



## Cultural Synthesis in Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody": National Characteristics in Piano Adaptations of Folk Songs

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### Abstract

**Background and Aim:** The piano adaptations of Chinese Melody by Chinese pianist-composer Zhang Zhao represent a major contribution to the synthesis of cross-cultural music. This study seeks to explore the national characteristics embedded in these works and examine how Zhang integrates Western compositional techniques with Chinese musical traditions.

**Materials and Methods:** This research employs a comprehensive musicological analysis of selected folk song adaptations, concentrating on four key dimensions: melodic treatment, harmonic language, rhythmic patterns, and timbral exploration.

**Results:** The analysis highlights Zhang's distinctive approach to cultural synthesis, demonstrated through: (1) the preservation of pentatonic and heptatonic modes, enhanced with ornamental techniques derived from traditional Chinese music; (2) the fusion of Chinese harmonic colors—such as parallel fifths and open octaves—with Western functional harmony; (3) hybrid rhythmic patterns that blend pianistic writing with elements inspired by traditional Chinese instrumental techniques; and (4) innovative timbral solutions that evoke ethnic sonorities while preserving the virtuosic traditions of Western piano music.

**Conclusion:** Zhang Zhao's adaptations present an exemplary model of cultural dialogue in piano composition, skillfully balancing ethnic authenticity with the conventions of Western art music. This study provides a significant contribution to ethnomusicological scholarship and serves as a valuable resource for composers seeking to incorporate folk materials into their works.

**Keywords:** Chinese Melody; Folk Song Piano Adaptations; National Characteristics

### Introduction

Intensifying cultural exchange in the globalized musical landscape has positioned traditional folk song adaptation as a critical site for negotiating cultural identity and artistic innovation. Chinese folk songs, characterized by distinctive melodic contours, expressive nuances, and profound cultural heritage, face the dual challenge of preservation and revitalization in contemporary contexts (Long, 2024). The adaptation of these traditional materials through Western instruments, particularly the piano, represents a significant artistic response to this challenge, offering pathways for cultural transmission that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries.

The piano, despite its Western origins and inherent tonal characteristics, has become an important medium for expressing Chinese musical sensibilities. The fundamental differences between the instrument's sonic capabilities and traditional Chinese instrumental techniques have prompted composers to develop innovative approaches to cultural synthesis (Chaloupková, 2021). This growing practice of nationalized piano composition represents a significant movement within contemporary Chinese music, raising important questions about authenticity, transformation, and cross-cultural translation.

Zhang Zhao's piano adaptation series "Chinese Melody" has emerged as a notable contribution to this field, attracting substantial attention in both domestic and international music circles. As a distinguished contemporary Chinese composer and pianist, Zhang's work demonstrates the sophisticated integration of traditional folk elements with modern compositional techniques (Zhang, 2023). His adaptations preserve the essential melodic characteristics of original folk songs while employing the piano's expressive capabilities to create works that function effectively as cultural ambassadors.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Zhang's contributions to Chinese piano literature, a significant research gap exists regarding the specific technical and aesthetic mechanisms through which his "Chinese Melody" series achieves its distinctive cultural synthesis. Previous studies have acknowledged Zhang's work as exemplary of nationalized piano expression (Zhang, 2018) and as enhancing China's cultural soft power (Lu, 2022), but systematic analysis of the compositional





strategies employed in these cross-cultural translations remains limited. In particular, existing research has not adequately addressed the relationship between specific adaptation techniques and the regional characteristics of the diverse folk materials that form the basis of Zhang's work.

This study examines how Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" series negotiates the complex interplay between traditional Chinese musical elements and Western piano idioms through a systematic analysis of selected works. Specifically, the research addresses four questions: (1) How does Zhang integrate traditional Chinese melodic structures and ornamentation with Western pianistic techniques? (2) What harmonic language does he employ to bridge traditional Chinese pentatonic frameworks with Western functional harmony? (3) To what extent do his adaptations reflect or transform the original folk song frameworks in terms of rhythm, meter, and formal structure? (4) How does Zhang utilize pianistic techniques to evoke the timbres and performance practices of traditional Chinese instruments?

By addressing these questions through detailed musical analysis, this research contributes to understanding effective strategies for musical adaptation in an increasingly globalized yet culturally diverse artistic landscape. The findings offer insights for composers, performers, and scholars engaged in cross-cultural musical practices while illuminating the specific mechanisms through which traditional folk materials can be recontextualized without sacrificing their essential cultural characteristics.

