

Analysis of Representative Works by Chiang Wen-yeh

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Abstract— *Exploring the Distinctive Features of Chiang Wen-yeh's Representative Works: An Analysis of His Integration of Traditional and Modern Musical Elements, with Emphasis on Melody, Orchestration, and Emotional Expression. Through in-depth study of these works, we may better understand his innovative spirit in musical creation and his role in preserving and developing traditional Chinese culture, thereby gaining new insights for the advancement of music composition.*



Keywords— *Taiwanese musician, Chiang Wen-yeh, Ethnomusicology, Orchestral Music.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Music, as a form of cultural expression, carries human emotions, thoughts, and values. Different cultural contexts are reflected in corresponding musical characteristics. In the field of ethnic music, the Taiwanese composer Chiang Wen-yeh has garnered significant attention for his distinctive compositional style. He skillfully incorporated traditional Taiwanese folk elements into his works while adeptly integrating modern musical techniques, creating a series of highly acclaimed compositions. [1].

II. CHIANG WEN-YEH (1910–1983): A LIFE ACROSS CHANGING TIMES

Chiang Wen-yeh (originally named Chiang Wen-pin) was born in 1910 in Sanzhi Village, Tamsui District, Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period. Around 1916, he moved with his parents to Xiamen (though his household registration remained in Taiwan). After arriving in Xiamen, he attended the Kyokugin Academy, a school established by the Xiamen Taiwanese Association that followed the Japanese educational system. The academy emphasized practical training and overseas studies, offering courses in commerce, foreign languages (including Japanese and English), as well as basic medical and artistic knowledge [2].

At that time, Xiamen's Gulangyu Island was a foreign concession, exposing Chiang to various forms of Western culture. Additionally, Christian church music on the island had developed considerably in the early 20th

century. Possessing a natural sensitivity to music, Chiang encountered the Western musical system during his time in Gulangyu.

After completing six years of study at the Kyokugin Academy, the 13-year-old Chiang Wen-yeh left for Japan in 1923 to pursue further education. Due to social unrest in Japan at the time, he moved to Nagano Prefecture with his Japanese servant, Yamasaki Akira, to continue his studies. During his middle school years in Nagano, Chiang displayed a clear musical talent—often experimenting with school instruments and teaching himself to play.

In 1928, after graduating from the five-year middle school program, he enrolled at the private Musashi Technical High School (located in Gotanda, Tokyo) for a three-year program. Meanwhile, he took private voice lessons in his spare time under a teacher named Abe. In fact, Chiang did not receive formal musical training from a young age but was largely self-guided by his innate talent and strong interest.

After graduating from Musashi Technical High School in 1932, Chiang was recruited as a vocalist by Columbia Records (Japan), marking the beginning of his professional music career. He went on to participate in multiple vocal competitions in Japan, consistently advancing to the final rounds.

III. ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIVE WORKS BY CHIANG WEN-YEH

Chiang Wen-yeh's significant place in music history can be attributed first to the remarkable diversity of genres in which he composed, and second to his distinctive integration of contemporary Western compositional techniques with traditional Chinese musical thought and indigenous stylistic elements.

3.1 Orchestral Work *Formosan Dance*

Formosan Dance (Taiwan no Bukyoku), composed by Chiang Wen-yeh, stands as one of his most representative works. It was the first Chinese orchestral composition to receive international recognition, winning an award at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Arts Competition (a category later discontinued), and remains an indispensable part of Chinese music history. While employing Western compositional techniques, the piece is not constrained by conventional Western forms; instead, all techniques serve the musical expression. Chiang drew from the profound and enduring Chinese cultural tradition, using traditional melodic elements and sincere emotion to convey his deep nostalgia for his homeland, Taiwan. This section provides a detailed analysis of *Formosan Dance* from three perspectives: musical form, tonality and harmony, and melodic structure.

