A comparison of commonly used Chinese and American children’s folk songs: To what extent are they alike or different?

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Introduction

As one of the oldest countries in the world, China has seen over five thousand years of well-developed civilization. This ancient civilization is well-known for the invention of many things that changed the course of mankind. Among these inventions, the ancient Chinese were one of the earliest civilizations to record and notate a complete system of music. On the other hand, America is a relatively young country that formed for around 250 years ago. And because America is a country of immigrants, the cultural base of the country is quite diverse- it is famous for synthesizing cultures from all over the world. Thus, American music may contain elements from musical traditions spanning from all across the entire world.

This paper focuses on analyzing the commonly used folk music from China and America, putting special focus on children’s songs. Because of the contrast in historical context between these two countries, it should be interesting to analyze how the simplest expression of cultural music is alike and different. Specifically, children’s songs, the most basic kind of folk music, is discussed because this music is taught to those who do not have any prior basic knowledge of music. Therefore, this music must be easy to understand and remember. More importantly, the quality of the children’s songs of a particular place may reflect the quality of the education system of a country and further the foundations of more mature music making in those musical traditions.

Similarities and differences between the children’s music of China and the USA are analyzed in two ways: First, the music elements. This is a focus on the music itself-evaluating how the music elements are used in the music to determine the quality of
each by discussing what makes each unique. Elements analyzed in this section include: melody, rhythm, tempo, instrumentation, texture and form.

The second method used to evaluate the similarities and differences of the children’s songs from China and America digs deeper than standard musical analysis to link the musical reasons for writing to the external factors - the cultural background of the music. In doing so, the musical theory can be defended to support how this music may benefit or abandon a nation’s youth in an education system. In this part, meaning of lyrics, cultural background of children’s songs, functions of children’s songs, and ways of teaching this music are discussed.
Analysis of examples of American children’s songs

Example I- Hot cross buns

This is a very simple and commonly used American children’s folk song. According to sheet music, there are only four measures in one section of the song, while the actual song has two sections. The lyrics in these two sections change while the melody stays the same making it a strophic form. For the music elements, the melody of this song is in G Major and uses a pentatonic scale. It has a very simple and repetitive melody because this song only use three notes which are the “B, A and G” - the median, supertonic and tonic notes in G Major. Also in one section of the song, the melody sequence “” repeats for three times in only four measures. So the melody of this songs can be defined as “repetitive”. Another element that should be mentioned is the rhythm. For the first two measure, it is repeating the same pattern of duration: two quarter notes followed by one half note. In the third measure, the rhythm changes into eight eighth notes which increase the tension of the melody. In the final measure, the rhythm returns back to the same as the first and second measure. By evaluating the rhythm with the melody, more characteristics can be found. The pattern of repetition and contrast suggests a simple ternary (ABA) form. The song is in G Major, with the tonic
note being a G4 – high in pitch relate to other folk songs for adults in this song, the third measure is not only creating a development and variation of the melody, but also the movement of the downward to tonic at the end of the phrase create a cadence of for the last measure to make this song sound more “perfect”.

Apart from the internal music elements, some external culture elements are also valuable to mention- such as the cultural background of “Hot Cross Buns” and its usage. Hot cross buns, literally, mean the sugary sweet buns that have a cross on the top of them and have butter and raisins inside the buns. These are very common celebration food for a Christian Easter tradition day – Good Friday. The crosses on the top of the buns represent the crucifix. This song was written from the perspective of a baker who was selling these hot cross buns. As a country that contain many Christians, selling cross buns on the street on Good Friday used to be a very common scene in an American’s life. So this song is not only teaching children about being a baker but also narrates to children a very common event in an American’s life.

**Example 2: London Bridge**

This is also a very common used children’s folk song in America. According to the melody, the form of this song can be define in either
binary form or a theme and variation form. Because the melody repeats twice with a
sight change at the end of the second phrase, it presents a small variation. This song
is again a strophic form with the lyrics changing at each repeat while the music
remaining the same. When analyzing music elements, it can again be identified that
this piece is in G Major. However, different from the first example, this song is
composed in a major diatonic scale and it uses more pitches than the first example.
Also, the rhythm of this song is more complex than the first: the usage of dotted
quarter notes is making the rhythm of this song more difficult to immediately identify
without subdividing beats. Because of most of the notes are quarter and half notes,
the long durations between notes make the songs feeling more slower than the first
example though the tempo of these two songs are similar.

