



# Exploring Chinese Students' Motivations for Learning Chinese Piano Works

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**Abstract.** In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to encourage Chinese students to engage with and perform Chinese piano works. Despite these initiatives, the prevalence of students choosing Chinese piano compositions remains significantly lower than those opting for Western classical pieces. This discrepancy forms the core investigation of this study, which seeks to understand the motivations behind Chinese students' preferences for Chinese piano music works. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with six piano graduate students from a university in northwest China, this research applies expectancy-value theory to analyze the motivational dimensions influencing students' choices. These dimensions include expectation, intrinsic interest, utility value, achievement value, and cost. The study identifies key factors such as the influence of tutors, peers, and the broader educational and cultural environment that promote or inhibit the selection of Chinese piano works. One critical finding is the pervasive impact of the Western classical music education system, which appears to significantly limit students' engagement with Chinese compositions. Based on these insights, the study proposes several strategies aimed at enhancing the appeal and perceived value of Chinese piano music among students. These recommendations are intended to address the systemic biases and barriers that currently favor Western classical music within educational settings.

**Keywords:** Chinese Piano Works; Motivation; Expectancy Value Theory; Graduate Students; Western Classical Music Education System.

## 1 Introduction

The piano, often lauded as the king of musical instruments, has a storied and expansive history. It is celebrated worldwide for its extensive range and vibrant expressive capabilities [1]. Across the globe, diverse nations and cultures have crafted piano compositions that encapsulate their unique musical expressions. Chinese piano music is distinguished by its national characteristics, including the use of pentatonic scales, integration of folk melodies, rhythmic freedom, and an emphasis on improvisation [2]. These elements not only foster a sense of national identity but also mirror and reinforce the cultural values of China, thus contributing to the strengthening of the nation's social fabric [3].

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Despite substantial support from both the state and society for Chinese piano music, highlighted by significant funding from the National Arts Fund of China to support local composers, the preference among students for studying Chinese piano compositions remains notably low. This preference is especially pronounced in contrast to the selection of Western classical pieces, a trend that is particularly evident within China's domestic arts education institutions [4]. This imbalance might be attributed to the dominance of Western classical music in the curricula of higher music education [5]. Furthermore, the aesthetic appeal—or 'audibility'—of piano works may also deter students from engaging with Chinese piano music, as many perceive Western classical pieces to be more melodically appealing.

In response to this trend, this study aims to investigate the motivations of Chinese music graduate students for studying Chinese piano music and to identify the factors that influence their decision to engage with these compositions. By understanding these motivations and factors, the study seeks to propose strategies that could encourage more students to embrace and advocate for the richness of Chinese piano music.

## 2 Literature Review

In China, the piano education system notably lacks integration of indigenous piano music, which may undermine the motivation of Chinese students to engage with local compositions. The piano, a Western invention, was introduced to China over a century ago, where local composers have since strived to infuse their cultural essence into piano music creation. This initiative has spanned significant historical periods, including the early 20th century, the Cultural Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, and the post-economic reform era [6]. Despite the development of many outstanding pieces, truly original piano works that meld unique musical thought with piano performance remain scarce in China [7]. The majority of compositions are adaptations of traditional folk songs and instrumental music, which often adhere to traditional styles and may not deeply resonate with audiences [8].

The limited availability of indigenous piano teaching materials further complicates students' ability to systematically study Chinese piano compositions. Primary and secondary educational institutions predominantly use Western textbooks, such as Germany's 'Beyer' and the United States' 'Thompson,' which limits exposure to native compositions during formative learning phases. Teachers frequently rely on these foreign materials, often overlooking Chinese compositions that may seem unconventional to students accustomed to Western musical structures and techniques. This educational gap fosters a disconnect when students encounter compositions based on different musical intervals, such as those commonly found in Chinese music [9].

