# Creativity in three one-to-one videoed piano lessons in Chinese higher education institutions

## Introduction

Studies have been conducted on teachers’ and students’ perceptions on creativity and creative teaching (de Souza Fleith, 2000) and creativity in music education and higher education (Burnard & Haddon, 2015; Haddon & Burnard, 2016; MacDonald, Byrne & Carlton, 2006). In parallel to the increasing interest in creativity in Chinese society the Chinese government has announced new educational initiatives aimed at fostering creativity. Academics in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2012, 2013, 2016) and Taiwan (Horng et al., 2005; Lin, 2009, 2011) have conducted research on the characteristics of creative instructors and creative teaching practices. Scholars in mainland China have begun to realise the importance of cultivating students’ creativity (Yi, Plucker & Guo, 2015), examining how Confucian ideology influences creativity (Niu, 2012) and conducting comparative studies on creativity (Niu & Kaufman, 2013).

Niu and Sternberg (2006) indicate that the Chinese tend to regard creativity as having ‘social and moral values’ (p. 18); this might be closely linked to collectivism in society and culture. As a result, doing something creative and unusual might require someone to face the risk of alienating others, and thus a society with a collectivist culture might be detrimental to the growth of creativity. In addition, Chinese creativity is not always associated with novelty, since creativity might be ‘making a connection between the new and the old’ (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 18). This is supported by Fung (2017), who discusses how Confucius may have influenced music education within the Chinese culture. Confucius believed that examining the known is necessary for discovering new perspectives [*wengu er zhixin, 温故而知新*], implying that creativity is founded on past knowledge and experience, thus ‘an established frame of reference’ (Fung, 2017, p. 148) is needed for creativity. In Zheng and Leung’s (2021a) empirical study (involving interviews with 13 participants involved in piano performance and pedagogy in China), knowledge and experience also emerged as two major characteristics associated with creativity. It might be seen that the Chinese perspective views creativity as intrinsically tied to the acquisition of knowledge and experience. As Fung (2017) explains, without a frame of reference, a piece of music cannot be composed, and instructors will fail to implement a new teaching approach without the theory as a reference. Knowledge and experience can be then referred to as expertise (Amabile, 1998); however, it appears as though the other two components of creativity discussed by Amabile, motivation and creative thinking skills, receive less attention in China.

Yan (2014) believes that creativity promotes students’ individual growth, and that creative teaching is a vital component of music education that should be encouraged. However, the Chinese educational system is deeply influenced by examination-oriented structures (Mullen, 2017). The traditional style of teaching music in China is teacher-centred: teachers deliver knowledge to their pupils, and pupils imitate their teachers; this appears to apply not only in school classes, but also in one-to-one instrumental tuition in China (Guo & Xu, 2015). However, this teaching method does not emphasise learners’ emotions in music (Burwell, 2016), and it provides little room for developing students’ creativity (Guo & Xu, 2015). Research on fostering students’ creativity and strengthening creative teaching practices in music education, particularly within piano pedagogy is limited and elementary (Zheng & Leung, 2021b). The current research is concerned with creative teaching in piano pedagogy in China, and analyses three videoed piano lessons that took place at Conservatory, Normal University and University music departments.

## Methodology

Two research paradigms are frequently applied in the field of social science research: the social constructivism paradigm, and the interpretive paradigm. A paradigm is defined as ‘a whole system of thinking’ (Neuman, 2007, p. 96). Social constructivism is concerned with the historical, cultural, and contextual relevance of the environments in which individuals work and live in, understanding what happens in society and constructing knowledge through this knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). In other words, what individuals perceive and experience in the social environment is created socially. Creswell & Creswell (2009, p. 8) indicated that social constructivists believe that ‘individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, and individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences’.Furthermore, there is a ‘complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas’ (ibid.); therefore, all of the views or beliefs from participants are seen as valid by the researcher. Interpretivism emphasises that knowledge is constructed through people’s experiences and perceptions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), and the researcher seeks to understand these. This illustrates that the interpretivist paradigm tends to be inclusive, and thus implies the potential of numerous realities instead of a single reality.

