Exploring the Value of Piano Pedagogy Methods in China's Educational Landscape

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Abstract

The results of this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 12 undergraduate and master's music students at East China Normal University in Shanghai, China. These interviews reveal complex negotiations between students' personal impulses, institutional pressures, and long-term purposes in pursuing music education. More precisely, they show that: (i) early impulses toward music, often shaped by family influence or childhood curiosity, gain retroactive significance; (ii) students' motivations reflect a hybridization of "reason" and "cause," combining intrinsic enjoyment of music with the extrinsic utility of gaining admission to a prestigious university; and (iii) despite coercive and exam-driven structures, students actively reframe experiences of pressure and rigidity into resilience, discipline, and meaningful growth. This paper ultimately concludes that Chinese music students creatively make sense of the past, present and future to reframe moments of absurdity into meaningful lessons of resilience, love and personal growth. This points to the need for school practices that support greater freedom of personal thought and reflection.

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Introduction

The dissonance that occurs when a child isn't receptive in class is akin to the dissonance we feel on a daily basis: something doesn't make sense! Consider the tale of Sisyphus, a man condemned to a lifetime of rolling a stone up a hill. Part of what makes his existence so disturbing is that his life is defined by absurdity, by the *lack* of sense. For Chinese students at the moment, they are going through a period of "involution" also known as *neijuan* 内卷. It can be best understood as the grueling pursuit for something meaningless. When students are living the modern version of Sisyphus' fate, it is no wonder that depression and suicide continues to rise.

This study takes up that debate in the context of Chinese undergraduate music education. The gaokao and yikao examinations for graduating secondary students strongly shape how and why students pursue music. For many, music is less a pursuit of creativity or expression and more a pathway to enter a prestigious university. This raises fears and questions about the quality of music graduates and the future of musicians entering the workforce. Yet, as the interviews in this study show, students are able to find personal meaning, joy, and growth in music—even when their choices are constrained by the system.

Drawing on John Dewey's ideas of educational experience, Mezirow's concept of transformative learning and Wolf's definition of meaning, this study examines how students create meaning by making creative sense of their experiences. The focus is not on evaluating the entire education system, but on exploring how individual experiences of music study reveal the complex relationship between social structures, personal agency, and educational purpose. First, it is necessary to understand the way educational experiences are understood and defined.

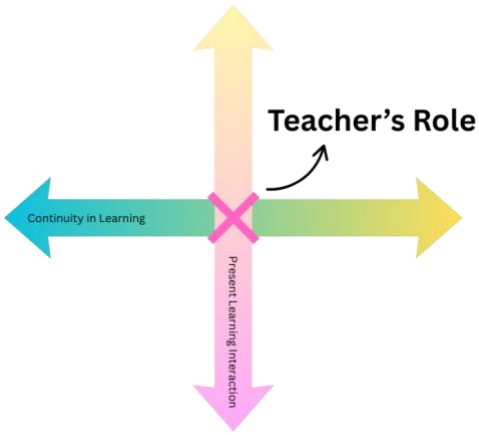
What is Learning?

Learning can be thought of as the *integration* of new knowledge into a framework that exists in students' minds. The *integration* is incredible important as new information is simply a resource. It doesn't hold any significance until it builds connections and relationships with an "already well-developed symbolic frame of reference" making it an "active process involving thought, feeligns and disposition" (Mezirow 2018, 10).

Now, think of every learning experience you've had as a single point in time on a continuous line of your educational journey. These learning interactions between you and your

environment are both discrete yet connected. Take for example, a music lesson you have with your teacher. You can say, I had *a* lesson last week. We learned *these* pieces and worked on *these* sections. Just by examining the language that we use, we understand that this lesson has its own distinct memories and emotional associations. Simultaneously, we recognize that this lesson is connected to all our previous classes and has implications for the future. This intersection between the past, present and future is what makes an educators job so complicated.

Figure 1: An Educator's Dillemna



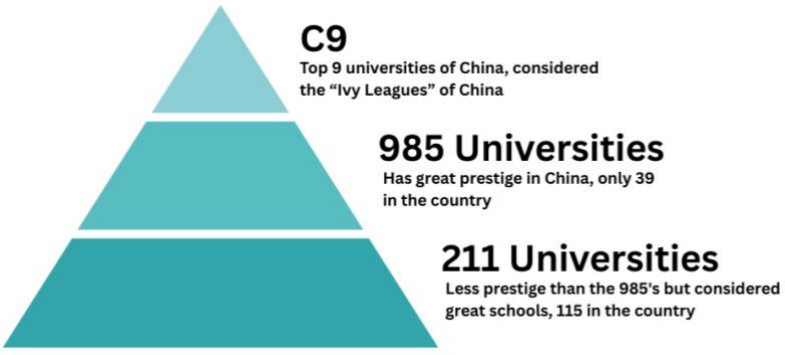
Dewey, an American philosopher, states this best when he says educators have to "select the kind of *present* experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in *subsequent* experiences" (Dewey 1938, 28). That is to say, education is not merely a solution to fill a need. Rather, each learning moment brings about a certain interaction that carries with it associations, feelings and the ability to influence future experiences. In other words, educators want present experiences to be *meaningful* so that they can hold *meaning* in the long run. This distinction between *meaningfulness* and *meaning* is important to make. Philosopher Susan Wolf states that something is meaningful from "loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way" (Wolf 2016, 256). Meaning however is better understood as being socially defined: "meanings emerge out of human interaction as rules or habits of action" (Mezirow 2018, 137). Both of these definitions recognize that meaning is the synthesis of subjective and objective ways of feeling, seeing and doing. Even

if something is inherently meaningful to an individual does not mean that society gives it meaning, and vice versa.

