

The Pedagogy of Chinese Traditional Music at the China Conservatory of Music

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The China Conservatory of Music (Zhongguo yinyue xueyuan) in Beijing was established in 1964 and is the only college-level institution in China that specializes in the teaching, practice, and theory of traditional Chinese music and musical instruments. The core curriculum in musicology at the China Conservatory is “Chinese Traditional Music Theory.”¹ This curriculum is framed by three mutually related teaching areas: an introduction to Chinese traditional music, the analysis of Chinese traditional music morphology, and case studies of Chinese traditional music. These three areas are geared to the needs of different levels of students, ranging from middle-school students affiliated with the Conservatory to undergraduate, graduate, and PhD students. This curriculum not only focuses on basic knowledge and theory of traditional music but also emphasizes the importance of practice; together these form the basis of pedagogy in Chinese traditional music.

A Brief History of the Curriculum’s Development

Introductory Study: From “Chinese Folk Music” to “Introduction to Chinese Folk Music”

The curriculum for teaching Chinese folk and traditional music originated with the Lu Xun Art Academy and the Chinese Folk Music Association in the 1940s. Two central figures in the Association were the well-known musicologists An Bo (1915–65) and Ma Ke (1918–76); they also were pioneers in developing this curriculum. In 1964, China’s then Premier Zhou Enlai personally proposed the establishment of the China Conservatory of Music, and the State Council appointed both An Bo and Ma Ke as the first leaders of

1. The China Conservatory of Music consists of a wide range of music departments including music education, composition, piano, and arts administration. For a brief English-language introduction to the Conservatory, see http://www.ccmusic.edu.cn/ccmusic/yingwenwang/About_Conservatory/.

the Conservatory. At that time, the curriculum was called “Chinese Folk Music.” From the early 1950s through the 1960s, China’s first generation of folk music theorists compiled several textbooks that were disseminated and used in schools throughout China. Following the publication of the textbook *Outline of Folk Music (Minzu yinyue gailun)*² the curriculum was renamed “Introduction to Chinese Folk Music.”

Developing Study: From “Introduction to Chinese Folk Music” to “Introduction to Chinese Traditional Music”

By the early 1970s, the China Conservatory of Music stopped holding classes because of the political and social turmoil created by the “Cultural Revolution” movement (1966–76) that had swept across China. As the national political situation improved in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Conservatory’s operations returned to normal and it began offering instruction again. During this period, one marked by great academic enthusiasm, many famous experts and scholars began a new era of research on traditional music, including various regional Chinese music cultures, which also led to the expansion of the scope of pedagogy on Chinese traditional music. This work produced a revision of the book *Outline of Folk Music*³ which played a leading role in teaching Chinese traditional music nationwide to such an extent that the curriculum was renamed “Introduction to Chinese Traditional Music.”

Mature Study: Establishing the “Chinese Traditional Music Theory Education System”

Since the 1990s, the structure and content of this curriculum has been revised on three levels.

1. *Introduction to Chinese Traditional Music*. This level is relatively basic and is directed primarily to first- and second-year undergraduate students majoring in musicology as well as students majoring in other departments of the Conservatory. This level introduces students to important genres of Chinese traditional music and includes such courses as: “Han Chinese Folk Songs,”⁴ “Folk Songs of Minority Groups in China,” “Chinese Narrative Songs,” “Chinese Opera,” and “Chinese Instrumental Music.”

2. *Chinese Traditional Music Morphology*. This is a research-oriented level, designed for advanced undergraduate and graduate students in musicology, advanced undergraduate composition students, and master’s degree students

2. (Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House, 1964).

3. (Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House, 1980).

4. Han is the dominant ethnic group in China, constituting about 93% of the population. Fifty-five other ethnic groups are officially classified as “minority groups” today in China.

in other fields. This level focuses on the internal structure and features of Chinese traditional music and includes classes in topics such as: “Analysis of Stylization and Non-Stylization,” “Timbre in Chinese Traditional Music,” “Chinese Musical Form,” “Chinese Traditional Music Theory,” “Chinese Polyphonic Folk Songs,” and “Methods of Vocal Embellishment in Chinese Opera.”

3. *Case Studies in Chinese Traditional Music.* This level is relatively new and focuses on original research. Among the topics of recent courses are: “Uyghur Muqam,”⁵ “The Kam Grand Choir,”⁶ “The Xipi Modal System in Chinese Opera,” “Theory and Practice of Chinese Traditional Music Classification,” “Traditional Chinese Music in Northwest China,” “Traditional Music of Fujian Province,” and “Chinese Traditional Gongche Notation and Sightsinging.” Instructors for this level are senior scholars from the China Conservatory who are experienced and accomplished teachers.