Moreover, outdated evaluation mechanisms for artistic proficiency in China constrain the piano repertoire available to students pursuing advanced music studies. Entrance exams for major conservatories traditionally mandate a repertoire that includes advanced etudes like 'Czerny 740' (absent in Chinese compositions), classical sonatas, Baroque polyphonic pieces, and large-scale works from both Chinese and Western tra-

ditions. This rigid requirement discourages experimentation with Chinese compositions, out of fear that such choices might jeopardize students' academic and professional futures.

Despite these challenges, some students choose to perform complex and emotionally charged Chinese piano works in competitive settings, recognizing that a flawless performance might distinguish them from their peers. Indeed, Chinese piano music not only carries the cultural heritage of the nation but also plays a crucial role in fostering national pride and cultural identity. Mastery of these works can offer significant advantages in competitive settings, yet the overall motivation among students to pursue Chinese piano music remains low due to the educational and systemic barriers highlighted above. This situation underscores the urgent need for educational reforms that embrace and promote the unique cultural legacy of Chinese piano music, thereby enriching the musical landscape and empowering future generations of musicians.

### **3 Theoretical Framework: Expectancy-Value Theory**

Expectancy-value theory, developed by Eccles et al. [10] and further elaborated by Wigfield [11], serves as a psychological framework to understand individuals' choices, persistence, and performance across different tasks. The theory posits that these behaviors can be predicted by two key factors: the expectancy of success and the value attributed to the task. These elements are crucial determinants of motivation, shaping how individuals approach and engage with various activities.

#### **3.1 Expectancy of Success**

In the Chinese piano education context, the expectancy of success is influenced by several factors. The dominance of Western music in educational materials may skew students' perceptions of their own abilities, particularly when comparing the playing of culturally familiar Western compositions against Chinese piano works. Limited exposure to challenging Chinese piano pieces can lead students to doubt their ability to successfully master these works, thus negatively impacting their expectancy beliefs.

#### **3.2 Task Value**

The value that Chinese students attach to learning and performing Chinese piano works can be categorized into intrinsic, utility, attainment, and cost:

1) Intrinsic Value: This is derived from the personal enjoyment of playing music that resonates with one's cultural heritage.

2) Utility Value: For students aspiring to professional music careers within China, proficiency in local compositions can enhance employability and relevance in the local music scene.

3) Attainment Value: The cultural significance of Chinese piano music may lead students to place high value on excelling in these works as a way to affirm their cultural identity and pride.

4) Cost: The costs of learning Chinese piano works encompass the limited availability of teaching resources, the emotional and psychological efforts required to diverge from the familiar Western canon, and the perceived risk of jeopardizing academic and professional prospects.

### **3.3 Application in Music Education**

The application of expectancy-value theory in the field of music education has been demonstrated in various studies [12]. This study employs expectancy-value theory to explore the motivations and influencing factors for piano graduate students in China who choose to study Chinese piano works. By analyzing how these factors interact, this study aims to illuminate the complex motivational landscape faced by students. This approach not only highlights the individual elements affecting student motivation but also places these elements within the broader educational and cultural frameworks of Chinese society.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the motivational dynamics influencing the selection of piano repertoire in China and offers insights that could inform curriculum development and pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering a more inclusive and representative musical education. Through this lens, the study seeks to advocate for educational reforms that recognize and enhance the value of Chinese piano music, thus encouraging a richer, more diverse musical landscape.

## **4 Research Purpose**

The primary purpose of this paper are to explore the underlying motivations of Chinese piano students for studying indigenous piano works and to identify the motivational factors influencing their choices. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What motivates Chinese piano students to learn Chinese piano music?
2. What are the motivational factors that influence Chinese piano students to choose Chinese piano music works?