## Research methods

For the purpose of investigating creativity in one-to-one piano lessons in the Chinese higher education context, the first author conducted a case study; this paper reports selected data and findings from the study. Case study research is defined as ‘an in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time’ (Neuman, 2007, p. 42); this may involve various research methods; Thomas (2013) indicates that observation is a significant method for gathering data in social science. This method was initially associated with social anthropological research, in which the researcher obtains access to a group, watches and listens to what those in the group, such as teachers and students, say and do. In the present study, the first author used video to aid the observation process. Video is considered as a significant means for recording human interaction, as it enables the researcher to gain detailed understanding of the context and to carry out detailed analysis (Roschelle & Goldman, 1991; Suchman & Trigg, 1992); video recording is used increasingly in educational research (Pirie, 1996). The advantage of using video recording is that it can ‘capture a social scene far more quickly than taking field notes’ (Thomas, 2013, p. 224); the researcher can gather various perspectives of an activity such as complex behavioural data (Roschelle & Goldman, 1991. Daniel (2006) also demonstrates that in instrumental teaching and learning, detailed analysis of student-teacher interaction and diverse teaching strategies might be accomplished via video analysis.

In the present study, the first author recorded three piano lessons and analysed them from several perspectives, such as ‘interactions between teachers and students, teaching strategies, teaching roles, learning opportunities presented to students and learning experiences provided for students’ (Daniel, 2006, p. 192) as well as pupil behaviours. These aspects can help understand how the teacher-student relationship operates in one-to-one teaching in the Chinese higher music education context, what creative teaching strategies may apply and how the teacher-student relationship might affect creative pedagogy.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of York, UK. Information and consent forms were distributed to potential participants; these were presented in Chinese and stated the aims and objectives of the research, methods of data collection, the issue of anonymity, how the data would be stored and used, and the risks or benefits of taking part in the research. Participants were informed that involvement would have no detrimental consequences or potential benefits, and there were no consequences if participants might withdraw at any point.

To avoid the possibility of disrupting teacher-student interaction within piano lessons, the first author was invited to sit in the corner of the teaching room by each of the three teachers and to operate the recording equipment (the first author’s iPad). After each lesson, the first author asked the teacher and the student to again confirm whether they were happy for the recording to be used in the study. Each person indicated their willingness for the first author to use and analyse the video, and confirmed that the lesson had followed their normal routine. While the students and teachers stated that the lessons were not affected by filming, it is possible that their actions during the lessons could have been influenced by the presence of the video camera and the researcher.

## Data analysis

The software Jian Ying [*剪映*] was used by the first author to analyse the videoed lessons. The videos were initially uploaded to Jian Ying; captions were manually added in both Chinese and English for each lesson; the second author reviewed them to ensure that the captions were understandable to a native English speaker; moreover, the captions were also transferred to Word documents as transcripts to calculate word counts for analysis of teaching approaches in the lessons. The first author re-watched each lesson many times to analyse the teacher’s teaching approach, teaching method and focus. Additionally, MAXQDA was employed to produce codes for teaching methods and teaching focuses by uploading lesson transcripts in order to quantify the number of times the teacher concentrated on technique, or reproducing elements of the music score, expression, or other areas of focus. The teachers and students who took part in the lessons will be referred to using the following teacher/student numbering: Lesson A took place with T1 and S1; Lesson B with T2 and S2, and Lesson C with T3 and S3. The main goal of the study was to analyse the process of teaching and learning in order to improve understanding of how one-to-one piano teaching is delivered in higher education institutions in China. Each of the three lessons will be examined separately; then discussed together in the conclusion section.

## Findings

## Lesson A

Lesson A took place a practice room in a Music Conservatory in China. There was a grand piano in the middle of the room, and no other piano. S1 was studying piano performance, at the time of the research, he was a Year 3 student preparing for his first term final piano exam. T1 was the piano teacher in this lesson.

