

## THE CHINESE ART SONG, *YISHU GEQU* : BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY<sup>1</sup>

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“Die größte Kunst und das meiste Können erfordert, in eine kleine Form einen großen Inhalt zu gießen.”

(Nikkels 1989, 11)

### ABSTRACT

The Chinese art song, *yishu gequ* 藝術歌曲, is a typical genre of New Music (Xin yinyue 新音樂) of the May Fourth Movement. Such pieces were primarily composed by Chinese graduates of European and American universities who found inspiration in European Romantic art songs, especially nineteenth-century German lieder. The existing Western literature about this genre emphasizes the connections between the Chinese art songs of the twentieth century and European Romantic songs and does not consider any relationship with the domestic Chinese tradition. Publications by Chinese scholars also do not examine in any detail specific connections to the Chinese tradition at the ideational level.

As this paper demonstrates, the Chinese art songs that emerged during the May Fourth Movement were not created solely by following a Western model. Their uniqueness is the result of combining the search for “new culture” with the significant traces of domestic roots in the social role of music and the tradition of joining words and music in a single artistic whole.

The paper first explores the emergence of the art song in the context of Chinese musical modernization, and then, through citing theoretical works and analyses of select compositions by three of the most famous art song composers – Xiao Youmei 蕭友梅 (1884–1940), Zhao Yuanren 趙元任 (1892–1982), and Huang Zi 黃自 (1904–38) – it demonstrates the various approaches to creating art songs, especially in terms of how they were related to the domestic tradition. I have chosen examples that allow us to observe the gradual adoption of an originally European genre in the Chinese cultural environment and various factors that influenced how this genre changed. I also examine the changing ways in which this foreign genre interacted with the domestic Chinese environment.

**Keywords:** Chinese New Music; Chinese art song; tradition; Xiao Youmei; Zhao Yuanren; Huang Zi

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## Little great art

Of the many genres of New Music (*Xin yinyue* 新音樂) from the first half of the twentieth century that combined Chinese material and Western compositional approaches, the art song, *yishu gequ* 藝術歌曲, is the ideal subject of study. The connecting of the German song tradition – which reached its apex during Romanticism – with traditional Chinese ideas about the social use of music as a means for influencing the mentality of its listeners makes the art songs of the 1920s and 1930s unique in many ways.

A leading expert on New Music,<sup>2</sup> Professor Liu Jingzhi, considers the period from the May Fourth Movement until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1919–76) to be an era when the work of Chinese composers was marked by often feeble attempts at imitating Western compositions (Liu Jingzhi 2000, 8). He claims that art songs were imitations of works by composers such as Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, Liu draws no link between the creation of these pieces and so-called school songs (*xuetang yuege* 學堂樂歌) even though the most prominent composers of art songs also wrote school songs and the forewords to collections of both types of songs share many similarities. Many Western scholars also share this view that Chinese art songs were often unsuccessful attempts at imitating German lieder. That these two kinds of works share a certain idea is ignored, that is, the didactic conception of music as a means for morally improving the individual and creating a harmonious society. In the existing literature, the main yardstick by which Chinese compositions are assessed is the extent to which they are similar to nineteenth-century German lieder.

In recent years, the genre of art song has become a popular topic of theses written by students at Chinese universities. Chinese authors attribute a nationalist dimension to this genre, claiming that it was an equal to its “Western counterparts” (Sun Yung-Wei 2012). This view of the Chinese art song genre, which side-lines any connection with the domestic tradition, is the result of the vestiges of ideas that emerged out of the May Fourth Movement.

In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate, by using primary sources and analysing selected songs, that art songs are not just imitations of German lieder, nor do they comprise a “modern” Westernized genre of Chinese New Music with no relation to the domestic tradition but a genre firmly embedded within the sociohistorical context in which they emerged, in which Western influences were eagerly borrowed and modified and adapted to mesh with Chinese cultural conventions. As I will show in this paper, the choice of Western models was made easier by existing domestic patterns. Chinese art songs are unique at two levels. First is the specific historical-cultural circumstances of the search for “new culture”, which opened the door to the import of foreign models and their adaption in a new context to meet specific values held by early-twentieth-century China: the importance of progress, scientificness, and national self-determination. Second is interest in the art song, even though it was a foreign music genre, which was supposed

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., music combining Western compositional techniques and instruments with Chinese tonality.

<sup>3</sup> This approach can be found in other works by this composer. Especially in the largest book on New Music written to this date: Liu, Jingzhi (2009). *Zhongguo Xin Yinyue Shi Lun* 中國新音樂史論. Hong Kong: Zhong wen daxue chubanshe. In 2010 an English translation titled *A Critical History of New Music in China* was published.

to contribute to burgeoning Chinese artistic modernism. Many of the ideas behind this genre had deep domestic roots and correspond with the didactic understanding of music as a means of perfecting the individual and ensuring a harmonious society, an idea contained primarily in Confucian texts.

In a certain sense the very principle of combining poetic text and music in the Chinese art song was a return to tradition. The art song can be understood as something that re-established the long-lost balance between both forms of artistic expression – words and music – a commonplace occurrence in China’s history. The classic *Book of Songs*, like works in the popular *yuefu* 樂府 and *ci* 詞 genres, was originally meant to be performed with musical accompaniment. However, the melodies gradually fell into oblivion and what were once songs turned into poems meant primarily to be read or recited.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, there was always a vivid awareness about the close link between poetic verse and music.

Even though Chinese composers of art songs often wrote magazine articles emphasizing the necessity of severing links with domestic traditions and promoted transitioning to modernism, this new genre in many ways bore traces of the Chinese tradition – in the lyrics to songs, compositional approaches, recommendations for how songs should be performed, and the very motivation of creating this genre.

