

Research on the Music Curriculum Standards for Primary and Secondary Schools in Modern China

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Abstract: *In order to conduct a more comprehensive and detailed study on the development of music education in China and to provide references and comparative materials for the better development of contemporary music curriculum reform, this paper adopts the literature method. It takes the development of modern and contemporary music curriculum standards and the discussions of relevant scholars on these standards as the research objects. The literature on music curriculum and curriculum standard revisions by modern and contemporary musicians is selected for review, providing historical references for the construction of contemporary school music curriculum.*

Keywords: Modern and contemporary, Primary and secondary schools, Music curriculum, Curriculum standards.

1. Introduction

The modern and contemporary school music education in China emerged and developed alongside the establishment of the new school education system during the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. It began its journey during the Hundred Days' Reform and consolidated and grew during the bourgeois democratic revolution. The beginning of school music education courses was marked by the introduction of school songs, an art form that rose from Japan and developed through the intertwining of foreign and domestic influences. The first half of the 20th century marked a stage of enlightenment and gradual development for general school music education in China, experiencing a growth process from scratch. Music courses, as a central part of education, are the basic means to achieve the goals of music education. The overall situation of music education in this stage is also reflected through the decrees, regulations, and curriculum standards issued by government departments. Studying the curriculum standards for primary and secondary school music in the first half of the 20th century is the most direct way to study modern and contemporary music education in China. In other words, the development of modern and contemporary music curriculum standards is set against the backdrop of the overall development of modern and contemporary music education. To fully understand the development of modern and contemporary music education, one should pay attention to the evolution of music curriculum standards.

2. Background of Research on Music Curriculum in Modern and Contemporary Primary and Secondary Schools

2.1 Definition of Curriculum and Music Curriculum Concepts

2.1.1 The concept of "course"

The origin of the term "curriculum": In China, the term "curriculum" first appeared during the Tang and Song dynasties. 'Course' refers to academic work, which is now

known as educational content; 'Cheng' means degree, program, or process. Course is the process of academic work. As Zhu Xi of the Southern Song Dynasty wrote in his book "The Complete Works of Zhu Xi: On Learning", there are discussions such as "lenient deadlines, tight schedules" and "small curriculum, great effort". In the West, the term 'curriculum' first appeared in the book 'What Knowledge is Most Valuable?' by British educator H. Spencer. In one article, it is derived from the Latin word 'currere'. The noun form of 'currere' means 'track', with a focus on the 'path'. Therefore, designing different tracks for different students has become a logical process, leading to a traditional curriculum system. The verb form of 'currere' is 'run', with a focus on 'running'. This way, the focus is on an individual's understanding of their own experience, and the curriculum is a person's re-evaluation of their own experience.

2.1.2 The concept of "music curriculum"

The definition of "music curriculum" is multidimensional. For example, "art courses include music courses and art courses", where "music courses" refers to "disciplines". "Music courses should be offered at the primary, junior high, and high school levels", where "music courses" is used from the perspective of curriculum "setting", that is, when music courses should be offered, how many hours of music courses should be offered at different educational stages, what should be taught first and what later in different educational stages, etc. This actually refers to "sequence" and "progress", which are "teaching plans". "Music courses should promote the comprehensive development of students' overall quality", where "music courses" refers to "goals" and "content". What exactly is music curriculum? Music curriculum is a course based on realizing the value of music courses, through classroom teaching and various music practice activities to stimulate students' interest in music, cultivate students' ability to perceive and appreciate music, express themselves creatively, improve their musical and cultural literacy, enrich emotional experiences, and cultivate noble sentiments.

2.2 Research Background of Music Curriculum in Primary and Secondary Schools in Modern Times

In the late Qing Dynasty, after years of seclusion, new ideas and cultures gradually began to sprout. The birth of new-style schools opened the door to the development of modern education in China, and curriculum standards for various disciplines were also established accordingly. The first half of the 20th century was a period of great transformation in China's educational system. The enlightenment and development of modern music education in China began during this period, and the development of music courses was the most powerful manifestation of the overall development of modern music education in China.

In fact, the emergence of school songs at that time became the main content of early music courses. The rise and development of school songs marked the origin and development of modern school music education in China, and also represented the beginning of modern education in China. School songs are of great significance to the development of Chinese music education. Firstly, they took the first step in ordinary school music education in China, promoting music classes to become a part of school education and curriculum standards, and ushering in a new era of Chinese music education development. Secondly, the development of school songs spurred the compilation and development of music textbooks.

The establishment and development of music courses in China began with the establishment of schools in the early 20th century, following the introduction of new-style schools and music and song classes. As the carrier of curriculum development, the establishment of new-style schools undoubtedly played an enlightening and foundational role, which is of great significance to the development of music education in ordinary schools in China, and even to the development of new-style education in China as a whole.