Composed in 1934, *Formosan Dance* was one of Chiang's earliest major works and earned him the top prize in music at the 1936 Berlin Olympics (after which the award was discontinued). The piece is structured as a compound ternary form, consisting of an exposition, a middle section, and a recapitulation—each itself in ternary form. However, some scholars argue that it is more freely constructed as a single-movement work, integrating characteristics of Western form with traditional Chinese instrumental music structures, creating a sense of “loose form but coherent spirit.” Melodically, the work exhibits a fusion of modal and melodic elements.

In terms of modality, Chiang incorporated Taiwanese indigenous modes as well as the Japanese *Miyako-bushi* scale. Although both are pentatonic, they differ from the traditional Chinese pentatonic system, lending the work a distinctive melancholy and mysterious quality. The modal choices also reflect Chiang's psychological state within his political context: on one hand, he received a Japanese colonial education, while on the other, he remained deeply influenced by native Taiwanese musical traditions, which became rooted in his creative practice [3].

3.1.1 Musical form

The formal structure of *Formosan Dance* remains a subject of academic debate, with multiple interpretations proposed from various analytical perspectives.

One view, focusing on musical character, suggests that the work resembles a compressed compound ternary form akin to a waltz, combining multiple sections of contrasting moods. The opening section is a small ternary form depicting joyful singing and dancing scenes of his homeland. The central section is the most extensive, comprising two major parts: a lyrical *moderato* followed by a developmental bridge, creating strong dramatic contrast. The recapitulation is shortened to a single phrase followed by a brief coda.

Another perspective, rooted in Chinese musical thought, argues that while the piece exhibits certain features of Western sonata form, it follows its own structural logic. The seven sections relate contrastively and unfold independently according to emotional progression, free from strict Western formal constraints, thus subordinating structure to expressive purpose [4].

From a Western theoretical standpoint, some scholars analyze the work as a sonata-rondo form. The exposition includes not only the typical sonata elements—main theme, transition, secondary theme, and closing—but also inserts a return of the main theme between the secondary and closing themes, giving the exposition a rondo-like character. The development section introduces new episodic material followed by development of earlier themes. A transitional passage leads to an abbreviated recapitulation, omitting the transition and secondary theme, while expanding the closing into a final conclusion.

A melodic perspective highlights the piece's use of traditional Chinese developmental techniques. The seven sections are structurally distinct yet interrelated through variation and transformation of a core motif, lending the work both variational and rondo-like qualities.

In summary, *Formosan Dance* is a large-scale work with a multifaceted structure. Regardless of analytical approach, it clearly reflects Chiang Wen-yeh's innovative breakthroughs in formal conception.

3.1.2 Tonality and mode

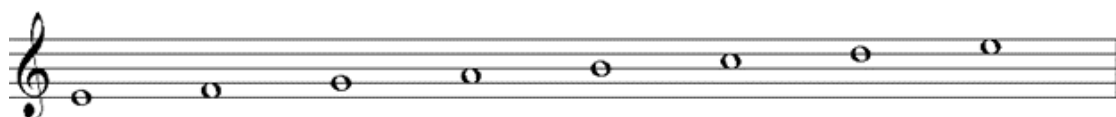
Chiang Wen-yeh's *Formosan Dance* exhibits a multifaceted approach to tonality and mode, synthesizing Chinese and Japanese modal characteristics—a reflection of his early studies in Japan and the consequent influence of Japanese culture on his work.

The first modal type draws from Taiwanese folk traditions, employing a pentatonic scale without minor seconds. The interval sequence consists of a minor third,

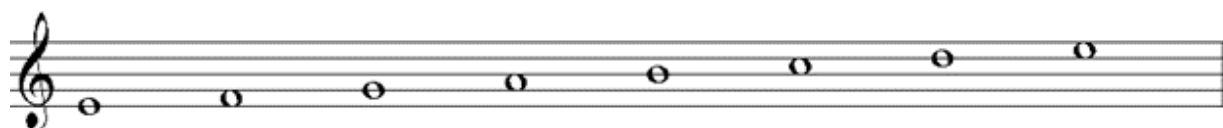
major second, minor third, major second, and major second. This mode emphasizes progressions based on minor thirds and major seconds, resulting in a gentle and lyrical character.