The typical features of Chinese art songs from the May Fourth Movement period are as follows:

- 1) The genre of art song is firmly connected with the development of Chinese New Music in the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century German lied was an ideal choice of model to adopt by Chinese composers because it allowed them to connect traditional awareness about music’s social role with the “progressiveness” attributed to Western music in this period.
- 2) From the beginning, Chinese composers adapted works in this genre to suit current values and topics, and the subjective portrayal of feelings typical of German lieder was replaced with themes related to national revival.
- 3) Over time, these songs ceased to play an exclusively didactic role, and their artistic dimension was more fully developed. Approaches borrowed from European models as well as methods specific to Chinese music and interpretation were critical in this transformation. Composers also turned to classical Chinese poetry as a new source of inspiration.
- 4) In addition to imitating a musical model, which at first was presented as the modernization of the “backwards” domestic musical tradition, there was renewed interest in tradition and incorporating elements of the domestic musical tradition into the framework of this adopted European genre. Hence, a unique form of artistic expression emerged.

It would be a grave mistake to view the genre of Chinese art song as only a poor imitation of European Romantic songs. Indeed, the works of composers of Chinese New Music from the May Fourth era do have much in common with Western Romantic songs – especially German lieder – but we cannot ignore their specific formal features, their con-

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<sup>4</sup> Cai, Zongqi (2008). *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*. Columbia University Press, pp. 330.

tent, their social role, and the historical-cultural context in which they were created. If we recall the words of Gustav Mahler that “writing songs is the most difficult art because it requires a great deal of knowledge and the ability to pour a great volume into a small form” (Nikkels 1989, 11), then we can view the composition of the Chinese art song as a most demanding task, for in it composers attempted to combine the content and form of two different cultural traditions. During the May Fourth Movement, questions regarding naturally combining the traditional and the modern, the Chinese and the Western, became a central point of creation in this genre.

### **Music as a means for transitioning to modernity: From the school song to the art song**

A series of events in the second half of the nineteenth century in China led to increased interest in European music, beginning with China’s defeat in the Opium Wars, when China was fully confronted with the West’s technological superiority.<sup>5</sup> After these conflicts China started importing modern technology and modern science with the goal of “strengthening” the country and making it prosper. At first, the cultural aspects of modernization were not a priority. In 1884, broad segments of the population still rated domestic music higher than its Western counterpart. J. A. van Aalst, a Belgian customs official working in China in the late nineteenth century, authored a book titled *Chinese Music*, in which he made the following observation:

Western music is not at all appreciated in China. The Chinaman seems to pity us for being still so far back in this particular line when we have shown our superiority in all other branches of science. It may be very patriotic for the Chinese to have the best opinion possible of their own music, but it will not prevent foreigners finding it monotonous, noisy, and disagreeable. (J. A. Van Aalst 1884, 6)

Nonetheless, the successful Meiji-era reforms in Japan, together with Qing China’s declining position in the world, led a segment of Chinese intellectuals to increase their efforts at achieving the same level of development as the Western powers, which resulted in, among other things, greater interest in Western music. In the eyes of the reformers, music, alongside technological and scientific achievements, philosophy, aesthetics, and literature, was seen as an essential component of modernity that could help China overcome its “backwardness”.

The ideas of the first generation of educated reformers, who often lacked a musical education, were formed in keeping with traditional notions about the close link between music, personal morals, and social order. Writings about the history of Chinese music from this period regularly attribute music the ability “to cultivate in people a feeling for rules” and “to cultivate one’s noble personality” (Sun Shi 1919 in Zhang Jingwei 1998, 286). These reformers therefore promoted Western musical genres because they believed

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<sup>5</sup> In this article I use the terms *Western* (to mean European and North American culture in general) and *Chinese*. Here, I am using the terminology featured in the Chinese discourse at the time, although I am aware that it is a gross simplification of both cultural complexes.

they could be a suitable means for morally edifying broad swathes of the public in the spirit of the new values of patriotism created following European models and pushed to have these genres incorporated into school syllabi. In the eyes of these intellectuals, the ideal genre for doing this was the art song.

Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), a reformer, politician, and influential journalist, who was the first to introduce Western songs in China, emphasized the ability of music and poetry to affect the mentality of Chinese people: “In order to transform the quality of the people, poetry and music are one of the essential elements of spiritual education, which can be understood by those with a little knowledge” (Liang Qichao 1999, 5333).

An example of how this educational effect was supposed to look comes directly from Liang’s “Patriotic Song” (“Ai guo ge” 愛國歌) from 1902, which, in an attempt to encourage patriotism, lauds China as “the greatest country on the greatest continent” (*zui da zhou zhong zui da guo* 最大洲中最大國) “with a history more than 5,000 years old” (*wu qian yu sui lishi gu* 五千餘歲歷史古).<sup>6</sup>

Early-twentieth-century educational reforms, which led to the creation of a new type of school and greater numbers of Chinese students travelling abroad, had an effect on musical education, especially through the adoption of what was known as “school songs” (*xuetang yuege* 學堂樂歌). This genre was adopted from Japan, whose entire system of musical education was built upon school songs. Thanks to the activities of associations founded by Chinese students who had studied abroad, these compositions became an essential part of the musical education lessons that had been freshly introduced in China (Ho 2011, 31).

These school songs, which were often created by setting the texts of existing Chinese poems to famous melodies from different genres of Western music, were primarily seen as a tool for strengthening national consciousness and a means for indoctrinating the people. There was heavy emphasis on the quality of the lyrics. The notion that school songs could be used to foster patriotism was based on two sources, a Western one and a domestic Chinese one. It was inspired by the lied movement, a product of Western Romantic nationalism. The ground for this movement had already been prepared in China, thanks to the similarities with the Confucian state ideology of late imperial China, according to which “correct” music could cultivate the human soul and bring harmony to social relationships (Yao Xinzhong 2015, 136). Even after the fall of the empire and the rejection of Confucianism as the state ideology, basic notions about the relationship between music and social order remained unchanged.

In the first half of the twentieth century, thanks to increased contact with the West, ideas about what values “correct” music was supposed to awaken in people changed dramatically. The original notion of achieving social harmony, grounded in the values of traditional society, turned into the idea of strengthening national consciousness and spreading ideas about modernization.

