

# **A Comparison of National Characteristics of Chinese and Japanese Art Songs in the Early 20th Century**

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**Abstract:** In the early 20th century, Japanese school songs and Chinese school songs movement flourished, opening a new page in music industry in the two countries. After the initial learning stage, Chinese and Japanese composers began to creatively use the techniques from western musicians, and constantly absorb the nutrition of traditional culture of themselves, and write a large number of artistic songs with distinctive characteristics of their nation. The development of Chinese and Japanese art songs in the early 20th century experienced a very similar process, showing the artistic characteristics of the same Oriental Han cultural circle. However, due to different historical, political and cultural backgrounds, they show different national characteristics at the consciousness, the use of sound and poetry, musical structure and techniques in art songs.

## **1. Introduction**

Art song is a kind of song written by professional composers with strongly literary lyrics, which is different from ordinary folk songs, operas and pop music and has a more rigorous artistic paradigm[1]. From the 18th century to the 19th century, with the formation of German and Austrian romantic literature trend, romantic music gradually prevailed in European countries[2]. Due to the profound social contradictions in European countries at that time, most of the music works showed the contradiction between ideal and reality, and expressed the musicians' ideal pursuit and yearning for life, for society, for freedom and value through various themes. The works expressed emotions, artistic conception and ideas through literary poetry[3]. In less than a century, Lied reached a very high artistic level, became an important part of European romantic music. A large number of Lied master composers such as Schumann, Schubert, Brahms and Wolfe came on the stage. In the middle and late 19th century, Lied had begun to spread to East Asia and became the first paradigm for oriental music to learn from western music[4].

## **2. The Germination and Development of Chinese and Japanese Art Songs in the Early 20th Century**

China and Japan are very close because of Han nationality culture. Since Han and Tang dynasty, the cultures of the two countries have influenced each other. In many fields, they also have basically the same similar spiritual value and aesthetic pursuit. However, since the 19th century, World has experienced turbulence for more than a century. China and Japan, as the two most important countries in East Asia, successively implemented The Meiji Reform and The Reform Movement of 1898, and led to different destinies of the two countries. As a western music genre originated from Europe, after its introduction into China and Japan, art songs, combined with their different cultural trends and social changes, have produced different social effects. Therefore, the similar and different national characteristics embodied in the early art songs have had a far-reaching impact on the development of Chinese and Japanese art songs.

### **2.1 The Germination and Development of Japanese Art Songs in the Early 20th Century.**

After the Meiji Restoration of Japan in 1868, Japan's national strength gradually became strong. In 1872, the reform government issued the law of education, which made requirements for music

education in primary and secondary schools. However, due to insufficient preparation and lack of specific measures, the two subjects of “singing” and “instrument” were considered as “temporary absence”. In 1878, Isawa Shuji and Megata Tanetarou submitted their advice on music education to the Ministry of Education. In 1879, the government set up the Music Research Institute in order to investigate and study music education, and Isawa Shuji served as the head. Since then, Japanese music has begun to implement comprehensive school singing education, which marked that Japan began to learn from the West in music. In the early days of the establishment of the Music Research Institute, in addition to the responsible Isawa Shuji, Kozu Senzaburo, Yamase Shouin, Uchida Yayichi, Shiba Fujitsune, Ue Sanemichi, and Okakura Tenshin, who later had a meritorious influence on Modern Japanese Fine art, all participated in the work. From 1880 (Meiji 13<sup>th</sup>) to 1882 (Meiji 15<sup>th</sup>), American music educator Luther Whiting Mason also helped Japan fully receive training in western music. From June 1883 (Meiji 16<sup>th</sup>), after Mason left Japan, as a teacher of the German navy military band, Franz Eckert had begun to conduct the Music Research Institute. German music, especially Lied began to massively and rapidly enter into Japan.

