

Xiao Youmei: Interpreting Patriotic Sentiment Through Music

Jingtao Jin

School of Arts, Studies of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China

Abstract: As a founder of modern Chinese music education, Xiao Youmei's lifelong work vividly exemplifies a musician's patriotic sentiment. This article explores this theme from three perspectives: the origins of patriotic thought, the artistic expression of patriotism, and the passing on of patriotic sentiment. The roots of Xiao Youmei's patriotic sentiment lie in the concept of 'family and nation' rooted in traditional Confucian education and the inspiration drawn from Sun Yat-sen's democratic revolutionary ideology, which spurred him to become a patriotic intellectual. Furthermore, as a musician, Xiao Youmei's advocacy of the 'music to save the nation' philosophy ensured that music education and musical practice remained firmly grounded in the foundations of traditional Chinese musical culture. Finally, Xiao Youmei's patriotic spirit exerted a profound influence on the development of modern and contemporary Chinese music, nurturing a cohort of outstanding patriotic musicians. By inextricably linking musical art with the nation's destiny, Xiao Youmei set an example for modern music practitioners; through his character as a musician who served his country through his profession, he has become a precious spiritual legacy in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese music.

Keywords: Xiao Youmei, Musical Composition, History of Modern Chinese Music.

1. Introduction

Previous research has primarily regarded Xiao Youmei as the 'pioneer of modern music education in China'. [1] However, Xiao Youmei was not merely an educator, but also a musician who expressed his patriotic sentiments through music. This paper will explore Xiao Youmei's identity as a patriot from three perspectives: firstly, the origins of his patriotic ideology; secondly, how he embodied the spirit of patriotism in his musical compositions; and finally, how he imparted patriotic education to his students. Through further research, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of Xiao Youmei and appreciate the significant contributions he made as a patriotic musician. [2]

2. The Origins of Patriotic Sentiment

2.1. The Influence of His Father

Xiao Youmei was born in Xiangshan County, Guangdong Province, in the tenth year of the Guangxu reign (1884). His father was Xiao Yuzeng (style name Yanqiao), a scholar-official of the late Qing dynasty [3]. Although historical records do not explicitly document Xiao Yuzeng's direct role in shaping Xiao Youmei's patriotic ideology, it is undeniable that, during his formative years, Xiao Youmei was likely profoundly influenced by his father, Xiao Yuzeng, through daily life and subtle, gradual exposure.

In the late Qing Dynasty, the imperial examination system continued to follow the Confucian ideological framework centred on the Four Books and Five Classics; as a scholar who passed the examination in the late Qing period, Xiao Yuzeng must have been thoroughly familiar with these texts. Within Confucian thought, concepts such as 'cultivating oneself, harmonising the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world', as well as 'loyalty, filial piety, chastity and righteousness', held a pivotal position [4]. Among these, the notions of 'governing the state and bringing peace to the world' and 'loyalty' particularly highlight their close

connection to patriotic sentiment. Furthermore, Xiao Yuzeng compiled *The Ladder of Sacred Learning*. This work was primarily intended for young students, imparting traditional Confucian scholarship and moral standards. *The Ladder of Sacred Learning* is divided into two volumes: the first volume contains foundational texts for children's education, such as *The Three-Character Classic* and *The Hundred Family Surnames*, with annotations that particularly emphasise the acts of loyalty and bravery performed by historical figures; the lower volume selects core passages from the *Four Books*, accompanied by commentaries from renowned scholars throughout the ages [5]. The book features a separate 'Chapter on Loyalty and Righteousness', which brings together patriotic poetry and prose such as Wen Tianxiang's *Ode to Righteousness* and Yue Fei's *Full Red River*, accompanied by annotations such as 'Since ancient times, who has not died? Let us preserve a loyal heart to illuminate the annals of history' [6]. "Xiao Youmei was steeped in family scholarship from a young age, and *The Ladder of Sacred Learning* formed the foundation of his ideology", serving as his introductory textbook and sowing the seeds of the idea that "music should serve the nation" [7].

