

A Review of the Development of Modern Chinese Music Education

XinRui Mu

Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, Henan 454000, China

How to cite this paper: Mu, X. R. (2026). A review of the development of modern Chinese music education. *Abstracts of Art*, 1(2), 45–55. ISSN Print: 3079-546X, ISSN Online: 3079-5478.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/Art.8014>

Published: 2026-06-01

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

Modern Chinese music education emerged, evolved, took shape, and developed tortuously amid domestic turmoil, foreign aggression, and drastic social transformation, alongside the modernization of education. After the First Opium War, the traditional ritual-music education system gradually collapsed. Western music culture and educational models were introduced into China, giving rise to new-style music education represented by school songs. The Westernization Movement, the Hundred Days' Reform, the New Policies of the Late Qing Dynasty, educational reforms in the Republican era, the rise of aesthetic education, the establishment of professional music conservatories, and music education practices during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression together form the historical thread of modern Chinese music education. Following a chronological approach, this paper examines the key stages, important figures, core ideas, and historical significance of modern Chinese music education from its inception to its initial systematization, summarizing its developmental logic of "Chinese essence with Western application—Integration of Chinese and Western—Aesthetic education for national salvation". This study provides a reference for understanding the origins and development paths of modern Chinese music education.

Keywords

Component, Formatting; Modern China; Music Education; School Songs; Aesthetic Education; Integration of Chinese and Western

1. Introduction

The First Opium War in 1840 shattered China's long-standing closed cultural pattern and initiated a difficult transition of Chinese education from tradition to modernity. The early modernization of Chinese education is generally marked by the founding of the Imperial Capital Foreign Language School in 1862 and the promulgation of the 1922 Renxu School System, spanning three major periods: Westernization education, educational reforms during the Hundred Days' Reform, and educational reforms under the New Policies of the Late Qing Dynasty. This process reflected both passive openness and forced Western learning, as well as

intellectuals' active exploration of education for national salvation and cultural self-strengthening amid the crisis of national survival.

As a vital component of aesthetic education, music education in modern China was closely intertwined with national destiny, educational trends, and cultural choices. Traditional Chinese music education centered on ritual and moral edification, subordinate to the Confucian ethical system, emphasizing moral education over aesthetic appreciation, inheritance over creation, and lacking an independent disciplinary status and systematic teaching system. In the modern era, the introduction of Western music, the establishment of new-style schools, the surge of overseas study, and the advocacy of aesthetic education collectively drove music education to break away from traditional ritual music, gradually forming a modern curriculum system, teaching models, and talent training pathways.

The development of modern Chinese music education was not a simple process of Westernization, but a dynamic balance between tradition and modernity, indigeneity and foreign influence, evolving from "Chinese essence with Western application" to "Integration of Chinese and Western" and finally to "Aesthetic education for national salvation". It constituted both a key part of China's educational modernization and a critical link in the modern transformation of Chinese music culture. Reviewing the development of music education in this period and summarizing its experiences and limitations is of profound historical and practical significance for understanding the cultural roots, values, and development directions of contemporary Chinese music education.

2. Background of Modern Chinese Educational Modernization: The Westernization Movement and "Chinese Essence with Western Application"

2.1. The Westernization Movement: The Beginning of Chinese Educational Modernization

The Westernization Movement (1860s–1890s) was a self-rescue campaign launched by the late Qing ruling clique in response to internal unrest and foreign aggression, marking the first step toward educational modernization in China. Defeats in the two Opium Wars led Westernization advocates to recognize the technological advantages behind Western military power, proposing the principle of "learning from the West to resist the West". They began to introduce advanced Western technology on a large scale, establish modern industries and new-style armies, and set up new-style schools to cultivate practical talents proficient in Western languages, science, technology, and military affairs.

Westernization education was distinctly practical and instrumental, aiming primarily to train technical, diplomatic, and military talents for the Westernization Movement rather than reforming the traditional education system or fostering well-rounded individuals. New-style schools established during this period fell into

three categories: foreign language schools (e.g., the Imperial Capital Foreign Language School, Shanghai Dialect School) offering courses in foreign languages, astronomy, mathematics, and natural sciences; military schools (e.g., the Fuzhou Naval Academy, Tianjin Naval Academy) training naval officers and technicians; and technical vocational schools (e.g., the Tianjin Telegraph School, Shanghai Machinery School) teaching practical skills in industry, transportation, and communication.

