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Rethinking Creativity in Chinese One-to-one Piano Pedagogy: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective

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Abstract

Creativity has become a central concern in twenty-first-century music education; however, its meaning and enactment within Chinese higher music education remain contested. This study explores how creativity is understood and supported in one-to-one piano pedagogy across three types of Chinese higher education institutions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 26

department heads, piano teachers and students, and thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA, the study develops the concept of negotiated creativity. This refers to a culturally situated and co-constructed form of musical agency shaped through teacher authority, student autonomy, technical inheritance, cultural imagination and institutional assessment pressures. The findings identify four key pedagogical strategies: inquiry-based questioning, cross-disciplinary cultural analogy, balancing technical rigidity with artistic flexibility, and collaborative interpretation. While ‘inheritance before innovation’ remains influential, the data also reveal diverse perspectives across participant roles, generations and institutional contexts. The study argues that creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy is not a simple rejection of tradition, but a negotiated process through which students develop interpretative agency within pedagogical and cultural boundaries.

Key words

negotiated creativity; one-to-one piano pedagogy; Chinese higher music education; musical agency; teacher authority; cultural analogy; conservatoire pedagogy

Introduction

The discourse on creativity in music education has shifted from a marginal concern to a central objective in higher education globally (Burnard & Haddon, 2015; Haddon & Burnard, 2022). In mainland China, this shift is not merely academic but policy-driven. The Chinese government's recent mandate, *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era* (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2020), explicitly calls for the integration of innovative thinking within artistic disciplines to foster a 'creative nation.' Despite this high-level policy support, the 'last mile' of implementation, the actual teaching that occurs within the secluded space of the one-to-one piano studio remains under-investigated (Zheng & Leung, 2021).

China's piano education landscape is unique. With millions of students and a culture that reifies technical mastery, the concept of creativity often collides with traditional pedagogical ideals. Creativity in the Chinese context is traditionally framed as a synthesis of novelty and 'social-moral value' (Niu & Sternberg, 2006). This study seeks to address a critical gap: how do practitioners, those responsible for delivering and receiving this education navigate the tension between the rigorous demands of Western classical piano technique and the modern imperative for creative expression? By examining the lived experiences of department heads, teachers, and students, this research aims to provide a comprehensive mapping of the creative

ecology in contemporary Chinese piano pedagogy.

Despite the enduring ‘piano fever’ in China and a shift towards valuing individual performance styles (Bai, 2021), a significant gap persists in the systematic implementation of creativity within one-to-one piano pedagogy (Zheng & Leung, 2021). Creativity in the Chinese context is traditionally framed as a synthesis of novelty and ‘social-moral value’ (Niu & Sternberg, 2006). However, contemporary perspectives suggest that this is evolving; the traditional ‘inheritance before innovation’ model is being challenged as educators seek to balance rigorous technical mastery with the need for artistic autonomy (Zhang & He, 2023; Tan & Lu, 2022).

While practitioners frequently acknowledge the importance of creativity, there remains a lack of empirical evidence regarding how it is conceptualised and operationalised across different hierarchical levels in Chinese conservatories and universities. This study, therefore, employs semi-structured interviews with department heads, teachers, and students to investigate these diverse perceptions. By doing so, it aims to identify the specific pedagogical strategies used to foster creativity within the unique constraints and opportunities of the one-to-one piano lesson.

Literature Review

In this study, creativity is not understood primarily as an innate individual cognitive capacity,

nor merely as the production of original musical ideas by an isolated learner. Rather, creativity is conceptualised as a culturally situated, sociocultural and co-constructed process. Within one-to-one piano pedagogy, students' creative possibilities are shaped through their interactions with teachers, their engagement with inherited musical traditions, and the institutional expectations of examinations, competitions and conservatoire training.

This does not mean that individual agency is irrelevant. Students still make creative decisions through phrasing, tone production, timing, interpretation and musical imagination. However, such agency develops within particular pedagogical, cultural and institutional conditions. In the Chinese conservatoire context, creativity is therefore examined as a negotiated process: it emerges through the relationship between teacher authority and student autonomy, technical mastery and interpretative freedom, inheritance and innovation.

Power dynamics in one-to-one pedagogy

The one-to-one piano lesson has traditionally been viewed as a master-apprentice model, characterised by a hierarchical transmission of knowledge. Burnard and Haddon (2015) argue that in such settings, the teacher often occupies the absolute centre of power, which can inadvertently stifle a student's original creative agency. From this perspective, power dynamics are not merely a background condition of one-to-one piano teaching; they are central to how creativity is enabled, constrained or co-constructed within the lesson. However, recent

scholarship (Haddon & Burnard, 2022) advocates for co-creativity, where the teacher transitions from a dictator of interpretation to a facilitator of musical discovery. In the Chinese context, this power dynamic is further complicated by the Confucian value of *Zun Shi Zhong Dao* (respecting the teacher and the Way). Consequently, balancing teacher authority with student autonomy becomes the primary challenge in fostering creativity within Chinese conservatories.

