

---

**Cultural colonialism, academic rigor, or both?**  
**A study of ABRSM examinations in Northern China**

By

Le Zhang  
Ph.D. Candidate  
The Pennsylvania State University

**Abstract**

*In this study, the researcher collects and explores the thoughts and insights of three Northern-Chinese music teachers regarding the curriculum and external assessments conducted by The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM). The teachers noted that ABRSM is highly recognized internationally, and its academic rigor and emphasis on standards have changed the traditional ways of music teaching in China. For the UK-based Board, the fast growth of this western music exam has resulted in unexpectedly huge—and still growing—financial benefits. The current condition of cultural colonialism in China favors its expansion, but teachers interviewed would like to see some Chinese music included in the syllabus.*

**Keywords:** ABRSM, international music test, academic rigor, cultural colonialism

As one of the most popular international music assessments worldwide, the UK-headquartered Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) has gone beyond gaining a firm foothold in China. In the last 12 years, China has consistently maintained its position as the fastest-growing market for ABRSM exams, doubling in numbers every three to four years. This study, involving interviews with three music teachers from Northern China, addresses the impact of ABRSM exams on music teachers' perceptions and their adaptations to a non-Chinese pedagogical approach (specifically), and music education in China (generally), particularly in terms of cultural colonialism.

ABRSM's recent Annual Review (ABRSM, 2018) established that: (1) in the 2017/2018 financial year, the Board had 429 representatives in 95 countries; (2) more than 612,000 music exams took place worldwide that year; and (3) China remained its fastest-growing market. For the last 120 years, since its founding in 1889, ABRSM has influenced the founding and development of similar music examination systems in other countries, including The Royal Conservatory of Music in Canada, Australian Music Examinations Board, and China's music grade exam system.

From my professional experience, I have found that ABRSM has widespread appeal because of its academic rigor: the syllabus develops a range of integral music abilities, which include performing, technical skills, ear training, sight-reading, creating, and musical knowledge. Take piano exams, for instance: candidates are required to (1) perform three music pieces drawn from a set selection representing different time periods and styles; (2) demonstrate technical fluency (scales and arpeggios); (3) play, on first sight, a short work chosen by the examiner (sight reading); and (4) are tested on their listening skills, musical perception and analysis (aural test)—all within 10 to 40 minutes, depending on the level (ABRSM, 2018). Figure 1 shows the allocation of marks.

---

Pieces: 1	30
2	30
3	30
Scales and arpeggios/broken chords	21
Sight-reading	21
Aural tests	18
Total	150

---

*Figure 1.* ABRSM mark scheme (ABRSM, 2017). It shows the distribution of marks for the graded exams.

Meanwhile, to pass requires 100 marks, 120 for a Merit, and 130 for a Distinction. This system means that candidates who perform three pieces perfectly, but are not prepared for other aspects of the exam, such as music reading and listening, may still fail. This situation serves as a reminder to teachers that music lessons should focus not only on playing the exam pieces accurately but also on developing well-rounded musical abilities such as improvising or playing a piece they have never seen or learned. This approach differs significantly from the Chinese "technique-centered" music teaching approach.

ABRSM and other similar organizations such as Trinity College of London, share some remarkable features unique to this system of assessment. Firstly, ABRSM began in the UK during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wright (2013) noted they may have contributed to music teaching, becoming a thoroughfare for those desiring upward social mobility. "The board is one of the significant legacies of Victorian Britain, generated as part of that society's concern to expand the technological and professional workforce needed to run the Empire" (Wright, 2013, p. 1). It was in this context that music teaching mutated "from an occupation that many considered evidence of low social standing, into the middle-class respectability of a 'profession'" (p. 19). Secondly, this exam system includes graded exams and diploma exams, enabling candidates to progress from elementary levels to professional level certifications as music performers, composers, and

