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Application of the Orff Teaching Method in Chinese Music Education

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Abstract

This study examines the application of the Orff teaching method within China's music education system. Through qualitative document analysis, it explores the method's adaptation across educational levels and identifies key implementation challenges. Findings show successful localization that fosters student creativity and engagement, yet systemic barriers persist, including teacher training gaps and resource limitations. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for sustainable integration, emphasizing professional development and culturally responsive pedagogy to enrich China's music education landscape.

Keywords: Orff teaching method, Chinese music education, Application

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1.0 Introduction

The global landscape of music education is continually reshaped by the cross-pollination of pedagogical ideas, compelling national systems to reflect upon and innovate their teaching practices. Within China, a nation with a profound and distinct musical heritage, music education faces the dual imperative of preserving cultural identity while engaging with innovative global methodologies to foster creativity and comprehensive student development. Among these imported pedagogies, the Orff Schulwerk, developed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman, has garnered considerable attention for its child-centered, experiential, and integrative philosophy.

Departing from traditional, notation-centric instruction, the Orff method posits that music learning should originate from natural human behaviours—speech, movement, and play. Its core principles advocate for active participation, improvisation, and the synergistic integration of music, speech, and movement, aiming to unlock innate musicality. Introduced to China in the late 20th century, the method has evolved from a novel import to a subject of scholarly and practical experimentation. Pioneering work by figures like Liao Naixiong in developing localized textbooks signifies a conscious effort to adapt its framework to Chinese musical content and educational contexts, aligning with broader national curriculum reforms that emphasize quality-oriented and student-centered learning.

Despite this engagement, the integration of the Orff method is not without contention or difficulty. Its implementation is mediated by deep-seated structural factors, including teacher preparedness, resource availability, and alignment with existing assessment paradigms. While existing literature offers valuable insights into its application within specific, isolated contexts—such as kindergarten classrooms

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or university courses—a comprehensive analysis that spans the entire educational continuum and critically examines its systemic integration within the Chinese socio-educational fabric remains underdeveloped.

This study aims to systematically investigate the application, adaptation, and effectiveness of the Orff teaching method within Chinese music education. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives guide the research:

- a) To analyze the core philosophical tenets and pedagogical features of the Orff Schulwerk.
- b) To examine its current application and adaptive strategies across key educational stages in China: preschool, primary/secondary, and tertiary education.
- c) To identify and evaluate the principal facilitators and systemic barriers affecting its implementation within the Chinese educational context.
- d) To synthesize evidence-based recommendations for policy, practice, and professional development to support its effective and sustainable localization.

2.0 Literature Review

The Orff Schulwerk is firmly established within the international canon of influential music education pedagogies. Its theoretical foundation is not a rigid curriculum but a flexible set of ideas centered on "elemental music"—music that is primal, accessible, and rooted in basic human expressions like rhythm, speech, and gesture (Li & Xu, 2011). International research has extensively documented its benefits, particularly in early childhood and primary education, highlighting its efficacy in promoting cognitive development, social collaboration, intrinsic motivation, and creative thinking (Coppola, 2009). The method's inherent adaptability is a recurring theme in cross-cultural studies. For instance, research by Kim et al. (2013) on its application in teaching traditional Korean music demonstrates its utility as a framework for cultural transmission and hybridization, showcasing its potential beyond its Western origins.

In China, academic engagement with the Orff method has progressed through distinct phases. The initial period involved the translation and introduction of core Orffian texts and concepts. This was followed by a practitioner-led phase, most notably spearheaded by Liao Naixiong, whose compilation of the Orff Chinese School Music Textbook represented a seminal step in localization, deliberately integrating Chinese folk songs and pentatonic melodic structures into the Orff pedagogical process (Liu, 2020). Contemporary scholarly work has shifted towards applied research within specific domains. Studies such as Liu Tian's (2022) exploration of the method in preschool settings report increased student engagement and creative output. Similarly, Chengcheng Li (2021) advocates for its use in university music classrooms to counteract overly theoretical instruction and rekindle creative practice among older students.