2.3 Decrees, Regulations, and Curriculum Standards Issued by the Ministry of Education in Modern Times

2.3.1 From the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China to before the May Fourth Movement

During this period, there were approximately twelve curriculum standard documents officially issued by the government or educational departments. In 1902, the Qing government promulgated the "Imperial Decree on School Regulations," also known as the "Renyin Educational System," which was China's first educational system document. It included six documents: "Regulations for the Imperial University," "Regulations for the Examination and Admission to Universities," "Regulations for Higher Learning Institutions," "Regulations for Middle Schools," "Regulations for Elementary Schools," and "Regulations for Elementary Schools." These documents stipulated the objectives, nature, duration, admission requirements, curriculum, and mutual connections of schools at all levels and types. In 1904, the Qing government published the "Imperial Decree on School Regulations" formulated by Zhang Baixi, Zhang Zhidong, and Rong Qing, known as the "Guimao Educational System." This was China's first curriculum standard, consisting of three articles: "Imperial Decree on Elementary Primary Schools," "Imperial Decree on Higher Primary Schools," and "Imperial Decree on Middle Schools." The regulations did not stipulate

the offering of music classes, but instead included ancient poetry in the curriculum. From 1912 to 1913, the Republic of China government successively promulgated the "Ordinance on Elementary Schools," "Regulations and Curriculum Schedule for Elementary Schools," "Rules for the Implementation of the Ordinance on Middle Schools," and "Curriculum Standards for Middle Schools." In this series of regulations, music was included as a subject in the curriculum schedule for the first time. The so-called new school music education that emerged in the form of curriculum began with this set of regulations. In the "Ordinance on Elementary Schools," music classes were called "Singing Classes," but were listed as optional subjects; in the "Ordinance on Middle Schools," "Singing Classes" were changed to "Music and Song Classes," and it was stipulated that there must be one class per week, indicating that music education was gradually becoming systematic and receiving attention.

In summary, the development of music curriculum in ordinary schools in China during the early 20th century was a process from scratch. The rise of school songs directly introduced Western music into China, and even more importantly, disseminated Japanese and European music curriculum concepts, making music curriculum an indispensable part of China's overall education. It gradually became systematic and standardized, marking the first step in the development of music education in ordinary schools in China.

2.3.2 "May Fourth Movement period" to the 1940s

After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the Chinese revolution entered the stage of the New Democracy Revolution. Driven by the May Fourth New Culture Movement, education underwent significant reforms, and new foreign educational ideas and methods were introduced. In September 1922, the Ministry of Education convened a meeting on the school system, and adopted the school system reform plan proposed by the "National Education Association Federation". The new school system was also known as the "Renxu School System". Music classes were included as compulsory subjects in primary and junior high schools, but not in high schools. During this period, the curriculum at all levels of schools had unified the previous terms "singing" and "musical songs" as "music". The music curriculum standards in the "Outline of the New School System Curriculum" were divided into two parts for primary and junior high schools. This was the first truly comprehensive and detailed general school music curriculum standard in the history of Chinese music education, marking a turning point. The "Outline of Primary School Music Curriculum" was drafted by Liu Zhiping and revised by the Joint Committee of the National Education Association. It stipulated the curriculum standards for primary school music classes from four aspects: purpose, procedure, method, and minimum graduation standards. The "Outline of Junior High School Music Curriculum" was drafted by Liu Haisu, He Yuan, Yu Jifan, and Liu Zhiping, and revised by the Joint Committee of the National Education Association. The overall structure was similar to that of the primary school music curriculum outline, divided into three parts: purpose, content and method, and minimum graduation standards.

In 1927, Chinese society entered the era of Kuomintang rule.

The “Interim Standards for Primary and Secondary School Curricula” published in 1929 made significant revisions to the curriculum standards of 1923. The “Interim Standards for Primary School Music” introduced a novel perspective on teaching objectives, emphasizing the need to nurture the joyful and lively nature of children and foster their interest and talent in appreciating and applying music. The “Interim Standards for Junior High School Music” shared a similar framework and content with the primary school standards, gradually increasing the difficulty of teaching requirements and levels based on the primary school foundation, while the key teaching methods remained consistent with those used in primary schools. Students were required to undergo assessments in four areas: singing, sight singing, music theory, and musical instruments before graduation.

