Abstract: What fueled the cultural fever of Western music education in Chinese families? This paper addresses the ongoing tension between adopting Western music and retaining indigenous music in China by examining differences in domestic, classical and jazz music reception from imperial China to post-Mao. To examine these differences, I evaluate how well each genre aligned with China’s nationalist agenda of cultural self-strengthening to consolidate national identity, reinforce cultural status and display artistic power. My findings conclude that China deviated from indigenous music, promoted classical music, and denounced jazz music because the function of Western classical music was the best means to construct a culturally powerful group of culturally sophisticated and high-performing citizens.

Keywords: music propaganda, cultural modernization, music in China, Western classical music

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1. Introduction

When Manchurian troops detained Chiang Kai-Shek to unite both parties in countering Japanese aggression during the Xi’an Incident of 1936, Communist composer Zhang Hanhui composed the song *Songhua Jiang Shang* (On the Banks of the Songhua River). The lyrics “my home is on the banks of the Songhua River, there are my compatriots, there are my old and feeble mom and dad!” were sung by Manchurian troops to induce anti-Japanese and nationalistic sentiment after the Japanese conquest of Manchuria. As this example illustrates, nations often use music as a political tool in propagating a particular agenda (propaganda). Countries can “pull” (import) foreign music into a state, “push” (censure) music, and display soft power (music diplomacy), based on the functional role a music plays in a specific historical period.

In this lens, the Chinese nation-state’s utilization of music is peculiar to examine because Western music planted firm roots in the Chinese musical sphere after the 1840s, against the backdrop of the first Opium War. Acknowledging this cultural shift impels the investigation of the relationship between the Chinese nation-state (past and present) and music (Western and Chinese). China did not accept Westernization as an aesthetic choice; rather, the history of music and politics in China shows that there is this recurring tension between adopting Western music and retaining China’s musical heritage and political identity following the rise of political and economic dominance in the West to construct a culturally powerful national image, and in turn, attain its nationalist need of modernization. The former argues that China’s participation in international musical culture will equip them with the ability to achieve cultural modernization as did scientifically advanced countries, and the latter believes that foreign culture is only representative of the bourgeoisie class, which would tarnish China’s revolutionary values.

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2. Imperial China before Western music (221 B.C.-1840): Confucianism and the State

From the earliest documented usage of music in China, music and dance were
inextricably linked as “music dances” in religious ceremonies and sacrificial rituals.\(^3\) From the
Xia Dynasty, rulers began to use music to praise their achievements.\(^4\) In the Shang and Zhou
Dynasties, music was embedded into social conduct with the invention of new musical
instruments and rhythms.\(^5\) In the Qin Dynasty, the first music institute was established to collate
folk music for musicians to perform on special occasions.\(^6\) In the Han Dynasty, music began to
serve for more purposes, such as anti-war military music.\(^7\) In the Sui, Tang, and Song Dynasty,
music became more diverse and accessible to ordinary people, with music coming from different
ethnic groups and foreign music being imported with trade.\(^8\) In the Ming and Qing Dynasties,
capitalism influenced music in a way such that folk music books were mass printed and readily
available for everyone to consume.\(^9\)

However, Chinese music was very different from Western music at that time, as it only
consisted of pentatonic scales. Characteristics in European music such as polyphony (chords or
harmony) and polyrhythm (simultaneous conflicting rhythms) were nonexistent in Chinese
music. Domestic music was essentially a “soundless auditory art” due to the emphasis on

\(^3\) Jie Jin, Li Wang, and Rong Li, *Chinese Music*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5,
PDF E-book.


non-sound elements (silences, rests, nothingness) and the merging of music from a variety of musicians through aural transmission. This makes music authorship in China groundless, which reflects this country’s value of collectivism over individualism, whereas classical music in Europe honored the act of genius by each individual composer that owned the original composition. Because of its transient and undocumented nature, “few music students and professional musicians, let alone the general public, knew how [Chinese] music progressed through the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasty.” In addition, creating music was ancillary to other occupations composers held, such as generals, politicians, or poets. Although Christian music was brought to China by missionaries in the eighth century, it was not exposed to the regular Chinese civilian, and thus the Chinese society was largely ignorant about European music developments.