educators. Thirdly, all of the exams have a specific syllabus, which sets standards and guides teachers and students as they prepare for the exam. Each syllabus contains information such as requirements and expectations, exam contents, assessment criteria, and repertoire for each level. Fourthly, Western art music serves as the basis for ABRSM —i.e., the instruments are Western-based (piano, strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion). There are no instruments from Asia, Africa, or Oceania. Besides, a majority of the selected exam music pieces are from Western music, typically characterized as Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and so on (ABRSM, 2019). Finally, and this is a significant point, ABRSM's primary income is from international exams (i.e., non-British). Its recent financial summary showed that the Board earned a total of £49.7 million (approximately US\$55.1 million) in the 2017-2018 financial year; international exams accounted for 57% (£28.2 million, approximately US\$31.3 million) of its total earnings (ABRSM, 2018).

However, ABRSM has done more than just send its examiners outbound to assess several million music learners worldwide each year, issuing certificates to those who successfully pass ABRSM examinations. In business parlance, for the Board, it has created a business empire, from which it has reaped massive economic benefits, which, at the same time, continues to contribute to Britain's gross domestic product. Furthermore, this system of assessment supports a form of cultural colonialism, impacting music education wherever in the world the exams are held (from Anguilla to Luxembourg, Macau to Zambia), propagated by its Western-style approach, syllabi, and examiners' musical worldview. In his book on postcolonialism, Young (2016) asserted that one might analyze colonialism according to "its two main forms of colonization and domination, motivated by the desire for living space or the extraction of riches" (p. 19). The ABRSM's "living space"—in this case, an education space—have coexisted with, and integrated into, many countries' music education systems.

Meanwhile, as reflected in its fast-increasing number of representatives, and the total amount of exam fees received, ABRSM's feature of "extraction of riches" is more than evident. Furthermore, according to Kenneth Coutts-Smith, the concept of cultural colonialism is used to describe "how all cultural production is actually determined and measured by the yardstick of the dominant Western civilization and how European arts attempted to appropriate all of the arts cultures into its self-conceived 'mainstream'" (Panayotopoulos, 2009, p.181). In particular, the terms *colonialism* and *cultural colonialism* are most relevant to this article.

### **Literature Review**

Examinations are a type of evidence or assessment used to process, gather information, verify, or evaluate an individual or group to ascertain standards (Anderson et al. 1975). Various countries use music examinations in various countries as a means of assessment in music education. In the United States, one uses the Advanced Placement Music Theory exam to assess the aural skills of high school students (Buonviri, 2013); in Australia, the Australian Music Education Board exam is a national body tasked with assessing the achievement of music learners (AMEB, 2019); in Canada, the Royal Conservatory examinations established its graded assessment system in 1886 to bench-mark their music students' progress (The Royal Conservatory, 2019). The Australian and Canadian music assessment systems are examples that followed the impact of British music exam boards in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As the largest country in Asia, China has the most variety of music graded assessments and the most number of participants. Recent statistics from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China (2019) showed that there are 92 different arts graded assessment systems in place, of which more than 30% are in music. China Music Industry Development Report (Sina, 2018) noted that it held 1.4 million graded music assessments in 2017; the total fee for exam and training amounted to 72.8 billion yuan (about 10 billion U.S.

dollars). According to Wright (2013), the Chinese developed music graded assessments in the 1990s by learning from the British music examinations system. This situation indicates the strength of the British system.

Wright (2013) noted that the Board's system of exams "was a symbiosis of educational purpose and entrepreneurial enterprise" (p. 1). He also boldly asserted that "the strongest inducement to establish the ABRSM was financial, with the anticipated profits from the exam fees providing a vital income stream that would alleviate the pressure on both schools" (p. 2). The cultural colonialism aspect of the exams is a by-product of what was principally an economic enterprise.

Since the 1890s, ABRSM has embarked on many strategies to attract more people to participate in its exams. The first was its development of a progressive grade-level system. From four levels (Lower Division, Higher Division, Junior Grade, Senior Grade) in 1890, it now has 13 levels. They start with the lowest, Prep level, followed by Grades 1 through 8. There are two pre-professional level diplomas (associate ARSM; Dip-ABRSM) and two professional-level diplomas (licentiate LRSM). These are the equivalent of a U.S. Bachelor's degree. Also, there is a fellowship FRSM, regarded in the industry as the equivalent of a U.S. Master's in the instrument or subject) (ABRSM, 2019; Wright, 2013). These levels allow for a graduated approach to music education, with a wide range of repertoire in different styles and from different periods. This repertoire caters to students at various stages in their learning, from novice music learners to Master's level in music standards.