During the Anti-Japanese War, the Ministry of Education attached great importance to music education, promulgating and revising various laws and regulations to clearly stipulate the importance of music education, especially the singing of anti-war and national salvation songs. In 1932, the national education department made appropriate modifications to the music curriculum standards of 1929, dividing them into three parts: “Primary School Music Curriculum Standards”, “Junior High School Music Curriculum Standards”, and “Senior High School Music Curriculum Standards”. In 1936, the national education department once again revised the music curriculum standards for primary and secondary schools. This revision mainly refined the primary school music curriculum standards, dividing them into lower grades (primary school grades one and two) and upper grades (primary school grades three, four, and five). At the same time, the curriculum standards were renamed as “Lower Primary School Singing and Playing Curriculum Standards” and “Upper Primary School Music Curriculum Standards”. On February 25, 1938, the Ministry of Education issued the “National High School Curriculum Outline”, which stipulated music as a compulsory subject and mentioned: “Music can skip music theory and focus on choral singing. During assemblies, it is necessary to sing military songs and songs that inspire morale and cultivate temperament.” On August 26 of the same year, the Ministry of Education issued the “Revised Weekly Teaching Hours for Music and Drawing in Junior and Senior High Schools”, which stated: “The two subjects of music and drawing are sufficient to stimulate national consciousness and inspire anti-war sentiment. They are particularly needed during extraordinary times. Therefore, it has been decided by this department to change the weekly teaching hours for the two subjects of music and drawing in junior high school to two hours per grade, and to one hour per grade in senior high school, in order to facilitate teaching and demonstrate emphasis.” Since the 1940s, there have been three formal curriculum standard reforms. The first was the “Revised Junior High School Music Curriculum Standards” and “Revised Senior High School Music Curriculum Standards” issued in 1940. The second curriculum standard reform was in 1941, when the Ministry of Education, based on the resolution made at the Third National Education Conference on “establishing a six-year middle school system without distinguishing between junior and senior high schools”, merged middle schools into a six-year system. At the same time, it also redefined the music curriculum standards for primary schools, issuing a new “Primary School Music

Curriculum Standards” and “Six-Year Middle School Music Curriculum Standards Draft”. The third curriculum reform was in 1948, which brought about significant changes in the school system. Primary schools were divided into lower and upper grades, and middle schools were divided into junior and senior high schools after the merger in 1941. Correspondingly, the curriculum standards were also reorganized into four parts based on the above school system: “Lower Primary School Singing and Playing Curriculum Standards”, “Upper Primary School Music Curriculum Standards”, “Revised Junior High School Music Curriculum Standards”, and “Revised Senior High School Music Curriculum Standards”.

In summary, this period represents a crucial chapter in the entire history of music education in China. Due to the strong influence of aesthetic education ideas, music education received significant attention. The formulation of music curriculum standards became more complete and standardized, and there were varying degrees of improvement in the implementation of textbooks, teachers, and schools. Many teaching ideas and concepts can serve as templates for today’s curriculum standards and continue to be used, and the teaching requirements are described in great detail, with a high degree of feasibility. These sets of curriculum standards fully reflect the level of development of music education in China and represent an important stage in the history of Chinese music education curriculum development.

3. Research on the Curriculum Standards for Primary School Music in Modern Times

The primary education stage is a period of rapid physical and psychological development for young children, and they possess great malleability. Research indicates that children’s sensitivity to music begins to develop before school age, and the primary education stage is the most precious period for developing children’s musical talents. It is crucial to strengthen the cultivation of students’ abilities during this period. The interpretation and practice of primary school music curriculum standards are essential in the educational and teaching process. The formulation of modern primary school music curriculum standards may have some flaws to varying degrees, and many scholars have put forward their own views to address these issues, aiming to promote better implementation of music classes.

Liu Zhiping believes that the purpose of setting up primary school music curriculum is to enable students to sing simple songs, recognize simple sheet music, develop their joyful and lively nature, and cultivate a sense of cooperation and love. The curriculum arrangement has different requirements for different school years, and corresponding graduation standards have been set for the study of music courses in the graduation grade: Elementary level - able to sing songs related to children’s daily life, mainly lively and happy songs, and be able to understand the common symbols that must be applied in the organization of sheet music. Advanced level - able to sing songs about beauty and cultivation, understand the role of strong and weak, fast and slow, omissions, beats, tone symbols, and the general meaning of intervals and scales in music theory.

Scholar Gu Shusen believes that the primary objectives of

revising the primary school curriculum standards are threefold: firstly, to implement ritual and music education; secondly, to cultivate spiritual and emotional education; and finally, to enhance children's mental health. There are also three main revisions: firstly, the teaching material outline should add specific learning content for each academic year; secondly, strengthen exercises for basic training materials; and finally, pay attention to the integration of art education and moral education. The revised primary school music curriculum standards in 1941 are rich in teaching content, aligned with students' physical and mental development, and of appropriate difficulty. Scholar Wang Wenqi believes that several points should be revised in the curriculum standards: the appreciation of Chinese and foreign music stories should be added to appreciation teaching, allowing students to understand the writing background of music; the descriptions of listening and pronunciation exercises should no longer be separated, as the two are inseparably related and should be collectively referred to as basic exercises; opera performances and elective musical instruments should be learned in extracurricular activities; for homework requirements of each academic year, some essential points to be learned should be added; and issues such as word-music coordination, teaching material arrangement, score selection, appreciation teaching, basic exercises, teaching aid production, performance examination, and instrumental playing in the curriculum standards should be addressed and revised. Wang Wenqi's viewpoint is to refine and specify the previous primary school music curriculum standards.

