

# Research on Chinese Style in the Piano Works of Chu Wanghua

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**Abstract:** Chu Wanghua is an important piano composer and performer in modern China, whose works are known for their distinctive national style and deep folk background. This paper discusses the characteristics and aesthetic connotations of Chu Wanghua's works by combing and analysing his piano works. Chu Wanghua's piano compositions are deeply influenced by Chinese folk music, and most of the themes are taken from real life and local folk songs. His works embody a strong spirit of the times, show a rich regional culture, and form a unique style of Chinese piano art.

**Keywords:** Chu Wanghua, Piano Music, National Style, Aesthetic Implications.

## 1. Introduction

Chu Wanghua is a representative figure in the development of modern Chinese piano music. As a composer and pianist, he has always taken "developing Chinese piano music" as his own responsibility, and he has devoted himself to integrating the spirit of Chinese traditional culture into the vocabulary of Western piano art, creating piano works with distinctive national styles.

In recent years, the research on Chu Wanghua's piano works has gradually increased, especially after 2010, presenting a multi-faceted and multi-level development trend. Through the collation of literature, the current relevant studies can be roughly summarised into the following three categories:

(1) Focusing on the analysis and research of a single work: mainly exploring the artistic characteristics of the work in terms of musical style, performance techniques, and ethnic customs. For example, Guo Shanshan's "The Ethnic Minority Customs of Chu Wanghua's Xinjiang Fantasy" (2006), Li Wenhong's "Study of Chu Wanghua's Six Piano Preludes" (2009), Wang Xue's "Study of the Compositional Characteristics and Performance Techniques of Chu Wanghua's "Reflecting the Moon in the Two Springs" (2012), and Chen Qing's "Maintaining and Reconstructing Folk Rhythms in Chu Wanghua's "Fantasia on the Jasmine Flower"" (2020), among others[1-5].

(2) Technical Research for Performance Teaching: Focusing on the significance of guiding performance techniques and teaching practice. For example, Wang Danqun, "Xinjiang Ethnic Music on the Fingertips - An Analysis of the Performance Characteristics of Reserve Wanghua's Xinjiang Fantasy" (2015), Wu Yifan, "Research on the Musicality and Performance of Reserve Wanghua's Piano Pieces with Elements of Folk Songs Adapted by Reserve Wanghua" (2017), and Zhao Yang, "Collision Between Chinese Ethnic Music and the Piano - An Assessment of the Piano Works of Reserve Wanghua" (2020). -Review of "Explanation on the Performance of Piano Works by Chu Wanghua (Teaching Edition)" (2020), Bo Fusheng and Zhou Jiaying's "Talking about the Performance of Chu Wanghua's 12 Concert Exercises" (2025), and so on.

(3) Theoretical Discussion on Overall Style and Aesthetic Characteristics: Focusing on the stylistic construction and

artistic characteristics of Chu Wanghua's piano works, involving a number of works and stylistic types. For example, Li Dan's "Talking about the Creative Style of Piano Music of Chu Wanghua" (2016), Yang Yongxian's "Exploration of the Chinese Style of the Piano Piece "Little Sentinel in the South China Sea" (2006), and Wu Chenxue's "Artistic Characteristics and Performing Techniques of Chu Wanghua's "Fantasia on Jasmine Flowers"" (2021), among others.

Generally speaking, although existing studies have initially revealed the stylistic characteristics and technical value of Chu Wanghua's piano works, there is still room for in-depth research to systematically explore the path of constructing the musical language and aesthetic implications of his "Chinese style". In this paper, we intend to systematically analyse the Chinese style embodied in Chu Wanghua's piano works from the three dimensions of the classification of his themes, creative features and aesthetic connotations, so as to reveal his artistic value in the fusion of modern piano vocabulary.

