

The Western Influences on Early Twentieth Century Chinese School Song

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Abstract

In early twentieth century, many Chinese scholars and intellectuals believed that the development of a new Chinese culture should follow the Western standard. School song was the earliest Western music genre taught in early twentieth century Chinese music classes. However, it was imported not only as an aesthetic subject, but also as an educational tool. In general, most of early twentieth century Chinese school songs were composed for the purpose of political propaganda. Many school song texts reflected Chinese intellectuals' patriotism and the revolutionaries' political expectations of the time. They spread political ideas to young Chinese students to fight against feudalism and superstition, and to study advanced Western Civilization and Western democracy. In addition, most of school song composers of the time were revolutionaries but not professional composers. This may be the main reason that caused the genre to lack quality.

Keywords: Chinese school song, Western influence, political propaganda, early twentieth century

For a thousand years, Chinese emperors and the Chinese people believed that China was the strongest and technologically most advanced nation in the world. This ideology was deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It can even be seen in the name of the nation – 中国 (China). A compound word, it is a combination of two single Chinese characters, 中 (central) and 国 (kingdom).

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Chinese people, especially Chinese monarchies, were proud of the achievements of ancient China. They judged Western countries and Western culture with the eyes of an ethnocentric nation, disregarding and denying Western Civilization, even when many Western countries had already turned into industrialized countries in the nineteenth century. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, the losses of two Opium Wars (1840-1842 and 1856-1860) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) completely destroyed this Chinese ethnocentrism. It resulted in the door of China being forcefully opened. As a result, the Chinese feudal society gradually became both semi-colonial and semi-feudal. Chinese intellectuals began to realize the importance of studying advanced Western Civilizations, including technologies, science, and social systems (Wang, 2009).

In 1911, over two thousand years of the Chinese feudal system was destroyed by the outbreak of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The main purpose of the 1911 Revolution² was to overthrow the feudal autocratic rule and build an independent, democratic, and prosperous nation (Wang, 2009). The Republic of China³ was established in 1912 and it became a capitalist nation. However, Yuan Shikai, the second president of the Republic of China, led a revival of the monarchy and proclaimed himself emperor of the renamed Empire of China (1915-1916). The restoration was short-lived and soon the Chinese revolutionaries won back power. This incident caused Chinese intellectuals to look for better ways to help China speed up the steps to adopt Western Civilization. The New Culture Movement boomed during the mid 1910s – 1920s. This movement claimed that the old Chinese culture and Chinese education system stifled Chinese peoples' thoughts, intelligence, and freedom and was one of the most important reasons the development of China lagged behind the Western world. Many Chinese scholars and intellectuals claimed that the development of a new Chinese culture should follow the Western standard. In their view, Western Civilization, especially Western democracy and science, were the ideal models for developing a new Chinese culture (Hummel, 1930).

²A coup d'etat led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sun in October of 1911 that overthrew China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, and established the Republic of China under the leadership of the Chinese Nationalist Party. Dr. Sun was elected as the provisional president of the newly declared Republic of China.

³ Republic of China located on mainland China from 1912 to 1949, then relocated to the island of Taiwan. It was commonly known as China into the 1970s, when it was expelled from the United Nations and its diplomatic ties with the United States were severed. Since then it has become commonly known as Taiwan.

The New Culture Movement influenced many Chinese to study advanced Western technologies, science, ideologies, and educational systems in order to change the future of the Chinese nation.

The Western style music class was introduced to the Chinese modern educational system as an independent subject in the early twentieth century. Generally, the basic idea of music education is that it should be used as a kind of aesthetic education and should teach basic musical skills. This kind of music education provides students with the ability to appreciate the beauty of musical arts, the skills to join musical activities, or the ability to play musical instruments. However, the introduction of the Western style music class in the early twentieth century Chinese educational system was not only for the purpose of aesthetic education but also for the strong political purpose of arousing the Chinese peoples' patriotism (Wang, 2009). In the early twentieth century, Chinese society was in an upheaval. Many Chinese people were still loyal to the feudal Chinese monarchy while others were loyal to Western democracy. This caused many Chinese people to be ideologically confused and indifferent regarding the fate of the Chinese nation. Thus, many Chinese educators used music as a tool to spread their ideologies, achieve their political goals, educate Chinese people, regulate society, and strengthen political power under the influences of Confucianism (Mao, 1991). Many Chinese educators of the time expected that the use of the Western music education system would help the Chinese people understand the change from feudal ideologies to those of Western Civilization. The use of this educational system may be one of the more important factors that caused the unusual development of early twentieth century Chinese school song.

