

The Traditional Chinese Music Elements in the Soundtracks of the *Film Full River Red*

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Abstract. The film *Full River Red* is a new masterpiece of director Yimou Zhang on the theme of "Family and Country Sentiment", which got a great response when it was exhibited in cinemas, and its soundtrack also aroused public discussion. It was nominated for the best music in the 36th networking. This paper focuses on the soundtrack of the film, from the perspectives of Chinese traditional Xiqu, plot characters, the use of musical instruments, and the fusion of multiple musical styles. How the Chinese traditional music is integrated into the soundtracks, and how the resulting cultural symbols are used in the films will be discussed. It is expected that this paper can provide some inspiration for the forms of innovation in the development of Chinese traditional music, as well as the stylistic innovation of Chinese film soundtracks.

Keywords: *Full River Red*, Chinese traditional music, film soundtracks.

1. Introduction

The film *Full River Red* is closely related to traditional Chinese culture both in terms of plot and soundtrack. Especially the traditional Chinese Yuju appeared in the soundtrack. And the film has gained excellent success and praise during its release. Meanwhile, the film's soundtrack was nominated for the best music in the 36th Golden Rooster Award. Since the film was released only one year ago, there hasn't been much research done on its soundtrack. For example, there are only about three articles available. Shi Tang's article focuses on the Xiqu soundtracks in the film as its research subject. It analyzes their musical forms and connects them with the plot to elaborate on the role of these soundtracks in the film's narrative. Additionally, it considers the dissemination of Xiqu music, which combines traditional Xiqu with modern elements [1]. Lili Wang's article focuses on Yuju and analyzes its rock characteristics, combining them with the film's gongs and drums accompaniment and Xiqu material to reveal the source of the soundtrack's magical brainwashing feeling [2]. Jiahui Fan and Lu Bai's article analyzes how music is revealed in the film as a narrative element, a structural element, and a rhythmic control element [3]. In addition, there is also some research that analyzes the film's narrative, characterization, and cultural spirituality. Jiayu Zhao's article focuses on the film's color symbols, character symbols, and cultural symbols, as well as the accompanying text to explore the artistic value of *Full River Red* as a commercial film [4]. Shupeng Yang and Naijia Huo's articles analyze the artistic content of the film in terms of its genre, narrative structure, and narrative space, as well as the national spirit of the film in terms of the spirit of the characters, the combination of visual and auditory senses, and the embedded sense of family and nation [5]. Jinghua Liang's article explores the contemporary variations of traditional culture in the film from famous Songci, the Chinese "Guochao" soundtrack, and the myth of Fei Yue [6].

In this paper, the author will focus on the soundtrack of the film *Full River Red* and analyze it to explore the fusion of traditional musical elements in it, as well as to investigate the symbolism of folk music.

2. Basic Information of the Film

2.1. The Film Crew

The film *Full River Red* was directed by Yimou Zhang. The soundtrack was composed by Hong Han, a pop singer and musician from Mainland China. Hong Han was born in 1971 from an artistic family. She joined the local choir at the age of 5, joined the Junior Children's Choir at the age of 9 and began her formal training, and was admitted to the Vocal Department of the China Conservatory of Music and the Department of Music of the formerly People's Liberation Army Academy of Arts to accept systematic music studies. As a singer, she has also composed musicals and orchestral works, and the film *Full River Red* was her first film soundtrack.

2.2. Characters and Plot

The film *Full River Red* tells the story of five years after the death of the famous anti-Jin general Fei Yue, the treacherous Hui Qin led troops to the border to negotiate a secret peace with the Jin Dynasty, but the Jin emissary was accidentally killed, so that the accompanying letter has disappeared, Hui Qin ordered his subordinates to look for the secret letter and a series of conspiracies and reversals triggered by the secret letter.

