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Comparative Study of Soviet Legacy in Music Education: Case Studies of Belarus and China

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Abstract

This research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the Soviet legacy's influence on music education in Belarus and China. Using a historical-pedagogical approach, the study examines the main characteristics of music education shaped by the Soviet educational model, as well as their transformation processes during post-Soviet and post-socialist periods. Special attention is given to methodological principles, institutional structures, the role of state ideology, and teacher training. The research results reveal common features and differences in the development of music education in both countries, while also assessing the significance of the Soviet model in contemporary context.

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Keywords

Soviet legacy, music education, Republic of Belarus, China, comparative analysis, pedagogical models, cultural policy, historical-pedagogical approach.

Introduction

The legacy of the Soviet Union continues to shape music education systems well beyond its former borders, leaving a particularly notable impact on both Belarus and China. In the Soviet Union, music education was characterized by a highly centralized structure, rigorous curricula, and an emphasis on technical proficiency, all aimed at producing elite musicians and educators [Zhuk, 2004]. This approach not only defined music education in Soviet republics but also influenced countries like China during the period of close Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s, when Chinese institutions actively adopted Soviet pedagogical models and invited Soviet-trained teachers [Ho, 2011]. However, while Belarus largely maintained the Soviet legacy after the dissolution of the USSR, China's trajectory has been marked by adaptation and integration of Western approaches, especially since the reform era of the late 1970s.

This comparative study aims to analyze how Soviet pedagogical principles were transplanted, transformed, or preserved within the music education systems of Belarus and China. Key research questions focus on identifying the core elements of the Soviet model present in both countries, examining the paths of divergence or continuity since the late twentieth century, and exploring the role of state policy in these developments. Methodologically, this paper employs a historical-comparative and pedagogical approach, drawing on institutional histories, curriculum analysis, and recent academic studies to reveal both the shared roots and unique developments in each context. The choice of Belarus and China as case studies reflects two contrasting outcomes of Soviet influence: Belarus as a post-Soviet state with sustained traditions, and China as a country that transformed the Soviet legacy to fit its evolving educational and cultural objectives [Zhuk, 2004; Ho, 2011]. This research not only provides insight into the durability and flexibility of Soviet educational models but also contributes to broader discussions on cultural exchange, educational policy, and the global circulation of pedagogical ideas.

Historical and Pedagogical Foundations of the Soviet Music Education Model

The Soviet music education model was constructed upon strong ideological foundations, reflecting both Marxist-Leninist cultural policy and a belief in the transformative power of the arts. From its inception, Soviet authorities viewed music education as a tool not only for fostering artistic excellence, but also for building socialist consciousness and collective identity [Tomoff, 2015; Frolova-Walker, 2007]. The goals of Soviet music education were thus deeply intertwined with state objectives: to cultivate technically skilled musicians, to promote mass participation in musical activities, and to disseminate ideologically "correct" content that aligned with socialist realism and state values.

The institutional structure of Soviet music education was highly centralized and hierarchical. It encompassed a comprehensive system of children's music schools (Детская музыкальная школа), specialized secondary music schools (училища), and prestigious conservatories in major cities like Moscow and Leningrad. These institutions formed a clear pipeline: talented children were identified early, rigorously trained through standardized curricula, and advanced through increasingly selective levels of education [Zhuk, 2004]. The conservatories, modeled after pre-revolutionary Russian academies but reorganized to reflect Soviet priorities, became elite centers for both performance and pedagogy, producing generations of influential performers and teachers [Slobin, 1972].

Core teaching methods in Soviet music education emphasized technical precision, a strong theoretical foundation, and ensemble experience. Solfeggio (сольфеджио)—systematic ear training and sight-singing—was a compulsory subject at every level, reflecting the belief that musical literacy

and aural skills were essential for all musicians. Technical rigor was maintained through daily instrumental practice, standardized repertoire, and frequent assessments. Ensemble work, from chamber groups to full orchestras and choirs, fostered discipline, cooperation, and a sense of collective achievement. The Soviet system also prioritized the training of future teachers, ensuring the perpetuation of pedagogical standards across the vast country [Ho, 2011].

This multifaceted system produced not only world-class performers but also a broad base of musically literate citizens. While the emphasis on discipline, centralized control, and ideological conformity drew criticism, the technical and artistic achievements of Soviet-trained musicians remain internationally recognized.

