

# From Western Polyphony to Modern A Cappella: Historical Roots and Contemporary Development in China

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## Abstract

This academic article examines the historical evolution and contemporary development of polyphonic and a cappella music, with a particular emphasis on the Chinese context. It begins by tracing the origins of Western polyphony in the Middle Ages, focusing on the shift from monophonic Plainsong to more intricate polyphonic forms such as Organum and the Motet. These innovations established the foundation for modern choral music and vocal harmony. The discussion then broadens to explore the global development of a cappella, highlighting the influence of styles like Barbershop and Vocal Jazz, and the role of international competitions such as the World Choir Games in promoting vocal ensemble music. In China, a cappella has seen notable growth in recent years, particularly within youth and university communities in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangdong. The rise of regional contests, cultural festivals, and institutional support has contributed to increased public engagement and artistic experimentation. These developments reflect both a growing appreciation for vocal performance and the integration of global musical trends into Chinese cultural life.

However, despite this upward trajectory, the development of a cappella in China still faces several obstacles. These include a lack of professional infrastructure, limited access to structured training programs, and an underdeveloped commercial market. The paper concludes by proposing key strategies to address these challenges, such as reforming music education, strengthening international

collaboration, and establishing clear professional standards. These recommendations aim to support the sustainable growth of Chinese a cappella and enhance its influence on the global musical stage.

**Keywords:** Western Polyphony; Modern A Cappella; Historical; Contemporary Development; China

## Introduction

A cappella, as a purely vocal form of music, has a rich historical lineage and has continuously evolved over time. Today, a cappella competitions are held worldwide, reflecting its enduring vibrancy on international stages and in diverse cultural contexts.

The sustained popularity of a cappella competitions highlights its significance in contemporary music. These events attract participants from various countries and regions, showcasing the diversity and dynamism of a cappella as a global art form. Through these competitions, one can observe the continual refinement of vocal technique, innovation in arrangement, and expressive artistry within a cappella groups.

Looking ahead, the evolution of Chinese a cappella is expected to become more diverse, with greater independence in both expressive forms and creative styles (Yang, 2015). This progression will naturally place higher demands on chorus groups. Enhancing performers' musical sensitivity, their ability to identify and shape vocal timbre, and their proficiency in artistic interpretation will be essential to future development. Chinese a cappella must also maintain emotional depth, vocal richness, and artistic integrity to bring out the beauty in performance, thereby elevating both the overall quality and the impact of live shows (Li, 2021).

At the same time, innovation in original themes and materials is necessary. Incorporating basic yet expressive melodies with advanced a cappella techniques—such as repetition, modulation, and reflection—requires ongoing practice and refinement. Performer coordination is another key aspect of development. A shared sense of pitch accuracy, rhythmic control, and an understanding of the piece's emotional tone are essential. While individual emotional fluctuations may occur, performers must align themselves emotionally within each section of the performance.

As Chinese a cappella continues to develop, breath control techniques must also adapt in response to these challenges. Additionally, careful attention must be given to the articulation, pronunciation, and rhyming of Chinese characters, as these elements influence vocal resonance and are

crucial to achieving an authentic and resonant a cappella sound in the Chinese language (Yiliang et al., 2024). Educators at general colleges and universities across various regions of China are increasingly emphasizing choral instruction as a means to enhance students' overall development and comprehensive quality (Xiaofang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the prominence of a cappella competitions underscores the genre's crucial role in the modern musical landscape. They serve as key platforms for both understanding and promoting a cappella music, fostering its growth, and ensuring its continued evolution within the broader spectrum of vocal performance.

## **The Development of Polyphonic Music in the Middle Ages**

During the 9th to 12th centuries of the Middle Ages, Plainsong, a monophonic chant, was performed by monks, with each individual singing a single melodic line at a time. The emergence of polyphony in the 9th century marked a significant advancement in Western music. Initially featuring two voices, it expanded to four voices by the 12th century, serving as an embellishment to religious services. Until the 13th century, polyphony maintained a supplementary role in liturgical settings (Xiaoyang, 2019).

One of the earliest forms of polyphony was Organum, which appeared around the 9th century. The earliest Organum was characterized by the Principal Voice carrying the original chant above, while the Organel Voice moved in parallel below. By the 11th century, Organum underwent significant transformations, including the incorporation of diverse intervals at phrase beginnings and endings, as well as the addition of second, third, fourth, and fifth intervals. These advancements enriched harmonic structures, enhanced the sense of musical phrasing, and contributed to a more systematic compositional approach.

