

# Exploration and Inspiration of Modern Chinese Aesthetic and Music Education Thoughts

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**Abstract:** *Since modern times, driven by the ideas of "abolishing the imperial examination system, revitalizing schools, nurturing talents, and strengthening China", the education system has begun to reform, and school music education has gradually gained attention. Due to the sweeping of Western cultural trends, the collision of Eastern and Western cultures has become the main theme of society. During this period, music education ideas were deeply influenced by Western educational concepts. This article reviews the historical context of aesthetic and music education ideas in modern China. It analyzes the relevant characteristics of education systems and music educators' aesthetic and music education ideas in different periods. The aesthetic and music education ideas of these periods were not separated, but were a great exploration of the development of music education in China by educators and government departments under the influence of Western music culture. The aesthetic and music education ideas of this period played an important role in promoting innovation and development of music education, and also have positive reference and enlightenment significance for the current development of ethnic music education.*

**Keywords:** Music education philosophy, Aesthetic education, School music education.

## 1. Introduction

In the late Qing Dynasty, the music education ideology of the Qing government revolved around the educational purpose of "using middle school as the body and Western learning as the application" to maintain the rule of the feudal dynasty; Under the promotion of the bourgeois reformists and the bourgeois reformists, a series of reforms were carried out, learning Western scientific knowledge and establishing new-style schools became a historical trend. School music emerged in this era, and school music education gradually received attention. At this time, the music education ideology advocated learning Western music culture and infiltrating patriotic spirit. In the early years of the Republic of China, the government adopted Cai Yuanpei's policy of promoting moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education as its educational purpose, and incorporated aesthetic education into educational regulations, becoming the guiding ideology for school music education. This article explores the development of music education ideas in China since modern times, including the late Qing Dynasty, the period of school music songs, and the early Republic of China, and discusses one's own views.

## 2. Music Education Thought in the Late Qing Dynasty

In the late Qing Dynasty, China was in a state of political decline, social unrest, foreign aggression, and economic difficulties. Under the impact of Western thought, a group of intellectuals emerged in China advocating for reform, represented by the bourgeois reformists. They paid attention to the importance of education in promoting social progress, criticized and reflected on traditional culture and education systems, put forward various self-improvement ideas and education reform plans, and called for national reform. Under the dual pressure of external aggression and internal reform calls, the Qing government carried out relevant educational reforms. The music education ideology of the late Qing Dynasty was reflected in the educational ideas of the reformists and the relevant education policies issued by the

Qing government.

Kang Youwei, a representative figure of the bourgeois reformists, was one of the earliest advocates of music education in Chinese schools. His ideas on music education were reflected in the philosophical series "The Great Harmony Book" he compiled in 1891. Kang Youwei fully demonstrated his social ideal of building a "Great Harmony World" in the book "Great Harmony", and believed that education is an important way to promote the construction of a "Great Harmony Society". Based on the characteristics of physical and mental development at different stages of human life, he divided human education into four stages: infant and toddler education, primary school education, secondary school education, and university education; Propose specific ideas for teaching at each stage of education, and integrate the content of music education into every stage of students' learning career. Although Kang Youwei did not explicitly propose "aesthetic education", his educational philosophy of "the beauty and joy of music, pictures, books, and prototypes... Therefore, we must follow the path of unity, and then everyone should strive for useful beauty and talent" reflects the role of music education in cultivating "beauty and talent". In fact, it has already involved related "aesthetic education issues". In addition, he envisioned the integration of music education into every stage of human education, believing that music education can be an important way to promote the comprehensive development of intelligence, body, and morality, laying an important foundation for the future development of music education.

