

Research on the Compositional Characteristics of Chinese Piano Works in the 1990s—Taking Zhang Zhao's "Dian Nan Shan Ballad" as an Example

Lei Gao, Neng Zhou

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, Zhejiang, China

Abstract: The 1990s marked a pivotal period of social and cultural transformation in China, accompanied by a shift in artistic creation concepts. Against the backdrop of deepening reform and opening-up and increasingly close cultural exchanges between China and the West, Chinese piano music composition entered a new phase pursuing profound integration and autonomous expression. Works like "Dian Nan Shan Ballad" signify the deepening and maturation of the "nationalization" process in Chinese piano music, laying a solid aesthetic foundation for its diverse development in the 21st century. This paper aims to examine the compositional characteristics and aesthetic orientations of Chinese piano works during this period by analyzing the musical substance of "Folk Songs from the Southern Mountains of Yunnan," a piano suite composed by Zhang Zhao in 1992.

Keywords: 1990s, Chinese piano works, Zhang Zhao, "Dian Nan Shan Ballad", Compositional characteristics, Nationalization.

1. THE ERA'S CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE PIANO COMPOSITION IN THE 1990S

The 1990s marked a pivotal decade of social and cultural transformation in China, as well as a crucial period for Chinese piano music composition to build upon past achievements, usher in maturity, and embrace diversity. With the deepening of reform and opening-up, socioeconomic development provided new material foundations and intellectual space for cultural and artistic creation. Having weathered the impact of 1980s "New Wave Music" and undergone experimental exploration, Chinese piano composition entered a more contemplative and profound phase of foundational development in the 1990s. Composers no longer contented themselves with merely imitating Western modern techniques or superficially referencing ethnic musical symbols. Instead, they dedicated themselves to achieving a substantive leap from 'borrowing' to "integration" by deeply understanding the essence of both Chinese and Western music.

1.1 Sociocultural Context and Creative Environment

1.1.1 Shifts in Cultural Policy and Expansion of Artistic Creation

Entering the 1990s, China's cultural policies, while continuing the overarching principle of "reform and opening up," further embodied an inclusive approach characterized by "promoting the main theme while encouraging diversity." This signified that while encouraging the creation of works reflecting the spirit of the times, it also provided a more relaxed space for diverse explorations in artistic forms, styles, and themes. This optimized policy environment directly ignited composers' creative passion and sense of agency, prompting piano music composition to shift from collective discourse back toward individual expression.

Against this backdrop, piano composition produced both mainstream works aligned with the spirit of the times and a wealth of personalized creations showcasing distinct individual styles. Cui Shiguang's Piano Arrangements of Liu Tianhua's Erhu Pieces, composed in the 1990s, reimagined Chinese traditional instrumental works through the Western instrument of the piano. This work both responded to the era's call to "promote national culture" and showcased the composer's artistic aspirations through personalized harmonic arrangements and tonal treatments.

1.1.2 Deepening Sino-Western Cultural Exchange Influences Musical Composition

As China's doors opened further, cultural exchanges between China and the West in the 1990s evolved beyond the “opening window” phase of the 1980s into a deeper, more frequent “dialogue.” Chinese composers gained more comprehensive and timely access to Western modern music genres and compositional techniques. Unlike the imitation of Western modern techniques by some composers during the 1980s “New Wave Music” period, composers of the 1990s demonstrated greater autonomy and critical thinking. They selectively assimilated these techniques and integrated them with Chinese musical traditions. Chen Qigang’s Piano Concerto “Er Huang,” published in 1995, profoundly fused the structural paradigm of Western concertos with the melodic characteristics of the ‘Er Huang’ melody from Chinese Peking Opera. This work not only demonstrated a precise grasp of Western classical compositional techniques but also, through a critical approach to borrowing, endowed the piece with a distinct national identity. It stands as a successful example of the “dialogue” between Chinese and Western cultures.

1.2 Fundamental Trends in Piano Composition

Against this socio-cultural backdrop, Chinese piano composition in the 1990s revealed two distinct yet intertwined mainstream trajectories: first, the deepening and internalization of the pursuit of “nationalization”; second, the popularization and creative transformation of “modern” compositional techniques. These two strands were not mutually exclusive but achieved organic unity within numerous works.

