

Folk-Song Reconstruction in Chinese and Western Contexts: A Comparative Study of Compositional Techniques and Performance Interpretation in the Piano Folk-Song Arrangements of Chen Yi and Jianzhong Wang

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Abstract: Over the century-long development of a Chinese national idiom in piano music, piano works arranged from folk songs have constituted a large proportion of the repertoire, and two relatively clear compositional directions have gradually emerged. The first, represented by composers such as Jianzhong Wang, takes Chinese folk songs or folk-style songs as its basis and makes “faithful” arrangements of their melodies; the second, represented by overseas Chinese composers such as Chen Yi, treats Chinese folk songs as resources for modern composition and subjects them to “modern reconstruction.” Jianzhong Wang’s folk-song arrangements place greater emphasis on the beauty and complete presentation of folk-song melodies. He frequently uses pentatonic treatment, ornamentation, imitation of the timbres of traditional Chinese instruments, variation form, and other means to preserve the folk songs’ bright character on the piano. Chen Yi more often treats folk-music materials as motivic resources for modern composition. Rather than preserving all of the original melodic material, she extracts such features as intervallic relationships and rhythmic accents and transforms them through a modern pianistic language. Taking representative piano folk-song arrangements by Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi as its subjects, this article compares them in five respects: compositional context, melodic material, harmony and texture, formal structure, and performance interpretation. It argues that the two composers do not embody a simple opposition between “tradition” and “modernity,” but instead represent two valid approaches to Chinese piano folk-song arrangement on domestic stages and in cross-cultural arenas.

Keywords: Chen Yi; Jianzhong Wang; Piano folk-song arrangement; Chinese piano music

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1. Introduction

Throughout the development of Chinese piano music, the “development of a Chinese national idiom in piano music” has consistently been the foremost compositional concern for Chinese composers. The piano is a Western instrument, and its timbre, performance techniques, and harmonic system differ markedly from those of Chinese folk music. Chinese folk songs are generally bound up with dialect, labor, festivals, rituals, and regional life; they were not originally created for the piano. Since the twentieth century, many Chinese composers have attempted to transform folk songs, traditional opera, Chinese instrumental music, regional tunes, and other materials into piano works. From the initial experiments of Zhao Yuanren, He Luting, and others, through the collective composition of numerous composers after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, to the cross-contextual explorations of overseas Chinese composers after reform and opening up, Chinese piano folk-song arrangement has developed into a diverse compositional landscape. Yue Wei regards the folk-song piano miniature as an “experimental field” for polyphonic thinking in a Chinese national idiom ^[1]. Folk-song arrangement, therefore, cannot simply transfer a melody to the piano; it must rework monophonic melody and polyphonic texture within the medium of the piano.

In this sense, the discussion focuses on Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi as two representative composers who also offer useful points of comparison. Jianzhong Wang was a domestic representative of folk-song arrangement in the mid-to-late twentieth century. His piano arrangements, including “*Liuyang River*” “*Five Yunnan Folk Songs*” and “*Four Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs*” are landmark canonical models that have long circulated in Chinese piano teaching, examinations, and concert performance. Most of their melodies are relatively clear, and their Chinese national character is pronounced. Even listeners without specialized musical knowledge can readily perceive their Chinese flavor. His compositional priority was to make folk songs fuller on the piano and better suited to stage performance while preserving their original sense of familiarity.

Chen Yi’s circumstances are different. A representative contemporary overseas Chinese composer, she received systematic training in Chinese folk music and Western modern composition and, after pursuing advanced study in the United States, gradually developed a cross-cultural mode of composition combining an awareness of Chinese materials with modernist techniques. A composer profile from the UMKC Conservatory notes that Chen Yi has continually developed her own musical language between Chinese and Western traditions ^[2]. Although her piano works, including “*Variations on Awariguli*” “*Duo Ye*” “*Ba Ban*” and “*Guessing (Cai Diao)*” draw on elements of Chinese folk songs, ethnic minority music, traditional opera, and Chinese instrumental music, these materials rarely appear as complete songs; instead, they are transformed into pitch-class collections, rhythmic structures, and textural layers. Zhang Kai and Xu Ling’s analysis of Chen Yi’s “*Guessing*” argues that the work does not simply copy the vocal song, but emerged only after folk materials had been assimilated and digested and then combined with new compositional techniques ^[3].

