



HELSINKI JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
A Scientific Publication of Helsinki University, Finland.

Volume: 9 Issue: 4 August, 2025

Pages: 88-106, 2025; Publication No: HJSSH.49074

ISSN: 3442-3567

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

GENDER INEQUALITY IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION IN CHINA: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Wai-Chung Ho

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China.

Abstract

Gender inequality in higher music education is a significant issue in China, shaped by both historical and contemporary factors that influence the opportunities available to women in this field. This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the challenges encountered by women in higher music education in China, examining the impact of traditional Chinese philosophy, Western missionaries, and the Chinese Government on gender relations and opportunities in music education. Drawing upon existing literature and data, this paper addresses three main research areas pertaining to women's education in China's higher education: the historical evolution of women's education in China, from traditional to modern times, in order to examine the progression of educational opportunities for women; the current landscape of opportunities for women's education and involvement in music practices within China's higher music education; and the existing employment framing issues that women face in higher music education in China, in comparison to their male counterparts. While acknowledging the increasing educational opportunities available to women in contemporary China, this paper recognizes that societal expectations and gender stereotypes can still impede women's access to teaching careers and other music-related professions. These challenges have substantial implications for women's education, music practices, and employability, underscoring the importance for policymakers and educators to actively promote gender equality within higher education.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Educational Opportunities, Higher Music Education, Music Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Gender issues have been a significant area of interest for music education researchers for several decades, and the field has experienced considerable growth in the past 60 years. During the 1960s and 1970s, feminist theorists widely challenged the traditional definition of gender, arguing that gender roles were socially constructed. The Music Educators Journal published a special issue on women in American music in 1979, while the American Musicology Society meetings in 1988 included a specific focus on feminist scholarship and its implications for musicology and teaching. The British Journal of Music Education was the first research journal to concentrate on gender and music education in 1988.

Within the field of music education, scholars have extensively explored the production and reproduction of gendered practices, as highlighted by Green's

seminar work in 1997 on education's role concerning music and gender. In this regard, Green's (1997) study on schools revealed how gendered meanings, discourses, and practices were created and perpetuated in music education; for instance, singing was reinforced as a feminine activity, while technology and composition were framed as masculine pursuits. Following Green, Dibben (2002) observed that older children tended to gender musical instruments, with boys showing a preference for instruments deemed "masculine" such as drums, guitar, and trumpet, while girls favoured instruments perceived as more "feminine" such as flute, piano, and violin. Werner et al. (2020) expanded upon existing research on gender in music practice, specifically addressing imbalanced musical canons, gender representation ratios and quotas, inequitable treatment and power dynamics, as well as the exclusive integration with music technologies.

This article primarily focuses on higher education; however, it is apparent that music education carries ecological ramifications. Subsequent investigations expanded to include the sex-stereotyping of instruments and music career choices, revealing a critical disparity between what females and males deemed appropriate and desirable. De Boise's (2017, p. 32) research, which compared gender inequalities in higher music education in the United Kingdom and Sweden, confirmed that the amplification of "gender divisions in instrument selection, and activity in secondary education" also infiltrated higher music education. Bogdanovic's (2010, p. 19) research on gender in university music departments revealed that "the gendering of roles, disciplines, practices and behaviours" was a significant factor in music education, resulting "in the underrepresentation of women" in various areas. The comments made by the participants in Bogdanovic's research highlighted a gap in existing research, specifically the experiences of young musicians in higher education concerning gender and sexuality. Research on music education and gender has shown that music teaching and learning is an arena where gender is constructed (Abeles, 2009; Almqvist, 2019). This is evident in the choice of instruments and genres, power relations, and the subordination of genders. Women have traditionally been confined to limited musical roles, which has restricted and curtailed their career opportunities (Bowers & Tick, 1986; Dunbar, 2020; Neuls-Bates, 1996). The gender-typing of instruments parallels the gender-typing of occupations in other ways. Women's success and failure at music conservatories has long been considered natural, not structural; for example, a few female trumpet players blamed themselves for failing to reach the top of their male-dominated class (see Valentine, 1985).

