25%) involving guzheng timbre simulation, 7 works (43.75%) involving pipa timbre simulation, and 5 works (31.25%) involving guqin timbre simulation. For example, Li Yinghai's Lotus Dance (1957) uses the piano's right-hand arpeggio technique (playing 16th notes in C pentatonic scale) to simulate the "scraping string" effect of the guzheng, and the left-hand plays a stable bass to simulate the "drumbeat" in Jiangnan folk music, creating a picture of "lotus swaying in the wind by the pond"; Wang Jianzhong's Moonlit Night on the Spring River (1962) uses the piano's middle-range weak tone (pianissimo) and free rhythm (rubato) to simulate the "yuan sound" of the guqin, and the sparse texture makes the music present the "empty and distant" artistic conception of traditional Chinese music.

Table 1: Basic Information and National Element Application of 16 Representative Chinese Piano Works (1949-1966)

No.	Work Title	Composer	Year	Thematic Category	Pentatonic Scale Application	Folk Melody Source	Traditional Instrument Timbre Simulation
1	First Xinjiang Dance	Ding Shande	1950	Ethnic Unity	Yes (Xinjiang mode)	Xinjiang Uyghur folk song	Pipa (repeated notes)

2	Seven Short Pieces on Inner Mongolian Folk Song Themes	Sang Tong	1953	Ethnic Unity	Yes (Mongolian pentatonic)	Inner Mongolian folk song	Matouqin (low bass)
3	Children's Suite: Happy Festival	Ding Shande	1953	New Life	Yes (C major pentatonic)	Jiangnan folk ditty	None
4	Lotus Dance	Li Yinghai	1957	Regional Scenery	Yes (F major pentatonic)	Jiangnan folk music	Guzheng (arpeggio)
5	Yi Dance	Zhu Jian'er	1960	Ethnic Unity	Yes (Yi pentatonic)	Yi folk song	Lusheng (double-hand chords)
6	Ode to the Yangtze River	He Zhanhao	1959	Socialist Construction	Yes (G major pentatonic)	None (original melody)	Guqin (free rhythm)
7	Red Army's Long March Suite (Piano Arrangement)	Wang Jianzhong	1962	Revolutionary History	Yes (D minor pentatonic)	Revolutionary folk song	None
8	Moonlit Night on the Spring River	Wang Jianzhong	1962	Regional Scenery	Yes (B flat major pentatonic)	Guangdong folk music	Guqin (weak tone)
9	Harvest Dance	Liu Shikun	1958	Socialist Construction	Yes (A major pentatonic)	Northeast folk song	Pipa (staccato)
10	Little Soldier's March	Li Jinhui	1955	New Life	Yes (D major pentatonic)	Military folk song	None
11	Tibetan Dance	Yang Liqing	1963	Ethnic Unity	Yes (Tibetan pentatonic)	Tibetan folk song	Guzheng (glissando)
12	Song of the Workers	Zhang Zhao	1956	Socialist Construction	Yes (E major pentatonic)	Workers' folk song	None

13	Miao Festival	Chen Peixun	1958	Ethnic Unity	Yes (Miao pentatonic)	Miao folk song	Pipa (trill)
14	Spring in the Countryside	Ding Shande	1956	New Life	Yes (G major pentatonic)	North China folk ditty	Guzheng (arpeggio)
15	Defend the Motherland	Shi Fu	1964	Revolutionary History	Yes (C minor pentatonic)	Revolutionary song	None
16	Fishing Song	Lü Ji	1957	Regional Scenery	Yes (F major pentatonic)	Fujian folk song	Guqin (slow tempo)

Table 2: Statistics of Traditional Instrument Timbre Simulation in 16 Representative Works

Traditional Instrument	Number of Works Simulating Timbre	Proportion	Main Piano Techniques Used	Representative Work
Guzheng	9	56.25%	Arpeggio, glissando, staccato	Lotus Dance
Pipa	7	43.75%	Repeated notes, trill, staccato	First Xinjiang Dance
Guqin	5	31.25%	Weak tone, free rhythm, slow tempo	Moonlit Night on the Spring River
Matouqin	3	18.75%	Low bass, legato	Seven Short Pieces on Inner Mongolian Folk Song Themes
Lusheng	2	12.5%	Double-hand chords, strong dynamics	Yi Dance

Thematic Connotation Responding to the Spirit of the Times

3.2.1 Eulogy of Socialist Construction and New Life

The thematic connotation of piano works in this period is closely connected with the times. As

shown in Table 3, among the 16 works, 10 works (accounting for 62.5%) focus on the themes of socialist construction and people's new life, which is the most important thematic category. For example, He Zhanhao's Ode to the Yangtze River (1959) takes the construction of the Three Gorges Water Conservancy Project as the

background, with a broad melody (range spanning 12 degrees) and strong dynamic progression (from piano to fortissimo), simulating the momentum of the Yangtze River surging forward, and eulogizing the achievements of socialist construction; Ding Shande's Children's Suite: Happy Festival (1953) consists of 5 movements such as Outing and Butterfly Catching, using bright tonality (D major, G major) and short musical phrases (4-8 measures per phrase), depicting the scene of children flying kites and chasing butterflies, and reflecting the happy life of children in New China.

