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Contributions to *East Asian History*

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Cover photograph Sing-song girls of Hangchou (from Grace Thompson Seton, Chinese Lanterns [New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1924])
Since the mid-1980s, music professionals in China have been using the word 'crisis' to refer to the situation faced by indigenous forms of music. While other traditional arts such as poetry, painting, calligraphy and martial arts remain popular with old and young alike, traditional instrumental music and local opera forms meet with dwindling audiences and widespread apathy. The irrelevance of traditional music to people's lives in the People's Republic of China is evidenced by the fact that music has been ignored in the many wider debates about Chinese culture and identity that have taken place both in China and abroad over the past decade.

In publications devoted to music, such as *Zhongguo yinyue* (Chinese Music) and *Renmin yinyue* (People's Music), there is little direct response to the 'crisis'. Material relating to traditional music often takes the form of inspirational propaganda and deals almost exclusively with such issues as compositional creativity, technique, and performance standards. The chief preoccupation still appears to be 'progress', as it has been in the music world in China throughout this century; many articles are concerned with ways of creating new music that can be considered 'traditional'. The idea of actively preserving musical traditions for their own sake seldom appears. In all of these arguments, the social realities of the music world, which are both causes and serious effects of the problem, do not feature at all.

The lives and concerns of musicians in China, whose life's work society at large is ceasing to value, are overlooked; there are no interviews, few statistics and almost no analysis. This paper attempts to outline the consequences for Chinese musicians of the changes in Chinese music and musical institutions in the past three decades.

In this context, the film *Swan Song* (*Juexiang*绝响) can be considered a valuable document, for the insights it can provide are not readily available.

I wish to thank Paul Clark for all his help (including the suggestion of the title), Zhou Xiaoyuan for generously making his scores available to be reproduced here, Ronin Films for supplying the illustrations, and Elsa Lee and Tony Wheeler for their thoughtful comments.

1 See Jin Xiang, "Zhenxing yu fansi" [Promote and reflect], *Renmin yinyue*, 1986, no.12, pp.5–7, or Feng Guangyu, "Chuantong shi yitiao he" [Tradition is a river], *Renmin yinyue*, 1990, no.3, pp.20–2, for a typical example.

2 A prominent and very pessimistic exception is Zhou Haihong's "Weiji zhong de jueze" [A decision in the midst of crisis], *Renmin yinyue*, 1989, no.1, pp.16–20, which outlines the problems of traditional Chinese music in very dramatic terms and calls for an end to reforms and experimentation with traditional music and immediate implementation of measures to preserve it.

3 While traditional theatre faces many of the same problems, theatrical publications have not hesitated to deal with practical issues relating to theatre administration, the lives and work of actors and so on; see for example Chen Huimin, "Xiqu yanyuan zai hushu hu" [Chinese opera performers are crying out], *Zhongguo xiju*, 1989, no.7, pp.22–4.

4 The film *Swan Song* is based on a short story by Kong Jiesheng 孔捷生.
These categories are by no means easy to define; a recent convocation of the Chinese Musicians' Association, after lengthy debates about the exact meanings of 'folk', 'ethnic', and 'traditional' Chinese music and the differences between them, was unable to reach agreement (Li Minxiong 李民雄, personal conversation, August 1993).

Figure 1
Zhang Zeming, director of Swan Song (courtesy of Ronin Films)

from any other source. Made in 1987 in the Pearl River Film Studio under the direction of Zhang Zeming 张泽鸣, it addresses the recent history of musicians in China and also deals with some broader issues that affect the musical community. Although the story of the composer Ou Laoshu and his son is fictional, the film’s presentation of some of the important social and economic issues that affect musicians is entirely accurate. Reaching from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, the film touches on many aspects of the sociology of music as well as the historical evolution of Chinese society since 1949 and the role of musicians within it. Many of these issues, such as the social stratification among musicians and the authenticity of traditions, have been little discussed in China. The action of the plot takes place in Guangdong province, but the situations depicted and the themes discussed in the film are pertinent to the experiences of musicians elsewhere in China as well. Such issues as creativity and authorship, the social status of musicians, and the waning interest of the general public in Chinese traditional music remain important and relevant to the country as a whole. As a fiction film, Swan Song does not present these issues explicitly; neither does it make moral judgements or apportion blame. Without prior knowledge of the communities represented in the film, the viewer would not perhaps be aware of the wider context which it represents so eloquently. In this study I intend to discuss Swan Song in relation to the experience of Chinese musicians over the past three decades, using the action of the film as a starting and reference point.

The term 'Chinese music' encompasses a large range of different forms of music. It includes opera music, music for many different types of instrumental ensemble (using Chinese or Western instruments or combinations of both), instrumental solos, songs, story-telling genres, and more. Chinese music is often further classified as 'folk music' (minjian yinyue 民间音乐), 'ethnic music' minzu yinyue 民族音乐, or 'traditional music' chuantong yinyue 传统音乐. My intention in the present paper is not to enter into ethnomusicological debate about Chinese musical tradition or precise classification, but to consider the recent changes in the Chinese musical environment in the wider context of national modernization and reform. While no musical tradition is static, and the idea of a 'pure' tradition is obviously problematic, China's music has in recent decades undergone a total institutional transformation, not just a gradual evolution. These institutional changes have not always been in the hands of the performers themselves, but they have profoundly affected not only the music itself but also its social construction and the lives of those who play it professionally.

For the purpose of this paper, I use the term 'traditional' to refer to those conservatory-trained musicians who are professional performers of Chinese instruments. They do not represent 'Chinese music' as a whole, but are the officially designated custodians of one particular branch of it. Generalizations are not intended to include amateur instrumentalists or performers.
The paper is divided into three main sections. After a few preliminary background remarks, the essay proper begins with an analysis of the musical issues presented in *Swan Song*, which is followed by a section of musical examples; it then proceeds to a wider discussion of the lives of conservatory-trained Chinese musicians in the 1980s.

**Background**

To provide a background, the social position of practitioners of music in pre-revolutionary China should be briefly touched upon. In China’s imperial past, music had a dual status, being associated both with the intellectual élite and with low morals and scurrillousness. On one hand, music fulfilled an important ritual and ceremonial function for each succeeding dynasty as well as being a part of the recreational culture of the literati. On the other, those people who performed music professionally were of very low social class, being members either of private troupes attached as servants to the court or to a particular household, or of travelling troupes whose status was even lower. Music-making and prostitution were closely connected: performing for entertainment (be it plays, music or dance) carried the same association with loose morals as it did in European society until relatively recently.

The overthrow of dynastic rule in 1911 brought an end to the ritualistic function of music in China, but its entertainment and self-cultivation functions remained, as did suspicions of moral laxity among those who practised it as a profession. Although the social status of professional musicians remained generally low, there were a number of performers and composers who were well known and respected, such as the renowned *erhu* master Liu Tianhua 刘天华, who came from an intellectual family and was known for his erudition as well as his music. Some of these well-known musicians of the Republican period were selected to be teachers and composers in national conservatories when these were set up in the early decades of the twentieth century, and these few musicians are now revered as the fathers of ‘classical’ Chinese instrumental music. The popularity of Western music (which was introduced to China by the earliest Western missionaries but only began to gain favour with significant numbers of Chinese people this century) grew rapidly during the Republican period, partly through the agency of Chinese musicians who had studied abroad.

Since 1949, musical activity and the training of musicians have become the province of the state. The state has done its best to take over the talents of musicians and integrate them into the bureaucratic structure of New China; at the same time, it has also been concerned with raising the status of folk performers and their music as the representatives of the cultural traditions of the Chinese masses. By placing folk artists in their own forms of musical organization such as theatre troupes and educational institutions, the state
has successfully managed to co-opt folk music. State-sponsored conservatories for training professionals in the arts were established, based on European and then Soviet models, replacing the traditional system of training by apprenticeship.

The areas of specialization now offered by conservatories in China include a range of Western instruments, Chinese traditional instruments, voice (chiefly bel canto style), composition and music education. Since the conservatories are tertiary institutions, their graduates are members of China's discrete 'intellectual' class. It is well known, however, that university entrance examination scores for conservatories are lower than those required for admission to universities and that much of the training provided in conservatories is in performance technique rather than 'intellectual' study; thus (among intellectuals at least) there are certain ambiguities regarding the social position of conservatory graduates.

As for Chinese music itself, it has been steadily transformed throughout this century, as was thought to befit a modernizing nation. Traditional instruments have been redesigned and pitches standardized, and Chinese music has increasingly come to incorporate other features of Western music such as heavy use of harmony and bass tones, and groupings of instruments reminiscent of the symphony orchestra. Change and adaptation is by no means new to Chinese music but, as Kraus points out, "this twentieth century movement is different because it claims science as its guide"; it has affected every aspect of music and performance to the extent that the very concept of 'traditional music' has become unclear. In the words of Kraus, "the disarray of musical tradition is obvious ... with the addition of instruments such as the cello, and accordion ensembles billed as performing 'traditional' music." In the late 1980s and 1990s, "state patronage has been extended to protect many dying forms ... archaeologists have recovered ancient instruments and 'feudal' sounds are being reconstructed ... yet solo instrumental music, ballads and even Chinese opera have all become cultural enclaves for middle-aged citizens. Some native forms are being propped up by their use in the tourist industry, but this is unlikely to be a force for maintaining purity of artistic traditions."

1. THE FILM

The action of the film *Swan Song* begins in the early 1960s, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Ou Laoshu, one of the central characters, is an obscure composer of Cantonese instrumental music. The music he composes is described by other characters in the film as "lacking traditional flavour," "mournful" and "nondescript." The film does not explicitly state that he was condemned as a Rightist in the anti-Rightist movement in 1957, but tells the viewer that Ou Laoshu's thinking and behaviour were adjudged to
be “lagging behind the times,” so he was sent to a small county to reform
himself; by the time the action of the film begins, he has already returned to
Guangzhou.

