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The Origin and Development of the French Horn in China

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Abstract: The historical development and evolution of the French horn in China are the focus of this study, which will examine the imported history of the instrument in China, its interweaving with Chinese culture, and its use in educational contexts and in professional orchestras. The research will trace the development of a Western brass instrument in one of the world's great musical landscapes, Chinese music, and add to the global history of musicology. Using a qualitative historical and comparative analysis, the study utilizes 12 peer-reviewed articles to explore archival records, conservatory curricula, and repertoire lists for orchestras. We find that the French horn arrived in China at the end of the 19th century, through missionary schools on the one hand and treaty ports on the other; in the 20th century, it spread throughout the country thanks to state-subsidized orchestras and post-1978 educational reforms. Its transplantation included mixing Western harmony techniques, Chinese pentatonic sound, and contemporary works in hybrid bands. The introduction of the instrument in conservatories such as the Shanghai Conservatory has led to a generation of great horn players who are making a mark on the world horn scene both nationally and internationally. In modern orchestras, such as the China National Symphony Orchestra, the French horn is a symbol of cultural synthesis, illustrating works that meld Western with Chinese musical identities. The study draws attention to the role of the horn in music education, with pedagogical adaptations combining global standards with local values, and to its role in the making of Chinese cultural modernity. Through documenting this cross-cultural trajectory, the study highlights the position of the French horn in China's participation in world music traditions and contributes to broader understandings of musical globalization. As suggested for future research, the study can be extended to cover the transcoding of this musical instrument in its digital versions and regional styles, thus contributing to the discussion on cross-cultural histories of instruments.

Keywords: French horn; China, music history; cultural adaptation; orchestras; music education

1. Introduction

The French horn, whose rich timbre and technical range has made it a mainstay of Western symphonic music, exercises a special role in the age-old musical culture of China. The present paper focuses on the development of the French horn in China in the context of its history, beginning from the time of its arrival, its cultural acclimatization as well as its establishment within educational and performing contexts. The instrument's travels also underscore the broader dynamics of cross-cultural exchange, as Western musical practices collided with China's own indigenous traditions during epochs of modernization and reform. This phenomenon is significant since it illuminates how globalized music spreads local identity, especially in an ever-changing backdrop like post-reform China [1].

Academic research on Western instrumental music in China has extensively focused on instruments such as the piano and violin, but the French horn has received comparatively less attention [2,3]. However, the adoption of the French horn provides a fascinating example of cultural negotiation — specifically, the intersection of Western harmonic structures with Chinese aesthetic values [4]. To fill this gap, this study asks: What historical conditions allowed the French horn to enter China? How did this foreign instrument — not only achieve success in its own right but even surpass more familiar Western instruments in cultural impact — emerge as a standout phenomenon within China's complex and multifaceted musical ecosystem? What role has it played in music education and professional orchestras? Based on 12 peer-reviewed articles, this study employs historical analysis and a comparative approach to trace the instrument's transformation from exotic novelty to a symbol of cultural convergence.

The introduction of the French horn in the late 19th century also corresponded with colonial and missionary influences, especially in treaty ports like Shanghai, where Western ensembles introduced the brass family [5]. Its incorporation was catalysed after 1978 when educational reforms adopted Western curricula and promoted conservatory education and the development of orchestras [3]. Percussion instruments is now a principal instrument in modern Chinese orchestras such as China National Symphony Orchestra, which is offered under state-supported cultural acts [1]. In theory, the French horn functions as a bridge between global and local musical identities in terms of transcultural affinities [6] and inclusive education [7].

The importance of this research is in its massive contribution to musicology, filling a gap at the level of the history of adopting a tool instrument in a nonwestern context and at the level of the ethnomusicology comparative pedagogy [8]. Drawing from archival materials and scholarly works, this article reconstructs the French horn's trajectory, shedding light on its acculturation to Chinese taste and its institutionalization by conservatoires and symphony orchestras [9,10]. The Literature Review (Chapter 2) is tasked with driving comparisons among research studies, the Methodology (Chapter 3) is positioned to describe the qualitative methodology applied. The Findings and Discussion (Chapter 4) sections discuss historical and contemporary research findings, and the Conclusion (Chapter 5) is used to advance a dialog about the applicability of insights derived from the combined Findings and Discussion in relationship to that of future research. This approach will facilitate a more thorough exploration of the French horn's historical and cultural significance in China and how it has contributed to the nation's participation in world music traditions.

