

Globalization and Westernization of Chinese Music: A Journey through Folksongs and Cultural Transformation

By Anthony Olson & Yan (Eva) Peng[‡]*

This presentation delves into the profound impact of Western influences on Chinese music during the 19th and 20th centuries. The session integrates performances of Chinese music in the dialogue, offering a comprehensive exploration of cultural exchange and transformation. Through a blend of performance and analysis, we examine how Western musical elements were assimilated into traditional Chinese music, leading to a unique synthesis that reflects broader trends of globalization and cultural adaptation. The 19th and 20th centuries were periods of significant upheaval and transformation for China, characterized by rapid modernization and increasing contact with Western powers. This era witnessed profound changes in many aspects of Chinese society, including its musical landscape. The influx of Western musical ideas and practices began to permeate traditional Chinese music, leading to the creation of new forms and styles that blended elements from both cultures. Our presentation highlights key historical moments and cultural shifts during this time, illustrating how the confluence of Western and Chinese musical traditions has shaped contemporary Chinese musical identity. One of the central themes of our presentation is the concept of cultural globalization and its implications for the arts. By focusing on the period of significant Westernization in China, we aim to offer insights into the processes of cultural globalization and their impact on musical expression. The integration of Western harmonic, melodic, and structural elements into Chinese music did not merely result in the adoption of foreign styles; rather, it sparked a creative fusion that produced a distinct musical genre, enriching the traditional Chinese repertoire. Our exploration will also touch on the socio-political factors that both facilitated and hindered this cultural exchange. The role of Chinese intellectuals and reformers, who saw Western music as a means of modernization and national rejuvenation, will be examined. By offering a rich perspective on the dynamic interplay between global and local cultural forces, this presentation aims to deepen the understanding of how Chinese music has evolved through its encounter with Western traditions. It sheds light on the broader processes of cultural globalization, illustrating how the arts serve as a medium for cultural dialogue and transformation.

The past two couple of centuries have been marked by profound global transformation, as industrialization, colonial expansion, and technological advances accelerated cultural exchanges across continents. From the spread of new ideas to the exchange of artistic traditions, this era saw unprecedented interactions between East and West. World fairs, such as the Paris Expositions of 1867 and 1889, showcased artistic and scientific achievements from around the globe,

*Professor of Music (keyboard instruments), Northwest Missouri State University, USA.

[‡]Freelance Musician, Bellus Music Studio & Board Member, KC Music Teachers' Association, USA.

bringing the music, art, and traditions of distant cultures into closer contact.¹ These exchanges led to hybrid cultural forms, as societies sought to reconcile their local traditions with newly encountered practices.

In the realm of music, this period of globalization fostered significant cross-cultural influences. European composers such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel incorporated elements of non-Western music, such as pentatonic scales and modal harmonies, into their works after encountering East Asian music at world exhibitions.² Conversely, non-Western nations, including China, began to adopt Western musical practices as part of their broader modernization efforts. This exchange was not a one-way assimilation but rather a complex dialogue, where local traditions were preserved and reshaped within new frameworks.

China, in particular, underwent dramatic cultural shifts during this time, spurred by educational reforms, political upheaval, and exposure to Western ideas. Music became a powerful medium for negotiating these changes, with folk songs serving as a vital link between China's rich cultural heritage and its aspirations for modernization. The transformation of Chinese folk music through Western-style arrangements reflect the broader social and cultural dynamics of the era. This hybridization not only introduced new musical techniques but also symbolized China's effort to navigate the challenges of globalization while maintaining its cultural identity.³

Folk songs, traditionally passed down orally, became central to the efforts of Chinese intellectuals and musicians to forge a modern national identity. These melodies were collected, arranged, and performed using Western musical instruments and compositional techniques, resulting in a distinctive hybridization of Eastern and Western styles. This process mirrored China's broader negotiation with globalization, blending traditional cultural elements with modern aspirations.⁴

This article examines how Chinese educators, reformers, and musicians harnessed folk songs as tools of modernization and nationalism, using them to articulate a vision of a modern yet culturally rooted China. The hybridization of these songs not only symbolized China's adaptation to Western influences but also reflected its resilience in preserving cultural heritage amid significant societal shifts. These musical arrangements became more than artistic creations; they were emblematic of China's complex journey toward modernity in an interconnected world.

