UDC: 78.03

Chinese Composer's Autographs during the Sino-Japanese War and Conflict: A Case Study of Nie Er and Xian Xinghai Patrick Huang

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Abstract:

The composer's autograph was an important first-hand source of musicological studies. Compared to other musical scores that were transcribed by copyists or printed by either woodblocks or movable types, composer's autograph showed significantly richer details of the progress of composition, as well as other details such as the modifications and revisions etc. Therefore, the study of composer's autograph (when it exists) is by any mean helpful for understanding more about the historical and cultural context of a piece of music, as well as more detailed information about what and how the composer has worked for his final composition.

Based on this guiding principle, in this study, I will mainly study the autographs of two representative Chinese composers at that period, NIE Er (聶耳) and XIAN Xinghai (冼星海), as both are significant figures of the patriotic composers during the Sino- Japanese war and conflict in 1931-1945 A.D., in order to understand the development

of Chinese music composition further, the nationalistic movements, the anti-Japanese propaganda as well as various political and cultural thoughts under such grand historical changes.

Keywords: composer's autograph, Sino-Japanese War, Chinese music

1. Introduction

Since the earliest identifiable autograph of music composition known to modern scholars, BnF (*Bibliothèque Nationale de France*) MS Latin 909 written the hand of Adémar de Chabannes in 1028- 1029 A.D. [1], the composer's autograph has then become an important source of musicological studies in the following ten centuries. Compared to other musical scores that were transcribed by copyists or printed by either woodblocks or movable types, composer's autograph showed significantly richer details of the progress of composition, as well as other details such as the modifications and revisions etc. Therefore, the study of composer's autograph (when it exists) is by any mean helpful for understanding more about the historical and cultural context of a piece of music, as well as more detailed information about what and how the composer has worked for his final composition.

Based on this guiding principle, in this study, I will mainly study the autographs of two representative Chinese composers at that period, NIE Er (聶耳) and XIAN Xinghai (冼星海), as both are significant figures of the patriotic composers during the Sino-Japanese war and conflict in 1931-1945 A.D., in order to understand the development of Chinese music composition further, the nationalistic movements, the anti-Japanese propaganda as well as various political and cultural thoughts under such grand historical changes.

2. Historical Background

2.1. Westernisation of Chinese Music

After the Opium War in 1840 A.D., the late *Qing* (清) dynasty gradually realised the huge gap of science and culture between China and the Western world. Despite the political debate between the 'conservatives' and 'reformists' of the Qing bureaucrats, the government decided to reformed gradually and learn from the West (known as the *Western Affairs*

Movement 洋務運動). During this period, the traditional Chinese music was also considered one of the 'unenlightened' culture that needed to be modified and improved. Many traditionally-trained Chinese musicians started studying abroad in Europe, the United States, and Japan (which was culturally similar and 'progressive' after the Meiji Restoration). This thought continued after the 1911 Revolution (辛亥革命) and the

following collapse of the Qing dynasty, and a newer generation of musicians and musicologists were still trained within such a social atmosphere [2].

However, it is worth noting that despite a newer generation of Western-trained musicians becoming active, the overall Chinese population is highly uneducated [3], which includes musical educations, which indicates the further need of communication between those 'Westernised' composers and the mass audiences. On the other hand, the development of contemporary Chinese music was also late and embryonic during this period; for instance, the first-ever Chinese piano piece,

'The March of Peace' (和平進行曲 *Heping Jinxingqu*) composed by Zhao Yuanren (趙元任) in 1915, was still in a simple and clumsy form of composition [4], which distinguished highly with the relatively mature discussion about music aesthetics and philosophy [5].

2.2. The Numbered Musical Notation

The numbered musical notation, known as *jianpu* (簡譜) in Chinese, is a popular notational method that is widely used in China from the late 19th century even until today. Historically, *jianpu* was not invented by Chinese; instead, it is a system designed by a French music educator Pierre GALIN (1786-1822 A.D.), and is widely known as *Galin-Paris-Chevé system* or *Ziffernsystem*, meaning 'cipher system' in German [6].

