

# Musical narratives in *The Last Emperor*: The power of leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments in storytelling

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## Abstract

This study explores music's narrative and emotional functions in *The Last Emperor* (1987), focusing on the strategic use of leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments. Rather than serving as a mere atmospheric accompaniment, music in the film functions as an active narrative force that shapes character development, emotional resonance, and cultural perception. Through a qualitative, interpretive framework, the research examines how recurring musical themes—leitmotifs—are dynamically altered in instrumentation, tempo, and harmony to reflect the protagonist Puyi's psychological evolution. These motifs serve as structural and emotional anchors, guiding the audience through the film's shifting narrative and thematic contours. Moreover, the study investigates the role of traditional Chinese instruments, particularly the *erhu* and *konghou*, in reinforcing cultural identity and emotional nuance. Their expressive timbres and integration into the Western orchestral fabric provide historical authenticity and a cross-cultural soundscape that bridges Eastern and Western musical traditions. Drawing on music semiotics and film music theory, the study employs thematic analysis, timbral examination, and audiovisual synchronization to understand how these musical elements contribute to a multisensory cinematic experience. The findings suggest that leitmotifs in *The Last Emperor* are not static musical tags but dynamic narrative agents that evolve alongside the characters' emotional and cultural transformations. Traditional Chinese instruments, when merged with Western orchestration, act as cultural bridges and emotional amplifiers that heighten both historical context and viewer empathy. Together, these musical strategies construct a layered narrative experience that deepens the audience's engagement intellectually, culturally, and emotionally. This study contributes to the discourse on cross-cultural film scoring, demonstrating music's capacity to construct meaning, evoke emotion, and convey cultural identity in visually rich and sonically immersive narratives.

## Keywords

*cross-cultural scoring, emotional resonance, film music narrative, leitmotif, traditional Chinese instruments*

## Introduction

In cinematic storytelling, music is crucial in setting the emotional tone and reinforcing narrative structure and cultural identity. From sweeping orchestral scores to subtle instrumental cues, film music can evoke memory, guide audience interpretation, and deepen character development. As Lipscomb and Tolchinsky (2012) observe, music also plays a vital communicative role in cinema by shaping narrative understanding through expressive nuance and stylistic convention. While much scholarly attention has been given to the

general functions of film music, fewer studies have examined the intricate interplay between leitmotifs and traditional instrumentation, particularly in films situated at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultural narratives.

*The Last Emperor* (1987), directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, offers a rich canvas for such exploration. As a historical epic recounting the life of Puyi, the last Emperor of China, the film navigates themes of imperial legacy, personal transformation, and political upheaval. What distinguishes its musical approach is the integration

of Western leitmotif techniques with traditional Chinese instruments, such as the *erhu* and *konghou* (Figure 1). The *erhu* is a two-stringed bowed instrument with a cylindrical resonator covered in snakeskin, often referred to as the “Chinese violin” for its expressive, voice-like tone and wide vibrato capabilities. The *konghou* is a plucked string instrument resembling a vertical harp, historically used in imperial court music and

revived in modern times for its bell-like clarity and ornamental glissandi. These instruments are not merely ornamental but play a central role in shaping the film’s emotional and cultural soundscape. Composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne, and Cong Su, the score merges emotional sensitivity with cultural specificity, rendering music as background ambiance and a vital narrative force.



Figure 1. *Erhu* and *konghou*

This study explores how leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instrumentation work together to shape emotional perception and narrative meaning in *The Last Emperor*. Using a dual framework of leitmotif theory and music semiotics, the research investigates how recurring musical themes and culturally coded timbres communicate psychological states, cultural transitions, and evolving identities. Through this lens, the study demonstrates how music functions as a cross-cultural storytelling device, transcending language, geography, and genre.

### **Theoretical Framework: Leitmotif Theory and Music Semiotics**

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical perspectives—leitmotif theory and music semiotics.

Leitmotif theory, rooted in 19th-century

Wagnerian opera, explores the structural and narrative functions of recurring musical themes assigned to characters, ideas, or settings. These motifs establish thematic coherence and psychological depth within a work (Bribitzer-Stull, 2015; Meyer, 2013). In cinema, leitmotifs function as identifiers and evolving narrative agents. Lehman (2018) conceptualized them as “musical architecture”—flexible in tempo, orchestration, and harmony—adapting to character development and emotional shifts, thus enhancing narrative cohesion and audience engagement.

Complementing this theory, music semiotics approaches music as a symbolic system in which sound operates as a signifier within a multilayered cultural and emotional context. According to Charles S. Peirce and Roman Jakobson, musical signs can be classified as:

- Icons, which resemble the emotions or actions they represent (e.g., rising melodic lines suggesting aspiration);
- Indexes, which point to emotional or physical causes (e.g., dissonance indicating tension); and
- Symbols, which rely on shared cultural codes and associations (e.g., rhythmic military patterns evoking nationalism) (Tarasti, 2002).

Mammadova (2025) expands on this foundation by emphasizing the three dimensions of semiotic analysis: syntax (the structural rules and patterns of musical signs), semantics (the conveyed meanings and emotional associations), and pragmatics (the interaction between the sign and the interpreter within a sociocultural context). From this perspective, each musical element—tone, rhythm, texture, or form—can serve not only expressive but also communicative and structural functions. Musical meaning, then, is not fixed but emerges through cultural experience, performer interpretation, and audience perception.

