

# A Cross-Culture Study on Chinese Music in the United States

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## Abstract

Since 1979, China has been promoting development strategies such as “outward and inward”, “one belt, one road” and “enhancement of national cultural soft power.” Today, with internationalization and diversification as driving forces, Chinese music has become a primary avenue for China’s “cultural confidence” in foreign lands. Being the country with the highest number of Chinese students studying in the USA as international students, the impact of Chinese music and culture in the American colleges and universities cannot be underestimated. It is noteworthy that in almost all studies exploring the dissemination of music culture in departments of Asian Studies in American institutions of higher learning, Chinese music culture is very broad in scope to include Chinese folk music, regardless of the historic variety that Chinese music encapsulates. The modern Chinese music seemingly disrupts the continuity and lineage of traditional Chinese music history, yet the traditional Chinese music and modern Chinese music indeed belong to the same family. The major differences include contemporary Chinese music genres such as people’s music, professional music, and popular music have been deliberately excluded from the propagation of Chinese music culture in curriculum. Furthermore, few scholars in Chinese academic circles pay attention to these genres at present. Therefore, this paper tries to explore the phenomenon of deliberate erasure of Chinese music culture in the U.S. This paper also intends to study the overseas dissemination of Chinese music in a cross-cultural context, combining the overview and strategies of Chinese music culture dissemination at home and abroad. Last but not least, this paper attempts to construct a unity of the historical and humanistic aspects of Chinese music culture dissemination overseas.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural, Chinese music culture, Asian studies in the United States, traditional Chinese music

## 1. Introduction

Since 1979, China has been implementing various development strategies such as “going in, going out,” “One Belt, One Road,” “Chinese Dream,” and “enhancing national cultural soft power.” These strategies have presented a unique opportunity and challenge for sharing Chinese culture with the international community. As the country that has attracted the largest number of Chinese students studying abroad, the United States holds a prominent position in terms of economic level and foreign exchange policy. Political leaders from both China and USA have always emphasized the need for China and the United States to strengthen cooperation in the field of education. This cooperation aims to cultivate talent for the development and progress of both countries, and to foster future leaders for China-U.S. friendship and cooperation. In addition to financial support from the Chinese Ministry of Education, local American universities and many non-profit organizations have contributed to the educational exchanges and cultural sharing in the United States. Their support aims to enhance the quality of Asian studies, further develop their international educational strength, and promote Chinese language learning and understanding of Chinese culture worldwide, thereby fostering friendly relations between China and other countries.

In today’s globalized and diverse world, learning about Chinese music plays a vital role in China’s overseas cultural sharing efforts. The United States, being a large and culturally diverse country, has a special interest in

the China-U.S. relationship continues to strengthen. Given the United States' strong economic power and global influence, getting to know the Chinese music in American colleges and universities can make a significant impact compared to parts of the Chinese culture.

## **2. The Current State of Chinese Music and Cultural Exchange in the U.S.**

Since 2004, there are been many diverse Chinese cultural activities in the U.S., making a substantial contribution to cultural exchanges between the U.S. and China. Among these cultural activities, music has consistently had the highest level of participation. According to recent data analyzed by the author, music activities over the past two decades, account for 31.5% (Gu, 2022). of the cultural experiences, surpassing any other activities. This highlights the importance of music activities for teaching and promoting Chinese culture in USA. By offering courses, activities, tours, concerts, book translations, publications, and training sessions, Asian studies programs can effectively disseminate Chinese music in a structured, comprehensive, and long-term manner. The distribution of Chinese music culture by Confucius Institutes in the U.S. occurs through music course instruction as well as music-related activities and performances.

### *2.1 Music Courses and Teaching*

In the United States, Chinese music and culture are primarily shared through specialized music courses and the incorporation of music into Chinese language teaching. The goal is to create a comprehensive cultural exchange platform and promote the internationalization of Chinese music. Some Asian Studies programs offer courses in ethnic instrumental music, ethnic vocal music, Chinese opera, and Chinese music appreciation. For example, the University at Buffalo in New York offered a total of 15 courses in 2018, including Chinese language and literature courses, dance classes, and music classes. Portland State University offers courses in Chinese folk instruments, Chinese folk dance, and Chinese folk songs. These courses aim to cultivate interest in Chinese music and culture and are taught by music teachers or volunteer teachers from Chinese universities. Students can choose to take multiple courses at the same time, and assignments are based on weekly progress. The teaching materials used in mainly focus on traditional Chinese music and folk music, with limited representation of modern Chinese music genres (Tao & Qing, 2023). This has been identified as a challenge in the dissemination of Chinese music, as it limits the audience's understanding of the diverse range of Chinese music styles. Additionally, the dissemination of content has been criticized for its superficial approach, lack of localized teaching materials, and limited opportunities for deeper engagement with Chinese music.