This method, despite its convenience for music pedagogy, has never become mainstream notation in the Western world, whereas it gained its popularity in the other side of the world: as a part of the reformation of traditional Chinese culture, musical scholars learned *jianpu* notation from Japan and brought it back to China for spreading and popularising newly-composed pieces (mostly in Western or contemporary Japanese style) [7]. The following *Figure 1*. shows an example of *jianpu* notation of *L'Internationale* (*Guoji Ge* 國際歌 in Chinese), a significant 'revolutionary song' of the Communist Party; the image is excerpted from a booklet published during the Cultural Revolution period.



Figure 1. L'Internationale in *Jianpu* notation and lyrics translated in Chinese [8]

In brief, the reading of this notation is relatively simple: the number 1 to 7 represents the seven $solf\`ege$ names (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti), 0 means 'silence' (i.e. the rest in staff notation), and × represents any non-pitch sound (mostly percussion); the default time value is a quarter note, i.e. one beat; a dot above or below the number indicates an octave up or down; a line the number indicates half the note value (eighth note / half beat), and two lines mean one fourth (sixteenth note) and so on; a dash at the right of a note means one more beat (so a quarter note with one dash indicates a half note / two beats, with two dashes indicate dotted half / three beats etc.); a dot at the right of a note is identical to dotted note in staff notation (so a dot with a number means 1.5 beats, and two dots mean 1.75 beats); the key is indicated by pairing the absolute pitch with the standard note '1'; so '1=C' indicates 'the pitch of do is C'; the use of sharp (\sharp) , flat (\flat) and natural (\natural) is identical to staff notation

(and theoretically double sharp and double flat did exist, but they are rarely used), in minor mode or

modes other than major, the sharps and flats need to be written as temporary altered, since key signatures are generally unused.

3. Case Study: Nie Er

3.1. Biography

Nie Er (1912-1935 A.D.) was born in Yunnan (雲南), a mountainous province located southwest of China. After his training in various traditional Chinese instruments (*dizi* 笛子, *erhu* 二胡, *sanxian* 三弦, and *yueqin* 月琴etc.) during his primary and secondary education (1918-1927), he also worked as a part-time conductor; later he learned to play violin and piano after entering the

college since 1927.

Nie's talent in music theory and composition is revealed in a treatise on Chinese song and dance he published in 1932; then he joined the *Lianhua Film Studio* (聯華影業公司 *Lianhua Yingye Gongsi*) and took part in the composition of film music. At the same time, he also became a radical nationalist and was active in leftist activities; he then joined the Communist Party of China in 1933. Nie continued to compose film music until he died accidentally while swimming in Fujisawa, Japan in 1935 [9].

3.2. Nie's Autograph: Start Mining

'Start Mining' (开礦 Kaikuang) is Nie's first composition of film music, and it was chosen as one of the three music pieces in *The Glory of Motherhood* (母性之光 *Muxing Zhiguang*) in 1933; the lyrics are written by the poet TIAN Han (田漢, 1898-1968 A.D.) and this song started their strong collaboration since then [10]. Nie's autograph is shown as below *Figure 2*.

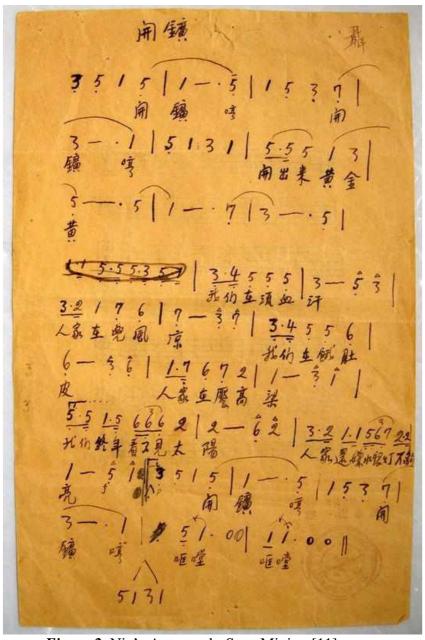


Figure 2. Nie's Autograph: Start Mining [11]