Influence of the Soviet Model on Music Education in Belarus

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus emerged as one of the post-Soviet states most committed to preserving the Soviet music education legacy. The country retained a centralized and state-funded system, continuing the practice of early identification of musical talent and comprehensive training through a network of children's music schools, specialized colleges, and conservatories [Sydor, 2015]. This continuity is reflected in the persistence of Soviet-era curricula, pedagogical methods, and the maintenance of a hierarchical progression from local music schools to the Belarusian State Academy of Music in Minsk.

State support and cultural policy have played a crucial role in maintaining this legacy. Since independence, the Belarusian government has prioritized the arts within its national identity strategy, positioning classical music and music education as key components of cultural policy [Shulga, 2021]. Regular state funding ensures accessibility to music education across urban and rural regions, and major music festivals and competitions—often with roots in the Soviet period—continue to be sponsored at the national level. Teachers' professional development is likewise sustained through state-sponsored programs, mirroring the Soviet practice of pedagogical standardization.

Nevertheless, Belarus has also experienced gradual reforms and selective modernization, particularly in response to globalization and the need for alignment with international standards. Some innovations include the incorporation of Western repertoire, digital technologies, and a growing openness to international competitions and educational exchanges [Lazarev, 2018]. However, these reforms are often implemented within the existing framework rather than replacing the Soviet model, resulting in a hybrid system that balances tradition and innovation.

Overall, music education in Belarus remains deeply shaped by its Soviet heritage, but evolving in response to new cultural, economic, and technological realities. This resilience demonstrates the lasting impact of the Soviet model and the ongoing role of state policy in shaping educational development.

Influence of the Soviet Model on Music Education in China

The profound impact of Soviet pedagogy on Chinese music education began in the early 1950s, as the new People's Republic of China sought to modernize its education and cultural systems. At that time, China entered into a period of intensive cultural cooperation with the Soviet Union, considering the USSR not only a political ally but also a model for social and cultural development. This collaboration was particularly visible in the arts, where Chinese leaders recognized the value of the Soviet system's rigor, professionalism, and proven ability to produce elite performers and teachers [Ho, 2011].

During this era, the Chinese government implemented wide-ranging reforms in music education. Soviet experts were invited to China to consult on the restructuring of conservatories and the creation of new music institutions. Many prominent Chinese musicians and educators were sent to the USSR for advanced study or were taught by Soviet teachers in China. These Soviet-trained professionals subsequently became the backbone of Chinese music pedagogy and administration for decades. This transfer of expertise was evident not only in teaching methods, but also in repertoire selection, performance practices, and even in the organization of student life and professional development for teachers. The approach emphasized collectivism and discipline, aligning with broader socialist ideals [de Kloet, 2010].

One of the most significant results of this collaboration was the establishment and reorganization of China's main music institutions along Soviet lines. The Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the Shanghai Conservatory, and others were either founded or thoroughly restructured during this period. Their curricula mirrored Soviet models, with a strong emphasis on technical training, theoretical coursework (especially solfeggio), and ensemble performance. Entrance exams and standardized, graded examinations became the norm, as did the early identification and specialized nurturing of musical talent. Russian-language textbooks and musical literature dominated classroom instruction, and Soviet repertoire became central to performance education. This resulted in the widespread adoption of Soviet teaching strategies, such as the use of "model lessons," rigorous assessment, and clearly structured advancement through educational stages [Ho, 2011; de Kloet, 2010].

The curriculum reforms of the 1950s and 1960s were not merely a matter of borrowing but were deeply embedded in a process of nation-building. The arts were viewed as a means to construct a modern socialist culture, and the state assumed a highly interventionist role in all aspects of musical life. Even during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), while many Western musical elements were temporarily denounced, the structure and discipline introduced through earlier Soviet cooperation persisted in various forms, underlying the resilience of this imported pedagogical model.

After 1978, with the advent of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-up policy, the context of Chinese music education changed dramatically. While the Soviet legacy remained in place—particularly in the structure of conservatories and in basic teaching methods—there was increasing openness to Western influences. Chinese music schools began to incorporate Western repertoires and pedagogical approaches, and more Chinese students and teachers participated in international exchanges and competitions [Law, Ho, 2015]. Many Western music educators visited China, and foreign textbooks, including those from Europe and North America, were gradually introduced into the curriculum. Internationalization also manifested in the way assessment and qualifications were handled, with greater emphasis on international standards and credentials.

