THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE CULTURE, NATURE, AND WESTERN MUSIC IN PI

by

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A Document Submitted to the Faculty of the

FRED FOX SCHOOL OF MUSIC

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2020
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Professor Zhao Zhang, for his generous assistance and openness throughout the course of my research, and for sharing his remarkable music with me.

I would like to express my utmost and deepest gratitude to my major professor, Prof. Tannis Gibson, for her artistic vision and invaluable guidance in directing this paper. Her enthusiastic pursuit of music, and her broad talent and competence has affected me deeply. I learned from her not only professional knowledge but life lessons. Her generosity, responsibility, and encouragement have been a great support during my entire doctoral study. I will be forever grateful.

Thanks to Dr. Rex A. Woods for his thoughtful insights and practical advice to shape and edit this document. His gentleness, patience, and reassurance always make me feel supported. I have greatly appreciated his valuable comments and efficient communication after each of my performances, which have offered me inspiration and direction for my practice and performing.

Thanks to Dr. Lisa Zdechlik for her support and intelligent ideas and disciplined approach to this research. Her classes and seminars on piano pedagogy have brought me knowledge and diverse practical methods for piano teaching. The precious learning experience with her will benefit my entire career.

Appreciation is also extended to my editors Dr. Kimberly Prins Moeller and Dr. Kevin Seal for their diligent care in reading this paper, and my good friends Jin Li, Xiao Yin, Christina M Fialkow, Dr. Robert Fialkow, Dr. Yanhua Zhou, Dr. Yuqian Yang, Dr. Xiao Li, Yi Zhao, Ju Pan, and Liang Zhang for the friendship, understanding, and support over the years.

A special word of thanks is due my parents for their full love and support, as well as the rich musical heritage they passed on to me. They enlighten my life with wisdom and optimism. Words are not enough to express how grateful I am.
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ABSTRACT

Zhao Zhang (b. 1964) is a celebrated Chinese composer, pianist, and distinguished educator, whose music has earned a worldwide reputation. Zhang’s versatile output includes symphonies, chamber music, operas, choral music, musicals, dance dramas, and solo vocal and instrumental music. His compositions are published by Schott Music and People’s Music Publishing House, and his music and articles have been collected into the *Dictionary of Chinese Music and Musicians*, the *Chinese Symphonic Anthology*, and *A Century of Piano Solo Works by Chinese Composers*.

In this study, the author will examine Zhao Zhang’s compositional development through the lens of his early piano work, *Pi Huang* (1995) and a piano work from his later years, *Nature No. 1* (2019). As a young composer Zhang was highly influenced by Chinese culture, in particular Peking Opera, literature, landscape painting, and *Yin/Yang* philosophy. As he matured, however, he often fused traditional Chinese elements with Western compositional techniques. The study will examine these elements in depth and will also introduce the inspiration Zhang derived from nature and from his own life experiences in shaping his musical ideas. Supported by information gleaned from email and smartphone interviews and extensive correspondence with the composer, these influential elements will be identified and analyzed in both piano pieces.

Previous scholarly studies of Zhang’s piano works have been focused primarily on *Pi Huang*, and provided examination of thematic material, rhythm idioms, textural treatment, structure, modes, and imitation of Chinese traditional instruments. This study provides supplementary analysis of *Pi Huang* and also contributes background information and analysis for *Nature No. 1*, which has been absent from the literature. The author’s research focus offers
comparisons of Zhang’s piano music from the early and present periods and summarizes the
development of his compositional style, going beyond the existing studies to address these
important new dimensions and bring them into the existing scholarly literature.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

A celebrated Chinese composer, pianist, and distinguished educator, Zhao Zhang (b. 1964) has written music for voice, dance, and a wide variety of instruments. His works include compositions for symphonic and chamber orchestras, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo and ensemble works for Chinese traditional instruments. He has written two operas and two musicals. Zhang’s works have been widely performed, recorded, and have received international recognition. He has the distinction of being the first Chinese composer whose piano compositions were selected for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and Trinity College London. His music is published by Schott Music and People’s Music Publishing House, and his music and articles have been collected in the Dictionary of Chinese Music and Musicians, the Chinese Symphonic Anthology, and A Century of Piano Solo Works by Chinese Composers.¹

This study examines Zhao Zhang’s compositional development through the lens of his early piano work, Pi Huang (1995) and a second piano work from his later years, Nature No. 1 (2019). As a young composer Zhang was highly influenced by Chinese culture, in particular Peking Opera, literature, landscape painting, and Yin/Yang philosophy. As he matured, however, he often fused traditional Chinese elements with Western compositional techniques. These elements will be identified and analyzed in both piano pieces. The study will also include an examination of how nature and Zhang’s life experiences helped to shape many of his musical ideas.

Previous scholarly studies of Zhang’s piano works have been focused primarily on Pi Huang, and provided examination of thematic material, rhythm idioms, textural treatment,

structure, modes, and imitation of Chinese traditional instruments. This study provides supplementary analysis of Pi Huang and also contributes background information and analysis for Nature No. 1, which has been absent from the literature. The author’s research focus offers comparisons of Zhang’s piano music from the early and present periods and summarizes the development of his compositional style, going beyond the existing studies to address these important new dimensions and bring them into the existing scholarly literature.

The analyses of these two representative works are informed by email and smartphone interviews and extensive correspondence with the composer, which took place between June 2019 to August 2020. The topics of these conversations were wide-ranging and ultimately brought to light the influential elements behind many of Zhang’s compositional decisions.
CHAPTER 2. BACKGROUND: ZHAO ZHANG’S BIOGRAPHY AND PIANO WORKS

Biography

Zhao Zhang was born in 1964 in Honghe, Yunnan Province, into a family of classically-trained musicians. His father is a composer and his mother plays the Yangqin, a Chinese hammered dulcimer, and also taught music and Chinese in the school classroom. Zhang received his early music education from his parents, beginning with Yangqin at the age of 5, moving on to the violin at 6, piano at 7, and accordion and composition at 11. Zhang’s first public piano performance was an excerpt of the Peking Opera, *The Red Lantern*, when he was 13, and he was admitted to Yunnan Arts School to study piano performance at the age of 14. In the same year, he completed his first piano composition, *Sea Swallow*, which he performed in the *Nie Er Music Festival*. Two years later, his solo piano work, *Scherzo*, was published in *Music Composition*.  

Zhang grew up under the strict cultural guidelines of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, during which many types of music and music-making were forbidden and owning and playing of western instruments was restricted. Fortunately, his father was committed to Zhang’s development as a musician. Under the influence of his father, Zhang practiced the piano secretly. Several years later, he realized the piano music which brought him peace and optimism were the masterpieces of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky. These composers were a musical beacon for him, and ultimately guided him to pursue a musical career.  

Zhang studied music at the Yunnan Art School, which is located beside the Dian Lake, the mother lake of Kunming in Yunnan Province. The impressive view of Dian Lake left an

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2 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
unforgettable impression on young Zhang, which would later become an important musical inspiration in his compositions. During the time at the Yunnan Art School, Zhang worked hard to gain scholarly knowledge and proficiency as a pianist and committed himself to becoming a professional musician.4

In 1987, he was awarded the Bachelor of Music degrees in Composition and Piano Performance from the School of Music at the Minzu University of China, and he received the Master of Music degree in Composition from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing in 1998. Life in this cosmopolitan city opened up new worlds for Zhang. He absorbed Eastern and Western musical knowledge as well as compositional techniques, and devoted his time to playing and writing different styles of music. When Zhang was in his twenties, China undertook economic reform and embraced a more open posture toward the world. With these economic and cultural changes, the domestic musical market bloomed. As an ambitious young adult, Zhang hoped to contribute to China's musical culture, but found the social rules and networks to be much more complicated and challenging than expected. He witnessed and experienced unfair treatment during these times. Nevertheless, Zhang never compromised his personal beliefs and philosophy while adjusting to the cultural realities of his environment and overcoming professional and personal difficulties.5 As a young scholar, Zhang began to use music to express himself, attempting to counter the injustices of the world with the music he created. During this

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4 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
5 Ibid.
period, he began reading historical heroic stories in his search for wisdom and was particularly drawn to the national hero, Fei Yue.6

By his mid-thirties, Zhang had established himself as a preeminent Chinese composer. He was rewarded with numerous positions at the School of Music in the Minzu University of China, including interim director, chair of the composition department, director of graduate studies, and director of the Chinese Musician Association at the School of Music. These positions, however, turned out to be a challenge for Zhang as a musician. Institutional politics drew his focus away from composition, eventually resulting in his resignation from the leading positions at the School of Music. This did not win empathy from his colleagues, and Zhang soon believed that he had become a victim of unfair treatment and ultimately, social isolation. Eventually, he resigned from all school-affiliated positions except for his professorship in composition. After this period of political turmoil, Zhang moved to the countryside near Beijing in order to recharge his compositional career. The following ten years were an important period that witnessed the resurgence of Zhang’s compositions. He traveled frequently, often communing with nature, and gathered musical inspirations that were later distilled from these experiences, particularly in *Nature No. 1*.7

Zhang became acutely aware of the global problems of environmental and ecological degradation in this later phase of his career. In his life and music, he attempted to achieve a

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6 Fei Yue (1103-1142) was a well-known national hero, who made great military achievements in recovering all the lost Chinese territory. However, he was framed by the minister Hui Qin and finally murdered under the command of his emperor.

