

# The Absence of Traditional Music: The Issue of Westernization in Primary School Music Education in China

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**Abstract.** Promoting Chinese culture has always been one of the indispensable goals in Chinese education. However, as multiculturalism becomes more integrated, the issue of Westernization in music education in Chinese primary schools becomes increasingly apparent. This article will take primary school music education as an entry point to deeply analyze the reasons for the lack of native culture. Through analysis, it is concluded that the reasons for the lack of national music culture can be summarized into four aspects of deficiencies: respectively the lack of teaching tools; the lack of teaching content; the lack of teaching system and the lack of teaching environment. In response to the above four problems, this article puts forward corresponding solutions and suggestions. This article is only based on the research at the primary education stage. Currently, junior high school, high school and other stages also have the same problems and are worthy of research and exploration.

**Keywords:** Chinese primary school, music education, traditional music.

## 1. Introduction

As a country with a history of five thousand years, China's traditional music culture also contains profound heritage. However, in today's primary school music education, the influence of Western music culture has led to significant issues of westernization. Zhang Yaqin believes that traditional music has high value in primary school music education, which can increase pupils' interest in learning and promote the inheritance of traditional music [1]. In the article, she pointed out that the impact of popular music culture resulted in a low level of interest among most pupils in traditional music. In response to the above issues, she proposed solutions such as introducing native culture and enhancing the appeal of traditional music to pupils [1]. Tiemei and Guo Minqi argue that there is currently a lack of Chinese musical instruments in primary school music classes. They emphasize that most of the music knowledge that Chinese pupils encounter in the classroom is based on Western theory, and the instrumental music they learn is predominantly Western. This situation significantly hampers the development of China's native music culture [2]. Guan Hui analyzed the music textbooks published by the People's Education Press and the People's Music Publishing House through statistical and comparative methods [3]. He found that the two music textbooks have problems such as more Western instrumental music repertoire than Chinese instrumental repertoire, lack of Chinese ethnic minority repertoire, and lack of pictures of Chinese ethnic instrumental music [3]. In response to the above issues, he suggests that Chinese ethnic minority instrumental music repertoire should be added to Chinese music teaching materials. The proportion of instrumental music repertoire of each ethnic group should be averaged, and solutions such as incorporating images and performance videos of ethnic instrumental music should be implemented [3]. Through literature review, many scholars typically start their discussions by addressing the absence of Chinese traditional music and ethnic music culture in primary schools. Building upon this foundation, this paper will analyze the reasons behind the absence of traditional music and the ethnic music culture in primary school music education in China. It will actively explore solutions and provide corresponding suggestions to address this issue.

## 2. Methodology

China's primary school music curriculum features various versions of teaching materials tailored to different regions. Prominent among these are the music teaching materials from People's Education Press, People's Music Publishing House, Shanghai Education Press, Jiangsu Education Press, among others. Given that the teaching materials from People's Education Press and People's Music Publishing House are widely used in primary school music education across most areas of China, this paper will primarily focus on the analysis of these two sets of teaching materials. Firstly, the catalogs of the two sets of textbooks will be observed and the proportion of Chinese and Western repertoire at each grade level will be counted. Secondly, an in-depth analysis of these repertoires will be conducted combining with the analysis of the "Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Annotation" [4].

## 3. Existing Problems

The problems existing in the primary music education in China can be delineated through four aspects. The first is the lack of teaching tools, the second is the insufficiency of teaching content, the third is the deficiency of pedagogical system and the fourth is the inadequacy of learning environment. This article offers a detailed analysis of these four aspects.

### 3.1. Lack of Teaching Tools

Piano is perhaps the only instrument equipped in the most classrooms in Chinese primary schools. As other simple and easy-to-learn small instruments entered the primary school classrooms, such as melodica, recorder, and Orff small percussion instruments. They started to dominate the teaching content [5]. It's undeniable that the piano itself has the advantages of wide range, high flexibility and adaptability. However, music class is an important way to cultivate pupils' aesthetic taste and cultural literacy. If the piano is the only teaching tool, the educational significance of the class will be greatly diminished. However, it is notable that the musical instruments predominantly found in classrooms are western in origin. According to the survey, most pupils can only learn about Chinese instruments through other media rather than, see or hear them in real life. Traditional musical instruments should appear in classrooms, be experienced and be played.

