

A Review of the Current Situation of Byzantine Music and China Research

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Abstract: The Byzantine Empire holds a pivotal position in world history, bridging the classical Greek and Roman civilizations with the Renaissance in modern Europe, exerting profound influence on human civilization. As a specialized branch of Byzantine studies, Byzantine music has served as a crucial link in European cultural development. While Chinese scholars have made notable progress in recent years through growing academic interest, their research still pales in comparison to the substantial achievements in this field abroad.

Keywords: Byzantine Empire, Music, Music History Research.

1. Byzantine Empire and the definition of Byzantine music

The Byzantine Empire, historically known as the Eastern Roman Empire (also called the Eastern Roman Empire) and commonly referred to as the eastern division of the Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital, originated in 324 AD when Emperor Constantine I ordered the construction of a new capital city in the ancient Greek settlement of Byzantium, later named Constantinople ("New Rome") in 330. This established the early 4th century as the starting point of the Byzantine Empire. After enduring barbarian invasions and the collapse of the Western Roman Empire's imperial authority, the Byzantine Empire endured for over a millennium until its final conquest by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. As a pivotal force in world history, it bridged the classical Greek-Roman tradition with the Renaissance movement in modern Europe, exerting profound influence on subsequent civilizations.

Byzantine music refers to the musical traditions that flourished and were passed down within the Byzantine Empire during its historical period[1]. However, as a medium of cultural transmission, the music that existed and developed during the empire's heyday could not have evolved in sync with its own rise and fall. Consequently, it is difficult to trace the trajectory of Byzantine music's development. Some scholars even argue that Byzantine music continued to develop and persist into the 19th century. In reality, after 1453, while music popular in the former Byzantine territories did not cease to evolve, it became increasingly influenced by Turkish and Islamic musical cultures. Therefore, the music that persisted after the empire's collapse and continues to be used in Eastern churches today is a product of historical development, fundamentally differing from what we define as Byzantine Empire music.

It is crucial to clarify that in authoritative dictionaries and scholarly research, the term "Byzantine music" is often equated with Byzantine church music. The Oxford Concise Music Dictionary defines "Byzantine music" as "Christian liturgical songs of the Eastern Roman Empire"[2], while the Dictionary of Foreign Music defines it as "Eastern Roman Empire's Christian church music" [3]. This conflation arises from two factors: historical remoteness and limited documentation, coupled with the deep integration of

Orthodox Christianity into society where religious and secular music became indistinguishable. Specifically, Byzantine church music primarily comprised "Eastern Christian hymns sung in Greek and ceremonial melodies composed to honor emperors, royalty, and high-ranking Orthodox officials"[4]. Scholarly research has predominantly focused on these elements, though attempts to analyze secular music have remained limited due to insufficient materials. Having evolved over millennia, Byzantine music exerted profound influence on later eras. Its notation system not only shaped the authoritative Gregorian chant of Western church music but also served as the precursor to modern notation. Even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, its musical legacy persisted within Eastern churches. To fully comprehend Byzantine music-whether through deciphering surviving scores, experiencing its essence, or exploring its cultural significance-it is essential to build upon existing scholarly foundations. Therefore, tracing the historical development of Byzantine music studies both domestically and internationally, while introducing significant research achievements, holds substantial academic value.

2. Research on Byzantine Music in China

Compared to the West, research on Byzantine music in China is far simpler and less abundant. "Overall, China's research on Western music exhibits a 'thin on antiquity, rich on modernity' pattern. There has been considerable introduction and research achievements regarding the period after the Classical era, particularly during the Romantic period which hosted numerous musicians and works, while the research findings on early music before the Classical era remain less promising. [5]" Against the backdrop where research on early Western music itself faces challenges, the study of Byzantine music naturally follows this trend.

The study of Byzantine music in China can be traced back to the early 20th century. Wang Guangqi (1892–1936), hailed as the founder of modern musicology in China, was a pioneering academic who pioneered comparative research methods to examine Chinese, Eastern, and Western music. Not only was Wang Guangqi a musician, but also a quintessential representative of patriotic intellectuals in modern times. He held the vision of using music to awaken

the nation and achieve the national cultural revival movement. To create "national music that embodies the 'Chinese national character'," he advocated for organizing ancient music and collecting folk melodies while applying scientific methods from Western music. During his studies in Germany, Wang began learning Western music and systematically introduced it to the Chinese people. His work **Research on Eastern and Western Musical Systems** was completed in 1924 and published by Shanghai Zhonghua Book Company in 1926. In Part V, "Medieval Europe," the section dedicated to Byzantine music contained brief yet inaccurate descriptions. For instance, he claimed that "the musical modes used in local churches evolved from ancient Greek melodies." However, he also astutely noted: "Modern European musical systems evolved from medieval ones, which themselves evolved from Byzantine church modes. Therefore, studying ancient European musical systems must begin with Byzantine church modes" [6]. While this perspective is now widely recognized in academia, it demonstrated remarkable foresight at the time.