China's "Status Education" and "Future Preparedness"

There will be some educators that do not consider the quality of the present interaction within the learning timeline. Not necessarily because they don't want to, but rather because it is almost impossible to achieve. Consider the *gaokao,* China's national college entrance examination. This exam is the center of all education institutions from early elementary to high school and it involves the mandatory testing of Chinese, mathematics and English along with three other subjects determined by the students' future career plans (Liu and Helwig, 2020). Schooling in China can be categorized as "status education" which means a four-year university program that has high social status and "survival education" which is found at vocational schools that provide skills and training less recognized by society (Jia and Ericson, 2017). Within the bubble of "status education," high achieving students strive for China's version of the "Ivy League" schools also known as the C9. However, achieving admission into these schools is extremely difficult, so most high-achieving students will strive for the "985 Universities". Currently, there are 39 "985 Universities" in all of China, and they are recognized as the most prestigious learning institutions of the country (Jia and Ericson, 2017). Below the "985 Universities" are the "211 Universities." They are solid learning institutions but have less prestige than the C9 and 985 Universities (Jia and Ericson, 2017).

Figure 2: Tiers of "High Status" Post-secondary Education in China



Once a student is admitted into a specific university, there are little options to transfer. Students are usually not allowed to transfer vertically (from a lower-status to higher-status university) or horizontally (from universities of similar status) (Jia and Ericson, 2017). Even transferring majors or changing degrees within the same school is extremely difficult and requires a student to be in the top 10% of their cohort (Heger, 2017). As a result, a child grows up understanding the high stakes and ultra-competitive nature of the *gaokao* (Cheng and Hamid 2025, 3).

As one of the only ways to enter higher-level education in China, the *gaokao* is known as a "single wooden pole bridge" for students (Liu and Helwig, 2020). Educators in China are forced to lean heavily on the concept of "future preparedness" to get them across this precarious bridge that millions of others are fighting to cross. It is no surprise that the reputation of educators are tied to their students' performance on the *gaokao*. Better test results equal more appraisal from parents which will incentivize their employers to grant them bonuses and welfare benefits (Yifeng and Hamid, 2025).

Dewey responds to this idea by stating, "the ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself" (Dewey 1938, 49). He believes that all educational experiences should strive to open up new possibilities and further the desire to learn (Dewey 1938, 35-48). "Future preparedness" is often defined by helping students satisfy a criteria that fits into a certain assessment like the *gaokao*. These standards are less of a reflective practice but more like a one-size-fits-all routine. As such, the methods of instruction will be less learner-centered and unlikely to create a "desire to go on learning" by sacrificing discovery and exploration (Dewey 1938, 48). This is supported by the countless amount of research showing Chinese students "lose or lack interest in learning and develop school-weary emotions" (Li 2017, 1002). These negative emotions arise when students are unable to feel and rationalize the impact of a future ideal with the suffering they have to endure in the present moment (Dewey 1938, 49). To a child, the immediate discomfort associated with learning will always be better understood than the joy of an arbitrary future that has not yet occurred. Therefore, all present experiences should be worthwhile if we want to achieve this ideal of "future preparedness" (Dewey 1938, 49).

China's *yikao*: Why Music?

Admission into the prestigious 985 and 211 univerisities previously mentioned are not only done through the *gaokao*. An alternative method is the undergradate art examination called the *yikao*. Students who are interested in applying for a music/arts major will have to take the *gaokao* and *yikao*, but the *gaokao* requirements are not as high for these students (Lin and Weatherly 2024, 3). Due to this realization, a greater amount of students and parents have seen the *yikao* and arts degree as a shortcut for candidates with worse grades to enter great universities, resulting in a lower quality of arts graduates (Lin and Weatherly 2024, 4). In 2024, the Chinese government released new standards for the *yikao*. One of the reforms state that the *gaokao* scores for arts students cannot fall below 75% of the minimum requirement scores of non-arts undergraduate students in that school (Lin and Weatherly 2024, 12). Their goal is to neutralize this loophole and protect the quality of post-secondary arts education (Lin and Weatherly 2024, 13).

