

THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF YUEN REN CHAO:  
A CULTURAL AND EMPIRICAL STUDY  
OF THE MODERNIZATION OF CHINESE MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

In the Chinese art song repertoire, “How can I help but think of you” has long enjoyed enormous prestige since its publication in the 1920s. The song is memorable not only because of its innovative use of language by Liu Bannong in the lyrics but also because of the ingenious arrangement of tonalities, forms, and melodies by Chao Yuen Ren in the music. This essay will be devoted to a cultural and empirical analysis of the song, with the aim of understanding the efforts made by eminent scholars at the early stage of modernization of Chinese music and language. To this end, we will first explore how the lyrics are structured phonetically and syntactically. Tonal complexity and ambiguity in the music will then be analyzed, followed by the discussion of *qǐ-chéng-zhuǎn-hé* in the musical form. The pentatonicism embedded in the song and its relationship with what generally makes music “sound Chinese” will also be examined. In the

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end, we will also review an essential concept, *yìjìng* (or mindscape), in Chinese aesthetics and philosophy to better appreciate how various components in the music and lyrics together contribute to the aesthetic success of the song.

## KEYWORDS

Ambiguity Modulation *Qǐ-chéng-zhuǎn-hé* Pentatonic *Yìjìng* (Mindscape)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Liu Fu 刘复 (1891–1934), also known as Liu Bannong 刘半农, was a Chinese intellectual who was among the earliest to receive Western training in linguistics.<sup>1</sup> While in London in 1920, he wrote a Chinese poem entitled *Jiào wǒ rúhé bù xiǎng tā* 教我如何不想她 (literally, teach me how not to think of her) or, more simply, *Rúhé bù xiǎng tā* 如何不想她 (How can I not think of her). Among other aspects, the poem was noteworthy because it introduced a new sinogram<sup>2</sup>—*tā* 她 “she.” Chinese did not distinguish the third person singular pronoun by gender, e.g., *he* versus *she* in English; both are pronounced /ta/ and written 他. Liu replaced the left side of the sinogram, which is the radical *rén* 人 “person,” with the radical *nǚ* 女 “woman.” This sinogram makes it clear that the poet intends that the object of the longing is no longer ambiguous, at least when written—it is a woman.

Liu Fu had a very talented brother called Liu Tianhua 刘天华 (1895–1932), who was famous for revitalizing Chinese music tradition and composing music for *èrhú* 二胡, a traditional Chinese two-stringed bowed instrument. Unlike most of his radical contemporaries, Liu Tianhua rose to the challenge of modernizing Chinese music by integrating Western music theories and techniques while preserving national characteristics. In 1926, another musically talented scholar, Chao Yuen Ren 赵元任 (1892–1982)<sup>3</sup>, who shared similar musical ambition to Liu Tianhua, put the poem “How can I not think of her” to music. Chao was the preeminent Chinese linguist of his day and a leading composer who made the first attempt to compose piano music in China. He composed many art songs to popularize what were regarded as the avant-garde poems at the time, including the one

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## 赵元任的音乐语言：中国音乐近代化的文化与实证研究

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### 摘要

在中国艺术歌曲曲目中，《教我如何不想他》自上世纪 20 年代发表以来便一直享有极高的声誉。作品中刘半农创造性的语言用法让人耳目一新，而赵元任融汇中西的和声技法及曲式运用更是中国音乐近代化的代表性诠释。本文旨在通过对该歌曲的文化与实证分析，探讨中国音乐和语言中的近代化元素。我们首先对歌词的语音语义以及篇章结构进行分析，然后在中西方乐理的比较框架下研究音乐的调性、曲式结构以及旋律构成。其中我们将具体讨论曲中转调的丰富性、离调的歧义性、起承转合的运用以及五声调式与中国风音乐的关系。最后，我们还将分析歌曲音乐背后所体现的中国传统美学中的一个关键概念——意境。

### 关键词

歧义 转调 起承转合 五声调式 意境