Thus, the difference between Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi is not simply a difference between tradition and modernity. More precisely, Jianzhong Wang represents a path toward the development of a Chinese national idiom in piano music centered on folk-song melody, whereas Chen Yi represents a path of cross-cultural modern reconstruction grounded in folk-song material. The former brings the piano closer to folk song, allowing the melody to remain audible and singable on the piano. The latter brings folk song into a modern pianistic language, transforming it from a fixed melody into a structural resource. This article focuses on the differences between these two approaches to piano folk-song arrangement.

Most current scholarship consists of individual case studies of each composer. Studies of Jianzhong Wang focus primarily on harmonic techniques, the pentatonic treatment of chords, imitation of traditional Chinese instruments, and performance interpretation, whereas studies of Chen Yi focus primarily on cultural identity, modern compositional techniques, the use of national elements, and cross-cultural style. However, no study has yet systematically compared the two composers. Both draw on Chinese folk songs as compositional sources, yet their different compositional contexts produced diametrically opposed techniques and aesthetic orientations. Comparing the two can both reveal distinct approaches to Chinese piano folk-song arrangement and provide a point of reference for contemporary Chinese piano composition and performance.

2. Differences in compositional context

Jianzhong Wang's compositional context was the domestic context of the development of a Chinese national idiom in twentieth-century Chinese piano music. After the piano became a principal instrument in Chinese music education, Chinese composers had to answer a practical question: how could a Western keyboard instrument express melodies distinctive to the Chinese people? Folk-song arrangement gradually became an important means of doing so because folk songs possess a broad popular foundation, a firmly established place in melodic memory, and pronounced regional characteristics. Ding Na argues that folk-song subject matter is well suited to piano arrangement and possesses considerable artistic and cultural qualities: it can make traditional melodies feel more familiar while using pianistic techniques to acquire additional layers and expressive power. Jianzhong Wang's works arose from precisely this cultural need ^[4].

Jianzhong Wang *is far more than a mere transcriber of folk melodies; his arrangements successfully fulfill a dual objective*: first, they must allow listeners to hear the melody of the source folk song or source song; second, the work must possess sufficient sonic depth, technical tension, and structural integrity on the concert stage. He therefore often places the original melody in a bright, clearly articulated upper or middle voice and uses accompanimental textures, contrapuntal imitation, registral contrast, cadenzal passages, and other means to expand the scale of the music.

This domestic path toward the development of a Chinese national idiom was associated with music education, popular aesthetics, and concert dissemination after the 1950s. Jianzhong Wang's "*Five Yunnan Folk Songs*" was composed in 1958, "*Liuyang River*" in 1972, and "*Four Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs*" in 1973. These works found a stable place in the folk-song movement, the circulation of revolutionary songs, and Chinese piano pedagogy. For performers, they are works for training in Chinese national style as well as in piano technique. Through relatively clear modes, sections, and textures, Jianzhong Wang transformed folk songs into pieces suitable for teaching, performance, and dissemination.

Chen Yi's compositional context was more complex. Born in China, she had a strong understanding of regional folk songs, traditional opera, and Chinese instruments and was a musician with formal training in composition. Luo Linzhi argues that "Variations on the Theme of Awariguli," composed in 1979, was an early piano work that Chen Yi wrote during her university years using a Xinjiang Uyghur folk song as its theme. At this stage, Chen Yi still retained a relatively clear theme-and-variations structure, but she had begun to combine counterpoint, variation, rhythmic transformation, and Chinese musical materials. She later went to the United States, where she studied modernist techniques, post-tonal pitch organization, complex rhythms, and cross-cultural expression ^[5].

Chen Yi's overseas context transformed "folk song" from a direct marker of national identity into a form of cultural material open to reinterpretation. Cong Ji's doctoral dissertation argues that the compositional style Chen Yi developed under the influence of American culture derived both from Chinese folk music and aesthetic experience and from Western modern compositional training. Her works often treat folk-song material through thematic transformation, motivic development, contrapuntal writing, nonfunctional harmony, and other techniques^[6]. Chen Yi's folk-song arrangements are therefore closer to reconstruction: she is concerned not with whether the melody is reproduced in its entirety, but with whether the folk song's intervals, rhythms, expressive inflections, and conceptions of timbre can continue to grow within a new structure.

3. Differences in melodic material

Melody is the level of folk-song arrangement most readily perceived by listeners and also the level on which the difference between Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi is most apparent. Traditional Chinese folk songs generally center on monophonic melody and emphasize melodic line, phrasing, vocal ornamentation, and expressive inflection. As a polyphonic instrument, the piano requires composers to decide what position melody will occupy: whether to foreground it as a complete theme or to break it down into motives that participate in the generation of structure.