As Wang Chunsheng noted in *The Birth of Early Modernization of Chinese Education through Westernization Education*, the Westernization Movement drove a fundamental transformation in the functions of Chinese education, reshaping all educational elements: the concept of talent shifted from cultivating feudal bureaucrats to practical technical personnel; the talent training model changed from imperial examinations to school education; teaching content evolved from Confucian classics to a combination of Chinese and Western learning, emphasizing Western learning; teaching methods transformed from oral instruction and individual tutoring to classroom teaching and experimental learning. These changes endowed Chinese education with the basic characteristics of modern education, marking the starting point of early educational modernization. Westernization education broke the ice of traditional education, dismantling the dominance of Confucian classics, opening the door for the introduction of Western culture and educational models, and laying the foundation for subsequent educational reforms during the Hundred Days' Reform and the New Policies of the Late Qing Dynasty. [1]

2.2. “Chinese Essence with Western Application”: The Core Guiding Ideology of Modern Educational Transformation

During the Westernization Movement, “Chinese essence with Western application” became the core ideology guiding educational reform and an inevitable choice in the early stage of China’s educational modernization. The doctrine advocated “traditional Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning as the application”, upholding traditional Confucian ethics and moral principles as the fundamental basis while absorbing modern Western science, technology, educational systems, and material culture as supplements, seeking national prosperity while preserving the feudal social order.

As Wang Lieying analyzed in *The Influence of “Chinese Essence with Western Application” on Early Modernization of Chinese Education*, the emergence of this ideology was historically inevitable. After the First Opium War, traditional education declined and failed to adapt to social transformation, making the introduction of Western science and technology inevitable. Meanwhile, deep-seated xenophobic psychology and conservative traditions precluded full acceptance of Western culture, leading to a compromise of “changing instruments without changing principles”. Thus, “Chinese essence with Western application” was not merely a choice of Westernization advocates but a historical necessity amid conflicting social

contradictions, an unavoidable stage in China's early educational modernization. [2] This ideology exerted a profound impact on the development of modern Chinese music education. On one hand, it dismantled the closed and conservative pattern of traditional music education, providing ideological legitimacy for the introduction of Western music theories, instruments, and teaching methods, enabling new-style music education to take root under the framework of "Western application". On the other hand, it rigidly preserved the core status of traditional ritual-music education, relegating Western music to a supplementary role of utility and entertainment, limiting the manifestation of music education's independent aesthetic value, and resulting in persistent limitations of "emphasizing skills over culture" and "emphasizing imitation over creation" in modern music education. This contradiction ran through the entire development of modern Chinese music education, serving as an inherent driving force for continuous exploration and breakthrough.

3. The Inception of Modern Chinese Music Education: Missionary Schools and Early Enlightenment

3.1. Missionary Schools: Early Carriers of Modern Music Education

In the mid-to-late 19th century, Western missionaries founded missionary schools in China, the earliest institutions introducing Western music education models, becoming an important enlightening force for modern Chinese music education. After the First Opium War, the Qing government was forced to open treaty ports, granting missionaries privileges to preach and run schools. A series of missionary schools were established, spanning primary to higher education, such as Shanghai Xuhui High School, Beijing Huiwen Academy, and Guangzhou Lingnan Academy. Missionary schools centered on spreading Christian doctrines, with music as an essential part of religious rituals, thus a compulsory subject. Curricula focused on Western religious music, including hymns, choral singing, piano, and organ, adopting Western classroom teaching systems and emphasizing systematic training in music theory, sight-singing, ear training, and instrumental performance. Though deeply religious and serving missionary purposes, missionary schools objectively provided Chinese students with access to Western music, disseminating Western music theories, staff notation, instruments, and teaching methods, nurturing the first generation of Chinese students proficient in Western music skills. They laid the talent and technical foundation for the subsequent rise of school songs in new-style schools.

As Li Mengsi noted in *Narratives of Problems and Related Measures in the Development of Modern Music Education*, missionary schools were a vital driving force in the formative stage of modern Chinese music education. Their music curricula, though subordinate to missionary activities, broke the singular pattern of traditional ritual-music education, infusing Western elements into Chinese music

education with irreplaceable enlightening value. [3] Of course, missionary school music education had obvious limitations: narrow content, strong religious overtones, detachment from Chinese social reality, and insufficient respect for and integration with traditional Chinese music, making it unable to undertake the task of constructing a modern indigenous Chinese music education system.

3.2. The Surge of Overseas Study: Introduction of Western Music Education Concepts

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, amid the trend of national salvation, China witnessed a massive surge of overseas study. A large number of young people studied in Japan, Europe, and the United States, becoming a core force connecting Chinese and Western music cultures and promoting modern music education. Early overseas study focused on Japan due to geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and low costs, as well as Japan's rapid modernization after the Meiji Restoration, serving as a bridge for China's Western learning. Later, overseas study gradually shifted to Europe and the United States, focusing on Western professional music theories, creative techniques, and educational systems.