1. Frederick Lau, "When a Great Nation Emerges: Chinese Music in the World," in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, University of Michigan Press, 2017, 267.

2. François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, (Achille-) Claude," in *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.07353>.

3. Jianbo Zhou, *Westernization Movement and Early Thought of Modernization in China: Pragmatism and Changes in Society, 1860s–1900s* (Fudan University Press, 2008), 98.

4. Joseph Lam, "Chinese Music and Its Globalized Past and Present," *Macalester International* 21 (2008): 34–35, <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol21/iss1/9>.

First Contact

Western music was first introduced to China by Christian missionaries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with Jesuits like Matteo Ricci at the forefront. In 1601, Ricci gained access to the imperial court, using his knowledge of Western music, science, and mathematics to establish a cultural dialogue with Chinese scholars and officials. This led to the publication of a music theory text that blended Chinese and Western perspectives on musical practice. However, tensions soon arose, as ancestor veneration—a core Chinese practice—was discouraged by Catholic doctrine. By the early 1700s, the Pope issued a decree prohibiting Catholic missions to China. China subsequently banned the Catholic church from its country, pausing formal missionary work. This early exchange, however, laid a foundation for the deeper musical hybridization that would come with nineteenth century missionaries.⁵

The nineteenth century marked a major turning point as colonial forces entered China in greater numbers during and after the Opium Wars. The Treaty of Nanjing of 1842 and similar treaties opened China's ports, granting Western powers and missionaries new privileges, including the right to establish schools. In cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, Western music became standard in the curriculum of these missionary-run schools.⁶ For many Chinese students, this was their first encounter with Western instruments such as the piano, violin, and organ, as well as Western musical notation and harmonic structures.

Western missionaries introduced music as part of their broader educational mission. As a result, Chinese students began to incorporate Western musical concepts, setting the stage for the later hybridization of folk songs. Western music, with its structured harmonies and notation, became symbolic of modernity and progress, a mark of sophistication for those who engaged with it.⁷

Educational Reforms and Musical Modernization

With these foreign educational institutions, China began to transition from the Confucian-based royal examination system, which had governed social mobility and education for centuries, to a Western-style education. This shift was especially impactful and led to a focus on social and political changes in what

5. Anna Chen, "Westernization and Music in China during and after the Qing Dynasty," *The Phenomenon of Singing* 9 (2013): 98-99, Memorial University of Newfoundland, <https://journals.library.mun.ca/index.php/singing/article/view/1023>.

6. Chen, 100-101.

7. Trevor Herbert and Margaret Sarkissian, "Victorian Bands and Their Dissemination in the Colonies," *Smith Scholar Works*, Smith College, May 1997: 169-170, https://scholarworks.smith.edu/mus_facpubs/5.

became known as the Self-Strengthening Movement. The Self-Strengthening Movement focused on addressing China's weaknesses in technology, military power, and education following losses in the Opium Wars. Leaders of this movement encouraged adopting Western technologies and military strategies while preserving the Confucian and cultural principles at the heart of Chinese society.⁸ Scholars and officials began to see Western music as a tool for conveying patriotism and discipline, particularly within the military. Military bands, inspired by Western models, became common in the late nineteenth century, marking an era where music was incorporated into China's modernization efforts as a means of expressing a strengthened national identity. The integration of Western music into Chinese schools provided a new model of learning that represented both adaptation and a move toward modernity.⁹

Influences of Western Military Bands

Colonial powers stationed military forces in treaty port cities, and these battalions included musical units – military bands that regularly performed both Western marches and adapted local tunes.¹⁰ Chinese composers absorbed these adaptations, incorporating Western instrumentation and arrangement styles. This further influenced how military and patriotic music developed in China, integrating folk elements in ways that were intended to inspire pride and unity. Following the modernization efforts of the late Qing dynasty and the Republican period, the Chinese military adopted Western-style brass bands as part of its professionalization and modernization agenda. These bands became symbols of national pride and strength, performing both Western military marches and arrangements of patriotic Chinese folk songs.¹¹

Chinese folk songs, once seen primarily as rural and localized expressions of culture, were now valued as national treasures that could be modernized to reflect China's aspirations. For centuries, these folk songs had been passed down orally. Rooted in local traditions, they often conveyed stories of love, labor, and the land, were typically monophonic (just a single, independent melodic line), and used pentatonic scales. However, with the introduction of Western education, intellectuals and reformers began systematically collecting

8. Ranbir Vohra, *China's Path to Modernization: A Historical Review from 1800 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Prentice Hall, 2000), 73–74.

