

Cultural Revolution and Musical Reform: The Yellow River Piano Concerto and its  
Cultural-Historical Importance

Christy Yu

MUS110: Introduction to Music History and Culture

Professor Amanda Hsieh

March 27, 2019

The *Yellow River Piano Concerto*,<sup>1</sup> arranged by a team of 4 led by Yin Chengzong, is one of the most well-known musical pieces in modern day China. It has come a long way to be where it is right now, which is generally praised and viewed by the Chinese as a symbol of national pride and identity. The concerto had been arranged from the *Yellow River Cantata*, which was inspired by a poem, a patriotic and sentimental poem inspired by a hardworking farmer who lived next to the Yellow River. Although the piano concerto was only premiered in 1970, the cantata by Xian Xinghai dates back to 1939, and original poem by Guang Weiran dates even further back to 1938. Originally created as a political tool by Jiang Qing, leader of the Gang of Four, this piece of music had been banned from being performed due to the political turmoil during the time period around the Cultural Revolution, but had also reached the peak of how much meaning and history a specific piece of music is able to carry.

Although Jiang Qing made no contributions to the music's actual composition and arrangement, she was the person who inspired and allowed for this piece of music to be created, and contributed significantly to China's reformation in various artforms, especially in music, during the Cultural Revolution. As Mao's fourth wife, Jiang is often referred to, by Western scholars, as Madame Mao. Although she was Mao Zedong's wife, she did not completely agree with all of his political movements. As she gained power by being Mao's personal political and "cultural watchdog,"<sup>2</sup> she would soon also become the leader of a radical revolutionary group named the Gang of Four.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yin Chengzong, Chu Wanghua, Sheng Lihong and Liu Zhuang, *The Yellow River Piano Concerto*, YouTube, arranged by Yin Chengzong, Chu Wanghua, Sheng Lihong and Liu Zhuang, performed by Yundi Li and China NCPA Concert Hall Orchestra, posted by Shaogang Huang, February 5, 2015, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://youtu.be/YPF1FOuxVQw>

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Jung Eian Tham, "The Influence of Socialist Realism on the Yellow River Piano Concerto" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 2009).

Music as an artform was largely debated in the pre-PRC (People's Republic of China) era. Musicians, politicians, and revolutionaries had varying views on Western music especially. There were two main views on Western Classical music: the pro Western Classical music, and the anti Western Classical music viewpoints. While both beliefs were driven by a desire to reform the existing Chinese feudalistic traditional forms of music, the two views took different approaches.<sup>3</sup> The pro Western Classical music group, on one hand, believed in molding traditional Chinese music into the Western musical world and thus gaining a spot in the world's stage of international music. When Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution started, however, this type of ideology was disallowed. Instead, the Red Guards (radical revolutionary student volunteers) made sure everyone was against the integration of Western classical music by prosecuting those that supported it. Music for the new Chinese nation had to be completely separate and different from the Western "capitalistic" music, and easily understood by commoners who have not had higher music education. Some musicians who held this belief, including Xian Xinghai, who composed the *Yellow River Cantata*, and Nie Er, who wrote the *March of the Volunteers* which would become China's national anthem, actually partially implemented Western techniques into their music. The important part is, however, that instead of gravitating towards the Westernized music theories and techniques, musicians such as Xian and Nie used these Western techniques to serve the purpose of writing nationalistic songs for the proletariat. In fact, this was a common theme with everything that the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) did in the early to mid 20th century. Everything had to be done for and by the proletariat, which are the workers and farmers of the lowest class. As the People's Republic of

---

<sup>3</sup> Chun-Ya Chang, "The Yellow River Piano Concerto: A Pioneer of Western Classical Music in Modern China and its Social-Political Context" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 2017).

