

Comparative Music Education

A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN
MAINSTREAM MUSIC EDUCATION

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Introduction

John Lubbock (1834-1913) once said, "Reading and writing, arithmetic and grammar do not constitute education any more than a knife, fork and spoon constitute a dinner." Music education is one of those subjects that adds significantly to general education and, for many kids, brings to life the reading writing, arithmetic, and grammar.

Comparative education is a thriving and vibrant field; however, there is relatively little research into comparative music education. Ho (2004) says that, "education generally, and music education in particular, plays a central role in cultural reproduction and social transformation," which makes understanding and comparing national music education norms and curricula a worthwhile pursuit. In addition, music education (and music in general) has been influenced by international forces for centuries. For example, the Suzuki method is an extremely common method of strings instruction used in the United States which was developed by the Japanese and is rooted in Japanese philosophy of education. An examination of how the whole Suzuki method package is then exported to Western cultures requires an understanding and comparison of the fundamental rationale and thinking behind music teaching in these different countries (Nielsen, 2006). Although music education is greatly influenced by globalization, it is rare to find research that situates music education within globalization in terms of international and intercultural approaches to music instruction (Johansen, 2013).

The emphasis on music education and how it is or is not woven into compulsory education reveals much about the values of a society. In addition, the manner in which music education is implemented by a government gives insight into what that government finds useful for students to learn. It is also important to examine music education, as musical change is a major component of general cultural change (Ho, 2004). Therefore, the main research question driving this paper is: How does the implementation of music education in China and the United States demonstrate each culture's valuation of music education? To answer this question the following questions must also be answered: What does mainstream music

education in China and the United States look like? How are they similar and different? What lies behind the value of music education in China and in the United States? The following paper attempts to answer these questions and to delve into what music education means to a society, and how it is shaped by that society.

Theoretical Framework

The following paper is written through the lens of a theoretical framework that applies Weberian Theory to explain the value of music education in China and Popular Theory to explain the value of music education in the United States.

Weberian Theory is used when discussing China because it sees nation-states as the main driver of education and the purpose of education as creating a loyal body of citizens. This is true of China which, as will be explained further below, used music education to create nationalist feelings in children and to inspire particular character traits that are seen as beneficial for the state, such as collectivism. Ho and Law (2004) argue that,

“Musical works reflect the cultures and subcultures from which they originate and musical values can be understood in terms of the human contexts and human experience that bring them forth. China’s music education can be thought of as transmitting the values and accumulated knowledge of a society that has experienced tensions between the individual and collectivism in the transmission of both musical and non-musical knowledge.”

They also attest that the meaning of music is the product of the constantly shifting interchanges between diverse groups, which may blend around a dominant ideology to create a consistent educational program (Ho & Law, 2004).

Popular Theory can be used to explain the presence of music education in the United States because it exists, not because the government necessarily sees it as an integral aspect of a balanced education, but because of demand from parents and educators. Parent and educator groups of activists continue to demand

better support for music education, and although this means that it exists in most schools, it remains on the margins of education in the United States.

Music Education in China

China's population is 1.3 billion people, with the majority being of the Han Chinese ethnic group (about 92%) and the rest consisting of 55 ethnic minority groups. Chinese civilization dates back 5,000 years and Chinese culture and values have been remarkably consistent over the centuries. Some argue that this is because of the fact that China's education system has long been dominated by Confucian teachings. This translates to music education in that it has been long regarded as a manner of harmonizing Chinese youth into the well-ordered Confucian society. Ancient Chinese people believed that music was the most compelling way to influence humans and their emotions. Music education in China today integrates music, arts, dance, and drama and links these arts with emotions, culture, science, and life as a whole. (Ho & Law, 2009).

Over the years, education-related policies have supported the transmission of core values that favor, or minimize challenges to, Chinese authorities (Ho & Law, 2009). In 1986, the first organization of an Arts Education Department was established by the National Education Commission to develop and implement policies for music education in Chinese schools. During the 1990s, education reforms in China recognized music education, which served to develop school music education and raise the status of music teachers. It has also resulted in better teacher education for music teachers. Elementary and high school education encourages music education and other arts education and higher education institutions are encouraged to urge their students to take courses in the arts (Ho & Law, 2009).