Before Western music officially set foot in China in the 1840s, cultural self-strengthening through music was the linkage between music and Confucianism. Under the Confucian framework of society in sustaining imperial rule, the state viewed music as a form of moral education. Focusing on the ethic of the music rather than the aesthetics, emperors used the stable and conservative nature of music to promote social harmony by indoctrinating their citizens in the concepts of beauty, self-control, and virtuous living. To learn music was seen as to benefit oneself, the family, society, and the state. Because Confucius stated that “if one should desire to


11 Kraus, Pianos and Politics, 19.


know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music will furnish the answer,"15 emperors could arbitrarily construct a system of music quality and assign state-sponsored music to the highest rank to stabilize and legitimize their rule.

Thus, the imperial court divided music into three categories: refined or cultivated music \((yayue)\); the official music of the court indigenous to the Han ethnicity, popular or uncultivated music \((suyue)\); and foreign or barbaric music \((huyue)\).16 One’s music taste directly translated to one’s status in society; thus, music taste inevitably reinforced the social hierarchy dominated by the elites and educated who listened to \(yayue\). The instrument \(qin\), a seven-stringed zither, was an exclusive instrument to the elites played only in \(yayue\). Girls, merchants, and foreigners were barred from learning the \(qin\), and families who did not play the \(qin\) would still display it as an indication of high social status. The function of \(qin\) was simple: it was not to be played in public venues, upholding the idea of inner cultivation “to reach a refined state of mind that could not easily be shared with another.”17 The private experience of playing the \(qin\) also included an auditory level below ambience. However, the Confucian goal of developing a composed state of mind proved to be impractical when China needed music of richer timbre and dynamic to support their changing political goals under a changing world order after 1840.

3. Imperial China after Western music (1840-1949): Adoption, Assimilation, and Appropriation


16 Ho, "Political Influences," 7.

17 Kraus, Pianos and Politics, 20.
When indigenous Chinese music could no longer be culturally powerful enough to express modernity, the state readily incorporated Western music as a progressive force into its political agenda. The Chinese nation-state associated Western music with modernity because it was more culturally advanced than traditional Chinese folk music. When Christian missionaries introduced Western classical music into China in the 1840s, its standardized system of notation and composition was starkly contrasted against indigenous Chinese music. The five-line staff notation enabled more complex composition than the Chinese numerical musical notation (jianpu) that often only operated on the treble clef, and European instruments allowed for more elaborate orchestration. The keyboard of the pianoforte allowed Chinese people to experiment with harmony, unachievable with their pentatonic scale, and the construction of it required assembly-line factories to construct uniform volume. Chinese intellectuals and leaders saw these qualities of Western music to signify scientific progress and professionalism, which had allowed the West to control China not just militarily (China’s defeat in the Opium War in 1839 and its ensuing internal economic instability and political uprisings), but also culturally. Yuan Shikai, a military leader in the Qing Dynasty, determined that Chinese music instruments were unfitting for military activities, so he appointed German military musicians as advisors and imported their instruments to form the first modern military band in China. It was crucial to compete against the rapid musical advancements outside of China because Chinese government advisors on the arts viewed art education as a way to help students in becoming good citizens, outcompete the

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19 Kraus, *Pianos and Politics*, 16.

non-artistic for educational and professional rewards, and to manifest a culturally sophisticated national image. But merely using domestic music to gain back their power in this cultural competition was unachievable.

The Republic of China’s first Minister of Education, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), saw assimilating sophisticated Western music as a way to accelerate the development of cultural sophistication among Chinese citizens. Because music was the “least national of the arts,” it aroused few political sensitivities and could be easily adapted to a domestic setting. The rigorous studying of Western classical music—strict memorization of compositions through practice and concentration—also fit the Confucian value of self-cultivation through self-discipline. Chinese politicians continued to promote Western music throughout the 20th century. Li Lanqing, former Vice Premier and Minister of Education of the People’s Republic of China, approved Chinese composers to “borrow theory and technique from European classical music to reform Chinese music.” Foreign missionaries taught a course called Qin Ke in church-run schools, which gradually helped to develop a music curriculum in music performance, history, and composition for Chinese schools. Many schoolsongs in music textbooks took Western melodies but rewrote Western lyrics into Chinese lyrics. Chinese music, after integrating Western music, became “New Music,” first seen in Lü Ji’s article proposing a “New Music Movement” to “liberate the masses and a medium to convey and reflect

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23 Kahn and Wakin, "Western Classical."


their lives, ideas and emotions.” In this respect, Western music was a means to achieve modernity in China, if modernization is interpreted as the self-strengthening of China’s cultural status by Sinicizing Western developments, instead of the emulation of Western developments under a Eurocentric framework.

