

# Peace and Tenderness: An Analysis on Chinese Female Contemporary Composer Leilei Tian's Works

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**Abstract:** Tian Leilei is a renowned contemporary composer from China, recognized for her significant contributions to the field of music composition. Notably, she achieved the distinction of being the first Chinese recipient of the prestigious Besancon composition competition, where she was awarded the esteemed 1st prize. The artistic creations of this individual are widely recognized for their adept utilization of compositional techniques and distinctive aesthetic. The artistic endeavors of the individual in question have garnered significant attention and acclaim on a global scale. This article aims to explore Tian's composition style by briefly analyzing four pieces of her work from different periods of time.

**Keywords:** Leilei Tian, Female composer, Chinese composer, Contemporary music, Music analysis

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing focus on female composers, particularly in the late 20th century and 21st century. This heightened attention stems from the recognition that female composers are exerting a significant influence on the advancement of music. As an illustration, the International Association of Woman Musicians (IAWM) was founded in the year 1981, as documented by Li<sup>[1]</sup>. The Chinese Women Composers Association (CWCA) was founded in 2002 in China, as documented by Xie<sup>[2]</sup>. During the 20th century, a notable development in the field of international music history was the emergence of female composers from China. Ji Ming, Liu Zhuang, Zhou Shu'an, Huang Zhun, Lei Deyuan, Qu Xixian, and Wang Qiang represent the esteemed cohort of elder Chinese female composers. Zhu Jie, Chen Yi, Luo Jingjing, Li Yiding, Zhang Lida, Su Fanling, and others represent the middle generation of female composers in China. Tian Leilei, Tao Yu, Liu Qing, Wang Yin, and Du Yun represent the emerging cohort of young Chinese women.

Tian Leilei, a renowned contemporary composer from China, was born in Nanjing, Jiangsu, China in 1971. Additionally, she is affiliated with the Chinese Writers Association (CWCA). Her father is an ardent music enthusiast in addition to being a natural scientist. The individual's musical talent was initially recognized and nurtured by her father, who also assumed the role of her first piano instructor at the age of six. In 1985, she commenced her study of music theory at the affiliated middle school of the Central Conservatory of Music. Subsequently, in 1988, she gained admission to the Central Conservatory of Music with exceptional achievement. The individual pursued her academic endeavors by engaging in composition under the tutelage of Professor Xu Zhenmin, exploring harmony with Professor Fan Zuyin, and delving into polyphony with Professor Yu Suxian. Ultimately, she successfully obtained her master's degree in the year 1995. The graduating portfolio titled 'Peace' is a tone poem that encompasses profound philosophical reflections and exhibits a vibrant and diverse acoustic timbre. The composition titled 'Wang Yue', created by a Chinese composer who was a student at the Gothenburg Conservatory of Music in Sweden, was performed in 1997<sup>[3]</sup>. This performance garnered significant praise from the local newspaper, which described the piece as a remarkable addition to the concert's second half. The reviewer highlighted the composer's ability to create a cohesive and vibrant composition, noting the captivating melody and exceptional arrangement that contributed to the work's rich and diverse acoustic qualities. She was offered a PhD opportunity from both the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music and the Gothenburg Conservatory of Music. Ultimately, she decided to pursue further studies in Sweden and successfully obtained her postgraduate diploma in 2002. During her time in Sweden, she received instruction from the esteemed composer Ole

Lützow-Holm. The artist produced several artistic pieces, one of which garnered favorable reception in Europe, namely the composition titled "Jiuquan—for Seven Altos, a Violin, and a Cello." According to Wang <sup>[4]</sup>, the composition titled "Zhan Zidu" emerged as the victor in the prestigious Gaudeanus competition held in the Netherlands in 1999. Between 2002 and 2003, the individual in question participated in a one-year program dedicated to the development of electro-acoustic music at IRCAM (Institute for Music/Acoustic Research and Coordination) located within the premises of Centre Pompidou in Paris. The individual in question has demonstrated a prolific output of musical compositions, having created a repertoire of more than 50 works. Furthermore, their talent and reputation have garnered frequent requests for commissioned compositions from esteemed music institutions, festivals, and ensembles.