The ‘piano fever’ and contemporary policy

Since the 1980s, piano learning in China has transitioned from an elite pursuit to a mass phenomenon, often termed Piano Fever. Recent research by Bai (2021) suggests that while technical standards have reached world-class levels, the standardisation of performance has become a concern. The 2020 aesthetic education policies represent a systemic attempt to move away from rote learning. However, as Zhang and He (2023) note, the disconnect between policy ideals and the high-pressure environment of competitions and examinations creates a creative paradox for both teachers and students.

Inheritance before innovation: The cultural logic of Chinese creativity

Unlike the Western romantic ideal of radical originality, Chinese creativity is often conceptualised as a tiered process. The concept of ‘inheritance before innovation’ (*Xian Ji Cheng, Hou Chuang Xin*) suggests that one must master the Rules (technique and tradition)

before one has the right to Break the Rules. Tan and Lu (2022) describe this as a Confucian perspective on music education where creativity is a sophisticated refinement of the past. This study explores whether this inheritance-first model acts as a scaffold for creativity or a barrier that students struggle to transcend.

Conceptualising creativity: From individual capacity to co-constructed musical agency

Western psychological frameworks often distinguish between Big-C creativity for eminent, world-changing achievements and little-c creativity for everyday creative expressions such as a student's unique phrasing, interpretative decision-making or expressive experimentation. While this distinction is useful for recognising small-scale forms of creativity in piano learning, it may not fully capture the relational and culturally embedded nature of creativity in one-to-one pedagogy. In contrast, Chinese traditional values emphasise the social and moral dimensions of creativity (Niu & Sternberg, 2006). As Tan and Lu (2022) suggest, creativity in Chinese music education is often framed as innovation within boundaries, the concept of *De-Cai-Bei-Jian* (combining moral integrity with talent). Innovation is seen not as a radical departure from tradition, but as a sophisticated refinement of mastered techniques.

In the context of piano education, creativity is rarely produced by the student alone. Rather, it is mediated through teacher feedback, modelling, questioning, correction and shared musical exploration. A student's creative interpretation may therefore be understood not

simply as an individual act of originality, but as the outcome of an ongoing pedagogical negotiation between the student's emerging agency and the teacher's musical, technical and cultural authority. This is particularly significant in Chinese conservatoire education, where creativity is shaped by values, such as the concept of inheritance before innovation (*Xian Ji Cheng, Hou Chuang Xin*), suggesting that mastery of rules is a prerequisite for breaking them. In this study, creativity is therefore understood as negotiated creativity: a culturally situated and co-constructed form of musical agency that is continually shaped through the negotiation between student autonomy, teacher authority, pedagogical practice, institutional pressures and broader Chinese cultural values.

Conceptual framework: negotiated creativity

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, this study proposes the concept of negotiated creativity as a framework for understanding creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy. In this study, negotiated creativity refers to a culturally situated and co-constructed form of musical agency that emerges through the ongoing negotiation between teacher authority, student autonomy, inherited musical traditions and institutional expectations. It is not treated as a purely individual cognitive capacity or as spontaneous originality produced by the student alone. Rather, creativity is shaped through pedagogical interaction, including modelling, feedback, questioning, imitation, adaptation and shared musical exploration.

Within Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy, this concept is particularly useful because students' creative decisions are often made within cultural and pedagogical boundaries, including respect for teacher authority, expectations of technical mastery, examination pressure and the logic of 'inheritance before innovation' (*xian ji cheng, hou chuang xin*). Creativity is therefore understood not as a radical rejection of tradition, but as a negotiated process through which students develop interpretative decision-making, expressive phrasing, tone production, musical imagination and creative confidence.

