

A Path of Music Theory Spanning Three Decades—A Comparative Study of Yaxiong Du's “Chinese Music Theory” Series

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Abstract: *The construction of a Chinese music theory teaching system is a difficult and glorious historical mission for Chinese musicologists. Since the 1990s, Mr. Du has been working on the writing of Chinese music theory textbooks for almost thirty years now. This paper uses Mr. Du's series of works on Chinese music theory as a research vehicle, and summarize the similarities and differences between the editions from both internal and external comparisons, not only to gain insight into his thinking, but also to shed some light on the establishment of a music theory system in China.*

Keywords: *Chinese music theory; traditional music; comparison*

1. Preface

The construction of a Chinese music theory teaching system is an arduous and glorious historical task for Chinese musicologists. In the 1920s, when the European music education system was introduced to China, institutions began to teach basic music theory based on the Western major and minor key system, which promoted the development of new Chinese music but neglected the foundation of the nation's "mother tongue".

After the 1980s, the Chinese musicological community began to learn more about its own musical culture, absorbing the essence of other ethnic cultures, including Western ones, and began to build up its own musical structure system. It was at this time that Mr. Du began to study the basic theories of traditional Chinese music, and in 1995, in response to the slogan "Music Education in Chinese Music Culture as the Mother Tongue" put forward at the Sixth National Seminar on Music Education, he published his first comprehensive monograph on the principles and techniques of traditional Chinese music. In 1995, he published the first comprehensive introduction to the principles and techniques of traditional Chinese music: "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music". In the past thirty years, Yaxiong Du has continued to devote himself to the writing of Chinese music theory textbooks and has made new leaps forward, publishing eight books and textbooks on Chinese music theory in both English and Chinese.

This paper uses Mr. Du's series of works on "Chinese Music Theory" as a research vehicle, and summarize the similarities and differences between the editions from both internal and external comparisons, not only to gain insight into his thinking, but also to shed some light on the establishment of a music theory system in China.

2. Internal exploration

2.1 *The title of the book*

Chinese folk music includes traditional Chinese music and new music. Traditional Chinese music is a category of Chinese folk music, which refers to the music created by the Chinese people using their own methods and in their own forms, with their own forms and stylistic characteristics. The terms 'Chinese folk music' and 'Chinese traditional music' are therefore two different concepts, and their research directions and approaches are also different. In the preface to "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music", Yaxiong Du also mentions that "this book is the basic theory of Chinese traditional music, which can also be referred to as the basic theory of Chinese music".^[1]

Music theory in a narrow sense refers to the basic theory of music, but the actual theory of music

should include micro, meso and macro levels, one is the basic knowledge of music: notation, tones, intervals, scales, keys, modes, chords, rhythms, beats, tempo, intensity, expression marks, etc.; the second is the theory of music techniques: tune composition, harmony, polyphony, orchestration, etc.; the third is the theory of music disciplines: involving philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology, psychology. The third is the theory of musical disciplines: philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology, psychology, ethnography, folklore, history, education and many other disciplines related to music.

Based on the above definition of the concept, a book on the basic theory of traditional Chinese music would be more appropriately titled "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" or "Basic Chinese Music Theory" than "Basic Chinese National Music Theory". It is also more aptly titled as "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" and "Basic Chinese Music Theory" than "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music".

2.2 Structure

The first ten chapters of "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" begin with an introduction on the nature of sound and the functions of the human ear, followed by two chapters on the two main components of music: pitch and rhythm. Chapter 4 moves into the realm of rhythmic theory, leading to chapter 5, which deals with the distinctions between 'even', 'court' and 'tune'. Chapter 6 deals separately with the short form. Chapter 7 focuses on melodic development and deals with the tune. Musical weaving is the subject of Chapter 8, which focuses on the polyphonic repertoire. Chapter 9 provides an intellectual overview of the Chinese musical score system, from the highly symbolic zither scores of the upper classes, to the curved scores used by Tibetan lamas, the gong and drum hieroglyphs used for Chinese percussion, and so on. The final chapter summarizes the relationship between the score and the actual performance of the singing and can be used as a practical guide for scholars and performers. In the afterword, the author briefly restates the importance of a solid theoretical foundation in music education.