### *2.2 Music Activities and Performances*

In addition to promoting Chinese music culture, institutions of higher learning in the United States organize various music activities and performances. For example, at Valparaiso University hosted the "First American Confucius International Music and Culture Exchange Forum" in 2013, exploring the topic of "Confucius' musical thought."<sup>1</sup> The institution has also participated in events like the World Culture Festival, showcasing performances such as the Guzheng solo *Singing in the Evening on a Fishing Boat* (渔舟唱晚), the folk music ensemble *Jasmine Flower* (茉莉花), Chinese dance performances like *Hymn to Tomorrow* (明日赞歌), and traditional music programs like *The Moonlit Night of Spring River* (春江花月夜) and *Kangding Love Song* (康定情歌). Lectures on Chinese poetry activities and Spring Festival Gala Programs have also been held, featuring songs like *A Road of Hills, A Road of Liangs* (一道道山来一道道梁), *The Golden Snake's Wild Dance* (金蛇狂舞), and *Two Springs Reflecting the Moon* (二泉映月) (Xiao Song Y, 2018). Furthermore, collaborations with other institutions have taken place, such as the performance of *The Peony Pavilion* by the Suzhou Kun Theater at the University of Michigan and the musical tour by the faculty and student art troupe of Yangzhou University in various universities in the Midwest of the United States (WANG & LIANG, 2021). The Binghamton Academy of Opera organized a concert called "Colorful China," featuring traditional Chinese operas like *The Three Crossings* (三岔口), *The Haunted Palace of Heaven* (闹天宫), and Kunqu Opera's *Renewing the Pipa* (续琵琶) (LIU, 2014).

Although the content of Chinese music and culture dissemination in American colleges and universities mainly focuses on traditional Chinese music, it is important to note that Chinese music culture in modern China is diverse and rich. Despite the political interference, American colleges and universities continue to play a significant role in promoting traditional Chinese music culture.

## **3. The Influence of Chinese Music Culture in China**

The cultural influence of a country is directly related to the strength of its political system and the development of its economy. China, with its international political status and growing economic power, has garnered significant attention from countries such as Britain, the United States, Germany, France, and Japan. Chinese music culture serves as both a form of artistic expression and a means of cultural identity (ZEN, 2010). Just like European and American rock music and black rap music, these genres also represent the cultural identity of their respective countries and ethnic groups.

### 3.1 Promotion of National Policies

Since 1942, the relationship between politics and art has been clarified. The principle of prioritizing political standards over artistic standards has been emphasized from a dialectical perspective. During the early years of New China, Mao Zedong introduced the literary and artistic policy of “letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend” (LIU, 2022). This policy sparked intense debates and reactions within academic and literary communities. Many musicians began creating musical works that reflected the political policies and the realities of life during that time. Theoretical scholars also expressed their views in academic forums, advocating for academic research to embrace the slogan of “letting a hundred schools of thought contend for the truth and achieving true freedom.” This highlights the significance of national policies as a theoretical foundation for the modern development of Chinese music and culture.

In 2016, Xi Jinping’s “Speech at the Symposium on Philosophical and Social Science Work” presented key principles regarding the relationship between politics and the arts (XU, 1985). These principles include serving the people, correctly managing the relationship between the Party and arts and culture, accurately understanding the Party’s nature and the people’s nature, and distinguishing academic issues from political issues.<sup>2</sup> The speech opposes engaging in unethical academic practices that violate laws under the guise of research, as well as simplistically conflating academic and political issues. These guiding principles have important implications for the literary and artistic circles and serve as a practical basis for the widespread dissemination of Chinese music and culture in China’s fertile soil.

