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**MISSIONARIES, REFORMERS, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF
WESTERN MUSIC IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA (1839-1911)**

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of Christian missionaries, Chinese reformers and the beginnings of Western music in late imperial China (1842-1911). It focuses on examining how Christian missionaries and Chinese reformers, in the process of advancing their goals, made use of aspects of Western musical culture and how their actions helped facilitate the introduction of Western music to a wider Chinese audience in the late Qing. The purpose of this study is to show that the introduction of Western music in China was essentially a by-product of Christian evangelism and Chinese reformism.

The central contention of the thesis is that Western music was introduced to the Chinese not for its aesthetic appeal or artistic superiority but for its utility in China's conversion to God and in its struggle for modernity.

This study is constructed upon empirical evidence chiefly from primary sources and from citations in Chinese and Western scholarship. It makes use of written accounts such as diaries, letters, memoirs, newspaper and magazine materials, religious tracts, sermons, and visual representations of musical activity in contemporaneous paintings, photos, drawings and prints.

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part, comprising Chapters 1 to 4, investigates the uses of music in Christian missions in China and the role of missionaries in the introduction and gradual spread of Western music in China. The second part, consisting of Chapters 5 to 9, deals with the role of Chinese reformers and that of Japan in the wide dissemination of Western music at the turn of the twentieth century. The Conclusion recapitulates some of the findings from the nine chapters and restates the general argument of this thesis. It also offers some reflections on the broad significance of the role of the missionaries and Chinese reformers in the forming of a new musical tradition in China.

Preface

In the autumn of 1923, Wang Guangqi 王光祈 (1892-1936), a May-Fourth student leader and a social reformer-turned-musicologist then residing in Berlin, wrote a series of reports for the Shanghai-based newspaper *Shenbao* 申報. In addition to providing general information on the origins, genres, and prominent figures of German music, Wang took pains to lecture the Chinese reading public on the vital importance of music in creating and maintaining a nation's prosperity.¹ Shortly afterwards, in the foreword to his book *Ouzhou yinyue jinhua lun* 歐洲音樂進化論 (On the Evolution of European Music), Wang once again reminded his readers of the crucial relevance of music to China's national rejuvenation. But this time Wang had worked out his concept of *guoyue* 國樂 or national music ideal. Citing the wealth of German music (i.e. Western classical music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) as the primary reason for Germany's rapid transformation from tradition to modernity, Wang called for "a revival of Confucian *li* 禮 and *yue* 樂" as a precondition for China's survival in a competitive Darwinist world, thus elevating music as the best means of social and political transformation.

Wang defined *guoyue* as a new kind of music that "is sufficient to carry forward the upward spirit of that nation and at the same time win international recognition for its [artistic] value."² Clearly, what Wang aspired to for Chinese music was the universality that European classics had achieved. But his European sojourn also set him on a search for musical nationalism. To Wang, the best approach to bringing the *guoyue* ideal to fruition was through a thorough investigation of China's own musical heritage and a selective assimilation of Western compositional techniques and research methodologies, and an adoption of Western musical instruments – an approach not fundamentally different from the one adopted earlier by composers from such "newly emerging nations"

¹ Wang Guangqi, "Deguoren zhi yinyue shenghuo" 德國人之音樂生活 (1) & (2) (Musical Life of the German People), *Shenbao* (7 & 8 October, 1923).

² Wang Guangqi, "Zhushu ren de zuihou mudi" 著書人的最後目的 (The Ultimate Aim of the Author) in *Ouzhou yinyue jinhua lun* 歐洲音樂進化論 (On the Evolution of European Music) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1924).

as Hungary, Bohemia, Poland, Russia, Scandinavia, England and Spain in the nineteenth century.³

Yet what distinguishes Wang from his nineteenth-century European predecessors was his extraordinary emphasis on the instrumentality of music in nation building and his belief in the indispensability of Western music in creating a Chinese national music. Clearly, an appreciation of the artistic value of Western music was not the primary reason behind Wang's attention to music. Nor would the realisation of his *guoyue* ideal mark the end of his quest. In other words, rather than seeing music as a realm that should be kept separate from politics, Wang regarded music as an effective instrument to speed up China's transformation from tradition to modernity.

