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**Traditions and Contemporaneity**

Yaxun Li and Tatiana Petrovna Samsonova

Athens Institute for Education and Research

8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10683 Athens, Greece

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**Yaxun Li**, Postgraduate Student, Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Russia

**Tatiana Petrovna Samsonova**, Head of Musical Disciplines Department, Faculty of Philosophy, Culture Studies and Fine Art, Professor, Pushkin Leningrad State University, Russia

**Contemporary Vocal Music in China:  
Traditions and Contemporaneity**

**ABSTRACT**

The article covers the matter of combining traditions and innovations in contemporary Chinese vocal music. The authors consider specific musical features of the Chinese folk melody (pentatonic), including such features as absence of polyphony and chord texture, a special way of vocal production (falsetto). Modern Chinese composers' music shows that in their works, they synthesize traditional vocal moments of the past centuries, and fill their compositions with innovations of the XX century, related to harmony, polyphony and musical language.

**Keywords.** Music, tradition, pentatonic, melody, innovation, poetry, tone, psychology of feelings.

## Introduction

The Chinese civilization is one of the oldest in the world. According to scientists, China had already had the highly developed culture, including science, literature and arts, for 2,000 years before the European civilization appeared. Due to the long historical isolation, many elements of the ancient musical culture have been preserved in China to the present days. It should be mentioned that the traditional Chinese culture considers nature as a single part of life. At the same time, it is emphasized that there is a direct relation between Man and Nature, the unity of Heaven and Man. This cosmological and ethical theory was totally expressed by Confucius (551 BC - 479 BC). According to Confucius, "Music is a mirror of the natural world; it contains two principles: Yang is the principle of Heaven, light, active, masculine, and Yin is the principle of Earth, dark, passive, feminine. So, music should be natural, like the harmony of Heaven and Earth, and serve as a means of communication between Heaven and Earth. In other words, music is a means of harmonious government of the society and the state" [7, p. 30]. Long before the adoption of Christianity in Europe, a unique set of "Philosophy of Music" and "Music of Philosophy" was created and regulated in China. In this set, the Chinese musical cosmology sometimes overlaps with the antique musical cosmology, not because, according to the legend, Pythagoras visited China, but because movement of human thought to expand the boundaries of knowledge is inherent to many cultures, which can be observed in different historical epochs.

In the literary and poetic monuments of ancient China, music was constantly present, as evidence of the spiritual existence of man. Here is the text of the famous Chinese philosopher of the IX century Han Yu, "<...> Each thing, expelled out of the state of rest, sounds. Grass and trees are silent, but the wind will touch them, and they will sound; the water is silent, but the wind will thrill it, and it will sound <...>; metals and stones are silent, but hit them, and they will sound. The same is the speech of man. When he has no choice, he speaks. His songs contain ideas, his cries contain thoughts. Everything that comes as a sound from the mouth, says that it is expelled out of the state of rest [2, p. 198]. So, already in ancient China, philosophers thought about the musical universe. National uniqueness, isolation, "codification", "outstanding conservatism" and an infinite variety of musical forms characterize the music of China's distant past and present. At the same time, "<...> the Chinese music is usually music with text, gesture, and dance; music accompanying a court or cult ceremonial ritual, a wedding dance, a funeral procession <...> This joint use of dance, gesture, word and music has led to development of a special, extremely differentiated system of analogies – sound "equivalents" for dance moves and, conversely, gesture "equivalents" for intonations, maximally corresponding to certain sequences of musical tones and dance moves" [2, p. 207]. This syncretism has been creating since ancient times a colorful, refined and aesthetic theatrical action, full of deep sense, with exceptional predominance of visual, objective associations and concepts.

We would like to point out an important distinctive feature of the Chinese music from the European one. It is pentatonic, a special sounding mode that has survived to the present day. It sounds so unusual for the European ear. Pentatonics is a musical system, a musical scale with five notes per octave, without semitones. Pentatonics has been and remains the basis of Chinese musical theory and practice for thousands of years. In Europe, this musical system was used by composers to give an Oriental flavor to individual pieces of music. Ancient Chinese philosophers considered these five steps to be a complex symbolic system. Thus, Chinese philosophers wrote that these five sounds correspond to five elements of Nature. In addition, the Confucian tradition attributed to these pitches the magical effect on society: «*гун*» correlated with the sovereign, «*шан*» – ministers, «*чжюэ*» – people, «*чжи*» -- deeds, «*юй*» -- material things” [8, p. 236]. In China, for centuries, there was a one-voice type of melody, without chords, harmony and polyphony. Special attention should be paid to Chinese folk instruments that have absorbed all the components of the traditional culture: court, ritual, military, folk music, rooted in the Zhou dynasty (XI-III centuries BC), the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), the Sui dynasty (581-618), the Tang dynasty (618-907) [7, p. 22], etc., up to the present time. The originality of Chinese folk instruments is expressed in many parameters: in materials used – stone, bronze, Jasper, clay, leather, silk, wood, pumpkin; in a diverse and wide timbral coloring of sounding of these instruments; in the way of producing sounds (shaking, scraping, stroking, pinching, etc.); in a huge number of all kinds of noise and percussion instruments. Folk instruments have existed in the Chinese musical culture for many thousands of years, and now they have retained their practical application in musical life and are used by modern Chinese composers.