Polyphony developed into various forms between the 9th and 13th centuries, including Organum, Florid Organum, Descant, Clausula, and Motet. By the 12th century, Free Organum had emerged, demonstrating greater independence between voices. Around 1100, the hierarchical relationship within polyphonic compositions evolved Plainsong was repositioned as the foundational lower voice, while the Organum Voice took prominence in the upper register, granting it greater artistic independence.

In polyphonic settings of Hallelujah, only the solo sections of the chant were arranged polyphonically, while the remainder retained its monophonic character. This shift underscored the growing artistic sophistication of polyphony, transitioning from an improvised singing tradition to structured compositions meticulously crafted by church composers (Deng, 2022).

## **World Choir Competition**

The 2006 World Choir Games marked a notable shift in the trends within choral competitions. While the number of award-winning ensembles in the Folk Music a cappella category decreased, there was a discernible rise in the participation of younger groups in the Vocal Jazz a cappella category. For instance, the KIVI Children's Choir, which won the gold award, had an average age of 12 to 14 years old. This group, based at the Lithuanian Youth Centre, is known for its impressive stage performances, characterized by movement and improvisation, all without a conductor. Their repertoire includes a mix of adapted Lithuanian folk songs as well as popular and jazz pieces. This emerging trend highlights the increasing engagement of young people in jazz music and unaccompanied choral singing, reflecting the expanding influence of music education. As young people are exposed to a wider array of musical genres, they are more eager to explore and participate in innovative forms of music like Vocal Jazz a cappella.

Additionally, the development of Barbershop music in the late 19th century played a pivotal role in shaping the choral music landscape. In 2012, the 7th Olympic Choral Festival, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, introduced Barbershop as a new competition category, acknowledging its cultural and musical significance. Barbershop music, which originated in American barbershops, evolved from informal community gatherings into a well-defined musical style. Rooted in the African American community, the genre was shaped by the musical talents and creative techniques of African American singers, including the "cracking up" technique. This technique involves adjusting the volume, timbre, and resonance of the voice to refine the melody and produce harmonies that are both clear and resonant. The rise of Barbershop Harmony not only reflects the impact of community culture on musical development but also underscores the innovative contributions of African Americans to the broader musical landscape.

Over time, Barbershop music has transitioned from a local, community-based art form to an internationally recognized style. Its inclusion as a formal category at the World Choir Games and the

Olympic Choral Festival highlights the widespread appreciation and influence of this unique genre, which continues to captivate audiences and musicians alike around the world (Tang, 2018).

## **The Rise and Challenges of A Cappella in Modern Times**

Since 2009, a cappella has gradually become a mainstream trend, attracting numerous young people, especially those without formal musical training, to explore harmony as a means of musical expression. Based on observations from the A Cappella Music Camp and competitions held over four consecutive years, students make up the majority of participants. A small number of individuals who continue to perform or promote a cappella post-graduation often draw inspiration from their school choir experiences.

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In China's southeastern coastal regions, a cappella has expanded beyond campuses into broader social spheres. Meanwhile, groups in central and western areas are transitioning from technical mastery to personal artistic exploration. However, the lack of a systematic training framework and effective communication networks remains a common challenge that hinders further professionalization and widespread adoption (Gao, 2020).

## **The Development Status of A Cappella in Various Regions in China**

While the rise of a cappella music in China may have lagged behind other regions, its rapid development within a relatively short span has been nothing short of impressive. In Beijing alone, nearly one hundred university choirs have been established, including notable groups such as the Peking University A Cappella Choir and the Yale University Pudding Proof Choir. These ensembles have cultivated an environment of collaboration and exchange among student groups. Prestigious institutions, including Beihang University, Tsinghua University, Central University for Nationalities, Beijing Institute of

Technology, and Beijing Normal University, have also seen the formation of their own a cappella groups. Moreover, independent a cappella choirs have begun to emerge across the city, reflecting a growing and vibrant interest in the genre. Simultaneously, the production of original compositions within the a cappella community is on the rise, signaling not only the genre's increasing popularity but also its expanding potential for creative innovation and artistic development (Wang, 2022).

The a cappella community in Shanghai has experienced impressive growth, with nearly 40 unaccompanied choirs currently active. These diverse ensembles—such as AHA from Shanghai Normal University, the Vocal Charm Choir from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the Wenzhen Middle School Unaccompanied Choir, the Friday Knight Voice Orchestra, and the SEMISCAN Voice Orchestra—showcase the city's exceptional talent and vibrant creative environment within the a cappella genre.