Secondly, it expanded its number of representatives worldwide. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this music exam system has extended its roots to British colonial countries such as Canada and Australia and, in recent decades, to non-colonial countries such as China. For ABRSM, these international markets are its most significant source of financial income.

Thirdly, ABRSM's system of assessment offers recognized benefits and rewards. Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) regulates exams in the United Kingdom; elsewhere, various governmental and educational recognize the exams. Additionally, passing ABRSM Grades 6 to 8 theory or practical exams can contribute towards entry into higher education in the United Kingdom through the allocation of UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points (ABRSM, 2019). This benefit is available when applying for admission to many (but not all) majors/programs at many colleges and universities in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Figure 2 (below) shows the allocation of points under the UCAS system.

	Grade 6			Grade 7			Grade 8		
	Pass	Merit	Dist.	Pass	Merit	Dist.	Pass	Merit	Dist.
<b>Practical</b>	8	10	12	12	14	16	18	24	30
<b>Theory</b>	4	5	6	6	7	8	8	9	10

*Figure 2.* UCAS points. The table shows the possible number of points that one may count in applications for entry to UK universities and colleges (ABRSM, 2019).

In the United States, which does not have a national education policy for university admissions, each university sets its admission requirements and credit exemption. Several U.S. universities are known to have offered credit exemptions for undergraduate General Education modules in recognition of the standards established by ABRSM and other U.K.-based music assessments.

Fourth, all exams are in English, but "a candidate who is not comfortable using English is allowed to bring an interpreter into the exam room" (ABRSM, 2019, p. 11). In China, for

instance, ABRSM representatives provide interpreters for all of the exams. Candidates can complete both the practical and theory exams without knowing any English, and the examiner's comments can also be translated into Mandarin. By being flexible and adaptive to the local environment, ABRSM can attract a far greater student base in China, allowing it to grow and expand exponentially. (The following section sets out China's growth numbers.)

The Board's annual reviews from 2007 to 2017 showed that it began to view China as a potential market in 2007. Its 2010 Annual Report stated that "we have benefited from continued growth in international markets, with China the single most important opportunity that has opened up in living memory" (p. 7). Since then, the China market has been—and continues to be—its fastest-growing market in the world. Compared to the previous year, the number of Chinese candidates increased 54% in the 2014/2015 financial year and increased by a further 48% in the 2017/2018 financial year (ABRSM, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017). Ji, former director of ABRSM's Beijing center, noted that the number of candidates in the entire Mainland China was 10,000 in 2011; A considerable increase to 50,000 in 2015, and about 80,000 in 2018 (P. Ji, personal communication, December 9, 2018) followed.

Wright, in his book (2013) on the social and cultural history of ABRSM, presented specific details about ABRSM's development in Mainland China. In Hong Kong, before the handover (or transfer of sovereignty from the UK to China) in 1997, already had 44,739 candidates that year; within 12 years, in 2009, the numbers almost doubled to 85,004. "This growth underlines the attraction of graded music exams within the Chinese diaspora, and so the desirability of establishing China itself a market," explained Wright (p. 246). Table 1 shows the timeline for ABRSM's early development in Mainland China.



*Table 1. ABRSM in China.*

Time	Event
1990	Wuhan Conservatory of Music was the first institution in China to write to
1992	ABRSM, indicating their interest in representing ABRSM exams in Mainland Wuhan Conservatory of Music followed up their initial letter and continued to
1993	The Board sent its team to Wuhan, establishing a relationship of cooperation.
1993	The Board visited Beijing to discuss with the Chinese National Educational
1994	The Board visited Beijing to explore the possibility of a joint venture with Central
1995	The Board made an initial connection with Shanghai.
1995	The Board initiated discussions with Guangzhou and completed negotiations with
1996	the Guangdong Culture Dispersion Department and the Guangdong Musicians Guangdong Society of International Musical Development signed on with
1996	ABRSM held its first exams in Shenzhen.
1997	ABRSM held exams in other cities in China.