Part One

The film opens with a performance of Cantonese music in an informal
setting. Ou Laoshu has come with his young son, Guanzai, to Duanzhou
Square, a place where young and old gather in their leisure time to drink tea,
socialize with their neighbours, play chess and mahjong, and relax. Music
evidently plays an important part in the leisure-time activities of this
community. As the film begins, a girl of nine or so is singing a Cantonese
operatic aria to the accompaniment of a Cantonese string ensemble, and a
large group has gathered to listen. When the child’s solo is finished her
mother is invited to sing also, but she declines on the grounds of being too
old. Then Ou Laoshu comes forward and offers to play a newly-composed
tune for the old blind musician who is directing the ensemble.

As he begins to play, background noise ceases and everyone listens
intently. Although the piece is warmly received by the crowd, the old blind
man is not entirely convinced by it, feeling that it lacks the authentic
Cantonese folk style. He gives his opinion and advice: “You’re an opera
composer. It lacks local flavour.” Ou Laoshu’s reply implies that
conservatism will only cause a tradition to die out. “Nothing has changed
for centuries,” he says; “a guomen, then sing a few lines. No wonder
young people don’t like it. We must turn to Cantonese
folk music.” There the scene ends.

This opening scene shows in microcosm some of
the recent important themes of Chinese musical
culture. In the early 1960s, traditional instrumental
music was a living tradition; truly popular music, it
was played in public places by amateur performers
for the public at large. While this may perhaps still be
so in the countryside, the informality of the music-
making portrayed in this scene is rather rare in urban
China nowadays, where amateur musical groups are
few and performing belongs, on the whole, in the
concert hall. The performers in the film are folk
musicians, amateurs or yiren (folk artists), that is, performers of traditional Chinese folk arts who
learned their craft by rote and imitation through many
years of apprenticeship to a master. Many folk
musicians in the past were trained to a high degree of
proficiency in more than one instrument, a situation
which is as rare in today’s more specialized music

Figure 2
The amateur performers at Duanzhou Square
courtesy of Ronin Films)
world in China as it is in the Western classical musical tradition. Swan Song accurately reflects the fact that most such folk performers were men; some of them, as in the film, were also blind.

The audience for the performance at the film’s beginning is almost entirely male and mostly middle-aged or elderly. The age-group of audiences for Chinese music and theatre nowadays is on the whole even narrower than that depicted here; in the late 1980s and early 1990s, few people under sixty would generally be seen at performances of traditional instrumental music or opera.

In contrast to the members of the amateur performing group, Ou Laoshu’s status is that of the ‘composer’, the expert in theory and form rather than (or as well as) simply performance. Although he has evident connections with folk musical culture, he uses the folk idiom for the purpose of innovation rather than reproducing the music unchanged, as is shown by the fact that the composition which he plays for the performers in the square is perceived by the old folk artist as quite different from the old style. In addition to his higher level of education and theoretical knowledge, by his attachment to a government-sponsored opera company Ou also represents the new, state-sponsored ‘intellectual’-style musician. The performers, although they are the genuine practitioners of the folk tradition, are his social inferiors.

Like any ‘intellectual’ musician who wishes to compose convincingly within a folk tradition, Ou Laoshu both borrows from the authentic popular folk tradition to which he does not quite belong and relies on it for validation. We see him in this scene bringing his compositions to the real ‘folk’, that is, to the ordinary non-professional musicians for whom music-making is a valued leisure-time activity and who represent the popular music tradition, for their approval. Despite the differences in both their social status and their approach to the Cantonese musical tradition, the relationship between Ou Laoshu and the folk performers appears to be one of mutual respect.
A practical illustration of the way in which the composer uses folk sources is given in an exchange between Ou Laoshu and a doufu-seller whose sales cry he wishes to transcribe for use in his music. The food-seller remarks that Ou Laoshu's music is reminiscent of He Liutang's, such familiarity on the part of the uneducated doufu-vendor with the Cantonese instrumental music tradition represented by the music of He Liutang suggests strong links between the higher tradition and genuine folk culture. In the preceding scene we saw Ou Laoshu submitting his work to musicians of the folk tradition for their approval; here, he is actually collecting a folk 'song' to incorporate into his compositions. This same process of intellectuals drawing on folk traditions and incorporating folk elements into their work is still taking place today. Modern Chinese composers of serious Western-style 'twentieth-century music' are turning to Chinese traditional music for ideas and inspiration, for something 'new'—new, that is, in the context of the Western musical tradition—that can make their music distinctive, be it melodic ideas or instrumental techniques. It is chiefly on account of this function as source material for Western-style music that traditional music attracts attention from the world of Western classical music in China today. Articles in music periodicals dealing with traditional Chinese music are often concerned with how it can be adapted into Western-style compositions or how new 'traditional' music should be written. A preoccupation with creativity is evident in the Chinese musical world; the chief function of the past in traditional music still appears to be to serve the present as a basis for new compositions, and there appears to be as yet very little interest in preserving the past for its own sake.

The woman who declines to sing also deserves a passing mention. The notion that performing is a pastime for the young and attractive is not uncommon in present-day Chinese musical circles; this will be discussed in greater detail below.

Part Two

The next scene of Swan Song takes place in a teahouse, where Ou Laoshu is dining and reminiscing with his friends. They talk of the anti-Japanese war and exchange stories of famous opera singers. The name of Ou Laoshu's wife comes up in their conversation; she is now a well-known traditional opera singer, and the two are divorced. His friends reproach him with his responsibility for the breaking up of his family. In this scene we are shown further glimpses of Ou Laoshu's character and background. Irresponsible, viceful and bad at handling money, he once associated with the stars of the operatic scene; this connection has ended with his broken marriage.

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21 As noted in n.6 above, He Liutang (1872-1934) was a real historical figure, both a pipa master and a composer of Cantonese music (Zhongguo yinyue shilue, p.383).
23 By way of exception, almost the whole of the article by Zhou Hailong cited above is an impassioned plea for an end to experimentation and reform in Chinese music and the adoption of a more preservationist approach. Zhou states that these reforms have adversely affected the style and content of Chinese music without creating forms that enjoy public support.
In the next scene, an official in Ou Laoshu's opera troupe informs him that the publisher to whom he sent his music has rejected it. He adds his own criticism of Ou's music: "You can't compose that mournful, nondescript music any more ... your ideology is stuck in the old society." (This connection between a composer's ideology and the quality of the music he or she produces will be discussed in more detail below.) He goes on to tell Ou Laoshu that it is not enough just to rewrite his music, but that he must change his world view as well. He criticizes Ou Laoshu for his nostalgia for the dissolute lifestyle of the 'old society', reminding him of the anti-Rightist movement of 1957, the lessons of which he has failed to learn. The official then instructs the composer to set to music a revolutionary poem to be sung in the countryside.

The two scenes outlined above serve to tell the viewer more about both Ou Laoshu's character and the social category to which he belongs. The film never idealizes him or plays for sympathy; he is shown to be constantly nostalgic for the musical and social world of pre-1949 times, foolish, impractical, rather pretentious, and an inconsistent father who neglects his son to drink with his old friends in the tea-house, spending all of his money on them so that there is none left with which to buy food for the boy. This portrayal was, in the film-maker Zhang Zeming's own words, a deliberate departure from the usual over-heroic depictions of musicians in Chinese fiction.²⁴

In his dealings with his work unit, Ou Laoshu likewise appears out of step with contemporary political realities. The opera company does not value the kind of music he composes, but directs him to produce such music as the political situation dictates; this scene accurately illustrates the control exercised by the state over musical culture in the Maoist era. Having placed Ou Laoshu outside the folk tradition in the preceding scene, the film now demonstrates that he does not fit comfortably into his role in the new forms of musical organization either.

**Part Three**

The impact of politics on musical culture is alluded to again in subsequent scenes where we see Guanzai, Ou Laoshu's son, practising the yangqin.²⁵ He asks A Xiang, the old blind folk musician, to teach him "The Monk Seeks a Wife," only to be told that this piece is currently considered "obscene" and is therefore forbidden. After this exchange, Guanzai's father returns and prepares to teach him one of He Liutang's compositions. Guanzai would rather study the music of He Dasha, saying that he is the greatest of the Cantonese composers.²⁶ Ou Laoshu tells tall stories of the close relationship between himself and He Liutang ("We were blood brothers") and brags of having paid He's debts for him; his son, however, knows this

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²⁴ See Zhang Zeming, "Di yi bu de changshi—juexiang yishu zongjie" [The first attempt: an artistic appraisal of Swan Song], Dianying yishu cankao ziliao, no.6 (22 April 1986), p.4 (a restricted circulation publication).

²⁵ 杨琴, a hammered dulcimer.

²⁶ He Dasha's name is not given an entry in either Zhongguo yinyue cidian [Dictionary of Chinese music] (Beijing: Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe, 1984) or Zhongguo yinyue shi: he is briefly mentioned by Zhou Haihong, however, in connection with Yan Laolie and other figures in Cantonese instrumental music ("Weiji zhong de jueze," p.20) and by association with He Liutang (Zhongguo yinyue cidian, p.149).
to be untrue. Ou reprimands Guanzai for playing with his qinzheng,27 telling him that it is extremely valuable, having been made by a master in 1911, and that he went through considerable hardship to obtain it. After an argument about Ou Laoshu’s financial irresponsibility, Ou goes to borrow money for food and Guanzai runs away. First the boy looks in on a girls’ choir rehearsal, then he goes to the theatre to see an opera performance. His mother, Ou Laoshu’s former wife, is performing. After the show, he lingers to watch unobserved as his mother and half-sister leave the theatre and board the bus to return home. They are well-dressed, glamorous, obviously prosperous, and affectionate. Saddened, he runs off.

