CHINESE NATIONAL MOTIFS IN THE FOLK SONG *MO LI HUA*: INFLUENCE ON MODERN CHINESE MUSIC

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Abstract: The traditional music of China is well-known outside the country. Because of how they are written, Chinese folk songs can be interpreted in a variety of genres, which contributes to the popularization of Chinese traditional music. This study aims to investigate Chinese national motifs in the folk song *Mo Li Hua* and determine its significance to modern Chinese music. Through comparison, the study identified the following four characteristics of the song: anti-romantic moods, the melodic motion of leaps, expressiveness of musical intonation, and connectedness of melody and lyrics. Using the coefficient of intensive properties, the study revealed that expressiveness of musical intonation (0.92) was of the greatest significance for the transmission and preservation of national cultural traditions. In the Shapiro-Wilk test, the melodic motion of leaps (0.831) and anti-romantic moods (0.795) were found to be of the greatest importance for modern music-writing. Comparing the two famous interpretations of *Mo Li Hua*, the study found that the second version (0.937) was more valuable as a source of inspiration for composers, mostly because it told a bigger story. The practical significance of the work lies in the possibility of using research results to enhance the Chinese-style modern folk music writing process. Future research may focus on other elements of folk music, determine characteristics that different music compositions share, and investigate the role of those common characteristics in the contemporary music-making process.

Keywords: folk music, leapy melody, musical form, shades of music, tonal dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Folk music is a type of music culture that conveys folk traditions (Liu et al. 2021). It has philosophical and political foundations that expand cultural consciousness (Yang 2021). The distinctive features of folk music are the naturalness and brightness of the sounds and a sincere expression of emotions, which opens a broad avenue for Chinese culture (Liu 2018). The sense of harmony in Chinese folk music is a product of various artistic manifestations realized by drawing together moderate melodies, the sense of consciousness and musical aesthetics (Tang 2021). Melody is one of the main elements of folk music characterized by harmony and played with a wide variety of timbres and dynamics (Rui 2022). The pictorial elements of sound in Chinese folk music vary by region and depict natural scenes (Yao 2020). The sound itself is characterized by lightness, flexibility, and colorful dynamics. Many features of folk music attained a second life in contemporary music (Wan 2022).

The elements of folk music have been used in modern Chinese music since the beginning of the 21st century (Ber 2019). This facilitates the production of diverse compositions and helps to preserve the 'soul' of the nation (Lin & Liu 2021). With a modern spin added to the folk songs, the melodies acquire more texture, and the timbre range expands, allowing for originality in the pieces. A new singing aesthetic is in the making that may be of interest to the younger generation and people fascinated by folk motifs (Gao 2021). The combination of modern and folk styles generates a new model of narration and updates the genre. Rooted in folklore, contemporary music preserves that distinct tonality that folk music has (Papakostas et al. 2018). The said combination is conducive to contemplation and admiration. The connection between modern and folk music manifests itself in the preservation of the vocal line, artistry, sound production features, and the message of the song (Selva-Ruiz & Fénix-Pina 2021). When incorporating folk music into mainstream music, composers should follow the laws of folk music creation. The crucial components of melodic interpretation are gestures, sound quality and dynamics, melodic movement, and lyrics (van Langendonck et al. 2020). The sound of modern music should be harmonious, and the melody must be clear to create a sense of space and enhance aesthetic experience (Ber 2019). To preserve the features of folk music in contemporary music pieces, one must consider not only the technical side of the problem (note combination), but also the timbre and the relationship between aesthetics and philosophy (Rui 2022).

Musicians can achieve a harmonious combination of folk and modern styles by looking upon folklore as a source of inspiration. One of the famous folk songs is *Mo Li Hua*. Not only is it popular in the Jiangnan region, but it also

has various interpretations outside China (D'Evelyn 2018). It was adapted by Kenny J. Anton Arensky for his concerto, and Puccini incorporated this melody into the score of Turandot (Jaago 2018; Nie 2021). *Mo Li Hua* gained popularity in the world because of its fine texture, polyphonic diversity and tonic modal structure; in addition, the song provides room for improvisation (Wilson 2016).