The second modal type is influenced by the Japanese *Miyako-bushi* scale, which incorporates minor seconds. Its interval structure is: minor second, major third, major second, minor second, and major third. Additionally, a tritone relationship exists between the second and fourth degrees of the scale, producing a sharp and tense quality (see Music Example 1).

Rather than keeping these two modes separate, Chiang often blends them within *Formosan Dance*, creating a natural mode with Phrygian characteristics (see Music Example 2). This synthesis reflects both his cultural background and his innovative approach to modal harmony [5].



Music Example 1: (Left) Pentatonic Scale Without Minor Second Intervals;
(Right) Pentatonic Scale Containing Minor Second Intervals



Music Example 2

3.1.3 Harmonic structure

Chiang Wen-yeh's approach to harmony was not confined to traditional functional relationships. Influenced by early 20th-century Western harmonic theory, he placed expressive purpose at the center of his harmonic language [6]. His works incorporate both conventional tertian harmonies and non-tertian structures. In the middle sections of the piece, he often employs traditional triadic chords enriched with added tones, lending a fresh color to familiar harmonies. In his use of non-tertian structures, he frequently inserts perfect fourths or fifths within pure octaves, enhancing the pentatonic character of the music. By innovatively reinterpreting traditional harmonic functions and integrating them with modal structures and progressions, Chiang developed a harmonic language that conveys distinct modal qualities.

Composed in 1940 after Chiang Wen-yeh moved to Beijing, *Festival Overture: Confucian Temple* stands as a major representative work from this period. It was created in response to Alexander Tcherepnin's call for a synthesis of Chinese and Western musical traditions and reflects Chiang's deep engagement with Confucian musical

philosophy. The work consists of six movements: "Welcoming the Deity," "Initial Offering," "Secondary Offering," "Final Offering," "Clearing the Offerings," and "Seeing Off the Deity." Premiered in Japan, the piece gradually gained international acclaim for its profound cultural synthesis and spiritual depth.

3.2 Analysis of Piano Works

Between 1934 and 1953, Chiang Wen-yeh composed a substantial body of music. According to the 2016 edition of *The Complete Works of Chiang Wen-yeh* published by the Central Conservatory of Music, over twenty of his works survive to this day—excluding those that have been lost—with an average of one high-quality composition produced per year, attesting to his remarkable productivity. Among these works, many exhibit distinctive Chinese national characteristics.

The piano suite *Sixteen Bagatelles*, composed in

1936, marks a watershed in Chiang's engagement with folk music. Prior to this work, his compositions still retained elements of Japanese musical culture. However, beginning with *Sixteen Bagatelles*, Chiang began incorporating substantial Chinese national elements, initiating his mature period of folk-inspired creation.

Influenced by Béla Bartók of Hungary, Chiang experimented extensively with modern compositional techniques in his piano suite *Five Sketches*, which stands as a significant achievement of his exploratory efforts. This section focuses on two pieces from the suite—*One-Legged Scarecrow in the Rice Field* and *The Field Behind the House*—analyzing their formal structure and melodic organization.

One-Legged Scarecrow in the Rice Field composed in February 1935, is the first of the *Five Sketches*. Its form is relatively free and can be divided into four sections based on the development of musical ideas [7].

The first section (19 measures) is a parallel binary form comprising two contrasting phrases, derived from three thematic materials (a, b, and c). Material A employs the E *Miyako-bushi* mode with a minor quality. In the first



Music Example 3

phrase, the tonic E is sustained as a suspension through measure 4, followed by a second phrase that ends openly on the dominant B. The pitch material is simple and austere, using only tonic and dominant, while the rhythmic texture—with left-hand block chords and right-hand ascending arpeggios—vividly depicts a solitary scarecrow standing guard over the vast fields (see Music Example 3).