Jianzhong Wang's usual choice is to foreground the complete melody. His treatment of the source folk-song melodies "*Dali Girl*" "*Following a Lover*," "*Guessing*" "*Mountain Song*," and "*Dragon Lantern Tune*" preserves a high degree of recognizability, as is clearly evident in "Five Yunnan Folk Songs." Yang Zijiang argues that, while the original folk songs are retained, their melodic materials are recombined, transforming the original songs into different songs. Consequently, even after their transformation for the piano, the works retain a foundation in "singing": the piano merely broadens the melody's sonic range rather than effacing its fundamental identity^[7].

Chen Yi's treatment of melody follows another logic. Her treatment of folk material is more abstract. She does not always write out the complete folk-song melody, but instead often extracts intervals, rhythms, figurations, or structural relationships and applies them within a modern pianistic language. The resulting works may not immediately allow listeners to identify the particular folk song, but they can evoke the style of Chinese music or ethnic minority music. "Duo Ye" provides such an example. Duo Ye was originally associated with Dong song and dance and is collective and responsorial in character. It is not a simple melody, but a musical activity embedded in a social setting, with a lead singer, responding singers, bodily movement, and rhythm all participating. When Chen Yi treats this material on the piano, the true objective is not to reproduce a passage of folk song, but to transform the relationship of "one leads and many respond" into interaction among the piano's voices.

4. Differences in harmony and texture

When a folk song is arranged for piano, the most important issue is how to handle harmony. Chinese folk songs are monophonic, whereas piano works inherently possess a vertical sonic dimension. If Western functional harmony is applied wholesale, the folk song will lose its original modal coloring; yet if only a single melodic line is retained, it is difficult to realize the piano's expressive potential. Jianzhong Wang and

Chen Yi therefore locate different points of balance between melody and polyphonic writing.

Jianzhong Wang's harmonic language is based primarily on pentatonic treatment. Here, pentatonic treatment does not mean using only the pentatonic scale; rather, it means weakening major-minor functional tendencies within a Western harmonic framework so that the harmonic materials more closely reflect the folk-song mode. Open-fifth chords omitting the third, coloristic chords with an added second or sixth, and chords built by stacking fourths and fifths are all sonic devices Jianzhong Wang frequently uses to cultivate a Chinese national idiom.

The aesthetic significance of this approach is that it preserves the piano's polyphonic capacity without allowing functional harmony to dominate the melody excessively. Take the first two sections of "*Liuyang River*" as an example. They employ incomplete chords to convey a sense of spaciousness.

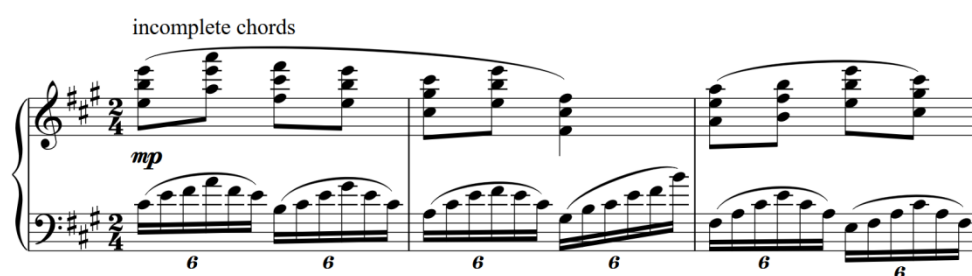


Figure 1. An incomplete chord appears at mm. 1–3 of *Liuyang River*.

Jianzhong Wang's textures display a strong impulse to imitate traditional Chinese instruments. He uses arpeggios, appoggiaturas, glissando-like figures, octave chords, and rapid broken figures to imitate the timbres of the guzheng, pipa, suona, gongs, and drums. The strumming-like figures in "Dragon Lantern Tune" readily evoke plucked-string instruments; the arpeggios and appoggiaturas in "Embroidering the Banner with Letters in Gold" suggest the sound of the guzheng; and the impassioned passages of "Fanshen Daoqing" feature gong-, drum-, and cymbal-like rhythms and forceful textures, heightening the atmosphere of northern Shaanxi folk song and dance. Such timbral imitation has an immediate quality: upon hearing the piano's sonority, listeners can readily associate it with traditional Chinese instruments ^[2].