Literature review

Particle swarm optimization (PSO) makes the Chinese folk music composition more effective (Zheng et al. 2017). The algorithm is designed to find the best solutions for melodic composition. It is based on a multi-melodic space constructed for the traditional pentatonic music creation. By making it easier to create gentle melodies, PSO facilitates the preservation of cultural traditions in music. The analysis of folk pieces should involve pattern discovery. By a rigid definition, music pattern sequences represent the pairs of pitch differences and duration ratio (D'Evelyn 2018). By comparing these patterns, musicians can determine the recurring melodic sequences that affect the expressiveness of the piece. The attention should be directed to open and closed patterns (Ren 2016). To analyze folk music, musicians must be creative, but the conventional music education (learning by books, without technology) fails to unlock the full creative potential of music students. Researchers suggest solving this problem by combining traditional pedagogies with the conservatory model of learning (Yang & Welch 2016). This way students learning folk music will be able to investigate the technical aspects of music and then apply their knowledge in a practical context (Yang & Welch 2016).

Vocal art is a means of conveying the artistic and emotional content of a musical work through voice, sounds, words and intonation. Folk singers can reach an aesthetic vocal performance by using integrated methods, such that combine innovative and conventional methodologies (Liu & Zhou 2021). The choice of a voice building technique will affect the purity of the performance. Chinese singing competitions heavily rely on the folk genre. There is evidence of folk singers becoming famous after representing performance traditions of a particular region on a national stage (Gibbs 2018). The interaction with those traditions also helps singers to improve vocally and develop their own style of singing. Since the 20th century, Chinese music has been intersecting with the Western traditions, and this interaction resulted in the emergence of more complex thinking and composing techniques. Modern songs under the influence of national folklore preserve the aesthetics, melodic intonations, rhythm and notation of the original (Gibbs 2018). One example of medieval music

manifested in contemporary culture is "The Rains of Castamere", a song written specifically for the Game of Thrones. When writing this song, musicians had to generate a musical piece that is pleasant to the ear. To create a harmonious sound, they were forced to reconstruct medieval music to make it sound modern while maintaining the elements of folk culture (Cuenca 2020).

It is impossible to imagine modern folk music without a developed folk art industry and innovation. To master folk music, musicians must be culturally capable and sensitive; otherwise, they will not be able to identify the elements of traditional music and blend them together (Żammit 2021). Traditional folk songs are constructed around patriotism, homesickness, affection, friendship, and love. These themes can also be narrated in contemporary Chinese folk songs to evoke a broad range of strong emotions. Modern Chinese folk songs tend to convey a variety of artistic emotions through melody, rhythm, tonality and aesthetic experience (Li 2022). The change of music genre should be justified artistically or economically. To blend modern and folk music, one should focus on sonic similarities between the two genres. When writing Chinese music, the emphasis should be on the polyphonic music writing technique, assuming the movement from counterpoint to free style and from simple texture to complex melodic line. The emphasis on Western traditional polyphonic music helps to preserve the modal features of Chinese music (Yang et al. 2015). To sum up, the literature suggests that folk music has a direct influence on contemporary music, but to make them blend well, one must work on the expressiveness of the piece, its melodic intonation, and rhythm.

Problem statement

Modern Chinese music and folk culture are closely related, with the latter being a source of cultural traditions, philosophy, religious motifs, and historical inspirations. Supported by folk art, modern Chinese music stands out with the presence of polyphonic texture, variations of rhythm, the combined use of various instruments and graded dynamics.