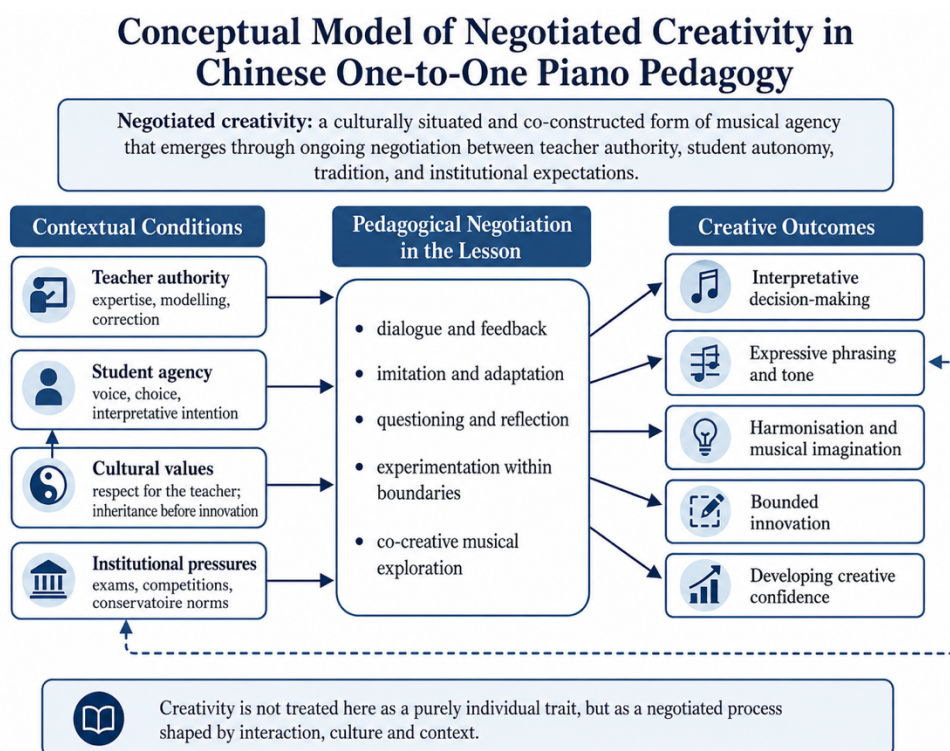


Figure 1 Conceptual model of negotiated creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy

As shown in Figure 1, negotiated creativity is shaped by three interconnected dimensions: contextual conditions, pedagogical negotiation in the lesson and creative outcomes. Contextual conditions include teacher authority, student agency, cultural values and institutional pressures.

These are mediated through lesson-based processes such as dialogue, feedback, imitation, reflection and experimentation within boundaries. The creative outcomes include interpretative decision-making, expressive phrasing, harmonisation, bounded innovation and developing creative confidence. The feedback loop indicates that these outcomes may gradually strengthen students' agency over time.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how creativity is understood, negotiated and supported within Chinese higher music education. Situated with an interpretivist paradigm, the study aimed to capture participants' subjective experiences, values and pedagogical practices in relation to creativity in one-to-one piano teaching. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed participants to articulate their own understandings of musical creativity while also enabling the researcher to explore emerging themes in depth.

Participants and context

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 26 participants from three distinct institutional contexts in China:

- Professional conservatories, where piano education is primarily performance oriented.

- Normal Universities, where music education is closely connected to teacher training.
- Comprehensive Universities: Where music is situated within a broader arts and humanities curriculum.

The participants included five department heads, eleven piano teachers and ten piano students. The department heads were responsible for curriculum design, faculty management and institutional decision-making. The piano teachers had between 5 to 30 years of teaching experience. The student participants were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate piano performance programmes.

This sample was designed to provide perspectives from different hierarchical and pedagogical positions within Chinese higher music education. By including department heads, teachers and students, the study was able to examine how creativity is understood at institutional, pedagogical and learner levels. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of York Ethics Committee, and all participants provided participant information and consent form before taking part in the study.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted either in person or via high-definition video conferencing. The interview protocol was designed to align with the core themes identified in recent literature (Zheng & Leung, 2021), focusing on:

The interview questions focused on four broad areas:

1. participants' educational and professional backgrounds;
2. their definitions and understandings of musical creativity;
3. perceived barriers to creative expression in one-to-one piano pedagogy;
4. teaching strategies, institutional expectations and assessment pressures that shape creative development.

Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA2022. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. The coding process began with repeated reading of the Mandarin transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' own words and examples. At this stage, the coding remained open and descriptive, capturing recurring ideas such as 'technical accuracy', 'teacher authority', 'imitation', 'student confidence'.

In the second stage, related codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes relating to examination requirements, competition culture and standardised performance expectations were grouped under a wider category of institutional

pressures. Codes relating to modelling, correction, questioning and shared interpretation were grouped under pedagogical negotiation. This process allowed the analysis to move from descriptive coding towards more interpretive thematic development.

In the third stage, themes were reviewed across the three participant groups: department heads, teachers and students. This comparative process helped identify both shared understandings and differences in perspective. For example, while teachers often described technical mastery as a prerequisite for creativity, students sometimes experienced the same emphasis on technique as a constraint on their interpretative freedom. Such points of convergence and divergence were central to the development of the study's final themes.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were written to record emerging interpretations, coding decisions and relationships between themes. These memos helped trace how the concept of negotiated creativity developed from the data, particularly through participants' accounts of the tension between teacher authority, student autonomy, cultural values and institutional expectations.

Translation and conceptual accuracy

Because all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, translation was treated as an important part of the analytical process rather than as a purely technical procedure. The initial

coding was conducted in Mandarin to preserve participants' original meanings and to avoid prematurely imposing English-language concepts onto culturally specific expressions.

