

## **Students' motivation in studying music: The Mainland China context**

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### **Abstract**

Entering the new century, China has gradually increased her participation in international affairs. Education is regarded as a crucial issue to strengthen the country in the long term. Music education in mainland China has been facing a reform with reference to recent global trends. However, students' motivation in relation to learning music in schools has not been widely studied. This article reports data drawn from an international study which examined students' motivation to study music as compared to other school subjects across the school grades. A total of 2,750 students from three middle schools and four high schools in Beijing responded to a questionnaire survey. Results indicated that the task value of learning music by Chinese students is significantly lower than other school subjects. Students' expectancy in learning music declines while their perceived difficulties in learning music arise across the school levels. However, their interest in learning music also arises across the school levels.

### **Keywords**

competence beliefs, cross-cultural comparisons, expectancy-value theory, motivation,

music education, school subjects, self-beliefs, task difficulty, values

***The context for this article***

This article reports data drawn from an international mapping exercise that involved eight different countries (Brazil, China, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, Korea, Mexico, and the United States of America), which examined students' motivation to study music as compared to other school subjects (e.g., art, mother tongue language, physical education, mathematics, science). Readers should refer to the lead article in this series (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010), for a full explanation of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the study, reliability and validity of the questionnaire scales, and description of the methods used to gather and analyse data. Further information on the eight country analysis can be obtained by contacting the research team leader (McPherson) or, in the case of this article, the lead author.

The studies in this series draw on the expectancy-value theoretical framework (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998), to examine the competence beliefs, values, and perceptions of task difficulty of 24,143 students across the eight countries. Competence beliefs were defined as expectations for success or the belief about how well each student thought she or he could do in each subject or upcoming task. Subjective task values were conceptualised in terms of four major components: *attainment value* or importance, *intrinsic value* or interest, *utility value* or usefulness, and the *cost* of participating in the subject.

Four key issues in the overall eight country analysis as reported by McPherson and O'Neill (2010) were investigated: (a) whether competence beliefs and values declined

across all eight countries; (b) whether perceptions of task difficulty increased across school levels; (c) differences in students' rating of competence beliefs, values, and task difficulty for music as compared to other school subjects; and (d) differences among boys and girls, and those students who were or were not learning an instrument or voice (either in or outside of school).

Across the lead article and individual country analyses, a variety of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and mixed-design ANOVAs were used to examine students' cumulative mean ratings for each of the three motivation measures (competence beliefs, values, task difficulty). The within-subjects factor (school subjects) and between subjects factors and interaction effects for school level, gender, and music learning are reported for each country. Tukey tests were used for post hoc comparisons. Because of the large sample size, a statistical significance level of .001 was set in the lead article, but adjusted where necessary in individual country analyses.

*Gary E. McPherson (research team leader)*

## **Introduction**

China is an ancient civilised nation with rich and varied musical resources that can be traced back more than 8,000 years, to a picture of an unearthed clay jar showing primeval singing and dancing. Today, China has the world largest school music education system. According to the official website, there are more than 580 thousand schools, and about 320 million primary and secondary students in 2008 (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2008). Formal school music education, however, has a history of only about 100 years,

with school music education still lacking standardisation and a real nation-wide adoption at all levels.

As a result of general reforms at all levels of schooling, China's school music education in the 21st century has reached a new level compared with the last three decades. A turning point for music education was the promulgation of the *National Music Curriculum Standard for Full-time School Compulsory Education (Experiment)* (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2001) and the *The National Music Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (experiment)* (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2003), which were to provide a full school music education system for China comprising compulsory music courses in primary and secondary levels (1 to 2 classes each week), in addition to elective music courses (3 credits, not an examination subject) at the senior high school level. Despite these reforms, music education is still regarded as less important than literature, language, mathematics and science education, especially for upper year students in each level, even though students are able to elect to undertake music major admission tests and graded music examinations (GME).

The quality of music education differs in each school across China, and normally depends on the attitude and competence of individual music educators. In addition, the conspicuous regional economic differences across China are another reason for such diverse disparity in provision of music education.