In 1887 (the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Meiji period), the music research institute was upgraded to the Tokyo music school, which systematically trained a large number of composers for Japan, such as Taki Rentarou, Yamada Kosaku and so on. They wrote a large number of school singing (kindergarten singing, primary school singing style, etc.), which are basically divided into three categories. The first kind is based on Western tunes, creating or filling in Japanese lyrics; The second mainly takes “*Ancient and modern collection*” as the word, coupled with the melody of Japanese Gagaku, Zokugaku and Children sing; The third is the school singing that creates new words and new melodies. The lyrics of the songs are catchy and the melody is sweet. Among them, “*The moon of the barren city*”, “*Flowers*”, “*Hakone Bali*” and other tracks have a high artistic level.

In 1901, Taki Rentarou, the first Japanese to compose music in the form of western music, went to Germany to study and composed the piano work “*Regret*” in 1903. In 1910, Yamada Kosaku went to Germany to study. After that, he successively published the orchestral music “*Prelude in D major*” and the symphony “*Victory and peace*” as first Japanese composer. Most of these works follow the creative techniques of Max CF Bruch (1838-1920), the composer of German mid-term romantic school. After that, influenced by Wagner, Strauss and other Late Romantics, Yamada published music poems such as “*The flower of mandala*” and “*The gate of darkness*”. After they returned to Japan, their music styles began to change greatly. The creative form and content of songs became more mature and colorful, and they began to think about the question that how to write their own Japanese music.

## **2.2 The Germination and Development of Chinese Art Songs in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.**

After the Sino Japanese War of 1894-1895, some people with lofty ideals in China successively went abroad to study for the country, most of whom went to Japan. In the field of music, early Chinese musicians such as Zeng zhizhai (studying in Japan from 1901 to 1907), Xiao Youmei (studying in Japan from 1901 to 1909), Shen Xingong (studying in Japan from 1902 to 1903) and Li Shutong (studying in Japan from 1905 to 1910) went to Japan to study. At that time, Japan's “School singing” developed very rapidly. Composers and music educators responded positively to the government's call and wrote a large number of influential works. After returning to China, the musicians imitated the form of Japanese school singing and wrote a large number of songs. These songs came into being with the public schools, which were different from the private schools. Like Japanese school singing, they mainly filled in words or wrote new words with Western or Japanese melodies, which we call “School songs”. In 1903, Shen Xingong returned to China and taught in Nanyang primary school. He was the first person to set up a “Singing” curriculum and devote himself to “School songs”. It promptly received a warm response from the society. Shen Xingong practiced it and wrote more than 180 school songs in his life. He has successively edited and published 3 albums of school singing collection, 6 of “*Recompiled school singing collection*” and 4 of “*Singing collection of the Republic of China*”, and translated and published “*The didactics of singing teaching in primary schools*”. With the wide spread of New Culture Movement, the school

songs have played a role in opening up the wisdom of the people and encouraging reform. Liang Qichao once appealed: "Once we engage in education, singing is an indispensable subject in the school." But generally speaking, musicians in this period still have a vague understanding of the social function of music, and their works are mainly from imitation, which is still relatively low in terms of the overall artistic level.

Before and after the May 4th movement in 1919, the New Culture Movement began to flourish in China and once again set off a wave of studying abroad in the music, but this time, most of the destinations of the study were European and American countries. Yang zhongzi, Xiao Youmei, Zhao Yuanren, Qing Zhu, Li Shuhua, Wang Guangqi and others have successively studied in Europe and the United States. After training in Western professional music and composition techniques, these musicians began to try to write more professional art songs. In 1916, with the support of Cai Yuanpei, President of Peking University, "Peking University music studying institute" was established. This is the earliest professional music institution in China. Its purpose is "to cultivate professional musicians, while transmitting western music (including theory and technology) and preserving and developing the Chinese traditional music." Besides Xiao Youmei, there are also Erhu fiddle Master Liu Tianhua, Guqin Master Wang Lu, Kunqu opera Master Wu Mei, calligraphy and seal cutting master and composer Yang zhongzi. At the beginning of 1922, Xiao Youmei wrote and published the *"Asking"* and other art songs, which were included in *"JinYue Chu Ji"*, which is the first collection of art songs with piano accompaniment in China. Since then, a large number of excellent art songs have been composed, such as Zhao Yuanren's *"Cannot help missing him"*, *"Rhyme of the sea"*, Yang zhongzi's *"song of Chinese workers abroad"*, *"Dialogue with the plum"*, Huang Zi's *"Those are not flowers"*, *"Nostalgia"*, *"Spring Song"*, *"Three wishes of the roses"*, and Qing Zhu's *"The river go to the East"* and *"I live at the head of the Yangtze River"*. The works are the symbol of great progress of China's early art songs in terms of composition.