During the time from 1842-1945, China underwent repeated invasions from Western nations and Japan. This period, commonly referred to as the "one hundred years of humiliation and suffering of the Chinese people," affected Chinese music and music education, which over time became a synthesis of local and Western styles (Ho, 2012). Throughout the 20th century, feelings of national humiliation and pride

powered Chinese nationalism and prompted the writing of numerous nationalistic songs for Chinese youth to learn in school. Kang Youwei stated that song writing was a manner of achieving “emotional transformation from the humiliation of Exclusion to the resolve of resistance” (Ho, 2012). Chinese leaders, from Sun Yat-Sen, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, have felt deep resentment regarding China’s humiliation and have supported the restoration of China to the status of a great world power, often harnessing the power of music to do so (Ho & Law, 2009). This has manifested itself in mandates regarding music instruction in primary and secondary schools.

During World War II, a new school curriculum was introduced with the purpose of strengthening anti-Japanese sentiment through education and to save the nation by means of singing and drama school. In 1938, the Ministry of Education in China released two important documents: *Regulations on Touring Choirs* and *Methods of Conducting Choirs by Touring Choirs in the Province*. These two publications required that primary school curricula in music focus on anti-war themes (Ho, 2012). During this time, the Ministry of Education issued new music syllabi for primary and secondary education and published the *Collections of Anti-War Songs*, and required that students be trained to sing them (Ho & Law, 2009).

Although Chinese children have continued to learn nationalist and specific value-promoting songs in primary and secondary education, the preceding several decades have seen increasing conflict between the government’s nationalist agenda when it comes to music education and children’s exposure to Western popular music. This has been the case particularly since 1978, when an open-door policy for Western music was adopted in China, opening up musical exchanges between China and the West (Ho & Law, 2009).

Music Education in China Today

Music is highly valued by Chinese society in general today; therefore, it follows that educating Chinese children in music is a high priority. The emphasis on music education in the primary grades in China reflects the value that the Chinese place on it. Ho (2012) reminds us that, “from Greek antiquity to the modern day, music has been seen as a potential source of power, with thinkers from Plato to Theodor W.

Adorno recognizing how it affects mood, stimulates the senses and generates social events.” It is interesting to note, however, that like in the United States, teachers in China are among the lowest paid professionals. However in terms of their professional development, many teaching degree programs require that students complete four years of study in music and dance (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997).

The school curriculum for what is referred to in China as “basic education,” which consists of the nine years of education that are compulsory in China as determined by the “Compulsory Education Law” adopted in 1986, includes music lessons. These lessons are broken down thusly: in first and second grades, students concentrate on “music games”; in third through sixth grades, students focus on the education of feelings, musical forms, and structures, in addition to instrumental performance; in seventh through ninth grades, students focus on music appreciation and there are fewer singing activities, largely due to the fact that boys’ voices are breaking at this time (Ho & Law, 2009). Primary school students are required to learn a simple instrument, such as the recorder or mouth organ, and interested secondary students are encouraged to learn a second instrument. Music listening is seen as the best method for first lessons on pitch, tone color, rhythm, melody and harmony. However, the examples used in listening lessons are predominantly based on western musical styles, despite the fact that Chinese culture is usually recommended for schools (Ho, 2004).

Regarding frequency, the music curriculum recommends three lessons each week of “music games” for first and second grade students, two lessons per week for third through fifth grade students, and one weekly music lesson for sixth grade students and up (Ho, 2004). Chinese children see specialized music teachers about twice a week on average, with their regular classroom teachers continuing to implement activities initiated by the music teachers throughout the week. In addition to this curriculum, nursery school teachers are also well-trained in music, so many children enter their compulsory education years with a few years’ experience in group singing and rhythm movement (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997).

In general, classroom music education emphasizes singing, with a significant amount of directed body movement being integrated into the songs. Similar to other primary and secondary school subjects in

China, the process of music learning focuses on repetitive drill work and rote memorization (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997). In addition to music instruction that is part of the curriculum, many Chinese municipal governments have very successful after school arts instruction programs for children (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997).

