

# The Development of the Modern Chinese Orchestra in Mainland China and the Chinese Diaspora: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

This article examines the literature on the modern Chinese orchestra, tracing its origins in Mainland China and its evolution within the Chinese diaspora in regions such as Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. The study analyzed 57 Chinese and English publications from 1979 to 2024, sourced from leading databases including Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, and CNKI. The review underscores the modern Chinese orchestra's pivotal role in shaping diverse interpretations of "Chineseness", cultural identity, educational value, contributions to community cohesion, strategies for financial sustainability, and the reconstruction of musical instruments. This research demonstrates that much of the current literature on the Chinese orchestra primarily examines the monumental, hegemonic, and significant orchestras directed by the experienced generation. In this era of globalization, where musical influences are increasingly diverse, we emphasize the importance of exploring the interactions and power dynamics among different generations of directors, musicians, and composers in shaping the orchestra's trajectory, repertoire choices, and thematic direction. In addition, the transnational exchange of musical interactions among global Chinese communities through alliances and collaborations will provide a deeper understanding of contemporary "Chineseness". Critical reviews in these areas will further illuminate the diverse forces and stakeholders shaping and enriching each orchestral performance

**Keywords:** Chinese Orchestra, Chinese diaspora, cultural identity, *huayuetuan*, transnationalism

## 1. Introduction

The modern Chinese orchestra *minzu yuedui* (民族乐队) was created in Mainland China during the 1930s as part of the initiative to foster a modern nation (Han & Gray, 1959). It was modeled after the Western orchestra and consisted of three families of musical instruments including strings, blowing instruments, and percussion. The string family comprises plucked lutes such as *liuqin*, *pipa*, *zhongruan*; board zithers, *yangqin* and *guzheng*; and the struck zither, *yangqin*. Bowed string instruments include bowed lutes such as *gaohu*, *erhu*, and *zhonghu*. The cello and double bass has since replaced the *diyong gehu* (bass *gehu*) and *da-gehu* (large *gehu*) respectively. Woodwind instruments include *qudi* (bamboo traverse flute), *gaoyinsheng* (soprano *sheng*), *zhongyinsheng* (alto *sheng*), *diyinsheng* (bass *sheng*), etc. Musical instruments in the percussion family comprise *luo* (gong), *bo* (cymbals), *bianzhong* (bronze bells), and *gu* (drums) (Mi, 2021; Wong, 2019).

With the migration of Chinese communities and the dissemination of cultural practices, the modern Chinese orchestra has become established in various countries and regions, evolving along distinct paths shaped by local social and cultural contexts. Although the orchestra has become a relatively standardized ensemble in many of these areas, scholarly attention has primarily focused on instruments, composers, performance practices, etc. To date, comprehensive or systematic studies critically examining the development of the modern Chinese orchestra across different regions remain scarce.

This article systematically reviews the literature published on the modern Chinese orchestra from its origins in Mainland China to its development among the Chinese diaspora in other regions including Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. It presents the methodology used for Systematic Literature Review (SLR), tracing the development of the modern Chinese orchestra from its origins in Mainland China to its evolution within overseas Chinese communities. This article provides a critical analysis of the major themes, theoretical approaches, and gaps in the existing literature, and proposes potential directions for future research. Therefore, the study aims to construct a more systematic and comprehensive knowledge framework for research on the

modern Chinese orchestra and to promote continued scholarly engagement and cross-regional dialogue in the field.

## 2. Methodology

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is an objective academic approach designed to locate and assess all pertinent literature on a given topic. It concludes to research gaps, identifies problems, and determines the implications that can be inferred from it (Feak & Swales, 2009, p. 3)

### 2.1 Data Collection

The primary databases used for data collection included Scopus, ProQuest, Web of Science, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). These databases encompass scholarly literature written on the modern Chinese orchestra in English and Chinese to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the development and significance of the modern Chinese orchestra in Mainland China and the Chinese diaspora. These databases were chosen for their academic quality and relevance to the humanities and social sciences. Scopus, ProQuest, and Web of Science were selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals and high-quality scholarly content, while CNKI was included for its focus on Chinese-language publications, providing region-specific insights.

### 2.2 Search Strategy

The initial search strategy involved using broad keywords to collect various articles. Specifically, the English keyword “Chinese orchestra” was used for a broad search, while for CNKI, Chinese terms (Note 1) with the same meanings as the following English thematic categories, “Chinese diaspora,” “cultural identity,” “music notation,” “educational functions,” “historical origins,” “policy,” “challenge,” “*minzu yuetuan*,” and “*minzu yuedui*”, were used to ensure the inclusion of literature relevant to the Chinese context. Subsequently, further filtering was conducted based on different themes, “historical origins”, “policy”, and “challenge”. The relevance of the articles was assessed by reading their abstracts and main arguments, followed by a full-text review focusing on the content and conclusions to determine the final selection of articles.

