

The Composition and Cultural Impact of Modern School Songs against the Background of the Eastward Spread of Western Music

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Abstract: The wave of 'Western music spreading eastwards' from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century constituted a crucial historical context for the transformation of modern Chinese music. School songs, which emerged against this backdrop, represented the first musical cultural phenomenon in modern China to exert widespread social influence. They not only facilitated the initial dissemination and localisation of Western musical culture in China but also served as a vital vehicle for conveying demands for social reform and reshaping the national spirit. Taking the 'Eastward Spread of Western Music' as its starting point, this paper systematically traces the developmental trajectory of modern school song composition, examining core dimensions such as the composition of creative agents, the origins of melodies and lyric-writing strategies, and the selection of thematic content. It provides an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted cultural impacts of these songs on the construction of the music education system, the intellectual enlightenment of the populace, the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, and the modernisation of Chinese music.

Keywords: Eastward Spread of Western Music, School Songs, Creative Practice, Cultural Influence, Musical Modernisation.

1. Research Background and Significance

In the mid-19th century, as the fire of the Opium War shattered the closed structure of the 'Celestial Empire', the military invasion and cultural penetration by Western powers advanced in tandem, forming the far-reaching wave of the 'Eastward spread of Western learning' in modern Chinese history. Western musical culture, as a vital component of Western learning, was consequently introduced to China, initiating the historical process of the 'Eastward Spread of Western Music'. Accompanying the introduction of Western musical culture was the urgent demand for 'new education' within modern Chinese society. In the late Qing and early Republican periods, the feudal traditional education system gradually disintegrated, giving rise to modern schools. The composition and dissemination of school songs were not only a practice of localising Western music in China, but also a proactive attempt by modern Chinese intellectuals to use music to enlighten the nation and drive social change. From the perspective of creative practice, school songs primarily employed the method of 'setting new lyrics to old melodies', thereby achieving a fusion of Western musical melodies with themes drawn from Chinese social reality; from the perspective of cultural influence, they not only established the preliminary framework for modern Chinese music education but also implanted modern concepts such as democracy, science and patriotism into the national consciousness through the medium of music, driving the transformation of Chinese music from 'courtly court music' and 'folk music' towards 'national music'. Taking the 'Eastward Spread of Western Music' as its core context, this paper comprehensively traces the developmental trajectory of school songs and provides an in-depth analysis of their cultural impact. It holds significant theoretical and practical value for clarifying the historical logic of modern Chinese musical transformation, unearthing the modern value of

traditional musical culture, and promoting the inheritance and innovation of contemporary musical culture.

2. The Evolution of School Song Composition: Explorations and Breakthroughs in the Localisation of Western Music

Within the historical context of the eastward spread of Western music, the practice of composing school songs was not merely a simple 'transplantation of Western music', but rather a dynamic process in which modern Chinese intellectuals, driven by the dual imperatives of national salvation and educational enlightenment, undertook the localisation of Western musical forms. Centred on the logic of 'Sino-Western fusion', this creative trajectory exhibited distinct characteristics of the era across three dimensions: the creators, the sources of melodies and lyric-writing strategies, and thematic content. It not only responded to the external impact of Western music's eastward spread but also took root in the practical needs of Chinese society, thereby establishing a wholly new paradigm for musical composition in modern China.[1]

2.1. Composition of the Creative Community and Creative Philosophy

The creative community behind school songs exhibited a diverse character, with the core group comprising students studying in Japan and advocates of modern education, supplemented by some folk musicians and missionaries. The intellectual backgrounds and value aspirations of these different groups collectively shaped the creative landscape of school songs. Although these creators differed in identity, they all shared 'musical enlightenment' as their core aspiration, closely linking the composition of school songs to the nation's destiny and public education, thereby forming a creative philosophy that was both contemporary and practical.

