

# On Piano Music *Xi Yang Xiao Gu* and Chinese Culture

## DE LA MUSIQUE DE PIANO *XI YANG XIAO GU* ET LA CULTURE CHINOISE

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**Abstract:** As the representative work of Chinese piano music, “Xi Yang Xiao Gu” has aroused a lot of research in musical world. This paper tries to study the relationship between this work and the traditional Chinese culture, so as to understand this work better.

**Key words:** “Xi Yang Xiao Gu”, Chinese piano music, Chinese traditional culture

**Résumé:** En tant qu’oeuvre représentative de la musique de piano chinoise, *Xi Yang Xiao Gu* a incité beaucoup de recherches dans le monde musical. Cet essai tente d’étudier les relations entre cette oeuvre et la culture traditionnelle chinoise pour permettre de mieux le comprendre.

**Mots-Clés:** *Xi Yang Xiao Gu*, musique de piano chinoise, culture traditionnelle chinoise

Among the free-expressed Chinese piano works, those that are transformed and updated on basic of fine Chinese traditional music are miracles that carry the traditional style and national temperament. Therefore a great number of excellent adapted music emerged, such as “Xi Yang Xiao Gu”, “Bai Niao Chao Feng” and “Mei Hua San Nong”. Their distinct national features and high piano taste made them classical among Chinese piano music.

As the representative, “Xi Yang Xiao Gu” has aroused a lot of research in musical world.

“Xi Yang Xiao Gu”, or named “Xun Yang Lute” or “Xun Yang Ye Yue”, is originally a Chinese lute sole that expressed emotions. Its firstly appeared in a hand-written copy “Ju Shi Lin Lute Music Score” during Qing Dynasty (about 1736 to 1820). It totally had seven paragraphs without title. However, in Chen Zijing’s copy there are seven titles: “Hui Feng”, “Que Yue”, “Lin Shui”, “Deng Shan”, “Xiao Rang”, “Wan Tiao” and “Gui Zhou”. In 1895, in “Thirteen Lute Music of Both North and South” (“Li Fangyuan Lute Music”), which wrote by lute player Li Fangyuan of Ping Hu School, the original seven paragraphs has been extended to ten in the name of Yu Nan Shi in Tang Dynasty. They are “Xi Yang Xiao Gu”, “Hua Rui San Hui Feng”, “Guan Shan Lin Que Yue”, “Lin Shui Xie Yang”, “Feng Di Qiu Sheng”, “Wu Xia Qian Xun”, “Xiao Sheng Hong Shu Li”, “Lin Jiang Wan Tiao”, “Yu Zhou Wan Chang” and “Xi Yang Ying Li Yi Gui Zhou”. According to his edition, Wang Yuting reformed changed it to “Xun Yang Lute” or “Xun Yang Song”, and those small titles are the same as Li Fangyuan’s. Then it was published by Li Yansong. In 1920s, Zhen

Jinwen and Liu Raozhang who were members of Shanghai famous amateur music group Da Tong Association adapted it to an instrument ensemble named “Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye” lead by lute. And there were also ten small titles: “Jiang Lou Zhong Gu”, “Yue Shang Dong Shan”, “Feng Hui Qu Shui”, “Hua Ying Ceng Tai”, “Shui Yun Shen Ji”, “Yu Ge Wan Chang”, “Hui Lan Pai An”, “Rao Ming Yuan Lai”, “Ai Nai Gui Zhou” and “The End”. Since then, this music, no matter played by lute alone, or in ensemble, all used the name “Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye”.

Though its name was given by Zhen Jinwen and Liu Raozhang, its lyric was written by Emperor Chen Shu-pao, and its music was composed by the Tai Chang musical officials. “Chun Jiang” has a long history that it is the short form of Chun Shen River. In Warring States Period, a Sir Chun Shen named Huang Xie has changed Huang Pu River to Chun Shen River or Chun River. Zhen Jinwen and Liu Raozhang all used to live beside the river, so they used “Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye” since they had deep feelings toward it. The reason they named it was explained in *A General Introduction to National Music*, “Perhaps its name was given according to their imagination. It can’t help reminding us poet Zhang Xuruo’s *Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye*, which was praised by Wen Yiduo as ‘Poem of the poems, top above the top.’”

“Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye” was the name of “Classical Chinese Poems in Qing and Shang Dynasty, Music of Wu Ge”, which was said to be created by Emperor Chen Shu-pao for his maids and ministers to sing, or by Emperor Sui Yang. It was a very florid palace poem. Beside this poem, there were also two of Emperor Sui Yang, one of Zhu Geliang, two of Wen

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Tingyun, however, they were either too small in pattern, or too sissy. Only Zhang Xuruo made it shiny that he recreated the scenery of spring night in the South with his fresh writing style. The atmosphere was charming just as Yangzi River under the light of moon, and it was lyrical and emotional that involved readers in it for quite a long time. It followed the old title of Chen and Sui's to describe the touching departure and philosophical life meaning. The language is fresh and graceful, the rhythm is melodious, and it brings readers a clean, natural and prosperous feeling after removing those overlaid modifications. Thinking about the music "Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye" and the poem with the same title together, this music not only developed the traditional classic music style, but also made it full of emotion and vividness. Through the simple melody, and smooth rhythms, this music described a mysterious beautiful scene of gentle river wind, rippling water, whirling moonlight, dancing flowers and the sound of wave flapping the shore. The music and the poem cooperated with and reflected each other that both of them have displayed their strong points to the full.

In extensive and profound traditional Chinese culture, there is a phenomenon called "landscape culture" that describes hills and water. It is the valuable legacy left by artists after they were inspired by local extraordinary scenery. From the view of culture, in Chinese traditional music exists a culture phenomenon that describes hills and water, such as "Gao Shan Liu Shui", "Yu Zhou Wan Chang" and "Xi Yang Xiao Gu". Those descriptions on nature were aimed at expressing one's emotion by scenery. To some extent, they not only have realistic significance, but also have some special culture meanings.

In Chinese traditional culture, those works on which the subject is hills and water almost all had a background of pessimistic mood that holds aloof from the earth affairs. More or less they expressed a kind of "would rather keeping alone than taking about trifles with common people". For example, "smash the koto for bosom friend" in "Gao Shan Liu Shui", "isolated from the earth" in "Yu Ge", "open heart and be intoxicated" in "Yu Ge Wan Chang". Their music is

graceful, and the cooperation between music and scenery was extraordinary, but viewing from the whole, there was pessimistic concept that bonded by thousands years' feudal system, so the artists in the history all had dual desperation both in mind and in creation.

Although Chinese culture origins from the pattern of commanding the nature, it is mainly in developing pattern now. The characteristic of it is that human being's depending on it is greatly more than what they cultivate on it, and their abeyance to it is greatly more than what they changed. This kind of means formed a special relationship between Chinese and the nature that people try to get close to make friend with nature, to keep united and harmony with it, and to support each other. By contrary, the relationship between westerners and the nature is contradictory; just like to rule and to be ruled, to conquer and to be conquered. The relationship between Chinese and the nature is a search for harmoniousness and intimacy in one's life and the nature, or it could reflect the saying that "the wise enjoys the water, the righteous enjoys the hills". Some important ideas of philosophy like "human and the nature are untied" and "nature sensed human's thinking" are coming from it, and that is why Chinese music always pay attention to the reflection on nature and the artistic conception of "human and the nature are untied".

With its strong national style, fresh taste, pastoral-like atmosphere and special sound effect, piano music "Xi Yang Xiao Gu" expressed not only the harmony between human and nature, but also the traditional Chinese aesthetic idea "human and the nature are untied". It is an uncommon fine work in adapted traditional music.

Chinese music culture is an important part of Chinese culture, for it reflects the oriental verve from all the aspects. As a representative work of traditional Chinese music, "Xi Yang Xiao Gu" necessarily includes many factors of Chinese culture, and piano has made this ancient music quite modern, and as a result, the traditional Chinese culture and art could continue to spread and to develop.

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