

Homogenization: Reasons for the Limited Development of Chinese Traditional and Minority Music

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Abstract: A considerable impact has been made on the inheritance and development of traditional and ethnic music in China as a result of the homogeneity of culture. The purpose of this article is to investigate the ways in which globalization, commercialization, and government policies have resulted in cultural inequality, the loss of authenticity, and the suppression of traditional music in favor of hybrid forms. This paper is accomplished through a method of a literature review and case studies. According to the findings of the article, homogenization dilutes the distinctive qualities of traditional music, making it increasingly difficult to maintain cultural authenticity and legacy. Furthermore, the study highlights how the pressures of modern society often overshadow local traditions, leading to a diminished appreciation for cultural diversity. People are able to construct more effective tactics to preserve the traditional culture of China and the rest of the globe as a result of this study, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage in an ever-globalizing world.

Keywords: Chinese Traditional Music, Cultural Exchange, Homogenization, Hybridization.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of society has led to technical and cultural exchanges and integration among various countries and ethnic groups around the world, significantly influencing the global cultural landscape, including Chinese traditional music and other ethnic music. A new generation of musicians is creating new musical styles by combining music from different genres. For example, Chinese musicians, influenced by Western music, have innovatively created their own styles by carefully integrating features from both their cultural heritage and Western traditions [1]. After being accepted and loved by the masses, this new kind of music gradually expanded its influence. But there are two sides to this integration. On the one hand, cultural convergence exposes traditional and ethnic music to a wider audience, providing opportunities for publicity and innovation. On the other hand, the homogenization that accompanies globalization tends to dilute the true nature of these musical forms. People's attention to old music will be shifted to new music; and what's even more problematic is that many traditional music genres face the challenge of reshaping to suit mainstream tastes, often losing their unique cultural context and deep-rooted meanings. This process of cultural homogenization often leads to cultural inequality and hinders the transmission and inheritance of "authentic" traditional music.

Several studies have explored the impact of globalization and cultural homogenization on the development of Chinese traditional music. Lau's research illustrates the transformation of traditional Chinese music through the incorporation of Western instruments, resulting in a redefining of "national music" and a dilution of its cultural validity [1]. Wang asserts that while "music of mixed forms" integrates contemporary elements and preserves the fundamental principles of traditional styles, these modifications result in a diminished cultural depth, particularly due to commercialization aimed at attracting tourists, distancing the music from its original cultural and social context [2]. Tuohy argues that Chinese nationalists often use music as a tool for cultural preservation and political purposes. However, this promotion sometimes leads to the standardization of local traditions, thus compromising their cultural uniqueness [3].

This paper will use literature review and case study methods to analyze the impact of homogenization caused by social development on Chinese traditional music and reveal how homogenization and commercial pressure suppress these cultures and affect cultural inheritance.

It is crucial to explore how globalization and cultural homogenization affect the preservation and performance of traditional Chinese music today. It can expose the cultural disparities resulting from homogenization and offer valuable perspectives for tackling cultural inequality and cultural extinction. This study aims to demonstrate the need to balance commercial interests and establish a sustainable framework that respects the integrity of traditional music, and to provide inspiration and suggestions for the preservation of traditional music heritage.

2. Literature Review

The limited development of Chinese traditional music and ethnic music can be traced to cultural homogenization caused by natural exchange between cultures, commercialization, and the influence of national policies. This paper will explore three key themes: cultural inequality caused by natural cultural exchange, loss of authenticity caused by commercialization and mixed forms, and the impact of policies on cultural inheritance.

2.1. Cultural inequality caused by natural cultural exchange

Cultural exchanges promoted global understanding but also contributed to the unequal development of traditional Chinese music. Starting in the 19th century, the influx of Protestant missionaries from the United States and Britain into China, coupled with Chinese students who studied in Japan and Europe and returned with knowledge of Western music, contributed to the popularity of Western music in China [1]. The ubiquity of Western music globally has led some individuals to perceive it as superior, prompting some Chinese composers to incorporate Western musical aspects into their compositions. The introduction and widespread impact of Western musical components have led to the marginalization and alteration of local music traditions [4]. This exchange leads to an unbalanced ecology as local traditional music is forced to adapt to global tastes, which dilute its original uniqueness. As diverse genres of world music rise in prominence, numerous traditionalists express concern that traditional music may gradually diminish, leading to a substantial cultural disparity [1]. This means that cultural exchange, while conducive to cross-cultural understanding, may also exacerbate cultural inequality because it favors dominant cultures over local traditions.