School song was the earliest Western music genre to be taught in early twentieth century Chinese music classes. The Japanese had originally adopted this genre from Western civilization and passed it on to the Chinese music education system. In many cases the tunes of early school songs were not composed by Chinese composers but were adapted from some of the well-known Western songs to which Chinese texts were united (Melvin & Cai, 2004).

An example of this adaptation was Li Shutong's *送别* (*Farewell*). Li Shutong was a well-known Chinese artist, teacher, and Buddhist monk. He studied painting and music at the Tokyo School of Fine Art in Japan in the early twentieth century and was one of the earliest music teachers who taught Western music to the Chinese.

The melody of *Farewell* was originally composed by the American composer John P. Ordway in 1851 and titled *Dreaming of Home and Mother*. It was a popular song during the American Civil War (Zhao, 2003). The text of *Farewell* describes typical Chinese scenery with sentimental Chinese poetic feelings:

Outside the road shelter by the ancient trail,
Grasses are green and wild.
Willows are waving with lingering flute,
The sun's setting down the hill.
To the ends of the earth,
Gone are the friends and acquaintances.
Take a cup of farewell with kind wishes,
Leaves the heart with cold dreams.
Author of text-Li Shutong
Translator-Feng Yuan

This song was one of a few early twentieth century Chinese school songs that were set to non-political texts. The music examples of Li Shutong's *Farewell* and John P. Ordway's *Dreaming of Home and Mother* are seen in figures 1, 2, and 3:

送别

(美) 奥德维曲
李叔同填词

长亭外，古道边，芳草碧连天，
晚风拂柳笛声残，夕阳山外山。
天之涯，地之角，知交半零落。
一瓢浊酒尽余欢，今宵别梦寒。
长亭外，古道边，芳草碧连天，
晚风拂柳笛声残，夕阳山外山。

Figure 1: Li Shutong's Farewell ⁴

⁴Music was scanned from Yang's Anthology of Chinese Art Songs, page 100.

DREAMING OF HOME AND MOTHER.

Poetry and Music by J. P. ORDWAY, M. D.

Simplioe.

VOICE.

PIANO.

1. Dreaming of home,
2. Sleep, balmy sleep,
3. Childhood has come,

dear old home! Home of my child-hood and Mother;
close mine eyes, Keep me still think-ing of Mother,
come a-gain, Sleep-ing I see my dear Mother,

Entered according to Act of Congress, A. D. 1884, by G. D. RUSSELL & Co., in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

Figure 2: John P Ordway's Dreaming of Home and Mother, page 1

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Oft when I wake 'tis sweet to find, I've been dreaming of home and mother.
Hark! 'tis her voice I seem to hear, Yes, I'm dreaming of home and mother.
See her loved form be-side me kneel, While I'm dreaming of home and mother.

Home, dear home, childhood's happy home! When I played with sis-ter and with brother;
An-gels come, 'soothing me to rest, I can feel their presence as none other;
Mother dear, whisper to me now, Tell me of my sis-ter and my brother;

'Twas the sweetest joy when we did roam, O-ver hill and thro'dale with mother.
For they sweetly say I shall be blest, With bright vis-ions of home and mother.
Now I feel thy hand up-on my brow, Yes, I'm dreaming of home and mother.

DREAMING OF HOME AND MOTHER.

Figure 3: John P Ordway's Dreaming of Home and Mother, page 2⁵

⁵ Music was downloaded from Johns Hopkins University, Levy Sheet Music Collection, Box 129, Item 038, URI:<http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/18847> (accessed November 07, 2011).

The genre of Chinese school song was born and developed during the time when Chinese society was in an upheaval. It was imported not only as an aesthetic education subject, but also as an educational tool for rousing the Chinese peoples' patriotism and encouraging young Chinese students to contemplate the thoughts of Western Civilization. The genre became the medium to spread political opinions of the time and soon the genre became a revolutionary propaganda tool. Moreover, many composers of school songs were revolutionaries (Liu, 2010). Thus, many school song texts reflected Chinese intellectuals' patriotism and the revolutionaries' political expectations of the time. These included saving the Chinese nation through studying the scientific Western Civilization and calling on Chinese people to fight imperialist invasions.