Overseas students systematically studied Western music theories, harmony, counterpoint, musical form, sight-singing, ear training, vocal music, and instrumental music, access Western symphonies, operas, and art songs, while gaining in-depth understanding of Western music education models, curricula, teaching methods, and aesthetic education concepts. They deeply recognized that music was not merely entertainment but a crucial means of cultivating sentiment, shaping personality, and enlightening the people, essential for education for national salvation and cultural self-strengthening. Upon returning to China, these students actively engaged in new-style school education, music creation, theoretical research, and educational reform, becoming the main force driving the rise of school songs, the spread of aesthetic education, and the establishment of professional music education.

Key figures include Shen Xingong, Li Shutong, Zeng Zhimin, Xiao Youmei, and Huang Zi. Shen Xingong and Li Shutong studied in Japan and pioneered school songs, initiating modern mass music education in China. Xiao Youmei studied in Japan and Germany, systematically learning Western professional music, founding the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai—the first independent higher music institution in China—laying the foundation for professional music education. Huang Zi studied in the United States, introducing modern Western creative techniques and promoting the development of Chinese art songs and symphonies. The cross-cultural learning and practice of overseas students enabled Western music education concepts, models, and methods to take root in China, providing critical talent and theoretical support for the modern transformation of Chinese music education.

4. The Rise of Modern Chinese Music Education: School Songs and the Aesthetic Education Trend

4.1. School Songs: The Beginning of Modern Mass Music Education

In the early 20th century, the late Qing New Policies promulgated the School Regulations of the Late Qing Dynasty, formally designating music (then called yuege) as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools, giving rise to school songs as a core symbol of the rise of modern Chinese music education. As Zhao Yan noted in *The Development of Modern Chinese Music Education*, after the First Opium War, traditional music failed to meet social aesthetic needs, its backwardness becoming increasingly apparent. Patriotic intellectuals urgently sought to transform society through advanced Western culture, and the introduction of new-style schools and the rise of school songs completely transformed traditional music education models, becoming the mainstream form of modern music education. [4]

School songs were mass songs taught in primary and secondary schools, using numbered musical notation and Western melodies with Chinese lyrics, covering themes of patriotism, aspiration, diligence, democracy, science, nature, and daily life. Their core goal was to enlighten the people, inspire national spirit, foster patriotism, and popularize aesthetic education through music. Representative works include Shen Xingong's *Be Ambitious as a Man and Farewell*, Li Shutong's *Spring Outing and West Lake*, and Zeng Zhimin's *Yellow River*.

The rise of school songs was epoch-making: first, it formally integrated music into the national education system, establishing its legitimate status in primary and secondary education, transforming music education from an appendage of ritual music into an independent aesthetic course. Second, it adopted Western numbered notation, classroom teaching, and group singing, creating a standardized and systematic mass music teaching model, establishing China's first modern music classrooms. Third, it achieved an initial integration of Western musical forms with Chinese cultural content, with lyrics rooted in Chinese social reality and simple, catchy melodies, rapidly spreading nationwide, greatly enhancing national musical literacy and broadening aesthetic horizons. Fourth, it cultivated a large audience for modern Chinese music creation, education, and culture, promoting the modern transformation of Chinese national music and laying a broad mass foundation for the subsequent establishment of professional music education.

4.2. The Aesthetic Education Trend: Elevating the Value of Music Education

In the early 20th century, educators led by Cai Yuanpei vigorously advocated aesthetic education, proposing the idea of "replacing religion with aesthetic education", elevating aesthetic education to equal status with moral, intellectual, and physical education. This profoundly transformed perceptions of music education's value, driving a shift from ritual-moral edification and skill training to

aesthetic cultivation.

Cai Yuanpei argued that aesthetic education cultivates sentiment, shapes sound personality, and elevates spiritual realms through beauty in art, nature, and society, with profound value in enlightening the mind, nurturing temperament, and promoting harmony. As the most expressive art form, music is the core carrier of aesthetic education, whose essence is aesthetic education aiming to cultivate aesthetic ability, taste, and ideals, rather than merely teaching skills or moral indoctrination.