### **Music Teaching**

There are noticeable regional differences between eastern and western parts of

China, as well as in urban and rural areas, with regard to the servicing of school music education. The eastern part and urban areas have developed considerably, whereas the western part and rural areas remain far behind in development (Wang & Fan, 2004). As a general feature of school education, rural school teachers usually teach all subjects, including music (Liu, 2010), while urban schools usually have well-trained professional music teachers who specialise in teaching music only.

In a music class, 'singing-centered' teaching is widely accepted by most school music teachers (Lu, 2004). Contemporary music education approaches, such as Kodály, Orff, or Dalcroze have been introduced to some urban schools during past decades, though not all teachers are accepting of these overseas methodologies. Teachers, who are sufficiently specialised, often bring common musical instruments such as the bamboo flute, recorder, harmonica, ocarina or metalophone into their music classrooms. Many urban schools now have their own choirs, bands or dancing groups. These 'Second Class Curricula' (an official name for school activities outside the compulsory curriculum in China's schools) have improved many students' musicianship. In addition, a variety of regional and national music competitions continue to enhance school music education, particularly as both school music teachers and administrators pay much attention to music education when their schools take part in a music competition.

### **Music Learning**

Students in Chinese public schools fall into two groups in relation to music education: those who do not study music outside the school curriculum, and those who

may be learning musical instruments, dance or singing for enjoyment in preparation for undertaking school admissions tests or graded music examinations (GME) in addition to studying music at school.

The rapid development of the Chinese economy has allowed many families to invest more in their children's education. The 'one-child policy' (see Hesketh, Lu, & Xing., 2005) and the 'National-joint College Entrance Examination (NCEE)' are sources of anxiety for many parents who are keen to see their only child succeed in a highly competitive society. As the Chinese economy has grown, so too has the number of students who undertake graded music examinations and 'special-skill student's examinations' aimed at equipping students for the rigours of university entrance. The graded music examination system is regarded as an 'open music school' for social music education. Each year, hundreds of thousands of children, who desire extra qualifications and a paper certificate, undertake these examinations. Normally, students who achieve the high level certificates in music (e.g., above Grade 8 of the graded examinations offered by the Central Conservatory of Music), are regarded as 'special-skill students' and are given priority for their university admissions.

Apart from the school music education and after-school learning, some music schools offer professional training programs that are designed for recruiting future students for music colleges. Professional extension opportunities in music, in addition to the common school curriculum, are all included in these music schools. Many young musicians originally received professional training from these types of schools. In the future it is hoped that more middle school students who are deeply interested in music, or

have reached a certain level, might also take the music college admission interview. This hope also applies to music major students. Figure 1 shows a typical student's progression for learning music. When non-music students start to learn an instrument or singing, they become music students. They can enter into the university through the High Level GME certificate examination. These students can become music majors in the university, or become special-skill students specialising in music in order to enrol in non-music programs. In sum, learning music is regarded as 'useful' in terms of successful university entrance.

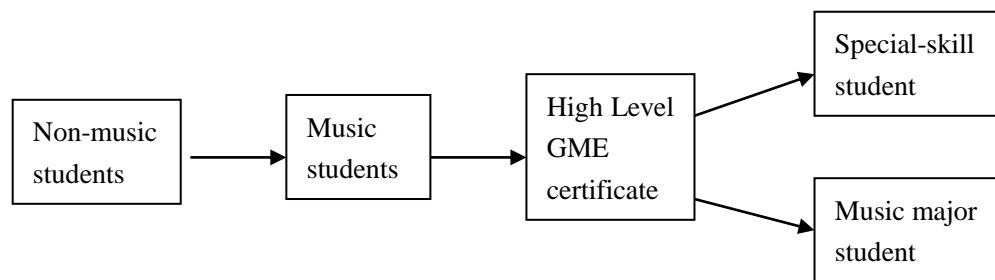


Figure 1. Music student progression to the university level

### Music Curriculum

The music curriculum development in China is connected with global trends. The *'National Music Curriculum Standard for Full-time School Compulsory Education (Experiment)'* (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2001) provides a new conception for school music education that is based on ten basic features:

- Aesthetic education as the central focus of the music curriculum
- An emphasis on meeting students' interests
- An inclusive view that advocates music education for all students
- The nurture of individual personality and encouragement of whole person development
- General emphasis on the importance of music practice
- The advocacy of musical creativity
- The encouragement of an integrated approach across disciplines
- Valuing of a sense of national culture



- The acceptance and recognition of a multi-cultural approach
- Continuing improvements in the evaluation system

Following the release of the compulsory music curriculum standard, the '*National Music Curriculum Standard for Senior High-School (Experiment)*' (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2003) was promulgated in 2003. It implies that senior high school students can have access to music, and proposes a system of completed music curriculum standard for all levels as a result of this policy. Instead of compulsory courses, senior high school music from Year 10 becomes an elective course that includes 54 meeting hours and 3 credits in one semester. This provides a flexible way for senior students to access music education and meets the different needs of all students. Table 1 shows the school music curriculum for all levels in China.

Table 1.

*School Music Curriculum in China*

<i>Level</i>	<i>No. of Years (Age)</i>	<i>Course Type</i>	<i>Credit</i>	<i>Academic Year with Music Class</i>	<i>Weekly Meeting</i>	<i>Total Meeting</i>
Primary	6 (6–12)	Required	0	6	2	432
Junior High	3 (12–15)	Required	0	3	1	108
Senior High	3 (15–18)	Elective	3	0.5	1–2	54
<b>Overall</b>			<b>3</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>1–2</b>	<b>594</b>

Although curriculum standards are stipulated, more work needs to be done in order to bring about greater national awareness of the importance of music education. The lack of sufficient and effective teacher training and professional development, the shortage of necessary facilities, and the marginalisation of music in the school curriculum still exist in most schools. Many students eagerly pursue arts activities, but are forced to focus on their ‘main academic courses’ such as literature, language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and politics in addition to other subjects that are included in NCEE. Consequently, most music classes are reserved only for lower year students (both junior and senior school).

### **Teaching Materials and Content**

As advocated by the Chinese Communist Party half a century ago, the main goal of arts education is to serve politics and socialism. Consequently, much ‘political and revolutionary’ content has been included in school music textbooks over the last 50 years. This content mostly includes songs based on the stories of the civil war, though the experiences of today’s children are far from those of their contemporaries of that era.

The school education reform has brought new ideas and content into China’s school music education. First, the ‘political’ or ‘revolutionary’ content has been reduced considerably and replaced by much more authentic children’s music. Second, the music curriculum has become more performance-based instead of pure singing. Many movement, games, appreciation, and creativity activities or instrumental performances have been added to music classes. Third, music textbooks do not always include reference

to domestic and foreign folk music, although these have been highly recommended to school music educators (Xie, 2000). For example, Jiaying Xie of the China Conservatory advocated including more folksongs into school music classes and encouraging all children to know the folksongs from their own hometown (2000). The Department of Arts, Hygiene and Physical Education, under the Ministry of Education, advocated Beijing Opera to be taught in school music classes in 2006. Nowadays more than 10 schools in major cities are adopting Beijing's Opera education into their music classes. Though Beijing Opera is quite hard for most children to comprehend and appreciate, the government has shown interest in fostering this unique genre of music across all schools nationally. Last, the contemporary music education approaches such as Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze have become increasingly integrated into some urban schools. Additionally, a number of returned overseas scholars and foreign experts have introduced much Western music into China, especially folk music through the introduction of these approaches.

