

## The Concept of Yin and Yang in Bright Sheng's "My Other Song"

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### Abstract

This paper explores the ancient Chinese concepts involved in Bright Sheng's solo piano work "My Other Song," as well as the compositional developments between "My Other Song" and "My Song" composed 17 years apart, drawing on the composer's answer, "I feel 100% Chinese and 100% American," he gave in an interview in the *Wall Street Journal*. The Chinese culture of I Ching is over a thousand years long, and its derivative theory of yin and yang has been used by contemporary Chinese composers to innovate approach to contemporary composition. This paper provided an in-depth analysis of Sheng's work in terms of pitch structure, tonality, dynamics, motifs, and musical gestures from the perspective of ancient Chinese and Confucian thought, the main concepts of I Ching, Yin and Yang theory. The paper concludes by considering the process and methods of integrating philosophical ideas into musical compositions, as well as the effects in modern music.

**Keywords:** Bright Sheng, My Other Song, Compositional Developments, Musical Analysis, Yin and Yang Theory

### Introduction

The amalgamation of the folk genre into Western compositional style has been studied from many musical perspectives, and it includes the recomposing of folk melodies, imitation of folk instrumental timbre, movements of folk dances, and so forth. Similarly, the use of Chinese philosophical concepts in various compositions ranging from solo, ensemble, to orchestral works is also not uncommon and was particularly favored by Chinese composers. Notable examples include the philosophy of Taiji by Zhao Xiao Sheng in his "Taiji Composition System"; the Taoist I-Ching by Chen Yi, Bright Sheng, and Zhou Long (Kwan, 1997; Smith, 2012); and calligraphic elements in Zhou Long's work (Everett, 2007). Foreign composers, such as Isang Yun from Korea (Lim, 2019) and Toru Takemitsu (Kim, 2003) from Japan, were similarly attracted to Chinese philosophical theories and presented them in their works having different understanding and application of Chinese Taoist elements. This paper analyzes "My Other Song," one of the significant works of Bright Sheng, in terms of how the composer incorporates and explores the concept of Yin and Yang into the work through two

compositional methods: Fang Xiaomin's five elements and Zhao Jiping's Taiji compositional system.

The use of these Chinese philosophical concepts that involve mathematical ideas, yin-yang concepts, the "Zhong Yong" method of Confucian culture, and so forth, allows composers to explore different structures, tonality, harmony, ornamental marks, and similar in their compositions. For example, in her work "Piano Concerto" (1993), Chen Yi deliberately avoided the harmonious tone and incorporated the "Zhong Yong" (middle way) of Confucianism, thus making selective use of Chinese aesthetics, as she employed more elements of contrast and change rather than elements of balance. She argued, "Since the vertical form of the notes of the 'Ba Ban' (eight beats) theme (Chinese folk tune) is too harmonious for my ears, I combine two other tonal materials, a 'twelve-tone' theme and a 'Chen Yi' theme, to create a harmonic language that belongs only to me. I composed with the twelve-tone method and microtonality, allowing for more variation in the music" (Li, 2003).

Among the many Chinese composers who obtained their music education from the West, Bright Sheng also obtained a purely Western musical education with George Perle, Hugo Weisgall, and Carl Schachter at the Queens College, the City University of New York, and with Chou Wen-Chung, Jack Beeson, Mario Davidovsky, and Leonard Bernstein in the Columbia University. After moving to the United States, Sheng began to learn in-depth about the twelve-tone method, counterpoint method, and even more from Bartok on true connotation of cross-cultural fusion of elements from different cultures. Bright Sheng once gave an in-depth answer to a Wall Street Journal reporter who asked him how he judged his nationality as a cultural immigrant: "I feel 100% Chinese and 100% American" (Sheng et al., 2009). Sheng's answer is a perfect response based on the traditional Chinese idea of "taking the best out of the worst." After experiencing the Cultural Revolution in China as a teenager for more than 7 years, Sheng did not lose his motivation to study when assigned to Qinghai, a rural area of China. On the contrary, the folk culture of the Qinghai-Tibet generation opened new horizons for him, such as folk songs, traditional instrumental music, pentatonic melodies, and even Buddhist music, and traditional philosophical concepts also engaged him deeply. With childhood memories, he returned to the northwest of China in 2001 and still experienced the charm of traditional culture and discovered more possibilities in combining folk elements and Western compositional techniques in this not so prosperous land. After several years of reflection, his new piano solo work "My Other Songs" was composed in 2007, a reminiscence of his previous work "My Song" composed 17 years ago.