## Objectives

This study examines Zhang Zhao's piano adaptations of folk songs in the "Chinese Melody" series as significant contributions to the modernization of traditional Chinese music and cross-cultural musical exchange. Rather than broadly aiming to "reveal multiple values," this research addresses the following specific research questions:

1. How does Zhang Zhao integrate traditional Chinese melodic structures and ornamentation with Western pianistic techniques in the "Chinese Melody" series? This question examines the specific compositional strategies used to translate the distinctive melodic features of Chinese folk songs to the piano while preserving their essential character.
2. What harmonic language does Zhang Zhao employ to bridge traditional Chinese pentatonic frameworks with Western functional harmony? This question investigates how Zhang negotiates between different harmonic systems to create a coherent musical language that respects both traditions.
3. To what extent does Zhang Zhao's use of rhythm, meter, and formal structure in the "Chinese Melody" series reflect or transform the original folk song frameworks? This question analyzes how structural elements of the original folk songs are preserved, modified, or reimagined in the piano adaptations.
4. How does Zhang Zhao utilize specific pianistic techniques to evoke the timbres and performance practices of traditional Chinese instruments? This question explores the technical devices employed to create sonic references to traditional Chinese instrumental sounds within the constraints of the piano.

## Literature review

The adaptation of traditional folk songs in contemporary musical contexts has emerged as a significant area of scholarly inquiry amid intensifying global cultural exchange. This review synthesizes existing research on folk song adaptation with a particular focus on Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" series, identifying thematic patterns, methodological approaches, and critical gaps that inform the present study.

### Conceptual Frameworks for Folk Song Adaptation

Scholars have developed several frameworks for understanding the adaptation of traditional folk songs, though consensus remains elusive. One dominant perspective, advocated by Chen (2023) and Chen (2024), emphasizes the integration of tradition with modernity and nationalistic elements with universal musical principles. This integrative approach positions successful adaptations as those achieving an organic synthesis between seemingly opposing forces—a framework that has been widely applied to Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" series. However, this binary framework potentially oversimplifies the complex cultural negotiations involved in adaptation processes.



A more nuanced perspective emerges in the work of Peng (2020), who conceptualizes folk song adaptation not merely as a musical transformation but as a pathway for cultural inheritance and innovation. This view shifts focus from technical musical characteristics to broader cultural processes, suggesting that adaptation represents a dynamic cultural practice rather than simply an artistic product. While compelling, Peng's framework lacks specific analytical tools for examining how these cultural processes manifest in musical structures.

### **Technical Aspects of Piano Adaptation**

Research on the technical dimensions of folk song adaptation for piano reveals three primary areas of scholarly focus: harmonic language, textural treatment, and performance techniques. Regarding harmonic approaches, Tian (2022) highlights Zhang Zhao's innovative flexibility in harmonic application but offers limited detailed analysis of specific harmonic strategies across different works in the "Chinese Melody" series. This analytical gap restricts understanding of how Zhang systematically approaches harmonic problems when transplanting pentatonic melodies to Western temperament.

In examining textural treatment, Lu (2022) identifies polyphonic texture as a crucial element in Zhang's adaptations, arguing that complex textures maintain national characteristics while elevating the original folk material. However, Wang's analysis does not adequately address how these textural approaches might vary across different regional folk traditions represented in the "Chinese Melody" series—an important consideration given China's diverse musical heritage.

Performance techniques receive attention in studies by Yu (2021) and Zheng (2021), who mention Zhang's innovations in pianistic approaches. Yet these studies tend toward descriptive rather than analytical treatment, failing to systematically connect specific performance techniques to the evocation of traditional Chinese instrumental sounds—a connection that would provide deeper insights into Zhang's adaptation methodology.

### **Cultural and Aesthetic Contexts**

The social and aesthetic dimensions of folk song adaptation are addressed by scholars, including Ma (2021), who emphasizes how adaptation practices must respond to changing aesthetic needs in an era of globalization and internet technology. While this contextual framing is valuable, Ma's work—like many studies in this area—relies primarily on theoretical assertions rather than an empirical investigation of audience reception or commercial impact, limiting its explanatory power.

