

A Literature Review on Timbre Aesthetic Characteristics of Traditional Chinese Music

Ning Xu

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, Zhejiang, China

Abstract: *Timbre is an auditory attribute of sound determined by the vibration state of objects and constitutes one of the vital expressive means in music. The most prominent distinction between traditional Chinese music and Western music lies in timbre. Through literature collection and collation, this paper summarizes four core timbre aesthetic characteristics formed throughout the long evolution of traditional Chinese music: diversity, uniqueness, naturalness and symbolism. Shaped by the traditional Chinese philosophical and natural outlook of "harmony between human and nature", these four interrelated aesthetic features permeate all forms of traditional Chinese music, including instrumental tones, folk vocal styles and opera music, collectively fostering an aesthetic inclination that reveres nature, multiplicity and individuality in timbre appreciation. Exploring these timbre aesthetic characteristics and their manifestations across musical genres not only clarifies the internal logical relations among the four traits, but also offers new perspectives for research and study within the discipline of musical aesthetics.*

Keywords: Chinese Music; Musical Aesthetics; Timbre Aesthetic Characteristics.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of musical aesthetics, musical sound refers to organized sound unfolding over time. As a fundamental element of musical sound, timbre carries both physical acoustic properties and unique aesthetic connotations. Scholars of musical aesthetics draw inspiration from traditional Chinese music and integrate relevant musical theories to interpret and research timbre aesthetics. As widely acknowledged, timbre is defined by the vibration characteristics of sound sources: different vibrating bodies produce distinct timbres due to variations in their materials and structures, hence timbre can be understood as the distinctive fingerprint of sound. Timbre can be categorized into musical tone, noise, natural timbre and artistic timbre. Unlike Western music confined largely to musical tones, traditional Chinese music embraces boundless sonic possibilities, incorporating virtually any sounding object into artistic creation. Physical acoustics confirms that differences in timbre stem primarily from sound producers and articulation methods, including vibration modes, resonator materials and playing techniques.

The divergence in timbre aesthetics marks the fundamental divide between Chinese and Western music, manifested in instrumental timbres, folk vocal timbres, opera vocal timbres and more. Core research questions in timbre aesthetics include: What are the defining aesthetic features of timbre in traditional Chinese music? How do these timbral characteristics manifest themselves? Influenced by the ancient Chinese holistic worldview of harmony between humanity and nature, timbre aesthetics in traditional Chinese music prioritizes naturalness, multiplicity and individuality, which can be encapsulated in four dimensions: diversity, uniqueness, naturalness and symbolism.

2. TIMBRE DIVERSITY IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

The timbral diversity of traditional Chinese music is prominently embodied in instrumental music. Musical instruments serve as the physical carrier of music; viewed through the lens of timbre, the developmental history of Chinese national instruments represents a continuous pursuit of diversified sound, breaking free from monotonous timbres.

2.1 Diverse Timbre Aesthetics of Traditional Instrumental Music

First and foremost, timbral diversity reveals itself in instrumental performance. Numerous scholars elaborate on this trait from three angles: the wide array of instrumental timbres, ensemble combinations, and varied tones generated by different playing techniques on a single instrument within the same register. The aesthetic pursuit of diverse timbres in instrumental ensembles fuses the rich inherent tones of different instruments with timbral variations brought by performing techniques, fully embodying the core aesthetic of timbral multiplicity in traditional Chinese music.

2.1.1 Diverse Timbre Aesthetics Derived from Instruments and Performing Techniques

The diversified timbres of traditional Chinese instrumental music arise from two sources: the distinctive tonal personalities of different instruments, and the wide range of tones produced by varied articulations on one instrument in an identical register. Relevant scholarly research on this characteristic is outlined as follows:

In *A Coursebook of Musical Aesthetics* (2002), Zhang Qian analyzes the rich timbral shifts of the guqin generated by core finger techniques such as tiao (pluck outward), gou (hook inward) and mo (wipe). He argues that timbre is governed by object vibration: distinct instrument materials and structures yield unique tones, while identical instruments played with varying dynamics and articulations within the same register also produce drastically different timbres. Therefore, timbral diversity exists not only across different instruments, but also through technical variations on a single instrument.

In his paper *The Meanings of the Names and Arrangements of the Six Lü* published in the first issue of *Huangzhong* (Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music) (2019), Du Yaxiong focuses on percussion timbres, taking bianzhong (ancient chime bells) and drums—the most pivotal pre-Qin percussion instruments—as examples. He describes the solemn, dignified, composed timbre of bianzhong, which evokes the majesty of rituals and reverence for ancestors and deities; their massive physical form also conveys overwhelming power and solemnity.