9. Lam, 47–48.

10. Edmund A. Bowles, "Military Music and the Emergence of Modern China," *Journal of Chinese Music Studies*, no. 5 (2005): 2–3.

11. Wei Cheng, "The Development of Military Bands in Modern China," *Asian Musicology* 10 (2010): 101.

and transcribing these songs, using Western notation and arranging them for performance in schools and concert settings.¹²

Western Compositional Techniques and Their Impact

Western influence on Chinese folk music is perhaps most evident in the introduction of harmonic structures. Traditional Chinese music has long emphasized melody, particularly through pentatonic scales and modal systems, while Western music introduced concepts of harmony that involved structured chord progressions to create tension and resolution. This approach, unfamiliar to Chinese musicians initially, became a standard feature in folk song arrangements. By incorporating harmonic techniques, Chinese composers created a hybrid musical style that preserved the integrity of traditional melodies while embracing Western structural frameworks, symbolizing both cultural heritage and aspirations for modernization.¹³

The turn of the twentieth century was a unique time in music history. Composers used the elements of music in ways that were unthinkable just a generation earlier, and Chinese composers of this era had a wide range of musical styles from which to draw inspiration. One musical trend of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Impressionism; this was perhaps the compositional trend that had the largest influence on Chinese composers and arrangers. The Impressionist composers revolutionized harmonic approaches, particularly in their use of parallel motion and modal harmonies. Claude Debussy, inspired by the East Asian music he encountered at the 1889 Paris Exposition, transformed his compositional style, incorporating pentatonic scales and unconventional harmonic progressions. These techniques abandoned the traditional forward-driving tonal structures of Western music, instead creating a sense of stasis and openness.¹⁴



12. Pan Feng, "The Entry of Chinese Music into the Global Space," *Актуальні питання гуманітарних наук* 70, no. 2 (2023): 75, <https://doi.org/10.24919/2308-4863/70-2-9>.

13. Lam, 43.

14. Lau, 269-270.

A prime example of this approach can be found in Debussy's *Préludes*, particularly in "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," which features a pentatonic melody underpinned by harmonies moving in parallel motion. Here is a phrase from this piece.



Audio QR code: <https://youtu.be/6istflS6oEk>

Such innovations profoundly influenced Chinese composers of the early twentieth century, who were exposed to Western music through studies abroad, travel, missionary-led educational initiatives, and other cultural exchanges. Chinese composers adopted these compositional techniques to create unique arrangements of their traditional folk melodies. An excellent example is the folk song "Flowing Stream." Here is one phrase of the melody.



Audio QR code: <https://youtu.be/tNxbrUqPUl8>

Here is that same phrase as arranged for voice and piano by Li Yinghai.

Vo. 想起我的阿哥在深山;
望見月亮想起我的哥;

Pno.



Audio QR code: https://youtu.be/SGKg_OmBCL8

In this arrangement, the harmonization employs chords moving in parallel motion, mirroring the melodic contour instead of driving toward a tonal resolution. This creates a floating, open quality reminiscent of Debussy's harmonic language. By using these techniques, Chinese composers like Li Yinghai preserved the simplicity and charm of their folk tunes while reinterpreting them within a global musical context. Their work highlights the successful synthesis of traditional Chinese and modern Western elements, forging a distinctive musical idiom reflective of their evolving cultural identity.

The End of Imperial Rule

In its last few decades, the Qing dynasty embraced reforms to modernize with the aim of stabilizing its power. This transformation fostered an interest in creating constitutional monarchy based on Western models. By 1908, a draft constitution, modeled on Japan's system, promised a gradual move to constitutional governance. The plan was to hold a National Assembly in 1910 and institute parliamentary rule by 1916. Despite public celebrations, these reforms failed to address the deep-seated social and political inequities, breeding public dissatisfaction. The monarchy's final years were marked by experimental governance that aimed at modernity but remained hindered by entrenched power dynamics and external pressures. This complex period set the stage for revolutionary forces that would soon end the monarchy and reshape China's political future.¹⁵

A Republic emerged first. During this Republican period, from 1912 to 1949, Chinese intellectuals and educators began promoting folk music as part of a unified national culture. Folk songs, once emblematic of rural traditions, were now reframed as elements of a broader cultural heritage that could unite the country in the face of external and internal challenges. By arranging folk songs with Western techniques, Chinese educators sent a powerful message: China could modernize and engage globally without sacrificing its unique cultural identity. This musical hybridization became a way to convey that China could embrace both its traditions and the new global ideas and practices that came with modernization.¹⁶

¹⁵ Vohra, 99–100.