In 1904, the Qing government promulgated the "Regulations of the Imperial Academy", which focused on the educational purpose of "secondary school as the body and Western learning as the application", and carried out a series of reforms with the aim of using Western scientific and technological means and educational methods to maintain the feudal monarchy system. This purpose also determined that the music education ideology and objectives of the Qing government were centered around maintaining the feudal system. The "Outline of Academic Affairs" in the 1904

"Regulations of the Imperial Academy" and the "Summary of Educational Objectives for the Ministry's Oath" in 1906 reflect the traditional ideological education carried out by the Qing government through music education, believing that the purpose of music education is to implement the educational objectives of "loyalty to the monarch, respect for Confucius, respect for the public, respect for martial arts, and respect for practicality". The Qing government recognized the important role of music education in school education, but due to the long-standing loss of ancient classical music, it was not practical to use it for teaching. Therefore, during this period, schools implemented music education by reciting ancient poetry and experiencing music from the rhythm of poetry. In 1907, the Qing government officially included music classes in the school curriculum and issued the "Regulations of the Women's Primary School" and "Regulations of the Women's Normal School", which stipulated the teaching objectives of music classes: "Its purpose is to enable students to learn simple and elegant music songs. Whenever lyrics are selected or compiled, they must be suitable for daily use and beneficial to moral education, so as to fully develop their temperament and cultivate their morality." "Its purpose is to inspire their emotions and cultivate their morality. Whenever lyrics are selected or compiled, they must be beneficial to moral education." From this, it can be seen that the Qing government attaches great importance to the role of music education in school education, uses music to cultivate morality, improve personal cultivation, Maintain feudal rule. Therefore, the music education ideology of the Qing government had a feudal educational effect.

The Opium War marked the beginning of modern Chinese history, forcing the opening of the country's borders and the gradual decline of the Qing Dynasty. The society was in turmoil, and the rule of the feudal dynasty was threatened. Under the influence of various forces, the Qing government promoted reforms in education, with the fundamental goal of consolidating the rule of the feudal dynasty. The music education ideology during this period also served to maintain feudal education. The early bourgeois reformists, influenced by Western educational thought, realized the role of music education in moral education and improving cultural literacy. Although they did not explicitly propose the concept of "aesthetic education", they also promoted the development of music education in modern China. In addition, during this period, although the Qing government's music education ideology paid attention to the importance of music education in ancient traditional education and the important position of ancient "elegant music", due to difficulties in teaching, it could only put aside the "temporary suspension".

### **3. The Music Education Ideology during the School Music Song Period**

The rise of school music songs in the early 20th century marked the beginning of modern school music education in China and also opened the way for school music education to learn Western music. The advocates of school music are represented by enlightenment music educators such as Shen Xingong and Zeng Zhimin. Their music education ideas run through patriotic education and break through the educational purpose of "middle school as the body, Western learning as the application" proposed by the Qing government. Western

music, as a "Western learning", has replaced the position of "middle school" in school music education, and music education no longer belongs to the category of "middle school".

Zeng Zhimin and Shen Xingong are both active advocates of school music. They have made contributions to the development of school music through their active music creation and teaching practice activities, and we can also see their music education ideas from it. Zeng Zhimin's music education philosophy was formed through specific music education practices, based on inheriting the traditional Chinese aesthetic education and learning Western music theory and culture. During his study abroad in Japan, he actively engaged in the creation of school music songs and published articles such as "General Principles of Music Theory", "Singing and Teaching Methods", "Music Education Theory", etc. These articles reflected on the role of music, the school music education concept, and the path to develop school music education, which is an important embodiment of Zeng Zhimin's music education thought. Zeng Zhimin noticed early on that music can be divided into "noble" and "debauchery". "Noble" music plays a positive role in promoting human development, so noble music should be selected as teaching content in music education. In addition, he advocated school singing teaching and social music education activities. He believed that Chinese people should create their own "new music". The current situation of "foreign music filling the national anthem" in school music creation was not a long-term solution. In view of the actual situation at that time, he proposed ways to develop music education from four aspects, namely: "train domestic music teachers, hire foreign music classrooms, edit music textbooks, and imitate western instruments." In Shen Xingong's music education thought, he strongly advocated school music, believing that singing is an ideal means of "aesthetic education". Through singing activities, children can be spiritually rich and grow healthily. In his music focused and teaching activities such as "School Singing Collection", "Revised School Singing Collection", "Heart Work Singing Collection", etc., which he created, organized and adapted, he paid attention to the aesthetic education role of music, the relationship between aesthetic education and intellectual education, and regarded inspiring people to strive for progress, love life, love the country, and love peace as the guiding ideology of music education and education, making important contributions to the development of music education in China.