4. Research on Music Curriculum Standards for Modern and Contemporary Middle Schools

The middle school music curriculum is a compulsory course in basic education, designed based on the age characteristics, learning experiences, and educational objectives of middle school students. It is an important field within the humanities and serves as one of the primary avenues for implementing aesthetic education. The formulation of middle school music curriculum standards should prioritize practical skills-based learning, enabling students to explore the inherent emotions of music through singing and playing.

In her article "Discussion on Improving the Music Curriculum in Secondary Schools", Zhou Lingsun elaborates on the teaching of music courses in secondary schools from five aspects: credits, equipment, teachers, teaching materials, and teaching methods. In terms of credits, the requirements for compulsory credits vary from school year to school year. Students are required to earn two compulsory credits in each of the first two school years, and one credit in the third school year. It is important not to use elective credits as compulsory credits. In terms of equipment, there is a need for dedicated music classrooms and instruments such as pianos. When hiring teachers for secondary schools, certain requirements should be set. Teachers should have a clear understanding of music theory and possess certain skills. When selecting teaching materials, attention should be paid to positive and uplifting content that can provide correct guidance to students. In terms of teaching methods, it is important to ensure that there is not too much teaching material and to pay attention to students' extracurricular practice.

Chen Hong pointed out what he considered to be the deficiencies in the Ministry-established junior high school music curriculum standards. The objectives of the junior high school music curriculum standards seem to be only four short points, but they encompass a lot of content. Regarding the time allocation for music classes, there are only four days and three hours for music theory classes in the three years of junior high school, and eleven days and seven hours for singing classes. When comparing the teaching time with the teaching objectives, it is clearly insufficient. This is a drawback of the Ministry-established curriculum standards. Later, Mr. Chen Hong elaborated on the requirements corresponding to each academic year's curriculum standards and found that the prescribed content could not be completed within the time allocated by the curriculum standards. Although it is important to improve the music abilities of middle school students, this curriculum standard is merely theoretical and has no practical value, hindering the progress of junior high school music education.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the modern and contemporary music curriculum standards have been able to draw on the excellent experience of Western music curricula, continuously supplementing and improving them. They emphasize students' aesthetic appreciation and enhance the cultivation of their musical literacy and connotation. The content of textbooks combines moral cultivation and patriotism, learning songs about the war of resistance, national salvation, and national independence. Under the guidance of experts, the curriculum standards have gradually become standardized and detailed, laying a solid foundation for music education after the founding of the People's Republic of China. At that time, many experts in the music industry also provided opinions and suggestions on the shortcomings of the curriculum standards, making the formulation and implementation of the curriculum standards increasingly perfect. This is commendable.

Overall, the development of school music curriculum standards in modern China has gone through different historical periods, including new-style school songs, traditional music education in the late feudal society, the old democratic revolution, and the new democratic revolution. It exhibits the following characteristics: 1. The development of modern Chinese music curriculum standards is closely linked to the history of the Chinese people's struggle for national liberation. Music education was used to boost morale and unite people, embodying the spirit of patriotism; 2. Modern music curriculum standards can be formulated and taught from the perspectives of aesthetic education, moral education, emotion, skills, and theoretical knowledge. 3. Music educators in each period have made different contributions to the formulation of music curriculum standards, proposing their own ideas and viewpoints, and selflessly dedicating themselves to modern Chinese music education.

It is of great importance to study the music curriculum standards for primary and secondary schools in modern China. Taking the evolution of music curriculum standards in modern China as a starting point, this study aims to trace the development trajectory of music education in schools in modern China through research on the music education

curriculum in schools during this period. By following this trajectory, we can understand and analyze some important issues related to the reform and development of school music education in China. Through this process, we can learn from past experiences and provide historical references and theoretical basis for the better development and construction of contemporary music education curriculum for primary and secondary schools.

Based on the research into historical materials related to modern and contemporary school music education, we should strive to fully leverage the unique characteristics of music education. Educational authorities should conduct in-depth field research in schools and address existing issues in music education. Music teachers should place greater emphasis on enhancing their own skills and theoretical knowledge, with students as the focal point, and fulfill the responsibility of music education as an aesthetic education.

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