### **Perceived Value of Music Education**

Generally speaking, music is regarded as an important part of aesthetic education in China, although different schools and students have different attitudes towards music as a school subject. The national music curriculum indicates that music education is an essential part of humanities and quality-oriented education, and music is a core course for all students at the compulsory education level (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2001). The national awareness and promotion of 'Quality-oriented Education' is based on improving people's quality of life, and places great importance on training students' spirit of

innovation and practical ability. Consequently, it aims to create an ideologically, morally, culturally, high-standard and well-disciplined, intellectually, and physically developed new generation to continue the building of socialism. In the new century the importance of music education is to be enhanced. The third National Education Conference has claimed to include ‘Quality-oriented Education’ in all levels of schools, families, and social education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2001). For Chinese educators, ‘Quality-oriented Education’ mostly refers to music, art, and dance.

Music education in China is generally accepted as less important than the other main subjects such as science, Chinese, and mathematics. Although music is regarded as an enrichment activity, rather than an academic subject in schools, many students, like those in other countries, are still highly engaged in music (especially popular music) outside schools. These students are often referred to as ‘the Star-chasing Group’; a phrase used to describe students who wish to be stars some day. Here the mass media plays an essential role for music education outside school. One of the most famous singing stars, the so-called ‘Super Girl’, Li Yuchun won a singing competition in a TV show by election via mobile phone messages from youngsters. In accord with students in other countries, most children have strong preferences for pop music, in contrast to the music they are exposed to in their school music programs.

### **Alternative Music Education**

The reform of education, and new development of music education in China in the 21st century, does not necessarily imply a common understanding or agreement among all

stakeholders. Unqualified music teachers, insufficient teacher training, and an over-emphasis on the ‘main academic subjects’ (such as literature, languages, and mathematics) all lead to implementation problems in relation to effective school music programs throughout China. In addition, negative perceptions of students and parents on school music education demand concerted action. There are several ways to acquire better music education outside campus for school students, such as music colleges, youth and children’s palaces (a kind of government-run after-school education institution), private training institutions, and individual tutoring. These outside of school enrichment opportunities are usually scheduled on weekends or after school hours. Due to the rapidly growing Chinese economy, interest in these alternative music education activities is booming in various parts of the country. In some urban cities, these types of ‘extra-curricular’ music education have surpassed participation in daytime school music education.

### **Specific Issues addressed in the China Study**

After reviewing the current situation of music education, there are a number of issues in China’s music education system that need to be addressed. On the one hand, music, as a school subject, has been marginalised in the school curriculum, because music is regarded to be an unimportant subject in assisting school leavers to obtain a job. On the other hand, music is regarded to be an extra competence and achievement which may enhance students’ profile so that they can be more likely to be admitted to university. This dilemma may have hindered students’ motivation in learning music. However, until now,

there has been no empirical evidence as to how Chinese students perceive music learning in schools. The aim of this study, then, is to seek evidence in relation to students' motivation in learning music.

## Method

A total of three middle schools and four high schools in the Beijing school system were involved in the project. Research assistants were hired to visit four schools and helped to explain the questionnaires and administer the procedures during normal classes. In the other three schools, teachers were briefed on the intent of the study and administered the questionnaires to students. A total of 2,750 students from senior primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels from those seven schools were invited to respond to a questionnaire. Table 1 shows the number of student participants in detail.

Table 1. *Number (and percentage) of participants according to school levels, gender and music learner (N = 3049)<sup>a</sup>*

	<i>Music Learner</i>				<i>Non-Music Learner</i>			
	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>	
<b>School Level</b>	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
<b>Senior Primary</b>	78	(2.56)	50	(1.65)	89	(2.92)	126	(4.13)
<b>Junior Secondary</b>	239	(7.84)	202	(6.62)	371	(12.17)	481	(15.78)
<b>Senior Secondary</b>	189	(6.20)	158	(5.18)	392	(12.86)	375	(12.30)

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Sample size. Not consistent with the total of participants reporting gender and music learning because of missing values

## Results

This article reports and discusses findings focusing on differences in students' motivational beliefs in relation to music learning. Before this discussion, however,

findings on students' perceptions of music and other subjects are shown in the following sections.