On a global scale, the development of a cappella music in China reflects the genre's continuous evolution and innovation in different cultural and technological contexts. By exploring the forms and practices of unaccompanied choral music across various regions and time periods, we can gain valuable insights into the widespread adoption and future potential of this art form. The fusion of technological advancements, expanding genres, and the growth of local ensembles has contributed to a global surge in a cappella music, transforming it into a widely recognized and celebrated mode of musical expression. In China, the genre has increasingly resonated with audiences, particularly younger generations and amateur musicians, gradually becoming a mainstream form of artistic expression.

In recent years, music events in the Yangtze River Delta, such as the Yangtze River Delta A Cappella Music Competition, have emerged as key platforms for advancing the growth and visibility of a cappella music. Since its inception in 2011, this competition has developed into a highly influential cultural event in the region, drawing attention from a broad array of a cappella groups. The 2023 competition featured 34 teams in the finals, comprising 22 youth groups, 9 junior groups, and 3 senior groups, who presented a wide variety of vocal performances. After intense competition, awards were given in multiple categories, including gold, silver, and bronze medals, as well as individual prizes and championship titles. The winning teams included Kangyuan, WACappella Kid, Chasing Light Singer, and Shanghai Petrochemical Haishang GM&GF. Additionally, the official founding of the Yangtze River Delta A Cappella Alliance during the competition marks a significant step forward in uniting efforts to foster the development of a cappella in the Xuhui district and surrounding areas.

In recent years, contemporary a cappella music in China has undergone remarkable growth and development. This expanding scene is reflected in the increasing number of a cappella groups, the establishment of dedicated festivals and competitions, and the rising participation in international events. These trends highlight the growing interest in vocal harmony music and its distinctive appeal to Chinese audiences.

A particularly significant aspect of China's a cappella landscape is the competitive nature of the scene. A cappella competitions have become increasingly popular across the country, providing valuable platforms for ensembles to demonstrate their vocal skills, creativity, and stage presence. These competitions often feature diverse categories, including traditional a cappella, beatboxing, vocal percussion, and innovative arrangements, which underscore the genre's versatility and artistic potential (Gao, 2016).

### **Beijing**

The A Cappella ecosystem in Beijing is relatively well-established, with over 50 teams having emerged across three main districts—east, south, and north—over the past decade. The eastern district primarily consists of professional ensembles affiliated with modern music conservatories, while the northern district has experienced rapid expansion due to the high concentration of universities and the active participation of student clubs. In the southern district, institutions such as Beijing University for Nationalities and its neighboring colleges have demonstrated significant growth, even incorporating an elective course on A Cappella appreciation into their curriculum. Independent groups like Zhuangsheng and Voice Out of Control are also dispersed throughout the city, contributing to Beijing's dynamic A Cappella landscape, which is characterized by a high level of technical proficiency and a wealth of performance opportunities.

### **Wuhan**

Wuhan has also witnessed remarkable growth in its A Cappella scene, with more than 40 active teams. The contributions of early pioneers like Wu Hao have played a crucial role in fostering this expansion. Additionally, collaborative concerts organized by various university ensembles have further propelled the popularization of A Cappella in the region, creating a vibrant and expanding musical community.

## **Guangdong**

Since the establishment of CL FORM in 2005, Sun Yat-sen University in Guangdong has nurtured a thriving A Cappella ecosystem, with 15 teams across its four campuses. This development has significantly contributed to the widespread adoption and enthusiasm for A Cappella within the province.

## **Shanghai**

Although the number of A Cappella teams in Shanghai (approximately 30) is smaller compared to Beijing and Wuhan, the city stands out due to its international outlook and innovative approaches. Shanghai has been at the forefront of conceptual and performance standards, largely benefiting from exposure to high-end international performances, which have fueled the evolution and sophistication of local A Cappella groups. This international influence has enabled Shanghai's A Cappella scene to distinguish itself through its forward-thinking vision and artistic excellence (Geng, 2019).

## **Choir Competition in China**

The 2024 competition is especially noteworthy, not only due to its widespread participation from the Yangtze River Delta region but also because it showcases the diverse and far-reaching appeal of a cappella music. Several defining characteristics of this year's competition are as follows:

**Wide range of participating teams:** A total of 37 teams participated in the finals across different age groups, including youth, middle-aged, and senior categories. This diversity highlights the broad appeal and adaptability of a cappella music across generations. Notably, there has been a significant increase in older age groups, with 24% of the teams being from this demographic, demonstrating the genre's ability to transcend age barriers and captivate audiences of all ages.