Parents are also very invested in their children's music education. For example, at the Sichuan Conservatory Youth Wind Ensemble in Chengdu, which rehearses on Sunday afternoons, families travel long distances on bicycles or in pedicabs so that their children can participate. In addition, many parents start their children on string and piano lessons at a very early age; even though they will not play in ensembles until they are much older, the young children practice their instruments for hours each day (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997). Because of parents' enthusiasm for discovering and developing the artistic talents of their children, after-school classes in music, painting, dance, and calligraphy are always popular (Ho & Law, 2009).

Purpose of Music Education in China

Immediately after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the new communist government established the Ministry of Education. During this time, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, education was formalized as a way to promote high moral ideals, including rules of good conduct and the civic virtues of love for the motherland, for the people, for labor, for science, and for socialism. Music was also used as a manner of communicating messages from the government. (Ho & Law, 2009). Today, school music education in China serves many purposes, mostly having to do with developing desirable traits in Chinese youth in terms of ethics, values, and character traits. Ho (2004) states that Chinese authorities use music instruction as a cultural tool for teaching and preserving national identities.

Chinese school music policy is influenced by Deng Xiao-ping's educational principle of "Looking for modernization, looking for the world, and looking for the future" (Ho, 2004). Therefore the music curriculum emphasizes five-line notation and solfège (the Western method of music notation that starts "do, re, mi, etc."). Chinese music textbooks, titled *Yin-yue*, are reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education,

whose teaching materials for primary and secondary schools are used widely in Shanghai and other major cities in China. The curriculum content is divided into one stage for first through fifth graders, and another for sixth through ninth graders. The two stages both focus on developing musical sensitivity and a love of music; developing aesthetic judgment; teaching the “Five Loves” (love the motherland, love the people, love labor, love science, and love socialism); and cultivating students’ interest in Chinese national music as well as foreign music (Ho, 2004).

Much of mainstream Chinese music education focuses on developing nationalistic feelings in students. In addition, school music education is seen as a way to “purify the heart, nourish the soul, inspire wisdom, as well as allow the power and function of emotion and intelligence to be developed among students” (Ho & Law, 2009). Generally, Chinese mainstream music education’s aim is not to develop expert musicians, but to imbue culture; the values of social interaction and inherited culture are viewed as important elements in Chinese music education curricula.

Music Education for Values Development

Values education is an important aspect of the music education curriculum in China, including development of emotion and intelligence, nationalism, character education, and global culture. Ho and Law (2009) assert that, “nationalism in school music education manifests itself not only in terms of the formation of the nation-state, and through applying the principles of nation-building, but also through national culture and consciousness, both being seen as advantageous to the promotion of good citizenship.” Chinese authorities see music education as having great ethical power in Confucian education and is crucial for cultivating the proper disposition in youth, and as a means of achieving a strong nation. Arts education in China is a powerful tool by the government in its nationalist agenda; music is used to symbolically represent cultural identity, specific social ideals, attitudes, and therefore, desirable social behavior. Cultivating in children a love for Chinese music and an understanding of the musical styles of the 56 ethnic groups of China is highly encouraged to promote students’ dedication to their homeland (Ho & Law, 2009). A love for Chinese traditional and contemporary music is understood to develop students’ nationalist feelings.

Mao Zedong, who repressed many musicians during the Cultural Revolution, attempted to harness the Chinese people's love of music by playing patriotic songs through loud-speakers in the streets (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997). During the Cultural Revolution, only revolutionary songs, like *The East is Red*, *March of the Revolutionary Youth*, *We Are Chairman Mao's Red Guards*, *Long Live Chairman Mao*, and *Generations Could Never Forget the Kindness of Mao* survived in music education under the political repression (Ho & Law, 2009). Even today, cultural and patriotic songs are common in music textbooks, such as *A Red-starred Song*, which asks the listener to follow the heart of Chairman Mao and the glory of the Communist Party, and *If There Was No Communist Party, There Would Be No New China* (Ho & Law, 2009). Nationalist education is not limited to traditional Chinese music or Chinese folk songs; nationalistic songs by foreign composers, such as those in the movie, *A Song to Remember*, produced during WWII to romanticize Federic Chopin's patriotism, which are used as examples to teach Chinese children to love their motherland (Ho & Law, 2009).