Regrettably, Wang Guangqi's introduction failed to spark domestic scholars' interest in Byzantine music. In fact, the entire field of Byzantine studies had not yet achieved significant breakthroughs at that time. Chinese scholars generally believe that domestic Byzantine research began with the establishment of New China and primarily involved introducing a series of Soviet academic achievements. "Apart from a few topics, such as Mr. Qi Sihe's study on the relationship between China and the Byzantine Empire, Byzantine studies in China have not truly developed" [7], let alone musicology as its branch. However, this was not entirely a blank slate. From the 1950s to the 1980s, some Western general histories of music were translated or compiled, marking the emergence of Western music studies. By 1985, He Changlin published his paper "Chinese Vernacular Notation and Byzantine Music Notations," which became the first article mentioning Byzantine music since the founding of the People's Republic. The author argued that "Byzantine musical notation could have been introduced to Xinjiang in the 5th century before gradually spreading to the Central Plains, and might have been directly transmitted to Chang'an again in 635." In reality, the article did not clearly distinguish between the neumatic notation of Byzantine music and the Greek notation of the Roman period. Moreover, the references cited only included "Studies on Eastern and Western Musical Systems," "An Outline of Western Music History," and "The Grove Dictionary of Music" [8]. This indirectly reflects the scarcity of Byzantine music research achievements in China at that time.

A year later, in 1986, the journal **World History** published an article titled "Strengthening Research on Byzantine History." The paper proposed: "We should initiate efforts to build archival resources and cultivate talent, establish connections with relevant international research centers, collect historical documents through various channels, gather comprehensive information, and establish China's own Byzantine history documentation system within a few years. Simultaneously, we should organize historians to explore this uncharted territory—unearthing materials from ancient Chinese writings, translating contemporary world classics, and offering specialized courses while sending students abroad for further study." [9] This marked the beginning of a new phase in domestic Byzantine studies. The research on Byzantine music also entered a fresh era during this period.

First of all, the Dictionary of Foreign Music edited by Wang Qizhang et al. in 1988 directly included the entry "Byzantine music" which had not been mentioned in other Chinese dictionaries before, and explained it as "the Christian church music of the Eastern Roman Empire", and briefly introduced the notation method and the musical instruments used in Byzantine music during the Byzantine period.

The study of Byzantine music truly began to develop and exhibit diverse characteristics in the 21st century. In 2002, Jiang Dan translated German scholar Stahl's "Byzantine Music" and published it in the fourth issue of the quarterly journal **Central Conservatory of Music**. This article was adapted from the German **History and Modernity** (MGG) music dictionary, reflecting the author's research achievements during his studies at the University of Vienna's Department of Music. With its professional rigor and rich content, the paper provides a detailed introduction to the development of Byzantine music, classification and evolution of notation systems, as well as Western scholars' research on Byzantine music. It stands as an indispensable reference for understanding Byzantine musical traditions in China.

The second category consists of four master's theses. The first is the 2003 thesis "Preliminary Study on Byzantine Chant" from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Author Bi Yi elaborated on the development of chant, church liturgy, Byzantine notation, modal systems, and its cultural influence. Its most significant contribution lies in Chapter 4 titled "Books and Manuscripts Related to Byzantine Chant," which systematically examines musical texts preserved by the Byzantine Empire. The chapter traces the origins, core content, and usage of documents like the **Holy Scripture**, emphasizing that "researching Byzantine music requires cross-referencing various manuscript materials" [10]—a pioneering approach in Chinese academia. The second is the 2007 thesis "Research on Byzantine Music and Hymns" from Northeast Normal University. Organized into three sections: the history of Byzantine music studies, three types of chant, and hymn development, this concise yet well-documented work provides valuable references for subsequent research. In the conclusion, the author argues that "the Byzantine logical framework itself made the charm of Byzantine music primarily manifest in genre innovation rather than vertical musical evolution", countering claims of stagnation in Byzantine musical development. The third is the 2011 thesis "Preliminary Study on Byzantine Music" from Northeast Normal University, which demonstrates broader scope and deeper analysis. It not only covers Byzantine notation, polyphonic music, instrument development, and composers but also summarizes the fundamental characteristics of Byzantine music, defining its essence as "lyric art." Of particular note, the author also makes a point of discussing the influence of Byzantine music

It highlights its influence on China's musical culture. Although the discussion is general in nature, it offers a refreshing perspective. The final piece is the 2012 master's thesis titled "Preliminary Exploration of the Uniqueness of Medieval Byzantine Chant" from Fujian Normal University. The author Liu Tingru, also trained in musicology, presents a significantly different approach compared to the previous three works. Instead of focusing on the formal content of Byzantine chant, the paper directly examines its unique characteristics. The so-called "uniqueness of Byzantine chant" is derived through comparison with Western Gregorian chant, where the author identifies distinct developmental

paths between Byzantine and Western chant traditions. The study argues that Byzantine music did not stagnate but rather underwent "horizontal expansion across genres," incorporating and integrating "heterogeneous elements" [11]. It further reveals the secular functions of Byzantine chant, particularly its application in royal music. While the argumentation remains relatively straightforward, this work stands as a relatively successful attempt and contains many valuable insights worth referencing.