Material B modulates to the dominant key of B *Miyako-bushi* mode, with rhythm serving as the primary expressive element. Material C continues the rhythmic emphasis of Material B but contrasts with Material A through accelerated tempo and gradually increasing dynamics.

The second section is a varied and compressed repetition of the first. Modally, it shifts toward traditional Chinese pentatonicism and Western church modes, transitioning first to F *Zhi* mode (F pentatonic) and then to B Dorian mode [8].

The third section represents the climactic point of the piece, characterized by intense conflict and developmental fragmentation. Thematic elements from Material A are combined with rhythmic patterns from Material C, and further developed through modulation and sequence, building progressively toward the structural climax.

The fourth section recapitulates the theme from the first section and concludes with a final arpeggiated passage in the coda.

The Field Behind the House, the second piece in the piano suite *Five Sketches*, is written entirely using pentatonic modes, giving it a distinctly Chinese character. The work follows a clear formal structure, adopting a traditional Western binary form with two independent and parallel sections.

Section A comprises 33 measures and consists of four phrases. Phrase A establishes a rhythmic foundation built on an eighth-note anacrusis followed by a half note, set in the E Jiao mode (E pentatonic; see Music Example 4). Phrase B unfolds in the A Yu mode (A pentatonic). To enhance tonal color, Chiang introduces the non-diatonic

itches A $\flat$ and B $\flat$ in the bass line. Phrase C employs a sixteenth-note rhythmic pattern and is set in the D Shang mode (D pentatonic), contributing to a cheerful and lively character. Phrase D returns to a more straightforward texture, with both hands moving in homorhythmic block chords, conveying a plain and unadorned musical quality.

Section B, also 33 measures long, contains four phrases. The first two phrases are variationally related and transition to A natural minor. The upper voice of the final two phrases shifts to E $\flat$ Dorian mode, creating a deliberate tonal juxtaposition with the natural minor harmony in the lower parts. The two sections contrast markedly in mode, character, and expression: Section A is bright and energetic, while Section B is contemplative and subdued.



Music Example 4

3.3 Analysis of Vocal Music Works

Chiang Wen-yeh's musical achievements extend well beyond instrumental composition into the realm of vocal music, where he demonstrated exceptional mastery. Not only did he set numerous classical Chinese poems to music, but between 1936 and 1946 alone, he composed 15 solo song cycles and 11 choral works, followed by a considerable number of vocal compositions in later years. In these works, the piano accompaniment is an indispensable element, often serving as a finishing touch that elevates the entire piece. Melody, poetry, vocal line, and piano are seamlessly integrated into a unified artistic expression. Although many of Chiang's works have been lost, those that survive attest to his remarkable creativity and unceasing courage in artistic exploration.

In 1938, Chiang compiled the *Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs* and composed several folk-inspired works such as "Beautiful Sun" and "Good Lad." He also wrote songs based on classical five- and seven-character poetry.

Motivated by nostalgia, he composed “Song of the Taiwanese Mountain Tribe,” reflecting his profound affinity for Chinese traditional culture. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Chiang produced the *Lin Geng Lyric Songs* in 1956—a work emblematic of his ideological transformation.

Completed in the early years of the PRC, this song cycle consists of ten pieces set to modernist poetry by Lin Geng, with music by Chiang Wen-yeh. This study focuses on two songs from the collection: “Spring Field” and “A Lone Cloud Is Like a Wild Flower on Earth,” analyzing their musical form and modal-tonal structure [9].

“Spring Field” is the second song in the cycle, with lyrics selected from Lin Geng’s 1934 poem “Spring Field and the Window.” The lyrics read approximately:

The blue water of spring flows down the mountain;
Green grass grows on both banks of the river.
No one remembers, no one knows—
Where the winter wind has gone.
Like the stillness around noon,
Soft as the wind in March,
Following unnamed butterflies,
Into the spring fields.