### **The Concept of Yin Yang**

The concept of yin and yang stems from ancient Chinese philosophy. The ancients believed that the universe began with nothingness (i.e., "void," "Wuji") or absolute stillness, then with something (the "whole," "ultimate being," "Taiji") or the beginning of movement, from which came the two poles (yin and yang), then the "four phenomena" and the "eight trigrams," and finally everything in the universe. Laozi, the founder of Taoism (Daoism), expressed it in the Tao Te Ching, "Tao gives birth to one (Tai Chi), one to two (Yin and Yang), two to three, three to everything (Yin and Yang intersect, and everything is born). Everything carries Yin and embraces Yang, and their mingling influence brings harmony" (Lee et al., 2008: 88). The two poles of yin and yang resemble the magnetic poles around which phenomena oscillate at either end. Everything is in a constant state of change (or progression), moving toward one

pole or the other. Yin represents all that is passive or feminine in the universe, such as the Moon, night, weak, dark, and soft, while yang represents all that is active and masculine, such as the Sun, day, strong, bright, and hard (Fang, 2012). The I Ching is often referred to as the *Book of Changes*. Kwan (1996) once provided a description of this book: "The book reflects a naturalistic understanding or interpretation of the objective world by prehistoric Chinese civilization which, upon recognition of predictable changes in nature (e.g., day–night, the seasons), came to conclude that the only 'constant' in the universe are 'changes'—specifically 'simple changes' revolving around the two polarities, the Yin and the Yang." Wilhelm (1950) once translated the I Ching into a foreign language version and wrote in the introduction:

The eight trigrams are symbols standing for changing transitional states; they are images that are constantly undergoing change. Attention centers not on things in their state of being--as is chiefly the case in the Occident--but upon their movements in change. The eight trigrams therefore are not representations of things as such but of their tendencies in movement.

In Zhou Yi, one of the three historiographies in the I Ching, Yang is represented by an uninterrupted line, and when Yang eventually becomes Yin (and vice versa), the uninterrupted Yang line (-) will break in half and become a Yin line (- -) (and vice versa).

### **Yin Yang in Musical Analysis**

The yin yang concept thus contributes greatly to many musical aspects. This opposing and complementary force gave the composer unlimited creativity, and Kim (2004, pp.184) discovered the fascination of combining yin and yang theory when he analyzed Isang Yun's work "Monolog for bassoon" (1983), in which the process of yin and yang pointing at each other is both contradictory and harmonious, and is nothing but an external aspect of Taoism. This concept of Taoism philosophy has become the ideal basis for many works. In general, the yin yang concept explains that the longer length is yang and the shorter length is yin; more bars represent yang and less bars represent yin. The model of the yin-yang rhythm is a structural form of musical duration consisting of various notes of identical and different durations, the combination of which is complex and varied. According to the concept of yin-yang rhythm, the long note duration is yang, and the short note duration is yin, and combined with the principle of yin-yang model production using the crotch note as yang and the quaver note as yin.

The yin-yang concept also contributes greatly when it comes to defining structures. Park (2012) once suggested that the concept of yin and yang is some kind of organic unity and growth, and that in musical works, yin and yang contribute to the dichotomy of various aspects, such as in tonal music, where the seventh chord is called "yin" because of its tension, and the third chord is "yang". The third chord also has a yin and a yang, with the major third is "yang" and the minor third is "yin". In this infinite cycle, each group is classified as yin and yang by the dichotomy. Therefore, in the structural form, comparatively, the ascending melody is yang, and the descending melody is yin; more tones in the chord is yang and fewer tones is yin; the major key is yang and the minor key is yin; the ascending key is yang and the descending key is yin; the higher number of scales is yang and the lower number is yin; the positive sequence of tones is yang and the negative is yin; the long duration of notes is yang and the short duration is yin; the odd number of beats is yang, and the even number of beats is yin; the fast speed is yang and the slow speed is yin; the high register is yang and the low

register is yin; the strong register is yang, the weak register is yin; the polyphonic register is yang, the monophonic register is yin. The structural patterns of yin and yang are often based on melody, harmony, modulation, tonality, scale, series, rhythm, tempo, speed, register, intensity, timbre, and texture, and so forth. For example, Chou Wen-chung created scale modes named after the eight trigrams in the theory of yin and yang, such as the thunder mode and the sun mode, which he applied to his compositions (Everett, 2007).