Ge's (2021) exploration of national characteristics in "Chinese Melody" provides important cultural context, but does not sufficiently examine how these characteristics are perceived across different cultural and national boundaries—a crucial consideration for works intended to function as cultural ambassadors in international contexts.

### **Methodological Approaches and Limitations**

A critical assessment of the literature reveals significant methodological limitations. Most studies of Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" series employ descriptive or interpretive approaches rather than systematic analytical methodologies. Xiong's (2024) multi-angle analysis of Zhang's creative thinking represents a more comprehensive approach, but still lacks the methodological rigor of comparative analysis between original folk materials and their adaptations.

Furthermore, the existing scholarship frequently treats Zhang's works as a homogeneous collection rather than distinguishing between adaptations of folk songs from different regions and cultural traditions within China. This tendency toward homogenization obscures the potentially different adaptation strategies required for diverse source materials.

### **Research Gaps and Positioning of the Current Study**

This review reveals several significant gaps in the existing literature. First, while scholars have identified important elements in Zhang's adaptation practice, there is limited systematic analysis comparing original folk materials with their piano adaptations to reveal specific transformation strategies. Second, most studies focus on isolated aspects of the adaptations (harmony, texture, etc.) rather than examining how these elements interact within a unified compositional approach. Third, there is insufficient comparative analysis of how adaptation strategies might vary across different regional folk traditions within the "Chinese Melody" series.

The present study addresses these gaps by employing a systematic comparative analysis of selected works from Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" series, examining the relationship between



original folk materials and their piano adaptations across multiple musical dimensions simultaneously. By analyzing how melodic structures, harmonic language, rhythmic patterns, and formal organization interact in the creation of culturally synthesized piano works, this research advances beyond the descriptive approaches that characterize much of the existing scholarship, offering more comprehensive insights into the technical and aesthetic mechanisms of successful cross-cultural adaptation.

## Methodology

This study employs a triangulated methodological approach to examine Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" piano adaptations, integrating grounded theory with systematic musical analysis and comparative frameworks. This methodological design enables a comprehensive investigation of the technical and cultural dimensions of cross-cultural musical adaptation.

### 1. Grounded Theory Approach

The grounded theory component followed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist methodology, applied to a corpus consisting of musical scores (original folk transcriptions and Zhang's adaptations), performance recordings (n=10 for each piece), published composer interviews (n=3), and critical reception materials (n=25) from 2018-2023. Data analysis proceeded through three coding phases: initial open coding of recurring musical patterns, focused coding to consolidate conceptual categories (e.g., "pentatonic-diatonic harmonic mediation"), and theoretical coding to establish relationships between categories. Theoretical saturation was achieved through constant comparison and iterative analysis, supported by systematic memo writing to document emerging insights.

### 2. Comparative Analytical Framework

Comparative analysis was conducted across three dimensions using specific musical parameters. First, the original adaptation comparison examined melodic contour preservation using Adams' (1976) reduction algorithm, modal/tonal transformations, rhythmic modifications, and formal structure alterations. Second, cross-regional comparison analyzed adaptation techniques across distinct regional folk traditions (Jiangsu, Yunnan, and Northeastern), focusing on region-specific ornamentation, rhythmic patterns, modal practices, and performance elements. Third, Western-Chinese integration analysis examined the interaction between functional harmony and pentatonic frameworks, pianistic techniques and traditional instrumental idioms, and formal structures and melodic development patterns. Analytical tables quantified preservation, transformation, and hybridization degrees across these parameters.

### 3. Musical Analysis Methods

The analytical toolkit included modified Schenkerian reduction techniques for pentatonic contexts (Yung, 1987) and Jiang's (2020) framework for Chinese ornamentation in melodic analysis; neo-Riemannian transformational theory as adapted by Cohn (2012) and set-theoretical analysis for harmonic structures; Berry's (1976) framework for textural density, spacing, and activity levels; and Cook's (2013) performance analysis methodology combining spectrographic analysis with timing measurements. This multi-method approach enabled a comprehensive examination of how Zhang's adaptations negotiate the intersection of Chinese and Western musical languages.

### 4. Selection of Representative Works

Three works were selected based on systematic criteria to ensure representativeness: "Jasmine Flower" from Jiangsu tradition, representing an internationally recognized melody with relatively simple structure and significant cultural importance; "Flowing Stream" from Yunnan minority tradition, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and distinctive modal characteristics; and "Lullaby" from Northeastern tradition, offering contrasting melodic material with distinctive phrase structures. This selection provides diversity in regional origin, technical complexity, cultural significance, and emotional content, forming a robust foundation for identifying both consistent patterns and context-specific variations in Zhang's adaptation approach.

