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The Role of Mentality in Understanding Musical-Theoretical Definitions (On the Example of Timbre and Texture Analysis in the Works of Chinese Musicologists)

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Abstract. The article considers the problem of mutual enrichment of research practices of Russian and Chinese musicology as a result of mastering the methods of music analysis developed within the framework of different scientific paradigms. The starting point of the discussion was the thesis that representatives of different cultures, characterised by different mental consciousness, have significant differences in the perception of artistic phenomena. The article considers the expressive means of music from this point of view — in particular, in terms of texture and timbral colouring — suggesting that the understanding of the meaning of timbre-textural sound colours by the European ear and the ear of representatives of Eastern cultures (China, in particular) is not the same. This appears to be due to differences in mentality, a significant characteristic of which, in the latter case, consists in the visual-figurative type of thinking as conditioned by the Chinese language system, especially its written hieroglyphic form, which presupposes the brain working with images. The visual-figurative type of thinking, in turn, determines the priority of painting among the arts. The special techniques of painting described in ancient sources were aimed at creating either deep, dense, multi-layered colours, or transparent single-layer dots and thin drawn lines. The orchestral sonorities created by Chinese composers, possessing various phonisms, are perceived as a transfer of the techniques of Guohua (国画) monochrome painting onto the musical fabric; as such, Chinese musicologists take the latter into account in the analysis of orchestral works. The experience of studying the timbre-textural features of Guo Zurong's piano concertos using this method as featured in the present work reveals its viability, allowing for a deeper understanding of the national type of musical thinking of Chinese composers.

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Keywords: mentality, timbre, texture, piano concerto, Guo Zurong, Guohua painting technique, analysis methods

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Роль менталитета в понимании музыкально-теоретических дефиниций (на примере анализа тембра и фактуры в работах китайских музыковедов)

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена проблеме взаимообогащения научных практик российского и китайского музыкознания в результате овладения методиками анализа музыки, выработанными в рамках разных научных парадигм. Отправной точкой рассуждений стал тезис о том, что представители разных культур, характеризуемые разным ментальным сознанием, имеют существенные отличия в восприятии художественных явлений. Авторы статьи предлагают взглянуть с этой точки зрения на выразительные средства музыки, в частности на фактуру и темброкрасочность, высказывая предположение, что понимание значений тембо-фактурных красок европейским слухом и слухом представителей восточных культур (в частности, Китая) неодинаково. Обусловлено это ментальным своеобразием, значимой характеристикой которого является визуально-образный тип мышления, предопределённый системой языка, его письменной иероглифической формой, предполагающей работу мозга с образами. Визуально-образным типом мышления обусловлен, в свою очередь, приоритет живописи в ряду искусств. Описанные в древних источниках особые приёмы изобразительной техники были направлены на создание либо глубокого, «плотного», многослойного по текстуре цвета, либо прозрачных однослойных пятен и тонких линий рисунка. Создаваемые китайскими композиторами оркестровые звучности, обладающие разным фонизмом, воспринимаются как перенос на музыкальную ткань приёмов монохромной живописи Гохуа, а китайские музыковеды учитывают последнее в анализе оркестровых сочинений. Осуществлённый в статье опыт изучения тембро-фактурных особенностей фортепианных концертов Го Цзужуна посредством данной методики раскрывает её жизнеспособность, позволяющую глубже понять национальный тип музыкального мышления китайских композиторов.

Ключевые слова: менталитет, тембр, фактура, жанр фортепианного концерта, Го Цзужун, техника живописи Гохуа, методика анализа

Introduction

In contemporary discourses, there is active interaction between the Russian and Chinese schools of musicology. This is undoubtedly a two-way process. On the Chinese side, it is aimed at studying the music of Russian composers and mastering the analytic methodology that has developed in the Russian musicological school. The musical culture of the PRC, in turn, is today the focus of attention of scholars from all Russian conservatories, both in its traditional forms and research into the works of contemporary composers. Meanwhile, the successful approaches taken by Chinese musicologists in terms of studying their own musical culture, especially in terms of analysis of melody, timbre, texture, and other aspects of musical language, has the potential to enrich the tools used in Russian academic and pedagogical schools, even potentially transforming existing research approaches. The article will discuss the specifics of these unusual (for Russian musicologists) methods of analysis, as well as considering the underlying cognitive paradigms that form their basis.