Inspired by the circular Taiji diagram of 64 trigrams of the I Ching drawn by Shao Yong (1011–1077) (Ryan, 1996), Zhao Xiao-sheng, who returned from his studies in the United States in the 1980s, discovered the similarities between the three basic elements of music (including pitch, harmony and tonality) and natural phenomena (such as sky, ground, wind, thunder water, fire and mountains) and tried to explain the implausible pitch colors and chords made by the combination of yin and yang in terms of bagua, and even the process of merging the concept of yin and yang with compositional concepts, thus the Tai Chi compositional system was created (Jiang, 2013). Since Taiji has the nature of yin-yang dyads, it is necessary to show an even-numbered increase if a certain regular sequence of tones is to be arranged, such as dyads, tetrachords, six chords, eight chords, ten chords, or twelve chords, resulting in different trigram sets such as Xie 4-23 [0, 2, 5, 7] and Yí 4-9 [0, 1, 6, 7] (Xue and Loo, 2019). The difference from the Western Allen Ford’s pitch-class set is that Zhao’s theory of the yin-yang set starts with a stationary C and increases by one digit per semitone (Figure 1).

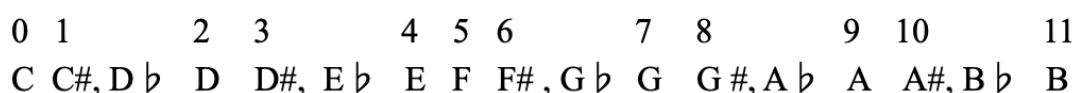


Figure 1. Zhao’s theory of the yin-yang set

Zhao composed another solo piano piece “Taiji” (1987), which includes 64 hexagrams of yin and yang and is connected at the beginning and end, arranged in an organized and regular sequence of different scales. These collections and scales are composed of yin and yang, and have a symmetrical “mirror image.” In other words, the various modes, chords, and intervals are combined to move from simplicity to complexity and back again.

Furthermore, Fang (1996) summarized the concepts and theories of yin-yang rhythm and structure based on the calculation of the trigrams of the yin-yang philosophy and thus created and integrated a series of tabular diagrams based on the formula of the number series into his compositions. On the one hand, Fang named the duration of the 64 notes based on each of the 64 different trigrams, using lines to represent the yin-yang nature, paralleling long lines as yang and short lines as yin, thus forming a six-digit expression of yin-yang from the bottom to the top in a sequence. Figure 2 illustrates several examples of this.

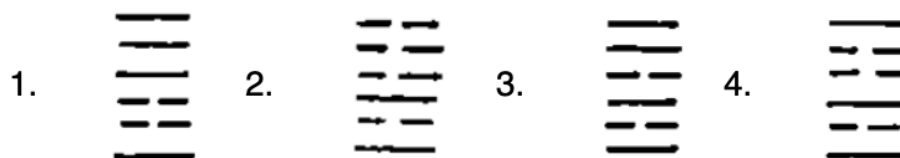


Figure 2. Six-digit expression of yin-yang from the bottom to the top in a sequence

On the other hand, according to I Ching, Tai Chi can be divided into the categories presented in Figure 3 based on the equation, and different patterns of yin-yang rhythms derived from the different trigrams were summarized by Fang (1996).