The present study aims to investigate the Chinese national motifs in the folk song *Mo Li Hua* and its influence on modern Chinese music. The objectives of the study are (1) to identify the distinguishing characteristics of *Mo Li Hua* which are typical of Chinese folk music; (2) to determine the possibilities of using the distinctive features of Chinese folk music in modern music; and (3) to estimate the significance the two famous versions of this song have from the perspective of modern music-making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

Not only did this study analyze the song *Mo Li Hua* to determine its distinctive characteristics, but their correspondence to the general folk traditions was also established. For this, the comparison method was used. The study focuses specifically on *Mo Li Hua* because it is one of the most popular folk compositions in China and abroad. The significance of this composition in Chinese folk music was evaluated using the coefficient of intensive properties (Weliver 2012), as shown below:

$$I = \frac{g}{M} , \qquad (1)$$

where: g is a conditional variable representing the extent to which a particular indicator and general tendencies in Chinese folk music are matched; M represents an ideal level of significance (i.e., the desired extent to which a particular indicator and general tendencies in Chinese folk music are matched). The characteristic of the song was considered as significant if it had appearance in a sufficient number of Chinese folk songs.

The distinctive features of the traditional melody named *Mo Li Hua* were the anti-romantic mood, the melodic motion of leaps, expressiveness of musical intonation, and connectedness of melody and lyrics (they convey the same intended emotion). The next step was to determine if those features were feasible in modern musical compositions. These four indicators were evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Weliver 2012). The formula is:

$$W = \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^{n} a_i x_{(i)})^2}{(\sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i - \bar{x})^2} , \qquad (2)$$

where: $x_{(i)}$ denotes the value of the i-th indicator; $\bar{x}$ is the sample mean; and a_i is the coefficient of statistical order.

The final step was to compare the two versions of *Mo Li Hua* to determine whether this song could serve as a reference in modern music-making. The comparison is based on the Shapiro-Wilk test (Everett 2021). The formula is:

$$k_s = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (p_i - p_{cp})^{1/2}}{n-1} , \qquad (3)$$

where: n is the number of indicators; p_i is the relative value of the i-th indicator; p_m denotes the arithmetic mean.

A correlation coefficient (k_s) of 0.9–1.0 signified a very high correlation, 0.7–0.9 high, 0.5–0.7 moderate, 0.3–0.5 low and 0.0–0.3 a negligible correlation between variables (Everett 2021).

Statistical processing

Data analysis was done in Microsoft Excel, which facilitated arithmetic operations by supporting the application of mathematical formulas. Microsoft Excel was used to process and sort the numerical results by creating charts.

Ethical issues

The study does not involve human subjects; hence, ethical approval was not required. However, the present study considered value indicators, which necessitated the researchers to be honest, impartial, and present consistent and accurate data. The authors confirm that the information presented in the current paper is unique and that it was not borrowed from previous research (National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology 2024).

Limitations

The focus of the present study lies exclusively on *Mo Li Hua* and other Chinese folk songs are ignored. Even so, the work details the features of that musical composition and their significance for both the preservation of folk traditions and modern music-making.

RESULTS

Written in the 18th century, the Chinese folk song *Mo Li Hua* is considered to be the second Chinese national anthem. Using the coefficient of intensive properties, this study identified the main characteristics of *Mo Li Hua* and their relationship to those of Chinese folk music. The results are presented in Figure 1.