2. Literature Review

The French horn, a mainstay of Western orchestral music, transitioned from a crude 17th-century hunting horn to a complex product of valve technology by the 19th century. Although its European development is well studied, its adoption in China is less well-known. It has been examined only through general studies of Western music reception and convention transformation in China. The article reviews 12 peer-reviewed publications to narrate the French horn migration in China with a focus on historical, educational, and cultural dimensions.

Ho provides a valuable perspective on the Westernization of Chinese music education from 1895 to 1949, particularly highlighting the role of missionary schools in what he describes as “a push toward brass instruments”. Both Protestant and Catholic missions in treaty ports — especially Shanghai — introduced brass bands, which acquainted the Chinese public with instruments such as the French horn and significantly shaped early orchestral practices. Ho also seriously examines the political implications of Western music's growing acceptance. For example, although Shanghai became a center of Western cultural influence, the city later faced internal criticism over Western music. He notes that

institutions like the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, established in 1879, prominently featured European instruments. While these studies effectively trace the introduction of the horn, they say virtually nothing about its musical or symbolic role during this formative period [5].

Reforms that came about post-1978, both economic and cultural, expedited the absorption of Western music into the educational and performance worlds of China. For instance, Yang and Welch examine Chinese music education between 2007 and 2019 and how conservatoires embraced Western curricula, including brass tuition to develop aesthetic and national identity. This realignment facilitated the formalization of French horn education, although specific pedagogical methods remain under-researched [3]. Dong contends that state-supported orchestras like the China National Symphony Orchestra carried out the state's cultural statecraft, elevating brass sections to denote modernization. These orchestras assimilated the French horn into national repertoires, but Dong's analysis is on a broader basis concerning symphonic music; the horn is explicitly not his center of interest [1].

Cultural adaptation theory can be employed as a tool for explaining the integration of the French horn. Zhang investigates how Western musical structures were adopted or adapted to conform to Chinese style by referring to pentatonic scales and melodic expansion. This process can be traced to early 20th-century hybrid ensembles, which combined the French horn with traditional instruments such as the erhu [4]. Huang in turn, offers the notion of transcultural affinity, where self-cultivation based on Confucian values empowered Chinese musicians' exposure to the European classical music tradition. These frameworks emphasize the French horn's negotiation of global and local musical identities but do not specifically detail the interplay for brass instruments [6].

Grenier Borel provides a micro-study concerning the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the appropriation of Western brass pedagogy. The conservatory produced hornists over generations, transmitting a rich heritage of European tradition combined with the Chinese musical sensibility and approach. However, precise mentions of the French horn are scarce [8]. Leung is a good supplement to this section in that it considers the introduction of community orchestras in Hong Kong, which opened up brass study and indirectly French horn study [9]. Chiba & Hebert position music education as a medium for inclusive cultural identity, proposing that in the pedagogy of the French horn, the pedagogical role promotes cross-cultural communication [7].

Váradi and Ho offer more general educational insights. Váradi connects music education and socio-emotional learning, a topic pertinent to the holistic approaches of horn pedagogy. Ho examines the role of music textbooks in citizenship education, reflecting state-driven cultural priorities. Inoue investigates the growth of Western classical musicians in Asia, highlighting the existence of working hornists; however, data specific to China are lacking [10-12].

A history of the French horn has been missing in Chinese musicology despite such achievements. Available research focuses more on broader Western trends in music or on other instruments such as the piano [2]. This review highlights the importance of focused studies on the French horn, connecting European musicology with Chinese cultural studies to reveal its distinctive development course.

3. Methodology

Such historical contextualization was conducted within a qualitative research framework in this study, which employed historical and comparative approaches to analyze the development of the French horn in China. Data were drawn from 12 peer-reviewed articles indexed by DOIs, ensuring academic rigor and relevance to the history of Chinese music, the import of Western music into China, and Western music education practices. These sources include conservatory curriculum analysis [3], orchestral programming [1], cultural policy [10], and the history of music education [2,5].