Different search terms were used for English and Chinese literature to accommodate differences in language and cultural terminology. This approach ensured that relevant sources were included, regardless of language or regional terminology. Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to combine keywords and create different logical sets. For instance, combinations such as “Chinese orchestra AND cultural identity” and “Chinese orchestra AND policy” were used to retrieve articles related to specific themes. The search strategy was iterative, starting with broad keywords and gradually narrowing down to include more specific terms. The initial search yielded many articles, which were then filtered according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Table 1 outlines the specific criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Type	Description
<b>Inclusion</b>	Related	The English articles included the keywords Chinese orchestra and <i>huayuetuan</i> and diaspora in titles or abstracts. Meanwhile, the Chinese articles included keywords, such as “民族乐团” or “民族乐队” or “散居” High-quality journals related to research topics, including articles from ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI. For CNKI Chinese language articles. Articles published between 1979 and 2024.
<b>Exclusion</b>	Not Related	The information in the article is incomplete, including the author, publication date, etc. Documents that include conference abstracts, notes, editorials, letters, opinion pieces, protocols, etc. Content unrelated to the categorized topics. Only the abstract is available, but the full text cannot be accessed.

### 2.3 Selection Process, Data Extraction and Analysis

The literature selection process included multiple stages to ensure that only the most relevant articles were included. Initially, a total of  $n = 410$  articles were identified based on keywords in the titles such as “Chinese orchestra”, “民族乐团”, and other relevant titles to the research. The articles were sourced as follows: Scopus  $n = 83$ , ProQuest  $n = 211$ , Web of Science  $n = 71$ , and CNKI  $n = 45$ . Subsequently, we filtered articles according to thematic categories such as “Chinese diaspora,” “cultural identity” “music notation,” “educational functions,” “historical origins,” “policy,” and “challenges,” using the corresponding Chinese terms to filter in CNKI. Based

on the relevance of the abstracts and main arguments,  $n = 270$  articles were excluded. Of these,  $n = 201$  were excluded for being irrelevant to the categorized themes, and  $n = 69$  were excluded for being outside the publication date range. From the remaining 140 articles,  $n = 35$  were further excluded due to duplicate studies or similar arguments. In the final step,  $n = 105$  articles were thoroughly read and critically evaluated in terms of their content and conclusions, resulting in  $n = 57$  articles selected for the final data analysis, with 48 in English and 9 in Chinese.

The extracted data in this paper underwent thematic analysis. Themes such as historical development, cultural identity, music notation, social functions, and challenges were identified and coded. The analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature, highlighting areas of consensus as well as gaps that require further research. To ensure transparency and reproducibility of the selection process, a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) flowchart (Figure 1) was used to visually document each step of the review process.

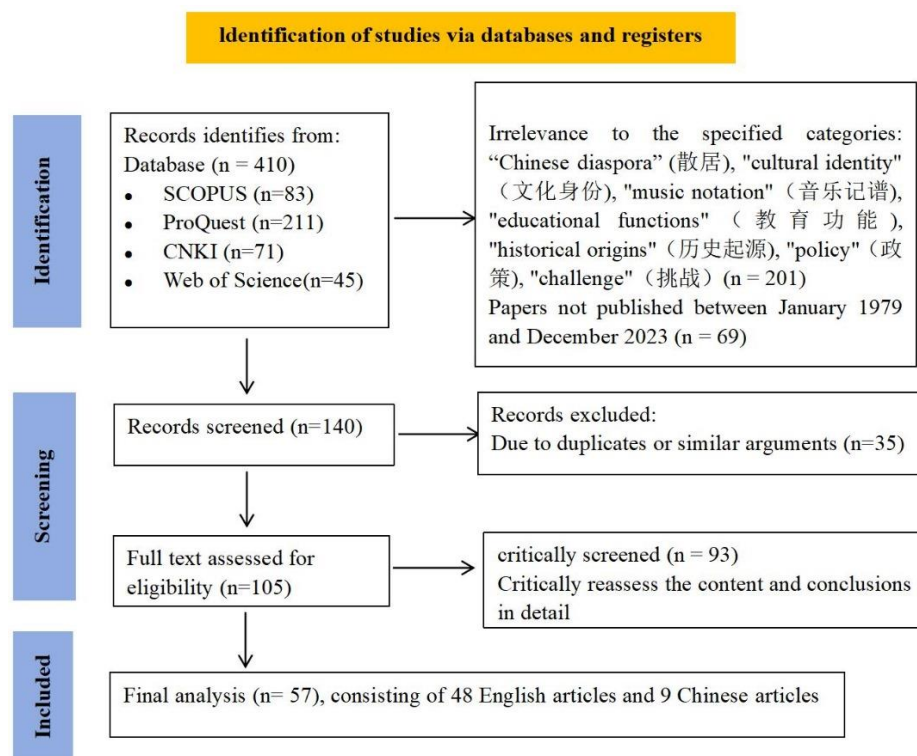


Figure 1. Literature review analysis methodology (PRISMA) flowchart

#### 2.4 Limitations of Methodology

One potential limitation of the methodology is its focus predominantly on journal articles, which may have led to the exclusion of relevant book chapters or edited volumes that could offer valuable insights. To achieve a more systematic and comprehensive review, future research should expand the search strategy to include these additional sources.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Literature reviews on the modern Chinese orchestras in Mainland China and within the Chinese diaspora highlight an intensification of nationalistic sentiments and pride, that has driven efforts to develop a unified national culture (Lau, 2008). Yet, each region faces challenges in creating this singular representation, given the complex history of migration, conquests, and interactions among various ethnic groups. The literature reviews below reveal the decisions in the inclusion and exclusion of specific musical instruments and styles in creating this national representation.

