

Wang Jianzhong's Piano Adaptation of the Chinese Red Song *Liuyang River*: Material Transformation and Structural Reconstruction

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines Wang Jianzhong's 1972 piano adaptation of the Chinese red song *Liuyang River*. The primary sources are the 2013 Selected Piano Works of Wang Jianzhong and a 17-measure vocal score, analyzed through documentary research, score observation, comparative musical analysis, and functional analysis. Objective 1 identifies retention and transformation in melodic contour, structural tones, rhythm, phrase order, cadences, texture, and form. Objective 2 examines how ornamental inflection, modal harmony, polyphonic texture, registral design, cadenza figuration, and dynamic planning create an autonomous piano structure. The four vocal phrases correspond to mm. 10-32: core contour and cadential direction remain stable while phrase length, texture, and harmonic support expand. Later sections develop the theme through variation, transition, intensified reprise, and coda. Title and thematic recurrence maintain continuity with the source song, while piano-specific organization provides independent instrumental development and formal closure. The study offers a score-based framework for analyzing piano adaptations of Chinese red songs.

Keywords: Wang Jianzhong, *Liuyang River*, piano adaptation

Introduction

In this study, a Chinese "red song" refers to a song formed or widely disseminated in the historical contexts of revolution, socialist construction, and public cultural life, and associated through lyrics, historical narrative, and collective memory with shared political and social experience (Chen & Gui, 2011; Shen & Lian, 2018). *Liuyang River* originated in early-1950s Hunan in connection with land reform and the delivery of public grain. Its text developed from Xu Shuhua's song-and-dance drama *Shuang Song Liang*, while Tang Biguang's melody drew on regional traditional idioms; the song later circulated independently (China News Service, 2011; Xiang, 2021). Its local identity is therefore grounded in pentatonic melodic practice and Hunan musical style, whereas its red-song identity arises primarily from its lyrics, historical context, and long public circulation.

Wang Jianzhong's 1972 piano adaptation removes the lyrics but preserves the title and core theme. This creates two related analytical questions: which musical features continue to connect the piano work to the source song, and how are those features reorganized into an autonomous instrumental structure? Adaptation is not a mechanical copy but a process of selection, reorganization, and re-creation for a new medium (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). In this article, material transformation refers to the retention, alteration, expansion, and



reordering of melody, syntax, rhythm, sequence, texture, and form. Structural reconstruction refers to the use of piano-specific techniques to give the source theme functions of presentation, development, transition, reprise, and closure. An autonomous piano-solo form is understood here as a work in which the piano independently sustains thematic statement, harmonic support, bass, inner voices, transitions, large-scale tension, and formal completion. The resulting framework clarifies how a historically situated song may enter concert, teaching, and analytical contexts without reducing its cultural identity to isolated musical symbols.

Research Objectives

1. To compare the vocal score of Liuyang River with Wang Jianzhong's piano adaptation in terms of core melody, phrase syntax and cadence, rhythmic skeleton, material order, texture, and overall form, and to identify how stable thematic features maintain the adaptation's relationship to the source song.
2. To analyze how ornamental inflection, modal harmony, polyphonic texture, registral design, cadenza figuration, and dynamic planning develop the theme, organize sectional functions, and reconstruct the source material as an autonomous piano solo.

Scope of the Research

1. Case and Source Corpus

The single case is Wang Jianzhong's 1972 piano solo Liuyang River. The controlling piano text is the 2013 Selected Piano Works of Wang Jianzhong (Tong & Wang, 2013). All piano pitches, rhythms, dynamics, measure references, sectional readings, and the piano score excerpts reproduced in Figures 1b, 2a, and 2b are taken directly from this published edition. The comparative source is a 17-measure vocal score credited to Xu Shuhua, Tang Biguang, and Li Zhongyong (2010). Because that vocal score is an online secondary source, its authorship and historical provenance are cross-checked against independent historical accounts (China News Service, 2011; Xiang, 2021).

2. Analytical Scope

Objective 1 examines stable thematic features and the retention, alteration, expansion, and reordering of source material. Objective 2 examines six piano-specific techniques and their thematic, textural, and formal functions. The analytical evidence is score-based and is interpreted in relation to the title, lyrics, historical context, and relevant scholarship.

3. Time Scope

The piano adaptation was composed in 1972, the principal edition was published in 2013, and the sources included in this study were reviewed through July 2026.

