

Chronotopes of Sound: Soviet Accordion and Argentine Bandoneón in China's Musical Landscape

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Abstract

This paper examines the divergent fates of the Soviet accordion and the Argentine bandoneón in China's musical landscape, analyzing how historical, ideological, and institutional factors influenced their reception. While the Soviet accordion was embraced and institutionalized as a symbol of proletarian culture through state-sponsored education and propaganda during the Maoist era, the bandoneón remained an exotic curiosity, never achieving widespread acceptance. Through the lenses of Bakhtin's chronotope, Peircean and Agha's concept of indexicality, and sound anthropology's soundscape theory, the study demonstrates how the Soviet accordion became embedded in the soundscape of socialist China, acquiring second-order indexicality as a symbol of collective ideology. Conversely, the bandoneón's limited exposure and lack of institutional patronage prevented it from acquiring comparable cultural meaning. This comparative analysis highlights the critical role of ideological fit, institutional pathways, and public soundscapes in determining whether foreign musical practices are localized or marginalized in new cultural contexts.

Keywords

chronotope • indexicality • soundscape • musical globalization • ideological adaptation

1. Introduction

Musical instruments do not circulate across cultures in isolation; historical, ideological, and institutional forces shape their reception. This study examines why two closely related free-reed instruments, the Soviet accordion and the Argentine bandoneón, have had such divergent receptions in China's musical landscape. In the mid-twentieth century, the accordion (particularly the free-bass accordion favored in Soviet conservatories) became deeply ingrained in Chinese music education and state-sponsored performance, supported by socialist ideology and cultural policy. By contrast, the bandoneón, the signature instrument of Argentine tango, has remained an exotic import in China, admired by niche enthusiasts but never achieving wide adoption or institutional support. Why did the accordion thrive as a symbol of socialism in China, while the bandoneón languished as a curiosity? This paper argues that ideological compatibility, institutional pathways, and chronotopic (time-space) positioning fundamentally shaped these outcomes. The Soviet accordion aligned with Chinese revolutionary narratives and was amplified through state-controlled soundscapes, allowing it to

acquire enduring indexical meanings (signifying proletarian culture and patriotism). In contrast, the bandoneón lacked a comparable historical nexus or state patronage in China, limiting its ability to develop socially recognized meaning beyond "foreign exoticism."

To answer the research question, the paper employs a theoretical analysis grounded in three key frameworks: chronotope, indexicality, and soundscape. These frameworks enable a systematic comparison of how each instrument was positioned in Chinese cultural time-space, how each accrued (or failed to accrue) social meanings, and how the listening environment shaped public reception. Following this introduction, Section 2 defines the theoretical concepts—*chronotope* as defined by Bakhtin, *indexicality* in the Peircean and Agha's sense, and *soundscape* as developed in sound anthropology—and discusses their relevance to music transmission. Section 3 then presents the case studies: first, the integration of the Soviet accordion into China, and second, the limited presence of the Argentine bandoneón. Each case is analyzed through the lens of the

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theoretical frameworks (chronotopic fit, indexical meaning, and soundscape exposure). Section 4 offers a comparative analysis, highlighting how differences in institutional adoption and ideological fit led to the accordion achieving a second-order indexicality in China (i.e., becoming a symbol of deeper social meanings), whereas the bandoneón remained peripheral. Finally, Section 5 concludes with the implications of these findings for understanding music globalization and ideological adaptation and suggests directions for future research on the localization of foreign musical practices. Throughout, the goal is to demonstrate the analytical process clearly, showing how theory can illuminate the “thought path” by which these instruments attained such different fates in Chinese musical culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Chronotope (Bakhtin)

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope¹ refers to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in cultural narratives. Literally meaning “time-space,” a chronotope provides the background that makes events and symbols meaningful by situating them within a particular historical time and social space. In literature, Bakhtin (1981) used the chronotope to explain how novels link plot developments to specific time-space contexts (e.g., the chronotope of the road, the castle, etc.). In a broader cultural sense, chronotopes can shape how certain artistic forms or practices become emblematic of a given era. They tether cultural symbols (such as musical genres or instruments) to historical moments and locales, endowing those symbols with narrative significance. For example, an instrument can be associated with *modernity* or with a nostalgic past depending on the chronotopic frame through which it is heard.

Applying the concept of chronotope to music enables us to ask: *what time-space does a musical instrument signify?* An instrument that strongly aligns with a society's key historical narrative will more easily integrate and symbolize that era, whereas one that arrives outside the main narrative may remain marginal. Bakhtin's chronotope thus helps explain why certain instruments become “emblematic of specific historical moments” while others stay peripheral. For instance, Hilary Dick's ethnographic work expands on this idea by showing how chronotopes operate in mass media contexts. In her analysis of Mexican radio broadcasts, Dick (2010)² observes that media

soundscapes create temporal-spatial frames that position some voices or sounds as authoritative (aligned with the nation's modern identity) and others as marginal. In other words, the broadcast medium can generate a chronotope that privileges specific musical styles as symbols of progress or tradition. By extension, if a musical instrument in China became tied to the chronotope of the Maoist revolution (a specific configuration of time and space: 1950s–1970s collectivist China), it could gain privileged status as part of that historical narrative. If another instrument lacks such a chronotopic alignment, it may also lack an analogous cultural foothold. In this study, the concept of chronotope will be employed to compare how the Soviet accordion aligned with a revolutionary time-space in Chinese history, whereas the Argentine bandoneón did not find a resonant chronotope in China.

