“Let a hundred flowers bloom, to discard the old for the new.” The Building of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

Ema Plafcan

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uark.edu/muscuht

Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons

Citation

“Let a hundred flowers bloom, to discard the old for the new.”
The Building of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in Music

By

Ema Plafcan

Summer 2023

Music

Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas
Abstract

“Let a hundred flowers bloom, to discard the old for the new.” Mao Zedong first said this when outlining his expectations for artists under the regime of the Communist Party in 1954, but it is also a quote that embodies what the Modern Chinese Orchestra is and has been throughout time. This paper aims to analyze this Chinese instrumental tradition and how it represents the people of China past and present, both inside China and in its diaspora. It shows music as a powerful tool for creating a collective identity. Starting with influences from ancient China, origins in the folk tradition jiangnan sizhu, the political landscape of 19th century China, to the double standard of growth and destruction of Mao Zedong, one sees how the Modern Chinese Orchestra has transformed to fit the needs of the Chinese people, and how it still continues to do so.
Introduction

“Let a hundred flowers bloom, to discard the old for the new.” Mao Zedong first said this when outlining his expectations for artists under the regime of the Communist Party, but this is also a quote that represents what Modern Chinese Orchestra is and has been throughout time (Lee 2018, 105). The Modern Chinese Orchestra is a tradition that reflects the history of China and functions as a symbol of Chinese culture today. With orchestras spread across the world, one can find this tradition in almost any place with a large population of Chinese people, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. And of course, mainland China itself, with groups such as the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra and the Beijing Chinese Orchestra (Lau 2008, 36-41). Musicians in these ensembles are professionally trained. The tradition is heavily inspired by Western musical techniques of harmony, counterpoint, notation, and composition, even including four sections of instruments with winds, percussion, plucked strings, and bowed strings. Musicians read scores of music rather than learning by oral transmission (Wang et al. 2020, 33). Pieces performed are varied, with traditional, contemporary, and popular pieces, all played on traditional Chinese instruments. Inspiration for pieces range from traditional Chinese instrumental solos or exploration of Chinese identity today (Lau 2008, 36-41).

This tradition started with origins in jiangnan sizhu and expanded from there, especially in the 19th century, when the Modern Chinese Orchestra transformed alongside the political landscape of China as Western powers and influential political figures affected the country. Mao Zedong (leader of the Communist Party) was the most influential figure during this time, as he aimed to make this art form represent the masses of China, until destroying his creation in a double standard of growth and destruction. This paper combines these connections to show that
music is a powerful tool for creating a collective identity. Specifically, this study finds that the development of the Modern Chinese Orchestra has been socially and politically shaped by the Chinese governing party to create a sense of nationalism within China and by Chinese communities abroad to create an ethnic and cultural identity outside of China.

**Early Ensembles**

Music ensembles have long had a significant role in the history of China. These ensembles had many functions but initially were created for ceremonial purposes and entertainment. Throughout history, the composition of these ensembles shifted as China’s culture changed. Early ensembles included bells, gongs, and drums, and later added wind and string instruments, a precursor to jiangnan sizhu and later the basis for the Modern Chinese Orchestra. From courtly musics to regional theatre forms, Chinese ensembles across the region reflect local traditions seen through material culture and the construction of musical instruments.

The first significant change in the structure of Chinese music began in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) with an influx of foreign music and instruments from the Silk Road, a network of trade routes that connected Europe to China (Moore, 2009). At this time, ensembles were formed around three main functions: ritual, courtly, and processional. Each of these had a different instrumentation and repertory. Ritual ensembles were used for Jisi (rites) where they performed elegant music (yayue) using instruments of Chinese origin such as bells, chimes, zithers, and winds. Courtly ensembles played for the court, performing banquet music (yanyue). Often, these courtly ensembles used foreign instruments that were incorporated through exchange with other courts. Finally, processional ensembles, known as guchui (drums and winds), played for processions and outdoor events. These ensembles comprised almost entirely
foreign instruments, such as reeds, flutes, and percussion batteries. Over time, these foreign instruments became integral to Chinese music and were no longer seen as foreign (Kuo-Huang and Gray 1979, 1-4).