#### 3.1 Chinese Orchestra in Mainland China

The musical instruments considered “traditional” in Mainland China today were originally derived from foreign instruments mixed with indigenous instruments such as the Tang dynasty ensemble *Shibuji* (Ten orchestra) and

Ming dynasty *Siyiwu* (Barbarian dance) (Lau, 2008, p. 36). Studies conducted on the modern Chinese orchestra include its historical development (Han and Gray, 1979; Lee, 2014; Lin, 2007; Li, 2009; Wong, 2020), social functions and identity (Chiu, 2008; Liu, 2007), composition techniques and styles (Lau, 2008; Liang, 2001; Sun, 2008), and the reconstruction of Chinese orchestra instruments (Lau, 2008; Li, 2019; Lu, 2006; Yu, 2007).

### 3.1.1 Formation of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

Many studies were conducted on the development of the modern Chinese orchestra in Mainland China as a representative of Chinese national music (Han & Gray, 1979; Wong, 2020). The modern Chinese orchestra, a twentieth-century invention, began to take shape in the 1930s with the aim of representing China's national music, known as *guoyue* or *minzu yinyue* (*minyue*). This ensemble has its roots in the *jiangnan sizhu* (bamboo and silk) 江南絲竹, a small ensemble from southern Jiangsu province, northern Zhejiang province, and Shanghai (Dujunco, 2023). It comprises traditional Chinese instruments, modeled after the Western classical orchestra, with a structured grouping of instruments, reliance on written scores over improvisation, and the use of a conductor. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese valorized European music due to its association with advancements in science and technology. Traditional Chinese music performed by local musicians were less valued. Chinese composers sought to incorporate Western musical instruments into the modern Chinese orchestra as a means of representing a modern Chinese nation (Lau, 2008, p. 31).

### 3.1.2 Early Pioneers and Key Societies

As the influence of Western classical music began to dominate China, many cultural organizations sought to resist the adoption of Western music through the restructuring the practice of traditional music. Among these organizations were *Datong* Music Society (1919) founded by Zheng Jinwen in Shanghai which aimed to protect and revitalize traditional Chinese instruments, especially the *qin* and *se*. Later, it evolved into promoting Chinese music through a large ensemble with a standardized four-part layout (wind instruments, plucked strings, bowed strings, and percussion). Their efforts laid the foundation for the development of the modern Chinese orchestra (Lau, 2008; Lu, 2006; Lin, 2007; Wong, 2020). The Society for Improving National Music was established by Liu Tianhua in 1927 aimed to protect national music *guoyue* 国乐 and enhance it by learning from Western practices. They expanded the traditional *jiangnan sizhu* (bamboo and silk) (Note 2) ensemble and introduced “doubling” (multiple players per instrument), which was influenced by Western orchestral practices, making this ensemble one of the prototypes of the modern Chinese orchestra. The Broadcasting Company of China (BCC) Chinese Orchestra (1935) adopted many Western orchestral practices, such as instrument organization and the use of conductors, to strengthen their ensemble capabilities (Lee, 2014; Li, 2009; Lin, 2007; Wong, 2020). These music ensembles were all early prototypes of the Chinese orchestra, contributing significant value to the eventual establishment and standardization of the orchestra.

Plafcan (2017) and Wong (2023) highlighted that under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Chinese orchestras underwent modernization in their instruments and promoted their development by organizing various musical activities and establishing music academies. For instance, the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, established in 1952, hired Soviet teachers to teach Western music theory and composition techniques, which influenced the orchestras' structure and performance forms, including harmony, counterpoint, notation, and composition.

### 3.1.3 Modernization and Instrument Reformation

The formation of the new PRC government in 1949 triggered the construction of national music to assert its proletarian ideology to serve most peasants soldiers and workers. Many reforms were conducted to promote the new concept of *guoyue*, including the adoption of the new term “*minzu yinyue* (national or people's music)” (Lau, 2008, p. 33). Reforms involved modifying traditional instruments to fill gaps in pitch range, improve dynamic control, and standardize tuning to the Western twelve-tone equal temperament. This reform was driven by the need for orchestras to be versatile enough to perform contemporary compositions and enhance overall performance quality. Innovations included creating new instruments, such as different types of plucked lutes, *ruan* (*zhongruan*, *daruan*) to expand the mid and low-pitch ranges, and adding keys to wind instruments like the *sheng*, *guan*, and *suona* to facilitate better control and playability (Lau, 2008; Lu, 2006; Li, 2019; Yu, 2007). On the music repertoire, Wong (2020) also emphasized the development of modern repertoire through transcription, rearrangement, and original compositions specifically for the Chinese orchestra. Contemporary Chinese composers have successfully integrated traditional Chinese cultural elements with Western compositional techniques, as exemplified by works like *The Butterfly Lovers* by He Zhanhao, *Songs for God* by Qu Xiaosong, *Pipa Concerto* by Tan Dun, and *The Sound of Water* by Yan Huichang (Wong, 2020). *Minzue yinyue* in the late twentieth century encompassed multiple characteristics and genres such as Chinese orchestral music, regional

music, vocal music, and solo repertory (Lau, 2008, p. 33)