It is evident from Xiao Yuzeng's own educational background and professional career that he provided Xiao Youmei with rich cultural nourishment and a profound family tradition. This undoubtedly had a profound influence on the young Xiao Youmei and laid a solid foundation for his future development as a patriotic musician.

2.2. The Influence of His Teacher

In the fifteenth year of the Guangxu reign (1889), Xiao Youmei moved with his family to Macao, where he studied under Mr Chen Zibao. Mr Chen Zibao had passed the Xiu Cai examination in the third year of the Guangxu reign (1877) and ranked fifth in the Guangdong provincial juren examination in the nineteenth year of the Guangxu reign (1893). Not only was he well-versed in traditional Confucian classics, but he also possessed profound expertise in various fields, including

literature and education. Furthermore, Chen Zibao was a man of principle, brimming with patriotic fervour and a strong sense of social responsibility. In 1895, whilst Chen Zibao was in Beijing to sit the imperial examinations, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 ended in defeat. Patriotic figures such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were preparing the ‘Joint Petition of the Public Carriage’; Chen Zibao resolutely joined their ranks, becoming an indispensable part of the historical tide, a testament to his ‘loyalty’ to the nation![8]

The failure of the Petition of the Public Carriages did not dampen the high spirits of this group of patriotic men. Chen Zibao resolutely threw himself into the Hundred Days’ Reform, joining the Society for the Preservation of the Nation without hesitation. Working hand in hand with fellow reformists such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, he devoted his heart and soul to the nation’s renewal and revival, offering counsel and devising strategies. Every action he took demonstrated his unwavering patriotic spirit and reflected his deep and fervent love for his country. Under Chen Zibao’s guidance, both in word and deed, the young Xiao Youmei was profoundly influenced and nurtured; this undoubtedly planted the seeds of patriotism deep within his heart, inspiring him to grow into a patriot dedicated to serving his country.

2.3. The Influence of Sun Yat-sen

It may be difficult for the average person to immediately perceive a direct connection between Sun Yat-sen, the great pioneer of the national revolution, and Xiao Youmei, the father of Chinese music education; yet, in reality, a subtle bond did indeed exist between the two. Xiao Youmei’s father, Xiao Yuzeng, had once moved his entire family to Macao, and at that time, Dr Sun Yat-sen happened to be practising medicine there. Sun Yat-sen and the Xiao family were long-standing friends. Three years after the Xiao family settled in Macao, Sun Yat-sen also came to Macao to open a clinic. Whenever he had the opportunity, Sun Yat-sen would promote his political views; according to his own account, he ‘used schools as a platform for advocacy and employed medical practice as a means of engaging with the world’[9]. The gist of this statement is that he utilised schools as a platform for propagating his ideas, whilst employing the practical skill of medicine as a means of engaging with society and promoting revolutionary thought.[10]

As he grew older, Xiao Youmei maintained close ties with Sun Yat-sen and became one of his most loyal followers. In the 32nd year of the Guangxu reign (1906), Xiao Youmei went to Tokyo Imperial University to study education.[11] Through Sun Yat-sen’s introduction, he joined the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance and provided cover for the revolutionary activities of Sun Yat-sen, Liao Zhongkai and others in Japan.

Sun Yat-sen’s active participation in revolutionary activities and his spirit of integrating patriotic sentiment into practice fully demonstrated his noble character and unwavering convictions. Throughout his formative years, Xiao Youmei was directly influenced by Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary spirit and patriotic sentiment. Sun Yat-sen’s words, deeds and various activities likely served as important references for Xiao Youmei in the subsequent development of his own patriotic sentiment and philosophy of music education.

3. The Spirit of Patriotism in Music

As a founding figure of modern Chinese music education,

Xiao Youmei holds a pivotal position in the history of modern Chinese music. Looking back on his life, his musical works are imbued with profound patriotic sentiment; this sentiment is not only reflected in his musical philosophy but is also fully manifested in his musical practice.

