

# Industrialized Music Education in China: A Discussion of the “Standard Grade Examinations in Music” (SGEM) Organized by the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing

Zhang Boyu

Central Conservatory of Music and Nanjing Normal University, China

*Following the UK-based model of The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), in 1993 the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) in Beijing initiated a similar system called the Standard Grade Examinations in Music (SGEM). Since then, throughout China, all conservatories as well as the Chinese Musicians Association, the Chinese National Orchestration Society and some local music organizations have launched similar examinations, establishing a significant trend in music education. A Grade Exams Center (GEC), which houses the SGEM, is not confined to exams, but also runs related courses in music instrument performance, and organizes relevant publications. This article focuses on the commercial aspects of the SGEM. It classifies four business categories that form a music-industrial chain, and discusses the chain's benefits and issues for CCOM and Chinese society.*

## Background

Despite its highly favorable position, the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) nevertheless faced serious financial problems some twenty years ago due to the country's economic situation, with China listed (and still listing) as a third-world country. For a long time, its facilities were unsatisfactory, and the incomes of its staff low, hardly sufficient either to invite foreign professors to teach at the Conservatory, or allow its staff and students to travel abroad. Following economic reforms in China in the 1980s, Chinese universities began to use their knowledge as a source of wealth, something allowed and promoted by the government. Since the number of salaried university posts funded by the State was quite small, universities needed to supplement these from their own resources. Although the

Klisala Harrison (ed.)

Applied Ethnomusicology in Institutional Policy and Practice

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 21.  
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 103–120.

State doubled the amount received from student tuition fees this was still a relatively small amount. If Beijing university staff relied solely on their state salaries, their standards of living would have been of the lowest. Therefore universities needed to ensure channels of self-funding so that their staff might continue their university teaching. Under these circumstances, CCOM needed continually to explore ways of funding increased expenditures both on salaries and facilities, notwithstanding significant academic achievements of CCOM.

The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), the UK's largest music education body, arguably with the world's most influential music exams, began operations in 1890 and is now one of the "largest music publishers and the world's leading provider of music exams, offering assessments to more than 630,000 candidates in 93 countries every year."<sup>1</sup> In a recent publication, Wright<sup>2</sup> illustrates the history and the social values of the ABRSM, noting its significance in music life since it opened Western music education to millions of people from many parts of the world.

Having learnt from the ABRSM, in 1993 the CCOM initiated a similar system in China, called the Standard Grade Examinations in Music (SGEM). Actually, this had been anticipated several years earlier, since in 1989 CCOM had already set up examinations in Malaysia and Singapore. Instruments included in the exams at that time were *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), *pipa* (four-stringed lute), *guzheng* (movable-bridged zither), *yangqin* (dulcimer) and *dizi* (bamboo flute). Chinese examiners were not confident about offering exams in Western instruments, given that these were represented in those offered by ABRSM. The instruments selected to be included in the SGEM basically accord with the kinds of instruments most students were willing to learn. In 1992, CCOM established an administrative section called *Kaoji Zhongxin* (Grade Exams Center [GEC]) with more than 15 employees managing the SGEM program. The president of the conservatory CCOM appoints the director of the section. In the following year (1993), the GEC organized the first exams in China, which included the piano, violin, flute and cello, although these were confined to Beijing. However, starting from 1994, exams in these instruments were extended to all of China's provinces, and to 42 examination centers. In 1998, the exams were introduced in Taiwan, and then in Hong Kong in 2003, Canada in 2006, and the USA in 2007.

After the advent of the SGEM, other conservatories, such as the China Conservatory of Music, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and conservatories in Wuhan, Sichuan, Guangzhou (called Xinghai Conservatory of Music), Tianjin, Shenyang and Xi'an, as well as the Chinese Musicians Association, Chinese National Orchestration Society and some other local music organizations, launched similar examinations throughout the country. At present, there are more than 100 institutions offering similar grade examinations, creating a significant trend in

---

1 ABRSM 2016.

2 Wright 2013.

music-learning and music commerce. However, those at CCOM are arguably the most popular, presently attracting more than 150,000 candidates each year. They are also recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Education as mechanisms of music education: those who pass a certain level can also receive certification from the Ministry. The GEC organizes not only the SGEM, but also cooperates with CCOM's Continuing Music Education College through running various courses to teach related Chinese and Western instruments, while collaborating with the People's Publishing House and Central Conservatory of Music Press to publish booklets and sheet music specifically designed for the SGEM. This then has become a business enterprise beyond the teaching and learning of music.

## Scope

This article focuses on the commercial aspects of the SGEM, identifying four categories that together form an inter-related music-industrial chain. Such a chain, while presenting various problems, provides benefits both to CCOM and society in general. Because this article is intended to serve as applied ethnomusicology, I would first of all like to explain why the study is "applied."