Winzenburg (2017) explored the bridging of timbral differences in Chinese-Western fusion concertos within Chinese orchestras. Analyzing the work *Dreams of Meeting* (1993) by Chinese composer Gao Weijie and other pieces in this domain, revealed how these compositions reflect broader socio-cultural contexts through cross-cultural timbral dialogues. Additionally, by studying the timbral combinations of Chinese and Western orchestras, Winzenburg (2017) discussed the Chinese music, or musical instruments have gradually attained insider status within the Western concerto tradition through such fusions. Han and Gray (1979) discussed how Chinese orchestras were carefully crafted from traditional Chinese ensembles with diverse regional music to a “pan-Chinese style orchestra in line with the government’s policy to unify the country” (pp. 19-20). They also detailed how Chinese musical instruments were reconstructed to the fixed tones of the equal-temperament, accurate intonation, and increased range. Additionally, Western musical notation, theory, Western instruments and orchestral techniques were integrated into the Chinese orchestra. For example, traditional Chinese music used *jianpu* (numbered musical notation) and *gongchepu* (ancient Chinese musical notation), whereas the introduction of Western notation allowed musicians to record and convey musical works more precisely. The standardization of tuning systems, musical instruments, and techniques playing has sacrificed regional and local flavors.

Li (2009) explores the development of Chinese orchestras by examining their historical evolution within a global context and from an anthropological perspective. Li (2009) points out that the formalization of Chinese orchestras was achieved through direct intervention by the state. Furthermore, Li (2009) examines the musical roles, tuning systems, and instrument capabilities, comparing the performance aspects of Chinese and Western orchestras. Finally, Li discusses the future trajectory of modern Chinese orchestras in the context of the current era. Lau (2008) notes that while the modern Chinese orchestra resembles the Western symphony in structure and performance style, especially in practices, sound ideals, and compositional methods, it is not a mere replica. Instead, it fuses traditional Chinese elements with modern influences, evolving into a cultural symbol for Chinese communities abroad. In places like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, modern Chinese orchestras help preserve cultural heritage. Lau also points out that composers for Chinese orchestras favor large arrangements and complex sections, often pushing musical boundaries by experimenting with atonality and avant-garde techniques. Song (2024) explores the construction and development of the percussion section in the Chinese Orchestra, with a particular focus on achieving a balanced and harmonious integration of traditional folk music and Western percussion instruments within the orchestra to promote the sustainability and development of national culture while enhancing the overall artistic expression of the orchestra. Yang (2017) believes that the mutual influence between Chinese and Western music has resulted in hybrid musical forms, challenging the binary distinction of “East” and “West,” and emphasizing the complex cultural attributes that shape contemporary Chinese music and its impact on musicians and audiences.

In discussing the development of contemporary Chinese orchestral music, Peng (2022) asserts that innovative practices and cross-cultural integration are essential components. Peng emphasizes that Chinese orchestral music, as a sophisticated ensemble form, should build upon its “regional” and “localized” aesthetic foundations while expanding its modern relevance and international expressive capabilities through diverse creation and performance methods. Furthermore, Peng (2022) explores the role of the conductor in the “secondary creation” process within the composition and performance of Chinese orchestral music, suggesting that while conductors should remain faithful to the score, they must also bring their artistic interpretations to elevate the depth and aesthetic quality of the music.

Much of the literature reviews on the modern Chinese orchestra in Mainland China focused on the debates between the traditionalists and modernists on musical taste and preference in confronting the crisis of China’s cultural identity in the phase of modernizing the country. This literature showed that the concept of *guoyue* or national music changes over time through a dialectic negotiation between these different forces. The reconstruction of Chinese musical instruments has brought standardization to their sound and design, but at the cost of diminishing the aesthetics and distinct regional characteristics in both timbre and technique. For example, the southern *erhu* which produced a softer tune compared to the brighter and sharper tones has been homogenized into standard sizes, tuning systems, thus losing its regional flavor, craftsmanship and tuning systems. Modelled after the Western symphony orchestra, the modern Chinese Orchestra has been effective in changing the heterophonic music to polyphonic and homophonic music. Traditional Chinese sounding scales have also been discarded in favor of atonal music and avant-garde styles (Lau, 2008, p. 39) Consequently, these explorations have distanced the music from its cultural value of spontaneity, improvisation and individual agency. Lastly, the literature also focuses on national endeavors in the portrayal of a one representation of China, which neglects the examination of various agencies involved in developing the diverse musical identities of the various

ethnic groups in the country.

### 3.2 Chinese Orchestras in East Asia: Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan

Modern Chinese orchestras have been the subject of research by numerous scholars in various regions and countries, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The terminology for modern Chinese orchestras varies depending on the country, particularly where Chinese communities are significant enough to form self-sustaining cultural groups with distinct historical or political contexts (Han & Gray, 1979). For example, the term *guoyuetuan* was first used in the early 20th century by Chinese Nationalists and is still in use today in Taiwan (Jeffcoat, 2009). The terms *minzuyuetuan* (民族乐团) or *minzuyuedui* (民族乐队) are frequently used. These terms emphasize “national” or “ethnic” music ensembles, aligning with a focus on traditional Chinese music as a cultural heritage (Lee, 2014; Li, 2004; Wong, 2020). In Hong Kong and Macau, the term *zhongyuetuan* (中乐团) is more common, directly translating to “Chinese music ensemble” and reflecting the regions’ distinct but culturally aligned musical identity (Azêdo, 2016; Lau, 2008; Lee, 2014; Wu, 2006; Yu, 2001). In Malaysia and Singapore, the term *huayuetuan* (华乐团) is prevalent, denoting “Chinese orchestra” or “Chinese music ensemble”. This term emphasizes the “Chinese” (华) ethnic identity in multicultural societies (Chew, 2013; Tan, 2000).

