



National Features in the Music of the Film Called *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Analysis on the Music Creation Concept of Tan Dun

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Abstract

Music has already become an indivisible part of film. The perfect combination of music and movie frames is able to better promote the development of the plot, revealing characters' inner feeling and applying colors to frames and atmosphere. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* contains abundant ethnic elements and its unique national characters serve as an important reason for winning Oscar for Best Original Score. This article is to make an analysis and research on the music creation concept of Tan Dun through analyzing national features in the music of the film called *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Key words: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; National features; Tan Dun creation concept

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INTRODUCTION

The film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a China-made martial arts films directed by a famous director called Li An. It was released in 2001, raising the great mass fervor of Chinese martial arts films. Many excellent martial arts films in Chinese language such as *Hero* and *Ambush on All Sides* appeared competitively at that time. However, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is still the one with most Chinese cultural connotation

among films during this decade. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* got six nominations and won four prizes in 73rd Academy Awards in 2001. Best Original Score and Best Original Song are among four prizes. In the film, Tan Dun, a famous composer, makes a perfect combination of Chinese folk music elements and western music to make this film full of oriental characteristics get highly praise at home and abroad.

1. NATIONAL FEATURES IN THE MUSIC OF *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*

Seen from Tan Dun's previous created works, he often takes Chinese traditional music as the starting point and his works are full of full-bodied national characters, which is a key factor for his success in the international world. Overall music rhythm is slow and distressed in the music of the film, settling the basic feeling of the whole story, indicating the tragedy and also coordinating the tragic ending that two couples of characters in the story are forever separated. As a Chinese martial art film, national instruments used can better set the extensiveness and profoundness of Chinese martial art off and also match up "morality" mentioned by Li Mubai, the leading character in the film. The combination of music played by national instruments and fight scenes in the film is not only able to apply colors to the atmosphere and shape characters' personalities but also to promote the occurrence of the plot climax in the film.

The first fight scene appears in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the setting that Yu Jiaolong steals the sword for the first time. The fight between Yu Jiaolong and Yu Xiulian is from the roof to the ground. The music is coordinated by strains of music accompanied by drumbeats with compact rhythm. The rhythm of drumbeats changes along with the speed of characters'

fight. Relatively fast rhythm sets tense fighting atmosphere off while relatively slow drumbeat rhythm matches up the chasing scene between two female protagonists. Drumbeats with relatively strong force manifest exquisite military arts of female protagonists. The tone of drumbeats is of high resilience, expressing light-footed posture and flexible swordsmanship of two female protagonists. Drumbeats change irregularly along with the fight, ingeniously hanging together with film screen and also making audience's emotion get up and down motion following drumbeats with variable speed. Drumbeat is used for another time in the film. It occurs in desert of Xinjiang Province. Yu Jiaolong fights with Luo Xiaohu in order to get her cherished comb back. Tambourine, a national instrument in Xinjiang is applied in that scene. The drumbeat is clear, lucid and lively, full of rich national customs of Xinjiang. It deserves to be mentioned that guitar performance with modern elements is added so that primitive simplicity carries with some modern fashionable flavor to make the audience find themselves in an entirely new world.

Bamboo flute is applied in the music of *To the South* in the film. The performance of bamboo flute sounds clear and melodious with mild, indirect and touching melody. Its coordination with historic towns with white walls and grey tiles in south east China presents us a quietly elegant, unique, fresh and refined feeling. Vertical bamboo flute is applied in the music of *Through the Bamboo Forest*. The tone of vertical bamboo flute is desolate, simple and unsophisticated, adding a mysterious color to all corners of the country with unceasing disputes. On top of fresh and green bamboo forest, Graceful, learned and refined Li Mubai is standing with an elegant and steady posture, showing the appearance as a talented person beyond the noisy world, calm and unruffled. Yu Jiaolong's flexible posture shuttling back and forth the bamboo forest forms a distinct comparison to Li Mubai's graceful and steady posture. Moving and motionlessness form a sharp contrast. Along with the sound of music, a unique flavor is added to their fight. Chinese zither is the major instrument used in the music of *The Encounter*. The tone played by Chinese zither simulates the clear and melodious sound brought about by metal collision. The music of *The Silk Road* and *Night Fight* makes use of cucurbit flute whose tone is soft and gentle. The trill played by cucurbit flute seems like narrating a distant and old story, creating a quiet, simple and unsophisticated atmosphere of the audience.