Kuang Jun's article *Acoustic Principles of Unique Timbres in National Musical Instruments* (People's Music, Issue 5, 2015) illustrates timbral diversity within single instruments through three case studies. First, the suona can produce multiple contrasting tones via varied blowing techniques, including flutter tongue, xiao-like softness, gravelly vocal timbre, breath hum and sanxian resonance. Second, plucked instruments generate abundant tonal shifts through different plectrum motions and plucking positions. Third, dozens of distinct timbres can be extracted from a single pitch on the guqin.

In his 2004 book *A Course in Traditional Chinese Music Theory*, Du Yaxiong discussed the aesthetic characteristics of the timbre of traditional Chinese instruments in three categories: percussion instruments, wind instruments, plucked instruments, and string instruments. One of the most representative percussion instruments is the "drum culture" of the pre-Qin period. Du Yaxiong believed that "the sound of the drum is extremely penetrating and irresistible." Drums are not only used to command orchestras and cooperate with etiquette, but also to give orders and boost morale in war, forming a unique "drum culture". Secondly, wind instruments such as flute, flute, sheng, and yu are more suitable for playing melodies than percussion instruments, and their timbre is closer to human voice than percussion instruments. Thirdly, the pipa, an important instrument that expresses the diversity of timbres, has a versatile timbre that can be transformed into various performance effects, meeting people's demands for richer timbres and stronger musical expression.

In his paper *An Exploration of Erhu Timbre* (Symphony – Journal of Xi'an Conservatory of Music, Issue 1, 2002), Li Shuangyan compares bowed instruments to unpack the mechanisms behind timbral diversity. First, erhu, jinghu and banhu—all string-vibrating instruments—differ in timbre due to divergent resonator materials and shapes. Second, erhu, pipa and yangqin, though classified as chordophones, bear unique tones because their sound-generating motions differ fundamentally.

The above scholarship on instrumental bodies and performing techniques demonstrates that musical instruments are the material foundation of music, and the evolution of Chinese national instruments constitutes an unceasing quest to transcend timbral monotony and embrace sonic diversity.

2.1.2 The diverse aesthetic characteristics of timbres produced in traditional Chinese instrumental ensemble music

Diverse Timbre Aesthetics in Traditional Chinese Instrumental Ensembles The profound appreciation for diversified timbres in traditional Chinese music manifests not only in solo instrumental techniques but also in ensemble formats that integrate heterogeneous instrumental tones. Multiple researchers have explored how ensemble repertoires embody this pursuit of timbral multiplicity.

In *Musical Aesthetics and National Psychology* (2011), Lin Hua argues that the love of colorful timbres extends prominently to instrumental ensembles. Ethnic Chinese ensemble genres featuring homogeneous instrumental timbres include string ensembles, silk-bamboo ensembles and percussion bands; mixed ensembles combining

dissimilar instrument families encompass wind-and-percussion suites and suona-led wind bands.

Edited by Zhang Jiefu and Li Ge, **Form and Aesthetics of Music** (2017) analyzes timbral combinations in luogu (gong-and-drum) ensembles, a core traditional percussion formation consisting of four core instruments: large gong, drum, small gong and cymbals. Their combined timbres produce layered sonic effects: muted or lightly struck large gongs create empty, desolate yet dignified bright tones; large gong paired with bass drums delivers full, grand resonance; large gong plus small gong sounds softer than solo large gong; large gong with cymbals yields intense, unstable sonority; all four struck together produce thick, weighty timbres. Such ensembles balance the pursuit of timbral variety with harmonious sonic fusion.

In **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004), Du Yaxiong analyzes timbral diversity in wind bands and silk-bamboo ensembles from an acoustic perspective. Wind bands derive richness from free-reed instruments, which feature soft timbres with strong blending capacity; paired with edge-blown winds, they create warm, full harmony, while combined with reed pipes they generate lustrous tones. In silk-bamboo ensembles, the staccato, bright, granular sound of plucked instruments contrasts with the legato, gentle, elegant linear tones of bowed instruments, forming a refined, clear sonic texture.