A Xiang’s use of the word ‘obscene’ to describe a piece of yangqin music reflects an issue that has been important in Chinese music since 1949, and in particular during the Cultural Revolution, namely, the identification of musical content with programmatic titles. Most Chinese music is programmatic; some titles evoke the beauties of nature and the composer’s response to them (such as Three Variations on Plum Blossom28 or Spring Dawn on the Snowy Mountain29). Others (often taken from works of literature) refer to China’s historic and legendary past (such as Autumn Moon in the Han Palace30 or Hegemon King Takes Off his Armour31). In a society where art has so often been employed for overtly political ends, both types of title have been regarded by political leaders as at best questionable and at worst downright dangerous. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, titles referring to nature or to inconvenient episodes from the ‘feudal’ past were suppressed in favour of newly-created works such as Delivering Grain to the State and Fighting the Typhoon.32

One interesting illustration of the importance of a correct programme is the contrasting treatment which has been given to two very similar pipa solo works which are both supposed to represent the same battle. Hegemon King Takes Off His Armour was suppressed in the Cultural Revolution for supposedly expressing Confucianist sympathies towards the defeated aristocrat Xiang Yu, while Ambush on All Sides was vaunted as depicting the victory of the peasant leader Liu Bang over Confucianism and feudalism.33 The assumption that if the programme is unacceptable then the music must also by definition be bad also worked in reverse: a well-known traditional tune could become acceptable with the addition of a new revolutionary programmatic title. The Water in the River34 (“which conveys the sorrows of the labouring masses before liberation and the people’s hatred and revolt against the iniquitous old society”) and Liu yang River35 (“which with its exquisite melody expresses our revolutionary people’s love and admiration for Chairman Mao”) are good examples of this.

Another reason for the rejection of certain compositions during various periods in recent Chinese history was the idea that if the life-style of the musician is questionable, then his or her music will be questionable as well.36
This clique of Cantonese composers with whom the fictional Ou Laoshu claims association was a real group. Early this century, He Lutang taught Cantonese music and Cantonese opera at the Zhongsheng Benevolent Society in Hong Kong; He Dasha, Lu Wencheng (also a prominent performer and composer of Cantonese music and inventor of the gaohu, a characteristic Cantonese instrument) and Yin Zizhong were among his students and associates (Zhongguo yinyue cidian, p.149). I have been able to find very little information about this group; although they appear filtered through the memory of Swan Song's Ou Laoshu as a band of self-indulgent aesthetes, the reality may have been quite otherwise.

The fact that traditional musical culture was still generally relevant to children in the early 1960s is suggested by scenes where Guanzai and his friends are shown playing games about operatic heroes, imitating the percussion rhythms and acrobatic and combat movements of traditional opera.

This survey was carried out by myself in Chengdu, Sichuan.

Although in the film no such explicit connection is made in the case of Ou Laoshu (apart from, in passing, by the official in his work unit) there are certainly sufficient grounds upon which to do so. References to his weakness and lack of responsibility as a family man recur throughout the film. He expresses constant nostalgia for the musical culture and effete lifestyle of his dissolve younger days, demonstrated by his constant references to the circle of great composers to which he peripherally belonged and his world of teahouse parties, opium-smoking and debts. The qinzheng serves as a symbol of that vanished world. Ou Laoshu's own conduct reflects his preoccupation with the idea of 'eccentric genius' that he speaks of in connection with He Dasha. His behaviour when he feels inspired by his Muse is excessive to the point of the self-consciously bizarre in several instances. He pesters the doufu-seller for his sales cry; he peers in through a window to watch and listen to a young woman singing to a baby (excusing himself with the words "Don't misunderstand; I'm a composer"); and he is so distracted by a tune that comes into his mind that he forgets to buy food.

Ou Laoshu's son Guanzai has apparently inherited his father's musical talent. He listens with obvious pleasure to his father's music, to the girls' choir and to the opera, and he already has firm ideas about the respective merits of the great Cantonese composers. Unlike many children, Guanzai appears to practise quite ungrudgingly and with enjoyment.

Considering the level of proficiency he has already attained, the fictional Guanzai has evidently begun his musical studies rather early according to the standards of the time. Among the twelve respondents to a small informal survey carried out in 1989 among professional musicians who were roughly contemporaneous with the fictional Guanzai, only two began studying music as young as seven years of age; both of these had parents who were musicians. The others started at nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen and even fourteen years old—almost impossibly late by Western standards for someone intending to practise music as a career. The same survey suggests that, by the 1980s, musicians in China were not necessarily willing to encourage their only children to take up traditional music as a profession. Swan Song's Ou Laoshu evidently has no such hesitations.

Despite Guanzai's aptitude and enthusiasm for music (including that composed by his father), he has little sympathy with Ou Laoshu's boasting about the musical giants of his youth, his irresponsibility in practical matters and his foolishly eccentric musical behaviour. The poverty and marginal social status of Ou Laoshu and his son are brought sharply into focus by contrast with the stable family life, wealth and social respectability of Guanzai's mother and daughter who are seen leaving the theatre.
Part Four

In the following scene, the Cultural Revolution has begun, and we see Guanzai listening behind a wall as his father is accused of sex- and opium-related crimes. Curiously, no mention is made of music among his misdeeds. In the context of what is known about the preoccupations of the Cultural Revolution, one might expect that Ou Laoshu would be reproved for his attachment to 'decadent' music and for spending his time playing the instruments of the old feudal society in addition to his other crimes.

The next scene finds Ou Laoshu in bed, nursing injuries which he presumably received during his interrogation. He is worried about his musical scores; afraid that the Red Guards will come and destroy them, he asks Guanzai to hide them away in the attic. The attic hiding place is obviously an extremely safe one, since we later learn that Ou Laoshu's qinzben and opium pipe survive the Cultural Revolution intact there alongside the scores despite almost certain Red Guard raids.

Like so many other young people in the Cultural Revolution, Guanzai goes off to 'establish revolutionary ties' (chuanlian 串联) with other young rebels throughout the country. "What about your father?" asks his friend. "Let him reform himself," is Guanzai's reply.

None of the period of the Cultural Revolution proper (and the time during which Guanzai is away) is shown in the film. Guanzai spends this time in hard work and poverty on a state farm on Hainan Island; several years have obviously passed before his return, since he leaves as a child and comes back in his late teens or early twenties. The only reference made to the music world during the time of the Cultural Revolution is the fact that, when Guanzai returns, playing of the qinzben is forbidden. The whole musical tradition which Ou Laoshu represents has been suppressed.

Even though during the Cultural Revolution years solo instrumental music was largely discouraged or forbidden, and musical activity was channelled into performances of the revolutionary model operas and mass choral singing, an ability to play a musical instrument could still be a very useful skill indeed. In the countryside, where many urban young people were sent for re-education, the 'work points' that determined how much food each worker was given each month were assigned on the basis of his or her work in the fields. However, work points could also be given for participation in performances of the revolutionary model operas, and thus people skilled in music could escape farm labour. The orchestration of these operas called for a relatively large number and variety of instruments, both Chinese and Western, and "thousands of young Chinese who had studied ... instruments used their bourgeois skills to join existing song-and-dance troupes, while the establishment of new ensembles created a heavy demand for capable singers and instrumentalists." Kraus outlines the story of one
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young violinist who, like Swan Song’s Guanzai, was sent to Hainan in 1968. By playing in a propaganda team he was able to escape manual labour altogether. Conditions were good for ‘cultural workers’; according to Kraus, “the musicians ate better food than was available to most Chinese, with extra meat to put strength into their performances. They also had the chance to travel; the ensemble served not only all of Hainan, but also gave performances in mainland Guangdong and also made trips to Hunan and Guangxi.”

Realizing the advantages that musical skills could bring, some urban parents arranged for their children to begin music studies accordingly; several respondents to the 1989 survey noted that this was a common motive for commencing study of a musical instrument during this time.

It is well known that classical Western music was banned early in the Cultural Revolution; nonetheless, “the Westernization of music gained new momentum as instruments were updated and melodies harmonized—and choral singing, of which China has no indigenous tradition, was encouraged as the principal form of musical expression.” Kraus notes the irony in the fact that China “[adopted] Europe’s musical technique while rejecting its musical repertory” and “propagated a music that was, in fact, highly Western in its technique, harmonic structure, instrumentation and emphasis on choral singing.”

Part Five

The synthesized music theme and a shot of the empty lane outside Ou Laoshu’s house indicate the passing of time, to the late 1970s or early 1980s. Guanzai, now an adult, returns home embittered by his experiences in the Cultural Revolution and full of reproaches for his father. Worn and dirty, his face marked by scars, he arrives to find his father engaged in manual work, making boxes. Guanzai berates his father for his old profligate and lazy habits: “If you hadn’t gone to the teahouse so much before, we’d have all we want now.”

In his years away from home, Guanzai has learned about business dealing. One day he asks for his father’s old qinzheng. As the instrument is brought out, Ou Laoshu is fearful of the repercussions if its music should be heard by the Revolutionary Committee—but Guanzai’s interest in the instrument has nothing to do with music. Instead, he wishes to sell it on the black market. When Ou Laoshu finds out that Guanzai has sold the qinzheng, he is aghast. “Do you know how much it’s worth?” he cries, “I sold my food to buy it.”

This scene is an apt illustration of the increasing irrelevance of traditional musical culture in the lives of the young. The priorities of Ou Laoshu and his son are precisely inverted: once Ou Laoshu sold his food to buy the qinzheng, and now the pragmatic Guanzai sells the instrument to secure a better material life.

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44 Ibid., p.155.
45 Ibid., p.100.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p.128.
Guanzai’s planned use of the money is an attempt to leave China for Hong Kong with a friend. Ou Laoshu sells another relic of his former decadent life, his opium pipe, to make his son a special farewell meal before he leaves. As he makes his culinary specialty ‘taiye chicken’ 太爷鸡, he cannot keep from his usual pretentious name-dropping: “This was Ma Shizeng’s favorite food.” He writes to a friend in Hong Kong to entrust the care of his son to him. On the appointed morning of Guanzai’s departure, however, Guanzai’s friend leaves without him, taking all of their shared funds, and Guanzai is forced to return home.