A critical synthesis of this body of literature, however, reveals two significant gaps that this study seeks to address. First, existing research is often siloed, focusing on a single educational sector (e.g., early childhood or higher education) without providing a panoramic view of its application across the entire educational pipeline. This fragmented perspective limits a holistic understanding of its systemic implications and the transferability of challenges and solutions between levels. Second, much of the Chinese literature remains descriptive, chronicling successful activities or listing obstacles without deeply interrogating the underlying socio-cultural, institutional, and political-economic factors that enable or constrain its integration. There is a scarcity of critical analysis that situates the Orff method's journey in China within the broader narratives of educational globalization, cultural policy, and teacher professional agency. This study aims to bridge these gaps by providing a consolidated, multi-level analysis and advancing the discourse from descriptive accounts towards strategic, system-aware recommendations.

3.0 Methodology

To address the research aim and objectives, this study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing documentary analysis as the primary methodological approach. This method is appropriate for constructing a comprehensive, interpretive overview of a pedagogical phenomenon as it is represented in the extant academic and professional literature, allowing for the identification of patterns, themes, and contradictions across a wide range of texts.

3.1 Data Collection

The data corpus was assembled through a purposive sampling of relevant textual materials. Sources included:

- a) Peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings (both Chinese and international) published between 2013 and 2023, identified through academic databases using keywords such as "Orff," "China," "music education," and "localization."
- b) Key monographs and edited volumes detailing the principles of Orff pedagogy and its global adaptations.
- c) Officially published teaching resources that exemplify localization efforts, most prominently Liao Naixiong's Orff Chinese School Music Textbook.
- d) Detailed published accounts of specific teaching sequences and case studies (e.g., lessons built around "Two Little Elephants" or the song "Dimple"), which serve as embedded units of analysis for practical application.

3.2 Data Analysis

A thematic content analysis was conducted on the collected documents. The process followed these stages:

- a) Familiarization: Repeated reading of all selected texts to gain an immersive understanding of the content.
- b) Coding: Systematic generation of initial codes from text segments relevant to the research objectives (e.g., "principle of improvisation," "use of body percussion in primary school," "teacher training deficit").

- c) Theme Development: Collating and sorting codes into broader, meaningful themes (e.g., "Strategies for Localization," "Infrastructure and Resource Challenges," "Pedagogical Shifts Across Educational Levels").
- d) Review and Refinement: Iteratively reviewing themes for coherence, distinctiveness, and accurate representation of the dataset.
- e) Interpretation and Synthesis: Analyzing the relationships between themes to develop an integrated narrative that explains the current state, dynamics, and implications of the Orff method's application in China.

3.3 Limitations

The findings and conclusions of this study are bounded by the inherent limitations of documentary analysis. The research interprets reported practices, challenges, and outcomes rather than directly observing classroom dynamics or capturing the tacit knowledge and lived experiences of practitioners and students. Therefore, while it provides a robust macro-level analysis and identifies systemic themes, it cannot account for the full nuance of individual classroom implementations or unarticulated practitioner perspectives. This underscores the value of future complementary research employing ethnographic, phenomenological, or survey-based methods.

4.0 Findings

The analysis of the literature yielded a structured overview of the Orff method's application across China's educational system, highlighting both adaptive innovations and consistent systemic challenges.

4.1 Application in Preschool and Early Childhood Education

At the preschool level, the Orff approach is primarily leveraged to cultivate foundational musicality and social skills through play-based, immersive activities. Instruction often follows a progression from guided imitation—where children replicate rhythms, melodies, and movements modelled by the teacher—towards supported improvisation and co-creation. Activities are designed as imaginative games. For example, a lesson based on "Two Little Elephants" might involve children imitating animal movements and sounds, which later evolves into creating simple vocal or percussive ostinatos as accompaniment. The method's alignment with early childhood developmental needs makes it particularly effective in fostering engagement, aural discrimination, and cooperative learning within a joyful musical context (Liu Tian, 2022).