2.1.1. Core Creative Groups: Students Studying in Japan and Modern Educators

The group of students studying in Japan formed the backbone of school song composition. Their creative philosophy was deeply influenced by the ‘music for national salvation’ ideology that emerged following Japan’s Meiji Restoration, embodying the dual attributes of ‘disseminating Western learning’ and ‘striving for national survival’. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, tens of thousands of young Chinese students travelled to Japan to study. Among them, a group of scholars-including Shen Xingong, Li Shutong, Zeng Zhimin and Feng Yaxiong-systematically studied Western music theory, instrumental performance and music education systems in Japan, and subsequently took the initiative to integrate musical composition with the Enlightenment movement in their homeland. Shen Xingong, known as the ‘Father of School Songs’, joined the ‘Music Study Society’ whilst studying in Japan in 1902, where he systematically studied musical notation and Western compositional techniques. His creative philosophy was clearly embodied in the principle that ‘music serves national education’; he advocated that songs should be ‘clear and easy to understand, and easy to sing’, using simple melodies and straightforward lyrics to convey patriotic ideas and modern knowledge to students. The works in his **School Song Collection** were primarily aimed at primary school pupils, featuring accessible language and lively rhythms. Pieces such as *Bamboo Horse* and *Gymnastics-Military Drill* not only catered to children’s cognitive development but also implicitly conveyed the Enlightenment ideal of ‘strengthening the nation and fostering a healthy populace’.[2]

The group of modern educators, however, approached the matter from a macro perspective of educational reform, viewing the composition of school songs as an integral part of ‘New Education’ and emphasising the unity of the aesthetic and moral functions of such songs. As an advocate of modern aesthetic education, Cai Yuanpei proposed the concept of ‘replacing religion with aesthetic education’, incorporating music education into the core system of national education and driving the transformation of school songs from the ‘teaching of skills’ to the ‘shaping of character’. Influenced by this philosophy, some educators directly engaged in the composition of school songs, emphasising the fusion of ideological and aesthetic qualities in their works. For instance, Wu Huai-jiao’s composition ‘Women’s Gymnastics’ not only advocated physical exercise for women but also conveyed the modern concept of ‘gender equality’. The lyrics – ‘Dear young men and women, do not squander your prime; build a strong physique and cultivate wisdom, so that in the future all nations may look upon you with admiration’ – resonated with the identity of female students whilst implicitly embodying the aspiration for national rejuvenation. The involvement of such creators enabled school songs to transcend the realm of mere ‘political propaganda’, becoming a vital vehicle for shaping the character of the modern citizenry.

2.1.2. Supporting Creative Groups: Folk Musicians and Missionaries

The participation of folk musicians infused school songs with indigenous musical elements, serving as a vital bridge for the localisation of Western music. These creators typically possessed extensive experience in folk music performance and were familiar with the aesthetic preferences of the Chinese populace; their compositions often incorporated folk melodic characteristics and vocal styles onto Western musical

frameworks. For example, the folk artist Abing (Hua Yanjun) was involved in the adaptation and performance of school songs in his early years, incorporating melodic elements from Jiangnan silk and bamboo music into the instrumental arrangements of works such as ‘Spring Outing’, thereby making Western melodies more attuned to the listening habits of the Chinese public. In addition, some folk theatre troupe artists also participated in the dissemination and adaptation of school songs. Through street performances and temple fair performances, they spread school songs from campuses to the general public, promoting their popularisation.

Missionaries, as early propagators of Western music in the East, were not the core creators of school songs, but played a supporting role in providing melodies and disseminating compositional techniques. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, Christian missionaries generally introduced music courses in the church schools they established in China, teaching Western religious songs and music theory. The melodies of these religious songs were often simple and soothing, making them easy to sing and memorise, and thus became one of the key sources of melodies for school songs. For example, Li Shutong’s ‘Farewell’ was adapted from the religious song ‘Dreaming of Home and Mother’ by the American missionary Odway. The Western melodies brought by missionaries provided rich creative material for school songs, whilst their advocacy of ‘choral forms’ and ‘staff notation teaching’ indirectly influenced the composition and dissemination of these songs.

2.1.3. Commonalities and Differences in Creative Philosophy

Although the creators came from diverse backgrounds, the creative philosophy behind school songs exhibited distinct commonalities: Firstly, ‘enlightenment’, viewing songs as tools to enlighten the people and reshape the national spirit, conveying modern concepts such as patriotism, democracy and science through the lyrics; secondly, “educationality”, which emphasised the aesthetic and moral educational functions of the songs, focusing on their positive role in students’ physical and mental well-being and character development; and thirdly, “popularity”, which sought simple melodies and accessible lyrics to facilitate collective singing in modern schools and achieve widespread dissemination.[3]