The external cultural background of this song is also very interesting. London Bridge is
a real bridge in London, England, and this bridge was really rebuilt using different
materials. So this song is giving a historical background of some part of the American
identity with the lyrics telling the children about when London Bridge fell down
because it was originally using unreliable materials. So the educational function of this
music is to help children learn more words about different building material as well as
understanding historical events.
Internal characteristic- America

For obvious reasons, the melody of American children’s songs is generally quite simple. Additionally, the melodies are repeated many times to make the songs easier to remember. Thus, the melody can be defined as repetitive because the melody is continuing to repeat similar phrases or patterns of melody.

An inquisitive music learner may ask, “Do all American children’s folk songs use the same key?” Or, in other words, do American children’s songs use different keys for different groups of children? The answer to this question is “Yes”. In America, CSP is used for children’s learning. This term stands for the “comfortable starting pitch” (Erdei 1). CSP is used to suggest to the teacher the most comfortable tonic note for a child of a particular age and vocal range. Because the majority of children sing in a higher vocal range, the typical CSP for children’s songs is usually between a G4 and a C5.

Another interesting thing about American children’s folk song’s melodies are the scale that is used in the music. In the “150 American Folk Songs to sing, read and play” (Erdei), the melodies of 150 examples provided can be divided into two main parts: music that use the pentatonic scale and music that use the major and minor diatonic scales. In the 150 examples given in the Erdei book, the number of the songs that use a diatonic scale is 57 which is less than the number of the songs that use a pentatonic scale- 93. And so it can be concluded that American children’s folk songs prefer pentatonic scales over diatonic scales. Because in pentatonic scales, the five notes avoid all the half steps in a diatonic scale and create M2 or m3 intervals so the scales
sound more “perfect” and pleasant than the diatonic major scale – which contains children songs are created mainly to entertain and simultaneously educate children in a pleasant and happy so a song made in pentatonic scale will be more suitable than the tension provided when composing with a major diatonic scale.

Another musical element to analyze about American children’s folk songs is the rhythm. Like the melody, the rhythm of these songs is very simple. In American children’s songs, the most common duration of the notes in these songs is either two beats, one beats or half beats; the most commonly used notes tend to be half notes, quarter notes and eighth notes. Notes with shorter duration require a great amount of subdivision that cannot be accurately realized by small children, and thus sixteenth notes and rests are not used very often in these songs. These simple rhythms, combined with the simple melody of the songs, make the American children’s songs easier to be sung by a young child. Even more often repetition and sequence is applied to help make the musical phrases predictable.

When discussing rhythm, two other key points must be addressed: tempo (or speed) and meter (or organization of strong and weak beats). In regular pulses, when an American elementary music teachers introduces song, they do not announce the use of an allegro speed- usage of Italian terms would only make the children confused when doing sight singings. Instead, the teacher is the only one aware that the folk songs use a particular BPM as they determine the most appropriate speed at which to introduce the music. In “150 American Folk Songs to sing, read and play”, the calculated average BPM of all of these songs is approximately 130 beats per minute
which is an allegro speed. Compared to the children’s songs from all over the world, this tempo is much faster than the others, which shows one common characteristic of American children’s folk music is quite fast and bright since that the tempo of American children’s folk songs usually have fast tempo. And also, these songs are sung by children so the timbre of these music should the clear and bright because these are the most different characteristic of children’s voice and adults’ voice.

Another important element of music to consider is which instruments are used in the music. Most children’s folk songs in America were specifically designed for piano and voice. Young children don’t play instruments due to a lack of fine motor skills. However, some children’s folk songs for older elementary students have created Orff accompaniment that integrate simple xylophones, metallophones, and hand keyboard/ percussion instruments in order to develop those very skills.