Chen Yi's harmony and texture more closely resemble modern polyphonic structures. Rather than expressing national character by making the piano sound "like a particular traditional instrument," she treats the gestural principles of folk-music rhythm, interval, and timbre as structural criteria. In "*Guessing*" the G-A-C motive moves across registers and voices and is juxtaposed and treated canonically, producing a strikingly modern sonority. At the same time, the work uses bitonality, complex rhythms, and new combinations of sonorities to move folk-song material beyond its original melodic surface into deeper structural levels. The result sounds both familiar and unfamiliar: its familiarity arises from the inflection of folk song, while its unfamiliarity comes from pitch-class collections and rhythmic organization.

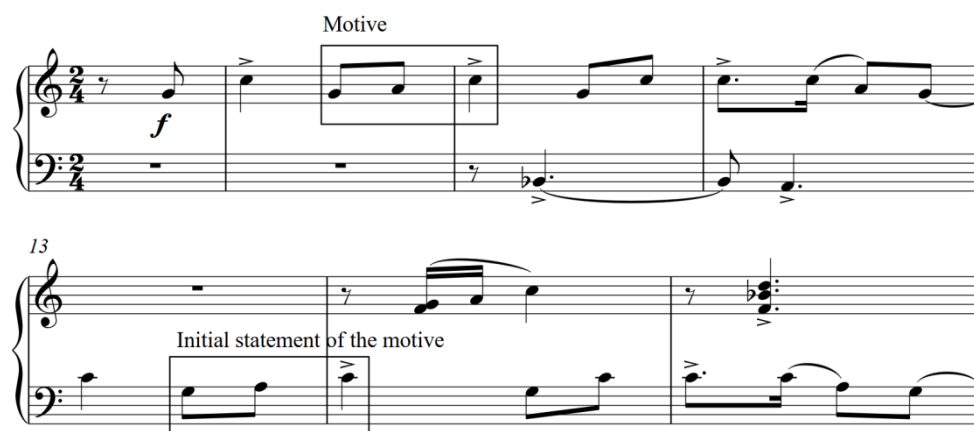


Figure 2. mm. 1–3 of *Guessing*. The G-A-C motive makes its first appearance in the bass register at m. 13.

Chen Yi's harmonic language is far more complex than Jianzhong Wang's. Jianzhong Wang's music often uses pentatonic harmony to support the melody, whereas Chen Yi combines pentatonic material with modern sonorities. Within a single passage, she may retain the timbral coloring of the pentatonic scale while introducing a chromatic scale or dissonant sound blocks in another voice. This produces a twofold perspective: on the one hand, traces of traditional Chinese music remain; on the other, the tension of modern music is present.

At the level of harmony and texture, therefore, Jianzhong Wang advocates “giving the piano a Chinese national character,” whereas Chen Yi advocates “giving folk songs a modern structural form.” Jianzhong Wang's pentatonic harmony provides the melody with support grounded in a Chinese national idiom, while Chen Yi's polyphonic structures regenerate folk-song material within modern sonorities. The former's sound is more transparent, approachable, and lyrical; the latter's is sharper, multilayered, and rhythmically driven. The former embodies timbral re-creation in Chinese piano folk-song arrangement, while the latter embodies structural reconstruction.

5. Differences in formal structure

Formal structure is the determining factor in whether a folk-song arrangement can become an independent piano work. Original folk songs are generally brief, with relatively flexible phrase and sectional structures. Direct imitation therefore makes it difficult to create a complete concert work. Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi both develop folk songs through variation, counterpoint, recapitulation, and contrast, but their structural conceptions differ.

Jianzhong Wang's structures generally have clearly articulated sections. In “*Five Yunnan Folk Songs*” for example, each piece is brief, and its structure is closely related to the phrase structure of the original folk song. “*Guessing*” is a one-part form based on varied repetition, while “*Dragon Lantern Tune*” is a recapitulating simple ternary form with an introduction, transition, and coda. These structures facilitate teaching and performance: sectional boundaries are clear, and thematic material is readily distinguishable. Even in the longer “*Liuyang River*” an introduction, theme, variations, cadenza, further variations, and coda form a relatively clear variation form.