2.2 Indexicality (Peirce and Agha)

The concept of indexicality originates from Charles Peirce's semiotics,³ and refers to the process by which a sign (a sound, word, image, etc.) points to or indexes some object or meaning due to a factual or contextual connection. An index is a sign that has a direct or causal link with its object (e.g., smoke as an index of fire). In sociocultural terms, indexicality explains how certain forms of expression come to “point to” social identities, values, or contexts. As linguist Michael Silverstein elaborates,⁴ repeated usage can elevate an index to a higher-order social meaning. For example, a first-order index might be a regional accent that simply indicates a person's place of origin. In contrast, a second-order index occurs when that accent comes to symbolize stereotypes or ideologies about a particular region. In *Language and Social Relations*, Asif Agha (2007)⁵ similarly discusses how linguistic or cultural forms accrue socially recognized meanings through processes of enregisterment and repetition in social contexts. Over time, people come to associate a particular form with a social group or context—this is indexicality at work.

Translating this to music, the sound of an instrument can become an index of something beyond itself: a social class, an era, an ethnicity, an ideology. For instance, a church bell indexes religious worship, or a bagpipe may index Scottish heritage. Such associations are not inherent in the sound but are learned through cultural exposure. The key to indexicality is sustained contextual association. When an instrument is

no. 2, May 2010, pp. 275–290, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01255.x>.

3 Charles Sanders Peirce. 1955. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Edited by Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications.

4 Michael Silverstein. 2003. “Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life.” *Language & Communication* 23 (3–4): 193–229.

5 Asif Agha. *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

1 Mikhail Bakhtin. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

2 Hilary Parsons Dick. “Imagined lives and modernist chronotopes in Mexican nonmigrant discourse.” *American Ethnologist* 37,

consistently heard in settings or alongside particular messages, people begin to associate that instrument with those contexts. If the process continues, the instrument's sound can acquire what Silverstein calls second-order indexicality, which evokes an abstract social meaning even when heard outside the original context. In simple terms, the instrument becomes a symbol. In China, as we will see, the accordion's role in revolutionary propaganda performances meant its music came to index socialist ideology itself, beyond just the notes being played. By contrast, the bandoneón's rare appearances offered little opportunity for such indexical enrichment. This framework of indexicality will help analyze how the accordion's sound became a socially loaded sign (a marker of proletarian patriotism). In contrast, the bandoneón remained a relatively "empty" sign, or one only indexical of foreignness.

2.3 Soundscape (Samuels et al.)

The concept of soundscape refers to the acoustic environment and the way it is perceived, experienced, and shaped by people. Originally introduced by R. Murray Schafer to denote the totality of sounds in a given environment, the term has been adopted by anthropologists to explore how power and culture shape the experience of listening. Samuels et al. (2010)⁶ propose *soundscape* as a framework for a "sounded anthropology," emphasizing that sound is not just a backdrop but an active element of social life. A soundscape includes all the sounds heard in a particular context—from music and speech to ambient noise—and crucially, it can be curated or regulated by institutions. For example, a government may encourage certain songs to be broadcast in public spaces or schools, thereby cultivating a *state-sanctioned soundscape* that citizens internalize. Samuels et al. describe how soundscapes shape social identity by embedding certain sounds into public spaces, making them an inherent part of a community's environment. In other words, what people hear repeatedly in daily life becomes part of the collective consciousness, influencing what sounds are considered normal, prestigious, or emotionally resonant.

In the context of our study, soundscape provides a way to understand the role of institutional and public listening environments in the fate of an instrument. China's urban soundscape during the Mao era (1950s–1970s) was carefully orchestrated, with revolutionary music and mass songs dominating radio broadcasts, rallies, schools, and workplaces. This meant that certain instruments (like the accordion, loudspeaker, drums, etc.) were frequently heard and became familiar symbols of the nation's sonic identity.

6 David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello. 2010. "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 329–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25735115>.

The bandoneón, on the other hand, was largely absent from these official environments. As a result, it remained outside the "soundtrack" of everyday life in China. Public exposure is critical: as anthropologist Paja Faudree⁷ argues, musical traditions embedded in official listening environments are far more likely to achieve widespread adoption. If a sound is not in the soundscape, for instance, if it's confined to private or underground settings, it has little chance of entering mainstream cultural memory. We will see that the accordion was deliberately placed into China's soundscape through state media and education, whereas the bandoneón remained peripheral, seldom amplified in public. Using the soundscape concept, we can analyze how "where and how an instrument is heard" conditions its social acceptance or marginality.

Together, these three theoretical tools—chronotope, indexicality, and soundscape—form an integrated lens for the case studies. Chronotope will highlight the historical-ideological time-space each instrument entered (or failed to enter) in China. Indexicality will illuminate the sign values that instruments acquire through use. Soundscape will foreground the auditory environments that supported or limited their spread. We now turn to the two cases, applying these concepts to unpack the divergent trajectories of the Soviet accordion and Argentine bandoneón in China.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Soviet Accordion in China

Institutionalization through Socialist Ideology and Soundscapes: The accordion's introduction to China predates the Communist period, but its widespread adoption is closely tied to the early decades of the People's Republic (1949 onward). The instrument first entered Chinese urban culture in the 1930s via cosmopolitan hubs like Shanghai, where it featured in dance halls and popular music fusions (the *shidaiqu* genre) during a time of colonial modernity. However, it was after 1949, with the establishment of a socialist state and the alliance with the Soviet Union—that the accordion found a powerful institutional patron. China and the Soviet Union engaged in extensive cultural exchanges in the 1950s, driven by the ideology of proletarian internationalism. As part of this exchange, Soviet music pedagogy and repertoire entered Chinese conservatories, and the free-bass accordion (favored in Soviet conservatories) was promoted as a modern instrument for the masses. By the early 1950s, the Chinese state was actively supporting domestic accordion production: factories in Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin began

7 Paja Faudree. 2012. "Music, Language, and Texts: Sound and Semiotic Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 519–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23270725>.

manufacturing accordions, making them widely accessible to ordinary people. This contrasts with instruments like the piano, which remained expensive imports. Unlike the piano—associated with Western bourgeois salons—the accordion was framed as an “instrument of the people,” affordable, portable, and well-suited to collective music-making.

