

Perspectives on the Accordion in Music Education in China

Huazhen Wei^{1,a}

¹*Institute of Music, University of Rzeszów, Rzeszów, 35-040, Poland*

^a*huazhen.wei@qq.com*

Abstract: *The main purpose of this thesis is to explore perspectives of the accordion in music education in China. The chapter 1) introduces questions the author trying to answer. The chapter 2) discusses the history of the accordion in terms of its origins and development as an instrument in China. The chapter 3) focuses on music education system in China. The chapter 4) points out the possibilities for further development of the accordion and music education in China in terms of the development of the accordion discipline in China.*

Keywords: *Accordion in China, Music Education in China, Accordion in Music Education*

1. Introduction

The accordion was of great significance to music education in China. The earliest western general music education in China start in 1842^[1], but the general education of music was not widely penetrated into the people until during the World War II. In World War II, the material conditions in the frontline areas of the Second Sino-Japanese War were very difficult. There are only a few kinds of western musical instruments such as the violin and the accordion. In the raging front-line regional music activities, the accordion has become an indispensable instrument for the performance and accompaniment of artists who resist aggression because of its convenient portability and rich functions. Many musicians learn music at that period regarded the accordion as their enlightenment instrument. It can even be said that the accordion has cultivated an entire generation of Chinese musicians during the most difficult period.

Taking up a theme devoted to a perspective on the accordion in music education in China, the author seeks to answer questions about the implementation of music education in China and how the accordion discipline develops in it. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore perspectives of the accordion in music education in China.

2. Accordion in China – Historical Background

Sheng is a kind of traditional Chinese instrument, is regarded as the origin of all free reed instrument. It was first mentioned in bone oracle writings dating from the 14th to the 12th centuries BCE, and were identified in later texts as types of Sheng. The first appearance of the word ‘sheng’ is in some of the poems of Shijing (Classic of Poetry), dating back to 7th century BCE. In 1777, Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (1718 – 1793) introduced sheng into Europe. This event stimulated the use of the free reed principle in the construction of organs and other instruments, including the development of the accordion.

The accordion was introduced into China in 1899, and spread around 1920s^[2]. When first introduced, it was used for entertaining; collected in exotic collections, given to children as presents, or usually used for promotions in commerce in order to attract customers. At that time, there was no widespread teaching material for the accordion, nor were there teachers or schools that taught the accordion. When the World War II broke out in 1939, many people left for other countries. They were anxious to find a settled place for life in the world. Many Russian accordionists and teachers moved into northeast China, giving professional performances. They also taught the accordion throughout China and helped standardize teaching methods. The Chinese accordionists readily took up this opportunity, which helped in the first generation of Chinese professional accordionists. They in turn passed on their knowledge, and the accordion continued to grow in popularity and expertise in playing.

Soon after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Yan’an became one of the centers of the Movement of Singing Resistance against Japan and National Salvation, and the whole of Yan’an was

filled with songs of resistance against the enemy. The accordion, as an accompaniment instrument, always accompanied the singing movement. After the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art, the vast number of musicians in Yan'an and the base areas responded to Mao Zedong's slogan by going to the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers to enrich their lives. At that time, the material conditions in Yan'an were very difficult and the musical instruments were poorly equipped. There was no piano in Yan'an, and apart from the portable western instruments that could be carried, such as the violin and the accordion, only some Chinese instruments could be found. In this situation, the accordion became an important fighting instrument. Some literary workers who had a basic knowledge of piano quickly mastered the accordion and went into the heat of battle. Xiang Yu was one of them. When he first arrived in Yan'an, Xiang Yu was assigned to work in the Beacon Theatre, and because he had a deep foundation in playing the piano, he was soon able to play the accordion with great skill, which won the warm appreciation of the Yan'an military and civilians.

From 1949 to 1966, the early 17 years of the founding of the People's Republic of China were the popularization stage of the accordion in China, and the first peak of the development of the accordion art in China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, with the social and political stability and the rapid growth of the national economy, as well as the active support policy adopted by the state for culture and art, it provided a superior social environment for the popularization and improvement of all arts, including the accordion. Because the accordion is light and moderately priced, it is suitable for use in the military, schools, and cultural and artistic work groups, so a wave of learning the accordion has started nationwide.