Note. The table shows the sequence of initial discussions and negotiations between ABRSM and Chinese universities and governmental departments.

Wright (2013) also indicated some obstacles in the initial negotiations between 1993 and 1996, such as the implication of foreign policy and "the cold water" from "distinguished musical experts." Eventually, in Beijing, the exams were considered a "cultural benefit and enrichment of the Chinese people" (p. 249). The backdrop and relevance of its historical and cultural background explain China's interest in Western-style music exams.

The context of this inquiry to ABRSM, indicating interest, was the resumption of the Chinese enthusiasm for Western music. This interest was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when Chinese musicians and teachers had been an evident focus for anti-Western sentiment. Sadly, fifteen of the staff at the Shanghai Conservatory had been killed or committed suicide. After Mao Zedong's death and the jailing of the Gang of Four brought political stabilization under Deng Xiaoping, teaching Western instruments in the leading musical

institutions restarted around 1978, and western musicians were again welcome in China (p. 247

Since ABRSM's exam syllabus exhibits some characteristics of academic rigor and cultural colonialism, and China has upheld its lead in ABRSM exams' global increase every year since 2007, the purpose of this paper is to analyze Chinese music teachers' experience with, and perceptions of, ABRSM in terms of academic rigor and cultural colonialism in music education in China. In particular, this research addressed the following questions:

1. From the Chinese music teachers' perspective, how does ABRSM measure in terms of academic rigor?
2. How do Chinese music teachers feel about this British-based music exam system as a means of cultural colonialism in China?

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This article utilized an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995; Creswell & Poth, 2018) and in a narrative way. Stake (1995) defined an instrumental case study to focus on "a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case" (p.3). Creswell and Poth (2018) also stated that "in a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (p.98).

In this study, I regarded Northern China as a single case. I recruited three ABRSM teachers with the help of its then-Beijing representative. I located the three teachers in different cities. While three might not be a sufficient number from which to draw conclusions or generalize to the entire population of ABRSM music teachers in Northern China, my purpose was to know more about teachers' personal experiences with this music exam system and try to find connections through these three interviewees.

Based on my research questions, I designed a series of interview questions which included the number of years they have been teaching ABRSM exams; their attitudes towards the exams; feedback from students and their parents; any strengths, weaknesses, difficulties, and limitations the teachers might be concerned about; and any modifications they had to make to their teaching methods to meet the requirements.

I facilitated interviews by using Zoom and WeChat Video in Mandarin Chinese, which I then translated and transcribed into English. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, I have changed the names of the interviewees.

### **Participants**

To learn more about music teachers' perceptions about ABRSM in Northern China, I contacted ABRSM's Beijing Representative, who, since 2010, oversees all of the ABRSM exams in Northern China. Compared with two other ABRSM representatives in China, the Beijing representative started later than those in Shanghai and Guangdong but had the most number of exam agents. As of 2019, there were 17 agents from 16 Chinese cities managed by the Beijing office. The Beijing representative invited three trained teachers (one each from Beijing, Shandong, and Henan) to answer my interview questions about their experiences with ABRSM exams. These three music teachers are different in terms of professional experience and teaching area(s). Of these, two are male, and one is female. One teaches singing, another teaches singing and music theory, and the other teaches the piano. Their ages range from 32 to 45. Table 2 shows the participants' information.