The anti-romantic mood of the song is associated with the richness of eastern cultural ethnicity and its dramatic tradition. The scene it portrays allows musicians to use bright tone 'color' and play the melody in the impressionist style. The rich colorful imagery determines the genre diversity, which can range from epic to lyrical and even ironic. As seen from Figure 1, the anti-romantic mood of the song is the least significant characteristic it has, likely because folk music compositions tend to convey a variety of moods. The significance score of this indicator is 0.71.
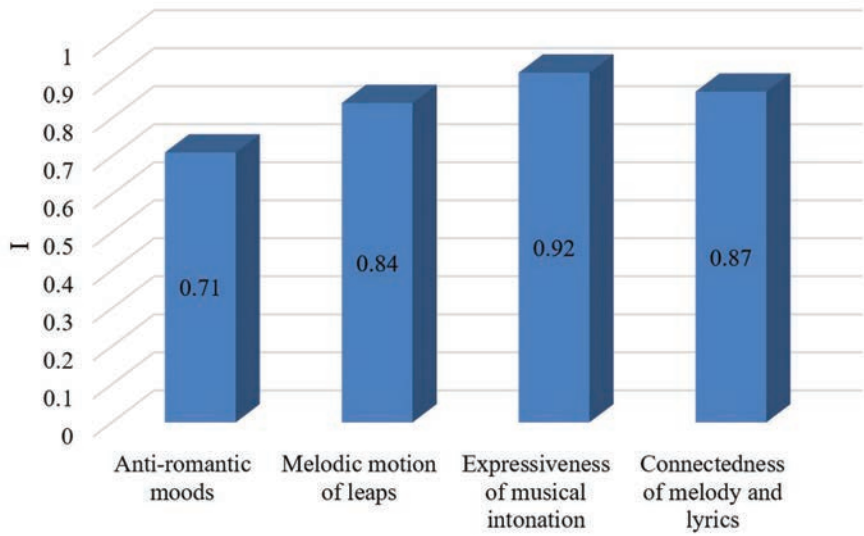
Figure 1. Four distinctive features of Mo Li Hua *and their levels of significance as building blocks in Chinese folk music.*

The song has a leapy melody (Figure 2) characterized by rhythmic variety and high registers. It moves from short to long musical phrases that affect the metrical structure. A smooth melodic shape predicts the emotional and melodic movement within the piece where the melody moves from high to low sounds. The melodic motion of leaps ranked third in terms of significance among the main folk music characteristics, with the significance score of 0.84.

Musical images can be embodied in the song by using unique intonations specific to a particular musical culture and accompanied by timbre, rhythm and melody. Phonetics and intonation are elements of musical culture that convey musical traditions. For instance, using intonation, singers can preserve the five-fret structure of the song, its distinctive flavor. Of all the characteristics investigated here, the expressiveness of musical intonation through which musical images are embodied holds the most significance in preserving and presenting folk traditions. The significance score of this indicator is 0.92. The connectedness of melody and lyrics is also related to phonetics. This characteristic appears to be important, with the significance score of 0.87, because Chinese folk music is all about harmony and naturalness of sound. To achieve this connectedness, one must lengthen the syllables while following the music.

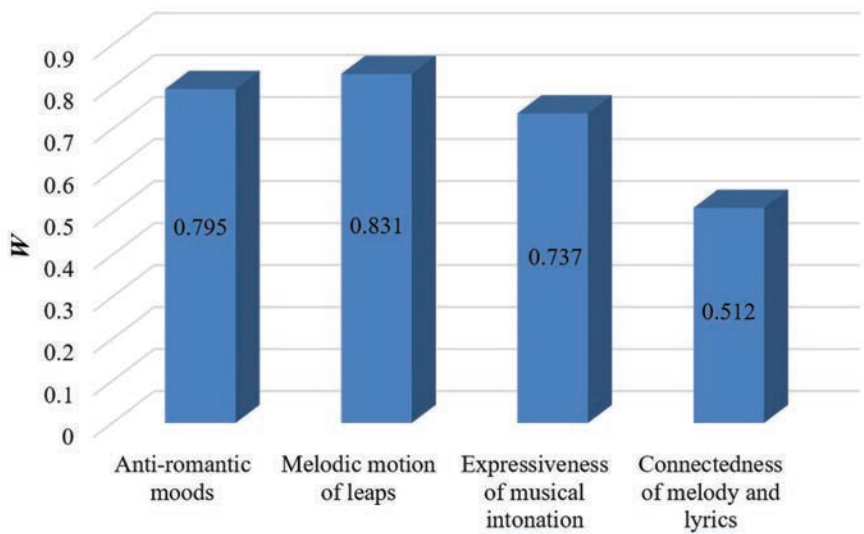**Figure 2.** *Chinese folk song* Mo Li Hua, *music notation.*

Figure 3. *Four distinctive features of* Mo Li Hua *and their levels of significance for modern music-making.*

The next step was to select those characteristics of *Mo Li Hua* that can be applied to modern music pieces. Figure 3 shows how significant these characteristics are when it comes to modern music-making.