### Related Literature

While film music's narrative and emotional role has been widely researched, few studies have explored how leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instrumentation function together within a cross-cultural cinematic framework. This study builds on previous works by combining semiotic theory, psychological research, and film music analysis to show how music actively supports narrative development, emotional resonance, and cultural identity in *The Last Emperor*.

Gorbman's (1987) foundational work conceptualized film music as an "unheard" semiotic system that influenced narrative perception even when not noticed consciously. Bribitzer-Stull (2015) and Meyer (2013) extended this work by tracing the evolution of leitmotifs from Wagnerian opera to Hollywood cinema, demonstrating

how changes in motif harmony, rhythm, and orchestration mirror shifts in character psychology. Lehman (2018) emphasized how networks of leitmotifs, particularly in the *Star Wars* franchise, formed complex emotional architectures that enhanced narrative cohesion. Similarly, Leinberger (2021) explores thematic reuse in classical Hollywood, noting Max Steiner's self-referential use of love themes across films like *Now, Voyager* and *Mildred Pierce*. These studies affirmed that leitmotifs were flexible narrative devices that grew in complexity and significance alongside the characters and plot.

Simultaneously, Chattah (2006) and Chanan (2019) applied music semiotics to film, illustrating how musical gestures - modality, timbre, and articulation - act as emotional and cultural signs. Kendall (2010) revisited semiotic theory in multimedia contexts, underscoring how sound constructs meaning in combination with visual media. Mera (2002) adds a complementary perspective by analyzing how musical humor and irony shift audience interpretations contextually, reinforcing the idea that musical meaning is highly contingent on narrative framing. Tagg (2012) underscored music's communicative role across cultural boundaries, describing how audiovisual congruence can heighten viewer interpretation and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Empirical studies have added to this theoretical base. Pallesen et al. (2005) demonstrated how different chord types elicited varying emotional responses - major chords are rated as happy, minor as sad, and dissonant as tense - especially among musicians. Figure 2 illustrates these findings, affirming the psychological basis for associating musical harmony with emotional valence. Parke et al. (2007) demonstrated that articulation and timbre significantly influenced emotional interpretation when matched with ambiguous visuals.

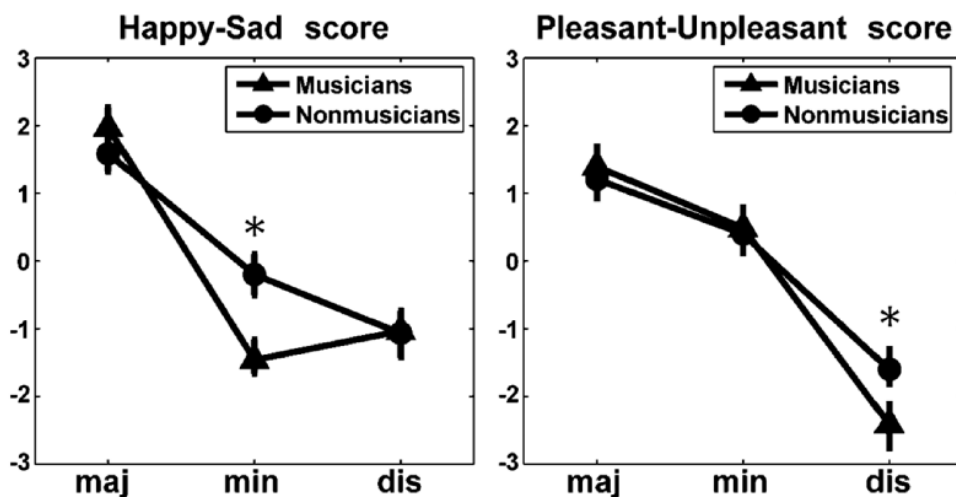


Figure 2. Emotional ratings (Mean  $\pm$  SE) of major, minor, and dissonant chords. Musicians rated dissonant chords as significantly more unpleasant and minor chords as significantly sadder than nonmusicians (extracted from Pallesen et al., 2005)

Cohen's (2005) experiments on audiovisual congruence built on these findings by showing how pitch and tempo influenced emotional interpretation. Figure 3 illustrates how auditory stimuli were created using varying pitch heights (C3, C4, and C5) and rhythmic values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth

notes). Figure 4 shows visual stimuli of a bouncing ball at corresponding heights and speeds. When music and visuals matched in tempo or register, participants reported higher happiness (Figure 5). This suggests that the emotional impact is amplified when audiovisual components are synchronized.