*Table 2: Participants' Information*

Name	Age	Gender	Place	Teaching Emphasis	Years of ABRSM teaching
Han	39	Male	Shandong	Piano	12
Yun	45	Female	Beijing	Singing	1
Du	32	Male	Henan	Singing, Music Theory	5

### **Interview Analysis and Findings**

#### **Interviewee #1: Han**

Han first learned about ABRSM during a visit to Singapore in 2005. "I was told that ABRSM is fair and standardized, and it reflects the true teaching level of teachers," he said. He started teaching the syllabus in 2007 and underwent ABRSM piano teachers' training in 2011. Three years later, he became a Representative in his hometown and went on to develop his center, which had become the largest in Shandong province. In the 2017/2018 exam year, more than 800 candidates took exams at his center—this is about the same number of ABRSM candidates as the entire state of New York for the same period.

In Han's view, students and parents are much more enthusiastic than teachers about the exams. "Students come to our center and ask if someone can teach ABRSM," he revealed. "We also receive phone calls from some music teachers and even university professors asking how to teach ABRSM. It's getting popular in our city because of its international reputation" (Han interview). Regarding exam fees, Han said that "you should know that all the candidates are from middle class or even higher-income families. They don't care [about] the price, of course."

In discussing limitations and difficulties, Han felt that the balance is always tilted in favor of the piano as an examination instrument and that there was little support or interest in exams for

singing, clarinet, or guitar. He believed language is the big issue [in] singing exams.

Teachers [do not find it] easy to prepare for singing lessons, because they have to learn the songs first themselves. Most of these songs are in English, and some are in Italian, Germany, and French. The syllabus says we can sing in Chinese, but who can help us to translate? (Han interview)

Finally, Han conceded that he had to make substantial changes to his teaching methods based on the exam requirements. “I think I learned a lot from ABRSM. This is not just an exam; it is a way of teaching. It guides us to teach more in our class, not only technique, but also aural skill, sight-reading, and understanding music written in different periods. I hope parents can understand this, but, you know, parents are choosing ABRSM because of blindly following the trend, its international reputation, and finally realizing that this system is indeed a good thing” (Han interview).

## **Interviewee #2: Yun**

Yun is a voice teacher in Beijing. She began preparing her students for ABRSM exams only recently.

I don't like exams. I didn't agree when my students told me that they wanted to take this exam, because I don't want them to learn music under pressure. But, you know what, when I studied the syllabus and music pieces, I realized that [there are benefits to taking] ABRSM exams. (Yun interview)

During our conversation, Yun made frequent comparisons between ABRSM and Chinese music exams and opined that ABRSM singing exams are much more difficult than the local exams.

I have a student who passed Grade 9 in music from China Conservatory of Music, but she could not even complete her preparation for ABRSM Grade 4. In the local exams, you only need to sing three songs, and then you are done. But in ABRSM, you have to sing three accompanied exam pieces, one traditional unaccompanied song, and you also have to finish the aural test and sight singing. And the most important thing is, ABRSM songbooks are all written in staff notation and have very nice piano accompaniment, which is very conducive to cultivating students' ability to perceive harmony. (Yun interview)

On parents' attitudes regarding the considerably high exam fees, Yun said that her students' parents never worried about it. "They (parents) know how difficult the exam is, and they also know that the ABRSM certificate can [provide additional points] if their children apply to universities in the UK. Also, these examiners are all musicians from the UK" (Yun interview).

Yun maintained that she understood the fast pace at which ABRSM has grown in China as:

Chinese parents love this highly internationally recognized certificate. Also, we teachers need this authentic system as a standard to see if our students have made progress and if we need to improve our teaching or not. Because Chinese teachers always take technique as the most important thing and ignore the importance of music understanding, which is not right. (Yun interview)

Nevertheless, she felt that, though ABRSM is of a high standard and has an excellent reputation around the world, it has to offer a more balanced and culturally rounded list of set music pieces in its syllabus. "I only see two Chinese songs in the singing syllabus; this is not fair."

### **Interviewee #3: Du**

As a voice and music theory teacher, Du first learned about ABRSM piano exams in 2014. He was attracted to this "distinctive exam," and wanted to know more about the rules of voice and music theory. In 2016, he participated in ABRSM's teacher training for voice and music theory. "If you were to ask me to use keywords to describe it, I think ABRSM is systematic, balanced, integral, and authentic," Du said. "I think this is a model of good teaching, rather than an exam." However, he expressed his wish that ABRSM would provide more professional development support and training to music teachers.