As seen from Figure 3, it is crucial to incorporate a leapy melody into modern music compositions. Because melody combines all means of musical expressiveness, including melodic intervals, rhythm, tonality, structural motifs and phrases, it is no surprise that it has a high level of significance. The large leaps in melody (wave-like, horizontal, etc.) increase the expressiveness of the piece by enlarging the melodic range. Expression in the song, in turn, affects how the listeners feel while listening to it. The presence of recurring sounds in the piece uplifts one's emotional state.

Creating anti-romantic moods in contemporary music also seems important, for they are conducive to climactic scenes. The mood embedded in the passage defines the rhythmic movement and intonation – elements that shape the perception of emotion in the piece.

The expressiveness of musical intonation is the third most significant characteristic that one should bring to modern melodies. It defines the ratio of ascending and descending intervals, which manifests itself in a varying melodic pattern. The intonation affects the harmonious inclusion of repetitions in the composition incorporated as the rhythmic motifs change.

From the perspective of music-making, the connectedness of melody and lyrics holds the least significance, for they can convey different emotions or be connected in a manner that breaks the rules of Chinese music-making. To make the song sound harmonious, musicians can incorporate dynamic and articulatory motifs with different timbre colors. Expressiveness can be achieved by featuring rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic contrasts.

There are two main interpretations of the folk song *Mo Li Hua* which have different lyrics and melody (Table 1). The second version seems to be of greater significance in modern music-making (0.937), for it is rich in elements of expressivity and repetitions and has a complete storyline. Focusing on these components while composing will enable musicians to use a wide range of musical elements and combine the varying musical forms (rhythm, tempo, pitch, etc.).

Table 1. Comparison between two popular versions of the Chinese folk song Mo Li Hua.

Version 1		W-statistic	Version 2		W-statistic	Correlation coefficient
Literal translation			Literal translation			
What a beautiful jasmine flower! What a beautiful jasmine flower! Fragrant and full of branches It's sweet, white, and boastful Let me pick you up Give it to someone else Jasmine flower, oh Jasmine flower		0.711	What a jasmine flower! Of all the fragrant flowers and grasses in the garden, there is none as fragrant as it. I want to pluck one and wear it, but the gardener would scold me. What a jasmine flower! When jasmine blooms, not even snow is whiter. I want to pluck one and wear it But I'm afraid those around me would mock me. What a jasmine flower! Of all the blooms in the garden, none compares to it. I want to pluck one and wear it But I'm afraid it wouldn't bud next year.		0.937	0.82

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that expressiveness of musical intonation (0.92) was of the greatest significance for the transmission and preservation of national cultural traditions. In the Shapiro-Wilk test, the melodic motion of leaps (0.831) and anti-romantic moods (0.795) were found to be of the greatest importance for modern music-writing. Comparing the two famous interpretations of *Mo Li Hua*, the study found that the second version (0.937) was more valuable as a source of inspiration for composers, mostly because it told a bigger story.

An important component of Chinese music tradition is the tone-melody matching. Chaozhou songs were reported to have a high degree of correspondence between tone and melody (Zhang & Cross 2021), but the extent to which these two elements are matched in the folk and contemporary interpretations is not the same. Contemporary music should preserve the relationship between tone and melody in the effort to protect folk traditions and convey aesthetic experience. In Chaozhou songs, the tones vary from high-pitched to low-pitched; single tones can be changed by playing with pitch directions of the melodic notes (Zhang & Cross 2021). The Chinese folk melodies share certain features with Korean folk music – both put the relationship between humans and nature at the forefront in their narratives. Folk music is a vehicle for transmitting thoughts and behaviors from one generation to another. In Korea, folk songs ensure the mission of showing human creativity and capturing historical transformations. The distinctive feature of Korean folk music is the use of high-pitched notes that last a considerable amount of time (Yoon 2021). In Western music, an important element is the counterpoint, which influences the survival of folk music. Some researchers believe that it can be incorporated into Chinese folk melodies using FolkDuet, an app that generates countermelodies while maintaining the Chinese folk melodic style (Jiang et al. 2020). The present study suggests that the most imperative component of Chinese folk music is the expressiveness of musical intonation because it is tied to timbre, rhythm, and melody.