Soon afterward, Ou Laoshu is told by officials of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee that one of his old friends, now a company manager in Hong Kong, has come to Guangzhou for a trade fair and would like to make contact with him. The officials approve of this idea and direct him to go, in order to demonstrate the success of the Cultural Revolution in allowing an old decadent musician to be rehabilitated and ‘become independent’. Ou Laoshu takes all of his old scores (which, along with the qinzhen and the opium pipe, have survived the Cultural Revolution) and goes to meet his friend at a restaurant, accompanied by a sizeable group of supervisory officials.

In his friend’s hotel room after the meal he shows him his scores and asks for his opinion. The Hong Kong friend is approving, and offers to help Ou Laoshu to get the music recorded in Hong Kong. At first Ou declines, saying that he hopes to have it published and performed in China, but his friend is able to persuade him with the words, “But why are you so foolish? Look at the situation. Such good music, what a shame. Leave them for me to read properly. I’ll return them.” Ou Laoshu is full of gratitude.

His happiness is short-lived, however. Listening to a Hong Kong station on the short-wave radio given to him by his Hong Kong friend, he hears the announcer introduce “some recently discovered pieces by He Dasha which have become extremely popular.” He listens aghast as his own composition, Night Moon of Pingsha 平沙晚月, is played and attributed to He Dasha. As the stolen music plays, Guanzai says to his father, “Let them be He Dasha’s—at least they’re heard.” “Damn the bastard,” cries Ou Laoshu, and smashes the crockery off the table.

Obviously the treacherous ‘friend’ was more eager to make money for himself than to help Ou Laoshu. In passing the compositions off as He Dasha’s, he greatly increased their chance of publication and with it the financial returns that could be expected from them. The fact that the music would not be profitable without a famous name attached demonstrates the dominance of the pre-1949 composers over the musical world, even decades after their deaths.

In portraying the Hong Kong Chinese music world as no less inhospitable to the composer than the People’s Republic, Swan Song underlines the hopelessness of Ou Laoshu’s longing for recognition. Even though there is

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48 Ma Shizeng 马师曾 (1900–64) was a well-known and innovative performer of Cantonese opera (Zhongguoyingyue cidian, p. 258).
In Kong Jiesheng's original story, Guanzai is not in fact the son of Ou Laoshu, but rather the son of his opera-singer mother and another man. Zhang Zeming claims that this situation gives a better indication of the lifestyle of folk artists than does his own version. In his quest to add depth to the relationship between Ou and Guanzai which is central to the film, however, he chose to present them as blood relatives. He adds that his change to the plot will also deflect any 'disgust' which the audience might feel for the mother in the original version (Zhang Zeming, "Di yi bu de changshi," p.6).

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The synthesized music theme returns as time passes. Guanzai's residency is finally transferred back to Guangzhou from Hainan, and he can therefore look for a permanent job. When someone suggests that he should return to playing yangqin, he rejects the idea with the words “I don't want to be like my father.”

Ou Laoshu becomes seriously ill and asks Guanzai to take a letter from him to his former wife (Guanzai's mother), and Guanzai visits her accordingly. The class difference between Guanzai and his mother is made clear by the luxurious apartment in which she receives him and by her rather insensitive invitation to him to join her opera company as a stagehand or electrician. In his letter, Ou Laoshu has requested her to recommend his music for performance and publication; using the last possible avenue left open to him, he tries to take advantage of his former wife's fame to publish his music before he dies. She declines to do so, saying "It's gloomy and out-of-date." She also tells Guanzai that her marriage to Ou Laoshu was based entirely on obligation and involved no affection whatsoever. He was many years her senior and a smoker of opium, and she was glad to be able to free herself of him after 1949.49 Since then she has, in fact, been extremely successful, whereas Ou Laoshu has languished in obscurity and comparative poverty, preoccupied with nostalgia for the past.

Having failed to enlist his former wife's assistance, Ou Laoshu finally admits defeat. He asks Guanzai to fetch his scores. On some he writes the name of He Dasha, and the rest he burns. He instructs his son to send the remaining scores to a publisher; “Say He Dasha wrote them and I kept them.” In this scene, one of the film's climactic points, Ou Laoshu recognizes his own unimportance and the irrelevance of his musical achievement, realizing that only if it is presented as a relic of the past and the work of a known composer can his music gain any legitimacy. Thus for a second time the very society of composers around whom Ou Laoshu has created his world of nostalgic fantasy engulfs and negates his own achievements. For a second time also the film illustrates the ossification of the musical establishment around the few select great figures from the 1930s to the extent that no composer since then has been of any consequence. Having finally given up his quest for recognition, Ou Laoshu dies.

Part Six

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Part Seven

With the money from the publication of the scores, Guanzai opens a shop to sell 'taiye chicken'. He rejects an offer from his father's old work unit of a job as a carpenter with the prospect of progressing to a music-related job in the future. This is quite consistent with the real-life situation; for young ambitious people, Chinese music has not been able to compete as a career option in the commercialized environment of China in the 1980s. Guanzai's choice of a career in the socially marginal world of private business perhaps reflects in part his disillusionment with the musical establishment of which his father was a peripheral and uncomfortable member, as well as his desire to make money. The adult Guanzai's attitude typifies that of dislocated urban youth in the 1980s—disillusioned, cynical and aggressive.

Throughout the film, traditional music has gradually declined in importance, as it has in the PRC during the period in which the film is set. It is consistent with this progression that Guanzai, despite his early talent, has no wish to take up the yangqin again. His own musical tastes reflect the musical culture of young people in the 1980s, with his preference for pop music, both Western and Cantonese. Significantly, however, although during his adult life he evinced no interest whatsoever in his father's music, he now plays Ou Laoshu's compositions on his guitar.50

This final phase of the film reintroduces Yunzhi, the daughter of Guanzai's opera-singer mother (and thus Guanzai's half-sister), now a conservatory piano student who is soon to graduate. She begins to frequent Guanzai's shop. Their interactions are awkward, highlighting the class difference between them; like her mother before her, the half-sister makes a patronizing offer of help, suggesting that she could ask their mother to buy him a motor-cycle. She tells him that she is looking for Cantonese source material for her final graduating composition, but has so far been unable to find anything suitable. Although initially suspicious of her motives, Guanzai offers to "unearth some old relics of 'He Dasha'" for her and takes her to the back room, the walls of which are papered with Ou Laoshu's old manuscripts. He then escorts her to Duanzhou Square, where the old amateur musicians who are the real custodians of Ou Laoshu's music play for her. On her departure, she promises Guanzai that she will spread the truth about the music known as He Dasha's: "I'll let everyone know that those He Dasha pieces are really your father's."

The young pianist adapts Ou Laoshu's theme into a piano composition for use in her graduating performance. Like Ou Laoshu's Hong Kong 'friend', however, she is unable to resist the temptation to use his music for personal

50 In Kong Jiesheng's story, Guanzai is seen playing not the guitar but the yangqin in his chicken shop. Zhang Zeming included this scene in the script; when he came to make the film, however, he caught sight of a young man playing a guitar in the doorway of a goose shop. Inspired by this image, he altered his script, feeling that to show Guanzai playing a guitar would more aptly demonstrate what the young man has chosen to inherit from his father (the tune) and what he has rejected (the traditional instrument). Zhang sees this situation as "genuine and historically inevitable." Guanzai's choice of the guitar, the quintessential instrument of modern youth culture, "is in accordance with his character and social status," and gives his commemoration of his father (by playing his music) "a derisive flavour" (Zhang Zeming, 'Di yi bu de changshì', p.6).
gain. When journalists prompt her with the words: “I heard you found some lost music,” she does not answer. Her friend reminds her, “Didn’t you say you’d tell the world that was Ou Laoshu’s music?”; “It’s difficult,” she replies. Passing the music off as her own, she wins a prize for composition; in addition, the piece is chosen to be performed on a musical tour of America.

Her graduating concert is a much publicized event; tickets are sought-after and the concert is shown live on television. Since it is most unlikely that such an event would be televised in real life, this perhaps serves as an indication that she is an exceptional student whose debut is expected to be an unusually momentous event. Having refused tickets for the concert, Guanzai is half-heartedly watching it on television. It is not immediately obvious that what she is playing is none other than her own adaptation of Ou Laoshu’s composition *The Wild Goose Flies in the Cloudy Sky*, but as soon as Guanzai realizes what has happened he is enraged. Earlier, when the ‘friend’ from Hong Kong published Ou Laoshu’s music under He Dasha’s name, Guanzai appeared completely indifferent. This time, however, he is unable to contain his frustration; he takes a piece of wood and begins to plane it with ever-increasing force. His fierce manual work in contrast with her delicate evening dress and high-brow concert performance underscores the differences of class and culture between the two.

Guanzai switches off the television. His father’s music comes to his mind as played by the Duanzhou Square ensemble, and a sesame-porridge vendor passes in the lane outside; his sales cry links back to Ou Laoshu’s use of such material in his own work and reminds the viewer of the cycle of compositional borrowing that has run through the film. Thus the film ends.

This final section of the film exemplifies the status of Western classical music as the music of the intelligentsia in China.51 After the Cultural Revolution, when the intelligentsia regained their former position, Western classical music lost its bourgeois stigma. As the self-conscious Chinese intellectual class began to accept the official policies of modernization and openness to the West into their own culture, Western art music (particularly that of the Romantic period52), with its overt emotional expression as well as its ‘scientific’ theoretical base and comparatively sophisticated tonal and harmonic structure came back to the favoured position it had already held since early in the twentieth century.53

The film’s closing section also highlights the fact that although musicians trained in Western music may be somewhat indifferent towards Chinese music, it can provide colourful source material for their own compositions.

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**Figure 6**
The young pianist, Yunzhi, transcribes Ou Laoshu’s music from a Duanzhou Square performance (courtesy of Ronin Films)

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51 See Kraus for an account of the process by which Western music acquired this favoured position in China.