¹⁶ Lau, 270.

A Tool for Nationalism

This sentiment was especially important during times of conflict. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), folk songs arranged with Western harmonies became potent symbols of resistance and unity. Military bands, orchestras, and large choral groups performed these songs to rally the populace and inspire patriotism. These ensembles were essential for boosting morale. The musical arrangements, while modern, drew on traditional Chinese tunes, showing the extent to which Chinese music had embraced Western instrumentation.¹⁷

As part of the broader nationalist agenda, the lyrics of many folk songs were adapted to reflect contemporary political themes, such as resistance against foreign invaders and calls for unity. Songs that had once been simple expressions of local culture were now repurposed to promote solidarity, inspiring the public to see themselves as part of a larger national project. An example of nationalism expressed through folk song arrangement of “Liu Yang River,” named for the river flowing through Hunan province. This folksong gained widespread popularity as a symbol of national pride, especially as Hunan was the birthplace of Mao Zedong. Many composers created arrangements of this song, including Wang Jianzhong, who composed a large number of pieces for solo piano based on Chinese folk melodies.

In this arrangement, Jianzhong employs several traditional Chinese musical techniques, notably imitating the sound of the Chinese instrument the guzheng. To get a sense of this, here is an example of the guzheng being played.



Video QR code: <https://youtu.be/9POQfNU8PKA>

In Jianzhong’s piano piece, we hear extensive arpeggios that mirror the guzheng’s sweeping sound. This imitation brings out the cultural resonance of “Liu Yang River,” combining folk melody with pianistic techniques that evoke the sound of traditional Chinese instruments. Here is a short clip from this piece.



Video QR code: <https://youtu.be/lXdyFkbTmZU>

The music freely alternates between a classical approach to harmony and passages grounded in pentatonic glissandos. By combining these elements, composers like Jianzhong redefined the role of the piano, transforming it into a bridge between China’s folk heritage and Western musical traditions while

17. Chen, 103.

contributing to a sense of nationalism – this time for the Communist Revolution led by Mao Zedong.

Modern Music Conservatories

These types of arrangements were developed by musicians in China's burgeoning music conservatories in the early twentieth century, marking a pivotal moment in the formalization of Western music education in the country. Conservatories in major cities, particularly Beijing and Shanghai, became hubs for systematic training in Western musical theory, composition techniques, and instrumentation. Modeled after European institutions, these conservatories introduced Chinese musicians to advanced concepts of harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration, alongside the study of traditional Chinese music.¹⁸

Beyond their academic function, these conservatories served as incubators for cultural and political transformation. They produced a generation of composers who were fluent in both Western and Chinese musical languages and who played significant roles in shaping the modern identity of Chinese music. Figures like Wang Jianzhong and Li Yinghai emerged from these environments, drawing from their formal training to collect, adapt, and arrange folk songs. By reinterpreting these melodies, they did more than create music—they helped redefine the cultural narrative of a rapidly modernizing China.¹⁹

These folk song arrangements did not merely bridge two musical traditions; they symbolized China's negotiation with globalization and its determination to preserve cultural identity in the face of rapid change. The enduring appeal of these arrangements lies in their ability to connect past and present, offering audiences a deeply resonant musical expression that celebrates both heritage and innovation.

In Summary

In conclusion, the hybridization of Chinese folk songs in the early twentieth century illustrates the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, local and global influences, and resilience and adaptability. By embracing Western techniques without abandoning their cultural roots, Chinese musicians demonstrated how music could serve as a dynamic medium for cultural preservation and innovation. These efforts not only enriched the global musical landscape but also underscored the profound capacity of art to reflect and shape societal change.

¹⁸ Lam, 45-46.

¹⁹ Feng, 80.

The legacy of these arrangements continues to inspire musicians and scholars alike. They stand as a testament to the transformative power of music education, the adaptability of cultural traditions, and the enduring significance of folk music as a vessel for national identity in an interconnected world.

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