Despite extensive debates on gender differences, socialization, and education in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia, relatively little research on gender and music education has been conducted in China and in other Chinese communities. As a result, gender studies on music education are still in their infancy in those regions, with only a few individual studies, such as Ho (2009, 2022) and Ho and Law (2014), having been carried out thus far. However, it is important to note that these studies focused on school music education. This paper aims to present a comprehensive overview of gender and higher music education in China. For the purpose of practicality, it is worth mentioning that the term "gender" used in this article aligns with the traditional Western understanding of a binary concept, where individuals are categorized as



male or female based on their anatomy. The paper seeks to explore three research questions:

How has women's education in China evolved over time, transitioning from traditional to modern times?

What are the current opportunities available for women's education and involvement in music practices within China's higher music education?

What are the existing employment challenges that women encounter in higher education in China?

This paper will address the obstacles and potential solutions related to gender issues concerning educational opportunities, music practices, and employability in China's higher education. To begin, an examination of the role of gender in Chinese philosophy will be presented.

Gender in Chinese Ephilsophy: A Review

In ancient Chinese society, male individuals held a central position in the family structure, while women were often relegated to supporting roles and were expected to exhibit qualities of loyalty, courage, and devotion. This gendered division was reinforced through ritualization, which integrated gender differentiation into various familial and social roles, demarcated by the concepts of "inside" and "outside".

Confucianism, a prominent philosophy in Chinese culture, emphasized the practice of rituals to enable individuals to fulfil their roles, regardless of gender, social status, and age. However, women in China have historically faced significant adversity due to their marginalized status and a range of systematic inequalities and discriminatory practices. In traditional Chinese society, women were assigned specific social roles as daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, and mothers-in-law. The "Three Obediences", which designated a woman's relationship to her father, husband, and sons, and the "Four Virtues", which emphasized chastity, modesty in speech, neatness of appearance, and proficiency in needlework and cooking, were prescribed moral principles and social codes for maidens and married women, reflecting the Confucian ideals of harmony and order.

Despite Confucianism's emphasis on ritual and order, it also reinforced male supremacy, limiting women's power and opportunities. The principle of "Men are superior, women are inferior" was deeply ingrained in Chinese society, and women were expected to confine themselves to the household, be modest, and obey men. Women were not permitted to take the imperial examinations (Rosenlee, 2006, p. 129), which made literary learning a privilege reserved for men. Men worked outside the home, while women were confined to working inside it (Rosenlee, 2006, pp. 82, 127).

Scholars such as Gao (2003) and Rosenlee (2007) have criticized Confucian principles for perpetuating outdated gender consciousness and suppressing women's achievements. The impact of Confucianism on gender inequality in China has been widely accepted and undisputed. However, there have been recent efforts to challenge these gender norms and promote gender equality in China, both within and outside of Confucian tradition. While progress has been made towards gender equality in China, there is still much work to be done to address the systematic inequalities and discriminatory practices that have marginalized women for centuries.

Women's Educaiton, from Traiditonal China to Modern China

In ancient China, Confucian ideology laid the foundation for patriarchal practices, resulting in the widespread exclusion of women from receiving an education comparable to that of men. This exclusion was perpetuated by a typical representation of Confucian doctrines, as reflected in the statement, "Women and crooks are unteachable" (Liu & Carpenter, 2005, p. 277), which underlined the discrimination that women faced.

Women's Education in Traditional Confucian Society

Confucius (551–479 BCE), who is widely recognized as the first teacher in China to make education widely available, likely adhered to the prevailing attitudes towards women that were commonplace in his society. Although he believed that education should be open to all, schooling for girls was restricted. The Analects of Confucius, which served as the primary text of guidelines for living within the moral codes of Confucianism, devoted little attention to women. The foundations of Chinese women's education can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty (104–256 BC), during which noble women were instructed in three key areas: inner-chamber behaviour, court music, and proper conduct during pregnancy (Du, 1996, pp. 16–18). In his "Analects for Women", Song Ruozhao (761–820), a Chinese Confucian scholar and poet of the Tang Dynasty (690–705), emphasized the importance of women learning the details of women's work in order to become virtuous (De Bary & Bloom, 1999, pp. 827–831). Ropp (1976) observed that the values and institutions that reinforced the subordination of women in China were even stronger than during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