The state cooperated with European musicians to compose music and sent musicians abroad to study in European musical institutions. After returning to China with Western music knowledge and techniques, musicians established Western musical institutions domestically to refine Chinese music. In 1907, writer Li Shutong introduced Beethoven through an essay expressing that his fighting spirit was “what China needed.” Chinese educator Cai Yuanpei believed that Beethoven’s persistence amid struggles that led him to success fit the Chinese value of “eating bitter” (chi ku), meaning to endure hardship. The mass public popularized many Western composers alike when their personal qualities aligned with traditional Chinese values. After China’s last imperial dynasty ended in the 1911 Xinhai revolution, foreign musical influence was more easily disseminated in the absence of a centralized political body. Music societies that offered western musical instrument instruction emerged, beginning the May Fourth New Culture Movement in 1919. In 1927, a graduate of the Leipzig Conservatory, Xiao Youmei, founded The Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the first conservatory to teach Western music, and


27 Ho, "Political Influences," 8.


29 Johnson, "Q. and A.: Jindong."

authored *A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Music*. Chinese musicians began to imitate melodic structures of Western music to develop New Music. Conductor Yin Zizhong, who studied in France, became the first Chinese conductor of a Chinese orchestra, the Chongqing Symphonic Orchestra, in the 1930s. He invented the “Guangdong” style of integrating the violin in Chinese opera music. Chinese opera music also assimilated European opera elements to create the “new opera,” seen in works such as Tide Tunes (composed by Ren Guang), Rural Tunes (by Xiang Yu), and Jingke (by Chen Tianhe).

While Western music flowed into China, Chinese elements were also disseminated out of China. American composer Harry Partch, whose parents were missionaries in China, hugely affected his Chinese-styled compositions. His piece Seventeen Lyrics of Li Po was based on Chinese poet Li Bai’s lyrics. He publicized this piece by performing at Henry Cowell’s New Music Society of California in 1932, which raised a Western public’s awareness about Chinese culture. In 1934, Russian composer Alexander Tcherepnin came from Paris to China as a consultant to the Chinese Ministry of Education. He advised “Chinese musicians avoid slavishly copying the West” and adapt European music techniques into the music of Chinese peasants. He even organized a competition for piano compositions in the Chinese style. This Sinocentric approach helped the state to establish a clearer direction in working with Western music. In the

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34 Jin, Wang, and Li, *Chinese Music*, 120.


36 Kraus, *Pianos and Politics*, 5.
wake of the Second Sino-Japanese War, many composers began creating music to resist Japanese imperialism and express solidarity. Famous composer Xian Xinghai fused the lyrics of the patriotic poem *Yellow River* with Western orchestral music in composing the *Yellow River Cantata* in 1939. The song starkly contrasts the living conditions of the people along the Yellow River before and after the war. Through juxtaposing the inhumanity of Japanese troops against the sufferings of the Chinese, the song served to heighten Chinese people’s revolutionary ambitions.\(^{37}\) Therefore, the purpose of using Western music was cultural self-strengthening—the Chinese view of modernization—instead of promoting artistic diversity or revering foreign music.

