

# Reconstructing the Narrative of Chinese Origins in Native American Music: The Mutual Corroboration of Pentatonic Modes and Cultural Functions

CaiLingjie

Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu Sichuan, 610101;

**Abstract:** The relationship between ancient Eastern and American civilizations has been widely discussed and remains highly controversial. Since the 19th century, discourse on the origins of ancient civilizations has been dominated by Western-centered historical frameworks, resulting in marginalizing China's contributions. In light of this phenomenon, it is urgent to review the concept of civilization and reconstruct its history. China is a cradle of human civilization and has long held a pivotal role in human history, making undeniable contributions to world civilization. This paper examines the spread of civilization from the East to the Americas through a comparative analysis of musical modes and cultural functions, providing a musicological perspective on the "Yindian" hypothesis.

**Keywords:** comparative civilization; Pentatonic Modes; Cultural Functions; American indigenous; music

**DOI:** 10.69979/3041-0843.25.04.044

Reexamining the view of civilization and reconstructing its history has become urgent. Since the publication of *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, Gavin Menzies has notably disrupted the long-standing Eurocentric narrative of global maritime history. Drawing upon an extensive body of historical research and cartographic evidence, Menzies reinterprets the Age of Discovery, positing a significant—though controversial—role for Ming China in shaping early global exploration. While his claims have sparked substantial debate and scrutiny within the historical community, they have also catalyzed a broader re-evaluation of world history paradigms. Within China, this intellectual momentum has given rise to a revisionist school of historical thought aimed at re-examining dominant Western historical narratives. Among its most prominent figures is Professor Huang Heqing, whose works—*No Need to Always Cite Greece* and *Light from China*—offer systematic and comprehensive critiques of the Western-centered historiographical tradition that crystallized in the 19th century. Employing what he terms the method of “proving history with diagrams,” Huang argues that ancient Chinese civilization not only originated key technologies such as the Four Great Inventions, but also exerted far-reaching influence on European development in areas including metallurgy, ceramics, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, the arts, and philosophical thought. His scholarship reveals the fabrications and falsifications underlying the canonical narrative of Western civilization shaped by Eurocentric historiography. It is through the pioneering efforts of revisionist scholars such as Menzies and Huang that the author has come to recognize the extent to which narratives concerning the origins of ancient civilizations have been dominated—if not monopolized—by Western-centric frameworks. In this context, the task of unearthing obscured historical truths and rigorously re-evaluating the genesis of global civilizations emerges as a critical undertaking for contemporary scholarship.

The potential historical connections between ancient Chinese civilization and the early civilizations of the American continents have long attracted scholarly interest. Drawing on textual analysis, archaeological excavations, and the interpretation of jade inscriptions, researchers have uncovered increasing evidence pointing to deep-rooted linkages between the two. Among the more prominent theories are the “Beringia Migration” hypothesis and the “Yindian” hypothesis, which posits that a group from the Chinese Shang-Yin civilization may have migrated eastward across the Pacific and contributed to the formation of early American indigenous cultures. According to such views, contemporary Native American populations may partially descend from ancient Chinese settlers, with some aspects of early American civilization sharing

common origins with those of China—thus suggesting the existence of a shared cultural lineage. Although still contested within mainstream historiography, these hypotheses have prompted interdisciplinary scholarly efforts aimed at re-evaluating the traditional narrative of civilizational development. For instance, Ouyang Wenliang, in *Chinese Ancestors' Exploration of the Americas*, draws on ancient Chinese classics such as the Classic of Mountains and Seas to argue for early Chinese maritime migration to the Americas. Parallel studies in comparative philology, linguistics, astronomy, and folklore have also been conducted to trace symbolic and structural continuities between Chinese and Native American traditions. Wang Dawei and Song Baozhong's collaborative work *The Mystery of Yindian* (first published under the title *Illustrated Book of American Totems*) investigates connections through phonetics, totemic symbolism, tribal origin myths, and material culture, presenting a detailed argument for cultural diffusion across the Pacific. Yet one domain that remains notably underexplored within this field of inquiry is that of music. This lacuna raises a compelling question: to what extent can musicological evidence—through the comparative analysis of musical modes and structures, instrumental forms, and the sociocultural functions of music—offer a distinctive and credible contribution to the broader discourse on early trans-Pacific civilizational interactions? Such an approach holds the potential to introduce a novel analytical framework for re-examining the origins, transmission pathways, and cultural convergences of ancient civilizations.