The movement for Chinese women's liberation was first introduced in the nineteenth century, which was initiated by Western missionaries and Chinese Western-educated revolutionaries (Drucker, 1979). The Western missionaries who arrived in China disseminated religion and preached the doctrine of gender equality, advocating the establishment of women's schools (Liu, 2010; West, 2011). According to Lu and Zheng (1995), formal women's education in China began with the Western missionaries, particularly the Christians. The first religious school for females was founded in Ningpo in Jiangsu Province in 1844. The curriculum included basic mathematics, science, and religion, which were infused with Chinese feudal doctrine, an essential component of the curriculum (Liu & Carpenter, 2005, p. 278). By 1877, there were 82 female day boarding schools, with a total of 794 female students (Lu & Zheng, 1995, p. 343). A considerable proportion of individuals received education in schools operated by Western missionaries. As far back as 1902, several missionary education institutions had a total enrolment of 4,773 girls (Chen, 1967, pp. 349–350). Some of the graduates from those schools went on to study in European countries and in Japan (Li, 1997).

In the nascent state of the Chinese feminist movement, some Chinese and Western scholars recognized that one of the objectives of the 1898 Reform Movement in China was the emancipation of women. Renowned writers and reformers such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) provided significant support for the women's rights movement and education during this period. Kang initiated the modern women's liberation movement to combat



gender inequality in society, while Liang was actively involved in the development of women's education. Liang's Proposals for Women's Education suggested that the ultimate objective was to create a strong nation, and to achieve this, women needed to achieve financial independence (Wong, 1995, p. 357). The first modern girls' school organized by the Chinese themselves was established in Shanghai in 1897 in relation to the Reform Group (Zheng, cited in Beahan, 1975, p. 380). The students were taught 16 different subjects, including "self-cultivation (xiushen), education, home economics, callisthenics, the Mandarin dialect (guanhua), the Chinese language (hanwen), foreign languages (yangwen), history, geography, arithmetic, chemistry, physics, calligraphy, drawing, sewing, and music" (cited in Qian, 2003, p. 412). In 1898, the Qing Dynasty Government approved the first experimental female school, Jingzheng Female School, which was established in Shanghai (Li, 1997). Between 1901 and 1907, a total of 12 girls' schools were established in Shanghai, indicating a growing trend (Burton, cited in Beahan, 1975, p. 381).

Women's Higher Education in Contemporary China

In the early twentieth century, as the concepts of evolution and women's liberation gained traction in China, various types of girls' schools emerged, including those established by churches, enlightened individuals, and the Qing Government, which issued regulations for women's education. Christian universities played a pivotal role in establishing the precedent of women's higher education in China. Lingnan University, a private institution founded by a group of American missionaries in 1888, notably admitted female students as early as 1905. After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the emergence of the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s and 1920s, there was a growing call to dismantle patriarchal society and promote freedom and women's liberation in China. This period of feminist activity was known as "May Fourth Feminism", named after the May Fourth Movement, which took place during the same period. In 1919, the first group of women was admitted to Peking National University, followed by the introduction of co-education in almost all colleges.

After the Communist Party of China (CPC) took power in 1949, women's education was promoted as a key element of social and economic development. Chairman Mao Zedong (1893– 1976) encouraged women to join the labour force, famously proclaiming that "whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can do too", and asserting that "Women hold up half the sky". The new Marriage Law of 1950 and the first version of the Constitution in 1954 continued to advocate equal rights between men and women in political, social, economic, cultural, and educational arenas. In 1956, China issued the Decision to Eradicate Illiteracy, which reiterated its goal of eliminating illiteracy and had a positive impact on the education of women. However, the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 significantly disrupted the education system in China. It was not until 1978 that the university entrance examination was reintroduced, which led to the tremendous expansion of all levels of education in China. The literacy rate among women increased from 10% in 1949 to 77.4% in 2000 (Liu & Carpenter, 2005, p. 279). However, persistent challenges remain for women's education, as demonstrated by Hooper (1991). According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report released by the



World Economic Forum, China ranked 102nd among 146 countries worldwide in terms of gender equality.

Despite these challenges, women's higher education in China has made significant progress in recent decades. The 1998 Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China aimed to expand the higher education sector and transform it from an elite domain to a mass enterprise. While overall enrolment in science and engineering fields still favours males, females outperform males in general course grades and English proficiency tests (Guo et al., 2010). Female graduates are also awarded a higher percentage of "A" ranking in science and engineering majors (Guo et al., 2010, p. 229). Between 2011 and 2020, the proportion of females in all types of Chinese higher education exceeded that of males, with the growth in the enrolment rate of higher education for females reaching 54.4% in 2020, reflecting a 27.9% increase from 2010 (Zhang, 2020). Women also make up a significant proportion of doctoral and undergraduate students in China's regular higher education (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021; Tang & Horta, 2021). These figures suggest that women academics already hold a significant position in China's higher education landscape and that this position is likely to continue to increase in the coming years.