The Role of Mentality in Different Understandings of the Meanings of Artistic Phenomena

Reflecting on the question of the assimilation of European genre models of instrumental music by Chinese composers, one involuntarily recalls the idea expressed almost two and a half centuries ago in the work *An Essay on the Origin of Languages, as well as on melody and musical imitation* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that all forms of national music owe their main features to language. [1, p. 238] This thesis, which is based on the phonosemantic structure of a given language, appears to be

profound and true in the context of modern linguistic research, confirming that the national way of thinking is recorded in the national language of representatives of a particular culture. [2, p. 765]

In the process of long-term historical development of traditional societies, which include China, a stable mentality is formed, which is characterised by “a collective mental state, a way of thinking and behaviour common to a people or nation.” [3, p. 34] National mentality should be understood as “a mindset, a set of intellectual, emotional and cultural characteristics, as well as value orientations and attitudes characteristic of a particular social or ethno-national group, as well as an entire people.” [4, p. 39] This explains the fundamental differences in the perception of art by representatives of different national cultures, since art creates artistic models of the world and personality, forming a picture of the world in accordance with the experience stored in the cultural memory.

Due to this factor, understandings of the same artistic phenomena and artefacts among representatives of different peoples cannot be assumed to be the same. Let us take Indian dance as an example. While for a European, the perception of this spectacle may be limited to the plasticity of movements and general decor, for a representative of a corresponding ethnic group, it is an open book that can be read through bodily symbolism¹ (Il. 1, a–d).

If we look at the expressive means of music from this point of view, we may proceed from the assumption that the same musical phenomena associated with them can be perceived and interpreted differently by representatives of different cultures. To a large extent, this

¹ The symbolism of Indian dance is formed by universal graphic symbols: the circle — beauty and strength emanating from the feeling of unity, the triangle — creation, preservation, etc. See more details: [5].

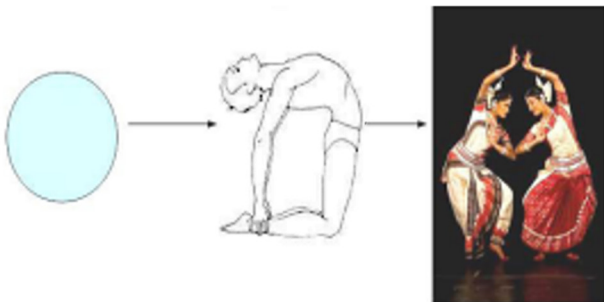
a) Triangle



b) Cross



c) Circle



d) Rectangle



Il. 1. Symbolism of Indian dance [5, p. 203–204]

relates to the timbral vibrance and semantics of instrumental timbres.

Discussing the communicative properties of timbre, Anna Limitovskaya notes the role of timbre stereotypes, citing as an example the signal quality of the trumpet, the pastoral quality of the oboe, the hunting “sphere” of the French horn, etc. [6, p. 80] However, timbral symbolic associations in different cultures may not coincide (similar to the mismatch of colour semantics) or have additional connotations. Evgeny Nazaykinsky offers an explanation for this. He points to the multi-layered nature of musical meanings conveyed by timbre, which, in his opinion, “cover both the individual, personal life experience of a person, ... and the social, historical, normalising experience.” [7, p. 160] Let us assume that, due to this multi-layered nature, the perception and understanding of the meanings of timbre-textured colours by the European ear and the ear of representatives of Eastern cultures (China, in particular) differs in a similar way to the differences in the perception of Indian dance.²

On the Role of Visual-Figurative Thinking in Chinese Culture

These differences, which are clearly manifested in the work with the texture and timbre of the symphony orchestra — a borrowed European “instrument” — in the works of Chinese academic composers, are determined by a mental uniqueness, a significant characteristic of which is the visual-figurative type of thinking inherent in Eastern cultures. The fundamental role of visual-figurative representations is determined, in turn, by the language system; however, not so much by the phonosemantic system, as by its written form. Maria Rubets

