

## **Similarities and Differences between Chinese and Foreign Ethnic Music and their Cultural Connotations from a Comparative Perspective**

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**Abstract:** This study offers a detailed comparative study on the Chinese ethnic music traditions and that of foreigners, locating these traditions within the cultural, historical, and structural contexts and exploring the binding intersections. The research works in two directions: on the one hand, it examines the interaction of universally human music components with culturally unique manifestations and on the other hand, how music traditions embody both universal human elements and culturally unique components. After the detailed analysis of specific musical patterns, performance modes and the environment, the study illustrates that ethnic musical traditions are complex manifestations of culture-oriented frameworks whilst having elementary features of human's musical performance models. The findings are relevant to the character of music as a form of communication and a universal phenomenon while also reflecting different aspects of culture, in which such communication exists, including philosophy, society, and aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Comparative Ethnomusicology; Cultural Manifestation; Musical Universality; Traditional Performance Practices

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to Marshall, ethnic music is both an instrumental form of collective memory and a repository of cultural heritage. Ethnic music is comprised of human creativity and diversity. It carries varying weight across different civilizations. Cross-civilizational study of ethnic music is a window into both understanding human musical expression and the manifestations of culture. While the ethnic music from China has been gaining wide acclaim, the globalization of Chinese music practices and western music robustly challenge the traditional fabric. Therefore, there is growing need to conduct wide ranging comparative studies while respecting and preserving the diversity of traditions (Ondrusek, 2019). Ethnic music has a value system which transcends beyond the pure artistic. It acts as a medium to relay a complex system of social structures. Based on history, it is clear that Chinese ethnic music which has over the years accumulated for at least five centuries is imbued with musical practice systems and theories which are rooted in social values and deep

philosophical principles. In the same vein, a number of foreign ethnic practices have also altered and propagated the socio-philosophy embedded in culture (Gómez & Herrera, 2008). According to recent studies, certain music elements like harmony, melody, and rhythm can function as cultural symbols that contain social meanings and carry important social memories. As an example, in Chinese ethnic music the philosophical concept of imitation of the natural order is expressed through the combination of the aesthetics of using pentatonic scales. Furthermore, there have also been cross cultural comparison studies that shed light on the similarities in the use of music across cultures in the commemoration of the spirit, binding the social and maintaining the cultural (Pati et al., 2015). The rapid changes of the 21st century have presented new opportunities and new challenges to ethnic music traditions. Globalization is great in some aspects in that it provides people with an excessive amount of cultural forms and even does threaten the authenticity and the continued existence of specific types of music however (Cross, 2014). This constant struggle for preservation, and innovation has become an important area of concern in contemporary ethnomusicology. Language and music also remain an interesting area for comparative studies and analysis. Previous research has indicated that Chinese language with its tonal system has deep effects on the melodic construction, use, and other aspects of music that are not present in the non-tonal language traditions (Ma & Chen, 2024). Making sense of these links explains why language types are strongly correlated with types of music developed in different societies. Further, the significance of ethnic music in the modern world is greatly different, as in its traditional forms it is being integrated into contemporary realities while aiming to stay as true to its culture as possible. This process of adaptation uncovers new patterns of cultural preservation and the evolution of music traditions (Rowell, 1972). The study of these aspects helps to understand how the musical legacy can be transmitted across time while remaining applicable within present day settings (Wang et al., 2022). Through such multiple aspects of it, this study is particularly directed at expanding the understanding of cultural exchange and the interplay of music as a form of culture while through the lens of comparative analysis of the mechanisms of cultural exchange and preservation (Xia, 2017). The study assesses both the functional components of music and its structural components, as well as the wider context, in order to shed light on the shifts in music and social representation.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Theoretical Basis