Music Education for Character Development

In addition to being used for the dissemination of values, music education, as well as compulsory education in general, plays an important role in character development in China. Songs learned in school encourage students to be involved in the life of their schools, communities, and families, and to be responsible for and aware of their duties inside and outside of the classroom. "National music is thought to be the "mother tongue" of Chinese music culture. There is a sentiment that, no matter where one goes in the world, the feeling of loving national musical art should not change, as demonstrated by the phrase in a song, "Even as I wear foreign clothes, I still have a Chinese heart; my ancestors already put a Chinese stamp on everything about me" (Ho & Law, 2009).

One popular character development-oriented song encourages students to build good habits in terms of cultivating diligence and frugality, persevering through hardships, and demonstrating respect for parents and teachers. The current music curriculum focuses on developing students' sense of community, hard work, discipline, and strong moral values, as well as a newer focus on respecting life and the human

body. These songs aimed toward positive character development are also intended to develop children's personalities, imaginations, and creativity.

However, although patriotic education in music has been effective for developing desirable character traits in students' for generations, such as collectivism, love for people and country, and social responsibility, these days these activities are often far removed from students' actual lives. This is especially the case when commercialism and individualism are having an increasingly strengthened influence on Chinese youths' lives (Ho & Law, 2004). Although Western ideas and music have influenced Chinese music for centuries, increased influences of Western ideals are presenting a tough challenge for Chinese educators.

Music Education in the United States

Unlike in China, the population and government of the United States are less sure about the value of music and music education. Discussions have been taking place for years regarding the purposes of musical education and whether it exists for immediate achievement or for lifelong participation. Since its beginnings, music education in the United States has been an aspect of the curriculum that is both celebrated and marginalized. Policymakers often state that it has great value, but it is frequently undermined by subjects deemed more important (Freer, 2012). When times get tough, as they were during the most recent recession, the value of music education diminishes in light of the current emphasis on preparation for standardized testing. However, research has repeatedly shown that students do not compartmentalize between subject areas, but rather see school as a single entity and look for connections between subject areas and experiences. This means that music education affects other learning in other subjects and the removal of music education affects many students' ability to make connections with other disciplines (Freer, 2012).

Characteristics of Music Education in the United States

Although music education is the best-represented of the arts in public schools, students' access to it and the quality of music instruction is still of concern to policymakers, educators, and families (Parsad &

Spiegelman, 2012). Numbers can help show the value of music education in the United States, at least at a base level. At least some instruction in music is almost universally available in public schools in the United States, with at least 94 percent of elementary schools and 91 percent of secondary schools offering instruction that is designated specifically for music. 91 percent of primary schools that offer music instruction employ a music teaching specialist to teach the music courses, the rest being taught by regular classroom instructors, volunteers, or artists-in-residence. Of those specialized music teachers, about 88 percent teach only music full-time. Most public schools in the United States provide music instruction at least weekly for students (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Schools with poorer students (measured by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch) offer less music instruction in comparison with their wealthier counterparts. However, even 89 percent of the poorest schools offer music instruction.

When it comes to music education in secondary schools, only 46 of them reported that they offer five or more different courses in music. Therefore, although most American secondary schools are offering music classes, what they offer is quite limited. Similarly, only 57 percent of public secondary schools in the United States have an arts graduation requirement. On a more positive note, 93 percent of public secondary music teachers teach the subject full-time. Regarding centralization of the curriculum, most secondary schools (81 percent) have at least district-wide music instruction curriculum guides (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012).