At the same time, there were marked differences in the philosophies of different creative groups: the group of students studying in Japan placed greater emphasis on ‘national salvation and survival’, with their works carrying a strong political tone; for instance, Shen Xingong’s ‘The Yellow River’ and Zeng Zhimin’s ‘Military Drill’ directly echoed the era’s backdrop of national peril; the group of modern educators placed greater emphasis on ‘character development’, with works often focusing on self-cultivation, motivation and popular science, such as **The Song of Self-Cultivation** and **The Song of Astronomy**, reflecting the comprehensive educational objectives of the ‘New Education’ movement; whilst folk music practitioners were more concerned with ‘local adaptation’, incorporating folk music elements to lower the barrier to entry for Western music and enhance the songs’ appeal to the general public. These ideological differences resulted in a diverse and symbiotic landscape within the creative practice of school songs, satisfying the demands of the era’s transformation whilst accommodating the receptiveness of different audiences.

2.2. Melodic Sources and Lyric-Writing Strategies: The Clash and Adaptation of Chinese and Western Music

The diversity of melodic sources and the flexibility of lyric-writing strategies constitute the core characteristics of the creative practice of school songs. In the early stages of the eastward spread of Western music, due to the immaturity of modern Chinese music theory and a scarcity of original melodies, ‘setting new lyrics to old melodies’ became the primary method of composing school songs. As creative practice deepened, some composers began to experiment with ‘fusion’ arrangements and original compositions, gradually achieving a transition from ‘passive borrowing’ to ‘active innovation’, thereby laying the foundation for the modernisation of Chinese music.

2.2.1. Three Major Categories of Melodic Sources

The melodic sources of school songs can be broadly divided into three categories: Western musical melodies, Japanese musical melodies, and traditional Chinese musical melodies. Among these, Western musical melodies held a dominant position, reflecting the core influence of the eastward spread of Western music.

The first category, Western musical melodies, encompassed a variety of forms including military music, folk songs, religious music and art songs. Due to their rousing rhythms and majestic grandeur, Western military marches became the preferred choice for patriotic and inspirational works in school songs. For example, Shen Xingong’s ‘Sons of China’ is adapted from the Japanese military march ‘The Old Bucket in the Dormitory’ (the original composition being a Western military march). Its powerful and resonant melody perfectly complements the heroic spirit of the lyrics, ‘Sons of China, sons of China, we shall prop up the heavens with our own hands’, making it a classic work that inspired the youth of the modern era; Li Shutong’s *Song of the Motherland*, adapted from a fragment of the Western piece *La Marseillaise*, combined the revolutionary melody of the French Revolution with Chinese patriotic sentiment, creating a powerful sense of historical resonance. Western folk songs and art songs, with their gentle melodies and beautiful harmonies, were well-suited to campus life and lyrical themes. For instance, Li Shutong’s ‘Farewell’, adapted from the American folk song ‘Dreaming of Home and Mother’, features a melodious and lyrical tune that complements the elegant lyrics “Beyond the long pavilion, by the ancient road, fragrant grass stretching to the horizon”, making it a model of lyrical works within the school song repertoire. Furthermore, melodies from Western religious music were widely adapted; for instance, parts of the “Hymn” were reworked into songs such as “The Song of Self-Cultivation” and “The Song of Loving One’s Neighbour”, whose simple melodies and themes of virtue aligned perfectly with the moral education objectives of the school songs.

The second category comprises Japanese musical melodies, which served as an ‘intermediary vehicle’ for the transmission of Western music into China. Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan introduced a vast amount of Western music and adapted it into ‘school songs’ suitable for the Japanese populace to sing. Chinese students studying in Japan then adapted these Western melodies—which had already been localised by the Japanese—once again, setting them to Chinese lyrics to form school songs. For example, Shen Xingong’s ‘Gymnastics – Military Drill’ was adapted from the Japanese song ‘Mr. A-Gong’. The original piece was in the style of a Western march;

after being adapted by the Japanese, its rhythm became more lively. Shen Xingong set it to the lyrics ‘A man’s first ambition is to aim high; age is no barrier’, turning it into a song to accompany primary school gymnastics activities; Zeng Zhifen’s “Spring Outing” was adapted from the Japanese song “Spring Excursion”. The original piece blended Western harmonies with elements of Japanese folk music; in his adaptation, Zeng retained the melodic framework of the original whilst incorporating ornamental notes from Chinese folk music, lending the tune a more indigenous flavour. The borrowing of such melodies not only bridged the cultural divide with Western music but also, through Japan’s ‘secondary adaptation’, achieved a preliminary alignment with the rhythm of the Chinese language, making it a significant choice during the early stages of school song composition.[4]