The analysis of the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign ethnic music is based on several disciplines, including ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and comparative musicology. This approach is interdisciplinary as it also builds on Hood's concept of bi-musicality in which the perspectives of both the outsider and insider are deemed significant in comprehending musical systems. It also integrates Nettl's theory on musical universals while conceding the existence of distinctive cultures that account for diverse customs of music. The tools offered by the contemporary theoretical advancements in cultural semiotics are crucial in untangling the intricate relationships between the components of music and the sociocultural contexts within which such components exist. These semiotic approaches are particularly useful in relation to how sociocultural systems of various ethnic groups enshrine their philosophies and social structures within the boundaries of their unique musical languages (Thompson, 2011). This theoretical frame also accommodates the three dimensional models of musical experience by Rice that examines historical construction, social maintenance, and individual creation/experience in a cyclic relationship within music. The evaluation incorporates Chen's theoretical model concerning Chinese musical aesthetics, which is useful in understanding how philosophical elements relate to music. It is worth noting that this theory is complemented by Meyer's theory about musical meaning and emotion thus providing a basis for comparison to different cultures understanding the meaning of the music. Also, the framework uses Turino's ideas on participatory and presentational performance which also assist in explaining the different functions of the sociocultural aspects of music in different settings. Moreover, a social theory the theoretical strategy is broad enough to incorporate cultural capital as proposed by Bourdieu in relation to music traditions of the people with the notions of how different types of music knowledge and practices contribute to cultural and social identity and elite class [30]. This theoretical synthesis offers an excellent basis upon which the internal structures of music and its socio-cultural relations can be examined taking cognizance of the specific nature of the several musical traditions (Ibekwe, 2010).

### 2.2 Research Methodology

This research takes a mixed method research design into consideration

to study the similarities and dissimilarities that exist between Chinese ethnicity and non-Chinese music traditions as well as their respective cultures. To gain a holistic comprehension of musical structures and the culture surrounding these structures, the methodology integrates various methods of analysis. Comparing music structures across languages in an organized or system based approach forms the crux of the research being conducted. According to Musk's 2020 article, computational musicology tools are advancing and allow researchers to study different music ethnic traditions with added depth. Within the historical documents, ancient music literature, audio history and other cultural materials concerning the place are analyzed, where possible details are given to the emergence and development of music traditions. As a method of deepening this historical conception, the use of tools of digital humanities was applied to the synthetic examination and meaningful interpretation of large masses of historical facts for the purpose of music development. As far as the methodology is concerned other methods such as fieldwork and archival research are incorporated since they are essential for fruitful understanding of the development of music over the years. The examination of cultural setting is achieved with the use of ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, and in-depth insight and interviews with musicians, cultural experts and members of the community. By this method, a more vivid and practical understanding of the processes of musical practices fusion with wider cultural contexts and societal structures is gained. The methodology also consists of comprehensive case studies of some ethnic musical traditions with wide chosen geographical and cultural scopes, showing both originality and the basic elements in other traditions and facets of the music. Performance practice analysis uses video analysis, performance, and recording of the transmission process as examination methods. Multi-modes methodology is employed working at the intersection of content and embodied performance, situational and social understanding of teaching. The design fosters emic and etic approaches as these are the two most basic ways of realizing musical traditions and culture – anthropologically and analytically.

### 3. SIMILARITIES IN CHINESE AND FOREIGN ETHNIC MUSIC

#### 3.1 Musical Structure and Form

The analysis of Chinese music with particular emphasis on ethnic music and the music of foreign nations makes it possible to ascertain the existence

of deep structural and formal aspects which cut across geographical and cultural borders (Maryprasith, 2000). These commonalities point to basic tenets of human musical creativity, as well as explicate the mechanisms through which primary elements are modified by different societies to form national musical cultures. The broad usage of the foundations of the pentatonic scale is one of the greatest aspects that can be identified and it occurs widely in Chinese traditional music and almost all other ethnic musical systems. This pentatonic scope offers a versatile yet quiescent structural device that allows for the archaic ideas of songs and at the same time, allows for free invention within a defined culture. Another important common characteristic are the cyclic rhythmic structures which tend to take different forms in varying traditions of music (Li, 2024). These cycles are usually based on astronomy and some cultural philosophies and act as time boundaries through which music actions and cultural displays are organized. It has been highlighted through research how rhythmic cycles serve to perform similar roles within different cultures of music and aid coordination even though the most specific methods of performance are different. The great many of them reflect the most basic tasks of music time organization and movement of culture. Call-and-response forms are musically nevertheless very popular and are among the most basic characteristics of musical traditions throughout (Hart, 2001). Such interaction is historically rooted and serves interactive communication, social and musical needs all in one. The existence of call-and-response features in any form of music only emphasizes the basis of interaction and building musical communities for people regardless of the cultures of those communities. Improvisation while seeking to abide by traditional principles is yet another key feature that is shared, but is a bit different in different forms of musical traditions. This resonates how different music cultures find the balance between accumulated practices in cover songs and self compositions aiming to preserve an aspect of culture while still allowing creative individuality (Guter, 2025).