2.2. Loss of authenticity caused by commercialization and hybrid forms

The emergence and commercialization of hybrid music forms has further accelerated the decline of the authenticity of traditional Chinese music. The hybrid music forms discussed here include music that combines different musical genres, such as those combining elements of Western and Eastern music. Composers such as Chou Wen-chung, recognized as a pivotal figure in music created outside

China, focused on the fundamental principles and essence of Chinese music, whereas most others primarily utilize superficial elements—such as folk melodies or the pentatonic scale—to produce what they term “national music” [1]. Nowadays, almost all contemporary Chinese music incorporates elements of Western music [5]. Some have taken the step of reworking traditional music to align with Western sonic ideals and aesthetics, which includes creating new types of ensembles by combining instruments, altering their sounds, and standardizing tuning systems and compositional methods [1]. Moreover, as this hybrid musical genre gains popularity among the audience, the influence of commercial elements has further solidified its preeminence in the Chinese music landscape. This genre of music infiltrates various industries, including advertising, film, fashion, and architecture [6]. Driven by commercial interests, more and more musicians are committed to creating this kind of non-traditional Chinese music. However, while the hybrid music integrates contemporary elements and preserves the fundamental principles of traditional styles, these modifications result in a diminution of cultural depth, particularly due to its commercialization aimed at attracting tourists, distancing the music from its original cultural and social context [2]. Simultaneously, the inadequate comprehension of traditional culture by certain songwriters often results in the misrepresentation of that culture [6]. Thus, while mixed forms may promote wider recognition, they often come at the expense of authenticity and cultural depth.

2.3. The impact of policies on cultural inheritance

Yet, commercialization and cultural exchange are not the only forces at play; government policies and national interventions also influence the development of traditional music. While national policies aim to protect and promote cultural heritage, they can also have unintended negative effects on the inheritance and development of traditional music. The legislative and policy actions designed to preserve intangible cultural assets in China are commendable; nonetheless, they face significant problems due to their fundamentally state-centric nature [7]. The idiosyncrasies of China's historical and social framework have consistently underscored unity and harmony; thus, while several programs seek to safeguard cultural diversity, they occasionally favor political objectives. This has led to standardization of some cultures, especially those of ethnic minorities. For example, since the late 20th century, township industry and tourism have been vigorously developed and prospered in rural China, bringing an increase in economic income and improvement of living standards for local farmers. This has changed the living space and mind of the farmers [2]. Numerous inhabitants forsook their traditional, rudimentary lifestyle or departed from their hometown, resulting in the decline of the indigenous musical culture, which is closely tied to agriculture and religion among various ethnic minorities. Governments that recognize these problems have actively instituted policies to protect minority cultures, such as the creation of cultural performance groups and the support of musical practices through funding and colleges [8]. However, the problem is not the intention behind the policy, but the implementation of the policy and the occasional lack of sensitivity to local conditions.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Hybrid Music in the 19th and 20th century

Traditional Chinese music is quite different from western music, among which the most obvious features include the pentatonic and heptatonic scales, the use of Chinese instruments like the erhu, pipa, and guzheng, and the emphasis on melody and timbre rather than harmony [9-10].

However, with the advent of Western influence in the 19th century, Western musical elements were gradually integrated into Chinese music, which led to the emergence of hybrid musical forms that combined elements of both musical traditions. Chinese musicians began to incorporate Western instruments, such as pianos and orchestras, into their works, mixing them with traditional Chinese

instruments to create new sounds [1]. They also added more harmonic progressions to their compositions, which are commonly found in Western music. Take “Jasmine Flower” as an example, the prototype of this song is an episode from a show during the Qianlong period, which was later written by Italian composer Puccini into his opera and widely spread in the West [11]. There are countless versions of “Jasmine Flower” today, and one of the most famous versions incorporates Western musical elements, including the pentatonic mode of Chinese singing and melody, as well as the symphonic accompaniment and complex harmonic trends of Western music. “Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto” is another example. This instrumental music created in the 20th century is based on Chinese traditional Yue opera “Liang Shan-bo and Zhu Ying-tai.” It is a violin concerto rich in traditional Chinese elements and Chinese musical idioms. It’s just that the song is performed by a pure orchestra, emphasizing sounds of flutes, violins, harps, brasses, and so on. This piece is also different from the single melodic lines with subtle variations common in traditional music, incorporating layered melodious periods, harmonic accompaniments, and different melodic segments, generating a rich tapestry of transitions in mood.