#### 3.2.1 Hong Kong & Macau

Ho (2019) discusses the creation of the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra (HKCO) in 1977, highlighting its status as the only professional full-sized modern Chinese orchestra in Hong Kong. Ho argues that the establishment of the HKCO is to promote Chinese arts and mitigate the social unrest that erupted in the late 1960s. HKCO also served as part of the United Kingdom’s strategy to enhance its position in the anticipated negotiations with the People’s Republic of China regarding Hong Kong’s future post-1997 (Ho, 2019). The repertoire of HKCO is diverse and includes traditional, contemporary, and popular pieces. HKCO promotes contemporary local Hong Kong composer and Chinese composers around the world—adopting a cosmopolitan flavor (Lau, 2008, p. 41)

Azêdo (2016) investigates how local identities are formed and articulated through the performances of the Macau Chinese Orchestra. The article emphasizes that the orchestra’s international appearances incorporate Chinese instruments and repertoire, merging diverse music genres like traditional Chinese melodies, adaptations of Portuguese songs, Western music, and contemporary Chinese compositions. The orchestra’s structure and public performances are tailored to the audience, performance space, timing, cultural policies, and the impacts of population mobility (Azêdo, 2016). Leung (2013) said that the four non-profit community Chinese orchestras in Hong Kong have demonstrated unique characteristics of cultural entrepreneurship by adopting different management strategies, innovative business models, and policy support to effectively utilize cultural capital to achieve both artistic and economic benefits. Witzleben (1983) examined the regional style of Cantonese music performed by Chinese orchestras in Hong Kong, focusing on musical instruments, repertoire, notation, and tonal materials (such as scales, modes, and intonation).

Kam (2010) conducted a case study on Hong Kong’s Wuji Ensemble, focusing on its development and expression of contemporary Chinese music. The ensemble, specializing in plucked-string instruments like the *ruan* and *pipa*, faces both challenges and opportunities in blending Chinese and Western musical elements. Using ethnographic methods, Kam observed the ensemble’s efforts to redefine “Chineseness” within Hong Kong’s post-colonial context, showcasing a unique modernity that merges traditional and contemporary, Eastern and Western influences. According to Lau (2008), the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra (HKCO) has played a key role in shaping a nuanced Chinese identity against the backdrop of both colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong. Rather than merely serving as a vehicle for the promotion of Chinese music, the HKCO also provides an important platform for conveying “Chineseness” within Hong Kong’s distinct cultural and political landscape. Founded in 1977 with the initial goal of alleviating anti-colonial sentiments by promoting Chinese culture, the HKCO performed the works of both local and international Chinese composers. Since it became an independent entity in 2001, the orchestra has actively fostered a broader and more global understanding of Chinese music through its educational initiatives and themed concerts.

#### 3.2.2 Taiwan

The first modern Chinese orchestra in Taiwan comprise musicians from China’s Broadcasting Chinese Orchestra from Chongqing. The orchestra was renamed as Broadcasting of Taiwan’s Chinese Orchestra (*Zhong-guang guoyuetuan* 中廣國樂團). According to Lee (2014), there any exchange of musical ideas from Mainland China was prohibited during the Martial Law (1948-1987) period in Taiwan. Since its founding in 1979, the Taipei Chinese Orchestra (TCO) has shifted from emphasizing Taiwan’s cultural ties to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to embracing an inclusive Taiwanese indigenous identity into its *guoyue* (national music) (Lee, 2024).

Lee (2021) explains that Taiwanese composers and musicians deliberately differentiated between Mainland *guoyue* and Taiwan *guoyue* to create a separate Taiwanese musical identity and to distinguish their musical style from that of Mainland China and other Chinese-speaking areas. They commissioned compositions that blend musical elements from southern Hokkien, Hakka, and Indigenous communities, creating music that appeals to both local and regional audiences.

Liu (2007) also analyzes the impact of different historical periods' political systems and cultural policies on the development of modern *guoyue* in Taiwan, starting from the "new music" prototype in 1900 to the promotion of traditional *guoyue* during the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement, and the facilitation of cross-strait cultural exchanges after the lifting of martial law in 1987. Liu (2007) focuses on the period since 2000, when the Democratic Progressive Party's governance emphasized localization policies, creating tensions between *guoyue* as a symbol of Chinese culture and Taiwan's local identity, making *guoyue* a focal point of political and cultural debates. At the same time, localization policies encouraged incorporating indigenous, Hokkien, and Hakka elements into Taiwanese music to highlight Taiwan's cultural independence. However, Liu (2007) did not make an in-depth analysis of the works of localized music creation.