### 3.2 Social Functions

Ethnic music is associated with social functions that are deeply rooted in both Chinese and other cultures, which goes on to show the significance of music for humanity. Such functions are fundamentally important as they reveal the social organizing structure of music, its cultural functions, and its contribution to society. The ethnic style in a music genre notes to be of ritualistic or ceremonial characteristic, which is one of its key social functions as it is used in marking life spans, seasons and religion. Emphasis

has been laid on how these forms of music play an integral role in organizing regulations, events and rituals, thus nurturing certain aspects of a particular society's culture. Music's function of promoting togetherness becomes one of its most significant aspects, in this regard, political ethnic music aids in enhancing social relationships and in preserving group identity (Schellenberg, 2012). As sociological and anthropological research suggests, this function is especially expressed in people's general musical engagements, which depict the construction of a social, emotional, and interactive event. Participatory musical practices have also been shown to promote social cohesion by facilitating collective emotional and temporal experiences that cut across individual differences, thus complementing the distinctiveness of the cultural end. The protection of cultural identity via ethnic music becomes a major social function which has been developed further with the process of globalization. Such music suggests cultural codes and contains social memories, values, and experiences that endorse the sense of community (Milovanov & Tervaniemi, 2011). This involves a selection of significant features, adaptation, and transmission mechanisms coordinates in a way that preserves the communication functions of music but allows for its growth and natural change. Moreover, transmission of knowledge across generations through musical practices is sophisticated cultural teaching that goes beyond simply teaching and performing music to reaching cultural values, social norms and historic knowledge. This process also encompasses horizontal and vertical education as inter-community communication is exercised through music in order to endorse replication of traditions but also adaptation to changing environments (Ashene, 2022).

#### 4. DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

##### 4.1 Chinese Ethnic Music Characteristics

Culturally, linguistically, and philosophically, Chinese ethnic music has been infused with specifics that are unique only to the Chinese civilization. To a greater extent, the characteristics that differentiate Chinese ethnic music from other music traditions, is the impact of a tonal language on the construction of the melody. Studies have indicated that the tonal character of the Chinese languages determines specific features of the underlying melodic patterns and phrasal structures yielding a complex intertwining of language, music and song (Rochester, 2024). This same correspondence between speech and music is exhibited through rather complex skills in

procuring the appropriate tones of speech to the contours of a melody resulting in a different perspective in composition and performance of a piece of music (Barton & Barton, 2018). The practice Idea of moderate orientation respect relative to the rest of the systems the practice physically translation usually carried out in Chinese ethnic music is linear development of the melody which is a distinct aesthetic concept. In this case, the focus tends to be on the linearity of the melody with respect to its horizontal movement, deep attention paid to slight changes in tone color together with microtonal shifts thus giving rise to intricate textures. Such emphasis in the melody has been found to be related to the traditional Chinese philosophical view of movement and flow, resulting in the melody to be an expression of natural and cultural phenomena. The concepts of Yin-yang duality and Five Elements philosophy are incorporated into the music of China's ethnic groups. Such metaphysical frameworks influence the organization of music, starting from compositions and performative approaches, including the setting up of instruments. The use of those principles is quite systematic and makes for a remarkable language of music that is grounded on the core tenets of Chinese cosmology and philosophy. The distinctiveness in the music of Chinese ethnic groups can also be seen in the making of original instrumental timbres and techniques which took centuries to perfect. Artisans of traditional instruments in China have developed complex techniques of sound production and modification of instruments, which translate to increased expressive potential of each instrument. These components, the timbre and the performance techniques, contribute to the 'sound' of Chinese socio-political music while also serving particular cultural and aesthetic ends (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008).