Xiao Youmei, the founder of modern Chinese professional music education, aligned closely with Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education ideology. As Zhao Xiangning noted in *Xiao Youmei's Music Education Thoughts and Contemporary Primary and Secondary School Music Education*, traditional Chinese aesthetic education valued music's role in personality cultivation. Cai Yuanpei's ideology established music education's independent status, and Xiao Youmei inherited and developed it, emphasizing that music education should center on aesthetics, focusing on fostering students' musical perception, understanding, expression, and creativity, guiding music education from technical learning back to aesthetic education. [5]

The rise of aesthetic education infused modern Chinese music education with soul, establishing its core value of aesthetic cultivation, freeing it from the ethical constraints of traditional ritual music and the instrumental limitations of Westernization education, transforming it into an independent, comprehensive, and humane form of education. This ideology profoundly shaped the development direction of modern primary/secondary music education, professional music education, and social music education, laying a historical foundation for contemporary Chinese music education's philosophy of "cultivating people with beauty, nurturing hearts with beauty, and fostering virtue with beauty".

5. Development and Systematization of Modern Chinese Music Education: Republican Era Exploration

5.1. Standardization of Primary and Secondary School Music Education

After the founding of the Republic of China, educational reforms continued, consolidating music education's status and standardizing curricula, content, and methods. In 1912, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *Primary School Regulations* and *Middle School Regulations*, mandating music classes with the goal of "cultivating aesthetic taste, nurturing sentiment, and enlightening morality". The 1922 Renxu School System renamed yuege to music, formalizing it as a compulsory subject, refining curricula, schedules, and syllabi, marking the maturity of modern primary and secondary music education.

This period's primary/secondary music education built on school songs, diversifying content: lower grades focused on singing and appreciating simple children's songs to foster interest; upper grades added music theory, sight-singing, ear training, and

simple instrumental performance (e.g., harmonium, harmonica) to enhance skills. It emphasized integrating traditional Chinese and Western music, teaching both school songs and Western classics, as well as folk songs and opera excerpts, nurturing students' recognition and love for national music. Teaching methods centered on group singing, demonstration, and appreciation, prioritizing fun and practice, and emphasizing aesthetic experience, aligning with children's physical and mental development.

5.2. Establishment and Development of Professional Music Education

In the 1920s–1930s, driven by social progress, the deepening of aesthetic education, and growing demand for musical talent, modern Chinese professional music education emerged, marking a leap from mass popularization to professional training and the initial formation of China's music education system.

In 1927, Xiao Youmei founded the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai (renamed the National Conservatory of Music in 1929), China's first independent higher music institution. It offered majors in composition, vocal music, piano, orchestral instruments, and traditional Chinese music, systematically introducing Western professional music education systems with courses in music theory, harmony, counterpoint, musical form, polyphony, sight-singing, ear training, music history, aesthetics, instrumental performance, vocal singing, and choral conducting. Adopting Western teaching models, textbooks, and assessment standards, it trained China's first generation of professional musicians, laying the foundation for higher professional music education.

Subsequently, professional music institutions were established nationwide, including the Music Department of Peiping Art Academy, the Art Department of National Central University, private Shanghai Music Academy, and Guangzhou Conservatory. This formed a collaborative professional music education system centered on the National Conservatory of Music. The establishment of professional music education promoted the professionalization and academicization of Chinese music creation, theory, and performance, nurturing outstanding musicians such as Huang Zi, He Luting, Liu Xue'an, Jiang Dingxian, Xian Xinghai, and Nie Er, providing core talent support for the prosperity of modern Chinese music culture.

5.3. Music Education during the War of Resistance: Integration of National Salvation and Enlightenment

The full-scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in 1937 intensified national crisis, shifting music education's focus from aesthetic cultivation to national salvation, forming a distinct characteristic of national salvation music education with strong national, revolutionary, and temporal dimensions.

During the war, music education's core goals were promoting anti-Japanese resistance, inspiring morale, awakening the people, and uniting the nation, with

anti-Japanese patriotic songs as the main teaching content. Representative works included Nie Er's March of the Volunteers, Xian Xinghai's Yellow River Cantata, He Luting's Guerrilla Song, and Mai Xin's Great Sword March. These songs featured powerful rhythms, imposing momentum, passionate lyrics, and profound patriotism, serving as core teaching materials for wartime music education.

School, social, and military music education were closely integrated. Primary/secondary schools, universities, art troupes, the military, and civil organizations widely held anti-Japanese singing activities, taught patriotic songs, organized choirs, and held concerts, transforming music into a vital weapon to mobilize the masses, unite strength, and resist aggression. Wartime music education broke the boundary between classroom and society, deeply integrating music education with national liberation, greatly inspiring public patriotism and national pride, promoting the modern transformation of Chinese national music, and nurturing a large number of talents with patriotism, national consciousness, and musical literacy, making significant contributions to the war's victory and national rejuvenation. As mentioned earlier, the war disrupted formal schooling, yet music education continued and expanded in society, demonstrating its vitality and temporal value.