### 3.2 Transformation in the History of Chinese Music

Throughout the history of Chinese music, its emergence and development have been influenced by the rules of art and history. It is not a random occurrence, but rather the result of social and historical changes, reflecting the rise and fall of the Chinese nation. While traditional Chinese music represents a significant portion of China’s musical culture, the era of Chinese professional music that emerged after the twentieth century has had a profound impact. This period is not only the history of music, but also the history of the national revolutionary struggle and the development of the country.

In the 1920s, the introduction of *XueTangYueGe* (学堂乐歌)<sup>3</sup> in China led to a generation of Chinese musicians who were culturally inspired by Western music and received professional training in conservatories. These musicians created influential musical works that gained recognition both domestically and internationally. They became the driving force behind music creation in New China and the leaders and pioneers of China’s modern music scene. Some composers incorporated local folk songs and operas into their music, such as He Luting’s (贺绿汀) solo piano piece *Piccolo for Shepherd Boys* (牧童短笛) and orchestral suite *Evening Party* (晚会), Ma Sicong’s (马思聪) violin solo *Homesickness Song* (思乡曲), and Chen Gang (陈刚), He Zhanhao’s (何占豪) violin concerto *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (梁山与祝英台). Other notable compositions include Make’s (马可) *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女) and *Shaanbei Suite*, Shi Guangnan’s (施光南) song *Fenghu Under the Moonlight* (月光下的凤尾竹) and the opera *Qu Yuan* (屈原), among others. There were also songs composed for films, such as He Luting’s *Song of the Guerrillas* (游击队之歌) and *Songstress of the End of the World* (天涯歌女), Ma Sicong’s *Song of the Chinese Young Pioneers* (中国少年先锋队队歌), and Shi Guangnan’s *Playing the Tambourine and Singing the Song* (打起手鼓唱起歌) and *The Tale of the Red Lanterns* (红灯记), as well as Make’s *We Workers Have the Strength* (咱们工人有力量).

Chinese music is represented in various works created by different musicians during the same historical period, as well as in the different genres explored by individual musicians. This is an objective reflection of the cultural development of Chinese music over the past century and an unchangeable and enduring fact.

In the 21st century, Chinese and Western music have been increasingly exchanging and integrating with each other. This has led to the development of Chinese modern music becoming more aligned with contemporary times and social values. In 2019, a micro-video released by China’s People’s Daily called “The CPC’s Centennial Report on the Duty of the Communist Party of China” discussed the origins of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its choice of Marxism as a means to save the country and its people (LI, 2023). As the country prepares for the 100th anniversary of the Party’s founding in 2021, various organizations at different levels are participating in the celebrations. It is evident that Chinese music culture not only holds practical significance for China’s current socialist economic and cultural development, but also incorporates new thematic meanings that align with the demands of social progress. In order to promote the spirit of the anti-epidemic efforts, the Central Radio and Television Administration and Shanghai Radio and Television Station have released film and television works such as “The Most Beautiful Retrograde” and “Together”, as well as music works with themes of promoting China’s anti-epidemic spirit, like “Retrograde”, “People First”, and “Together”. (LI, 2023) In February 2021, the Beijing Winter Olympic Games launched a large-scale music reality show called “Winter Dreams”, which showcased musical performances with the theme of anticipating and welcoming the East Olympic Games (PANG & LE, 2017). This highlights the fact that Chinese musical culture is evolving

towards a more international, diverse, and inclusive development in the context of modern globalization.

#### **4. Building Chinese Musical Culture in as Cross-Cultural Setting**

Promoting Chinese musical culture in the international communities involves engaging in cross-cultural activities. The presence of Chinese music culture at various colleges and universities in the United States serves to foster cultural exchanges between the two countries. It aims to foster a sense of shared identity, eradicate cultural bias, facilitate exchanges between both parties, and achieve mutual benefits in the realm of culture and education. This endeavor reflects a friendly attitude and a diplomatic approach to building relationships between major powers. Therefore, the promotion and popularization of Chinese music education among overseas Chinese communities in a cross-cultural context are influenced by the current era.