The third category comprises melodies from traditional Chinese music. Although these accounted for a small proportion, they reflected a conscious commitment to localised composition. Some composers, whilst drawing on Western music, attempted to draw inspiration from traditional Chinese music to achieve a ‘fusion of East and West’ in their compositions. For example, Li Shutong’s ‘Recalling Childhood’ is adapted from the Chinese folk tune ‘Meng Jiangnu’, combining the melody of the traditional folk tune with modern lyrics; this retains the gentle and evocative atmosphere of traditional music whilst conveying the modern concept of ‘cherishing time’; Zeng Zhiming’s *Drill* incorporates the rhythmic patterns of Peking Opera, blending the march structure of Western music with the melodic elements of Peking Opera’s ‘Xipi and Erhuang’ styles to create a unique musical style. Although such works are few in number, they mark a transition in the composition of school songs from ‘unidirectional borrowing’ to ‘bidirectional fusion’, providing early insights into the localisation of modern Chinese music.

2.2.2. Lyric-writing Strategies: Linguistic Adaptation and Semantic Integration

The core challenge of ‘setting new lyrics to old melodies’ lies in achieving rhythmic harmony and semantic coherence between Western or Japanese melodies and Chinese lyrics. The composers of school songs resolved this dilemma through a series of precise lyric-writing strategies, thereby achieving an effective fusion of Chinese and Western music.

Firstly, rhythmic adaptation strategies: selecting lyrical sentence structures based on the rhythmic characteristics of the melody. Western music is often based on the alternation of strong and weak beats, with fixed rhythmic patterns, whereas Chinese lyrics are characterised by the interplay of level and rising tones and rhyme. When writing lyrics, composers typically adjust the sentence structure and word count according to the melody’s time signature (such as duple or quadruple metre) and melodic contours, ensuring that the recitative rhythm of the lyrics aligns with the melodic rhythm of the tune. For example, Shen Xingong’s ‘Bamboo Horse’ employs a 4/4 time signature, with lyrics structured as a combination of ‘three-character lines + five-character lines’: ‘Moonlight shines, illuminating the courtyard; riding a bamboo horse, passing by the pond’. Each line has an even number of characters, with level and rising tones alternating, ensuring that the recitation rhythm aligns closely with the musical rhythm, making it easy for students to sing in unison; Li Shutong’s ‘Spring Outing’, on the other hand, employs a triple-time melody, with lyrics such as ‘The spring breeze

caresses my face, lighter than gauze; the springtime folk's attire is more subtle than a painting'. The varying lengths of the lines echo the lightness of the triple-time melody, evoking the serene atmosphere of a springtime outing.

Secondly, the semantic alignment strategy: ensuring that the content of the lyrics remains consistent with the emotional tone of the melody. When selecting a melody, creators match it to the subject matter and emotional tone of the lyrics, achieving a 'unity of sound and emotion'. For example, patriotic and inspirational lyrics often employ stirring and majestic Western military music or march tunes, such as in 'Sons of China' and 'The Yellow River'. These melodies feature stark contrasts between strong and weak beats and an upward melodic progression, which aligns perfectly with the emotional tone of the lyrics-'reviving China' and 'pressing forward with courage'; lyrical and descriptive lyrics, on the other hand, often employ gentle and beautiful Western folk or art song melodies, such as in 'Farewell' and 'Recalling Childhood'. These melodies feature gentle fluctuations and harmonious harmonies, resonating with the sentiments of homesickness and nostalgia expressed in the lyrics; Lyrics for science education, on the other hand, often adopt simple and lively children's song melodies, such as 'The Astronomy Song' and 'The Geography Song'. These melodies are simple and repetitive, with a light and cheerful rhythm, making it easier for students to memorise the knowledge contained in the lyrics.[5]