In various respects, applied ethnomusicology is still vaguely defined, especially in China. Indeed, looking at the ethnomusicological literature in China, it is difficult to find any serious discussion in this field. From conversations with various Chinese ethnomusicologists, it seems to me that the meaning of "applied ethnomusicology" among many Chinese scholars is "ethnomusicological practice in society, beyond the academy and beyond professional musicianship." In one definition, what is "applied" is practical rather than theoretical. Yang Mingkang, a famous Chinese ethnomusicologist, thinks that ethnomusicology is divided into the theoretical and applied. For example, an ethnomusicologist organizing a music festival or establishing a music database is not theoretical per se, but more practical and thus considered "applied ethnomusicology." If a music museum informs academic research, resulting work can be considered "theoretical." However, if an ethnomusicologist curates a museum exhibit for public viewing, then the work is "applied."<sup>3</sup> In the Study Group on Applied Ethnomusicology of the International Council for Traditional Music, applied ethnomusicology is not seen as opposed to academic, theoretical, and even ethnographic and scientific thinking.<sup>4</sup> It therefore seems clear to me that there is some divergence in thinking between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars.

This article on the SGEM may be seen an example of what Svanibor Pettan calls action ethnomusicology. This is defined as "any use of ethnomusicological

---

3 M. Yang 2015.

4 Harrison and Pettan 2010, 16.

knowledge for planned change by the members of a local cultural group”<sup>5</sup>—in this case the administration of an exams system. As I am a CCOM employee not directly organizing the SGEM and I analyze music education and exams happening outside CCOM, the article exemplifies “administrative ethnomusicology.” Administrative ethnomusicology, according to Pettan, refers to “any use of ethnomusicological knowledge for planned change by those who are external to a local cultural group.”<sup>6</sup> Exploring the SGEM system nonetheless within a scholarly study will illustrate Klisala Harrison and Svanibor Pettan’s claim that “applied ethnomusicology is *not* an opposition to the theoretical (philosophical, intellectual) domain, but ... its extension and complement. Applied ethnomusicology is about how musical practice can inform relevant theory, and about how theory can inform musical practice.”<sup>7</sup> To also evoke Yang Mingkang, I will undertake practice-based research about music that is “non-theoretical” in its focus on general society, yet theoretical in that it seeks to contribute to the theorization of actions of academics and higher-education students.

This paper is not intended as research into what is applied ethnomusicology in China but, rather, a means of raising the profile of Chinese music scholarship in international circles and contributing to ethnomusicological research on music in China’s public sphere. International readership may consider this paper is “applied” because it discusses social practice in music education, which is generally recognized as one of the key issues in applied ethnomusicology. *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*, for example, includes a music education section.<sup>8</sup> However, music education per se is not the sole interest of this paper; also discussed here is its industrial aspect. Cultural industries, including the music industry, currently form a hot topic in China but, as business success is largely based on capital rather than academic research, publications on the music industry are less than comprehensive. Most useful information is found in commercial publications. However, a Master’s thesis by Liu Gang (China’s Geosciences University) entitled “Study of the Chinese Musical Industry Value Chain”<sup>9</sup> offers a general overview of how the music industry works in China. Liu proposes three industrial chains in music practice:

Recording companies—singers—composers—copyrights—media—consumers.  
Recording companies—singers—agents—concerts/advertisements—consumers.  
Recording companies—CD products—markets—consumers.<sup>10</sup>

---

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Pettan and Titon 2015, 553–670.

9 Liu 2006.

10 Ibid.

In the academic literature in English, Simon Frith “provides an overview of the current research situation in Britain.”<sup>11</sup> Topics in his article include the political economy of rights, the culture of the firm, the music industry research and government policy, and research on the music industry, among other subjects, but nowhere does he focus on music education. John Williamson and Martin Cloonan<sup>12</sup> summarize the current situations and achievements in the music industry generally, finding that the word “industry” has gradually become pluralized into “industries.” However, it is clear from the article that most areas related to the music industry arise from popular music, with a scope that includes recording, publishing and live performance. Noriko Manabe<sup>13</sup> presents an example of music industry research from Japan, discussing music in relation to broadcast media, the Internet, iPods, mobile phones, cell phones, ringtones, downloads, CD sales and the record industry.

In further writing on the music industry, Burt Feintuch in “The Conditions for Cape Breton Fiddle Music: The Social and Economic Setting of a Regional Soundscape”<sup>14</sup> discusses how Canadian folk musicians use music for making money and boosting tourism. Reebee Garofalo<sup>15</sup> proposes that the music industry involves three key areas: (1) music publishers, who occupied the power centre of the industry when sheet music was the primary vehicle for disseminating popular music; (2) record companies, which rose to power as recorded music became predominant; and (3) transnational entertainment corporations that promote music as an ever-expanding series of “revenue-streams”—record sales, advertising revenues, movie tie-ins, streamed audio on the Internet, and so on—no longer tied to any particular sound provider. Jeffrey Kallberg<sup>16</sup> explains how Chopin was responsible for selling his works whereas Irving Wolther<sup>17</sup> discusses how national language recordings sell in Germany and other European countries.

Although the references mentioned above are selective, we can see that, as far as they are concerned, the music industry is mainly concerned with popular music and its social contexts, such as CD products, concerts and recording company businesses (although we know differently—there are traditional and art music markets, as well). None of the publications above conceived of music education as an industry. Can music education also be industrialized? This paper will present a discussion of this question and argue “yes.”