Tian Leilei's artistic creations are notably imbued with a fusion of Chinese cultural elements and sophisticated compositional techniques derived from the Western tradition. The artist incorporated Anton Friedrich Wilhelm von Webern's succinct style and Pierre Boulez's vibrant acoustic elements into her artistic compositions. The incorporation of Eastern elements in conjunction with Western creative thinking results in the distinctiveness of her artistic creations. According to Wang <sup>[4]</sup>, this article analyzed four pieces of Tian's work, including an orchestral composition titled 'Open Secret' (composed in 2009) and a composition for cello and percussion titled 'Never-Ending Journey' (composed in 2016). One example of chamber music is 'The Hymn of The Pearl', composed in 2011. Additionally, an example of electronic music is 'Illusion Réelle', composed in 2003.

The analysis will primarily emphasize the examination of the structure, timbre-acoustic qualities, form, and content. The styles of contemporary music exhibit a high degree of diversity, thus necessitating a range of analytical approaches. The primary focus of contemporary music scholarship lies in the examination of musical structure. The dominance of tonality as a factor in music composition diminished significantly by the early 20th century <sup>[5]</sup>. The acoustic timbre is a significant element in contemporary music, particularly in the analysis of electronic music. The significance of form and content in various genres of music cannot be overstated. In this article, the primary method employed for the analysis of electronic compositions is timbre-acoustic analysis. The objective of this study is to investigate the stylistic characteristics of the composer. The author will refrain from employing spectral analysis and other analytical techniques to thoroughly deconstruct the work.

## 2. The work 'Illusion Réelle'

The composition titled 'Illusion Réelle' was crafted in the year 2003 specifically for the purpose of showcasing the tenor saxophone as a solo instrument, accompanied by live electronic elements <sup>[6]</sup>. In 2003, Tian pursued studies in the field of electric music at IRCAM (Institute for Music/Acoustic Research and Coordination) in Paris, under the guidance of esteemed composers Philippe Leroux, Jonathan Harvey, Tristan Murail, Brian Ferneyhough, and Philippe Manoury. The present work's introduction highlights the predominant utilization of saxophone sounds, encompassing various sizes and playing techniques, alongside recorded sounds sourced from nature and animals. Within the solo saxophone segment, the author employed vocalization as a means to amalgamate with the inherent instrumental timbre, thereby engendering a heightened sonic texture characterized by the manifestations of unison, multiphony, or polyphony. In terms of technical proficiency, my primary experience lies in utilizing Max/Msp for both sound file manipulation and live performance, as well as employing Audio Sculpt for sound transformation. Throughout these processes, the author strived to maintain the inherent qualities of the sounds, preserving their natural essence to the greatest extent possible. Specialization is a crucial aspect to consider in relation to this particular work.

The duration of this task is ten minutes. The subject matter can be classified into two distinct components. The initial segment spans from the beginning of the text to a time marker of four minutes and ten seconds. The subsequent portion comprises the second part of the text. In this piece, the listeners are exposed to a range of saxophone transformations that exhibit a distinct sense of modernization. The amalgamation of natural acoustics and the diverse range of the saxophone also elicits a profound sense of harmony and affords the audience an immersive encounter with the tranquilly inherent in nature. The initial climactic moment of the piece occurs precisely at the timestamp of four minutes and eight seconds. The second climax commences at the timestamp of seven minutes and 46 seconds. The incorporation of a diverse array of dynamics, the presence of unstable pans, the intentional manipulation of the acoustic environment, and the utilization of delay and reverb collectively contribute to engendering a profound perception of spatiality within the audience. The conclusion of this piece does not conform to a conventional ending, as it concludes abruptly amidst a

climactic crescendo. The prevailing atmosphere of this piece is characterized by a sense of tranquilly and optimism.