1.2.1 Deepening the Pursuit of “Nationalization”

‘Nationalization’ has been a core challenge for Chinese piano music since its inception. By the 1990s, this pursuit transcended the earlier phase of adaptation—primarily involving arrangements of folk melodies with added nationalistic harmonies—and entered a new realm seeking “spiritual fusion.” Composers no longer contented themselves with transplanting ready-made folk tunes onto the piano. Instead, they focused on delving into the core of folk music culture and deeply integrating it with the piano’s instrumental characteristics and their individual compositional styles. Wang Jianzhong’s 1990s revision of the piano arrangement for Three Variations on “Mei Hua San Bian” emphasized the spiritual essence of guqin playing techniques over earlier versions. By simulating the guqin’s “yíng, ráo, chuò, zhù” techniques through delicate fingertip touch rather than merely replicating timbres, the work achieved a balance between the piano’s instrumental qualities and the aesthetic beauty of traditional Chinese instruments.

This era of “ethnic-inspired” composition exhibited multi-layered, multidimensional characteristics. Similarly, many works dedicated themselves to using the piano to mimic the timbres and playing techniques of traditional instruments like the guzheng, pipa, and dizi, aiming to convey the artistic conception and charm inherent to these instruments. Liu Dunnan’s 1993 piano suite “Shan Lin” draws inspiration from the music of ethnic minorities in western Hunan. Rather than directly quoting folk melodies, it extracts their rhythmic essence and modal characteristics, combining them with the piano’s polyphonic strengths to create an entirely new work that conveys the humanistic atmosphere and natural spirit of the region’s mountains and forests.

1.2.2 The Popularization of Modern Techniques

During the 1990s, Western modern techniques—such as counterpoint, harmonic innovation, timbre music, and new structural concepts—were increasingly applied across diverse piano compositions. This widespread adoption signaled growing technical confidence among Chinese composers. The focus shifted from mere novelty for novelty’s sake to serving more nuanced emotional portrayal, imagery creation, and profound cultural reflection. Zhu Jian’er’s Piano Sonata No. 3 (1994) employs Western twelve-tone technique to construct its core tonal row. Yet through personalized treatment of this row, it subtly incorporates elements of Chinese pentatonic modes. This demonstrates not only mastery of modern techniques but also conveys the distinctive characteristics of Chinese cultural thought through creative transformation of these techniques.

Thus, Chinese piano works of the 1990s collectively exhibit richer, more mature technical language alongside more introspective and diverse musical expression, marking the full maturation of Chinese piano composition during its “second developmental period.” This maturity is particularly evident in Luo Zhongrong’s 1999 Piano Trio. The work integrates Western modern harmony and timbre techniques with the traditional Chinese concept of “qi yun”. Here, technique serves emotion, and emotion carries culture, making it the crowning achievement of the 1990s piano repertoire in its dual maturity of technique and content.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF 1990S PIANO WORKS AS SEEN IN “DIAN NAN SHAN BALLAD”

Zhang Zhao composed the piano suite “Folk Songs from the Southern Mountains of Yunnan” in 1992. This work not only draws deeply from the rich folk music traditions of Yunnan’s Yi ethnic group but also serves as a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, ethnicity and the world, reflecting its era through its creative philosophy, technical language, and aesthetic style.

2.1 Evolution of Creative Philosophy

2.1.1 Constructing “Personalized Ethnicity”

Zhang Zhao’s approach in Dian Nan Shan Ballad avoids direct quotation of any single complete Yi folk song. Instead, he delved into the folk music treasures of Yunnan’s Honghe and Lunan regions, collecting, refining, and assimilating the essence of their mountain ballads, nursery rhymes, and dance tunes—capturing their spirit, melodic characteristics, and rhythmic core. For instance, in “Mountain Fire,” he captures the exuberant rhythms and distinctive third-sixth interval colors found in the dances of the Yi Sani people. This creative approach, grounded in both intuitive experience and rational refinement, resulted in a musical language that is both ethnic and highly personalized. Thus, the ethnicity in “Dian Nan Shan Ballad” is no longer a label but has been internalized as part of the composer’s personal musical identity—a genuine expression of his individuality.

