

The Origin and Development of Western Music History Textbooks by Chinese Scholars: A Review

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The formal teaching of Western music history in China can be traced to the beginning of the last century and is closely tied to specific historical and political events. On May 4, 1919, student demonstrations in Beijing protested the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles which led to an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement known as "The May Fourth Movement." It was during this time that China's first professional music college was established. Chinese composers began incorporating Western techniques of musical expression into their reflections of life in China, and Western ideologies began to be reflected in the spiritual life of contemporary Chinese intellectuals. On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was established, which marks the beginning of the current period now referred to as the "New China." At the beginning of this period, music history textbooks often drew on concepts of class struggle to examine the historical development of music.

Beginning in December of 1978, the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China established the policies of "Reform and Opening of China to the West" as a national development strategy which invigorated interest in and development of teaching Western music history in China. These developments have continued since 1990, including the introduction of new textbooks written for China's growing number of music conservatories. The following review introduces the major Western music history texts written since 1919 and provides a discussion of the most important of these works in each period. Particular attention is given to *A History of European Music* (*Ouzhou yinyueshi*), written primarily by Zhang Hongdao in the 1960s and 1970s; *A Brief History of European Music* (*Ouzhou yinyue jianshi*) by Qian Renkang, et al. in the 1980s; and selected books written from the 1990s to the present by Yu Runyang, Yu Zhigang, and the author.

1919–49: Before the Establishment of the People’s Republic of China

Major works on Western music history published by Chinese scholars in the 1920s and 1930s included: *The Evolution of European Music* (*Ouzhou yinyue jinhualun*)¹ and *An Outline of Western Music History* (*Xiyang yinyue gangyao*) by Wang Guangqi² and *A Brief History of Western Music* (*Xiyang yinyue xiaoshi*) by Yu Jifan.³ These texts concentrated on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The most important author of music history books during this time was Wang Guangqi, the author of *The Evolution of European Music* and *An Outline of Western Music History*. Dr. Wang, one of the earliest “professional” musicologists in China, completed these two books during his study in Germany. The ideas in these two books were influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. *The Evolution of European Music* highlights the development of Western music from its origins to the Romantic period, and it is divided into four stages of development: monophonic music, polyphonic music, melody with accompaniment, and melody and harmony mixed. After Wang’s death in 1936, no new comprehensive book discussing the general history and development of Western music by a Chinese scholar was published in China for almost fifty years.

1949–79: The Three Decades after New China was Founded

After the founding of New China, the teaching of Western music entered into a new period of development. The early days of this period were under the influence of what Chairman Mao called the “historic, foreign” point of view or “Make the past serve the present and foreign things serve China” (*Guweijinyong yangweiZhongyong*). That is, New China should use both Chinese tradition *and* the ways of the West.

However, implementing Chairman Mao’s proclamation was difficult. Although Western music began to circulate in China, contacts with the West were cut off, and China was learning about the West from the Soviet Union. The former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe became the sources of information for China to learn about Western music history research, writing, and its development. In the 1960s, political problems weakened ties between China and the Soviet Union, but the influence of the Soviet Union’s concept of historical musicology continued for an additional ten to twenty years. Meanwhile, Chinese musicologists began thinking for themselves about how to approach and interpret the history of Western music

1. (Shanghai: Chinese Book Press, 1924).

2. (Shanghai: Chinese Book Press, 1937).

3. (Shanghai: Chinese Book Press, 1930).

In the 1960s, an important textbook on the history of Western music titled *The Music History of Foreign Countries* was written by Chinese scholars and edited by Zhang Hongdao. This book served as the primary Western music teaching resource for a long time, and was formally published in 1983 as *A History of European Music* (*Ouzhou yinyue-shi*, **Figure 1**).⁴ Many textbooks published by China's leading conservatories are first written as manuscripts and used as teaching guides by the professors. Only after years of experience and feedback from their practical use in the classroom do these books get edited and published. *A History of European Music* was notable for being systematic,

content-rich, comprehensive, and using China's latest research methods. Until 1991, this book was the only major work of European music history written by Chinese scholars.