Literature Review

Chen and Gui (2011) and Shen and Lian (2018) discuss the historical and cultural attributes of red songs and red culture. China News Service (2011) and Xiang (2021) use author recollections, publication history, and an investigation by the Hunan cultural authorities to outline the genesis and attribution of Liuyang River. Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) conceptualize adaptation as reorganization across media, providing a basis for distinguishing retained source material from medium-specific reconstruction.

Research on Wang Jianzhong emphasizes national style, polyphonic technique, and Chinese aesthetics (Peng, 2004; Wei, 1999; Zhu, 2023), while Fan's (2003) theory of



pentatonic modal harmony supports the technical analysis. Wang Junyi (2023) examines national musical elements and sectional design in Liuyang River, and Chang (2023) compares two piano versions. Existing studies, however, seldom map all four vocal phrases measure by measure or place thematic stability, material transformation, and the formation of the complete piano structure within one analytical sequence. This study therefore follows a three-part logic: historical source, material transformation, and structural reconstruction.

Research Methodology

1. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case-study design combining documentary research, score observation, comparative musical analysis, and functional analysis. Documentary research establishes the song's historical context; score observation records measures, tempo, dynamics, voices, ornaments, harmony, register, and articulation; comparative analysis addresses Objective 1; functional analysis addresses Objective 2.

2. Research Steps

2.1 The vocal score, lyrics, historical sources, and piano edition were checked and measure numbers standardized.

2.2 Thematic contour, structural tones, rhythmic skeleton, phrase order, and cadences were compared phrase by phrase.

2.3 The six piano techniques were classified and examined for thematic, textural, and formal functions.

2.4 The findings were integrated into the sequence: historical source, thematic correspondence, material transformation, and structural reconstruction.

3. Data Collection

Data comprise the 90-measure piano score in the 2013 published edition and a 17-measure vocal score, in which mm. 1-5 form the introduction and mm. 6-17 contain four vocal phrases. Tempo, dynamics, voices, ornaments, harmony, register, and articulation were recorded. Because the 2013 edition lacks continuous bar numbers, measures are counted from the first bar; cadenza and sectional boundaries are checked against meter, cadence, thematic content, texture, and form. The published 2013 edition is the controlling source for every analytical claim concerning the piano notation.

4. Data Analysis

At the first level, structural tones are identified as pitches that belong to the source melody and retain a phrase-defining contour or cadential role; evidence includes recurrence in both versions, metric or durational salience, and participation in phrase-final arrival. Surface ornaments are added passing, neighboring, appoggiatura, turn, or triplet tones whose removal leaves the source contour and cadential goal intact. Cadences are identified through the convergence of melodic arrival, rhythmic lengthening or phrase break, and harmonic stabilization. At the second level, modal harmony is identified where accompaniment sonorities center on pentatonic core tones and provide coloristic support rather than a continuous dominant-tonic chain (Fan, 2003). Sectional functions are assigned from thematic completeness or transformation, cadential strength, texture, register, tempo-dynamic trajectory, and the role of each span in preparing or resolving the next section.



Research Results

Objective 1: Material Transformation and Continuity with the Source Song

The vocal score consists of a five-measure piano introduction followed by a twelve-measure vocal section organized as four three-measure phrases. In the piano adaptation, mm. 10-32 present the same four phrases in the original order but expand them to twenty-three measures. The comparison applies the criteria defined above: melodic contour, recurrent structural tones, rhythmic skeleton, phrase order, and cadential targets are treated as stable thematic features; added ornaments, harmonic filling, interludes, texture, and phrase length are treated as surface transformation.

Table 1: Phrase Correspondence between the Vocal Theme and the Piano Adaptation

Phrase	Vocal mm.	Piano mm.	Retention and transformation evidence
1	6-8	10-14	Opening contour, structural tones, and cadence retained; harmonic filling, bass support, and an interlude expand three bars to five.
2	9-11	15-19	Call-and-response contour and cadence retained; octave placement, inner-voice response, and rhythmic extension produce five bars.
3	12-14	20-24	Rising onset, descending return, and final tone retained; bass motion, accompaniment, and links add layers.
4	15-17	25-32	Closing cell and cadence retained; repetition, thicker chords, and 3/4 meter at m. 31 extend and close the thematic section.

Table 1 shows clear correspondences for all four phrases. The expansion changes phrase length and piano sonority rather than the basic syntax of the theme. In the lyric-free adaptation, the title identifies the source, while repeated appearances of the four-phrase theme supply verifiable musical continuity: the theme is established in mm. 10-32, varied in mm. 33-52, and intensified in mm. 61-87. Its core contour, structural tones, and cadential direction remain stable at each appearance. Thus, the theme sustains the musical relationship to the source song, whereas the work's red-song status is established by the lyrics, historical context, and public memory.