In **The Verve of Chinese Music** (1998), Liu Chenghua contrasts Chinese and Western orchestral scale to interpret timbral aesthetics. The powerful individual timbres of Chinese national instruments lend themselves to small-scale flexible ensembles that harmonize diverse distinctive tones, embodying the core Chinese philosophical concept of “harmony within difference”—a defining feature separating traditional Chinese music from Western art music.

Scholarly discourse on traditional ensembles attests that China’s rich heritage of hundreds of national instruments and diverse band formations represents an invaluable ethnic cultural asset. Ensemble performance unites the unique tonal personalities of individual instruments with timbral variations from performing techniques, realizing an aesthetic balance of multiplicity and equilibrium.

2.2 Diverse Timbre Aesthetics in Traditional Chinese Vocal Performance

Vocal music in traditional Chinese music equally pursues timbral diversity, manifested through flexible tonal variations of the human voice.

In **A Coursebook of Musical Aesthetics** (2002), Zhang Qian uses the fixed vocal timbres of Peking opera role types to illustrate vocal timbral diversity. Timbre functions as a core expressive medium: distinct vocal qualities strictly define sheng (male), dan (female), jing (painted face), mo (supporting male) and chou (comic) roles. Audiences can distinguish qingyi, laodan, laosheng, xiaosheng and huadan purely through vocal timbre alone.

Du Yaxiong states in **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004): “Timbre serves as the primary marker distinguishing opera role types.” The five core opera categories feature intricate subdivisions based on character and tonal requirements: sheng splits into laosheng, wusheng and xiaosheng, with further divisions of literary and warrior subtypes for each, alongside impoverished young male roles. Every character demands highly specific vocal timbres in performance, highlighting the rigorous pursuit of vocal timbral multiplicity in opera.

In his paper **A Study of Timbral Characteristics in Kunqu Performance** (Ethnic Art Studies, Issue 23, 2010), Tian Shaodong notes the nuanced tonal standards governing Kunqu singing. Cross-gender casting expands timbral diversity: female performers interpret male sheng and jing roles, while male singers portray zhengdan and caidan female roles. Contrasting natural vocal registers of male and female performers generate dual timbres within a single role category, enriching the overall sonic palette of traditional opera.

Jiao Xinbo’s article **On the Arrangement of Traditional Operas during the “Seventeen Years” Period—A Case Study of Peking Opera Water Margin Plays** (Journal of Hainan Normal University, Vol.31, 2018) details differentiated timbral requirements for three wusheng warrior male characters: Lin Chong’s soft, muted tone reflects his scholarly-martial temperament; Wu Song’s impassioned, vigorous voice conveys fierce boldness; Yan Qing’s bright, penetrating timbre embodies refined gallantry.

In summary, timbres in Chinese music boast extraordinary diversity, spanning instrumental and vocal genres as well as tonal shifts within single instruments or human voices. Over centuries, Chinese national instrumental

music overcame timbral monotony, integrating technical variations and ensemble formats to achieve an aesthetic ideal of individualized yet diversified timbres.

3. TIMBRE UNIQUENESS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

Traditional Chinese music deploys a full spectrum of distinct sonic types—musical tones and noise, transient harsh sounds, natural and artistic timbres, vibrato and overtones—to construct vivid musical imagery. Scholars widely agree that China's accumulated practical experience with diverse timbres creates a unique aesthetic system, centered on two defining traits: a preference for clear, bright, penetrating timbres, and deliberate artistic application of noise.

3.1 Aesthetic Preference for Clear, Bright, Penetrating Timbres

Scholars identify consistent national inclinations in Chinese timbre aesthetics: affinity for human vocal quality, reverence for natural sound, pursuit of multiplicity and individuality, preference for high-frequency clear, bright, penetrating tones, and fondness for sweet, crisp, rounded timbres alongside resonant nasal resonance.

In **A Coursebook of Musical Aesthetics** (2002), Zhang Qian draws on the aesthetic framework of **Xishan Qin Kuang** (Conditions of Qin Playing on Western Hills), a foundational ancient guqin treatise, to analyze historical tonal standards for qin performance. The work establishes twenty-four aesthetic categories for guqin art, including he (harmony), jing (serenity), qing (clarity), yuan (remoteness), liang (brightness) and cai (luster), explicitly prioritizing clear and bright timbres in qin interpretation.

In **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004), Du Yaxiong outlines unique Chinese timbral aesthetics distinct from other cultures: deliberate use of noise, affinity for human vocal timbre, and a preference for clear, bright, penetrating high-frequency tones.

