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## China's Piano-Mania is Reaching American Shores: The Development of Chinese Pianism and its Influence on American Institutions

by Zhong Bei Lin, Columbus State University

As of 2007, there are an estimated 30 million students actively studying piano in China;<sup>1</sup> a decade later, more recent estimates place this number closer to 40 million. This number is the approximate equivalent to the current population of children between the ages of five to fourteen living in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The sheer scope of this pianistic phenomenon in China has inspired the terms *piano-mania*, *piano-fever*, and the *Lang Lang effect*.

Twenty-first century pianism is undergoing a transformation that is increasingly featuring Chinese pianists. Piano superstars such as Lang Lang, Li Yundi, and Yuja Wang have garnered international attention; their fame has propelled the Chinese piano fever among parents and students to an unprecedented height. Nevertheless, their virtuosic pianism has also prompted criticism: Lang Lang has a “tendency to seize every opportunity to play fast and loud, and then faster and louder.”<sup>3</sup> Yuja Wang has been praised for having the “rudiments of the piano idiom down solidly,” but has been criticized for a playing that lacks shape, where the “rhetoric tend[s] to drift.”<sup>4</sup>

Considering the development of pianism in the United States, this level of virtuosic extravagance in Chinese pianists is not without historical precedence. In 1865, the United States had concluded the Civil War and shortly after, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. These traumatic national events meant the country had to rebuild its social fabric, infrastructure, and economy. This era of rebuilding gave birth to a period now known as the Gilded Age, a time when the United States experienced an explosion of wealth. This wealth drove Americans toward the pursuit of piano and musical studies as a symbol of cultural refinement. Europeans, however, criticized U.S. society at this time, saying: “America had gone from barbarism to decadence without the usual interval of civilization.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the musical realm, this decadence was reflected in the repertoire of pianists performing in the United States who gravitated toward flashy and virtuosic transcriptions and variations that served as crowd pleasers.

All this musical activity led to an increase in piano production. Pre-Gilded Age numbers from 1850 show that the United States produced 9000 pianos per year.<sup>6</sup> By 1910, one decade after the conclusion of the Gilded Age, the United States was producing 350,000 pianos per year,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Kahn and Daniel J. Wakin, “Classical Music Looks Toward China With Hope,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/03/arts/music/03class1.html>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Population by Age and Sex: 2000 and 2010.”

<sup>3</sup> Allan Kozinn, “CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW; Plenty of Pianistic Swagger, But Some Tenderness, Too,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2006, sec. Arts, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Charles McCardell, “National Symphony,” *American Record Guide* 73, no. 2 (April 3, 2010): 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition, Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin M. Good, *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos: A Technological History from Cristofori to the Modern Concert Grand* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 166.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Dolge, *Pianos and Their Makers: A Comprehensive History of the Development of the Piano from the Monochord to the Concert Grand Player Piano* (New York: Dover, 1972), 175.

signifying a 4000% increase. As classical music entered the realm of maturity, cultural refinement, and elitism in the United States, its populist appeal fell. In 2013, only 32,122 pianos were sold<sup>8</sup> in the United States, marking a 90% decrease from a century ago.

Enter China: 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution and, like the end of the Civil War in the United States, it was a time of rebuilding China's social fabric, infrastructure, and economy. This rebuilding propelled a period of growth in both private and public wealth, drawing a parallel between the United States during the Gilded Age and contemporary China today. In the musical realm, similar to the American piano production rate during the American Gilded Age, in 2012, 394,000 Chinese pianos were produced—a number that accounted for 80% of all pianos produced globally that year.<sup>9</sup>

While both the American and Chinese middle class have been the driving force behind these two countries' fascination with the piano, the Chinese middle class has been uniquely and further shaped by the country's one-child policy that extended from 1978 to 2016. For children in China, the pressure to excel comes not only from their two parents, but also from their four grandparents. This mounting pressure has led to an increase in competition at all levels of society. Students and parents compete for entry into top elementary, middle, and high schools with a fervor one might expect for entry into an elite university. For piano students, this social and academic pressure translates to only two viable paths of piano study in China.

The first is the path of an amateur who enrolls in piano lessons in the pursuit of a well-rounded education. These students must complete their piano education before middle school, or at the latest, before high school, when academic pressures are too overwhelming to permit further piano study. They must have “mastered” the piano by this point. This mastery is often defined by having completed the highest level of graded piano exams, administered by Chinese or international organizations.