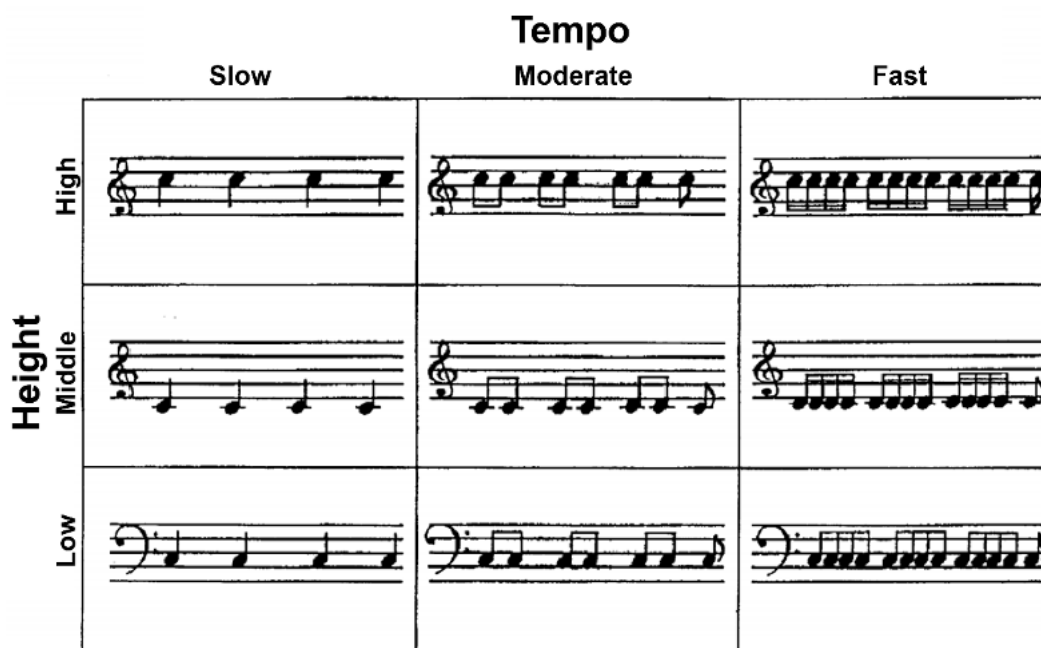


Figure 3. Representation of different musical soundtracks created from three tempos and three pitch heights of a repeating tone (extracted from Cohen, 2005)

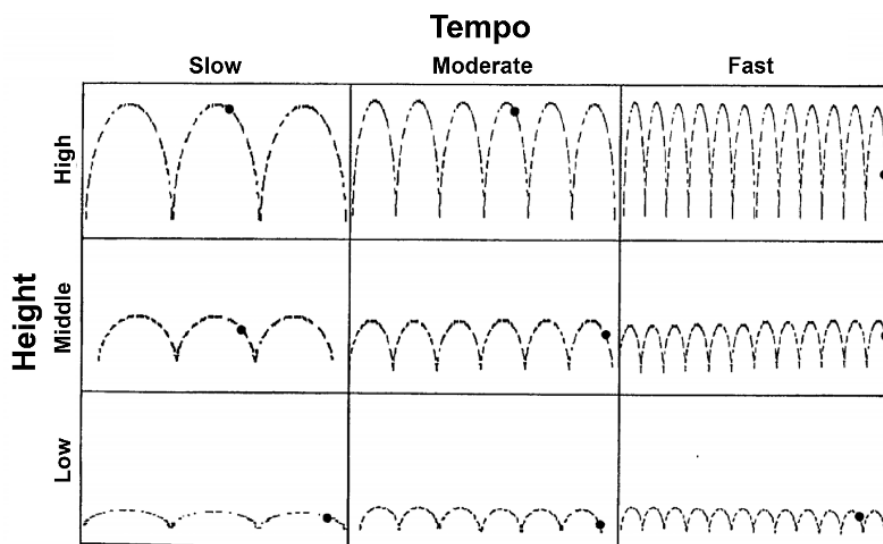


Figure 4. Representation of different video patterns created from three tempos and three heights of a bouncing ball (extracted from Cohen, 2005)

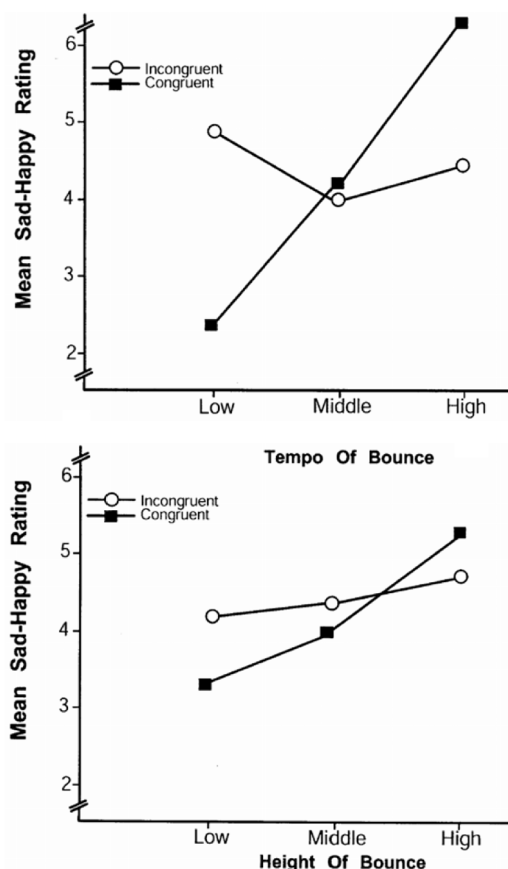


Figure 5. Mean rated happiness represented by the bouncing ball under congruent and incongruent audiovisual tempo and height combinations (data from Cohen, 2005)

Moving to traditional instrumentation, Cooke (2008) noted how instruments, such as the *erhu* and *konghou*, functioned as emotional amplifiers and cultural markers. Hou (2024) found that these instruments evoked nostalgia and longing, especially when blended with Western orchestration. Tian and Ng (2024) analyzed the *erhu*'s frequency profile, showing a peak around 1600 Hz, which contributed to its piercing and mournful tone (Figure 6). The *konghou*, in contrast, resonated around 1000 Hz, producing a bell-like clarity that evoked serenity and elegance. These unique timbral qualities were deployed in *The Last Emperor* to signify emotional transformation and cultural memory.