Figure 1a: Vocal theme from Liuyang River

Note: Vocal notation from Xu, Tang, and Li (2010); authorship and historical provenance cross-checked against China News Service (2011) and Xiang (2021).



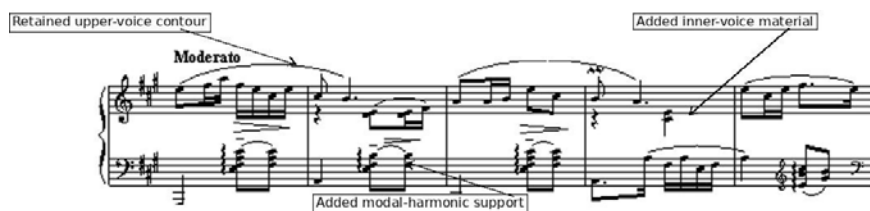


Figure 1b: Wang Jianzhong's piano adaptation, mm. 10-14

Note: Source: Tong and Wang (2013, p. 29).

Objective 2: Structural Reconstruction of the Source Theme

Objective 2 asks how a lyric-bearing melodic line becomes an instrumental theme capable of independent presentation, development, transition, reprise, and closure. Table 2 summarizes the structural process; the following analysis identifies the contribution of the six principal techniques.

Table 2: Structural Process through Which the Source Theme Acquires Piano-Instrumental Functions

Stage	mm.	Material and principal techniques	Instrumental function
Introduction	1-9	Theme not yet complete; chords, broken figures, and free tuplets.	Establishes an independent sonorous space and prepares the theme.
Theme	10-32	Four phrases in source order; harmonic filling, interludes, and layered voices.	States the theme and forms the first complete section.
Variation	33-52	Structural tones retained; ornaments, rhythmic subdivision, polyphonic exchange.	Transforms stable statement into continuous development.
Cadenza	53-59	Theme fragmented and extended through tuplets, arpeggios, and registral motion.	Expands musical time and connects development to reprise.
Transition	60	Theme recedes; ritardando, soft dynamics, harmonic change.	Releases tension and prepares return.
Climactic reprise	61-87	Theme returns with thicker texture, wider register, and dynamic growth.	Creates the climax and structural reprise.
Coda	88-90	Soft broken figures and final harmony.	Provides formal closure and an independent ending.

Ornamental inflection. In mm. 33-52, appoggiaturas, turns, passing tones, sextuplet figures, and rhythmic subdivision alter local attacks and durations while preserving structural-tone order and cadences. The theme therefore remains traceable but changes from stable presentation to continuous variation.

Modal harmony. The reading follows the criterion defined above: accompaniment is treated as modal when it is organized around pentatonic core tones and coloristic support rather than a continuous dominant-tonic chain. In mm. 10-14, alternating bass tones and



middle-register chords support the retained upper-voice contour; in mm. 33-35, broken sextuplets circulate around the same pentatonic center; and in mm. 66-70, bass, chords, and upper melody form a denser three-layer texture. These changes distinguish transparent presentation, flowing variation, and intensified reprise while keeping the theme audible (Fan, 2003).

Polyphonic texture. In mm. 20-24, the upper voice carries the cantabile line while the left hand provides bass, chords, and short links; mm. 33-52 intensify hand-to-hand response; mm. 66-79 thicken inner voices and accompaniment. A single vocal line thus becomes a layered piano statement whose density grows across presentation, variation, and climax.

Registral design. The theme is concentrated in the middle-high register in mm. 10-24, redistributed between high and low layers in mm. 33-35, expanded through clef changes, octave displacement, and cross-register arpeggios in mm. 53-59, and vertically polarized in mm. 66-79. Register therefore supplies a spatial trajectory from concentration to expansion and climactic separation.

Cadenza figuration. In mm. 53-59, nine- and twelve-note tuplets, broken chords, and wide arpeggios fragment and prolong the former lyric melody. Complete phrases become motives and figures that accumulate tension and bridge variation to reprise.