## 2. Chu Wanghua's Piano Compositions and Their Classification

Born in 1941 in Hunan Province, China, Chu Wanghua lived in a family of intellectuals since childhood and entered the Central Conservatory of Music at the age of 11. While completing his piano studies, he also devoted himself to composing, and in 1956, due to his fondness for the erhu piece "Reflections of the Moon in the Two Fountains," Chu Wanghua completed his debut erhu solo piece, "Song of the Village," which began his compositional career. After nearly half a century of creative journey, Mr Chu Wanghua has created more than 60 excellent works, more than 40 piano works, of which more than 30 are piano solo pieces, which have become important piano works for Chinese piano students to learn. The author classifies the works according to their genre and content, which can be roughly divided into 5 parts, as shown in Table 1[2-11].

**Table 1.** Classification of Chu Wanghua's representative piano work

Classification	Composition	Time
Centred on the depiction of natural scenery and life	Gangnam Scene Suite	1960
	Looking Across the River	1961
	Zheng xiao ching	1961
	The Yellow River	1970
	Two Fountains Reflecting the Moon	1972
	Xinjiang Rhapsody	1978
	Shadow of a Boat on the Spring River	1980
Centred on Describing People's Lives	A Big River	2000-2003
	Haidian is a Good Place	1959
	The Day of the Liberated Area	1963
	The Day of the Turnaround	1964
	New Songs from the Countryside	1964
	Poor Brother Lv Chuanliang	1965
	Song of the Dockworkers	1973
	The Little Sentinel of the South China Sea	1975
	Children of the South Sea	1975
	Eulogy	1977
Centred on the Chinese Revolution	City Dance	2008
	International Songs of Praise	1970s
Other creative themes in the centre	The Red Star Shines Brightly	1974
	Lullaby	1961
	Concert Exercise - Dance Piece	1961
	The Butterfly Lovers	1961
	Variations on the Little Pine Tree	1973
	Ambush from Ten Sides	1973
	Prelude and Toccata	2000
	Variations on Little Star	2014
Adaptation of Traditional Folk Songs	Twelve Concert Etudes	2024
	Liu Yang River	1977
	Love Song	1979
	Guess the Tune	1979
	Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter	1985
	The Sun Comes Out In Joy	1985

As can be seen from the above list of works, Chu Wanghua's piano creations can be roughly divided into three stages:

The first stage (1959-1977): Rooted in reality, depicting the landscape

The works of this period centred on the guiding principle of "serving the people and facing life" in the early period of the founding of New China. Chu Wanghua devoted himself to the creation of piano works with full creative enthusiasm, and most of the themes originated from the construction of rural areas and natural scenery, highlighting the glorification of the life of the working people and the depiction of natural scenery, such as "Haidian is a good place", "Gangnam Scene Suite", "New Song of Rural Areas", "Turning Over Day" and so on, with simple melody, rich in singing, and a distinctive sense of the times and regional colours[12-17].

The second stage (1978-2000): Turning to adaptation, emphasising folklore.

After the reform and opening up, Chu Wanghua's creative thinking further expanded, and he began to adapt a large number of folk songs from different regions, introducing traditional folk music elements into his piano compositions, such as Liu Yang River, Guess the Tune and Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter. The works of this period focus on the fusion of national melody and piano language, reflecting the musical proposition of "revolutionisation, populism and popularisation", and at the same time demonstrating the maturity of Chu Wanghua's technique and stylistic integration ability.

The Third Stage (2000-present): Integration and Innovation, Towards Diversity

Entering the 21st century, Chu Wanghua has shown greater innovation and openness in terms of genre and musical language. He has not only created works with modern Western techniques, such as Prelude and Toccata, Jasmine Fantasy and Little Star Variations, but has also integrated traditional Chinese melodies and pentatonic modes into variations and fantasies, exploring a new way of blending the East and the West. 12 Concert Exercises, completed in 2024, is a masterpiece, inheriting the Western tradition of the Exercises and highlighting the unique melodic beauty and acoustic characteristics of Chinese piano music. The 12 Concert Etudes, completed in 2024, is a masterpiece that not only inherits the Western tradition of the Etudes, but also highlights the unique melodic beauty and acoustic qualities of Chinese piano music, demonstrating his spirit of innovation and perseverance at his advanced age.