Historical research reconstructs the introduction and early reception of the French horn in China, emphasizing the influence of missionaries and colonialism during the late 19th century. Evidence of brass bands in treaty ports is documented by Ho in his 2003 study [5], while Shanghai's emergence as a center of Western music is explored in Kraus's 1989 work [2]. These accounts are further enriched by studies on cultural statecraft by Dong [1] and urban musical elites by Inoue [10], which trace the institutionalization of the instrument throughout the twentieth century. Archival materials, such as conservatory records and orchestral repertoires, are accessed indirectly through secondary analyses in the works of Grenier Borel and Yang & Welch and are examined within their pedagogical and performance contexts [3,8].

Comparative methods contrasted the French horn's technological history in Europe with its development in China. Zhang provided insights into cultural reinterpretations reflecting Chinese aesthetics in hybrid ensembles [4]. Grenier Borel detailed Western pedagogical adaptations at the Shanghai Conservatory, which were compared with European brass training [8]. Educational studies explored the French horn's role as a pedagogical tool and its implications for general music education [9,11,12]. Theoretical perspectives from Chiba and Hebert and Huang informed the analysis of cross-cultural integration [6,7].

Data synthesis employed thematic coding of social, historical, cultural, and educational dimensions across sources to construct a coherent narrative. Given the scarcity of French horn-specific primary sources, relevant information was inferred from broader orchestral and brass studies. Potential biases in secondary sources, such as state-centrism in Dong, were mitigated by cross-referencing independent investigations [1,2]. Despite limitations, this approach provides a solid foundation for examining the French horn's historical and cultural role in China through peer-reviewed scholarship and systematic inquiry.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Historical French Horn Transmission to China

The introduction of the French horn to China in the latter half of the 19th century was part of a broader engagement with Western musical traditions, influenced by missionary activities, colonial trading networks, and cultural interactions in treaty ports. Ho emphasizes that missionary institutions, predominantly Protestant and Catholic schools in coastal cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Tianjin, formed brass bands for religious and communal activities [5]. These bands, usually led by Europeans, included the French horn among their brass instruments, which attracted the attention of local musicians and audiences. Its unique tone and harmonic flexibility fascinated the instrument's pioneers and paved the way for its acceptance in Chinese music today.

Kraus highlights Shanghai's role as a cosmopolitan center of Western music, made possible by its status as a treaty port with foreign concessions. Orchestras served as important vehicles for this cultural revolution, and the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, established in 1879, hired European hornists to perform symphonic works by composers such as Mozart and Brahms. This orchestra helped raise the artistic consciousness of the Chinese public as one of the first Western-style orchestras in Asia, patronized by the Chinese upper class. It showcased the expressive potential of the French horn and performed at venues like the Lyceum Theatre, bringing orchestral music to the city and influencing local musicians to incorporate Western instruments into their repertoire [2].

Moreover, colonial trade networks facilitated the import of modern valve horns and instrument-making knowledge, leading to some local production by the early 20th century. Additionally, some children from mountainous regions attended Catholic missionary schools in India, where they learned to play early forms of musical instruments. A number of Chinese children even learned to play the French horn in church ensembles. This fusion of religious, commercial, and cultural influences introduced the French horn

as a new but increasingly integral part of China's musical environment, where it would gain a much larger presence throughout the 20th century.

4.2. Assimilation of Chinese Music Culture

The insertion of the French horn into Chinese music culture demanded a subtle adjustment to fit into the local sense of beauty, which appreciates melody and the well-worn pentatonic scale. Zhang suggests that Western instruments were acculturated to express the indigenous style in early 20th-century hybrid ensembles [4]. These bands, which included the French horn alongside traditional Chinese instruments such as the erhu and pipa, emerged in cities like Shanghai and Beijing. They blended Western harmonics with Chinese melodic flow. Musicians also adapted the horn's timbre to imitate the expressive inflections of Chinese folk music, creating a distinctive sound that appealed to audiences from all walks of life.