Dewey once said, "just because we prefer something doesn't mean that's the reason we should prefer it" (Dewey 1938, 34). This cannot better summarize the issue that exists when music and art has transformed from a profession for critical expression and personal exploration to a degree that is completed solely for greater career opportunities. Why does this very notion seem so disturbing? Firstly, musical skills allow children to enjoy listening and producing organized sound, social co-operation, self-discipline and a myriad of extramusical benefits for a child's intellectual and emotional development (Sloboda 2001, 249). More importantly, music is regarded to be a medium of social communication that represents a community's "cultural, aesthetic [and] political values" across history (Woodford 2012, 35). In ancient China, music and art carried the historical and philosophical importance in promoting ethical and moral principles to maintain social order (Ho 2023, 67). Music education assisted with "harmonizing human beings into a well-ordered Confucian society" (Ho 2023, 68). Here, music education is not only valued by its utilitarian benefits but rather as the "very life-blood of a society" to "reflect special cultural ways of thinking and doing things" (Walker 1998, 57). Music itself cannot translate all this knowledge through notes and sound (Walker 1998, 57). Rather, it is the musicians and music educators that are tasked with explaining the meanings that are embedded within our music (Walker 1998, 57). Consequently, we want to ensure that the next generation of musicians and artists are those who genuinely feel connected to the act of spreading art to others.

Rationale & Significance of the Study

A tension occurs when a system like the *gaokao/yikao* is evalulated according to the standards of progressive education. Since China's society is built entirely on the instrumentalization of education, it is incompatible with the idealistic pursuits that Dewey puts forward for educators. While Dewey focuses on how an educator holds the power and ability to curate *meaningful* experiences for students, this study focuses how a student can do the same for themselves. As such, this research examines how meaningful music education *can* be created by Chinese students despite inhabiting an educational system with different goals. Instead of suggesting large-scale changes, this study focuses on the autonomy and resilience of music students to negotiate meaning in their educational experiences over time and how we can support other students to do the same.

Theoretical Framework

This project uses symbolic interactionism in conjunction with Dewey's ideas of progressive education and Mezirow's ideas of transformative learning as the conceptual frameworks. The research uses a case-study methodology that focuses on "understanding situations, contexts, and interactions from participants' perspectives" (Blumer 1969). It utilizes an explanatory, instrumental case study research design, exploring cause-and-effect relationships to have a clearer picture of how students form their attitudes towards learning, education and music in an unique education climate.

Research Questions

This study aims to examine music students' values and experiences of music and music learning with reference to which experiences play the greatest role in creating meaning in their lives. As such, four research questions guide this study:

1. How do students describe their original motivations and how have those motivations changed over time?
2. How do students interpret moments of meaning, conflict, or disconnection?
3. How do students experience and respond to the Gaokao/Yikao structures?
4. How do past experiences shape students' future plans, ideas and attitudes towards music?

Definition of Terms

There are certain terms that have been introduced previously and will continue to reappear through this article:

Wenhua / Cultural Classes: General academic subjects (math, English, Chinese, science) that form the basis of the *gaokao*.

Reason: The intrinsic value of pursuing music (creativity, expression, growth).

Cause: The external driver behind pursuing music, often tied to exams, careers, or social mobility.

Impulse: A raw attraction or desire, often from childhood (e.g., curiosity, family influence).

Purpose: Impulse directed by reflection and knowledge, often assigned retroactively to earlier experiences.

Experience: The lived and interpreted interaction between individuals and their environment.

Learning: The integration of new knowledge into an already-existing framework

Participants & Sampling Technique

The sample included 12 students (10 girls, 2 boys) currently pursuing their undergraduate or masters music program at East China Normal University in Shanghai. East China Normal University is part of the 39 schools that are considered "985 schools" so it is well positioned to examine the relationship between *why* people pursue music education and *what* the consequences of those decisions are. Participants were selected through word of mouth, with the only criteria that they had been a) of the age of consent, b) pursuing/pursued music undergraduate studies and c) a voluntary participant. Exclusion criteria included a) conservatory students with gifted proficiency at piano from the younger to high school level, b) students who are planning to exit the country and pursue international studies, therefore not needing to take the gaokao and c) students with learning differences that pursue music education for intervention purposes, such as music therapy or social support.

Data Collection Procedures

The study began with initial contact with the School of Music and Dance at East China Normal University, facilitated by liaison An Chen. Interested individuals were invited to participate in a 30–45 minute semi-structured interview. All interviews and observations took place on university premises during regular class hours. Participants' responses and class interactions were audio-recorded on the iPhone's built-in audio-recording software called Voice Memos. Participants were required to provide written informed consent before any data collection begins. Their identities remain confidential, and data was anonymized through the use of unique participation codes.

Data Analysis

Data was translated manually and analyzed inductively to develop conclusions from repeated lines of data within the interview transcripts. Analysis followed the constant comparison method based in grounded theory to constantly compare pieces of data. First, data is categorized broadly into different scenarios. Then, different categories are integrated or expanded or to be more specific to its properties. Finally, the data will suggest a coherent theory to explain how meaningful education is found within the gaokao/yikao music pathway that students pursue.

