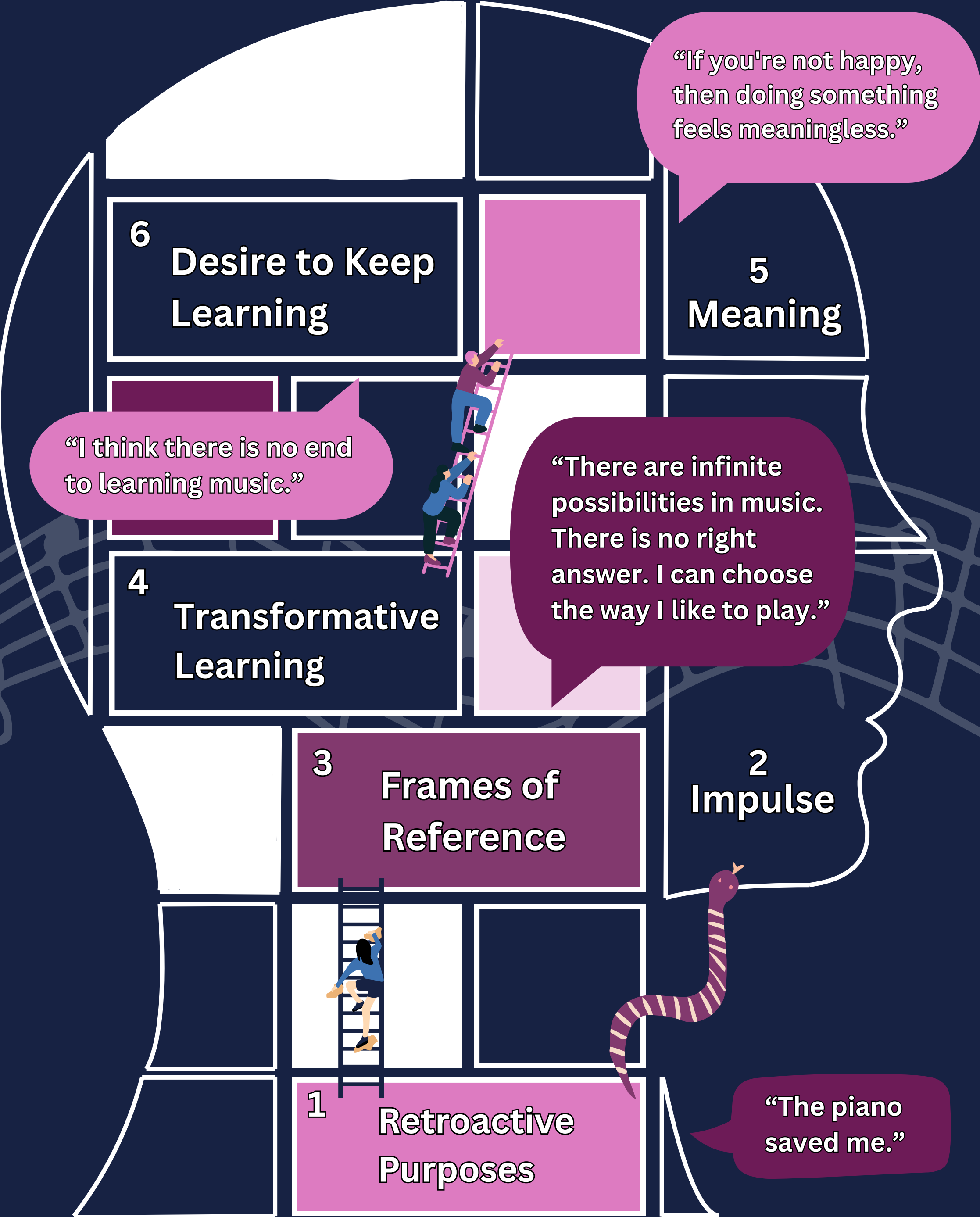


STRIKING A CHORD WITH CHINA'S STUDENTS: MEANINGFUL EDUCATION FOUND IN CONSTRAINT

JOY LUO
JOYRL.LUO@MAIL.UTORONTO.CA



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

FINDINGS

"But through every day's practice, and realizing that today was better than yesterday – that's a small victory that I can recognize."

The Beginning: Students' initial motivations for studying music often began with curiosity or family influence. These early impulses were fragile, often fading under the pressure of practice or exams. Yet later, many students **retroactively reframed** these childhood **impulses** as **purposeful** resources.

The Middle: Despite rigid and sometimes punitive teaching practices, students also described transformative encounters where patience, autonomy, and freedom reshaped their perspectives. Mezirow's theory of **transformative learning** can show how students reframed struggle as part of growth, expanded their "frames of reference," and found meaning even within coercive structures.

The End: While students initially pursued music instrumentally, the reframing of their experiences and the adoption of different points of view revealed a **genuine desire to keep learning**. Music became a **meaningful** source of emotional release, personal growth and social connection.

BACKGROUND

- In China, the gaokao (national university entrance exam) is the **sole pathway** to elite universities and social mobility
- Many students believe that an emphasis on **future-preparedness** in school is grueling and **meaningless**
- Students turned to the yikao (arts exam, including music) as a **"loophole"** to top universities, since lower academic scores could be offset by artistic ability

PURPOSE

Identify if/how meaningful learning exists for Chinese music students by examining how they describe 1) shifting motivations, 2) interpretations of conflict, 3) respond to the gaokao/yikao system, and 4) connect past experiences to future aspirations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools should work to **strengthen student support systems** through dialogue, mentorship, and reflective practice to allow reframing and newer perspectives to emerge. Future research should integrate more perspectives and test the generalizability of this research with different disciplines.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 (10 girls, 2 boys) music students studying at East China Normal University in Shanghai. *Primary Inclusion criteria: >18, took the gaokao/yikao, current music students*