### **3. The work 'Open Secret'**

The composition titled 'Open Secret' was commissioned in 2009 by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication for Claude Delangle and the Taipei Chinese Orchestra [7]. It was specifically composed for soprano saxophone and Chinese orchestra. The time frame for the completion of this task is 15 minutes. The fusion of Chinese elements and Western style, along with the investigation of the instruments' expressive capabilities and the advancement of novel timbres, contribute to the exceptional quality of this composition.

The prelude commences with rhythmic strikes on the guzheng, followed by a performance on the shudi. The primary focus of the performance was the execution of the saxophone's high and sustained pitch. The saxophone performance showcases a rich infusion of Chinese musical elements, evident through the deliberate utilization of portamento techniques and the incorporation of Chinese tonalities. The initial segment of this composition encompasses the initial five minutes, characterized by a 'mf' dynamic marking. The subsequent section of the composition commences with the instrument known as the 'Guqin' and is performed at a dynamic level denoted as 'piano'. The third section of the composition emerges subsequent to the saxophone solo, commencing with an orchestral accent and maintaining a dynamic level of forte. The comparative aspect of dynamism is evident not only within the sections, but also within the phrases, notes, and even the annotations. The incorporation of melody and rhythm in this composition renders it reminiscent of traditional works to a certain degree. However, the exploration of novel timbre-acoustic qualities is evident not only in individual instruments but also in the collective interplay of multiple instruments, resulting in a fresh and innovative approach to acoustic composition. The presence of harmonic acoustic elements in this composition extends beyond mere conflicts. The melodic and rhythmic elements in this composition contribute to its overall sense of tranquilly and gentle ambiance.

### **4. The work 'The Hymn of The Pearl'**

The composition titled 'The Hymn of the Pearl' is designed for an ensemble consisting of five instruments, namely the bass flute, bass clarinet, piano, violin, and cello, in addition to electronic elements [8]. The commission for this work was granted by the Sond'Ar-te Electric Ensemble. The present composition draws inspiration from a hymn discovered within the Christian Gnostic literary work known as The Acts of Thomas the Apostle. The narrative depicts the journey of an individual who is identified as the offspring of a monarch of supreme authority, tasked with the mission of procuring a precious pearl that is protected by a formidable serpent within the confines of Egypt. During the course of his journey, the protagonist becomes enticed by the allure of the Egyptian culture, leading him to lose sight of his own heritage. Nevertheless, a correspondence is dispatched by the protagonist's paternal figure with the intention of evoking recollections of his previous experiences. Ultimately, the young protagonist managed to mesmerize the serpent, inducing a profound state of slumber. Subsequently, he seized the precious pearl and triumphantly returned to his realm, hailed as a heroic figure. The text conveys an allegorical message that pertains to the progression of a soul from its pre-mortal abode, through the mortal realm, and ultimately returning to its celestial origin. The bass flute assumes a significant role as the enchanter within this composition. The electronic component comprises various transformed multiphobic vocalizations. The overarching objective of this composition is to explore and highlight the tonal qualities of each individual instrument, as well as the diverse possibilities that arise from their combinations.

This composition consisted of four distinct sections. The initial segment spans from the first measure to the twenty-third measure. The entirety of this section exhibits a dynamic range that spans from piano (p) to mezzo forte (mf). The theme, spanning from the first bar to the fourth bar (Figure 1), is executed by both the bass flute and the bass clarinet. The theme is comprised of a group of nine musical notes, known as a ninthplet, along with a sustained note.

The musical score for the beginning of 'The Hymn of The Pearl' features five staves: Bass Flute, Bass Clarinet in Bb, Piano, Violin, and Cello. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 52. The Bass Flute part includes dynamics from *mf* to *mp*, a 'voice' section, and 'ord.' (order) markings. The Bass Clarinet part has dynamics from *p* to *mf* to *mp*. The Piano part starts with *mp* and includes a pedal instruction: '(hold the pedal until no more sound)'. The Violin and Cello parts are mostly silent in this section.