The film centers around utility soldier Da Zhang, deputy commander of the military battalion Jun Sun, chief of the chancellor's residence Li He, and deputy chief Yichun Wu. Da Zhang appears to be a greedy and willful man, but he has his own plans and beliefs, and in the final reversal, he calculates everyone; Jun Sun appears to be ruthless and works for the traitors, but in fact, he has beliefs; Hui Qin, the prime minister, is a traitor and insults Fei Yue, but in fact, he respects him very much in his heart. Fei Yue, the clue character throughout the whole film, exists in all the characters' lines and beliefs, because of "Fei Yue", there exists the film *Full River Red*, and *Full River Red* is also the name of the Songci made by Fei Yue.

3. Music Analysis

3.1. The Musical Characteristics of Yuju

Yuju is one of the traditional Chinese Xiqu, its music style is simple and unrestrained, straight and powerful, including the singing style, song, accompanying instruments, all of them have great geo-cultural characteristics. The aria of Yuju can be divided into two majors: the Yudong vocal accent and the Yuxi vocal accent [7]. The Yudong vocal accent is based on the rhythms and tones of the Eastern part of Henan, and is sung in a high, thin voice, mostly in falsetto, with the use of flash panels, added liner, and superimposed phrases to make the music lively, bright, well-behaved, and full of changes [7]. Yuxi vocal accent singing large cavity large tone, voice mellow, mostly with the real voice singing, line cavity when the tail tone downward meandering, implicit style, emotionally rich and delicate, rhythmic, singing more reading less [7]. In the choice of accompanying instruments in the early Yuju is mainly clapper beat. The tune is high-pitched and exciting, and later by the influence of Peking Opera, the jinghu is used as the main instrument. The sheng, Chinese flute, erhu and other instruments are used [8].

3.2. The Usage of Musical Instruments

The use of instruments in the soundtrack is closely linked to the plot. First, several key tracks have been examined: The film's opening soundtrack *Full River Red* and the drama soundtrack *Seize when Biao Wang fights with Jun Sun*, *Farewell Forever* when Yaoqin assassinates Hui Qin, *The Bottom Card* when Li He kills Yichun Wu, *Occur* when Jun Sun fights with his two attendants and *The Last Fight* when Jun Sun fights with Wan Zheng. All these soundtracks are related to the plot in which the characters fight or even produce the death of a character. Most of music adopts the Yuju, and the orchestration uses Chinese gongs, drums, and wooden clappers, which are traditional instruments that

can directly produce character. In *Seize*, the sound of gongs and drums shows the fierce battle between weapons; in *Farewell Forever*, as the tempo of the drums and clappers speeds up, the atmosphere is pushed to a high point, Yaoqin tries to assassinate Hui Qin; in *The Bottom Card*, the rapid bass drumming, when Li He suddenly kills Yichun Wu; and in *Occur* the sound of the drums and gongs showing the messiness of the maid catching the pigeons, as well as the lowest tones of the drums imitating the sound of heartbeat, all acted to push the mood and the plot forward. In addition, the rapid rotating fingers in the pipa of *Full River Red* create a solemn atmosphere, the guzheng and guqin rubbing strings in *Seize* simulate the sound of weapons rubbing, and the sheng of *The Last Fight* shows the tension of the fight. In addition to folk instruments, these soundtracks incorporate electronic bass, which is used to create a tense, scary atmosphere.