**Diversity of performance styles:** The development of a cappella music in China shows a clear trend towards diversification. In this competition, participants not only showcased traditional unaccompanied choral pieces but also incorporated a variety of modern music genres, such as contemporary pop, jazz, and more. This trend reflects the innovative nature of Chinese a cappella groups, who are adept at blending traditional forms with modern musical trends. It also signals the potential for future integration and expansion of diverse musical styles, highlighting the richness and creativity that are increasingly characteristic of Chinese a cappella music.



To further nurture this growth, it is essential to continue fostering innovation and diversity within the Chinese a cappella community. Encouraging the exploration of new musical styles and performance formats, supporting the creation of original works, and promoting cross-border collaborations will help push the artistic boundaries of a cappella music. By doing so, Chinese a cappella can contribute to the ongoing global evolution of this unaccompanied choral art form, ensuring its continued vitality and relevance for years to come.

**Innovative Approaches to Sound:** The continual advancement of technology, combined with ongoing creative innovations, has greatly elevated the technical quality and artistic expression of a cappella music. Events like the Shanghai Unaccompanied Choral Music Festival have been instrumental in fostering both technical expertise and creative excellence within the a cappella community. Contestants displayed impressive inventiveness in their vocal performances, using their voices not only to deliver traditional melodies but also to replicate various instrumental sounds, adding layers of richness and vitality to their performances. With increasing access to specialized training and technical resources, Chinese a cappella music is poised to achieve an even higher standard of artistry, positioning itself more prominently on the global stage.

**Globalization Potential:** China's a cappella scene has demonstrated clear potential for international expansion, evidenced by its growing connections with global music festivals. Notable events such as the Shanghai Unaccompanied Choral Music Festival and the National Contemporary Children's Unaccompanied Choral Music Competition have played a pivotal role in raising the profile of a cappella music within China. These festivals not only promote the enhancement of technical skills but also foster creativity through diverse programming and the participation of renowned international experts. The children's competition, in particular, strengthens the foundation of a cappella by engaging and inspiring the younger generation.

These events go beyond being mere competitions, acting as cultural hubs that promote the genre. Through activities such as masterclasses, public lectures, and audience interactions, they deepen the appreciation of a cappella music among the general public, sparking widespread enthusiasm for cultural participation. As international events like the A Cappella International Music Festival continue to grow, Chinese a cappella music will benefit from more opportunities for global collaboration and exchange. This will enhance the international visibility of Chinese a cappella, provide domestic groups with platforms to showcase their talent, and facilitate the further global expansion of the genre.

Strengthening ties with global a cappella organizations will offer Chinese performers invaluable exposure and recognition, fostering cross-border exchanges of both technological advancements and artistic practices.

**Educational and Cultural Outreach:** As initiatives to promote a cappella music education and public engagement grow, events like the National Children's Unaccompanied Choral Competition and community music programs will continue to solidify the foundation of a cappella in China. These efforts, particularly in educational contexts, will further promote the genre, ensuring that the next generation of musicians develops both technical skills and a passion for a cappella. Strengthening music education, particularly for young people, will cultivate not only proficiency in a cappella but also a broader appreciation for the art form.

Community and campus-based outreach programs play a vital role in expanding the reach of a cappella music. By encouraging more individuals to participate, these initiatives help to establish a solid societal foundation for the genre's growth. These efforts will foster a new generation of a cappella enthusiasts and creators, ensuring a vibrant and sustainable future for the genre. As more people engage with a cappella music, it will continue to evolve, expanding its presence both within China and on the international stage.

The successful organization of the Yangtze River Delta A Cappella Music Competition, alongside related musical initiatives, serves as a testament to the rapid growth and increasing prominence of a cappella music in China. These events not only highlight the vast diversity and creativity inherent in the a cappella genre but also encourage participation across various age groups, underscoring the broad appeal and inclusivity of this musical form. The prospects for the future development of Chinese a cappella music are indeed promising. Through ongoing innovation, diversification of styles, fostering deeper international exchanges, bolstering educational outreach, and the establishment of supportive platforms, Chinese a cappella music is poised to play an increasingly significant role in the global music landscape.

Furthermore, through its strategic connections with international music festivals, Chinese a cappella is set to gain enhanced recognition and broaden its influence on the world stage. This not only facilitates the growth and advancement of the genre within China but also enriches the global music community with new and diverse musical experiences. As China's a cappella scene continues to evolve through continuous innovation and international collaboration, it is primed to make a lasting impact,

fostering greater cultural exchange and integration on the global music platform. The future of a cappella music holds tremendous potential, both in terms of artistic development and its capacity to bring people together through the universal language of music (Lun & Dong, 2014).