### **Students' perceptions of task values on different subjects**

A mixed two-way repeated measures ANOVA (school subject x school level) to examine differences in students' perceptions of task values across types of schools indicated significant main effects of school subject,  $F(5, 3045) = 276.47, p < .01$ , school level,  $F(2, 3045) = 80.98, p < .01$ , and their interaction,  $F(10, 3045) = 31.87, p < .01$ . Findings indicate that Chinese students regard music as a subject of relatively low task value when compared with other academic subjects, including Chinese and mathematics. However, unlike these subjects which significantly decreased across school levels, students' perceptions of music did not differ significantly across the three school levels (Tukey test for pair-wise comparisons,  $\text{adj. } p > .01$ ; see Figure 1).

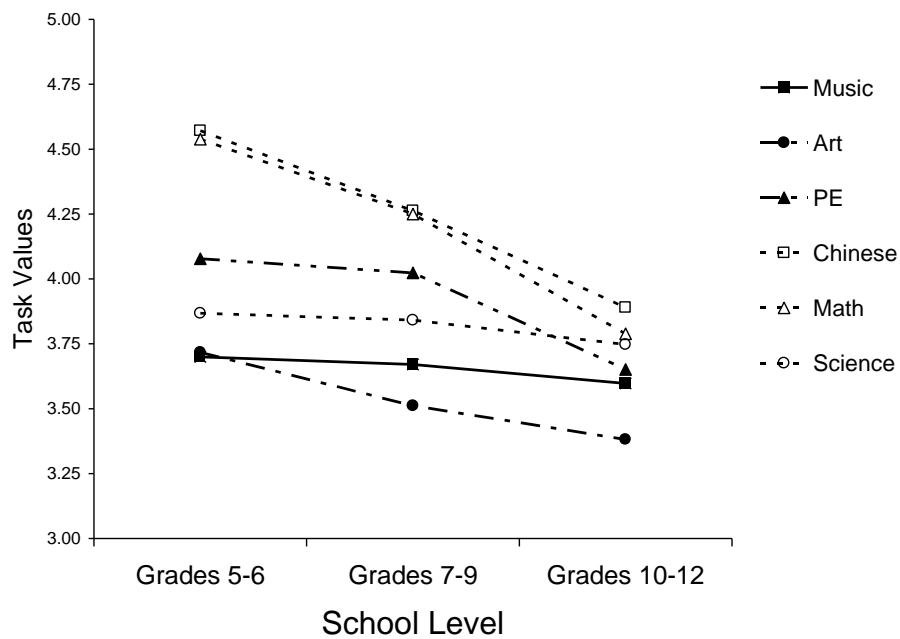


Figure 1. Students' perceptions of task values on different subjects

### Students' expectancy on different subjects

A mixed two-way repeated measures ANOVA (school subject x school level) used to examine differences in students' expectancy on different subjects across the school levels indicated significant main effects for school subject,  $F(5, 3014) = 30.96, p < .01$ , school level,  $F(2, 3014) = 116.06, p < .01$ , and their interaction,  $F(10, 3014) = 5.55, p < .01$ . Figure 2 shows that students' expectancy on studying the various subjects (including music) declined significantly across the school levels (adj.  $p < .01$ ).