2.1.2 The Fusion of Programmatic and Descriptive Thinking

Comprising three short pieces—Mountain Child, Mountain Moon, and Mountain Fire—each bearing distinct literary titles, this work inherits the tradition of programmatic piano music in China. Yet its descriptive thinking is deeply intertwined with rigorous, abstract musical structural thinking. Though “Mountain Child” vividly portrays children at play, its musical construction adheres to a ternary form framework. Through the correspondence between the introductory material and the coda, along with thematic transpositions and contrapuntal treatments, it demonstrates a high degree of logical coherence. In depicting tranquil nightscapes, “Mountain Moon” achieves its hazy poeticism through constantly shifting modal progressions and harmonies rich in coloristic variation. This fusion renders the musical imagery vivid and accessible to listeners’ perception and imagination while avoiding structural looseness, reflecting the more mature and balanced compositional approach of 1990s composers.

2.2 Fusion of Technical Language

2.2.1 Modern Transformation of Folk Music Elements

“Dian Nan Shan Ballad” represents composer Zhang Zhao’s modern adaptation of primitive folk music materials. His creation stems from field recordings of Yi ethnic folk music in Yunnan. He reimaged the distinctive mountain ballads, nursery rhymes, and dance tunes of southern Yunnan’s Yi folk music using modern harmonies, contemporary piano techniques, and various variation methods.

Melodically, the work does not directly quote any single folk song but distills the distinctive interval structures and ornamental inflections characteristic of Yi music. In Mountain Fire, extensive use of grace notes, legato, and staccato techniques serves as an imitation and piano-based recreation of the unique “inflectional” qualities found in local folk singing and instrumental performance. The thematic melody is dominated by a four-note sequence of la-do-re-bmi, reflecting the characteristics of the a-scale mode. However, the dominant note mi is emphasized by the lowered bmi, and the use of this altered interval creates the modal color unique to Yi music, as shown in Example 1.

Example 1

At the level of rhythm and beat, the complex and ever-changing rhythmic patterns of Yi ethnic dances are abstracted. This process preserves their original vibrant vitality while employing modern beat transformations and rhythmic counterpoint techniques to create rhythms that feel both familiar and novel. This transformation liberates folk elements from their original contextual constraints, elevating them into a modern musical language with universal expressive power—a reflection of composers' deepening “ethnicization” thinking in the 1990s. The rhythm of “Mountain Child” is nimble and leaping, extensively employing contrasts between sixteenth notes, staccato, and legato to mimic the vivid moments of children running, whispering, and playfully wrestling. The rhythm brims with elasticity and improvisational flair, as demonstrated in Example 2.

Additionally, two distinctive rhythmic patterns emerge. The first stems from the composer's intent to embody the unrestrained, improvisational spirit of ancient Chinese literati music, where musical statements often adopt non-periodic, non-regular “prose-like” syntax. One manifestation is the elastic tempo variation rhythm, as heard in Pi Huang, Chinese Dream, Divine Song and Joyful Dance, Luo Zuo, Flower Yi Dance, Meditation and Reverie, and Numa Ame. The second is “a chant-like tempo progression with free rhythm, imbued with a uniquely Chinese quality of contemplative musing and a leisurely, unhurried temperament”.



Example 2

2.2.2 The Nationalization of Modern Compositional Techniques

In the suite “Songs of the Southern Yunnan Mountains,” both “Mountain Child” and “Mountain Fire” employ a ternary form structure, while “Mountain Moon” follows a binary form. “Mountain Child” adopts a ternary form structure in a moderate tempo, comprising an introduction, Section A, Section B, a transition, Section A’, and a coda, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

No.	Title	Form	Structure
1	“Mountain Child”	Ternary Form	Introduction + A + B + A' + Coda
2	“Mountain Moon”	Binary Form	Introduction + AA' + BB' + Coda
3	“Mountain Fire”	Ternary Form	Introduction + A + B + A' + Coda

The first two measures of the introduction employ appoggiaturas to enrich the piece's expressiveness. This is immediately followed by a descending run of sixteenth notes introducing the theme, conveying the lively and endearing character of the “mountain child.” Section A consists of two phrases: phrase a in A minor mode, while phrase b features different modes for the left and right hands. The right-hand melody is in D Phrygian mode, while the left-hand accompaniment is in G Phrygian mode. The melody of phrase a shifts upward by a perfect fourth to form the melody of phrase b. After this perfect fourth transposition, phrase b's melody proceeds an octave higher, with the use of higher registers further advancing the emotional intensity of the piece. Section B is entirely in D Phrygian mode, comprising phrases c and d. Phrase d incorporates appoggiaturas over phrase c's foundation and employs counterpoint, a frequent technique in Bach's works. The transition section, marked from “f” to “mp,” introduces Section A’. This section comprises phrases a1 and a2. Phrase a1 transposes the melody of phrase a up an octave, while phrase a2 varies the right-hand melody of a1. Here, the left-hand voice incorporates the theme from Section B.