7 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
balance between humanity and nature and used his compositional voice to advocate for protection of the environment.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
Piano Works

Three Periods of Zhang’s Compositional Career

Zhang describes his compositional career as comprising three periods. In the first period (1978-1987), he worked as a student to absorb Chinese and Western compositional knowledge and techniques. Throughout his second period (1988-2007), he applied himself to the task of creating a Chinese voice while using Western instruments, in particular the piano. For Zhang, the process of creating a Chinese voice meant the act of borrowing from a wide range of selected Chinese cultural elements. In his third and current period (2007-present), Zhang has devoted himself to juxtaposing Chinese and Western cultural elements.9

Categorizations of Piano Works

Zhang has written prodigiously for the piano. He has composed over 80 piano solos and 3 piano concertos. He categorizes his solo piano works into six broadly-defined collections as follows: the “Antique Collection,” containing works inspired by Chinese historical culture and spirit; the “Folk Collection,” which incorporates local customs and practices; the “Music Diary Collection,” which attempts to capture significant moments from the composer’s life; the “Nature Collection,” inspired by the vitality of nature; the “Children Collection,” which aims to educate children and spark their interest in music; and the “Transcription Collection,” wherein Zhang adapts Chinese folk music for the piano.10

Overview of Pi Huang and Nature No. 1

Zhang considers Pi Huang, written in his second period, to be the representative solo piano work in the Antique Collection. Written on Zhang’s 30th birthday, Pi Huang is an

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9 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.

10 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
autobiographical review of his early life, from his colorful childhood and adolescence through to his experiences as a young adult.\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Pi Huang} was awarded the First Prize in the 1st Palatino Composition Competition in 2007.\textsuperscript{12} As the composer stated in interviews, the piece draws heavily on Peking Opera traditions. The well-known Chinese couplet, \textit{Great View Pavilion Couplet of Kunming}, served as further inspiration for the composer, as did Zhang’s admiration for the beloved Chinese historical hero, Fei Yue.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Nature No. 1} was also shaped by many influences, and was completed in his third and current period; it occupies a place in the Nature Collection. The piece comprises two movements: \textit{Meditation of Ice and Snow} and \textit{Poem from a Blaze}. According to Zhang, the title of the first movement refers to the isolation he experienced in his middle-age years. He commented, “I kept envisioning spring amid coldness.”\textsuperscript{14} The title of the second movement portrays the struggles in his life, and the subtitle, \textit{Nirvana}, addresses his sense of rebirth following this difficult period in his personal life. The movement also stands as a metaphor for Zhang’s vision of the exploding sun: a symbol for mankind’s ongoing ecological destruction and a reflection of the composer’s commitment to nature and to the environment.\textsuperscript{15}

In his approach to both piano works, Zhang intentionally applied the concepts of dualism and balance of \textit{Yin/Yang} philosophy in shaping musical ideas. He also turned to the spatial

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{11}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
relationships and aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting as an applied compositional tool. The influence of nature plays an equally important role in shaping *Pi Huang* and *Nature No. 1*.16

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16 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS OF PI HUANG

Influence of Peking Opera

Peking Opera, widely accepted as the predominant form of Chinese opera, combines vocal performance, instrumental accompaniment, spoken language, mime, dance, martial art forms, acrobatics, and elaborate costumes. As an artistic form it is regarded as one of the great cultural treasures of China. Peking Opera originated in Anhui Province, and was further developed in Beijing during the mid-Qing Dynasty. Already popular by the mid-19th century, it has continued to mature as an art form through many generations. This analysis will focus on Peking Opera and the influences of styles, form, and dramatic roles that are found in Zhang’s solo piano work, Pi Huang.

Styles

The title, Pi Huang, is derived from the two dominant musical styles found in Peking Opera: Xi Pi, which originates from Shaanxi Province school of singing in Northwestern China, and Er Huang, which comes from Anhui Province school of singing in Southern China. Xi Pi is generally characterized by a fast tempo, lively melody, and a major key quality; the mood is one of excitement, and at times anxiety and anger. Er Huang style is often defined by its lyricism, slow tempo, a minor tonality, and is inspired by a sense of fantasy and romanticism. Zhang juxtaposed the two contrasting styles of Xi Pi and Er Huang to express a wide variety of emotions and drama in Pi Huang.

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17 The Qing Dynasty was from 1644-1911.


19 Ibid., 5.

20 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
The following table presents an overview of *Pi Huang*, including a listing of the ten sections that make up the work with Chinese titles, the author’s English translations, Zhang’s tempo indications, and the Peking Opera styles for each of the sections (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the ten sections of *Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections (10) with Chinese Subtitles</th>
<th>English Translations</th>
<th>Italian Markings</th>
<th>Peking Opera Styles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daoban</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Rubato</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuanban</td>
<td>Main theme</td>
<td>Largo pacatamente</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erliu</td>
<td>2x6 (introductory beats)</td>
<td>Allegro innocente</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liushui</td>
<td>Flowing water</td>
<td>Allegro zeffiroso</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuai Sanyan</td>
<td>Fast four beats</td>
<td>Spirito</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manban</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Lento a capriccio</td>
<td>Er Huang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuaiban</td>
<td>Fast, lively</td>
<td>Allegro decisivo</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yaoban</td>
<td>Rocking</td>
<td>Vivace angoscioso</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duoban</td>
<td>Agitated</td>
<td>Presto sdegnoso</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weisheng</td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Andante brillante</td>
<td>Xi Pi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traditional Chinese music is typically drawn from five pentatonic modes. Each mode is made up of five notes, in Chinese they are identified as the named notes: *Gong* (宫), *Shang* (商), *Jue* (角), *Zhi* (徵), and *Yu* (羽).\(^{21}\) Each name represents both the note and the modal system.

Gong and Zhi modes most resemble the Western major scale; the intervallic relationships between the tonic and the other pitches produce major seconds, thirds, and sixths. Correspondingly, the Gong and Zhi modes are usually applied in Xi Pi style. Jue and Yu modes are similar to the Western minor scale since the intervallic relationships between the tonic and the other pitches produce minor thirds, sixths, and sevenths, and they often appear in Er Huang style. Shang combines features of both major and minor tonalities, containing both major seconds and minor sevenths (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Chinese pentatonic modes.

It is commonly understood in Chinese musical culture that Xi Pi style is primarily characterized by the choice of major mode. For example, the Kuai Sanyan section, is in the mode of E♭ Gong (E♭-F-G-B♭-C), which aligns most closely with the major tonality in Western music. The irregular accents applied in the right-hand melody and the fast 16th notes in the left hand beginning in m. 67 also underscore the excitement of Xi Pi style. (Musical Example 1.1).
Musical Example 1.1. *Kuai Sanyan* in *Xi Pi* style, *Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 67-73.

To the listener, it might be surprising that the *Yuanban* section is also in *Xi Pi* style. Its slow melodies and emphasis on narrative style would suggest *Er Huang* style. However, according to Zhang, it is often the key that determines style designation. The *Yuanban* is written in the E\(^b\) *Gong* mode, and because a sense of major tonality permeates the entire section, he places it in the *Xi Pi* style (Musical Example 1.2).\(^{22}\)

Musical Example 1.2. *Yuanban* in *Xi Pi* style, *Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 7-16.