### 3. A Comparison of National Characteristics of Chinese and Japanese Art Songs in the Early 20th Century

Generally speaking, the creation of early Chinese art songs is similar to that of Japan. While using western music creation techniques, it strives to embody the characteristics of the national music language and style, which are obviously reflected in the following two aspects: First, in terms of aesthetic characteristics, Chinese and Japanese early art songs are mostly presented unreal life in the freehand music structure, different from most of the western lied which has performed the realistic society. For example, the work "farewell" was taken from the tune of the Czech composer Antonio Podvershach, and was later composed into three works *"Dreaming of Home and Mother"*, *"Travel Sorrow"* and *"Farewell"* by American J. P. Odway, Japanese Indou Kyukei and Li Shutong respectively. Through the comparative analysis of in creation and singing, although the tune is the consistent, we can clearly distinguish the different styles of the first song and the last two songs, *"Dreaming of Home and Mother"* is the style of black folk songs, while *"Travel Sorrow"* and *"Farewell"* show different Oriental aesthetic implications from black folk songs through lyrics expressed by borrowing things and singing with the characteristics of the times. Secondly, they both seem to hope to reflect the characteristics of their own national music through traditional tunes and melodies, and conform to the aesthetic paradigm of western music also. For example, Yamada Kosaku's *"Red Dragonfly"* uses the pentatonic scale, *"This road"* uses the hexatonic scale, Taki Rentarou's *"Moon of desolating city"* uses the miyako bushi scale, Huang Zi's *"Those are not flowers"* uses the pentatonic scale, and Qingzhu's *"I live at the head of the Yangtze River"* uses Major. However, in terms of writing techniques, Chinese and Japanese musicians still imitated Western art songs. Take Xiao Youmei and Yamada Kosaku, who studied in Tokyo music school and Germany successively, for example, Xiao Youmei's *"Asking"* has simple musical lyrics, neat counterpoint between poetry and music, and has only four phrases with initially stating, repeating or Variable repeating, developing the theme and ending the whole music. *"Red Dragonfly"* has 3/4 beat, and the whole song has 8 bars. It is composed of neat phrases by one-part form. The

monosyllabic structure, composed of neat, balanced and symmetrical phrases, strictly refers to the creating mode of western music.

Although Chinese and Japanese early art songs have similar taste in national characteristics, they have great differences.

First of all, from the perspective of histories, their different experience determined their different national characteristics. Japan implemented the music reform through the Meiji Restoration led by the government, focusing on the aesthetic function of music from the beginning. With the success of the Meiji Restoration, the victory of the Sino Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the continuous growth of Japan's national strength, all industries in Japan have thrived. People are full of longing for nature, hope and reverie for life. Most of the themes are the description of natural scenery or the memory and thinking of good life, carrying and expressing the voice of heart of people at that time. These themes are short and exquisite, full of elegant, relaxed and warm life atmosphere. By comparison, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, China society was in chaos with weak national strength, corruption, and warlord scuffle. Chinese art songs had to grope forward in the darkness. This passive reform could not get the strong support of the government, resulting in the final reform being neither systematic nor thoroughgoing. At that time, weak China could not pay as much attention to music education as Japan, music majors did not get the money from the government to study abroad, and most of them changed to music halfway. In 1904, Yang Zhongzi studied science in France. Music theory and piano can only be taught by himself. He was admitted to the Geneva Conservatory of music in 1910, majoring in piano and music theory. In August 1910, Zhao Yuanren went to Cornell University to study. His major was mathematics, and music was just an optional subject. In 1912, Qing Zhu went to Germany to study law at Berlin University and studied piano and composition theory. Li Shuhua, who went to France in 1919, was admitted to the Lyon Conservatory of music through part-time-work and part-time-study. Wang Guangqi went to Frankfurt in April 1920 to study political economics. In the autumn of 1924, Huang Zi went to Oberlin College in Ohio to study psychology and took music theory, solfeggio, harmony and other music courses. Many musicians and educators tried to arouse people's national consciousness and save the country in danger through music. Music pioneers try to express strong national feelings through writing traditional music. Therefore, China's early art songs initially had a strong national consciousness, with the desire and appeal of political reformation and opening the wisdom of the people, which mostly reflected a complex national emotion of worrying about the country and the people. Xiao Youmei's *"Asking"* is a perplexity about the future of the country, Huang Zi's *"Missing in spring"* is a memory of the past, Qing Zhu's *"The river goes East"* shows the spirit of the motherland, and Tan Xiaolin's *"Farewell"* is a helpless sigh about the reality.