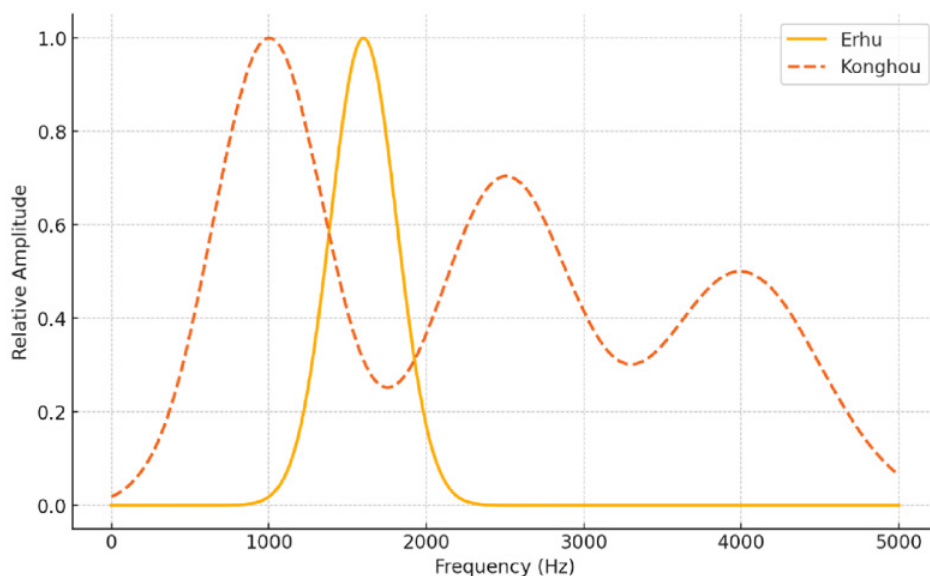


Figure 6. Frequency characteristics of the *erhu* and *konghou*

Qiu et al. (2021) profiled the *qudi*, also known as the *dizi*, a traditional Chinese transverse bamboo flute that is widely used in various genres of Chinese folk and classical music (Figure 7). The instrument is known for its bright and penetrating tone and features a unique buzzing membrane (*dimo*) that adds a distinctive timbral quality. Their study demonstrated how the *qudi*'s tonal dynamics effectively enriched dramatic tension in audiovisual contexts.

Wang and Shpagina (2024) examined the synthesis of traditional Chinese string instruments with Western compositional techniques, suggesting that such integration not only preserved cultural heritage but also enhanced emotional complexity in modern film scores. This cross-cultural dialogue is further illustrated in the works of Tan Dun, in which traditional Chinese and Western instruments interact to build multicultural sonic narratives (Litvikh & Lyu, 2024)<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 7. Qudi, traditional Chinese bamboo flute

Despite these advances, few studies have systematically analyzed how leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments interact to convey character development and cultural tension. One such study was conducted by He (2024), examining the use of traditional Chinese music elements in the film *Full River Red* to show how they contribute to emotional intensity and national symbolism within contemporary Chinese cinema. This gap is addressed through a case analysis of *The Last Emperor*, which applied the above frameworks to show how music enhanced

<sup>1</sup> Give information about this instrument and show their pictures. It will provide illustrative information and will help readers to be more imaginative.



the film's emotional arc and cross-cultural resonance. By analyzing musical motifs and instrumental timbres in conjunction with narrative shifts, this study revealed how music transcends its supportive role to become a central force in cinematic storytelling.

## Research Aim and Problem

The central aim of this study is to investigate how music functions as an active narrative force in *The Last Emperor* (1987) by analyzing the interplay between “leitmotifs” and “traditional Chinese instruments.” Rather than treating film music as an atmospheric accompaniment, this study positions it as a “semiotic and narrative agent” that contributes to character development, emotional engagement, and cultural representation.

Specifically, this research addresses two questions:

- **How do leitmotifs function as narrative and emotional tools in *The Last Emperor*?** This question explores the use of recurring thematic material to represent character identity, psychological transformation, and thematic cohesion. It investigates how variations in instrumentation, tempo, and harmony reflect the evolving emotional landscape of the protagonist, Puyi, and contribute to the overall narrative structure.
- **How does the integration of traditional Chinese musical instruments contribute to the film's cultural and emotional depth?**

This question examines the role of instruments, such as the *erhu* and *konghou*, in reinforcing the film's historical authenticity and cross-cultural resonance. It investigates how these instruments function as cultural signifiers and emotional amplifiers within the score.

This research is significant for two reasons. First, it contributes to the expanding field of

music semiotics by illustrating how musical motifs and instrumental timbres operate as meaningful signs within a cinematic context. Second, it provides a cross-cultural perspective on film scoring, highlighting how the fusion of Eastern and Western musical idioms enhances narrative complexity and emotional depth. Focusing on *The Last Emperor*, a film that epitomizes cultural hybridity, this study demonstrates the “transformative power of music” in global cinema and its capacity to bridge cultural, historical, and emotional divides through sonic storytelling.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in musicological and semiotic analysis. Rather than relying on statistical generalizations, it uncovers the nuanced narrative and emotional functions of film music through close reading and detailed score analysis. The research approach is interdisciplinary, integrating music theory, semiotics, psychology, and cultural studies to explore how sound shapes meaning within audiovisual media.

### Data Sources

The primary data for this study consisted of the original score and soundtrack recordings from *The Last Emperor* (1987), composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne, and Cong Su. Selected film scenes were transcribed and analyzed for their melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and orchestration features. The study focused on sequences that prominently featured leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments, including scenes from Puyi's childhood, exile, and moments of personal transformation.