"Fundamentals of Chinese Music Theory and Its Cultural Basis"[2] is published in English and consists of three main chapters on pitch, time and score. The preface discusses the need to study Chinese music theory, and chapters 1 to 3 introduce the characteristics of Chinese music theory in terms of pitch, time value and score, starting with a comparison with Western musical concepts. "General Knowledge of Chinese Music Theory"[3] then omits the introduction to Western concepts such as the simple score and intervals, leaving the simple score as the main form of notation and adding the link between the simple score and Chinese notation. The chapter on the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese music is intended to distinguish Chinese music theory from Western music theory. The chapter includes three sections on the philosophical basis of "the unity of heaven and man", the aesthetic pursuit of "flourishing and transforming the gods", and the highest realm of "establishing the image and completing the meaning". "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" [4] accepts Zhaogang Li's suggestions to add a chapter on timbre, covering 1) the categories and composition of timbre, 2) the timbral diversity of traditional Chinese music, 3) the timbral combinations of traditional Chinese instrumental music, and 4) the aesthetic tendencies of the Chinese people's timbre. [5] The second change is to incorporate the relationship between singing and playing from "General Knowledge of Chinese Music Theory" as a section into the chapter on traditional notation.

As a result of Yaxiong Du's continuous exploration and Dexiang Qin's advice, a new goal was set for "Chinese Music Theory" [6] - to produce a work on Chinese music theory with distinctive Chinese characteristics and a self-contained system that could break away from the European music theory moulds more thoroughly and yet be on a par with them. As a result, the entire structure of "Chinese Music Theory" has been revamped. First of all, from the point of view of cultural care for music, the concept of "Chinese music" and "music theory" is interpreted in the preface, and the history of the writing of Chinese music theory is sorted out, and the last chapter in the "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" is entitled "Aesthetic Features of Traditional Chinese Music" is renamed "The System of Musicology" in the first chapter and expanded to introduce music in traditional culture, then explain the philosophical foundations and aesthetic features, and the sixth section on traditional notation "The sixth section of traditional notation, 'The relationship between music notation and singing and playing', is also included in this chapter, and the original chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 are combined into a system of materials that discusses the four properties of the tone and stress the links with Chinese music. The book also uses some European terms, such as intervals and rhythms, while using as many of our traditional musical terms as possible. In addition, a few new terms, such as "cadence" and "elastic beat value", have been tried out.

The structure of "A Course in Chinese Music Theory" [7] is more detailed than the previous books, and is an improvement of the "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory", with the music of traditional culture in the prologue, and the musical forms (straight tone, cadence), accents, order names, rhythmic names, and the roll call of the Gongche notation in separate chapter. A comparison of various tonality systems has been added to the chapter on musical temperament, and a comparison between the East and the West has been added to the chapter on timbre and palette. Designed for secondary school students, the overall content of "A Course in Basic Chinese Music Theory" [8] is basic, with abridged timbres, tunes, multi-voice texture and aesthetic features, and no in-depth introduction to musical temperament and palette. The 2021 edition of "Basic Chinese Music Theory" [9] is a re-publication of the "A Course in Chinese Music Theory", and the content remains largely unchanged.

2.3 Perspectives

Chinese and Western music theory is a different system of musical knowledge that has been developed by Easterners and Westerners through different musical practices, and is the result of different explorations by Easterners and Westerners of their respective musical totality.[10]

Although the "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" and the "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" have added chapters on timbre and aesthetic characteristics to highlight Chinese characteristics, they are not fundamentally free from the framework of Western music theory, but still follow the Western analytical mode of thinking, starting from the specific details of sound, tone, rhythm and beat. "Chinese Music Theory", on the other hand, follows the tradition of our culture and follows the comprehensive mode of thinking of the Easterners, looking at and discussing music theory from a higher and more macroscopic perspective, starting from the broad aspect of the musicological system, and then analysing the material system, the rhythmic system, the palette system, the structure system and the symbol system. It is a break with the usual European music theory style, which does not start from the technical details of music such as the nature of tone, pitch and rhythm, but goes in the opposite direction, from the macroscopic aspects of philosophy and aesthetics related to music and art, and discusses Chinese music theory from a broad cultural perspective according to the basic principles of ethnomusicology, using the Chinese way of thinking and the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture.

3. External transformation

3.1 The demand of audience

The book called "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" was originally designed for children who have never studied music theory. It is intended to change the dominance of Western music theory by using a preconceived approach, and therefore uses the Gongche notation as the primary notation and the Chinese Zither as a teaching aid to provide a comprehensive introduction to general knowledge of Chinese music theory while familiarising them with the traditional music of their own nation and region from the accompanying exercises. Based on the book "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music", "General Knowledge of Chinese Music Theory" is specially written for music lovers in general, and is more concise, with far fewer examples and exercises. It can be used as a reference for music lovers in general, or as a textbook for music departments and subjects in music colleges and teacher training colleges, and can be taught in one semester. "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" was written to be more in line with the practical and pedagogical needs of our country, and is designed for undergraduate musicology departments in conservatories, so it is more theoretical than "General Knowledge of Chinese Music Theory", and can also be used as a reference for music lovers who have studied Western music theory. As a comprehensive and systematic discussion of Chinese music theory, "Chinese Music Theory" is not only suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate music students in music colleges and teacher training colleges, but is also the first of its kind at home and abroad, and can be read and referred to by practitioners of art, philosophy and aesthetics.