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\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Xi Pi style can express negative emotions such as anger. Zhang selected the Duoban to express his feelings of indignation regarding the mistreatment suffered by China’s historical hero, Fei Yue. He purposefully placed the G Zhi mode in the treble clef and E\textsuperscript{b} Gong mode in the bass clef, establishing the two separate but interwoven modes. The Duoban is a presto passage, one beat per measure with crescendo and accelerando, which builds to a dramatic climax. (Musical Example 1.3).

Musical Example 1.3. Duoban in Xi Pi style, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 178-228.

\[\text{Musical Example 1.3. Duoban in Xi Pi style, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 178-228.}\]

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\[\text{23 Ibid.}\]
In the *Yaoban* section, also in *Xi Pi* style, Zhang used the Peking Opera feature known as *Jin la man chang* (slow singing with fast bowing accompaniment), a colorful musical device used to express tension. He suggested that when considering the passage from mm. 135-138, one should hear the top voice E\textsubscript{b}-A\textsubscript{b} in whole notes as representation of the slow singing line. Zhang assigned the inner accompanying voices to traditional Chinese instruments including the Jinghu, and Sanxian, both stringed instruments, and the Bangu, a percussion instrument (Musical Example 1.4).\textsuperscript{24}

Musical Example 1.4. *Jin la man chang* in *Yaoban, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 135-138.

The *Manban*, a slow and dream-like section, illustrates typical *Er Huang* style. It is written in the mode of E\textsubscript{b} Yu (E\textsubscript{b}-G\textsubscript{b}-A\textsubscript{b}-B\textsubscript{b}-D\textsubscript{b}), and uses a minor tonality to capture the fantasy-like quality of the passage (Musical Example 1.5). The *Manban* is the only section written in *Er Huang* style.\textsuperscript{25} It also functions as a lyrical connection between the preceding and following sections.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
Musical Example 1.5. *Manban* in *Er Huang* style, *Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 88-91.

Form

Scholars have been unable to agree on the form of *Pi Huang*: some contend it is in *Banqiang Ti*, the traditional form of Peking Opera, while others identify it with Western forms such as theme and variation or ternary form.\(^{26}\) My analysis supports the classification as *Banqiang Ti* but provides further evidence for why it is not in theme and variation and ternary form, discussing in detail how musical elasticity characterizes the piece throughout.

*Banqiang Ti* consists of several sections, each of which is derived from a basic theme while functioning as development. The format is similar to Western theme and variation form, but differs in that it uses transitions between sections that are to be played without pause. Some scholars have divided the piece into three parts referencing ABA’ Western ternary form. In that

interpretation, Section A of *Pi Huang* includes the *Daoban, Yuanban, Erliu, Liushui,* and *Kuai Sanyan,* Section B is the *Manban,* and the A’ comprises the *Kuaidan, Yaoban, Duoban,* and *Weisheng.* A key element of ternary form is that Section B often incorporates new contrasting material. While the musical character of the *Manban* does contrast with the other sections, it was composed with a consistent musical idea drawn from the theme of the *Yuanban,* therefore, cannot be recognized as the same formal structure as ABA’ ternary form.

Historically, *Banqiang Ti* features musical elasticity to create contrast, flexibility, and tension.27 The traditional layout of *Banqiang Ti* is as follows: *San* (free), *Man* (slow), *Zhong* (moderate), *Kuai* (fast), and *San* (free).28 Zhang borrows the arrangement, adopting the pattern of free, slow, fast, and free, and presents these four sections twice in succession throughout the course of *Pi Huang.*29 The *Daoban* serves as a free introduction, the *Yuanban* is marked *largo pacatamente* and represents the slow section, the sections of *Erliu, Liushui,* and *Kuai Sanyan* are the fast portion, and the end of the *Kuai Sanyan* marked with a *ritardando* is once again in a free style. The *ritardando* passage serves as both the free part for the end of the first round and the beginning of the second round. It is followed by the *Manban* in the slow *Er Huang* style, then a section that features a constant *accelerando* from the fast *Kuaidan* and *Yaoban* to the *presto Duoban,* and finally concludes with the *ritardando* on the rising fourth intervals. All together, the four parts of each round reveal the layout behind *Banqiang Ti* and result in a work that is highly contrasting between sections.

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27 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.


29 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
Zhang’s emphasis on the idea of elasticity is also illustrated in his use of notation from *Banqiang Ti*. One example of this is his practice of writing numbers above the repeat signs in this piece to indicate the minimum number of repeats required. Non-numbered repetition indicators offer performers flexibility in the number of repeats to accommodate different types of audiences, halls, and performers (Musical Example 1.6).\(^{30}\)

Musical Example 1.6. Non-numbered and numbered repetition marks, *Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 5, 171.

**Roles**

Much like the stock roles found in some forms of Western theatre, Peking Opera features four main role types: *Sheng* (生), *Dan* (旦), *Jing* (净), and *Chou* (諧). These roles may be divided into numerous subtypes and most are typically associated with age and personality.\(^{31}\)

The *Sheng* is the main male role in Peking Opera and is often seen and heard in several subtypes, two of which are *Xiao Sheng* and *Lao Sheng*. *Xiao Sheng* represents a refined young man, who usually speaks and sings in a higher register to indicate his youthfulness. *Lao Sheng* is a dignified older male role, whose low and deep voice conveys gentleness and firmness.\(^{32}\) In the

\(^{30}\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.


\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Manban section of Pi Huang, Zhang writes a melody that alternates between the alto register and bass register representing a conversation between Xiao Sheng and Lao Sheng (Musical Example 1.7).

Musical Example 1.7. Lao Sheng and Xiao Sheng, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 95-99.

The Dan in Peking Opera comprises all-female roles and includes five subtypes: Qing Yi, Hua Dan, Lao Dan, Wu Dan, and Daoma Dan. The Qing Yi is the most important type among the female roles and is often given the character of a caring mother, wife, or obedient daughter. The role is written for an elegant and pure voice in a high register.\(^{33}\) For example, in the Yuanban section, Zhang expressed the gentle disposition of Qing Yi with a simple melody in the high register (Musical Example 1.2).

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
The *Jing*, a male role, exudes a forceful personality and generally sings in a low register. Following tradition, these performers paint their faces with many colors to portray different personalities. For example, characters with red faces are brave, loyal, and virtuous, while faces painted black reflect an angry and fierce quality. To express their wrath, actors painted black will increase and accelerate the roar of “wa ya ya ya ya ya ya” with a gruff bass voice. This is dramatically portrayed in Zhang’s *Duoban* section of *Pi Huang*. The E-A-D chord is repeated with increasing frequency and intensity from mm. 248-257 (Musical Example 1.8).

Musical Example 1.8. *Jing, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 248-257.

The general term for clowns is *Chou*. *Chou*, translated as “ugly,” is reflective of the traditional concept of the clown as a character who is unattractive, but jovial. This role is intended to make the audience laugh. In the *Erliu* section in *Pi Huang*, Zhang’s use of grace

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34 Zhao Zhang, performance notes, in *Pi Huang*, score, 1995.

notes in the right hand and the broken octave leaps in the left hand as well as the sixteenth-note turns from mm. 25-35 vividly conjure the comical movements of Chou. (Musical Example 1.9).

Musical Example 1.9. *Chou, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 25-35.
Influence of Nature

Besides the influence of Peking Opera, Zhang was inspired by nature while composing *Pi Huang*. In interviews, he referenced the Yunnan Art School and Dian Lake from his early studies: “The classrooms and practice rooms offered a perfect angle to view Dian Lake, and he and his friends loved to play and swim there, explore the clear water and green plants, and listen to the temple bell around them.” The compositional approach in *Pi Huang* includes some hints regarding Zhang’s deepening love for the natural world. The marking in the *Erliu*, “like flowing water” (mm. 44-49) captures the rhythmic movement of the waves. The play of light on the lake is conveyed in the insistent trills and the use of pentatonic scales in sixteenth notes aurally conveys the flowing texture (Musical Example 1.10).

Musical Example 1.10. Description of the flowing water in *Erliu, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 44-49.

In selecting the Italian *zeffiroso* for the *Liushui* section, Zhang pays homage to the breezes he remembered from his time spent along the shores of the lake. The fast sixteenth notes

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36 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
capture the movement of the wind as it whirls and changes direction throughout the *Liushui* (Musical Example 1.11). At the end of this section, from mm. 62-65, the descending passage of lively alternating notes suggests the wind as it rushes forward (Musical Example 1.12).

Musical Example 1.11. Fast sixteenth notes in *Liushui, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 51-57.