### 3.2.3 Summary

Lee (2014) discusses how government power, through cultural policies, has influenced and shaped the development and cultural identity of three modern Chinese orchestras (Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, and Taipei Chinese Orchestra) during different historical periods. During the early historical period from 1920 to 1986, the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, under Mainland China's government leadership, became a symbol of national identity, while the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and the Taipei Chinese Orchestra developed their musical characteristics within their respective political contexts. In the early stage of frequent cultural exchanges from 1987 to 1996, as Taiwan lifted martial law and Mainland China underwent reforms and opening, the relaxation of government policies facilitated cross-regional cultural exchanges, further influencing the orchestras' musical styles and cultural expressions. In the recent stage from 1997 to the present, Hong Kong's return to China has further promoted musical exchanges between the three orchestras. Policy changes during this period have led the orchestras to pursue a unified musical style while also placing greater emphasis on maintaining and strengthening their cultural identities by integrating local cultural elements (Lee, 2014). Liu (2007) describes since 2000, Taiwan *guoyue* has continuously explored a localized musical identity in response to the localization policies of the Democratic Progressive Party and mentions the impact of these policies on the development of *guoyue*.

### 3.3 Chinese Orchestras in Southeast Asia

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra has established a "Nanyang Identity" in their orchestra performances while the *huayuetuan* in Malaysia demonstrate a collective "Malaysian Chinese" identity over the regional dialect speaking groups of their ancestral origins.

#### 3.3.1 Singapore

Lee (2022) argues that the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's "Nanyang-style music" is created and performed based on modern Chinese orchestral music, reflecting the cultural hybridity of the Chinese community in Singapore. Additionally, Lee (2022) proposes that the Nanyang-style music of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra is performed in two main ways: 1) Incorporating Nanyang elements into Chinese music, and second, by presenting a Singaporean identity through Chinese music. Tu's (1991) concept of "Cultural China" and Bernard's (2018) research on "Nanyang" provide information for the creation and performance of new forms of music by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

Additionally, research on the Singapore Chinese Orchestra has often focused on its social practices and development. For example, Wong (2010) examined the characteristics of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra from a sociological perspective. Ho (2015) provided a detailed account of the cultural development of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra since its inception, exploring its significant influence in both the local and international music scenes. Tan (2012) conducted an in-depth analysis of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's European tour, detailing the performance repertoire, audience reactions, and the tour's significance in enhancing the international reputation of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. Tan's study not only showcased the orchestra's performance on the international stage but also highlighted the importance of such cross-cultural musical exchanges.

Wong (2010) argues that the Chinese orchestras (COs) in Singapore face significant internal and external challenges that hinder their ability to create music harmoniously as a collective society. Internally, both professional and amateur musicians are dissatisfied due to oppressive work environments, insufficient

opportunities for creative expression, and an intensely competitive, factional atmosphere. Externally, pressures from government bodies, schools, and the public emphasize results and prestige over genuine musical enjoyment and creativity. These dynamics lead to a fragmented orchestral community rather than a unified entity. The above scholars have conducted detailed research on various topics related to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

### 3.3.2 Malaysia

The development of *huayuetuan* in Malaysia dates to the late 1800s, driven by the immigration of Chinese laborers from the coastal regions of Southeast China. During that period, these musical practices primarily served to reinforce Chinese identity and promote community cohesion (Tan & Camacho Fernández, 2023).

#### 3.3.2.1 Early *huayuetuan*

Tan (2000) discusses the development, organization, sponsorship, membership, repertoire, and social functions of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia since the 1960s. She noted that the *huayuetuan* originated from small Chinese ensembles that played *difang yinyue* (regional music). During the 1960s, *difang yinyue* ensembles began to adopt the musical instruments and music scores that were introduced from China and Hong Kong. Over time, they evolved into modern *huayuetuan* groups (Tan, 2000). The *huayuetuan* offered a venue for the Chinese working class and Chinese-educated youths to interact, create music, and acquire new skills through amateur cultural organizations and the “arts for people” movement (Tan, 2001, p. 112). Tan (2001) illustrates how the Malacca Teo Chew Association Chinese Orchestra (TCCO) maintained Chinese culture through close collaboration with clan associations while also providing an important cultural and social platform for community members.

In response to the National Cultural Policy (NCP) in 1971 which emphasized the development of the national culture based on the dominant ethnic group in the country, the Chinese population has become increasingly conscious of their identity and the necessity to overcome regional and cultural barriers to foster a collective consciousness and unified identity within the Chinese community (Tan, 2012). The *huayuetuan* (Chinese Orchestra) became a symbol of this collective Malaysian Chinese identity (Tan, 2000, p. 115). After the 1990s, various professional groups emerged with the understanding that asserting their Malaysian Chinese identity was essential for their effectiveness. Consequently, they became less reliant on China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan for music and dance influences. Local musicians and composers began incorporating elements and techniques from Malay, Indian, and other non-Chinese cultures into their works, showcasing the unique aspects of Malaysian Chinese identity through their musical practices (Tan & Lee, 2001). Both “amateur cultural groups” and professional musicians started to view music as an art form, focusing on the pursuit of “arts for art’s sake” and emphasizing artistic excellence (Tan, 2000; Wang, 2009).