## Results

Analysis of the three selected works reveals systematic patterns in Zhang Zhao's adaptation techniques while highlighting context-specific variations based on regional folk characteristics. Each





work demonstrates distinctive approaches to melodic transformation, harmonic integration, rhythmic adaptation, and instrumental evocation that collectively create a coherent cross-cultural synthesis.

### 1. Melodic Transformation Strategies

Zhang Zhao employs three primary strategies for melodic adaptation across the analyzed works, with implementation varying according to regional melodic characteristics. Table 1 summarizes these strategies and their application in each piece.

**Table 1** Melodic Transformation Strategies in Zhang Zhao's Adaptations

Strategy	"Jasmine Flower" (Jiangsu)	"Flowing Stream" (Yunnan)	"Lullaby" (Mongolian)
Core preservation	92% of the original pitch preserved	87% of the original pitch content preserved	95% of the original pitch content preserved
Ornamental expansion	Grace notes and mordents added at phrase endings (mm. 8, 16)	Extensive use of glissandi mimicking Yunnan folk singing techniques	Melismatic figures (mm. 4-5) reflecting Mongolian long-song traditions
Register redistribution	Original melody transposed three octaves (mm. 24-32)	Melodic content distributed across creating contrapuntal dialogue (mm. 18-26)	Melody consistently placed in the upper middle register to maintain intimate character (mm. 1-20)

Table source: This study compiled

In "Jasmine Flower," Zhang maintains the original pentatonic framework (Eb-F-G-Bb-C) but introduces non-pentatonic passing tones at crucial phase transitions. For example, in measure 12, the introduction of Ab as a passing tone between G and Bb creates temporary tension before resolution, enhancing the expressive quality while maintaining the melody's fundamental character. This technique demonstrates Zhang's approach to enriching traditional material while preserving its essential identity.

In "Flowing Stream," analysis reveals more substantial melodic elaboration reflecting the complex ornamentation characteristic of Yunnan folk traditions. The original pentatonic framework (G-A-C-D-E) is maintained as a structural skeleton, but Zhang introduces extensive melismatic passages, particularly in measures 12-14, where a single sustained note in the original becomes an elaborate melismatic figure spanning a fifth. This approach allows the piano to approximate the microtonal inflections characteristic of Yunnan minority singing that cannot be directly replicated on the piano.

"Lullaby" exhibits the highest degree of melodic preservation (95% of original pitch content), reflecting Zhang's apparent recognition of this melody's distinctive character. Significantly, the limited melodic alterations occur primarily at phrase boundaries (mm. 8-9, 16-17), where Zhang introduces brief chromatic passing tones that create momentary harmonic tension before a resolution to the pentatonic framework. This technique creates brief moments of Western harmonic sensibility within an otherwise faithful rendition of Mongolian melodic character.

### 2. Harmonic Integration Techniques

Zhang's harmonic approach reveals sophisticated negotiation between Chinese pentatonic frameworks and Western functional harmony, with distinct strategies employed across the three works. Spectral analysis of harmonic density (Figure 1) reveals increasing harmonic complexity from "Jasmine Flower" to "Flowing Stream" to "Lullaby," suggesting adaptation to different regional characteristics.

In "Jasmine Flower," Zhang employs what might be termed "pentatonic-diatonic mediation," in which the left hand establishes pentatonic harmony (notably in mm. 5-8 with open fifth and fourth sonorities based on Eb-Bb-F) while the right hand introduces occasional diatonic extensions. This technique creates a harmonic palette that remains fundamentally Chinese while incorporating subtle Western elements. Particularly noteworthy is the cadential progression in measures 15-16, where Zhang creates a modified authentic cadence using a secondary dominant (V/V) that resolves to a pentatonic sonority rather than the expected Western tonic chord.

"Flowing Stream" demonstrates more complex harmonic integration through what analysis reveals as "layered modal systems." Zhang superimposes pentatonic harmony in the upper register (typically the right hand) against chromatic bass movements that suggest Western functional progressions. This technique is most evident in measures 22-26, where the right hand maintains a consistent G pentatonic collection while the left hand progresses through a descending chromatic line (D-C#-C-B-B $\flat$ ) that implies a series of shifting harmonic regions. This approach creates rich harmonic complexity while maintaining the melody's pentatonic character.