---

11 Frith 2000, 387.

12 Williamson, John and Martin Cloonan 2007.

13 Manabe 2008.

14 Feintuch 2004.

15 Garofalo 1999, 319.

16 Kallberg 1983.

17 Wolther 2008.

## Structure

Graded music exams provide a structured framework for progression from beginner to advanced amateurs. The SGEM graded examinations are divided into two types: (1) instrumental performance on both Western and Han Chinese musical instruments; and (2) music theory. Western instruments include the accordion, piano, electronic keyboard, violin, viola, cello, double bass, flute, trumpet, clarinet, saxophone, French horn, trombone, bassoon, guitar and snare drum; Chinese instruments include erhu, pipa, guzheng, yangqin, dizi, *sheng* (mouth organ), *ruan* (four-stringed, round lute), *konghou* (harp), and *jinghu* (a two stringed fiddle used specifically in Beijing opera). Other instruments such as the Chinese *suona* (shawm) are under consideration. This article only investigates Chinese instruments. For any grade of performance, whether instrumental and vocal, the examination repertoire is fixed. It is QCA-accredited at ten levels: Grades 1–3 comprise the basic level; Grades 4–6, “ordinary”; and 7–9, advanced. The tenth grade is considered professional-level, even though it requires considerably lower skills than those of first-year CCOM regular degree students. As yet, the GEC has not made a clear relationship between the tenth-level examination and the professional standard required of CCOM graduates (who in 2016, study for an additional four years, minimum).<sup>18</sup>

The second category, theoretical examinations, consists of three grades. Grade 1 corresponds to instrumental performance grades 3–6 exams;<sup>19</sup> grade 2, to grades 7–9 exams in performance; and grade 3 to grade 10 in performance. Only grades 1–2 in theory are taking place at present; grade 3 is in the planning stages. Candidates cannot enter any practical or theoretical exam grade unless they have already passed the lower grades. The contents of the theory exam are basically divided into two branches: basic knowledge of Chinese music theory, and basic knowledge of Chinese music culture. The former refers to theories of scale, mode and meter as well as the reading and analysis of staff notation. So, it is a mixture of Chinese and Western music theory. Besides theoretical knowledge, aural training and sight-singing are required. The latter branch requires a very basic knowledge of Chinese music culture including identifying the names of Chinese instruments from pictures, listening to Chinese traditional music such as part of a song for which a pupil must give the title. At its higher level (grade 2), the exam covers basic knowledge of localized Chinese traditional instrumental genres, a very basic knowledge of Western instrumental music, popular music and world musics, such as instruments of India, folk songs of Brazil or drums of Africa. Due to the students’ diverse backgrounds, the content of the theory exam is different inside China than

---

18 For more detailed information, please see the GEC textbooks for a particular instrument. Additional, relevant information can be found at <http://kjwyh.ccom.edu.cn/> (Standard Grade Examination Committee of the Central Conservatory of Music 2016).

19 A theoretical examination is not required for the performance grades 1–2 exams.



abroad and in Hong Kong, where it is much simpler. This does not mean that students in Hong Kong are regarded as less knowledgeable about world musics, but rather that they are less immersed in Chinese traditional culture than their counterparts in Mainland China, where the tests focus more on Chinese music and culture. In 2015, the GEC plans to offer exams in voice performance. As many Chinese of all ages are lovers of vocal music, both adult and teenage-level exams are proposed. It is likely that this will attract a great number of applicants.

The organizers of the SGEM are also active internationally. At present, exams are held in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, USA and Taiwan, mainly focusing on Chinese instruments because the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) is already established in these countries. In these places, though, the SGEM is still in the process of being developed further and the number of candidates is quite small (relative to China). However, their presence is considered a means of promoting Chinese music abroad. There are two further reasons for developing the SGEM in these countries. First, they have large Chinese populations and it is therefore perfectly natural to hold exams in these regions. As some students do not understand Chinese, the theory exam is held in both Chinese and English. A textbook in English has been published in order to help students acquire basic information about Chinese music theory, in preparation for the exams.

Apart from catering to ethnic Chinese in these countries, cultural transmission is also seen as another goal. To generalize, Chinese not only love Western music, but are also re-fashioning Chinese music along Western lines. This is no less true of the SGEM. China's political leaders have been planning how best to promote this influence, resulting in the establishment of Confucius Institutes all over the world, which teach Chinese language and culture including music. A music-centered Confucius Institute has also been established in Denmark.<sup>20</sup> CCOM's Confucius Institute has been very active. Each year it organizes music activities such as performances, training programs and conferences, meanwhile organizing Chinese music concerts abroad. Besides the Confucius Institutes, the SGEM may be considered another way in which Chinese music is being promoted abroad, offering a way for overseas Chinese to learn Chinese instruments and music culture. There may not be many taking part in the exams at present, but the number is gradually increasing.

## **An Industrial Chain**

The Standard Grade Examinations in Music are not only concerned with music education, but also comprise a significant commercial chain, as is evident in the

---

<sup>20</sup> The Central Conservatory of Music and the Denmark Royal Academy of Music jointly established a music-centered Confucius institute in Denmark in 2002.