Before 1949, the accordion already circulated in Shanghai's modern entertainment ecologies—as a portable keyboard timbre in *shidaiqu* (Shanghai popular songs), in cabaret dance-hall bands (e.g., the Paramount), and in film studio accompaniments associated with stars like Zhou Xuan. In these venues, the instrument indexed cosmopolitan urbanity and leisure rather than collectivist ideology. This first-order indexicality in Republican-era Shanghai sets up the dramatic re-signification under the socialist soundscape after 1949, when the same timbre was re-anchored to revolutionary collectivism through schools, work-unit ensembles, and mass pageantry. (See Kwan 2004/2008 on early circulation and post-1949 institutionalization; see also scholarship on *shidaiqu* dance-hall culture for the social milieu.)

The socialist state's ideological aims further cemented the accordion's place. During the Mao era, especially the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976),⁸ Western classical music and traditional elite arts were denounced as bourgeois or feudal remnants.⁹ In contrast, music that embodied a revolutionary spirit and served propaganda was highly regarded. The accordion's very qualities—loud enough for outdoor rallies, capable of melody and accompaniment, and playable by amateur enthusiasts—made it ideal for this new mass music culture. Whereas grand pianos were literally smashed or abandoned during the Cultural Revolution, accordions survived and even thrived, precisely because they were associated with the working class and revolutionary fervor. The instrument became ubiquitous in Red Guard performance troupes, propaganda teams, and revolutionary song-and-dance ensembles. It accompanied *yangbanxi* (model revolutionary operas) and “red songs”¹⁰ (hymns to Mao and the Party) such as *The East Is Red* and *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*, being one of the few Western-origin instruments not condemned. In 1963, the Chinese Musicians' Association established an official Accordion Society, a significant institutional move that further legitimized accordion music and

ensured its inclusion in state-sponsored activities. By the late 1960s, large accordion orchestras were performing at political rallies, factory meetings, and national celebrations. The soundscape of China at this time resounded with accordions: national radio broadcasts¹¹ featured accordion-accompanied marches and choruses, and schools incorporated accordion instruction into music classes. Many Chinese who grew up in that era recall the accordion as an omnipresent sound of public life—from parades to cinema newsreels—all carrying messages of socialism. In short, the accordion was deliberately woven into the *socialist soundscape*, so that its timbre became the musical backdrop of collective life. Even today, this legacy continues: for example, in 2021, the Shenzhen University Accordion Ensemble performed the revolutionary anthem “Guerrilla Song” with six accordions to commemorate the Communist Party's 100th anniversary.¹² Such events illustrate how deeply institutionalized the accordion is as a bearer of China's revolutionary memory.

Chronotope—Revolutionary Narratives and Collective Identity:

The success of the accordion in China can be interpreted through the Bakhtinian chronotope of Maoist socialism. The time-space of 1950s–1970s narratives of collective labor, class struggle, and national rebirth under communism dominated China. In this chronotope, every cultural object was expected to serve the revolution. The accordion is perfectly aligned with this historical schema.

In the Soviet Union, it had already been mobilized as a “proletarian instrument” during the 1920s and 1930s. Neil Edmunds (2000)¹³ notes that the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM)—a powerful Soviet cultural organization—championed music that was mass-oriented, accessible, and ideologically charged. The RAPM favored simple, unison songs and communal singing over bourgeois complexity. The accordion, being portable and easy to learn, became a natural tool to fulfill RAPM's dictates, spreading socialist songs in Red Army clubs and village meetings. By the 1930s, its indexical meaning in the Soviet context had shifted—from a folk instrument of peasants to an emblem of

8 Yin Yee Kwan. “The Transformation of the Accordion in Twentieth-Century China.” *The World of Music* 50, no. 3 (2008): 81–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41699849>.

9 Amy Nelson. “The Struggle for Proletarian Music: RAPM and the Cultural Revolution.” *Slavic Review* 59, no. 1 (2000): 101–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2696906>.

10 “Singing ‘red songs’ expresses patriotic feelings.” *China Education News*. Accessed February 21, 2025. http://www.jyb.cn/zgjsb/201808/t20180828_1203293.html.

11 “Chinese Veteran Accordion Artist - Yu Jiqing.” Chao Gang Accordion Network - Chinese Veteran Accordion Artist - Yu Jiqing, www.cgsfq.com/post/120.html. Accessed 17 Mar. 2025. http://ilias.cssn.cn/xsnews/kynews/201902/t20190219_4832585.shtml.

12 Shenzhen University Accordion Ensemble - Guerrilla Song - Ensemble Performance - Outstanding Work - National College Ideological and Political Work Network. Accessed February 21, 2025. https://www.sizhengwang.cn/a/tqjs_yxzp/210902/932061.shtml.

13 Neil Edmunds. “Music and Politics: The Case of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians.” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78, no. 1 (2000): 66–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4213008>.

revolutionary modernity. This Soviet chronotope of revolution traveled to China in the 1950s. The Chinese Communist Party shared the Soviet narrative of class struggle and the use of culture for ideological mobilization.¹⁴ The accordion's prior embedding in the Soviet revolutionary chronotope made it easily adaptable to China's equivalent chronotope. It was, so to speak, *pre-loaded with socialist associations*. Once inserted into 1950s China's time-space, the accordion quickly took root as a symbol of collective, modern, anti-feudal culture.