### Teaching approach

The lesson began with S1’s performance of the work that had been practised and the teacher providing feedback on various elements. Comments were frequently made in response to errors in S1’s performance. T1 started the dialogue with an exploratory question, ‘when you practise on your own, what did you think about?’ While this opening suggests a mentor-friend rather than master-apprentice relationship, T1 later asked numerous rhetorical questions, such as: ‘I told you before that you need to pedal first, didn’t I?’; ‘this is where you can immerse yourself in, isn’t it?’ These might imply that T1 did not require a response from S1. Previous research has advocated that the use of exploratory questions from the teacher seems the best way to stimulate students’ active participation (Burwell, 2005). Rhetorical questions might not appear to seek a response from the student, but rather serve as a model for the learner (Burwell, 2005). In this case, the frequent use of ‘isn’t it?’ from the teacher at the end of their statements seems to require the learner to agree rather than disagree. Therefore, although both exploratory and rhetorical questions were used, the balance of these towards the rhetorical emphasises the authority of the master.

Within instrumental lessons, the proportion of student’s talk and teacher’s talk, as well as the quantity and type of questions that the teacher asks, could be a significant indication of teaching approach (Young, Burwell & Pickup, 2003). In Lesson A, the student’s contribution was minimal; they learned through the teacher’s instructions and comments. Consequently, the teaching approach in this lesson was consistent with the master-apprentice format, where the teacher is viewed as a model of imitation and source of knowledge, and the student learns through the teacher’s instruction, as described in previous research (Jørgensen, 2000).

### Teaching content

The focus of Lesson A was on reproducing a Chopin Nocturne from the written score, and most of the time was devoted to technique, followed by reproducing the musical score and musical expression. Technique-oriented issues appeared 55 times. The most frequent aspects were dynamic issues (17 times) and speed issues (11 times), followed by pedalling, articulation, phrasing, and rhythm. Moreover, although T1 was very strict in requiring S1 to play according to the marks on the score, musical expression was not the main focus of Lesson A; there were only five instances of expressive focus. The specific teaching strategies that were applied are discussed in the next section.

### Teaching strategy

Several strategies were shown in Lesson A, such as imagery, metaphor, demonstration, and directive teaching, in which the student follows the teacher’s directives. Body contact was also used as a teaching strategy to support the student’s understanding of metaphor. T1 illustrated the musical expression about a specific section using imagery. For example, T1 stated: ‘it seems like the door will open, I must go out and to find something that I long for, so this [harmonic] tendency, [it] needs to be expressed’. In terms of metaphor, T1 used a metaphor strategy frequently to support musical expression. For example, the teacher’s metaphor for a section was mournful: ‘it’s starting to get rather sad here, isn’t it?’; ‘could be more helplessness’. However, the most frequently-used teaching strategy was demonstration, and it was found that T1’s demonstration was not separate from explanation. Sometimes explanation was followed by demonstration; at other times, demonstration was followed by explanation. This demonstration could be divided into two types: demonstration on the piano and through gestures. Moreover, the teacher’s directive teaching was identified at multiple points in the video, where T1 gave simple and short instructions and the student followed what the teacher indicated. S1 mostly responded by playing according to T1’s directives rather than verbal reactions.

The evaluation of student performance is an important aspect of instrumental music teaching, and is linked to effective teaching (Mills & Smith, 2003; Zhukov, 2012). Positive feedback and negative feedback can be both divided into general and specific feedback. For example, ‘yes’, ‘right’, and ‘much better’ can be viewed as general positive feedback; if followed by a specific reason or explanation, it is therefore specific positive feedback (Zhukov, 2012). In Lesson A, positive comments from T1 seemed to be general positive feedback, for example: ‘it’s not bad’ (5:43); ‘it was good just now’ (15:30); ‘Yes, good, good, good’ (17:08); however, this type of feedback was not followed by detailed feedback stating what exactly was good.