Key terms and quotations were translated into English only after the main themes had been identified. Particular care was taken with culturally and aesthetically specific concepts such as *yixiang*, musical imagery or imagined artistic conception. *wei-dao*, flavour, style or expressive character. These terms do not have exact English equivalents, and therefore they were translated contextually rather than literally.

Where necessary, the original Chinese terms were retained alongside English explanations in order to preserve conceptual nuance. Selected quotations were also checked against the original Mandarin transcripts during the writing process to ensure that the English translation accurately reflected the participants' intended meaning. This approach aimed to maintain conceptual equivalence between the Mandarin data and the English-language analysis.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, data source triangulation was achieved by comparing the perspectives of department heads, piano teachers and students. This enabled the study to examine creativity across institutional, pedagogical and learner perspectives. Second, member checking was conducted with six participants,

representing approximately 20% of the sample. These participants were invited to review preliminary thematic summaries and comment on whether the interpretations accurately reflected their views and experiences. Their feedback helped refine the wording of several themes and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives.

Third, the use of MAXQDA supported systematic data management and enabled the researcher to organise codes, categories and themes transparently. Analytic memos were used throughout the coding process to document interpretive decisions and reduce the risk of unsupported thematic claims. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in the presentation of findings, and identifying institutional or personal details were removed where necessary.

Findings: negotiated creativity in Chinese piano pedagogy

The interview data revealed a multifaceted understanding of creativity in Chinese higher piano education. Rather than presenting creativity as a fixed or monolithic concept, participants described it as a negotiated practice shaped by technical training, teacher–student interaction, institutional expectations and culturally mediated forms of musical imagination. Across the dataset, creativity was frequently discussed in relation to the tension between technical mastery and individual expression. This reflects broader debates in music education, where creativity is

increasingly understood not only as individual originality, but also as a situated and relational process shaped by pedagogical and cultural contexts (Haddon & Burnard, 2022).

However, this tension was not experienced uniformly. Differences emerged across participant roles, institutional contexts and generations, suggesting that creativity in Chinese piano pedagogy should not be understood through a single cultural explanation alone. In this study, creativity is therefore conceptualised as a form of negotiated creativity: a culturally situated and co-constructed process through which students and teachers negotiate the relationship between authority and autonomy, inheritance and innovation, discipline and expressive freedom.

1. Foundation-based innovation: inheritance as both scaffold and constraint

A recurring theme among department heads and teachers was the belief that creativity requires a strong technical and musical foundation. Several senior participants described creativity not as spontaneous originality, but as a gradual process that emerges after sustained discipline, imitation and technical refinement. This finding resonates with Tan and Lu's (2022) discussion of the Chinese educational logic of "inheritance before innovation", in which creativity is often understood as refinement and transformation built upon mastery of existing traditions.

Teacher T2 explained:

Creativity is like a tree; the foundation is the root. Without the root, you cannot have new leaves.

Department Head H1 similarly described creativity through the metaphor of accumulation:

Creativity is not something that falls from the sky. In the Chinese tradition, we believe in *hou-ji-bo-fa*, accumulating thin layers of knowledge in order to release a powerful force. Without ten years of ‘dead’ practice on Hanon or Czerny, any attempt at creativity is just a house of cards.

While many teachers viewed technical inheritance as a necessary scaffold for creativity, students expressed a more ambivalent view. Student S4 recognised the importance of foundation, but questioned whether technical work sometimes delayed or restricted creative exploration:

I understand the need for foundation, but sometimes the foundation becomes a cage. We spend 90% of the lesson fixing the curve of a finger, leaving only five minutes for expression. Is creativity a reward for technical perfection, or a part of the process?

This contrast reveals an important hierarchical and generational difference. For many teachers, creativity was framed as something that becomes possible after technical discipline has been established. For some students, however, creativity was not simply the final stage of learning, but something they wished to experience throughout the learning process. The inheritance-first model therefore functioned in two ways: as a scaffold that supports musical depth and as a potential constraint when technical correction dominates the lesson. This also reflects Zheng and Leung’s (2021) notion of ‘style-based creativity’, where creative agency develops through the individualised refinement of existing musical styles rather than through radical departure from them.

2. Musical imagery and ‘flavour’: creativity as expressive interpretation

Students often described creativity through the language of emotional expression, musical imagery and personal interpretation. Rather than defining creativity as changing notes or radically altering the score, they associated it with finding an individual sound, atmosphere or expressive flavour within the boundaries of the musical text.

Student S5 stated:

Creativity is not about changing the notes, but about finding a new *wei-dao* within the tradition.

Here, *wei-dao* may be understood as flavour, style or expressive character. Similarly, the concept of *yixiang*, musical imagery or imagined artistic conception appeared frequently in participants’ accounts of creative performance. Students described creativity as the ability to move beyond technical execution and construct an internal image of the music before translating it into tone, phrasing and timing.