Influence of Chinese Literature

Zhang’s deep regard for Chinese literature is evident in Pi Huang through the inspiration he draws from the well-known *Great View Pavilion Couplet of Kunming*, written by Ran Sun (1711-1773) in 1765. In Chinese poetry, an antithetic couplet refers to a pair of successive lines that have parallel rhyme and metrical length. These couplets often appear on the sides of doors as hanging scrolls. Regarded as the longest couplet in Chinese poetry, *Great View Pavilion Couplet of Kunming* consists of a top line and a bottom line containing 90 Chinese characters respectively with a one-to-one correspondence in its rhyme and structure. The *Great View Pavilion* is located beside Dian Lake in Kunming, which afforded a perfect panorama of the entire lake. When the poet viewed the lake from the vantage point of the pavilion, the sight stirred up his feelings and inspired him to write the couplet. The English translation of the couplet by the Chinese translator, Xinmin Fan, is as follows:

**Top line:**

Lake Dian of five hundred miles rushes into view. Gown and hood loosened; how ravishingly boundless this expanse seems! Be-hold, to the east canters a divine Steed, to the west hovers a numi-nous Pheasant, to the north slithers a si-nuous Serpent, to the south soars a white Crane. Bards of surpassing talent, why not pick and attain a panorama commanding height? Crab isles and snail reefs yon lie coiffed like maidens’ hair wind-swept or fog-blurred; rearing reeds and floating duckweeds make heaven and earth, spotted with emerald feathers and vermeil clouds. Do not leave unadmired the teeming aromatic rice-paddies all around, a myriad acre of gleaming sand, louts blooms in high summer, and weeping willows throughout spring.

**Bottom line:**

Events past of several thousand years gush into mind. Wine raised and poised, how I. inexorably gone those heroes appear! Re-call, in the Han maneuvered storeyed warships,

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in the Tang towered an iron column, in the Song flourished a jade axe, in the Yuan strode leather-sack rafts. Feats of tremendous moment, how they exacted and exhausted mountain-moving pains! Pearled curtains and painted beams could not ever anticipate elemental vagaries rain-borne or brume-wrought; broken steles and decrepit tablets lapse into oblivion, abandoned to dusk ing haze and westering sun-shine. Nothing gained abides except a few faint bell-strokes from afar, a half river of fishing torchlight, autumn swan-geese in two skeins, and chilly frost on a pillow.38

The top line depicts the magnificent scenery of Dian Lake, significant for Zhang as a student in the Yunnan Art School, also situated beside Dian Lake. Specifically, the couplet’s top line inspired him to portray the image of the lake in the sections of Erliu and Liushui.

From the bottom line, Zhang was inspired to learn of the Chinese national heroes who had established and protected his hometown. He expressed his emotional response to the tragic experience of the historical hero Fei Yue through the Duoban and Weisheng. In the Duoban, Zhang expressed rage at the historical hero’s suffering. He elevated the heroic spirit of Fei Yue in the Weisheng with brilliant block chords in fortissimo, followed by extended broken octaves that end finally with a decisive chord in sforzando (Musical Example 1.13). The scenery description in the Erliu and Liushui and the historical narrative in the Duoban and Weisheng match the antithetical grammatical structure and meaning of the couplet.

Musical Example 1.13. Weisheng, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 260-262.

38 Ibid.
Influence of *Yin/Yang* Philosophy

The concept of *Yin/Yang* was first introduced by the ancient Chinese thinker, philosopher, and cosmologist Yan Zou around or before the 3rd century, who attempted to explore the mysteries of the universe and understand the laws of phenomena in nature.\(^{39}\) The *Yin* in Chinese is generally understood to mean darkness, coldness, femininity, and negativity, while the *Yang* represents brightness, heat, masculinity, and positivity.

The philosophy was later absorbed by the founders of Taoism, Laozi and Zhuangzi, and has since become a predominant Chinese philosophy. The *Yin/Yang* in Taoism refers to the art of living and the nature of strongly interrelated yet contradictory elements. The basic principle of Taoism retains spontaneity and pursues the balance between *Yin* and *Yang* to achieve harmony in the universe. Everything in this dualism is a reflection of the One, resulting in two complementary agents coming together in unity.\(^{40}\) Examples include heaven and earth, sun and moon, maleness and femaleness, static and dynamic, fullness and emptiness, horizontal and vertical, and up and down.

Zhang believed that two opposed yet connected elements could also co-exist in music. He related the vitality of music to the concept of *Yin/Yang* with its opposing movements of inhale and exhale creating the breath for life.\(^{41}\) According to Zhang, *pianoforte*, the formal name of the modern piano, describes an instrument that can produce soft and loud dynamics, and as such contains elements of *Yin/Yang* philosophy. Other characteristics of the piano further reinforce the

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\(^{41}\) Ibid.
unity of opposite forces, such as the way the black keys occupy a higher position on the keyboard while the white keys are lower, horizontal melody with vertical harmony, and the lyrical *legato* timbres and percussive *forte* sounds. These elements reflect the inseparable aspects of *Yin/Yang* as features where contrasting elements reinforce each other.\(^42\)

In *Pi Huang*, Zhang explored the musical expression of the dual elements of *Yin/Yang* philosophy, which are visible in two ways. The composition includes two contrasting styles, lively *Xi Pi* and lyrical *Er Huang*.\(^43\) While these two opposing musical styles can exist singularly, in combination they bring an enhanced quality of tension and release to the music.

The dualism also inspired Zhang to shape the musical stories of *Pi Huang* from his personal life experiences. According to Zhang, the simple thematic melody in the *Yuanban* symbolized his initial unsullied view of the world; the lively *Erliu*, marked *innocente*, referred to his contented childhood; the *Liushui* suggested the sense of peace he experienced as a young student in the art school; and the *Kuai Sanyan*, marked *spirito*, described the energy and motivation of his teenage years. The *Kuaiban* became a reflection of his post-graduation life experiences with injustice and societal complexities as a young adult. To Zhang, the beginning accented two chords in mm. 103 function as the alarm bell, heralding the difficulties to come (Musical Example 1.14). The *Yaoban*, *Duoban*, and *Weisheng* are related to the hero Fei Yue, and associate Yue’s afflictions with Zhang’s experiences during his twenties.\(^44\) The sections of *Yuanban*, *Erliu*, *Liushui*, and *Kuai Sanyan* are a positive description of his childhood and school life, while the *Kuaiban*, *Yaoban*, *Duoban*, and *Weisheng* correspond to his struggles in post-

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\(^42\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.

\(^43\) Ibid.

\(^44\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
school life. Moreover, the *Manban* plays the role of a bridge to create further balance between the two parts. Zhang takes the significance of the two portions yet deeper, regarding the musical depiction of his younger years as reflecting an idealistic dream, set against the musical portrait of social hardship as the cruel facts of reality.\(^{45}\) These implications further reinforce the contradictory aspects of *Yin/Yang*.


\(^{45}\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
Influence of Chinese Landscape Painting

Regarded as the highest form of Chinese painting, landscape painting in Chinese is called “Shan-shui hua,” literally meaning “mountain-water painting,” a depiction of natural scenery in art. It originated in the fourth century and was painted and carved on walls and pottery. The late Tang Dynasty (618-907) saw the evolution of landscape painting into an independent genre, and by the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it reached its pinnacle of appreciation.⁴⁶

Art appreciation is a two-way process: artists express themselves through their works, and viewers appreciate the works through their imagination and empathy. Chinese landscape painting possesses a unique atmospheric perspective, “six distances,” as a guidance for painters in creating a sense of space for viewers to imagine and experience in paintings. The Northern Song Dynasty painter and theorist Xi Guo (1020-1090) described the first three distances in his treatise of painting, The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams (Lin Quan Gao Zhi).⁴⁷ The well-known scholar on Chinese arts James Cahill explained Guo’s atmospheric perspective as the following: “Kuo Hsi has brought to perfection the technique of atmospheric perspective, a method of creating the illusion of space and distance by depicting objects in progressively lighter tone as they recede into depth, suggesting the intervention of atmosphere between them and the viewer.”⁴⁸ The three distances include “level distance” (pingyuan), “high distance” (gaoyuan), and “deep distance” (shenyuan). Later in 1102, the painter Zhuo Han elaborated on Xi Guo’s statement and supplemented the other three distances in his theoretical work Collection on the Purity of Landscape Painting (Shan Shui Chun Quan Ji): “broad distance” (kuoyuan), “shrouded

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⁴⁷ Valérie Malenfer Ortiz, Dreaming the Southern Song Landscape: The Power of Illusion in Chinese Painting (Boston: Brill, 1999), 79.

distance” (miyuan), and “mystery distance (youyuan).\textsuperscript{49} Zhang was inspired by the idea of the six distances and created a sense of space with diverse dimensions in his compositions.

