

# Personal Thinking on the Creative Directions of Chinese Contemporary Zheng Music

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**Abstract:** in this article, composer Peng Liu investigates the role of the Zheng instrument in Chinese new music scene. The composer focuses on three main approaches on how Zheng music has been written so far: the preservation of tradition, the modern development, and the extreme use. Peng also talks about the resistance from traditional Zheng players when performing pieces from the new music repertoire, and the encouragement to experimentation led mainly by Chinese composers. Although the text is a personal response by the composer, Peng is motivated to contribute to the development of new music repertoire for Zheng [note by editor].

**Keywords:** Zheng music, new music in China, new music repertoire, instrumentation, collaboration performer and composer.

Zheng<sup>1</sup> is a representative instrument of Chinese traditional music with its own long history. Although its tradition has been passed down mainly by folk artists, it has been favored by Chinese contemporary composers because of its vivid expressiveness and various possibilities of timber. As a composer, I have also composed a series of Zheng music works such as “The Shadow of Vines” [蔓影] for Zheng ensemble, “Pisces” [双鱼] for solo Zheng, “The Sound of Anvil in A Cold Midnight” [一夜寒砧] and “Night Recall” [夜忆] for mixed chamber music, to name a few<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, being a teacher at the Conservatory in China, I have observed that both students and professors, who have certain practical musical experiences, usually keep a very close collaborative relationship with the performers of traditional instrument. On the one hand, for the notation system and many other reasons, ancient Chinese classical music is now more preserved in literary forms, and it even appears to have relatively limited repertoire when compared with Western music, which has led musicians to have a great interest in reviving the tradition of Chinese national music. On the other hand, composers began to gradually absorb the spirit of oriental aesthetics and to show a strong sense of initiative, especially in Zheng music. In fact, there are some courses provided by the Conservatories of China on orchestration of traditional music, including Zheng, but it still depends on the students' own interests in further study and stage practice. Despite all this, we perceive that Conservatoires as well as different independent art groups have been promoting and stimulating Zheng music in different ways, such as inviting Zheng players to exchange face-to-face experiences in workshops or running the composition competition for a particular national instrument. Taking the Con Tempo composition competition held by the Central Conservatory of Music as an example, it has consistently encouraged participants to compose for mixed chamber ensemble and reflects an idea of following the modern times and mixing the multi-cultures. As a result, many contemporary Zheng music with high quality and exploring spirit have been created in the last few years. And although most composers are comparatively less aware of Zheng's music specific historical development than the professional Zheng performers (I include myself in this group), I will now discuss about my personal thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Guzheng, literally the ancient Chinese zither.

<sup>2</sup> The audios can be listened at the website: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/e3061cvsl5c.html> and <https://v.qq.com/x/page/w3061nxetkx.html>

based on the writing experience of Zheng.

I usually notice such a phenomenon when I read certain music reviews. In some music critiques (including these Zheng's works), the main argument is often written like this: “[some] works do not adhere to Chinese tradition, nor deliberately pursue novel compositional methods and extreme performance techniques, which show a kind of ... the creative philosophy of...” (SHA, 2013, p. 34). The question is: what exactly is the creative philosophy? I pondered that this statement may embody two layers of meanings: the former must refer to it as not conservative and not extreme, showing a concept that speaks from the heart and pursues the inner voice of the self, while the second may represent a more eclectic approach. Apparently, it aims to remain neutral in these codes of language, but in fact it is possibly meant to be both traditional and modern. In this way, it will broaden its audience and need to be able to have high mass acceptance and influence. I have briefly summarized several creative directions of contemporary Chinese Zheng music as follows, and the eclectic approach mentioned above belongs to one of them in my views.

### **1. Preserving: Inheritance of Tradition**

As we all know, Zheng is an antique musical instrument. In this long history of thousands of years, the most significant change is that its string system has changed drastically from the early 5-strings system in the Eastern Han Dynasty to the 12, 15 and 21 strings system that has eventually become the standard since the 1960s. Hence, it is undeniable that Zheng often presented a monophonic expression form before the establishment of the 21 stringed system, and formed different folk genres through the characteristic tones and melody charms generated in different regions. The multitude of music pieces covered by these genres has already become classics and traditions today. So how should we inherit these traditions? About this point, I will discuss it in the next sections.