3.1. The Idea of Saving the Nation Through Music

Xiao Youmei placed ‘saving the nation through music’ at the core of his musical educational philosophy. In his essay ‘The Power of Music’, he stated: ‘The rhythm of music can command the largest possible masses and unify the actions of the entire nation.’ He firmly believed that music could not only elevate the artistic cultivation of the masses but also shape their national character, serving as a vital means of inspiring patriotic sentiment. Xiao Youmei devoted himself to awakening the people’s patriotic consciousness and enhancing the overall quality of the nation through music. “He combined music with national morality, using music to stir patriotic sentiments among the masses, shape the national character, and subtly influence people’s thinking.” [12]

Following the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan, Xiao Youmei actively organised the staff and students of the National College of Music to participate in the anti-Japanese salvation movement. He called upon them to compose patriotic songs, hoping to inspire the masses and ignite their patriotic fervour through these compositions, thereby becoming a vital spiritual pillar of the War of Resistance. Furthermore, Xiao Youmei actively organised the staff and students of the National College of Music to promote anti-Japanese sentiments and contribute to the war effort through choral performances and fundraising concerts. He personally led the staff and students onto the streets to raise funds for the Northeast Volunteer Army, using choral performances and other means to collect money to support the war effort on the front lines. [13] At the same time, he organised the staff and students of the National Conservatory of Music to hold a special ‘Concert to Bolster Morale and Support the War Effort’ in Hangzhou, using the art of music to rally support for the war. These activities not only demonstrated Xiao Youmei’s patriotic sentiments and musical talent but also made significant contributions to modern Chinese music education and the anti-Japanese salvation movement. These initiatives not only strengthened the public’s awareness of the need to resist Japan but also made a positive contribution to China’s War of Resistance.

At the same time, Xiao Youmei actively devoted himself to musical composition, hoping to awaken the patriotic sentiments of the masses through his works and to pour his own feelings for the nation and the people into his music. For example, in March 1925, when Dr Sun Yat-sen passed away, Xiao Youmei was deeply grieved and adapted his ‘Mourning Overture’-originally composed in 1916 to commemorate the two outstanding revolutionaries Huang Xing and Cai E, for the public memorial service. The piece not only expressed the public’s grief at Dr Sun Yat-sen’s passing, but also gave voice to his lifelong aspirations for ‘peace’, ‘struggle’ and ‘saving China’. Following the “September 18th” Incident, with the Chinese nation facing an existential crisis, Xiao Youmei composed “The Song of Enlistment” to call upon the youth to actively respond to the nation’s call, join the military, and put their patriotic sentiments into practice through concrete action. [14] Whilst inspiring the people’s patriotic fervour, it also bolstered the fighting spirit of the young.

3.2. Upholding Cultural Foundations

Whether in his musical philosophy or in his musical practice, Xiao Youmei steadfastly safeguarded the foundations of national musical culture. In his musical education practice, he put forward the proposition of ‘taking national music as the foundation’. ‘He believed that whilst Western music is undoubtedly classical, Chinese music education should take traditional Chinese music as its primary teaching content.’ Xiao Youmei combined Western musical educational concepts with traditional Chinese musical education. By introducing courses such as Chinese Music History and Chinese Instrumentation at the school, he imparted knowledge of traditional musical culture to students, aiming to cultivate their national musical literacy. The curriculum of the National Conservatory of Music explicitly stipulated: “All full-time students majoring in music theory, composition or piano must take one Chinese traditional music course as an elective for at least one year; from 1938 onwards, Xiao Youmei personally delivered a lecture series entitled ‘The Evolution of Ancient Music’, which covered the history of ancient music.”[15] Furthermore, he invited several musicians with considerable expertise in traditional instrument performance, such as Zhu Ying and Wu Bochao, to teach at the National Conservatory of Music, with a view to strengthening and elevating the standard of traditional Chinese music education at the institution.