Under Mao, the dominant chronotope in the arts was what we might call socialist realism, where art occurs in factories, fields, and battlefields—the locales of the working masses—and in the forward-driving time of revolution. The accordion was uniquely well-suited to this chronotope for both practical and symbolic reasons. Practically, it was *highly portable*, allowing music to literally travel to the communes, factories, and frontlines that defined socialist space. One could sling an accordion on one's back and perform on a truck bed or in a rice paddy. Its loud, reedy sound carried well outdoors. It could substitute for an entire band, important in remote areas. Symbolically, its history as a folk instrument reinvented for mass songs mirrored the communists' project of remolding society—taking something old/worldly and giving it a new revolutionary purpose. By the 1960s, the accordion in China had firmly become an index of the collective revolutionary experience. A vivid example of the chronotope in action is the piece *The Sparkling Red Star* (红星闪闪). This song, from a 1974 propaganda film about a boy who joins the Red Army, became an anthem for youth loyalty. Its melody—bright, march-like, and easily played on the accordion—was taught in schools and performed nationwide. The song's chronotope is clear: it situates the listener in a mythologized revolutionary past (the time of Red Army heroism) and in the collective space of rallies or classrooms where it is sung. The accordion arrangement of *The Sparkling Red Star* cemented the instrument's place in that narrative, as children across China learned to associate the accordion's sound with the shining ideals of communism. In sum, the accordion “found a home” in the chronotope of Chinese socialism—its music became the soundtrack of a time (Mao era) and space (collective gatherings) that carry great meaning in China's national history.

Indexicality – Sonic Marker of Proletarian Culture: Through repeated use in these ideological contexts, the accordion's sound in China gained strong indexical meanings. Initially, when the accordion was a salon and folk instrument in pre-1949 China, it might have indexed modern urban entertainment or cosmopolitanism (as in Shanghai cabarets). But after

1949, each performance at a factory gate, each broadcast of an accordion-accompanied “red song,” reinforced a new association: the accordion came to index socialist patriotism, collective joy, and the presence of the Party. In Peircean terms, this was a shift from a first-order index (accordion sound indicating live music or dance in general) to a second-order index (accordion sound directly evoking communist ideology). The mechanism behind this shift was the state-controlled soundscape discussed earlier—the fact that the accordion was everywhere in public life, carrying ideological content. By the mid-1960s, hearing an accordion in China often meant one of two things: either a revolutionary song was being played, or a communal activity was taking place. In both cases, it pointed to collective socialist life. As one example, major television networks and radio programs frequently featured accordion performances of revolutionary anthems, even long after the 1950s. The sound became “naturalized” as part of the nation's audio identity.

Two factors strengthened the accordion's indexical link to proletarian culture. First was political repetition: the Party's propaganda departments kept accordion music in rotation for decades. Certain songs (like *The East Is Red*) performed on accordion were played so often that they became auditory icons of communism. As Peirce noted, an indexical sign solidifies its meaning through recurrent coupling of sign and context. Here, the coupling was between accordion music and socialist settings. Second was institutional recognition: the incorporation of accordion into formal music education meant that learning the accordion became itself a socialist act. The Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, for instance, established an accordion program under the rubric of training performers for *the people*. Many students first encountered the accordion in school ensembles playing patriotic repertoire. That educational context gave the instrument a second-order indexicality: beyond just making music, playing accordion indexed participation in the sanctioned culture. By contrast, instruments not chosen for mass promotion (like the violin or guitar during the Cultural Revolution) lacked such strong indexing—they were heard less and often carried whiffs of disfavored classes (Western bourgeois or local feudal). The accordion stood apart as a sonic emblem of the worker-peasant class, a musical “red flag.” Even in later decades, as China modernized, the association persisted to a degree. The older generation still hears an accordion and recalls the imagery of collective singing,

PLA (People's Liberation Army) performances, and Mao-era rallies, demonstrating how an indexical link forged in one historical moment can linger in collective memory. In short, through deliberate placement in China's socialist chronotope and soundscape, the accordion's sound attained a potent indexicality: it became the audible symbol of proletarian China.

14 Chin H. Suk. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 9, no. 4 (1975): 597–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4190308>.

3.2 1959 “Tango Diplomacy”: Symbolism and Limits

Contemporary Chinese coverage of the Osvaldo Pugliese Orchestra's month-long tour in Beijing in late 1959 described the ensemble's “accordion players [as] spirited” and framed tango as a “national music” of Argentina that “reflects the joys and sorrows of the people.” Notably, the Chinese report used the generic term *shoufengqin* (accordion) rather than *bandoneón*, revealing an early lexical conflation that obscured the instrument's distinct indexical identity in the mainland context. Premier Zhou Enlai personally attended the closing performance and received the artists, underscoring the event's symbolic importance but not altering the instrument's low indexical uptake in everyday listening thereafter. In later Chinese-language promotional writing, the bandoneón still required explanation as the “indispensable soul of tango” for general audiences—evidence that, decades on, it largely remained an “exotic curiosity” rather than a marker of emotion. By contrast, in the very same decade Soviet-model accordions were rapidly normalized within state ensembles, school curricula, and youth competitions, establishing a durable institutional pathway that anchored the timbre to socialist collectivism and everyday musical life.