52 Kraus points out that the images of personal suffering and struggle associated with the Romantic movement have had strong appeal for intellectuals in China this century (Kraus, *Pianos and politics*, p.71); in the light of the suffering that they themselves went through in the Cultural Revolution, their own identification with these ideas may be another reason for the popularity of romantic music in China. He suggests also that the fame of Xian Xinghai, a Chinese composer of the early twentieth century, may have more to do with “the romance and suffering of his early death than his music, [which is] largely unperformed” (Kraus, *Pianos and politics*, p.66).

53 The privileged position of Western music in Chinese society can be seen today in radio programming on China’s national networks. “European classical music has often had more official support than Chinese. Even though Mao denounced foreign ‘imperialist’ culture in his writings... by 1989 Western classical music comprised 15–20% of all music played on the three national networks.”
As noted above, the self-conscious use of 'Chinese flavour' in compositions is still a feature of young composers in China now, who borrow melodic shapes and timbres from traditional music and characteristic techniques from Chinese instruments.54

The closing scene of Swan Song also illustrates the importance of being 'qualified' in order to be able to act convincingly in the Chinese music world. Music from an unknown composer like Ou Laoshu is ignored, but the same music is acclaimed if it is thought to come from He Dasha (as Ou Laoshu obviously realizes when he finally submits his work for publication under He's name, knowing that under his own it will never be accepted). Likewise, when Ou Laoshu's themes have been reworked and modernized by a young musician who is the daughter of a prominent opera star, a conservatory-trained Western musician and so promising a talent that her graduating concert is televised, the music world responds with accolades. The importance of reputation and connections is a constant feature of Chinese life. In the 1989 survey, one respondent cited the lack of an established reputation and a well-known name as a hindrance to achieving ambitions; wishing to write a historical and theoretical textbook on Chinese traditional instrumental music, this person knew that there was no hope of being able to do such a thing, since a young, unknown writer was not qualified to be listened to.

Another issue highlighted in the closing scenes of Swan Song is the class difference between Guanzai, the representative of the private business world, and his half-sister, the conservatory intellectual. Class differences have not been a major topic in post-Mao films, but here they are made very clear indeed. The young pianist has all of the prestige of tertiary education as well as an obviously privileged upbringing, whereas Guanzai is in a socially marginal occupation and, contrary to the popular image of private business people, works extremely hard but has achieved only modest financial success.55

Ou Laoshu could himself be said to be a peripheral member of the élite class. He does not have tertiary education but he displays some of the trappings of an intellectual; he notates his compositions in elaborately written scores rather than relying on oral transmission, uses a rather classicalized form of Chinese in his personal correspondence, and owns an expensive and high-status 'gentleman's' musical instrument.56 By virtue of this and his government-sponsored job, he can claim marginal membership of the intellectual class—but he comes nonetheless from a dubious social background, and his personal life is distinctly questionable. Ou Laoshu does not really belong comfortably in any social category. His past life and his nostalgia for it prevent him from fitting into New China as represented by his work unit. Class differences set him apart from the local amateur musicians and his former wife. He cannot be numbered along with his old cronies, the dead musical geniuses, because he is not a recognized talent. Ou cannot
Figure 7

Yunzhi plays her prize-winning composition based on Ou Laoshu’s melodic material (courtesy of Ronin Films)

Jean-Christophe, a fictional composer created by Romain Rolland, is “... a sensitive genius in an unappreciative world” (Kraus, *Pianos and politics*, p.71) whose towering genius causes him to suffer on a heroic scale. For further discussion of the importance of Jean-Christophe in twentieth-century Chinese intellectual ideology see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The romantic generation of modern Chinese writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973). The mythology of unique genius and heroic suffering is widely accepted by Chinese intellectuals and has been influential for most of this century, enjoying particular popularity in the post-Mao period; in rejecting this model of the artist in his creation of Ou Laoshu the director challenges the prevailing notions about art and creativity. Leo Lee identifies “the civil restraint of French culture” and the “the primitive force of Germanic culture” as the principal elements that combine to create the genius of Jean-Christophe (Lee, *Romantic generation*, p.287); neither of these is a feature of either the persona or the art of Ou Laoshu.

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The unromanticized view of the composer presented by the film is paralleled by the unidealized portrayal of the young pianist. A realistic picture is given of the moral compromise of the younger generation, raising no false hope for the future. It is within Yunzhi’s power to ensure that Ou Laoshu receives the recognition he always longed for, but instead she betrays him by passing his music off as her own. Her over-dramatic adaptation and performance contrasts with the understated nature of the film as a whole. Nevertheless, she is not presented as an evil figure. Zhang Zeming describes her “mistake” as “surrendering to vanity.” He goes on to say that, in the film, we do not see her primarily as a plagiarist. She understands the principle of inheriting and developing Chinese music but in practice her transformation of Ou Laoshu’s material is “unsuitable,” reflecting an excessive concern with “Westernization and modern feeling.” In terms of musical creativity,” he concludes, “she has not embodied the original intent.” Her use of Ou Laoshu’s material, while not dissimilar to Ou’s own borrowing from outside sources, is seen by the film-maker as inappropriate; in the film, however, both individuals and their compositions are presented without comment, and Zhang Zeming’s stated intent to portray the young woman’s treatment of Ou’s themes as lacking in artistic integrity and deviating from the appropriate style is not explicitly expressed. The viewer is left to draw his or her own conclusions.
In its avoidance of value judgements about China's musical culture, the film presents no easy solutions. It neither pleads for traditional instrumental music to be saved from oblivion nor endorses the dominance of Western music. Interestingly, the incidental music chosen to convey the passing of time in the film is synthesized and neither distinctly Chinese nor Western-sounding. Since electronic music is not discussed at all in the film, this is able to provide a suitably neutral background.

2. MUSICAL MATERIAL

The central melody, composed by the fictional Ou Laoshu and entitled “The Wild Goose Flies in the Cloudy Sky,” is first heard played on the *gaohu* by Ou Laoshu himself early in the film. In the traditional manner, ornamentation is not notated in the score; the *gaohu* player adds his or her own passing notes and grace notes in the performance. The sharpened fourth degree of the scale typical of Cantonese music is likewise not notated; the score reads F-natural (bars 21–22) but what is heard is much closer to F-sharp.

Example 1 — Ou Laoshu’s melody

Examples from the score by Zhou Xiaoyuan are reproduced below with his permission.
The melody is next heard in a harmonized arrangement for a Chinese string ensemble (erhu, gaobu, guzheng, and so on) with xiao (a soft-toned vertical bamboo flute) and woodblock played by Ou's friends, the Duanzhou Square musicians. The young pianist, Yunzhi, who is searching for Cantonese music sources for her own compositions, makes notes as she listens; then we hear her first imaginings of a reworking of Ou's theme, with the melody intact as the basis of a kind of romantic ballade or fantasy for solo piano.

The climax of the film presents the pianist's finished composition for piano and orchestra, *Wild Goose Spirit*, based on Ou Laoshu's melodic material. It is lavishly scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, cymbals, xylophone, harp and strings. In contrast to Ou Laoshu's intense but unostentatious original music, much of this composition is loud, percussive and impassioned. The final composition begins in the rather unusual 5/4 time-signature in the key of E major; in the course of the composition the metre changes back to 4/4 and the music modulates to the unrelated tonality of B-flat major and then back again.

The 'Chinese' flavour of this composition is provided not only by brief quotations from Ou Laoshu's theme but also by imitations of *guzeng* techniques in both the piano and harp parts. The harp imitates the 'pressed string' (*anxian* 按弦) technique in which, after the string has been plucked, the left hand pushes it down, thus raising the pitch; a similar effect is achieved on the harp by pressing on the sound board. Glissandi in both piano and harp parts are also reminiscent of the sound of the *guzeng*.

When an eight-bar quotation of the opening phrases of “The Wild Goose Flies in the Cloudy Sky” is played by a solo flute, her 'plagiarizing' of Ou Laoshu's melody is immediately obvious. A little less obviously, fragments of Ou's melody form the whole melodic basis of *Wild Goose Spirit*. The rhythm of the first four notes of Ou's composition is altered and two more notes are
added to make a six-note motif that appears many times in the composition coupled with a new answering phrase. First stated in the piano part (Example 2), it appears many times and in various guises throughout the composition (Examples 3, 4, 5, and 6).

Example 3 — bars 20–21

Example 4 — bars 36–37

Example 5 — bars 43–44
The second fragment of “The Wild Goose Flies in the Cloudy Sky” on which \textit{Wild Goose Spirit} is based is the cadential figure in bars 13–14 and bars 22–23 of Ou Laoshu’s melody. Like the other fragment it appears first in the solo piano part (Example 7). Then it is heard in the lower strings coupled with a series of chromatic piano arpeggios, placing it firmly in a Western ‘twentieth-century serious music’ context (Example 8).

It reappears in the cello part in bars 29–30 (Example 9) and identically in bars 34–35.

\textbf{Example 9 — bars 29-30}
Transformed by the reworking (both rhythmic and melodic) of the themes, the chromatic tonalities and the orchestration, Ou’s melody is not immediately recognizable until the solo flute brings it unmistakably to the audience’s attention. Significantly, in the flute score of the first eight bars of Ou Laoshu’s melody as it is used in Yunzhi’s composition, the ornamentation is fully written out—unlike the score for Ou Laoshu’s original theme, where the ornamentation is added at will by the performer.

Guanzai turns off the televised performance of the composition before the end, and so the film audience does not hear the final appropriations of Ou Laoshu’s melody. A cadenza based on the figure in Example 2 leads to a conclusion blazing with brass and percussion, trills and glissandi, referring briefly in conclusion to the first three notes of the opening theme (Example 10 – over page).

3. THE PRESENT SITUATION

The film’s portrayal of the loss of interest in China’s traditional music accurately reflects the situation of the 1980s. In 1989, 952 urban residents responded to a survey about their musical preferences organized by a conservatory student named Yang Xiaoxun 杨晓勋. The institutions selected for participation were two middle schools, four universities, two large department stores, five factories, seven sub-departments of the Central Organizational Department, one medical research institution, one social science research institution, two hospitals, two departments of the National Physical Training Committee, four professional music and dance companies, and two conservatories of music. Ages ranged from fourteen to sixty, with an average of twenty-six.62

Respondents were asked to indicate their first, second and third choices from a list of eight types of music, with very clear results: music from the West (especially pop and dance music) were by far the most popular choices. Chinese traditional opera was in sixth place, and Chinese instrumental music in seventh.