## Challenges and Future Directions for Development

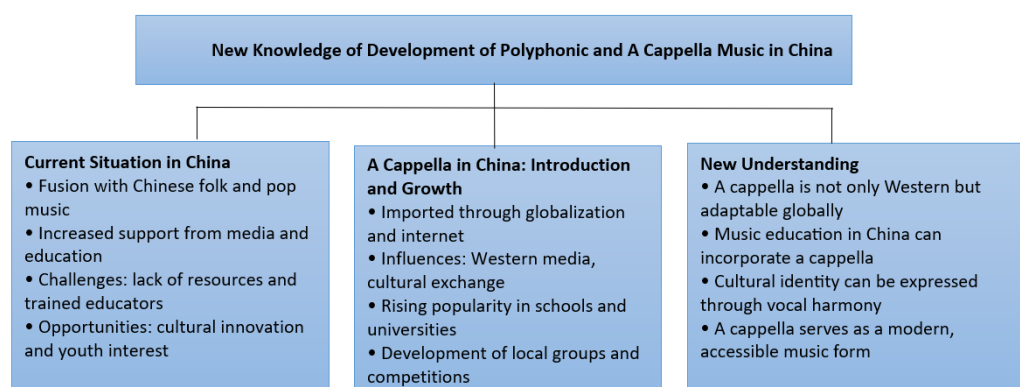
Although a cappella music has made significant progress across various regions in China, it continues to face several key challenges:

**Limited Professional Development:** Unlike regions such as Taiwan, the Chinese mainland has yet to establish fully professional a cappella ensembles. Most groups remain at an amateur level, with members often having to juggle their primary responsibilities alongside their musical pursuits.

**Lack of Systematic Training:** The current training framework remains underdeveloped, making it difficult for newcomers to gain entry into the field. There is an absence of standardized training protocols and professional arrangement capabilities, leading many groups to rely heavily on existing repertoires rather than engaging in structured, skill-specific training (Guo, 2024).

**Underdeveloped Commercialization and Market Presence:** The commercial operation and market promotion of a cappella music are still in their early stages, requiring further exploration and strategic initiatives to enhance sustainability and industry recognition (Dong, 2021).

## New knowledge



**Figure 1** New Knowledges Diagram of Development of Polyphonic and A Cappella Music in China

This figure illustrates a structured overview of the evolving landscape of polyphonic and a cappella music within China, highlighting three major areas: the current situation, the process of introduction and growth, and the emergence of new understanding.

**Current Situation in China:** outlines the present state of a cappella and polyphonic music development. Chinese music education and performance scenes are experiencing a fusion of traditional Chinese folk elements and contemporary pop music with choral and a cappella forms. With growing support from media platforms and educational institutions, the genre is gaining visibility. However, challenges persist, particularly a shortage of trained educators and limited resources. At the same time, cultural innovation and the enthusiasm of the youth population present promising opportunities for growth.

**A Cappella in China: Introduction and Growth,** emphasizes how a cappella music has been introduced and developed in China. Globalization and internet connectivity have played key roles in bringing a cappella into the Chinese cultural scene. Influences from Western media and ongoing cultural exchanges have shaped local interpretations of the genre. A cappella is increasingly popular among students in schools and universities, with local performance groups and competitions further driving its development.

The final section highlights the broader cultural and educational implications. It suggests that a cappella is no longer viewed as a purely Western art form but as one that is globally adaptable. In China, it is being integrated into music education, offering a vehicle for expressing cultural identity through vocal harmony. Additionally, its accessibility and modern appeal make it an effective and inclusive tool for contemporary music engagement.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the evolution of polyphonic music from the Middle Ages to contemporary a cappella reflects a remarkable journey of artistic innovation, cultural adaptation, and technological advancement. From the early development of Organum as a liturgical enhancement to the vibrant, genre-blending performances of modern a cappella groups, vocal music has continually adapted to reflect societal changes and artistic aspirations. In China, a cappella has grown from a campus-based interest into a dynamic and diverse musical movement, marked by the formation of numerous

ensembles, the rise of original compositions, and increasing participation in national and international competitions. Despite ongoing challenges such as limited professionalization and the need for systematic training, the genre's future is promising. With growing educational outreach, international collaborations, and community engagement, a cappella music in China is poised to achieve greater artistic depth, cultural influence, and global recognition, continuing to unite people through the shared power of the human voice.

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