One of the school song texts introduced feminism to Chinese people. In traditional feudal Confucian Chinese society, women only played the roles of daughter, wife, and mother at different stages of their lives. They were the property of men and most of them never had the chance to be educated. Western feminism came to China after the Opium Wars and many Chinese women were no longer satisfied with their traditional roles in society. The first Chinese girls' school was founded in 1844 by Western missionaries. Soon, girls' schools were established in almost all the major Chinese cities in the early twentieth century (Zheng, 1997).

Many school songs were specifically composed for female students. Qiu Jin's *勉女权* (*Strive for Women's Rights*) was a simple school song but the text strongly encouraged Chinese women to fight for their rights as equals of men. In addition, the strophic song form of this song was the typical compositional form of many early twentieth century political Chinese school songs, because the song could be easily learned and would spread the political messages faster. Once the people learned the song melody, they just needed to memorize the different texts. The music example of *Strive for Women's Rights* is seen in figure 4.

勉女權

秋瑾填詞

我輩愛自由，勉勵自由一杯酒。
舊習最堪羞，女子竟同牛馬偶。

男女平權天賦就，直甘居牛後。
曙光新放文明候，獨立佔頭籌。

願奮然自拔，一洗前羞垢。
若安作同儕，恢復江山勞素手。

責任上肩頭，國民女傑期無負。

Figure 4: Qiu Jin's Strive for Women's Rights ⁶

We women love freedom,
 Let's drink a cup of wine to encourage that freedom,
 Heaven has bestowed on men and women equal rights,
 How can we be satisfied by staying behind?
 Wish we women [to] raise and free ourselves,
 Wash off the old shames.
 Happily we become companions to men,
 to recover the mountains and rivers requires our fair hands.
 Author of text-Qiu Jin
 Translator-JianGuo

This song was published in one of the early Chinese women's newspapers, *News of Chinese Women*, on July 1, 1907 when China was still under the control of the Chinese feudal Qing government (Zheng, 1997).

This song's composer was a well-known Chinese woman revolutionary who dedicated her life to the Chinese democratic revolution. She wrote poems, articles, and songs to encourage Chinese women to resist oppression by their families and by the feudal society. She declared that a better future for women would be found under a Western-type government instead of the corrupt feudal Qing government.

⁶Music was scanned from Yuan's Anthology of 20th Century Chinese Songs, page 16.

She also worked to unite many secret revolutionary societies in overthrowing the Qing government. In 1907, she was arrested and beheaded at the age of 32 (Liu, 2010). But her ideas were spread by some of her revolutionary propaganda school songs.

In order to engage more Chinese people with revolutionary song texts, Qiu Jin liked to use images of well-known traditional Chinese heroines such as Mu Lan to encourage Chinese women to dedicate themselves to the revolution. *女军人* (*Women Soldiers*) is one of the best examples of her revolutionary propaganda school songs. In the text, Qiu Jin calls on Chinese women to fight against feudalism and fight for their nation in the same manner as men:

Fighting with hatred for a common enemy
We risk bloody execution
For the thousand cities of our nation,
We scarf-clad females strive hard,
To form a united force not lagging behind the men.
Author of text-Qiu Jin
Translator-JianGuo

Many early Chinese school songs were composed by unknown composers or unknown revolutionaries. But their political expectations were clearly spread by the genre. For example, *自由* (*Freedom*) was a school song that spread the ideology of Western democracy and asked the Chinese people to stand up and throw off the feudal Qing government. After the victory of the 1911 Revolution, school songs were composed to introduce the ideology of democracy and republicanism which became very popular in song.

In general, most early Chinese school songs were composed for the purpose of political propaganda. They spread political ideas to young Chinese students to fight against feudalism and superstition, and to study modern Western Civilization.

Those political ideas suited Chinese intellectuals' and revolutionaries' aspirations to save the Chinese nation and establish a Western style democratic republic.

The genre of Chinese school song opened the door of Western music to early twentieth century China. Since Western style music classes were adopted into the Chinese educational system, playing Western instruments and singing Western style songs became fashionable for young Chinese (Zheng, 2002). Thus, many school songs were widely circulated in mainland China and the popularity of these songs encouraged Chinese people to be familiar with Western musical tunes. At that time, for most of the Chinese people, the genre of Western style school songs was one of the primary resources of their Western style music education.

However, early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals and educators had put too many political and educational expectations on the genre rather than considering it as a pure art form for aesthetic education purposes. Many school song composers were revolutionaries but not professional composers. This may be the main reason that caused the genre to lack quality. Many of them consist of simple melodies composed without accompaniments, but the school song texts with political elements became a special characteristic of the genre.

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