Empowering Women in Higher Music Education and Music Practice Opportunities

During the first half of the 20th century, Christian universities founded by North American missionaries in China made a substantial contribution to the development of higher education in the country, serving as a model for other universities (Hayhoe & Lu, 2010; Mou, 2020). These universities played a significant role in shaping the landscape of higher education in China by adapting American liberal arts education to the Chinese context, despite significant differences in social and cultural traditions (Mou, 2020). Notably, the impact of Christian universities on the development of higher music education in China during this period is also noteworthy.

In 1907, the Qing Government issued the Constitution of Women's Normal Schools, which mandated the inclusion of music courses in normal schools for the first time, primarily to provide music education to girls. The Beijing Women's Higher Normal School, founded in 1908, is an esteemed educational institution that was elevated to the status of the National Beijing Women's Higher Normal School in 1919. Ginling Women's University, founded in 1913, was the first women's university in China, offering 16 undergraduate majors, including Chinese, English, history, sociology, music, physical education, chemistry, biology, home economics, and medical specialties (Zhang, n.d.). The university has established a strong reputation both domestically and internationally. Despite the limited number of women who received higher education in music during the 1920s and 1930s, the foundation provided by these institutions was of profound significance in the development of China's higher education in the new era (Song & Wang, 2011). From 1919 to 1951, a total of 999 graduates were produced by the University, who are fondly referred to as the "999 roses" (Zhang, n.d.).

Trends and Causes of Education Opportunities



The expansion and transformation of China's higher education system in response to economic reforms and the promotion of higher education have been significant since Deng Xiaoping's rise to leadership in 1978. The Compulsory Education Law, implemented in 1986, has continued to address education equality and educational access at all levels has become equally accessible for both urban females and males. Studies by Lee (2012), Tsui and Rich (2002), and Veeck et al. (2003) suggest that changing attitudes are taking place among urban parents towards boys' and girls' education in China. For instance, the educational success of only-children in urban families has maintained that "gender equality in education is an unintended consequence of the one-child-per-family policy and that ... girls are better off living in one-child families in the big cities of modern China" (Tsui & Rich, 2002, p. 74). According to the results of the China Health and Nutrition Survey, one-child households enjoyed significantly improved opportunities for education compared with children in multiple-child households. The improvements for girls were larger than those for boys, and years of schooling for girls with male siblings were lower than that of girls with female siblings (Lee, 2012). These findings indicate that the one-child policy inadvertently contributed to greater educational gender equality in China (Lee, 2012).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, China's higher education system underwent significant expansion, resulting in the formation of three distinct types of education models in higher music education: traditional professional music education in conservatories; normal music education in teachers' colleges/universities; and music education in comprehensive universities. More than 150 Chinese normal universities (i.e., universities for teacher training and education) and over 841 other universities have music departments/sections in the mainland (Ding, 2015, p. 47). However, the underrepresentation of female students in certain academic fields can be attributed to the influence of family and societal norms, which often encourage boys to pursue science while girls are encouraged to focus on liberal arts (Fan, 2022; also see Shen et al., 2015). This phenomenon is exemplified by data from a national normal university in China between 2003 and 2008, which showed that female enrolment in the music programme was significantly higher than male enrolment (Xie, 2016, p. 11; see Table 1).

Table 1. Statistics of male and female students majoring in music at a national normal university over six years

Gender	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Male	23	35	27	24	45	37
Female	127	159	128	133	146	138
Total number of male and female	150	194	155	157	191	175
Percentage occupied by females	85.6%	82.0%	82.6%	84.7%	76.4%	78.9%

As can be seen in Table 1, female students accounted for a majority of the music programme's enrolment, ranging from 76.4% to 85.6% over the six-year



period. This suggests that state policies may have facilitated greater access to higher education for women in the field of music.