This process of hybridization led to a situation where Soviet foundational practices—such as the rigorous technical training and structured teaching hierarchy—coexisted with Western values of creativity, individuality, and broader stylistic diversity. Chinese conservatories and music departments continued to produce musicians with exceptional technical skills, but the environment became more diverse and open. This evolution did not erase the Soviet influence; instead, it resulted in a unique system where old and new, East and West, were blended within the boundaries of China's ongoing modernization and cultural strategy [Ho, 2011; Law, Ho, 2015].

Comparative Analysis: Belarus and China

The trajectories of music education in Belarus and China, though both deeply shaped by the Soviet model, display a blend of profound similarities and striking differences that reflect their unique historical and cultural contexts.

Similarities: Centralized Control, Academic Rigor, Standardized Structure

Both Belarus and China inherited and maintained the hallmark features of the Soviet educational system: a strong tradition of centralized administrative control, highly academic and rigorous standards, and a standardized structure for the identification and training of musical talent. In Belarus, the post-Soviet period saw minimal deviation from the Soviet system, with the Ministry of Culture retaining direct oversight over curriculum, teacher training, and the progression from children's music schools through specialized secondary institutions to elite conservatories [Sydor, 2015]. China, following its initial adoption of Soviet models in the 1950s, similarly constructed a hierarchy of music schools and conservatories characterized by centralized planning, strict entrance examinations, and a focus on technical mastery [Ho, 2011]. In both countries, the early identification of musical ability and subsequent specialized training have produced generations of highly skilled performers and educators.

Curricula in both Belarus and China have emphasized solfeggio, ensemble playing, and systematic progression through graded examinations. The teaching profession in each system was professionalized and tightly regulated, ensuring uniform standards across institutions. In both cases, state support and institutional prestige have made music education accessible to broad segments of the population, not just social elites [Law, Ho, 2015].

Differences: Ideological Emphasis, Degree of Adaptation, Cultural Hybridization

Despite these shared features, the evolution of music education in Belarus and China diverged in key respects, particularly regarding ideology, adaptation, and hybridization. Belarus, as a former Soviet republic, retained not only the administrative and pedagogical systems of its Soviet past, but also much of its cultural and ideological orientation. The repertoire and teaching methods remain closely aligned with Russian and Soviet traditions, and the role of music as a vehicle for national identity continues to echo the Soviet emphasis on collective values [Sydor, 2015].

China, in contrast, underwent substantial adaptation and hybridization, especially after the late 1970s. While the structure and discipline of Soviet methods endured, Chinese music education became increasingly open to Western influences. International collaborations, student exchanges, and the introduction of Western pedagogical materials and repertoires have profoundly diversified the musical landscape in Chinese conservatories. This process of cultural hybridization resulted in a distinctive blend: Soviet-style technical rigor coexists with Western ideals of creativity, improvisation, and stylistic plurality [Law, Ho, 2015]. This hybrid approach has not only elevated the technical and artistic level of Chinese musicians but has also enabled them to excel in global competitions and perform on international stages [Ho, 2011].

Role of the State and Shifts in Educational Policy

In both Belarus and China, the state has played a decisive role in shaping the direction of music education, though the policy focus and degree of reform have differed. In Belarus, the government's commitment to preserving Soviet traditions is evident in consistent funding, centralized curriculum decisions, and strong institutional continuity. The political and cultural leadership emphasizes the continuity of a distinct Belarusian (and by extension, Soviet) cultural identity, using music education as a tool for social cohesion [Shulga, 2021].

China's state role has shifted more dynamically. While the government initially adopted Soviet models to modernize rapidly and train a professional cadre of musicians, from the 1980s onward, policy has increasingly supported internationalization, competition, and the integration of global educational trends. State policy now balances the preservation of core disciplinary traditions with the need for innovation and responsiveness to global cultural currents. This openness has enabled Chinese music

education to remain both rooted in Soviet discipline and responsive to international developments [Law, Ho, 2015].

Contemporary Developments and Transformation

The 21st century has brought both continuity and transformation to music education systems in Belarus and China. While both nations remain anchored in the pedagogical traditions inherited from the Soviet era, each has responded to new cultural, technological, and international pressures in distinct ways.

Belarus: Continuity with Limited Reform

In Belarus, music education has largely maintained the structures and curricula established during the Soviet period. State policy continues to emphasize the value of classical music and the cultivation of technically proficient performers, with government funding and oversight ensuring the accessibility and stability of music schools and conservatories [Sydor, 2015]. Reforms have been gradual and cautious, often limited to minor updates in course content or the introduction of new teaching materials. The enduring influence of Russian and Soviet repertoire, as well as the retention of centralized examinations and teacher training methods, reflect a deliberate strategy to preserve national cultural identity [Shulga, 2021].