Achievements

Reform of the Teaching System

1. *Establishment, Reform, and Innovation.* Pedagogical and structural reforms and innovations have led to the establishment of a core curriculum that is framed by three related teaching areas: introduction, morphology, and case studies. The curriculum lays the foundation for both theory and research on Chinese traditional music as well as emphasizes the importance of practice. With continued allocation of resources and funding, we anticipate that this curriculum will be sustainable in the long term.

2. *Individualization and Complementarity.* Given the different pedagogical needs of undergraduate and graduate education, three types of courses have been developed under the principles of “resource sharing” and of teaching students in accordance with their relative aptitudes.

3. *Scheduled and Level-based.* The curriculum has been structured to form a trapezoidal teaching structure of “Preparation—Basic—Advanced—Innovation.” For affiliated middle-school students, we offer preparation courses on Chinese traditional music that focus on stimulating and guiding students’ interests. For undergraduate students, we offer introductory courses on Chinese traditional music that focus on the accumulation of knowledge. Freshmen enroll in “Han Folk Songs” and “Narrative Songs;” sophomores take “Chinese Opera Forms” and “Chinese Instrumental Music;” and juniors enroll in “Folk Songs of Minority Groups in China” and “Fieldwork.”

5. The musical systems and forms associated with the Uyghur minority group in Northwest China.

6. A polyphonic choral form of the Dong minority group in southern China.

For graduate students, we offer classes on Chinese traditional music morphology that are aimed at cultivating students' research abilities. These include courses focused on the analysis of Han Chinese folk songs, folk songs of Chinese minority groups, Chinese narrative songs, Chinese opera forms, and Chinese instrumental music as well as courses such as: "The Literature of Chinese Traditional Music," "Classical Literature in Chinese Traditional Vocal Music," "Historical and Contemporary Research on Chinese Traditional Music," "Studies of Gongche Notation," and "Research on Traditional Performing Arts and Sound Embellishment." For doctoral students, we offer specialized courses focused on particular genres and regions to encourage students to develop into leading scholars on the academic forefront of research on traditional music theory.

Reforms in Teaching Methods

1. *Advanced Science and Technology.* This course of study is presented primarily through multimedia courseware as well as Internet resources; it also draws upon the Conservatory's archive and database of Chinese folk music as well as ethnographic videos and other archives of fieldwork conducted by individual faculty members.

2. *Scientific Research and Innovative Theory.* We have completed a number of major research projects, such as those devoted to the protection and development of resources related to Chinese minority music research and to the compilation of scholarly literature on Chinese music theory in the twentieth century. Among our current projects are: an ethnographic research project on the cultural and artistic heritage of the Nisu people (a subgroup of the Yi minority in southern China) that focuses on ritual music and a transnational ethnographic project that focuses on music and culture in the Mekong River area.

3. *Prioritizing Practice.* Practice and performance-based classes are required for all Conservatory students in order to develop aural and performance skills. We also offer courses in traditional Chinese instruments such as the guqin and in Kunqu Opera to increase our students' understanding of traditional music and culture.

The curriculum also includes instruction in ethnomusicology, ethnographic theories and methods along with opportunities for fieldwork experience and practice for senior students in order to facilitate systematic learning from theory to practice. Every year, teachers and students of the Musicology Department go out as teams to conduct fieldwork in regions throughout the country, from the folk villages in Hubei Province in central China and minority regions in Southwest China, to the Yangtze River Delta region, the Korean Yanbian region, Urumqi in the Northwest, and the Northeast provinces. To prepare for their thesis work, students also are required to conduct fieldwork

for two to six months, under the supervision of their advisors. Every year, we also invite different folk artists to give lectures and presentations for students in order for them to become fully involved and gain a better understanding of traditional music. Students then complete final research reports.

The China Conservatory Library has abundant resources on Chinese traditional music culture, including a music archive and database. Statistics from the last four years show that our recordings cover different types of folk music in eighteen provinces as well as fifty styles of traditional music from sixteen ethnic minority groups.

We have also invited hundreds of folk artists to perform at our Conservatory and have organized more than sixty related activities that complement regular classroom teaching. Over the last several years we have held thematic teaching-week activities that also involve the performance of Chinese traditional music, including: traditional music of the Uyghur, Dai, and Hezhe minority groups; the theatrical form Errentai of Hequ Town; traditional music of Lisu, Pumi, Dulong, and Nu minorities in Yunnan province; and the well-known Liaoge folksongs from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Conclusion

Education on Chinese traditional music is tightly linked to the China Conservatory's goal of "cultivating national music talents." The combination of introductory, practical, and specialized teaching forms the basis of the traditional music teaching model. At the same time, it integrates the features of Chinese music and gives priority to the combination of the theory and practice. Framed by three related teaching areas, geared to the needs of students at different levels—from middle-school students to undergraduate, graduate, and PhD students—the China Conservatory has set up a solid foundation and educational system for Chinese music and theory.