“I believe that when our composers refuse to capitulate to Western music, they must create a new style capable of representing the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese nation and distinguishing it from the music of other nations; only then can it become a ‘national school of music’.” Xiao Youmei actively advocated for the establishment of a ‘national school of music’. He believed that only by establishing a national school of music with Chinese characteristics could the independence and self-reliance of Chinese music be truly realised. In 1923, at the Second Annual Meeting of the Chinese Society for the Improvement of Education, within the National Music Education Group, Xiao Youmei seconded Li Rongshou’s motion titled ‘Whether Our Country’s Pihuang Melodies Have Any Value in National Music Education, and Whether They Can Be Adopted as a Reference for the Music World’, stating: ‘Pihuang is prevalent throughout our country, yet many contemporary music scholars pay little attention to its study. I believe that every nation has its own spirit and its own characteristics; the rise and fall of culture, the depth of customs, and the strength or gentleness of the national character all bear a profound relationship to music. Pihuang opera embodies the emotions and sentiments of the Chinese people; rooted in the echoes of ancient music, it has gradually evolved and transformed, changing with the times. Its melodies are stirring and solemn, profound and rich, expressing joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure with ease; it is music that is in harmony with the national character. [16] Adopting its melodies and refining the libretto would certainly serve as an aid to social education. Might it be possible to adopt and refine it, transcribe it into a universal musical notation, and use it as a reference for the music world?” In short, Xiao Youmei believed that Peking Opera is deeply loved by the Chinese people and embodies a rich national spirit and cultural identity. Although contemporary music scholars have paid insufficient attention to it, the value of Peking Opera cannot be overlooked. It should be refined and considered for integration into the global musical system, serving as a reference for the music community; this would

not only enrich musical culture but also contribute to social education. It is evident from this that Xiao Youmei approached traditional music with a rational perspective, rather than offering uncritical praise. It is precisely because of this rational approach that his deep affection for traditional music and his profound sense of responsibility towards the preservation of traditional culture are all the more evident.

In his musical compositions, Xiao Youmei also remained steadfastly rooted in traditional Chinese culture. In the 1920s, he composed the piano piece **New Rainbow Robe and Feathered Garment Dance**, inspired by the poem of the same name by the Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi; in creating this work, Xiao Youmei was influenced by the Tang Dynasty piece **Rainbow Robe and Feathered Garment Dance**. In terms of form, the Tang-daiqu is divided into three sections: ‘The Sanxu (Prelude) has no fixed metre or singing, with a free rhythm, performed by instrumentalists. The Zhongxu (Middle Section) enters the metre with singing, mostly in a lyrical, slow tempo, accompanied by instruments. The Po (Climax) focuses on dance, with the rhythm gradually accelerating, concluding in a fervent atmosphere.’ Similarly, Mr Xiao Youmei’s *New Ni Chang Yu Yi Dance* is also divided into three sections: the first is the overture, the second is the main body, and the third is the coda. In terms of metre, apart from the overture being in 4/4 time, the subsequent twelve sections of the main body and the coda are all in 3/4 time. Melodically, Xiao Youmei employs the pentatonic scale as the primary structure, incorporating chromatic notes, which is highly characteristic of Chinese music.[17]

4. Passing on the Torch of Patriotism

As a figure of significant stature in the history of modern Chinese music, Xiao Youmei’s historical contributions are evident not only in the realm of musical composition, but also in the foundational and pivotal role he played as a music educator. Looking back on his life, it is clear that he devoted himself entirely to the cause of Chinese music education. Whether in his early years as Director of Academic Affairs at the Music Training Institute of Peking University, or later as Principal of the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai, Xiao Youmei consistently regarded ‘saving the nation through music’ as his personal mission. He set an example for his students by closely integrating artistic pursuit with national duty, and nurtured a generation of patriotic musicians, including He Luting, Lü Ji, Ding Shande and others. In this section, taking He Luting as an example, the author will elaborate in detail on Mr Xiao Youmei’s influence on his students from the dual perspectives of He Luting’s artistic philosophy and musical composition.

Firstly, regarding the shift in artistic philosophy, Xiao Youmei proposed in his essay ‘The New Life of the Musician’: ‘Musicians must recognise their responsibilities to the times; they must not confine themselves to the ivory tower of art, but must use sound to awaken the spirit of the nation’. In other words, he believed that music should serve society, rather than being an art confined to an ivory tower. Xiao Youmei’s musical philosophy exerted a profound and substantial influence on the formation of He Luting’s artistic outlook. According to the manuscript of He Luting’s *Musical Notes* from 1933, currently held in the archives of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, detailed excerpts of Xiao Youmei’s discourse on the ‘ivory tower’ can be found, accompanied by a marginal note: “If music cannot awaken the masses, then technical perfection is but a mere pretence.” This line of