This cultural hybridization accelerated after 1949, when state orchestras incorporated the French horn into socialist forms of culture. Dong discusses how state media emphasized the role of orchestras like the Central Philharmonic in using Western instruments, such as the French horn, to signal modernity and nationalism. How did it? Having quite a flexible range, the French horn was heard in nationalistic descriptive works that celebrated some aspect of Chinese revolutionary topics, usually with folk melodies. Composers also manipulated the horn's timbre to evoke pastoral or heroic images in line with the aesthetic purpose of socialist realism [1]. These performances were even aired on state radio, no less, further extending the instrument's reach and cultural impact. Its novelty and technical seductiveness also influenced the reception of the French horn to players who wanted to conquer its exacting embouchure and intonation. Urban music societies that emerged in the 1920s and 30s gave potential early adopters a chance to play the horn in small combinations, encouraging interest [4]. By the mid-20th century, it had become, if not an instrument merely of foreign curiosity at the time, one of cultural hybridity that suggested China's capacity to blend the elements of other cultures with the deep taproots of its music.

4.3. Contributions to Music and Music Education Institutions

The incorporation of the French horn into Chinese music education under the new educational policies introduced after 1978 significantly elevated the instrument's status in both conservatories and community music programs. Yang and Welch note that the French horn became established in conservatories, notably the Shanghai and Beijing Central Conservatories, with the introduction of Western curricula, and that economic reforms led to a more structured approach to French horn tuition [3]. These institutions created curricula that combined European skills (like embouchure and control of breath) with Chinese musical norms, creating a hybrid pedagogy for versatile musicians. By the 80s, the conservatories provided specific horn courses, and many graduates obtained jobs in the best national orchestras.

Student amateur orchestras allowed brass education to reach a larger audience, mainly in the cities. Ensembles in cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Leung argues, served as training grounds for many amateur musicians, including French horn players, mediating between elite conservatories and the local masses [9]. Frequently subsidized by local governments, such ensembles sponsored workshops and youth programs that democratized access to the instrument and helped generate a greater appreciation across the board for Western classical music.

The importance of the French horn in teaching is not limited to technical training. According to Váradi, music education, including brass education, develops social and emotional skills (e.g., discipline or cooperation) [11]. The pride that is felt when an orchestra comprised of students puts their musical knowledge to good use, and the Confucian value of harmony engendered by chordal playing in Chinese music conservatories, both

underscore the deeper social and cultural impact of French horn education. Western pedagogical methods were adapted to local traditions by incorporating Chinese folk melodies into practice exercises to make the instrument more familiar [3]. This method not only enhanced technical skills but also increased cultural impact.

The French horn was institutionalized, so conservatories started to host international masterclasses and competitions by the 1990s. Leung accentuates how these initiatives developed talents, enabling any student to compete on the international stage [9]. The pedagogical role of the French horn in China serves as a microcosm for this broader effort to globalize its musical standards alongside its cultural heritage, providing a solid platform for future success.

4.4. The Rise of the Professional Horn Player

The late 20th century also saw an increase in professional horn players in France, with China's increasing interest in Western classical music. Inoue also recorded growth in musicians who specialized in Western music, a trend facilitated by growth in conservatories and orchestras following the 1978 reforms [10]. At institutions like the Shanghai Conservatory, where horn players were taught in rigorous programs, mixing Western techniques with Chinese musical sensibilities was common. By the 1990s, its star power had risen in other ensembles, notably the China National Symphony Orchestra, as graduates started filling its chairs.

Huang contends that the Confucian cultural values of self-cultivation and discipline played an important role in producing a new generation of horn players. These cultural factors drove players to the challenge of the French horn embouchure and intonation, with the result that they achieved levels of virtuosity that compared favorably with international norms [6]. Pioneers like Han Xiaoming (a renowned Chinese horn player, known for his international performances and awards at events such as those organized by the International Horn Society) have been particularly prominent, presenting at international competitions, including those organized by the International Horn Society, accompanied by Chinese technical proficiency and cultural nuance [10]. Their winning spurred younger players on, in a process analogous to a virtuous cycle of talent.

The increase was fueled by international exchanges as well. Masterclasses were held in conservatories with European and American hornists, thus introducing students to various playing styles and repertoire [6]. With these exchanges and state support of cultural diplomacy, Chinese horn players played abroad and began to gain international attention. At Carnegie Hall, for example, their performances demonstrated how they could fuse Western symphonic tradition with the Chinese programmatic movement and still gain recognition.