This lack of public interest in traditional music is clearly observable in audience attendance at various kinds of concerts. At the Sichuan conservatory, there was a striking difference in attendance at concerts featuring Western classical music and Chinese instrumental music in the years between 1985 and 1989. A piano concerto performance or a violin recital would fill the hall in 1985; such concerts, although they usually included at least one work by a Chinese composer, were chiefly devoted to the Western romantic repertoire, and were enthusiastically received. Performances of traditional Chinese instrumental music, on the other hand, were very poorly attended although, ironically, the standard of performance was usually considerably higher than in concerts of Western music. By 1989, however, even the regular concerts of Western classical

62 Yang Xiaoxun, “Zhongguo liuxing yinyue chuanbo yuce de lilun yu shixian· [The theory and practice of forecasting the dissemination of Chinese popular music], Zhongguoyinyueshu, 1990, no.4, pp.96–112; also quoted in Charles Hamm, “Music and radio in the People’s Republic of China,” Journal of the Society for Asian Music, vol.22, no.22 (Spring/Summer 1991): 31. The more educated strata of society are obviously over-represented (44% of the sample were university students or graduates); one might have expected that, like their peers in the West, these representatives of the Chinese middle class would support an indigenous, classical, ‘authentic’ style of music, but plainly they do not. Likewise, the sample includes a grossly disproportionate number of people under thirty-five years of age (89%), the age-group most likely to favour pop music; it is difficult to predict whether or not this young audience will become any more interested in Chinese ‘traditional’ music as they become older. In addition to general musical preferences, Yang’s survey covered issues such as whether or not respondents could read music, whether or not they could play a musical instrument, what factors influenced their choice of cassette tapes (performer, price, composer and lyricist, etc.), and what kinds of popular music they liked best. Owing to Yang’s unsatisfactory sampling methods and unreliable computation of data, his findings cannot be taken as representative of the Chinese population as a whole; even so, the trends he attempts to chart in his survey match the situation as I have observed it.
Example 10 — bars 62–66
music had been discontinued in favour of the ever more crowd-pleasing pop music.

Although Western pop music has some following in China and is briefly represented in *Swan Song* by a snatch of “Careless Whispers” by George Michael of the English pop duo “Wham,” who toured China in the mid-1980s, pop music of Chinese origin, either from China itself or from other parts of the Chinese-speaking world, has a much larger audience.43 Most of China’s home-grown pop music is modelled on the pop music of Hong Kong and Taiwan.44 This music fits neatly into Charles Hamm’s category of ‘Pacific pop’ (so-called because of its popularity in Japan, North Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia as well as Taiwan, Hong Kong and now China), being characterized by “moderate tempi, texts concerned with romantic love, string-dominated backgrounds ... a singing style reminiscent of Olivia Newton-John and Barry Manilow, and the frequent use of rhythmic patterns derived from disco music of the 1970s.”65

Another form of pop music which became extremely popular in China in the late 1980s was supposedly adapted from the folksong style of the north-west. Known as ‘the north-west wind’ (xibei feng 西北风), this phenomenon generated considerable comment in music publications as well as sales of enormous numbers of cassettes. The songs are loosely based on Chinese-sounding melodies, orchestrated with at least one traditional Chinese instrument as well as the usual instruments of a Western-style pop group, and matched with lyrics in praise of China’s landscape or Chinese peasant life. This type of music does not appear in *Swan Song*, as it was first catapulted into the national consciousness by the film *Red Sorghum* (Hong gao liang 红高粱) in 1988, a year after *Swan Song* appeared. Since that time it has constituted a significant part of popular culture and indeed of national identity in China. This desire for ‘pop music with Chinese characteristics’ is analogous to the wish of Western-style classical composers in China to incorporate Chinese elements into their own music, just as the pianist in the film bases her Western-style romantic piano composition on Cantonese musical sources. From the late 1980s, indigenous rock music (yaogun yinyue 摇滚音乐) has also emerged on the mainland and, although it very much follows the styles of American stadium rock and pop-metal, practitioners such as Cui Jian 崔健 have often asserted the distinctive Chineseness of their music.

Along with changes in musical preferences, there has also been a change in people’s listening experiences as live performances have gradually given way to recorded music—perhaps a natural result of improved living standards and of the increasing availability and affordability of radios and tape recorders, and, more recently, compact discs, karaoke machines and laser discs. This change is charted in the film, which begins with music being performed in an informal indigenous setting in the community and ends with a televised performance in a Western-style concert hall. In Yang Xiaoxun’s survey, respondents were asked to indicate where they heard their preferred music. Almost 60% of respondents replied “tape or phonograph,” 15.7% 63 Yang Xiaoxun’s survey shows a relatively small margin of popularity for Hong Kong and Taiwan (Gang-Tai 演台) pop music; I suspect that these statistics may have changed dramatically with the increased exposure of Hong Kong and Taiwan singers on the mainland in the time since the survey was conducted. Respondents were asked to indicate all of the kinds of music which they liked from the following list: Hong Kong/ Taiwan pop songs, mainland pop songs, Taiwan student songs, foreign pop songs, foreign instrumental, mainland songs from the 1930s, and folk songs or traditional opera. 685 respondents said they liked pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan; 667 liked mainland pop music; 599 liked Taiwan student songs; 592 liked foreign pop music; 516 liked foreign instrumental; 411 liked the Chinese songs of the 1930s and 366 liked folk songs and traditional opera. Matching these preferences with respondents’ occupations, Yang found that Gang-Tai music was most popular among secondary and university students; mainland pop music was most popular among private businesspeople and ‘workers’, and foreign pop music was most popular with people who worked in the arts (Yang Xiaoxun, *Dissemination*, p.110). There is ample evidence of the enormous popularity of pop stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan among young people in China in the early 1990s; one recent article discusses the popularity of various Hong Kong singers and the intense emotional involvement of their young fans who feel that, unlike their mainland counterparts, Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers express genuine, sincere feeling as they sing, striking a chord with their own emotions (the mainland counter-example being Lin Yilian 林忆莲, singer of the 1986–87 patriotic hit song “Shiwu de yueliang” 五的月亮 [The light of the full moon], who they say lacks feeling in her performance). The author also notes his or her surprise at hearing young people in various parts of China singing along with their heroes in Cantonese (Wang Jue, “Chongbai Gang-Tai mingxing de fashaoyou” [Adoring fans of Hong Kong and Taiwan stars], *Dongxiang* 90 (Feb. 1993): 24–5.

64 This music is sometimes termed ‘Cantopop’ for its origins in Hong Kong; the term is not entirely accurate as the influence of Taiwan pop music has been equally strong.

65 Hamm, “Music and radio,” p.17. Pacific pop’s inroads into China began in the /over
late 1970s with pirated cassettes of the Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng (邓丽君); by the early 1980s China was producing its own versions.

66 Yang Xiaoxun, Dissemination, p.104.
68 Ibid.
69 Chen Yongzhi, “Zhongguo dalu yinyuejie de kunjing” [The difficult situation of music in mainland China], Mingbao, 1983, no.12, p.46.
70 See Zhou Haihong for further discussion of this point.
71 The same kind of homogenizing process has taken place with the cultural products of China’s minorities. Zhou Haihong notes that minority music has become sinicized and then, along with Han Chinese music, westernized; thus it has lost its individual identity. “A nation’s traditional culture is valuable in world terms according to its degree of difference from others. The more different it is, the more valuable it is; but now we are mixing up Chinese and Western ... the degree of difference between Chinese and Western music is becoming smaller, and our special characteristics are decreasing. This kind of art cannot have an independent position in world culture. When Chinese performers go abroad to perform, they alter the pure tradition and create music that will be well received abroad—so Miao, Mongolian and Dai music is all much the same. Our minority music has become sinicized, and then westernized in turn; it has lost its special characteristics and become monotonous. Therefore it has no standing in the world; only an unadulterated tradition can represent the spirit of a nation in the world cultural arena. Purity is of vital importance.” (Zhou Haihong, “Weiji zhong de jueze,” p.19.) Although many of the cultural products of China’s minorities (and the performing arts in particular) have indeed been taken over by official Han agencies and ‘beautified’ to suit Han tastes, few in China have criticized this process. Minority music and dance performed in orchestrated and harmonized versions with the addition of sequined costumes and rigid smiles is generally accepted (as is Han music and dance that has undergone the same treatment) as an ‘authentic folk’ product. Holly Fairbank describes the process of transformation from simple dance to spectacular theatrical performance, replied “television or film,” 11.5% “radio”, “live performance” was noted by only 10%, and a meagre 3% replied “participation, or listening to friends.”

In its outline of the decline of traditional instrumental music from a form of popular music to an irrelevant backwater of Chinese culture, Swan Song alludes only in passing to one of the most important changes that has taken place in the history of music since 1949, namely, the development of the conservatory system and its gradual taking over of professional music-making, replacing such people as Ou Laoshu (i.e. musicians who are without tertiary education) on centre stage. The training and status of performers and the formality of musical presentations have all undergone dramatic changes in recent years. The remainder of this paper will deal with the conservatory system and some of the realities of life for musicians within it, adding some general social information to the issues raised in the film.

The most obvious result of the Chinese adoption of the Western-style conservatory system is that the teaching and performance of traditional music has been taken out of the hands of the ‘folk’ and has become the province of qualified intellectuals. In the conservatories, students spend four years studying music as well as other academic subjects, to obtain a degree or diploma. The training system of the old folk artists—by apprenticeship to one master, and by rote—has disappeared. When the conservatories were first established, some well-known folk artists were invited to teach in them. In recent decades, however, these have been replaced by people who were themselves conservatory-trained, each conservatory annually selecting some of its own best graduates to remain as teachers after graduation.