#### 4.2 Foreign Ethnic Music Characteristics

Foreign ethnic music traditions are considered different based on their cultural history, geography and social structure as stated by Smith, R. & Wilson, M (Smith & Wilson, 2023). The evolution of harmonic complexity, especially in the case of Western musical traditions, can be singled out as one of the most important features that set these traditions apart from numerous musical systems (Turna & Bolat, 2016). There are findings that indicate such a focus on vertical elements of sound began to fall within distinct historical patterns and eventually grew into elaborate harmonic schemes that suffice for composition and improvisation. The presence of such an harmonic accent has greatly widened the possibilities of musical forms and ensemble types in many cultures. Exporting ethnomusicology

rhythmical complexity approaches expose global variety in the organization and expression of time. All the way from the complex metric systems found in Indian classical music to the multilayered polyrhythms of African music, all the abovementioned approaches to rhythm note different time and movement notions (Haddon, 2016). These rhythmic systems are said to be related to the spoken language of a particular culture, its dancing, and other activities according to research. Foreign ethnic music features a plethora of types of voice raising techniques, from the overtone singing found within Central Asian practices to the implements of tone arrangement used in European folk music. Quite a few illustrative vocal styles exist which serve the ideals of a culture, and because of the geography of the society, and the form of communication required in the society. The emergence of these techniques is influenced by the culture but also stems from pragmatic issues hence giving rise to diverse expressive dimensionality in various traditions of music. The arrangement of instruments into families and the composition of ethnic ensembles associated with foreign ethnic music is yet another feature, and such features integrate cultural aspects and political systems within a society [80]. Each different ethnicity has its individual style of instrument classification, tones and grouping, and such features construct the musical characteristics of such ethnic groups. These ensemble architectures are parallel to the social structures and cultural ideologies due to their operational purposes (Nettl, 1956).

## 5. CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS

### 5.1 Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical bases of some ethnic music traditions indicate strong relationships between systems of thought and the practice of making music which goes to demonstrate the very premise that overtly philosophical ideas are ingrained within the practice of music making. While examining Chinese ethnic music, it can be seen that the features of Confucian philosophy are apparent in the hierarchical order of the musical organization and in the relationship and performance activities. Such Confucian ideas seek to promote equilibrium within the society that leads to harmony, order, and a balance between elements of music and performances in a social environment (Molino et al., 1990). Some of the research has provided evidence how these philosophical assumptions do not only dictate the form of architecture but also the role functions of the music within the society in China. Influence of Taoist ideas of naturalism



is major in Chinese ethnic music, especially within Chinese ethnic music, there is a strong Chinese tradition sensitivity towards flowing musical phrases as well as using sounds and rhythms from nature. This approach is philosophical in that it states that spontaneity and naturalness should at all times characterize the performance of music, but always with a strong touch to cosmic idea (Lewis, 2008). Such concepts are factors affecting instrumental and compositional approaches and techniques like Tao's ideas of balance and flow in Chinese music. The combination of these philosophical prerequisites discourages an ordinary approach to a Chinese musical expression of emotion and attitude as they focus on a combination of life-shaping aspects. When it comes to religious and meditative forms of African music, Buddhism has added a dimension which is quite amusing, specifically in terms of the spiritual. Specific techniques and forms display the notion of impermanence as well as the quest for ultimate truth. They accompany the intermingling of Buddhist elements with those derived from Confucian and Taoist board principles to form sophisticated concepts that are core in inspiring the music focus and performance. On the other hand, music of foreign ethnic traditions possess distinctly different philosophical and religious motivators coinciding with the particulars of their civilization. Western music can be said to synthesise significant elements of Christian religion and Greek philosophy, while music of the Middle east incorporates Islamic philosophy and indeed, an aspect of spiritual practice. Whereas Hinduism and Buddhism and their interrelationships have been the basis for Indian classical music, a complex web of systems, in their theoretical and indeed practical aspects, has appeared as a result. Religious constructions of silence and musically mediated sound are quite different affecting cultures to varying degrees. Cultures that appreciate the importance and purpose of silence in music, especially in terms of spirituality, differ from those that appreciate devotion expressed through sound which is need to be continuous. The above evidences of difference in approaches correlate with downright differences in philosophies on how different societies understand the interplay between sound, silence and spirituality (Bar-Yosef, 2001).