China was founded by Mao in 1949, the CCP needed ways to unify such a large land as China. “Red” songs and choruses were a big part of their campaigns and efforts to create a nationalistic identity. This was when the *Yellow River Cantata* was largely broadcasted, leaving an impression on Jiang which would eventually lead her to ask Yin to arrange the piano concerto. Western classical music and instruments, during this time period in China, were criticized as they were seen as symbols and representations of capitalism, and too complicated and bourgeois to be understood by the people: the common people, the proletariats, the undereducated workers and farmers. Simple songs that praised the land which China occupies, the hardworking people themselves, and the leaders of the CCP, were created and broadcasted, while everything else were banned: older, more traditional ballets and operas were considered to have included too much feudalistic ideology, while Western music were too capitalistic. It was even said, by a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, that “listening to Western classical music muddles your class’ viewpoint for understanding problems.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, one of Jiang Qing’s arguments on the negative effects of Western music involved questioning the inaccurate racial representation and blatant orientalism in *Madama Butterfly* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, which is a controversial topic still discussed today. Jiang refers to Western music as unhealthy, calling out *Madama Butterfly* for its unfair shaming of Japanese women.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Jiang had a very forward-looking perspective with which she challenged social norms, artistic portrayals, and their accuracies and inaccuracies.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ma Tingheng, “Xiyang zichan jieji yinyue dui wode duhai [Poisonous impacts of the Western Bourgeoisie music on me].” *Guangming Daily* (1965): 150.

<sup>5</sup> Jiang Qing, *Jiang Qing tongzhi lun wenyi* [Discussion on literature and arts by comrade Jiang Qing] (Beijing: Beijing Press, 1968), 62.

While the original *Yellow River Cantata* had eight parts, each with a patriotic name and nationalistic lyrics and meanings, the eight separate parts were not able to be all fitted into the piano concerto. For the arrangement of the piano concerto, Jiang Qing ordered that the lyrics and words be removed, while the melodies of each of the eight parts of the cantata were either kept, left out, or combined together to produce four separate movements for the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*. Each movement is given a patriotic name again to provide a setting and backstory for the music. They are named, in order of performance, "The Song of the Yellow River Boatman," "Ode to the Yellow River," "The Wrath of the Yellow River," and "Defend the Yellow River." Each movement provides a different perspective on what the Yellow river, also known as the Yangtze River, means to the Chinese as a whole nation, and tells an almost narrative story. The first movement, "The Song of the Yellow River Boatman", is comparatively the shortest movement, and expands only on a very simple and short motif, DEDEDBAB; as the movement develops, it never strays far from this motif, which imitates the rhythmic calling and morale-boosting singing of a boatman when he tries to row a boat up or down a fast-moving stream of river, which is generally the case with the Yellow River. The ascending and immediately descending scales that follow in the orchestra accompaniment parts imitate well the rise and fall of the waves of the river, providing a vivid image of a harsh situation through which the boatman bravely fights. Then comes a more expressive section, which paints the picture of a calmer part of the river, on which the boatman relaxes after his long struggles with rowing in the fast rushing waters. Eventually the movement pick the pace back up, and the boatman is back to the dangerous and yet exciting work. This movement sets the tone and

background of the conditions of the Yellow River and its people, which leads into the later movements that tell more extended and detailed stories.

The second movement that follows has a slower tempo marking and is called “Ode to the Yellow River.” This movement begins with a beautiful and profound melody on the cello, which is a Western instrument. As the arrangement of the piano concerto began, the arrangers soon began to realize the difficulties of composing a full, grandiose concerto with only the traditional Chinese instruments, which were comparatively narrower in range and less diverse in timbre.<sup>6</sup> Jiang Qing, while being a radical revolutionist, believed in borrowing the range and timbre or Western instruments to add fullness to the symphonic piece, and she justified her usage of Western instruments, which was a big taboo in Pre-PRC China, by claiming that these instruments are only to serve her revolution. She believed that the vessel through which the music is delivered did not matter, as long as the heart, intention, and the message of the music was clearly for the revolution. Following the cello line, the piano soloist comes in and paints through the melody a picture of hardworking laborers that had lived alongside the Yellow River for thousands of years. The Yellow River, geographically, spans 9 different provinces of China, and is one of the most iconic features of the land that most areas of China can easily relate to. Therefore, by praising the people of the Yellow River, the concerto brings people of China together, and helps Jiang, Mao, and the CCP create a national identity for the newly founded PRC. Towards the end of the movement, the music expands in range, and becomes more and more grandiose. Here, the arrangers even cleverly incorporated a short theme of Nie Er’s *March of the Volunteers* (Chinese national anthem today) into the orchestra part, hinting that the rising

---

<sup>6</sup> Yin Chengzong, “How the Piano Concerto ‘Yellow River’ was Composed,” *Chinese Literature* 11 (1974): 96.

new China, comprised of the people of the Yellow River, would work together as one nation under Mao, and become a very strong state in the world. This movement credits the Yellow River as an major origin source for the Chinese civilization, and uses it as an embodiment of the Chinese spirit.