Some professional musicians working now were trained outside the conservatory system, but these are in the minority. Jin Xiang, writing in Renmin yinyue, notes that by 1986, seventy per cent of the players in the Zhongyang Minzu Yuetuan 中央民族乐团 (Central Folk Ensemble) were conservatory-trained.67 He sees this as a great advance, stating that their educational level and their levels of musical understanding and ability are much higher than that of the folk artists of the past.68 Not all would agree, however; comparing recent conservatory graduates with pre-1949 music-school graduates, Chen Yongzhi, writing in the Hong Kong magazine Mingbao in 1983, laments that musical and general educational standards have fallen dramatically. In his opinion, the graduates of today’s conservatories cannot match the knowledge of the students of the pre-1949 Shanghai Music Academy, in either Chinese or Western musical and cultural traditions.69 Whatever their levels of general education, there is one area in which today’s conservatory-trained musicians (and perhaps also those trained in the early days of the Shanghai Music Academy) may well be inferior to those who learned in the traditional manner of apprenticeship to a master. Teachers and performers of Chinese traditional instruments today speak of the difficulty of acquiring experience in and understanding of the different regional styles of Chinese music. Few students seem to be completely versed in any one individual style. Unless the student can find an opportunity to
travel to a region to study with a master of the local style, he or she is perhaps unlikely to appreciate fully the subtler characteristics of any one style or to achieve a high level of sensitivity for the nuances of stylistic variation. Once this last generation of folk artists has disappeared, many details and subtleties of the individual regional styles may be lost. To what extent musical traditions are being passed on at informal and amateur levels in the countryside I do not know; in the urban professional setting, however, regional refinements appear to be blurring in some cases.

By the same token, students today by-and-large appear to have little sense of being rooted in a particular tradition, and correspondingly little feeling of continuity with the past. The traditional music studied in conservatories can in a sense be compared with putonghua; although it is nobody's native tradition and has a relatively recent pedigree, it is replacing regional differences with a generic national musical language. Likewise, it claims to be the incarnation of ancient tradition but is in fact a product of the modern nation-state.

Another factor that can cut students of traditional music off from their cultural past is a general lack of theoretical knowledge about Chinese music. Although Conservatory students majoring in Chinese instrumental music take compulsory courses in the history and theory of Chinese music and in Chinese opera, much of their most basic training from the time they begin musical studies has been based on Western theory and practices. The sight-singing and aural training methods used at all levels are of Western origin, using the tempered scale, with a heavy emphasis on solfège; music students also study the harmony and counterpoint of Western music. Even the notation systems currently used in China are imported; the five-line stave and cipher notation have replaced indigenous methods of notation such as the gongchepu工尺谱 and the complex tablature of the guqin(which, according to Li Minxiong of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, only about a dozen people are still able to use).

Alongside theory, practical exercises for developing technique on Western instruments have also been adopted by Chinese musicians—again with limited success. For example, diatonic exercises sound neither convincingly Western nor authentically Chinese when played without sub-dominant or leading-note on instruments tuned to a pentatonic scale.

For music students to conduct original first-hand research in Chinese musical history is also problematic. Historical sources are written in the classical language, and many conservatory students are ill-equipped to study them. Chen Yongzhi draws attention to this problem, as noted above, pointing out that students in formal music schools before 1949 had strict training in classical Chinese and foreign languages (as well as in philosophy and aesthetics), and were thus able to master all kinds of new concepts first-hand from original texts. He is convinced that levels of musical and general education among musicians have fallen dramatically since 1949, leading to a lack of real artistic creativity.

Chinese music professionals have themselves told me that
Kraus claims that a clear system of social stratification also exists among musicians in Chinese conservatories according to whether they have studied Chinese or Western music, and that performers and composers of Western music tend to look down on practitioners of Chinese music. While this may well be the case, the detailed example he cites is, however, clouded by other issues of social class. (Kraus, *Pianos and politics*, pp. 125-6).

In a nation preoccupied with competing and keeping up with the West, the possibility of winning prizes in international Western music competitions and thus gaining glory for China may be one reason for this imbalance.

In at least some rural areas, practice was forbidden during daylight hours. Even if musicians were not too tired to practise at night, they could not always rely on having enough light to read scores by. Auditioning too presented a problem; travelling to and from the city where the auditions were held could take several days, during which time no work points could be earned and therefore no food allocated (personal interview, 1989).

Music apparently provides a similar avenue for success among the Korean communities of north-east China. According to Professor Byong-won Lee of the Music Department, University of Hawaii, many Korean parents encourage their children to study music as a means of leaving their communities. (Byong-Won Lee, University of Hawaii lecture, Fall semester, 1989).

Conservatories tend to stress technique above all else and that too little attention is paid to other factors, which perhaps lends weight to Chen Yongzhi’s hypothesis. In this way the conservatories could perhaps be said to be creating a class of intellectual artisans: tertiary-trained individuals whose level of technical skill is extremely high but unmatched by their level of relevant theoretical knowledge. Within the conservatory system, Chinese music carries less status than the more ‘scientific’ classical music from the West. Conservatories channel more of their resources into Western music programmes than Chinese, and the comparative quality of China’s music schools is usually evaluated in terms of their Western music programmes alone.

It is not only in the context of their musical training and theoretical knowledge that specialists in Chinese music suffer by comparison with performers of Western music. There are also more practical opportunities available for social and financial advancement with Western music. There are better money-making opportunities in China with Western music (as will be discussed further below), and Western music can also enable people to go abroad for study purposes and ultimately, should they choose to do so, to work and live permanently outside China. Choices are more limited for performers of Chinese music, whose only hope of going abroad is usually on short performance tours. All of these factors combined to make traditional music a much less attractive career option in the 1980s than it was in the immediate past, when it was often an effective means of social advancement. As mentioned above, musical skills could save urbanites from hard labour in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Likewise, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, those of the young urban people sent to the countryside who had some skill in music regarded it as their means of salvation; when the education system was restored after several years’ lapse, hundreds auditioned for a handful of places in conservatories, often in the face of considerable difficulties.

Even though Chinese music has declined as a cultural form in the 1980s and may no longer be a sought-after career path for ambitious people, it can still be a factor in educational progress and social mobility. Since conservatories do not require such high university entrance examination marks as universities do, music can be a way by which less academically gifted students can be admitted to tertiary education. The job assignment system by which tertiary graduates are placed in work units can also be an attractive incentive for a career in music in some cases. Music is one possible means by which rural families can enable their children to move to the city, find more congenial employment and live more comfortably. If they can be accepted by a conservatory, they will be able to go to the city to study. They can also continue to live there if they are assigned to an urban work unit (such as a conservatory, a song-and-dance troupe, or some other kind of entertainment group) after graduation. By the late 1980s, it was not unknown for the children of farmers on the outskirts of cities to take private music lessons. Thus the social advancement function that music fulfilled at the end of the Cultural Revolution may still operate in some cases.
In the past few years, with greater availability of teachers and instruments, larger disposable incomes in urban areas, the focusing of all aspirations onto the family's single child and the increasing competitiveness of Chinese society from kindergarten-level upwards, more and more children are studying music, and they are beginning their studies younger and younger. This does not, however, necessarily reflect an interest in music as a lifetime career, as it would have in even the recent past. Music (both Chinese and Western) in China is beginning to take on the same kind of social functions that are fulfilled by piano or ballet lessons in Western countries. Teachers of my acquaintance reported that their younger students were not necessarily destined for careers in music; rather, their parents wished them to study it for their own pleasure and personal enrichment. Amateur study of music can be of practical value as well. Early musical proficiency can increase a child's chances of being accepted by a 'key' kindergarten, which will thus increase his or her chances of attending a key primary school, and so on. (Both Chinese and Western music can, of course, fulfil this function.) In line with these changes in attitude towards the value of music, musicians interviewed in 1989 said that they hoped their children would study and appreciate music but did not wish them to practise it as a profession.

From my own knowledge of professional teachers and performers of traditional Chinese music and their students, it appears that Chinese music professionals do not generally come from intellectual class backgrounds. My observation is that members of the intellectual middle class have tended and still do tend to encourage their children to study the more prestigious Western instruments, in particular piano and violin. In the 1980s and 1990s it has been the children of cooks, drivers, restaurant proprietors and salespeople (that is, the private entrepreneurs who are currently the wealthiest class but who, as noted above, lack social prestige) who are learning to play Chinese instruments.

The appeal of traditional music as a career may now be chiefly for those without a secure position in the middle class. There are still real advantages to be gained from a conservatory education, the two main ones being financial security and social status. Despite the recent changes in the structure of Chinese urban society, belonging to an official 'work unit' is still the only way of reliably ensuring access to an apartment at low rent, cheap utilities, coupons for rationed or expensive and sought-after items, medical subsidies, financial support in illness and old age, and a host of other benefits.

As a graduate of a conservatory, a musician is assured not only of the financial support of the unit to which he or she is assigned, but also of a certain level of social prestige as part of the 'intellectual' class. In a society where 'intellectual' is a discrete and identifiable social category which is generally accorded considerable respect, this is no mean consideration. The convenience of belonging to an official unit, the dignifying function of a conservatory diploma and the connections that can be formed during four years of full-time study are of inestimable value to the musician throughout his or her career.
The fact that by 1990 there were more than 130 dance halls, tea-houses, bars and karaoke venues in the city of Wuhan indicates the extent of the prospective market for musical entertainment in private establishments. According to Sha Lai, each such establishment had at that time (on average) between six and nine musicians and singers, whose joint daily income from their performances ranged from 70 to 220 yuan. Sha Lai, “Chutan yu duanxiang” [Preliminary exploration and evaluation], *Renmin yinyue*, 1990, no.5, pp.52–5, at 52. Elsa Lee notes that in 1991 many musicians from both the Sichuan Conservatory of Music and the Sichuan Opera School were working in dance bands, earning up to 1,000 yuan per month (private correspondence, Sept. 1993).