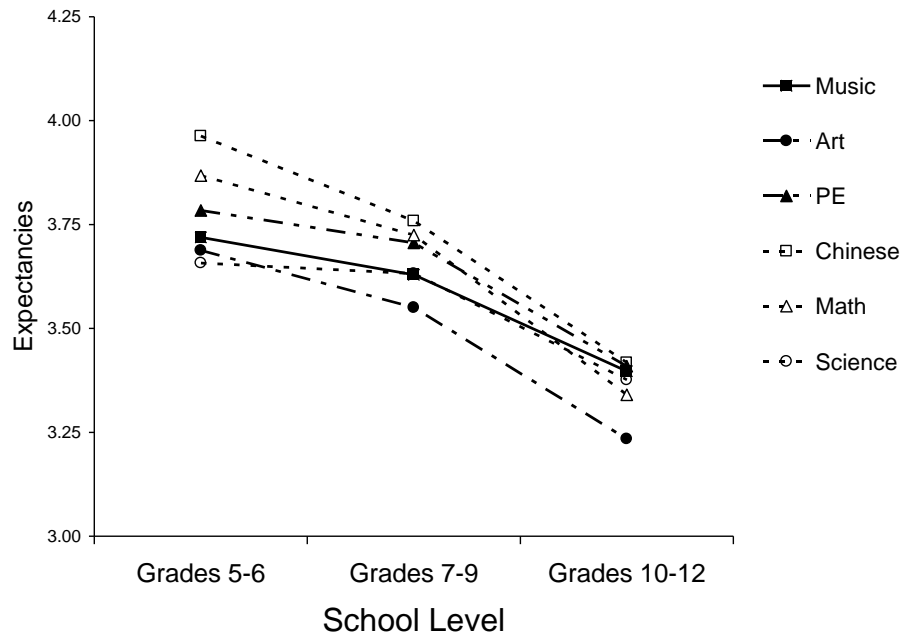


Figure 2. Students' expectancy on different subjects

### Students' perception on task difficulties of different subjects

A mixed two-way repeated measures ANOVA (school subject x school level) was used to examine the differences in students' perception on task difficulties of different subjects across school levels. The significant interaction,  $F(10, 2980) = 4.34, p < .01$ , and pair-wise comparisons revealed that Chinese students' perceptions on the task difficulty of music increased significantly across school levels (adj.  $p < .01$ ). However, music was the subject which possessed a relatively lower level of task difficulty among other subjects (see Figure 3).

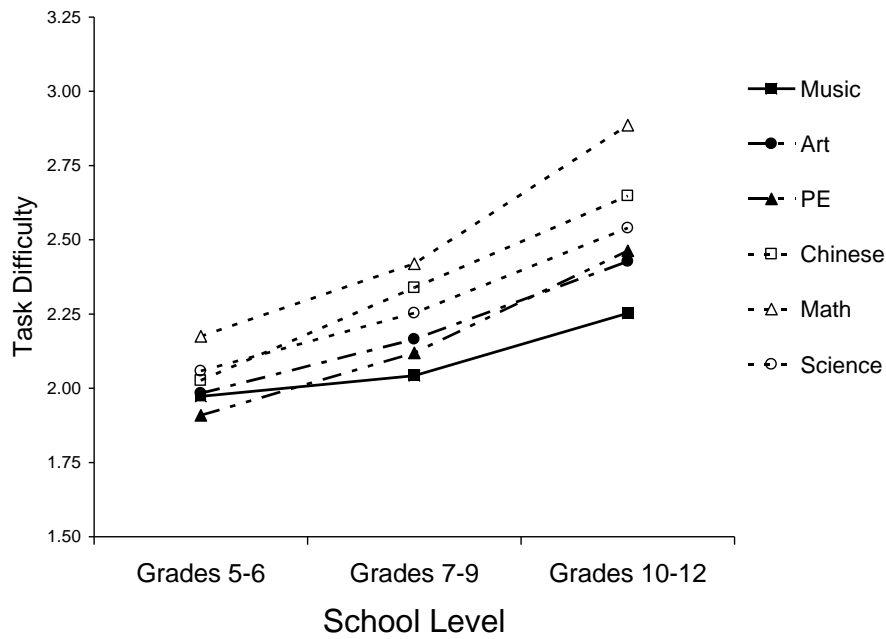


Figure 3. Students' perception on task difficulties of different subjects

### Students' interest in learning the subjects in schools

An additional mixed two-way repeated measures ANOVA (school subject x school level) was used to examine students' interest in learning subjects in school. The significant interaction,  $F(10, 2980) = 4.34, p < .01$ , and the pair-wise comparisons revealed that students' interest in learning music in school increased significantly across school levels (adj.  $p < .01$ ; see Figure 4). In addition, music was the subject that possessed the highest level of interest among high school students (adj.  $p < .01$ ).