#### 3.3.2.2 Sustainability and Commercialization

Tan and Camacho Fernández (2023) said that the main challenges faced by Chinese orchestras in Malaysia include lack of funding and government support, support from the community environment, cultural identity and musical expression, professionalization and career development, and artistic value and public perception. Tan (2001) notes that national policies marginalize Chinese cultural expressions, making it difficult for these orchestras to receive government support and recognition. Lee and Wong (2018) how the Dama Orchestra opted not to rely on Chinese associations for funding support but instead adopted a transformation approach, incorporating musical theater styles and integrating elements of Western pop music to attract the Malaysian elite (Lee & Wong, 2018). Loo and Loo (2012) examined the challenges faced by the Dama Orchestra in balancing traditional Chinese cultural elements with contemporary multicultural influences to attract a broader Malaysian audience such as incorporating Malay songs, such as P. Ramlee’s “*Getaran Jiwa*” and “*Lenggang-lenggang Kangkong*”, as well as the Tamil song “*Mukala Mukala*.” They further included the use of the Malay *kompang* and Tamil *tabla*. Lee and Wong (2018) also said this integration broadened Dama Orchestra’s appeal, as they reinterpreted these non-Chinese songs using Chinese musical instruments. Loo and Loo (2014) examine how the Dama Orchestra incorporates *shidaiqu* (Chinese golden oldies), along with Western chamber music, jazz, and other multicultural music genres, into their musical theater performances to appeal to a broader, more elite audience. Due to financial concerns, they reduced their members, incorporated pop elements, and performed Western music with Chinese instruments (Loo & Loo, 2012).

Chin (2017) argues that Regal Orchestra’s (Note 3) transformation from a traditional Chinese ensemble into a more diverse and commercialized music organization occurred under the influence of globalization, localization, Western culture, and Malaysia’s multicultural policies. Regal Orchestra gravitated from a focus on Chinese popular music to fusion bands, live bands, jazz bands, and *Muhibbah* (goodwill) performances, that catered to the diverse tastes of a multicultural audience. While the transformation into a commercialized entity was aimed



at survival, it also represented a process of redefining and recreating the orchestra's cultural identity within a multicultural and political context.

### 3.3.2.3 Traditional Music Education

Liu (2022) noted that there are now over 165 *huayuetuan* in Malaysia (Note 4). Chew (2013) explored the music practices of Chinese orchestras in four secondary schools, focusing on the origins of musical scores, techniques, and regional styles. She argues that the repertoires performed are rooted in the cultural heritage of Malaysia's dialect-speaking groups, such as the Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew, and Hainanese. As a result, performing the music effectively can be challenging without a deep understanding of the cultural nuances embedded within it. Lee & Wong (2017) that Chinese-medium schools became the core venues for *huayuetuan* activities, providing students with systematic music training to master the skills of playing traditional Chinese instruments. This not only helped students develop their musical talents but also allowed them to participate in *huayuetuan* activities outside of school. For example, many students continued to participate in alumni associations, political associations, and religious groups' *huayuetuan* after graduation, further promoting the spread and influence of *huayuetuan* in society.

### 3.3.2.4 Local and Global Identity

The Malaysian Chinese embody an eclectic identity that is mobile and fluid. Tan argues for the localization of the Chinese identity including the Malay and Peranakan culture (Tan, 1997, p. 114). In Malaysia, Chinese orchestras play a unique role in cultivating a Malaysian Chinese cultural identity that resonates locally while bridging dialect groups and strengthening community bonds. In examining the creative works of Hands Percussion Malaysia, Chan (2019) postulates for the adoption of a cosmopolitan and international identity influenced by global trends, ideas, and values. However, she emphasizes that choices in musical alliances were determined by the group's value for performance skills and cultural philosophies. This internationalized identity challenges the notion of a fixed, essentialized Chinese identity and, instead, celebrates the fluidity of Chinese culture (Chan, 2019). According to Chung (2002), the Chinese in Southeast Asia have multiple identity recognition, including cultural identity, ethnic identity, national identity, regional identity, etc. Their identity recognitions are influenced by factors such as profession, language, religion, country, political parties, and more. In citing the *dizi* player of the Malacca Teo Chew Association Chinese Orchestra (TCCO) who stated, "We play Malay and Indian music in *huayue* arrangements". Chan (2022) argues that the 24 *Jie Ling Gu* embodies a diasporic imagination of Chinese heritage, constructed by Malaysian Chinese who have never physically experienced China. Over time, it has evolved into a hybrid art form that reflects both global cultural memory and local Malaysian identity (Chan, 2022). Mi (2021) asserts the openness to the culture of Malaysian Chinese to integrate suitable music into their music-making.

The *huayuetuan* in Malaysia is currently experiencing an upsurge in the schools and community. The literature on *huayuetuan* in Malaysia does not explore how the *huayuetuan* in Chinese schools can maintain good performance standards without the support of national music degrees that cater to Chinese music instruction. The role of diplomatic relations, such as Malaysia the "Malaysia China" diplomatic relations which reached its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year (2024) also has not been examined. The approach used in *huayuetuan* to navigate the absence of government support for cultivating composers skilled in traditional Chinese music, the dominant influence of a particular generation of directors over repertoire selection, and the lack of agency among the younger generation in expressing their sentiments and hopes, as well as diverse musical aesthetic and preference would enrich knowledge on sustainability.