The second is the path of professional study. These students may enter conservatories as early as ten years old to begin full-time music study. They dedicate their lives to practicing, which makes future pursuit of other studies difficult, if not impossible. These young professional pianists will be ill-equipped to partake in the demanding university entrance exams administered across China should they decide to pursue a non-music subject when they graduate high school. Nevertheless, these students are highly sought after by western music institutions for their thorough technical proficiency and training.

For my research into the pedagogical trends of Chinese pianism, I interviewed four teachers throughout various regions of China and observed six students in various lesson settings. Three recurring themes arose from the teacher interviews and lesson observations:

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<sup>8</sup> “The 2014 NAMM Global Report,” National Association of Music Merchants, [https://www.namm.org/files/ihdp-viewer/global-report-2014/A7352D4907B25A95B2CE27A075D3956F/2014MusicUSA\\_final.pdf](https://www.namm.org/files/ihdp-viewer/global-report-2014/A7352D4907B25A95B2CE27A075D3956F/2014MusicUSA_final.pdf), 14.

<sup>9</sup> “Major Challenges, Minor Successes -Chopin’s Piano-Maker Gives up but Others Are Fighting Chinese Rivals,” *The Economist*, December 7, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21591243-chopins-piano-maker-gives-up-others-are-fighting-chinese-rivals-major-challenges-minor>.

1. Students practiced the assigned amount.
2. Students attended twice-weekly lessons.
3. Parents demonstrated involvement in their child's pianistic studies by attending lessons and assisting with practice time.

Further analysis of these three themes revealed that they may be attributed to the following social factors:

1. Chinese students, who are often the only child in the family, face intense familial and social pressures for academic excellence, as mentioned previously. The students observed in this study were not only engaged in piano studies, but were also involved in academic tutoring sessions, ballet classes, English lessons, and math competitions. Although these students were observed in lessons during summer vacation months, the students were also required to complete summer academic homework.
2. Piano functions as a symbol of middle-class attainment. Students, teachers, and parents seek external legitimization through competitions, exams, and even the employment of English in lessons to confirm their procurement of western culture. The successful integration of western culture and music into the student's education signals middle-class achievement. The symbolism of piano as western culture may also serve to explain the attraction of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) exams in China: Judges utilize handwritten English on their comment sheets, and even though these comments are often difficult for parents, students, and teachers to decipher, the written English functions as a western seal of approval.
3. The emphasis on results and exams have given prominence to the rote-learning styles of education in which teachers teach students to master exams and achieve high scores. Chinese students cannot readily access communal performance venues such as nursing homes, hospitals, festivals, churches, or community centers. This scenario starkly contrasts with the United States, where performance opportunities throughout the community can be easily scheduled. In China, because such cultural infrastructures are not available or accessible, the focus of performance is not on the communal experience of sharing or giving, but on achieving high scores on graded exams, juried recitals, or competitions. Therefore, Chinese teachers instruct with the aim of preparing students to excel in such types of performances by molding and directing them with a calculated, focused, and detailed pedagogical approach that does not allow for much experimentation or individuality.

Within the lesson context, students displayed a range of abilities, personalities, and relationship with the instrument, their teacher, and their parents; some were more inquisitive and vocal while others were more reserved and hesitant. Nevertheless, observing as an American-trained pedagogue, all students performed at a level that was higher than what I would have expected for children at their various ages and stages of learning. In order to protect the privacy of the students observed, all names have been changed; however the students' true age and gender are retained in an effort to provide the most accurate portrayal possible for each student.

Five-year-old Peipei, after a year of lessons, could already play several repertoire pieces from John Thompson's *Modern Course for the Piano*, had a proficient knowledge of solfège and

intervals, could harmonize folk tunes with I, IV, and V7 chords in the left hand, and transpose simple pieces to closely related keys. In two examples of intermediate students, Li Dong was studying intermediate repertoire after less than a year of piano studies. Similarly, Yi Yi was only nine years old and well into her study of intermediate repertoire. On the advanced spectrum, ten-year-old Sisi performed repertoire that is on par with what is expected of undergraduate piano majors in American universities.

There was an underlying intensity in each of the students' lessons. Six-year-old Buo Nan had his lesson conducted entirely in English. His mother requested this of his teacher, who proceeded to meet this request; Buo Nan was also fluent in English. Likewise, Li Dong, studying under a different teacher, also had his lesson conducted entirely in English. Nine-year-old Meng Yao was observed in her once-a-week aural-skills lesson. At her young age, Meng Yao was already preparing to test on the highest level of the ABRSM exams. Her aural-skills lesson was held in addition to her regular twice-weekly piano lessons, making it her third lesson of the week. Sisi, the most advanced of the students observed, was described by her teacher as an "average" student at the conservatory, but was praised for her genuine love of music and the piano. During the lesson, Sisi's father stood at the back of the studio, video recorder turned on, notepad and pencil as well as a duplicate copy of all the music in hand, poised to take notes for the lesson.