Civilizations, much like genetic codes, do not evolve in isolation—nor do their similarities arise by mere coincidence. The arguments presented in this study will undoubtedly provoke debate and perhaps even sharp criticism. Yet it is precisely through sustained scholarly dialogue and critical engagement that humanity moves closer to forging a renewed understanding of the global civilizational past. Music, as a cultural form that has evolved alongside human civilization, functions not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a repository of collective memory and cultural practice. In the present paper, an interdisciplinary methodology combining music archaeology and comparative analysis is employed to examine the material and intangible musical remains of Native American traditions. The discussion proceeds along two principal axes: modal systems and tonal organization and the sociocultural functions of music within ritual, communal life, and symbolic practice. Through this framework, the study seeks to offer an alternative evidentiary perspective for understanding the possible connections between ancient Chinese and early American civilizations. The author fully acknowledges the limitations of both her research capacity and the availability of relevant information. The arguments advanced here remain tentative and open to revision. Accordingly, the author earnestly invites critique, correction, and constructive engagement from scholars across disciplines in the hope that even flawed or partial attempts may contribute to a broader scholarly effort to revisit and reconstruct the history of world civilization.

## 1 Dialogue among Civilizations through the Chinese Pentatonic Modes

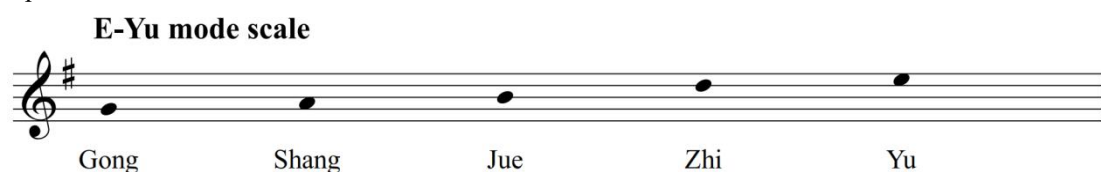
Throughout the long arc of human musical development, regional musical traditions have been profoundly shaped by factors such as ethnicity, philosophical thought, language, ritual custom, and prevailing aesthetic ideals. These diverse influences have given rise to distinctive musical styles across different historical periods and cultural contexts. One of the primary manifestations of these differences lies in the construction and use of modal systems. Modes—defined as organized systems of pitches centered around a principal or tonic tone—form stable and internally coherent tonal frameworks. Through the systematic arrangement of intervallic relationships, each modal system acquires structural integrity and expressive identity. Owing to their unique scalar configurations and pitch hierarchies, different modal systems have come to serve as markers of cultural and regional musical identity. Ancient Chinese music, with its long-standing philosophical and artistic heritage, developed a highly distinctive musical system shaped by indigenous cosmological views, ritual needs, and aesthetic paradigms. Among its defining features, the Chinese pentatonic mode stands out as the most representative. This five-tone scale system, rooted in Chinese philosophical cosmology and artistic practice, not only constitutes the structural foundation of traditional Chinese music but also functions as its expressive core. Its distinctive modal logic and scalar architecture set it apart from the musical systems of other civilizations, making it both a cultural symbol and an essential element of China's musical identity.

The Chinese pentatonic tuning system constitutes a distinctive tonal framework rooted in traditional Chinese musical thought. It is based on the structured relationship among five core scale degrees—Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu—which

serve as the foundational tones of the system and are typically arranged in this specific order. Several defining characteristics distinguish the Chinese pentatonic modes. First, the scale structure is organized around these five principal tones (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu), which form the essential tonal backbone. Second, the intervallic structure of these tones is limited to specific relationships: there is only one major third interval—between Gong and Jue—while the remaining adjacent tones are generally separated by major seconds or minor thirds. Notably, the system lacks chromatic semitones and augmented intervals, which are common in Western musical systems. Third, the principle “without the Gong mode, there would be no complete mode” underscores the central role of the Gong tone in defining modal identity and tonal orientation within the pentatonic framework. Fourth, in pursuit of an aesthetic ideal characterized by balance and serenity, melodic motion in traditional Chinese music typically proceeds by stepwise intervals—predominantly major seconds and minor thirds—with larger leaps (exceeding a fifth) employed sparingly for expressive effect. Fifth, non-pentatonic tones, when they occur, usually function as ornamental or auxiliary tones. Even when these tones are not strictly auxiliary, they are often resolved through characteristic techniques such as tonal substitution (e.g., “taking the QingJue as the Gong” and “taking the BianGong as the Jue”) or modal rotation, preserving the overall pentatonic integrity. Ultimately, to determine whether a given piece of music adheres to the Chinese pentatonic mode, one must examine whether the melodic structure is fundamentally constructed upon the five principal tones—Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu—which together constitute the essential tonal identity of the system.