During the whole process of restoration and development of national economic construction from 1950 to 1956, the government opened the accordion majors in Shenyang Conservatory of Music, Xi'an Conservatory of Music, Sichuan Conservatory of Music and other music professional colleges and universities, which systematically and rapidly cultivated many professional accordion talents and enriched the teaching force of accordion education in China, making Chinese accordion education oriented to the public and to the direction of specialization and artistry. The accordion education in China has become more professional and artistic. At the same time, the accordion was greatly popularized in the army. In just 3 or 4 years, the number of accordionists expanded rapidly from a few to thousands, creating a group of excellent players. Warehouses were filled with accordions of various brands and models imported from Europe, accordion training classes were held in various places, and cultural groups and performance units were equipped with their own full-time accordionists. In 1952, after the first accordion was made at the Southwest Military Instrument Repair Factory, accordion manufacturing plants were established in Shanghai, Tianjin and Yingkou, and the production and quality of accordions grew, laying the material foundation for the development of the accordion art in China.

From 1966 to 1976, the Cultural Revolution was the most serious national disaster since the founding of the People's Republic of China, and all industries suffered heavy losses. During this process, the art of accordion, which was at the stage of popularization in China, was also affected to a certain extent. However, because the accordion was often used in the army and factories to accompany revolutionary songs, it was not totally rejected like other western instruments, but by trying to accompany the songs of the times and adapting and transplanting the model operas, it was able to find a way to move forward with the art of Chinese accordion in the midst of all the restrictions on the art. The accordion has continued to grow in China by trying to accompany the songs of the times and adapting and transplanting the model operas.

In September 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end, and in December 1978, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was held. With the establishment of the Reform and Opening-up policy, the country's undertakings began to get on track, China's comprehensive national power gradually increased, and the material and cultural life of the people became increasingly rich. The emancipation of ideas, especially the National Conference on Art Education held in February 1979, brought unprecedented vitality to China's musical development, thus ushering in a new prosperity for the accordion in China. During this period, the country's open policy, the momentum of economic development and the people's high demand for spiritual civilization and cultural life all provided sufficient conditions for the development of accordion work in the new period, and with the state's support, central and local accordion societies were established, and accordion majors were resumed in music colleges and teacher training colleges. After the resumption of exchanges with the international accordion community, the professional theoretical framework and teaching and performance level of the Chinese accordion rose to a new level, new experiments in the use of the instrument began, and a large number of representative accordion artists were cultivated.

In 1981, German-Japanese accordionist Mie Miki came to Tianjin, and held a concert in Tianjin

Musical Instrument Factory, at the invitation of Professor Wang Yuping. On the concert, Mie Miki introduced the development of professional explore in the field of classical accordion in Europe with free-bass accordion and many contemporary compositions for it. It is the first time that free-bass accordion was introduced to Chinese accordionists. In 1984, Tianjin Musical Instrument Factory started to design and produce free-bass accordion with the strong promotion of Prof. Wang, and students of Tianjin Conservatory of Music started to learn free-bass accordion in 1985. Prof. Wang and other Chinese accordionists confirm that free-bass accordion represents the direction of international accordion professional development, and call to regard this instrument as major in professional education.

In 1987, Chinese accordionist Zhang Guoping took part in The International Accordion Competition in Klingenthal, Germany, and took the 6th prize. He is the first Chinese accordionist who took part in an international accordion competition. In 1997, Chinese accordionist Cao Xiaoqing won the first prize of “PIF – International Accordion Award” in Castelfidardo, Italy. He is also the first winner of world class accordion competition in China.

3. Music Education in China

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, music education system in China can be divided into three different parts: school music education, amateur music education, and professional music education. These different models of music education correspond to learners of different ages and with different needs.