"We all know that ABRSM earns much money from China; why don't they give us more support? There are more than 1,000 songs in the syllabus, but over 80% of them are not published in China. This is a big challenge for us." (Du interview)

Discussing the changes he had to make because of ABRSM, he said that the music theory syllabus provided him with a more comprehensive and progressive program he could align with his teaching.

China has many music theory books, but few of them are appropriate to teach kids. However, ABRSM music theory books help me to resolve this problem. The Grade 5 theory prerequisite for those sitting Grade 6 and above in a practical exam, is a very good standard. I always believe that music theory and music knowledge is as important as music pieces. If you only know how to play music pieces and ignore the relevant knowledge, that's far from enough. (Du interview)

However, he was concerned about ABRSM's exam fees. As he teaches at a large music learning center in the capital of Henan province, where students are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, he noted that not all students could afford ABRSM's exam fees.

All of my ABRSM learners are from middle-class families, and their parents are well educated and have a good understanding of music education... but I know most of the students in our center still prefer the Chinese music exam system, just because it is less expensive. Actually, the main difference is not just the exam fee, but the lesson fees as well. [Teachers charge more for] lessons based on ABRSM syllabus than for general music courses, because teachers have to prepare more. (Du interview)

Du confirmed that he had made a lot of changes to his teaching since he started working with the ABRSM syllabus. “I really want to be a good teacher, as [required by the ABRSM] syllabus” (Du interview).

### Summary

When I looked at the narratives given by these three music teachers, I found that there were many similarities:

#### **The main reason to choose ABRSM**

The main reason they chose ABRSM was because of its distinctive feature: a balanced structure to its academic content and requirements. **(1)** This can be seen in the emphasis, not only on performance and technical facility, which account for only 60% of the total mark (90 out of

150), but also on supporting tests such as aural and sight-reading; and **(2)** the Grade 5 theory prerequisite (as noted above). Yun's comment that China's local music exams have lower requirements in that "students can easily pass the exam with only three songs," suggests that teachers tend to ignore other essential aspects of music teaching, especially the ability to listen, read, and analyze. Hence, all three teachers had to change how they teach because ABRSM requires candidates to do more than play three exam pieces.

### **Limitations and difficulties**

When discussing the limitations and difficulties they experienced, two of the interviewees raised the issue of language, especially in singing exams. English is not only the primary language used in the syllabus and exam but also in the selection of songs. Take the Grade 1 singing exam. For instance: of the 68 songs listed in the syllabus, 54 (or 79%) are in English. The remaining 21% are in languages such as French, Germany, Dutch, and Spanish; none are in Chinese (ABRSM, 2018).

### **“Authentic”**

Interestingly, all three interviewees used the word "authentic" in describing the benefit of ABRSM. To them, authentic means (and includes): (1) the examiners who have examined in China so far are all British musicians; (2) regardless of where they examine, the examiners assess based on the same international standard worldwide; (3) international reputation and internationally recognized certificates; (4) college-bound candidates may be eligible to count ABRSM Grades 6 and above as additional points in their application for admission to universities in the UK.

## **Discussion**

These three ABRSM music teachers in China share similar experiences in terms of their perceptions about the system of assessment and having to make adjustments in their teaching



methods, style, and approach. Other similarities include their confidence in, and acceptance of, ABRSM's academic rigor and "authenticity"; and their attitudes, which can be described as passionate, desirable, enjoyable, and even excited. When I told Yun during the interview that "Now, this is your last question," she showed her disappointment, as she had enjoyed our discussion. Han's voice undulated a lot, especially when he answered my question, "Have you had to make any changes because of ABRSM?" Not only did he talk about the many changes he had made to his piano teaching, but he also shared much feedback from students and parents, all the while speaking in a fast and excited voice. Du laughed off a little too quickly when I asked, "Do you think ABRSM has any limitations or weakness?" He felt my question was "too hard to answer," and would only volunteer that "this exam system is perfectly good." Undoubtedly, these three music teachers appeared very satisfied with ABRSM, and are proud to be known as ABRSM teachers because of its "authentic" and "international" feature, and made it known to me that their students come from middle- or upper-class families who "never worried about the price." Radocy (1995) summarized the feature of "authentic assessment" in his article: that it should represent the real-world performance, and it must engage the tasks that reflect some ongoing practices, because even "music educators' use of rather authentic tasks in evaluating performance and composition, most formal commentary in education seems to come from other fields" (p.21). According to these music teachers, their "authentic" is less relevant to neither the "real world" nor "ongoing" feature.