## 4. Conclusion

This Systematic Literature Review provides a detailed description of the historical development of Chinese orchestras originating from Mainland China and the Chinese diaspora. It delves into the history and development, identity, social functions, musical practices, and contemporary challenges of the Chinese orchestra. The Chinese orchestra is an important organization among the Chinese diaspora and serves as a vehicle for the sustainability and vitality of Chinese culture and community cohesion. Whether in musical presentation or current development, the Chinese orchestra not only sustains traditional Chinese musical culture but also integrates with local culture, forming a musical expression that represents Chinese culture. It plays cultural identity construction, educational functions, and community cohesion, while also facing the challenges brought by globalization and modernization.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the history and cultural significance of the Chinese orchestra, several research gaps remain. Musicians often traverse between Mainland China and the diaspora to acquire musical instruments, compositions, and approaches to transmission, manifesting the ongoing exchange

and interdependence in this cultural sphere. How do the communicative ties maintained by the Chinese diaspora with Mainland China continue to influence the development of its modern Chinese orchestras? Secondly, further investigation is warranted into the processes of local diversification in musical compositions and performance practices. For instance, examining how Chinese orchestras incorporate musical elements from the diaspora's rich cultural tapestry into their repertoire can provide a deeper understanding of the orchestra's role in reflecting and shaping a nation's multicultural identity.

Thirdly, on the inter-generational perspectives on identity, examining the perspectives of different generations of orchestra members regarding their identity. Understanding how younger and older members perceive and express their identity through music can reveal the evolving nature of cultural identity within the modern Chinese orchestra. This inter-generational perspective can also illustrate how the Chinese orchestra contributes to the continuity and transformation of the Chinese identity. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in the cultural identities of orchestra members over time can provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of cultural identity within the Chinese orchestra. These studies may examine how participation in the Chinese orchestra, associations, teachers, and composers influence members' perceptions of their cultural heritage and their sense of belonging to the Chinese community. Additionally, exploring how external factors such as government policies, societal attitudes, and global cultural trends impact these identities will enrich our understanding of the interplay between individual and collective identity construction.

Fourthly, organizational structure and power dynamics: Current research on the power and organizational structure of Chinese orchestra is limited, particularly in assessing and understanding the specific impact of these structures on musical performance styles and the strategic positioning of Chinese orchestra's development. In-depth research on how the management structure and power distribution within the Chinese orchestra influence their artistic expression and performance is crucial for understanding the overall development of the orchestra. Finally, multi-ethnic audience engagement and interaction: It is important to understand whether the audience of the Chinese orchestra includes non-Chinese locals and people from other regions or countries, and how the orchestra attracts and interacts with a diverse audience. Investigating these interactions can provide deeper insights into the broader social and cultural impact of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia's multicultural society.

This research demonstrates that much of the current literature on the Chinese orchestra primarily examines the monumental, hegemonic, and significant orchestras directed by the experienced generation. In this age of globalization characterized by the mobility of musical influences, we argue for exploring the interactions and power dynamics between different generations of directors, musicians, and composers in shaping the orchestra's trajectory and decisions made on repertoire and thematic direction. In addition, the transnational flow of musical interactions between the global Chinese communities through musical alliances and collaborations will provide a broader understanding of contemporary "Chineseness". Critical reviews in these areas will offer a more nuanced understanding of the multiple forces and stakeholders influencing and enriching each orchestral performance.

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## Notes

Note 1. “Chinese diaspora (散居)”, “cultural identity (文化身份)”, “music notation (音乐记谱)”, “educational functions (教育功能)”, “historical origins (历史起源)”, “policy (政策)”, “challenge (挑战)”, “*minzu yuetuan* [民族乐团]”, and “*minzu yuedui* [民族乐队]”.

Note 2. *Jiangnan sizhu* originates from the southeastern *Jiangnan* region of China, encompassing areas such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, along with Shanghai. This traditional folk music ensemble is community-driven, with amateur musicians gathering in teahouses and other public venues for regular performances. The ensemble features silk-stringed instruments like the *erhu* and *zhonghu*, as well as bamboo wind instruments such as the *dizi*, *xiao*, and *sheng*. Known for its improvisational style, *Jiangnan sizhu*, despite its former low social standing, has significantly influenced the development of the modern Chinese orchestra through its instrumentation and performance techniques. While its popularity has waned over time, it continues to be preserved and evolves as an important cultural practice (Witzleben, 1995).

Note 3. Regal Orchestra, originally a classical ensemble focused on traditional Chinese music, gradually evolved into a commercial music organization encompassing various musical styles and forms, reflecting the strategic adjustments made by the orchestra to adapt to modern market demands and cultural environments (Chin, 2017).

Note 4. Chew (2013) explained that these modern *huayuetuan* are often founded by Chinese schools from different regions and named after their respective schools. The number of school-based *huayuetuan* has grown significantly, from around 35 in the 1990s to about 165 by 2022. Specifically, there are 28 *huayuetuan* in Kuala Lumpur, 25 in Penang, 28 in Selangor, 17 in Perak, 14 in Sabah, 13 in Sarawak, 4 in Negeri Sembilan, and 7 in Malacca, among other locations. These orchestras perform and organize events within schools, in public spaces, and through associations (Liu, personal communication, September 2022).

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