

# From “Chrysanthemum Terrace” to “Chinese Wedding”: The Evolution of the “Chinese Style” in Popular Music

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## Abstract:

This article aims to explore the evolution of the “Chinese Style” in the Chinese music scene. Through a comparative analysis of two representative “Chinese Style” songs - “Chrysanthemum Terrace” and “Chinese Wedding” - in terms of lyrics, melody, harmony, arrangement, special instruments, and singing techniques, it reveals how the development and changes of “Chinese Style” popular music over different periods. This evolution demonstrates how ‘Chinese style’ has transformed from a more traditional expression with classical overtones to a style that is more integrated, culturally authentic, and modernized.

**Keywords:** Popular Music; Chinese Style; Jay Chou; Ge Dongqi.

## 1. Introduction

“Chinese style” popular music holds a unique position in the Chinese music scene today. It is a musical style that skillfully combines Chinese classical culture and traditional musical elements with popular music.

The author has selected “Chrysanthemum Terrace” and “Chinese Wedding” as two influential Chinese style songs to represent the creative styles of “Chinese style” music in different periods and stages. “Chrysanthemum Terrace” is the end theme song for the movie “Curse of the Golden Flower” performed by Jay Chou. The song, with its intriguing lyrics, poignant melody, and royal classical atmosphere, has become a classic of “Chinese style” music and is widely loved by audiences. “Chinese Wedding”, on the other hand, is a song with rebellious and innovative elements composed by Ge Dongqi. It differs from previous “Chinese style” songs in terms of

lyrical expression, musical element integration, and emotional delivery.

This article outlines the concept of “Chinese style” and its development in the field of popular music. It compares and analyzes the evolution of “Chinese style” in the songs “Chrysanthemum Terrace” and “Chinese Wedding”, demonstrating the development path and artistic value of “Chinese style”.

## 2. The Connotation of “Chinese style”

### 2.1 “Chinese style” in the Music Field

“Chinese style” is a term born in the context of Chinese popular music. Its meaning is not to express traditional Chinese art forms, but to draw on and utilize elements of Chinese culture [1]. While there is some connection between the terms “Chinese style” and

“Chinese flavor”, their contexts of use differ. In 1934, musician Qi Pinda organized a competition to “collect piano pieces with Chinese flavor,” marking the first application of the term “Chinese flavor” in music. Subsequently, the term “Chinese flavor” began to be used in various musical domains including folk songs and orchestral music. The use of this term served to distinguish traditional Western music from Chinese traditional folk music [1]. The development of “Chinese style” in popular music can be traced through four stages.

### 2.1.1 Early Exploration Stage (1980s-early 1990s)

Teresa Teng is a representative singer of this period. Her 1983 album “Light Exquisite Feeling” was groundbreaking. In this album, all 12 songs, including “Onto the Tower”, “May Only Life Be Long”, “The Sound of Every Leaf”, “Who Now Knows My Feeling”, and “Sunset Liaison”, were lyrics taken from classic ancient poems by Li Yu, Su Shi, Ouyang Xiu, and other renowned poets [2]. She sang classical poetry in a modern pop music style, allowing listeners to experience a fascinating collision between the classical and the modern. This provided an early exploration and reference for incorporating elements of traditional Chinese culture into popular music [3].

### 2.1.2 Initial Formation Stage (mid to late 1990s-2002)

During this period, some musicians created songs based on the life stories of historical figures, incorporating more traditional Chinese musical elements into popular music. Some film and television producers also used these songs as theme songs for their works to better match the plots. For example, Tu Honggang’s “Loyalty to the Country” was inspired by Yue Fei, a famous general from the Southern Song Dynasty, and served as the ending theme song for the TV series “Sword Master”. “Wilderness” was the opening theme song for the TV series “Secret History of the Great Grand King”, depicting the military career of Nurhaci, the founder of the Qing Dynasty [4]. These works incorporated ancient Chinese historical stories and heroic figures into their lyrics, added Peking opera singing techniques and ethnic instruments to their melodies and arrangements, showcasing a unique Chinese style. These songs were well-received by fans and viewers at the time, laying a solid foundation for the development of “Chinese style”.