### Pupil behaviour

S1's behaviour showed several characteristics, with a primary emphasis on positively engaging through playing trials throughout the lesson, as well as listening to T1's speaking and playing. In addition, S1 was often nodding to indicate agreement with T1, making eye contact with T1, looking at T1's hands when she demonstrated, and sometimes looking at the score and asking questions or responding to T1’s questions. The pace of the lesson seems to be moderate; while T1 spoke quickly, T1 gave S1 the opportunity to reflect, answer, and ask questions.

## Lesson B

Lesson B was conducted in a practice room of a Normal University[[1]](#footnote-1). There was one upright piano in this room. At the time of the research, S2 was a first-year student, and the lesson supported S2’s preparation for the first term final exam. T2 is a young piano teacher, who has been teaching at this Normal University for several years.

### Teaching approach

At five points during this lesson, S2 asked a clarification question to T2, as the student was not very clear about T2’s instructions. However, T2 did not ask questions to inspire S2 to think and help S2 be responsible for her learning; T2 did not act as a guide on the side. The entire lesson seemed as if T2 was used to being in a leading position to teach and S2 was used to receiving knowledge passively. This seems to be suggestive of a strong master-apprentice relationship.

### Teaching content

The three pieces played by S2 included a contemporary Chinese piece, ‘*Colourful clouds chasing the moon*’ *[Caiyun zhui yue, 彩云追月]* by Jianzhong Wang, a Chopin Ballade and a Haydn Sonata in F-major. However, the instruction focused on the Chinese repertoire and the Haydn sonata, covering fingering, pedal, phrasing, dynamics and musical expression. Frequent topics of instruction in Lesson B included those relating to technique, which occurred 64 times, and those relating to notation and expression, which occurred nine and three times, respectively. Therefore, it might be seen that the teaching content was strongly technique related.

### Teaching strategy

Directive teaching was frequently employed in Lesson B. T2’s verbal directives were consistent, using shushing to encourage a quieter dynamic, and finger clicking to emphasise pulse/speed, all to develop S2’s performance according to T2’s understanding of the music. T2 used singing while S2 was playing to indicate aspects such as speed, dynamics and musical expression. This could be due to the melodic style of the pieces or because there was only one piano in the room, thus it was convenient to demonstrate by singing. T2 showed fingering technique on the piano three times, and also demonstrated on the piano for dynamics. In addition, T2 demonstrated with both hands on the piano that the performance should be more passionate, saying: ‘get a little riled up’. However, T2 was playing at a fast tempo, at a speed that S2 could not reach at this point in time, thus while this demonstration may have been intended to be motivating, it could have also been a moment to show off T2’s skills. Consequently, the demonstration seemed to have had little influence on S2’s performance during the lesson. In addition, T2 also applied metaphor to demonstrate for S2.

There were a few brief instances of praise from T2, but they did not seem to be precise. For instance, T2 did not state what was good and how it was good when the student had finished playing; T2 said: ‘Overall much better than the last lesson. Good, good, let’s start from the beginning’. After S2 finished her first performance, T2 said: ‘Ok good. Let’s start with these. Let’s start again from the beginning’. Thus, T2’s compliments seemed to be only general, perhaps motivational, but not full or informative.

### Pupil behaviour

Overall, S2 played actively and positively participated in playing throughout the lesson. The majority of the lesson was spent on playing and trials. S2 listened to T2's talk, directives and demonstration throughout the lesson. In addition to nodding, establishing eye contact with T2, and being prepared to move off the piano stool when T2 was going to play the piano, S2 demonstrated awareness of the situation and readiness to take action, demonstrating that she was actively engaged with Lesson B. The general pace of Lesson B was rapid; T2 spoke immediately after S2 made errors and expected S2 to correct the errors after the lesson on her own if she was unable to do so during the lesson. This lesson appeared strongly embedded in a master-apprentice mode of teaching.

## Lesson C

Lesson C took place in a teacher’s practice room in a University with T3 and S3, and there were two upright pianos in this room. At the time of research, S3 was a Year 3 student and studying piano as her main instrument. T3 has many years of piano teaching experience at that University.