## 2. Eclectic: Modern Development Based on Tradition

There are two keywords in this chapter, one is “based on tradition” and the other is “modern development”. In my perspective, this type of creative direction is a major trend and mainstream of the current Zheng music creation. The development obviously refers to the combination with Western composition technology and the development of a series of special performance techniques. For example, Western music pays attention to the contrast of tonal relationship. The tension of music produces a strong drama in the process of tonal confrontation and dissolution, which promotes the development of music. And specifically applied to the 21-string Zheng, this combination of Chinese and Western worlds directly leads to the manipulation of artificial string tuning scordatura. By tuning separate strings in advance for the designed pitch relationship, contrasts of multi-tonalities and modulation can be effectively and easily formed. In addition, the introduction of harmony and polyphonic music also freed the left hand of the Zheng player, borrowing keyboard playing characteristics from the piano, like voice part independence and texture possibilities. In the reformation and development of a series of performance techniques, some techniques that express a specific impression or emotion emerge naturally, such as striking the strings or instrumental body in order to create the percussive effects, and scraping the strings or playing the left side of the bridge when a mysterious and distant mood is desired. All of these elements integrate and enrich the capacity of musical expressiveness and undoubtedly open up a new space for exploration for composers. The so-called “based on tradition” has also several different approaches. One of the most common is to directly or fragmentally refer to traditional materials. For example, Chinese female composer Wang Danhong's Zheng Concerto Ru Shi [如是] is derived from the traditional tune of Zao Luo Pao<sup>3</sup> [皂罗袍] in Kunqu Opera<sup>4</sup> Peony Pavilion, and the tune has assuredly shaped Liu Rushi<sup>5</sup> [柳如是] 's delicate and elegant character of the woman who is living in the Jiangnan region of China. The other common practice is not to

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<sup>3</sup> The particular name of tunes (Qupai) in Chinese opera and every Qupai has its own established meter and form.

<sup>4</sup> Kunqu Opera is one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera and it has been listed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO since 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Liu Rushi (1618-1664) was a Chinese courtesan and poet in the late Ming dynasty who married the scholar Qian Qianyi at the age of 25. Liu's fame is well known for her artistic talent and patriotic sentiment because she committed suicide with her husband during the period of invasion by Qing regime.

directly quote, but to simulate the temperament of a traditional music style, although each has its own uniqueness. Some composers may pay attention to rhyme of poetry, some want to retain the mood of ancient Chinese music, the others will use certain characteristic tunes, but generally they all have features of pentatonic mode, for example, Tan Dun's duet *Nanxiangzi* [南乡子]<sup>6</sup> for *Xiao*<sup>7</sup> and *Zheng*. Although nobody knows what is the original sound of *Nanxiangzi* in the distant Tang Dynasty, the composer still depicts his own fascination of the ancient Chinese culture and art that has long disappeared in history, with help of rich imagination and traces that were preserved in the traditional music. The tuning of the piece uses a mixed application of tonal pentatonic scales, such as the D Gong system<sup>8</sup>[宫调] and the D flat Gong system in the opposite register (precisely, the *Zheng* part in the beginning of the piece is a comparison of the B Yu mode [羽调] and the D flat Gong mode), for creating a light and dark contrast of tonal colors (Ex. 1). Moreover, it also fits the structural logic similar to the arrangement of “Rubato-Slow-Medium-Fast-Rubato” in the ancient dance music as the *Daqu*<sup>9</sup> of Tang Dynasty [唐大曲], so it reflects another way of Chinese composers' thoughts about “tradition”.