In addition to traditional instruments, some of the music is performed by Western orchestra. The first full orchestra piece *Loyalty to Serve the Country* appeared when Jun Sun found out that Da Zhang had engraved the words “Jing Zhong Bao Guo” on his back, then Da Zhang pointed out that Jun Sun was not a Jin man's lackey with *Memory*, *Living Towards the Sun* when the fake Hui Qin recites Fei Yue's last words in front of the whole army, *The Falling Curtain Song* when Jun Sun and the real Hui Qin finally clear up the complete clues of the whole story, and *Horizon* when Jun Sun leaves at the end of the film. From *Loyalty to Serve the Country*, the patriotic thought of the film began, and the core theme of Yue Fei's spirit surfaced completely. The orchestra's orchestration is full and rich, and the music has a strong sense of emotion. The introduction of *Loyalty to Serve the Country* is led by the brass, with string ensemble and a clear piccolo, which has a sense of sadness, followed by string staccato, then the overall orchestra to enter, and a sense of grandeur emerges, with the final tonguing of the brass section advances the emotion of the music. *Memory* also begins with long strings, followed by the various orchestrations, and the gradual progression of the music dispels the sadness, as the power of faith begins to emerge. *Living Towards the Sun* appeared when Hui Qin recited Songci *Full River Red*. At the beginning the volume of the lines is obvious, the string ensemble and the piano are gentle, then the lines gradually raise the mood, the violin and cello voices are excited, the addition of timpani push the mood high, the volume of the music over the lines, and in the end together to achieve the highest climax. The prelude to *The Falling Curtain Song* consists of a harp, piano, and string ensemble with a long, airy melody, and the second half of the piece is similarly propelled emotionally by timpani. As the final soundtrack, *Horizon* culminates in the atmosphere of the film, and as the full orchestra instruments begin to move forward, the strong addition of the Chinese suona brings the musical style back into the folk music.

The utilization of musical instruments also plays a significant role in character development. Da Zhang and Yaoqin are a couple, and the film's reference to the *Cherry Song*, which is the love song between them, appears repeatedly in plots related to them. *Oh, Lover* when they recognize each other, *Farewell Forever* when Yaoqin prepares to assassinate Hui Qin, *Lose My Love Forever* when Li He uses the way of insulting Yaoqin to force Da Zhang to confess and when Yaoqin farewell to Da Zhang. The first appearance of *Cherry Song* is *Oh Lover*, the clear singing of Yaoqin makes the atmosphere of their turn to sadness, and then the two of them confide in each other, embrace and cry, and the violin solo of *Cherry Song* further rendered the sad atmosphere. The violin solo melody of *Farewell Forever*, followed by a string ensemble entering the music, makes the sad atmosphere between the two more intense. In *Lose My Love Forever*, there are variations in the *Cherry Song*. First, the tempo of the violin melody solo becomes faster, the end of each phrase finishes with a glissando, the third phrase is accompanied by the obvious sound of strings, the player's strength in the expression of the emotions is more sobbing, and the melody is played on the piano when the two farewell at the end, then Yaoqin dies, which is more astringent and sadder than the violin music. Similar soundtracks with variations also include *Tearful Farewell to Brother*, *Memory* and *Occur*. These musical plots are all related to the sacrifices of Da Zhang and his partners. *Tearful Farewell to Brother* is when Da Zhang kills Sanwang Ding to hide his identity, the theme melody is played by cello and other strings, the low tone creates a sad atmosphere. Then he meets Sanwang Ding 's daughter, Tao, the theme melody is played by a piano, which is slightly more dynamic, implying that Tao doesn't know anything, and

Da Zhang pretends to have nothing to play with Tao. The theme melody of *Memory*, in which Da Zhang confides his heart to Jun Sun, is played by a string orchestra, with a longer melody lines and sadness among the warmth, implying that Da Zhang decides to set up a trap using his sacrifice in exchange for Hui Qin's trust in Jun Sun. The melody of the theme of the *Occur* is played by the piano, at this time in a quiet environment, Jun Sun recalls when to move the idea of betrayal, the plot to this point all the pawns are sacrificed, the piano melody is not as rich as the violin sense, more heartbreaking. In addition, there are several moments in the movie where Li He takes a fan and knocks it, this action is synchronized with the sound of the gong being struck, and with some witty sound effects, it creates a comedic atmosphere.