### Teaching approach

T3’s speech accounted for 1861 words, or 99.8 percent, of the total word count based on the transcription of the verbal behaviour, whereas the student accounted for just four words, or 0.2 percent of the entire word count. This seems to be evidence of a highly dominant master-apprentice relationship. This teacher did not ask any questions throughout Lesson C. T3 only used questions to confirm whether the student understood or not, thus T3 asked several times ‘understand?’ or ‘do you understand’? However, T3 generally went straight on to the following point rather than waiting for the student’s response after making statements or asking questions. Hence, this might indicate that T3 did not care whether the student understood or not, or that they have become used to silence from the student. Therefore, there was no dialogue; S3 and T3 were clearly differentiated in status.

### Teaching content

S3 played Etude Op. 299, no. 5 by Czerny in the lesson, a work set for the student’s Year 3 piano exam. The teaching content tended to be technique-oriented. Technique-related themes featured 16 times, whereas practice-related themes appeared eight times.

### Teaching strategy

In Lesson C, T3’s most common teaching strategy was modelling. The reason might be that T3 had a piano of her own, thus it was convenient for her to demonstrate on the piano, or this might be as a result of T3 believing that modelling was the most efficient way for S3 to learn. There were also five instances of student-teacher collaboration which consisted of S3 and T3 playing together on separate pianos, rather than S3 playing one hand and T3 playing the other part. In addition, Lesson C included directive teaching at several points and a few instances of metaphor strategy.

In Lesson C, T3 used more specific positive feedback and there were more compliments than in the previous two lessons. For example, ‘um, good. The completeness is good’; ‘That’s what I just told you about doing *crescendo*, you did well’; indicating specific feedback. Overall, T3 seemed relatively positive and encouraging in her evaluation of S3’s performance in Lesson C.

### Pupil behaviour

S3 demonstrated attentive listening to T3's speaking and playing by establishing eye contact and looking at T3's hands. In addition, marking something on the score and silently imitating T3's playing occurred several times. The overall lesson tempo was moderate, as was T3's speaking speed, and T3 enabled S3 to attempt individual sections more than once and to play at a slower speed at which she felt comfortable.

## Discussion

The analysis of these three piano lessons explored teaching approach, teaching strategy, and teaching content and pupil behaviour. The master-apprentice teaching approach was demonstrated in all lessons, which were teacher-directed, showing unequal relationship status between teacher and student, and minimal dialogue involving the students’ own ideas. As indicated by Luo (2018), piano education at the higher education level in China is mostly didactic in style. Carey et al. (2013) define this didactic method as transfer pedagogy, and since teachers place a focus on the outcome rather than the process, this type of teaching might not encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, leaving them reliant on their teacher. Except for a few teacher-student interactions in Lesson A, there was very little verbal communication between students and teachers in Lessons B and C, and the teachers did not seem to offer students the opportunity to speak. The students in these lessons appeared to be in a relatively passive position, learning through imitation and instruction. Dialogue between the teachers and the students was infrequent.

Questioning techniques seem to be overlooked by the teachers in all three lessons, although in Lesson A, T1 asked the student a few questions. However, these inquiries tended to be closed questions, and the dialogue did not appear to be an equal discussion that respected S1’s ideas since T1 interrupted their replies. Allsup and Baxter (2004) emphasise the significance of asking more open questions and the role of dialogue in music lessons, since students can gain additional musical knowledge. Additionally, Kassner (1998) believes that skilled questioning can stimulate students’ higher-level thinking, promoting their own evaluative capabilities.

It can be seen that the teacher in Lesson A (conservatory) used slightly more varied teaching strategies than the others. There appeared to be more verbal communication between T1 and S1; this might be due to the longer duration of this lesson (33 minutes compared to 27 minutes and 19 minutes for the others). In addition, a common feature of all three lessons was an instructive approach of pointing out immediately where the students had made mistakes. This is in line with findings of previous research; Yeh (2018) indicated that piano teachers in their study mostly focused on analysing students’ playing mistakes in one-to-one lessons.