The third movement, "Wrath of the Yellow River," begins with a single line on the bamboo flute, which is a common traditional Chinese instruments that produces a clear and crisp sound. Following it, the solo piano imitates the techniques and sound patterns of a guzheng, a traditional Chinese string instrument. Although the movement starts in a light and hopeful major key with a moderate tempo, this is merely a transition from the brave spirits of the boatmen in the first moment, the unity of the land in the second movement, to difficulties that the people would have to face. The music suddenly turns darker with the piano's sudden low arpeggios. This seems to portray the oppression and the suffering that the people of the Yellow River have had to endure, and keeps climbing to a higher catharsis as the movement progresses. The amount of anger and oppression is apparent in both the solo piano part, and orchestral part, and one can easily interpret this as related to the Second Sino-Japanese War. Because it was such a brutal war, the Chineses authorities made sure to take advantage of the victory to quickly evoke national pride and patriotism upon the foundation of the nation after the victory against the Japanese. Past the dark and angry passage, through the people's suffering and bravery, the music gradually reaches a climax and returns to the main melody that is comprised of traditionally Chinese folk music elements, namely in the pentatonic scale.

The fourth movement, "Defend the Yellow River," begins forte in the orchestra, with the brass section playing a melody that is almost combative. This creates the image of troops of

high morale who are ready to fight their battle and defend what they care for, which is their homeland in the case of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Yellow River as metaphor of the music. Maintaining the pentatonic style of the melody, the music develops through grand and victorious passages, until it becomes quieter, with the flutes' ascending and descending scales to once again imitate the river's waves, as in the first movement. This suggests that the defense of the Yellow River, metaphorically, had been successful, and the river had now calmed down to a peaceful state once again. After a celebratory march-like passage that visualizes the fierce soldiers, the melody of the folk song "The East is Red," which we can almost consider the de facto national anthem during the Cultural revolution. The lyrics of this song praises Chairman Mao, calling him "the people's great saviour." By incorporating this well-known melody into this final movement, Yin, the other arrangers, and Jiang provoke once again the sense of belonging and national identity to feel patriotic. Because of its fame, no lyric is needed when this song is quoted in the concerto. This is a clever and neat technique to induce certain patriotic meaning to the concerto without explicitly expressing messages with words or lyrics. Towards the end of this movement, the melody even hints at the melody of the infamous Internationale, which again showcases pride and ambition and peaceful intentions in international matters.

Music as an artform had always been generally viewed as a means of entertainment and pleasure, but in reality, it has historically served significantly more purpose than for leisure and enjoyment. It could also be a powerful political tool, for example, used to make a strong statement to create effects in the mass populations. By combining traditional Chinese instruments to preserve the easily understood style of music, and the Western instruments which can be expressive in more ways, Yin and Jiang created a masterpiece of a concerto that



helped the Gang of Four in their political campaign. Although this piece of music was patriotic, it was still banned during the Cultural Revolution due to its use of Western instruments, especially for its focus on the piano, as it was a piano concerto. Eventually, after the Cultural Revolution had passed, the ban on the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* was lifted, and it continues to live and thrive today as both an enjoyable and musically colorful piece of music, and something that carried more meaning than one would expect, serving as a reminder for the Chinese people and the rest of the world for the struggles of the Great Proletarian Revolution.

## REFERENCES

- Chang, Chun-Ya. "The Yellow River Piano Concerto: A Pioneer of Western Classical Music in Modern China and its Social-Political Context." DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 2017.
- Jiang Qing. Jiang Qing tongzhi lun wenyi [Discussion on literature and arts by comrade Jiang Qing]. Beijing: Beijing Press, 1968.
- Ma Tingheng. "Xiyang zichan jieji yinyue dui wode duhai [Poisonous impacts of the Western Bourgeoisie music on me]." Guangming Daily (1965): 150.
- Tham, Gloria Jung Eian. "The Influence of Socialist Realism on the Yellow River Piano Concerto." DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 2009.
- Yin Chengzong. "How the Piano Concerto 'Yellow River' was Composed." Chinese Literature 11 (1974).