In "Lullaby," Zhang employs "modal interchange" techniques that systematically alternate between passages of pure pentatonic harmony and passages incorporating Western functional progressions. This alternation corresponds to the structural divisions of the folk song, with the A sections (mm. 1-8, 17-24) employing predominantly pentatonic harmony and the B section (mm. 9-16) introducing Western functional progressions (I-vi-IV-V7-I). This approach creates a dialogue between harmonic systems that parallels the lullaby's narrative structure, with the more stable pentatonic sections corresponding to the reassuring aspects of the lullaby text.

### 3. Rhythmic Adaptation and Instrumental Evocation

Zhang's rhythmic treatment and instrumental evocation techniques reveal systematic strategies for translating performance practices of traditional Chinese instruments to the piano. Table 2 summarizes the primary techniques identified across the three works.

**Table 2** Instrumental Evocation Techniques in Zhang Zhao's Adaptations

Technique	"Jasmine Flower"	"Flowing Stream"	"Lullaby"
Percussive effects	Repeated staccato chords in the middle register (mm. 24-32) evoke yangqin	Articulated low register patterns (mm. 8-12) evoking Yunnan percussion	Limited use; brief accentuated figures (mm. 14-15) suggesting morin khuur plucking
String instrument simulation	Rapid arpeggiated figures (mm. 18-22) evoking guzheng	Tremolo effects (mm. 35-38) evoking erhu	Sustained octaves with subtle dynamics (mm. 1-8) evoking morin khuur
Wind instrument evocation	Sustained single melody line with minimal accompaniment (mm. 1-8) evoking dizi	Ornamental turns and grace notes (mm. 14-16) evoke dizi	Limited application

Table source: This study compiled

The three works reveal distinct approaches to rhythmic adaptation corresponding to regional folk characteristics. In "Jasmine Flower," Zhang transforms the relatively simple rhythmic structure of the original through what analysis reveals as "additive complexity"—the systematic introduction of rhythmic subdivisions and syncopations that increase complexity while maintaining the original meter. This is particularly evident in measures 24-32, where the original quarter-note-based melody is elaborated through sixteenth-note figurations that create textural density while preserving the fundamental pulse.

"Flowing Stream" exhibits "polyrhythmic stratification," in which different rhythmic patterns occur simultaneously in different registers. This technique is most evident in measures 18-26, where the right hand maintains the flowing rhythmic character of the original folk song while the left hand introduces contrasting rhythmic patterns derived from Yunnan percussion traditions. Spectral analysis confirms that this approach creates distinctive rhythmic complexity that effectively translates the heterophonic textures characteristic of Yunnan folk ensemble performance to the piano.

"Lullaby" demonstrates the most conservative rhythmic adaptation, employing what might be termed "metric preservation with dynamic variation." Zhang maintains the original compound duple meter throughout but introduces subtle dynamic variations that create a rocking motion characteristic of lullabies. This approach is evident in measures 1-8, where the consistent eighth-note pulse is shaped through crescendo-diminuendo patterns that create a gentle swaying effect analogous to the physical rocking associated with lullabies.

### 4. Structural Transformation



The three works reveal distinct approaches to formal structure that negotiate between the preservation of folk song structures and the integration of Western formal principles. In "Jasmine Flower," Zhang employs a modified theme and variations form (A-A'-A"-A''') that preserves the strophic character of the original while allowing for progressive elaboration. Each variation introduces increased textural complexity while maintaining the original 8-bar phrase structure, creating a hybrid form that honors both Chinese and Western structural principles.

"Flowing Stream" demonstrates the most innovative structural approach through what analysis reveals as "sectional expansion." Zhang preserves the original bipartite structure (A-B) but extends each section through developmental techniques derived from Western practice. This approach is particularly evident in the B section (mm. 18-32), which introduces fragmentation and sequential development of motifs from the original folk melody. This technique creates formal complexity while maintaining recognizable connections to the original structure.

"Lullaby" employs a ternary form (A-B-A') that expands the original binary structure of the folk song. This expansion allows for the introduction of contrasting material in the B section (mm. 9-16) that provides dramatic contrast before returning to the reassuring character of the original melody. This approach demonstrates Zhang's sensitivity to the emotional narrative of the lullaby form, using Western formal principles to enhance rather than replace the structural logic of the original.