² Reflecting on the characteristics of Chinese painting, researchers note a similar difference in the interpretation of meanings by representatives of different cultures: “The artistic image in Chinese painting contains practically no random details and can be correctly read only in the context of a certain cultural tradition. In the same pictorial image, a Chinese person and a European will see different meanings.” [8, p. 132]

writes that “hieroglyphic writing as such, when perceived, presupposes the brain’s work with images: a hieroglyph is not an alphabetical word, it does not require letter-by-letter reading, and it does not even always contain a phonetic component. A hieroglyph is a reflection in writing of some perceptual image, concept or entire situation, in contrast to an alphabetic word, in which the phonetic expression most often quite accurately corresponds to the written one.” [9, p. 8]

The visual-figurative type of thinking that determined the specificity of hieroglyphic writing also preconditions the special role of painting in Chinese culture in terms of organically incorporating text fragments (Il. 2).³



Il. 2. Wu Youhuo. *Streams and Mountains with Cascading Waterfalls*.
Qing Dynasty

Vera Belozerova notes: “The main graphic elements of Chinese painting have a calligraphic genesis and analogues described in treatises.” [11, p. 355] Ancient techniques of drawing with ink and Indian ink were based on the transmission of the finest nuances of colour, the variability of which, with the dominance of only two colour principles — white and black — was achieved through special methods of applying paint to the surface of the sheet (Ils. 3 and 4).



Il. 3. Wang Zhen.
Ink Drawing of a Lotus (1925)

³ Noting the inseparability of the connection between painting and calligraphy as the main directions in Chinese art, Oksana Ovsyannikova and Natalia Tagiltseva write: “Every artist in China is simultaneously both a calligrapher and a painter.” [8, p. 132] See also: [10].



Il. 4. From the book *A Word on Painting from the Garden with a Mustard Seed*, Vol. II: Plum, Orchid, Bamboo and Chrysanthemum (2002)

Analysis of Timbre and Texture of Musical Works by Chinese Composers in Comparison with the Guohua Painting Technique

The roots of traditional Chinese painting go back to the 2nd–3rd millennia BC. The importance of this practice is captured in the word itself, where *guó* (国) is the state, and *huà* (画) is a painting or picture. Obviously, the name captures the deep cultural significance of this practice. Wang Wei writes: “Chinese painting reflects the spirit of the people of the Celestial Empire; it expresses the people’s consciousness like nothing else. Its main objects are the manifestation and glorification of the soul and feelings, expressed through composition and that which is ‘not visible to the eye,’ which is located, as it were, between the lines.” [12, p. 154] Over the centuries of its existence, a detailed technique has developed. The Guohua painting techniques

described in ancient sources — ink splashing, ink layering, broken ink and others — were aimed at creating either a deep, “dense,” multi-layered colour in texture, or transparent single-layer dots and thin line drawing.⁴ This principle of working with the colour and texture of paintings is close to the phenomena of background and relief in terms of the density or sparseness of the musical fabric. Let us recall Evgeny Nazaykinsky’s words on the inextricable connection between texture and timbre in the creation of sound colour. “Texture as a configuration of musical sound is determined ... not only by the lines of voices and the outlines of sound masses,” the scholar noted, “but also by sound colour and phonic brightness.” [14, p. 74–75] Timbre, in his opinion, “serves as the basis for the colouristic texture.” [Ibid.] Let us pay attention to the presence in the musicologist’s definitions of concepts close to painting, such as lines and sound arrays.

Confirmation of this is the existence in Chinese musicology of works in which the textural and timbre techniques used by Chinese composers are considered in direct parallel with the aforementioned technique of traditional Chinese painting. Their authors offer a unique, ethnically distinctive method of analysing the musical texture of works in comparison with the techniques of applying paint to parchment described in ancient treatises on painting.

