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The Evolution of General Music Education in Chinese Classical Universities (1940s-2020s)

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of general music education in classical Chinese universities from the 1945s to the 2020s. It traces key historical phases, from the early ideological frameworks of the mid-20th century to the diversified and student-centered approaches of the 21st century. Drawing on policy analysis, institutional case studies, and pedagogical trends, the study highlights the influence of national reforms, cultural shifts, and global educational movements. Challenges such as limited institutional prioritization, uneven regional implementation, and lack of trained faculty are critically examined. The article also identifies emerging trends, including digital integration, cross-disciplinary learning, and the incorporation of traditional Chinese music. Finally, it proposes strategic directions for strengthening general music education as a vital part of liberal arts education in modern Chinese universities.

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Keywords

General music education; classical Chinese universities; curriculum development; music pedagogy; higher education reform; cultural policy; 1945s–2020s.

Introduction

General music education has played a growing role in China's higher education system, particularly as the country has undergone massive educational reforms since the mid-20th century. Originally influenced by Soviet-style professional conservatory models, China's music education system has gradually expanded to include general, non-specialist music instruction in comprehensive universities. This shift reflects broader efforts to improve students' cultural literacy and holistic development through liberal arts education. As Wang (2023) notes, music education is increasingly recognized not only as an artistic discipline but also as a tool to enhance students' moral, cognitive, and emotional development in line with national goals for well-rounded talent cultivation [Wang, 2023]. In the post-1980s era, general music education in classical universities began to diversify, incorporating both Western and traditional Chinese musical content to reflect China's cultural identity in a globalized context [Huang, 2019].

Classical universities—comprehensive institutions with broad academic offerings and long historical legacies—have served as key arenas for implementing educational reforms in China. These institutions often act as testing grounds for new curriculum models and interdisciplinary learning, making them vital to understanding the evolution of general music education. Despite improvements, general music courses remain underprioritized in many classical universities, facing challenges such as limited faculty, insufficient funding, and unclear curricular goals. This article aims to examine the historical development and current trends of general music education in classical Chinese universities from the 1945s to the 2020s. It focuses on three main objectives: (1) to trace the historical evolution of general music instruction in university settings, (2) to analyze the role of classical universities in shaping and reforming music education, and (3) to identify challenges and propose future directions for enhancing the general music education system in China.

Historical Development (1945s–1970s): Early Foundations

The foundation of general music education in Chinese universities during the 1945s to 1970s was deeply influenced by Soviet educational models and strong ideological control under the newly established People's Republic of China. Music was viewed not only as an aesthetic subject but as a vehicle for ideological education and political alignment. Institutions such as the Central Conservatory of Music adopted Soviet-style curricula and textbooks that emphasized Marxist historical materialism and class struggle. In this era, music history and theory were reframed to reflect socialist values, and Western classical music was selectively taught within ideological boundaries [Zhigang, 2012].

Despite its constrained scope, this period also saw the institutionalization of traditional Chinese music education within formal universities. As part of the government's broader cultural agenda, educators such as Yu Shaoze developed politically aligned compositions for the guqin and other traditional instruments, embedding revolutionary values in musical content. Teaching and curriculum were carefully shaped by state-approved cultural policies, and music educators had to align creative output with the needs of political propaganda. Zeng and Loo (2024) highlight how this politicization of musical expression led to stylistic conformity but also produced a distinctive body of works reflecting the sociopolitical climate of Maoist China [Zeng, Loo, 2024].

Expansion and Reform (1980s–1990s): Opening-Up and Curriculum Diversification

The reform era beginning in the late 1970s marked a pivotal shift for general music education in Chinese universities. As China opened up to global academic influences, universities began to shed the rigid Soviet-style system that had dominated for decades. The 1985 Decision on the Reform of the Education System encouraged universities to expand general education and embrace pedagogical diversity. Within music education, this led to broader curricular content, the reintroduction of Western music traditions, and experimental teaching approaches that aimed to foster creativity and cultural awareness. As Shen, Zhang, and Liu (2022) explain, this “de-Sovietization” involved rebuilding connections with global academia and incorporating elements from American liberal education models—especially in comprehensive universities where music became a tool for holistic student development [Shen, Zhang, Liu, 2022].

This period also saw a diversification of musical content, particularly in the teaching of piano and traditional Chinese instruments. According to Li (2005), since the 1980s, Chinese piano composition began to integrate folk motifs with modern compositional techniques, reflecting a broader educational trend toward cultural synthesis and innovation. Universities began offering electives in jazz, film music, and regional folk styles, while student performances became increasingly public and interdisciplinary [Li, 2005]. These changes signaled a shift from music as ideological reinforcement to music as a dynamic and expressive academic field, deeply integrated with both national identity and global dialogue.