There were more musical developments during the Sui Dynasty (581 – 618 CE), which introduced the concept of entertainment ensembles based on country of origin. This idea was further developed in the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE), with the development of the Shibuji (Ten Orchestras), or ten main orchestras originating from different countries. This included two Chinese orchestras and ensembles based on neighboring countries of West Liang, Korea, India, Kashgar, etc. As a result of these cosmopolitan musical expressions, the timbre of ensembles changed. One integral change was the introduction of bowed chordophones, most notably the two-string huqin fiddle, originating from the Mongolian orchestra, another important ensemble of the Tang Dynasty. Huqin is the generic name for the bowed lutes used in Chinese ensembles today. Another piece of evidence connected to jiangnan sizhu is the Xiansuo Shisantao (13 Pieces for Strings), compiled by Rong Zai in 1814. It is a rare piece of Chinese music history where pieces were written down instead of being orally transmitted. The instrumentation shown in the Xiansuo Shisantao is very similar to jiangnan sizhu ensemble instrumentation today. These pieces were most likely used by court musicians, who passed them down to the Manchu literati, and later folk ensembles (Kuo-Huang and Gray 1979, 1-9). Outside influences led to the beginnings of jiangnan sihzu and foreshadowed the beginnings of the Modern Chinese Orchestra.

**Jiangnan Sizhu**

The history of jiangnan sizhu itself is vague and not well documented due to its low social status, but it first grew popular in Shanghai at the end of the 19th century. It was likely
selected to be the basis for the modern Chinese orchestra due to its lyrical qualities that represented the Jiangnan area (characterized by elegant culture and scenery), as well as its less specialized instrumentation compared to other ensembles (Kuo-Huang and Gray 1979, 9-12).

Jiangnan sizhu is a community-based instrumental tradition originating from the Jiangnan region in Southeastern China. This includes an area south of the Yangtze River, the Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, and the city of Shanghai.

This tradition consists of multiple groups of amateur musicians who come together to have weekly performances at a set time and day, usually in a public setting, such as a teahouse. The musicians vary depending on which music club you attend. In some clubs, the same members attend every week, all having a deep bond formed over many years. In others, there are different musicians present each time. Some musicians even choose to go to multiple clubs throughout the week. The majority of jiangnan sizhu musicians are men: mostly retired, some in their thirties and forties, some in their twenties, and occasionally young children who are studying the tradition. Women are welcome, but a rarity, as traditionally, Chinese ensemble music was played by men. Overall, anyone is welcome to participate in these sessions as it is a very welcoming and forgiving tradition. Musical background is not a concern, as even beginners can join in using sheet music. Financial background is not a concern, as the instruments are shared between the participants. Usually, the only connection of participants is their interest in the music (Witzleben 1987, 248-250).

As musicians arrive in the community space, the music starts. In groups of four to ten people, a small number of pieces are played out of a limited repertory. This list only consists of the “eight great pieces” (ba daqu), and a few pieces popular at the discretion of the group. After they finish, the next group goes, then the next, until everyone has played.
The pieces are played by memory, with some of the pieces being repeated multiple times during a single session by different groups. Looking from the outside, this may seem boring and repetitive, but to the musicians gathered, this is what makes playing special. The emphasis is on improvisation. The musicians know the basic form of the piece, but the goal is to bring something new to it every time they play it (Witzleben 1987, 241-256).

Sizhu means “silk and bamboo,” referring to the instruments used. Traditionally, the stringed instruments used silk strings, though today they can often be made of steel. The wind instruments are made from bamboo (Witzleben 1987, 241).

The “silk” instruments that are the most present in jiangnan sizhu are the erhu and zhonghu. The erhu is a bowed two-string spiked lute. Its body is made up of a hollow hexagon-shaped belly covered on one side with snake skin. The bow is fixed between the two strings (Lau 2008, 4-10). Commonly, there are at least two erhus in each ensemble. The strings of the lead erhu are tuned to A and D. The fanhu, with thicker strings, and the zhonghu, often tuned lower than the lead, are most common. The function of the erhu is to add to the melody being played using various techniques unique to it. For example, langyin is used, or “wave note,” where the bow is pulled to the right while the right hand slowly moves up and down, making long sustained notes special. (Witzleben 1995, 43-46).
Figure 1. A man plays the erhu in the streets of Melbourne, Australia (Wiki Media Commons n.d.).