Chinese folk songs come in various regional musical styles, each with unique temporal characteristics of the melody structure that affect musical aesthetics (Li et al. 2019). An example is the hua'er folk songs, which serve as the expression of multi-functional and regional traditions. Hua'er lyrics are constructed in the creative communicative process through social interactions, which can be seen from the way people sing these songs. To be more specific, hua'er songs are sung in the form of antiphonal dialogue. The artistic expression of these songs reflects the soul of local communities (Tuohy 2018). Chinese folk songs may be considered as national and dialect literature. The current state of the Chinese music culture, however, is such that folk songs undergo the process of

revival, with a modern take. Contemporary musicians simply take inspiration from the folkloristic and dialect aspects of folk narratives. Modern compositions tend to be polyphonic and thus rich is sound. Different styles of singing also affect the interpretation of the song. Note that vocalization is characterized by acoustic and musical parameters, which require additional tuning (Shao 2016). The presented study did not examine the acoustic aspect, but it was found that different versions of the musical composition have different effects on music perception.

Scholars suggest that gender and social status can influence the aesthetics of singer's performance. Not to mention that singers have different types of vocal timbre and articulation used, and their vocal ranges are not the same, making every performance sound unique. The accuracy of a sung melody depends on the vocal apparatus of the singer and on their ability to use their voice (Shuwen 2018). A modern remix of a folk song requires a singer to breathe properly and have good vocal resonance. The repertoire thus must correspond to the vocal capabilities of the singer. When bringing the modern composition to life, performers must consider the historical and contemporary aspects embedded within the piece. The incorporation of folkloristic elements in the song makes a flowy and leapy melody that encourages singers to expand their voice range to hit higher pitches (Jiayin 2019). The distinctive features of folk music are rhythm and inherent symbolism, which affect emotional experience. The relationship between tone and melody affects the singing speed and contrast. The way listeners perceive a folk song also depends on the singer's charisma and audience. The national style of singing also emerges as a result of soft and smooth singing, regardless of the pitch (Stenberg 2020). The analysis of previous research made it possible to determine that Chinese traditional music, regardless of its genre (folk or pop), should have brightness, expressiveness, accurate interpretation and soft music patterns at its core. The present study focused on a specific music piece (*Mo Li Hua*) and determined its significance for both modern and folk music.

CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, this study determined the significance of the folk song *Mo Li Hua* for the preservation of national traditions. According to the results, the expressiveness of musical intonation (0.92) is the most significant characteristic of the song, as it portrays the national identity. The second most important characteristic is the connectedness of melody and lyrics (0.87), which contributes to natural

sounding. Other characteristics include the melodic motion of leaps (0.84) and anti-romantic artistic mood (0.71).

Secondly, the study established the possibility of using the above characteristics to write modern music. The leapy melody (0.831) and anti-romantic moods (0.795) appear to be the most valuable characteristics in this regard, for they are responsible for the variation in intervals, rhythm, tonality, and sound. The connectedness of melody and lyrics is of the least importance, as it implies adherence to academicism and prevents musicians from breaking the rules of music writing.

Comparing the two famous interpretations of *Mo Li Hua*, the study found that the first version of the song is shorter and less specific storywise than the second one. Therefore, the second version with its deeper story is a better foundation for creating modern music.

The practical significance of the study lies in the suggestion that folk songs can be incorporated into the curriculum as a basis for writing modern-style songs. Future research may focus on other elements of folk music, determine characteristics that different music compositions share, and investigate the role of those common characteristics in the contemporary music-making process.

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