### 2.1.3 Development Stage (2003-2010)

In 2003, Jay Chou’s “Never Walk Away” emerged. This work met Huang Xiaoliang’s definition of “Chinese style” as “three ancient and three new” - ancient poetry, ancient culture, ancient melodies, new singing techniques, new arrangements, and new concepts [5, 6]. Since then, “Chinese style” popular music has truly entered the public’s field

of vision and occupied a valuable place among various popular music styles. The lyrics of “Never Walk Away” were written by Fang Wenshan and based on Su Shi’s “Eastern Slope”. Jay Chou used the G major Qing Yue mode to compose a beautiful melody. The arrangement featured ethnic instruments like the erhu and pipa, creating a classical and elegant atmosphere. The meticulous collaboration between Jay Chou and Fang Wenshan made this song a classic in the eyes of the public. Subsequently, Jay Chou released a series of “Chinese style” songs such as “Hair White as Snow”, “Blue and White Porcelain”, and “Chrysanthemum Terrace”, which not only promoted the development of “Chinese style” but also opened up a unique new path for the Asian music scene [7].

David Tao and Wang Leehom also made contributions to the development of “Chinese style”. They combined “Chinese style” with R&B, Hip-Hop, and other Western popular music styles. For example, David Tao’s “Susan Said” incorporates the melody of “Susan left Hongtong” from Peking Opera into R&B. Wang Leehom’s “Flower Field Mistake” and “Shangri-La” integrate Chinese traditional pentatonic scales and ethnic instruments into Hip-Hop and R&B, allowing listeners to experience the collision of Chinese and Western music cultures.

This period also saw the emergence of Xu Song, who was skilled in using imagery in his lyrics to vividly depict classical artistic conceptions. Songs like “Broken Bridge Snow”, “Raining in Qingming”, and “Half City Smoke Sand” used words with specific connotations, such as “flowers”, “willows”, “moon”, “sunset”, “wild geese”, “fallen leaves”, and “chrysanthemums”, to stimulate listeners’ rich associations [8].

### 2.1.4 Diversification Stage (2010 to present)

Today, with the rapid development of the internet, “Chinese style” popular music has taken on a more diversified form of development. Many original music teams, internet singers, and rap singers have created many high-quality “Chinese style” songs.

Huo Zun’s “Rolling Up the Beaded Curtain” showcases the charm of traditional Chinese culture with his ethereal voice and beautiful melody. The song features a large number of ethnic instruments such as the guzheng and erhu, creating a simple and elegant atmosphere.

Interestingcn’s songs like “Grain in Ear”, “Qingming”, and “The Waking of Insects” record the 24 solar terms passed down by the Chinese nation for thousands of years. They combine traditional folk music with popular electronic elements, exuding a modern atmosphere while retaining classical charm.

GAI Zhou Yan’s “Heavenly Dryness” and “Laughter in the Vast Sea” are “Chinese style” rap songs that combine

local dialects with Chinese traditional cultural elements. They feature a strong Chinese style in their lyrics and arrangements while incorporating the rhythm and rhyme of rap music, chartering a new chapter for the development of “Chinese style” popular music.

During the same period, Li Yugang also tried to express “Chinese style” in new forms. Songs like “The New Drunken Beauty” and “Along the River During the Qingming Festival” are works combining Peking Opera with popular music. In “The New Drunken Beauty”, his singing uses a “double voice” technique alternating between male and female voices (imitating the “resonance” of the “Mei School” dan roles), and he portrays Yang Yuhuan in the performance, narrating the love story between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Yuhuan. This performance style imbues the song with a uniquely crafted classical essence [9, 10].

Looking back at the development of “Chinese style” songs, many excellent musicians have used classical poetry, added ethnic instruments to their arrangements, or combined singing methods with Chinese cultural characteristics. Their creative practices have made “Chinese style” more mature and diverse.

## 2.2 “Chinese style” from a Macro Perspective

In addition to its use in the field of music, the term “Chinese style” also refers to an art form that is based on traditional Chinese culture and integrates modern elements. It is widely used in fields such as fashion, film, and advertising. It not only reflects the essence of traditional Chinese culture but also adapts to the trends of globalization, demonstrating its application and integration in various fields.

The characteristics of “Chinese style” emphasize the beauty of oriental classical connotation and incorporate a large number of traditional cultural elements. When combined with popular music, it can manifest these elements from various aspects and perspectives. For example, in terms of auditory perception, traditional pentatonic scales are generally chosen for the musical score, and ethnic instruments such as the erhu, guzheng, pipa, and bamboo flute are extensively used in the arrangement. Sometimes, sounds of flowing water or insects are added to evoke the ambiance of Chinese landscapes. Lyrics often draw inspiration from classical poetry and prose, extolling the beauty of mountains and rivers or praising the magnificent scenery of the country. This approach creates an auditory experience that immerses listeners in the beauty of nature. In terms of visual perception, popular music’s MV generally choose costume and scenery with Chinese red or Chinese elements for the costumes and settings, and natural landscapes are often used as the main shooting subject. In

live performances, singers and musicians often wear national costumes to perform, directly and more intuitively bringing audiences a visual impact and subtly allowing them to experience the “Chinese style” in popular music.