4.2 Application in Primary and Secondary School Education

Within compulsory schooling, the Orff method's foundational emphasis on rhythm is prominently operationalized. A common and effective strategy involves deriving rhythm patterns from the natural prosody of the Chinese language, using familiar nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, or idiomatic phrases. The pedagogical tool of "body percussion"—using the body as an instrument—is widely adopted to explore timbre, rhythm, and ensemble skills without reliance on formal instruments. Documented case studies, such as teaching the song "Dimple," illustrate integrative lesson designs where singing, structured movement, body percussion, and melodic work on pitched percussion instruments are woven together. This multimodal, experiential approach is reported to enhance student participation, deepen aural and kinaesthetic understanding, and improve overall musical literacy more effectively than segmented, theory-first instruction.

4.3 Application in Tertiary and Higher Education

In universities and conservatories, the influence of Orff philosophy is evident in two key areas: music teacher education and ethnomusicology/cultural heritage studies. In teacher training programs, it serves as a model pedagogy for experiential, student-centered learning, providing future educators with a viable alternative to traditional methods. In courses focused on Chinese traditional music or ethnomusicology, the "elemental" and participatory approach of Orff provides a framework for actively experiencing folk music—through singing, dance, and instrumental play—rather than solely studying it through historical or analytical lenses. This active engagement is cited as crucial for making intangible cultural heritage relevant and accessible to university students, thereby supporting its preservation and revitalization (Chengcheng Li, 2021).

4.4 Systemic Challenges and Barriers

Despite these adaptive applications, the analysis consistently identified several structural impediments to optimal implementation:

- a) Insufficient Teacher Expertise and Training: A critical gap exists between awareness of the method and deep pedagogical mastery. Many in-service teachers lack comprehensive training in the improvisational, facilitative, and compositional skills central to the approach, often reducing it to a set of pre-designed activities rather than a dynamic, responsive teaching philosophy.
- b) Resource and Logistical Constraints: The hands-on, materials-intensive ideal of Orff practice is frequently hampered by a widespread lack of dedicated music classrooms, storage, and specialized instrumentaria (e.g., Orff xylophones, metallophones, and diverse percussion sets).
- c) Curricular and Assessment Misalignment: The process-oriented, open-ended outcomes of Orff-based learning (e.g., creativity, collaboration, improvisational skill) often conflict with standardized curricula and exam-focused assessment regimes, creating a tension for teachers who are held accountable to traditional, product-oriented metrics.

5.0 Discussion

The findings indicate that the Orff Schulwerk in China is undergoing a process of selective assimilation and creative adaptation rather than wholesale adoption or rejection. Its growing presence can be interpreted as a pragmatic response to perceived limitations within traditional Chinese music pedagogy, offering a tangible pathway towards achieving the very educational goals—cultivating innovation, individuality, and holistic development—increasingly espoused in national policy documents.

The method's demonstrated adaptability is its most significant asset for localization. Successful adaptation, as exemplified by Liao Naixiong's textbook, involves more than the superficial substitution of Western songs with Chinese ones; it requires re-rooting the pedagogical process in Chinese musical structures (e.g., the pentatonic scale), cultural metaphors, and educational values. This process of "glocalization" suggests that the Orff approach's core principles are sufficiently abstract to be culturally transcendent, yet concrete enough to provide a practical and flexible framework for local enactment. This adaptability is further evidenced in how the method's core elements are being re-interpreted. For instance, the Orff principle of "elemental music," originally tied to European folk traditions and children's lore, is being successfully mapped onto China's rich repository of folk songs, nursery rhymes, and even the rhythmic patterns of the Chinese language itself. This represents a deeper, more philosophical alignment that goes beyond mere activity translation, suggesting the method's potential to act as a bridge between China's musical past and its educational future. This cultural translation is not without its tensions, however, as it necessitates navigating the complex interplay between preserving authentic musical traditions and embracing a pedagogy that encourages spontaneous reinterpretation.