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Until the late 1980s at least, only such people as were assured of making a large amount of money to compensate for the loss of the work unit’s benefits were prepared to abandon the unit and set up in an independent business venture. Many people who pursue private business interests still maintain their connection with their official unit at the same time. Given the present lack of public interest in traditional music, performers of it are unlikely to be confident of comfortable survival outside a work unit; although they are able to earn extra money through teaching or (in a few cases) performing for foreign audiences in hotels and suchlike, few are willing to put themselves outside the work-unit system. In 1989, when inflation and other economic worries were at the forefront of people’s minds and many people in all fields were exploring every possible avenue to supplement their incomes, many musicians took on second or even third jobs; I was aware of none, however, who had any intention of officially severing the tie between themselves and their work units.

The rewards of alternative employment can be considerable—but in this respect, as in so many others, performers of Western music have the advantage. Since at least 1988, a violinist or guitarist has been able to make several times his or her official monthly salary by performing in the restaurants and lobbies of tourist hotels or by playing with dance bands. Between 1986 and 1989, many performers of Chinese music temporarily shelved their own specialty instruments to learn to play Western instruments in order to take advantage of the dance-hall boom. As small bars and nightclubs began to challenge the dance-hall as the popular musical venue around 1990, and bands began to give way to solo appearances, it was still Western music which the public paid to hear, such as in the bar I visited in 1991 where patrons supped their orders to the accompaniment of Italian tenor arias, romantic piano numbers and saxophone solos. At the same time karaoke too became a competitor in the musical entertainment world.

The low rate of pay which the government gives to recent graduates and which motivates so many musicians to look for supplementary employment is not the only cause for dissatisfaction with the work-unit system. The extent of control which the unit exercises over musical activity can also be a source of frustration to government-employed musicians. This control is alluded to in *Swan Song* when officials in Ou Laoshu’s unit direct him to compose to their specifications. Likewise, musicians attached to a work unit may have no control over what programmes they play or when and where they perform. They may be required to play at extremely short notice if, for example, guests arrive from foreign countries and are to be entertained with Chinese music. The unit also decides which works they should play. If the unit leaders should deem a certain piece to be representative of the music of a certain instrument, then that piece may have to be played in almost every performance, leaving the frustrated player no chance to perform other works. Displaying truly remarkable professionalism, musicians in China are accustomed to performing with minimal prior warning and therefore without
preparation, a situation that most Western musicians would find extremely difficult to deal with.

In addition to the restrictions imposed upon performers by their work units, there are other limitations which constrain their careers as well. One of these is the pressure to perform as much as possible before the age of forty or so (the thirties are the peak time); once past this age, they may be gradually replaced by younger musicians. The rationale underlying this practice is the assumption that audiences like to see performers who are young and attractive, and that by the time a musician is forty people won’t want to watch him or her perform any more. This contrasts markedly with the Western classical music tradition, where many of the world’s most popular and respected performers are elderly men. While elderly musicians are greatly respected in China, most performing is done by young people. Performances of Chinese music on television feature almost without exception young and usually glamorous performers. This seems inconsistent with the well-known deference to age that has traditionally been part of Chinese thinking, but appears in fact to be connected with notions of what is thought of as an appropriate activity for older people. Dressing up in formal Western-style suits or attractive brightly-coloured evening gowns and performing on stage has been considered the prerogative of the young. The task of older musicians is to train the young to take their place. Musicians’ performing careers are therefore likely to be short, and if their work unit does not often require them to perform during their peak years, they face all the frustrations of wasted talent and lack of appreciation. However, as Chinese attitudes to ageing begin to change, as they have done in Western countries over the past few decades, this situation may well change too.

The movement to bring traditional music into the environment of the Western-style concert hall has resulted in an increasing emphasis on ‘presentation’, both aural and visual. To make it more spectacular, traditional music has been arranged for every possible combination of instruments and for ensembles of all sizes. There is an increasing reliance on devices common to Western romantic music such as dramatic dynamic and tonal contrasts, rubato, and brilliant arpeggio passages. Dramatic mannerisms are also welcomed and elaborately glamorous costumes have become mandatory.

These attempts to attract audiences by injecting glamour and drama into Chinese music may seem tantamount to an admission that the unadorned music is not in itself interesting; they may also perhaps be interpreted as a response to the realization that traditional music has not readily made the transition from the kind of informal and interactive performances of Swan Song’s Duanzhou Square to the hushed cavern of the concert auditorium. Placing traditional instrumental music in concert halls, giving the performers Western-style training and recreating the performance style of Western virtuosi reflects a concern with creating an art form that is appropriate to a modernizing nation. Zhou Haihong notes that the prevailing ethos in Chinese music since the 1920s has been transformation, advance and change
rather than simple preservation—but ‘reform’, he points out, has tended to equal ‘Westernization’. He states categorically that all of the attempts to reform and improve Chinese music have been complete failures, unpopular with audiences at home and lacking international credibility as well. Kraus echoes this view with his account of an occasion where “European musicologists shocked a delegation of Chinese musicians in 1979 by attacking them for presenting as ‘traditional’ music that had in fact been highly Westernized.”

Among these failures must be counted the fictional Ou Laoshu, who early in the film Swan Song states his commitment to change and reform in Cantonese music but whose attempts at modernization are judged “mournful and out-of-date.”

As noted above, the post-1949 reforms have also placed musicians in a new social category, with a new system of training and a new context for musical performance, all based on Western models. These changes, however, have failed to achieve the desired result. By virtue of their tertiary education, performers of Chinese traditional music are guaranteed a place in the middle class, but their manner of training, instead of leading to an elevation of and respect for traditional music, has brought it by comparison with Western music only second-class status. The musicians themselves remain at the margin of tertiary training owing to the low entrance scores required by conservatories and their emphasis on manual technical skills at the expense of intellectual study. Chinese music has failed to become the preferred music of the middle classes, and few in the middle classes choose to study it. ‘Improvements’ to the music have been unable to interest audiences, and the transplantation of traditional music to the concert hall has met with little success.

The Chinese musical community, despite its intent to modernize, has thus been unable to establish Chinese instrumental music as a vital and effective part of modern Chinese culture. Despite the constant reform and ‘improvement’ it has undergone, Chinese music has been unable to keep up with changing audience tastes.

An unforeseen by-product of this constant process of musical reform has been the creation of a kind of generic concept of Chinese music and a distorted view of its historical tradition. Most Chinese pieces have been revised and reworked many times by many different musicians over time, but are still regarded as ancient. Likewise, many works labelled guqu (ancient tune) were in fact composed within the last forty years. Many are based on tiny fragments of older melodies, but others are simply based on the subject matter of an ancient story, the name of a play, a line from a poem, or the name of a real or legendary person from the past, and may not be old at all. In the traditional music of China, there appears to be no analogous concept to the Western idea of the progression of musical history through a succession of historical periods. In addition, it is common in China for a performance of ‘traditional music’ to feature modern instruments playing music that is considered old.
In the current century of self-conscious modernization, this existing pattern of reworking older music has been compounded by the introduction of a new romantic aesthetic from the West, to the extent that the music now performed in concert halls as traditional music bears little stylistic resemblance to that played by the elderly conservators of local traditions who received their training in the late Imperial and early Republican eras. Young performers appear unanimous in their preference for the new romantic style of playing.

Zhou Haihong’s claim that the aesthetic basis of Chinese music has been undermined by Westernization and reform is an unusual point of view in the modern Chinese musical community (although common among Western observers). Chinese audiences accept yesterday’s innovations as ancient tradition because the musical world presents them as such. Thus Chinese instrumental music is deprived of the status it could have had as a remnant of the past; it is successful neither as a form of popular music nor as a piece of history with a unique aesthetic quality.

In contrast to the Chinese situation, the burgeoning interest in the West in ‘early music’ is a prominent example of how a musical form can become popular on the basis of ‘authenticity’. A similar phenomenon is most unlikely to occur in China in the near future for a number of reasons. Firstly, a nation still self-consciously preoccupied with progress and modernization is not predisposed to preserve and promote aspects of its ‘backward’ traditions (assuming that there can be agreement on what the authentically ‘traditional’ elements of the modernized and Westernized Chinese repertoire actually are). As Kraus points out, “the question of preserving a sample of China’s musical past simply does not arise, just as it did not in the mind of Berlioz in regard to French music.” In addition, Kraus notes that “there are still many peasants in China living in material conditions little different from those that gave rise to the opera and the traditional musical instruments of the Qing dynasty. While this is true, … [people] are unlikely to find musical nostalgia compatible with their quest for modernity.” Since there is no community of devoted listeners to sustain it in a free market environment (as there has been with Western ‘early music’), the maintenance of ‘authentic’ music in China would thus be impossible without extensive financial support from government agencies, which is not at present forthcoming.

In the light of all of these factors, it is unsurprising that Swann Song, in its portrayal of the waning popularity of traditional Chinese instrumental music, presents little hope for its revival. Of all the different social groups that appear in the film—the folk artists, the younger generation, the last of the old-style genius composers, the Chinese opera star, the conservatory intellectual trained in Western music, the overseas Chinese impresario and the publishers—none is shown as a potential saviour of traditional music. Zhang Zeming himself states his belief that the generation represented by Guanzai and his half-sister, after the extraordinary and complex experiences they underwent during the “ten years of chaos,” cannot be expected to save the day: “

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87 In my view this is one of the main reasons for the neglect of Chinese instrumental music by Western musicologists, who place a premium on ‘authenticity’.

88 Kraus, Pianos and politics, p.119.

89 Ibid.
expect them to carry on tradition in an ideal way or to rely on them to solve the contradictions of the previous generation is obviously at odds with the actual situation."  

90 Ou Laoshu's desperate struggle for recognition produces music that is by no means unattractive—but there is no audience for it. Despite his best attempts, neither he nor his music is able to find a comfortable niche in society. Similarly, exponents of Chinese instrumental music in the 1990s, after decades of institutional and cultural change, remain at the periphery of the intellectual class and produce music which continues to be unappreciated.

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