Thirdly, cultural adaptation strategies: transforming the cultural connotations of Western melodies into emotional expressions within a Chinese context. Western musical melodies often carry specific Western cultural backgrounds; when setting lyrics, creators replace cultural symbols and incorporate elements of traditional Chinese culture to make the emotional expression of the melody more in line with the cognitive habits of the Chinese public. For example, the original melody of 'Farewell'-'Dreaming of Home and Mother'-is an American folk song expressing longing for one's hometown and mother. When Li Shutong wrote the lyrics, he incorporated imagery from traditional Chinese culture such as 'the long pavilion', 'the ancient road' and 'the weeping willow', transforming the Western sentiment of homesickness into the traditional Chinese sorrow of parting. This allows the work to retain the lyrical tone of the original melody whilst imbuing it with a rich flavour of Chinese culture; Shen Xingong's *Ode to the Teacher* was adapted from the Western religious hymn *God Save the King*. The original melody was used in religious ceremonies, but Shen Xingong inserted the lyrics "A teacher's grace is profound, never to be forgotten; their diligent instruction, their affection endures", transforming religious devotion into gratitude towards teachers and achieving a localised translation of the melody's emotional content.

2.2.3. The Transition from 'New Lyrics to Existing Melodies' to 'Original Compositions'

As creative practice deepened and Western musical theory became more widespread, some composers began to move away from reliance on existing melodies and experimented with original compositions, marking a significant breakthrough in the practice of composing school songs. This transition occurred primarily between the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement, reflecting a growing cultural self-awareness during the deepening phase of the Eastward spread of Western music.

Zeng Zhifen was one of the pioneers of original melodies.

During his studies in Japan, he systematically studied Western compositional theory, and upon his return to China, he actively advocated for 'original music'. His compositions, such as 'Drill' and 'Spring Outing', all feature independently composed melodies. The melody of 'Spring Outing' blends Western harmony with the pentatonic scale of Chinese folk music; its natural melodic undulations and light, lively rhythm harmonise perfectly with the lyrical imagery of "The spring breeze blows, a hundred flowers bloom; those out for a spring stroll are filled with joy", making it a model of original composition within the school song tradition. Furthermore, although Li Shutong's *Spring Outing* drew in part on melodic elements from Japanese songs, it demonstrated independent innovation in harmonic arrangement and melodic development. By employing Western polyphonic techniques, the work achieved greater musical depth, becoming a representative example of original compositions that blend Chinese and Western elements.

The rise of original compositions marked a shift in the creation of school songs from 'imitation and borrowing' to 'independent innovation'. Underlying this was the assimilation of Western musical theory by modern Chinese composers and the conscious application of indigenous musical elements. This transformation not only enriched the musical expressiveness of school songs but also laid the foundation for modern Chinese musical composition, propelling Chinese music from a traditional 'melody-dominated' approach towards a modern 'polyphonic and multi-form' style.[6]

3. Classification of Themes and Content, and Characteristics of the Era

The themes and content of school songs were closely aligned with the social transformations and educational needs of modern China, covering multiple domains such as patriotism and national salvation, educational enlightenment, campus life, and democracy and republicanism, thereby forming a thematic system that combined contemporary relevance with practical utility. These themes not only responded to the impact of modern ideas brought about by the eastward spread of Western music but were also rooted in the real-world demands of Chinese society, becoming important vehicles for conveying modern thought and shaping the national spirit.

3.1. Patriotic Salvation Themes: The Era's Cry for Survival

Patriotism and national salvation constitute the core theme of school songs, accounting for over half of all works. They vividly embody modern China's sense of crisis regarding the 'peril of national extinction' and the era's call for 'reviving China'. With stirring melodies and forceful lyrics, these works called upon the people to awaken, resist aggression, and strive for a strong and prosperous nation, serving as a spiritual weapon to inspire the Chinese people's struggle during the modern era.

Representative works include Shen Xingong's 'The Yellow River' and 'Sons of China', Li Shutong's 'Song of the Motherland', and Zeng Zhimin's 'Military Drill'. The lyrics of 'The Yellow River'-'Yellow River, Yellow River, flowing from Mount Kunlun, journeying far from Mongolian lands, flowing into the Great Wall's passes. Since ancient times,