The opportunity-to-learn gap has widened in music education in secondary schools over the last ten years, influenced by the emphasis on standardized test scores. In the last decade, high poverty secondary schools suffered a significant drop in music instruction, from 100 percent to only about 80 percent offering music education (Shuler, 2012). School officials feel the need to sacrifice arts education and other programs that are not tested to increase instructional time spent preparing students in the subjects that are tested (Shuler, 2012). Although this can be blamed on emphasis of standardized test scores, there are other factors at play; the perceived value of music education in the United States is shown by the fact that it is one of the first activities to be axed when resources grow thin. As Shuler (2012) states, “while policymakers pay lip

service to balanced education, they continue to enact legislation that effectively narrows curriculum...

Although some erosion of arts programs can be blamed on our recent economic recession, the seeds of neglect have been sown and nurtured by policymakers.”

In addition to tenuous instrumental support from policymakers for music education, the charter movement persists in the United States, with significant support from privately funded advocacy groups, leading families to send their children to schools other than the public schools in their communities. This is in spite of numerous meta-studies that show that charter schools do not outperform regular public schools. In addition, with the exception of arts-themed schools, charter schools are notoriously unlikely to provide a balanced curriculum that includes quality arts instruction (Shuler, 2012).

A little over half of public elementary schools integrate music into other areas of the curriculum in some way, such as having music teachers collaborate with other classroom teachers (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). A little under half of public secondary schools integrate music into other areas of the curriculum or integrate other areas of the curriculum into music instruction (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). This is positive in light of the research mentioned above that students are more successful in an environment where they can draw connections between subject areas in school.

Effects of Goals 2000 and National Standards for the Arts

Despite lack of instrumental support for arts education in general, policymakers agree from time to time that music should be a core subject. This was demonstrated by the fact that the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, a set of national educational standards set by Congress in the 1990s (and eventually abandoned during the Bush administration), created the first National Standards for Arts Education. In doing this, the Goals 2000 elevated music to core status for a time (Elpus, 2013). The goals were not intended to be a curriculum but rather that curricula would be developed on the basis of the goals depending on the local context. Educators were optimistic that this statement by policymakers would promote music as a legitimate school subject and move the discipline from the margins of education.

However, in the twenty years since the act was passed, this has not been the case, due to several circumstances. Elpus (2013) reminds us that, “the toxic politics that came to surround Goals 2000 and the National Standards, especially after the Senate censure of the history standards, eventually led President Clinton to essentially abandon Goals 2000 and the National Standards in all subjects.” In addition, the National Standards for the Arts failed in part due to their disregard for the current state of arts education in the early 1990s, therefore making it unrealistic to achieve the set goals by 2000 (Elpus, 2013). The Goals 2000 were largely abandoned before 2000, and officially stopped being funded in 2001.

On a more positive note, the National Standards for the Arts did lead to some change in terms of the presence of music education in public schools in the United States. Although the specific goals may not have been met by 2000, by July 31, 1996, 24 states had adopted state-level content standards in the arts that were either the same as the National Standards or based on them. In addition at the time, 20 states were in the process of adopting state-wide arts standards. Therefore, in just over two years from the passing of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 44 states had essentially accepted the fact that arts education was a core subject and were actively making changes to be implemented in their schools (Elpus, 2013). Changes in arts education as a result of Goals 2000 also included a greater likelihood that secondary schools required arts education in their graduation requirements, although this did not necessarily result in more music classes being offered at secondary schools (Elpus, 2013).

Education reform efforts in the United States tend to be cyclic and, once again, with the Common Core standards, we are seeing a rise in standards-based reform. However, the arts have not been included in the initial list of core subjects with drafted standards. Elpus (2013) warns that “exclusion of the arts from the Common Core Standards may have a deleterious effect on the status of music and arts education that should be avoided.”

Concluding Comparison

Interestingly, China has been engaged in a comparative approach to music for several hundred years. In the late 1800s, Kang Youwei developed and promoted the first school singing lessons, which were designed to help develop Chinese children's cultural spirit. In a book he wrote and submitted to the Qing Government, *Required to Open a School*, Kang stated that the Chinese education system "should learn from as far as France and Germany and as near as Japan," and that 'all towns should establish a primary school, and all citizens above the age of seven must go to the school to learn literature and history, arithmetic, geography, physics, and music for eight years'" (Ho, 2012).