When Western music did not encapsulate the state goal of strengthening Chinese culture, the state censured the archetype and transformed it to align with its visions. In the 1930s, a new music form called “modern song” (*shidai qu*), “a hybrid genre of American jazz, Hollywood film music, and Chinese folk song”\(^{38}\) emerged as a Sinified form of jazz in Shanghai dance halls sang by sing-song girls. Because only the Chinese elites and bourgeoisie enjoyed *shidai qu*, and not the working class who Western imperialists oppressed, the song form was not representative of the state’s goals. Only classical music was viewed as healthy music contributing to China’s cultural advancement. The state coined *shidai qu* “yellow music.” “Yellow” meant pornographic, which rose from the fetishized image of songstresses. “Yellow” thus carried a derogatory connotation that jazz was ideologically corrupting and morally denigrating.\(^{39}\) When paired together, the “blackness” of the roots of jazz and the “yellowness” of its usage, relegated the genre to the lowest status among the hierarchy of music. To denounce this musical form and appropriate it to align with the vision of national cultural rebirth, the state employed composers


\(^{39}\) Jones, *Yellow Music*, 530
and film directors to construct an alternative called *qunzhong yinyue*, a hybrid genre “fused from elements of Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley music, Soviet choral music, and Chinese folk songs.” The state used *qunzhong yinyue* to authenticate the prestige of its self-created music contrasted with the unwanted influence of *shidai qu*.


After the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, Mao Zedong (1949-1976), chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), continued the project of appropriation by utilizing music as propaganda to promote state ideology. To construct an image of national unity, Mao sought to utilize art forms that were inclusive to the masses to present the state as “the voice of the people.” He exercised control over composers by limiting their music creation to solely political purposes, and over the general population by censuring music that would threaten the state’s cultural purity. Although much Western music was banned, Mao was interested in European romantic music from communist countries because it epitomized the modern Chinese identity—a socialist state based on Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought, which contrasted against the values of the defeated Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese Republic Party. The messages conveyed by romantic composers through the auditory experience were the “guiding spirit for young men and women, driven by a love of their country, to build a China of social equality and dignity.” Mao favored grandiose, picturesque harmonies and symphonic

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40 Jones, *Yellow Music*, 525


instrumentation because it evoked profound emotional responses in its listeners. In effect, it was the function of European romantic music that appealed to Mao, not the art per se. After the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao used European romantic music to educate the illiterate rural population on party goals and mobilize them to share his political sentiments, provided that the underlying political message of the music aligned with his ideologies to qualify as “revolutionary.”\(^\text{44}\) Mao’s selection criteria were that “the title [should be] revolutionary, the program Mao-praising, the music loud and arousing, and the rhythm fast and invigorating.”\(^\text{45}\) He approved music written by composers from Russian and other satellite countries of Eastern Europe, such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Antonín Dvořák, Franz Liszt, and Frédéric Chopin. Only then did Chinese musicians play the music with a “clean conscience.”\(^\text{46}\)

Along with endorsing selective foreign music, Mao also sought to create “original” Chinese music that were reduced to the simplest musical constructs intended for mass mobilization. Domestic music that Mao espoused were _geming gequ_ (revolutionary songs) and _qunzhong gequ_ (mass songs), whose main purpose was to extol the CCP, Mao, campaigns, and acknowledge class struggles and workers’ hard work.\(^\text{47}\) To motivate the audience to support government policies, Chinese composers incorporated Western styles of composition, such as the sonata (a three-section musical structure consisting of an exposition, a development, and a recapitulation) and Chinese folk tunes into mass songs. The rhythm was march-like and fast-paced, the melody and chord progressions were repeated in each stanza and, although the

\(^{44}\) Run, "Music under," 109.
^{45}\) Run, "Music under," 122.
^{46}\) Run, "Music under," 108.
^{47}\) Lau, Music in China, 133.

lyrics changed, they were simple and straightforward for the mass to memorize easily and sing in rallies in shared consciousness.\textsuperscript{48} One symbolic mass song during the Cultural Revolution, \textit{Dongfang Hong} (East is Red), derived its lyrics from a farmer from Shaanxi province, who associated the rising sun with the image of Chairman Mao as the perfect hero. Students and workers sang the song every morning, and loudspeakers played it across China, as opposed to limiting the songs to professional singers. Its highly politicized lyrics convey the glory of Mao and the CCP, which was an effective tool in indoctrinating ordinary people with the modern Chinese spirit when they were involved in the creative expression of singing:\textsuperscript{49}

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The east is red, the sun rises China has brought forth a Mao Zedong
He brings fortune to the people
Hu er hei yo, he is the savior for the people
Chairman Mao loves the people
He is our guide
To build a new China
Hu er hei yo, he leads us forward
The Communist Party is like the sun
Wherever it shines, there is light
Wherever there is a Communist Party
Hu er hei yo, there the people are free.```

\textsuperscript{48} Lau, Music in China, 133.