3.1. School Music Education

School music education refers to music programs for preschool and school-age children and adolescents in kindergarten, elementary, and secondary schools. As early as 1952, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China defined the music subject standards for kindergartens, elementary school, and secondary schools respectively. The elementary school teaching plan stipulates that music classes are offered in each school year for grades one to five, with teaching hours: two hours per week for grades one, two and three, and one hour per week for grades four and five. The secondary school teaching plan stipulates that music classes are offered in the first, second and third years of junior high school, with one hour per week; there is no music class in high school, but one hour of music activities per week should be provided in extracurricular activities.

3.2. Amateur Music Education

Amateur music education in China can be divided into two parts, education in Children’s Palaces (non-profit institutions) or education in for-profit art training institutions.

3.2.1. Children’s Palaces

The Children’s Palace is a public facility in China where children engage in extracurricular activities. The name of facility ‘Children’s Palace’ came from Russian word ‘Дворец пионеров (Pioneers Palace)’. Children’s Palace is a citizen’s welfare and livelihood project in China. The Pioneer movement and Pioneers Palace of the Soviet Union which began in 1930 spread to other Socialist countries. At a Children’s Palace, the Chinese youth engage in extracurricular activities, such as learning music, foreign languages, and computing skills, and doing sports. In larger cities, each district has set up its own Children’s Palace, while there is also a City Children’s Palace whose larger auditorium and planetarium are shared by the children of all the city’s districts.

3.2.2. For-Profit Art Training Institutions

These institutions can be divided into two categories, private art training institutions and music courses affiliated with musical instrument dealers.

Private art training institutions are usually formed by professional artists who have spare time for artistic education. These institutions usually offer a variety of courses, including painting, instrumental music, vocal music, photography, etc. Musical instrument dealers also serve music courses, in order to promote selling of instruments. Dealers always have a deep cooperation with musical instrument manufacturers, who are able to provide recourses of music education by great musicians.

In China, these art training institutions are usually run by individuals and tend to be smaller and more dispersed.

3.3. Professional Music Education

Professional music education in China can be divided into two parts from the different stages of education, Pre-university Education and University Education. The Pre-university Education is carried out by the middle schools attached to conservatories of music and art vocational schools; the University Education is carried out by departments of music in universities, conservatories of music and art vocational schools.

3.3.1. Middle Schools Attached to Conservatories of Music

These schools are for students who want to act as professional musicians and live by music. Students usually take a 3-year study for high school diploma or a 6-year study for middle school and high school diplomas.

3.3.2. Art Vocational Schools

These Schools are also for students who want to become professional musicians, but subjects are much more abundant than the former, especially on the comprehensive vocational skills training instead of just focusing on professionalism.

3.3.3. Departments of Music in Universities

While the departments of music in universities conducts the same professional studies as the conservatories, it is easier for students to carry out interdisciplinary research and practice because of the more abundant resources of the university.

3.3.4. Conservatories of Music

Conservatories of music in China focus on promotion of professional abilities. Students always take deep learning in their field, and all practices are closely linked to the art of music.

4. Perspectives on the Accordion in the Field of Music Education in China

This section of the thesis will discuss the possibilities for the future development of the research directions presented in this thesis from three perspectives: the accordion, music education in China, and the accordion in music education in China.

4.1. Perspectives on the Accordion

Nowadays, development of the accordion has two different directions. As a folk music instrument, the stradella bass system still leads the way, due to its convenience. Manufacturers are making these models more and more lightweight with various exterior. These instruments widely separate all around the world, and deeply bound with folk, musette, jazz, and popular music. As an art music instrument, free-bass system was gradually wide spread, and grabbed more attention of art music composers. Accordionists will having higher requirements to the instrument, as contemporary art music demands more on expression of the instrument. As things stand now, manufacturers are trying to find the optimal solution in terms of the instrument's range, sound quality, weight, expressiveness, and durability. Already, some manufacturers are trying to abandon traditional materials in favor of new materials such as carbon fiber to get better results. With the rapid development of materials science, a breakthrough in this area is just around the corner.

Today, accordion music is gradually gaining a place in the art music market, with the boom of original work for the free-bass accordion since 1960's. As it attracts attention of classical musicians, the accordion is now a regular feature at major classical music and art events around the world. As original works continue to appear in the future, the accordion's presence in the art music field will further increase.