Level distance and broad distance have a similar concept in which the paintings are viewed from a broad horizontal angle. However, broad distance has more detailed characteristics, describing a painting of a nearby shore with a wide stretch of water in the middle followed by far-away mountains, showing in Gui Xia (1195-1224), \textit{Pure and Remote View of Streams and Hills}.\textsuperscript{50} With a length of 889.1cm and a height of 46.1cm, one of the parts of the handscroll shows a wide field of vision (Figure 2).

![Image of Pure and Remote View of Streams and Hills](http://www.chinashj.com/sh-gdh/13276.html)

**Figure 2.** \textit{Pure and Remote View of Streams and Hills} (portion only), Gui Xia.\textsuperscript{51}

In the \textit{Manban}, the \textit{cadenza} covers almost the entire keyboard, which mirrors the broad angle of level distance (Musical Example 1.15). The brilliant Coda begins with three voices, which is similar to the three parts found in the broad distance (Musical Example 1.13). The bass

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\textsuperscript{49} Val\`{e}rie Malenfer Ortiz, \textit{Dreaming the Southern Song Landscape: The Power of Illusion in Chinese Painting} (Boston: Brill, 1999), 80.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

octaves refer to the front shore while the middle chords echo a large span of water, and the top chords symbolize the further mountains. The instrumental sonority of the wide range also mirrors the expanded view of broad distance.

Musical Example 1.15. Level distance in Manban, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 100-101.

High distance is the view one experiences when looking up to a mountaintop from its base, emphasizing the vertical effect and lofty grandness.\textsuperscript{52} The loftiness of the mountain is accentuated by the presence of the pine trees on the foreground rocks, as seen in Figure 3, Travelers among Mountains and Streams (206.3 x 103.3 cm) by Kuan Fan (960-1030).

\textsuperscript{52} Valérie Malenfer Ortiz, Dreaming the Southern Song Landscape: The Power of Illusion in Chinese Painting (Boston: Brill, 1999), 80.
An example of high distance is found at the beginning of the *Daoban*, where Zhang creates vertical space between each trill and arpeggiated chord, symbolizing the extensive reach between the peak and foot of the mountain in high distance (Musical Example 1.16).

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Musical Example 1.16. High distance in *Daoban, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 1-3.

![Musical Example 1.16](image)

Deep distance, which creates a perspective of depth (Figure 3), is experienced from foreground to background through successive layers, as shown in Gongwang Huang (1269-1354), *Nine Pearly Peaks in Green* (79.6 x 58.5 cm). In the painting, the mountains are repeated layer by layer as they go from near to the distance, producing a space of depth. These repeating layers are a key element of deep distance. In the *Kuai Sanyan*, the groups of notes ascend consecutively, corresponding with the successive layers. The marking of diminuendo also allows the sound to go further and further away (Musical Example 1.17).

Musical Example 1.17. Deep distance in *Kuai Sanyan, Pi Huang* by Z. Zhang, mm. 84.

![Musical Example 1.17](image)

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Shrouded distance refers to natural objects that are covered by mists and fogs that produce an indistinct sense before dissipating. In Figure 2, everything is blurred but the nearby stones, plants, and mists appear to flow on the top of the water. Mystery distance is similar to shrouded distance, but tends to be more fragmentary. The faraway mountain peaks appear unevenly, shown in the painting of Figure 2.

According to Zhang, the damper pedal plays a crucial role in shaping the misty atmosphere of shrouded distance in music since it blurs the percussive sound. In the Daoban, the long damper pedal is held until the end to create a hazy sound effect. As the composer marks *diminuendo* with an unnumbered repetition, the sound decreases and fades away at the end, as the fog and clouds are dispersed gradually in the shrouded distance (Musical Example 1.18). Mystery distance refers to the scenes in paintings that are fragmentary and indistinct. The *staccato* broken octaves in the right hand of the Manban fragment the scene as it fades in and out, while the light octaves flowing in the high register produce an added sense of vagueness (Musical Example 1.5).

Musical Example 1.18. Shrouded distance in Daoban, Pi Huang by Z. Zhang, mm. 5-6.

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56 Ibid.

57 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS OF NATURE NO. 1

Fusion of Western and Chinese Musical Elements

In Nature No. 1, Zhang adopted elements of Western tonal and post-tonal music in addition to Chinese pentatonic modes and imitation of Guqin. His intentional incorporation of Western techniques arose organically from experiences with global access to musical styles. Zhang explained that he incorporated a combination of pitch-class sets and tonal harmony into his compositional organization of Nature No. 1.\(^{58}\) His approach to tonality relied not only on familiar harmonies, but also on creating a variety of dissonant colors.

**Pitch-Class Set**

The pitch class, a group of pitches with the same or enharmonic name, is a fundamental element of many post-tonal compositional techniques.\(^ {59}\) Joseph Strauss defined the pitch-class set as \“an unordered collection of pitch classes.\”\(^ {60}\) Octave equivalence is another feature that defines a pitch-class set where pitches are given the same letter name in any octave or register and are able to sustain their function regardless of octave displacement.

The first movement, Meditation of Ice and Snow may be divided into two sections: Section A (mm. 1-19) and Section B (mm. 20-39). Zhang applied two pitch-class sets to organize and shape the motif of Section A. The pitch-class sets are \([G^\#, D^\#, B, F^\#]\) in m. 1 and \([G^\#, G^\#, F^\#]\) in mm. 2-3 (Musical Example 2.1).

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\(^{58}\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 43.
Musical Example 2.1. Pitch-class sets \([G^\#, D^\flat, B, F^\natural]\) and \([G^\#, G^\natural, F^\natural]\) in *Meditation of Ice and Snow, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 1-5.

Take the pitch-class set in m. 1 as an example, in order to easily visualize the set \([G^\#, D^\flat, B, F^\natural]\), the following pitch-class clockface shows the compact pitch-class form of the set as \([D^\natural, F^\natural, G^\# , B]\) appearing here with the integers of 2, 5, 8, and 11 (Figure 4). This form is known as normal form, a simple, compressed way of writing a pitch-class set.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{61}\) Ibid., 45.
In Figure 4, the intervallic relationship between two pitch classes is labeled the pitch-class interval (pci). There are two types of the pitch-class interval: the ordered pitch-class interval (opci), which counts the semitone numbers clockwise, and the unordered pitch-class interval (upci), which calculates the semitones either clockwise or counterclockwise, but follows the shortest available route. In m. 1, due to octave equivalence, the unordered pitch-class interval between D♮ and F♮ is the same as the unordered pitch-class interval between F♮ and D♮, an inversion that is similarly found in tonal music where minor thirds and major sixths are inversions of each other, as are minor seconds and major sevenths (Musical Example 2.1). It is evident from the pitch-class clockface that there are three semitones between each pitch class, creating the intervallic relationship of upci3. Zhang transposed the intervallic relationship of this pitch-class set throughout the first movement, forming and making a closely related family of sets, such as [D♯, F♯, A♯, C♯] in mm. 25 (Musical Example 2.2). This family is called set class (sc), a collection of pitch-class sets related by transposition. The prime form (a string of pitch-class integers starting with 0) is to identify the set class. Therefore, the prime form of the sets that transposed from the normal form [2, 5, 8, 11] of the pitch-class set [D♯, F♯, G♯, B] is sc(0369).

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62 Ibid., 9-12.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 62-67.
65 Ibid.
Musical Example 2.2. Transposition of the upci3 in *Meditation of Ice and Snow, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 25.

Applying a similar analysis, the pitch-class set \([G^\#, G^\#, F^\#]\) from mm. 2-3 belongs to the sc(012) with a upci1 between each pitch (Musical Example 2.1). The entire Section A of the first movement is made up of these two set classes or, alternatively, the compositional language is derived from them. For example, the pitch-class set from mm. 8 to 10 comprises set classes (0369) and (012), while the chords in m. 7 are in the collection of the sc(0347). The new chordal structure as shown in m. 7 are a combination of upci3 and upci1 (Musical Example 2.3).