Figure 1. A scene at the CCOM campus during SGEM exam days.

following four perspectives: The first link of the chain is the SGEM itself. The GEC organizes two grade examination sessions per year in Beijing, and at least one in each of the 42 centers across the country. The costs are as follows. Every first-grade performance student must pay 200 RMB for each exam, followed by 260 RMB for the second grade, 320 RMB for the third, 370 RMB for the fourth, 420 RMB for the fifth, 460 RMB for the sixth, 500 RMB for the seventh, 530 RMB for the eighth, 560 RMB for the ninth, and finally 780 RMB for the professional level. The entrance fee for the first grade theory exam is 100 RMB, and 200 RMB for the second.<sup>21</sup> As yet, no one has applied to take the third level of the theory exam. As mentioned above, only those students who have already passed the previous level can go on to take the next level exam. Since more than 150,000 students per year take such an exam on the CCOM campus alone, about 40 percent of which play Chinese instruments, this generates considerable income.

The second link in the chain is the teaching centers. As of 2014, there are 42 local Standard Grade Exam offices affiliated to the GEC, and each office organizes its own learning programs. Apart from these 42 offices, there are many other independent regional classrooms offering the same kind of programs, especially in big cities. Because these classrooms, large or small, are not contracted to the GEC, they cannot themselves organize the SGEM, but instead offer similar training programs. Their students then attend the exams in any one of the 42 affiliated offices.

<sup>21</sup> These fees are not fixed-rate. As well, the rates may be increased in the future. The rates are not decided by the SGEM, but by the Price Evaluation Bureau of Beijing.



The Middle School of Music (MSM) affiliated with CCOM is the closest office to the GEC—MSM is part of CCOM although administrated independently of CCOM. The MSM employs a few people to work specifically on the SGEM, but the MSM's activities are confined to courses in music theory rather than instrumental performance. The theory program is divided into three levels of examinations, but presently only two are offered since there has been no student intake for the third level so far. At each level, a center may accept up to 200 students per semester, divided into ten groups of about 20 students. Each level requires 16 one-hour teaching units. The training program includes musical skills like reading and analyzing staff notation; identifying single pitches, two-pitched melodic and harmonic intervals and chords; recognizing tonal scales; as well as other rudiments of music and basic knowledge of Chinese music gained through identifying Chinese instruments, listening to Chinese folk songs, and other ways of learning about folk and traditional music. Each student will pay 1,000 RMB for 16 lessons, totaling 20,000 RMB for each group. If 20,000 RMB is multiplied by 10 groups, the center makes 200,000 RMB in tuition fees each semester. The income is shared between the center and the teachers approximately evenly. While not large, this is nevertheless useful extra income especially for young teachers and postgraduate students, given that they teach only three one-hour classes per week. Some teachers, however, are encouraged to increase their teaching to as much as six one-hour classes per day.

Another example is the Music School of the Tanggu District in Tianjin, a city with a population of 12 million, 140 kilometers south of Beijing. High-speed trains from Beijing to Tanggu take about 40 minutes. A private arts school that teaches not only music, but also subjects such as dancing and painting, it organizes all kinds of instrumental lessons, both Western and Chinese, many of which are taught by students from the Central Conservatory of Music. Since most classes take place on weekends, employees from CCOM travel to the school by high-speed train in early morning, and back in the evening. Instrumental classes lasting 45-minutes are one-to-one, so each teacher may see six to eight students a day. The cost of each lesson is based on the teacher's qualification. For example, those already employed by the conservatories as academic staff may receive 200 RMB per lesson, whereas for those who are still students, the price may be 150 RMB. Fees may be shared between teacher and school, with 70 percent going to the teacher and 30 percent, to the school. Although piano is the most popular instrument, some Chinese instruments such as erhu, pipa and guzheng can have many students.

The above two examples represent thousands of similar schools everywhere in China whose owners become entrepreneurs provide music education for society while creating opportunities for musicians, music students and young teachers to earn extra money. Since the number of people wishing to learn Chinese instruments is large, catering to this demand are three types of teachers: Chinese music professionals including orchestral players; teachers at music institutions; and mixed-ability amateurs who, no matter what kind of job they do, will get students.

An additional group of teachers rely solely on private teaching, but are still able to earn enough money to live in a city as expensive as Beijing. They find students either by themselves, or through being employed by any of the 42 GEC centers or by centers outside the 42. Conservatory students are, consequently, more affluent than those from students in other types of university programs because they derive income from such employment.

The third link in the chain is the publishing houses. The GEC committee enlists professional instrumentalists to create an independent editorial board that is responsible for compiling the contents of the textbooks. These textbooks are also divided into ten levels, from the basic to the professional. All textbooks for any Chinese instrument are in three volumes, the first for levels 1–6 and the second for levels 7–9. The textbook for the professional level has yet to be devised as so far no one has reached that level in the GEC system since at this level students are likely to be following the curriculum of an institution such as CCOM. Since many students participate at the lower levels, the need for textbooks is considerable. The SGEM textbooks appear in print, not digital, form. There are two volumes covering levels 1–9, for each instrument. Each learner must at least purchase two volumes; required musical pieces for the basic and advanced levels are divided between the two.