In this stage of modernization traditional Chinese music was rejected, or rather Chinese reformers active within the field of domestic music could not identify a traditional genre suitable for proclaiming the ideas of modernization. The court music of the Opium

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<sup>6</sup> This song was published in Liang, Qichao 梁啟超 (1902). *Shao nian zhongguo zhi shaonian* 少年中國之少年, *Ai guo ge si zhang* 愛國歌四章. *Xin xiao shuo* 1: 183.

Wars era slowly lost its influence, largely because it was closely linked with the political and social order that the reformers wanted to change. The music of the literati was viewed as a noble genre connected with the private life of intellectuals. It was too individualistic to contribute to social change. On the other hand, the reformers thought folk songs were primitive and lacked the “maturity” of Western music. Moreover, they were linked to traditional values and what the modernizers considered to be a backwards society. Xiao Youmei, one of the composers of art songs that I will discuss in this paper, made the following comment about traditional Chinese music: “Our cultivated music, *yayue*, is nothing more than an antique, and folk music, *suyue*, still has a malignant influence on common people” (Xiao Youmei 2004, 679–81).

The art song genre followed in the footsteps of the school song in terms of both ideas and forms of expression. Creators working in both genres saw them as means for edifying listeners and performers. They were intended for didactic use in schools and use compositional techniques typical of Romantic European music. The difference between these two genres, however, lay in the fact that art songs relied on newly composed melodies whereas school songs used existing melodies. Moreover, art songs were more musically elaborate, both in terms of vocals and accompaniment. After 1920 many composers wrote art songs, including Xiao Youmei; Zhao Yuanren; Huang Zi; Liao Shangguo 廖尚果, better known as Qing Zhu 青主 (1893–1959); Ying Shangneng 应尚能 (1902–73); He Luting 贺绿汀 (1903–99); and Xian Xinghai 冼星海 (1905–45).

This generation of composers included piano accompaniments in their songs and to the many features adopted from school songs gradually added an emphasis on the aesthetic quality of music. Compositions from the May Fourth period often reflect this emphasis. The outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937, however, led to an emphasis on mobilizing the nation to fight against the occupiers through art. Music output was dominated by the mass song and the revolutionary song, which often sacrificed the artistic qualities of the compositions. Their form and content were fully subordinated to efforts at mobilizing the masses (through easy-to-remember melodies, persuasive lyrics, etc.). In the work of Chinese composers of New Music the revolutionary song gradually replaced the art song. The conditions in the post-war People’s Republic of China were not conducive to the popularity of the art song; this genre would only reappear after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Today, art songs from the May Fourth period can be encountered nearly solely in the repertoires of vocal students at Chinese art schools. This year, in 2020, the various activities being held at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the art song should bring a desirable change in how the art songs of the 1920s and 1930s are viewed by performers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the history of Chinese music in the twentieth century, see Ming, Yan 明言 (2017). *20 shiji Zhongguo yinyue piping shi* 20世纪中国音乐批评史. Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue xueyuan chubanshe.

<sup>8</sup> Efforts to present Chinese songs to Western audiences include Mei Zhong’s twenty-six-song album from 2009, *Traditional and Modern Chinese Art Songs*. The album contains transcriptions of the Chinese texts, including phonetic transcriptions and English translations.

## ***Yishu gequ*: Between tradition and modernity**

In the Sinophone world the term *art song* (*yishu gequ*) denotes a musical composition that is usually intended for a solo vocalist with piano accompaniment.<sup>9</sup> Such compositions are based on poems, which are set to music, and are meant to be performed at concerts or salons.

Chinese composers gravitated towards this genre at a time of great social and cultural upheaval, that is, in the period from the beginning of the May Fourth Movement to approximately 1937. During these nearly twenty years, the Chinese art song took on many forms. The composers of these songs used them to demonstrate the unique nature of Chinese culture and to have an ideological effect on listeners (Xiao Youmei), to popularize the spoken language (Zhao Yuanren), and, later, to emphasize the essential nature of this genre's aesthetic qualities (Huang Zi).

Like with European songs, here too the basis was the text, to which music was added. In selecting the texts themselves, the composers faced a dilemma – whether to find inspiration in the domestic tradition or to create a “new culture”. Chinese composers sometimes chose the texts of classical poems and thus engaged in dialogue with the Chinese tradition. They used traditional Chinese themes that they set to music using Western compositional techniques. Other times though they used works of “New Poetry” (*xin shi* 新詩) by contemporary poets, which were written as literary experiments and explicit manifestations of breaking with tradition. The development of the art song genre in China is linked to language reforms, efforts to promote the spoken language (*bai hua* 白話), and the emergence of new literature. These efforts led some composers of art songs to seek out lyrics in works of New Poetry and to formulate new rules for how to approach interpreting them.

For most artists the main impetus for creating art songs came from their time studying music abroad<sup>10</sup> and from their efforts to lift up Chinese music and create New Music in a Chinese style using the advanced techniques of Western composition. In 1920s China the art song represented two ideas connected to the May Fourth Movement<sup>11</sup>: science (in music this meant using “advanced” Western music techniques – harmonies, modulation, contrasting rhythmic schemes, etc.) and the importance of national self-determination (emphasized in the “Chinese style”; it was usually reflected in the text of the songs and in the use of pentatonic melodies; Zhao Yuanren also utilized Chinese singing techniques).

After 1920 the art song became the first genre of Chinese New Music to heavily incorporate piano accompaniment. Piano music in China has always been connected with the adoption of Western musical elements, for the piano was always viewed as the main symbol of the Western musical tradition, an understanding that resonated with the ideas of Western writers (recall the famous quote from Max Weber, who claimed that the piano

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<sup>9</sup> In the 1920s several songs of this type were written for solo vocalists, but later piano accompaniment would become a fundamental part of art songs.