“Mountain Moon” employs a parallel two-part form, a graceful andante comprising an introduction, A section, B section, and coda. The introduction spans one measure: the right hand features staccato notes in octaves, while the

left hand plays arpeggiated chords in the tonic of B minor. The piece begins with the right hand's staccato 7th, alternating between hands to introduce the theme.

In Section A, Phrase a is in B-flat minor, while Phrase a1 is in B major. The right-hand melody in Phrase a is highly song-like, with the left hand providing supporting and echoing accompaniment. Phrase a1 introduces a middle voice that imitates the right-hand melody, creating a distinct contrapuntal texture. In Section B, Phrase b is in B minor mode, while Phrase b1 is in B major mode. This section employs extensive sextuplets, lending the music a softer quality. The concluding coda reprises the theme from Section A to close the piece.

“Mountain Fire” is a lively allegro in ternary form, comprising an introduction, A section, B section, A’ section, and coda. The introduction’s first four measures feature a descending third-based motif, with the subsequent progression ascending to foreshadow the impending bonfire gathering.

Section A comprises phrases a and b, both in C mode. Phrase b is played an octave higher than phrase a, with the left-hand accompaniment texture shifting to staccato to highlight the distinctive rhythmic characteristics of Yi ethnic dance music. Section B comprises phrases c and d, maintaining the C mode. It employs an alternating technique of syncopated monophonic melodies and staccato notes, lending this section greater interest. Section A’ comprises phrases a1 and c1. Phrase a1 modulates to the F mode, reverting to C mode at the start of phrase c1. Continuous left-hand staccato notes intensify the bonfire gathering atmosphere. In the coda, the dynamics build from soft to loud, culminating in a fortissimo conclusion. The reprise of the introduction’s theme, combined with its strong rhythmic pulse and distinctive rhythmic patterns, creates a festive, jubilant, and vibrant atmosphere.

2.3 The Essence of Aesthetic Style

2.3.1 The Fusion of Regional Flavors and Modern Aesthetics

In the 1990s, Chinese piano composers no longer contented themselves with vague generalizations of “national style.” Instead, they turned to deep excavation of specific regional cultures, organically integrating them with modern and contemporary artistic aesthetics. “Dian Nan Shan Ballad” is precisely rooted in the folk music traditions of the Yi and Ha Ni ethnic groups in areas like Hong He, Yunnan. Its melodic contours, rhythmic pulsations, and overall musical character all derive from distillations of local mountain ballads, nursery rhymes, and dance tunes. Through masterful application of modern compositional techniques, the composer achieved an aesthetic elevation of regional flavor.

The distinctive glissandos and ornamental notes in the work are unmistakably imitations of the “melodic inflections” found in Yi folk songs. “Mountain Fire” vividly captures the fervor and complexity of Yi dance rhythms, with its “intense rhythmic drive and unique rhythmic patterns” being the most prominent features of the piece. Though grounded in 3/4 time, the piece frequently alternates between 3/8 and 2/4 time in its transitions and developments. This alternation becomes particularly regular in the middle section (Part B) of “Mountain Fire,” as demonstrated in Example 3.

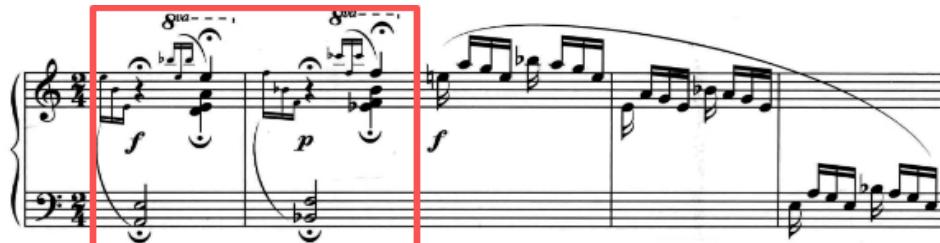
Example 3

2.3.2 Individual Creativity Rooted in Ethnic Style

While the “ethnicization” explorations of the 1980s primarily reflected a collective consensus and pursuit of commonality, by the 1990s, establishing a distinctive personal style grounded in profound ethnic musical traditions became the conscious pursuit of outstanding composers. Dian Nan Shan Ballad vividly exemplifies this characteristic of “individual creativity rooted in ethnic style.”