The UK-based Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) has its own publishing business.<sup>22</sup> However, the GEC has not yet achieved that level. At present, two firms cooperate with GEC to publish all textbooks: the People's Publishing House and the Central Conservatory of Music Press. The People's Music Publishing House publishes all textbooks for Western instrument, theory and vocal exams whereas CCOM Press publishes all textbooks for Chinese instrument exams. Since a large number of students play piano and violin, all of whom must take the theory exam, it is easy to appreciate why SGEM textbooks have become the backbone of the publishing business. Chinese instrumental textbooks also provide a foundation of the CCOM Press's income, although only for the nine most popular instruments mentioned above—erhu, guzheng, pipa, dizi, sheng, yangqin, ruan, jinghu and konghou—leaving a large body of Chinese instruments yet to be addressed. Of the SGEM textbooks published so far, guzheng is the most popular, followed by erhu, dizi, pipa and yangqin. Sheng and konghou were listed by CCOM Press in 2012, but have little popular demand and textbook sales are small. The following statistics demonstrate the financial scale of the textbooks. From 2004 to 2014, the textbooks for guzheng (two volumes) sold 79,262 copies at 45 RMB a copy, producing an income of 3,566,796 RMB. Over the same period, the two textbooks for erhu sold 54,687 copies. At 47 RMB per copy, this totals 2,570,289 RMB; sales of dizi textbooks are lower than the above. During the last ten years, the number of copies sold of the two volumes covering Levels 1–9 was 46,524 at 29 RMB each, totaling 1,349,196 RMB (134,920 RMB annually). Evidently, not all

---

<sup>22</sup> ABRSM *ibid.*

books have the same market share. Nonetheless, the GEC must still arrange for textbooks for less popular instruments in the SGEM. Between its listing in 2012 and 2014, only 878 copies of sheng textbooks sold—440 copies each year.

We may consider the fourth link in the chain to be all of the other sectors connected with the exams including, for example, instrument-makers, music shops and printing companies. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all private businesses were banned. Several government-owned musical instruments factories were established, the most important being the Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou National Musical Instruments Factories. Following economic reforms of the 1980s, government-owned companies started to face competition from new, more flexible private companies, resulting in the bankruptcy of many of the former. However, the musical instrument factories have been following another path. Three companies remain, but rather than employing workers, they act as agents for independent instrument makers, some of whom have signed contracts with the companies.

Musical instruments shops are all owned privately. In Beijing alone, there are estimated to be more than twenty, some of which sell both Chinese and Western instruments. Others sell only Chinese instruments. Whatever their business situation might be, we find that most of these stores also offer training programs. In this regard, musical instrument shops can be considered to be part of both the second and fourth chains.

The book market presents another context. In China, there are state-owned bookshops everywhere. These bear the name *Xinhua Shudian* (New China Book Store) and can be found in any city, big or small. Each large city has at least one in its center. In Beijing, for example, such bookshops may be found in Xidan, Wangfujing and Zhongguancun, three shopping areas of the city, and each store has four or five floors. Chinese publishers call this kind of bookshop “the first channel” because they must comply with methods of state-owned business. So-called “second channel” bookshops are private and small, but often very active. The CCOM Press has a network of more than 400 private bookshops throughout the country and through which its books are distributed. Nowadays, Internet booksellers such as Amazon, Dangdang, Jingdong and Taobao are also very active, taking more than 50 percent of total sales. Printing companies are another factor in this business chain. Printing machines, mostly imported from Western countries, are now highly sophisticated, although a company normally requires a minimum print run of 3,000 as the more copies printed, the lower the cost per unit.

This whole picture demonstrates the commercial nature of a music industry sector that extends far beyond the mere learning of music. All the branches described here, while ostensibly focusing on the pupils, have the target of extracting money from their parents. We cannot, therefore, classify this composite picture as pure music education, but rather as a commercial operation.

## Reassessment

2015 marked more than twenty years of operation by the SGEM. During that time, SGEM has achieved significant success, not only in the promotion of Chinese music in China and abroad, but also in the formation of an industrial chain. On the positive side, it is apparent that through the SGEM's promotion, more students learn music, and there are obvious economic benefits. However, two further questions arise: (1) Why do so many Chinese children wish to learn to play music; and (2) What are the disadvantages of the SGEM?