The question of whether traditional Native American music bears a close relationship to Chinese traditional music has been affirmed by some scholars in the field of ethnomusicology. It is well known that many Native American musical traditions are characterized by monophonic texture and pentatonic scales. However, these two shared features alone are insufficient to substantiate a deeper historical or cultural connection. A more rigorous comparative analysis—particularly from the perspective of modal structures and tuning systems—is necessary to explore potential links. If the Chinese pentatonic scale is understood as a set of musical genes deeply embedded within the fabric of Chinese civilization, then the exploration and comparison of Native American modal systems may be seen as a form of acoustic “genetic testing”—a method of tracing musical origins within a cross-cultural framework. For example, in the renowned piece *El Cóndor Pasa* (*The Flying Eagle*), after arranging its backbone tones by interval (Example 1), the piece can be identified as employing an E–Yu mode within the pentatonic framework. Its melodic movement features a significant number of compound progressions combining major seconds and minor thirds (Example 2), while it notably lacks large leaps such as the perfect fifth, resulting in an overall smooth and stable melodic movement. Similarly, in the widely recognized composition *The Last of the Mohicans*, the arrangement of its primary tones (Example 3) reveals a D–Yu mode with the altered seventh tone (BianGong). The melodic line remains fluid and steady, also characterized by the frequent use of compound progressions consisting of a major second followed by a minor third. When the non-pentatonic tone fa appears, it is accompanied by a modal resolution through the transformation of BianGong into Jue—a technique known in traditional Chinese theory as “changing the altered seventh tone into the third tone” (Example 4). The overall tone of the piece is mournful and profound, with a bleak and solemn character, strongly exhibiting what may be termed a distinct “Chinese pentatonic features.”

Example 1.



Example 2.



Example 3.

### D-Yu mode scale with the added BianGong



Example 4.



Due to the unique historical trajectory of Native American societies, it is inevitable that the transmission of the aforementioned musical examples has undergone certain degrees of variation over time. Fortunately, earlier generations of dedicated ethnomusicologists—such as Gu Zongzhi and Chen Ziming—personally traveled to the Americas, where they conducted field investigations and documentation of Indigenous music and dance, thereby preserving invaluable primary research materials for future scholarship. From these archives, the author has selected several older examples of Indigenous music for analysis. Remarkably, they still reveal morphological features of Chinese pentatonic music. For instance, *The Holy Virgin Who Serves the Sun God* is composed in the E-Jue mode, and its melodic structure predominantly features major seconds and minor thirds (Example 5), reflecting a pronounced pentatonic characteristics. Another example is an anonymous piece of ancient music collected in Cajamarca by Baltasar Jaime Martinez Compañón (Example 6). In this piece, the backbone tones form an E-Yu pentatonic mode, with melodic motion likewise centered on the composite intervals of major second and minor third, and only a single chromatic inflection appears at the conclusion as an auxiliary tone.

Example 5. *The Holy Virgin Who Serves the Sun God* (Notated by Professor Chen Ziming in 1997.)



Example 6. (Noted by a Spanish humanist and bishop of the Trujillo Diocese in northern Peru.)



These examples clearly reveal that Indigenous American music undoubtedly contains the cultural seeds of the Chinese pentatonic system. Its foundational structure—based on the five tones of Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu—as well as its melodic motion dominated by major seconds and minor thirds, and the use of auxiliary tones and their resolution, all resonate closely with the characteristics of traditional Chinese pentatonic music. It may thus be argued that Native American traditional music is not only closely related to Chinese national music, but should also be regarded as belonging to the broader category

of Chinese pentatonic folk music. What we are hearing, then, may not be a mere coincidence of intervals, but rather an unwritten musical chapter in the epic narrative of human migration.

## 2 Shared Cultural Functions of Music

In ancient civilizations, music was not merely for entertainment, but also fulfilled multiple practical social functions. Whether in early Chinese civilization or in pre-Columbian Indigenous cultures of the Americas, music was widely employed in sacrificial rites, religious ceremonies, ritual healing, and popular festivals. It functioned as a bridge between the human and the divine, the earthly and the celestial, while also serving as a vital means of reinforcing social cohesion and expressing power and status.