This theme complicates a simple opposition between Chinese tradition and Western creativity. Students were not necessarily rejecting tradition; rather, they sought personal agency within inherited musical and pedagogical structures. Their creative expression was often subtle, emerging through rubato, tone colour, phrasing, silence and atmosphere rather than through overtly radical reinterpretation. This interpretation aligns with Zheng and

Leung's (2021) argument that creativity in music education may appear through stylistic nuance, expressive decision-making and interpretative individuality.

3. Cultural analogy as a pedagogical bridge

A distinctive pedagogical strategy identified in the interviews was the use of cultural and cross-disciplinary analogy. Teachers drew on calligraphy, poetry, painting and architecture to help students understand abstract musical concepts. These analogies were not used simply as decorative cultural references; rather, they functioned as pedagogical bridges that helped students translate technical demands into embodied and imaginative musical experiences.

This finding corresponds with Tan and Lu's (2022) view that creativity in Chinese music education is often mediated through culturally embedded aesthetic resources. For example, Department Head H1 explained:

We often compare the legato in Chopin to the continuous flow of Chinese calligraphy. It helps students understand that creativity is about the breath between the notes.

Similarly, Teacher T6 described using Chinese architecture and landscape painting to explain contrapuntal structure:

When teaching Bach, I don't just talk about counterpoint. I compare it to the structural balance in Chinese architecture or the interlocking lines in traditional landscape painting. For a Chinese student, the word 'polyphony' is abstract; the image of 'mountain behind mountain' is visceral.

Student accounts suggest that these analogies could support creative understanding. S9 recalled how the concept of *liu-bai*, empty space in Chinese painting, transformed their understanding of silence in Mozart:

My teacher used the concept of *liu-bai* to explain the rests in a Mozart sonata. Suddenly, the silence wasn't a break in the music; it was a breath of the soul. That was my first creative breakthrough.

However, it is important not to treat these analogies as evidence of a single or essential Chinese approach to creativity. Not all participants relied on traditional cultural metaphors, and their use varied depending on the teacher's background, the repertoire being taught and the student's level of responsiveness. In this sense, cultural analogy is better understood as one available pedagogical resource rather than a universal characteristic of Chinese piano teaching.

4. Inquiry-based dialogue and experimentation within boundaries

Another important finding was that some teachers actively moved beyond the traditional demonstration-imitation model by using questioning, dialogue and guided exploration. This approach allowed students to participate more actively in interpretative decision-making. Such practices resonate with Salvador and Knapp's (2022) idea of the teacher as an improvisational artist, where the teacher facilitates creative thinking rather than simply dictating correct answers.

Teacher T7 explained:

I don't tell them how to play a phrase immediately. I ask: What kind of scene do you see here? I want them to find their own colour before I give mine.

Teacher T2 similarly described shifting away from direct instruction:

I stopped saying 'play louder here'. Instead, I ask: If this sound was a colour, would it be a bright crimson or a faded sunset? I want the student to own the decision.

These examples suggest that creativity was sometimes cultivated through carefully bounded experimentation. Teachers did not necessarily abandon authority; rather, they used their authority to create a structured space in which students could imagine, test and justify interpretative choices. This form of creativity was therefore neither fully teacher-directed nor fully student-led. It was negotiated through dialogue.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that inquiry-based teaching could be limited by time pressure and assessment demands. Department Head H3 noted:

In a 45-minute lesson, inquiry takes time. If the student has a competition next week, we revert to 'Do as I do'. Efficiency often kills the creative spark.

This data illustrates the tension between creative pedagogy and institutional pressure. Even when teachers valued dialogue and imagination, competition schedules, examinations and performance expectations often encouraged a return to more efficient, directive forms of teaching.

5. From technical rigidity to artistic flexibility

Many participants described creativity as developing through a staged movement from

technical rigidity to artistic flexibility. In the early stages of learning a piece, teachers often emphasised accuracy, fingering, rhythm, articulation and score fidelity. Once these technical foundations were secure, students were given greater freedom to shape rubato, tone colour and phrasing.

Student S3 described this process:

In the first month, my teacher is very strict with the notes. But once the foundation is there, she gives me the space to change the rubato. That's where my creativity starts.

This finding supports Zheng and Leung's (2021) concept of scaffolded creativity. Technical discipline did not necessarily prevent creative expression; in some cases, it provided the conditions for more confident interpretation. However, the timing of this transition was crucial. When flexibility was introduced too late, students could experience creativity as secondary to technical obedience. When teachers introduced imaginative thinking earlier, students were more likely to perceive creativity as part of the learning process rather than as a reward for technical perfection.

