

Wai-Ling Cheong\*<sup>1</sup>*\*The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*<sup>1</sup>cheongwl@cuhk.edu.hk

## Harmony as Cultural Hybrid: Reflection on the First Nationwide Music Theory Conference in China (Wuhan 1979)

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

In China the so-called nationalization of harmony stands out as a much-debated topic to which high importance is attached. Where music theoretical research is concerned, the first nationwide conference to have ever taken place in China happened in the post-Mao period in 1979, at a time when the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening up' policy started to trigger new attempts on different fronts. From 1979 to 1989, altogether four nationwide music theory conferences were held in China. The first two of them were organized in 1979 and 1986 by Wuhan Conservatory of Music, then a powerhouse of pioneering initiatives. Harmony was set up as the conference theme on both occasions. There is consensus that the First Conference focused on the nationalization of harmony, while the Second Conference shifted to focus on the modernization of harmony, having reportedly 'made its way out from the narrow space of functional harmony' (Zuyin 2003). Novel harmonic possibilities explored by Western composers in the twentieth century had virtually no place at the First Conference, as 'the theoretical research, teaching, and compositional use of harmony remained tied down to restrictively the system of functional theory' (Huanzhi 1997).

#### Aims and Repertoire Studied

Notwithstanding the near monopoly of functional harmony in China since the translation of *Uchebnik garmonii* — the famed harmony textbook co-authored by a brigade of Soviet theorists — was launched in 1957, I argue with recourse to the proceedings of the First Conference that the escape from 'the narrow space' was already underway in the late 1970s.

#### Methods

This paper compares the harmonic approaches advocated by Sang Tong and Li Yinghai with reference to their contribution to the First Conference as documented in the proceedings. Li Yinghai's idiosyncratic use of tertiary chords and also what he referred to as functional theory to harmonize Chinese pentatonic melodies is pitted against Sang Tong's espousal of pentatonic harmonies.

#### Implications

Sang Tong's paper, which advocates the use of pentatonic chords (with recourse to Hindemith's rendition of unconventional chords) to serve the cause of the nationalization of harmony, came first in the proceedings. A much shorter paper by Li Yinghai, advocating the use of tertiary harmonies and the

functional theory to serve the same cause, was allotted only the second place. Sang Tong had not published any major theoretical text prior to the First Conference. Until then he had published mainly musical compositions. In contrast, Li Yinghai authored one of the earliest theory books on the harmonization of Chinese pentatonic folk melodies in the first decade of the New China. His *Hanzu diaoshi ji qi hesheng* (Han Modality and Its Harmony) was published in 1959 with a view to solve the problem of how best to apply functional harmony — widely accepted as an unshakable scientific truth in the Soviet Union before it made its way to China in the 1950s. By the late 1970s, however, Li Yinghai's position came to be challenged by Sang Tong's. The wind had changed. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, the use of tertiary chords were no longer forcibly prescribed and it no longer worked well to use tertiary chords to dispel non-tertiary chords under the pretext of functional theory. Sang Tong came to stand out as a major torchbearer in the theorization of Chinese pentatonic harmony. Sang Tong's ascendancy as a scholar in China, an early sign of which can be gleaned from the 1979 conference proceedings, went from strength to strength, even as 'the narrow space' was progressively relegated to history. In the late 1990s, the Ministry of Culture commissioned scholars to contribute to a series of art education publications that marks the advent of the new millennium, and Sang Tong was invited to be the author of a new textbook on harmony. The latter — together with the two volumes of his award-winning textbook on traditional tonal harmony published in 1982 and 1988 respectively — signified the official recognition of Sang Tong as arguably *the* specialist in harmonic studies.

Sang Tong's attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the use of pentatonic harmonies was influenced by Hindemith's theory. The novelty of Sang Tong's position rests with his attempt to systematize the retrieval of intervals and different chord types from the pentatonic collection. On this basis, he constructed a harmonic syntax with recourse to the theoretical models set up by Hindemith in *Unterweisung*. Sang Tong's systematic retrieval of harmonies from the pentatonic collection led him to arrive at distinct types of pentatonic chords, though their availability is restricted to selected scale degrees of the pentatonic collection. While the notion of root is conventionally applicable to tertiary harmonies exclusively, Sang Tong insisted on the identification of roots in all the other chords. He thus turned to *Unterweisung*, followed the guidelines established by Hindemith for determining the root of individual intervals or chords, and applied them to the pentatonic harmonies. Hindemith's notion of root enabled Sang Tong to identify the so-called roots in all the pentatonic harmonies he categorized, regardless of how unconventional they were in structure. In addition, it enabled him to figure out how

different pentatonic chords may be added together to forge progressions that are rationalized on quasi-acoustical grounds by privileging the root progressions concerned.

In sum a comparative study of Li Yinghai's and Sang Tong's approaches reveals how the noble cause to nationalize harmony had led to the creation of perplexing hybrids, which effectively challenge us to rethink style and idea that have for long been taken for granted.

### Keywords

Functional Theory, Tonal Theory, Pentatonic Harmony, Tertiary Harmony, Cultural Revolution, Nationalization/Ethnicization, Sang Tong, Li Yinghai.

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