Before the European incursion into the Americas and its ensuing profound influence, music among Indigenous peoples did not exist as an isolated artistic category. Rather, it was commonly integrated with dance into a unified form of “musical dance,” which featured prominently in various ceremonial contexts. These included communication with deities, religious rituals, and ritual healing, during which participants would offer prayers or expressions of gratitude to deities for sustenance and well-being—often in times of crisis. These musical dances encompassed both religious and secular aspects. Religious musical dances were typically employed in rites to communicate with deities and express reverence or supplication. Examples include the Sun Dance performed by the Sioux as an oath of loyalty to the divine; the Spirit Dance of the Salish in present-day Washington State, in which participants sought power from the spirits; the Purification Dance used in funerary and memorial ceremonies; healing-oriented ritual dances within the Yeibichei ceremonies; and the Tsesbare, a humorous dance featuring bird mimicry, originally intended for healing and still performed by Pueblo communities today. Other examples include the “Sun-basket Dance,” which celebrates agricultural abundance, and the “Okushare” (also known as the Turtle Dance), performed to invoke the rain god. Secular musical dances more often reflected the everyday life and social interactions of Indigenous peoples. These included the Victory Circle Dance and Bison Dance performed by the Salish to mark harvests, the Battle Dance to commemorate heroic deeds, and the Fish-Eating Snake Dance, which was used for social interaction. Overall, music and dance in Indigenous American traditions were closely intertwined, typically forming a single, cohesive entity. This integrated form of “musical dance” played a vital role in the collective life of Indigenous communities and carried significant social meaning.

In China, poetry, music, and dance have since ancient times been integrated into a unified form known as *yuewu* (musical dance), serving labor and collective social practices. By the Western Zhou period, *yuewu* had reached a mature stage and was extensively employed in court ritual sacrifices. The historically renowned series of “The Musical Dances of the Six Dynasties” (*liudai yuewu*) emerged during this period. It consisted of the Six Grand Musical Dances (*liuyue*) and the Six Minor Dances (*xiaowu*). *The Six Grand Musical Dances* was grand in scale and was an epic - level ritual musical dance in ancient China, including: *Yunmen*(*Cloud Gate*), performed in veneration of heavenly deities during the time of the Yellow Emperor; *Xianchi*(*Azure Pool*), performed in reverence to terrestrial deities during the reign of Emperor Yao; *Xiaoshao*(*Shao Dance*), devoted to the four cardinal directions and the cosmos during the Yu and Shun periods; *Daxia*(*Dance of Great Xia*), performed in honor of rivers and mountains in the Xia dynasty; *Dahuo*(*Dance of Great Huo*), which extolled the martial accomplishments of King Tang of the Shang; and *Dawu*(*Dance of Great Martiality*), dedicated to ancestral worship in the Western Zhou. *The Six Minor Dances*, subordinate to *the Six Grand Musical Dances*, were employed in the moral and ceremonial education of the nobility. These performances involved hand-held ritual objects such as multicolored ribbons, long sleeves, ox tails, shields, and feathers. In addition, there existed other ritual music and dances used for religious communication, such as *Wuyu*, performed to invoke rain during droughts, and *Nuo*, enacted to expel demons and epidemics. Furthermore, various secular musical dances also existed—for instance, *Sanle*, reflecting the everyday life of common people, and *Siyi zhi yue* (Music of the Four Barbarians), associated with local tribal cultures. All of the aforementioned musical dances constituted a rich and systematic body of performance practices, being intricately connected with theocratic rule, religious ceremonies, and social life, serving vital functions in their historical context.

It is worth noting that in certain minority regions of China, traditional forms of *yuewu*(musical dances) are still preserved today, exhibiting notable parallels in both cultural context and social function to the musical dances historically



practiced by Indigenous communities in America. For example, in China's Miao communities, traditional musical dances associated with spirits and deities include *the Musical Witch Dance* and *the Musical God-Drum Dance*. There are also commemorative and sacrificial forms such as *the Musical Creation Dance* and *the Musical Ancestor-Worship Dance*. In addition, dances like *the Musical Labor Dance*, *Musical Harvest Dance*, and *Musical Hunting Dance* reflect aspects of everyday life. These musical dances likewise display a clear distinction between the religious and the secular, and they embody a strong social function.

