

# Research on the Cross-cultural Narrative Effect of Traditional Chinese Music

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**Abstract:** As an important component of fine traditional Chinese culture, promoting cross-cultural communication of traditional music is the theme of the “Culture Going-Out” Strategy. This paper introduces narrative theory into the cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese music and separates five paradigms of its overseas narrative: Japan’s geographical relationship dimension, South Korea’s cultural trade dimension, Southeast Asia’s historical immigration dimension, the United States’ political security dimension, and Italy’s cultural sharing dimension. It also puts forward suggestions for reconstructing the cross-cultural narrative system of traditional Chinese music based on the analysis of the relationship between the narrative subject, narrative strategy, narrative discourse and narrative effect.

**Keywords:** traditional Chinese music, cross-cultural narrative, traditional culture, The Belt and Road, “Culture Going-Out” Strategy

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## 1 Introduction

At the closing ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, performances with Chinese unique cultural rhymes, such as “Loving the Willows” and “Farewell,” attracted worldwide attention, showing the hidden and powerful effect of music narration. As an American scholar Edward Cone said, “Music is a language,” “so there are a lot of discussions about what music tells and how to tell—indeed, music can tell anything (Cone 1974/2011: 1)”. Promoting the cross-cultural narrative of Chinese traditional music is an inevitable move under the initiative of the “the Belt and Road” and the blueprint of “Culture Going-Out.”

Traditional Chinese music can be traced back to the Huangdi period, while its overseas communication began in the pre-Qin period. With the development of economic and trade exchanges between China and foreign

countries, cross-cultural exchanges of traditional music have been carried out. In the era of globalization and information technology, the cross-cultural narrative of Chinese traditional music faces many new challenges, such as how to integrate into the world cultural family while maintaining its characteristics and how to enhance the cultural soft power while enhancing the cultural identity of Chinese culture. Analyzing the current narrative effect of Chinese traditional music and summarizing the gains and losses of historical experience will help clarify the obstacles and improve the narrative effect.

## 2 Five Dimensions of Cross-cultural Narrative Effect of Traditional Chinese Music

In the long-term historical practice, the cross-cultural narrative of Chinese traditional music yielded fruitful results and established a cognitive foundation around the world. However, in modern times, until “Western learning spread eastward,” the cross-cultural communication of Chinese traditional music progressed slowly, and some audiences formed an impression of aging, rigid and outdated traditional Chinese music. The overseas narrative of Chinese traditional music in the modern and contemporary period has been seriously hindered due to the long-term weakness of national strength, serious cultural trade deficit and other unfavorable conditions. Generally speaking, the cross-cultural narrative effect of Chinese traditional music varies significantly in different periods and regions.

### 2.1 *The geographical relationship dimension in Japan*

Chinese traditional music has a long history of communication in Japan, benefiting from geographical location and profound origin in the two countries. Even today, Chinese music still shows an important influence on Japanese music. For example, at the opening ceremony of the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games, the entrance music of Japanese sumo wrestlers was an elegant tune originating from China.

Since the early Qin Dynasty, traditional Chinese culture, including agricultural production technology and musical instruments, came to Japan, with the development of water transportation. In the Tang Dynasty, Chinese musical instruments, music scores, and music rituals, were systematically introduced into Japan. Japan also set up special music institutions such as Gagaku-ry (雅樂寮), Nei chiao fang (内教坊) and Drum-Blowing Department (鼓吹司), following the music management system of the Tang Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty, Ming Yue was widely spread among the mainstream people in Nagasaki and Kyoto. In the Qing Dynasty, Chinese songs such as Nine Linked Rings were very popular in Nagasaki, and often were taken as one of the compulsory music courses for children in upper-class families (Wang Zhiguo 2021: 33).

However, since modern times, the attitude of Japanese society towards Chinese culture changed significantly. In particular, the rise of Japanese nationalism and the outbreak of the war of aggression against China made it impossible for the two countries to have large-scale and effective communication in music and culture. Entering the contemporary era, especially since the Chinese Reform and Opening-up, the music and cultural exchanges between China and Japan have opened up a new situation. Two new trends emerged: Folk forces became an important driving force, including Chinese musicians living in Japan and Japanese local folk

forces; Besides, commercial interests became another important driving force. A typical case in the contemporary music industry was the success of Twelve Girls Band.

Overall, the Japanese audience's interest in Chinese music focuses on music with both contemporary style and traditional charm, which implies the factors of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the recognition of Chinese culture by mainstream Japanese people.