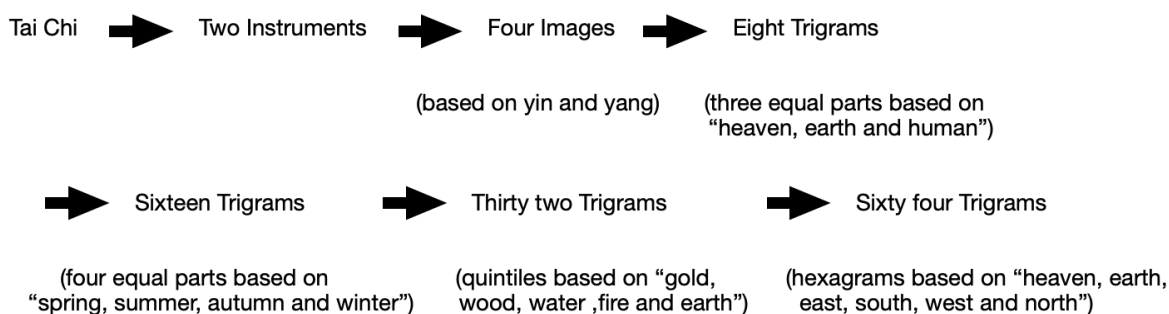


Figure 3. Process of Tai Chi based on the equation

Note duration is the symbol and the basic structural unit representing the yin-yang rhythm. The division based on the yin-yang theory is based on the semibreve (1, which can also be considered as Tai Chi) and is divided sequentially using the bisector method, resulting in a series of individual notes and dotted notes. Based on Fang's (1994) formula for the yin-yang function of the Tai Chi model (yang as 1, yin as 0), a table of note duration mode is summarized, and the table below shows some of the note durations. Boulez once used this method in his 1956 work "Structures, Livre II," which consists of 12 structures in the Taiji pattern (Figure 4), including "Fu, Ming Yi, Tai, Zhen, Gui Mei, Feng, Da Zhuang, Lin, Sui, Jie, Jiji, Xu" (Fang, 1996).

Da Zhuang	-- Crotchet	Xu	-- Dotted Crotchet	Dui	-- Double Dotted Crotchet
Tai	--Quaver	Gui Mei	-- Dotted Quaver	Feng	-- Double Dotted Quaver
Lin	--Semiquaver	Fu	-- Demisemiquaver	Ming Yi	-- Dotted Semiquaver
Zhen	--Quaver+Demisemiquaver	Sui	--Crotchet+Demisemiquaver	Jie	--Crotchet+ Quaver
Ji Ji	--Crotchet+ Dotted Semiquaver				

Figure 4. Note Duration Mode Table

The interconversion of tone patterns combined with compositional techniques can be divided into the following five types: order, inversion, transaction, interaction, and rebirth. The corner method reverses the sequence of tones; the inversion method changes the yin and yang of the notes in the structure or changes the order; the transaction method changes the position of the yin and yang notes in the structure; the interaction method changes the position or adjusts the order of the internal and external monophonic patterns to form a new structure; and the rebirth method changes the yin and yang of the notes in the opposite direction.

As a typical Chinese compositional technique, Professor Fang Xiaomin (1996) not only elaborated its theory in his thesis, but also highlighted its relevance to Western compositional theory:

In serial music, composers make extensive use of rhythmic “inversions and reversals” in their works. Furthermore, they make extensive use of “inversions” and “reversals” of rhythms. They systematically alter the arrangement of tonal forms, as well as the irreversible rhythms of the ‘order’ method, and transform them in symmetrical and asymmetrical, variable and invariable, precise and imprecise, equal and unequal in proportion, expanded and reduced in “yin and yang.” The rhythms have been systematically altered in form and structure to achieve a universal rhythm form.

On the one hand, some Western serialist composers have used yin-yang rhythms and yin-yang structures, such as Babbitt’s Three Compositions for Piano (1947). In Figure 5, the methods of inversion and transaction were used.

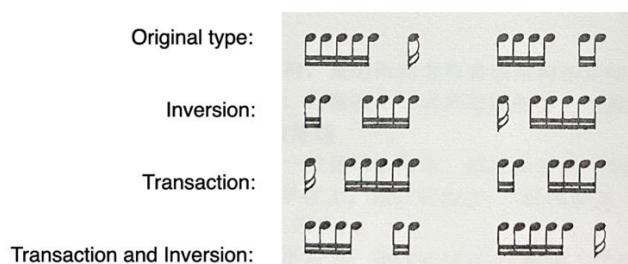


Figure 5. Babbitt’s method in yin-yang concept

On the other hand, most works by Chinese composer Zhao Xiaosheng are products of a combination of yin and yang philosophy, such as the solo piano piece “Taiji” (1987), inspired by the 64 trigrams of the yin and yang theory, thus creating a corresponding arrangement of the 64 tone sets (Shi, 2012). By using numerous reflections and recreations, the work has a Chinese element while simultaneously incorporating features of the Western sonata structure.

The structural length of music is generally divided by the length of time and the number of bars, and when the latter is combined with the principle of the yin-yang pattern development, it can be expressed as the following isometric series:  $2^n+1$  (Fang, 2006). The following diagram (Figure 6) is a partial (number of bars within 20) Taiji structure length diagram calculated based on Tang's yin-yang theory and mathematical formulae.