Results and Discussions

Through an analysis of the interview excerpts, three prominent themes emerged:

i) Impulsive Desires vs Purposeful Plans
ii) The Marriage Between Reason and Cause
iii) Negotiating Meaning: The Tail Becomes The Head

Impulsive Desires vs Purposeful Plans:

When describing why partipants were initially drawn to music, the reasons fell within three main categories: a) family/personal interest and b) academic advantages. When describing the involvement of family, a handful of participants had family figures who were music teachers themselves. For example:

> Example 1: "I think I started playing the piano when I was four years old. But it was because I had a grandma who was studying music education."
>
> Example 2: "My parents supported me a lot. My mom is a Guzheng teacher. She was the one who persuaded me to study music."

Participants imply that their caregivers suggestion to pursue music was not to be taken lightly due to their experience and wisdom. This can be suggestive of how the value of obedience and respect toward parents and elders in Chinese culture plays a big part in one's education. On the other hand, there are also students who described their intial interest in music to be more personal and curiosity based.

> Example 1: "At first, I wanted to play the piano because I liked it. I didn't have any particular goal."
>
> Example 2: "When I was a kid, I saw people's electric pianos in the supermarket, and I always wanted to touch them. I just really liked this instrument. Then my mom took me to a piano shop, and I bought a piano and started learning."
>
> Example 3: "When I was young, I used to go shopping in the shopping mall with my mom. And the shopping mall has a piano. I was a little interested to try it. And then my mom sent me to the piano academy."

Each of these responses have to do with a sense of curiosity. The first response was simple and vague, but it can represent how most children don't often think about *why* they want things, they just *do* before rationalizing their decisions. The other two responses speak about feelings of wanting to touch and try the piano after seeing others. This references how children socially imitate others as a way of learning and developing interest. A more nuanced set of responses speak about how interest diminishes or plateaus when faced with struggle:

> Example 1: "Maybe it started in primary school, grade 1. I probably wanted to learn it myself, yes… But after a long time of practicing, I found it really hard, so I even considered giving up."
>
> Example 2: Actually, in middle school, I gave up practicing because we had zhongkao exams, which were incredibly stressful. I probably spent most of my time studying, so I didn't get much time to practice."
>
> Example 3: "When I was young, playing the piano was quite painful. Because I was only five or six years old. My mother asked me to practice for an hour every day. For a child, half an hour is already unbearable. She insisted that I play for an hour. Then I often quarreled with her."

Both responses demonstrate a conflicting relationship between interest and struggle during the early stages. When practicing became difficult to sustain, their interest waned and participants described feelings of giving up, taking a break or arguing with others. Interestingly, participants interpreted the question "*When* and *why* did you start learning music?" in two ways: the first speaks of the exact time frame whereas the second is about when they *seriously* started learning music. This distinction between learning music *for fun* compared to pursuing it *seriously* meant that many participants began with a vague response about it being a childhood interest but followed up with one main reason: music education serving as an academic advantage in their later years. Associated

with this idea are themes of parental/teacher guidance, reassurance of one's success and future career stability.

> Example 1: "When I was in the first year of high school, my piano teacher said that I had a bright future. He advised me to take the arts entrance exam, so that I wouldn't have so much pressure on my studies… My teacher said I could get a job in the future. If I didn't take the music exam, I could go to a tier one university. But my teacher said I could make a lot of money in the future. The piano saved me. My teacher said I could not only make money but also enjoy music."
>
> Example 2: "Mainly because I thought getting into a good university would be stressful. While that might not be the best way to put it, the art exam might actually help you get into a better university. Plus, I had a talent for singing since I was a kid, because I participated in competitions and got pretty good grades."
>
> Example 3: "Actually, I didn't initially want to pursue this path. It was during my middle school to high school entrance exam, that my homeroom teacher suggested it. He said, "You've been studying music since you were a child. You should do it." Yes, then he said that if you use your major, you can get into the best high school. Because my grades at the time could get me into the second-best high school, but our homeroom teacher wanted me to strive for the best high school, so he suggested that I take the art exam."
>
> Example 4: "I think it's because my math grades are not very good. I didn't do well in my studies. So if I pass this exam, I don't need such a high score."
>
> Example 5: "Because I didn't have a big advantage in my cultural studies. For example, if I wanted to take the wenhua exam for 985 or 211, I may not be able to take the entrance exam. I may be about 50 points short of the entrance exam. At that time, I had been practicing piano and vocal music. My teachers and parents thought that if I could use my advantage in the results of the college entrance exam, it would be better."
>
> Example 6: "Because the wenhua marks at that time was not very good If you add music, you can go to a better school So I wanted to take the entrance exam."
>
> Example 7: "At that time, it was because my grades were not very good, and I happened to have studied piano for a long time, so I thought it would be okay to take the art exam, and then I started over. If you only take the gaokao exam, then you may not be able to go to a good university, like a university like this."
>
> Example 8: "But when I was about to take high school and college entrance exams, I learned piano because I thought it would help me get into a better school."
>
> Example 9: "I was about to take the arts entrance exam in high school. I used to play the piano. I liked the harp and my teacher recommended it to me. She said it would be better to take the harp exam. So, I changed from piano to the harp [because there's less competition]."