Thus, in the study of the symphonies of the outstanding Chinese composer Guo Zurong, carried out by Tu Zhijie, the analysis of texture is realised through analogies with the techniques of Guohua writing. The researcher explains the use of this method of texture-timbre analysis, which is unconventional for European musicology, by the fact that in China “there are many compositional rules of ‘ink painting,’ which can be relied upon

⁴ Techniques for working with brush and ink are discussed in detail in the work of Tu Nan: [13].

in the structural understanding of orchestration, arrangement and use of timbres.” [15, p. 106] The author argues for this approach according to the multiple analogies between the coloration of painting and sound. He emphasises that “...the arrangement and transformation of timbres, as well as the regulation of strength and other techniques, can be clearly represented in the score through various phenomena of density (‘thickness’) or sparseness (‘thinness’) of the interweaving of voice,” [Ibid.] arguing that the fullness or transparency of sounds is analogous to the texture of the application of paints in Guohua painting.

The analogies between painting and music in Chinese culture are also based on the fact that *drawing, like a piece of music, was understood procedurally*. One of the most important compositional rules of Guohua painting is *kai he* (开合, opening and closing). This is explained through the similarity of the drawing to a musical work: the painting “must have an introduction (*kai* — opening), development of the theme and conclusion (*he* — closing).”⁵

Let us take as an example the scroll *Grapes and Squirrel* by Qi Baishi (Il. 5). “The composition begins at the top, where the grape vine begins its movement, unfolding like a musical theme. This is ‘*kai*.’ Then comes the development — the bunches of grapes create a rhythm, leading the gaze. And finally, at the bottom of the painting there is a small squirrel, which seems to place a full stop on the composition and thus complete it. This is ‘*he*’.”⁶

Tu Zhijie’s analytical experience, which examines the techniques of forming musical fabric through the prism of painting techniques, corresponds to the cultural paradigm. Of course, one could consider such an approach to be



Il. 5. Qi Baishi.
Grapes and Squirrel (1952)

⁵ Chinese painting as discussed by Artem Savichev. 11 golden rules of composition in Chinese painting (Guohua). URL: <https://dzen.ru/a/Z6-3rYdwfBgc7QLI> (accessed: 16.11.2025).

⁶ Ibid.

purely experimental, but a closer examination reveals that this is not so.

In an article devoted to the analysis of Wen Deqing's string quartet, *Po Mo II*, researcher Ding Chun applies the same comparative analysis method. The musicologist shows how the composer, in an effort to maximally expand the space of timbral expressiveness, imitates "the dynamic process of drawing technique, the play of ink colour and the techniques of their application in painting with the help of such methods as transparency and density of texture, as well as changes in dynamics and timbre." [16, p. 92] It is no coincidence that the title of the work — *Po Mo II* — corresponds to a special technique of applying ink in thick layers to create the impression of volume in Guohua painting. Analysing the orchestration techniques in Yang Lishan's work *Desert at Dusk*, another researcher Gong Huahua also thinks of orchestral texture as sound painting and interprets its structure and development as a result of the use of Guohua techniques. [17]

Let us dwell on a specific example to explain the specifics of the textural and timbral thinking of composers and researchers who are bearers of the Chinese mentality. One of the methods of applying ink to the surface of the scroll in Guohua painting practices is ink splashing,⁷ which can be single-layer, double-layer, or multi-layer.

In considering the implementation of this technique in relation to the symphonies of Guo Zurong, Tu Zhijie writes: "...to imitate the two-layer paint on paper after splashing the ink, the orchestra is divided into two main sound groups of equal strength, which play alternately and stand out among other instruments by their absolute sound advantage."

[15, p. 164] Analysing the development of the first movement of Guo Zurong's Symphony No. 17, the author highlights the technique of "two-layer ink splashing" as dominant. He notes that the first layer is made up of high timbres, while the second combines mid and low (Example No. 1, see mm. 50–54), and "two sound groups echo, intertwine with each other, forming bold strokes, the sound of 'ink' is heavy, similar to strong colour contrasts." [Ibid.]

By applying this method to the analysis of Guo Zurong's piano concertos, we discovered a similar technique for creating a sound fabric. Thus, in the first movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2 (mm. 232–245) the sound groups of woodwinds and strings are formed into two separate layers, which dominate over other timbres. Their alternation forms a dialogue similar to the alternation of configurations achieved by the technique of double layers of ink in Guohua paintings (cf. Example No. 2 and II. 6).