In his 2006 doctoral dissertation **Research on Chinese National Musical Aesthetic Psychology** (Fujian Normal University), Shi Yong addresses the prevalence of high-pitched national instruments: "Across Chinese vocal and instrumental traditions, a marked tendency toward high-pitched vocal registers and high-frequency timbres prevails." This deliberate cultural preference for clear, bright, penetrating high-frequency sound emerges from collective national aesthetic psychology.

Shen Qia elaborates on Kunqu vocal timbres in his paper **On Tone Contour** (Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, Issue 4, 1982). Male roles such as jing, wai and laosheng rely on full, resonant chest voice. From a physiological perspective, Chinese vocal folds tend to be shorter and thinner, naturally generating higher frequencies. Cultural auditory conditioning has diminished sensitivity to low registers, fostering a cultural bias toward mid-to-high frequencies in both vocal and instrumental timbre aesthetics.

Luo Jiaqi's paper **Research on Musical Characteristics of Sichuan Opera High Tunes** (Chinese Theatre, Issue 4, 2018) documents the register range of mountain folk high tunes across Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan provinces. Mountain singers' most resonant register spans g^2 to e^3 , extending up to f^3 and g^3 , tangible evidence of the cultural preference for clear, bright, penetrating timbres in folk art.

Collective scholarly research confirms that traditional Chinese music values bright, sweet, crisp timbres above all, most prominently in regional folk music and opera repertoires. Chinese national instrument inventories are dominated by high-pitched instruments, with relatively few mid and low-range varieties.

3.2 Artistic Valorization of Noise

Among the four instrument families of wind, bowed, plucked and percussion, percussion emerged earliest and retains central importance throughout Chinese instrumental history. The enduring prominence of percussion reflects not only cultural emphasis on rhythmic expression, but also a core aesthetic appreciation for noise as a legitimate timbral resource, extensively documented in ensemble research.

Du Yaxiong uses luogu gong-drum ensembles as an example in **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004), illustrating how noise timbres and rhythmic patterns collaborate to construct musical imagery. The Tujia people's liuzi percussion suite employs four instruments: liuzi gong, large gong, first cymbal and second cymbal.

Purely through contrasts of timbre, volume and dynamics, works such as **Hen Laying Eggs** and **Myna Birds Bathing** vividly depict pastoral scenes of waterfowl frolicking.

Luo Jiaqi notes in **Research on Musical Characteristics of Sichuan Opera High Tunes** (2018) that percussion holds an irreplaceable position in all regional opera forms. Standard opera percussion kits consist of ban drum, large gong, nao cymbals and small gong—all single-tone noise-producing instruments. Through shifting dynamic and timbral patterns in luogu rhythmic scores, they depict grand battlefields, wind and rain, string resonance and horse bells, embodying the aesthetic integration of musical tone and noise in opera art.

Edited by Zhang Jiefu and Li Ge, **Form and Aesthetics of Music** (2017) addresses the deliberate use of transient noise on the guqin. Such fleeting harsh tones intentionally dim bright resonance, creating light-dark timbral contrast that enhances musical expressivity and yun (lingering charm), a tonal quality revered by literati musicians for millennia. Dong Weisong's paper **On Vocal Ornamentation** (Chinese Music, Issue 4, 2004) analyzes the celebrated "cloud veiling moon" singing technique in opera schools. It alternates gravelly noise timbres and smooth rounded musical tones to evoke moonlight flickering through drifting clouds, producing profound aesthetic pleasure. This demonstrates that traditional Chinese music integrates noise timbres not only in percussion ensembles but also in vocal performance.

To conclude, the unique timbre aesthetics of traditional Chinese music hinge on two complementary preferences: clear, bright, penetrating high-frequency tones, and the artistic utilization of noise. This dual tendency permeates folk ensembles and vocal art, representing grassroots musical taste. Both literati and common folk traditions incorporate noise timbres as a vital expressive resource.

4. TIMBRE NATURALNESS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

"Natural perceptual auditory needs establish the fundamental principle of favorable auditory forms." As an essential mode of aesthetic psychology reliant on intuitive sensory expression, naturalness constitutes a defining feature of traditional Chinese music. Its timbral naturalness manifests in two key ways: an innate preference for human vocal timbre, and a reverence for unadulterated natural sound, prioritizing simple, unrefined instrumental articulation that retains raw sonic character with minimal standardized modification.