One pattern within many of these responses is the role of a parent/teacher/student influencing and helping guide the decision to use music education as a way to gain entrance into a better school. This shows that this "shortcut" or "loophole" is not taboo, but rather normalized as a method for students to pursue. Secondly, each response speak to how music education can "secure" one's spot

in a better school by making them more competitive and relieving the pressure and anxiety of having to compete in a more difficult environment. This need for security without as much pressure was especially true for students that admitted to being academically weak and were just at the brink of being "cut off" into the ideal school that they wanted to enroll in. One student (Example 1) even describes the piano as an instrument that "saved them," presumably from the stress and pressure of the *gaokao*. Uniquely, some students express an understanding that pursuing music education solely for academic gain may not be ideal when they say, "while that might not be the best way to put it…" Another participant expressed how this loophole is commonly thought of amongst society:

> "In China, some might consider that if your grades are not good you should consider the yikao. Saying it like this might be criticism. People won't say it like this outright, but a lot of people who take the yikao does it for this reason. We still have to take wenhua classes (*mandatory classes for the gaokao)* and yikao exams we have to take - it might be 50/50 - so if people's wenhua classes aren't very good they will take yikao exams to have raise their overall grade. Even for me, my wenhua classes are still pretty good. But compared to others taking the gaokao, it will not guarantee a 985 school. However, compared to the yikao group – it puts me at an advantage.

This means that this loophole was not just exploited by students with weaker wenhua scores, but students who were competent in the wenhua classes found it reassuring to pursue an art degree for a guaranteed spot into a 985 school. This so-called advantage is described best by one participant:

> "It's a game of comparing. You have to choose which group of people you want to be compared with. Maybe with that group, I am average. Maybe with this group – I am considered more competitive. This might seem like a utilitarian thinking method, but it's how it is."

There are two important observations made about these responses: 1) the difference between pursuing a hobby impulsively vs purposefully and 2) utilizing impulses as latent resources. John Dewey describes the creation of purpose to involve three parts: 1) observation of their environment, 2) knowledge of the past and from others with more wisdom, 3) judgement that combines their present and past knowledge (Dewey 1938, 67). He states that a purpose is different from an impulse because it is, "based upon foresight of the consequences of acting under given observed conditions in a certain way" (Dewey 1938, 69). When describing their childhood discovery of music, it seems like a decision was made on the whim based on innocent curiosity or parental influence. None of the participants referenced a great deal of reflection in *why* they want to pursue music. As a result,

there is a large gap in almost all the participants' learning journey in which they begin music as a child but stop during late elementary to early high school.

On the other hand, their descriptions of learning music in high school carried a lot more thoughtfulness and detail. Participants described their situation at the time by explaining the cut-off scores of 985 and 211 schools, their alternatives and justified why music was the best option for them through a comparative advantage when evaluated with other music students. Many of the participants were not afraid to admit that their wenhua grades were lower than they'd like it to be, showing a level of vulnerability and honesty with their strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, many of the students referenced how learning music impulsively when they were younger kept this pathway open as they grew older.

Even though Dewey states that impulses are not significant without a purpose, the responses demonstrate that purposes can be *reotractively assigned* on impulsive actions. As such, impulsive actions and experiences don't necessarily have little value if they can be co-opted in the future. Therefore, the relationship between impulse and purpose is more flexible than it seems.

The Marriage Between Reason and Cause:

Even if impulsive learning experiences can be reassigned a purpose, the true *cause* for pursuing music remains flawed. As a society, we want students to be pursuing music for the right *reasons*: one driven by a genuine desire and enjoyment. However, students are largely pursuing music education to gain social recognition when they apply for jobs. One student affirms this harsh reality:

> "Maybe it's just a title but during recruitment, many HR professionals will look at your title and they'll be very concerned about it. For example, East China Normal University is a 985 university and then some universities are 211 universities. Interviewers will think, "Oh, a 985 university is better than a 211 university," and they'll take your university background into consideration when hiring."

It may be reasonable to assume that because students are pursuing music for the *gaokao/yikao*, the value of music education is solely tied to its ability to get you into a greater school. However, when asked what the value of music and learning music is to them, the responses showed three main themes: a) emotional value, b) personal growth and c) learning/performance satisfaction. Firstly, many participants describe the value of music education to be a source of emotional relief:

> Example 1: “When I'm unhappy, I can play a very upbeat song. I can play the music I like on the internet. It makes me happy.”
>
> Example 2: “No, I've always loved it. For example, the most obvious one is when I was stressed out in high school—yes, when I was stressed out or feeling down, I tried many things, like watching movies, exercising, and listening to music, but I found that listening to music was the most effective. And playing the piano or singing, for example, really helped me get over the mood.”
>
> Example 3: “It helps me relax when I'm under a lot of pressure. For me. Especially when I have things I don’t like.”