The musical fabric is designed differently, appealing to "the method of accumulating ink" (ji mo fa 積墨法).⁸ In relation to musical texture, it was examined by Ding Chong in the article "Traditions of Chinese Calligraphy and Guohua Painting in Wen Deqing's string quartet *Po Mo II*." [16] As was discovered, this principle is also widely used by Guo Zurong in the culmination sections of his piano concertos with the effect of increasing sonority from *p* to *f* not only due to dynamics, but also due to the accumulation of energy of ever new layered timbres. There are many examples of this kind.

The extent to which the considered techniques of timbre-texture graphics of musical scores are close to the effects achieved through the Guohua painting technique can be judged by comparing

⁷ "Po mo fa 泼墨法 ("method of splashed ink") — the ink solution is applied liberally to the desired area of the image so that it spreads out, leaving no traces of the brush movement." [11, p. 366]

⁸ "Ji mo fa 積墨法 ("method of accumulating ink") — the ink is applied in completely dry layers (sometimes up to 10–25 layers) sequentially from a light tone to increasingly darker tones, which allows the artist to achieve a special depth of black colour." [11, p. 366]

Example No. 1

Guo Zurong. Symphony No. 17.
First Movement, mm. 48–54

The musical score is presented in a multi-staff format. The top system consists of five staves, likely representing the first five parts of the orchestra. The second system also consists of five staves, with the first two staves showing more complex rhythmic patterns. The third system shows a continuation of the orchestral parts, with some staves having rests. The fourth system is a single staff, possibly for a solo instrument or a specific section. The fifth system consists of five staves, with the first two staves showing more complex rhythmic patterns. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, beams, and dynamic markings like 'cresc.' (crescendo). The overall style is characteristic of 20th-century symphonic music.

Example No. 2

Guo Zurong. Piano Concerto No. 2.
First movement, mm. 232–241



The image displays a musical score for Example No. 2, which is the first movement of Guo Zurong's Piano Concerto No. 2, measures 232–241. The score is presented in two systems, each with five staves. The top two staves of each system are for the piano, showing complex, rapid passages. The middle two staves are for the violin, featuring long, flowing lines with many slurs. The bottom staff of each system is for the cello, providing a more rhythmic and harmonic foundation. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings. A measure number '142' is visible between the two systems.



Il. 6. Hong Zichen. *Landscape in the Chinese Style of the 17th Century*



Il. 7. Mi Youren. *Wonderful Views of Xiaoxiang*. Southern Song Dynasty

them with the paintings of old Chinese masters. Let us take as an example the scroll Mi Youren (1074–1153) from the Southern Song Dynasty *Wonderful Views of Xiaoxiang* (Il. 7), which was created “primarily using splashing and ink-laying techniques, thanks to which images are formed by the spreading and blurring of water ink. Contour lines are almost never used. Dense and transparent, dark and light shades make the landscape appear and disappear, suddenly stand out brightly, then plunge into a haze, creating a mysterious and changeable atmosphere,”⁹ which resembles the exquisite alternations of transparent and dense textures with subtle dynamic nuances in the symphonic and concert works of Chinese composers.

Conclusion

It is impossible to examine within the framework of this article the full diversity of

textural and timbre techniques that may be interpreted through analogy with the visual techniques of Guohua painting. However, even this brief comparative analysis reveals the specificity of the national “vision” of textural-timbre development, whose essence is the perception of lines, layers, condensations or rarefactions, etc., from the position of Guohua techniques, the processual perception of canvases made within the framework of the root tradition for Chinese culture. This perspective seems to be essential for understanding the method by which Chinese musicologists analyse sound colouring. And this is important, since Chinese composers address their orchestral works primarily to their own people, relying on the peculiarities of the national mentality — the totality of mental, emotional, value orientations and attitudes embedded in the cultural memory of the ethnic group.

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⁹ Source: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%BD%87%E6%B9%98%E5%A5%87%E8%A7%82%E5%9B%BE/10736178> (accessed: 11.11.2025).

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