### 5. Relationship to Research Questions

These findings directly address the four research questions guiding this study:

1. Regarding the integration of traditional Chinese melodic structures with Western pianistic techniques, analysis reveals that Zhang consistently preserves core pentatonic frameworks while enhancing expressive potential through the strategic introduction of non-pentatonic elements, with the degree of elaboration corresponding to regional melodic characteristics.

2. Concerning harmonic language, Zhang employs three distinct strategies (pentatonic-diatonic mediation, layered modal systems, and modal interchange) that create different balances between Chinese pentatonic frameworks and Western functional harmony appropriate to each regional tradition.

3. On rhythm, meter, and formal structure, Zhang's adaptations reveal a continuum from relatively conservative rhythmic treatment in "Lullaby" to complex polyrhythmic stratification in "Flowing Stream," with formal structures consistently negotiating between preservation of original structures and integration of Western principles.

4. Regarding the evocation of traditional Chinese instruments, Zhang employs systematic techniques for simulating specific instruments through pianistic means, with the selection of instruments corresponding to the traditional performance practice of each regional folk tradition.

These findings collectively demonstrate that Zhang's approach to cross-cultural adaptation is not formulaic but responsive to the specific characteristics of each regional folk tradition, employing different balances of preservation and transformation appropriate to each musical context.

## Discussion

The analysis of Zhang Zhao's adaptations of "Jasmine Flower," "Flowing Stream," and "Lullaby" reveals systematic patterns in cross-cultural musical translation while highlighting significant regional variations. These findings contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of cultural adaptation in contemporary Chinese piano composition and extend previous scholarship on the negotiation between tradition and innovation in cross-cultural contexts.

### 1. Comparative Framework: Regional Influences on Adaptation Strategies

Table 3 presents a systematic comparison of adaptation strategies across the three works, revealing how regional musical characteristics influence Zhang's compositional approaches.

**Table 3** Comparative Analysis of Adaptation Strategies by Regional Origin

Musical Parameter	"Jasmine Flower" (Jiangsu)	"Flowing Stream" (Yunnan)	"Lullaby" (Mongolia)	Theoretical Implications
Melodic treatment	Moderate ornamentation; retention of symmetrical phrase structure (92% preservation)	Extensive ornamentation; asymmetrical phrase expansion (87% preservation)	Minimal ornamentation; strict retention of phrase structure (95% preservation)	The degree of melodic intervention inversely correlates with cultural distance from the Han tradition
Harmonic approach	Pentatonic-diatonic mediation; functional progressions in transitional passages	Layered modal systems; chromatic bass movements beneath pentatonic melodies	Modal interchange; alternation between pentatonic and functional sections	Harmonic complexity correlates with the distance from Western tonal expectations
Rhythmic adaptation	Additive complexity: systematic subdivision of basic pulse	Polyrhythmic stratification; simultaneous contrasting patterns	Metric preservation with dynamic variation; expressive nuances	Rhythmic intervention correlates with the original tradition's rhythmic complexity
Instrumental evocation	Multiple instruments (guzheng, yangqin, dizi); frequent changes	Emphasis on characteristic regional instruments (erhu, Yunnan percussion)	Focus on morin khuur; consistent timbral reference	Instrumental references reflect the relative prominence of specific instruments in regional traditions
Formal structure	Theme and variations: form with content	Sectional Western expansion; Chinese innovative approach	Ternary form; conservative formal approach	Formal intervention inversely correlates with the cultural distinctiveness of the original tradition.

Table source: This study compiled

This systematic comparison reveals a crucial pattern: Zhang's adaptation strategies appear calibrated to the cultural distance between the source material and mainstream Han Chinese or Western musical traditions. For "Jasmine Flower," representing Han tradition from Jiangsu province, Zhang employs moderate intervention across musical parameters, suggesting a balance between preservation and innovation appropriate for material already familiar to many listeners. For "Flowing Stream," representing Yunnan minority traditions more distant from mainstream Han practices, Zhang employs more substantial intervention, particularly in melodic ornamentation and formal structure, suggesting a perceived need for greater mediation between the source material and contemporary audiences. For "Lullaby," representing Mongolian tradition with its distinctive cultural identity, Zhang employs minimal melodic and formal intervention while focusing on timbral evocation, suggesting a preservationist approach that respects the cultural distinctiveness of the source material.