Figure 2. An erhu bow close up, fixed between the two strings (Wiki Media Commons n.d.).
The pipa, a teardrop-shaped lute, is also quite common in these ensembles (Lau 2008, 4-10). The pipa has four frets on the neck and twelve additional frets on the body. The strings are made of nylon, and the player uses finger picks to pluck the strings. It is held at a vertical angle and is almost entirely played in the middle and upper octaves in jiangnan sizhu ensembles. It supports the melody with special techniques, such as the half-lunzhi, where there are four rolled musical notes leading to a melody note, and the tui, where the string pushes along the fret towards the musician and then is returned to its original position (Witzleben 1995, 46-48).
There are three aerophones in a jiangnan sizhu ensemble: the dizi, xiao, and sheng. The dizi is a side-blown bamboo flute that has a nasal timbre due to a vibrating membrane. The xiao is a vertical notched flute. The sheng is a mouth organ made of a blowing chamber and a thin bamboo pipe system that can produce two or more tones at the same time (Lau 2008, 4-10). The dizi is the lead instrument in a jiangnan sizhu ensemble. Dizi players often suggest the piece to be played, and they help the other musicians keep a steady tempo during the piece by tapping their feet, (Witzleben 1987, 242 - 243). The other two instruments act as supporting instruments, with the xiao adding small ornaments to the music such as trills (when two neighboring musical notes are played alternatingly), and the sheng adding to the melody by playing multiple pitches at
a time, making a kind of “harmony.” However, this “harmony” can be thought of as more of an addition to the melody. The additional pitches played that are not the melody are in intervals of a unison, a fifth, or an octave. These are intervals that any note can have that complement them (Witzleben 1995, 41-42).

Figure 5. A dizi made of bamboo and ivory.

Figure 6. A xiao from the late 19th century.
There are many percussion instruments in a jiangnan sizhu ensemble. The bangu, a type of drum that is hit with two small bamboo sticks (Lau 2008, 4-10). The biqu gu, a “water chestnut drum” with a wood frame covered in cow skin, is placed flat on a table or tilted. There is also a pair of wooden clappers called a guban. These instruments are only played by one person in the ensemble. They hold the guban in their left hand and a drumstick in their right, striking either one of the drums or a woodblock, while they control the tempo for each piece played. Percussion is usually played by one of the most experienced performers in the ensemble (Witzleben 1995, 53-57).
Figure 8. A bangu.

Figure 9. A guban (held in the musician’s left hand) and ruan played by Yin Xiaoxiang in the foreground.
Although jiangnan sizhu still exists in China today, it is unfortunately losing interest. It had been gaining interest from scholars, but currently, it is somewhat seen as a tourist attraction, creating nostalgia for what China was like before the modern era (Lau 1998, 53). However, the folk instruments used in the tradition are still popular today. They went through major changes during the twentieth century to become the basis of the Modern Chinese Orchestra as China’s political and sociological landscape greatly changed, beginning with the Wuchang Uprising.

The Republic of China 1912-1949

The Wuchang Uprising occurred in October of 1911 as a successful coup of the last dynasty of China, leading to the formation of the Republic of China in 1912, led by Sun Yat-sen and the Nationalist Party.

The movement against the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912 CE) was a build-up of over a decade’s worth of strife, defined by many Western wars that left China defeated, forcing the country to give up much of its land. This included the two Opium Wars (1839-1842 CE and 1856-1860 CE) against Great Britain with the loss of Hong Kong, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895 CE) with the loss of Taiwan and parts of Manchuria, and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905 CE) (“The Chinese Revolution of 1911” n.d. U.S. Department of State).

This political unrest also resulted in a period of self-reflection by the educated class of China, leading them to pull away from the ideals of Confucianism that had ruled China for over two-thousand years in favor of an era of modernization (Wong 2001, 417). This was furthered by the May Fourth Movement of May 4, 1919, a “new culture” movement led by students at Peking University following the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I where Germany’s territorial claims in China were not returned to China as expected, but rather given to Japan.
instead. The movement further blamed traditional culture for the fall of China and encouraged the adoption of Western ideas like equality and democracy to improve the country (*Before and after the May Fourth Movement* n.d.).