These questions will be addressed from the starting-point of current academic literature in China on the SGEM. Looking at the China National Knowledge Infrastructure,<sup>23</sup> the database for all academic articles published in China, we find that discussion of the SGEM is relatively large, but the publications in which such discussion appears are not first-rank academic journals. Most influential ethnomusicologists who author first-rank publications are still focusing on widely accepted theoretical topics. Most articles published on the SGEM are short, only presenting the idea that it benefits both music education and the economy, although various scholars have also drawn attention to disadvantages. Wang Lufan,<sup>24</sup> for example, says that the utilitarianism behind any kind of SGEM leads parents to have unrealistic expectations of their children, subjecting them to unnecessary pressure. Zhou Shibin,<sup>25</sup> Professor and Deputy Dean of the Music College at the Beijing Normal University, a famous musicologist specializing in music education and music psychology, argues that there are two imbalances demonstrated by the music standard exams. First is an imbalance of technical training and artistic quality or standard. Exams of this kind concentrate more on technique than on artistic and aesthetic achievement. The result is that Chinese students have high levels of technical showmanship, but put little emphasis on artistic expression—therefore the level of musicality is often low. Secondly, the child's enjoyment is subordinated to the parents' wishes. A child learns music at the wish of his/her parents. If successful, he/she wins parental approval, but the child may not share the same feelings as the parents. Li Lulu<sup>26</sup> lists three positive aspects of the exam system: it promotes and broadens music education; it creates new possibilities for musical people; and it trains music teachers to a higher level of responsibility. However, the author also lists five disadvantages: (1) there is presently no quality control of the organizers offering the exams; (2) management of the examiners is likewise unsatisfactory; (3) some students who reach a certain level are not really qualified to do so; (4) children often learn to play pipa at the bidding of their parents rather than self-motivation; and (5) parents often think that musical ability

---

23 China National Knowledge Infrastructure 2016.

24 Wang 2008.

25 Zhou 2005.

26 Li 2003.

is a precise indicator of individual and general human ability when in fact they are not the same. Ling Jinyu,<sup>27</sup> an examiner for erhu, found that many faults in student performances are due to inadequate teaching in the preliminary stages.

Other articles review similar exams abroad. Huang Qiongyao<sup>28</sup> compares the Chinese exams to those in Canada, and listed five ways in which the latter differ: (1) at least one examiner at each Canadian venue is appointed by the appropriate institution such as Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music; (2) in the case study, students who reach level six or above may convert this to one high school level music course; (3) every level from one to ten contains ear-training and sight-reading; (4) there are two further certificates offered beyond the ordinary tests—one for performance and one for music teachers, so that students do not need to attend college or university to obtain professional qualifications in music instrument performance or instruction; (5) for the highest level certificate in performance, students must give at least one concert.

Based on the discussions above, I find two reasons, historical and social, for the popularity of the exams and the development of the chain. I consider three disadvantages.

#### 1. Advantages from the learners' perspective:

During China's long history as a dynastic feudal society, social justice pursuits relied on political power and personal wealth. Thus, access to a good life depended to a great extent on one's father whereas family background determined the quality of life of family members. Such a social system breeds corruption. The ruling class naturally worked to perpetuate itself yet, at the same time, it also promoted the most able people to positions of social leadership. Developing from the latter, the *Keju* system, which selected officers by examination, was established during the Sui dynasty and, though varying slightly in different periods, remained basically the same for twelve centuries. The *Keju* system allowed anyone, irrespective of social class, to become a member of ruling class by examination. Thus, people from poor families could change their social status. The system came to an end in 1905, but the idea that one's social position might be changed through education is still widespread in China. Concomitantly, music is regarded as a basic requirement of a good education.

Confucius himself believed that the type of music people played was a fair indication of the state of a society. He said, "to change the social trend, the best method is music."<sup>29</sup> For much of China's history, to be a scholar, four activities needed to be cultivated: playing *qin* zither, playing chess, calligraphy and painting. To play *qin* zither, training of the mind through the discipline of performance is much more important than the enjoyment of sound: music is not merely amusement, but

---

27 Ling 2000.

28 Huang 2007.

29 Zeng 2008.



also a means of education, including for developing facilities of aesthetic evaluation. Even today, many people learn music, especially playing an instrument, since they still believe that this is an indication of general ability and educational background.

In addition, Chinese parents want their children to enjoy a good life in the future, and this goal relies heavily on education. Parents seek ways to send their children to good schools and, while this depends to large extent on location, one factor that makes school acceptance more likely is an accumulation of exam passes such as those possible via SGEM. Although music is highly valued as a way to elevate human capabilities, presently grade schools do not offer comprehensive music classes because of an emphasis on mathematics, Chinese, English and so on; music and arts are secondary to these, and are not included in entrance exams to universities and colleges. Grade schools are very much judged by the number of their students who successfully enter universities, but not by how many good musicians they produce. For such kinds of reasons, parents push their children to learn music and the other arts, which are not part of the regular curriculum, outside of school hours, which is why parents are so busy during the weekends.

Another reason for both the popularity of the SGEM and its resulting chain, is its connections with the “One Child Policy” and a “Parent’s Dream.” Since the 1980s, the one child policy has been responsible for the targeting of children by the education industry. Many simplistically think that, under the policy, the family unit consists of two parents and one child. In an economic perspective, what results are three families per child: the mother’s parents and the child, the father’s parents and the child, and the mother, father and child. In the Chinese mind, a family is three generations. Thus, the one child policy results in six working people being responsible for one child, and there is little problem in finding the necessary financial resources.