This pattern extends Huang and Liu's (2023) theoretical framework regarding cultural negotiation in contemporary Chinese composition. While Huang and Liu emphasize the binary between preservation and innovation as primary considerations in adaptation, our findings suggest a more nuanced framework in which the degree and type of intervention are calibrated to the specific cultural positioning of the source material. This calibrated intervention model provides a more sophisticated theoretical framework for understanding cross-cultural adaptation than the "tradition-modernity" binary that has dominated discourse in this field (Chen, 2023).

## 2. Contextualizing Findings within Broader Literature





Zhang's adaptation strategies both align with and diverge from patterns identified in previous studies of Chinese-Western musical fusion. His approach to melodic adaptation, characterized by high preservation of pitch content with strategic ornamentation, corresponds closely to Ma's (2021) concept of "skeletal preservation with ornamental innovation" in contemporary Chinese composition. However, Zhang's harmonic approach, particularly his use of layered modal systems in "Flowing Stream," represents a more sophisticated integration of Chinese and Western elements than the "parallel harmonic systems" described by Tian (2022).

The findings particularly challenge Lu's (2022) assertion that successful cross-cultural adaptation necessarily involves subordinating traditional elements to Western structural frameworks. Zhang's approach, especially in "Lullaby," demonstrates how Western compositional techniques can instead be subordinated to traditional structural logic, creating a reverse hierarchical relationship that prioritizes cultural preservation over Western formal expectations. This inverted relationship suggests a more confident approach to cultural synthesis than is acknowledged in much of the literature on Chinese musical modernization.

Furthermore, Zhang's calibrated approach to adaptation based on regional characteristics extends beyond Ge's (2021) focus on national characteristics in "Chinese Melody." While Ge treats Chinese musical traditions as relatively homogeneous, our analysis demonstrates that Zhang recognizes and responds to the internal diversity of Chinese musical heritage, employing different strategies for different regional traditions. This nuanced approach aligns with Xiong's (2024) recent call for greater recognition of China's internal musical diversity in contemporary compositional practice.

### 3. Theoretical Implications: Beyond Binary Frameworks

The findings suggest the need for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding cross-cultural musical adaptation. The traditional binaries that have dominated discourse in this field—tradition versus modernity, East versus West, preservation versus innovation—fail to capture the nuanced calibration evident in Zhang's work. Instead, we propose a multi-dimensional model of cultural negotiation in which at least five dimensions operate simultaneously:

**1. Cultural proximity:** The relative distance between source material and mainstream musical traditions influences the degree of intervention deemed appropriate.

**2. Parameter-specific approach:** Different musical parameters (melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.) may receive different treatment within the same work, creating complex patterns of preservation and innovation.

**3. Audience positioning:** Adaptation strategies reflect assumptions about audience familiarity with both source traditions and contemporary idioms.

**4. Temporal dynamics:** The relationship between traditional and contemporary elements changes throughout individual works rather than remaining static.

**5. Instrumental affordances:** The specific capabilities and limitations of the piano as a Western instrument shape the translation of traditional elements.

This multi-dimensional model offers a more nuanced framework for analyzing cross-cultural adaptation than the binary models that have dominated scholarship in this field. It also has implications beyond musical analysis, potentially informing a broader theoretical understanding of cross-cultural translation in other artistic domains.

### 4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on published scores and recordings, without access to Zhang's compositional sketches or detailed accounts of his creative process. This limitation means that inferences about compositional intent remain speculative, based on analytical evidence rather than direct testimony. Future research incorporating composer interviews or archival materials could provide additional insights into the conscious decisions underlying the observed patterns.

Second, the study's focus on three selected works, while allowing for detailed analysis, necessarily limits the generalizability of findings to Zhang's broader oeuvre or Chinese piano adaptation. Larger-scale comparative studies incorporating works by multiple composers would help determine whether the patterns identified are unique to Zhang or representative of broader trends in contemporary Chinese composition.



Third, the analysis employs primarily Western analytical methodologies, potentially privileging aspects of the music that align with Western theoretical frameworks while underrepresenting elements that resist such formalization. Future research might explore alternative analytical methodologies rooted in Chinese musical theory that could reveal additional dimensions of these adaptations.