3.3 Argentine Bandoneón in China

Lack of Cultural Integration and Institutional Support:

In contrast to the accordion, the Argentine bandoneón did not benefit from a welcoming ideological or institutional environment in China. The bandoneón is a type of concertina integral to Argentine tango music, known for its distinctive, mournful sound. Historically, it arrived in Argentina from Germany in the late nineteenth century and became central to tango by the early twentieth century. However, its journey to China was sporadic and lacked sustained follow-through. Initial contacts between Chinese audiences and tango (and by extension the bandoneón) occurred surprisingly early: in 1959, at the height of Mao's rule, China hosted a prominent Argentine tango ensemble. That year, Osvaldo Pugliese—a legendary tango composer, pianist, and bandleader—toured China as a cultural ambassador. Pugliese's group, which presumably included bandoneón players, was invited by Premier Zhou Enlai to perform during the tenth anniversary of the PRC (China's National Day celebrations). Over three months, the Argentines traveled to over twenty cities, giving Chinese audiences a first taste of authentic tango music. Contemporary records from *The Chinese Blossom of Tango Art* (探戈艺术的中国之花)¹⁵ note Zhou's personal interest in these performances as an early form of “tango diplomacy” between the two nations. Despite this auspicious start, however, tango did not take root in the 1950s–60s. The reasons are not hard

to surmise: politically, China in the late 1950s was aligning with the Soviet bloc and prioritizing socialist cultural forms. By 1960, the Sino-Soviet relationship soured, and China turned inward during the Cultural Revolution—a hostile climate for foreign art forms perceived as bourgeois.¹⁶ Tango, with its sensual dance and Western origin, was hardly a revolutionary art acceptable in Maoist doctrine. Thus, whatever impression Pugliese's tour made, it was quickly submerged by domestic upheavals. No institutions in China in the 1960s would have dared promote tango or bandoneón music, given the xenophobic cultural policies of that era.

It was only after China's reform and opening (post-1980) that tango music re-emerged, and even then, indirectly. A pivotal moment came in the late 1990s with the growing popularity of Ástor Piazzolla's compositions in China. Piazzolla, an Argentine composer and bandoneón virtuoso, revolutionized tango into a new style (*nuevo tango*) that fused tango with elements of classical music and jazz. In 1997, world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma released the album *Soul of the Tango*, featuring Piazzolla's works, which garnered significant attention globally. The album quickly found an audience among Chinese musicians and listeners, capitalizing on Yo-Yo Ma's reputation and the accessibility of Piazzolla's tango-meets-classical sound. When *Soul of the Tango* won a Grammy in 1999, interest in Piazzolla surged further, especially among China's classically trained community looking for new repertoire. Around the same time, Chinese accordionists began transcribing and performing Piazzolla's pieces on the accordion. A key figure was Li Yansheng, a respected accordion educator in China. In 1999, Li encountered Piazzolla's music arranged for free-bass accordion during a study trip to Europe. Impressed by its emotional depth, he brought these arrangements back and incorporated them into Chinese accordion pedagogy. Through this channel, tango music (specifically Piazzolla's concert tangos) entered Chinese conservatories—but crucially, via the accordion rather than the bandoneón. Students learned pieces like “Libertango” or “Oblivion” on accordions, often unaware that the bandoneón was the instrument of origin. In Argentina, Piazzolla's use of bandoneón and departure from dance-oriented tango sparked debates (traditionalists even said he “ruined” tango). In China, however, these historical debates were largely unknown. Chinese musicians and audiences accepted Piazzolla's tango as art music with little concern for the original instrumentation or the social dance context that purists in Argentina held dear.

The consequence of this path is that the bandoneón itself never became institutionalized in China. Tango music gained popularity—in Beijing and Shanghai, tango dance clubs and

15 探戈艺术的中国之花. Accessed November 11, 2024. <http://www.lib.zjut.edu.cn/2020/0714/c6188a107907/page.htm>.

16 “Exploring the Depths of Music: The Legacy of Accordion Artistry.” *Zhihu*, 2022, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/588234631>. Accessed March 17, 2025.

occasional concerts emerged in the 2000s, and Argentine cultural diplomacy, under President Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), actively promoted tango abroad. But the instrument, the bandoneón, remained scarce. There were no bandoneón classes in major Chinese music schools, no local market to buy one (most had to be imported at great expense), and few teachers. In performances of tango music in China, musicians overwhelmingly defaulted to the instrument they were familiar with: the accordion. A recent survey of students at two top institutions (Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and Tianjin Conservatory) illustrates this trend: 100% of the 21 students surveyed reported using the free-bass accordion to play tango, and 0% used the bandoneón.¹⁷ In other words, even among aspiring professional musicians interested in tango, none had adopted the bandoneón. This indicates not only preference but availability and training—Chinese accordionists have more access to accordions and instruction on them. The bandoneón remains so niche that even tango enthusiasts often have never handled one.

Chronotope – Absence of a Historical Time-Space Nexus:

Unlike the accordion, the bandoneón did not intersect with any powerful chronotope in Chinese history. There was no moment in China when the bandoneón became deeply rooted in the nation's narrative. Tango music itself, in its golden era (1930s–1950s), corresponded to a time when China was experiencing war, revolution, and socialist transformation, realities far removed from the cosmopolitan nightlife of Buenos Aires. Thus, tango and its signature instrument lacked a *historical bridge* into Chinese cultural memory. The brief encounter in 1959 was insufficient to create a chronotope; it was an isolated event soon overshadowed by the Sino-Soviet split and the Cultural Revolution. The next wave in the 1990s occurred in a very different chronotope—that of post-socialist, globalizing China. In this period, many foreign cultural forms flooded in (pop music, rock, classical, etc.), and tango was just one among many genres vying for attention.

Crucially, by then, the state no longer guided cultural imports with an iron hand as it had in the 1950s; the cultural market was more decentralized, and tango had to compete in the urban nightlife and high-art concert scene without any special advantage. There was no large-scale societal narrative or defined time-space slot that the bandoneón could slip into and be perceived as naturally belonging. The instrument wasn't part of the story China told about itself during its nation-building or during its reforms.