Supplementary materials included:

- Interviews and commentaries from the composers (when available)
- Published analyses and orchestration notes

- Visual materials (film scenes) synchronized with music for audiovisual correlation
- Scholarly literature on leitmotif theory, music semiotics, and traditional Chinese instruments

### **Analytical Framework**

The analysis was conducted in three stages:

- **Thematic analysis:** Identifying recurring leitmotifs and cataloging their variations across narrative contexts.
- **Timbre and instrumentation analysis:** Examining how the *erhu*, *konghou*, and other traditional instruments interacted with Western orchestration to support emotional and cultural cues.
- **Semiotic interpretation:** Applying music semiotic theory to interpret how musical gestures function metaphorically, indexically, and symbolically within the narrative.

Moreover, spectrogram and frequency analysis were conducted on selected scenes to visualize the acoustic characteristics of traditional instruments and their interaction with orchestral textures. These visualizations substantiated the claims about timbral contrast and narrative function.

### **Procedure**

The film was viewed multiple times to identify musically significant scenes. These were analyzed frame-by-frame to synchronize musical gestures with cinematic elements, such as editing, lighting, and dialogue. Transcriptions were made manually, using notation software, to preserve musical fidelity, and scene timings were logged to ensure accurate cross-referencing between visuals and sound.

### **Ethics**

This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or personally identifiable data, and, therefore, did not

require formal ethical approval according to institutional and journal guidelines. Nevertheless, the authors maintained high ethical standards by ensuring proper attribution of all cited materials, securing appropriate permissions for audiovisual content used for academic purposes, and presenting the methodology and interpretations transparently. All musical examples and visual stills were selected with scholarly intent and used within the bounds of educational fair use. This ethical stance was taken to uphold academic integrity and ensure the responsible treatment of creative and cultural content throughout the study.

### **Leitmotif as a Narrative Tool for *The Last Emperor***

This analysis explores the intricate use of leitmotifs in *The Last Emperor*, a cinematic masterpiece that interweaves music with narratives to enhance emotional depth and storytelling. The film, set against the backdrop of the life of Puyi, the last Emperor of China, uses music as a background element and a narrative force that parallels and intensifies the onscreen drama. Through a detailed examination of specific scenes, this study delves into how the film's score, with its unique motifs and traditional Chinese instrumentation, echoes the characters' emotional arcs and historical context. Each section of this analysis focuses on key moments in the film, dissecting how leitmotifs and their development reflect Puyi's journey from innocence to the complexities of later life (Figures 8 and 9).



**home motif**

Chinese violin *mf*

Chinese harp *mf*

Violin I *mf*

Violin II *mf*

Viola *mf*

Violoncello *mf*

Double Bass *mf*

**home motif**

Chinese violin

Violin I *p*

Violin II *p*

Viola *p*

Violoncello *p*

Double Bass *p*

**Puyi left his mother**

**home motif**

Violin I *div. marcato*

Violin II *marcato*

Viola *marcato*

Violoncello *marcato*

Double Bass *mp*

**home motif**

Flute

Oboe

Horn

Violin I *div. Marcato*

Violin II *Marcato*

Viola *Marcato*

Violoncello *Marcato*

Double Bass *Marcato*

**Puyi left his wet nurse**

**home motif**

Violin I *p*

Double Bass *p*

**home motif**

Violin *pp*

**Puyi left his wife**

Figure 8. Variations of the “home” motif

Figure 9. Thematic persistence: Ostinato-based presentation of the “home” motif

### **Puyi Taken from His Mother by Soldiers**

In the scene that shows Puyi being brought to the palace, he is very young, facing separation from his mother, and only cries. The motif consists of two national instruments (Chinese violin and Chinese harp) playing in unison, and nationalism becomes an important part of the theme. At this time, the music depicts the image of the mother, who embraces Puyi, and the accompaniment of the string section is uncomplicated. The slow melody is presented in the bass area, which highlights the emotions of the mother who, although living within the feudal family system, is reluctant to lose her child.

### **Exposition**

The most prominent musical motif is built around a perfect fourth leap, ornamented with descending auxiliary tones and characterized by a distinct pentatonic style. This motif recurs throughout the movie and frequently accompanies key scenes involving Puyi and his family.

The motif employs relatively straightforward developmental techniques, such as repetition, sequence, inversion, and transpositional progression, preserving the motif’s essence, making it easily memorable for the audience, and connecting it with the

film's narrative. Its application often follows a ternary structure, serving as the primary musical material for the exposition and recapitulation sections, with a contrasting "climax" theme often inserted in between. The "home" theme is initially presented as Puyi's mother carries young Puyi out of the room when he is taken to the palace for the first time.

The music is tranquil, presented in harmony

using two traditional Chinese instruments - the Chinese harp (*guzheng*) and violin (*ehru*). The *guzheng* is a horizontal plucked zither with expressive pitch bending, while the *konghou* is a vertical harp-like instrument known for its lyrical and delicate tone. Embellishments performed on the Chinese harp are particularly characteristic of this ethnic style. The melody follows the E-flat major hexatonic scale, which consists of four motif repetitions (Figure 10).

The musical score for Figure 10 is a multi-staff arrangement. At the top right, a timecode '0:07:52-0:08:03' is displayed. A box labeled '"home" motif' with an arrow points to the first measure of the Chinese violin staff. The score includes the following staves from top to bottom: Chinese violin, Chinese harp, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The Chinese violin and harp parts feature a melodic motif in the first measure, which is then repeated in the subsequent measures. The other instruments provide harmonic support, with Violin I, Violin II, and Viola playing sustained notes, and Violoncello and Double Bass playing a rhythmic pattern. The dynamic marking 'mf' (mezzo-forte) is present in the first measure of the Chinese violin, Chinese harp, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello staves. The Chinese harp part also includes a 'pott.' (pizzicato) marking in the second measure.