Modern Transformation (2000s–2020s): Integration with Liberal Arts, Digital Pedagogy, and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches

Since the early 2000s, music education in Chinese classical universities has undergone significant modernization, marked by deeper integration with liberal arts curricula, technological innovation, and interdisciplinary approaches. As part of national education reform, universities increasingly treat general music education not only as an artistic discipline but as a contributor to cultivating creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence—skills essential for holistic education. Liu (2024) emphasizes that the “new liberal arts” movement in China has prompted educators to blend music with philosophy, aesthetics, and cultural studies, allowing students to explore music in broader intellectual contexts [Liu, 2024]. This reorientation has also encouraged universities to adopt more diverse teaching materials, including global music traditions and multimedia sources.

In parallel, the digitalization of education has played a transformative role in music pedagogy. Many universities have adopted online platforms, smart classrooms, and AI-supported assessment tools, allowing music instruction to move beyond traditional lecture-based models. Wang (2023) notes that these innovations support personalized learning, enhance engagement, and address faculty shortages by enabling scalable instruction [Wang, 2023]. Furthermore, cross-disciplinary programs—such as music and technology, music therapy, and music-business hybrids—have gained traction, aligning music education with the demands of a rapidly evolving job market. Together, these shifts signify a modern transformation in general music education: from a marginal supplement to an integrated, forward-looking component of Chinese university education.

Key Drivers and Challenges

The development of general music education in Chinese universities has been shaped by a unique convergence of socio-political mandates, cultural heritage, institutional structures, and evolving educational reforms. One of the key drivers is the state's recognition of music as a vehicle for promoting national identity, moral education, and holistic talent development. Since the implementation of quality-oriented education in the early 2000s, music has been increasingly embedded into liberal arts curricula to support student well-being, creativity, and cultural competence. These shifts align with broader goals of educational modernization that prioritize well-rounded talent over rote academic excellence. Additionally, China's growing emphasis on "aesthetic education" (美育) has fueled policy efforts to make music accessible to students across disciplines, rather than restricting it to conservatory training.

Another important driver is the diversification of institutional types across the higher education landscape. While classical universities in metropolitan areas have been able to integrate music into general education through elective programs, music appreciation courses, and interdisciplinary modules, regional and rural universities often face infrastructural and human resource limitations. As noted by Wang (2023), many institutions suffer from understaffing, lack of modern facilities, and outdated teaching models, which limit students' access to music education and diminish its overall quality [Wang, 2023]. These gaps are especially pronounced in underfunded schools where music remains marginal and is often treated as a non-essential elective.

Despite policy ambitions, several challenges persist that hinder the full realization of music education goals. One major issue is the continued low prioritization of music within university resource allocation. Many administrators focus heavily on STEM and economic disciplines, viewing music as recreational rather than developmental. As a result, classrooms may lack instruments, practice rooms, or multimedia tools essential for effective instruction. Moreover, music instructors often hold dual teaching loads and lack formal pedagogical training, particularly in non-music-major courses. Wang (2024) highlights how such systemic issues—ranging from insufficient funding to poorly defined assessment standards—generate low job satisfaction among music educators and uneven student engagement [Wang, 2024].

A further barrier lies in curriculum fragmentation. Without a standardized national framework for non-major music education, universities often design programs independently, resulting in inconsistencies in learning outcomes, teaching quality, and student exposure to global and traditional musical styles. Cross-university cooperation is rare, and there is little shared repository of best practices, which limits innovation and scalability. Nonetheless, recent trends—such as digital integration, aesthetic literacy campaigns, and international exchange programs—offer hope for a more unified and forward-looking system. To sustain progress, educational policy must continue to address disparities in institutional capacity, raise the professional profile of music educators, and ensure music remains a core pillar of comprehensive student development.

Contemporary Trends and Approaches

In recent decades, general music education in Chinese universities has evolved from a rigid and lecture-based model into a more dynamic, student-centered system reflecting global pedagogical reforms. One of the most visible changes is the institutionalization of non-major music courses as part of general education requirements. These courses, often titled "music appreciation," "Chinese

traditional music,” or “world music,” aim to broaden students' aesthetic literacy and cultural awareness. Unlike conservatory training, the goal is not professionalization but fostering emotional intelligence, creativity, and cross-cultural competence. As Zhang (2023) notes, such courses have increasingly adopted flexible formats, including elective credit modules, interdisciplinary combinations with literature and art, and performance-integrated instruction, which has enhanced both accessibility and student engagement [Zhang, 2023].

A parallel trend is the widespread adoption of technology and digital learning tools. Universities across China have embraced platforms such as MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses), WeChat-based micro-lectures, and AI-assisted teaching to make music education scalable and more interactive. For example, students can now participate in virtual rehearsals, submit performance assignments via cloud platforms, and receive feedback through smart evaluation systems. These tools have not only expanded access—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—but also diversified the modes of delivery and learning, encouraging asynchronous and blended formats. Wang (2023) emphasizes that the integration of e-learning tools has made it possible to accommodate larger student populations without sacrificing quality, and has helped standardize assessment criteria across institutions [Wang, 2023].