Another way to see this is through *incommensurate chronotopes*: The bandoneón is deeply embedded in the chronotope of Buenos Aires cafés and immigrant neighborhoods of the early twentieth century, where tango emerged as the voice of a specific urban underclass and later a nationalist symbol of Argentina. None of that context transferred to China. Chinese audiences hearing tango in the 1990s–2000s did so typically in concert halls or ballroom dance floors—contexts divorced from the original social meaning of tango. Thus, the historical and social fabric that gives the bandoneón meaning in Argentina (smoky bars of La Boca, the ethos of melancholy and passion post-Perón, etc.) is absent in China. The bandoneón had no choice but to piggyback on the accordion's context. In effect, tango in China was re-contextualized within an existing Chinese chronotope: the modern urban music education scene. This is a chronotope where Western classical music and various world music is taught as cosmopolitan arts in conservatories and performed on stage for educated audiences. It's quite distant from tango's original time-space. Therefore, the bandoneón—which in Argentina indexes authenticity and tradition—did not enjoy the same automatic recognition in China. Instead, it was perceived as a somewhat interchangeable instrument for producing tango sounds, not as a historical symbol. The absence of a strong time-place linkage meant the bandoneón floated free of narrative in China, preventing it from gaining a compelling identity, unlike the accordion, which did in the socialist narrative.

Indexicality – The Bandoneón as an Exotic, Non-Institutional Instrument:

Given its limited presence, the bandoneón never developed widely recognized indexical meanings in China. To the extent people recognize it at all, it indexes “foreignness” or “tango” in a generic sense—and often, Chinese listeners conflate tango with the accordion anyway. One might say the bandoneón in China is stuck at a first-order indexicality: it indicates a particular sound (the tango sound) but has not attained a second-order meaning (it does not symbolically stand for something in Chinese culture). Interviews and survey data support this. In the aforementioned survey of conservatory students, over 90% responded that the bandoneón is “unnecessary” for performing tango music authentically—they felt that the accordion could capture the essence of tango music sufficiently. This implies that for these young musicians, the bandoneón carries no special aura of authenticity or cultural capital. It's simply another free-reed instrument, one that they have not been socialized to value. Indeed, few Chinese listeners would notice if a tango piece were played on an accordion rather than a bandoneón; many are surprised to learn that traditional tango uses a different instrument altogether. Unlike in Argentina, where the raspy bandoneón

¹⁷ Survey results on the use of instruments in tango performance among students at the Central Conservatory of Music and Tianjin Conservatory of Music. The results show that all 21 participants play the free-bass accordion, while none use the bandoneón.

timbre immediately indexes tango heritage and the nostalgia of Buenos Aires, in China, the *sound* of the bandoneón has no entrenched social meaning. One could argue it indexes a kind of cosmopolitan chic, the idea of a distant Latin culture, but that's a very diffuse association, and it competes with other exotic sounds in the global soundscape.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *cultural capital*¹⁸ is particularly useful in this context. Bourdieu noted that cultural objects have value when a society recognizes their meanings and assigns them prestige. In China, the bandoneón has little embodied cultural capital because the knowledge and historical context that grant it significance in Argentina are not present. There is no native folklore or collective memory surrounding it. As a result, Chinese audiences and even musicians tend to prioritize the *musical content* (melody, expressiveness of the piece) over the instrument used to produce it. An expressive tango melody played on violin, piano, or accordion can move a Chinese audience just as well; the specific timbre of the bandoneón is not regarded as essential for emotional impact.

My observations at tango concerts in China confirm this: audiences respond to the passion of the music and the skill of performers, but hardly anyone comments on the absence of an actual bandoneón. This suggests that the bandoneón, lacking institutional support, has remained an "outsider" in terms of its sonic identity. It has not been woven into China's collective auditory experience, and thus it fails to index much beyond its literal presence.

Another outcome of non-institutionalization is that the bandoneón's image is somewhat romanticized but not internalized. It is exotic—people find it novel and perhaps visually intriguing (the way it expands and contracts)—but this exoticism further underscores that it is *not part of "our" culture*. It resides in the realm of world music festivals or special events, rather than everyday life or national tradition. No strong indexical link ever formed between the bandoneón and any aspect of Chinese identity or social life. Even tango dance communities in Chinese cities often rely on recorded music or live ensembles that use violin, piano, guitar, and accordion; the bandoneón is sometimes completely absent. In summary, the bandoneón in China exemplifies how an instrument can remain indexically "neutral" or unanchored when it is not continuously present in the public soundscape or connected to local historical narratives. It indexes only the general idea of tango (for the few who know it) or simply indexes "a strange accordion-like instrument" for others—a far cry from the rich indexicality the accordion achieved as a patriotic symbol.

18 Pierre Bourdieu. "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste." Google Books. Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://books.google.com/books/about/Distinction.html?id=nVaS6gS9Jz4C>.

4. Comparative Analysis

The divergent fates of the Soviet accordion and the Argentine bandoneón in China highlight the significance of institutional pathways and ideological alignment in the cross-cultural reception of musical instruments. A comparative lens reveals that it was not inherent musical qualities that determined their status, but the contexts in which each instrument was introduced and the degree to which each could be assimilated into China's socio-political landscape.