Musical Example 2.3. Use of set classes (0347), (0369), and (012) in *Meditation of Ice and Snow, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 6-10.
The composer’s blurring of tonal and atonal writing in *Nature No. 1* is demonstrated in the sc(0369), which reveals a strong tonal tendency. The pitches G♯-B-D♮-F♮ in m. 1 together represent a diminished seventh chord and though the octave displacement obscures some of that impact, it may also be heard as a tonal stand-alone structure. Other intervals with the semblance of tonality include the minor thirds (G♯-B-D♮-F♮), the tritone (G♯-D♮) from the diminished seventh chord, and the minor seconds (F♯-G♮-G♯) from the sc(012).

In the second movement of *Nature No. 1, Poem from a Blaze*, Zhang extended the use of the intervallic relationships of the set classes (0369) and (012). The motive of this movement is composed of minor seventh chords, triads, and quartal chords (Musical Example 2.4). The minor seventh chords are developed from the diminished seventh chord in m. 1 of the first movement, while the three-note quartal chord is built on two fourths, making the outer voice a seventh interval which also stems from the diminished seventh chord. The triads containing major and minor thirds refer to the intervallic relationship of the diminished seventh chord. The chromatic color in the sc(012) appears in all voices in mm. 2-3. The tonal and atonal elements are blurred through contrary motion between the hands in m. 3, as the F♯ major chord in the right hand and G♭ major chord in the left hand progress to a G major chord juxtaposed against an F major chord, creating a bitonal sonority.

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66 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
Musical Example 2.4. Use of the minor seventh chords, quartal chords, and triads in Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1 by Z. Zhang, mm. 1-3.

Tone Cluster

The tone cluster, a group of adjacent notes sounding simultaneously, was introduced by American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965) as an expanded piano technique. Cowell and German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), further explored the tone cluster with glissandi in their compositions.67 Pianists are instructed to use fingers, palms, forearms, and elbows while playing the cluster glissando with an outer limit in either upward or downward motion, or even simultaneously upward and downward. Unlike a normal glissando, the cluster glissando tends to be faster and more accented. There are three types of tone cluster options for the piano: diatonic (all on white keys), pentatonic (all on black keys), and chromatic (all keys with a specific outer range).68 Zhang absorbed the idea of the diatonic cluster and arranged it in various ways throughout Section A of Poem from a Blaze (Musical Example 2.5).


68 Ibid., 33.
Zhang stated that the clusters need not be played with specific notes, but considered any group of adjacent notes within the designated boundaries to be acceptable.\textsuperscript{69} In mm. 31-32 from Musical Example 2.5, the range of clusters in the left hand is found within the outer limits of G1 to E2. The right-hand cluster in mm. 31 is from F2 to C3. Pianists play the clusters with a grace note by depressing the keys from approximately G1 to E3. The cluster glissandi from mm. 88-94 require pianists to use the elbow and forearm of the right hand, and palms of both hands to press the keys from top to bottom in the range between F4 and A0, creating a highly dramatic effect (Musical Example 2.6).

\textsuperscript{69} Zhao Zhang, interview by author, September 14, 2019.
**Controlled Chance Music**

Controlled chance music was widely used and popularized by the French composer Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) during the mid-20th century. Compared to John Cage’s use of chance music, where the composer’s intention is purposely erased, Boulez’s interpretation of chance music limits performers to a certain set of possibilities outlined by the composer. In *Poem from a Blaze*, Zhang adopted this element of controlled chance music, specifically instructing the player to make adjustments throughout this passage without constraints of specific notes (Musical Example 2.7).  

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71 Zhao Zhang, Playing Instruction, in *Nature No. 1*, score, 2019.
**Octatonic Scale**

Another compositional device employed by Zhang in *Poem from a Blaze* is the octatonic mode or scale, which consists of eight pitches alternating between whole tones and semitones that are arranged symmetrically. This pitch organization dates from the mid-19th century and was explored by numerous composers of the 20th century. Though Zhang did not precisely follow the rule of symmetrical alternation, he adopted the pattern of whole tones and semitones and formed his octatonic-inspired scale seen in the top bass clef of the coda: G-Ab-Bb-C-Db-Eb-Eb-F#-G (Musical Example 2.8).

Musical Example 2.8. Octatonic-inspired scale in *Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 142-147.

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Chorale

Zhang is inspired by the German polyphonic chorale tradition. He believes that sacred music sung by the natural human voice is the purest representation of nature.\(^3\) Zhang borrowed elements of the chorale genre and introduced it briefly in the second movement from mm. 120-128 (Musical Example 2.9). The typical textures of Chinese traditional music comprise a melodic voice with accompaniment, and result in a texture that is more horizontal when compared to the vertically-oriented Western polyphonic traditions. Zhang wrote the chorale-like passage to provide layers of movement, thus enriching the texture, and demonstrating a conversational element between the lines.

Musical Example 2.9. Chorale-like passage in *Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 120-128.

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\(^3\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
Chinese Pentatonic Modes and Imitation of Guqin

In contrast to the Western compositional techniques found in Section A of the first movement, Section B was written almost entirely in the Chinese pentatonic mode of D♯ Yu (D♯-F♯-G♯-A♯-C♯). The coda of the second movement then adopts another Chinese pentatonic mode. In addition to the basic five notes Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu as discussed earlier in this document, there are also supplementary notes that form what Chinese music theorists described as the varied notes, such as “varied Gong” which is a half-step lower than Gong, and “varied Zhi” that is a half-step lower than Zhi. In the coda of the second movement, Zhang uses these two varied notes in C Gong mode (C-D-E-G-A). In the mode, Gong is C while Zhi is G. The top voice B in m. 147 and the F♯ in m. 144 in Musical Example 2.10 are the varied Gong and varied Zhi, resulting in the expanded C Gong mode as C-D-E-F♯-G-A-B.

Zhang begins Section B (Lento) of the first movement with a simple melody that is meant to imitate his favorite Chinese traditional instrument, the Guqin. The melody imitates the timbres of the Guqin and the descending thirty-second notes in mm. 21 reference the glissando sounds of the instrument (Musical Example 2.11). The imitation of the Guqin reappears at the end of the second movement as an echo of the first movement.

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74 Yaxiong Du and Dexiang Qin, Zhongguo Yueyi [Chinese Music Theory] (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2007), 163.

75 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
Musical Example 2.10. Expanded C Gong mode in Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1 by Z. Zhang, mm. 142-147.

Musical Example 2.11. Pentatonic mode D# Yu and imitation of Guqin in Meditation of Ice and Snow, Nature No. 1 by Z. Zhang, mm. 19-24.
In recent years, Zhang has shifted his focus more significantly to the study of nature and the environment, stating that nature is the greatest teacher for mankind. For example, he explains that the sun rises each day and brings light without expecting a reward and thus exemplifies selflessness and generosity, while the crisis of environmental pollution exemplifies the selfishness and narrow-mindedness of those who abuse nature. Acutely aware of the human toll attached to pollution and toxic drainage from his beloved Dian Lake, Zhang has worked on global issues centered on environmental and ecological degradation. He has urged people to reflect and take action on environmental care to build a more harmonious world.\textsuperscript{76}

Bringing this understanding of the environment to Nature No. 1, Zhang attempted to encourage listeners to take care of the earth as our homeland and to achieve a balance between humanity and nature. These thoughts are echoed in Poem from a Blaze, where numerous dissonant sonorities symbolize the damage of the environment and the explosion of the sun due to human destruction. The alternation of the consonant and dissonant chords with different rhythmic patterns, such as dotted and over-dotted rhythms, triplets, and syncopations reflect the movement of the sun’s fire (Musical Example 2.12). The chords shown in mm. 13-19 in Musical Example 2.12 increase in number from 4 to 8, shaping the accelerating movement of the raging blaze. The cluster glissandi repeated seven times create a massive sound, symbolizing the explosion of the sun and the complete destruction of the earth (Musical Example 2.6).