The lyrics and their literal translation in English are shown in *Appendix I*. From the text, it is

clear that the song is not merely a description of mining, it features the large contrast between 'we' the miner under poverty versus 'they', probably those rich land-owners and capitalists, in order to depict the contradiction between social classes. The song therefore showed a strong sense of sympathy for poor people, and the overall theme is full of 'revolutionary' sense against the great unfairness that widely existed in Chinese society that time. This figure presented rich information about Nie's compositional procedure: compared to the recording, it is easy to find that the autograph is likely a draft, as the performance contains more detailed melodic patterns (i.e. more melismata) as well as additional contents. There are clear signs about addition (melodic pattern added in the second last bar), erasure of a whole bar and modification etc. That overall indicates the composition is a draft version after Nie's initial musical inspiration. Besides, it is also worth noting that, since the *jianpu* notation does not (and usually cannot) contain any information about orchestration, it requires additional arranging by orchestrators or performers after the composition. By cross-referencing to the recording, it can be seen that the accompaniment is relatively simple and monophonic; additionally, the instrumentation more or less follows the pattern of melody but with some modification, which means the instrumentalist has some flexibility and needs to pre-compose or improvise for some essential features.

3.3. Nie's Autograph: March of the Volunteers

The March of the Volunteers (義勇軍進行曲 Yiyongjun Jinxingqu) is Nie's most famous composition with the lyrics again written by Tian Han. The song was initially composed for the film Children of Trouble Times (風雲兒女 Fengyun Ernü) featuring the Sino-Japanese conflict after Manchukuo (滿洲國), the Japanese-controlled puppet state was claimed to be established in 1931 [12]. After the première of the film, Yiyongjun Jinxingqu became popular and inspirational to the Chinese resistance, and it was later used as the army song of the 200th Division of National Revolutionary Army in 1939; furthermore, it is more famous for being chosen as national anthem of The People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949. This autograph is shown as Figure 3. below, and the lyrics and translation are shown in Appendix II.



Figure 3. Nie's Autograph: March of the Volunteers [13] From the figure and information above, it is easy to observe some clear differences

compared to 'Start Mining': there is identical staff notation listed above the *jianpu*, with little instructions including *marcia vivace* ('lively tempo march' in Italian) and 'military brass solo' (軍號獨奏 *junhao duzou*) in Chinese. By studying the music piece with relevant historical records, we know that Nie mainly wrote the melody, but the orchestration is completed by Aaron AVSHALOMOV (1894-1965), a Judaeo-Russian composer who resided in China for years [14]. Avshalomov's contribution perhaps indicates that although Nie was also trained in Western music, his orchestration skill may not be fully professional and thus needs additional assistance; and indeed, the staff notation did potentially imply multiple readers from different backgrounds.

Unlike 'Start Mining' that was full of signs of editing, the autograph of March of the Volunteers does not show any editorial remarks or erasures; the staff notation and some underlining in *jianpu* is straight, which is probably drawn with a ruler carefully. Overall, this seems to be a final draft of composition, which Nie probably finished for the purpose of reviewing by film directors and for Avshalomov's orchestration.

4. Case Study: Xian Xinghai

4.1. Biography

Xian Xinghai (1905-1945) was born in Portuguese Macau in 1905; due to the early death of Xian's father, he moved frequently with his mother: to Singapore from 1912-1918, where Xian was first exposed to Western music culture and his musical talent was noticed; then, he returned to China but continued to study Western music systematically, and then he subsequently pursued higher education in music at *Peking University* and the *National Conservatory* in Shanghai until later being expelled because of his involvement in the radical student movement. After that, he moved to Paris to study violin with Paul OBERDOEFFER, then music theory and composition with Noel GEALLON and Vincent D'INDY; then he planned to study with Paul DUKAS at the *Conservatoire de Paris* but this project was interrupted by Dukas' death in 1935 [15].