3.3. Innovative Transformation of Xiqu in the Film

The soundtrack in the film *Full River Red* borrows a lot from Yuju. Some of them are taken from existing traditional pieces. The composer's adaptation mainly focuses on the tempo and rhythm, the accompanying instruments and style. The part of the singing lyrics is less adapted. The soundtracks with Yuju singing are found in the transitions of the scenes as well as in the character's walk, so all the involved sections have been adapted with increased tempo and speed.

Searching for Clues is based on *Bao Resigns from the Court - Fighting Qiang Wang*. The original tune is in E-gong key, while the film is in G-gong key [1], and the overall speed is accelerated, with the original version having a gradual fast tempo, while the one in the film is more average. The original version is accompanied by folk instruments, and the melodic instruments are mainly erhu. The film opens with banhu, followed by gongs, drums, clappers, and other rhythmic instruments. The melodic parts are mainly made by electronic synthesizers, which make the bass-heavy rhythms more obvious and modern. Here as the first time in the film appears an Xiqu section, Da Zhang, Jun Sun and others go to interrogate Yaoqin, the story begins, so the music orchestration unfolds layer by layer, there is a sense of gradual evolution. The adaptations of *Interrogate*, *Fireworks* and *Awe-inspiring* are like *Searching for Clues* in that they all have more modernized adaptations of the accompaniment parts.

The Meeting is adapted from *The Search for Yin Mountain*, the original tune is in ^bB Zhi key, and in the film is in ^bB Gong key [1]. At this point, the plot has already entered the main movie, and the accompaniment no longer has the feeling of advancing track by track, but after the opening of the banhu solo, all the accompaniment voices join in collectively. It is implied that the first conspiracy has been completed and Jun Sun has been successfully tied into a boat. Meanwhile, a new line with a similar bass tone has been introduced in the electronic music section to accentuate the more dynamic and energetic feel of the music.

The music of *Shake Shake* is different from the previous pieces in terms of archetypes, deriving from the primarily female characters of *Five Generations Request to Fight* and adapted in a larger musical style. The original version is in a slower tempo with freely rhythm. The lyrics are more long-drawn out to demonstrate the style of Xiqu. The music in the film is faster and more excited. Accompaniment is no longer opened by the banhu, but the lyrics are sing first. The electronic sound is no longer played by a heavy bass beat, but there is a smaller volume, monotone rapid repeated. At the same time, the electric bass sounding voices are more designed, no longer accompanied from the beginning to the end but short repeated three times for a decorative purpose. Compared to the previous soundtrack's heavy bass, the light bass here is matched with the plot of the Yaoqin being escorted staggering towards the scene, which corresponds to the difference between the characterization of the Yaoqin and male figures such as Da Zhang and Jun Sun.

Recognize appeared when the plot began to developed to a kind of ridiculous and dramatic moments, showing the comedic style of the film. The accompaniment begins with clapper beat rhythm, followed by the banhu. The bass drum beat in the electronic tone section become to a dotted rhythm, reducing the sense of mystery and heaviness, increasing the sense of liveliness and comedy. It implies the plot that follows the music: Yichun Wu secretly hides Yaoqin which is discovered, with the witty story of what happens between people.

The adaptation of *Farewell* combines *Shake Shake* and *Recognize*. Opening with banhu, the gongs set the tone and then the lyrics are sing out. The first half-sentence of melody by vocals, and the second half-sentence is repeated by banhu. Added an interlude, played by drums and clappers, and the overall music has a faster tempo with more staccato, increase the sense of comedy in film. Plot to here, the day has gradually bright, and Da Zhang, Yaoqin and others thought that this time to go will be able to successfully assassinate Hui Qin, so the music style here also has a certain sense of confidence. The original version of *Guiying Mu Takes Command* has more free and relaxed style, instead of a lively feel.