\textsuperscript{49} Kraus, \textit{Pianos and Politics}, 133.

\textsuperscript{50} Lau, Music in China, 133.
Mass songs were oftentimes created without genuine creative interest from the composer, and thus the lack of substance could be easily felt. Consequently, they were “sung and then forgotten”\(^{51}\) once they lost their function of propaganda.

The state labeled a new music form, Yangbanxi (model opera), that emerged in the 1960s as the “model” to delegitimize and rewrite traditional operas that were considered feudal and superstitious, since characters were mostly upper-class figures that contradicted proletarian ideology.\(^{52}\) By contrast, highly propagandistic plots in Yangbanxi narrate “the struggle between communist soldiers and their aggressors and recount how the final victory was won.”\(^{53}\) Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing was a prominent figure in producing these operas. In the opera Shajiabang, the town of Shajiabang is attacked by Japanese and Kuomintang troops during the Second Sino-Japanese War, but the CCP’s New People’s Army comes into defense and defeats Japan and Kuomintang.\(^{54}\) This story helps perpetuate CCP’s goal of depicting the party as the liberator of oppressed people and validates their power in protecting the nation. On a deeper level, the rejection of traditional Chinese music was shown through the replacement of Chinese instruments with Western counterparts. The timbre became bel canto, an Italian singing style.\(^{55}\) Because new music was a factor of the new Chinese identity, the Westernization of opera music was only to promote the CCP’s dominance of artistic discourse that conveyed to its people that all old systems of thought were to be abolished, including traditional art.

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Composers also integrated Chinese percussion instruments in symphonic compositions to sound more “oriental” and representative of traditional Chinese culture. The incongruity between the tension to borrow European techniques and retain Chinese tradition manifests. For parts played by Western instruments, Mao ordered them to play it in the “Chinese way” according to his doctrine to “make foreign things serve China.” The strings and trombones had to play portamento or glissando to imitate the erhu (a traditional Chinese two-stringed bowed musical instrument), or pizzicato, or staccato to imitate the pipa (a traditional four-string plucked lute) to make the piece sound “Chinese.” Although the famous violin concerto *Liang Zhu* (Butterfly Lovers), composed in 1959, follows the form of a concerto, it includes Chinese folk music and opera-style dialogue when narrating the story of a young couple. Cosmopolitans like He Luting believed that folk instruments should be scientifically refined, for example, silk strings on the erhu and pipa should be replaced by metal or nylon. Nevertheless, Mao insisted that Chinese musicians create “greater pieces than those written by the masters of the 19th century in the western world.” He only acknowledged the superiority of Western music to promote Chinese culture, showing that his adoption of Western music was solely out of national interest. He obscured this implicit hierarchy of music from the public and successfully established the impression that Chinese music was culturally advanced and that China was a modern state.

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60 Kraus, *Pianos and Politics*, 155.
5. Post-Mao (1976–): Emphasis on Music Education

In the post-Mao era, New Music became less politicized after the government endorsed open-door policies under Deng Xiaoping, which encouraged cultural dialogue. Chinese composers were no longer restrained in form, intent, and content. While this has allowed for more sincere composition by composers, Chinese music textbooks distributed by the government still serve as thought correction to instill the “right” ideology and values to younger generations. This is evidenced in the Chinese State Education Commission’s current objectives of music education: to cultivate “love of country, people, work, science, socialism and unity through music education, [and enable children to become] the ideal moral, educated and disciplined successor and builder of socialism.” The lyrics of the songs schoolchildren are required to learn indoctrinate them in Confucianism, communism, nationalism, competitiveness, and reinforce Western stereotypes of the Chinese character. For example, a song that contains the lyrics “Learning is good and through learning one can protect the motherland” emphasizes not only the importance of learning but also one’s duty in China’s collectivistic culture. Another song, “Work Hard Creates Honor” conveys that “continuous happiness comes to those who work hard,” emphasizing the Confucian work ethic of persistence that shadows not only the Chinese education system, but also organizational culture.