thinking led directly to his 1936 essay *The Development of National Defence Music*, in which he explicitly stated: “The composer should regard technique as a tool, not an end in itself. What is needed today is the ability to express the paramount theme of resisting Japan and saving the nation through the most economical harmonic language (such as avoiding complex altered chords), the most distinctive rhythmic patterns (such as the certainty of a march), and the most easily disseminated melodic lines (such as pentatonic core tones). The merit of technique should be judged by its ability to enhance the emotional impact of the content”, a view that further deepened and expanded upon Xiao Youmei’s concept of music’s social service. While emphasising the contemporary and social nature of musical content, it more specifically outlines how musical technique should serve the core objective of the content. In his musical composition, He Luting adhered to the principle of ‘serving the nation through music’, transforming his fervent patriotism and profound insight into the spirit of the times into stirring melodies and heartfelt lyrics, thereby creating a series of widely beloved patriotic songs. These songs, such as ‘The Guerrilla Anthem’ and ‘Defend Our Hometown’, not only feature beautiful melodies and lively rhythms but also embody profound patriotic sentiment and an indomitable national spirit, becoming a source of spiritual strength that inspired countless Chinese people to fight bravely and defend their homeland.[18]

While teaching at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts, He Luting kept Xiao Youmei’s legacy firmly in mind. At the ‘Music and the Masses’ symposium in November 1942, he further emphasised: ‘The “Three Dos and Three Don’ts” are not technical standards, but a matter of creative stance. No matter how technically perfect a work may be, if the masses cannot accept it, it is a failure.’ In 1944, in a letter to Lü Ji, He Luting further elaborated on the ‘Three Dos and Three Don’ts’ creative principle, clearly pointing out that this principle represented a practical development of Xiao Youmei’s educational philosophy that ‘music serves the masses’.[19] In the letter, he emphasised: “Music educators should take Mr Xiao’s teachings as their guiding principle, not only imparting skills but also cultivating virtue. In today’s musical composition, the primary objective must be to rouse the masses and serve the War of Resistance.” This profoundly demonstrates He Luting’s understanding of the social function of music, marking a transition and elevation from a focus solely on technical dimensions to the assumption of a cultural mission. He believed that the duty of music educators was by no means limited to cultivating students’ artistic prowess; more crucially, it was to painstakingly instil in students the firm value of ‘serving the nation through music’, and to nurture a cohort of outstanding patriotic musicians, such as Liu Chi and Wang Ming.

As a founder of modern music education in China, Xiao Youmei not only taught musical skills but also placed great emphasis on cultivating students’ sense of patriotism; his musical patriotism profoundly influenced the trajectory of 20th-century Chinese music. Through Xiao Youmei’s musical educational practice, this patriotic sentiment formed a distinct lineage of intergenerational transmission, nurturing a large cohort of patriotic musicians who closely linked their personal artistic pursuits with the nation’s destiny. [20] By using music to inspire the people’s fighting spirit and promote the national spirit, they successfully forged a unique ‘group of patriotic musicians’ in the history of modern Chinese music,

thereby ensuring the enduring transmission of patriotic sentiment.

5. Conclusion

Through a systematic examination of Xiao Youmei’s musical career, this paper explores the process of constructing his identity as a patriotic musician and its historical significance from three dimensions: the origins of his patriotic ideology, the ideological and practical manifestations of his patriotic sentiments in music, and the educational transmission of these sentiments. Xiao Youmei’s patriotic sentiments stemmed both from the influence of traditional Confucian culture and the profound impact of modern national salvation movements, giving rise to a distinctive concept of ‘saving the nation through music’ in his musical composition and educational practice. In the field of professional music education, Xiao Youmei pioneered the integration of Western music theory with traditional Chinese musical culture, steadfastly upholding the foundations of traditional culture. Through the educational platform of the National Conservatory of Music, he cultivated a cohort of musical talents who possessed both professional expertise and a sense of national duty. Xiao Youmei’s patriotic sentiments not only propelled his musical practice but also drove the establishment of China’s modern music education system, serving as a model for “serving the nation through music”. Xiao Youmei’s educational practice reminds us that true music education is never merely about cultivating technically proficient performers, but rather about fostering musicians with cultural self-awareness and a sensitivity to the times. Precisely because of the increasing commercialisation of the music industry today, Xiao Youmei’s educational philosophy is all the more precious. At a time when popularity has become the primary yardstick for measuring musical value, the spiritual legacy he left behind serves as a sobering reminder, reminding us that the ultimate value of music education lies in cultivating well-rounded talents who possess musical thinking, artistic expression and a sense of social responsibility. Such individuals are not only capable of interpreting the national spirit and expressing patriotic sentiments through the language of music, but can also utilise music’s unique power to engage with reality, respond to the challenges of the times, and ultimately grow into modern citizens with well-rounded personalities, combining artistic sensibility with a sense of duty to their country and people!