As a result, in an effort to rebuild, the Chinese government reformed everything, especially the Chinese school system. Remodeling was based on Western and Japanese education systems, including music education (Kuo-Huang and Gray 1979, 12). Many Chinese students were sent to Japan, Europe, and the United States to study music (Yu 2000, 244). The Chinese were inspired by Japan’s progress after the Meiji Restoration (1868 CE), which occurred as a coup of the previous feudal system that restored the Japanese Emperor and ushered in a parliamentary system of government as a major era of political, economic, and social change. The new Japanese government enacted the creation of a national army, a universal education system, and the construction of major transportation and communication systems (Jansen 2002). The Chinese students witnessed the military and band music of the new Japanese army and saw them as extremely successful musical symbols, due to their integration of Western technology (McClimon 2013). They brought this music back with them, translated them into Chinese, and integrated them into the school system as the main repertoire (Yu 2000, 244). At this time, traditional music was not forgotten but was second to the Western music paths being offered in Post-Secondary schools. For example, Peking University taught traditional instruments alongside piano and violin. The National Conservatory in Shanghai offered Chinese music courses, but the newer keyboard, orchestra, voice, and composition courses were more popular. In addition to this, musicians were trained in the Western style, and there was a standardization of musical instruments. The Western Romantic Period of music (1830 – 1900 CE) was another inspiration for these changes (Huo-Kuang and Gray 1979, 12-14).
Cai Yuanpai, president of Peking University during this time, was also inspired by this movement of modernization and put forward a proposal that the best parts of Western music should be “applied to Chinese music to make up for Chinese music’s weaknesses.” (Wang 2020, 30). This led to many talks about issues in Chinese music, leading to the creation of the Peking University Music Society in 1919, which provided courses in both Western and Chinese musical instruments.

Liu Tianhua, a prominent erhu and pipa player who was also experienced in violin and trumpet, joined the Peking faculty in 1922 and furthered the movement. He reformed the erhu by applying violin techniques to the instrument, changing it from a folk fiddle to a concert-grade instrument. This included improving the design, expanding the instrument range in pitch and dynamics, and writing new pieces. Liu also formed the Institute for Improvement of Chinese Music (Guoyue Gaijinshe) and a music periodical. He wanted to create an ensemble based on sizhu music but have more than one player on each instrument, which was unheard of at the time, as traditional sizhu ensembles usually only had one player per instrument. He created scores for this ensemble based on Western parts, adding rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and ornamentation. This was also new compared to the Chinese tradition of learning pieces through oral transmission.

Another society that was experimenting with similar activities at the time was the Datong Music Society, founded in 1920 by Zheng Jinwen. This society also focused on improving traditional instrumental music, upgrading folk instruments, and experimenting with orchestration. Liu Yaozhang, a composer in the Datong Music Society, even composed the first large Chinese ensemble piece: Spring Blossoms On A Moonlight Night (Chunjiang Huayue Ye), based on a pipa solo, orchestrated in a Western style. Inspired by the Datong Music Society, similar music societies sprung up (Wang et al 2020, 29-31).
These ensembles were brought to the attention of the Broadcasting Company of China (BBC) in Nanjing, in the 1930s (Tsui 2001, 266). The company felt a need for “the organization of a national orchestra to broadcast ‘national’ music,” so there was a proposal to form a national music department (Fang 1970, 1, as cited in Huo-Kuang and Gray 1979, 14). A few years later the Central Broadcasting Station National Orchestra was founded. By June 1939, the music department had a 14-member national orchestra and a 28-member Western orchestra. They did many broadcasts and campaigns, leading to the orchestra model being spread to schools and communities all over China. The orchestra model they used was highly inspired by the large symphonies of the late Western Romantic Period, which were composed of four main instrument sections: strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion (Huo-Kuang and Gray 1979, 14-17). The musicians were arranged in a semi-circle, facing the audience, and conducted by a director using a baton (Tsui 2001, 266). This was different from jiangnan sizhu, which arranges musicians around a rectangular table with no conductor, playing in settings like a loud public teahouse where customers are not expected to pay attention to the music or keep quiet (Witzleben 1995, 24).

Broadcast members also tried to substitute a Chinese instrument for each Western instrument in the ensemble. For example, they used zhonghus as violas or the xiao as a clarinet. Western instruments were used if there were no equivalent Chinese instruments that could be used. Members also improved instrument range and created new instruments in the medium and low registers (Huo-Kuang and Gray 1979, 14-17). For instance, the new pipa has twenty-three frets on the body, and strings made of steel (John 2001). Or the dahu, similar to the erhu, but pitched an octave lower and sized up much larger (Tsui 2001).
The Communist Party

In 1949, the Communist Party came out victorious in the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949 CE), leading to the Nationalists fleeing to Taiwan where they established a government as the Republic of China. The Communist Party took over China and established the People’s Republic of China (Wong 2001, 422). The leader of the party, Mao Zedong, was an avid art lover and saw it as the perfect medium to serve the common people and connect them to politicians while spreading new Communist ideologies. This was a different turn than what had been previously seen in the Nationalist government, as Mao wanted to use music as a political tool. He stated that Chinese artists should “Let a hundred flowers bloom, to discard the old for the new.” (Lee 2018, 105). To inform musicians about the exact way he wanted them to create art, he conducted two key talks that then served as the foundation of music-making before the arrival of the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976 CE). These two key talks were the “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” on May 2, 1942, and the “Talks to Music Workers,” on August 24, 1956.