It is not difficult to discern that both Indigenous American civilization and early Chinese civilization exhibit pronounced commonalities in the structural composition and sociocultural functions of music and dance. In terms of formal expression, as in early Chinese civilization, music and dance in Indigenous American cultures were inseparably integrated, predominantly appearing in the form of *yuewu*—that is, musical dance as a unified performance within communal and ritual ceremonies—while instances of music as an independent art form were comparatively rare. Functionally, *yuewu* in both traditions played a pivotal role in mediating communication between the humans and the divine, particularly in times of existential crisis. In such contexts, musical dance served as both a medium and a vehicle through which communities sought to fortify spiritual power against adversity, to express hope and visionary longing, and to articulate a profound theocratic worldview. Therefore, From the perspective of mutual corroboration in the musical and cultural functions, such pronounced commonalities lend strong support to the civilizational diffusion hypothesis, offering compelling evidence for the view that essential elements of Indigenous American culture find their roots in early Chinese civilization.

### 3 Conclusion

In the above comparative analysis of traditional modal systems in Indigenous American music and the shared cultural functions of music with those of China, it becomes evident that the music civilization of the Indigenous Americas bears a striking resemblance to that of ancient China. The former displays the characteristic features of traditional Chinese pentatonic music in terms of modality, melodic progression, and the resolution of secondary (auxiliary) tones. Moreover, in their cultural function both musical traditions integrate music and dance as *yuewu* (musical dances) to serve social practices; they are closely linked to theocratic authority, sacrificial rites, and communal life, and thus exhibit pronounced social functionality. Although *yuewu*(musical dances) among Indigenous American cultures display rich and varied forms, they generally appear more unadorned in character when compared to the sophisticated systems of ancient China, and in many respects bear closer resemblance to the traditional musical dance practices preserved among contemporary ethnic minority groups in China. In sum, the mutual corroboration between the pentatonic modes and the shared cultural functions of music confirms the profound historical and cultural connections between Indigenous American and Chinese musical traditions, indirectly supporting the historical assertion that the Indigenous American civilization may have originated from the ancient Chinese civilization. These correspondences further lend indirect but significant support to the historical hypothesis that the Indigenous American civilization may have originated from early Chinese civilization. Such insights not only expand our understanding of the diffusion of civilization from the East to the Americas but also compel a more profound reconsideration and reexamination of prevailing narratives of civilizational history. As rightly observed, “The right to interpret history is not only a matter of cultural self-confidence, but also one of cultural discourse, which must be reclaimed by our own hands”<sup>1</sup>. We must break free from the long-dominant frameworks of Western-centric historiography and cease to overlook the profound contributions of Chinese civilization to the development of human society. The historical truths that have long been marginalized or obscured must ultimately be brought to light and restored to their rightful place in the global narrative.

Just as genetic lineages do not yield such extensive and enduring resemblances by coincidence, civilizations, too, do not exhibit profound and consistent cultural affinities without underlying historical causation. Therefore, there is sound reason to believe that long before Columbus's so-called “discovery” of the Americas, descendants of the Chinese people had already reached the continent and sown the seeds of civilization. It follows that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are, in all likelihood, the descendants of ancient Chinese populations. Therefore, it may be inferred that the designation “Indian” could possibly have originated from “Yindian” (Yin-di-an), denoting the territory of the ancient Yin (Shang) people. It is highly probable that the ancient Indigenous civilizations of the Americas originated from the Huaxia civilization. As future

excavations and investigations into tangible and intangible cultural heritage progress, it is anticipated that further evidence will be uncovered to shed more light on this hypothesis. In this unfolding inquiry, both archaeology and historiography stand in vigilant anticipation, poised to reshape our understanding of the continent's deep past.

## References

- [1] He Qing. Light from China. Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Press, 2024.
- [2] Gu Zongzhi. American Indian Music and Dance. Guizhou: Guizhou University Press, 1979.
- [3] Chen Ziming. Music of Latin America. Chongqing: Southwest Normal University Press, 2019.
- [4] Wang Zichu. Chinese Music Archaeology. Fuzhou: Fujian Education Press, 2002.
- [5] Yang Yinliu. History of Ancient Chinese Music. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1981.
- [6] Luo Qin. Culture in Music and Music in Culture. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2010.
- [7] Matthias Stockli and Arnd Adje Both. Flower World – Music Archaeology of the Americas. Berlin: Ekho Verlag, 2013.
- [8] Dou Junhong. "On the Stylistic Logic of Chinese Pentatonic Modulation. " Symphony (Journal of Xi'an Conservatory of Music) 38, no. 2 (2019): 65 – 69.
- [9] Liao Shengjing. "Melodic Writing in Chinese Pentatonic Modes. " Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music, no. 2 (1998): 19 – 23.
- [10] Brown, E. J., and T. A. Seltzer-Rogers. "A Comparison of Musical Instruments from the Prehispanic American Southwest and Paquimé, Chihuahua. " Revista de Arqueología Americana, no. 39 (2021).