<sup>10</sup> Even the author of the first Chinese art song, “A Great River Flows to the East” (“Da jiang dong qu” 大江東去), Qing Zhu 青主, composed it in 1920 after returning from Germany (Yu Quanheng 2013, 32).

<sup>11</sup> The two main demands of the May Fourth Movement focused on science and democracy. See, e.g., Schwartz, Benjamin (2020). *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement*. Brill, pp. 46. A major theme in art songs is patriotism rather than democracy.



is a “significant piece of middle-class furniture” [Weber 1958, 124]). In China, the piano embodies the “otherness” of European culture.<sup>12</sup> In the early twentieth century the piano was still a novelty for most of the Chinese population. After the first Opium War in 1842 missionaries came to China bringing pianos, which they used to accompany the liturgy and at the same time as an aid for teaching European music theory. With the arrival of the European bourgeoisie to China’s open ports, pianos began to be imported as an essential part of the cultural life of Western elites.<sup>13</sup> The surprising speed with which this instrument gained a prominent place in China is testified to by the fact that the first factory making Western musical instruments in China opened in 1895 to produce pianos.<sup>14</sup>

The first art songs were composed at a time when there was an ongoing debate about “aesthetic education” (*mei yu* 美育), which was meant primarily to round out the education of talented individuals and in general to develop morals in society. It immediately resonated with many composers of art songs. One of the most prominent modernizers from the early twentieth century, the famous rector of Peking University during the May Fourth Movement, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940),<sup>15</sup> advocated exactly this type of approach to teaching. He spoke on the importance of musical education and, partly influenced by reading the works of Friedrich Schiller, he claimed that music could unite and help people accept moral guidance. The following quote sheds light on his emphasis on combining aesthetic and moral education: “Aesthetic education is meant as the application of aesthetic theory in education, where the main objective is to cultivate emotions. Life is nothing more than will, interpersonal relationships, and good behaviour. So that everyone behaves suitably, it is necessary for the centre of education to be moral education” (Cai Yuanpei 1912, 2).

Aesthetic education was understood as one path to personal refinement, and hence, to the formation of a new citizen and the modernization of society. Even though Cai was an advocate of educational reform, in his writings he often quoted from the Confucian canon to defend his arguments. Another proponent of aesthetic education was one of the earliest composers of art songs, Xiao Youmei. Similar to Cai Yuanpei’s concept of aesthetic education and his idea that musical activities have the potential “to model characters” (Cai Yuanpei 1918, 4), the Chinese art song is the result of combining traditional Chinese ideas about music’s potentially beneficial effect on the emotions and mentality of listeners with efforts to reach the masses. Even though the new generation of composers often explicitly rejected Chinese tradition (in both its folk and official forms), in reality their works are in many ways rooted in tradition – namely, in the understanding that songs can educate and cultivate, in the focus on songs about a prosperous society, and

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<sup>12</sup> One reason the Chinese emperor was so fascinated by the harpsichord when it was demonstrated to him by Ricci in 1601 was that no traditional Chinese instrument created sound in the same way.

<sup>13</sup> One example is the Moravian engineer Vítězslav Veselý (1877–1964), who would later serve as the rector of the Brno University of Technology in Czechoslovakia. In the early twentieth century he worked in the glass factories in Suqian. After arriving in Shanghai, he purchased a piano at an auction and wrote home asking for the sheet music to songs by his favourite composers. Veselý, Vítězslav (2003). *O mé cestě do Číny*. Brno: Vutium, 100–103.

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Kraus, Richard (1989). *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>15</sup> For details about the life of Cai Yuanpei, see Yin Xueman 尹雪曼 (1979). *Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培*, Taipei: Hua xin wenhua shiye zhongxin.



sometimes in the use of formal elements connected with the Chinese tradition before the arrival of Western music.<sup>16</sup>

### Three composers of art songs, three different viewpoints

I will now focus on three composers of Chinese art songs who contributed significantly to the development of this genre and who each had their own approach to the creative process: Xiao Youmei, Zhao Yuanren, and Huang Zi. Studying their songs reveals different perspectives on the social role of music and the possibilities for using art songs to improve society, for choosing texts to set to music, and for different extents of musical inventiveness. Above all, these composers tried to reflect various aspects of their present day in their works, which was manifested in their different compositional approaches.

### Xiao Youmei: Songs for didactic use

“The life of a work of music is definitely not related to its form and interpretation but relies on its content.” (Xiao Youmei 1993, 539)

Xiao Youmei is a typical representative of the composers active from the May Fourth Movement period until the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War. In 1901–10 he studied in Japan, and in 1912–20 in Germany. He graduated from conservatories in Tokyo (piano and voice), Leipzig (composition and musical theory), and Berlin (composition, theory, conducting). Clearly, Xiao Youmei was not narrowly focused on just one aspect of making music; he was mainly motivated by the desire to contribute to various aspects of developing musical education in China. The time he spent in Leipzig, where he met Hugo Riemann (1849–1919), a composer of many lieder and a musical theorist, had a major influence on his decision to create art songs (Zhang 1982, 41).<sup>17</sup>

Although Xiao Youmei is often presented as a critic of Chinese tradition or as an opponent of reviving ancient Chinese music,<sup>18</sup> this does not mean that he had no interest in traditional Chinese music. Just the opposite was true. His dissertation, which he defended in 1916 in Leipzig, was about traditional Chinese music, specifically about the history of Chinese orchestral music before the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> In China, this study is now celebrated as the first Chinese musicology work for which a doctoral degree was

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the relationship between modernization and Confucianism, see Kyong-Dong, Kim (2017). *Confucianism and Modernization in East Asia*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>17</sup> For detailed bibliographical information about Xiao Youmei, see the introduction in Xiao Youmei 萧友梅 (2004). *Xiaoyoumei Quanji* 萧友梅全集. Shanghai: Shanghai yinxueyuan chubanshe.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., in Gild, Gerlinde (2004). “The Evolution of Modern Chinese Musical Theory and Terminology Under Western Impact” In: Lackner, Michael (ed.) *Mapping Meanings: The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China*. Leiden, Brill, 571.

