

## On “Revival of National Music”: An Analysis of Youmei Xiao’s Musical Thought

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### Abstract

The thesis takes the musical thought of the May Fourth period as a clue, combs through some of the articles published by Youmei Xiao in the May Fourth period, and through comparative analysis, summarizes Youmei Xiao’s musical thought and his knowledge of the road of the development of Chinese music at that time and the prospect of the development of Chinese music, and Youmei Xiao’s propositions are of great significance to the development of Chinese music at that time.

**Key words:** Youmei Xiao; Music thought; Revival of national music; Music education

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During the May Fourth Movement, against the background of the massive introduction of Western music into China and under the influence of the two banners of “democracy” and “freedom”, a variety of musical ideas came to the country, forming a “hundred schools of thought”. “A hundred schools of thought contended. Among them, the idea of “revival of national music” advocated by Youmei Xiao, as one of the representative ideas in the “combination of Chinese and Western musical ideas”, had an important impact on the development of music and music education at that time and in later generations.

### 1. MUSICAL IDEAS OF THE MAY FOURTH PERIOD

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 included both the May Fourth Patriotic Movement and the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Since the founding of the New Youth magazine, a landmark event of the New Culture Movement, the zeitgeist, which advocated the ideals of science and democracy, has impacted all areas of Chinese culture. Since the founding of the New Youth magazine, a landmark event of the New Culture Movement, the zeitgeist of “science” and “democracy”, advocating the ideas of freedom and equality, and “opposing the old ideology and rituals, and advocating the vernacular language against the vernacular language” has impacted on all areas of Chinese culture. Chinese music culture has also entered a new stage of development under such an impact. In addition to the rapid development of music creation, a hundred schools of thought have also emerged, tenaciously expressing their concern for the future of Chinese music development.

These musical ideas can be broadly classified into three categories: nationalist ideas, the combination of Chinese and Western musical ideas, and the wholesale westernization of musical ideas. Among them, “national essence” refers to “the essence of our country’s inherited culture”, “nationalism” is a kind of insistence that traditional culture is not allowed to change in the slightest and that foreign music culture is a “flooding beast”, and its spread will endanger Chinese music culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of combining Chinese and Western music belonged to the “stalwarts” of the music industry, who believed that Chinese and Western music had their strengths and that the two could and needed to complement each other, as far as specific opinions were concerned. As for the specific ideas, they varied from one another, such as “improving”, “transforming”, “using the Chinese body in the West”, “using the Western body in the

West”, etc.; the so-called “Chinese and Western music” was also used as the basis for the “Chinese and Western music”. The so-called “wholesale Westernization” is based on the pessimism of “the theory of the backwardness of Chinese music”, which holds that there is no cure for the bleak future of Chinese traditional music and that the only way out is “wholesale Westernization”, which is the only way out. The only way out is “total westernization”, i.e. the complete abandonment of traditional music in the development of Chinese music and the importation of Western music, thus making Chinese music completely Westernized.

As for these three kinds of musical ideas, more musicians support the idea of “nationalism” or “combination of East and West”, and there are only a few musicians who advocate “total westernization”, and some of them have a tendency towards “total westernization” or “Fan-Westernization”. There were only a handful of musicians who advocated “total Westernization”, and those who did were mostly those with a “total Westernization” ideological tendency or a “Fan Westernization Theory” viewpoint. Therefore, most of the articles on the future of Chinese music published during the May Fourth period were by musicians who supported the idea of “nationalism” or “combination of East and West”.

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## 2. AN ANALYSIS OF YOUMEI XIAO'S MUSICAL THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS

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Throughout Youmei Xiao's several articles published during the May Fourth period, they all revolve around the same topic, namely, the revival of national music. In the following section, we will analyse the numerous ideas and suggestions that Youmei Xiao put forward with the revival of national music at the core.

### 2.1 “Backwardness of National Music” - Why “Revival of National Music”?

In Youmei Xiao's article, “Backwardness of National Music” one of the main ideas. Youmei Xiao discussed the reasons for the backwardness of national music from several aspects. Youmei Xiao listed the three major reasons for the sluggishness of our old music: “1. Previously, our musicians could not invent and manufacture keyboard instruments with five-line notation; 2. Previously, our musicians were overly conservative of the old methods and lacked the spirit of enterprise, so even though there were good instruments and good methods of input, they were unwilling to adopt or imitate; 3. There has been no formal organ for music education in our country, so the method of teaching music has not been improved and the method of notation has not been standardised.” (Xiao, 1934). Similar statements have also appeared in other articles, such as the reasons for

the failure of old music in the article “Feelings on the Death of Mr. Tianhua Liu, the Tutor of National Music”: “The lack of progress in music in our country can be attributed to the following four reasons: the imprecision and lack of unity in notation, firstly; the preference for technology over theoretical research, secondly; the muddled antiquity of the professorial method (i.e., preference for listening to learning rather than looking at the score) and the maintenance of secrecy, thirdly; the preference for technology over theory, thirdly; and the lack of knowledge in the teaching of music, thirdly. The teaching method is based on the old ways (i.e., favouring listening to music over reading it) and keeping secrets, and there has never been a real music education organ established in the past generations, and there is no real music education organ. (Xiao, 1934) The following is a point-by-point analysis.