## ***2.2 The cultural trade dimension in South Korea***

In ancient times, the transmission path, and narrative characteristics of traditional Chinese music in the Korean Peninsula were similar to those of Japan. Traditional music and culture in the Korean Peninsula have a deep Chinese mark, such as local representative instruments, Xuanqin (玄琴) and gayageum (伽倻琴), which are all transformed from Chinese musical instruments.

After the reform and opening, especially the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, the two countries conducted music communication frequently, including music-academic exchanges and music performance exchanges. In terms of performing arts, the Beijing Opera Academy of China, China Disabled People's Art Troupe, and Wuhan Peking Opera Art Troupe, have all performed in South Korea, demonstrating the cultural charm of traditional Chinese opera. In addition, the Central National Orchestra, the Japanese Music Group and the Korean Central National Orchestra jointly founded the Asian National Orchestra. At the same time, a large number of non-governmental exchanges have emerged, especially in the field of popular music and youth culture. China South Korea Song Festival and "Korean Wave" are the most typical.

Overall, the cross-cultural narrative of traditional Chinese music in South Korea presents the following three characteristics: Firstly, the audiences of the two countries objectively have a high degree of cultural commonality, and the consistency in language, culture, and customs, brings convenience to cultural communication to some extent. Secondly, the popular music industry represented by the "Korean Wave" has formed an industrial cluster effect with the help of mass media, showing strong penetration and commercial value. In comparison, the Chinese music and cultural industry face a huge cultural trade deficit. Third, due to the rapid improvement of South Korea's national strength and the rising trend of nationalism, some Korean audiences have many misunderstandings and even discrimination against Chinese music and culture.

## ***2.3 The immigration dimension in Southeast Asia***

Southeast Asia, formerly known as Nanyang, plays an important role in China's Maritime Silk Road. Traditional Chinese music is widely spread in this region, which is driven by both official and folk forces, presenting a scene of multiple subjects, multiple channels and large-scale.

Officially, Ming treasure voyages (Zheng He's voyages to the West) in the Ming Dynasty promoted economic and cultural exchanges. In addition, accompanied by two population migrations "going to Southeast Asia" in history, a large number of Chinese migrated there. The first time was the transportation of Chinese workers from the Opium War to the early 20th century; The second one was from the early 20th century to the early 1950s.

Local audiences in Southeast Asia have high cultural recognition of Chinese traditional music culture, and

massive market demand for cultural consumption, due to the high proportion of Chinese in the total population. The history of traditional Chinese operas performing in Southeast Asia has exceeded 150 years. At the content level, the most typical is the wide spread of local Chinese operas represented by Nanguan (Helen REES 2014: 40–54). Cantonese opera is also widely spread there.

In recent years, the spread of traditional Chinese music in Southeast Asia is in ascendant, which reflects the great influence of music as a unique language on promoting cultural identity.

#### *2.4 The Political Security Dimension in America*

The narrative effect of Chinese traditional music in the United States shows the typical landscape of contemporary cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture. And the narrative drive of traditional Chinese music in the United States can be roughly divided into three dimensions: Chinese and American folk music forces, music education and communication institutions, and official organizations.

Migrant population and performance exchange have become important factors. Many Chinese workers went to the United States in the middle of the 19th century, they could be regarded as the first generation of immigrants. Since modern times, the upsurge of Chinese immigrants to the United States has not subsided, forming a phenomenon of new immigrants. Mei Lanfang's visit in 1930 became an epoch-making event and was considered as the most successful case in history (Li Tongwei, Li Qingben 2020: 41–48). In the contemporary era, Zhou Wenzhong, Tan Dun, Yo-Yo Ma, and other musicians are recognized in the mainstream market of the United States. Another folk force is American scholars. For example, Louis Strong Hammond and Henry Eichheim, combined Chinese characteristics to create Christian ritual music after studying in China.

In terms of music education and communication, Zhao Yuanren founded the Chinese Singing Arts Seminar in the United States in 1969. In 1987, the Asian Music Research Association began to publish research articles on Chinese music by American scholars. In 2017, the Central Conservatory of Music and the Bard Conservatory of Music in New York opened the major of Chinese folk music instrumental performance, which was the first major of Chinese folk instrumental performance established by foreign universities. Since then, local Americans could also study Chinese folk music and obtain a degree in Chinese folk music (Ding Chen, Wang Zhijun 2018: 10–11).

As for official organizations, they mainly include official cultural performances, official literary exchanges and Confucius Institutes. For example, Binghamton University established the Confucius Institute of Opera and a large number of Chinese literary and artistic groups performed in the United States.