### 3.2. Insufficiency of Teaching Content

Textbooks are the most important content carrier in music classes in China. In the primary school textbooks published by both the People's Education Press and the People's Music Publishing House, the repertoire of traditional Chinese music is less than that of western music. The total number of instrumental music pieces in the textbooks of the People's Education Press is 181, including 52 traditional instrumental music pieces, 25 Chinese-style works (performed by Western instruments), and 104 foreign instrumental music pieces. The total number of instrumental music pieces in the primary school textbooks of the People's Music Publishing House is 151, including 39 ethnic instrumental pieces, 25 Chinese-style works (performed by Western instrumental music), and 87 foreign instrumental pieces [6]. It can be seen from this that the number of traditional music in China's primary school music textbooks is still far less than that of foreign instrumental music. The situation poses significant challenges for teachers to aiming to impart more ethnic music culture to pupils. It also greatly limits pupils' exposure to and understanding of ethnic music culture, as well as their opportunities to engage with that music.

Many schools currently conduct secondary classes on ethnic instruments to enrich pupils' extracurricular activities and cultivate pupils' ability to play ethnic instruments. The development of the secondary classes on ethnic instruments has indeed promoted the spread of ethnic music culture, but it has also caused many new problems. First, only a small proportion of pupils are involved in the secondary classes. Parents are voluntarily to desire for their children whether to participate or not. Since the class time is used for learning outside of teaching time, many pupils are not interested to participate. Second, the availability of professional teacher resources is inadequate. In the secondary

classes, due to the large variety of teaching instruments, many schools hire external teachers. However, the proficiency levels of these instructors vary, resulting in inconsistent teaching quality and challenges in effectively addressing pupils' needs. Additionally, pupils have limited time for practice due to heavy loads of schoolworks and participation in numerous extracurricular activities, resulting in suboptimal outcomes for secondary classes [7].

### **3.3. Deficiency of Pedagogical System**

Through investigation, the author found that the average number of music classes in most schools is once a week. This is far from enough for the coherence and follow-up of music teaching. Many schools and music teachers do not realize the importance of music classes. This has led to problems such as a small number of music classes and teachers not taking classes seriously, which has greatly reduced the significance of music classes.

The westernization of teaching methods is also a prevalent problem. Many music teachers have been trained within the western music teaching system, and the influence of western teaching methods is deeply rooted. For example, in many traditional music, such as folk songs, traditional melodies, etc., most of this music are passed down through oral transmission. Since many notes cannot be notated using the equal temperament system, using the piano as a teaching tool cannot accurately represent this music. At the same time, the Western music teaching system pays more attention to harmony, melody, rhythm, etc., which provides rich educational resources for global music education. However, the unique musical style, performative forms and musical elements in Chinese national music are obviously different from the western music system. Therefore, the western music teaching system cannot support the content of Chinese ethnic music teaching.

### **3.4. Inadequacy of Learning Environment**

As a crucial avenue for fostering pupils' holistic development, music has unfortunately become a marginalized subject. Many parents only focus on the cultivation of their children's Chinese, mathematics, English and other subjects while ignoring the cultivation significance of music. Parents' lack of attention has also led pupils to believe that music classes are not important. Music classes have gradually lost their meaning in such a context. Many schools organize activities related to various subjects, such as reading sharing meetings and sports meetings, but few music-related activities are held. In such a learning atmosphere, it becomes challenging for pupils to develop an interest in music, thereby creating greater obstacles in teaching ethnic music.

## **4. Solutions and Suggestions**

### **4.1. Suitable Instruments as Teaching Tools**

How to find suitable instruments as teaching tools requires thinking from many aspects. Primary school is at an important stage of student growth and development. pupils of this age are characterized by strong curiosity, desire for knowledge, and poor self-control ability. Considering those characteristics, the author believes that the best way is to choose an instrument that is small and easy to learn. Today, many schools introduce the recorder and melodica into the music classroom as teaching tools. It has been proved through practice that the recorder has the advantages of cultivating pupils' finger flexibility, rhythm and coordination in primary school music education, but the recorder and the melodica are both fixed-key instruments with monotonic tonality. Since the performance is limited, the pupils' interest will decline after a period of study, which is not suitable for long-term teaching [7]. The recorder and melodica are western instruments that are not suitable for playing Chinese traditional music. The author argues that the ocarina is a better instrument for teaching in lower grades (grades 1-3), and the bamboo flute is more suitable for teaching in senior grades (grades 4-6).