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65 Zhejiang Educational Publishing Society, Music, 5.
A more politicized agenda of cultivating a communist mindset in elementary school children is understood in song lyrics with explicit references to communism. The patriotic song “Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China”\textsuperscript{66} repeats the exact refrain throughout the song, and China brought in the “International Song,” from the Soviet Union as “the song of the world’s proletariat.” Moreover, to invigorate national spirit, the state utilizes anti-Japanese sentiment by amplifying the brutality of the Japanese military.\textsuperscript{67} The song “What Shall I Do?” requires students to recite “I will be a soldier and kill those Japanese,”\textsuperscript{68} which antagonizes the Japanese nation as a whole, instills hostility against them, and motivates the younger generation to form a distorted image in the minds of their neighboring country. By distorting sensitive history, the state is able to exploit the memorable nature of lyrics to perpetuate the legacy of patriotism and the Chinese consciousness.

Domination of the production market is another key marker of China’s cultural sophistication and modernity. The Chinese nation-state asserts its culturally powerful national image by becoming a leading manufacturer of Western musical instruments. China’s success in manufacturing comes from apprenticeships in Italy and Germany under world-renowned violin makers. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the quality of instruments steadily improved. 70 to 80 percent of violins sold in the US are made in China, indicating international recognition of China’s instrumental production standards. The world’s largest piano factory, Pearl River Piano, now produces 290 pianos per day in Guangzhou, China.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{66} Zhejiang Educational Publishing Society, Music, 46.

\textsuperscript{67} Brand, "Dragons in the Music," 77.

\textsuperscript{68} Zhejiang Educational Publishing Society, Music (Book 3 for Secondary School) (Zhejiang, China, 1999), 65.

China’s nationalist agenda to train and promote Chinese musicians into the world has also allowed the international community to recognize its cultural sophistication. China has become a major consumer of classical music education; over 38 million Chinese students are studying the piano today, six times that of the US. Within China, the state government has constructed numerous Western-style concert halls to match the performance facilities of the West. Official figures profess their love for Western classical music and attend concerts. Music students study in conservatories abroad, compete in international competitions and win top prizes. Professional musicians go on international tours and are recorded by international labels. Wang Yuja and Lang Lang, two Chinese classical piano prodigies, have been acclaimed for their “stupendous technique with theatrical flair” and named the world’s greatest living pianists. As the pioneer of China’s classical music community, Li Delun claims that “if there weren’t classical music, there wouldn’t be modernity,” because “people need this product of the West to liberate their cultural thinking from 2,000 years of feudalism.” While the Western contemporary entertainment industry has pushed Western classical music consumed by a privileged and elderly few to the periphery, China has retained its existence as a living art form, refined by its contribution and enjoyed by everyone.

6. Conclusion

70 Melvin and Cai, Rhapsody in Red, 1.

71 Melvin and Cai, Rhapsody in Red, 332.


73 Melvin and Cai, Rhapsody in Red, 330.

74 The Wilson Quarterly, "Why Is Western."
Today, China holds the cultural power of dominating the market of Western classical music as a manufacturer, student, and audience. Because classical music is a symbol of high-class cultural taste, its efforts in creating a cosmopolitan cultural image have been successful. However, it is important to note that China’s participation in international musical culture is not merely the intent to Westernize. Instead, it allows China to explore its own cultural identity, creating the concept of New Music while bridging between tradition and modernity. Modernity under China’s lens, therefore, is a revival of its traditional goal of educating culturally sophisticated and high-performing citizens to consolidate national identity, reinforce its cultural status, and display artistic power. However, because traditional Chinese folk music has yet to become a symbol of cultural sophistication, it has not gained international recognition and remains unknown to Western audiences. Given the context of cultural globalization, classical music will likely decline along the music hierarchy, as an omnivorous taste in music is arising.

Although the tension between tradition and modernity still remains evident and unsolved in the Chinese nation-state, if new markers of scientific progress and cultural sophistication replace the struggle for international recognition of Chinese artists’ musical abilities against latent prejudice denying their artistic achievements—that an Asian will never articulate a Western art form as flawlessly as a European, then one will better understand the convoluted relationship between music and politics and tradition and modernity in China.
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