At the same time that nationalist songs were becoming a required aspect of the school music curriculum, Chinese music was undergoing, and had in fact been undergoing for some time, the influences of Western music. Chinese nationalist songs that integrated Western styles were lauded and promoted by the government. Well-respected Chinese scholars in the early 1900s, such as Cai Yuanpei, who was China's first Minister of Education, supported the importing of Western culture and argued that Chinese-style music could be improved by integrating Western musical styles (Ho, 2012). For example, Huang Zi, a prolific composer in the early 20th century, wrote songs that were very popular. His songs were well-structured, had easily appreciated melodies and lyrics, used eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European harmonies and tonalities and included piano accompaniments much like those of early German lieder (Ho, 2012).

Similarly, Xian Xinghai (1905-1945) was highly regarded by the Chinese government and the rest of the Chinese population as an example of a patriotic composer who found successful ways to combine Chinese and Western styles of music in his 300 patriotic songs. Shen Xingong, Zeng Zhimin, and Li Shutong were all prolific school song composers in the early 1900s, and all three believed that music could save the country. In their compositions, they attempted to synthesize Western songs with Chinese characters (Ho, 2012). After earning his doctorate abroad and returning to China in 1921, Xiao Youmei, who has been called the father of contemporary Chinese music education, introduced Western ideas and practices regarding

music learning to Chinese music education, with the purpose of “creating a new and better China and linking it with the rest of the world” (Ho, 2012).

The root of the difference between support for music education in China and in the United States seems to be an understanding on a societal level of what music means to life. The Chinese seem to see music as an important aspect of daily life, as well as a tool for accomplishing goals (such as the government’s use of music education for nationalism promotion). The fact that authorities have seen music as a means to create feelings of nationalism and loyalty to the homeland for decades shows that there is an implicit understanding of the power of music and what it can do. This is something that does not seem to exist in American culture, where music is seen as an “extra” or an accessory to life, but not an integral part of it. Obviously this is different for musicians, but our culture in general does not center around music the way that Chinese culture does.

It is these differences of understanding of what music is on a basic level that seems to affect policies regarding music education in the two countries. The implicit understanding of the value of music in Chinese society makes for an easy understanding of how it should play an integral role in education as well. On the other hand, given that music is not an integral part of American society in that same way, it follows that it is harder to enact policies that place it at a “core” level in education. Although the way that music is valued in China, for nationalism promotion and specific character development, would not necessarily be beneficial to the United States (nor would it translate to American culture), we can learn something from a comparison with China’s music education.

Areas for Further Study

Little empirical research has been done regarding the effects of educational policies on music and other arts education in the United States. Research into this area could illuminate how music education affects students’ development and how it affects students’ learning in other subject areas. In addition, there is relatively little written in the field of comparative education regarding music instruction. Many other non-

Western countries such as South Korea and Cuba, value music education in a different way from the United States. A comparative approach could lend useful research to the understanding of what music education can and should be in the United States and what it could do for our students.

Personal Rationale

The study of comparative music education is particularly interesting to me as a musician and as someone who has benefitted immensely from the music education I received throughout the entirety of my public schooling. It concerns me when changes occur in music education curricula because, in my lifetime, they have been changes that eliminate programs or opportunities. While I was in high school, for example, I learned that the strings program that existed for fourth and fifth graders in my district was being eliminated, which meant that students who didn't have parents who were involved or wealthy enough to pay for private lessons couldn't start learning a stringed instrument until middle school. This concerns me as stringed instruments are difficult to learn, and as with most things, the later one starts the more difficult it is to learn. I am saddened by the thought of kids being discouraged because they find it difficult to start learning a new instrument as a pre-teen.

Music is something that keeps me going through my life—I am a lifelong violinist and singer, and although I have never considered using those skills in my career, I never plan to quit. Music helps us learn math and master foreign languages, as well as providing an outlet for students' creativity and a break from hours of sitting at desks. The lack of instrumental support for music education in the United States is upsetting to me, so I thought it interesting to do a comparison with a country whose government actively supports music education in public schools. Although music education in China is supported for some specific reasons that I would not necessarily want to see happen in the United States, I think we have something to learn from the value they place on music.

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