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Yellow River Piano Concerto: History, Politics and Identity

Abstract

This study examines the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* (1970) as a product of the complex interplay between history, politics and cultural identity in twentieth-century China. Focusing on the experiences of Yin Chengzong – the principal composer and original performer – it traces how the work emerged during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) under Mao Zedong’s directive to ‘make the foreign things serve China’ and ‘make the past serve the present’, transforming the Western piano into a vehicle for socialist ideology and national expression. Through its adaptation of the wartime classic *Yellow River Cantata* (1939), incorporation of revolutionary symbolism and alignment with model operas, the concerto functioned as both an artistic innovation and a political instrument. The study situates the work within shifting political contexts: from its elevation as a model of proletarian art, to its role in cultural diplomacy during China’s reopening to the West in the early 1970s, and finally to its decline following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Its temporary suppression and revival in the late 1980s and 1990s reflect changing attitudes toward Cultural Revolution-era art and the ongoing renegotiation of national identity. Ultimately, this paper argues that the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* exemplifies how music in modern China is deeply embedded in political forces, serving as a site where ideology, nationalism and artistic expression converge. Its evolving reception always mirrors broader transformations in Chinese society.

Short CV

Zhouxiang Lu is an Associate Professor within the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at National University of Ireland Maynooth. He is Member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and Adjunct Professor at University of Electronic Science and Technology of China. Zhouxiang's research interests include nationalism, national identity and cultural history, and he has published extensively in these fields.