From the above description and especially compared to Nie's biography and the Chinese society that time, we can know that Xian is one of the earliest Chinese musicians that was rigorously and academically trained in Western conservatories, and so he was able to compose Western-styled music with full harmonic arrangements and orchestrations by himself. After returned to China in 1935, Xian wrote vocal works that encouraged the Chinese resistance to the Japanese invaders and worked at

film studies for some years; he then went to Yan'An (延安), the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party, where he became dean of the music department at Lu Xun Institute of Arts (魯迅音樂學院) in 1938. During this period, composed his most famous work, the Yellow River Cantata (黃河大合唱 *Huanghe Dahechang*), an eight-movement musical work which contains [16]:

- 1. Yellow River Boatmen's Song (黃河船夫曲 Huanghe Chuanfu Qu)
- 2. Ode to the Yellow River (黄河頌 *Huanghe Song*)
- 3. Water of the Yellow River (黄河之水天上來 Huanghe zhi Shui Tianshang Lai)
- 4. Yellow River Ditty (黃水謠 *Huangshui Yao*)
- 5. Dialogue on the Banks of the River (河邊對口曲 Hebian Duikou Qu)
- 6. Yellow River Lament (黃河怨 Huanghe Yuan)
- 7. Defend the Yellow River (保衛黃河 Baowei Huanghe)
- 8. Roar! Yellow River! (怒吼吧黃河 Nuhou ba Huanghe)

Xian then visited Soviet Union for the composition of documentary films since 1940, and the Yellow River Cantata was revised once for the Western orchestra. After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Xian's work was disrupted; unable to return China, he

was stranded in Almaty (in today's Kazakhstan) and died of pulmonary disease in 1945.

4.2. Xian's Autograph: Yellow River Cantata, Yan'An Version

The Yellow River Cantata has multiple versions as listed in *Appendix III.*, but only two of them are edited in the composer's own hands. Xian completed his autograph of the first version and had its première in Yan'An, China (henceforth the Yan'An autograph). It was a region under extreme poverty at that time, and so it would have been impossible to assemble a full-scale orchestra ensemble in such conditions; instead, Xian composed this version with choir, limited Western instruments, but mostly traditional Chinese instruments [17] with some 'temporary inventions', e.g. spoons in porcelain vase, a 'bass instrument' made from a petrol barrel and so forth [18].

Below is a part of Xian's Yan'An autograph:

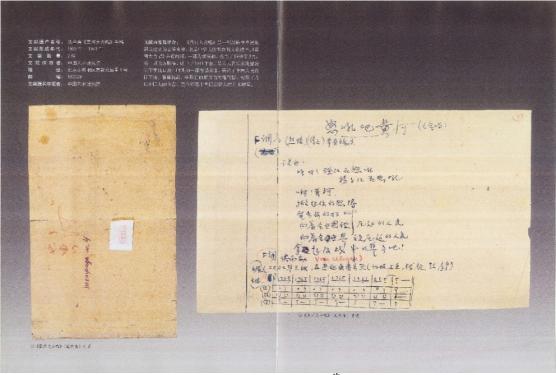


Figure 4. Cover Page and First Page of the 8th Movement in Yan'An Autograph [19]

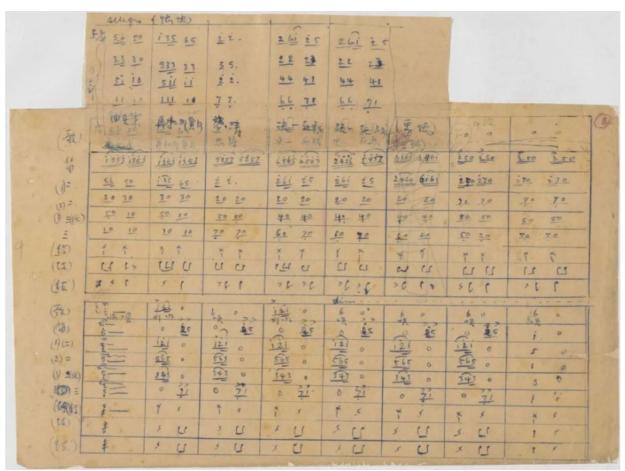


Figure 5. An Excerpt of Yan'An Autograph [20]

We can observe that the material of the music score is kraft paper, which is brown-colour, more rough (so the ink fades more easily) and thus not an ideal medium for handwriting; there are also some signs of rewriting, and the second figure shows an extra piece of paper pasted at top of the original draft for additional instruments. Such writing material may be due to the poor economic condition in Yan'An.