## 3. „Chinese style“ in „Chrysanthemum Terrace“ and „Chinese Wedding“

### 3.1 Lyrics

“Chinese Wedding” is a song with national elements that tells a story of love, rebellion, and revenge. The lyrics express emotions of contradiction, pain, and sadness. The lyrics use ancient Chinese to describe a complete wedding story. Although simple and easy to understand, they also convey a deeper meaning. For example, “She Laughs as She Cries” is a wedding song, but it expresses the helplessness of the girl towards life and the oppression of women in the feudal era. The song also uses a lot of Shanghai dialect, conveying a strong local flavor and making the audience feel more approachable. The opening line of the song, “The eighteenth day of the first lunar month, an auspicious date, the sorghum is carried”, is intriguing and raises questions. Why is there sorghum, which is used to ward off evil spirits, on a wedding day? The detailed descriptions in the lyrics, such as “The red bridal attire is carried in, cut hastily, each inch filled with regret. Cutting away the beloved, unable to return, a forced smile is worn” also imply the girl’s inner helplessness and her reluctance towards her lost love. It can be said that the creation of the lyrics of this song allows listeners to be immersed in the scene and leaves a lingering aftertaste.

The lyrics of “Chrysanthemum Terrace” depict the deep love and longing between a general who goes out to fight and his wife who waits at home alone. The song is filled with sadness, helplessness, and reluctance. The opening line, “your tearful gaze” and “pallid moon”, sets a desolate and melancholic atmosphere. The contrast between the moonlight, night, the sound of rain, and the crimson window profoundly expresses the protagonist’s deep sorrow. “Sorrow cannot cross the river; the autumnal heart is split in two. Fearing you won’t reach the shore, a lifetime of swaying. Whose empire is this, with the frantic sound of horse hooves? I am clad in battle armor, weathered by the winds of time. As the sky faintly brightens, your soft sigh expresses a night of such delicate melancholy.” This section marks the climax of the song. Through the clever wordplay of separating the Chinese character for “sorrow” (愁) into “autumn” (秋) and “heart” (心), it artfully combines the autumnal sadness of parting with the protagonist’s inner solitude.

### 3.2 Melody

The melody of “Chinese Wedding” is mainly characterized by its fast-paced rhythm and the application of national musical elements such as the suona. The melody of the song contains rich emotions, whether it is joy or sadness, expressed through the ups and downs of the melody. The fast, fierce, and accurate melody is catchy and diverse, instantly drawing listeners into the story and striking their hearts. The fast-paced melody is closely connected to the emotions expressed in the song, making the entire song full of tension. The use of national musical elements like the suona adds a unique charm to the song. The sound of the suona plays a crucial role in the song, making the rhythm more distinct and adding a simple and realistic style to the song.

The melody of “Chrysanthemum Terrace” is relatively melodious and elegant. It uses the pentatonic scale to depict the artistic conception of high mountains and flowing water. However, it also combines with Western traditional harmony, showcasing modernity. This collision of Chinese and Western musical styles creates a melody that sounds both elegantly understated and infused with a touch of foreign flair, offering listeners a novel auditory feast.

### 3.3 Singing Techniques

In terms of singing techniques, the singer of “Chinese Wedding” uses a traditional pop singing style and lowers their voice to narrate the story in the first half of the song. As the suona plays, the song transitions to the chorus with a traditional Hangzhou Opera singing technique. The lines “First bow to heaven and earth, second bow to the parents” immediately captures the audience’s attention and bring them into the scene of a grand wedding scene. The bright vocal timbre characteristic of Chinese opera achieves the effect of piercing the heart and lamenting tragic experiences, leaving the listeners contemplative and sighing with emotion.

“Chrysanthemum Terrace” is also a song with a strong sense of storytelling. In this song, the singer pays attention to the use of soft mixing and laryngeal-lingual separation. This technique allows high notes to be reached effortlessly while maintaining the song’s storytelling quality. Jay Chou is known for his prominent use of nasal resonance, which may result in less distinct enunciation. However, this vocal characteristic aligns perfectly with the song’s themes of sorrowful reminiscence and ambiguous emotional expression.

### 3.4 Harmony

Jay Chou’s “Chrysanthemum Terrace” features rich and clever use of harmony. The song not only incorporates the

traditional Chinese pentatonic scale but also utilizes some special chords in the chorus section. For instance, it borrows the subdominant chord from the parallel minor key in a major key context, adding a unique color and emotional tension to the song. This harmonic approach makes the overall harmony sound both reminiscent of traditional Chinese music and characteristic of modern pop music. This harmonic technique originates from the concept of parallel major-minor interchange in harmony theory, where chords from the parallel minor are introduced into a major key. This allows the song to maintain its melodic beauty while enriching the harmonic progression, making it more varied and complex. Such harmonic choices align well with the poignant tone of the film “Curse of the Golden Flower,” for which the song was composed.