At the “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” Mao introduced five main questions for artists to ask themselves:

1. What is your political position? Aligned with Communism and the People.
2. What is your attitude? There are three types of people: enemy, ally, and ‘one of us.’ Each type has a certain attitude associated with them, and you must know whom to praise or reject.
3. What is your intended audience? Much larger and more diverse than previously, you need to make music for the masses.
4. What is the problem with your work? Your work is unrelatable. Go and integrate yourselves with the common people to understand their positions.
5. What should you learn more about? You should learn more about Marxism and Leninism and understand people of different classes.
These questions guided musicians to a more aligned view with the Communist Party, integrating musicians into a more political, rather than individual approach, giving Mao a way to influence the people.

At the “Talks to Music Workers,” Mao focused on the practical parts of music making. He implored musicians to first learn Western music techniques before returning to apply them to Chinese music to make it more effective, benefiting the Chinese people. However, they should not completely Westernize (Lee 2018, 101-107). Mao said they should be able to “use ancient material in a modern way, and the Western style in a Chinese way” (Lee 2018, 107). Through these decrees, Mao used the ideas from the Nationalist Party but expanded them further as he wanted musicians to use their art to represent the masses of China, not solely repertoire based on existing pieces. He wanted them to go out and spread his ideas while expressing the feelings of the common people.

The Great Leap Forward, an economic and social campaign launched in 1958 to maximize agricultural and industrial productivity, saw these key talks applied as there was a desire for new compositions praising the government and common people. During this time, composers lived with the common people to gain first-hand experience. Some of the compositions that came out of this push were “Loving Kindness of the Communist Party” and “Fisherman’s Song of the East Sea,” key examples of Mao’s decrees being carried out (Lee 2018, 107).

Despite these efforts, Mao still saw a need to grow, and put out further instructions in the “Two Instructions Concerning Literature and Art.” The first set of instructions came in December of 1963 when he stated that many art forms were still problematic due to government departments being led by “dead men” (Lee 2018, 108). Mao believed these department heads promoted feudal and capitalist art and did not develop socialist art enough. Members tried to
self-rectify after this event and admitted their wrongdoings. But Mao felt it was still insufficient and issued a second set of more forceful instructions in June 1964, saying that artists had failed to meet his instructions, failed to rectify, and needed to maneuver even further away from feudal and capitalist art. The language used in these instructions created great tension among artists and added to the advent of the Cultural Revolution (Lee 2018, 108).

During this period under the two instructions, Mao made sure that artists underwent “ideological rectification,” that met his standards, as well as pushed to establish multiple music ensembles and institutes, such as Shanghai Chinese Orchestra established in 1952, or the Shanghai Music Conservatory of Music (Lee 2018, 108). These schools carried out Mao’s ideals, especially through the hiring of Western musicians from the Soviet Union to teach Western music theory and composition. Original compositions by musicians during this time were used to praise Mao, spreading his ideologies further. Before being released to the public, however, they were submitted to party reviewers who either approved or banned them. Any artist who had thoughts that did not align with the party was punished by the government (Lee 2018, 107-110). This was another sign of what was to come.

**Mao’s Modern Chinese Orchestra**

During the time of the two instructions, Mao and the regime were also interested in creating their own Modern Chinese Orchestra. The Chinese Communist Party wanted to greatly increase the progress that was previously made. One official said, “Even though our national musical instruments are varied and colorful… they are insufficient and backward…” (Yang 1957, 73, as cited in Huo-Kuang and Gray 1979, 17). This was also brought about by a radio station, the Central Broadcasting Station in Peking. This new model was formed with 35 musicians in
April 1953, created to serve the masses. Even more discussion of orchestra instrumentation happened because of the push to modernize. Traditional instruments helped musicians express Chinese tradition but were not sufficient to play modern pieces with Western tonal systems. There was also more experimentation with national instruments to improve them, use better materials for their construction, and add accurate intonation, range, construction, etc. These new instruments were spread across the country with massive conferences to display them. By the mid-1960s this orchestra model from the Central Broadcasting Station (now including 52 musicians) had spread around the country, becoming the model for thousands of professional and amateur orchestras in schools, factories, armies, and other units.