Institutional Pathways and Ideological Fit: The accordion entered China hand-in-hand with a political ally (the Soviet Union) and at a time when the Chinese state was actively seeking cultural tools to build socialism. It was quickly funneled into state institutions—from music conservatories to the military cultural troupes—and aligned with the ruling ideology. Because the accordion could be mobilized in military performances, factory songs, and school education, it became a naturalized part of China's socialist *sonic landscape*. In essence, the instrument was at the right place at the right time: the chronotope of 1950s–60s China demanded art that was collective, accessible, and ideologically charged, and the accordion fit that demand perfectly. This tight fit ensured robust institutional support that persisted for decades. By contrast, the bandoneón had no comparable window of opportunity. When Pugliese's tango troupe arrived in 1959, China's cultural policy was already shifting towards Sino-Soviet models and soon became insular and radical. Tango—and the bandoneón with it—did not align with the socialist realist chronotope that dominated Chinese arts at the time. Later, when tango reappeared in the reform era, the ideological climate no longer demanded a single unifying art form, and tango was simply one optional import among many. The bandoneón thus never benefited from the kind of state patronage and ideological endorsement that the accordion enjoyed. No government campaign proclaimed tango as the music of the people, nor did any mass program teach citizens to play the bandoneón to glorify the nation. In fact, tango might have carried connotations of Western decadence or romanticism that made it *ideologically awkward* in a society still negotiating its stance on Western pop culture in the 1980s and 90s. In sum, the accordion was in harmony with China's political narrative, whereas the bandoneón remained tangential to it.

Soundscape and Public Exposure: A stark contrast lies in how the two instruments were (or were not) embedded in China's public soundscapes. The accordion was deliberately broadcast, taught, and heard widely; the bandoneón was not. As a result, the accordion became *familiar* to generations of Chinese, while the bandoneón stayed *alien*. Anthropologist Paja Faudree notes that traditions rooted in public institutional

soundscapes achieve much greater cultural penetration than those confined to niche arenas. In China, the accordion's omnipresence—from radio programs of revolutionary songs to school pageants—meant that its sound became part of the collective aural memory. People might not consciously think “this is socialist” every time they hear an accordion, but the cumulation of experiences makes the instrument's timbre reassuringly linked to community gatherings, patriotic events, and childhood education. Conversely, the bandoneón was largely inaudible in daily Chinese life. Perhaps only small circles of tango dance aficionados or occasional concertgoers ever heard a live bandoneón. Without widespread exposure, an instrument cannot become ingrained in the public consciousness or acquire cultural significance. Thus, the soundscape factor heavily reinforced the adoption of the accordion, while limiting the use of the bandoneón. The state-curated soundscape of Maoist China explicitly amplified accordions as part of its program to inculcate socialist values (for example, broadcasting “red songs” via accordion ensembles). The bandoneón, having no role in state media or public education, effectively *remained silent* in the Chinese context. One can draw a parallel with language: the accordion was like a language that children grew up hearing and speaking, whereas the bandoneón was a foreign tongue rarely heard, much less learned.

Indexical Outcomes – Second-order Indexicality vs. Niche Symbolism: Due to these differences in ideology and soundscape presence, the accordion and bandoneón attained vastly different levels of indexical meaning in China. The accordion achieved what we can call *second-order indexicality*: its sound consistently evoked a set of social meanings (revolution, collectivism, patriotism) beyond the music itself. By being continuously linked to socialist contexts, the accordion evolved from being just an instrument to becoming a sonic icon of socialist identity. Michael Silverstein's framework predicts this: when a sign (here, accordion music) is repeatedly foregrounded in ideological contexts, listeners begin to hear it as directly *emanating* those ideological values. Indeed, by the 1970s, in China, one could scarcely separate the accordion's sound from the mental image of patriotic rallies or mass singing events—it symbolized the collective spirit. The bandoneón never had the chance to develop such layered meaning. It did not undergo the repeated social coupling necessary for strong indexicality. For most Chinese, if the bandoneón signifies anything, it is simply “tango” in a generic sense, and even that connection is weak because the accordion often substitutes for it. In other words, the bandoneón remained at a pre-indexical or first-order indexical stage: it might index Argentina or tango in the abstract to a knowledgeable few, but it certainly did not become an index of any Chinese social experience or value. It remained a *niche*

instrument, its meaning confined largely to those specialists who deliberately sought it out (for instance, a few classical musicians who appreciate its role in tango history). The notion of second-order indexicality helps articulate this contrast: the accordion's sound became “enregistered” in Chinese society as a sign of something larger (the state, the people, nostalgia for the Mao era perhaps), whereas the bandoneón's sound did not progress beyond being a literal part of tango music, with no broader cultural resonance.

In practical terms, this meant that when Chinese institutions in later years sought to evoke patriotism or collective memory, they could call upon accordion music (e.g., an accordion ensemble playing a red song at a national event) and expect the audience to catch the reference and feel the intended sentiment. There is no equivalent usage of the bandoneón—no one in China is using bandoneón music to stir national feelings or to represent China's identity. Instead, the bandoneón persists only in the niche context of tango subculture, appreciated primarily for its authentic sound by tango connoisseurs, many of whom are themselves expatriates or have cosmopolitan backgrounds. Thus, from an indexical perspective, the accordion moved into second-order meaning (an emblem of ideology). At the same time, the bandoneón remained an indexical orphan, not adopted into any living system of Chinese symbols.

Overall, the comparative analysis reveals that the accordion's institutionalization and chronotopic alignment in socialist China paved the way for widespread acceptance and symbolic power. In contrast, the bandoneón's lack of these factors kept it marginal. The divergent receptions are not merely about the popularity of musical style (since tango music *did* gain some popularity), but about whether the instruments themselves became embedded in the cultural framework of meaning. The accordion's sound was woven into Chinese narratives and soundscapes, giving it enduring significance, whereas the bandoneón floated at the periphery, never quite naturalized in the new environment.