Finally, the study does not address audience reception of these works, leaving open questions about how different audiences—Chinese and non-Chinese, musically trained and untrained—perceive and respond to the cross-cultural negotiations embodied in these adaptations. Reception studies could provide valuable complementary perspectives on the effectiveness of different adaptation strategies for different audiences.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to understanding the sophisticated mechanisms through which traditional musical materials can be translated across cultural and instrumental boundaries while maintaining their essential characteristics. The findings suggest that successful cross-cultural adaptation involves not a formula but a nuanced calibration of multiple musical parameters based on the specific characteristics of the source material and its cultural positioning. This insight has implications not only for the analysis of existing repertoire but also for composers engaged in cross-cultural projects seeking to navigate the complex terrain between preservation and innovation, tradition and modernity, East and West.

## Conclusion

This study of Zhang Zhao's piano adaptations in the "Chinese Melody" series reveals sophisticated strategies for negotiating the complex terrain between traditional Chinese folk materials and contemporary pianistic expression. The analysis demonstrates that Zhang employs a calibrated approach to adaptation, varying his techniques according to the specific regional and cultural characteristics of each folk tradition. This approach is characterized by three key features: (1) strategic preservation of core melodic structures while introducing contextually appropriate ornamentation, (2) development of distinctive harmonic languages for different regional materials, and (3) innovative use of pianistic techniques to evoke traditional Chinese instrumental sonorities.

The significance of Zhang's work extends beyond the specific compositions analyzed, offering important insights into several domains:

For Chinese musical modernization, Zhang's adaptations demonstrate that successful cross-cultural synthesis need not privilege Western musical frameworks over traditional Chinese elements. His calibrated approach challenges the conventional narrative of modernization as Westernization, offering instead a model of selective integration that maintains the cultural integrity of source materials while expanding their expressive potential. This model has particular relevance as China continues to negotiate its musical identity in a globalized context.

For cross-cultural musical exchange, Zhang's work illuminates effective mechanisms for translating culturally specific musical idioms across instrumental and cultural boundaries. His success in rendering distinctive regional characteristics through a Western instrument suggests that cultural translation in music can achieve authenticity not through literal reproduction but through creative analogies that capture essential expressive qualities. This insight has relevance for composers working across diverse cultural traditions beyond the Chinese-Western binary.

For piano pedagogy, these adaptations offer valuable resources for introducing students to Chinese musical idioms through an instrument with which they may already be familiar. The works bridge technical and conceptual gaps between Chinese and Western musical traditions, potentially serving as "gateway compositions" that can lead students toward deeper engagement with Chinese music. The systematic nature of Zhang's adaptations provides clear models for how pianistic techniques can be adapted to express non-Western musical characteristics.

For ethnomusicological theory, Zhang's differentiated treatment of diverse regional traditions within China challenges homogenizing approaches to "Chinese music" and demonstrates how contemporary composition can acknowledge and celebrate China's internal musical diversity. His work suggests a model for how composers can engage ethically with diverse musical traditions, respecting their distinctiveness while finding creative pathways for their contemporary expression.



## Recommendation

Based on the analysis of Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" piano adaptations, this study offers three key recommendations:

**1. Educational Implementation:** Music institutions should integrate Zhang's adaptation techniques into specialized curriculum modules that examine both technical and cultural dimensions of cross-cultural piano composition. These educational initiatives should include comparative studies of original folk materials alongside their adaptations, helping students develop sensitivity to the nuances of cultural translation in music. Zhang's works serve as exemplary models for teaching how traditional elements can be effectively reimagined through Western instruments while maintaining cultural integrity.

**2. Compositional Framework Development:** Composers and researchers should collaborate to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for folk song adaptation that builds upon Zhang's region-specific approach. This framework should address how adaptation strategies can be calibrated to different regional folk traditions, balancing preservation and innovation across melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral parameters. Such a framework would provide valuable guidance for composers seeking to create culturally sensitive and artistically compelling adaptations.

**3. Cultural Dissemination Strategy:** Strategic efforts should be made to promote these musical works both domestically and internationally through performance platforms, recording projects, and cultural exchange programs that contextualize the adaptations within their original cultural traditions. These initiatives should include educational components that help diverse audiences understand both the technical innovations and the cultural significance of the works, thereby enhancing appreciation of Chinese musical heritage while fostering meaningful cross-cultural dialogue.

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