One possible explanation for these three teachers' apparent satisfaction could be because of the patron-client relationship, in that they were introduced by ABRSM's Beijing Representative, from whom they had received their ABRSM teacher training. The training content consisted mainly of exam regulation and how to prepare students for the exam. Although it is not essential for teachers to undergo the training, music teachers, who regard themselves as "passionate fans"

choose to do so because they would earn a certificate with English words and featuring the ABRSM president's signature. As ABRSM's Beijing Representative was proud to remind the teachers, it means that you are officially recognized. This training also enhances the patron-client relationship between representatives and teachers.

Another noteworthy point concerns teachers' comments about the ABRSM repertoire. Two of them mentioned that they very much enjoy learning and teaching these music pieces. I thought it unusual that none of the three teachers thought of the all-western music repertoire as less balanced; instead, they felt that the only flaw was the lack of Chinese translation for the lyrics. It seemed that the teachers' primary criteria were that Western music is highly enjoyable and worth teaching; hence, there was no need to change. Obviously, this British music exam does help to steer Chinese music teachers away from a technique-centered approach, focusing more on teaching musical skills. However, I should note that ABRSM's education space—as a means of cultural colonialism—is being planted in music classes across China wherever the ABRSM syllabus is being taught.

Meanwhile, other disadvantages, such as exam anxiety and pressures, did not seem to be of concern. Research shows that anxiety in music performance and exams can present a serious problem for many music learners (Fisher, 2008; Guven, 2017; Steptoe, 2001; Valentine, 2002). Rae and McCambridge (2004) studied 120 participants, most of whom were ABRSM music exam takers; the findings showed that anxiety in music performance could lead to a reduction in the joy of music learning. These music teachers appeared satisfied with the academic rigor of this British exam but felt that the teachers should not ignore the students' healthy development of psychology enjoyment of music learning.

Some researchers have expressed their concern that the development of music education in China has become more and more impacted by globalization, and have advocated the

conversion from Western music teaching methods to the Chinese way of teaching (Ho, 2016, 2019; Law & Ho, 2009). Questions remain: what is "the Chinese way" of teaching music? What can we provide for our students without Westernized music? Perhaps the emphasis should be to strengthen "the Chinese way" so it becomes as "authentic" as possible? These arguments and questions can be the focus of future research.

### References

- Anderson, S. B. (1975). *Encyclopedia of educational evaluation*. New York: Books Demand.
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2008). *Annual review 2007-2008*. Retrieved from <https://us.abrsm.org/resources/annualReview2007.pdf>
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2009). *Annual review 2008-2009*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publishing/annualReview0809.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publishing/annualReview0809.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2010). *Annual review 2009: a celebration of the year*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/emails/images/headerimages/annualReview2009.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/emails/images/headerimages/annualReview2009.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2011). *Annual review 2010: supporting music's future*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/home/annualreview10.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/home/annualreview10.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2012). *Celebrating success: the annual review 2011*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/annualReview2011\\_b.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/annualReview2011_b.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2013). *ABRSM annual review 2012: enriching lives by inspiring musical achievement*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/abrsm\\_review\\_2012.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/abrsm_review_2012.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2014). *Inspiring musical achievement - ABRSM annual review 2013: supporting musical participation & progression*. Retrieved from [https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/annualReview13.pdf](https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/annualReview13.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2015). *ABRSM annual review 2014: 125 years of inspiring music achievement*. Retrieved from [https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/annual\\_review\\_2014.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/annual_review_2014.pdf)
- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2016). *ABRSM annual review 2015: inspiring musical achievement*. Retrieved from