Figure 1: The beginning of the work 'The Hymn of The Pearl'.

The subsequent section of this composition commences at the 24th measure and extends to the 53rd measure (figure 2). Throughout this segment, the overall dynamic is designated as fortissimo (*ff*). This dynamic is achieved by executing a forceful strike on the lowest string of the piano using timpani mallets, while the violin and cello employ the batt technique to produce a similarly forceful sound at the lower range of pitch, also marked as fortissimo (*ff*). The content of this section is derived from the preceding section, although the tone significantly diverges from that of its predecessor. The intricate musical passages derived from the initial measure of the composition are present in each individual instrument.

The musical score for the second part of 'The Hymn of The Pearl' starts at measure 24. It features five staves: Bass Flute (B Fl.), Bass Clarinet (B Cl.), Piano (Pno.), Violin (Vln.), and Cello (Vc.). The Bass Flute part includes a '+ key click' marking and dynamics from *ff* to *mf*. The Bass Clarinet part has dynamics from *fff* to *mp* to *ff*. The Piano part is marked 'strike on the lowest strings with timpani mallets' and has dynamics from *ff* to *mp* to *ff* to *ffmf* to *ff* to *mp*. The Violin part is marked 'batt.' and has dynamics from *ff* to *ffmf* to *ff* to *mp*. The Cello part is marked 'batt.' and has dynamics from *ff* to *mp* to *f*. The score includes various performance instructions like 'ord.', 'pizz.', and 'arco'.

Figure 2: The beginning of the second part of the work 'The Hymn of The Pearl'.

The third section of the composition commences at the 54th measure and extends to the 86th measure (figure 3), encompassing a dynamic range that spans from mezzo piano (*mp*) to fortissimo (*ff*). In contrast to the preceding sections, rhythm assumes a significant role in this particular segment. The auditory characteristics resulting from the simultaneous production of dense musical notes across various instruments elicit a perceptual experience of heightened tension within the audience.

Figure 3: The beginning of the third part of the work 'The Hymn of The Pearl'.

The final section of this composition spans from the 87th measure until its conclusion, and the musical dynamics within this section revert back to the soft and quiet indication of "p". The final section of the material incorporates elements from the preceding sections, namely the first, second, and third parts. The composition of this piece bears resemblance to the conventional structure found in traditional Chinese music, characterized by the sequential elements of "qi" (introduction), "cheng" (elucidation of the theme), "zhuan" (transition to another viewpoint), and "he" (summing up).

## 5. The work 'Never-ending Journey'

The piece titled 'Never-Ending Journey' is regarded as one of her notable works in recent years<sup>[9]</sup>. The composition was specifically designed to be performed on the cello and percussion instruments, including two bongos, one bass conga, five Japanese singing bowls or temple bowls, and a glockenspiel. This piece of work was devoted to Chunchun Wang, who is Tian Leilei's cherished spiritual sibling. Similar to Tian's other compositions, this particular work exhibited a strong sense of musicality. The timbre of the piece is also rich, as Tian adeptly utilizes the unique characteristics and performance techniques of the instruments. Additionally, Tian demonstrated a delicate approach in navigating the shifts in expression throughout the composition. The meticulous examination of the timbre in this piece contributes significantly to its pronounced audibility. The non-traditional performance techniques employed in the work were indicated on the musical score through interpretation. An instance of a prolonged note in the pitch of D-flat, executed on the Japanese singing bowls or temple bowls, was denoted as a 'circular movement following the initial strike to sustain the sound'. This particular rendering was reiterated a total of 17 instances. The cello line was annotated with indications of 'tremolo on the belly', 'beat on the belly' and 'beat on the fingerboard'.