In 2021, the total number of male freshmen admitted to various major music conservatories was fewer than the total number of female students. For instance, the male-to-female ratio at the Xi'an Conservatory of Music was nearly 1:2, and the Harbin Conservatory of Music admitted 83 males and 88 females (Wu, 2021). Citing an example from a Chinese normal university, the ratios between male and female music students during the three years of 2013, 2014, and 2015 were 18:102, 15:115, and 11:99, respectively (Xie, 2016, p. 11). Females continue to outnumber males in attaining master's and doctorate degrees in higher music education (Xie, 2016, p. 13).

Music Practices

Music education has a long-standing tradition in European higher education, and this section will explore why education institutions in China emphasized Western art music education as a crucial component of their curriculum. It will also examine how female students benefited from their engagement with Western art music, and how performing this genre was used to advance the ideals of liberation, modernization, and national revitalization. The first generation of Chinese female composers emerged with works that were largely connected to the revolution in China. For example, Qiu Jin's (1875–1907) "Encouraging Feminism Songs" (Mian Nuquan Ge) was a notable work from this era. Following the establishment of the Shanghai National Music College, the number of female composers increased as women were finally able to receive professional musical training in higher education (Liu & Lee, 2020). Female musicians and composers who were born in the middle of the twentieth century and had received their higher music education in China were no longer limited to composing with elements of national music, as they set their sights on the world to fully convey the image of Chinese music globally (Shu, 2013, p. 45). The next generation of Chinese female composers were born in the 1970s, during a period of rapid economic and technological development in China (Liu & Lee, 2021). Simultaneously, the number of female students majoring in composition and graduating from local music schools also grew each year (Rui & Ji, 2015, p. 351).

In the twenty-first century, China's higher music education has developed music disciplines that are in line with the international education mode of similar institutions in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the Western world (Dai, 2021). Chinese women have played a significant role in the development of music education (Rui & Ji, 2015; Shu, 2013). In the new era of China, the teaching contents, methods, and forms of higher education are closer to females' practical use, increasing their self-confidence and encouraging them to continue their higher education (see Shu, 2013; Song & Wang, 2011; Tian, 2020). For instance, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (2021) established a women's chorus and percussion ensemble to develop music education more in line with the practical concept of modern music education, cultivate and foster the spirit of teamwork, and enhance students' employment competitiveness.

However, gender stereotypes regarding musical instruments are still present in China's higher music education, as in Western and Asian countries. Wang (2015)



found that male and female music students in China exhibited differences in the types of instruments that they preferred to learn and play. Wang (2015) found a significant correlation between the students' interest in music and parental support for their instrumental learning. In general, Chinese music instruments, such as the guzheng, pipa, and yangqin, are viewed as more suitable for female students, while Western musical instruments, such as drums, trombone, and saxophone, are considered more appropriate for male students (Wang, 2015). Zhuang (2005) conducted a study aimed at investigating the perceptions of Chinese undergraduates from a national university in Shandong Province regarding the masculinity and femininity of 10 Western orchestra instruments. The participants were asked to rank these instruments from the most masculine to the most feminine, and the obtained ranking was as follows: trombone, trumpet, saxophone, drum, clarinet, guitar, cello, piano, flute, and violin (Zhuang, 2015). The study revealed that the clarinet was perceived as more masculine, and the drum was considered more gender-neutral in previous studies conducted in Western countries. Moreover, Zhuang (2015) also aimed to rank seven traditional Chinese musical instruments from a gender perspective. The study found that the suona, xiao, and dizi were perceived as the most masculine instruments, while the erhu, guqin, guzheng, and pipa were perceived as more feminine. Additionally, Lin (2022) surveyed Chinese students to investigate their instrument preferences, and the results revealed that the piano was the most preferred instrument among both male and female students. However, a higher percentage of female students were interested in learning the guzheng, as presented in Table 2 (Lin, 2022).

Table 2. Percentage of male and female students learning Chinese or Western musical instruments

Types of Musical Instruments by Gender (%)

	Piano	Erhu	Guzheng	Violin	Dizi	Guitar
Male students	35	15	2	3	15	25
Female students	37.8	5	39	10	3	12

Ma (2004) noted that gendered musical learning was evident in higher music institutions, with females primarily learning hammered and plucked instruments, while males mainly learned wind and brass instruments, and that the major reason for this phenomenon was the impact of contemporary music media on gender stereotypes in China.