sages and virtuous men have been born along this riverbank. Standing alone upon the embankment, my thoughts are vast and open. Beyond the Great Wall, on the banks of the Hetao, yellow sands and white grass, no trace of human life. If only I could borrow three thousand soldiers, to sweep away the dust from the north-western frontier”, use the Yellow River as a metaphor to depict the magnificent landscapes of the motherland whilst expressing the lofty ambition to repel foreign aggression and reclaim lost territories. The melody adopts a Western military style, with a brisk rhythm and majestic grandeur, making it extremely popular; The lyrics of “Sons of China” - “Sons of China, sons of China, we shall prop up the heavens with our own hands. A sleeping lion for a thousand years, a sleeping lion for a thousand years; when one man raises his arm, ten thousand men are emboldened. The great rivers of the Yangtze, in the east of Asia; the lofty Kunlun Mountains, the majestic Great Wall. The Land of Abundance, rich in resources and vast in scope; descendants of the Yellow Emperor, a divine race. Like tigers and dragons amidst the clouds, nations gather in unity; as the pride of Heaven, we shall reign supreme”, directly proclaims the slogan of “Reviving China”. With its stirring and majestic melody, it became a spiritual totem for the youth of the modern era. A common feature of such works is the close intertwining of individual destiny with that of the nation; through the power of music, they stirred the patriotic sentiments and spirit of resistance among the people, embodying the core aspiration of school songs: “saving the nation through music”. [7]

3.2. Educational Enlightenment Themes: Modern Knowledge and Character Formation

Educational enlightenment themes constitute a vital component of school songs, encompassing self-cultivation, motivation, scientific popularisation and moral education, thereby reflecting the goal of ‘holistic education’ in the new educational system. Using simple and accessible language, these works impart modern scientific knowledge, moral standards and life aspirations to students, facilitating the transformation of the populace from ‘traditional subjects’ into ‘modern citizens’.

Works on self-cultivation and motivation, such as ‘Song of Self-Cultivation’, ‘Song of Aspiration’ and ‘Encouragement to Study’, emphasise personal moral cultivation and a spirit of endeavour. For instance, the lyrics of ‘Song of Self-Cultivation’-‘In this world, conduct comes first. Filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty and trustworthiness; propriety, righteousness, integrity and shame. These are the foundations of one’s character; none can be neglected. Strive, strive, and do not squander your youth,” combine traditional Confucian ethics with modern civic virtues. The melody is gentle and soothing, making it easy for students to internalise moral concepts whilst singing; the lyrics of *Encouragement to Study*-‘Youth fades quickly, learning is hard to master; not a moment of time should be taken lightly. Before one realises the dream of spring grass by the pond, the sound of autumn is already heard in the wutong leaves before the steps”, adapted from Zhu Xi’s “Poem on Encouraging Study”, features a simple and lively melody that conveys the concept of “treasuring time and studying diligently”. [8]

Works aimed at popularising science, such as “The Song of Astronomy”, “The Song of Geography” and “The Song of Natural History”, incorporate modern scientific knowledge-

including astronomy, geography and biology-into their lyrics, serving as “musical textbooks” for the new-style schools. For instance, the lyrics of *The Song of Astronomy*-‘The light of the sun and moon shines in all directions; the Earth revolves round the sun, whilst the moon orbits the Earth. Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth: the five planets busily circle the sun; myriad stars stud the sky; all phenomena are works of art’-explain the basic principles of celestial motion in plain, accessible language, set to a light and lively tune that is easy for students to memorise; The ‘Geography Song’, meanwhile, introduced China’s mountains, rivers, and provincial boundaries. The lyrics, “Our China, a vast land, bordered by the sea to the east, backed by land to the west, reaching Hainan in the south and the desert in the north. The Yellow River is long, the Yangtze is wide, the Five Sacred Mountains are majestic, and the Four Seas are vast. Rich in resources, with a large population, a nation of five thousand years of civilisation”, not only disseminated geographical knowledge but also strengthened students’ sense of national pride.

3.3. School Life Themes: Childlike Innocence and Collective Consciousness

The school life genre focuses on students’ daily studies and lives, covering scenes such as gymnastics, games, spring outings and farewells. These works are imbued with childlike innocence and playfulness, whilst also emphasising the cultivation of students’ collective consciousness and spirit of cooperation. Having shed the heavy tone of political propaganda, these works are more attuned to the physical and mental developmental characteristics of students, making them the most approachable segment of school songs.