The time frame for this task is ten minutes. This composition can be divided into two distinct sections based on the materials used, the tempo, the performance techniques, the form, and the content. The first section spans from the first bar (figure 4) to the fiftieth bar, while the link between the first and second sections is found from the fiftieth bar to the fifty-ninth bar. The second section of the composition encompasses bars sixty to one hundred and twenty-three, with the remaining bars serving as the coda. The initial segment of the composition consists of a legato melody performed on the cello, accompanied by a meticulously arranged percussion section. The initial measure of the composition elicits a feeling of unease within the listeners. The aforementioned feeling of tension remains present until the onset of the second measure.

The image shows the beginning of a musical score for 'Never-Ending Journey'. It consists of two staves: Percussion (top) and Cello (bottom). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 50. The Percussion staff features Bango 1 (high), Bango 2 (low), and Conga (bass). The Cello staff includes dynamics like *mf*, *p*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *sfz*, and *fp*, along with performance instructions such as *pizz.* and *arco st.* with a triplet of eighth notes. The score starts in 4/4 time and changes to 3/4 time at the beginning of the second measure.

Figure 4: The beginning of the work 'Never-Ending Journey'.

The melody on cello is like narrating and the narrating tone are the main elements of the first part (figure 5). The using of second intervals and sustaining note are the main materials of the motivation. This motivation emergence in different position to make the music proceeding. The first time of the motivation to appear is at fifth bar.

The image shows a musical score for Cello (Vc.) starting at measure 5. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 50. The score is in bass clef and 4/4 time. It features dynamics *mp*, *mf*, *p*, and *mf*. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with a prominent second interval and a sustained note.

Figure 5: The motivation of the first part of the work 'Never-Ending Journey'

The interplay between percussion and cello can be likened to a conversational exchange. This piece of work can be classified as a polyphonic composition. Particularly, the latter portion of the study. The second part primarily consists of rhythmic elements that are formed by the combination of percussion and cello. The motivation of the second part emerged initially in the cello line at the 60th measure (figure 6), subsequently reiterated in the percussion section at the 62nd measure. The tempo is being altered to a value of 56.

The image shows the beginning of the second part of the musical score for 'Never-Ending Journey'. It consists of two systems of staves: Percussion (top) and Cello (bottom). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 56. The Percussion staff features Bg. 2, Cg, and Bg. 2. The Cello staff includes dynamics *pizz*, *arco*, and *pizz*, along with performance instructions like *tremolo on the belly (2 fingers)* and *arco ord*. The score starts in 3/4 time and changes to 4/4 time at the beginning of the second measure. The second system starts at measure 6.3 and includes a *tremolo* instruction for the Percussion staff and *arco ord* for the Cello staff.

Figure 6: The beginning of second part of the work 'Never-Ending Journey'

The subsequent portion of the second part involves the progression and development of the underlying motivation. The coda of this composition reintegrates the thematic material presented in the initial section, while the tempo reverts to a rate of 50 beats per minute. The dynamic has returned to its initial state of 'p'. The acoustic qualities of this composition evoke a sense of tranquilly and optimism among the listeners. This literary piece exhibits a scarcity of conflicts, with one of its central characters,

Tian, embodying traits of gentleness and tranquilly.

## 6. Conclusion

Tian's artistic creations exhibit a distinct southern Chinese temperament, owing to her birthplace in the southern region of China. In contrast, her extensive academic and professional background in Europe has resulted in her work being highly regarded by European audiences. Tian's composition exhibits a highly innovative and vibrant timbre-acoustic quality. Each musical note and acoustic element in her work is intentionally arranged. The amalgamation of traditional and avant-garde elements, as well as the fusion of Western and Eastern influences, imbue her music with a distinct and unparalleled quality. Based on her literary oeuvre, it is evident that her primary intention is to convey the notions of peace and tenderness as the central themes and philosophical underpinnings of her works.

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