##### *4.1 In-Depth Understanding of the History of Chinese Music Culture*

Chinese music has evolved over time, transitioning from folk and traditional music to professional, popular, and mass music. Each era's musical culture has had a significant impact on China. From my perspective, the products of Chinese musical culture in a specific historical period are crucial for creating a new communication paradigm for Chinese music in an intercultural context. This marks a turning point in the renewal of Chinese cultural values. To achieve this, we need to adopt a multicultural perspective and develop a cultural communication concept of "integrating Chinese and foreign cultures." However, the current status of music and culture promotion in U.S. Asian Studies programs has some shortcomings. The cross-cultural music promotion paradigm is not yet reasonable, resulting in international students having limited knowledge of Chinese music and Chinese students lacking understanding of cross-cultural music. To address this, we should not only maintain traditional Chinese music and cultural activities in Asian Studies programs but also strengthen the teaching of modern Chinese music history and the history of Sino-Western musical legends such as the "China threat theory" and "Eurocentrism" (PENG & YU, 2016). Asian Studies programs in the U.S. have the responsibility to maintain correctness and innovation. As an important means of outreach, Asian Studies programs should disseminate culture in an authentic, three-dimensional, and comprehensive manner. Therefore, in the new era, the music culture that China vigorously promotes and inherits should serve as the guiding standard in honoring China's cultural self-confidence, street self-confidence, and national self-confidence overseas.

##### *4.2 Cultivating a Multicultural Perspective on Music*

Cultivating a Multicultural Perspective on Music involves recognizing the political function of music and its impact on society. Throughout history, various types of music, such as ancient Chinese ritual music and modern Chinese music, have served as a means of expressing political ideologies. In Western music, for example, the sense of freedom in ancient Greek music, the martial flavor in ancient Roman music, and the simplicity in medieval music were all influenced by the political and social orientations of their respective times. Music played a crucial role in providing spiritual guidance and consolation during times of war and served as a medium for social mobilization. This integration of civil and military life contributed to the progress and development of the country. Chinese music culture, therefore, cannot be separated from the mainstream culture of the country. It has evolved over time and has incorporated elements from Chinese folk music, professional music, and modern music. Understanding Chinese music culture requires examining its wartime and military cultural characteristics within its broader cultural context.

Similarly, music serves important cultural functions such as screening, inheritance, and innovation. If we only define the cultural qualities of Chinese music based on traditional attributes like beauty, classicism, and deep meaning, while neglecting its modern attributes such as the main theme and positive energy that contribute to momentum and support the war effort, then the cultural significance of Chinese music will not be able to contribute to the soft power branding of a future world power. It is important to note that overseas research institutes in China are currently conducting extensive research on Chinese culture. For instance, they have collected numerous modern Chinese historical documents in overseas libraries, including translations of writings and speeches by contemporary Chinese leaders, as well as newspapers and paintings that reflect China's revolutionary history. Naturally, both foreign and Chinese scholars may interpret these research findings from a political standpoint. However, would it not be more appropriate to define Chinese musical culture in terms of its aesthetic culture and cultural functions?

#### **5. Conclusion**

In light of globalization and the increasing interactions between China and other countries, it is crucial to gain knowledge and understanding of the diverse musical cultures around the world. It is important for scholars both domestically and internationally to actively explore the extensive and profound Chinese musical culture, so as to avoid narrow-minded perceptions. The Asian Studies programs as a promoter of Chinese culture, naturally bears the responsibility of spreading China's exceptional national music to the world and has become a well-known

symbol of the global dissemination of Chinese music. In the author's perspective, overseas Chinese and Asian Studies programs should be the primary forces for spreading Chinese musical culture abroad, and the Asian Studies programs should also focus on the academic and theoretical guidance of their practices. This will help bridge the gap between theory and practice, and optimize the development of its diverse values in a more rational manner, ultimately fostering the harmonious integration of the humanities and history of Chinese musical culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Jing, (2017). Information from China Youth Net: New Silk Road Explorers Band Debuts at Valpres World Culture and Arts Festival.

<sup>2</sup> People's Daily Website: <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/paperindex.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *XueTangYueGe*: Songs composed for the music or singing classes of the New Style schools in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. They were mainly composed in the form of "selecting songs and filling in the lyrics" or "selecting songs according to the lyrics", with most of the tunes coming from Japan, Europe and the United States, while some of them were composed in the form of traditional Chinese folk songs and their own compositions, and then the lyrics were filled in Chinese by Chinese people.

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