Figure 10. Visualization reflected through instrumentation with the "home" motif

Regarding harmony, the composer draws inspiration primarily from the melody and continually emphasizes it, using the motif's core intervals (perfect fourth and fifth) in the development process. This maintains an overall pentatonic musical style. Through this tranquil, slow-paced, and ethnically rich music, the composer contrasts preceding musical elements, setting the scene for women in a feudal family, slowly walking toward the crowd and cradling their children.

As the mother carries Puyi and approaches the crowd, the background harmony gradually builds tension by altering rhythms and shifting to higher registers until Puyi reaches the sedan chair, at which point the music reaches its climax (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Notation example from the climax of the “home” motif in *The Last Emperor*

## Recapitulation

At the end of the scene in which Puyi enters the palace, Puyi’s mother walks out to bid him farewell as he is taken away (Figure 12), and the music reintroduces the “home” motif as its recurring segment. However, the melody is no longer played in unison with the Chinese harp (*guzheng*) and violin (*erhu*). Instead, it is performed using a Chinese violin solo with a string section. The Chinese violin’s performance in the lower register displays its unique timbre, which carries a distinct sad tone. The solo theme’s melody implies Puyi’s loneliness and sorrow when he enters the palace with a nurse. The collaboration with the string section, while retaining the ethnic style, adds a tonal unity,

suggesting this segment’s conclusion, where Puyi leaves his home (Figure 13).

Background harmony initially maintains the musical tension by utilizing a higher register. However, toward the end, it lowers the register, and the rhythm becomes steadier, creating a conclusive atmosphere. As the audience anticipates the music’s ending, the composer skips the motif’s reappearance, and the music abruptly concludes with a modulatory cadence. As Puyi’s mother sadly turns away, without looking back at the departure procession, the music suddenly ends, leaving the sound of receding hoofs. The music’s incomplete quality indicates that the movie has not concluded, leaving room for further development.



Figure 12. Puyi’s wet nurse watches as he is taken away by the guards (09:08)

The image shows a musical score for a film segment. The staves are labeled from top to bottom: Chinese violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The Chinese violin staff has a box labeled "home" motif with an arrow pointing to a specific melodic line. The time range 0:09:10-0:09:18 is indicated in the top right corner. The score shows the progression of the music across these instruments, with the Chinese violin playing a prominent role in the "home" motif.

Figure 13. Utilization of the “home” motif

### Wet Nurse Taken Away by Minister and Soldiers Exposition

In the image of losing the wet nurse, Puyi has grown up a bit and has some thoughts of his own, such as wanting to rebel against the ministers who have controlled him for a long time. Here, the music transitions back to a traditional orchestral style, emphasizing Puyi’s struggle against the entrenched feudal forces that have controlled him since childhood. The composition becomes more grandiose, incorporating a fuller orchestration with prominent brass and woodwinds. The melody rises to a high register, reinforced by multiple instruments playing in unison, heightening the tension between the opposing forces.

The core motif representing the “home” theme is repeatedly employed throughout the movie’s score, however, each appearance is adjusted according to the scene’s needs. For example, Puyi realizes he can only be the Emperor within the Forbidden City. However, the rest of the world has become a republic; his sorrowful moment recalls his only family member, his wet nurse. At this moment, he utters, “Where is Armo? Armo?” and the music begins to play.

In this section, the composer introduces two bars of the string tremolo as an introductory element. As the characters cautiously remain in their positions, the tremolo effect in the high register of the violins, with sixth intervals, indirectly emphasizes their helplessness in the face of the downfall of the Imperial authority. When the theme invoking Puyi’s brother’s crying is officially reintroduced, it differs from the previous version, as it incorporates an upbeat rhythm, adding a musical pulse and leading to the upcoming dynamic music (Figure 14).

This film segment primarily depicts Puyi searching for his wet nurse and involves several running scenes (Figure 15). The background musical accompaniment frequently employs a steady rhythm composed of quarter notes, creating a march-like musical style that harmonizes with the film’s content. As Puyi first runs off to find his wet nurse, the musical theme changes, and the film’s focus shifts. The thematic melody no longer uses traditional ethnic instruments and is played at a higher pitch, with music carried entirely by the string section. The accompanying voices feature a rhythmic pattern composed of quarter notes that echo Puyi’s footsteps as he searches for his wet nurse.

Figure 14 is a musical score snippet from *The Last Emperor*. It features five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The timecode 0:49:36-0:50:04 is displayed in the top right. Annotations include 'introduction' pointing to the start of the Violin I staff, 'home motif' pointing to the first measure of the Violin I staff, and 'div. marcato' pointing to the first measure of the Violin II staff. The Violin I staff has a '2x only' annotation. The Double Bass staff is marked 'mp'.

Figure 14. Utilization of the “home” motif to explain Puyi’s emotion



Figure 15. After realizing the establishment of the Republic, Puyi sadly goes to look for his mother (49:54)

As numerous attendants rush toward Puyi, the music transitions into sustained tremolos with longer durations, emphasizing the chaotic footsteps of the characters. Action movies frequently employ the concept where physical movement equals musical events’ speed “to intensify visual action.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the composer skillfully shortens the duration of the thematic motif, subtly signaling that the characters are closing in on Puyi. The sudden introduction of the brass French horn sections evokes the image of adult males and amplifies the musical tension, mirroring the plot’s progression toward an intense phase (Figure 16).

