

Around the World

The Practice and Development of Music Therapy in Mainland China

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Highlights:

- China has established a full academic pathway for music therapy, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral programs, with 17 institutions offering specialized programs and nearly 100 institutions providing related courses.
 - Over 300 institutions across China, including general hospitals, psychiatric centers, and rehabilitation facilities, offer music therapy programs. These institutions integrate diverse professional fields and approaches, blending Western techniques with traditional Chinese elements.
 - Music therapy in China faces challenges such as imbalanced curricula, lack of certification systems, and underdeveloped traditional music therapy. To address these, strategies include establishing a national certification system, enhancing faculty clinical experience, and promoting traditional Chinese music therapy.

Music therapy in China began in the 1970s with the application of music electrotherapy. By the 1980s, the introduction of the American music therapy system fostered a model that combined Western approaches with traditional Chinese elements. Over the past 50 years, China has made significant advancements in the field, contributing to public health and enriching global music therapy practices with unique insights.

Discipline Development in China

The formal development of music therapy as a discipline in China began in 1989, when Professor Zhang Hongyi pioneered the first music therapy program at the China Conservatory of Music. The program's first cohort consisted of five students from major psychiatric hospitals in Beijing and Xuzhou. In 1994, the conservatory admitted its first master's students in music therapy, and by 2003, the Central Conservatory of Music launched an undergraduate program. In 2010, the China Conservatory began

accepting doctoral candidates, establishing a complete academic pathway from undergraduate to doctoral studies.

Key figures such as Zhang Hongyi, Shi Feng, Wang Xudong, Gao Tian, Xie Hongyan, and Yang Yanyi played pivotal roles in the discipline's early development. Today, 17 higher education institutions in China offer music therapy programs, including renowned institutions like the Central Conservatory of Music, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and Wuhan Conservatory of Music. Additionally, nearly 100 institutions, such as Beijing Union University and Sun Yat-sen University, offer music therapy courses or electives.

Establishment of Music Therapy Institutions

The first music therapy institutions in China were established in the 1980s, with early adopters including the Shandong Coal Mining Linyi Hot Spring Sanatorium and the Chinese People's Liberation Army No. 202 Hospital. By 1984, Changsha's Mawangdui Nursing Home had opened a psychological music therapy room, utilizing music electrotherapy technology.

Post-1990, institutions incorporating Western music therapy techniques emerged in cities like Hong Kong, Beijing, Fuzhou, and Wuhan. Today, over 300 institutions in China, ranging from general and psychiatric hospitals to rehabilitation centers and special education facilities, offer music therapy programs. Professionals involved in these programs represent diverse fields, including medicine, psychotherapy, traditional Chinese medicine, education, and the arts.

Notable institutions include the Hong Kong Pang's Music Therapy Center, established in 1990, and the Gao Tian Music Psychology Health Research Center in Beijing, founded in 1999. Recent initiatives, such as the Brain-Neuro Music Therapy Laboratory at Wuhan Conservatory of Music and the Music Therapy Room at Yichang Psychological Hospital, have further advanced the field.

Challenges

Despite its progress, music therapy in China faces significant challenges:

- **Imbalanced Curricula:** Art schools often overemphasize music courses while neglecting psychology and medical training. Conversely, medical schools provide limited instruction in music therapy techniques.
- **Lack of Certification:** The absence of a nationally recognized certification system for music therapists hampers the professionalization of the field.
- **Misunderstandings and Misapplications:** Many medical institutions confuse music therapy with music entertainment or vibroacoustic therapy, overlooking its therapeutic functions in cognitive education, psychological treatment, and physical rehabilitation.

- **Short-Term Focus:** Some researchers prioritize short-term clinical trials over long-term studies, limiting the evidence base for sustainable applications.
- **Traditional Music Therapy Neglect:** While traditional Chinese music therapy has theoretical foundations, efforts to promote and integrate it into modern practice remain limited.

Strategies

To address the primary challenge in advancing music therapy in China, which is the lack of standardized guidelines for its application, a key solution is collaborative promotion of a nationally recognized certification system for music therapists, a critical step in formalizing and advancing the profession. Secondly, University faculty should gain hands-on experience in clinical settings to bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhancing both teaching and research. Finally, institutions offering music therapy should actively hire trained graduates or send staff for formal music therapy training. Continuing education programs featuring domestic and international experts can also further enhance the skills and research capabilities of practicing music therapists.

Conclusion

Over the past five decades, music therapy in China has evolved from its exploratory phase to substantial growth. Despite challenges such as academic disagreements, insufficient administrative support, and underdeveloped clinical techniques, the field is poised for further development. Future efforts will focus on discipline building, professional training, innovation, and international collaboration.

China's localized approach to music therapy is expected to play an increasingly significant role in shaping the global music therapy landscape, benefiting both domestic and international communities.



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