6. Co-constructed interpretation and emerging student agency

In advanced teaching contexts, some participants described the one-to-one lesson as a collaborative space in which teacher and student jointly constructed musical interpretation. This did not mean that the teacher's authority disappeared. Rather, authority became more dialogic, with the teacher guiding, questioning and refining the student's ideas rather than

simply imposing a fixed interpretation. This finding aligns with Haddon and Burnard's (2022) discussion of co-creativity in one-to-one music pedagogy, where creative agency emerges through interaction between teacher and learner. This co-constructive process was particularly visible in examples where students used imagery or cultural analogy to develop a personal musical response. For example, in discussing Chopin's nocturnes, Teacher T4 explained:

I told the student that the touch here should be like *cang-feng* in Chinese calligraphy, the strength is internal and continuous, never abruptly broken.

Student S2 reflected that this analogy allowed them to move beyond finger technique:

When my teacher mentioned calligraphy, it clicked. I stopped focusing just on my fingers and started imagining the resistance of the brush on paper. This imagery allowed me to introduce a more organic rubato that felt personal rather than imitated.

A similar process appeared in relation to Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. Teacher T8 encouraged students to read Impressionist poetry before playing the piece:

Creativity comes from the internal image before the first note is played.

Student S7 initially saw this as additional work, but later recognised its creative value:

Having a visual image of dappled light helped me control my tone colour more proactively. I felt I was no longer just a performer but a creator of the scene.

These examples show how student agency can emerge through guided interpretation. Creativity was not simply transmitted from teacher to student, nor was it produced by the student alone. Instead, it developed through a negotiated process in which the teacher

provided metaphors, questions and technical frameworks, while the student transformed these into personal musical meaning.

Overall, the findings suggest that creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy is best understood as negotiated rather than simply individual, cultural or institutional. Participants frequently connected creativity with technical foundation, discipline and inheritance, a finding that resonates with Tan and Lu's (2022) discussion of inheritance before innovation. However, the data also reveal important variation across participant roles and pedagogical approaches. Senior teachers and department heads tended to emphasise technical mastery and tradition, while students more often highlighted emotional expression, imagery and the desire for greater interpretative space.

The findings therefore avoid presenting Chinese piano pedagogy as culturally uniform. Instead, they show that creativity is shaped by multiple and sometimes competing forces: teacher authority, student agency, institutional pressures, cultural resources and the practical demands of performance training. Within this context, negotiated creativity emerges through the ongoing movement between imitation and adaptation, correction and exploration, discipline and expressive freedom. This extends existing discussions of scaffolded creativity, style-based creativity and co-creative pedagogy by showing how these processes are culturally

and institutionally negotiated in Chinese higher piano education (Zheng & Leung, 2021; Haddon & Burnard, 2022).

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to broader debates on creativity in music education by showing that creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy cannot be adequately understood as either an individual cognitive capacity or a simple outcome of cultural tradition. Instead, the data suggest that creativity is best understood as a negotiated, culturally, situated and co-constructed process. This interpretation aligns with sociocultural approaches to creativity, which emphasise that creative action is shaped by interaction, context and cultural meaning rather than by individual originality alone (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Haddon & Burnard, 2022). Within the participating institutions, creativity emerged through the interaction between teacher authority, student agency, technical inheritance, cultural imagination and institutional assessment pressures.

This discussion situates the findings within three wider theoretical debates: first, the relationship between individual agency and sociocultural understandings of creativity; second, the role of inheritance, discipline and tradition in creative development; and third, the ways in which institutional structures shape the possibilities for creative risk-taking. By doing so, the

study contributes to international discussions of conservatoire pedagogy, co-creativity and culturally situated music education.

1. Negotiated creativity as a relational and co-constructed process

A key contribution of this study is the development of negotiated creativity as a conceptual framework for understanding creativity in one-to-one piano pedagogy. The findings suggest that creativity is not located solely within the individual student, nor is it simply transmitted by the teacher. Rather, it emerges through pedagogical interaction: through questioning, modelling, correction, imitation, adaptation, reflection and shared interpretative exploration. This supports Haddon and Burnard's (2022) argument that creativity in instrumental learning is often co-constructed through interaction between teacher and learner.

This finding also extends earlier discussions of power dynamics in one-to-one pedagogy. Burnard and Haddon (2015) suggest that the traditional master–apprentice model can position the teacher as the central authority, potentially limiting student agency. However, the present findings show a more nuanced picture. In some cases, teacher authority provided the structure through which students gradually developed interpretative confidence. In other cases, overly directive teaching limited students' ownership over musical decisions. Teacher authority therefore functioned neither simply as a barrier nor as a guarantee of creative development; rather, its effect depended on how it was enacted within the lesson.

The concept of negotiated creativity therefore helps move beyond a binary opposition between teacher control and student freedom. It suggests that creativity in the piano studio is produced through the ongoing negotiation between these forces. Students' creative agency develops not by rejecting teacher authority altogether, but by learning how to participate more actively within, through and sometimes against existing pedagogical structures.