The most impressive fragment in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* goes to the fight scene of Li Mubai and Yu Jiaolong in the fresh and green bamboo forest. The frame of luxuriantly green bamboo forest with the addition of two white robed persons seems extremely beautiful like a bamboo landscape painting containing classical charm regions south of the Yangtze River. Learned and refined Li Mubai just needs several movements in martial arts to defuse the attack of light and lively Yu Jiaolong. Leap

and fight shuttling back and forth green bamboos of these two characters make the frame intense with no vacancy of elegance. Vertical bamboo flute is the major used musical instrument in the music here. The music played by vertical bamboo flute is slow and elegant, possessing primitive simplicity and adding certain mysterious feeling to the frame. Violoncello and erhu are applied in the scene of Li Mubai's practicing swordsmanship and talking with Yu Xiulian in the mansion house of Beiler, a rank of the Manchu nobility below that of the Prince. The performance of violoncello sounds low and deep while vigorous. On the contrary, the tone of erhu is melancholy and sentimental. Tone interweaving of violoncello and erhu sets quietness of night off to the point and makes the profound friendship of these two persons stand out while generating misunderstanding deep gloomy mood unconsciously.

Bamboo flute is applied in the fight scene which occurs in a Cantonese restaurant after Yu Jiaolong runs away from wedding. At the moment, Yu Jiaolong is like a canary escaping from the birdcage, doing as she wishes and experiencing her long-anticipated life in all corners of the country. The coordination of Bamboo flute's clear and melodious tone and Yu Jiaolong's flexible posture expresses her inner composure. With the addition of her excellent martial arts, her free and easy characteristic is successfully shown. Drumbeat is added in the music here. The coordination of bright flute sound and strong rhythm of drum makes the fight scene extraordinarily lively to a higher degree. Thus, the audience's heart and mind are tightly seized.

At the end of the film, Yu Jiaolong jumps from the cliff of Wudang Mountain and drifts among the ink landscape. Her falling posture gradually disappears from the scene. Music mainly played by vigorous violoncello and gloomy erhu at the moment comes to sound little by little, which makes the whole melody painful, low and deep. Backbone sound of the theme music is used and melody contrapuntal at both ends is conducted embracing the backbone sound, making this melody fragment process over and over again. A plunge with relatively range is arranged at last to repeatedly emphasize a kind of sad and gloomy emotion. Background music in the title sequence and tail leader of the film is in cooperation with each other, further deepening the emotion expressed by the film.

2. VIEW ON THE MUSIC CREATION CONCEPT OF TAN DUN FROM THE BACKGROUND MUSIC IN *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*

Music in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* not only makes use of orchestral instruments but also a lot of Chinese musical instruments. Moreover, musical genre specially

owned by Chinese national minorities is mixed together with the music. Tan Dun makes a perfect combination of two kinds of musical instruments with distinct features. In the Academy Awards Ceremony, Tan Dun said, “as a composer, my dream is to make music become a cross-domain art with no national boundary. Another important music creation concept is to blend inherent music that is separated into different categories and make the music learn from others’ strong points to offset one’s weakness. Although Tan Dun was talking about the music in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* at that time, he still expresses his consistent music concept and objective that he pursues.

Films and television works develop from silent mode to voiced mode. Simply background music turns into complex and various movie and tv music. So many leaps in progress are achieved through years of development. Movie and TV music is developing with the prosperity of films and television works. Movie and TV music in China has changed from simple national music to the combination of Chinese and Western music, traditional musical forms turning into modern multimedia electronic music. Movie and TV music has exploited a brand-new space for developing. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the music is not merely in the form of traditional national music but the combination with international musical elements, which not only lets Chinese audience feel unacquainted Chinese style but also makes foreign audience get cordial feeling. Tan Dun finds a common character between Chinese and Western music and makes a perfect use of it in creating music. Thereby, Chinese and Western music is perfectly banded together.

Among film music created by Tan Dun, the music of a certain film is very typical and that film is called *Hero*, a Chinese swordplay film directed by director Yimou Zhang. The occurrence of this film has awakened the film market which is depressing in recent ten years and won an impressive box office record. Thus, it is evaluated as Top 1 among Top 10 best films in the global market in 2004 by American TIME. In addition, the film has won the best music award in 22nd Hong Kong Film Award held in 2003. In *Hero*, Tan Dun bands Chinese classical music and western music together in a perfect way once again, making the connection between Chinese and Western musical cultures more tight. In this film, Tan Dun unexpectedly employs a set of musical instrument called ancient cymbal occurred more than 4,000 years ago in China. Itzhak Perlman, regarded as the god of modern violin, and chief drum god in Ondekoza, a drumming performances group in Japan, Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra, a chorus made up of 50 basso profundos are specially invited. In addition, pop star Wang Fei holds the post of the singer of theme song. Such a powerful group makes the music in the film bound to give the audience brand-new shock and impact in auditory sense. For Tan Dun, a wizard of music, existing musical instruments are

not enough to satisfy his demand. Hence, he substitutes the string of erhu into violin and adjusts the tune with loading string and tuning method of a seven-stringed plucked instrument to simulate the tone of ancient string. Violin which goes through strings changing and tune adjusting performs a kind of desolate, rough, lonely and empty artistic conception.