The ocarina has a unique timbre, and can play semitones. It is relatively easy to learn compared with other ethnic instruments. At the same time, compared with the pipa, guzheng, erhu and other

ethnic instruments, the ocarina is small and easy to carry. The instrument family of ocarina consists of six-hole ocarina and twelve-hole ocarina. For pupils in the lower grades, it is more appropriate to learn six-hole ocarina. The tone range of the twelve-hole ocarina is wider than the six-hole ocarina, and the finger flexibility requirements are higher when playing the twelve-hole ocarina. In the teaching process, "music games" can be used to help pupils learn the ocarina. For example, when teaching the song "Twelve Zodiac Songs", there are many rhythm changes in the song, including quarter notes, eighth notes and sixteenth notes. The teacher can let pupils use the ocarina to play the length changes of the rhythm, so that they can learn and appreciate the rhythm in music more quickly. When teaching the piece "Heavy Rain and Light Rain", the teacher can ask pupils to learn in a cooperative way, dividing the pupils into two groups. The first group of pupils sings the lyrics, and the second group of pupils plays the ocarina. When singing about describing raindrops that lyrics of the song were like "wow la la", and the second group of pupils played the ocarina to imitate the sound of raindrops. This teaching method allows pupils to concentrate more in class and improve their musical instrument playing abilities.

The bamboo flute is another portable traditional instrument with beautiful sound. Compared with the ocarina, the bamboo flute has higher requirements on breath and fingering, and the timbre of the bamboo flute is more melodious. Based on the above analysis, the author believes that the bamboo flute is more suitable for senior pupils to learn. In the "Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Annotation", it is proposed that pupils can play musical instruments [4], and pupils in grades 3-9 have the learning task of playing musical instruments solo or cooperatively. In addition to playing solo, the bamboo flute can also be used in ensembles. pupils can choose to play in the way they like and practice group cooperation skills. At the same time, the bamboo flute can also be used as an accompaniment instrument, which can adapt to different types of teaching methods in senior teaching. When teaching the piece "Sister Moon, Come Down Quickly", since this piece is a song for two voices, during the teaching process, pupils can first play the same part in unison, and the teacher will use the piano to accompany the other part. When the pupils are proficient, the teacher can divide the pupils into two groups to play a two-part ensemble. Through this teaching method, the pupils' ensemble ability can be improved and the pupils' bamboo flute playing ability can be enhanced.

#### **4.2. Increase the Number of Chinese Songs in Teaching Materials**

Faced with the problem that there are more Western music works than Chinese music works in music textbooks, adding suitable Chinese music works is the best solution. There are many Chinese music works with rich types, some are highly professional and require a certain music appreciation ability to learn, and some are highly entertaining and lively and interesting. How to find suitable works for teaching pupils of different ages is also a question worth thinking about. This article is based on the training goals for pupils of all ages in the "Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Annotation" [4]. Combined with the characteristics of pupils of different ages, appropriate types of music repertoire are selected according to age as music teaching materials.

Grade 1 - Grade 2: pupils of this age are characterized by strong curiosity, strong imitation ability, and inattention. In the selection of teaching materials, children's songs and nursery rhymes can be mainly used. At the same time, animal-themed songs and some songs with strong rhythm can be added. Some familiar children's songs and songs with strong rhythm can attract pupils' attention and stimulate pupils' interest in learning. For example, the children's song "Happy Clapping Song" has a strong rhythm. During the teaching process, it can be taught through music interactive games. During the song singing, pupils can clap according to the rhythm and interact with the music to enhance their perception of rhythm and learning.

Grade 3 - Grade 5: The thinking mode of pupils of this age has transitioned from concrete image thinking to abstract logical thinking, and they also have their own goals for learning. For pupils of this age, they can choose small instrumental pieces or opera music with rich emotions in the selection of textbook songs, so that pupils can understand different forms of music performance, at the same time, pupils can feel the basic emotions expressed by music by listening to the melody of music, such

as cheerful, sad and other emotions. For example, the Guqin solo piece "High Mountains and Flowing Waters" can be introduced with the background story of the song during the teaching process, so that pupils can understand the content expressed in the song. Then introduce the appearance, timbre characteristics, etc. of the Guqin to the pupils, and compare it with the Guzheng, a national instrument that is easier for pupils to access, so that pupils can learn more about the national instrument through a song. More opera excerpts can be added to the teaching materials to allow pupils to distinguish the differences between different types of opera and increase their confidence in national culture.

Grade 6: pupils of this age have strong learning ability. In the selection of teaching materials, we can choose some songs with strong national characteristics, and add appreciation of dialect songs where appropriate. For example, the Cantonese nursery rhyme "Moonlight" is a Cantonese nursery rhyme sung in Cantonese. Its melody is beautiful and catchy. If there are pupils from Guangdong, the teacher can invite the pupils to be the lead singers for singing demonstrations. This kind of teaching method can enhance pupils' self-confidence and opportunities for practice. In the selection of teaching materials, songs with ethnic characteristics can also be added, such as Uyghur songs with strong rhythm and cheerful characteristics, representative musical instruments such as Dongbula, tambourine, etc., and Uyghur songs such as "Youth Bird" and "Kambarnusa" can be added. Korean songs have the characteristics of beautiful melody and strong musical expression, and the representative musical instruments of the Korean nationality include the Gayageum, the long drum, etc., which can be added to the Korean songs "The Ballad of Spring Ploughing" and "Nodor Riverside" as teaching material songs. In the study of different ethnic songs, we can also learn different national cultures, national musical instruments and national characteristics, which enriches the knowledge of national culture and enhances the interest of pupils in music learning.