Women and Employment Framing Issues in Higher Music Education

China has seen a steady increase in the number of college and university graduates in recent years, with women accounting for approximately 40% of the workforce in Chinese cities and townships (Zhang & Li, 2021). However, despite

progress in education and gender equality, significant gap disparities still persist in the labour market. For instance, the use of the internet has been found to exacerbate the overall gender-based wage gap by 26.73% and the presence of gender bias present in online platforms is a notable contributing factor to this phenomenon (Gao Liu, 2023). Moreover, while the gender gap in higher education attainment in China's higher education system has narrowed, the employment ratio of female undergraduates has remained relatively stable between 2016 and 2020, with males maintaining a slightly higher ratio (Central Conservatory of Music, 2020, pp. 24–25).

The next section will examine gender differences in higher education among music graduates and highlight the persistent gender employment gap in music teaching and related careers in China. Despite the reduction of the gender gap in higher education attainment in China's higher education system, it remains a significant issue.

Gender Differences in Employment: An Analysis of Teaching and Related Professions

School music teachers, particularly from cities, are typically required to hold a bachelor's degree in music or music education. According to Ma (2004, p. 20), music teaching was rated as the top career choice among both male and female university students, mainly in their second and third years, followed by acting (refer to Table 3).

Table 3. Top 10 career aspirations of university music students

Career	Female	Male
Teacher	72.48%	64.56%
Actor/actress	19.72%	24.05%
Management officer	18.34%	10.13%
Pop singer	14.22%	13.92%
Freelance composer	8.26%	/
Militarist/merchant/government officer	7.80%	
Merchant	/	16.46%
Musician	/	11.39%
Vocalist	5.96%	10.13%
Television producer	4.59%	8.86%

However, more female than male students in China choose music education as their future career path (Mei & Yang, 2021). National education statistics from all

Chinese provinces in 2016 showed that female teachers, who typically graduate from Chinese music conservatories and universities, accounted for 65.34% of primary school teachers, 54.49% of junior secondary school teachers, and 52.13% of senior secondary school teachers (Guang Ming Ribao, 9 May 2018). In Beijing and Shanghai, over 80% of primary school music teachers were female, while the percentages of female music teachers in junior secondary school were 76.3% and 73.7% and in senior secondary school were 71.9% and 65.9%, respectively (Guang Ming Ribao, 9 May 2018). As Ma (2004) explained, the number of female teachers entering higher music education was closely related to the number of female teachers employed in school music education. Ou's (2012) study on music teachers' identity transition during the period of teacher apprenticeships in Northeast China found that 87% of music education majors were females (also see Ma, 2004; Xie, 2016). These unbalanced figures have resulted in a disproportionately low percentage of male teachers in primary and secondary schools in China (Xie, 2016).

In addition to school music teachers, gender plays a significant role in the employment of music professionals in China. Music graduates are engaged professionals who work as teachers, performers, composers, producers, and elsewhere in the creative industries, in which women are primarily employed as singers and pianists, while men are more likely to work as composers, conductors, percussionists, and brass players. However, Chinese women have been making increasingly important contributions to the field of classical music composition and conducting.

Chen Yi (1953–) was the first Chinese woman to receive a master's degree in music composition from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. She was also a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Music for her composition *Si Ji* (Four Seasons) and is now a Chinese American violinist and composer of contemporary classical music.

The number of active Chinese women composers has been on the rise, and many have achieved international acclaim. Women composers born in the 1970s and 1980s are particularly well-known, such as Cheng Huihui (1985–), who graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music and studied electronic composition at the State University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart, Tian Leilei (1971–), who graduated from the Conservatory of Music and furthered her studies in Gothenburg, and Wang Ying (1976–), who graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and completed a master's degree in contemporary music at the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts. To support and promote the work of Chinese women composers and performers, the Chinese Women Composers' Association was established in 2002. This non-profit organization, which was formed by a group of accomplished Chinese women musicians, seeks to encourage and promote women composers and performers who have graduated from Chinese higher education institutions at all stages of their careers, both in China and around the world.

Music students in China now have better prospects, with unique musical skills and a broad range of graduate jobs on offer. New majors, including those in new undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, have been introduced under the new liberal arts construction in Chinese universities. Furthermore, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and interdisciplinary studies has become a major driving force for



the employment of music graduates in China. Chinese higher education institutions are leveraging the AI revolution to promote the development of technologies in higher music education, capitalizing on the booming technology industry in China, with companies such as the e-commerce titans Alibaba and Tencent and other social platforms streaming music. However, the overall number of women in technology remains relatively small (Cadell & Jourdan, 2018). Liu and Yan's (2021) research showed that male students in science and technology colleges had significantly higher subjective well-being than female students, possibly due to the social expectations of different genders.