<sup>2</sup> See Juan R. Chattah’s dissertation, *Semiotics, pragmatics, and metaphor in film music analysis*, p. 33.



Figure 16 shows a musical score for the "home" motif. The score is in 3/4 time. The instruments listed are Horn, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. A box labeled "home" motif points to the first measure of the Horn staff. The time range 0:50:05-0:50:08 is indicated in the top right corner.

Figure 16. "Home" motif with horn and tremolo

## Recapitulation

In the concluding segment of Puyi's pursuit of his wet nurse, a new development emerges in the recurring "home" theme. In contrast to the music accompanying Puyi's initial

search, the soundtrack incorporates three additional instruments - a French horn, flute, and oboe. These instruments create a fuller sonic effect, subtly suggesting Puyi's final separation from his wet nurse (Figure 17).

Figure 17 shows a musical score for the "open the door" scene. The score is in common time (C). The instruments listed are Flute, Oboe, Horn, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. A box labeled "Puyi's image" points to the first measure of the Flute staff. A box labeled "wet nurse's image" points to the first measure of the Oboe staff. A box labeled "attendant's image" points to the first measure of the Horn staff. The time range 0:51:16-0:51:26 is indicated in the top right corner. The score includes markings for "div. Marcart" and "Marcart".

Figure 17. Utilization of the "home" motif for the "open the door" scene

The scene involves three distinct characters - the attendees leading Puyi's wet nurse away, the wet nurse, and Puyi chasing after her (Figure 18). The composer parallels this by introducing three instruments. The flute, with its transparent and melancholic tone in the mid-range, symbolizes young Puyi's vulnerability and helplessness. The oboe, playing in the midrange, carries a sense of sorrow and features pronounced reed sounds, signifying mournful weeping as Puyi's wet nurse departs. With its repetitive harmonies,

the French horn section represents the attendees accompanying Puyi's wet nurse. Brass instruments are employed to allude to male characters, and the rapid staccato notes in this section convey the attendants' anxious demeanors as they constantly glance back and fear Puyi's pursuit. Overall, this composition underscores the poignant moment of Puyi's final pursuit of his wet nurse, with the instruments enhancing the scene's emotional depth and complexity.



**Figure 18.** The guards take the wet nurse away, and Puyi runs after her (51:32-51:34)

In another scene, the combination of flute, clarinet, and first violin playing the thematic motif at the same pitch level creates a blended tonality that enhances the musical tension, implying that Puyi's eager pursuit of his wet nurse has reached its zenith. The music concludes with a modulation of the motif, and as the music ends, Puyi's calls echo throughout the vast Forbidden City.

### **Puyi's Wife Is Taken Away by a Japanese Doctor and Soldiers**

The primary conflict shifts in the scene where the Japanese take away Puyi's wife, the Empress. The conflict is no longer between Puyi and the feudal forces but between Puyi and Japanese fascists. This is the most intense part of the film, and the music evolves into a "horror" style to depict the cruelty of the Japanese. Thematic motifs are no longer played in unison with a large ensemble of instruments, and the blending of different timbres is eliminated, leaving only string instruments. The music is reduced to two melodic lines with high

tension. The extended motif conveys Puyi's oppressed state under Japanese control, and the tense sound of chromatic progression in the accompanying voices hints at the fear of the fascist rule.

### **Exposition**

To exert greater control over Puyi, the Japanese forcibly took his wife hostage (Figure 19). Puyi attempts to stop them by running after them, but he is too late. The music is derived from this exposition section's "family" motif. However, this creates a heightened and terrifying sonic effect along with the accompanying voices (Figure 20). The accompaniment emphasizes the core motif's perfect fourth intervals while accentuating the half-step progressions, portraying the aggressors' terrifying actions toward Puyi and his family. Simultaneously, the "home" motif is played relatively slowly by employing rhythmic augmentation, creating a musical backdrop that underscores Puyi's helplessness in the face of the Japanese.



Figure 19. Upon learning that the Japanese have taken the Empress, Puyi runs after her (03:09:04-03:09:44)

Figure 20. Extended “home” motif

At the film’s end, following Japan’s surrender and the return of Puyi’s wife, she is driven to madness by the torment inflicted by the Japanese. When Puyi is reunited with his wife, the music used when the Japanese forcibly removed her is employed again. Its tense sonic effects underscore the cruel control exerted by the Japanese on Puyi and his family.

### Recapitulation

In the scene where the Japanese forcibly take away Puyi’s wife, Puyi looks helpless (Figure 21). At this moment, the “home” motif’s reprise omits the auxiliary tones’

embellishments and is composed of a perfect fourth interval (Figure 22). This simplified reprise meets the audience’s expectations. It conveys Puyi’s sense of helplessness and unspoken frustration in a concise and subdued musical style.