## 5.2 Social Implications

Ethnomusicology, or the scientific study of music, focuses on streams of expression where acclamation does not supersede social relevance. Such streams serve as tools for elevating the standard of societal relations and structure. Quoting P. C. Aidan, such musical traditions which revolve around precise, socio-political, and cultural contexts, indeed do enact roles

that reproduce social structures through instrument selection, roles in social divide, and transmission. No matter the native home of such structures, the roles remain intact as upholding existing social order as well as enabling cultural mobility and expression. Musical domains ensure gender roles within the traditions, which in turn reveal relationships without the terminology of social structures and expectations. The way musical roles are divided or instruments made accessible acts as a validation of gender stereotypes, alongside that, it helps provide a space to contest such norms (Zhang & Wang, 2024). More recent studies suggest, that gendered dynamics shaped by musical instruments maintain conventions whilst birthing new practices, or simply put, the relationship between music and gender is ever evolving. The music is crucial in the building of social furnaces or simply bonding and ethnic identification, as demonstrated by the study of the relations of the community in respect to the musical practices. Conflict resolution, expression of socio-political power strife, and negotiation of community morality and regulation occur within the framework of interaction that is constructed around musical activities. In situations of societal or cultural change where the need for such change is unequivocal but the answer is also music, these elements of community development through musical practice are important. Cultural practices and traditions are studied in the context of cultural adaptation and persistence with a focus on instruments, which enables communities to withstand a relationship of power while ‘doing their thing’. Newer and greater musical practice is in the integration of useful but often foreign influences while still retaining core cultural values which in turn would explain the communities’ diversity within the context of modernisation and globalization.

## 6. CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS AND CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

### 6.1 Modernization Impact

Modernization induces cultural change. While on the one hand, it poses a substantial threat to preserving ethnic music customs, on the other, it creates unparalleled opportunities to further enhance those customs. There is a growing body of work that investigates the relationship between traditional music and contemporary technologies and how these relationships engender new spaces for cultural expression and cultural transmission. The evolution of society, technology plus the transmission

traditional methods are issues that contribute to ethnic music preservation being hard in this century. It has been shown that urbanization and changes in lifestyle have led to the disruption of traditional ways of safeguarding music and therefore to the need for new methods of safeguarding culture. Adaptation to modern contexts becomes a vital element for the existence and development of ethnic music traditions. There are studies conducted Which shows that all musical practices are re-invented in a bid to stay relevant while trying to retain a 'core' (Ramnarine, 2013). This adaptive process also specializes in negotiating between various complex elements; achievement in triangulating tradition with modern models often results in different hybrid versions of practicing history and modern expressing. This has seen the advent of technology becoming central in the protection and sharing of ethnic music traditions; it has provided new ways of documenting, analyzing and transmitting. The use of digital platforms and recording technologies enables one to save and preserve the older traditional music, but at the same time brings in challenges to its authenticity and cultural setting. Ethnic music has been taught and studied in greatly modified ways due to modernization and has absorbed both former teaching practices and more recent ideas of learning. These changes, in turn, fit into wider amendments of the educational systems and at the same time cater to the requirements of cultural transmission in modern conditions. Likewise, the introduction of formal class-room music education coupled with the same oral dancing traditions marks one of the great developments in adaptation to social changes, but such development also poses questions regarding the potential problems of preserving cultural authenticity and the role of informal transmission.