### 3. Characteristics of Chu Wanghua's Piano Pieces

#### 3.1. Keeping in Touch with the Times and Folk Life

Chu Wanghua's piano works are closely related to the social reality, reflecting the distinctive era and a strong folk life. The works of the 1960s, such as "the day of the liberated area" and "the day of the turnaround", are full of optimism and high spirit, the former is adapted from the Shanbei folk song "our leader Mao Zedong", which combines "nationalisation" and "revolution" on the basis of the continuation of the folk melody. The former is adapted from the folk song "Our Leader Mao Zedong", which combines "nationalisation" and "revolutionisation" on the basis of the continuation of the folk melody, showing the spirit of the working people. After entering the 21st century, the subject matter of the work has shifted to urban life and modern contexts. 2008's "City Dance", a four-handed piece, imitates the city scene with complex harmonies, showing the rhythm and vitality of the city in the new era, embodying the shift from "revolutionary" to "modern" composition. It reflects the transformation from "revolutionisation" to "modernisation".

In 1964, Yin Chengzong's Suite for two pianos, New Songs from the Countryside, used folk songs and suona tunes to reflect the new outlook of the countryside, which was inspired by their experience of participating in the Socialist Education Movement, while Zhu Gongyi's Piano Concerto Children of the South Seas in 1975 was based on the lives of fishermen in the fishing villages of Guangdong, vividly demonstrating the labour of the fishermen. In 1975, he collaborated with Zhu Gongyi on the piano concerto "Children of the South Sea", which is based on the life of fishing villages in Guangdong, vividly showing the fishermen's labour and the ocean weather, and is full of the texture of life and regional colour[18-22].

Looking at their creations, the early works reflect the "revolutionary" and popular nature of 20th century China, while the later works turn to the portrayal of the life of the new era and the expression of modern style. Throughout, there is a deep concern for the people's lives and sincere expression, forming a distinctive sense of the times and realistic concern in the works.

### 3.2. Adaptation of Folk Songs from Different Parts of China

A large number of Chu Wanghua's piano works are based on folk songs from different parts of China, and through artistic adaptation, he gives traditional melodies a new form of piano expression. For example, "Haidian is a good place" originates from Hebei folk songs, "Jiangnan Scene Suite" is based on Jiangsu folk songs, "The Day of the Liberated Area" continues the style of Shaanxi folk songs, "Liuyang River", "Love Song", "Guessing the Tune", "The Sun Comes Out Joyfully", "Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter", "New Year in the New Month", "Fantasia of Jasmine Flower" and so on, which are respectively adapted from folk songs and opera songs in Hunan, Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi, etc., forming a trans-regional folk music scene. This creates a cross-regional picture of folk music.

According to Chu Wanghua, "Adaptation is not only about transplanting melodies, but also about harmonising with melodies in terms of harmony and weaving, integrating with national feelings and temperaments, and adapting to national appreciation habits, so as to form a whole of art with national styles."

He configured harmonies and chose the piano weave patterns for the national tunes, using more colourful

harmonies with a strong national tonal style, imitating the characteristics of the national instruments on the weave, highlighting the main theme of the piano while retaining the folk rhythm on the tone, deeply rooted in the soil of Chinese national and folk music, and embodying a strong Chinese style of music.

It is worth noting that diatonic intervals appear in a large number of Chu Wanghua's works. He loves the use of diatonic intervals and uses them to express the unique ethnic style of Chinese music. For example, "Jasmine Fantasia" is adapted from the Jiangsu folk song "Jasmine", and there are 180 different types of diatonic intervals in the whole piece. For example, the score Figure 1, from the 7th bar onwards, the diatonic intervals have been in the treble area, together with the rhythmic background of the pentatonic, set off the left hand beautiful melody, creating the atmosphere of "jasmine fragrance overflowing in all directions, the petals of the residual fall of the next", the diatonic intervals of the colourfulness together with the rhythm of the pentatonic, to show the "Oriental beauty" of the Chinese music. The colourful intervals and pentatonic rhythms show the "Oriental beauty" of Chinese music. Chu Wanghua's use of diatonic intervals has greatly created the harmonic language of Chinese music in the national style.