Students use music as a coping strategy for their unhappiness when they can play or listen to something soothing to the ear. Other students describe how music has changed their way of seeing the world:

> Example 1: “Music [has made] me very emotional. It [continues to] make me more emotional. It's a part of my personality. And this emotional component made me change a lot of things I won't... I will have a more... How can I put it? A more intimate perspective to look at this world. I won't feel [as] depressed or sad. I will have a more emotional world to comfort myself. And at the same time, to look at my mistakes.”
>
> Example 2: “Maybe back then I only learned piano for school, I was still young, so I didn't understand many things until I went to college. Now I think piano taught me to persevere, to persevere in something, and I discovered I really loved it.”
>
> Example 3: “It makes my life less monotonous and allows me to relax to the greatest extent possible. Through music, I can understand more about the emotions between people, including the emotions between people and composers. I can travel through time and understand their culture and the emotions they felt at the time. I think this is very interesting.”

Here, the value of music is tied to personal growth in areas of introspection and resilience. The second response alludes to the next set of students who articulate how the value of learning music has changed from a passive activity to a learning process that is more meaningful:

> Example 1: “I used to study for the exam. Just to get into school. Get into a good university. Now it may be... passion… I love to do this thing (play their instrument) every day. There’s no need to force me to do it. If I have time, I do this thing.”
>
> Example 2: “When I was a kid, I practiced the piano just to play a song well enough. But when I went to university, I found that I could play the piano more delicately. I can listen to the music more carefully. I found that the piano has a different way of playing and the sound is different.”
>
> Example 3: “In the past, I wanted to practice popular music to reward myself from my teachers boring selections. But now I don't hate classical music so much. I think it's actually very interesting. For example, people may say Mozart's music is not as good as Paganini's music but it's not that simple. In fact, there is a lot of hidden content in all music especially when you look at the original score.”

Over time, certain students discovered an internal passion for music along with a desire to be more attentive, autonomous and creative in their learning pursuits. This desire also translates into the way they describe their experience performing:

> Example 1: "When I am on the stage, I feel like I am expressing what I want. For example, this song is expressing a depressing and sad circumstance. When others can relate to the feeling that I am trying to express – it feels like a form of communication. I feel like I am somebody who likes to converse with others. So I can overcome my own musical difficulties and communicate with others."
>
> Example 2: "I feel like singing allows me to express myself completely, and I enjoy it. And when people hear me sing well, they encourage me, and it feels like a positive cycle of affirmation and beautiful music."

This need to express oneself is connected to how an audience enjoys and appreciates the music with them. As such, music turns from an isolated experience to a social one. Finally, when students were asked about the value of the "process" compared to the value of an "end result" in music, many participants highlighted the importance of enjoying the process:

> Example 1: "I think there is no end to learning music. I can't say that I can finish it when I reach a certain goal. I have to enjoy the process. And find out why I want to learn music."
>
> Example 2: "Various things on the stage are actually unpredictable. So you can only do it well in the process. If I think I worked hard enough during the process, I won't regret it."
>
> Example 3: "In the act of practicing, I've already improved my abilities. I've begun to think about how to integrate and elevate them. I think the process is crucial."

In addition, some participants actually gave two perspectives when responding to this question:

> Example 1: "I think for the learner, the process is definitely more important. However, if you're performing, the result is more important, because the audience only sees the result, not the process…"
>
> Example 2: "So if we step outside ourselves and become a bystander, then the result is more important than the process. So I say both are important: one is what it means to me, and the other is what it means to others. Because others will see your changes and growth through your results, but your growth experience is a process, well, you know it yourself."
>
> Example 3: "No matter how long you practice, the final presentation is what's most important to the audience. However, as mentioned earlier, I think as long as you really put your heart into it and prepare well, it will definitely not be worthless. It will definitely be growth for you."

The most significant discovery from these set of responses is that a genuine desire to pursue music is explicitly expressed. A sense of happiness is achieved in the *present experience of doing* rather than the anticipated benefits of the future. Participants share that the act of practicing music can be flexible to their mood and bring happiness based on different circumstances. For example, when there is a great amount of stress, students can play music in a relaxed and casual fashion to ease

their anxiety. On the other hand, focused practice also brings a sense of deep fulfillment and appreciation for what music has to offer. Students share a desire to play difficult music in different ways, express a wide range of emotions and extract lessons of personal growth. As mentioned before, the quality of a learning experience is evaluated based on the immediate agreeableness of the experience and its influence to further a desire to continue learning (Dewey 1938, 27). This is achieved when participants admit to a natural desire and passion towards the subject and the goals of continuing growth in their performance and personal skills. Participants express a change from learning music solely for the purposes of getting into a better school with how they experience learning music now. This demonstrates that while one can pursue music for instrumental reasons, it doesn't limit them from discovering a genuine desire and appreciation for music education.