Chen Yi's structures are freer and depend more heavily on the internal logic of the material. The structure of "*Guessing*" is especially free. The work is divided into five sections, A through E: section A presents the thematic pitch-class collection; section B develops and juxtaposes the material; section C unfolds in polyphonic canon; section D highlights distinctive rhythms and a triplet pulse; and section E uses chords and octaves to conclude the thematic pitches. This is neither a traditional ternary form nor a regular variation form. Instead, motivic material, variations in rhythmic density, the distribution of dynamics, and the progression toward the climax shape an organic form. Although the work is free, it is not disordered, because the G-A-C motive and its rhythm remain internally consistent.

Table 1. Differences in formal structure between the two composers

Dimension of Comparison	Jianzhong Wang	Chen Yi
Presentation of the Theme	Complete melody, prominently positioned, and highly singable	The theme may be rewritten, fragmented, or compressed into motives
Common Formal Structures	One-part form, ternary form, variation form, and sonata-like design	organic form, variation-based structure, and contrapuntal/motivic development
Means of Unification	Repetition of the original melody, modal stability, and sectional recapitulation	Pitch-class collections, rhythmic cells, timbral gestures, and relationships among voices
Aural Effect	Clear and approachable, with direct national imagery	Multilayered, tense, and strongly modern, with a more internalized national character

6. Differences in performance interpretation

For performers, works by Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi cannot be approached in the same way. Jianzhong Wang's piano folk-song arrangements first require performers to know how to sing—that is, to articulate at the piano the inflection and breathing of the folk-song melody. The line must have phrase structure, breath, and direction. The right-hand melody must not be obscured by the left-hand accompaniment. Even when the left hand contains many broken chords, its role is merely supportive, and it must not usurp the melodic line.

Second, Wang Jianzhong's ornaments should have the flavor of ethnic vocal styles. The grace notes should not be played too rigidly, and the trills should not be played mechanically like in practice pieces. The performer should make these sounds sound "sharp, bright, and delicate." The fingers should grip the keys tightly, with a "scratch" feeling, while the wrist should be relaxed, rather than simply aiming for loudness. Pedaling must also remain clear. Because Chinese pentatonic melodies are inherently clear and bright, overly heavy pedaling will cause the sonorities to blend and thereby undermine the Chinese national style. Pedaling in Jianzhong Wang's works should be used flexibly in response to changes in melody and harmony; the sound must not become muddy, particularly in high-register ornaments and rapid passages.

Chen Yi's works, by contrast, require performers not only to sing but also to hear the layers of the polyphonic texture, rhythmic centers of gravity, and motivic structure, maintaining the clarity of the material within a modern texture. Rhythmic control is the first priority: her works often contain irregular accents, complex rhythms, and sudden registral changes. Performers cannot treat them arbitrarily on intuition alone, because doing so would disrupt the works' internal structure. Freedom in modern music generally emerges from a foundation of rhythmic precision.

Next comes the differentiation of timbral layers. Different voices in Chen Yi's works represent different spaces: one may resemble a lead singer, another a response, another a dance step, and another a distant echo.

Performers must make these layers audible rather than play every note at the same dynamic level. Another requirement is a deeper understanding of the function of the folk material. The national character of Chen Yi's works is not necessarily manifested directly through a complete folk-song melody; it may instead reside in rhythm, register, call-and-response relationships, and timbral organization. Performers who look only for "which phrase sounds like a folk song" will overlook the works' true structural features.

Table 2. Differences in performance interpretation between the two composers

Performance Dimension	Works by Jianzhong Wang	Works by Chen Yi
Melodic Treatment	Centers on the singing quality of the principal melody, emphasizing phrase articulation and vocal-style ornamentation	Gives equal weight to the theme, motives, and voices, with attention to the transformation of the material
Rhythmic Treatment	Preserves the natural flexibility of folk song and avoids mechanical playing	Precisely handles syncopation, anacruses, compound meter, and displaced accents
Touch and Timbre	Bright, rounded, and suggestive of traditional Chinese instruments	Contrasts dry and resonant sonorities, with a percussive attack, distinct layers, and clearly delineated blocks of color
Pedaling	Supports melodic continuity and clarity in pentatonic harmony	Used judiciously according to textural layers to avoid blurring motives
Interpretive Goal	To give listeners a sense of familiarity and brightness, with direct national imagery	To let listeners hear folk-song material grow within a modern structure

This comparison not only facilitates analysis of the two composers' compositional techniques but also provides performers with contrasting approaches to interpretation. Approaching Chen Yi as one would Jianzhong Wang may lead to an excessive pursuit of expansive melody at the expense of structure; approaching Jianzhong Wang as one would Chen Yi may render an originally warm and approachable folk-song style overly austere. A convincing performance should select its sonority according to the work's logic of arrangement.