In order to meet the "teaching requirements of undergraduate music majors and postgraduate students of other majors pursuing related master's degrees" and "based on the recommendation of Taiwanese scholar Gufang Lin", Yaxiong Du and Dexiang Qin continued their work on the basis of the "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory" and "Chinese Music Theory". "A Course in Chinese Music Theory" was published in 2012, based on the continued writing of the book. It is hoped that teachers will adopt the principle of "more lectures, more practice" and a more interactive teaching style

to provide students with more time for reflection, discussion and practice in class. Depending on the actual needs and possibilities of teaching, teachers may use or supplement these exercises as appropriate.

The book "A Course in Basic Chinese Music Theory" can also be used as an optional textbook for secondary art schools and as a reference textbook for other teacher training colleges, art schools, colleges of higher education and tertiary art schools. As this textbook is specifically designed for secondary art students, it does not provide a complete discussion of traditional Chinese music theory, but rather focuses on the basics of Chinese music theory, such as pitch, rhythm and meter, court tune and rhythm. Taking into account the age and comprehension of secondary school students, the book has been written to be focused, distinctive and easy to understand. The book is also designed to provide a good foundation for further study and research of Chinese music theory. After trial teaching and many revisions, this textbook is now well suited to the learning needs of students in secondary art colleges.

3.2 Sound of the academic circles

The publication of "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" in 1995 has generated strong reactions both at home and abroad, and has continued to be discussed for six or seven years. While some scholars have touted it as "the first comprehensive introduction to the principles and techniques of traditional Chinese music, it has also received a lot of criticism and scepticism from the academic community. In an article published in the Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, No. 3, 1999, Qinru Zhou's 'The need for a scientific approach to the study of basic Chinese music theory - from the fallacies of Yaxiong Du's "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" severely points out the fallacies in the definition of the subject, the design of the chapters, the definition of concepts, the interpretation of theories, the introduction of methods, the application of guidance, the design of exercises and the teaching methods and approaches, as well as the fallacies in the author's approach to this book. The book's title is a reference to the book's history, and the author's work on the subject is a reference to the book's history. [11] In "Rules of the Game" in a State of Pluralism: Reflections on Qinru Zhou's Criticism of Yaxiong Du", Yan Ming also criticizes him for "pointing out the rules of the game" and "making a lot of noise". [12]

Yaxiong Du did not become proud of the accolades the book brought him, nor was he discouraged by criticism and criticism. He listened humbly to different opinions and constantly revised the "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music, and spent eight years presenting "A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory", which Delong Li described as "a textbook with historical significance and application value" [13] and Heping Yang called it "a new flower of Chinese traditional music theory". [14] After the publication of "Chinese Music Theory" and "A Course in Chinese Music Theory", Houyong Gao said that "it has moved on to a new level, making a breakthrough and an improvement". [15] Yongfu Liu shifted from his acerbic and critical attitude to affirmation and appreciation in his article 'Thoughts on Constructing a Basic Theory System of Chinese Music — Prompted by Yaxiong Du's "Basic Theory of Chinese Folk Music" [16], and 'Pursuit, Breakthrough and Innovation — A reading of Yaxiong Du and Dexiang Qin's new book of "Chinese Music Theory" acknowledges the highlights and progress of the book, and also points out the problems to be further studied and improved. [17]

4. Conclusion

In summary, Yaxiong Du's series of works on Chinese music theory has been internally adjusted in terms of title, content and perspective, especially "Chinese Music Theory", which has distinctive Chinese characteristics and is a self-contained system, striving to achieve a shift towards the sinicization of music theory. The changes in the textbook also reflect, to some extent, the increasing refinement of the music theory textbook.

The development of a course on the basic theory of Chinese traditional music is an important part of the establishment of a Chinese music education system, and the construction of teaching materials is a prerequisite for the development of the course. Mr. Du's thirty years of writing Chinese music theory textbooks has summarized the practice of Chinese traditional music culture and raised it to a theoretical level, which helps students and teachers understand the ideological connotation of Chinese traditional music culture and guides the educational practice of passing on and developing the excellent Chinese traditional music culture in the music curriculum of primary and secondary schools, and also has certain inspirations for the establishment of the music theory system in China: 1) situated in the context of traditional Chinese culture, free from the Western framework. 2) create a "new vocabulary" of

Chinese music theory and harmonize it with Western music theory. 3) create a supporting textbook for sight singing and ear training.

There are still many regrets and shortcomings in this article, such as the focus on the writings in the series, the neglect of the influence of other titles on it, and the lack of a horizontal comparison with other good Chinese music theory textbooks of the same period.

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