Firstly, notation, Youmei Xiao argued that “the lack of improvement in notation and the failure to teach it” (Xiao, 1935) were the most important reasons for the complete cessation of progress in Chinese music. According to Youmei Xiao, one of the major reasons for the remarkable development of Western music was “the invention of the five-line notation and the length of the notes”, whereas in China, “during the Sui and Tang dynasties ..... although it had already switched to the use of the Gongche notation (the so-called flute-colour notation), the music itself remained the same. .... but the music itself still made little progress; it was still composed in monophonic tones, and the musicians taught the music, paying more attention to listening than to reading the score .....” (Xiao, 1935).

Secondly, in terms of musical instruments, Youmei Xiao once said that “the invention of keyboard instruments was the best opportunity to produce polyphonic music”, although many musical instruments had been imported from the Western regions after the Sui and Tang dynasties, most of them were still unable to play chromatic scales, let alone transpose the key; and keyboard instruments and pentatonic scores had already been imported into China for many years but had not been popularised because they were “only used by the court” and “still centred in churches or schools set up by the church”. Keyboard instruments and pentatonic scores have been imported into China for many years, but have not been popularised because they are “limited to the use of the court and are not available to the public” and “are still centred in churches or schools set up by the churches, with minimal contact with musicians of the old music” (Xiao, 1935). The second is that musicians in China were reluctant to learn from the West. He believed that since ancient times, musicians in China had been stuck in their ways in terms of techniques and tunes, seldom exchanged ideas, and were good at keeping secrets, which resulted in the scarcity of musical compositions passed down from

the Tang Dynasty. The development of music came to a near standstill, resulting in national music becoming more and more backward (Xiao, 1935).

Furthermore, from the perspective of music education, Youmei Xiao argues that China's failure to set up formal, professional music education institutions has led to the backwardness of music education in Chinese music. Youmei Xiao has given a detailed description of Western educational institutions, including a comparison of Chinese and Western musical instruments and an introduction to the curriculum of Western music schools. After comparing the development of music education institutions in ancient China, he pointed out that there were three reasons for the underdevelopment of music education in China: firstly, the state music education institutions were either made or broken down, and could not be maintained; secondly, most of the apprentices in the workshops were uneducated and of unclean background; and thirdly, the "pseudo-rationalists" took advantage of the clutter of categories in the workshops and rejected music (Xiao, 1920), of which the third reason was the most serious. Youmei Xiao's review of the development of music education in ancient China, from the focus on morality and music in the Shun, Zhou, and Sui Dynasties, to the prosperity and abolition of the Jiao Fang during the Tang Dynasty to the end of the Shaoxing period of the Song Dynasty, as well as the ups and downs in the development of music education in the Ming Dynasty, are sufficient to illustrate the power of the "pseudo-rationalists"; coupled with the fact that the various dynasties of China did not all attach importance to the development of music, as mentioned above, the state-run Jiao Fang had the power to reject music. In addition, all Chinese dynasties did not attach much importance to the development of music. As mentioned above, the state-run music education institutions were "sometimes persistent, sometimes lacking in perseverance and prone to giving up halfway through the day". They could not provide a favourable environment for the development of music education, implying that the lack of development of music education was related to the government's restriction.

## 2.2 "Revival of National Music" - The Road to National Music Revival

Youmei Xiao's views on how to revive the national music are mainly related to two aspects, one is to revive the "national music", and the other is to tidy up the old music.

To revive "national music", it is necessary to first clarify what "national music" is. Youmei Xiao defined the scope of "national music" in terms of the degree of difficulty of external influences on the form, content and performance of the music, arguing that "the distinction between national music and non-national music should be based on the sole criterion of content", defining "national music" as "music that is capable of being performed appropriately" (Xiao, 1939). Defines "national music" as

"that which expresses the spirit of the times, the thoughts and the sentiments of the modern Chinese people", and gives examples to illustrate the spirit of the times, the thoughts and the sentiments of the Chinese people; at the same time, Youmei Xiao's definition of "national music" is "that which expresses the spirit of the times, the thoughts and the sentiments of the modern Chinese people". At the same time, Youmei Xiao made a comparative distinction between "national music" and "old music". He believed that only works containing the spirit of the times, thoughts and emotions can be called Chinese national music, while "old music" is relative to "national music". "Old music" is a title relative to "national music", i.e. musical works that have nothing to do with China's national movement, and when classified, they are classified as "old music", and are distinguished from excellent musical works that have been handed down in China since ancient times. As for the expression of "national music", Youmei Xiao believed that it should be in line with the times and trends and the needs of musicians and that there was no need to limit the forms and instruments to be used.