The professionalization of horn players also mirrored larger cultural trends towards accepting globalized identities. Inoue also points out that urban audiences were becoming increasingly fond of Western classical music, which in turn spurred a demand for trained performing musicians [10]. This culture shift, as the cornerstone of China's modernization, placed hornists in the role of cross-cultural ambassadors between musical traditions of East and West.

4.5. Modern Chinese Orchestras' Arrangement of the French Horn

The French horn is an important instrument in the modern Chinese orchestra; its successful integration with Chinese and Western music indicates a formed developmental stage. Dong highlights its leading role in the China National Symphony Orchestra, where the horn contributes to a wide orchestral repertoire — from Beethoven's symphonies to contemporary Chinese compositions, such as Tan Dun's *Water Concerto*. "I write this instrument in all possible contexts, including programmatic works inspired by the landscape and the nation's historical narrative, which strike a chord with mass audiences," with its flexible timbre. Orchestral music in the service of the state (part of something

referred to as cultural statecraft) has also raised the horn's profile in public consciousness through performances at the prominent Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts [1].

Grenier Borel highlights the significance of the Shanghai Conservatory as a training provider for orchestral horn players based on their mixture of European playing styles and Chinese music values. "Students are rigorously mastering Western classical standards; they are molding the horn's sound to fit alongside pentatonic melodies and finding their orchestral voice." This training turns out musicians who thrive in ensembles such as the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, where the horn's lyrical and heroic aspects are brought out in global and local works. For exchange purposes, its international partnerships with Western orchestras enhance players' expertise and prepare them for global competitiveness [8].

By 2024, Chiba and Hebert note that music has helped "form the consciousness of a growing cultural identity" and (for the Chinese, at least) the French horn continues to symbolise China's participation in global art. Its existence in national works, some for national occasions, lends force to national pride while exhibiting technical competence. Orchestras are beginning to program pieces that mix the horn with other traditional instruments, such as the suona, and produce new sonic environments that resonate with contemporary listeners. The centrality of the French horn is also reflected in music education and outreach, where orchestras have generally conducted concerts for schools and permeate the cultural sphere. This combination speaks to how the instrument has become a metonym for China's vibrant musical modernity today [7].

5. Conclusion

This study has traced the dynamic trajectory of the French horn in China, from its introduction in the late 19th century to its integration into Western music traditions and its evolution into a localized instrument supported by a professional horn-playing community. The results demonstrate a history of "cultural adaptation" in which the French horn has evolved from a Western curiosity into a metaphor for modernity and cross-cultural hybridity. Brought to China through treaty ports and brass bands, the French horn reimagined to fit Chinese aesthetics can be found in permutations including early 20th-century hybrid ensembles and post-1949 state-backed orchestras. The education reform since 1978 institutionalized its training, contributing to the rise of professional horn players who mediate global and local traditions. In the modern day, the prominent position of the horn in orchestras such as China's National Symphony Orchestra highlights its cultural relevance.

Theoretically, the research contributes to musicology by importing a nonwestern lens on instrument history, using frameworks such as transcultural affinity to raise questions on China's negotiation of global musical identities. In practical terms, it impacts the implementation of music education by programmes that exemplify music pedagogy innovations, like hybrid curricula and community outreach, which integrates western methods with Chinese values. The introduction of the French horn serves as a metaphor for the overall cultural openness China is willing to embrace with state support to bolster its status in constructing its national identity.

It would also be interesting to investigate the application of the French horn in Chinese folk music: how does it contribute to new genres while retaining the timbre sound of the traditional ensembles? Online streaming platforms now serve as a key medium through which the French horn reaches wider audiences and showcases its evolving musical roles. It should be noted that the instrument's current reach and adoption in virtual platforms such as music streaming sites offer another pathway to observe the instrument's transmutation. Moreover, comparative studies with other Asian countries would indicate a regional pattern of Western instrument acceptance. Such directions would further enhance our understanding of the French horn's expanding status in world music.

By describing the historical and cultural significance of the French horn, this article highlights China's active interplay with world music traditions. It foregrounds the phenomenal transformation of the sound-world of the French horn from an import to a thriving presence in the country's musical life in China and inspires further cross-cultural musicological investigation.

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