Content-wise, there has been a clear shift toward incorporating traditional Chinese music and multicultural perspectives. While Western classical music still plays a foundational role, curriculum designers have expanded the repertoire to include Chinese folk music, minority ethnic traditions, and global contemporary forms such as jazz, Latin music, and African rhythms. This aligns with China's broader cultural confidence campaign (文化自信) and promotes music as a medium for national identity and intercultural communication. Some universities now host "World Music Week" events, invite artists-in-residence from diverse backgrounds, and encourage students to compose or interpret pieces from multiple traditions. These efforts contribute to a more pluralistic, culturally rich learning environment.

Finally, student-centered and experience-based methodologies are now widely promoted. Instructors are encouraged to move away from rote theory instruction toward interactive formats such as collaborative projects, group performances, classroom debates, and reflective journals. Practical engagement—like instrument demonstrations, site visits to music museums, or performance analysis of live concerts—fosters experiential learning and deepens musical understanding beyond textbook knowledge. These pedagogical approaches are more aligned with constructivist theories of learning and help bridge the gap between academic learning and personal expression.

Problems and Prospects for the Development of General Music Education in Classical Chinese Universities

Despite ongoing reforms, general music education in Chinese classical universities still faces deep-rooted challenges that hinder its full integration into higher education. One of the primary issues is the systemic undervaluation of music education in non-specialist institutions. Music is often treated as an ancillary or decorative subject, which results in minimal funding, limited class hours, and a shortage of qualified educators. According to Yu Feng and Tsetsegdelger Damdindorj (2024), these problems are compounded by outdated teaching approaches, homogenized course content, and an inflexible evaluation system that fails to account for student creativity and individual growth [Yu, Damdindorj, 2024]. Furthermore, the recruitment and training pipeline for music teachers is fragmented and inconsistent, with little coordination between universities and national teacher training institutions. This

leads to disparities in teacher qualifications and exacerbates regional inequalities in educational quality.

Looking ahead, the prospects for enhancing general music education are promising if systemic reforms continue to align with national policies on aesthetic and holistic education. Increasing recognition of music's role in emotional development, cultural literacy, and creative problem-solving offers a strong policy rationale for investing in curriculum innovation. Shuang (2022) argues that integrating international pedagogical models, such as competence-based frameworks from Europe and Qatar, can elevate the training standards for music educators in China and ensure more engaging, student-focused learning environments [Shuang, 2022]. Future development may also benefit from incorporating digital platforms, cross-disciplinary music programs, and partnerships with cultural institutions to broaden the reach and relevance of general music education. With targeted support, Chinese universities have the potential to make music an integral, rather than peripheral, component of higher education.

Conclusion

This study has traced the historical development and contemporary evolution of general music education in classical Chinese universities from the 1945s to the 2020s. It reveals a dynamic interplay of cultural, political, and institutional factors shaping music education policy and practice. From its Soviet-influenced beginnings and ideological constraints to the reforms of the 1980s–1990s and the innovative integration of technology and liberal arts in the 21st century, music education in China has transformed significantly in both scope and approach.

Key trends, including the diversification of curricula, student-centered methodologies, and the inclusion of traditional and global music elements, reflect a growing awareness of music's role in holistic education. Nevertheless, persistent challenges such as unequal resource distribution, insufficient teacher training, and the marginalization of music as a non-core subject continue to limit the potential impact of general music education. Addressing these issues will require systemic reforms, increased policy support, and the adoption of best practices from international models.

Looking forward, the prospects for general music education in Chinese universities are optimistic, especially as aesthetic education becomes a national priority. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, expanding access through digital tools, and promoting cultural inclusivity, classical universities can elevate music education to a more central role in cultivating well-rounded, creative, and culturally aware graduates.

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Эволюция общего музыкального образования в классических университетах Китая (1945-е – 2020-е годы)

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается эволюция общего музыкального образования в классических университетах Китая с 1945-х годов по 2020-е годы. Прослеживаются ключевые этапы развития — от идеологически ориентированного обучения середины XX века до разнообразных и ориентированных на студента подходов XXI века. На основе анализа государственной образовательной политики, институциональных примеров и современных педагогических тенденций выделяются ключевые факторы влияния: национальные реформы, культурные изменения и глобальные образовательные процессы. Особое внимание уделяется существующим проблемам, таким как низкий приоритет музыкального образования, региональное неравенство и дефицит квалифицированных кадров. В заключение предлагаются стратегические направления для укрепления роли общего музыкального образования как важной части гуманитарного обучения в университетах Китая.

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Ключевые слова

Общее музыкальное образование, классические университеты Китая, развитие учебных программ, музыкальная педагогика, реформа высшего образования, культурная политика, исторический анализ.

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