The repertoire of modern orchestras during this time also expanded. In the 1940s, there were even three full-time composers at the broadcasting station who created pieces combining new and old traditions. They introduced harmony, and the untempered and unison quality was replaced with precise intonation, dynamics, and specific rhythms. However, they kept the traditional ways that each instrument used embellishment.

These pieces were then organized into three main categories, a system that is still used today: unison, ensemble, and solo-ensemble pieces. The unison pieces where each instrument played monophonically were inspired by jiangnan sizhu, but they required more precise intonation as well as contrasting tones. The ensemble pieces that included harmony had both old and new transcriptions of folk songs and original compositions. The solo-ensemble pieces were the most popular, where a solo instrument received the opportunity to show off virtuosity while the ensemble served as an accompaniment.

Finally, the physical layout of the orchestra changed. The Modern Chinese Orchestra has four sections of instruments versus the traditional two sections of winds and strings, as exhibited
in jiangnan sizhu. These sections are bowed strings, plucked strings, winds, and percussion. There is no brass section like in Western orchestras, due to the absence of extensive brass wind instruments in Chinese history. There is a conductor, and the players on the stage are arranged similarly to Western orchestras by the strings being placed by the conductor, winds in the middle, and percussion at the back. The size of the orchestra varies from as small as twelve players to more than fifty. If the orchestra is small enough and the music simple enough, the percussion section can serve as the conductor, much like its predecessor jiangnan sizhu (Kuo-Huang and Gray 1979, 17-26). Mao’s influence led to all of these changes, directly affecting Modern Chinese Orchestra practices today.

Overall, the goal of the government was to create images of national unity and spread the populist beliefs of taking power from the elite and giving it to the people. Other ways they did this was to take traditional cultural forms representing the many common people of China and create new genres of music, literature, painting, and dance to give them new life. These genres became invented traditions of the period, which eventually became ‘true’ traditions (Lau 1996, 113-126). As Lau says in the article “Forever Red,” all traditions were invented at some point in time, and to characterize them as invented or not can be misleading (e.g., Hobsbaum and Ranger, 2019). “Rather than casting them within rigid boundaries, it is more fruitful to place them along a continuum and to focus on the ways each of them has been shaped by individuals within a specific historical moment and context.” (Lau 1996, 115).

This affected attitudes toward musicians during this period. Traditionally, professional musicians were looked down on as low class, a tradition stemming from ancient China and Confucianism. But respect towards musicians grew as the new genres of music taken from regional folk music traditions were “politically correct” as they served the needs of the common
people. Regional musicians were encouraged to take part in the new music movement, and the government organized many events to promote them, such as new performing troupes, public concerts, and national music holidays.

In the late 1950s, these musicians gained the title of zhuanye yanzouyuan (professional performer), different from their previous title of minjian (low-class). They became teachers and performers in state-sponsored music institutes, receiving salaries, housing, job security, and reputation. This reinforced the populist ideology even further, as this created success stories of former poor rural peasants who suffered in the previous “feudalistic” society, gaining success after joining the party and devoting themselves to this new movement (Lau 1996, 113-126).

The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution started in 1966 as a campaign led by Mao to renew the spirit of the Chinese Revolution (1911-1912 CE) when the Qing dynasty was overthrown and China created a republic. He was afraid that China was becoming too like the Soviet Union. His four goals were to replace his current successors with people more aligned with his ideologies, to correct the Communist Party, to give Chinese youths a revolutionary experience, and to enact changes to make education, health care, and other systems less elitist (Lieberthal 2022).

During the early Cultural Revolution, the government decided to stop all performances and compositions of works produced from the start of the People’s Republic to the start of the Cultural Revolution, except for works that praised the party or used Mao’s words. This was a result of the “Minutes of the Literary Work Force Symposium Held by Comrade Jiang Qing and Commissioned by Comrade Lin Biao” in February 1966. Instead, eight model works decided on by the government were the main pieces of music in this period. These works used melodies
from Beijing operas with new lyrics written to praise the party and Mao. They also matched the revolutionary spirit of the period. The instrumentation in these pieces combined existing percussion from the operas and only some instruments from the Modern Chinese Orchestra with the addition of the Western orchestra. Due to this, the Modern Chinese Orchestra turned into a model that could not represent the country (Lee 2018, 111). Conservatories and universities also stopped entrance exams. Musicians who did not perform in the model works were sent to work in labor camps in the countryside alongside skilled workers and intellectuals, as the government was afraid they would lead political uprisings (Wang et al. 2020, 35). This was a complete reversal from the “blooming” that Mao had initially planned, as the country was not being influenced in the way he wanted. It was becoming too Westernized in his eyes.