Zhang Zhao’s creativity is built upon the deep internalization and creative transformation of ethnic musical

materials. He absorbs and deconstructs the “genetic elements” of Yi music gathered during field research—such as specific interval combinations, rhythmic patterns, and structural thinking—then reassembles them according to his unique musical logic. In the opening prelude of “Mountain Child,” the free-rhythm ornamentation leading into the column-like chord progression simulates the plucked timbre of Yi plucked instruments and the natural echoes resonating through mountain valleys, as illustrated in Example 4.



Example 4

2.3.3 The Creation of Poetic Imagery in Emotional Expression

In terms of aesthetic orientation toward emotional expression, Chinese piano works of the 1990s collectively shifted from the direct outpouring characteristic of Romanticism toward a return to the subtlety, introspection, and cultivation of poetic imagery unique to Eastern aesthetics.

All three movements of this suite are themed around objective imagery, with the composer entrusting all emotions and reflections to the musical portrayal of these images. In “Mountain Moon,” nostalgia for the homeland and yearning for tranquility are not voiced through direct, song-like arias. Instead, a vast, chilly, and contemplative moonlit night is conjured through sustained, flowing melodies, crystalline high-register timbres, and ever-shifting harmonic colors over a persistent bass foundation.

Similarly, the fervent collective emotion in “Mountain Fire” is sonically rendered through rapid, repetitive toccata-like motifs and forceful piled-up chord hammering, evoking the rhythmic intensity of passionate dance and the collective power of communal chanting. This pervasive approach of imitating timbres through sound is one of the key techniques enabling the work’s poetic imagery, as demonstrated in Example 5.

Example 5

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 Technical Characteristics: Rooted in Ethnic Diversity and Integration

During this period, Chinese piano compositions underwent a technical transformation from superficial imitation to profound integration. Composers no longer merely harmonized folk songs or mechanically applied Western modern techniques; instead, they genuinely embraced ethnic musical language as the foundation of their creations. Selective use of various modern compositional techniques served to better express the essence of ethnic music. For instance, Zhang Zhao’s “Dian Nan Shan Ballad” ingeniously blends Yi ethnic musical elements with modern

harmony and rhythm; Sang Tong's "Nine Short Piano Pieces on Folk Song Themes" employs atonal techniques to convey the poetic mood of folk songs.

3.2 Aesthetic Characteristics: Expression of Subtle and Profound Ambience

In artistic pursuit, piano works of the 1990s generally shifted toward an understated and introspective mode of expression. Composers no longer contented themselves with directly depicting scenes or expressing emotions, but instead dedicated themselves to creating musical ambience rich in imaginative space. Drawing nourishment from traditional Chinese aesthetics, they employed modern musical language to create artistic effects where emotion and scenery intertwine. For instance, Wang Lisan's "Impressions of Higashiyama Kaii" blends music and painting to evoke a harmonious unity between humanity and nature; Zhang Zhao's "Dian Nan Shan Ballad" presents distinct moods—such as tranquility and fervor—across its different movements.

3.3 Creative Characteristics: Distinctive Artistic Styles

A defining feature of this period is the maturation of composers' individual styles. While united by a shared pursuit of ethnic expression, each composer developed a unique musical language. Through personalized interpretations of ethnic culture, they forged distinctive creative approaches. For instance, while both Zhang Zhao and Sang Tong employed ethnic musical elements, Zhang's works carry a strong regional flavor of Yunnan, whereas Sang Tong's pieces exhibit a more abstract and modern sensibility. The emergence of these individual styles signifies Chinese composers' evolution into true creators. Their works possess both ethnic foundations and distinct personal imprints.

The 1990s marked a crucial period of maturation and diversification in Chinese piano music composition. With its solid ethnic roots, open technical horizons, and profound aesthetic dimensions, the creative output of this era laid a robust and inspiring foundation for the diverse flourishing of Chinese piano music in the 21st century.

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