However, there have been signs of incremental change. Select music institutions have started to experiment with more diverse curricula, incorporate some Western works, and utilize digital resources in teaching. Yet, such changes are typically introduced within the established framework, and the overall approach remains conservative. Belarusian music education's primary focus continues to be the training of classically-oriented musicians who can succeed in both domestic and international contexts.

China: Diversification and Global Integration

In contrast, China's music education landscape has undergone significant diversification and internationalization since the 1980s. Building on the foundations of Soviet pedagogy, Chinese conservatories and music schools have embraced a wide array of Western teaching methods, repertoires, and collaborative projects [Law, Ho, 2015]. Chinese students and faculty routinely participate in international competitions, exchange programs, and joint degree initiatives with leading global music institutions.

This openness has led to profound changes in curriculum and institutional priorities. Alongside traditional technical training, there is now greater emphasis on creativity, improvisation, and contemporary genres. Western music history, music technology, and global pop and jazz are increasingly included in coursework. This diversification is mirrored by a growing presence of foreign faculty, increased opportunities for study abroad, and the import of educational resources from Europe, North America, and beyond [Ho, 2011].

Emerging Trends: Digital Tools, International Collaborations, Soft Power Strategy

Both Belarus and China are experiencing the influence of digitalization and globalization, though to different extents. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital teaching tools, online masterclasses, and remote auditions in both countries, making music education more accessible and flexible. In China, platforms such as MOOCs, livestreamed lessons, and digital practice applications are now widespread, providing unprecedented access to musical instruction and global expertise [Law,

Ho, 2015]. Belarus, though somewhat slower to digitalize, has nonetheless integrated online learning into select institutions and piloted digital exams and resources.

Additionally, both nations have increasingly recognized the strategic value of music education as a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power. China, in particular, has made deliberate efforts to project its musical achievements globally, through international festivals, touring ensembles, and collaborations with renowned musicians and institutions. These initiatives are seen as vehicles for enhancing China's image abroad and strengthening its role in the global cultural arena [Ho, 2011]. Belarus, though on a smaller scale, also participates in international competitions and cultural exchanges, leveraging its Soviet-trained musicians as cultural ambassadors.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that the Soviet legacy has played a central and lasting role in shaping music education in both Belarus and China, but the evolution of these systems reveals both the resilience and adaptability of Soviet pedagogical models. Belarus remains characterized by a strong continuity with its Soviet past, evident in the centralized structure, classical focus, and preservation of pedagogical traditions. State policy continues to prioritize classical music education as a pillar of national identity, resulting in only limited and cautious reforms [Sydor, 2015; Shulga, 2021].

China's path, by contrast, reflects an initial period of intensive adoption of Soviet models followed by profound adaptation and diversification. The integration of Western pedagogical approaches and global collaborations has led to a hybrid system in which the rigor and technical standards of Soviet pedagogy coexist with creativity, innovation, and international engagement [Ho, 2011; Law, Ho, 2015]. China's experience demonstrates the potential for Soviet-derived systems to evolve rapidly in response to global trends, while Belarus's case highlights the durability and coherence of more conservative, tradition-focused policy.

In both countries, the role of the state remains crucial, mediating the balance between preservation and change. Recent trends—such as digitalization, internationalization, and the deployment of music education as soft power—underscore that even deeply rooted educational systems are subject to transformation in the face of new challenges and opportunities. Future research could explore how these systems continue to adapt amid shifting geopolitical landscapes and the ongoing evolution of global cultural exchange.

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Сравнительное исследование советского наследия в музыкальном образовании: на примере Республики Беларусь и Китая

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Аннотация

Данное исследование направлено на сравнительный анализ влияния советского наследия на музыкальное образование в Белоруссии и Китае. На основе историко-педагогического подхода рассматриваются основные особенности музыкального образования, сформировавшиеся под воздействием советской образовательной модели, а также процессы их трансформации в постсоветский и постсоциалистический периоды. Особое внимание уделяется методическим принципам, структуре учебных заведений, роли государственной идеологии и подготовки педагогических кадров. Результаты исследования позволяют выявить общие черты и различия в развитии музыкального образования в двух странах, а также оценить значимость советской модели в современном контексте.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Советское наследие, музыкальное образование, Республика Беларусь, Китай, сравнительный анализ, педагогические модели, культурная политика, историко-педагогический подход.

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