Figure 21. Puyi is watching his wife being forcibly taken away by the Japanese

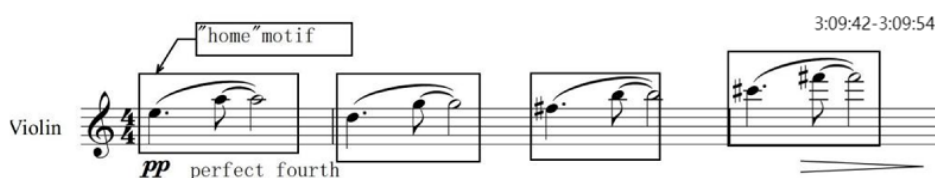


Figure 22. Melodic simplification of the “home” motif

## Conclusion

This study examined how *The Last Emperor* employed leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments as narrative and emotional tools. It investigated how leitmotifs contributed to character development and thematic cohesion, and how traditional instrumentation enhanced the film’s emotional and cultural depth. The findings demonstrated that music actively shaped the storytelling process. Through the evolution of leitmotifs and the integration of traditional Chinese musical elements, the film achieved a harmonious fusion of auditory and visual storytelling, resonating with audiences across cultural and emotional contexts.

Leitmotifs in *The Last Emperor* were more than recurring themes. They were dynamic narrative devices that evolved alongside the story, reflecting the complexities of Puyi’s psychological and emotional journeys. From the poignant transformations of the “home” motif to the intricate interplay of cultural and emotional symbolism, these motifs functioned as emotional signifiers and structural anchors. They guided the audience through Puyi’s shifting identity, struggles

with loss, and search for redemption, providing a rich subtext that complemented the visual narrative.

The film’s integration of traditional Chinese instruments, such as the *erhu* and *konghou*, further enriched its soundscape. These instruments did not exist in isolation; instead, they were woven into the orchestral fabric, blending with Western harmonic structures and instrumental timbres. This cross-cultural synthesis bridged the gap between the East and West through the inclusion of Western brass instruments and the harmonization of Eastern melodic structures (pentatonic scales) with Western orchestral techniques. The orchestration allowed Chinese instruments to interact with Western strings, woodwinds, and brass, creating a unique hybrid sound that enhanced cultural authenticity and cinematic universality. By carefully layering these elements, the score transcended cultural divisions, making the film’s historical and emotional dimensions more accessible to diverse audiences.

By demonstrating the transformative power of music in cinema, this study highlighted how leitmotifs and traditional instrumentation



did more than enhance atmosphere; they functioned as narrative collaborators that deepened audience engagement. As film scoring evolved, *The Last Emperor* served as a benchmark for composers and filmmakers seeking to harness music's potential as a storytelling device. By combining cultural specificity with universal emotional appeal, the film illustrated music's boundless capacity to enhance storytelling, making it a critical case study for future explorations in film musicology. In summary, this study finds that leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments in *The Last Emperor* function as dynamic semiotic tools that shape cultural meaning, emotional depth, and narrative continuity.

### Recommendations

Future research should explore the cultural interactions between Eastern and Western film music. Comparative studies on the use of traditional Asian instruments in Hollywood films and Western orchestration in Chinese cinema could provide deeper insights into cross-cultural musical storytelling. Additionally, examining audience perception of film music would be valuable. While this study focused on the structural and narrative functions of leitmotifs and traditional instruments, future research could analyze how audiences from different cultural backgrounds interpret pentatonic melodies, leitmotifs, and traditional instruments, offering a broader understanding of the universality and cultural specificity of film music.

With advancements in AI-driven composition, digital orchestration, and immersive sound technology, it is necessary to investigate how modern technology can integrate traditional instruments while maintaining cultural authenticity. Research on virtual instrument modeling of the *erhu* and *konghou* or adaptive film scoring techniques would provide valuable insights into the evolving role of technology in film music composition.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of leitmotif usage across different film

traditions could enhance the understanding of narrative musical techniques in various cultural contexts, such as Wagnerian leitmotifs in Hollywood and recurring musical themes in Asian cinema. Research should examine how composers balance the preservation and innovation of traditional music, particularly in historical films where music serves as a cultural identifier and a modern storytelling tool. Investigating how composers maintain cultural authenticity while ensuring accessibility to global audiences would contribute to discussions on the sustainability of cultural heritage in film music. Addressing these research areas will expand academic discourse on film music, bridge cultural narratives, and advance interdisciplinary approaches to storytelling through sound.

In addition to its academic contribution, this study may also offer practical implications for composers, arrangers, and educators involved in cross-cultural film music. For example, those working in applied settings such as film scoring, music production, or music pedagogy may find value in understanding how traditional instruments can be adapted into contemporary audiovisual contexts without compromising cultural integrity. The findings may support the development of culturally sensitive approaches to orchestration and inspire new models of creative collaboration across musical traditions.

### Limitations of the study

While this study provides insights into the leitmotifs and traditional Chinese instruments utilized in *The Last Emperor*, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis primarily focused on musical structure and narrative function without empirical validation through audience perception studies. Future research could incorporate listener response analysis or eye-tracking and emotional response studies to assess how different audiences interpret these musical elements. This study relied on qualitative musicological analysis,

which lacks quantitative support through computational music analysis. Employing spectrogram analysis, pitch-tracking algorithms, and statistical methods could provide a comprehensive understanding of how leitmotifs evolve throughout the film.

Additionally, this study focused on *The Last Emperor*, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies examining leitmotif usage and traditional instrumentation across multiple films, particularly within other cross-cultural film scores, would offer broader insights into global film music trends. This research does not extensively address production aspects, such as composer intent, director influence, and industry constraints that shape film music composition. Interviews with composers, music supervisors, and film editors could provide context regarding the decision-making processes behind integrating traditional and Western musical elements.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the understanding of film music as a narrative force, highlighting the cultural and emotional power of leitmotifs and traditional instrumentation. Future research will enhance the multidisciplinary discourse on film music, cultural representation, and audience perception in cinema.

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