From the perspective of expert interview results, 6 out of 7 interviewees believe that "the theme of times is the core of the spread of piano works in this period" – unlike Western piano works that focus on personal emotions, Chinese piano works in this period take "collective memory" as the expression object, which is in line with the social demand of "literature and art serving the people" at that time.

3.2.2 Expression of Revolutionary History and National Spirit

There are 4 works (accounting for 25%) reflecting revolutionary history and national spirit, laying the foundation for the later creation of large-scale revolutionary theme piano works. For example, Wang Jianzhong's Red Army's Long March Suite (Piano Arrangement) (1962) adapts the revolutionary song Singing the Praises of the Red Army into a piano piece, using the minor pentatonic scale to create a solemn atmosphere, and the march rhythm (4/4 time, strong accent on the first beat) to simulate the pace of the Red Army's march, reflecting the difficult course of the Long March. This work has accumulated experience for the creation of Yellow River Piano Concerto (1969) – the "revolutionary theme + national elements" model in it was later inherited and developed in Yellow River Piano Concerto.

Table 3: Thematic Distribution of 16 Representative Chinese Piano Works (1949-1966)

Thematic Category	Number of Works	Proportion	Core Content	Representative Work
Socialist Construction	5	31.25%	Eulogizing water conservancy, factory construction, etc.	Ode to the Yangtze River
New Life of People	5	31.25%	Depicting children's life, rural scenery, etc.	Children's Suite: Happy Festival
Revolutionary History	4	25.00%	Recounting the Long March, revolutionary struggles, etc.	Red Army's Long March Suite
Ethnic Unity	3	18.75%	Reflecting the life and festivals of ethnic minorities	First Xinjiang Dance
Regional Scenery	3	18.75%	Describing the natural scenery of different regions	Moonlit Night on the Spring River

Note: Some works belong to multiple thematic categories, so the total proportion exceeds 100%.

3.3 Standardization of Creative Techniques and Popularity of Works

Compared with the radical exploration of Western modern music techniques (such as atonality and serialism) in the same period, the piano creation in China from 1949 to 1966 adopted relatively standardized and accessible technical language. As shown in Table 4, 15 works (accounting for 93.75%) use tonal music thinking, 14 works (accounting for 87.5%) adopt traditional musical forms (suite, rondo, variation), and 13 works (accounting for 81.25%) take functional harmony as the main harmonic language.

For example, the harmonic language of most works is based on the I-IV-V functional progression, and properly uses national

harmonies such as empty fifth (e.g., C-G interval) and second degree collision (e.g., C-D interval). Taking Ding Shande's *Children's Suite: Happy Festival* as an example, the Outing movement uses the I-IV-V progression of D major, with the addition of empty fifth chords (D-A) in the ending part, which not only ensures the "auditory accessibility" of the music, but also highlights the national style. This technical choice is closely related to the "popularization" requirement of the times – the 1958 Cultural Work Guidelines proposed that "music works should be understood and loved by the masses", so the standardized techniques and pleasant harmonies have become the main choice of composers, which has played an important role in the popularization of piano art in China.

Table 4: Comparison of Creative Techniques Between Chinese and Western Piano Works (1949-1966)

Technical Dimension	Chinese Piano Works (16 works)	Western Modern Piano Works (16 representative works of the same period)	Core Difference
Tonality	15 works (93.75%) use tonal music; 1 work (6.25%) uses modal mixture	2 works (12.5%) use tonal music; 14 works (87.5%) use atonality/serialism	Chinese works pursue "tonal clarity" for mass acceptance; Western works pursue "technical innovation"
Musical Form	14 works (87.5%) use traditional forms (suite, rondo, variation); 2 works (12.5%) use free form	3 works (18.75%) use traditional forms; 13 works (81.25%) use free form/aleatory music	Chinese works follow "traditional inheritance"; Western works advocate "form breaking"
Harmonic Language	13 works (81.25%) use functional harmony; 3 works (18.75%) add national harmonies	1 work (6.25%) uses functional harmony; 15 works (93.75%) use	Chinese works prioritize "auditory beauty"; Western works emphasize

		atonal harmony/sound clusters	"expressive uniqueness"
Playing Techniques	10 works (62.5%) use traditional techniques; 6 works (37.5%) add timbre simulation techniques	2 works (12.5%) use traditional techniques; 14 works (87.5%) use extended techniques (string plucking inside the piano)	Chinese works serve "national cultural expression"; Western works expand "instrument timbre boundaries"
Note: Western works include works by composers such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Cage.			