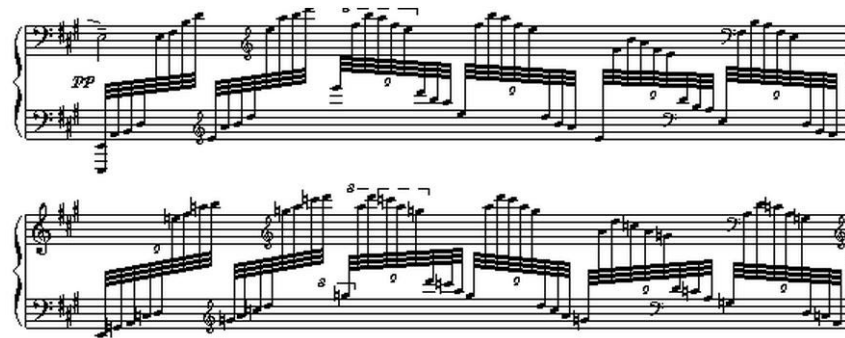


Figure 2a: Piano adaptation, mm. 53-59 (cadenza connection)

Note: Source: Tong and Wang (2013, pp. 31-32).

Dynamic planning. The cadenza begins at pp, grows toward an ff peak, and recedes through ritardando and softer dynamics; mm. 61-87 rebuild the climax through thicker texture, wider register, and dynamic intensification; mm. 88-90 close at pp. The resulting curve-soft opening, growth, peak, release, climactic return, and soft ending-organizes large-scale tension.





Figure 2b: Piano adaptation, mm. 66-79 (climactic reprise)

Note: Source: Tong and Wang (2013, pp. 32-33).

Taken together, these techniques do more than lengthen the source. They assign different structural roles to successive appearances of the theme: establishment in mm. 10-32, development in mm. 33-52, cadenza transition in mm. 53-60, intensified reprise in mm. 61-87, and closure in mm. 88-90. The piano simultaneously carries melody, bass, harmony, inner voices, and connective material. The source melody consequently becomes an instrumental theme that can be stated, developed, connected, reprised, and closed without lyrics or voice.

Discussion

Following Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013), this adaptation is best understood as medium-specific re-creation rather than fidelity-based transfer. It differs from transcription because the twelve-measure sung theme is not merely redistributed for piano: Wang adds an independent introduction, expands thematic presentation, creates a developmental variation, inserts a cadenza and transition, intensifies the reprise, and supplies a coda. It differs from reproduction because lyrics and voice are removed and replaced by piano-specific melodic, bass, harmonic, inner-voice, registral, and dynamic functions. It also exceeds simple thematic variation because variation is only one stage in a larger formal trajectory whose sections assume distinct preparatory, developmental, transitional, recapitulative, climactic, and closing roles. The medium therefore changes not only sonority but also the formal work performed by the source theme.

The sectional interpretation broadly agrees with Wang Junyi (2023), but the phrase-by-phrase comparison here specifies the measures in which all four vocal phrases reappear and separates stable thematic features from surface transformation. Chang (2023) emphasizes differences between piano versions; the present analysis instead explains how transformation proceeds through a continuous formal sequence. The findings also give concrete support to accounts of Wang's national style, polyphonic organization, and Chinese aesthetic orientation (Peng, 2004; Wei, 1999; Zhu, 2023). The study is limited to one published piano edition, one comparative vocal score, and documentary sources; recordings, performance practice, and audience studies may reveal how these score-based structures are realized and perceived.



Conclusion

Objective 1 is answered by the finding that all four vocal phrases remain traceable in mm. 10-32 through stable contour, structural tones, rhythmic skeleton, phrase order, and cadential direction, while phrase length, harmony, texture, and register are transformed. The title and recurring theme therefore maintain a verifiable musical relationship to Liuyang River. Objective 2 is answered by the finding that ornamental inflection, modal harmony, polyphonic texture, registral design, cadenza figuration, and dynamic planning assign the theme new functions of presentation, variation, transition, intensified reprise, climax, and closure, thereby reconstructing the source material as an autonomous piano solo. Material transformation supplies thematic continuity; medium-specific structural reconstruction gives the theme a new temporal scale, sonorous depth, and solo-performance logic.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for the Application of Research Results

Analysis, teaching, and performance may follow four steps: introduce the song's historical context; identify stable thematic features; trace material transformation; and explain how piano techniques produce sectional and large-scale functions. Performance should preserve the upper melodic line while ornaments, harmony, texture, register, cadenza, and dynamics clarify establishment, development, return, and closure.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may compare recordings and interview performers about tempo, touch, pedaling, and sonority; audience studies may examine thematic recognition and historical-cultural association. The framework may also be applied comparatively to Wang Jianzhong's other piano adaptations of Chinese red songs.

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