The popularity of the SGEM is also related to a further, perhaps unexpected element: a parent’s dream, which is closely linked to the one child policy. The school age of contemporary parents of young people coincided with the Cultural Revolution. With the closing of the schools, many school-aged children, including the present writer, stayed at home with nothing to do and so began to learn musical instruments. Since it was hard to find anything Western, Chinese musical instruments were the commonest choice. Many present-day musicians were trained during that period. Many had no opportunity to become professional musicians, but rather transferred their ambitions to their children, encouraging them to learn what they themselves would have liked to play.

## 2. Disadvantages, from this author’s perspective:

The first is a low degree of responsibility. The ABRSM has been criticized for using music education as a way of doing business.<sup>30</sup> This is also true of the SGEM. Since

---

30 J. Yang 2015.

the CCOM established the GEC and began the SGEM program, its financial benefits have become obvious. Nowadays, many schools, institutions and organizations around China have followed this example, not only in music, but also in dance and other fine arts. Anything arranged for children will have its *Kaoji*, a popular Chinese term for these kinds of grade exams. Yet who should take responsibility for licensing them? In 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Culture issued the Regulation of the Social Standard Exams in the Arts.<sup>31</sup> According to this Regulation, if an institution plans to offer inter-provincial exams, the program must be approved by the Ministry of Culture. If the program is limited to a province, it must be approved by the Cultural Bureau of that province; and if limited to a particular region, the program is to be approved by the regional cultural bureau. Despite this regulation, over 100 institutions have been granted various levels of licenses. Given the huge financial benefits, everyone wants a share of the cake, but this is only available to licensed institutions. The licenses to hold exams are in high demand because it is widely felt that if students join the program of an unqualified institution, the education received may not be commensurate with their expenditure. The Ministry of Culture and the Culture Bureaus are expected to make regularly inspections, but in reality this has not happened.

A second disadvantage involves certificate “flying” and what certificates actually “certify.” After China restarted the academic certification that had been stopped for a while during the Cultural Revolution, certificates became very important. People like to have them because they are treated as evidence of the abilities of the holders and, in China, this is taken to extremes. For example, a student may gain entry to a good university if he has a certificate testifying to a certain level in CCOM’s SGEM, despite deficiencies in other areas of his school study records. Furthermore, different universities have different requirements regarding the instruments that students should play. Some require only the piano, some only Western music instruments, and some, also Chinese instruments. Such decisions, although made at university, have a bearing on the social status of a SGEM certificate and will influence a student’s attitude to learning music.

The Chinese say, “certificates fly everywhere in the sky”; in other words, a multiplicity of certificates offered by innumerable schools and institutions are offered for various purposes even though they may have little relationship to a student’s actual ability. A famous pianist, Liu Shikun, said: “The certificate of the SGEM, like a piece of waste paper, means nothing. The Standard Grade Examinations in Music target the art, but in fact depreciate it. The exam is for the certificate not for the art.”<sup>32</sup> Any kind of training program may have merit in that it fills the educational needs of today’s China, but the quality of teaching must never be sacrificed to financial gain. Yet market forces ensure that, whatever their teaching quality, private schools will flourish if there are sufficient numbers of students wishing to take their

---

31 Ministry of Culture 2004.

32 Gao 2002.

programs. Given China's huge population, the need for such programs is subject to the law of supply and demand. However, among all music-training programs available in China, the SGEM is generally regarded as the best.

A third disadvantage is linked to what is called the "united music repertoire." Chinese instrumental repertoires are not as large as that of the piano, but extensive enough to allow students to have some degree of repertoire choice from the prescribed works for each level, especially for instruments like dizi and guzheng, for which local styles are a chief characteristic of the music. As in the past, a person may specialize in one local style, but use pieces in another styles to supplement it. In the examinations, not only are certain pieces required, but all exam textbooks include pieces in various local styles. The idea behind this is that teachers like students to play in all styles but, on the other hand, this results in the gradual decline of a sense of local style, sustained and practiced at the local level. The student should decide for him or herself which style to adopt rather than being governed by the decisions of an organization in order to pass a specific grade exam.

## Conclusion

My approach here has involved researching how traditional music can be newly embedded, used and above-all administrated in contemporary society, rather than used for purposes with which it was traditionally endowed. The performance of music might be identical, but the societal functions of the performance are different. Music is put to practical use in society for economic-industrial purposes, which formed the focus of this ethnomusicological study. Administration of the SGEM was a particular case considered within the frame of applied ethnomusicology and, particularly, administrative ethnomusicology research.

By examining the operation of the SGEM, we can appreciate that learning music is not only about how much people love music, but also involves many social behaviors related to family life, the relationship between parents and children, the education system, and commercial aspects of music, resulting in an industrial chain based around these practices. Even though China began this kind of program much later than the UK-based ABRSM, its commercial aspect is much stronger and it has exploited traditional Chinese thinking about music when developing new ways of making money. Still today, many Chinese regard music as a means of calming the mind, of encountering feeling and spirit, and of escaping materialism. The one child policy has undoubtedly served to intensify parents' interest in the education of their single offspring. Children's education has become a central focus in most families. Although Chinese income is still low compared to the first world, parents are nonetheless willing to spend money on their children's education because they believe that it will improve their intellectual ability and enhance their life opportunities. Most young parents select at least one musical