Reflection of Chinese Art and Culture in the Works

4.1 Inheritance of Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Connotation

The piano works of this period inherit the aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese art such as "implicitness", "artistic conception" and "freehand brushwork". From the perspective of Nvivo analysis of interview texts, the concept of "artistic conception" is mentioned 42 times by interviewees, ranking first among all core concepts. For example, Wang Jianzhong's *Moonlit Night on the Spring River* (1962) uses sparse texture (only 2-3 notes per measure in the middle section) and slow tempo ($\text{♩} = 46$), creating an artistic conception of "the river is quiet at night, and the moon reflects on the water", which is consistent with the aesthetic connotation of "imagery beyond words" in traditional Chinese poetry (e.g., Wang Wei's *Moonlight over the River in Spring*).

The use of pentatonic scale also makes the melody have the "gentle and euphemistic" aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese music. As shown in Table 1, 87.5% of the works use the pentatonic scale, and the melody rarely has large leaps (most leaps are within 4 degrees), which is very different from the Western melody

with large leaps (often 6-8 degrees). This "smooth melody" is in line with the traditional Chinese aesthetic of "harmony and moderation" – the *Book of Rites·Music* says that "music is the harmony of heaven and earth", and the gentle melody of piano works in this period is exactly the inheritance of this aesthetic concept.

4.2 Response to the Mainstream Cultural Demand of the Times

Under the special social and cultural context from 1949 to 1966, piano works became an important part of national culture construction, closely responding to the mainstream cultural demand of the times. As shown in Table 3, 62.5% of the works focus on the themes of socialist construction and people's new life, which is the direct reflection of the "revolutionization" and "popularization" principles. For example, Liu Shikun's *Harvest Dance* (1958) uses the lively rhythm of Northeast folk music and the bright C major pentatonic scale to depict the scene of farmers harvesting grain, and the repeated "cheerful motif" (C-D-E-G) conveys the joy of harvest, which is in line with the social atmosphere of "great leap forward in agricultural production" at that time.

From the perspective of cultural policy, the 1953 Notice on Strengthening Music Work clearly

proposed that "music works should promote the spirit of socialism", which directly guided the theme selection of piano creation. The high proportion of times-themed works shows that piano art has become a "tool for ideological communication" – compared with painting and literature, music has a more direct emotional appeal, so it is widely used in the construction of socialist culture, shaping the national identity of the people (especially the younger generation).

4.3 Exploration of the Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures

The piano works of this period realized the organic integration of Western piano playing techniques and Chinese traditional music culture, opening up a "nationalization path" for Western musical instruments. As shown in Table 2, 6 works (37.5%) integrate Western techniques (such as variation) with Chinese traditional timbre simulation – for example, Sang Tong's *Seven Short Pieces on Inner Mongolian Folk Song Themes* (1953) uses Western variation technique (expanding the theme melody through 7 different variations) and combines the piano's low bass to simulate the matouqin timbre, forming a "Western form + Chinese content" creation model.

This integration is not a "simple superposition" but a "organic fusion". Expert interviews show that 5 out of 7 interviewees believe that "the success of piano works in this period lies in 'taking Western techniques to express Chinese culture'". For example, Li Yinghai's *Lotus Dance* (1957) uses Western arpeggio technique, but the notes of the arpeggio are selected from the F major pentatonic scale (F-G-A-C-D), which not only retains the "flowing feeling" of the arpeggio, but also highlights the national style. This kind of exploration not only promotes the localization of Western musical instruments in China, but also provides a reference for the integration of Chinese and Western cultures in the field of music.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of 16 representative Chinese piano works from 1949 to 1966 and expert interview data, this paper draws the following conclusions:

In terms of musical language, 87.5% of the works integrate national elements such as pentatonic scales, folk melodies and traditional instrumental timbres, forming a unique Chinese piano vocabulary. The high application rate of national elements is closely related to the state's cultural policy of "nationalization of music creation".

In terms of thematic connotation, 62.5% of the works focus on socialist construction and people's new life, closely responding to the spirit of the times. Piano works have become an important carrier for spreading socialist culture and shaping national identity.

In terms of creative techniques, 93.75% of the works use tonal music thinking and traditional forms, which is in line with the "popularization" requirement of the times and promotes the spread of piano art in China.

In terms of cultural reflection, the works inherit the traditional Chinese aesthetic of "artistic conception" and "moderation", and realize the organic integration of Chinese and Western cultures, laying the foundation for the formation of the Chinese piano school.

5.2 Future Work

This paper focuses on the overall artistic characteristics and cultural reflection of piano works from 1949 to 1966, and there are still two aspects to be expanded:

In-depth analysis of individual works: Follow-up research can select 3-5 core works (such as *Moonlit Night on the Spring River*) to conduct a "micro-analysis" of their musical structure and performance techniques, and compare them with the original folk music to explore the "transformation law" of national elements.

Cross-period comparison research: Compare the piano works of 1949-1966 with those of 1978-1999 (the reform and opening-up period) to analyze the changes in the artistic expression and

cultural connotation of piano works under different social contexts.

International communication research: Collect the performance records of piano works in this

period in Western countries (such as the United States, Germany) and use audience feedback data to analyze the "international acceptance" of these works, so as to better excavate their international cultural value.

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