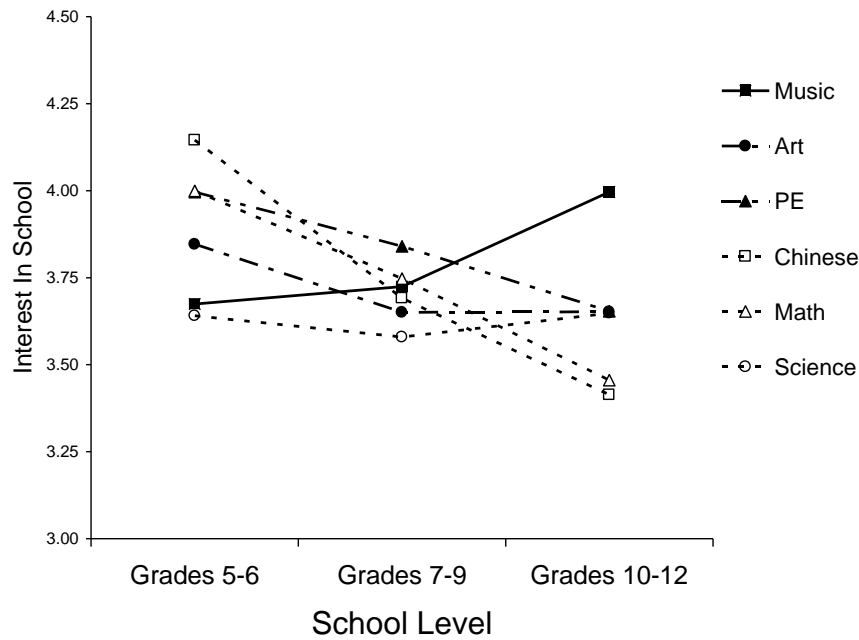


Figure 4. Students' perceptions of interest on each subject in the school

## Discussion

This article aims at selecting significant findings from the comparative study reported in the lead article and providing attributions to the findings from the current situation of music education in China. From the above findings, two major issues are identified and considered to be critical in students' motivation for learning music in the school curriculum in China. The first issue relates to students' perceptions on the task value of learning music in schools, while the second refers to students' self-confidence, interest, and perception of task difficulties in learning music.

According to the findings from this study, the respondents regarded music with lower task value than the other academic subjects. In other words, they regard learning music as being less useful and important than learning academic subjects. For a lengthy period in China, music was not included as a subject in the National-joint College

Entrance Examination. Inevitably music has been marginalised by the schools, parents, and students. Due to the ‘one-child policy’, it is common to see Chinese parents encouraging their children to take a ‘safe path’ for their future career by focusing on learning ‘academic subjects’. Learning ordinary and ‘useful’ subjects such as sciences and technology are considered to be more likely to secure a job with a higher income. Facing the recent rapid economic growth in China, it is understandable, perhaps, that most parents and students are eager to seek opportunities of lifting their standard of living by seizing a discipline that is functional in the modern economy.

The historical-cultural context of China is a critical attribute influencing the modern thinking of Chinese people. According to Rogoff (2003), human development is comprehended in the light of cultural practices. Since ancient times in China, Confucian thinkers have recognised two purposes of education: (a) personal enjoyment of acquiring knowledge; and (b) social implications of learning (see Lee, 2000). Together with rites, archery, chivalry, writing, and mathematics, music was one of the ‘six arts’ taught and advocated in Confucian education, which regarded music as a symbol and a metaphor of social order (Thrasher, 1981). For instance, the scale of ensemble systems of court music in the Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 B.C.E.) varied in different ranks of aristocracy. In Taoism, music was considered to be a tool for nurturing a peaceful mind and promoting a natural perspective of philosophy (Pu, 1993). In the world of traditional Chinese intellectuals, music was a spiritual goal for humanity building but not for utilitarian purposes (Liu, 2006). For those professional musicians who made a living with music, their social status would be lowered. For instance, in traditional China, only the blind people and the

beggars would sing and play musical instruments on the street for a living. This traditional thought has, to a certain extent, influenced the Chinese mind that music should not be regarded to be a tool for career-building.