4.1 Cultural Affinity for Human Vocal Timbre

Traditional Chinese timbre aesthetics uphold a core tenet of "resemblance to the human voice", deeply shaped by the holistic philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature, alongside linguistic traditions and vocal techniques. A wealth of scholarly research explores this cultural preference for vocal timbre.

In **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004), Du Yaxiong traces the historical aesthetic hierarchy: "Silk strings are inferior to bamboo winds; bamboo winds are inferior to human voice." This ancient proverb establishes a tonal ranking: plucked silk instruments produce granular, segmented sound less evocative than sustained bamboo wind lines, while instrumental tones remain less authentic and captivating than the natural human voice. The progression silk—bamboo—human voice encapsulates the cultural priority of natural vocal timbre and sensory authenticity.

Li Shuangyan states in **An Exploration of Erhu Timbre** (2002) that the erhu is universally recognized as "the instrument closest to the human voice", reflecting a national psychological tendency to value vocal-like naturalness. Influenced by nature-centered Chinese philosophy, authentic human voice is regarded as the most vivid medium for inner emotional expression.

In **A Comprehensive Treatise of Musical Aesthetics** (1999), Luo Xiaoping and Xiu Hailin cite records from **History of the Song Dynasty – Treatise on Music** to document the historical supremacy of human voice: "In court music performance, human singing ranks highest; song bells stand to the left, song chimes to the right." This textual evidence confirms the central position of vocal timbre in Song-dynasty musical aesthetics.

In **A Coursebook of Musical Aesthetics** (2002), Zhang Qian cites Bai Juyi's poetic line: "Better to sing the verse aloud than play it upon the flute", affirming the proverb "bamboo winds inferior to human voice" and the poet's clear preference for vocal timbre.

Zhang Pan's 2007 master's thesis **Research on *Yuefu Zalu* (Miscellaneous Records of Music Bureau)** references Duan Anjie's classical text: "Singing embodies the soul of music; silk strings are inferior to bamboo winds, bamboo winds inferior to human voice, which surpasses all instrumental sounds." This text reinforces the aesthetic primacy of natural human vocal timbre.

Across this body of scholarship, whether analyzing ancient aesthetic thought or instrumental emulation of human sound, a consistent cultural reverence for vocal timbre emerges as a core pillar of traditional Chinese timbre aesthetics.

4.2 Pursuit of Unrefined Natural Timbre

Timbral naturalness denotes retention of the raw, unprocessed sound of a source without artificial stylized standardization, visible across all traditional Chinese articulation and performance techniques.

Lin Hua argues in **Musical Aesthetics and National Psychology** (2011) that vocal naturalness stems from folk vocal training methods, which expand the natural chest voice rather than restructuring it artificially. Early folk vocal training employed rigorous endurance exercises analogous to martial arts, prioritizing preservation of the raw native vocal timbre as a central aesthetic feature.

Huang Hanhua's paper **Word Music and Wordless Music – Aesthetic Reflections on the Connection and Transformation between Vocal and Instrumental Music** (Chinese Music, Issue 4, 2002) frames the human voice as humanity's innate instrument, the most direct medium for externalizing inner emotion, hence performance prioritizes unmodified natural vocal production

Du Yaxiong elaborates in **A Tutorial of Traditional Chinese Music Theory** (2004) that the cultural love of vocal timbre drives national instruments to imitate linguistic inflection. Instruments with skin resonators such as erhu and sanxian are cherished for speech-like tonal contours; instrumental emulation of natural human voice indirectly reinforces the aesthetic pursuit of raw, unrefined timbre.

Shen Qia's **On Tone Contour** (1982) links the cultural preference for unmodified native vocal timbre to human physiological traits: short, thin Chinese vocal folds naturally generate high-frequency sound, fostering a cultural auditory bias toward unrefined mid-to-high register timbres in both vocal and instrumental performance.

Collective research reveals that nature-centered Chinese philosophy positions authentic human voice as the most genuine vessel for inner emotion. Pre-Qin musical aesthetics prioritized unrestrained sensory expression without rigid standardized timbre systems or formalized sonic blending—a key distinction from technically systematized Western timbre aesthetics, granting traditional Chinese music its inherent natural timbral quality.

5. TIMBRE SYMBOLISM IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

Traditional Chinese music is inseparably intertwined with material and social life, tasked with depicting real-world soundscapes, conveying emotional tension and carrying layered symbolic meaning through timbre. Multiple scholars have investigated the symbolic aesthetic dimension of traditional Chinese timbre.

