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Identity and Influence: New Music Research at Wuhan Music Conservatory

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[References](#)

[1] Following a whole decade of Cultural Revolution, the opening up of China in the late seventies brought about noted changes on the academic scene. Insofar as new music is concerned, the second half of the eighties saw a distinct surge of interest in pertinent compositional techniques, theoretical concepts, and related technological developments. Many of these have been imported, but there are also signs of an emerging identity. This paper reviews the latest development of new music theories, not least set theory, in China. In "Theory Reception in China" (*Music Theory Online* 3.4 [1997]), I have already touched on the dissemination of set theory as evinced by journals issued by China's top two conservatories. In it, I surveyed nearly two decades of journals published by the Central and Shanghai Conservatories of Music. Unfortunately, this delimitation ignored an important, though perhaps little known, powerhouse of new music research in China.

[2] For it is Wuhan Music Conservatory, a provincial establishment rather, than the cosmopolitan Central and Shanghai Conservatories of Music, which has over the years fostered a climate for the study of new music. This conservatory has shown a keen interest in Western new music and, with it, theories, compositional techniques, and technological advances that serve the same end. Frequent discussion of the music of contemporary Western composers, including Berio, Cage, Crumb, and Lutoslawski, is a hallmark of *Huang Zhong*, the Journal of Wuhan Music Conservatory. Since its inception in 1987, this journal has been at the forefront of new music research in China, though official recognition came only in 1997, when it became listed as one of the nation's major academic journals.

[3] The first set theoretical article to appear in *Huang Zhong* was Yang Heng-Zhan's introductory essay on Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music*.^[1] This was soon followed by the translation of articles originally published in the *Journal of Music Theory*.^[2] In the ensuing years, theoretical and analytical writings on new music have continued to appear.

While some of these employ set theory relentlessly, others go barely beyond the use of set names. By the late nineties, however, judging from the number of articles that relate directly or indirectly to set theory, there is little doubt that the tenets of this theory have taken root in *Huang Zhong*. Two articles that draw most extensively on set theory analyze Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* and Webern's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, though it is a bit worrying that no reference is made to the existing literature. Qian Ren-Piang's set theoretical analysis of Bright Sheng's *Four Movements for Piano Trio* is, by contrast, wholly original. The importance of a pentatonic set (4-23) is examined through a careful reading of the Schirmer score of 1993. This study of Chinese new music through Western theoretical systems is by no means an isolated incidence. In 1997, an article on George Perle's twelve-tone modal system appears in *Huang Zhong* and this is supplemented in 1998 by analyses of Chinese new music based on Perle's system.

[4] Despite all these efforts, the influence of set theory and other Western theoretical systems in China remains to date overshadowed by a strong inclination towards twelve-tone music. Whether it is *Huang Zhong* or other major music journals, articles on serialism exceed those on set theory. The twelve-tone technique, first introduced to China in the pre-1949 era by German composers in exile, started to flourish in the eighties. A twelve-tone work by a Chinese composer was first published in 1980.^[3] Luo Zhong-Rong's "Picking Lotus Flowers at the Riverside," which sets to music an ancient Chinese poem, attempts to express archaic Chinese sensibility through modern Western means. In what is possibly the only article on Chinese new music published by a Western music journal, Zheng Yin-Lie of Wuhan Music Conservatory focuses exclusively on the composition of twelve-tone music in China, noting in particular how contemporary Chinese composers imbue serialism with local colors.^[4]

[5] The question as to when the predominance of twelve-tone music will be supplanted by different compositional aspirations still awaits the verdict of time. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the discussion of set theory and Perle's twelve-tone modal system in *Huang Zhong* tells of a gradually broadening view. The belated listing of *Huang Zhong* as one of the nation's major academic journals in 1997 has brought with it not only the official recognition of this journal but, even more significantly, that of the importance of new music research in China. In the late nineties, the analysis of new music has for the first time been set up as an elective course at the Central Conservatory of Music. Yao Heng-Lu, the faculty in charge has, upon his return from Leeds, authored a Chinese textbook on Western analytical approaches, set theory included. But courses of a similar nature remain to date rare in China. If Western theoretical

thinkings of the twentieth century were to speed up their influences in the new millennium, the present language barrier should ideally be demolished. But, theories and influences aside, the quest for an identity remains a major challenge to be faced up to by composers of Chinese new music in times to come.

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