Secondly, how to revive "national music". Youmei Xiao held a completely favourable attitude towards the idea of accepting "Western music in its entirety and then producing a new music with the spirit of our country as its soul and Western technology as its trunk". Rather than "reviving the old Chinese music", Youmei Xiao thought it would be more appropriate to call it "transforming Chinese music", suggesting that the transformation of music required "..... to take the best and weed out the dregs". He suggested that the transformation of music needed "to take its essence, weed out its dregs, and present it in a new light. Therefore, all techniques and tools must be Western, but the spirit must be preserved, so as not to lose the national character." Out of this view and understanding, Youmei Xiao proposed seven plans to revive national music, which were incorporated into the curriculum of the National Conservatory of Music (Xiao, 1935).

Youmei Xiao was in favour of sorting out old music and improving musical instruments. First of all, the collation of old music, Youmei Xiao believed that the richness of old music in China lay in the words and music scores that had appeared and passed down through the ages and hoped that the government would hire experts to collate the old music; he also pointed out that collation of old music was not only one of the important work of the music experts, but also required a careful and classified study with scientific methods, and need to be indomitable spirit and many times of experimentation before there is a hope of success. (Xiao, 1935). Mr. Xiao also put forward his own opinions on China's popular music. First, collect old folk songs, remove vulgar words, replace them with similar words and phrases, and compose them according to the tunes; collate the folk songs with musical scores and

set them to appropriate harmonies; second, collect folk songs and tunes, collate them and set them to harmonies; third, collate the old dramas of historical value that are in line with the trend of the times; fourth, solicit new folk songs and set them to scores from both the government and the music schools; and fourth, collect new folk songs and set them to music. Fourthly, the government and the music schools solicited new compositions of folk songs added scores to them, and asked the government to reward valuable new compositions, and in this way, they continued to create popular music for the new era (Xiao, 1935).

The second is to improve musical instruments. Youmei Xiao pointed out that the improvement of musical instruments should adopt the “catching up method”, that is, to directly adopt the most advanced and complete form of musical instruments at present; because Western musical instruments were of great value, from an economic point of view, Youmei Xiao hoped that the government would send foreign students abroad to learn the technology of musical instrument production, and then return to the country to imitate the instruments themselves, which would reduce the state’s financial expenditure. This would reduce the state’s financial expenditure (Xiao, 1939).

### 2.3 The “National School of Music” - A Bright Future for National Music

According to the above, Youmei Xiao believed that the “revival of Chinese music” should be based on the use of Western techniques and theories to create Chinese music with Chinese thoughts, spirit and emotions, to transform Chinese music without losing its national character. However, Youmei Xiao was not satisfied with this; he preferred that the final result of the revival of Chinese music should be the creation of a “national school of music”, i.e., a Chinese national school of music, which was also the reason why Youmei Xiao did not give up the old music completely.

Youmei Xiao’s definition of “national music” mentioned above is also a definition of the “national school”, i.e., the combination of traditional elements of the nation with Western compositional theories and techniques to create music with its national style, which is in line with the definition of the national school formed in Eastern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. This is in line with the definition of the national music school formed in Eastern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Youmei Xiao also compared the social conditions of the formation of the Russian national music school with those of his own country, and in the face of the fact that the musical atmosphere in China was far inferior to that of

Russia a hundred years earlier, Youmei Xiao believed that what would determine the future of music in China would be the intentions and endeavours of the new composers of that time and that the formation of the national school of music in China would require a long and arduous process (Xiao, 1935).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Since the May Fourth Movement put forward science and democracy in 1919, the government has been the “leader” in promoting science from the perspective of the state, endeavouring to promote “science” to all walks of life, as well as scientific methods to music, and incorporating the “collation of old music” into government actions. “The revival of national music, however, was not the first step towards the revival of music. However, the revival of Chinese music is not only about tidying up the old music but also about creating “new music” and the emergence of musicians capable of creating “new music”. Youmei Xiao has dealt with music education and the cultivation of musical talents in many articles and has also elaborated on the method of formulating school statutes and the curriculum of student education. However, music education cannot be implemented by one person alone, and the revival of national music through music education cannot be accomplished by one conservatory or one association but requires the assistance of the government in the right direction, which is also expressed in many of Youmei Xiao’s articles.

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