1 Kun	000000	6 Ming Yi	101000	11 Jie	010100	16 Da Zhuang	111100
2 Fu	100000	7 Sheng	011000	12 Gui Mei	110100	17 Bi	000010
3 Shi	010000	8 Tai	111000	13 Xiao Guo	001110	18 Tun	100010
4 Lin	110000	9 Yu	000010	14 Feng	101100	19 Kan	010010
5 Qian	001000	10 Zhen	100100	15 Heng	011100	20 Jié	110010

Figure 6. Taiji structure length table

Listed in the order from left to right are the number of subsections, the corresponding names of the 64 trigrams, and the yin-yang expressions (yang is 1 and yin is 0). For example, Tai illustrated here are eight bars in a phrase. The yin and yang of the eight trigrams are

represented as three lines and of the 64 trigrams as six lines. According to Ni (2002), 111000 is neither yin nor yang, which represents a balance achieved by the yin-yang neutralization.

Because the theory of yin and yang is applicable in note timing, rhythm, and structure, it is also present in scales and modes. For example, the San Cai (three equivalents of heaven, earth, and human) mode is mentioned in Fang’s Five Elements of Composition, where he classifies and categorizes the Chinese pentatonic, hexatonic, and heptatonic modes and applies them to the transformation of various scales in the composition process according to the changing forms of the five yin-yang elements.

**Analysis of Sheng’s “My Other Songs” in the Yin-Yang Context**

The work in this paper will be analyzed based on the aforementioned methodology in terms of tempo, musical structure, bar length, tonality, melody, dynamics, and register. There are four movements in Sheng’s My Other Song, the first and fourth of which are slow and belong to the yin, while the rest are fast and belong to the yang. Figure 7 illustrates the bar number and based on the table of the ying-yang structural length pattern, the ying-yang notation in musical structure could be marked as shown. The structure of the first, third, and fourth movement is the type of A–B–A1 or A–B–C, which is the monomorphic form (Yin) of mono-poly; the second movement is A–B–A1–B1 (Li Yin, 1010), which is the polymorphic form (yang) of mono-poly. The total number of bars is even, except for the A section, which is odd, but the number of bars in the entire movement is still odd as yin.

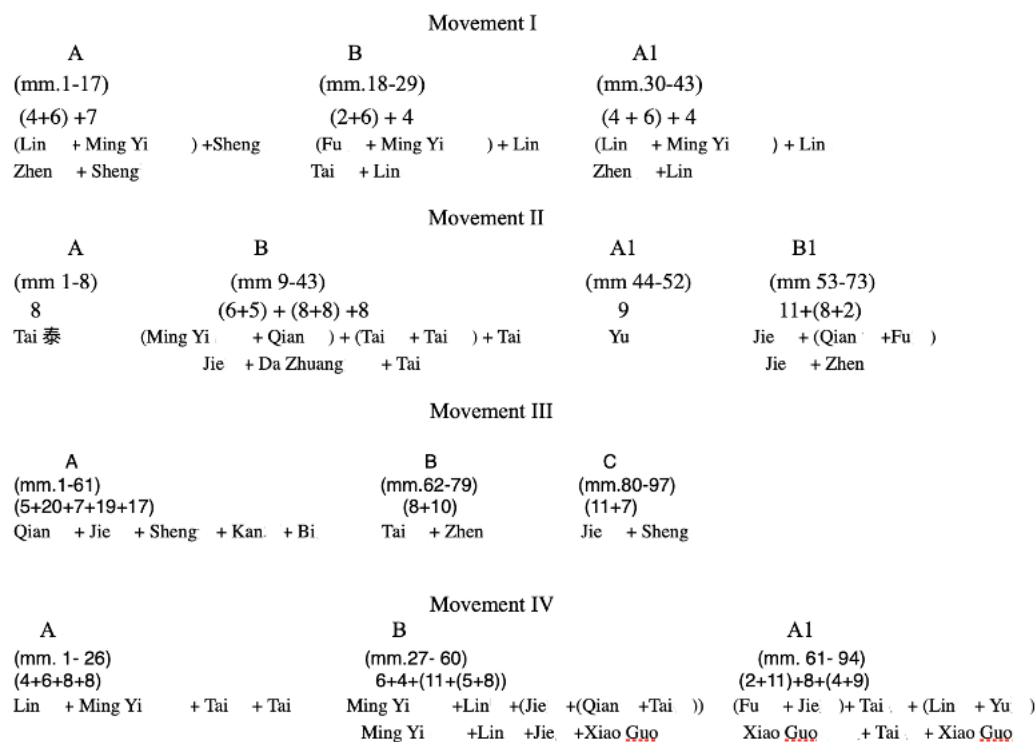


Figure 7. Yin-yang structure of Sheng’s “My Other Song”