7. Comparative significance: From "Pianization of Folk Songs" to "Modernization of Folk Songs"

A comparison of Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi demonstrates that Chinese piano folk-song arrangement does not follow a single path. Jianzhong Wang's path can be summarized as the "pianization of folk songs": he brings folk songs into the medium of the piano while striving to preserve their recognizable identity as songs. Chen Yi's path can be summarized as the "modernization of folk songs": she brings folk songs into modern compositional structures, transforming them from melodic objects into generative resources for pitch, rhythm, texture, and formal structure.

These differences first emerge in the composers' conceptions of material. Jianzhong Wang regards folk songs as material that merits respect and expansion; the key to arrangement lies in enriching them without compromising the original melodies. Chen Yi regards folk songs as renewable material; the key to composition lies in transforming their spirit into a new structure. This difference in their conceptions of material does not imply that Jianzhong Wang is conservative and Chen Yi progressive; rather, it indicates that they faced different historical tasks. Jianzhong Wang needed to establish recognition of a Chinese national piano repertoire among Chinese audiences and within piano education, whereas Chen Yi needed to

demonstrate, within the international context of modern music, that Chinese materials could participate in a contemporary compositional language.

Second, their differences are manifested in their conceptions of national character. Jianzhong Wang's national character is explicit, appearing in pentatonic melodies, regional folk songs, imitation of traditional Chinese instruments, and clearly delineated folk-song images.

Chen Yi's national character is often internalized, appearing in intervallic relationships, rhythmic logic, antiphonal exchanges between voices, and cultural imagery. The former is readily recognizable to listeners; the latter must be understood gradually by performers and listeners through analysis and attentive listening. Both forms of national character are authentic; they simply exist in different ways.

Third, the comparison can enrich contemporary piano pedagogy. In traditional teaching, Jianzhong Wang's works are often used to cultivate the singing quality of Chinese folk-style melodies, an understanding of pentatonic modes, and timbres suggestive of traditional Chinese instruments; Chen Yi's works can be used to develop modern rhythmic skills, polyphonic listening, timbral control, and cross-cultural understanding. If the two composers are placed within the same instructional unit, students can understand how folk-song arrangement ranges from the presentation of a complete melody to the reorganization of motivic structure. Such an approach builds historical and stylistic awareness more effectively than studying a single work in isolation.

Finally, this comparison also offers lessons for contemporary composition. Folk-song arrangement cannot remain at the level of merely "changing the instrument" or "adding accompaniment," nor can modernization come at the cost of eliminating the folk song's perceptible character altogether. A genuinely vital arrangement should choose its method according to the material itself: some folk songs can retain their complete melodies and be expanded through piano sonority, whereas with others only rhythm, intervals, and inflection can be extracted and reshaped within a modern structure. Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi together demonstrate these two possibilities ^[8].

8. Conclusion

This article compares the piano folk-song arrangements of Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi across five dimensions: compositional context, melodic material, harmony and texture, formal structure, and performance interpretation. Their differences should not be understood as a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Jianzhong Wang's contribution lies in establishing a canonical paradigm for Chinese piano folk-song arrangements, enabling the Western piano to convey the melodic beauty and national imagery of Chinese folk songs; Chen Yi's contribution lies in expanding the contemporary possibilities of folk-song material, enabling Chinese folk music to enter the language of modern composition and the international musical arena. The former emphasizes "making the piano speak Chinese," whereas the latter emphasizes "allowing Chinese folk songs to participate in modern musical thought." Together, these two approaches constitute the dual trajectories through which Chinese piano music has developed a national idiom and engaged with the wider world.

For performers, understanding these two approaches is more important than merely resolving technical problems. Performing Jianzhong Wang requires making the melody sing and bringing out the timbres of traditional Chinese instruments and the inflections of folk song; performing Chen Yi, by contrast, requires

hearing the motivic relationships, rhythmic centers of gravity, and polyphonic structures. Only when performance interpretation accords with compositional logic can piano folk-song arrangements possess cultural and musical value.

Overall, the piano folk-song arrangements of Jianzhong Wang and Chen Yi demonstrate two forms that Chinese folk song can assume in the medium of the piano: one continues the melody, whereas the other reconstructs the material. Together, they show that folk song is not a static traditional legacy; across different historical contexts, technical languages, and cultural arenas, it can continually generate new musical resources.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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