So, in this picture, on the one hand, monolithic, on the other hand, extremely branched, traditional centuries-old musical unity of the nation, we will focus our attention on a specific phenomenon, on solo vocal performance, and pay attention to the kind in which it is present in modern China.

### **The Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of the article is to– to point out the variety of forms of vocal music in contemporary China; to determine specific features of traditional folk vocal that has been practiced in China for many thousands of years; to show possibilities for Chinese singers to master the European system of singing; to pay attention to the composer’s methods used by contemporary Chinese composers, on the one hand, which correspond to the European achievements of the XX century, on the other hand, striving for preserving traditions of the musical culture of past centuries.

## **Literature Review**

We studied works of Russian scientists, dedicated to the matter of Chinese culture and music: Gruber R.I. History of musical culture. Moscow – Leningrad, 1941; U Gen Ir. History of Music of East Asia: China. Korea. Japan. St. Petersburg – Moscow, 2011; Kholopov Yu.V. Pentatonics // Musical encyclopedia in 6 volumes. T. IV. Moscow, 1976; Schneerson G. Musical Culture of China. Moscow, 1952. Orlov G. The Tree of Music. Washington – St. Petersburg, 1992.

When working on the article, we used modern Chinese composers' musical material: Wang Jianzhong "Five poems of Li Chinzhao" and Li Yinghai "Three poems of the Tang dynasty" // Internet source: h5.m.taobao.com, sheet music; Internet source: Beijing, Folk Music Publishing House. 2013. № 1. January. ISBN 9787103021675. Sheet music.

## **Methodology**

In the article "Modern Chinese vocal music: traditions and innovation", the methods of historical, cultural, source studies, musical-theoretical and comparative analysis are applied.

## **Main Part**

Vocal music of contemporary China is quite diverse. On the one hand, it is based on the traditional scale (pentatonics), on the other hand, the world processes of integration of cultures have affected modern Chinese music in general. In modern vocal Chinese music, several directions can be distinguished. Due to specific historical conditions, the isolated development of the country as a whole, musical art was characterized isolated, "codified" for several millennia. Vocal folk music is part of the national mentality brought up on a certain musical archetype, which is based on the musical harmony of pentatonics. On the basis of this tonal system, musical "canons", "rules", "melodic models" were developed, which expressed the generally accepted national idea in their semantic tone. Ancient Chinese aphorisms emphasized the meaning of the philosophy of life and music of Ancient China, "In music, the universal is manifested", "Music is expression of what remains unchanged in the senses" [2, p. 208]. It is typical for traditional Chinese vocal music to produce artificial falsetto sounds, which are like a "mask", under which a living, full of natural curves, the human voice hides. One-voice vocal Chinese traditional music is rich in various decorations: melisms, the glide of the tone from one sound to another, whimsical melodic lines. This is rightly pointed out by the American scientist Henry Orlov, "Music of the East cultivates precisely those properties of sounding that obscure, vibrate, dissolve the graphics of musical constructions – glide, changeability, fluidity and fusion. The sensual richness, flexibility and liveliness of the sounding of music, which, in the West, depend on acoustic "additives" and skillful performing liberties, constitute the

innate quality of music of the East” [6, p. 60]. Folk vocal art of China has developed for many thousands of years, has been embodied in a special theatrical genre, where there is a synthesis of music, singing, dance, pantomime, circus. It is so called “Peking opera” (or “Beijing opera”) that has existed since the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) to the present. This genre the most fully expresses national musical idea. “Peking opera” is considered the pinnacle of theatrical and musical development of the Chinese culture. “Some ancient Chinese sayings often present the favorite form of comparison music, gestures and dance in respect of their role and the nature of the impact; “For ears music sounds; for eyes it is a pose”; “Music refers to hearing, as well as to vision through selection of sounds and gestures”; <...> “That is why the solemn ceremonial strictly regulated not only tunes, tempo, the character of music, picking the instruments, but also those poses that were supposed to correspond to movement of the chant in the process of accompanying the music <...>» [2, pp. 207-208].