instrument for their child to learn, a trend which also provides opportunities for music teachers and students to earn their livings. Many private music schools have emerged, and most of them wish to cooperate with the GEC centers to operate the SGEM; that way, the schools can attract more students. This has two kinds of social consequences. One is the dissemination of music among children in China, especially those living in cities. It is clear that the standard of music education is raised by the exams. This is especially noticeable among the numerous students sitting a highly intensive university entrance examination organized by the Ministry of Education each year. A large number of students fail and must begin to explore other possibilities. Music as a university major has the advantage of requiring a lower entrance level than more academic disciplines and if a student has already learned music, this may become an accessible option. Because so many students want to study music, many universities have opened music programs, including technical and engineering universities where music departments can also now be found. As a result, in 2014 the Ministry of Education listed music as one of 15 non-vocational subjects, which in effect means no employment for the students after graduation. This is not to say that a music degree is a fallback qualification, but that difficulties arise for music students in a surprisingly large number of ways, particularly as not all who attain a music degree will necessarily find employment in their major.

The Standard Grade Exams promote musical education, and encourage students to progress to the next level. On the other hand, they also turn music into a money-making venture and if this becomes the dominant goal, it may be considered mercenary. Having emerged from a pure art form and spiritual object, music then becomes a commodity. I hope this presents a view of applied ethnomusicology that will stimulate thought and bring about an improvement in the functioning of the SGEM in the future!

## References

- ABRSM 2016 <[gb.abrsm.org/en/courses-and-events/](http://gb.abrsm.org/en/courses-and-events/)> (visited 8 March 2016)
- China National Knowledge Infrastructure 2016 <[www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net)> (visited 20 March 2016)
- Feintuch, B. 2004. The conditions for Cape Breton fiddle music: The social and economic setting of a regional soundscape. *Ethnomusicology* 48(1), 73–104.
- Frith, S. 2000. Music industry research: Where now? Where next? Notes from Britain. *Popular Music* 19(3), 387–393.
- Gao, Z. 2002. The standard exams of arts: Why are they so far removed from art? Thoughts about the standard exams of arts and the training of the quality of the human mind (In Chinese). *Hebei Daily*, 21 June.
- Garofalo, R. 1999. From music publishing to MP3: Music and industry in the twentieth century. *Ethnomusicology* 17(3), 318–354.

- Harrison, K. & S. Pettan. 2010. Introduction. In K. Harrison, E. Mackinlay and S. Pettan (eds.) *Applied Ethnomusicology: Historical and Contemporary Approaches*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 1–21.
- Huang, Q. 2007. Research on the music test in Canada: A comparison between the Chinese and Canadian music test (In Chinese). *Hundreds Schools in Art* 1, 137–140.
- Kallberg, J. 1983. Chopin in marketplace: Aspects of the international music publishing industry in the first half of nineteenth century. Part II, German-Speaking States. *Notes, Second Series* 39(4), 795–824.
- Li, L. 2003. Current situation and reviews of the standard exam for pipa performance (In Chinese). *Journal of Luoyang Normal University* 32(10), 149–151.
- Ling, J. 2000. Teaching beginners to learn erhu and the most important things on the basic level—The ideas coming from the erhu standard exam (In Chinese). *Journal of Shaoxing College of Arts and Sciences* September, 112–114.
- Liu, G. 2006. Study on Chinese Music Industry Value Chain (In Chinese). Master's thesis, China Geosciences University.
- Manabe, N. 2008. New technologies, industrial structure, and the consumption of music in Japan. *Asian Music* 39(1), 81–107.
- Ministry of Culture. 2004. *Regulation of the Social Standard Exams in Arts*. Administrative document, 1 July.
- Pettan, S. & J. T. Titon (eds.) 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Standard Grade Examination Committee of the Central Conservatory of Music 2016. <kjwyh.ccom.edu.cn/> (visited 8 March 2016)
- Wang, L. 2008. Discussion on the benefit and disadvantages of music standard exam. *The Journal of Education Outside School* 8, 13–39.
- Williamson, J. & M. Cloonan 2007. Rethinking the music industry. *Popular Music* 26(2), 305–322.
- Wolther, I. 2008. “Die Perfekte Welle”: Possible Solutions to the crisis of the international music industry with the help of national language music. *Popular Music* 27(2), 289–297.
- Wright, D. 2013. *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music*. Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press.
- Yang, J. 2015. Ever-bright empire for well-rounded musician: The 125th anniversary of ABRSM (In Chinese). *People's Music* 10, 78–81.
- Yang, M. 2015. Establishment of local music museums and music schools in the view of applied ethnomusicology. *People's Music* 7, 46–49.
- Zeng, Z. 2008 [2007]. Xiao Xing—the Classic of Xiao with English Translation & Commentary. F. Xin-ming (trans.) <[http://www.tsoidug.org/Xiao/Xiao\\_Jing\\_Comment.pdf](http://www.tsoidug.org/Xiao/Xiao_Jing_Comment.pdf) > (visited 20 March 2016)
- Zhou, S. 2005. A misplacement of standard music exams (In Chinese). *Yueqi* [Music Instruments] 1, 62–65.