Overall, in the mainstream cultural market of the United States, the sense of the existence of Chinese traditional music is not strong, the market competitiveness is weak, and some audiences have a rigid impression. In addition to the ever-changing Sino-US relation, the narrative of traditional Chinese music is not smooth. A typical example is that many Confucius Institutes in the United States have been closed in recent years (Hou Honghong 2022: 182–192).

It is particularly important to note that the music and media industry in the United States is undoubtedly the first in the world. And they are good at learning from other countries. For example, the music score of Kung Fu Panda combines Chinese traditional music with Western music. It was created by Hans Zimmer, a Hollywood music master. With the help of this popular global film, it objectively promoted the spread of traditional Chinese

music and culture. This method of innovating narrative texts and expanding narrative channels is very worthy of our reference and learning.

### *2.5 The two-way communication dimension in Italy*

The opening of the Silk Road enabled the two remote countries, ancient China and ancient Rome, to initiate economic and cultural exchanges. The exchanges between the two countries epitomized the value of two-way and mutually beneficial sharing. The exchange entered a prosperous period, which began in the Yuan Dynasty and was most prosperous in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, especially with the participation of business travelers, missionaries and other cultural figures.

Marco Polo, an Italian businessman and traveler, lived in China for 17 years. The Travels of Marco Polo recorded the music played in folk activities, banquets, wars and other scenes in detail. In the Ming Dynasty, Matteo Ricci, the first Italian missionary who came to China and the first foreign music teacher in the Chinese court, participated in the revision of the music part of the Ming Huidian (明會典). Matteo Ricci's Notes on China (利瑪竇中國劄記) systematically introduced Chinese musical instruments, operas, music activities, etc., to the west, which improved the Western understanding of traditional Chinese music and culture. At the same time, Matteo Ricci also introduced the Western piano, organ, etc., to China. In the 17th–18th century, “China fever” rose in Europe, and Chinese customs such as architecture, clothing and clothing, as well as Confucian philosophy and Chinese literature, were sought after in Europe. Opera, which was born at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, was inevitably affected by Chinese music and culture. Many Chinese elements appeared in Italian opera. One was to embody “China” rather than traditional Chinese music. For example, “Chinese Women” embodies clear Chinese elements; The original story of “Chinese Hero” came from the Chinese Yuan Opera “Zhao's Orphan (趙氏孤兒)”. The other was the explicit use of Chinese music. For example, Puccini used the Chinese Jiangnan folk song Jasmine (茉莉花) (Zhou Lina 2022: 65–66) and the folk song “Mom, how confused you are (媽媽你好糊塗)” in his plays.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy in 1970, traditional Chinese music has been widely and continuously spread in Italy. Not only do Chinese musical performance organizations visit Italy frequently, but also, the Italian government launched the “Turandot Plan,” the “Italian Culture Year” in 2006, and the “Chinese Culture Year” in 2010. This is naturally driven by administrative forces, but the Italian audience's recognition of the aesthetic value of traditional Chinese music culture is the key factor. It can be seen that traditional Chinese music is also an important contribution of Chinese culture to world civilization. Promoting cross-cultural narration of Chinese traditional music is conducive to inheriting world civilization and sharing excellent human wisdom and cultural crystallization.

## **3 Factors Influencing the Cross-cultural Narrative Effect of Chinese Traditional Music**

### *3.1 Narrative subject and narrative effect*

From the perspective of historical practice, the narrative subject of Chinese traditional music was erratic

between the official and the folk. The official played a central role in communication and communication, such as the establishment of “Yuefu(樂府)” in the Han Dynasty, the establishment of Li Yuan(梨園), Taichang Temple(太常寺) and Jiaofang(教坊) in the Tang Dynasty, and Ming treasure voyages. Until recent years, many foreign cultural exchanges also were promoted by administrative forces. Although official promotion brought some convenience, too much official participation and hard implantation of official discourse, also tend to bring about a sense of propaganda, thus producing a preconceived position on the narrative text, resulting in counterproductive effects.

The overseas narration of Chinese music in history could not be separated from the drive of Chinese immigrants. Not only they became an important narrative subject of traditional Chinese music, but also the main object in fact. The narrative object was excessively dependent on the immigrant population, and there was a risk that the audience was only Chinese.