The data analysis has shown the use of a variety of teaching methods, including imagery, metaphor, demonstration, directive teaching, and student-teacher cooperation. However, where there were two pianos in their classroom, the teacher in Lesson C appeared to choose modelling as her primary teaching strategy. On the other hand, constant directive teaching was also seen, as used particularly by T2 in Lesson B. According to Zhukov (2012), modelling, directives and praise are frequently used for teaching instrumental music in higher education; however, this research found the predominance of directives and demonstration as teaching strategies, and underdeveloped use of praise.

Although the students were learning through imitation and obeying directives, this approach perhaps deprives them of the ability to play according to their own preferences. Laukka (2004) interviewed teachers from UK and Swedish conservatoires and found that they emphasised the tendency of verbal inspiration while developing students’ independence. Teachers in Laukka’s study felt that if students’ primary learning strategy is imitation, they might not be able to have their own ideas and really learn to express the music. Thus, this might undermine their development of independence in learning.

When comparing the most significant aspects of creative teaching revealed from Cremin and Chappell’s (2021) comprehensive study of the literature linked to creative teaching (idea generation and exploration; co-construction and collaboration; supporting autonomy and agency and problem solving) with these piano lessons, none of these features appear to be evident in the three videoed lessons. However, T1 in Lesson A did use imagery, asking S1 to imagine various things, with the imagery technique relating more to musical expression than technical aspects, and this verbal motivation seemed to have a positive influence on S1's performance, as he displayed more *rubato*, and his tone quality and musical expression were enhanced. Furthermore, T3 developed several types of exercises to play the same piece in different rhythms, which not only might have made the exercises more enjoyable but also engaged S3's attention to listen and imitate in terms of generating creative performance. As the creative performance was first created by the teachers and then conveyed to their students in each of these three lessons, this might imply a reproductive creativity rather than the development of students’ individual creativity.

Additionally, the students learned repertoire that included at least one, if not two, pieces of Western classical music. As indicated by Wang (2018), Western piano music has dominated in piano education in higher education in China; this might be because piano teachers are educated by Western piano systems. Lesson B did include a contemporary Chinese piece, though it is a somewhat dated work. The piece ‘*Colourful clouds chasing the moon*’ [*Caiyun zhui yue, 彩云追月*]was first composed in 1935 for orchestra and later arranged for piano by Jianzhong Wang in 1975. However, all of the material in these lessons was taught with the same approach and a primary focus on accuracy and realising the teacher’s interpretation.

The three lessons were found to have a tendency towards detailed and informative teaching, mainly focused on technique-related content; issues related to emotion and expression appeared to be infrequently mentioned in the teaching and dealt with implicitly. However, this might be due to the student’s level of learning in relation to each piece, as well as their year of study. The student in Lesson B was in their first year; this filmed lesson may have involved more extensive and informative teaching related to technique than other lessons that they participated in during the academic year. The students in Lessons A and C were in Year 3 at the time of filming. While Lesson A appeared to contain slightly more discussion and reflection on musical expression compared with the other two piano lessons, it seems as though the student was still not given much freedom to develop their own independence and creativity.

## Conclusion

The teaching style and teaching strategies employed in these one-to-one lessons were largely consistent across the three lessons in all three types of institutions. Teachers seemed to have complete control over one-to-one teaching and learning, and this hierarchical relationship may not appear to help students to become independent learners. Furthermore, technique-oriented teaching, demonstration and directives as predominant teaching strategies, limited encouragement, and the choice of repertoire might not sufficiently encourage students’ motivation and thus support them taking responsibility for their own learning or support their development of creative approaches to instrumental learning. Future research might examine more teaching contexts, including a Year 4 student and lessons for master’s students, and explore this over a longer period of teaching and learning. Findings from this study could be used to advocate for wider strategies and the facilitation of increased student communication in one-to-one piano lessons; this may have further implications for how creativity can be fostered in the context of piano teaching.

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1. A Normal University is one which focuses on teacher-training [↑](#footnote-ref-1)