The development of school music has introduced modern school music education systems from Europe, America, and Japan, and has also led to the standardization and systematization of music education in China. The music education ideology during this period was deeply influenced by Western music culture, advocating the learning of Western music knowledge, including vocal singing, instrumental performance, notation, music theory knowledge, composition techniques, and Western music aesthetics. For China, which was undergoing a transition from feudal system to modern democratic system, the rise of school music accompanied by the development of learning Western music was a manifestation of social progress, which objectively adapted to the needs of Chinese society's modern development. Many Chinese composers and music educators create new Chinese

music by studying Western music; The development of new music has added new content and expanded new fields for the later development of music education ideas and school music education. It is worth mentioning that the music education ideology during this period was equally focused on the "aesthetic education role" of music as the education ideology in the early Republic of China, and the two were not separated. However, there was a tendency towards "complete Westernization" in the music education ideology during this period, and there were also weak creative effectiveness issues such as "improper word filling and mismatch between lyrics and music" in music creation, ignoring the significant role of traditional Chinese music culture in music education.

#### 4. The Art and Music Education Ideas in the Early Republic of China

The aesthetic and music education ideas in the early Republic of China were mainly reflected in relevant educational policies. On January 1, 1912, Sun Yat sen was sworn in as the interim president in Nanjing, declaring the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of China. In the same year, Cai Yuanpei, who served as the Minister of Education, issued a series of educational reform documents to the whole country, including the "Interim Measures for General Education" and the "Interim Curriculum Standards for General Education". These documents stipulate that the main teaching objectives of music classes in schools are to conduct aesthetic education through classroom singing teaching, aiming to cultivate students' feelings of beauty, cultivate their sentiments, and cultivate their moral cultivation. Singing subjects will be added in primary schools, music courses will be set up in secondary schools, and music subjects will be offered in teacher model schools. On September 2, 1912, the Ministry of Education promulgated the educational purpose: "To focus on moral education, supplemented by practical education, military and civilian education, and even more importantly, to achieve moral education through aesthetic education." This is the purpose of combining moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education; At this point, "aesthetic education" was officially included in the government's educational policy and became the guiding ideology for school music education. The position of music education as an important component of school education was established.

Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei were the earliest scholars to introduce the term "aesthetic education" into China. They believed that the starting point of "aesthetic education" was to cultivate a "complete personality" as the fundamental goal. In August 1903, Wang Guowei published "On the Purpose of Education", elaborating on his educational philosophy of cultivating a "complete personality", namely: combining intellectual education, moral education, aesthetic education, and physical education. He emphasized that "aesthetic education" can cultivate noble sentiments and enhance one's ideological realm, and believed that "aesthetic education" is an indispensable component of cultivating a perfect personality, which can be implemented through various means. Music art is one of the important means to achieve aesthetic education, and music education should be promoted. In his article "On the Materials of Singing in Primary Schools", Wang Guowei elaborated on his understanding of