Education in modern China has been westernised since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the government of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) adapted Japanese modernisation in education, economy, politics, and the military. The first university of China, the Peking University, was built with modern disciplines and faculties. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chancellor of Peking University, Cai Yuenpei (1868–1940) advocated the ‘equal importance of five ways of life — Virtue, Wisdom, Health, Collective, and Beauty’ (Cai Yuenpei, 2009), and this view still affects modern Chinese education. Nowadays, the economy has been the most important social and national goal shared by most Chinese people. However, most parents and students have inherited the traditional Chinese view that music education is not for earning a living but for aesthetic and personal development.

In addition to the issues raised above students’ personal value system in relation to learning music, including self-confidence and intrinsic value is an important factor. According to the findings, Chinese students’ self-confidence in learning music declines across the grade levels. In addition, students perceive learning music to be more difficult when they reach higher grade levels. This may be attributed to the music curriculum in schools. Since most schools in China rely on a ‘singing-centred’ curriculum, secondary students, adolescent boys in particular, often find singing difficult when their voices change. This could be a significant factor affecting the self-confidence of students in the

middle years of their learning. Hence, secondary students might be more stressed than primary students, since they must face the college entrance examination. They might find less time for music learning which leads to a higher perception of task difficulty.

According to the results, primary 5 and 6 students find music least interesting when compared with other subjects, including visual arts and P.E. This might be regarded as alarming by Chinese music educators. Before the reform in 2001, the school music curriculum was regarded as being separated from students' social life, with emphasis on imparting music knowledge relying on teacher-centred teaching approaches and drilling; the aim of assessments merely focused on selecting students (Wu & Jin, 2002). In an earlier survey undertaken by the editorial board of a music education journal in China, students, music teachers, and school principals were asked why their students did not enjoy music classes in school. Two reasons were suggested by these three parties: (a) the music teachers were unable to deliver good quality teaching, and (b) the school textbooks were of low quality (China Music Education, 1999). These studies have revealed that there have been different issues in music education in China. Quality of music teachers and teacher education, music curriculum, and content seem to be the most pressing issues which deserve a national curriculum reform.

Paradoxically, students' interest in learning music in higher grade levels was found to be higher than those in lower grade levels. Hence, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders were interested in music significantly more than other school subjects. In modern times, the media has been highly influential in the lives of adolescents. Secondary students have different channels through which they encounter music. As mentioned earlier, some

Chinese pop stars have very rapidly become famous and earn substantial amounts. Such success by a few may have influenced students to fantasise about music bringing them fame and fortune.

### **Implications**

In order to further advocate music and to motivate students in learning music in China, the findings imply that a thorough review of music education should be initiated. A balanced view on the philosophy of music education between the notion of ‘music education as aesthetic education’ and the advocacy of the pragmatism of music might be necessary. Music teachers and advocates may need to convince parents and students that learning music can be ‘useful’ in different ways. For instance, researchers need to explore how music learning may influence personal development, including cognitive development, social skills, and moral education. Recently initial research in this direction has started in China. For example, there is recent research studying how participation in music activities (such as singing in a choir and playing in a wind band) might impact on children’s social skills and learning motivation. Findings indicate that the social skills and learning motivation of primary school students who participate in music activities are significantly higher than those of students who do not participate in music activities (Sun, 2009).

The recent music curriculum reform in China might be a solution by which music classes would incorporate listening and creative activities along with singing and instrumental playing. The advocacy of developing musical creativity may lead to more

composing and arranging activities in schools so that students would achieve well in music even though their voices are changing. In addition, the offer of music in the senior secondary level will provide new opportunities for interested students to pursue music in their college and career life. These new advocacies may lead to higher motivation in learning music.

In conclusion, Chinese students have been facing a paradoxical situation about music education. On the one hand, senior students are interested in studying music more than other subjects; on the other hand, they find learning music difficult and consider it not to be useful for their future study and career. The recent music curriculum reform is timely in addressing these issues. However, how best to further motivate all students to see the value of learning music remains an unsolved problem that deserves urgent attention.



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