Based on this evidence, the primary purpose of manipulating music in America becomes clear- to elegantly create ingenious music with the objective of simplicity.
Internal characteristic- China

The melody of the music is an important feature that reflects the special character of Chinese children’s folk song. Most of these songs come from ancient China and have been handed down through the generations by an oral tradition of elder to youth. This means that for many of these songs, there is still no actual sheet music for musicians to read, but rather than a shared meter understanding of how to perform these. Nonetheless, some score sheets do exist today- one such example is shown below. Upon quick glance, it may be noted that
Chinese children’s songs are share basic characteristics with American children’s songs- they both contain very simplified melodies with a limited number of pitches, as well as a small melodic range. Although some Chinese songs use odd keys in children’s songs, such as “Yue Liang” which is showed above. This song uses an E flat major. Additionally, there is always an extra section that provide the notes in the C major which may be transported into the numbered musical notation (jianpu notation) so that the children will be able to read the score with less interference while singing. For instance, “Yue Liang” is written to be performed in the key of E♭ Major. In Chinese jianpu notation, this is simply written as “1=E♭” and at the bottom of the score, the composer provides an extra part that present all the notes in E flat key in numbered musical notation compared with notes used in the song in western staff notation in the same key to help the children know which pitches they are going to sing. Furthermore, one defined similarity noted by many scholars in melody between these two countries’ children’s songs is scale preference. As previously observed, American songs use both the pentatonic and diatonic scales but more often using a pentatonic scales. The Chinese children’s folk songs are also most likely to use the pentatonic scales and seldom or even never use the diatonic scales. However, in this similarities, there are still one difference. In Chinese children’s songs, the pentatonic scale is used more frequently than in American children’s folk songs. As previously listed, there are about 24 percent less in “150 American Folk Songs to sing, read and play” are using diatonic scale than pentatonic scale. But this number increase to over 80 percent in Chinese children’s folk songs which have the scores left till now. As you can see, though
the scale of children’s folk songs are the similar, American children’s folk songs have far more of the diatonic scales than Chinese children’s folk songs.  

The rhythm of Chinese children’s songs also differs from the American songs. In the second score “Yao Dao Wai Po Qiao”, dotted quarter notes are used quite frequently on the score. This is unlike the American folk songs which do not use many dotted notes at all. Instead, most of the notes are quarter or eighth notes which equal to one beat and two beats in the 6/8 time. However, the duration of these notes are not actually different from the American folk songs when the tempo of Chinese children’s songs much slower than American children songs because in triple meters, the combination of one beat notes with two beats notes make the rhythm more groovy. In contrast, American children’s folk music usually use duple meters with very steady and even beats. So the rhythm of American children’s folk music are faster than Chinese children’s folk music. In regard to the instrumentation, Chinese children’s folk songs are also differ from American children’s folk songs. While American children’s songs simply use the piano as the accompaniment for the children’s voices, Chinese children’s songs typically only contain a single melodic line that is sung without
harmony. This occurs for a variety of reasons. The first reason is because of the oral tradition for passing on music in China. The songs have been able to retain many characteristics from ancient times when instrument were rare. Secondly, one technique that is used very often in Chinese children’s songs is word painting. One example of the usage of this technique used in Chinese children’s song is that when the lyric, “xiao lao shu shang deng tai”. As it stated, word, bottoming out at the pitches goes down in an octave. The word painting technique is not very commonly used in American children’s folk songs. One good instance is “London bridges” which shown before. When the lyrics are “falling down”, the pitches of melody are going upward stepwise which is the opposite of the meaning of “falling down”. So American children’s folk songs are not using word painting very often.

To sum up, Chinese children’s folk music shared many similarities with American children’s folk music, such as the simple melodies and rhythm; usually using a pentatonic scales. But there are still several internal differences of music elements: triple meters with groovy rhythm verse duple meters with steady meters; the higher frequency of using pentatonic scale than American children’s folk music.
Analysis of example of Chinese children’s folk music

Example: *xiaolao shushangdengtai*

This is a very commonly used Chinese children song that usually sung by elders to their grandchildren. The score is written down in *jian pu notation* which is a Chinese traditional notation system of music. However, since this song is sung by the elders, so when they are singing this song, the notes may not follow this score and improvising this song by changing the key, note or rhythm of this song. So this may be the reason that this song is in a through composed form. Because there is no exact notes or score of this song. However, we can still find some music characteristic of this song through this sheet music. Such as, this song is composed in a pentatonic scale though this is an improvised song. The reason for this is maybe because of there is no “m2” intervals in a pentatonic scale so it is easier for
people to sing and feeling comfortable. Also, the usage of woed painting in this song are very notable: when the lyrics are “ji li gu lu gun xia lai” in the last two measures which in English means “falling down”, the notes in the melody are going downward.