<sup>19</sup> The title of the dissertation was “Eine Geschichtliche Untersuchung über das Chinesische Orchester bis zum 17. Jahrhundert”, which was translated into Chinese as “17世紀以前中國管弦樂團的歷史研究”. It was defended in 1916 in Leipzig.

awarded at a non-Chinese university. Nonetheless, it was first translated into Chinese in only 1990.<sup>20</sup>

Like many other composers in this period, when Xiao returned from Europe, he primarily concentrated on musical education. He worked first at the conservatory in Peking and later in Shanghai, compiling suitable teaching materials and teaching practical courses. He authored textbooks on harmony<sup>21</sup> and on playing the organ,<sup>22</sup> the piano,<sup>23</sup> and the violin<sup>24</sup>.

Most of Xiao Youmei's works were written for a solo vocalist. Their didactic nature and patriotic zeal revealed the enduring legacy of the school song tradition. Like the school songs, many of his art songs were published in collections. The most well-known include *The First Collection of Contemporary Music (Jinyue chujī 今樂初集)* from 1922, the first collection of Chinese music to be fully accompanied by piano written using Western musical staff notation, and the three-volume *Collection of Songs (Geji 歌集)* from 1924. Unlike school songs, the works contained in these books indicate a higher standard of compositional techniques and therefore should be considered art songs. They were also intended for didactic use, and as we shall see in the following example, they adopted several typical features of school songs.

Xiao Youmei avoided setting classical poems to music. Although he considered Song- and Yuan-period Chinese poems easy to set to music, he felt they contained inappropriate themes. He explicitly writes that “they do not meet the requirements of the present day and their melancholy nature is not suitable for the needs of musical education in schools and society” (Xiao Youmei 1931). Although most of Xiao's songs use texts in the traditional *ci* 詞 song genre, they were written by the composer's collaborator of many years Yi Weizhai 易韋齋 (1874–1941), a member of the Southern Society (Nanshe 南社) and an active participant in the Xinhai Revolution that put an end to the empire.

We can study how poetry in this genre was set to music by examining one of Xiao's most famous songs, “A Question” (“Wen” 問), whose lyrics were written by Yi Weizhai. The song was written in 1922 and was published in *The First Collection of Contemporary Music*. The lyrics in both verses reflect the chaotic, difficult situation in China under military rule (“Do you know how many tears there are in the country?,” “Ni zhidao jinri de jiang shan, you duoshao qihuang de lei?” 你知道今日的江山，有多少淒惶的淚) and the general atmosphere of insecurity, introduce questions about the true identity of the Chinese nation (“Do you know who you are?,” “Ni zhidao ni shi shei?” 你知道你是誰), and make a call for immediate action in a time of crisis, before it is too late (“Do you know that the years of youth are like water?,” “Ni zhidao nianhua ru shui?” 你知道年華如水?).

Xiao used long ligatures in many long phrases. The song hence includes more than just syllabic word setting, one of the typical features of early school songs from the beginning of the twentieth century. The progress of the melody reflects the occurrence of questions

<sup>20</sup> The translation was published in Xiao, Youmei 蕭友梅 and Liao Fushu 廖輔叔 (1990). *Xiao Youmei yinyue wenji* 蕭友梅音樂文集, Shanghai yinyue chubanshe.

<sup>21</sup> Xiao Youmei 蕭友梅 (1932). *Heshengxue* 餽聲學, Shangwu yinshu guan.

<sup>22</sup> Xiao Youmei 蕭友梅 (1925). *Xin xuezhī fengqín jiàokeshū* 新學制風琴教科書, Shangwu yinshu guan.

<sup>23</sup> Xiao Youmei 蕭友梅 (1926). *Gangqín jiàokeshū* 鋼琴教科書, Shangwu yinshu guan.

<sup>24</sup> Xiao Youmei 蕭友梅 (1927). *Xiaotiánqín jiàokeshū* 小提琴教科書, Shangwu yinshu guan.

in the original poem only in some places. Whereas the first phrase (“Do you know who you are?”) ends on the mediant and truly acts like a question, the second phrase (“Do you know that youth is like water?”) ends on the tonic and sounds like an answer. Here, to create his own melodic line, Xiao used triplets, which combined with the syllabic word setting, make the music seem leaden. Unlike in earlier periods, here attention is paid for the first time to the dynamics and minor nuances of the performance, such as agogics, slowing down the tempo, and so forth. Xiao used staff notation, and following Western models, he always noted the tempo of his songs (here *adagio*). The piano accompaniment of the song is very simple and copies the main melody, and arpeggios are used several times to underline the song’s melancholic mood.

Xiao Youmei studied music in Germany, a country where the Romantic song has its roots, but in some respects his music clearly diverges from the fundamentals of *lieder* composition, for example, in his choice to apply highly contrasting rhythmic patterns that interrupt the flow of the melody. In many ways, they are reminiscent of the incoherence of the lyrical and musical elements of school songs.

Xiao Youmei was a proponent of modernizing Chinese music, which in his eyes meant using modern European instruments such as the piano, introducing reliable musical notation, and using counterpoints and modulation. Interestingly, most of his songs do not contain modulation. A majority of Xiao’s songs are characterized by their rather graceless combining of complicated poetic lyrics written in a form that calls for the alternating of verses of various lengths with forgettable melodies layered over primitive arpeggios.

The difficult themes and the complicated forms of the poetry genre of *ci*, whose irregular metrical pattern is not adequately transferred into the musical adaptation, may contribute to why Xiao’s songs are not popular today. Thus, many of Xiao’s songs, like some less successful German *lieder* that did not resolve “Das Wort-Ton-Problem” (Whitton 1984, 5), do not combine lyrical and musical elements in a non-forced manner.