### 4.3. Enhance the Music Learning Atmosphere

Since the music subject has always been called a minor subject in the Chinese education system, the public generally pays little attention to the music subject. Many Chinese parents think that music as a minor subject is not worthy of attention and ignore the role of music in improving children's cognitive and emotional development. Faced with this problem, the author believes that it can be solved from the following two aspects. First, set up a music subject examination mechanism. At present, many parents pay less attention to the music subject. Part of the reason is that the music subject does not have a relatively complete assessment mechanism like other subjects. At the same time, in some college entrance examinations, the music subject is not used as an examination subject and assessment standard. Under the Chinese education system, for most schools, test scores are the only way to check whether pupils meet the admission standards. In this social environment, schools and parents will focus more on subjects that require examinations such as Chinese and mathematics, thus reducing the importance of music subjects. At present, most areas have included music examinations as subjects in high school entrance examinations, and pupils and parents are gradually paying more and more attention to music subjects. If music subjects can be included in some important examinations in primary school education, the importance of learning and parents will be promoted. Second, increase the number of music lessons. In primary education, the frequency of music classes is mostly one class a week, and the number of such courses is set to the teaching content is less follow-up and continuity, and pupils only regard music lessons as entertainment and relaxation classes, and many pupils will forget the knowledge taught in the previous class in the classroom. Therefore, increasing the number of music lessons to two to three times a week will be more conducive to pupils' learning of music subjects.

A good learning atmosphere can increase pupils' interest in learning to a certain extent. Schools can regularly hold music activities for pupils, such as concerts and music flash mobs. Music performances can be organized for pupils during breaks to increase pupils' practical experience, enhance pupils' self-confidence, and at the same time attract more pupils to be interested in music subjects. Secondly, strengthen the construction of music societies. Establish school art societies, such as choirs, orchestras, folk bands, etc., to enhance the influence of music on pupils and provide pupils

with a platform to express themselves. In addition, set up corresponding music competitions, such as the "Campus Singer Competition", and add a reward mechanism to increase pupils' enthusiasm for participating. Creating a good music learning atmosphere can allow pupils to feel the charm of music in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, and cultivate pupils' musical aesthetics and improve their musical literacy.

#### 4.4. Improve Teachers' Own Abilities and Enhance the Pedagogical System

Improving teachers' own teaching abilities can be carried out from two aspects. First, understand and master the playing methods of national musical instruments. At present, the basic requirements for the training of music teachers in normal colleges and universities are piano and vocal music. Mastering piano performance skills has become a basic requirement for music teachers [8]. In the teaching of ethnic music, teachers can divide national musical instruments into four categories: blowing, playing, and singing, and learn to master the basic performance methods of national musical instruments, improve their own teaching ability, and then be able to play the teaching content for pupils in the classroom and enhance pupils' understanding of the timbre of national musical instruments. Second, enhance the study of national music culture and enhance one's own national consciousness. As a music teacher, you need to have a large reserve of music knowledge. There are many ethnic minority music cultures in our country that are constantly being explored and studied by scholars. These precious ethnic cultures are vivid and interesting, such as the "Po Ya Song Book" of the Zhuang ethnic group. It also requires music teachers to continuously learn and understand national music culture and keep their music knowledge reserves up to date, so that they can bring more national music and culture knowledge to pupils.

Regularly conducting music teaching exchange meetings will help improve the teaching level of music teachers and help the construction of a new teaching system. First, teachers can observe the teaching of teachers from other regions. Through such teaching exchange meetings, teachers can have an in-depth understanding of the excellent national cultures of different regions, which will bring better teaching content to pupils and help the inheritance of national music culture. At present, the problem of imbalance of music teaching resources in my country is significant. Teaching exchanges can better promote music teachers to share teaching resources, break geographical restrictions, and bring better educational resources to pupils.

## 5. Conclusion

This article analyzed the reasons for the absence of traditional music culture and the problems caused by the systematic westernization in Chinese primary school music education. The existing problems are reflected in four aspects: the lack of teaching tools, the insufficiency of teaching content, the deficiency of pedagogical system and the inadequacy of learning environment. Following the in-depth analysis of these four aspects, this paper provides corresponding solutions and suggestions. However, in China's junior high and high school education, the similar issues also exist. How to systematically deal with these problems cannot be included in this paper but is worthy of further exploration.

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