V The external differences between Chinese and American children’s folk songs

Many of the differences seen between these two music can be explained culturally. For instance, song lyrics which play a major role in reflecting a particular country’s ideals. According to the “150 American Folk Songs to sing, read and play” by Peter Erde(1985) 114 examples have lyrics that describe the daily life of a normal American and their everyday experiences. These songs then take on a “realism” style because the stories described in these songs often have actually happened before. Therefore, these songs primarily function to educate American children about how to be an American by using “typical American experiences”. However, this is not the only function of the lyrics of American folk songs. Another big reason for the creation of the music is simply to make the music for children to play games which have educational purposes. For instance, these games songs can help children to have motor skills, understanding of their bodies in time and space, how to interpret emotions and etc. In the 150 examples
provide in the “150 American Folk Songs to sing, read and play” by Peter Erdei (Erdei), over one-third of the music have related to a game or several different games because games is more efficient for an adult to educate children and the children are more likely to remember the game than the knowledge. Game is a very big part of the learning in our childhood because we can remember the physical movement more easily than remember some abstract words and listening. The American folk songs which contains very strong and steady beats can help the children to get how to play the game more easily. Also the rhythms of American folk songs are very repetitive and the rondo form can make the games that with songs be played longer to express children’s exceed energy. As you can see, the main function of the children songs in American is quite singular.

In contrast, the functions of Chinese folk children’s songs are quite complex. There are mainly three functions of Chinese children’s folk songs: 1) game songs, 2) educational songs and 3) the songs for language training- like tongue twister. The games songs are very similar to the game songs in America. But, they aim at the educational songs are very different. For American educational children songs, the lyrics are more entertaining because these songs are usually silly stories designed to entertain children and keep their attention. For Chinese educational songs, on the other hand, the songs are usually sung by the elders to young children, so the songs educate the children in a passive way- children cannot avoid listening to these songs and be educated by just listen to these songs-, using more mature, adult stories and also the language is more serious than the language in American educational songs.
This is because of the “one child policy” and excessive population in China. This allows the one child to receive a lot of attention from elder family members in their home. Though sadly these children may not have many friends of their same age level to play games with outside of school. Further most of the parents of them are employed full time, leaving their children with their grandparents. Of course, grandparents are less likely to play games with the children – instead, they just sit at home and tell their grandchild stories through songs. However, the elders are often not well-educated in singing so the songs are not sung in a meticulous technical fashion musically – typically the pitches are slightly incorrect, the rhythms are not steady and the songs are somewhat free meter because only one person sings the songs without harmony. Apart from the game songs and serious educational songs, the third category of the Chinese children’s folk songs is very similar to educational songs, but the difference is that the lyrics themselves have a very strong educational function - teaching topics like how to pronounce words, how to count numbers and the sounds of different animals. In this kind of song, the lyrics follow regular metrical pattern so that the children can learn more words and numbers and other words meanings from the songs. This is a very efficient way of learning.
VI Conclusion

From the analysis about American and Chinese children’s folk music above, most of the characteristics these two countries’ children’s folk songs are present. It is not difficult to find out that though these two countries have very different cultural background, the children’s folk music of these two countries have some shared characteristics, such as the simple melodies and rhythms; usually pentatonic scales and seldom diatonic scales; the educational function of the music is mainly teaching children more experience and knowledge of the life, learning words and train their language skills; another big function of these children’s folk songs is to get entertainment to the children. As you can see there are many similarities between Chinese children’s folk songs and American children’s folk songs. On the other hand, in these big circumstance of similarities of these two country’s children folk songs. They are still slightly between each other – although both two countries are likely to use pentatonic scales, Chinese folk songs are using the pentatonic scales more
frequently than American folk songs; Chinese prefer groovy triple meters and American prefer steady duple meters; the rhythm of Chinese contain more dotted quarter notes than American; In the instrumental part, Chinese are usually a cappella without accompaniment and American are usually accompanied by a piano; finally, Chinese are using jian pu notation but American are using staff notation.

In conclusion, although American children’s music seemed very similar to Chinese children’s folk music, and it is true that they shared several big similarities with each other. They are quite different from each other in many small parts of music elements.