## 6.2 Cross-Cultural Influence

As we know, modern ethnic music has transcended to an unprecedentedly high level of interchange and change which comes from the cross-culture impact that has started to capture attention in today's global setting. Following this trend, research shows that fusion practices have moved away from being simple alteration of elements to an intricate dialogue between two or more cultures. These types of fusions showcase multiplicity of cultural negotiation and artistic advancement aimed at creating something new that breaks the traditional framework yet encapsulates the cultural essence. Other studies showcase how the musicians are able to balance between the two extremes of cultural preservation and creative fabric, that is, developing a fresh cultural mix. Ethnic music traditions are now able to grow and get globalised better than

before. A note of caution however - this comes at a potential risk of cultural erosion which needs to be protected against. Bearing this undertone, the global music market has changed the scope of business. As it happens, business influences both into ethnic production and consumption which in turn leads to changed form and presentation of music. Research has evidenced the interaction of commercial interests and performance practice alongside wider representation and exchange of culture. In effect, two new types of hybrids created - one which is local and the other global and both of them impacted music's evolution. Such activities intensified in the past thirty years with the recognition that culture is not static and new hybrid cultural patterns can emerge from traditional practices even if these are of little or no relation to them. Thus, the making of such hybrid forms constitutes one of the important processes of the development of music today to show how cultures do not only mix together but still survive within their own framework (White, 1994).

## 7. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A comparative analysis of music of different ethnic groups reveals not only the universal aspects of human music but also the particularities arising from specific civilizational influences. This synthesized view enables us to better comprehend the interaction between music culture and human geography – both in terms of general experience and specific culture. The research findings demonstrate that while basic musical elements and social functions may share common ground across cultures, their specific manifestations are deeply influenced by local philosophical traditions, social structures, and historical developments. The analysis of the processes of accumulation of cultural identity through music makes it possible to formulate absolutely complex strategies of communities in preserving, maintaining, and transmitting their basic values and beliefs. Musical practices assume the role of active and fluid coordinates of cultural historical memories which are most likely to be affected by change, so long as the core cultural factors are retained. This capacity to adapt is compounded by the fact that musical traditions help regions to respond positively to external evolutionary pressures enabling them to retain their identity while operating under a wider umbrella. Your goals outline an elaborate definition of music and its impact. Share it with a self-defined focus on how music engenders interaction between different cultures and civilizations. You may need to explain how language barrier is broken

through musical harmony and creation. The global community's bonding as a result of a shared human experience that you have so concisely concluded highlights the beauty of musical culture. Structure, function and form under which any given emotion is expressed points out that even if these forms are culturally and traditionally unique, being human is universal. This particular understanding opens the mind further up to envision other possibilities that music can help with. Simplistically viewing a culture as either being superior or inferior is far from the goal this case study attempts to achieve. It, instead, aims to establish the future of transgenre diplomacy by first countering the idea of actively discarding one's own heritage as one attempts to understand someone else's. Combing through the sea of cultural diversity that various tribes exhibit and observing how they work together succeeds this goal. With the hope of charming everyone into believing in the power of the middle ground, the research seeks to pull in creative musicians, engage the global community and make sense of what it means to be a citizen today while also being a part of their civilization. And with this transcendence, change to one festive creation will only be possible through preserving the basis of the culture that existed before it. These findings imply that the fate of ethnic music shall henceforth not rely on mere conservation or reinvention of the genre but instead, be delicately blended with creativity and careful repurposing. As the world progresses, our role becomes to enable sustainable practice for the coexistence of various traditions while also promoting impactful exchange and adaptation of cultures.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Comparative studies of Chinese music and foreign music traditionally showcase an intricate mosaic of universal musical principles and particular ethnic ones. It is shown in this work how different music traditions which develop as autonomous systems within specific cultures may still serve similar fundamental human needs and human goals but using different cultural perspectives. Through the consideration of structural components, social aspects, and cultural supplements, the thesis also shows the elements that unite different types of music and the elements that set other traditional music types apart. The results emphasize the double character of the ethnic music which is on one hand an integral part of every human being and at the same time a part of a cultural peculiar group. While on a general level primitive elements of music and social roles may appear always across the globe, their expression is and must always be determined

by local ethics, local history, and sociology. Appreciation of the ways in which music traditions act as more complex cultural systems that ensure the encoding and decoding of experiences in human societies is broadening that understanding. The research further brings to light the evolving nature of musical traditions in world today. When societies deal with the issues of modernization and globalization, their musical practices are capable of change and maintaining their distinctiveness. This indicates that the possible sustainable future of ethnomusic lies within the equilibrium of the historical components with the contemporary modifications, safeguarding the originality but at the same time permitting unforeseen growth and change.

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