Outside of piano lessons, the students' schedules reflected the competitive nature of being a child in China. For example, Yi Yi's teacher expected her to practice several hours a day in preparation for the ABRSM exam with a practice session after breakfast and a practice session before going to bed. Stressed about being able to find time, Yi Yi recounted that her summer schedule included ballet for three hours each day, English speech class, and Math Olympiad, in addition to her school-assigned summer homework. Li Dong, a student who studies and boards at an arts magnet middle school began, like the majority of the students there, with no prior knowledge of, or even exposure to, the piano. Yet the school's rigorous and demanding schedule of seven-days-a-week classes means that students progress quickly in their instrumental studies. Student dormitories are in the same building as their practice rooms, and students can be heard practicing as early as 5:30AM, on weekdays and weekends.

The Chinese pedagogues interviewed were keenly aware of Chinese pedagogy's strengths and deficiencies. They were quick to boast on the technical efficiency of the system, noting that due to their students' discipline and technical proficiency, western institutions are eager to recruit their students with generous scholarship offerings. Alex Ross echoed and highlighted this relationship between Chinese virtuosity and western institutions in *The New Yorker*; he observed that it was the West's penchant for "fleet-fingered" performers that is being replicated in Asia and that the musical world's criticism of Asian pianistic virtuosity is, "in effect, scapegoating Asians for its own defects."<sup>10</sup> These same Chinese pedagogues, so assured of their students' technical excellence, voiced a concern for the lack of a holistic approach to piano education. They advocated for a more thorough knowledge of piano repertoire beyond the classical and romantic era standards, emphasizing a need for the incorporation of early music and contemporary repertoire into the curriculum. They articulated a need for a grounded understanding of music theory and history. One piano professor noted the need for more equipped educators in these academic fields, while another teacher lamented the irregularity with

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<sup>10</sup> Alex Ross, "The Wow Factor," *New Yorker* 83, no. 6 (April 2, 2007): 86–87.

Summary Chart of Lesson Observations Arranged in Increasing Length of Study

Student Name	Gender	Age	Length of Study	Repertoire	Lesson Setting	Leveling*
Buo Nan	Male	6	0	Not applicable: Student's first lesson  New assignments from <i>Poco Piano</i> .	Private Studio	N/A
Li Dong	Male	13	<1 year	Kabalevsky: Songs of the Cavalry, Op. 27, No. 29.  Bartók: Slovakian Boy's Dance Sz. 39, No. 3.	Arts Magnet Boarding School	Kabalevsky: 7 Bartók: 4
Peipei	Male	5	>1 year	Folk tunes and transposition assignments, Thompson's <i>Modern Course for the Piano</i>	Private Studio	N/A
Yi Yi	Female	9	4–5 years	Vis: 60s Swing No. 1 from <i>Swinging Rhythms</i> .  Dussek: Sonatina in G, Op. 20, No. 1, I. Allegro non tanto.  Hofmann: Am Abend, Op. 88, No. 2.	Private Studio	Vis: N/A Dussek: 6 Hofmann: 7
Sisi	Female	10	6 years	Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 21 in C, K. 467, I. Allegro Maestoso.  Moszkowski: Etude in G Minor, Op. 7, No. 2.  Beethoven: Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 2, No. I. Allegro.	Conservatory	Mozart: 10+** Moszkowski: M–D to D*** Beethoven: 10
Meng Yao	Female	9	N/A	Not applicable: Aural-skills lesson.  Takes piano lesson with another teacher, preparing for ABRSM Level Eight Exams.	Private Studio	

\*According to Jane Magrath's *Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature*, 1995.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*Concerto leveling provided by Karen Beres and Christopher Hahn's *The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Concertos*, 2017; leveling is equivalent to and based on Magrath's work for solo literature.<sup>12</sup>

\*\*\*Not available in Magrath's book because of the advanced nature of these works. Leveling provided by Maurice Hinson's *Guide to the Pianists' Repertoire*, 2014. M–D means "moderately difficult," D means "difficult."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Jane Magrath, *The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature: An Invaluable Resource of Piano Literature from Baroque through Contemporary Periods for Teachers, Students and Performers* (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing, 1995.)