Negotiating Meaning: The Tail Becomes The Head

This leaves us with one final question: *How* did students find meaning in their musical studies? Here, interview questions were geared towards transformative learning experiences that prompted large paradigm shifts. The first part of responses provided contextual background for what certain students were used to experiencing at school:

> Example 1: "[The teacher] opened the door of the piano room and scolded me loudly. He even hit my hand. I was very depressed before class. I couldn't concentrate. I didn't focus on music or what phrase I was in. I was worried that he would hit me next second. Or insult me."
>
> Example 2: "If you make a slight mistake, they will scold you. You have to be perfect. But in class, if teachers are too strict, you'll be more nervous."
>
> Example 3: "I have experienced two teachers. One teacher was too strict. So I didn't want to practice the piano."

Participants expressed how negative conditioning led to greater anxiety and nervousness which impeded their performance. This was counterintuitive since teachers thought that higher expectations would lead to greater performance. One student describes how most teachers don't even consider the implications for the work they assign, causing emotion strife:

> "A popular saying is "neijuan" 内卷. Teachers will keep pushing you to succeed or hit a specific standard for no real reason. For example, we need to write an essay. Maybe around 1000 words is enough. But they will push you to write around 5000 words. It will make you depressed. Every student I know has some emotional problems."

These arbitrary and difficult standards that teachers set for their students had a negative effect on students' learning when the pressure was too high. An overwhelming amount of students expressed how patience and freedom of thought built a genuine interest and love in music. One student describes what patience looks like in the process of learning music compared to typical classes:

> "I think cultural courses are quite rigid about right and wrong. If you can't remember this fact, you can't remember it. But sometimes, if you keep learning with this attitude, it may make people nervous and unmotivated. But when you learn music, you learn to have a mentality that [learning] takes time. Therefore, I just have to work hard. As long as I don't stop, I will have different results one day."

The benefits of trusting the process is shared amongst many students when they discuss ideal traits in a teacher:

> Example 1: "I think the best teachers are those who are more patient. They will demonstrate and tell you, for example, if you can't play well, how you should play it."
>
> Example 2: "I think it was my vocal teacher who had a huge impact. He told me that he used to think I was impatient and would get discouraged if I hadn't mastered something. Then he told me to observe the plants and flowers around me, to experience their lives, and to learn from these things in nature. It really helped me slow down. After listening to him, I felt that my attitude towards life had changed."
>
> Example 3: "I would say my undergraduate teacher. She is pretty laidback and won't push me to achieve in a rush. Vocal music is not something that you can learn immediately, for example breathing or style. So she taught me how to accomplish these skills over time."

Another group of students highlighted how preserving a students' freedom of thought throughout the learning experience can encourage greater interest and equal participation:

> Example 1: "For example, this music. When you hear it, What kind of scene will it have in your mind? What kind of emotion? You have to experience it yourself. These are all in my college and graduate years. It changed me a lot. It makes you more... Have your own thoughts… He guided me. He didn't give me a framed answer. But let me think. There are infinite possibilities in music. There is no right answer. I can choose the way I like to play."
>
> Example 2: "The relationship between teachers and students should be relatively equal. Sometimes, the teacher is the dominant [one]. The students may be pressed down all the time. They may not dare to say anything or have some new ideas."

The responses show how the autonomy to make their own decisions and have a say in their learning makes a significant difference in preserving interest in the learning process. The key with all of these experiences is that the *way* participants experienced and thought about learning reshaped moments of struggle from being the "end" into part of the "process." For example, when results did not arrive as quickly as students anticipated – they interpreted this not as a moment of failure

but as a test of patience. Furthermore, a greater amount of independent thought allowed students to realize the "infinite possibilities" within music. Nothing is fixed which blurs the line between "right" and "wrong" relieving a student of the pressure of having to fit a specific standard or expectation. This idea of creating new possibilities during the learning process is in alignment with what Dewey considers to be the most important driver of educational interactions (Dewey 1938, 35). Independent thought helps achieve personal fulfillment and freedom to choose actions that truly align with themselves:

> Example 1: "I thought I only live once. I don't want to put too much pressure on myself. I did what I wanted to do. I didn't care what others thought of me or their expectations of me to do better."
>
> Example 2: "Success is the autonomy to do whatever I want. This is very hard. But slowly, you will look for these opportunities."
>
> Example 3: "I think doing what you want to do is already good in this society."
>
> Example 4: I hope that it means I'm in a profession I like. I don't want to do this job in the future think every day, "I don't like this job, Why do I have to do, it feels hard." Instead, I can feed myself and also be a profession that I like. As such, I can be happier."
>
> Example 5: "For individuals, it's the happiness you gain from the process. If you're not happy, then doing something feels meaningless. Why would you do it if it's so painful? That's the feeling."