This has wider international relevance because one-to-one instrumental pedagogy, whether in China or elsewhere, often involves unequal distributions of expertise, authority and evaluative power (Haddon & Burnard, 2022). The Chinese case examined here makes these dynamics particularly visible, but the theoretical issue is not limited to China. It raises a broader question for conservatoire education internationally: how can teachers preserve the value of expert guidance while creating space for students' interpretative agency?

2. Reframing 'inheritance before innovation': scaffold, constraint and cultural variation

The findings also contribute to debates on the relationship between tradition and creativity. Participants, particularly senior teachers and department heads, frequently described creativity as something that must be built upon technical and stylistic foundations. This resonates with Tan and Lu's (2022) discussion of 'inheritance before innovation', where creative development is understood as a process of refinement, transformation and deep engagement with tradition rather than radical departure from it.

However, the findings also suggest that this inheritance-first model should not be treated as a fixed feature of Chinese culture in general. Participants did not express a single, uniform view. Senior teachers often emphasised discipline, accumulation and technical mastery, while students were more likely to question whether creativity should only appear after technical perfection had been achieved. This generational and hierarchical difference complicates any essentialist reading of Confucian values as simply restrictive or uniformly accepted. It also echoes Zhang and He's (2023) argument that contemporary Chinese music education is shaped by tensions between traditional pedagogical values and newer policy discourses around innovation and student agency.

The inheritance-first model therefore operated in two ways. On the one hand, it functioned as a scaffold: technical discipline enabled students to acquire the control necessary for expressive interpretation. On the other hand, it could become a constraint when lessons focused so heavily on accuracy that students had little opportunity to explore musical imagination, tone colour, rubato or personal phrasing.

This finding extends Zheng and Leung's (2021) notion of style-based or scaffolded creativity. It suggests that, in this context, creativity often emerges not through breaking away from tradition, but through developing individuality within inherited stylistic frameworks. The contribution of this study is to show that such creativity is not merely conservative or

reproductive. Rather, it may involve subtle forms of interpretative agency, including expressive timing, sound imagination, metaphorical thinking and the personalisation of musical meaning.

3. Cultural analogy and musical imagery as mediating tools

Another important theoretical contribution concerns the role of cultural analogy in creative learning. The use of calligraphy, poetry, painting and architecture in participants' accounts suggests that creativity in piano pedagogy is not only a musical process, but also a process of cross-modal and cultural mediation. Teachers used familiar aesthetic concepts such as *yixiang*, *wei-dao*, *liu-bai* and *cang-feng* to help students understand abstract musical qualities such as tone colour, silence, phrasing, rubato and structural balance.

This finding extends Tan and Lu's (2022) discussion of culturally embedded creativity in Chinese music education. It also supports Zheng and Leung's (2021) view that creativity in music learning may emerge through stylistic nuance and culturally meaningful forms of expressive decision-making. In the present study, cultural analogy was not simply an illustration added to teaching; it was part of the creative process itself. It enabled students to transform technical problems into imaginative and embodied experiences.

At the same time, the findings suggest that cultural analogy should not be interpreted as a universal characteristic of Chinese piano pedagogy. Its use varied depending on the teacher's

background, the student's receptiveness, the repertoire and the pedagogical situation. Some teachers used traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts extensively, while others relied more on inquiry, demonstration or technical correction. This variation is important because it avoids reducing Chinese pedagogy to a single cultural pattern.

Theoretically, this suggests that creativity can be understood as a form of cultural translation. Students were often learning Western classical repertoire, but they made musical sense of it through locally meaningful aesthetic images and metaphors. This does not mean that Western music was simply sinicised, nor that Chinese aesthetics determined interpretation. Rather, creativity emerged through the interaction between multiple aesthetic systems. This finding enhances the paper's international relevance by showing how creativity in global music education is often intercultural, hybrid and situated (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Tan & Lu, 2022).

4. From rote learning to inquiry: complicating stereotypes of East Asian music education

The findings also challenge overly simplified representations of Chinese or East Asian music education as purely reproductive, examination-driven or based only on rote learning. While participants did identify strong pressures toward technical accuracy, imitation and high-stakes performance, the data also revealed examples of inquiry-based questioning, dialogic teaching and collaborative interpretation. These findings are consistent with Haddon and Burnard's

(2022) emphasis on co-creativity and with Salvador and Knapp's (2022) view of the teacher as a facilitator of musical exploration rather than simply a transmitter of knowledge.

This does not mean that rote learning or hierarchical teaching have disappeared. Rather, the findings suggest a more nuanced picture: reproductive and creative practices often coexist within the same lesson. A teacher may begin with strict correction of fingering, rhythm and articulation, but later invite the student to explore imagery, colour, rubato or phrasing. This movement from rigidity to flexibility was central to many participants' accounts of creative development. The study therefore complicates the binary between 'Western creativity' and 'Eastern discipline'. The findings suggest that discipline and creativity are not necessarily opposites. In the participating institutions, creativity was often disciplined, scaffolded and bounded. Yet it was still creative, particularly when students were encouraged to make interpretative decisions, develop musical imagery and take ownership of expressive choices.