Both *Messy Step* and *The Meeting* are derived from *The Search for Yin Mountain*. *The Meeting* is a meeting between Da Zhang and his accomplice Xi Liu, while *Messy Step* is Hui Qin's way to see the evidence of his betrayal of his country. By this time, it was full daylight and the audience thought the story had reached the final critical point. Hence there is a difference between the two adaptations. For the electronic tone section, it increases a high pitch melody with a crisp and granular tone. The singing part is weakly melodic, mainly reciting, echoing the high pitch track, followed by interludes accompanied by banhu, gongs and drums, the overall mood of the music is continuously high, and at the end of the final long notes, the atmosphere reaches a climax, with a strong sense of rhythmic movement.

3.4. Fusion with Other Musical Styles

As mentioned in the previous two sections, in addition to folk instruments, the film's soundtrack includes many electronic sounds. This approach diminishes the rural feel from the traditional version of Xiqu music and the sharp sounding sensation that comes with the vocal method. Meanwhile, the film art as a product of the industrial age has developed to this day, constantly introducing new elements to make it closer to modern life, so the combination of traditional Xiqu and electronic music makes the sound and picture more integrated and easier to be accepted by the audience.

As European and American rock music spread to China in the 1980s, rock singers led by Jian Cui added Chinese folk instruments as backing instruments in their compositions, resulting in a Chinese rock style with traditional musical elements [9,10]. The soundtrack of *Full River Red* utilizes many ethnic instruments, while the bass-heavy drums use the rock music commonly used to increase the force on the second or fourth beat, making the rhythm more intense and reminding the listener about the Chinese rock music style [11]. In rock music, the accompaniment is on an equal level of importance with the vocals [12]. And when singing based on a high-pitched and exciting vocal tone, the voice has explosive power, mainly in high pitch shouting, firm and powerful [11]. In the soundtrack for the Yuju, the accompaniment voices and the dialect singing complement each other. And the vocalization of Yuju is like the shouting in rock music. The main tune of the Yuju originated from the Bangzi Tune of the Northwest Plateau, which is a kind of excited, high-pitched, exuberant and enthusiastic musical tune [2]. Henan people often called singing Yuju “Kao Shan Hou”, because the past theatrical troupe always set up a stage on the mountain, singing with their voices, and its enthusiastic and unrestrained style is like today's rock music [2]. Therefore, the Yuju sections in the film have rock attributes by themselves, and combined with the catalyst of modern electronic music, it has the maximizes development of the electronic rock music. In the part of electronic music accompaniment in the film, in addition to using electronic synthesizers to produce bass drums such as in *Searching for Clues* and *Recognize*, there are also *Assassination* and *One Last Look* which the sound of accompanying instruments is made by music production software.

4. Symbolism in the Xiqu Music Presented in the Film

4.1. Fusion with Other Musical Styles

Yuju is a typical representative of Henan folk music, born in the Heluo area, with an original name “Henan Bangzi” [7]. It is the reflection of the folk art and culture of Henan. So, it is very regional character in the selection and style of music. Most of its repertoire are categorized into loyalty and

treachery Xiqu, detective Xiqu and martial arts Xiqu, such as *Lord Bao Series*, *Generals of the Yang Family Series*, *Three Kingdoms Series*, which portray characters who are active defenders and protectors of the state or dynastic political system [7]. In the film, although each of the leading roles has his own purpose and ideas, but all are centered on the character of “Fei Yue” and his *Full River Red*. So “Fei Yue” and *Full River Red* have a crucial position in the film as the clues linking up the whole story. Fei Yue's birthplace is precisely Henan, so the movie uses Yuju to imply Fei Yue's role image, which is very ingenious [13]. In addition to a consistent geographic location, Fei Yue, as a patriotic general, has a resounding and powerful sense which is highly consistent with the style of the Yuju. The film does not appear “Fei Yue” but everywhere is “Fei Yue”, in addition to recurring in the actor's lines, the soundtrack also has been repeatedly implied that bring the audience into the same mood as the main character in the film. The soaring and exciting tunes of the Yuju contrast with the film's sense of tension and excitement that is brought about by the dim color filters of the late night, and combined with the *Full River Red* passionately recited by actors, it makes the audience immersed in the scene.