Figure 1. of the piano piece "Jasmine Fantasy" bars 5-12

### 3.3. Taking the Timbre and Playing Techniques of Folk Instruments as the Foundation of Expression

In his piano compositions, Chu Wanghua attaches great importance to the expressive power of Chinese folk music. Through simulating the timbre of folk instruments, drawing on playing techniques, and tapping into the elements of folk music that are suitable for piano expression, he has formed a piano language rich in Chinese characteristics. He uses the "Western" sound of the piano to write the "Chinese" meaning, and incorporates the aesthetic characteristics of folk instruments into his melodies, modes, patterns and acoustic constructions.

One of his masterpieces, Erquan Yingyue (Reflecting the Moon in the Two Springs), composed in 1972, was adapted from an erhu piece of the same name by Hua Yanjun. In this work, Chu Wanghua draws on the erhu's glissando, vibrato, and legato techniques, and simulates the erhu's characteristic lyrical lines through the design of tone patterns and rhythmic arrangements. As shown in Figure 2, the introductory part unfolds with a weak single note, and the melodic line is similar to that of a bow-pull; the thirty-second note #C appearing in the left hand of the fifth measure is followed by the eighth note B, which simulates the vibratory effect of the erhu's empty strings, and strengthens the oriental connotation of the piece.

Chu Wang-Hua

( 1 3 1 2 )

**Andante cantabile** ♩ = 48-52

**Figure 2.** Piano piece "Two Fountains Reflecting the Moon", bars 1-6

The equally representative Zheng xiao yin (1961), from Six Preludes for Piano, uses the piano to simulate the acoustic texture of the zheng and xiao ensemble. The work combines the structural techniques of Western preludes with the moody expression of Chinese classical music, with particular attention to timbre design. The large number of pentatonic scales and glissando patterns in bars 23-25 of Figure 3 mimic the sweeping strings of the guzheng, while the rapid diatonic intervals from bar 26 onwards create the glissando qualities of the xiao, demonstrating an ethereal and distant aesthetic

style that is both elegant and refined. In the process of composition, Chu Wanghua attaches great importance to the expression of Chinese music's national style. He imitates the timbre of Chinese folk instruments and borrows the playing method of Chinese folk instruments, explores the hidden elements of Chinese folk music that are suitable for piano playing, and then borrows the harmonic language, melodic direction, and national tuning of Chinese music, and creates his unique style of Chinese piano works on this basis.

*Lento poi accel.*

**Figure 3.** of the piano piece "Zing xiao yin", bars 21-30

## 4. Aesthetic Implications

### 4.1. Poetic Expression of Situational Integration

Chu Wanghua's piano compositions embody strong Chinese traditional aesthetic qualities, especially focusing on the artistic expression of "subtlety", "pictorialism" and "blending of scenes". He is good at expressing his feelings through scenery, and putting his feelings into objects, continuing the Chinese culture of "borrowing objects to express one's feelings". For example, the prelude "Looking at Each Other Across the River" uses the scene of looking at each other along the riverbank as a guide to express the feelings of longing and attachment; "The Gurgling Sound of the Valley" imitates the sound of the gurgling brooks in Laoshan Mountain, constructing an acoustic space like that of a landscape painting, and transforming the natural scenery into a mapping of emotions. "Spring River Boat Shadow" pushes the expression of river water and boat shadow to the extreme, with emotions in the scene and emotions arising from the scene, demonstrating the creation of the mood of "forgetting both things and oneself" in oriental aesthetics.