## **5 Methodology**

To delve into the motivational dynamics among music graduate students regarding their selection of Chinese piano works, this study employed semi-structured interviews[13]. Recognized for yielding rich, detailed insights into participants' motivations and experiences, this qualitative research tool offers "privileged access to our basic experience of the lived world" and is pivotal in probing educational processes through individual experiences. Semi-structured interviews provide a versatile format that combines a structured question framework with the flexibility for spontaneous, in-depth "second

questions" based on participants' responses, facilitating a dynamic and responsive dialogue. This approach allows participants to express their thoughts extensively and naturally.

The interview protocol included a set of predetermined questions designed to explore deep motivational structures:

1. Can you tell us about yourself? (age, ethnicity, gender, grade; educational background)
2. Tell us about your music education experience.
3. What is your favorite/least favorite piano piece to play and why?
4. In preparation for your graduation concert, what are some of the Chinese piano music works you are currently practicing?
5. Why did you choose to practice these Chinese piano works?
6. What inspired you to choose these Chinese music works?
7. How often do you practice the piano and what is the time and frequency of practicing Chinese piano music?
8. What do you get out of Chinese piano music?
9. If you could choose a new piano music piece, would you still choose Chinese piano music for your graduation concert? Why?

### 5.1 Research Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse sample that enhances the study's insights. The sample consisted of six piano students aged between 24 and 26 years, each majoring in piano and possessing over 15 years of experience in piano study. These students were enrolled at a university conservatory in northwest China. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants.

These graduate students have been immersed in music education from an early age, with continuous and uninterrupted learning. Notably, one participant began their musical education at a music-attached primary school and continued through to a music-attached middle school, underlining a deep-rooted engagement with both Western and Chinese piano music. All participants had experience learning and performing Chinese piano works, providing a rich foundation for examining their motivations and experiences. See Table 1 for demographic information of the participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants

Pseudo- nym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade	Chinese piano works prac- ticed
Brittany	26	female	Han	Grade 3- Pos graduate	"The Combination of Long and Short" And "Silk Road"
Andrea	25	female	Han	Grade 3- Pos graduate	"Haney's Love Song"
Viona	26	female	Han	Grade 2- Pos graduate	"Autumn Moon on the Peaceful Lake"

Selina	24	female	Han	Grade 2- Post graduate	“Dream of China”
Jim	26	male	Han	Less than a year after graduation	“Anlun Huang Prelude in C major”
Joanna	24	female	Hui	Grade 1- Post graduate	“Zhang Shuai's three preludes”

## 5.2 Procedure

The study aimed to maximize sample diversity by including students from various stages of their graduate studies, from newcomers to those nearing completion. Each interview, lasting about 25-30 minutes, was conducted in a private setting. Four interviews were carried out one-on-one in a familiar and relaxed environment—the school café—while the remaining two, involving students who were not on campus, were conducted online.

All interviews were audio-recorded using a smartphone's recording function and subsequently transcribed. The audio files and transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer. A thorough repeated review of the transcripts facilitated the emergence of thematic patterns. Selective coding was utilized to distil core categories from the data, integrating them within the framework of the Expectancy-Value Theory. This theory, encompassing the elements of expectation, intrinsic value, utility value, sense of achievement, and cost, served as a lens for identifying and constructing relevant themes. The refined data were then analyzed and coded into themes by the researcher, a graduate student specializing in the interpretation of piano music works, ensuring a nuanced and informed analytical process.

## 6 Findings and Discussion

This study applied expectancy-value theory to explore the motivational factors influencing Chinese piano students' choices of piano works. Data analysis revealed insights across five dimensions: expectation, intrinsic value, utility value, achievement value, and cost, as well as the influence of external factors such as tutors, classmates, peer cooperation, and the environment.

### 6.1 Expectations

Participants often discussed the challenges associated with learning Chinese piano works. They perceived these pieces as more difficult and less appealing than Western compositions. For instance, the complex rhythms and profound artistic expressions in works like Quan Jihao's "The Combination of Long and Short" were noted as particularly challenging, leading to lower motivation among students to pursue these compositions.