4.2. Symbols of Characters and Plot

The Xiqu tracks in the film are adapted from classic Xiqu music, which have symbolism for the characters and plot. The first half of the film focuses on Jun Sun and Da Zhang, who receive orders to secretly find a secret letter, and the stories that happen in the process. *Interrogate* takes place after Biao Wang's death, when no useful clues are found in his room so Sanwang Ding is interrogated again. But Sanwang Ding changes his testimony and everyone follows him to look for the secret letter. The music is derived from *Bao in Prison*, which tells the injustices of a twisted and complicated case, symbolizing that Biao Wang was wrongly accused, and the plot is reversed for the first time. And the libretto mention that “Bian Zhong Jian Shang Xv Min Yi Cha Fang”, implying that when faced with a clue, it should be carefully judged and think deeply about their truthfulness. *The Meeting* is derived from the Xiqu *the Search for Yin Mountain*, which has two versions, Peking Opera and Yuju, also tells the injustices of frame and make the best of a mistake, which cleared up later. Corresponding to the plot of Sanwang Ding died, the secret letter is still missing. But the clues are broken. People can only be based on their previous testimony “make the best of a mistake” to look for new clues. Meanwhile, in the original Xiqu, *The Search for Yin Mountain* corresponds to the plot of Zheng Bao investigating and getting the truth, which also implies the secret meeting between Da Zhang and Xi Liu, the identities of all the people surfacing in the next episode.

The previous sections of libretto from the view of the male character, based on the image of Zheng Bao in Xiqu. But when it comes to *Shake Shake*, the original music begins to move towards the female character. *Shake Shake* originates from the Xiqu *Five Generations Request to Fight*, which tells the story of the Xiqiang rebellion during the Beisong Dynasty, she led five generations of her family to request to go battlefield to fight. The plot begins to move into the main Yaoqin story line, using the image of Guiying Mu to imply that Yaoqin is not the prostitute we seem to think she is. *Farewell* with the theme of *Guiying Mu Takes Command*, appears when Da Zhang and Yaoqin recognize each other and Yaoqin reveals her plans. In the original Xiqu, Guiying Mu was in command of the army, and in the film, Yaoqin also plans to take the place of Da Zhang to “go out to battle” to assassinate Hui Qin. From the previous implication to the obvious, Yaoqin is not a woman who doesn't know the demise of her country, but a female general in command of the army. The last song, *Awe-inspiring*, although a plot which Jun Sun is the protagonist, seems to use the music of *Guiying Mu Takes Command* to correspond with the ambition of Jun Sun's assuming the post of commander of the military battalion, but the image of Guiying Mu implies that the plot will be reversed again, and that Jun Sun is not the villainous character that has been seen until now.

In addition, most of the Xiqu pieces selected for the film are based on the literary work *Three Heroes and Five Gallants*. It tells the story of Zheng Bao eliminating the violence and acting as a chivalrous warrior, with the help of many chivalrous, reflecting the aspirations of the underclass people. The use of these clips allows the audience to sublimate the minor characters in the plot, led

by Da Zhang and Jun Sun, who followed in Fei Yue's footsteps and risked their lives to bring to light the treacherous Hui Qin's collusion with the Jin, into true heroes.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, the success of the soundtrack of *Full River Red* is due to the perfect match between music and plot. Through analysis, this paper shows how the musical style of Yuju and the geographical and character factors of the selected Xiqu clips fit the plot of the film, and also explores the symbolism of these traditional cultural symbols in this film. The fusion of movie music with elements of Chinese folk music has been commonplace, but from a macro perspective, using traditional music to tell a Chinese story is a good creative direction. However, one film *Full River Red* is not able to show all the creators' efforts and attempts in the direction of ethnic music fusion. It is worthwhile to think about what kind of development and influence will bring to movie music or traditional Chinese music through this kind of fusion.

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