Representative works include Shen Xingong’s ‘Gymnastics-Military Drill’ and ‘Stilt-Walking’, as well as Li Shutong’s ‘Spring Outing’ and ‘Farewell’. The lyrics of ‘Gymnastics-Military Drill’-‘A boy’s first ambition is to be bold; age matters not. Brothers and younger brothers join hands, coming to perform military drills. The officer holds his baton, the little soldiers fire their guns and cannons. A dragon flag flutters in the breeze, the bronze drum beats with a thud-thud,” depict the scene of primary school pupils undergoing gymnastics training. The melody is bright and lively, and the rhythm is perfectly synchronised with the gymnastic movements, thereby not only strengthening the pupils’ physiques but also fostering a spirit of collectivism. The lyrics of *Bamboo Horse*-“Moonlight shines, illuminating the courtyard; riding a bamboo horse, crossing Heng. The pond is too deep to cross, so I wave my bamboo horse’s whip and pretend to be drunk with joy. The little lads from the house to the east, the little lads from the house to the west, gather together in joyous merriment,” brim with childlike innocence and playfulness. The light and nimble melody captures the joyful atmosphere of school life; the lyrics of “Spring Outing”-“The spring breeze caresses my face, lighter than gauze; the springtime folk’s attire is as delicate as a painting. Spring-goers walk as if in a painting, amidst a flurry of flowers as they pass beneath. Pear blossoms are pale, rapeseed blossoms yellow; willow catkins litter the ground whilst mustard flowers give off their fragrance. As the oriole sings by the path, people make their way home; beyond the flowers, the distant toll of a bell bids farewell to the setting sun”, depict the beautiful scenery of a spring outing with delicate brushstrokes. With a melodious and lyrical tune that combines aesthetic value with educational significance, it has become a classic example of lyrical works within school

songs.

4. Historical Insights: Lessons for the Inheritance and Innovation of Contemporary Chinese Musical Culture

The creative practice and cultural influence of school songs provide important historical lessons for the inheritance and innovation of contemporary Chinese musical culture. Firstly, adhering to a creative path of ‘fusion of Chinese and Western elements’: the success of school songs demonstrates that cultural modernisation must neither blindly reject foreign influences nor adopt Westernisation wholesale; rather, it should absorb outstanding cultural achievements from abroad whilst remaining grounded in indigenous cultural foundations, thereby achieving ‘adapting foreign elements for Chinese use and the synthesis of Chinese and Western traditions’; Secondly, upholding the contemporary mission of ‘music as a vehicle for moral and cultural values’: music is not merely an aesthetic art form; it also serves to enlighten minds, convey values and foster social cohesion. Contemporary musical composition should address the needs of the times, resonate with the themes of national development and national rejuvenation, and realise the social value of music; Thirdly, we must prioritise a dissemination model centred on ‘educational empowerment’: the experience of School Songs achieving widespread dissemination through the education system teaches us that the transmission and popularisation of musical culture require a sound educational framework. Music education must be integrated into the core of national education to achieve a unity of aesthetic cultivation and value formation; Fourthly, we must strengthen the innovative spirit of ‘cultural self-awareness’: contemporary musical composition should inherit the spirit of localised innovation seen in the later period of school songs, deeply explore the cultural significance and artistic value of traditional Chinese music, and combine modern musical theory and technology to create musical works with Chinese characteristics, style and grandeur.

As a cultural product emerging against the backdrop of the eastward spread of Western music, modern school songs not only facilitated the initial dissemination and localisation of Western music in China, but also served as a vehicle for promoting intellectual enlightenment, educational reform and social transformation in modern China, becoming a pivotal starting point for the transition of Chinese music from tradition to modernity. The experiences and limitations of their creative practice provide profound historical lessons for the inheritance and innovation of contemporary Chinese musical culture - only by grounding ourselves in our local context, embracing openness and inclusivity, and responding to the demands of the times can we achieve the sustainable development of musical culture and inject powerful cultural momentum into national rejuvenation.

5. Conclusion

Modern school songs, born out of the wave of Western music’s eastward spread, represent a significant achievement resulting from the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western musical cultures. Adopting the form of ‘setting new lyrics to old melodies’ as their primary creative method and relying on modern education for widespread dissemination, they not only systematically introduced Western musical systems-including music theory and musical forms-and drove the transformation of traditional Chinese music into modern forms, but also used music as a vehicle to enlighten the public, awaken a sense of patriotism among the people, and contribute to modern social reform. Although constrained by the limitations of the era-with works predominantly consisting of adaptations and original composition still lacking-school songs established the preliminary framework for modern music education and charted a viable path for the integration of Chinese and Western music. Their practical experience of ‘adapting foreign elements for Chinese use and educating through music’ continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary music composition, music education and cultural exchange.

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