Lin Hua writes in **Musical Aesthetics and National Psychology** (2011) that Chinese instruments feature simpler construction and less technically demanding performance skills compared to Western counterparts, granting their timbres unique symbolic expressive power to depict scenes, personalities and abstract states. Two primary applications emerge: first, the piercing suona symbolizes grand celebration, heroic passion or solemn tragedy depending on contextual timbral treatment; second, specialized articulation techniques carry symbolic weight—noise timbres on instruments represent extreme grief, while falsetto vocalization evokes ethereal fantasy and transcendence

Wang Xun's review essay **Wandering Between Beauty and Music—Reflections on Liu Chenghua's<The Verve of Chinese Music>and<A Treatise on Guqin Art>** (Chinese Music, Issue 3, 2010) connects timbral symbolism to Confucian human-centered thought under ancient Chinese patriarchal systems. Rooted in the cultural priority of human vocal timbre, instrumental techniques are designed to mimic human voice, endowing instrumental tones with symbolic human expressive qualities.

In **A Coursebook of Musical Aesthetics** (2002), Zhang Qian explores timbral symbolism through Peking opera role divisions. Distinct timbres assigned to qingyi, huadan, wudan, literary and martial xiaosheng, laodan, literary and martial laosheng, jing and chou encode character social status, moral temperament, gender and age. Experienced audiences instantly interpret narrative meaning purely through symbolic timbral coding.

Qian Rong's paper **Linguistic Methodology for Chinese Musical Elements—A Curriculum Argument for National Linguistic Musicology** (Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, Issue 2, 2009) identifies culturally ingrained symbolic timbral stereotypes rooted in feudal patriarchal gender norms. Soft, sweet, mellow timbres are culturally idealized for female voices; male vocal timbres carry symbolic markers of refined erudition or rugged boldness, forming widely accepted national aesthetic archetypes for gendered vocal sound.

Dong Weisong's **On Vocal Ornamentation** (2004) analyzes symbolic emotional expression through exaggerated vocal timbres and nuanced articulation, particularly opera diction. Individual notes unfold in layered phases: preparatory ornamental glissandi, stable core tone, and intensifying vibrato. Timbre is inherently sensory, and the universal Chinese critical term yun (lingering flavor) encapsulates the symbolic aesthetic dimension of timbre, reflecting culturally specific modes of sonic appreciation.

This body of research confirms that timbre bears symbolic expressive weight due to the intimate linkage between music, emotional communication and social life, constituting a uniquely restrained Chinese mode of artistic expression. All traditional genres—opera roles, vocal art and instrumental performance—utilize specialized timbres to mirror lived experience. Timbral symbolism infuses traditional music with vivid depictions of social reality and articulates emotions beyond verbal language, enabling cross-temporal and cross-spatial emotional communication. Symbolic timbral traits amplify dramatic tension in opera and deepen the conveyance of human sentiment across all traditional Chinese musical forms.

6. CONCLUSION

This literature review clarifies the four core timbre aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese music: diversity, uniqueness, naturalness and symbolism. Timbral diversity manifests in the distinct tonal personalities of national instruments, tonal variations generated by single-instrument technical shifts, and layered sonic richness created through mixed instrumental ensembles. Chinese national timbre aesthetics diverge sharply from Western traditions, defined by unique cultural traits: artistic utilization of noise and preference for clear, bright, penetrating tones (uniqueness); cultural affinity for unrefined human vocal sound (naturalness); and narrative, character-driven symbolic timbral coding (symbolism).

The cultural valorization of noise originates from the primacy of percussion in early instrumental history: archaic simple instruments lacked fixed pitch, relying solely on percussive noise for expression, imprinting this sonic tradition onto Chinese aesthetic consciousness for millennia. The cultural preference for human vocal timbre derives from the foundational philosophical ideal of harmony between humanity and nature, alongside a cultural emphasis on sensory embodied experience that elevates authentic human voice above artificial instrumental sound. The national fondness for clear, bright high-frequency tones arises from the prevalence of high-pitched national instruments and the pursuit of sonic harmony, which balances vocal timbres with high-range instrumental resonance to achieve unified, balanced sonority.

In summary, the timbre aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese music evolved over millennia, coexisting across all musical genres while embodying a uniquely Chinese sonic worldview. Driven by the collective pursuit of timbral diversity, uniqueness, naturalness and symbolism, traditional Chinese music transcends the narrow boundaries of formal musical tones to embrace infinite sonic possibilities, integrating every sounding object into artistic creation.

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