The book is divided into four chapters: the period of ancient slave society, the period of feudal society, the period of transition from feudal society to capitalist society, and the period of capitalist society. These chapter headings refer to the development of Western music through a social history of economics, politics, and class—the method of “historical materialism.” German philosopher Friedrich Engels defined historical materialism as using the economic conditions and life qualities within a certain historical period to illustrate all historical events, concepts, and political, philosophical and religious phenomena. This approach was also in keeping with the ideas of Chairman Mao's belief that culture reflects society, politics, and economic ideology. If we want to grasp “historical materialism” accurately and completely, we need to develop a logical approach toward understanding the history of Western music.

The decade of the 1960s was a period when China grappled with the theoretical notion of “class struggle.” During this time, methods of class analysis became an important basis for musicologists (and the country as a whole) with which to analyze the West. This research methodology was also applied

Figure 1. Zhang Hongdao, ed., *A History of European Music*.



4. (Beijing: People's Music Press, 1983).

in the writing of *A History of European Music*; for this reason, it is inevitable that it included some biased perspectives. For example, in analyzing Beethoven, authors focused on Beethoven's fights with the aristocracy as a representation of class struggle. Historically, Beethoven was endowed with the spirit of heroism and that of a revolutionary, but a considerable number of Beethoven's works were dedicated to the nobility. How are we to understand Beethoven's apparently contradictory relationship with the nobility? During the 1960s, the interpretation of Chinese authors was that we must understand Beethoven through the ideology of a class-based society, which ultimately leads to class struggles.

1979–90: The First Decade after the Reform and Opening of China to the West—Reflection, Exploration and Development

The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, held in December 1978, established the Reform and Opening of China to the West as a national development strategy. From then on, the study of and education on Western music in China entered a new era. Gao Shijie⁵ summarized the development of Western music in China during this period as characterized by:

1. the rapid development of music research;
2. the investigation of modern Western music;
3. the establishment of foreign music symposia and foreign music societies;
4. the establishment of the discipline of musicology and its various fields in China;
5. the expansion of current research from published articles to the level of monographs;
6. the attention given to music research on Asia, Africa, and Latin America; and
7. the growth and development of the next generation of researchers of foreign music.

During this period, the most innovative works in Western music history were written by Liu Jingshu, *Outline of History of Western Music (Jianming Xifang yinyueshi)*⁶ and Li Yinghua, *A Brief History of Western Music (Xifang*

5. Gao Shijie, *Lijie, zhuiwen, fansi: Gao Shijie yinyue wenji* [Understandings, Investigations, Reflections: The Collected Work of Gao Shijie] (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory Press, 2007).

6. (Beijing: People's Music Press, 1991).

yinyue shiliue).⁷ The *Outline of History of Western Music* introduces to Chinese musicology a new methodology of writing the history of Western music, abandoning biographical research methods in favor of “cultural and stylistic history.” For example, Liu categorizes Western music culture into Nietzsche’s two abstract artistic spirits: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Liu also references aesthetics and cultural perspectives to view the nineteenth century and nationalism in music. Unfortunately, although the book well represents the author’s ideas, some of the analyses included within the book are somewhat simplistic.

Li’s *Brief History* was the first true guide to organizing the classroom teaching of Western music history. Although the book is short, it has had a huge influence in China. This text is divided into established periods of Western music history, enabling easy understanding of the basic concepts, schools of thought, music genres, and forms.

Continued Development post-1990

Since 1990, the most influential textbooks have come out of Shanghai and Beijing. They are *A Brief History of European Music (Ouzhou yinyue jianshi)* by Qian Renkang from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music;⁸ *A Concise History of Western Music (Xifang yinyueshi jianbian)* led by Shen Xuan,⁹ also from the Shanghai Conservatory; and *The Culture of Western Music (Xifang yinyue wenhua)* by Cai Liangyu from the Music Division of the Art Academy in Beijing.¹⁰

A Brief History of European Music by Qian (**Figure 2**) was originally written to accompany a satellite TV education program. Qian is a musicologist known for his knowledge of both Eastern and Western cultures. His book focuses on musical styles and genres such as medieval church music, medieval secular music, and twentieth-century aleatoric music. Although this text targets secondary school music education and uses non-specialist language, it maintains professional standards, making it very good for readers outside of secondary school education.

A Concise History of Western Music edited by Shen Xuan and others (**Figure 3**) is used as the primary teaching material for undergraduate courses at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.¹¹ Shen’s book is divided into seven parts with seventeen chapters, including a 158-page section on twentieth-century music; it also uses geographic centers and their cultural identities as its major

7. (Beijing: People’s Music Press, 1988).