Had Wang been the only Chinese intellectual who advocated this extremely utilitarian approach to music, we could just dismiss this out of hand as some kind of idiosyncratic nonsense. But Wang was neither alone nor the first to advocate this approach. The notion that music can be used as an instrument for moral education and political governance has a venerable history in China going back to China's high antiquity. Confucius, earlier than Plato, Aristotle and Horace, emphasised the transformative effect of music on the body and mind and used music as a means to instruct his students in ethics. In modern times Liang Qichao was among the earliest to call for the creation of a new type of music in China that would help "renovate the people" (*xinmin* 新民). Coterminous with the prevalent trend to revive the Chinese nation through rebuilding China's national culture,⁴ the 1920s and 1930s saw intense efforts by Chinese intellectuals highly trained in either Chinese or Western music (and in some cases both) to reform China through music. The call for the creation of a new kind of music that was scientific and national but invested with a crucial social purpose was

³ Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), p. 344. Chapter 11, entitled "Nationalist Music," focuses on these countries.

⁴ For a stimulating discussion of China's nation-building and culture-building project as reflected in the field of literature, see Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 183-256. In art, Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren – the three founders of the Lingnan School – all held "the approach to art as a means to national rejuvenation" and experimented with "a syncretic style that sought to combine the best features of modern Western and traditional Chinese painting." See Ralph C. Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 1.

not simply a musical phenomenon but an integral part of Chinese intellectuals' effort to revive China through cultural means.

When I started to work on this thesis, my intention was to concentrate on Wang Guangqi -- not to write a biography but to use him as a signpost to guide me through the discourse on *guoyue* and to explore the highly pragmatic and utilitarian objectives inherent in this mode of discourse. The choice of Wang was due not so much to his importance in the history of modern China as to the fact that he more than anyone else epitomizes a group of post-May Fourth Chinese intellectuals who advocated the use of music as a means of national rejuvenation. My working hypothesis was that the enthusiasm for and wide acceptance of Western musical values and techniques in the 1920s and 1930s were not merely a musical phenomenon but an integral part of China's struggle for cultural transformation and national survival. This theme, as will be seen, remains my overriding argument. However, as the work progressed, it became clear to me that the treatment of music as a practical tool did not begin with the May Fourth generation. It was the dominant reason behind the missionary involvement in introducing Western music to China in the first place. Similarly, the realisation that Western music could be used as an effective tool to advance their reform causes was precisely the rationale that motivated earlier Chinese reformers to promote Western music in the late 1890s and the early 1900s. Thus, for a better and more historically grounded understanding of the interconnectedness between the inception of Western music and China's struggle for modernity, and, to a lesser degree, the fortunes of Western music in China in the last hundred years, it seems logical to start with the late Qing.

It must be pointed out, however, that the issues explored in the present thesis are multi-faceted and far from being resolved. Nor have the themes discussed here ceased to interest scholars of modern Chinese music. Debates in China and elsewhere have shown that assessing and reflecting on the impact of Western music on the formation of a new and now dominant musical tradition in China have been a major focus of scholarly attention since the mid-1980s. The tension created by differences over the importance and desirability of Western music continues to be a significant motif of modern Chinese music history. The interest in the social and political uses and

significance of music is unlikely to diminish on the part of Chinese music historians, composers, performers, musicologists, theorists, and policy makers and party bureaucrats in charge of music.⁵

* * * *

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⁵ Apart from numerous journal articles, debates of this nature are mainly recorded in the proceedings of the seminars on the development of new music held in Hong Kong from 1984 to 1999. For bibliographical details, see Bibliography, under Liu Ching-chih 劉靖之.

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