<sup>12</sup> Karen Beres and Christopher Hahn, *The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Concertos* (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing, 2017.)

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Hinson, *Guide to the Pianists' Repertoire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.)

which these courses are offered to students. A third educator articulated the need for more student performance opportunities outside of academic contexts.

The impact of this type of pedagogy has been felt globally and will, predictably, continue to reverberate into the future. There has been an increase in the Chinese student population in piano studios in the United States. In fall 2016, Northwestern, New England Conservatory, and Peabody all reported a 60–80% Asian student enrollment in their piano studios, with some elite institutions reporting that Chinese students accounted for as much as half of all pianists enrolled. Their increased presence suggests that western pre-collegiate piano teachers must seriously consider how to prepare their students to remain competitive at these already highly selective institutions. The sheer number of Chinese pianists in U.S. institutions also means that institutions ought to be poised not only to benefit from the strengths of these pianists' training, but also be equipped to address possible gaps in the theoretical, historical, and repertoire knowledge of these pianists.

Further research beyond the present study might reveal the ways in which the influx of international Chinese piano students is impacting current pedagogical practices in studios and classrooms. How well do these eastern-trained students adapt to a “western” style of learning? Are professors, whose classrooms are increasingly filled with Chinese students, adjusting their teaching styles to accommodate the rote learning that these students are acquainted with, or are students expected to readily absorb western styles of pedagogy? Does their presence in small or large numbers pose a strength or a challenge to professors in lecture-based classes such as music theory and music history? What aesthetic and cultural values do these students bring with them, and how are they being influenced by (or how are they influencing) the institution and students around them? Which institutions are successful at recruiting these Chinese students, and is there a maximum capacity for Chinese student intake that might be reached one day? As institutions increasingly rely on the enrollment of Chinese piano students to bolster their studio numbers, future research should seek to shed light on whether this present “piano-fever” in China can be sustained into future generations, and if so, for how long?

According to the 2015–2016 Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) report, out of the 656 non-graduating piano doctoral students reported from 47 U.S. institutions, 40% or 265 of these students were Asian, while only 22% or 145 students were reported to be White. The HEADS report also recorded that 38% or 54 of 141 graduating piano doctoral students reported by 39 U.S. institutions in 2014–2015 were reported to be Asian compared to the 35% or 50 students reported to be White.<sup>14</sup> One might reasonably deduce that as institutions graduate proportionally more Asians, including Chinese pianists at the doctoral level, that in a few generations, the faculty composition at U.S. institutions will experience a demographic shift that reflects this graduation statistic.

For pre-collegiate piano teachers in the West, the influx of competition from Chinese students for the already limited spaces available at the most elite institutions of music study have significant implications on how these teachers might prepare their students for a successful audition. Pre-collegiate teachers with gifted, ambitious piano students will need to provide serious, intense study for these students at an earlier age with lengthier and more frequent

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<sup>14</sup> “Music Data Summaries 2015-2016,” Higher Education Arts Data Services, 2016.

lessons. Students who decide they want to become a piano performance major when they are in high school will find it difficult, if not impossible, to compete with a student who has been on the path of professional musical training since elementary or middle school. Parents will need to be more engaged in lessons in order to help sustain their student's interest and commitment to practicing the piano, and students must take on a heavier practicing regimen at an earlier age. Western pre-collegiate piano teachers should nurture their students with a thorough theoretical and historical knowledge as well as a broad understanding of the styles of piano music ranging from Baroque to contemporary eras, so that these students might enter into auditions and interviews with a different type of competitive advantage, that of a thorough and integrated understanding of musical structure, styles, periods, and syntax.

If this trend of Chinese pianism continues to progress, it suggests that piano and classical music studies are migrating rapidly towards China, and some elite institutions are already preparing for this geographical shift. In 2018, Juilliard is due to open the Tianjin Juilliard School in Tianjin, China. Robert Sirota, former president of the Manhattan School of Music, observed, "I honestly think that in some sense the future of classical music depends on the development in China in the next 20 years. They represent a vast audience as well as a classical music performing population that is much larger than anything we've had so far."<sup>15</sup> Jamal J. Rossi, dean of the Eastman School of Music, explained, "One goes where the talent is."<sup>16</sup> Chinese pianist Lang Lang articulated, "Two hundred years ago it was Europe. A hundred years ago it was America. Fifty years ago it was Japan. And now it's China."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Wakin, "Increasingly in the West, the Players Are From the East," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/04/arts/music/04clas.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



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