References

- [1] Wang, Y. H. (2002). A history of modern and contemporary Chinese music (Rev. ed., p. 87). People’s Music Publishing House.
- [2] Liao, F. S. (2000). Xiao Youmei and Macao. People’s Music, (1), 24–25.
- [3] Xiao, Y. M. (1990). The influence of music. In C. L. Q., Q. Y. Y., & D. P. H. (Eds.), *Collected works of Xiao Youmei* (pp. 343–346). Shanghai Music Publishing House.
- [4] Chen, W., & Huang, J. M. (2014). An analysis of Xiao Youmei’s musical educational philosophy. *Grand Stage*, (6), 139–140.
- [5] Xu, B. (2014). Xiao Youmei’s musical educational thought and practice. *Lantai World*, (10), 57–58.
- [6] Feng, J. Q. (2012). Insights from Xiao Youmei’s musical educational thought for music education. *Grand Stage*, (2), 203–204.

- [7] Huang, X. D. (2012). The fundamental characteristics of Xiao Youmei's educational approach: Taking the National Conservatory of Music as an example. *Music Art*, (2), 34–37.
- [8] Xiao, Y. M. (1990). On China's new music movement. In C. L. Q., Q. Y. Y., & D. P. H. (Eds.), *Collected works of Xiao Youmei* (p. 466). Shanghai Music Publishing House.
- [9] Wang, Y. (2017). On the characteristics of ancient Chinese history in Xiao Youmei's view of music history. *Music Creation*, (5), 90–92.
- [10] Sun, J. N. (2003). *A concise general history of Chinese music* (2003 ed., p. 85). Shandong Education Press.
- [11] Wu, L. (2017). On the creative characteristics of Xiao Youmei's piano work "New Rainbow Robe and Feathered Garment Dance". *Music Creation*, (12), 104–106.
- [12] Shanghai Conservatory of Music Xiao Youmei Music Education Promotion Association. (2004). *The complete works of Xiao Youmei* (Vol. 1, p. 317). Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press.
- [13] He, L. T. (1981). *Selected musical essays of He Luting* (p. 37). Shanghai Literature and Art Press.
- [14] Special Report on the Lu Xun Academy of Arts Music Symposium. (1942, November 8). *Jiefang Daily*, p. 3.
- [15] He, L. T. (2005). *Collected letters of He Luting* (He Luting Research Office, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Ed., p. 117). Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press.
- [16] Huang, S. G. (2011). On the status of Xiao Youmei in the history of modern music education in China. *Journal of Hebei Normal University (Education Science Edition)*, 13(3), 45–49.
- [17] Zhang, X. (2011). Several historical records concerning the death of Xiao Youmei. *Music Art (Journal of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music)*, (1), 190–192, 5.
- [18] Qi, M. (2010). A brief study of the editors of the "Music Academy Journal". *Music Art (Journal of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music)*, (4), 30–32, 4.
- [19] Chi, B. (2009). The artistic characteristics of Xiao Youmei's piano language. *Chinese Musicology*, (3), 135–138.
- [20] Huang, X. D. (2008). "We must have the resolve to stand or fall with the National Conservatory of Music!"-A profile of Mr Chen Hong, Xiao Youmei's right-hand man in the early years of the War of Resistance. *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music*, (1), 25–30, 71.