The music creation in *Hero* is like fiction writing. The music in the whole film is divided into 15 sections, among which themed music appears constantly and repeatedly, and changes along with the ups and downs of film plots. In the beginning of the film, shot is aimed at a stretch of broad loessland. At the moment, Perlman plays a section of low and deep while graceful violin melody. This sound is ancient, remote and rough, manifesting distant, solemn and stirring artistic conception. There is also another violin but the expression is targeted to the nation, destiny and nature. For the background music in *Prelude*, its melody is simple but graceful with no loss of momentum. Symphony and drum are combined in the music. Simple and beautiful melody of western beautiful melody reveals the tune of a song-and-dance duet popular in the Northeast of China. Eastern drum incorporates beats of western jazz and rock music. Mighty army is coming forward in the excited movement. The music of *Populus Euphratica Forest* is made up of Perlman’s lyric and euphemistical violin, Kodo, and graceful and vacant soprano. Their combination shows a kind of romantic and peculiar effect, expressing love and hatred among lust, heartburn and national cause of Fei Xue and Ru Yue. Pathetic and touching female solo seems to narrate a romantic but sad love story. There is sound of falling leaves in the fight scene, which adds dynamic beauty to the background music. In *In the Chess Court*, we hear the blending of a seven-stringed plucked instrument, a kind of Chinese traditional instrument, and violin, the most representative instrument in the west for the first time. Such kind of tone combination not only expresses old fashion and deepness in oriental musical culture but also aestheticism and romance in western culture. With regard to the background music of *Sorrow in Desert* which occurs when Fei Xue is crying out loud in the vast desert, Tan Dun makes use of violin to perform the sound of string, an ancient musical instrument in his imagination, and fingers are used to beat a drum. Fierce fight in *Memory in Water* is a classical scene in the film history. Unlike conventional film music, exciting, the whole scene only shows quietness with merely the sound of water drop in the fierce fight. Tan Dun applies water music here. The combination of quiet scene and fierce fight seems misty and profound, which make the music become a legend in the history of film music. Ancient cymbal is used in *At Emperor’s Palace* and this set of cymbals is ancient instruments more than 4,000 years ago. Distant and old ancient bell tone with the addition of vigorous bass sets the fight scene off splendidly. Materials of Shanxi opera

in northern China is employed in *Farewell to the Hero*, in which Perlman plays melody a melody between the northeast song-and-dance duet and Shanxi opera in China, appearing very soft and gentle.

Hero gives people profound impact and this impact is not only from fantastic film screen but also from the music and sound in the film. Tan Dun's strength is shown that he makes use of Western instruments to display the musical sensation with Chinese national color to the audience and also revealed that he makes different combinations of various kinds of music style and elements, for instance, he makes a dynamic integration of the northeast song-and-dance duet, music in Inner Mongolia and desert music. Moreover, he boldly makes ingenious combination of Chinese zither and drum, national instruments, and Western violin on unexpected places. Furthermore, there is fresh collocation of dramatic soprano and Taiko drum and the union of violin performed by Perlman representing western world and drum performed by Japanese Kodo representing eastern world. However, is it better to utilize the coordination of Shanxi opera when Qin area, another name for Shanxi Province, which appears in the scene? Is the Japanese drum too heavy with excessive murderous look? Is the ending of the music in the epilogue too full? Or maybe some imagination could be left for the audience. Anyway, defects cannot belittle virtues. As a whole, the music in *Hero* is nevertheless very laudable.

The music in *Hero* gives off a riot of colors, presenting us a kind of distant and extensive auditory sense. Deep feeling is contained in the tender feeling, appearing plump and masculine. In huge contrast to the music style of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero* shows northern style, pursuing roughness, heroism, wideness and generosity. It portrays a picture of broad and domineering scene which can be described as "straight lonely smoke rises in the desert, grand long river reflects the round sun set". The film plots and musical forms both utilize the form of multilayer spatial development to narrate several different stories. However, the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* lays particular emphasis on southern lingering charm and focuses on freshness, elegance, and euphemism. Main melodies of music are relatively

pure and simple. Harmony is brief and clear. Matched instruments are morally lofty. Film plots and musical forms are both presenting mono-lines development. Although there are many differences between these two films, we can still find some things in common. That is to say, Tan Dun is developing Chinese traditional national music in a modernized way, perfectly mixing Chinese ancient music and Western string music together and pushing music creation into the development in a new form to truly achieve music without borders and popularize Chinese national music to the international stage so that more and more people get to know infinite charm of Chinese music.

CONCLUSION

In a globalizing world, mutual blending of cultures is becoming more and more frequent and intimate. Real value of film music is reflected in the national culture. Only movie and TV music created on basis of national culture can be regarded as excellent works. Music whose creation resource is national music is able to make films and television works possess historical feeling and national feeling so as to get more recognition and acceptance. Blindly pursuing internationalization while developing movie and TV music only makes music lose due charm. Only established on the traditional culture of our nation, can films and television works, movie and tv music show diverse splendor on the world arena on condition of the integration of national culture and world culture.

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