

National Discourse and Subjectivity Expression in Chinese Symphonic Creation

Yun Zhang

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, 11000, Mongolia

Abstract: Taking Chinese symphonic works from 1978 to the present as the research object, this paper explores how this Western art form carries and continuously reshapes the cultural subjectivity of Chinese music. It is argued that in this historical process, the construction of Chineseness unfolds primarily in the tension of three forces: cultural root-seeking centered on nationalization, grand narratives supported by national projects, and aesthetic strategies shifting toward individualization and cross-cultural dialogue in the context of globalization. Through a combined method of musical text analysis and cultural-political criticism, this paper outlines the evolutionary trajectory of Chineseness—from a relatively stable "cultural marker" to a symbolic "national symbol", and ultimately to a diverse and fluid "dialogical strategy". It further reveals the complex interactive relationships underlying this evolution between national discourse, composers' subjectivity, and the pressures of globalization.

Keywords: Chinese symphony; Chineseness; Nationalization; National discourse; Globalization; Cultural identity.

1. Introduction

The symphony, a "monstrosity of sound" (Adorno) originating in Europe, has been inextricably intertwined with China's pursuit of modernity and cultural identity since its introduction to China in the early 20th century. If the exploration of *nationalization* in Chinese symphony before 1978 mainly addressed technical and stylistic questions of "how to express Chinese content through Western forms" (exemplified by the successful paradigm of the *Butterfly Lovers* Violin Concerto), the core issues it has faced since the reform and opening-up have become far more complex: against the multiple contexts of globalization, the reshaping of national ideology, and the awakening of individual creative consciousness, what exactly does Chineseness in symphonic music signify? And how has it been constantly imagined, constructed, and interpreted? This question is rooted in a fundamental cultural-political reality: music is by no means an autonomous aesthetic object, but "a social construct whose meaning is produced in history and culture" (Cook, 1998). For Chinese symphony, Chineseness itself is a constructed concept, its connotations evolving with shifts in the political climate, cultural policies, and social ideological trends. Existing studies, such as Liang Maochun's *Contemporary Chinese Music*, have provided a detailed sorting of works, composers, and historical contexts, offering abundant historical materials for the practice of nationalization. However, few studies have taken Chineseness itself as a research question to systematically examine how it has been shaped and contested by different forces—the state, the market, individual composers, and the international art field—throughout history.

2. Restart and Reconstruction (1978 – Early 1990s)

Chineseness as a "Cultural Marker": Root-Seeking and Return. At the dawn of the reform and opening-up, China's literary and artistic circles emancipated themselves from the monolithic model of "model operas" and were in urgent need of rebuilding connections with the "world" and "tradition" at

this new historical starting point. In the field of symphonic music, a strong consciousness of "cultural root-seeking" prevailed. The construction of Chineseness at this time was primarily manifested as the pursuit of a recognizable cultural marker with historical depth. Its core strategy was "return"—returning to the interrupted exploration of nationalization, to regional culture, and to classical literary and historical themes, in an attempt to establish a relatively stable aesthetic subject with "fine traditional Chinese culture" as its core within the framework of "Chinese and Western".

Creative practice in this period exhibited two distinct dimensions. First, it represented a continuation and deepening of the successful nationalization path developed since the May Fourth Movement, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Composers made more conscious and skilled use of folk song melodies, timbres and playing techniques of traditional Chinese musical instruments, and modes and rhythms of traditional music, integrating them into the linguistic system of the symphony. Works such as Du Mingxin's *Symphony for the Youth*, for example, follow Western classical paradigms in structure but brim with distinct ethnic flavors in their musical vocabulary. This practice aimed to prove that the symphonic form could be effectively "Chinesized", with its Chineseness directly embodied in the transformation and sublimation of local musical materials. As the musicologist Wang Anguo pointed out, this period was characterized by "the pursuit of an organic combination of Western techniques and ethnic verve in musical form". Second, and more philosophically profound, was the exploration reflected in a series of works that sought inspiration from the spiritual core of Chinese culture, rather than merely superficial materials. A representative figure here is Zhu Jian'er. His works of the 1980s, such as *Sketches of the Qianling Mountains* and *A Wonder of the Naxi*, transcended simple fieldwork and notation, attempting to capture the vital rhythms and primitive spirituality of ethnic minority cultures. His landmark *Symphony No.10 "River Snow"* (conceived in 1999, with its conceptual origins in the 1980s) integrates the timbres of guqin's glissandi and vibratos, the artistic conception of Peking Opera's recitative, with Western modern structures such as the passacaglia, constructing an aloof and profound

Eastern philosophical realm through sound, inspired by Liu Zongyuan's poem of the same name. Here, Chineseness is no longer merely a label of melody or timbre, but elevated to an expression of aesthetic realm and cultural temperament. Composers sought to reconstruct a subjectivity connected to the spirit of ancient Chinese literati in the symphony.