From the perspective of melody in the first movement of “My Other Song,” the melodic line begins with a single line at the beginning of the A section and becomes diatonic by adding a parallel melody at bar 11. At this point, the melody is parallel and in the same direction. It is not until bar 25 that the melody becomes a reverse progression, changing from yang to yin, announcing the arrival of the second movement in which yin and yang are interchanged

(Figure 8). Moreover, the register of these bars spans beyond the five-octave range, with both the high and low registers covered to their maximum.



Figure 8. “My Other Song,” bars 19–28

The rhythmic structure relates closely to the yin-yang concept as it involves various and unique compositional methods and innovational ideas. According to the yin-yang rhythmic structure table, there are two different rhythmic structures in measure 21, which could be expressed as a Kan–Tai–Yin rhythm (01000) in the left hand, and a Kun–Shao–Yin rhythm (00010) in the right hand. The composer applies the same yin-yang compositional method (i.e., inversion) as Babbit above in this bar.

From the tonality perspective, the work begins in  $C_b$  mode. However, it is worth noting that the fourth note F is raised a semitone from the measure 24. Chang (2007) reported that Bright Sheng was greatly influenced by Ravel and Ligeti in the perspectives of the mixture of parallel and triadic harmonic style and overlapping sound layers and special timbre. There is an outstanding presentation from the measure 20–29 that can be observed in Figure 8, two different melodic lines are played in each hand as a contrapuntal juxtaposition. From the longitudinal angle to analysis, it appeared like a group of random tones. However, changing to the transverse one, those two melodic lines show interesting compatibility with contradiction and compresence.

Before the appearance of the F sharp, two lines are combined to form a hexatonic scale, C Gong (added Qing Jue, the fourth note) scale (C–D–E–F–G–A–C). With the appearance of the ascending F; however, the complete seven-tone scale was promoted to a new dimension by the conflicting but compatible situation of the two lines. In Fang’s San Cai (heaven, earth, human) composition method, the modes in which all the tones in the scale are all major (human) and minor (earth) second are named *di ren* modes, and they include the Chinese heptatonic, medieval heptatonic, and Western major and minor modes. Furthermore, the modes in which the tones in the scale are all augmented second or minor third (heaven), major (human), and minor (earth) second are named *tian di ren* modes, and they include the Chinese hexatonic and the Gypsy major and minor modes (Fang, 2010, p. 42). Sheng transforms from the *tian di ren* mode to *di ren* mode, then moves the C Gong hexatonic mode by a perfect fifth to form G Zhi Yayue for the left hand, which is based on the Ren Zhong method of yin-yang composition (the modal structure remains the same, but the position of



the tonic dominant changes), and then moves it up by a major second to form *A Yu Yayue* for the right hand based on the turn regeneration method. From the perspective of musical texture, a simpler texture is illustrated, changing from a parallel octave in the A section to a parallel fourth and fifth interval in the B section. The scales in each mode are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 displays three traditional Chinese pentatonic scales in musical notation. The first scale is labeled "Chinese traditional pentatonic scales" and "C Gong Yayue", with notes G, A, C, E, G and labels Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu. The second scale is labeled "A Yu Yayue", with notes G, A, C, E, G, A, C, E, G and labels Yu, Biangong, Gong, Shang, Jue, Bianzhi, Zhi, Yu. The third scale is labeled "G Zhi Yayue", with notes G, A, C, E, G, A, C, E, G and labels Zhi, Yu, Biangong, Gong, Shang, Jue, Bianzhi, Zhi.