In addition, the choice of narrative text and narrative scene, in the final analysis, is actually about the narrative subject. Traditional Chinese music has accumulated a wealth of text reserves, and a certain cognitive basis in overseas audiences which, of course, provides some historical benefits. However, this kind of “wealth” is not put things right once and for all. Due to the outdated narrative text, the lack of reasonable screening and the lack of modernity, some audiences regard Chinese traditional music as an obsolete culture. It is not an overnight thing to make “wealth” play its contemporary value.

### *3.2 Narrative strategy and narrative effect*

From the perspective of the narrative effect, the cross-cultural communication of traditional music is never independent from society and times, but consistent with the social and economic communication needs of the period. The planning and implementation of the narrative need to constantly change and adjust the narrative text around the dynamic development, combined with specific narrative context, media channels, and narrative scenes.

The Silk Road aimed to promote economic and trade exchanges, but it objectively greatly promoted the overseas communication of traditional Chinese music. During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the development of shipbuilding and navigation technologies made the Maritime Silk Road possible, which in turn promoted economic, musical, and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. Meanwhile, a large number of foreign travelers came to China. Although their original intention was mainly about economics and trade, their active narration brought mainstream people in Europe a much vivid and intuitive understanding of Chinese music culture.

The narrative effect of traditional Chinese music varies greatly in different periods, regions, and cultural and social backgrounds. For example, in Italy, it relies on theater performance, while in Japan and South Korea, it relies on the mass media of popular music and cultural consumption. Constantly enriching and adjusting the narrative strategy is of great significance for improving the cross-cultural narrative of Chinese traditional music.

### *3.3 Narrative discourse and narrative effect*

Through the analysis of historical practice, it can be seen that the more attention is paid to reciprocal

exchanges in the narrative, the more likely it is to be recognized and accepted. In comparison, the narrative with strong propaganda and preaching would arouse disgust and rejection.

As a narrative text, traditional Chinese music is a dynamic cultural system, which is constantly enriched by the development of society, economy, culture and foreign exchanges. In the Han Dynasty, the policy of amity was implemented, and the two princesses were successively married to Wusun in the Western Regions. The long-necked disc lute(中長頸圓盤琵琶), as a unique Chinese musical instrument, became one of the dowries. Zhang Qian sent to the Western Regions to bring back the Western region music Moko Doule(摩柯兜勒), which was adapted into Twenty-eight Interpretations of the New Voice(新聲二十八解) and became a famous Han music. In addition, the curved neck pipa(曲頸琵琶) was also introduced from India to China in the 4th century, and became an important local instrument in traditional Chinese music. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, a large number of Hu music was introduced into the Central Plains in China and integrated with local music. The most famous Nishang Feather Clothes Song(霓裳羽衣曲) in the Tang Dynasty was created by Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty based on India's Brahman Song(婆罗门曲). Overseas communication has also enriched and developed the cultural system of traditional Chinese music.

The acceptance of Chinese traditional music is also in direct proportion to the will and ability of local narrators. Typical examples are Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci. These foreign communicators regard Chinese music and culture as treasures, actively absorb nutrients and share the achievements of Chinese civilization. Their promotion of Chinese music, combine with Chinese customs and culture, has greatly enhanced the appeal of Chinese music. The first perspective of the story has also increased the persuasiveness so that Western audiences can see the three-dimensional China. To further increase the attraction and appeal of traditional Chinese music culture and promote the narration of "others" will help greatly improve the cultural transmission.

## 4 Conclusion

New historical background brings new propositions to the cross-cultural narrative: how to highlight the unique aesthetic value and humanistic purport of traditional Chinese culture in the context of world culture, how to balance the promotion of traditional culture with the avoidance of one-way cultural output, or even narrow nationalism. In history, traditional Chinese music and world civilization had extensive and in-depth exchanges and realized the exchange of teaching subjects through mutual influence, which was why the rich and prosperous content system of traditional Chinese music emerged nowadays. The gains and losses of traditional Chinese music in the past cross-cultural narrative practice should be regarded as an important reference to promote relevant research and practice.

Traditional Chinese music has insufficient sense and awareness in the contemporary overseas mainstream music market, and some audiences' impression stays in a narrow historical category. Although this is closely related to cultural differences, cultural discounts, and man-made eyeglasses, it is also because of the lack of a complete narrative system in traditional Chinese music.

The cross-cultural narrative of traditional Chinese music should not only have a historical pattern, a sense of historical mission and a high degree of cultural self-confidence, but also be down-to-earth, pay more attention to

the study of narrative laws, promote the reconstruction of narrative discourse system, and then adopt different narrative strategies for different audiences in different regions and cultural background, so as to comprehensively improve the narrative effect.

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