8. (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 1991).

9. (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Press, 1999).

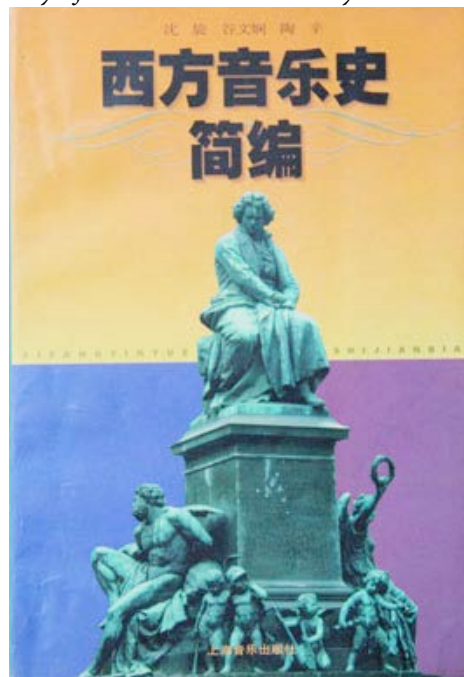
10. (Beijing: People’s Music Press, 1991).

11. Shen Xuan, Gu Wenxian, and Tao Xin, (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Press, 1999).

Figure 2. Qian Renkang, *A Brief History of European Music*.



Figure 3. Shen Xuan, ed., *A Concise History of Western Music History*.

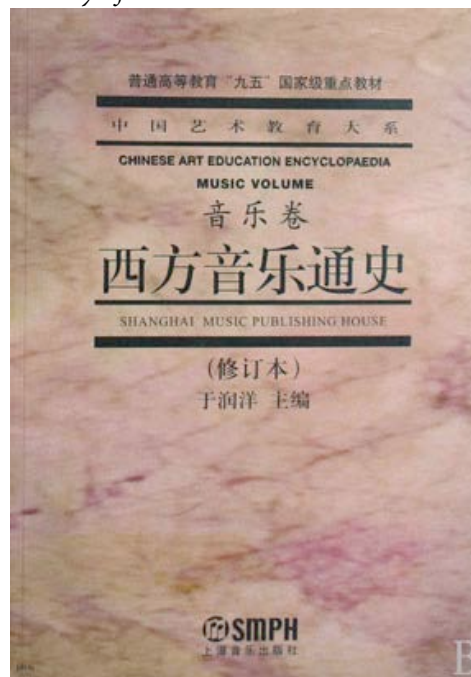
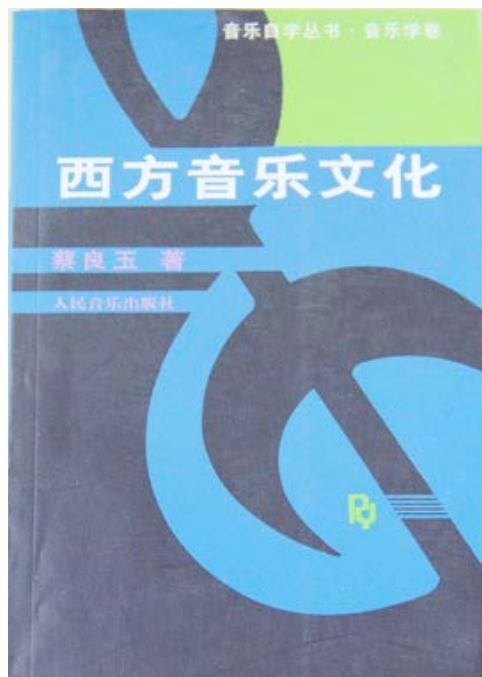


organizational idea. In the Preface, Shen writes that the text shows that “the history of Western art music began with music of Christianity,” which is different from the common view that music originated from ancient Greek and Hebrew societies.

Cai Liangyu states that her book, *The Culture of Western Music* (**Figure 4**), is a systematic study of both Western music history texts written in China as well as English, commenting that she “tried to use the ideas and methods of historical materialism, and placed Western art music into this context and background.”¹² Cai’s book does not cover contemporary music and the music of the Soviet Union, because separate books had already been written on these subjects. Instead, *The Culture of Western Music* covers the periods from ancient Greece to the music of Richard Wagner, including nationalism in the nineteenth century, throughout which she reflects on cultural and historical contexts and on the development and evolution of musical style. The final section of *The Culture of Western Music* consists of Cai’s previously published paper, “Three Cultural Features of Western Music,” which discusses the relationships between Western music and Christianity, Western music and capitalist societies, and Western music with Greek civilization and scientific tradition.