To align with an industry-facing perspective, a brief empirical snapshot clarifies why the accordion—not the *bandoneón*—formed a supply–education–performance loop in mainland China. First, domestic manufacturing from the 1950s (e.g., Tianjin's Parrot/Yingwu brand) created affordable supply chains and local service/repair ecosystems; by the reform era, this was reinforced by competition and pedagogical materials. Second, *bandoneóns* remained largely import-dependent and high-cost, with limited repair and teaching resources, which discouraged incorporation into conservatory curricula and state ensembles. A replicable future metrics plan includes: (1) surveying conservatory syllabi and competition repertoires (1950–2000); (2) coding film/TV/radio soundtracks for timbral presence (diegetic vs. non-diegetic); and (3) cataloging state-ensemble instrumentation lists. These quantitative tracks

extend—rather than replace—the present study's cultural-policy and indexical analysis (Xinhua 2023; China Daily 2023).

5. Conclusion

The contrasting trajectories of the Soviet accordion and the Argentine bandoneón in China demonstrate how politics, culture, and history profoundly mediate the transmission of musical instruments. Far from being neutral carriers of sound, instruments carry with them chronotopic histories and indexical potentials that condition their reception abroad. In China, the accordion's success was not due simply to its versatility or sound, but to a confluence of political ideology, institutional structure, and cultural priorities that welcomed and reshaped it. Adopted into the national conservatories and propaganda troupes, the Soviet free-bass accordion became a naturalized element of Chinese music—even a nationalist instrument—by virtue of its integration into the socialist soundscape. State support, from manufacturing to education, ensured that the accordion was both widely available and symbolically charged as an instrument of the people. The bandoneón, despite its iconic status in its homeland, failed to find a comparable footing in China. It remained a niche import, with limited institutional backing and little practical incentive for Chinese musicians to adopt it (especially when the accordion was a readily available substitute). This outcome is a reminder that the “success” of a foreign musical tradition is not just about artistic merit or exotic appeal, but about fit—fit with existing cultural narratives (chronotopes), with channels of dissemination, and with local meanings (indexicality).

By applying Bakhtin's chronotope and Peircean/Aghaian indexicality, we gain a theoretical explanation for these outcomes. The accordion aligned with the revolutionary chronotope of 1950s–1970s China, a time-space in which music was explicitly harnessed for collectivist and patriotic purposes. It filled a role that the new society needed, performing in factories, schools, and parades, thereby rooting itself in that historical moment. The bandoneón, arriving outside of this time-space nexus, never had that advantage. Similarly, through the lens of indexicality, we see why the accordion could become an enduring marker of socialist identity—repeated exposure in state contexts continuously linked its sound to notions of collective labor and revolutionary struggle. In effect, the accordion's music became indexically charged as a representation of the state and the people (second-order indexicality). The bandoneón, lacking sustained exposure or institutional reinforcement, never developed a stable indexical link in China's context. It remained just an instrument—not a symbol—in the Chinese ear.

It is important to note, however, that the story of the bandoneón in China is not merely one of failure or “lost

authenticity.” Instead, it highlights a broader phenomenon of musical recontextualization. As scholars like Faudree and Wood & Harris¹⁹ (2018) argue, when musical traditions travel, they do not remain static; they adapt to new frameworks and landscapes. In the Chinese case, tango *did* take root, but in a localized form—via the accordion. We might be tempted to lament that the “authentic” bandoneón was sidelined. Yet, from another perspective, Chinese musicians negotiated a fusion that made sense within their cultural logic: they prioritized institutional legitimacy (using an instrument that had pedagogy and audience acceptance) over strict historical authenticity. The result was a hybrid soundscape where one can hear Argentine tango melodies rendered through a Soviet-Chinese accordion style. Rather than a dilution, this can be seen as a creative adaptation that allowed tango music to flourish in China. This case thus invites a nuanced view of cultural globalization: foreign music can be indigenized through existing channels, sometimes at the expense of certain original elements (like instruments), but also in a manner that produces new cultural meanings and continuities.

Ultimately, the divergent reception of the accordion and bandoneón in China highlights the complex interplay between politics, education, and cultural adaptation in the localization of foreign music. By examining the chronotopic alignment (or misalignment) and the indexical embedding of these instruments, we gain insight into how and why musical symbols gain—or fail to gain—traction in new cultural contexts. The accordion's story shows that when a foreign instrument resonates with a host country's grand narrative and is propagated through authoritative channels, it can become more than foreign—it becomes *ours*, part of the national fabric. The bandoneón's story, conversely, shows that even a beloved instrument from elsewhere may remain an outsider if it does not intersect with local narratives or find space in the public ear. For scholars of music transmission and cultural policy, these findings underscore the importance of examining not only popularity but the institutional and ideological conditions that facilitate musical integration as well. As a direction for future research, one could explore how other imported genres in China (or elsewhere) have fared under different institutional regimes—for example, the reception of Western classical orchestras in East Asia, or the spread of hip-hop in socialist versus capitalist contexts. Additionally, studying the ongoing role of institutional control (or its relaxation) in shaping the *sonic identities* of non-native musical genres would be valuable. In an era of rapid globalization, understanding these dynamics can inform how we approach cultural exchange: recognizing that it's not a level

19 Abigail Wood and Rachel Harris. “Introduction: Sharing Space? Sharing Culture? Applied Experiments in Music-Making Across Borders.” *The World of Music* 7, no. 1/2 (2018): 7–16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26562972>.

playing field, but one structured by power relations, historical resonances, and the careful curation of sound. The tale of the accordion and the bandoneón in China serves as a compelling example of how ideology and imagination, as much as sound and technique, govern the life of music across borders.

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