EXAMPLE 1 – The *Zheng*'s part in the beginning of Tan Dun's *Nanxiangzi*

The musical score for the beginning of Tan Dun's *Nanxiangzi* is presented in two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The tempo is marked "Rubato". The right hand part begins with a melodic line in the B-flat mode, indicated by "bD 宫". The left hand part begins with a bass line in the B Yu mode, indicated by "b羽" and "fff". The piece transitions through various dynamics, including "f" and "p", and features a "V" marking and a "trill" symbol.

Source: Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, 1985(4)

<sup>6</sup> *Nanxiangzi*, the particular name of the tunes to which poems are composed, was the title of music work originated from the music institution (*Jiaofang*) of the Tang Dynasty.

<sup>7</sup> *Xiao* is a Chinese vertical end-blown flute and generally made of bamboo.

<sup>8</sup> In Chinese music theory, each degree in a pentatonic scale can be a tonic note, respectively creating the following 5 modes: *Gong*, *Shang*, *Jue*, *Zhi*, *Yu*. Examples: *D gong* mode as D E F# A B; *D yu* mode as D F G A C.

<sup>9</sup> *Daqu* was a genre of entertainment music popular in China from the Tang dynasty. While *da* in Chinese means large or great, *qu* means a song, it was always a long, multi-sectional piece with implication of its name.

### 3. Exploring: The Extreme Use of Personalized Language

Going back to the characteristics of the pentatonic mode mentioned above, does it mean that it is equivalent to “traditional”, or can it directly represent “Chinese style”? Apparently, China has a vast land rich in resources, and subsequently its music has great diversity. It is located in the context of diverse cultures that, according to my observations, some composers intentionally circumvent or reduce the constraints of the pentatonic features, and instead go for more profound explorations from other perspectives. In this regard, I would like to enumerate the two Zheng music works of two composers: one is “Prayer Flags In The Wind<sup>10</sup>” [吹响的经幡] composed by Qin Wenchen, which tunes 21 strings to the same pitch with microtonal nuances, which is divided into five groups within the range of four octaves while playing with bow, presenting a subversive and unique acoustic effect. At first, the musical color played on the Zheng low-registered strings have the shadow of Mongolian Khoomei (throat singing), and as the composer guides, it also reminds Lamaist music, especially the great and imposing sonority of the Bronze Tibetan Temple horn, which is several meters long. That is an example on how Chinese composer expanded the sound of national musical instruments, and it also exemplify the reforming experiment based on the state of the sound itself. The other work is “Circuit<sup>11</sup>” [圆] by composer Chen Xiaoyong, who is active in Germany. In his piece, he paid particular attention to the essence of sound, that is, a complete sounding process in which a sound event starts from Attack-Decay-Sustain-Release. At the beginning, the music only used a D (also the lowest note of Zheng). It also plays with a Double bass bow and gradually moved in pitch. With the overtones and subtleties produced at this time, the changing “musical noise” caused by the bow pressure forms a hidden two-part melody in high and low layers, thereby structuring the music by gradual acoustic tension, so that it presents a process of “complete consonance to tension, and then to consonance again” (see Ex. 2). Although these two examples cannot be generalized and fully represent this direction, they undoubtedly reflect a personal, extreme exploration of creative thinking.

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<sup>10</sup> The audios can be listened at the website: <https://music.163.com/#/song?id=143629&market=baiduqk>

<sup>11</sup> The audios can be listened at the website: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/e30610m7u31.html>

EXAMPLE 2 – The opening fragment of Chen Xiaoyong's Circuit

The musical score is for a string instrument, likely a guqin, in 4/4 time with a tempo of approximately 60 beats per minute. It is marked *Espressivo*. The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-5) features a treble clef staff with a series of notes and a bass clef staff with a wavy line representing the bow. A 'Sounding' staff above the treble clef shows the overtone series. The second system (measures 6-10) continues the wavy line in the bass clef and includes a box titled 'The possible overtones' with a treble clef staff showing notes. The score includes dynamic markings *ppp*, *poco*, *a*, *cresc.*, *f*, and *fff*. Performance instructions include 'arco (play with the bow)', 'poco a poco ponticello for more overtones until M.7', and 'play the middle of the string for more normal tones'.