\textsuperscript{76} Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
Zhang’s increasing ties to nature and his wish to connect people in this world through *Nature No. 1* are found also in the elements of ice and snow. In the first movement, *Meditation of Ice and Snow*, the elements symbolize emotional responses through simple intervallic relationships. He identified the opening intervals of the minor thirds (G♯-B-D♮-F♮) and the tritone (G♯-D♮) as symbolic of the coldness of the snow, making reference to the movement’s title. He also linked the minor third interval to images of the overcast, dark sky. In further discussions about the intervallic relationships of the opening, Zhang identified the pitches G♮ to F♯ in mm. 2-3 as a dissonance that for him symbolized ice, specifically capturing its sharp and hard textural quality.\(^{77}\)

\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Influence of *Yin/Yang* Philosophy

The well-known scholar of Chinese philosophy, J.C. Cooper, stated: “The basic aim of the Taoist is the attaining of balance and harmony between the *Yin* and the *Yang*, known as The Two Great Powers, the two poles between which all manifestation takes place.”\(^7^8\) Zhang stated that like the balance between the rational and emotional, his goal was for balance and harmony to play a key role in his compositional choices.\(^7^9\)

As Zhang did in *Pi Huang*, he absorbed the concept of dualism and balance in *Yin/Yang* to shape the decisions regarding content and structure in *Nature No. 1*. The title of the two movements is seemingly contradictory, presenting the opposing elements of ice from the first movement entitled *Meditation of Ice and Snow* and the fire in the second movement, *Poem from a Blaze*. *Yin* and *Yang* concepts --- cold and static for *Yin* and heat and dynamic for *Yang* --- are directly at play in the images he selected for the titles. Continuing the symbolism of *Yin/Yang* within the deeper meaning of the music itself, Zhang intentionally adopted two contrasting musical languages. Atonal and tonal sonorities are in contrast but through Zhang’s balanced approach they become complementary. In the first movement, Zhang applied pitch-class sets in *Nature No. 1* incorporating dissonant intervals and chords, which for Zhang symbolized the icy sharpness of the title and the difficulties of his life experiences including the professional isolation he had suffered. For balance, in Section B, he chose the D$\#$ *Yu* mode to embed a warmer atmosphere within the harmonic language. Zhang associated these consonant qualities with hope and rebirth.

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\(^7^9\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
One may apply a similar analysis to Zhang’s compositional decisions when considering his passionate commitment to nature and to preserving the environment. Zhang was drawn to the contrast and balance of Yin/Yang here as well. For example, in Section A of the second movement, the wild and dissonant chords with persistent dotted rhythms mirror the ongoing human destruction brought to the planet while the consonant sonorities in Section B, subtitled Nirvana, provide the balance in reference to people’s hope for a transformed environment where the natural world is supported and sustained.

The dualism found in Nature No. 1 is abundant in other ways. The dynamic level of Section A in the first movement is generally piano while Section A of the second movement is fortissimo. The first movement is lyrical while the second movement is written with much exuberance and energy. The voices in the first movement are simply written in two staves, while in the second movement multiple voices are arranged in four staves, which would indicate a more complex texture. The contrast of slow and fast harmonic rhythm movement also reflects the composer’s Yin/Yang approach. The harmonic progression is paced slowly in the sparsely-voiced Section A of the first movement. The theme is organized by the two set classes (0369) and (012), which emerge slowly, and the harmonic language remains static throughout. However, the harmonic rhythm changes dynamically and rapidly in the densely-voiced Section A of the second movement.

Zhang’s choice of chords also reflects the influence of Yin/Yang. In m. 7 of the first movement, the chord contains two contrasting colors, as the three top notes create a minor triad while the three bottom notes produce a major triad (Musical Example 2.3). The differing colors of the major and minor chords represent the two interwoven opposites of Yin/Yang. Another
reflection of *Yin/Yang* can be seen in Zhang’s alternation of “black-key chords” and “white-key chords” throughout Section A of the second movement (Musical Example 2.4).  

Zhang’s purposeful choice to cohesively balance traditional and non-traditional performance methods is one of his most innovative accomplishments. His stated goal was to find new approaches to generating sounds at the piano, using only hands and feet while remaining seated at the instrument. This was an attempt to preserve a more balanced approach for the pianist. His preference was to avoid additional tools such as those required for prepared piano techniques, in favor of pursuing new sound possibilities for the instrument that would be generated through the hands and feet.  

Zhang’s efforts resulted in the invention of the “Half-key” performance method and the “Post-sound resonating pedal,” both of which apply modified traditional approaches to piano playing. According to the Playing Instructions, the half-key performance method utilizes the left hand to gently press the key or several keys halfway down without making a sound. The right hand then plays those notes, which should result in an ethereal and hazy sound. There are three ways to touch the key with the half-key performance method (Table 2).  

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80 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.

81 Ibid.

82 Zhao Zhang, Playing Instruction, in *Nature No. 1*, score, 2019.

- First press the key(s) halfway down with the left hand then play the key with the right hand.
- First press the key(s) halfway down with the left hand then place the right hand on the left-hand fingers (fingers can be flat on the keys) to make a softer sound.
- First press the key(s) halfway down with the left hand then place the right hand on the back of the left hand and press simultaneously to play the chord.

Zhang also created the post-sound resonating pedal performance method that requires the depression of the pedal right at the moment of releasing the key when playing a *staccato* chord. In this way, the damper has not completely eliminated the string vibration, which results in partially preserving the resonance (Musical Example 2.13).\(^8\) His inventive performance methods serve as a bridge between the traditional and modified traditional approaches to innovative piano sounds; a new dualism inspired by *Yin/Yang*.


\(^8\) Ibid.
Influence of Chinese Landscape Painting

After exploring the six distances of Chinese landscape painting as noted in *Pi Huang*, Zhang’s expansion of the process is visible in *Nature No. 1*. In the coda of *Poem from a Blaze*, he significantly enlarged his approach to level distance. Beginning with the left-hand accompaniment centered on C in the second beat of mm. 137, the voices taken by the right hand rise gently against the steady accompaniment to convey an infinite horizontal feeling of level distance (Musical Example 2.14).

Broad distance can be seen in the recapitulation of *Nirvana* in *Poem from a Blaze*. Zhang marked the theme of this section as *fortissimo*, and it covers six octaves in the open four-line stave with the top and bass voices doubled, underscoring the spaciousness of broad distance. The theme’s *tenuto* and accent markings assist in building the magnificent sonority (Musical Example 2.15).

Musical Example 2.15. Broad distance in *Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 129-132.

![Musical Example 2.15](image)

High distance is also portrayed in the Musical Example 2.15. The large expanse between the top and bottom voices enhances the vertical effect. The concept is apparent in *Meditation of Ice and Snow*, from the low D♮ of the left hand in m. 8 to high G♮ in m. 10 (Musical Example 2.3). The dynamic markings move from *pianissimo* in m. 8 to *mezzo forte* in m. 10, emphasizing the loftiness of high distance.

Deep distance appears in many places in *Nature No. 1*. At the end of *Meditation of Ice and Snow*, the dynamic decreases gradually from *fortissimo* to *mezzo forte*, to *mezzo piano*, to *piano*, creating the impression of the sound moving from near to far (Musical Example 2.16).
Similarly, the volume of the entire coda of *Poem from a Blaze* reduces dramatically from *forte* to *mezzo forte*, to *mezzo piano*, to *piano*, to *pianissimo*, to *pianississimo*, to *pianissississimo*. Zhang marked the section with *calando* (gradually slower and softer) and *morendo* (fading away) to create a sense of depth through the variation of the dynamics (Musical Example 2.17). The whole movement can be seen as further evidence of deep distance, developing from the passionate Section A to the grandiose *Nirvana* followed by the gradually disappearing coda.


Shrouded distance denotes an obscure atmosphere in landscape painting. As Zhang’s program note states: the half-key performance method aims to make an ethereal and hazy sound on the piano. In *Meditation of Ice and Snow*, the new performance methods applied with the damper pedal and the soft pedal mirror the misty effect of shrouded distance. Mystery distance is accomplished with the post-sound resonating pedal in *Poem from a Blaze* (Musical Example 2.18). The light interrupted pedaling creates instability and vagueness, symbolizing the part

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84 Zhao Zhang, Playing Instruction, in *Nature No. 1*, score, 2019.
hidden, part visible effect of mystery distance. The Guqin is capable of a shadowy, distant timbre, and the imitation of Guqin in Section B of the first movement as well as the end of the coda from the second movement beautifully enhance the sense of mystery (Musical Example 2.17).

Musical Example 2.18. Mystery distance in *Poem from a Blaze, Nature No. 1* by Z. Zhang, mm. 117.