Another remarkable feature is that, although Xian is fully conservatory-trained composer, the absolute majority part of this autograph used *jianpu* notation, with little 'Western-like' features like bar lines and rest symbols; then, most explanatory terminologies are in Chinese, or with Chinese translation: *viva allegro* with 'quick and powerful' (快而有力 *kuai er youli*), the second *allegro* with 'very fast' (很快 *henkuai*). There is also poetic introduction at the beginning of movements that is not musical, but rather like an emotional instruction to singers and narrators [21]. Those are all

evidence that Xian's potential audience in Yan'An are mainly traditional musicians and participants that had lower education; therefore, such non-musical instruction with *jianpu* notation became the balance and it was proven effective at its performance in Yan'An.

4.3. Xian's Autograph: Yellow River Cantata, Moscow Version

As mentioned above, Xian reworked the cantata during his stay in Moscow, Soviet Union; in his revised version (henceforth the Moscow autograph), the composer re-orchestrated the whole work with full Western ensemble but retained a few decorative Chinese instruments; besides the eight movements, an additional 'prelude' at the very beginning is added. From the excerpts shown below, we can obviously see that both versions differ significantly in most aspects.

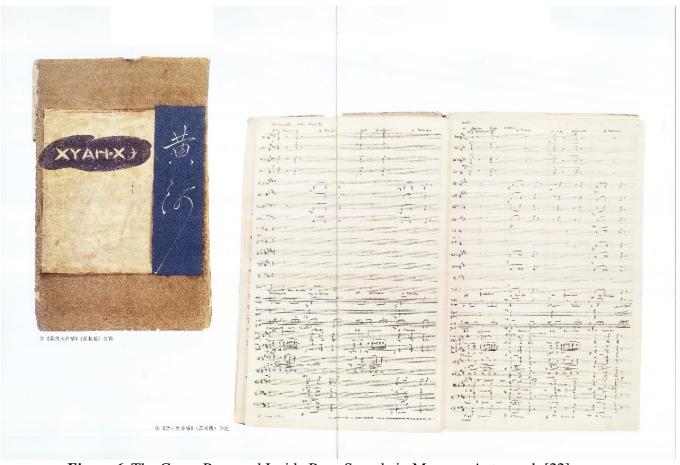


Figure 6. The Cover Page and Inside Page Sample in Moscow Autograph [22]

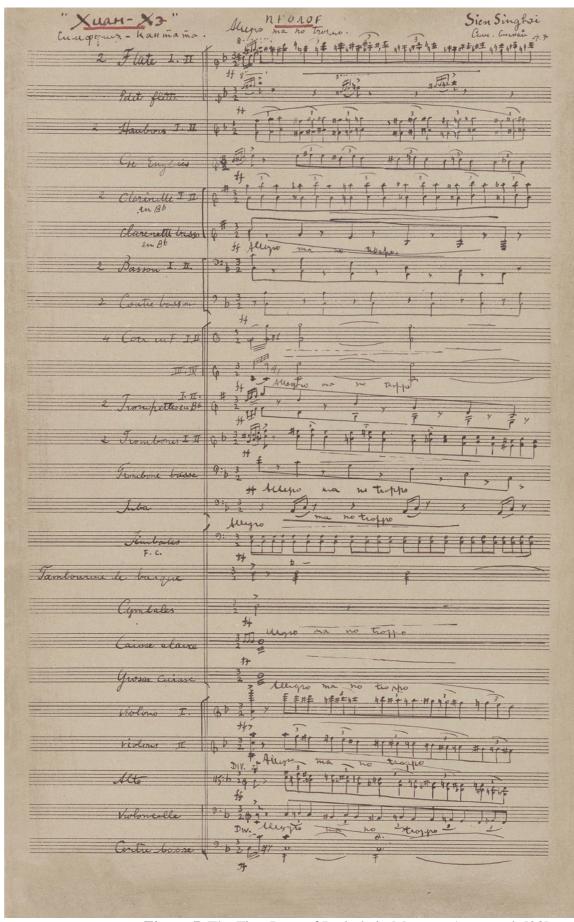


Figure 7. The First Page of Prelude in Moscow Autograph [23]