Figure 9. Traditional Chinese pentatonic scales

Zhao's yin-yang concepts are involved not only in the second movement, but also in the third movement. The pitch-sets concept was expressed as the quintets in one pedal as rhythmic motivation, which could be seen as  $E_b-F-A_b-B_b$ ,  $F-G-B_b-C$ ,  $B_b-C-E_b-F$ ,  $A_b-B_b-D_b-E_b$ , and so forth that the relationship of intervals could be described as the pitch-class set Xie 4-23 [0,2,5,7]. The twelve-tones scale concept was involved in the third movement. The stacking and arrangement of chromatic relationships are fully realized in the third movement, which has no fixed tonality but a variety of musical textures throughout. The constant running and alternation of chromatic scales make for a magnificent and modern acoustic, while spanning almost the full range of the tonal spectrum. The composer's distinctive composition style is highlighted in this movement, first by the fact that the accented pairs are often presented in juxtaposition with the ongoing octave, and second by the fact that he often juxtaposes two octaves at a distance of one third or fourth, which certainly creates more chromaticism. In addition, by employing special phrasing, Sheng breaks up the prevalent long tones and makes the harmonic rhythm faster and promotes a more forward motion. Many of the notes that sound dissonant but are harmonized in the composer's unique arrangement reflect the root theory of yin and yang, that is, yin to the extreme is yang, and yang to the extreme is yin.

The stressful and intense atmosphere returns to calm from the fourth movement with the quotation of a Buddhist chant, "Ode to Namó Amitabha." The movement begins with the previous movement's concept of "harmony at the end of dissonance":  $D-A$  in the left hand, and  $D_b-A_b$  a semitone lower in the right hand, after which the melody of the Buddha's hymn weaves throughout the movement. In this movement, the pitch-class set is repeated in Xie 4-23 [0,2,5,7] ( $D_b-E_b-F-A_b$ ) and Sheng 4-9 [0, 1, 6, 7] (Xue and Loo, 2019), for example,  $A_b-D-E_b-A$  and  $D\#-G\#-A-D$ . This particular repetition of the difference in fifths and the constant use of the four-note series repeatedly demonstrates the composer's integration of traditional Chinese philosophies, absorbing the essence and adding his own understanding and

compositional techniques, fusing and sublimating two different cultures to form a unique musical signature bearing the composer's label.

### Conclusion

In summary, the first and fourth movements are yin and the rest are yang. According to the table of yin and yang structural length patterns, the first, third, and fourth movements are yin, and the second movement is yang. Furthermore, according to the table of yin and yang structural length patterns, the yin and yang in terms of the number of phrase bars are also "moderately balanced." Except for section A, which is odd, the total number of bars of the whole piece is even. In terms of melody, the melodic lines of both single melodic lines and polyphonic parts follow the form of "one above the other, rising and falling, alternating yin and yang;" the rhythmic structure and tonality are closely related to the concept of yin and yang, except for the diagrams given in the data, which conform to the rhythmic structure of yin and yang. The composer uses the same yin-yang compositional method as Babbitt in most of the bars, the inversion method, as well as the Fang's rotational regeneration method; in terms of harmony, the composer also abandons the traditional harmonic intervals and adds a large number of discordant elements to achieve the effect of "the yin pole produces the yang, the yang pole produces the yin." Therefore, Sheng's "My Other Song" is based on the traditional Chinese philosophy of I Ching, in terms of tempo, structure, tonality, melody, and rhythm.

Xue and Loo in 2019 linked the concept of "solidity at the bottom" to the long-standing practice of pianists in developing finger dexterity and strength and found that the pedagogical theory between Tai Chi and piano playing reveals similarities between Tai Chi and piano playing in that the foundation of footwork parallels the flexibility, strength, and key resistance of the fingers, forming the initial foundation to the next stage of circular movement. Furthermore, Everett (2007) has expanded the non-traditional approach to the analysis of modern musical works by considering a product of traditional Chinese thought—calligraphy—and analyzing it in the context of composer Chou Wen-Chong's works. He found that although the pitch and rhythmic structure are attributable to Western polyphonic techniques on the surface and are not different from other modernist composers' works, attention to Chou's meticulous illustrations in the score and the idea of calligraphy itself can attest to the uniqueness of his compositional approach based on calligraphic principles. From an analysis of Zhao and Fang's theories and Sheng's works, it can be concluded that the traditional Chinese philosophy of yin and yang can, on the one hand, be seen as a summary of thousands of years of Chinese philosophical theories or the culmination of a collision of multiple ideas, and on the other hand, these esoteric philosophical concepts that seem to exist above reality can actually be understood as the basis for the formation of all things in the universe. According to the two complementary concepts of yin and yang, solidity and emptiness, the corresponding examples attached to the different domains are shown as derived from the action of yin and yang, everything can be fused with yin and yang and can provide corresponding examples to prove it.

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