The quality of these dissertations varies, but they all mark the gradual entry of young scholars into the field of Byzantine music research and their own contribution to its development.

Since Byzantine church music is inseparable from Christian church music, especially the liturgical music of the Orthodox Church, we must also mention some research results in this respect, among which two papers and one book are representative.

Both papers were published in 2011: Xu Fenglin's "A Brief Explanation of Orthodox Music" and Zhang Wenba's "An Analysis of Orthodox Music." The former delves into the religious significance of hymns, lyrical content, Byzantine Orthodox chant techniques, and Russian Orthodox vocal forms. While the article doesn't strictly differentiate between Byzantine and Russian music, nor clearly distinguish historical compositions from contemporary works, its substantial content includes numerous song titles for easy reference and practical use.

In "A Brief Analysis of Orthodox Music", after providing a concise historical overview of the development of Eastern Christianity, the author categorizes the church liturgies into five distinct types: Byzantine Rite, Armenian Rite, Western Syrian Rite, Eastern Syrian Rite, and Alexandrian Rite. The text traces the evolution of Byzantine music from the troponion to the canon form, while also examining the renowned "octave modes" that defined this musical tradition. Compared to the previous article, this piece offers a more accessible and simplified exploration of the subject matter.

Another noteworthy work is Chen Xiaolu's 2006 publication *History of Christian Music*. This 670-page volume stands as a seminal domestic study on Christian music. The book adopts the Western chronological framework, tracing its development from around 313 AD through contemporary church music across various nations. Chapter Five, "Orthodox Church Music," provides an accessible introduction to Byzantine liturgical traditions, covering Holy Communion rituals, Byzantine hymns, notation systems, and international research findings. While concise, this chapter remains a valuable resource for understanding Byzantine musical heritage in China.

Finally, the development of Byzantine music studies in China is also reflected in its attention to international conferences and the latest research findings. In his 2012 paper titled "The International Society for Musicology (IMS) 'Music Research in the Balkan Peninsula Region' Held in Greece", Lu Guangrui introduced an international conference held at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece, in June 2011. The article listed key conference topics including "Research on Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantine Music", along with discussed paper themes such as "Manuscripts and Paleography of Byzantine Music" and "Historical and Musical Analysis of Typical Byzantine Hymns". While brief and merely listing topics without detailed elaboration, this paper still provides domestic scholars with a basic understanding of relevant content.

It is evident that Byzantine music studies in China have truly begun to develop since 2000. However, a comprehensive review of the history of Byzantine music research reveals several issues. First, domestic research started relatively late and progressed slowly. Although Wang Guangqi introduced Byzantine music to Chinese scholars in the 1920s, substantial academic work only emerged in recent decades. To date, no specialized monographs on Byzantine music have been published domestically, and the situation with academic papers remains concerning. This pales in comparison to Western scholarship, which has undergone centuries of development and produced countless research achievements. Second, translation dominates while original research is scarce. As discussed earlier, most domestic Byzantine music studies involve translating foreign research findings, with genuine scholarly papers being few and far between. This trend has also influenced domestic scholars' approach to Western music history. Zhao Zhongming commented: "This millennium-long period, which is crucial for compiling Western music history, has remained an underexplored chapter in published Western music history works in China. Many scholars, when addressing this era (especially in general histories), either gloss over it citing' insufficient materials 'or parrot others' claims without substantive analysis. Truly insightful researchers can be counted on one hand." [12] The term "millennium-long" refers to the medieval period, but subsequent text indicates the author incorporates the Byzantine Empire phase into this timeframe.

3. Conclusion

The primary reasons for this situation stem from three key factors. First, the scarcity of materials. Most musical manuscripts from the Byzantine Empire are preserved as handwritten scores, with these rare documents primarily housed in European libraries, monasteries, and museums. Apart from copies published by Western scholars or references in academic works, they remain inaccessible to domestic researchers. Although rapid internet development has provided some convenience, it still falls short of revealing the full scope of these materials. Second, language barriers. The aforementioned musical manuscripts are all written in Ancient Greek, which significantly limits researchers' access to primary sources. Moreover, most Western scholarly works available for study are not in English. Without fully utilizing research from German and French scholars, domestic scholars find it challenging to comprehensively understand various aspects of Byzantine music. Finally, Byzantine music studies present unique challenges. They require not only high musical literacy but also historical and religious knowledge. This dual demand often leads domestic researchers to struggle with balancing these requirements, hindering thorough and in-depth investigations.

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