The title page contains 'Yellow River' in both calligraphic cursive Chinese (黄河) and Russian (ХУАН-ХЭ); and in the first page, there are title and primary information in Russian, e.g. the name 'Хуан-ХЭ' again, the title 'Пролог' (prologue), and the description 'Симфония-кантата" (Symphonia-Cantata), then the composer's name in Latinised (Sien Singhai) and Cyrillic (Сиен Сингай) forms; so Xian has probably learned some Russian during his stay in Soviet Union, and was using it for potential readers or publication issues. The descriptive terms are in Italian (e.g. Allegro ma no[n] troppo, div. [divisi], etc.) and the names of various music instruments are in French. Those features are quite 'typical European' during that period; the whole autograph is purely written with staff notation but no jianpu; the paper is in better quality and has printed staff lines. Comparatively, Xian enjoys a much better environment and flexibility for his composition in Moscow than Yan'An, and consequently, he is able to use a large ensemble that could produce a more balanced symphonic sound effect.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

From these two representative cases, we can find a lot of common features between Nie and Xian, and can also extend the discussion to other Chinese composers during the Sino-Japanese conflict between 1931-1945 that affects the music environment for a whole generation.

Music at that time was strongly allied with nationalism — the modernisation of 'nationalistic' music is considered a 'strong medicine' to the Chinese nation [24]. However, the average rate of music education at that period was far lower than most Western countries, and composers are usually not sufficiently trained (Xian is one of the few exceptions); however, many of them presented astonishing talents for composing songs for their era. They exhibit enthusiasm and hard work at difficult times, and the nationalistic movement inspired them to compose music that echoes with the Chinese spirit; the extensive use of *jianpu*, an easy method for quick learning despite its various limitations, serves as one main bridge for popularising those 'nationalistic' and 'revolutionary' tunes. Such success left a rich legacy to modern China, as *jianpu* is still widely used in the primary and secondary education nowadays; the March of the Volunteers, initially a piece of film music, serves as the national anthem and unchanged since 1949; a huge number of 'red songs' (紅歌) were composed after PRC rule, and even after its peak time during the Cultural Revolution, this tradition is still flourishing.

6. Appendices

Appendix I: Lyrics and literal translation of 'Start Mining' [25]

開礦哼,開礦哼,開礦哼,開出了黃金黃。我們在流血汗,他們在兜風涼。我們在熊肚皮,人家在饕高粱。我們終年看不見太陽,人家還嫌水銀燈不□亮。開礦哼,開礦哼,回口。

Start mining (hey), start mining (hey).

we found the golden yellow [mine].

We are bleeding and sweating, they are going for a cool ride.

We are starving our belly, they are [gastronomically] enjoying sorghum.

We cannot see the sun all year round, they still disguise the mercury lamp not shining enough, start mining (hey), start mining (hey), kuangtang, kuangtang [onomatopoeia of mine-digging].

Appendix II: Lyrics and translation of March of the Volunteers [26]

起來!不願做奴隸的人們! Arise! All who refuse to be slaves! 把我們的血肉, Let our flesh and blood, 築成我們新的長城! become our new Great Wall! 中華民族到了最危險的時候,每個人被迫着發出最後的吼聲。起來!起來!起來! As the Chinese nation faces its greatest peril, All forcefully expend their last cries. 我們萬衆一心, Arise! Arise! Arise! 著敵人的炮火, 冒著敵人的炮火, 前進!前進!進! 前進! Our million hearts beat as one. Brave the enemy's fire, March on! Brave the enemy's fire, March on! March on! March on! On!

Appendix III: Versions of Yellow River Cantata [27]

- 1. 1939, Yan'An, Xian Xinghai (autograph)
- 2. 1941, Moscow, Xian Xinghai (autograph)
- 3. 1946, United States, Wallingford Riegger
- 4. 1955, Shanghai, Li Huanzhi
- 5. 1975, Beijing, Yan Liangkun
- 6. 2005, Hong Kong, Carmen Koon

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to James Grier for his valuable suggestions and constructive criticism. Additionally, I extend my thanks to Vahagn Vardanian for generously assisting in reading some of the composers' handwriting in Russian.