Despite these shifts, the incorporation of Western elements into Chinese music did not completely erase traditional forms but created a complex cultural landscape. Admittedly, in some cases, this cultural exchange has even revitalized traditional music. However, it cannot be ignored that the phenomenon of “loss of authenticity” brought about by this phenomenon.

3.2. Trend of Modern “Chinese Style” Music

Modern “Chinese-style” music represents an attempt to blend traditional Chinese elements with contemporary pop music to create a unique cultural expression on the global music scene. The genre often incorporates traditional instruments, melodies, and themes into popular musical frameworks, seeking to establish a distinct Chinese identity.

A key characteristic of modern “Chinese-style” music is its hybrid nature, which often involves the use of traditional Chinese instruments within modern compositions. A typical example is “Blue and White Porcelain,” which was written by Fang Wen-shan and composed and sung by Jay Chou. The song uses the composition and melody of modern pop music while adding elements of traditional instruments like guzheng and lyrics blending ancient and modern cultures. The lyricist Fang borrows elements from ancient Chinese poetry in terms of rhetoric, rhythm, mood, and wording, and covers cultures full of classical charm such as “blue and white porcelain,” “Peony,” and “Ladies’ Pictures” [12]. However, it is worth noting that some traditional cultures spread in this song seem to be different from the truth in history. For example, there is a line in its lyric stating that “in the bottom of the blue and white porcelain vase, there lay the Han Li font of the Han Dynasty, mimicking the elegance of a previous dynasty,” but in history, the Han Li font was never written on the bottom of the Chinese blue and white porcelain vases. This mistake may be because of the lyricist’s ignorance of traditional culture, leading to the erroneous spread of traditional culture. Therefore, some scholars believe that this modern form of music is not sincere enough [6].

But as this style of music has taken off in China, the market and consumers are desperate for fresh songs with Chinese characteristics. In addition, with the push of celebrities and the media, many songwriters, driven by commercial interests, arbitrarily attached some traditional cultural elements as gimmicks to attract listeners [6,13]. A lot of “Chinese-style” songs gained great popularity through dramas, shows, and Tik-Tok, while the authenticity of the musical and cultural elements they adopted has yet to be studied and discussed. But clearly, abuse of traditional music and cultural elements could cause listeners to misunderstand or simplify the profound historical and cultural connotations contained in traditional music, and eventually lead to the formation of stereotypes. Additionally, commercialization may also push musicians away from more authentic cultural explorations as they are catering to the masses.

3.3. Development of Li Ethnic Music

The music of the Li ethnic group, a musical culture developed mainly on Hainan Island in China, reflects the challenges faced by the musical traditions of China's ethnic minorities under the influence of modernization and national policies. With a history of more than 3,000 years, this ethnicity has formed its own unique art and musical culture. What is worrying, however, is that what was once a rich and diverse musical cultural tradition is now in a state of rapid degradation and extinction [14].

Due to the development of transportation, the ties between Li ethnicity and Han ethnicity (the largest ethnic group in China) have also become closer and closer, leading to the so-called "sinicization," that is, the non-Han society is influenced by and assimilated into the Han dominated society [15]. Today, the lives of the Li people are basically the same as that of Han people. Their musical activities and tastes also gradually shifted from traditional music to the modern music flourishing in the Han regions.

Because of the Han ethnicity's advanced agricultural means and technology and the central government's policy of unifying agricultural technology throughout the country during the Tudi Gaige (Land Reform) period, the "slashing songs" of the Li ethnicity, which used to be sung while farmers slashing and ploughing together and which is one of the most common types of Li songs, are now hard to be heard in Li farms dominated by automated equipment [16]. Similar loss of music is also occurring due to changes in people's other living habits, such as beliefs and customs.

In addition, the younger generation is increasingly attracted to modern types of music. Some elderly Li singers expressed their disappointment that young people are disinterested in learning the Li songs, fearing that they will be completely lost after their passing [16]. This is because the government and society have always emphasized rapid development and the unity needed to achieve rapid development, causing the ethnic minority people to have a mentality of worship for the advanced development of the Han nationality in many aspects, which finally leads to a lack of self-identity and self-confidence. This makes the Li people, while respecting the Han lifestyle, abandon their original culture and art.