Like the song “Question”, Xiao’s later works reflect the author’s emphasis on the didactic potential of the original texts. In 1931, in a section dedicated to recommendations for song composers contained in his *Manifesto of the Song Club* (*Geshe chengli xuanyan* 歌社成立宣言), Xiao states that they should select comprehensible texts that have the potential to contribute to transforming the Chinese national character (Xiao 1993, 32). Xiao’s statements about the interconnections between music and morals in his some of works (e.g., “A Song in Memory of Confucius” 孔子紀念歌) demonstrate that the predominant understanding of Xiao Youmei as an anti-traditionalist needs to be reevaluated.

### **Zhao Yuanren: Comprehensibility, musicality, and a Chinese–Western synthesis**

“Performers must thoroughly dedicate their attention to the title of the composition, the structure of phrases and sentences contained in it, and the overall arrangement. Sometimes it is also important to study the intents of the composer, the historical context, and the motivation giving birth to the work. Only then can performers make beautiful music.” (Zhao Yuanren 1996, 271)

“I consider it important that we in the music world first achieve the necessary level. Then it is necessary to add the individual or Chinese character as a personal contribution.” (ibid.)

Zhao Yuanren, a graduate of Cornell and Harvard, is not known so much as a composer but more as a linguist who contributed to standardizing new spoken Chinese, the national language (*guoyu* 國語). At the same time though he wrote popular art songs, which in 2020 were regularly included in recitals celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of this genre in China. This fact is quite remarkable considering that Zhao had no formal musical education and that music for him was only a marginal interest.<sup>25</sup> What motivated Zhao to use the form of the German *lieder* is revealed in his article “A Discussion of Musical Education Materials” from 1917: “Western music should do everything it can for the Chinese people” (Zhao Yuanren 1917 in Zhang Jinwei 1998, 284).

His most famous collection is *A Collection of Songs Based on the Lyrics of New Poetry* (*Xinshi geji* 新詩歌集) from 1928, which contains most of his art songs. With the exception of “A Flower in a Vase” (“*Pinghua*” 瓶花), which is a musical version of verses by Song-era poet Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126–93), all of Zhao’s songs are based on the work of modern poets, especially Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891–1934). Zhao Yuanren thus set to music contemporary experimental poetry, which like New Music, acknowledged its European inspiration. Even more interesting, some component of every song referred to Chinese culture, whether it was in the choice of theme, where a modern poet might reach for a traditional motif, or the use of an existing pentatonic melody.

In the foreword to the collection Zhao writes:

A poem is a poem and a song, a song. A bad poem will certainly not become a good song, but a great song does not necessarily have to be a good poem [...]. The authenticity of a poem, transformed into the form of a song meant to be sung, will experience certain damage. [...] When singing, you cannot use the natural intonation of speech and cannot therefore directly express ideas. [...] At the same time, to express emotions we can rely on musicality for help. [...] In singing songs, we add a musical dimension, which can enhance the shared aesthetic perception of listeners, the *raison d'être* of the art song. (Zhao Yuanren 1987, 260)

He also writes about how to select poems that can be suitably set to music as art songs. In his opinion, the original text must be easy to comprehend, have a regular structure, and feature frequent repetition. Only thus can a composer be sure that the original meaning of the text is preserved in a comprehensible form when it is sung (ibid.).

Zhao was a proponent of through-composed songs and combining pentatonic melodies with poetic texts in *Guoyu*. In several works, he focuses on how to sing appropriately in spoken Chinese, especially as concerns what he proclaimed to be standardized pronunciation. He preferred that, when sung, Chinese syllables be equally split into the initial, the vowel, and the final, although the vowel was supposed to be just slightly longer than the other two parts. Zhao considered the most demanding aspect of song performance to be combining the necessity of the lyrics to be comprehensible with singability. He consid-

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<sup>25</sup> For more information, see Zhao Rulan. 趙如蘭 (1996). *Zhao Yuanren jinian zhuankan* 趙元任紀念專刊, Taipei: Xingzheng yuan wenhua jianshe weiyuanhui.

ered the ideal solution to be if the delivery was as natural as possible and emphasized the musicality of the whole without the necessity of using the bel canto technique.

In a 1977 interview Zhao spoke about the specifics of setting texts written in the spoken language to music and the issues related to accent. He differentiated between classical poetry, where there was the assumption that each syllable (which was usually one word) would be equally stressed in the verse, unlike poetry in the modern living language, where there were many polysyllabic words with the stress on the first syllable. Zhao Yuanren identified the stress where a full word is accompanied by a grammatical particle: “The matter of stress is not important when the words are in the classical verse, but in modern colloquial wording, the stress should fall on the so-called full words rather than the empty words.”<sup>26</sup>

In terms of themes, Zhao set to music both poems about social topics, such as ones promoting democracy, and lyric poems. With one exception, the choral “Sea Rhymes” (“Hai yun” 海韻), all his songs were written for solo vocalists.

This collection also contains what is likely his most famous song, which fully demonstrates Zhao’s patriotic fervour: “How Not to Think about Her” (“Jiao wo ruhe bu xiang ta” 教我如何不想她) for piano, violin, and voice. It exemplifies the synthesis of Chinese melody with Western compositional techniques.