However, the identified challenges are not merely practical obstacles but are symptomatic of deeper systemic issues within the education sector. The teacher preparation gap highlights a fundamental mismatch between the demands of innovative, facilitative pedagogies and the prevailing structure of teacher professional development, which often prioritizes short-term, top-down workshops over sustained, collaborative, and practice-based learning communities. This gap points to a need for a paradigm shift in how music teachers are conceived—not merely as technicians delivering a fixed curriculum but as reflective practitioners, cultural facilitators, and co-creators of musical experience. Such a shift would require overhauling not only in-service training but also the foundational curricula of music teacher education programs in Chinese conservatories and universities, embedding Orff's philosophy alongside traditional mastery-based training.

The resource constraints reflect the persistent, albeit contested, status of music as a "non-core" or marginal subject in many school contexts, directly impacting budget allocations and institutional priorities. This marginalization is part of a broader historical and societal valuation of education, where subjects perceived as directly contributing to economic competitiveness or university entrance examinations receive precedence. Advocating for the Orff method, therefore, becomes intertwined with advocating for the intrinsic value of arts education itself, requiring arguments that demonstrate its contribution to cognitive development, social-emotional learning, and creative thinking—skills increasingly recognized as vital in the 21st-century global economy.

Furthermore, the tension with standardized assessment underscores a central paradox in contemporary educational reform: systems seek to foster 21st-century skills like creativity and critical thinking through pedagogical methods whose outcomes are inherently difficult to measure via conventional, standardized testing formats. This creates a significant implementation risk, where teachers feel pressured to "teach to the test," potentially sidelining the very open-ended, process-oriented activities that define the Orff approach. Therefore, the discussion around implementing the Orff method must extend beyond technical pedagogical training to engage with broader questions of educational values, resource equity, assessment reform, and the reconceptualization of the purpose and outcomes of arts education within a national curriculum. The future of the Orff method in China may depend on the parallel development of alternative assessment models—such as portfolio assessments, performance-based evaluations, and observational rubrics—that can capture the qualitative growth in student creativity, collaboration, and musical understanding that the method aims to foster. Ultimately, its sustainable integration may serve as a litmus test for the depth and genuineness of China's commitment to moving beyond an exam-centric education model towards a more holistic, student-centered paradigm.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study concludes that the Orff teaching method offers a potent, philosophically congruent, and adaptable framework with significant potential to enrich and diversify music education in China. Its emphasis on creativity, experiential learning, and cultural engagement aligns well with the direction of contemporary educational reforms. However, its potential is currently circumscribed by systemic factors related to professional capital, material resources, and deeply ingrained curricular and assessment paradigms.

To facilitate the more effective, sustainable, and meaningful integration and localization of the Orff method, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

- a) Reform and Enhance Teacher Professional Development: Move beyond one-off workshops to establish long-term, credentialed professional learning pathways. This should include partnerships with international Orff associations for certified training, embedding Orff pedagogy core modules into university-based music teacher education programs, and fostering school-based professional learning communities for peer mentorship and collaborative lesson study.
- b) Invest in the Development and Dissemination of Culturally-Grounded Resources: Support and fund the collaborative development of high-quality, open-access teaching materials that deeply integrate Chinese musical heritage, language, and aesthetics with Orff pedagogy. This includes creating digital repositories with video demonstrations, lesson plans, and repertoire collections tailored to different educational levels and regional cultures.
- c) Advocate for Structural Support and Policy Alignment: Educational authorities and policymakers should formalize support for music education infrastructure through guidelines and funding for dedicated spaces and instrument inventories. Furthermore, curriculum and

assessment frameworks should be revisited to create space for recognizing and valuing process-oriented, creative outcomes alongside traditional knowledge and skill acquisition.

d) Foster Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Networks: Encourage the formation of strategic partnerships and networks among universities, schools, educational research institutes, and cultural heritage organizations. Such ecosystems can drive evidence-based innovation through action research, pilot programs, and the systematic sharing of expertise and resources between theory and practice.

Acknowledgment

Acknowledging the documentary basis of this study, future research should employ mixed-methods designs to capture the nuanced realities of classroom implementation. Longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impact of Orff-based instruction on student musical identity, creativity, and cultural awareness are needed. Additionally, comparative research analyzing the localization processes of the Orff method across different Asian contexts (e.g., China, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia) could yield valuable transnational insights into the complex interplay of pedagogy, culture, and educational policy.

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