The construction of Chineseness in this phase generally echoed the "cultural fever" and root-seeking ideological trends in the intellectual and cultural circles. With a mindset of making up for lost ground and reconstruction, composers strove to embed a clearly identifiable "Chinese cultural image" in the symphony—an image primarily oriented toward history and tradition, whose driving force for construction stemmed largely from the anxiety of intellectual (composer) subjects about cultural discontinuity and their desire for continuity. National discourse was relatively relaxed during this period, providing space for such artistic exploration and "return". Chineseness at this time resembled a cultural marker awaiting to be re-polished; its connotations were expanding, yet its fundamental tone was retrospective and ontological, aiming to answer the cultural ontological question of "who we are".

3. National Projects and Grand Narratives (1990s – 2000s)

Chineseness as a "National Symbol": Ritualized Expression. With the deepening of the market economy and the rise of nationalist ideological trends in the 1990s, the state took an increasingly conscious leading role in cultural development, regarding it as an important means of shaping national identity and demonstrating comprehensive national strength. The symphony, due to its inherent grandeur, solemnity, and internationality, was systematically incorporated into national cultural projects, becoming an auditory carrier for writing the "main melody" and constructing the "national image". During this period, the construction of Chineseness highly overlapped with "national character", often refined into a symbolic system eulogizing glorious history, contemporary achievements, and national pride, and performed at various national celebrations, political rituals, and foreign affairs activities.

A marker of this shift was the emergence of a large number of symphonic works commissioned by the central or local government, themed on major historical events, projects, or eras. Examples include special symphonic works composed for the return of Hong Kong and Macao, large-scale symphonic concerts held for the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and grand works titled after national geographical and cultural symbols such as the "Silk Road", the "Yangtze River", and the "Yellow River". These creations typically featured a distinct theme-first approach: Chineseness was embodied as an object worthy of eulogy—the magnificent rivers and mountains of the motherland, the nation's long history, the great achievements of the Party, and the vibrant spirit of the times.

In terms of musical language, to achieve a shocking, uplifting, and unified aesthetic effect, composers often synthesized the following techniques: 1) broad, ode-like melodies with strengthened tonality; 2) rich and splendid orchestral orchestration; 3) symbolic references to classic national musical materials (such as motives from *The East Is Red* and *March of the Volunteers*, or familiar folk song themes); 4) programmatic and descriptive structures easily

perceptible to the general public. Though originally a film score, Zhao Jiping's symphonic suite *Raise the Red Lantern* has been performed independently in concerts, and its use of Peking Opera gongs and drums as well as female wordless humming successfully transformed an auditory image of "Oriental spectacle" into an internationally recognizable "Chinese sound", to some extent participating in this symbolic national image output. Tan Dun's *Award Ceremony Music* for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games more directly embedded "Chinese elements" (the sounds of bianzhong and jade chimes) into a global ceremony, making Chineseness an auditory calling card for a world-class national public relations event.

Within this paradigm, individual composers' explorations sometimes needed to align with collective national narratives. Works such as Ye Xiaogang's *Great Wall Symphony* attempted to integrate personalized modern musical grammar into grand themes. On the whole, however, Chineseness in symphonic music during this phase was largely appropriated as a ritualized national symbol. Its production and dissemination were closely linked to the state's cultural development strategy, with its primary function being expression and cohesion rather than reflection and criticism. The "China" experienced by audiences in these works is an image of a unified, progressive, and praiseworthy community. At this time, the driving force for the construction of Chineseness shifted significantly from intellectuals' cultural consciousness to the guidance and planning of national discourse. It answered the question of "why we are strong and glorious", yet its connotations tended to become fixed and generalized due to serving clear ideological goals.

4. Global Context and Individual Narratives (Since the 21st Century)

Chineseness as a "Dialogical Strategy": Fluidity. Entering the 21st century, especially as China became more deeply integrated into the global system, a new generation of composers (or middle-aged composers in a new phase of creation) faced an unprecedentedly complex context: on the one hand, the diverse demands of the domestic cultural market; on the other, the evaluation system of the international contemporary music circle; burdened with the cultural identity expectation of being a "Chinese composer", yet eager to engage in universal expression as independent artists. Against this backdrop, a profound transformation has taken place in the construction of Chineseness in symphonic music. It has gradually broken away from the relatively stable forms of the previous two periods—either focusing on "cultural essence" or submitting to "national symbol"—and instead presented a strategic characteristic of fluidity, individualization, and a strong awareness of cross-cultural dialogue.