When it comes to performing art songs, Zhao generally welcomed the use of the traditional Chinese singing technique of *huayin* 花音, typically marked by a more relaxed approach to the interpretation of staff notation and the frequent use of ornaments (trills, mordents, etc.) and portamento. In a 1936 recording of “How Not to Think about Her” performed by Zhao Yuanren, the song feels like an aria from the Peking Opera,<sup>27</sup> which is enhanced by the use of a melodic line typical of opera intermezzos. The composition is interesting thanks to its ample use of modulation, which conjures up the atmosphere of the changing seasons and is based on Western Romantic music. The text of the poem also explores the changing of the seasons, and each stanza is about a different one. The author of the text is Liu Bannong, a poet, linguist, and enthusiastic collector of Chinese folk songs, who stylized his texts based on traditional Chinese and folk works. Liu Bannong wrote this poem in 1920, when he was studying in England. Zhao Yuanren likely chose it based on its regular structure and fluid text. The song also contains linguistic innovations. It was the first work by a Chinese author to use a character with the radical of a woman to denote the feminine third-person pronoun.<sup>28</sup>

A contemporary recording of this song performed by Zhao Yuanren demonstrates that, despite the singing technique used, which straddles the boundary between the method typical of the Peking Opera and European songs, Zhao, fully in keeping with his theoretical ideas, made a point of properly pronouncing the words and maintaining

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<sup>26</sup> Zhao Yuanren (1997). *Chinese Linguist, Phonologist, Composer and Author, Yuen Ren Chao: Interview Conducted by Rosemary Levenson*. Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley China Scholars Series. 161. Accessible at: [http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb8779p27v&brand=calisphere&doc.view=entire\\_text](http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb8779p27v&brand=calisphere&doc.view=entire_text)

<sup>27</sup> The recording is accessible on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UceaEkSnAGk>

<sup>28</sup> Inspired by practices in Western languages, Liu Bannong was the first to propose different ways of denoting the third person in the feminine (她) and in the neuter (它) while maintaining the same pronunciation (tā). For more information, see Wang, Wei. (2020). *Analysing Chinese Language and Discourse across Layers and Genres*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 115.

the length of vowels and consonants so that the lyrics would be fully comprehensible to listeners (Zhao Yuanren 1987).

Zhao Yuanren, unlike his contemporaries, considered the performance to be an important part of the art song. His ideas about the ideal delivery were reflected in the process of selecting texts and how they were set to music. Because his works emphasize the unstrained combination of text, melody, and accompaniment, modern audiences are still receptive to his works even though singers now use a different approach to interpreting them and the texts have already lost their connection to the historical context in which they emerged.

Zhao Yuanren's work is characterized by setting works of New Poetry to music using pentatonic melodies intended to be sung using techniques from traditional Chinese opera, harmonized in the spirit of Romanticism, with the frequent use of modulation. Zhao Yuanren thus demonstrated one of the possible ways to combine Western and Chinese music, which then inspired many other composers. The influence of tradition in Zhao Yuanren's work is clear, especially in terms of the style of delivery he preferred.

### Huang Zi: Combining content and form

"Music is capable of expressing the inclination of human nature and mentality. [...] The essence of music is not mimicry; it is an expressive art." (Huang Zi 1997, 73)

At a tender age Huang Zi<sup>29</sup> played the piano and sang in a choir. Like Xiao Youmei, he also studied abroad, in the USA, first at Oberlin College (psychology) and later at Yale University. There he studied composition, orchestration, and musical analysis. The overture "In Memorium" ("Huai jiu" 懷舊), which he composed as a graduation piece, was very well received. It was the first Chinese orchestral piece ever composed and also the first of its kind to be performed in China.<sup>30</sup>

After returning to China, he taught alongside Xiao Youmei as a professor at Shanghai Conservatory (from 1930 until his death in 1938) and served as an expert on musical education at the Ministry of Education. One of his most important deeds was establishing the first purely Chinese symphony orchestra in 1936.

Huang Zi, along with other teachers from the Shanghai Conservatory, was among the composers whose legacy was tarnished during the anti-right-wing campaign in the late 1950s. Huang Zi was posthumously labelled a rightist due to his time abroad. Huang Zi's students were also subjected to criticism (in 1958 the music theorist and teacher Qian Renkang 錢仁康 was admonished for writing articles about the anniversary of Huang Zi's death), as were Huang Zi's works.

Like Xiao Youmei, Huang Zi was not just a blind critic of the Chinese musical tradition. He studied the history of Chinese music and Chinese music theory his entire life. Several of his articles were about the importance of evaluating the quality and characteristics of individual compositions based on the social and historical circumstances at the time they were created and about Confucian ideas about the ability of music to have

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed biography, see Qian Renkang 錢仁康 (1997). *Huang Zi de shenghuo yu chuanguo* 黃自的生活與創作. Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe.

<sup>30</sup> By Maestro Paci in Shanghai in 1930.



a positive effect on the morals of listeners. Most of his music theory articles, however, were about composing New Music and creating a new national compositional style (Huang Zi 1997, 73).

Huang Zi also examined the perception of music, which he divided into three categories: sensory, emotional, and rational perception. Whereas everyone is capable of perceiving music with the senses, the other two types of perception were in his opinion typical of more learned listeners, especially rational perception, which required an understanding of music theory. Huang Zi criticized composers who tried to only write works that played to the senses and downplayed the other two categories or even intentionally ignored them to attract listeners. In his opinion, holistically perceiving music in all three ways and fully appreciating a composition can be achieved by combining the ability to discern aesthetic qualities with knowledge of the rules of musical language (Huang Zi 1997, 7–13).

Huang Zi considered music to be a unique form of art in which connecting the subject (meaning) and form (the structure of the composition corresponding to its message) is essential. Here, Huang Zi cites the 1877 essay “The School of Giorgione” by English art critic Walter Pater (2017): “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music (i.e., the arts seek to unify subject-matter and form, and music is the only art in which subject and form are seemingly one).”

The collected works of Huang Zi include ninety-three art songs as well as classical *shi* and *ci* poems and texts in the New Poetry style. Huang Zi preferred lyric poetry, and in setting it to music he masterfully used the melodic structure to emphasize critical moments in the text of the poem. He worked with the piano accompaniment in a similar manner. It is an integral part of the song and helps elicit images of the environment in which the poem is set. Most of his songs have an ABA rhyme scheme and religiously follow Western rules of functional harmony, where we can clearly observe the influence of his studies at foreign conservatories. The accompaniment often features extracts from the melodic line of the vocal part, sometimes in the form of a dialogue. Seventh chords and ninth chords appear in his later songs, in which the use of modulation is also more frequent.