12. Liangyu, *Xifang yinyue wenhuz* [The Culture of Western Music], 478.

Figure 4. Cai Liangyu, *The Culture of Western Music*. **Figure 5.** Yu Runyang, ed., *A General History of Western Music*.



Of all the most recent textbooks, I believe that *A General History of Western Music* (*Xifang yinyue tongshi*), edited Yu Runyang¹³ from the Central Conservatory of Music (**Figure 5**), is the most influential work since Zhang's *A History of European Music*. All of the teachers focusing on Western music from the Musicology Department of the Central Conservatory of Music participated in its writing. It includes a total of seven parts divided into thirty-two chapters, with detailed explanations of the development of Western music from ancient Greece to the 1980s. Each chapter is written by authors based upon their area of specialty. This book was created after three decades of reform and development, and it adheres to the research and analysis methods of historical materialism. In addition, this text has included discussions of previously published Western books written on music history, and includes both Chinese and foreign language bibliographies and an index.

The China Conservatory of Music and other arts institutions use my book *A Course in Western Music History* (*Xifang yinyueshi jiaocheng*), as a major teaching resource.¹⁴ It has proven to be very suitable for students preparing for various Western music history exams. At the end of each chapter there is a “Study Guide and Review” and “Required Listening.” My second textbook,

13. (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing Press, 2001).

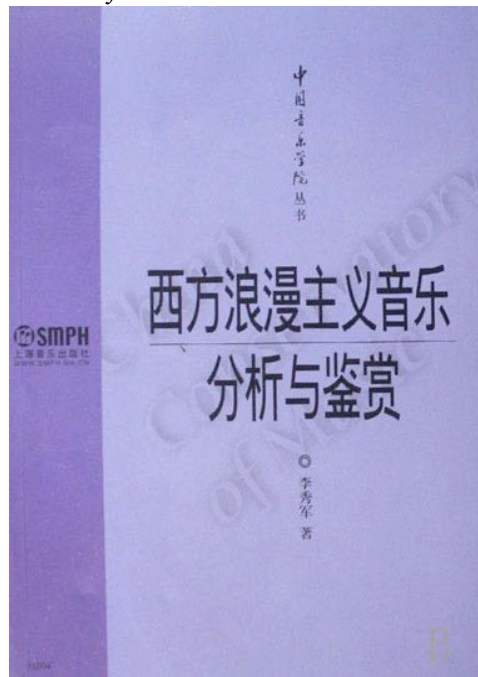
14. (Beijing: Jilin Audio-Visual Publishing Press, 2001).

Analysis and Appreciation of Romantic Music (*Xifang Lanman zhuyi yinyue fenxi yu jianshang*, **Figure 6**) includes additional information on “Recommended Listening” at the end of each chapter.¹⁵

Yu Zhigang from the Central Conservatory of Music wrote another influential text during this period, *Xifang yinyue jianshi* (*A Brief History of Western Music*).¹⁶ This book represents the pinnacle of Yu’s long career in teaching, research and reflection on the history of Western music. Yu’s book presents a balanced writing of the six major periods of Western music, highlighting the main features from each period; for example, his description of the

Baroque period emphasizes opera and instrumental music. This book was the first music history book published in China with an accompanying CD; it also includes an appendix for further reading, bibliography, and index. Yu studied at Yale University, and has translated the sixth edition of Claude Palisca’s *A History of Western Music* into Chinese.¹⁷

Figure 6. Li Xiujun, *Analysis and Appreciation of Romantic Music*.



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To understand the history of how Chinese music scholars have approached the study and writing of Western music, one must also understand how the Chinese people have learned about Western music. Such an understanding also provides insight into China’s approach to studying Western culture in general. A review of the teaching materials used in China for the study of Western music illuminates our changing ideas of understanding the music, art, and culture of the West, but also our evolving effort to enhance music education in China.

15. (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing Press, 2008).

16. (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2006).

17. (Beijing: People’s Music Press, 2011).