Chiang structured the song in ternary form (ABA') with an introduction and coda. The three-bar introduction begins with flowing thirty-second-note figures in the piano’s upper register, depicting a spring breeze sweeping across the land. The 15-measure A section, based on a Chinese pentatonic mode, continues the elaborate piano accompaniment, evoking vivid images of spring. The 10-measure B section introduces contrast through shifting meters, chordal textures, and frequent modulations. The 20-measure A' section expands the original theme and, after a series of modulations, concludes in B-flat *Gong* mode.

Lin Geng’s poetry, while rooted in classical tradition, embodies a modern sensibility. Chiang’s choice of this poem reflects the historical context of the early PRC—a nation emerging from hardship into renewal, much like winter turning to spring. Through this work, Chiang expressed both personal and collective hope for the future.

“A Lone Cloud Is Like a Wild Flower on Earth” is selected from Lin Geng’s *Beiping Love Songs* and is set in two-part form (AB). Chiang used a line from the poem as the title. The lyrics are:

Spring, so quiet; the wind rests on the grassy shore.
By the bridge, one feels the river rising.
A lone cloud is like a wild flower on earth—
It falls on the wanderer’s blue collar.

Section A comprises 19 measures divided into two contrasting phrases. Section B consists of 29 measures, also in two phrases, and incorporates a Peking opera-style vocal technique of elongating syllables, enhancing the expressive spontaneity and emotional depth. The song is set in E-flat *Gong* mode with a primary meter of 2/4. The form is straightforward, and the melody is highly lyrical.

Chiang made deliberate revisions to the original poem. In the third line, he replaced the word “如” (*rú*, “like”) with “像” (*xiàng*, also “like”) to avoid phonetic monotony, as both “孤云” (*gū yún*) and “如” (*rú*) contain the vowel “u.” In the fourth line, he changed “便落” to “落在” (“falls on”), intensifying the tone of certainty and deepening the sense of solitude. These adjustments illustrate Chiang’s acute sensitivity to linguistic nuance and musical prosody.

IV. A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CHIANG WEN-YEH’S ARTISTIC LIFE

Chiang Wen-yeh was a renowned Chinese music educator and composer, a pioneer in the creation of national music, and a key figure in the development of modern piano music. He made outstanding contributions to the advancement of piano music and left a precious musical legacy to the world.

In 1990, the first symposium after Chiang’s death was held in Hong Kong, introducing him and his works to Chinese music communities across the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and abroad. In 1992, the Chiang Wen-yeh Memorial Week in Taiwan reignited interest in his work among music circles and the general public. In 1995, the Central Conservatory of Music hosted an academic conference on Chiang Wen-yeh—the first large-scale comprehensive seminar on his musical output and scholarly achievements in mainland China. This conference provided an opportunity to reassess Chiang’s musical accomplishments and secure his artistic recognition. In 2010, an academic conference was held in Xiamen, Fujian, to commemorate the centenary of his birth, serving as a significant event for deeply remembering Chiang Wen-yeh in domestic academia.

Although Chiang was born during the Japanese colonial period and deeply influenced by Japanese education, he was also fervently dedicated to studying traditional Chinese music theory and compositional techniques, laying a solid foundation for modern Chinese music creation. To truly evaluate his legacy, we must not only acknowledge his achievements but also examine his creative thinking to inspire music that resonates with the

people. Below are several key evaluations and reflections on his musical contributions:

First, Mr. Chiang Wen-yeh's contribution to musical creation. Chiang was a prolific composer in Chinese music history, renowned for the sheer volume and diversity of genres in which he worked. Throughout his life, he created over 20 piano works (including individual pieces and suites), not including those that have been lost.

Second, Mr. Chiang Wen-yeh was a pioneer in nationalizing Chinese piano music. Despite the challenging social environment of his time, Chiang remained active on the creative front and produced many outstanding works. These not greatly advanced the development of Chinese music but also embodied a rare personal integrity that continues to inspire later generations. With youth and dedication, he forged a path in music development. Early in his career, he not only recognized the need to "reflect national characteristics in composition" but also created numerous works that embodied these characteristics. This was an invaluable contribution to the yet-to-be-established process of nationalizing modern Chinese music.