Source: Sikorski Musikverlage (2002)

The above example shows the three categories of creative directions combined by the author.

## Conclusion

Then I return to the previous question: how to protect and inherit the tradition? In addition to indirect or direct reference to traditional music materials and style simulation, are there more possibilities? Composer Jia Guoping, a professor of the Central Conservatory of Music (China), talked about the definition of “tradition” in a lecture. He believed that “tradition was selected from history and was being deconstructed or rebuilt by modern people by understanding the past”. So, is the matter a cultural core that is slightly overlooked beyond the appearance of these selected musical traditions? This reminds me of a sentence that Zheng player and composer Mr. Zhao Yuzhai said: “The left hand is the soul of Zheng”, and traditional Chinese music has its own way of accent (decorations of a single note), free notes, noise (supplementing the decorations) and other forms. From liberating the left hand, to returning to the left hand, then to attaching the soul to the left hand, I think these details and elements are at least one of the ideas to break the model of piano-stylized Zheng and that kind of tradition should be truly devoted to development and exploration

in the creation. At the same time, we should consider again, are the contemporary Zheng music compositions truly diverse? History has proved that open concepts, broaden horizons, and diversified development are the fundamental principles for the vigorous development of art and culture. This kind of openness does not mean obscurity to keep the old or seek new; the openness is compatible and comprehensive development. However, in fact, just as the previous discussion, the mainstream of Zheng music today is an eclectic approach based on tradition and modernity. If it becomes mainstream, it means that the first and third categories are as if modest and slightly altered in the macro cultural environment. I don't mean to advocate for this, but also not to deny that there are many unique and personalized musical languages in the range of eclecticism and commonality. Among them, a large number of outstanding, elegant and popular Zheng works were born. The melody audibility, content thought, and modernity of the technique not only captured a large audience, but also favored by many performers. I just feel that, to a certain extent, it should encourage all aspects of the development of Zheng music creation rather than to afraid of the extreme as consistent as the previous music reviews.

Talking about encouragement, the greatest encouragement to creators is undoubtedly that their works are performed and promoted. Looking at the performance of the entire Zheng music work, the third type of direction also has relatively few performance opportunities. There are many reasons for this situation: the work itself, performance difficulties, fame, performers, aesthetic concepts, and specific environmental conditions and so on. Nevertheless, as creators, we often hear such a voice from the performers: "Zheng works written by Contemporary composers are often not very familiar with the performance practice, their methods are monotonous, and they are not easy to play. The use of playing techniques such as scratching and sweeping is not enough. Some music leaves an impression of a fancy string of sounds...". It is undeniable that this phenomenon exists, but this sounds like a statement with a tone of reproach: the composer has little communication with the performer. In fact, composers may feel the same. Composers should strengthen their communication with performers, carrying out the collaborations on the creative ideas, aesthetic interests, content techniques and performance methods in addition to better understand the characteristics and rationality of Zheng's writing. Consequently, composers can reach a channel of communication with players that integrates creative performance and feedback, then helping to



promote and cultivate a more solid and diverse audience group. In short, creators, performers, and listeners should be a trinity, assist each other as “keen friend”, contest each other as “adversaries” and inspire each other as “role model”. They should communicate and compete with each other, not only in the inheritance of music traditions and development of modern techniques, but also try to respect and understand the so-called extreme personalized music language, so that we can work together in all directions to create a new, comprehensive and three-dimensional creative peak in the endless river of the history of Zheng music!

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peng Liu, Ph.D. in Music Composition, holds a teaching position at the Composition Department of Sichuan Conservatory of Music, while he is engaging in the postdoctoral research under the co-advisor Jia Guoping in the Central Conservatory of Music. His works have won numerous awards, including the outstanding award of 2019 Asian Composers showcase in Korea and several prizes of competitions hosted by Traditional Music Festival. Groups that have performed his works include the Teana Zheng ensemble, the New Zealand Trio/ Quartet, the Kammer Musik Veräin Lëtzebuerg and The Hong Kong New Music Ensemble. E-mail: [newpain@qq.com](mailto:newpain@qq.com)