4.2. Perspectives on Music Education in China

As the economy developing, the demand and requirement of music education in China will gradually grow. In 2021, China's national per capita disposable income was RMB 35,128 and per capita consumption expenditure on education, culture and entertainment was RMB 2,599, an increase of 27.9% from 2020, accounting for 10.8% of per capita consumption expenditure. ^[3] With the income growing, people are requesting better quality of artistic education, which including music education. The Report on the Development of China's Music Industry in 2020 pointed out that the total scale of China's music

industry in 2019 was about RMB 395,096,000,000. [4] The Report pointed out that the form of music education was gradually turning to online education, in accordance with the epidemic of COVID-19. Traditional for-profit art training institutions are highly dispersed. Those institutions have regional characteristics, and most of them are franchised. Restrictions during the epidemic prevented these institutions from operating in their usual routine mode. These institutions have coincidentally taken their teaching process from the offline classroom to online by leveraging the way the technology of the day allows them to work. This way of working eliminates the time needed for commuting and allows for more scheduling possibilities; it also saves space costs for these institutions. Most importantly, however, working online provides excellent conditions for expanding teaching resources. Relying on today's Internet, the faculty serving the institution can refer to a wider range of teaching resources and provide students with a broader perspective.

As of November 2020, China's national population totaled 1,411.78 million, an increase of 72.06 million, or 5.38%, compared to 1,339.72 million in the sixth national census in 2010, with an average annual growth rate of 0.53%. [5] The large and steadily growing population foreshadows the huge demand for music education in China in the future.

On 15th October, 2020, The State Council of The People's Republic of China published Opinions on the Comprehensive Strengthening and Improvement of School Aesthetic Education in the New Era. [6] This document requires to '... include elementary and middle school students' study of music, art and other art courses as well as their participation in art practice activities organized by schools in academic requirements, and explore the inclusion of art subjects in the scope of academic level examinations in junior and senior high schools. Fully implement the art quality assessment for primary and secondary school students, and incorporate the assessment results into the comprehensive quality evaluation for junior and senior high school students. Explore the inclusion of art subjects in the pilot reform of the secondary school entrance examination, into the high school examination admissions scoring subjects, based on curriculum standards to determine the content of the examination, the use of modern technology to promote objective and fair evaluation... Higher education level will be public art courses and art practice into the school talent training program, the implementation of credit management, students complete the public art course 2 credits before graduation. Encourage universities and research institutes to aesthetics, art courses into the graduate education public curriculum system... All areas should increase the supplemental efforts of primary and secondary school teachers of aesthetic education, not all areas should be allocated a certain percentage of the annual recruitment of teachers of aesthetic education. Conditional areas can be purchased by way of services, and related professional institutions and other social forces, to primary and secondary schools to provide aesthetic education and teaching services to alleviate the shortage of teachers in aesthetic education. Encourage outstanding literary and artistic workers and other people to schools as part-time teachers of aesthetic education. Promote the implementation of art education college students to teach program...'

From the aspects of the economy, the population, and the national policy, music education in China is going to meet a chance of great of development.

4.3. Perspectives on the Accordion in Music Education in China

Since Prof. Mie Miki visited China, education on the free-bass accordion gradually promoted. Now in the field of the accordion education, from amateur to professional, the level is getting higher step by step. However, judging from the percentage of people receiving music education who choose accordion as their main subject, the accordion is far less prominent in the field of music education in China than instruments such as the piano or the violin. This situation was caused by multiple effects.

First of all, Chinese people still have a strong stereotype on the accordion, which regard it as a folk instrument rather than an art music instrument, despite of its great development in recent decades. In order to improve this situation, accordionists in China must increase exposure of the free-bass accordion to audience and performance art music with high quality by this instrument.

Secondly, the lack of instrument is a big problem. Most manufactures in China didn't have ability to make free-bass accordion, and accordions made by other countries are much more expensive than other instrument which was required in the field of music starter education, which means that the high price of the instrument is also an extremely high barrier for learners. Although there are some manufacturers in China are able to produce the free-bass accordion, they still need to look at the market to produce products, the market demand to prompt enterprises to make up their minds to produce such products. As the main consumer accordion professional workers, if there is no urgent demand for this accordion awareness,

then it is difficult for the production enterprises to make up their minds. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to take time and cultivate a mature market environment, which can prompt manufacturers to invest more in the free-bass accordion researching, developing, and manufacturing.