[https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/annualReview15.pdf](https://us.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/annualReview15.pdf)

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2017). *ABRSM annual review 2016: inspiring musical achievement – financial year 2016-2017*. Retrieved from [https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/Annual\\_Review\\_2016\\_final.pdf](https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/Annual_Review_2016_final.pdf)

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2017). *Singing exams Grade 1 – 8 (from 2018)*. Retrieved from: <https://us.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/singing-exams/>

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2018). *ABRSM annual review 2017: inspiring musical achievement – financial year 2017-2018*. Retrieved from [https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDFs/ABRSM\\_Annual\\_Review\\_2017.pdf](https://gb.abrsm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/ABRSM_Annual_Review_2017.pdf)

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2019). *Exam regulation and UCAS points*. Retrieved from <https://us.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/information-and-regulations/exam-regulation-and-ucas-points/>

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2019). *Our exams*. Retrieved from: <https://us.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/>

Australian Music Examinations Board (2019). *About AMEB*. Retrieved from <https://www.ameb.edu.au/about/about.html>

Buonviri, N. (2013). Measuring aural skills in United States high schools: a critical analysis of the Advanced Placement Music Theory Exam. In T. S. Brophy (Ed.), *Music assessment and global diversity: practice, measurement and policy* (pp. 191-201). Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc.

China Music Industry Development Report (2019). *The name list of social arts graded exams*.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishing.

Fisher, R. (2008). Debating Assessment in Music Education. *Research and Issues in Music Education*, 6(1), n1.

Güven, E. (2017). Levels of music performance anxiety and test anxiety of Turkish prospective music teachers in piano exams. *International Journal of Music Education*, 35(2), 154-164.

Ho, W. C. (2016). Students' experiences with popular music: the case of Beijing, China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(1), 145-164.

Ho, W. C. (2019). Citizenship education and music education: exploring the crossroads between globalisation and localisation in Taiwan. *Music Education Research*, 21(3), 228-242.

Ji, P. (2018, December 9). Personal communication.

- Law, W. W., & Ho, W. C. (2009). Globalization, values education, and school music education in China. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41(4), 501-520.
- Panayotopoulos, N. (2009). On Greek photography: eurocentrism, cultural colonialism and the construction of mythic classical Greece. *Third Text*, 23(2), 181-194.
- Radocy, R. E. (1995). Planning assessment in music education: it's not risk free. *Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*, 6, 19-27.
- Rae, G., & McCambridge, K. (2004). Correlates of performance anxiety in practical music exams. *Psychology of Music*, 32(4), 432-439.
- Royal Conservatory (2019). *About us*. Retrieved from <https://www.rcmusic.com/about-us>  
*The Social Psychology of Music*, pp. 229–45. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sina (2018). 2018 China music industry development report. Retrieved from [https://k.sina.com.cn/article\\_6236057337\\_173b2aef900100dcbz.html](https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6236057337_173b2aef900100dcbz.html)
- Stake, R. E (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Steptoe, A. (2001). Negative emotions in music making: the problem of performance anxiety. In P. N. Juslin and J. A. Sloboda (Eds.), *Music and emotion: theory and research* (pp. 291–307). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Valentine, E. R. (2002). The fear of performance. In R. Rink (Ed.) *Musical performance: a guide to understanding* (pp. 168–82). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, G.D. (1997) Performance anxiety. In D. J. Hargreaves and A. C. North (Eds.)
- Wright, D. C. (2013). *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music: a social and cultural history*. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press.
- Young, R. J. (2016). *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

**Le Zhang** ([luz58@psu.edu](mailto:luz58@psu.edu)) is a Ph.D. candidate in music education at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests include international music curriculum and testing, cultural awareness and national identity in music education, and the professional development of music teachers. Before coming to the United States, she was a high school music teacher in Beijing (China), where she taught International Baccalaureate (IB) and A-level music for many years.