These specific features of the Chinese traditional vocal culture was long a certain barrier to mastering by Chinese singers of the European school of singing, in particular, the Italian style of bel canto, which is based on other mechanisms of epy singing breath. Processes of globalization have affected this seemingly distant and unlike anything else musical world. Currently, there is an active “invasion” of Chinese singers into the European musical space, which occurs in parallel with pianists and violinists. Many Chinese singers were able to master the European technique of bel canto, won awards at prestigious international competitions. These are the Chinese vocals “stars” – Song Zuin, Wu Bixia, Wang Xin, Li Li, Li Ao, Chang Changyen, Wang Chuan Yue and others. The stages of the best opera houses in Europe and America are opened for them.

The vocal works of contemporary Chinese composers deserve serious research attention. Thus, the composer **Wang Jianzhong** (1933-2016), who received in China titles of “Great Leader”, “Chief” and “Guardian”, in the vocal cycle “Five poems of Li Qingzhao”<sup>1</sup> showed an amazing synthesis of Chinese national tradition with a European stable form, with innovations of the musical European language of the XX-XXI centuries. The Cycle is written for soprano and piano. Attention is drawn to the composer’s understanding of the musical and poetic sphere, the unity of the text with the vocal and piano parts, which is a kind of polyphonic three-voice. In Wang Jianzhong’s “Five poems of Li Qingzhao”, the melody moves whimsically according to the rules of pentatonics, and the harmony demonstrates the composer’s mastery of the European innovations of the XX century – clusters, extended tonality, chromatic harmony, etc. The poetic side of the cycle shows the deep connection with the general cultural national traditions of China, the philosophy of human life and nature, the psychology of a wide range of emotions in the female soul’s movements” [5, p. 43]<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Li Qingzhao (1084-1151) was a prominent Chinese poet. Her poems are full of traditional for China images and symbols. The collection of poems addressed by the composer Wang Jianzhong is called “Stanzas Made of Faceted Jasper” // Internet source: Natalia Naumova. Poetry, which became destiny: <https://shkolazhizni.ru/culture/articles/74321/Shkolazhizni.ru> .

<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of this cycle is published in the journal “Colloquium-journal”. Warsaw, Polska, 2019 [5, pp. 38-43].

The famous modern Chinese composer, music theorist and public figure, **Li Ying Hai** (1927-2007) created about 200 works in the vocal genre. They are diverse in subject matter, content, and musical embodiment. These are famous in China songs, such as: “Flower”, “A Look at the Map of the Motherland”, “Fight for One”, “Boat Song”, “Two Little Football Teams”, “A Thousand Miles of Meadows Overturned”, “Near the Grave of Heroes”, “The Iron Tree of the Millennium” and many others. The study of folk songs prompted Li Ying Hai to make numerous arrangements of them. He collected old songs from different regions of China. Thus, Li Ying Hai’s “Fifty Folk Songs for Piano” show the whole microcosm of Chinese vocal intonation in the piano arrangement. This work of Li Ying Hai is attributed to significant achievements of Chinese contemporary music [3].

Li Ying Hai’s vocal cycle “Three poems of the Tang dynasty poetry” reveals other facets of his work. The composer turned to ancient Chinese poetry, which helped him to create a refined and elegant work filled with deep implications, where the traditional culture found refraction in the modern European musical language. The names of these three vocal miniatures are poetic: № 1. “Spring Morning” (Wind and rain did not stop, Flowers do not know how many of them fell...); № 2. “Maple on the Night Bridge, near the Monastery” (“Maple Bridge Night Pod”); № 3. “Tower in Guan” (The Sun sets behind the mountains, the Yellow River flows into the sea...) [4]. The cycle was created in 1982. The skill of the composer was highly appreciated in China: this cycle was awarded the Gold award of the Chinese artists’ works competition at the National Higher Arts Institute in 1988.

Establishment of permanent contacts with Russian opera houses – the Mariinsky Opera and Ballet Theatre under Valery Gergiev’s direction (St. Petersburg) and the Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre (Moscow), is of great importance for development of the Chinese vocal culture. In China, Russian operas are currently heard: “Eugene Onegin” by P.I. Tchaikovsky, “The Tsar’s Bride” by N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov, “Prince Igor” by A.P. Borodin.

The field of entertainment and pop music in China is influenced by the Western civilization. The modern generation of Chinese singers who filled the stage, easily absorbed all innovations of European and American pop-music from rap to jazz, win in China at various television competitions and demonstrate assimilation of musical cultures of the West and the East.

## **Finding Result**

The ballad of R. Kipling “East – West” and its first lines, often quoted, is well known: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet <...>”. Taking place in the modern world, processes of globalization and integration show the “counter” processes of musical cultures, which are rather remote in their basic parameters. The modern vocal music of China shows interesting processes of rapprochement with the Western musical culture, and, in

some cases, even active assimilation. All this witnesses about globalization and integration of the modern world in musical art.

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