In the latter part of the Cultural Revolution, starting in 1971 and lasting until 1976, Chinese Orchestra practices reemerged. This was set in motion in 1971 by broadcasting authorities requesting the return of the Central Cultural Broadcasting Company of Chinese Orchestra to record revolutionary tunes on Western instruments (Wang et al. 2020, 35). However, this changed slightly as Peng Xiuwen, the director of the CCBC orchestra, believed that they could capture the essence of revolutionary tunes on traditional instruments (Penyeh 1998, 26). He adapted many tunes himself, contributing to the return of the Modern Chinese Orchestra. Musicians were allowed to compose and perform again, but they had to produce pieces that were aligned with the revolutionary spirit. An example of such a piece would be “Swirling Clouds” by Peng Xiuwen, which used the tune of the model piece “The Azalea Mountain” and Beijing opera instruments with orchestral style played in a heterophonic form, a reference to the earlier jiangnan sizhu style of music (Lee 2018, 111-114). However, many musicians composed pieces
with hidden meanings that gave voice to disagreements among workers and peasants with the Communist party (Wang et al. 2020, 35).

**The Current Modern Chinese Orchestra**

Despite Mao’s destruction, the Modern Chinese Orchestra has bloomed once again, spreading beyond mainland China. Mao’s influence laid the base for the technical aspect of the tradition, but it is the people of China, both inside China and its diaspora, who have helped the meaning of the tradition evolve once more. As the idea of what it means to be Chinese has expanded, this art form has risen up to be an outlet for this new phenomenon. Especially for Asian Americans, who represent both the West and East. I specifically chose this topic due to my interest in traditional Chinese instruments and history, as well as my wish to explore this identity.

The Asian American identity is complex. Each Asian American’s experience is different, mine included. I know a lot of people in my generation feel a disconnect from Asia. Usually, they are born in the US to first-generation immigrant parents. But even with this status, many people do not feel Asian enough to fit in with family still in Asia, but they are too Asian for Americans. I have felt this disconnect as well. After moving to the US, I was raised as an American. I am much more comfortable in this part of my identity since it is all that I really remember.

My disconnect from an Asian identity mainly comes from my lack of knowledge about the culture. People with Asian parents have at least grown up around the culture. I have always been proud of being Chinese, and open to learning more, but I feel like I should have pursued it more when I was younger. Living in a small southern town, however, there were not many chances to learn or even meet other Chinese people. Since coming to college, I have met more
Asian people and learned a lot more about China, but still, I do not know what everyday life in China is like and the little nuances that go with a cultural identity. I feel like I should know more about my heritage and am a little scared of how people born and raised in China perceive me. I know I have a connection, but it is frustrating to not have more memories, or how to find the right way to connect. One of my minors is Mandarin Chinese, but I still struggle with the language. I know about Chinese holidays like Lunar New Year, but I have never celebrated. I do not know if there is a perfect way to be Chinese, American, or any other identity. In the end, I know that everyone has their own unique experiences that have shaped their identity, and many people across the world struggle to understand themselves.

In my Music of East Asia class, I read about how other Asian Americans have found a sense of belonging in their culture through music. The article I am specifically referencing is Deborah Wong’s *Louder and Faster*, where she talks about taiko, “a contemporary form of ensemble that is built on the bones of Japanese festival drumming” (Wong 2019, 4). Even though it originated in Japan, it has been adapted and made unique by Asian Americans and their interactions with people from other cultures. At first, it was used as a political tool after World War II, to express themselves, but now it has transformed as more and more people from all different backgrounds have joined (Wong 2019, 7-10). This idea is also applied to the Modern Chinese Orchestra as the practice has spread across the world to places like Singapore, the Philippines, Canada, and San Francisco.