The reason why this is so significant in creating meaningful and enjoyable learning interactions can be explained with Mezirow's concept of Transformational Learning. Meizrow states that everyone has a "frame of reference" for future experiences (Meizrow 1997, 5). This frame of references encompasses "habits of the mind" and a "point of view." Habits of the mind can be defined as "habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (Mezirow 1997, 6). They are often unconsciously accepted as "truths" of the world which helps form the conclusions, or the "point of view" that we buy into. Mezirow states that in order for new information to have any meaning, it must require that the new content is incorporated into an "already well-developed frame of reference" (Mezirow 1997, 10). This means that the greater possibilities a frame of reference can allow, the more meanings an individual can extract from their learning experience. If a learner's frame of reference is too narrow, it will not be able to accommodate a wide variety of meanings. As such, the focus to help students have meaningful learning interactions is to a) examine the belief systems that shape the way we think and b) encourage the consideration of alternative perspectives (Mezirow 1997, 11). This means that something that once was thought of as the "end" can now be the "beginning" and moments that used to be defined by "struggle" can also have a feeling of

"success." This flexibility and acceptance of multiple truths is what ultimately bridges the gap to help creating a quality learning interaction.

Strengths, Limitations and Conclusion

This study used a qualitative, interview-based approach to identify if and how meaningful learning exists for Chinese music students by examining four key questions: their original motivations, moments of conflict and disconnection, experiences within Gaokao/Yikao structures, and how past experiences shape their future plans. Findings show that students often began music study impulsively or through parental influence, but reframed those beginnings into purposeful strategies for academic advancement. In describing conflict, students revealed both the harm of coercive teaching and the transformative value of patient mentorship and autonomy. Reflections on Gaokao/Yikao highlighted how exam structures simultaneously constrain freedom while offering perceived "loopholes" that students strategically exploited. Finally, early experiences—whether frustrating or inspiring—continued to shape identities, future goals, and attitudes toward music as both security and personal meaning.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was small, limited to East China Normal University, and the findings are hypothesis-based rather than generalizable. Interviews were retrospective and may include rationalizations. Moreover, while this study emphasizes student resilience and meaning-making, it risks underplaying the broader structural inequities of China's education system.

Despite these limitations, the study builds upon student narratives within Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, Dewey's ideas for progressive education and Wolf's definition of meaning to demonstrate how Chinese music students actively reinterpret coercion and exam pressure as opportunities for growth. Unlike calls for sweeping Gaokao reform, which remain politically difficult and slow, the insights here suggest more practical steps for educators: cultivating patient teaching, preserving student autonomy, and building supportive forums for reflection and dialogue. These strategies can help students transform imposed structures into sites of agency and meaning without waiting for large-scale systemic change.

In sum, this study shows how impulse and purpose, constraint and agency, pressure and passion coexist in the lives of Chinese music students. Their stories reveal the capacity to make

creative sense of the past, present and future reminding us to reframe moments of absurdity into meaningful lessons of resilience, love and personal growth.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Specific -> Broad	1. I'm guessing you have been playing this instrument for a while. When did you start learning the instrument? Whose idea was it to begin? 我猜您弹钢琴一段时间了。请问您是从什么时候开始学习的？这是您自己的主意，还是父母的建议(jian yi)呢？ a. *Probe:* If parents, what do you think their intended goal was? Why do you think they enrolled you in the piano specifically? What benefits were they trying to reap? 如果这是父母的主意，你认为他们的目的(mu di/biao)是什么？你觉得他们为什么特别让你学习钢琴？他们希望你获得(huo de)什么好处？ Note: Were you drawn to music because of personal interest, family influence, or for school (e.g., Gaokao bonus, university admission)? a. How did you feel about music or piano lessons during your childhood or teenage 青少年时代(qing shao nian shi dai) years? b. What kind of value 价值 jia zhi (if any) did piano have for you back then—was it cultural, emotional, academic, or instrumental?

Descriptive/broad	Since entering university, how have your goals and perceptions about music education changed? • Do you still see piano as a means to achieve something else, or has its meaning shifted over time? • After entering your music program, did your earlier achievements (qǔdé liánghǎo de chéngjì) (e.g., exam certifications or performance experience) feel more or less meaningful? • Can you give an example of how your current learning goals differ from what they were in the past?
Descriptive/broad	*Context:* 2. Can you describe a piano learning experience (jīngyàn) that felt especially meaningful (nàirénxúnwèi) or transformative? a. *Probe:* What was it about that moment or experience that made it meaningful? Was it connected to a specific piece, teacher, collaboration (hézuò), or internal shift? Did the process (guòchéng) (practice, struggle, or exploration) feel valuable, even apart from any final outcome?
Descriptive/broad	1. In your opinion, how does the current structure of music education in China shape your experiences and values as a student? a. *Probe:* Does the focus on performance, competition, or assessment feel limiting or motivating to you? b. Have you felt space to define your own goals or pathways within your training? c. What role do peers, teachers, or social expectations play in shaping how you value your progress?
Descriptive/broad	2. What would you tell a younger student about finding meaning in music education today? a. *Probe:* Has your idea of success in music changed over time? What does success look like for you now? b. Do you plan to continue pursuing music professionally or personally? Why or why not? What would you tell a younger student about finding meaning in music education today?