Beyond the six distances, another key technique of Chinese landscape painting that inspired Zhang’s approach in *Nature No. 1* is the concept of “leaving blank” (*liubai*).\(^8^5\) Leaving blank flourished in the Song Dynasty and is an important rule of composition and aesthetic conception, creating a full and infinite space for imagination.\(^8^6\) The blank space in paintings can be found in water, sky, mist, cloud, the surface of paths and rocks, or importantly, a state of

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\(^8^5\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.

\(^8^6\) Xiongshan Gao, “The Art of *Liubai* in Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Yihai* (February 2013): 60-61, https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFQ&dbname=CJFD2013&filename=YHZZ201302029&v=MjQ5MjdTN0RoMVKzVRyV00xRnJDVV13cWZiK2RyRnkzbVU3N09QQ1hSZExHNg5TE1yWTIY1lSOGVYMUx1eFk= (access June 26, 2020).
mind. In Gui Xia’s *Pure and Remote View of Streams and Hills*, the painter left the paper blank in order to depict the large span of lake, the mist on the middle of the range upon range of mountains, the distant clouds on the left side, and the nearby rocks and paths on the right side (Figure 2). Compositionally, leaving blank in Chinese painting reveals the spatial contrast between near and far, height and horizontal, and emptiness and fullness. The void space as an aesthetic concept allows viewers to meditate their way through the space via their imagination and empathy.

According to Zhang, the damper pedal applied on long-valued notes functions as leaving blank in music. These sustained whole and half notes appear frequently in *Meditation of Ice and Snow*. Specifically, the sustained sound in mm. 2-3 produces the tranquil effect of leaving blank (Musical Example 2.1). On a larger scale, the pure melodies, soft sonorities, and slow harmonic changes in this movement create a peaceful atmosphere for listeners to meditate and imagine freely.

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87 Zhao Zhang, interview by author, June 30, 2019.
CHAPTER 5. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the two solo piano compositions, *Pi Huang* (1995) and *Nature No. 1* (2019), the development of Zhang’s compositional style is traced across his three self-described compositional periods. Zhang’s earliest music education came largely from the Western classical music tradition; accordingly, in his first compositional period he absorbed a large amount of Western compositional knowledge and mastered techniques, devoting himself to imitating and writing various types of Western music. He soon came to realize that imitating Western musical writing would be limiting to his artistic growth and turned to the creation of a style that would reflect his culture and authentic surroundings. In pursuit of a Chinese voice, he began to establish his unique compositional approach by selecting elements from traditional Chinese music and national folk music. Zhang’s movement toward Chinese culture was as strong as his desire to free himself from the influence of Western music in this second compositional period. As he approached writing the early piano work, *Pi Huang*, he intentionally focused on traditional Chinese music, and especially Peking Opera. What he did retain in this second period, however, were classical Western instruments, such as the piano, violin, and oboe, as vehicles for delivering his compositions.\(^{88}\)

Later, Zhang realized that the complete avoidance of Western music might make his music singular and conservative. He stated in a recent interview, “Music should not be constrained by any fixed mode, format, boundary or limitation.”\(^{89}\) As demonstrated through the analysis of *Nature No. 1* from Zhang’s late period, he attempted to broaden his compositional angle by using various Western expressive elements and theoretical practices including pitch-

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\(^{88}\) Zhao Zhang, interview by author, August 12, 2020.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.
class sets, tone clusters, controlled chance music, modified octatonic scales, and the chorale

tradition. This broadening was further enriched through the use of contrasting Chinese pentatonic

modes and the distinctive and ethereal sonorities of the Guqin. Zhang intentionally obscured

boundaries in his third compositional period, often blurring the labels of nationalism, Western,

and Eastern. In writing *Nature No. 1*, he had come to embrace diverse styles and practices and

satisfied his goal of creating music as a tool for worldwide communication.

As seen in this study, by the second and particularly third periods, Zhang had

significantly expanded his compositional voice by identifying a range of influences to guide his

compositional aesthetic. It is most likely that Peking Opera was Zhang’s most significant

influence in the writing of *Pi Huang*. He stated, “As a Chinese composer, it is my responsibility
to introduce Chinese culture to the world through music.”\(^90\) This motivation naturally led him to

Peking Opera, one of the great cultural treasures of China, and inspired him to adopt aspects of

theatrical roles including vocal style and range linked to stock characters. He also turned to a

traditional Peking Opera form, the *Banqiang Ti* as well as the two basic contrasting styles that

make up traditional Chinese music, *Xi Pi* and *Er Huang*. Zhang’s motivation to introduce

Chinese culture to the world was further reinforced in his choice of the piano as the best vehicle

through which to achieve this goal. He claimed the piano, with its ability to capture a range of

color, sonorities, and nuance to be “the most powerful and universal of Western instruments.”

For Zhang, bringing together the great traditions of Chinese culture, especially Peking Opera,

with the Western piano was the ideal combination for writing *Pi Huang*.\(^91\)

\(^90\) Ibid.

\(^91\) Ibid.
The well-known Chinese poem, *Great View Pavilion Couplet of Kunming*, also inspired Zhang in shaping the structures and meaning of *Pi Huang* to the two-column structure of the poem as found in the alignments with nature and his admiration of the historical hero Fei Yue and his outrage. Like Peking Opera, this ancient poem from the 18th century held a direct appeal for the composer.

The influence of nature is present in both piano works, though it is characterized by contrasting approaches. In *Pi Huang*, Zhang captured the flowing water and light breezes of Dian Lake, using a descriptive approach inspired by the innocence of his young teenage years living and studying near the lakeshore. The calm of the writing contrasts sharply with *Nature No. 1*, where the more forceful elements of nature are brought forward in the brutal tone clusters that cover a wide expanse of the keyboard. Zhang draws the listener’s attention to the demise of the climate, and endeavors to inspire humankind to awareness. Zhang’s movement from an inward focus to an external view that uses his role as a composer to address environmental deterioration is readily apparent.

Zhang was inspired by the dualism and balance of interrelated opposites in Chinese *Yin/Yang* philosophy in shaping the compositional techniques and musical languages of the two works. The principle of dualism was applied in shaping the styles, formal structure, and musical narratives of both *Pi Huang* and *Nature No. 1*, and Zhang further pursued balance between the two inseparable opposites of *Yin/Yang* to create a harmony between traditional and non-traditional performance practices. Sensing that inside-the-piano techniques had shifted out of balance with the traditional keyboard approach, he was motivated to invent the half-key and post-sound resonating pedal performance methods. Other *Yin/Yang* illustrations in *Nature No. 1*
include dynamic changes, shifts in harmonic rhythm, arrangement of modes, choice of chords, texture contrasts, and opposing titles for the movements.

It is interesting that both compositions chosen for this study display the influence of Chinese landscape painting. Zhang absorbed the atmospheric perspectives of the “six distances” to create an enhanced sense of space through transforming visual concepts into musical gestures and textures. To the basic six distances found in Pi Huang, and in Nature No. 1, Zhang expanded the practice by introducing the element of “leaving blank”, a concept in painting that allowed space for the imagination to engage rather than providing a curated experience. In Nature No. 1, his innovative approach was to translate this visual device into musical silences and toward expanding space between notes through a non-traditional use of the pedal.

Through an introduction of Zhao Zhang’s life experience and the close examination of the specific influences drawn from Chinese culture, nature, and Western music in Pi Huang and Nature No. 1, this study offers an overview of the development of Zhang’s musical insights and compositional styles from his early to present periods. The comparison of these two piano works reveals a unique employment of stylistic synthesis and contrast. The study will serve as a resource for later researchers in investigating Zhang’s compositional output, and provide pianists with a greater understanding through which to guide and refine their performances.
APPENDIX—PERMISSION LETTER FROM COMPOSER

Re: Official Request-Use of the manuscripts in Shiqi Gu’s Doctoral Document
from: Zhao Zhang <840389806@qq.com >
to: Shiqi Gu <gushiqlsh@163.com >
date: Sun, Jul 5, 2020 at 14:37

Hello Shiqi, I hereby give you permission to use the requested manuscripts and scores as musical excerpts in your dissertation.

Zhao Zhang 7/5/2020

from: Shiqi Gu <gushiqlsh@163.com >
to: Zhao Zhang <840389806@qq.com >
date: Sun, Jul 4, 2020 at 15:22
subject: Re: Official Request-Use of the manuscripts in Shiqi Gu’s Doctoral Document

Dear Professor Zhang Zhao,

I am in the final stage of my dissertation document writing, and would like to formally request permission to use your manuscripts as musical excerpts in the document.


Sincerely,
Shiqi Gu
REFERENCES