The Firebird Youth Chinese Orchestra in the San Francisco Bay Area is a key example of this. The organization was founded in 2000 by Chinese music educator Gordon Lee and is encompassed of over 100 students playing traditional Chinese instruments. Most of these students are American-born Chinese. The repertoire played by the ensemble reflects this heritage,
as they have premiered concerts with both Chinese music and music with an “American Chinese spirit” (“Introduction.” n.d. *Firebird Youth Chinese Orchestra (FYCO)*). In 2004, the Firebird Youth Chinese Orchestra was invited by the Ministry of Culture itself to perform in mainland China in a joint concert with three of the current top conservatories of music. It is an outlet for these Asian Americans to truly experience and explore their culture. Their mission statement further supports this, with the mission to “promote Chinese music as an integral part of Chinese American culture by training young musicians to play traditional instruments, thereby strengthening the Chinese community and enhancing the cultural diversity and richness of American society (“Introduction.” n.d. *Firebird Youth Chinese Orchestra (FYCO)*).

Another example is the Canadian Chinese Orchestra, an organization that “aims to promote Chinese music and culture in Canada” (“Home Away From Home.” n.d. *Canadian Chinese Orchestra*). They have been very successful and currently host concerts, music camps, and workshops of traditional Chinese instruments for all age groups. Their most recent concert, titled “Home Away From Home,” was performed on May 27, 2023, and is another example of the growth of the Modern Chinese Orchestra. The concert focused on hardships faced by Chinese immigrants as they traveled to Canada and the settlement in their new home, as well as the 100th anniversary of the Chinese exclusion act. “Longing for Home,” “Love for Wei River,” “Dance of Liujing,” and “Homeland” were all examples of pieces played that exemplified the nostalgia for home, as well as demonstrated traditional Chinese instruments. The director of the Canadian Chinese Orchestra, Amely Zhou, hoped that “through music, we hope to educate people about the hardships that Chinese immigrants faced and how they contributed to Canada’s growth and development (“Home Away From Home.” n.d. *Canadian Chinese Orchestra*). These examples
show how the Modern Chinese Orchestra has grown to represent people of all connections to China.

**Conclusion**

This paper aimed to look at how the Modern Chinese Orchestra has changed throughout time by looking through the lens of history. It was also an outlet to explore my own Asian American identity. The paper began with early Chinese ensembles, discovering the origin of jiangnan sizhu as the origin of the Modern Chinese Orchestra. Seeing this musical development throughout the history of China showed interesting connections, starting with the Wuchang Uprising and the formation of the Republic of China in 1912 by the Nationalist Party. This uprising was inspired by a series of Western wars that left China defeated and in a time of self-reflection where the educated class blamed traditional Chinese culture for the fall of China and encouraged the adoption of Western ideas. As a result, the Chinese government reformed everything, including the school system and music education, modeling it after Japan and the West. During this time, music served as one of many vehicles for the improvement of China.

Cai Yuanpei, president of Peking University at the time, was another advocate for this movement and furthered the change in music education through the formation of the Peking University Music Society in 1919, a society focused on applying Western techniques to Chinese music. These activities caught the attention of the Broadcasting Company of China in Nanjing in the 1930s, which developed the Central Broadcasting Station National Orchestra, a precursor to the Modern Chinese Orchestra. By the late 1940s, the Communist Party won the Chinese Civil War against the Nationalists and established the People’s Republic of China. Mao Zedong used music as a political tool to spread Communist ideologies. The Great Leap Forward, a campaign
launched in 1958, developed policies to replace old traditions with new ones. A key feature was the establishment of music training centers to modernize traditional Chinese music.

The creation of a Modern Chinese Orchestra was a government project, started by the Central Broadcasting Station in Peking. Much progress was made through experimentation on instruments, physical layout, and repertoire, and the results spread across the country. Attitudes towards musicians changed as well. As the government created other art movements inspired by traditional Chinese culture, musicians were encouraged to take part in events to promote them.

However, this movement was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, a campaign started by Mao in 1966 to renew the spirit of the Chinese Revolution. He had become afraid of what he created. Music performances of all previous works were stopped, and only eight model works using melodies from Beijing operas with lyrics praising the party were approved for performance. The instrumentation for these works did not use many instruments from the Modern Chinese Orchestra, and musicians who did not perform in these were sent to labor camps in the countryside for fear that they would start uprisings.

This paper has shown the transformation of this music throughout time using the circumstances of the history surrounding it: origins as ceremonial music, transforming folk traditions, being built upon to grow China, to being used as a political tool that was perhaps too dangerous. Today, it is a mix of East and West, a model that is present across the world, playing pieces from traditional Chinese repertoire but also contemporary pieces. It serves as a connection to a beautiful, complex country that has representation all over the world, from mainland Chinese, immigrants, and Asian Americans. It is truly a model that has adapted to the needs of its people and will continue to represent the Chinese identity, however complex it is.
References