Thirdly, accordion teachers must improve their experience on the free-bass accordion and related academic abilities. Although the free-bass accordion has been introduced into China more than 40 years, there are still many accordion teachers are unable to play and teach this instrument, especially in school and amateur music education. This situation is caused by a variety of factors and is understandable. In order to improve this situation, there are several solutions. On the one hand, for teachers with extensive teaching experience, they do not have to practice the free-bass accordion from scratch, they just have to understand its basic rules. In terms of performance and music observation, it is the same as the traditional accordion, but it is necessary to broaden the horizon in terms of teaching materials and teaching repertoire. We should not stop at the old repertoire of the past, but study the music of different periods and styles, such as baroque, classical, romantic and different contemporary styles, etc. On the other hand, for younger accordionists, they should try their best to get chance to work on the free-bass accordion, browse through many musical works from ancient times to the present in order to gain their own feelings and experiences, and if have the conditions, they should further study in high level institutions in China or abroad and participate in master classes and academic exchange activities.

Fourthly, the teaching repertoire is not rich enough. Before the free-bass accordion, due to the limitations of the stradella system, the professional teaching repertoire was limited to a very small area. With the reform and progress of the instrument, the existing accordion professional repertoire must be thoroughly updated, and the basic idea is to extend it in both ancient and present directions. On the direction to ancient, compositions in baroque period such as by Johann Sebastian Bach, Girolamo Alessandro Frescobaldi, Jean-Philippe Rameau and etc. are good choice. On the direction to present, Emphasis should be placed on applying original compositions written specifically for the accordion in teaching, while broadening the horizons and trying to discover excellent musical works for other arrangements suitable for adaptation to the accordion. Through careful screening, a scientifically, systematically and gradually establish a documentation system that meets the needs of music education in China, and eventually forms the documentation science of the accordion.

Fifthly, it is necessary to continue the creation of Chinese accordion music compositions on the basis of organizing and preserving our original compositions and documents. During In the process of writing, I had considered arranging a chapter dedicated to summarizing Chinese accordion literatures, but in the process of collecting and summarizing the information, I found that it was difficult to summarize in a short space because of the confusing publication of early Chinese accordion literatures, so I had to give up. Also, as an instrument much younger than others, like the piano, it is difficult to develop and mature without musical compositions with its own characteristics, especially those of its own national style and connotation, which means it is necessary to encourage Chinese composers to compose for the free-bass accordion. Chinese accordionists should take the initiative to communicate with composers, let them understand the performance characteristics of the free-bass accordion, and tell them that their “musical ideas” can be brought to full play through this instrument, and that there is a wide world for them to realize their talents in the field of accordion music.

Sixthly, insufficient professional theory construction in the field of accordion in China. It seems to be a general problem that the performance profession does not place much emphasis on theoretical construction. In the past 50 years, most of the articles on accordion in China are about technical theory, and a few of them are about art theory, psychology and aesthetics, which are still superficial and not deep and systematic. Lacking in-depth theoretical research, the development of the performance profession will fall into a blind, purely empirical and purely technical misconception. Chinese accordionists should strengthen their theoretical construction work and study the art of accordion playing from different perspectives and in different fields.

Seventhly, international and domestic academic exchange activities are less developed. The accordion does not have a long history, so it is developing faster than other instruments. It is especially crucial to strengthen exchanges, communicate information, and grasp the frontiers and dynamics of development in the field. It is worth trying to invite experts to do some medium and long-term teaching work in places where they are available, or to send talented and ambitious young people abroad for further study.

5. Termination

Another bloom of the accordion in music education in China seems inevitable, with fast development

of the instrument itself, and huge music education need in China. This situation presents both opportunities and challenges. It asks all accordionists as music educators to keeping up with times, and strengthening their abilities on discipline constructions. As a young musical instrument discipline, the accordion will surely shine in the field of music education in China through this way.

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