“Chinese Wedding” also has its unique aspects in terms of harmony. The song uses some non-traditional harmonic progressions to create a unique atmosphere and express contradictory emotions. For example, different chords are combined, and the harmony alternates between tension and relaxation to express the theme of “contradiction”. In the accompaniment, the melody composed of the pentatonic scale played by ethnic instruments collides and contrasts with the non-diatonic notes played by the piano, creating a sense of conflict in harmony that matches the absurd and contradictory emotions expressed in the song.

### 3.5 Arrangement

The arrangement of “Chrysanthemum Terrace” is grand and majestic, exuding a regal dignity. The song was arranged by Zhong Xingmin, renowned as a master of string music. He incorporated a large number of traditional Chinese ethnic instruments into the arrangement, including the hulusi, guzheng, and sheng, and also engaged the China Philharmonic Orchestra for the recording of the string parts of the entire song. The use of strings gives the song a thick and grandiose style, evoking a solemn and elegant feeling in the listeners. At the same time, the use of folk music showcases the charm of traditional Chinese music. This arrangement style complements the song’s theme and the story expressed in the film, making the listeners feel as if they are immersed in the tragedy brought about by the struggle for imperial power.

Ge Dongqi has masterfully fused various elements to create a unique and innovative arrangement style in “Chinese Wedding”. This is a very distinctive song, with a pop music style that not only integrates folk instruments like suona, erhu, and pipa but also combines rap and recitation. This diverse arrangement style breaks the boundaries of traditional music, bringing a refreshing experience to the listeners. The prelude starts with the sorrowful sound of the erhu, accompanied by discordant piano notes, creating

a stark contrast with the song's title "Chinese Wedding" and laying a strong tragic foundation for the song. The spoken word sections not only add auditory depth but also lay the groundwork for the song's climax. The use of the suona is the highlight of the piece, creating a unique tension between the joyous music of "Chinese Wedding" and the tragic emotions.

### 3.6 Special Instruments

"Chrysanthemum Terrace" features the use of many traditional Chinese ethnic instruments, such as the hulusi, guzheng, and sheng. These instruments add a significant touch to the song's "Chinese style", deeply immersing the listeners in the flavor of traditional Chinese culture. The unique timbres of these traditional instruments, blending with Jay Chou's modern music composition techniques, create a musical atmosphere where tradition and modernity passionately collide. Whether it's the melodious tones of the hulusi or the elegance of the guzheng, each instrument plays a crucial role in enhancing the song, making its "Chinese style" characteristics even more pronounced. The most prominent special instrument in "Chinese Wedding" is the suona. With its high-pitched and bright timbre, the suona exhibits strong expressiveness and even penetration in its performance. The use of the suona in "Chinese Wedding" can be considered a stroke of genius. In Chinese traditional culture, the suona is associated with both weddings and funerals, and its presence is seen as a sign of either great joy or great sorrow. "Chinese Wedding" expresses a story that metaphorically encompasses both emotions. The suona not only serves to drive the rebellious sentiment and enhance the eerie atmosphere in the music but is also closely connected to the song's "contradiction" theme. When the sound of the suona rises, the emotional conflict of great joy and sorrow is instantly magnified. The "joyous scene" represented by "Chinese Wedding" and the "mournful sentiment" contained in the suona sound are intertwined, constantly stimulating the listeners to deeply feel the complex emotions embedded in the song. Additionally, the incorporation of ethnic instruments such as the erhu and pipa adds rich cultural elements to the song, rendering its style even more distinctive.

## 4. Conclusion

This article showcases the evolution of "Chinese style" in Chinese pop music through a comparative analysis of the songs "Chrysanthemum Terrace" and "Chinese Wedding". By comparing and analyzing aspects such as lyrics, melody, and arrangement, the author finds that the combination

of "Chinese style" with pop music has evolved from traditional classical elements to a harmonious integration that keeps pace with the times. The oriental classical charm and abundant traditional Chinese elements embodied in "Chinese style" have evolved from initial experimental explorations to a widely accepted and beloved presentation across multiple domains and perspectives in the hands of practitioners. This developmental journey reveals the flourishing landscape of contemporary Chinese culture and national confidence. Future research on "Chinese style" can continue to delve deeper into its mysteries by examining its stylistic characteristics, historical context, or specific works.

### Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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