the purpose, laws, and particularities of music education in primary school music singing classes. He believes that the main task of singing classes is to cultivate emotions and practice singing skills. In music education, attention should be paid to exploring the characteristics of music art itself, focusing on the "form" (i.e. "melody") of music, rather than just being confined to the "content" (i.e. "lyrics"). Only in this way can music education play a role in cultivating emotions and assisting moral education. Cai Yuanpei's "Opinions on New Education" published on February 10, 1912, defined "aesthetic education" as: "Those who apply the theories of aesthetics to education with the aim of nurturing emotions; Written by Cai Yuanpei Classic Library of Famous Cultural Masters of the Republic of China, Cai Yuanpei Classics [M] Beijing: Contemporary World Press, February 2016. Cai Yuanpei believed that "aesthetic education" belongs to "emotions", which is different from intellectual education and moral education, but can be used together with intellectual education to assist moral education and beautify life. In his article "Methods for Implementing Aesthetic Education", he specifically discusses the content, facilities, environment, and other issues of aesthetic education; Emphasizing that aesthetic education, as a lifelong education, should run through every stage of human learning, music education, as an important component of aesthetic education, can promote the physical and mental development of individuals. Cai Yuanpei's educational philosophy emphasizes actively promoting the learning and absorption of excellent foreign cultural achievements while also maintaining national characteristics, that is, "after completing studies, traveling to several countries to fully absorb their advantages and develop our own characteristics." Here, "my characteristics" actually refers to national characteristics, aiming to emphasize the learning of excellent Western culture to develop our national cultural characteristics. At the same time, he also emphasizes that music teaching methods should be suitable for students' characteristics, and should not blindly worship foreign teaching methods. In teaching, we should pay more attention to the achievements of traditional Chinese music culture.

The relevant education policies in the early Republic of China were deeply influenced by Cai Yuanpei's educational ideas, especially the first inclusion of "aesthetic education" in the purpose of school education, making "aesthetic education" the guiding ideology of school music education. In addition, Cai Yuanpei's music education philosophy incorporates the idea of absorbing excellent foreign cultures to enrich the characteristics of our national culture, and emphasizes the use of traditional ethnic music and cultural achievements in the teaching process. This has significant implications for the later emphasis on ethnic music education in Chinese schools.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of relevant music education ideas during the late Qing Dynasty, early Republic of China, and school music and song period, we can see the continuous improvement of the status of aesthetic education and music curriculum in school education. At that time, music education ideas were closely related to political movements. Music educators and creators promoted the creation of new music and the development of school music education by learning Western music and Western music education ideas, laying a

good foundation for the development of school music after the May Fourth Movement. However, since modern times, there has been an excessive Westernization of music education ideas, neglecting the inheritance of our own ethnic music culture. Even in the early days of the Republic of China, the Minister of Education Cai Yuanpei proposed relevant educational ideas for the nationalization of music education, but due to relative difficulties in implementation, the emphasis on traditional folk music education in schools is still insufficient. Due to historical limitations, such drawbacks are inevitable. On the one hand, people regarded Western music as a model for Chinese new music, and Western educational ideas had a profound impact on the music education in schools that were just starting in China at that time; On the other hand, during the period of social turmoil in pursuit of change and survival, the slow and long melodies of traditional Chinese music, with a slow rhythm, are not suitable for expressing the needs of saving the nation, inspiring morale, and enlightening the people's intelligence. They are even more difficult to use for collective singing among school students. In contrast, the introduction of foreign marches, military songs, and choral songs into schools has a lively tone, high momentum, and is more suitable for expressing the voice of the times and the demands of the people. It is also easy to sing collectively, so traditional music is naturally ignored.

Today, with the continuous advancement of China's quality education reform, the status and role of music education are increasingly valued. From the current music curriculum standards, ethnic music activities, and policies related to the inheritance and protection of traditional music, it can be seen that ethnic music education, as an important way to inherit and develop our own traditional music culture, has gradually become prominent in China's school music education. Nowadays, China's comprehensive national strength continues to improve, and people's living standards are constantly improving. We no longer live in that turbulent and war-torn era. Inheriting and developing our excellent traditional music to enhance multicultural understanding, strengthening the teaching and innovation of ethnic music education, further promoting the improvement of the ethnic music education system, relevant educational regulations and policies, and providing rich and valuable educational resources for students' personal growth and comprehensive quality have become the direction of research in the current music education field. The traditional Chinese ethnic music culture has a history of thousands of years, and has accumulated a vast heritage in the fields of folk songs, instrumental music, opera, quyi, and song and dance music genres. Selecting excellent works from them, integrating them into music textbooks, music courses in general music education, and formulating relevant protection policies can help cultivate students' sense of national pride and identity, enhance their understanding of cultural roots and emotional connections, and further promote the inheritance and development of traditional culture.

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