Secondly, in the choice of music and poetry, early Japanese composers often used contemporary literary and poetry works, while Chinese composers often used more classical poetry. For example, Ono Tadasuke's *"Evening primrose"* took from the same generation famous Japanese poet Takehisa Yumeji's work, and Yamada's *"Red Dragonfly"* was the poet Miki Rofu at that time. Huang Zi's *"Those are not flowers"*, *"The river goes East"* and Qing Zhu's *"I live at the head of the Yangtze River"* are taken from the poems of famous poets such as Bai Juyi in the Tang Dynasty, Su Shi and Li Zhiyi in the Song Dynasty. As we all know, Chinese ancient poems such as *"The songs of Chu"*, Tang poetry, Song poetry and Yuan poetry have relatively strict language style and rhythm format. Ancient poems are easy to read, and have a strong sense of rhythm. They are organically combined with people's thoughts and feelings to form a wonderful language atmosphere. Ancient poetry is generally short, which makes it unable to break through the restrictions of structure and length, so this kind of such works always concentrate and express their feelings as much as possible, needn't too much description. It is the so-called "two sentences took three years, one word made full of tears". After the Meiji Restoration, under the impact of foreign literature, the traditional Japanese poetry began to gradually develop from the form of expression to the subject content, from the language habit to the rhythm of poetry to more free new style poetry. These beneficial attempts and innovations increased the form of music and enriched the content of music. Therefore, although the lyrics of early Japanese art songs were not as strict as those of ancient Chinese poetry, the works

adapted to the needs of Japanese social and national psychology and the language expression at that time.

In addition, in terms of musical structure and accompaniment, China's early art songs initially focused on imitating and learning from Japan, but after a period of development, they gradually explored a creative path with Chinese characteristics. With the intense of the national relationship and broken war between China and Japan, more musicians began to give up Japan and choose to study in Europe and the United States, making China's early art songs gradually get rid of the Japanese mode. In 1919, Zhao Yuanren made a new attempt in style based on "Going up the mountain" wrote by Hu Shi's new poetry, and incorporated a distinctive Chinese style into the melody, which was quite different from the school music at that time. In particular, Huang Zi's works further perfectly integrates new poetry, Chinese style and western music style, raise Chinese art songs to a new level, and fully shows the artistic characteristics of Chinese art songs. Early Chinese art songs generally used single or two parts structure, and then expressed different colors by introducing discordant harmony into the melody. By complicating and independence of accompaniment, the music is very colorful through changeable rhythm. Especially from the perspective of accompaniment writing, Japanese composers emphasize the atmosphere of music in the accompaniment. The purpose of accompaniment is to create a theme atmosphere. Most of the accompaniment parts are subordinate to the lyrics. Therefore, the accompaniment of Japanese art songs generally adopts a relatively simple size harmonic sound structure and musical form structure. However, the composers of early Chinese art songs, they paid attention to the accompaniment part. The accompaniment of the song is no less than the voice part. It has distinctive harmonic characteristics, rhythm, independent musical structure and musical logic, forming a unique musical tension.

#### **4. Conclusion**

China and Japan are the two most important countries in East Asia. It is necessary to strengthen cultural exchanges between the two countries. The excellent Chinese and Japanese traditional culture is the resource and fertile in where two countries characteristics are rooted. By comparison with the early art songs in the two countries, many differences was found, Only by profound understanding and grasping the national characteristics rooted in excellent traditional culture, can we produce excellent works and promote development of music industry of the two countries.

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