In addition, Chu Wanghua also skilfully uses the techniques of sustain, rest and rhythmic white space to strengthen the beauty of the music. For example, in "Jasmine Fantasy", the main melody is reproduced like an echo after the climax, and a short pause is inserted to make the melody hidden, leaving a rich space for imagination, showing the oriental aesthetic flavour carried by "white space".

### 4.2. Fusion of Ethnicity and Modernity

Chu Wanghua's music is always centred around the core concept of "Chinese style", emphasising the fusion of ethnicity and modern techniques. He is deeply influenced by Chinese painting and calligraphy and traditional art, and pursues the expression of "vividness", emphasising the unity of inner spirit and formal language. His piano works cover multiple dimensions such as imitation of the sound of national instruments (e.g. "Zheng xiao yin", "The Day of the Turning of the Tide"), adaptation of folk songs from different regions (e.g. "Liu Yang River", "New Year in the First Month", "Jasmine Fantasia"), and praise of people's life and natural scenery (e.g. "The Sky of the Liberated Zone", "Children of the South China Sea", "The Yellow River", "Xinjiang Musical Piece"). Chu Wanghua emphasised that "Chinese composers must retain their own national style, and even if they absorb Western creative techniques, it is still something Chinese".

He is good at drawing on western piano techniques, absorbing the experience of preludes, variations, fantasies and other genres in structure and form, and at the same time integrating the unique lyricism, pentatonic scale, colour harmony and tonal characteristics of Chinese music. For example, Six Preludes for Piano inherits the Western tradition in its structure, but its melody, rhythm and temperament distinctly reflect the spirit of the Orient, realising the organic intersection of Chinese and Western techniques[22-24].

### 4.3. Interweaving of Individual Experience and Cultural Memory

Chu Wanghua's creations are deeply rooted in people's life and national culture, and his works not only display a strong

sense of life, but also contain deep cultural memories. In his melodic construction and musical language, he incorporates the expression of "iambic pentameter", emphasising the generation of "context" and "meaning", reflecting the narrative and aesthetic qualities of Chinese music.

Chinese traditional thought focuses on life perception and artistic cultivation, emphasising "to understand the way of life through emotion" and "the work lies outside the poem". This concept also permeates Chu Wanghua's music. For example, "Little Sentinels of the South Sea" and "Children of the South Sea" originated from his life experience in the fishing villages of Guangdong, depicting scenes of the sea and fishermen's life, full of deep feelings for the people and love for the motherland. The "Gurgling Sound of the Valley" originates from his trip to Laoshan Mountain, where he expresses the quietness and flow of the natural landscape through sound, integrating his personal feelings with the landscape, showing the oriental art core of "writing scenery is writing feelings".

In his creation, Chu Wanghua not only records life, but also carries cultural memories through music. He organically integrates his personal experience, national emotion and traditional culture, and with the help of the piano as a western instrument, he expands the boundaries of Chinese piano music expression, forming a unique aesthetic style.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of piano music with Chinese characteristics is Chu Wanghua's consistent creative ideal and artistic pursuit. From his initial exploration of combining Chinese tones with Western compositional techniques, he has gradually built up a musical language system that combines a variety of compositional techniques and is rich in personal style. His piano works are deeply rooted in the soil of the times and folk life, full of national emotions and social memories, showing a distinctive national style and artistic personality.

In his compositions, Chu Wanghua absorbs a wide range of musical resources such as Chinese folk songs, operas and folk instrumental music, and flexibly applies western piano techniques to reproduce the lyricism, implicit beauty and contextual beauty of Chinese music with the piano as a carrier. By imitating the timbre of ethnic instruments and integrating ethnic modal language and piano weave, he expands the boundaries of piano music expression and builds up an aesthetic space for the piano with oriental charm. Chu Wanghua not only provides an important paradigm for Chinese piano music creation, but also lays a solid foundation for Chinese piano teaching and the international dissemination of folk music.

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