The 1932 song “Nostalgia” (“Sixiang” 思鄉) deals with the popular motif of homesickness. The New Poetry-style text was written by Wei Hanzhang 韋瀚章 (1905–93), who would later become a professor at the Hong Kong School of Sacred Music. This song has two parts. The first is marked by a melancholic mood; the second contrasts with the first. The melodic apex of the song is preceded by an ascending chromatic series that is enhanced by the accompaniment. Its main feature is the elaborate piano accompaniment, which comes to the forefront in the beginning, middle, and end. In the introduction, the accompaniment employs the canon technique to evoke the sense that home is somewhere too far away to reach. Here we observe the clever use of triplets to lighten the melody and non-chord tones to enhance the feelings of insecurity.

Although the text does not address such serious social themes as those contained in Xia Youmei’s “A Question”, its comprehensibility and elaborateness, with its ideal ratio of contrasting parts that enhance turning points in the text, make “Nostalgia” an emotive composition of high artistic merit.

The works of Huang Zi, who also wrote songs on Confucian themes, share the same features as songs by the other two composers mentioned above when it comes to



following the domestic tradition. He used citations from Confucian texts to support his ideas about the importance of music in society and believed in the association between music and social morals. His works also make direct reference to the domestic tradition, especially in terms of the themes of the texts he chose to set to music.

### **Conclusion: Even little things can be precious**

The art song genre appeared in China during the May Fourth Movement, when Chinese culture underwent radical transformations, and enjoyed great popularity until the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War. Although European songs from the Romantic era (primarily German *lieder*, and to a lesser extent French *mélodie*) were the initial impetus behind the creation of this genre, Chinese art songs were not mere imitations of their Western counterparts. This genre was a meeting place of the domestic tradition (ideas about music's social role, pentatonic melodies, traditional singing techniques, texts from classical poems) and modernity (ideas about modernization, Western compositional techniques, piano accompaniment, "New Poetry" texts). The hybrid nature of the art song, which permeates all aspects of this genre, was the result of a more general question of the era: how could composers help Chinese culture toss off the yoke of tradition and stand side-by-side with "advanced" Western culture, but at the same time keep its national distinctiveness?

The very inclination of Chinese composers to this genre is in fact the logical culmination of the domestic tradition. May Fourth-era art songs incorporate traditional ideas about music's social role, which were typical of Chinese music during the imperial era. Here, just like in the New Music genre that preceded the art song – the school song – music played a new role in society: to strengthen Chinese national self-determination and to boost Chinese national pride. Chinese songs, unlike the products of European Romanticism, did not focus on being original or expressing the subjective feelings of the individual. Instead, they tried to develop the patriotism of listeners and contribute to teaching them new values. This process included the introduction of music education into the general school curriculum in the belief that music at school can contribute to cultivating the Chinese nation. The emphasis put on developing music education by all composers of New Music associated with the May Fourth Movement<sup>31</sup> was reflected in art songs. The fact that composers included in collections of their art songs instructions for how to perform them to best communicate the messages they contain or theoretical essays stressing the role of singing songs in the modernization process demonstrates the interconnectedness of this genre with social objectives and efforts to create a new Chinese culture.

Adherence to the European tradition in the spirit of the ideas of the May Fourth Movement and the Movement for a New Culture does not mean that songwriters completely abandoned domestic sources of inspiration, but rather modified and adapted them. They used domestic pentatonic melodies that were familiar to Chinese audiences, but in new

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<sup>31</sup> Proponents of music education who also composed New Music for educational purposes include essayist, painter, and translator Feng Zikai 豐子愷 (1898–1975) and teacher, dramatist, musician, and painter Li Shutong 李淑簡 (1880–1942). Both also composed art songs.

ways, and explicitly spoke about “the modernization of Chinese music”. By this term they meant accepting Western inspiration in the form of new compositional techniques that were considered “progressive” or even “scientifically more advanced”. The hybrid nature of Chinese art songs is also manifested in their combining of traditional domestic singing techniques with piano accompaniment.

The issue of balancing the demands of the May Fourth Movement to break away from the old culture with efforts to create new works that contained something specific to Chinese culture manifested itself in the texts of new art songs. Chinese composers chose to set to music the texts of classical poems as well as works of New Poetry that were created in opposition to the Chinese literary heritage. In a certain sense the very principle of combining poetic text and music in the Chinese art song was a return to tradition. The shift toward creating art songs in China was in a way a return to older ideas about the connections between poetry and music, in an entirely new form, a modern-era attempt to revive tradition. Viewed in this context, the art song gains a new dimension confirming that it was not just the result of transplanting a foreign genre into a new environment.

Although the works of great composers of art songs, whether they be by Xiao Youmei or Huang Zi, who were both composers and teachers, or the linguist Zhao Yuanren, shared many features, each of these composers introduced new elements into the developing genre. Art songs by all three composers reflect each of their perspectives on the period they lived in and represent efforts to contribute to the development of a new Chinese culture. Their works reflected not only motifs that could be found in Western Romantic songs (such as being away from home or descriptions of natural beauty) but also themes that were related to current events (fears about China’s fate under militarist rule, the promotion of necessary modernization) and ideas about how to, at least partly, incorporate traditional values into modern society (reflections on the qualities of Confucian values and how they can be adapted for modern society in the work of Huang Zi).

The first song contained in *Italienisches Liederbuch* by the master of the German art song, Hugo Wolf, published in 1891, starts with the following two lines: “Auch kleine Dinge können uns entzücken, Auch kleine Dinge können teuer sein”, or “Even little things can delight us, even little things can be precious.”<sup>32</sup> It is equally as true that art songs from the May Fourth period are unique historical sources that can tell us about the creation of works of art that straddle the boundary between tradition and modernity and which should not escape our attention.

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<sup>32</sup> The translation is taken from here: BREITZER, Donna. 2003–11–09, *The LiederNet Archive*. Retrieved from: Even little things (Heyse, set by (Hugo Wolf)) (The LiederNet Archive: Texts and Translations to Lieder, mélodies, canzoni, and other classical vocal music).

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