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- 2. For a detailed survey of the Western influence and the progress of modernisation, see Liang,
 - Y. Western influence on Chinese music in the early twentieth century. PhD Dissertation, Stanford CA, Stanford University, 1994, pp.22-72.
- 3. In regard to literacy, for example, the estimation may vary; e.g., some scholars argued that the overall literacy rate in eighteenth-nineteenth centuries is roughly 20-25%, see Reed, C. A. 'From woodblocks to the internet: Chinese printing, publishing, and literary fields in transition, circa 1800 to 2008'. In *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008*. Under edition Brokaw, C., & Reed, C. A. Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp.14-15. But in some early documents about policy-making, such as one in 1908, aimed to increase the literacy rate to 1% in the following years, see He, J. 'Literate in What Language? The Qing Empire's Trilingual Policy towards the Jirim League (1901-1911)'. *Saksaha: A Journal of Manchu Studies*, 2018, 15, pp.89-90. Such differences may be due to the different definition and standard of 'literacy'; but in any case, the overall literacy rate between late Qing dynasty and early Republic period is clearly low. This could be a point of reference when discussing the music knowledge within the mass audience.
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- 5. About the thoughts of music, see Feng, C. (□□春). *Zhongguo Jindai Yinyue Sichao Yanjiu* (中国近代音□思潮研究) [The Study of Contemporary Thoughts of Chinese Music]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House (人民音□出版社 Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe), 2007, pp.13-118.
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- 11. From Yunnan Museum collection, see: https://www.ynmuseum.org/detail/1281.html

- 12. The original recording can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6icFnCSF2yA
- 13. From Yunnan Museum collection, see: https://www.ynmuseum.org/detail/1282.html
- 14. For more information, see Ma, N. 'Transmediating Kinesthesia: Wu Xiaobang and Modern Dance in China, 1929–1939'. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 2016, 28(1), pp.157-158.
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- 16. Ibid, p.93. An early recording in 1955 can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjrZziE8HQY
- 17. Including Chinese flute (笛子 *dizi*), harmonica, small and large *sanxian* (三弦), *erhu* (二胡), *dahu* (大胡), bamboo sticks (竹板 *zhuban*), wooden block (木魚 *muyu*), Chinese cymbal (鈸 *bo*), bell (鈴 *ling*), drum (鼓, *gu*), gong (鑼 *luo*). See Zha, T. (□太元). *Huanghe Dahechang Banben Kaoding Jiqi Xiangguan Yanjiu* (〈黃河大合唱〉版本考訂及其相關問題研究) [Yellow River Cantata: The Editing of Versions and Studies of Relevant Questions]. Master's Dissertation, Taichung, Feng Chia University, 2012, p.38. Ibid, pp.38-39.
- 18. From the List of Chinese Archives and Documents Heritage
 - (中国档案文献遗产名录), see:

https://www.saac.gov.cn/mowcn/cn/c100509/202105/ad415d9dfa8448cc88d06fe58109b96a.shtml

- 19. From the news: https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20210506A08TR800
- 20. For instance, in the first excerpt, Xian wrote: 'F key, 2/4, passionate, magnificent, with courage. Narration: "Whoosh! the Pearl River is roaring, the Yangtze River is roaring. Ah! Yellow River, stir up your furious surges, let out your scream, towards the oppressed people all over China, towards the oppressed people all around the world, take up your siren for

battle!"" (F □ 2/4 □ 情、偉大、□有魄力;□白:呼呀!珠江在怒吼,楊子江在怒吼;啊!黃河,掀起你的怒涛,発出你的狂叫;向着全中國被□迫的人民,向着全卋界被□迫的人民,拿起你□斗的警号吧!)

21. From the List of Chinese Archives and Documents Heritage (中国档案文献□□名□), see:

https://www.saac.gov.cn/mowcn/cn/c100509/202105/ad415d9dfa8448cc88d06fe58109
b96a.shtml

- 22. From the news: https://k.sina.com.cn/article_2131593523_7f0d893302000ufsw.html
- 23. Feng has described this topic in length at his book, see Reference [5].
- 24. Translated by the author.
- 25. The lyrics and translation are excerpted from Liao, T. F., Zhang, G., & Zhang, L. 'The Changing Fate of the Chinese National Anthem'. In *Northeast Asia's Difficult Past: Essays in Collective Memory*. Under edition Kim, M., & Schwartz, B. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p.161.
- 26. Listed by Hong, X. *Performing the Yellow River Cantata*. DMA Dissertation, Champaign IL, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009, p.V.

Included: 7 Figures

Article received: 2023-09-13