This point is significant for international debates because it challenges narrow definitions of creativity as radical novelty or individual originality. In one-to-one piano pedagogy, creativity may be modest, relational and interpretative. It may appear not as new composition or dramatic innovation, but as the student's ability to hear, imagine, shape and justify musical meaning. This interpretation resonates with broader understandings of little-c creativity, where

everyday creative acts are understood as meaningful forms of agency within specific contexts (Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

5. Policy, assessment and the conditions for creative risk-taking

The findings further reveal a tension between policy-level aspirations and assessment-level realities. The 2020 aesthetic education policy promotes broader artistic development and innovation, but participants suggested that examination systems, competitions and conservatoire norms continue to prioritise technical accuracy and error-free performance (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2020). This creates a policy-practice gap in which creativity is encouraged in principle but constrained in practice.

This tension is important because creativity requires the possibility of risk. Students need opportunities to experiment, make interpretative choices and tolerate uncertainty. However, when assessment criteria reward accuracy above all else, both teachers and students may become reluctant to take creative risks. As Department Head H2 explained:

The assessment system, exams and competitions still overwhelmingly prioritises technical accuracy. When ‘not making a mistake’ is the highest goal, both teachers and students are afraid to take creative risks in high-stakes performances.

This finding suggests that creative pedagogy cannot depend solely on individual teachers’ willingness to use inquiry or metaphor. It also requires institutional conditions that legitimise creative exploration. If assessment systems continue to reward only precision, speed and

technical control, creativity may remain marginal or reserved for more advanced students who have already proven their technical competence. Theoretically, this links the study to sociocultural understandings of creativity. Creativity is not only a personal quality or classroom strategy; it is shaped by the broader ecology of curriculum, assessment, competition and policy (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Zhang & He, 2023). The piano studio may be the immediate site of creative negotiation, but the conditions of that negotiation are shaped by institutional and national structures.

6. Theoretical contribution: from individual creativity to negotiated musical agency

Taken together, the findings suggest that creativity in Chinese one-to-one piano pedagogy is best understood as negotiated musical agency. This concept brings together three dimensions. First, creativity is individual in the sense that students make interpretative choices through phrasing, tone, timing, imagery and emotional expression. Second, it is sociocultural because these choices are shaped by cultural values, aesthetic metaphors, teacher expectations and institutional norms (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Tan & Lu, 2022). Third, it is co-constructed because creative agency develops through interaction between teacher and student rather than being produced by the student alone (Haddon & Burnard, 2022).

The concept of negotiated creativity therefore offers a theoretical synthesis between Western psychological models of creativity, sociocultural theories of learning and Chinese

aesthetic-pedagogical traditions. It suggests that creativity in piano education should not be evaluated only by the degree of novelty produced, but also by the quality of the learner's agency within a specific pedagogical and cultural context. In this sense, the study extends existing work on scaffolded creativity and style-based creativity by showing how such processes are negotiated through authority, tradition, institutional pressure and student agency (Zheng & Leung, 2021).

This contribution has relevance beyond Chinese higher music education. Many conservatoire systems internationally continue to struggle with the relationship between tradition and innovation, authority and autonomy, technical excellence and creative individuality (Burnard & Haddon, 2015; Haddon & Burnard, 2022). By examining these tensions in the Chinese piano studio, this study offers a framework for understanding how creativity may be fostered in contexts where mastery, discipline and hierarchy remain central to musical training.

Conclusion

This study has examined how creativity is conceptualised and enacted within one-to-one piano pedagogy in Chinese higher music education. Rather than treating creativity as an individual trait, a fixed cultural value, or a simple pedagogical outcome, the findings suggest that creativity emerges as a negotiated form of musical agency. It is shaped through the dynamic

interaction between teacher authority, student autonomy, technical inheritance, cultural imagination and institutional assessment pressures. The study contributes the concept of negotiated creativity to describe this process. This concept challenges binary understandings of creativity as either free individual expression or disciplined reproduction. Instead, it shows that creativity in the piano studio may develop through the productive tension between discipline and freedom, imitation and adaptation, inheritance and innovation. In this sense, creativity is not positioned outside tradition, but emerges through a dialogic and imaginative engagement with it.

This argument has relevance beyond the Chinese context. One-to-one instrumental pedagogy internationally continues to negotiate similar tensions between expertise and autonomy, technical excellence and creative individuality, tradition and innovation. By foregrounding the cultural, relational and institutional conditions through which creativity is made possible, this study offers a framework for understanding creativity not as a stable capacity possessed by the learner, but as a situated process co-constructed within pedagogical practice. Future research could further examine how negotiated creativity develops over time across different instruments, institutions and national contexts.

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