The practice of Chineseness by the new generation of composers has shown several distinct paths. First is the in-depth transformation of aesthetic concepts and philosophical artistic conception. No longer satisfied with using ready-made folk songs or opera tunes, they attempt to transform core concepts of classical Chinese aesthetics, such as *qiyun* (verve and resonance), *xushi* (emptiness and substance), *scattered perspective*, and *shanshui artistic conception* (landscape mood), into unique structural forces and sound organization methods. Chen Qigang's works are an outstanding representative. Though his *Reflections on Time Past* (for cello

and orchestra) takes the melody of *Three Variations on the Plum Blossom* as a thread, its core is to create an Eastern poetic realm of the passage of time and blurred memories; its delicate orchestration and lingering breath deeply embody the aesthetic character of "sorrow without grief" in Chinese literati art. Works such as his *Erhuang* place the abstract refinement of the verve of Peking Opera's Erhuang tune in a modern harmonic and timbral atmosphere, where Chineseness has been completely internalized as a mode of auditory thinking. Second is the contemporary writing of personal memory and local knowledge. Some composers anchor the foundation of Chineseness in more specific and personalized experiences. For example, Guo Wenjing's symphony *The Road to Shu Is Hard* and many other works rooted in the folk music of southwest China are full of primitive vitality and regional color, yet this regionality gains universal artistic appeal through his rugged and intense personalized linguistic expression. Works such as *Memorial* by Shanghai composer Shen Ye attempt to address the relationship between the individual and urban historical memory, in which Chineseness is fragmentary and introspective. Third, and most characteristic of the times, is active cross-cultural hybridity and dialogue. Deeply influenced by postcolonial theory, many composers are clearly aware of their "in-between" position and take this cultural tension as a creative resource on their own initiative. Tan Dun's works such as *Map* and *Nu Shu* juxtapose and dialogue with video recordings of the original ecological music of ethnic minorities in western Hunan and the symphony orchestra through multimedia technology, constructing a live scene of "cultural polyphony". This juxtaposition itself is a deconstruction of monolithic cultural essentialism, implying that Chineseness exists in the interaction and negotiation of different sound levels. Similarly, works such as *Kaleidoscope of the Times* by Wang Ying, a Chinese composer based in Germany, are completely situated in the vocabulary of international contemporary music, in which Chinese interest only appears as a coloristic "flash of inspiration" or a deep structural metaphor. Homi K. Bhabha's theories of "hybridity" and the "Third Space" are highly explanatory here. Chineseness in these works is often generated in the "Third Space" where Chinese and Western musical elements, traditional and modern techniques, and local and global perspectives meet, collide, and fuse. It is no longer a retrospective origin or a fixed symbol, but a strategic identity positioning continuously produced in dialogue. In this way, composers not only respond to the international music circle's expectation of "cultural difference", but also transcend simple nationalist or Orientalist expressions in a more critical and creative manner. Chineseness at this time mainly answers the question of "how we speak and dialogue in a unique and equal way in the global structure".

5. Conclusion

Overviewing Chinese symphonic creation from 1978 to the present, Chineseness, as a core cultural-political issue, its construction process clearly reflects the complex mental journey of Chinese society—from closing to opening up, from cultural reflection to great power confidence, and then from a single subjectivity to diverse dialogue. This evolutionary trajectory can be summarized as follows: from a

"cultural marker" (root-seeking and return, emphasizing ontology), to a "national symbol" (grand narrative, emphasizing identity), and finally to a "dialogical strategy" (individual expression and cross-cultural hybridity, emphasizing fluidity). In the first phase, the main subjects of construction were composers with cultural consciousness, driven by the desire to continue historical traditions; in the second phase, national discourse became the dominant force, and the symphony was incorporated into national image projects; in the third phase, under the pressures and opportunities of globalization, individual composers re-emerged as dynamic subjects, flexibly using local and global resources to construct Chineseness as an open, strategic process continuously practiced and defined in creation.

It should be pointed out that these three phases are not simply linear replacements, and their paradigms coexist and overlap at present. Grand narrative works commissioned by the state still exist and have important platforms; explorations deeply rooted in traditional cultural aesthetics continue; and cutting-edge cross-cultural experiments are in the ascendant. Together, they constitute a rich and multi-layered sound landscape of contemporary Chinese symphony, and also keep the connotations of Chineseness in a constant dynamic tension.

The history of the construction of Chineseness in Chinese symphony is essentially a spiritual history of modern China exploring, expressing, and dialoguing with the world through artistic media. It reveals that cultural identity is by no means a static essence waiting to be discovered, but a construction process participated in by multiple forces and continuously narrated and performed in specific historical contexts. In the future, the vitality of Chinese symphony may depend on its ability to maintain the openness of this construction, while carrying profound cultural memories, bravely moving toward that "Third Space" full of uncertainty and creativity, and ultimately realizing a profound transformation from "telling China's story" to "participating in telling the world's story" with Chinese wisdom.

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