The journey of modern Chinese music has been arduous and prolonged, filled with numerous challenges before finally entering an era of flourishing diversity. However, a country with five thousand years of history, vast territory of 9.6 million square kilometers, and rich multicultural traditions of 56 ethnic groups has faced unexpectedly difficult development. Taking piano composition as an example, although certain achievements have been made through generations of efforts, they still pale in comparison to the output of European composers. Perhaps due to insufficient understanding of Chiang Wen-yeh, his contributions and status remain undervalued, compounded by his complex life experiences and political-historical factors. Therefore, researching his historical status and contributions is essential both for introducing this outstanding composer to the world and for advancing Chinese music.

Chiang's complex and tumultuous life experiences not only led to a diverse body of musical works but also left behind extensive written materials and publications. His resilient character and distinct artistic individuality provided invaluable professional insights and exerted a significant influence on later generations.

In expressing "Chinese style," composers primarily innovated in two aspects: thematic material and musical language. As early as 1936, when piano music in China was still in its infancy, Chiang stated, "I had already begun striving to shed Western European influences." He believed that "music should not merely be about ideology,

appearance, or surface-level expression; there must be more to music itself." This idea took root and drove his creative practice, as evidenced by the diverse works he produced in the 1930s—an unprecedented achievement in the history of Chinese piano music [10].

Earlier, his works were often debated for their "national style." Although he employed techniques of program music and incorporated folk music elements from Taiwan and mainland China, he did not directly quote existing folk songs nor merely convey superficial meanings of titles. Instead, he explored and expressed the inner essence of his subjects.

Eighty years ago, Chiang proposed: "Without using perceptible tonal elements, one can delve into the depths of Chinese cultural tradition, draw inspiration from music, literature, and other arts, and create piano works that embody an inner connection to Chinese cultural tradition or a profound Chinese cultural spirit." Later, the Chinese piano music community recognized and validated his perspective, indicating that his ideas influenced others to some extent.

Today, many modern Chinese composers have broken away from the traditional "folk song plus harmony" approach. Their styles have gradually become richer, more unique, and diverse, emphasizing bold explorations of new techniques. This shift has been influenced to some extent by Chiang Wen-yeh's creative concepts and thinking. For example, Luo Zhongrong, one of Chiang's students and a renowned Chinese composer, employed a "pentatonic twelve-tone series" in his *Three Piano Pieces*, focusing on rhythmic combinations and highlighting sonic color—techniques frequently used by Chiang. Luo's development of these methods fully illustrates the profound influence of his teacher, Chiang Wen-yeh.

In summary, Chiang Wen-yeh was a composer of important status and influence in modern China. Unlike others, he eventually held mainland Chinese citizenship and nurtured many outstanding composers and musicians. Despite facing unfair treatment, his transformation from a colonized Taiwanese to a progressive musician was a conscious choice in his life.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper offers an in-depth exploration of the compositional style and musical works of Taiwanese composer Chiang Wen-yeh. It not only illuminates Chiang's unique understanding of music and his innovative approaches, but also highlights his contributions and enduring influence on Taiwan's musical

culture. Through detailed analysis of his works, two defining characteristics of Chiang's style are identified: "diverse modern expressions of traditional music" and "profound emotional depth infused with national sentiment." His versatile creativity and patriotic expression distinguish his popular songwriting, while his meticulous attention to instrumentation and vocal arrangement further enriches the texture and diversity of his sound.

Similarly, the study of Tyzen Hsiao's musical output allows for a deeper understanding of his artistic evolution and his distinctive integration of diverse cultural elements. His music not only conveys personal emotion and aesthetic ideals but also reflects and extends Taiwan's musical traditions within a contemporary context.

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