6. Historical Significance and Limitations of Modern Chinese Music Education

6.1. Historical Significance

The development of modern Chinese music education was a vital part of China's educational and cultural modernization, with profound historical significance:

- Promoting educational modernization: It dismantled traditional ritual-music education, introduced modern Western concepts, models, and methods, formalizing music's status in national education, enriching curricula, improving systems, and driving China's comprehensive educational transformation from tradition to modernity.
- Pioneering modern music education: School songs initiated mass music education, and the National Conservatory laid professional education foundations, forming a dual system of popularization and professional training, laying a solid basis for modern Chinese music education.
- Facilitating cultural integration: It absorbed Western music's strengths while inheriting traditional Chinese music, promoting the sinicization of Western music and modernization of traditional music, opening paths for national music innovation.
- Realizing aesthetic education values: Guided by aesthetic education ideology, it centered on aesthetics, cultivating public aesthetic ability, taste, and sound personality, enhancing cultural literacy, and advancing social civilization.
- Uniting national spirit: Especially during the war, music education became a vital

force for national salvation, awakening the people, inspiring patriotism, and contributing significantly to national liberation.

6.2. Historical Limitations

Constrained by temporal conditions, social environments, and cultural traditions, modern Chinese music education had clear limitations:

- Over-reliance on Western models: It largely emulated Western music education, with content, textbooks, methods, and assessments copied from the West, insufficiently valuing, exploring, and inheriting traditional Chinese music, lacking distinct national characteristics.
- Inadequate implementation of aesthetic education: Despite advocating aesthetic cultivation, practice often prioritized skills over aesthetics, knowledge over experience, and classrooms over practice, failing to fully realize aesthetic values.
- Uneven development: Significant gaps existed between urban and rural, coastal and inland, primary/secondary and higher education, with rural areas suffering from scarce resources, weak faculty, and lagging development.
- Disruption by social turmoil: Prolonged warfare, social unrest, and economic backwardness deprived music education of stable environments and material guarantees, leading to repeated interruptions and tortuous development, hindering sustained, healthy, and comprehensive progress.

7. Conclusion

The development of modern Chinese music education was a history of exploration amid national salvation, integration amid Chinese-Western collision, and progress amid temporal change. From the Westernization Movement's Chinese essence with Western application to the Hundred Days' Reform's educational innovations, from missionary schools' early enlightenment to school songs' mass popularization, from aesthetic education's value elevation to professional education's systematization, and finally to wartime national salvation practices, modern Chinese music education always kept pace with the times, balancing tradition and modernity, indigeneity and foreign influence, aesthetics and utility, gradually forming the prototype of a Chinese-style modern music education system.

The development of modern Chinese music education not only advanced China's educational and cultural modernization but also nurtured public aesthetic literacy, patriotism, and national spirit, accumulating valuable experience and laying a solid foundation for contemporary music education. Meanwhile, its over-Westernization, inadequate aesthetic education implementation, and uneven development offer profound insights for contemporary reform: uphold cultural confidence, root education in Chinese soil, inherit traditional music culture; adhere to aesthetic cultivation, return to music education's aesthetic essence; pursue balanced development, promote coordinated progress between urban and rural music

education; maintain openness and inclusiveness, absorb global best practices, drive high-quality development of Chinese music education, and contribute to nurturing new generations capable of national rejuvenation.

References

- [1] Wang Chunsheng. The Birth of Early Modernization of Chinese Education through Westernization Education [D]. Qufu Normal University, 2008.
- [2] Wang Lieying. The Influence of “Chinese Essence with Western Application” on Early Modernization of Chinese Education: A Historical Study of Westernization Schools [D]. Huazhong University of Science and Technology, 2004.
- [3] Li Mengsi. Narratives of Problems and Related Measures in the Development of Modern Music Education [J]. Northern Music, 2019, 39(14): 3-4+139
- [4] Zhao Yan. The Development of Modern Chinese Music Education [J]. Drama House, 2018(07): 136-137.
- [5] Zhao Xiangning. Xiao Youmei’s Music Education Thoughts and Contemporary Primary and Secondary School Music Education [J]. Comedy World (Second Half), 2021(03): 78-79.
- [6] Cai Yuanpei. A Collection of Cai Yuanpei’s Writings on Aesthetic Education [M]. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House, 1987.
- [7] Xiao Youmei. Collected Works of Xiao Youmei on Music [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 1990.
- [8] Zhang Jingwei. A Compilation of Historical Materials on Modern Chinese Music [M]. Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House, 1998.