## 6.2 Intrinsic Value

The majority of participants (5 out of 6) expressed a deep personal affinity for Chinese piano music, citing intrinsic interest and emotional connection as significant motivators. Selina, for example, mentioned being "easily intoxicated" by the mood of the pieces he practices, while Andrea appreciated the beauty of the melodies, indicating that personal enjoyment and appreciation significantly influence their engagement with Chinese piano works.

## 6.3 Utility Value

All participants acknowledged the practical benefits of learning Chinese piano works. These included enhancing their professional capabilities, fulfilling academic requirements, and gaining a competitive edge in performances and examinations. For example, Brittany pointed out, "If you want to make your piano profession more mature, you must be exposed to Chinese works to expand and enrich your performance ability. In addition, several students noted that performing Chinese works could lead to higher scores in competitions and were favorably regarded in entrance examinations. Finally, all of the participants highlighted that their schools required learners to study at least one Chinese piece, failing which they would not graduate. These factors greatly enhance the utility value of these works. After the learners' rational thinking, their motivation to choose to study Chinese works was significantly enhanced.

## 6.4 Achievement Value

Only two participants spoke about the achievement value associated with mastering Chinese piano works. They mentioned feelings of national pride and personal satisfaction, highlighting how cultural identity influences their choice. For instance, Joanna felt a deep emotional connection to practicing music from his homeland, which was emotionally satisfying and reinforced his cultural ties. Selina practices Chinese works is often emotional, and she feels proud and proud in her heart.

## 6.5 Cost

The participants unanimously noted the high costs associated with learning Chinese piano works, including the effort required to master difficult pieces and the limited selection available which makes choosing suitable works time-consuming. Brittany mentioned the challenge of the auditory appeal of Chinese compositions, while Andrea and Jim emphasized the extensive effort needed to master the complex rhythms and the lesser developmental state of these works compared to Western classics.

## 6.6 Motivational Factors

External factors such as the influence of mentors, peers, and the broader educational and familial environment also played a crucial role. For example, Brittany was influenced by a mentor who actively promoted Chinese works, and Andrea was inspired by seniors who shared their positive experiences with these compositions.

These findings illustrate a complex interplay of motivational factors influenced by both internal valuations and external influences, shaping students' decisions to engage with Chinese piano works. This intricate motivational landscape suggests that while intrinsic appeal and utility value drive interest in Chinese compositions, significant barriers related to cost and achievement values, coupled with external educational pressures, continue to impact students' engagement with this genre.

## 7 Conclusion

This study has explored the motivational factors influencing Chinese piano students' decisions to select Chinese piano works within the educational context of China. Through the application of expectancy-value theory, motivations were analyzed across five dimensions: expectation, intrinsic interest, utility value, achievement value, and cost. The findings underscore the significant role played by interpersonal influences such as tutors and classmates, as well as broader environmental factors in shaping students' decisions.

A key impediment identified is the pervasive influence of the Western classical music education system, which has been deeply integrated into Chinese piano education. This Western dominance may hinder students' inclination towards Chinese piano works, suggesting a cultural and educational misalignment that affects students' musical choices.

To extend the findings of this study, future research could employ quantitative methods such as questionnaires to assess the general trends and additional factors influencing the motivation of a broader population of Chinese piano students. This approach would enable the collection of data from a larger sample size, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the motivational dynamics at play. Such studies could also explore the impact of specific interventions designed to increase the attractiveness and perceived value of Chinese piano music within educational curricula.

Educators and policymakers should consider strategies to better integrate Chinese piano music into the curriculum and to mitigate the overshadowing impact of Western classical dominance. This might include the development of specialized resources, teacher training programs focused on Chinese piano music, and the inclusion of Chinese works in performance and examination settings to enhance their visibility and perceived value.

By fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of Chinese piano music, educators can cultivate a more diverse and culturally rich musical education that resonates with the national heritage and supports the development of a uniquely Chinese musical identity.



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