Han cultural standards or popular music trends have adapted or changed parts of Li music. For example, the famous modern Li song "Wuzhishan Song" uses synthetic sound effects and electronic music elements based on the melody trend with Li characteristics to tell a story about the Wuzhi Mountain in the Li region. Such moves have made Li musical culture more acceptable to the masses, but at the same time, it often loses the distinctive texture of traditional instruments.

Therefore, Li music faces great challenges due to modernization, sinicization, and national policies that may inadvertently stifle the development of its authenticity.

4. Discussion

The three cases discussed provide unique insights into the influence of social dynamics on traditional Chinese music. The hybrid music of the 19th and 20th centuries shows how cultural exchange altered Chinese musical landscape. Modern "Chinese-style" music reflects an attempt to combine traditional elements with popular music, but this can lead to superficial uses of traditional culture. Finally, the development of Li music underscores the challenges faced by China's ethnic musical traditions amid modernization, cultural assimilation, and state-led policies. Despite occurring in different periods and regions, three cases share common themes: cultural exchange, commercialization, hybridization, and, notably, homogenization.

As hybrid forms gain popularity, they are often adapted to market needs, which further diminishes their traditional elements. Traditional music in the 19th century entered Western markets using Western elements; modern "Chinese-style" music uses traditional cultural gimmicks to cash in on listeners; the Li music is more accepted by the market using modern adaptations. While

modernization and commercialization have helped broaden the audience for these musical forms, they often simplify or misrepresent complex cultural or historical contexts.

In all three case studies, homogenization plays a central role, diluting the unique qualities of traditional music to cater to mainstream preferences. Incorporating new sounds leads to a “loss of authenticity,” obscuring the original characteristics of traditional Chinese music.

To address these challenges, one essential strategy is documenting and archiving existing traditional music cultures. This includes recorded performances, oral histories, and the practical context of these musical traditions. Digital archives and audio-visual recordings could help reserve cultural heritage for future generations.

Another strategy is increasing awareness of traditional Chinese music’s cultural significance through educational programs at schools and universities curricula. This could counteract inaccurate portrayals in popular music and encourage musicians to engage with traditional elements more accurately and cautiously, so that “Chinese-style” music could effectively support the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture.

In deciding whether to prioritize “original ecology” or “innovation,” one could refer to the development of Australian aboriginal music amidst commercialization. Australia’s approach involves maintaining “original” practices while acknowledging “innovation.” Australian aboriginal music retained its “sacred” functions and restrictions while combining with western modern music elements to create a new form of “indigenous rock.” “Indigenous rock” is not recognized as traditional aboriginal music, but it does introduce indigenous music to the public [17]. Similarly, ethnic groups in China, like those practicing Li music, can preserve their cultural heritage through local musicians while adapting to social trends.

Finally, empowering local communities and artists to own their own forms of cultural expression is significant. By supporting community music groups and involving elders and practitioners in decision-making processes, cultural practices can remain authentic while adapting to modern environments. By fostering pride and ownership of their cultural heritage, these communities could effectively resist the forces of homogenization.

5. Conclusion

This article discusses the evolution of traditional Chinese music in different historical and social contexts. The essay examines hybrid music from the 19th and 20th centuries, contemporary “Chinese-style” music, and Li ethnic music, elucidating the cultural homogenization resulting from cultural interaction, hybridization, and commercialization, along with its effects on traditional music. These instances demonstrate that within the framework of globalization, the issues confronting traditional music mostly revolve around the erosion of its distinctiveness and cultural significance. Consequently, cultural preservation is essential in the context of globalization, applicable to both Chinese culture and other global cultures, and it is imperative to honor and maintain their authentic cultural identities.

One limitation of this study is that the number of cases is limited and cannot cover all the complexities of traditional Chinese music. In the future, more research could be extended to music forms of other ethnicities or other art forms, such as Chinese traditional opera.

In the future, traditional Chinese music may achieve broader international exposure via internet platforms, cross-cultural exchanges, and educational initiatives. At the same time, through a parallel approach of innovation and conservation, traditional music can evolve within the contemporary context while preserving its cultural heritage and distinctiveness, so enhancing global cultural variety.

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