Women's Representation in Professorship and Leadership in Higher Music Education

Despite occupying management roles and contributing to the growth and development of universities, relatively few women ascend to senior leadership positions in China's higher education institutions (Wang et al., 2013; Kohtamaki et al., 2023). Gender-based obstacles continue to hinder gender equality in higher education, particularly in terms of leadership positions. For instance, according to a survey conducted by Renmin University of China among 1,792 presidents (i.e., Vice Chancellors in the British context), only 45% of leaders in China's higher education institutions were female (Xue, 2008). Similarly, a study analysing the resumes of 7,796 top-level university leaders across 1,166 Chinese universities revealed a low proportion of female teachers (Wang & Yu, 2015). In the local music sphere, only a few prominent female figures hold leadership positions as professors and university leaders (Ma, 2004).

Gender divisions have had a significant impact on the composition of teaching staff in Chinese higher music education institutions. For instance, in 2014, although there were more female teachers than male teachers, senior positions such as associate and full professors were predominantly occupied by men, with males accounting for 89% and females 11% of the positions (Xie, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, data collected from seven higher music institutions in China showed a gender imbalance, with 20 male professors and 14 female professors and male professors supervising more PhD students than their female counterparts, indicating a gender imbalance (Xie, 2016, p. 14). An analysis of administrative positions at the top nine music conservatories in China in 2016 revealed that most departmental heads and school deans were male (Xie, 2016, p. 15). This trend is also evident in the male dominance of president positions in top conservatories in China, such as the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the China Conservatory of Music, and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

When examining gender and higher music education in China, it is apparent that gender, power, and social and cultural positions are intricately intertwined. Previous research has identified various socio cultural obstacles that account for the lack of women in leadership positions (Zhao Jones, 2017). These obstacles include male-dominated networks, social stereotyping, and gender discrimination when it comes to promotion, and the burden of managing both work and family responsibilities simultaneously (Huang & Aaltio, 2014). Social expectations and traditional cultural norms that shape female roles and self-positioning can also hinder the career advancement of young female teachers. The gender wage gap among



higher education groups is widely believed to be rooted in gender discrimination. Ou and Lin's (2015) study on 50 young female university teachers, known as "female green peppers" in Chinese, from 16 universities in Beijing, including Peking University, Renmin University, and the Communication University of China, found that the most intense pressure on the participants came from work itself and the pressure of life and financial stress. Females often have fewer opportunities for advancement than their male counterparts, even when males share the burden of family responsibilities, which are often prioritized more highly by females than work duties, while males tend to prioritize work over family responsibilities (Fan, 2022).

DISCUSSION

For centuries, gender and education have been intertwined in China. Confucianism, which has been the dominant philosophy in China for over two millennia, has traditionally considered women inferior to men and relegated them to domestic roles. However, China's education system has undergone significant changes in recent decades, leading to increased opportunities for women in higher education. This section will explore three research areas: the evolution of women's education in China, current opportunities for women's education and music practices in higher education, and the issues women face in higher education related to employment framing compared with men.

First, the history of women's higher education in China has been shaped by various factors over time. Traditional Chinese philosophy reinforced gender inequality, with men as the dominant figures in society and women as subordinate. However, the introduction of modern education in the nineteenth century influenced by Western missionaries, provided women with opportunities for higher education. Chinese intellectuals and the government also played a role in promoting women's education, with the establishment of girls' schools and women's colleges during the Republican Era (1911–1949). After the establishment of Communist China, the political ideology of the Communist Party emphasized equal opportunities for women in education and the workforce. This led to significant progress in women's education and career pursuits in various fields, including music and music education. Women's enrolment in higher education has surpassed men in recent years, reflecting the impact of these changes. However, despite these advances, gender inequality persists in certain aspects of China's higher education (Tang & Horta, 2021).

Second, the recent reforms in higher education in China have led to an increase in women's enrolment in music education at conservatories and universities, which is a positive step towards achieving gender equality in higher music education. However, despite these advancements, women continue to encounter obstacles when it comes to accessing specific fields of study and career opportunities, particularly in music composition, conducting, and music technology. For instance, studies conducted in Western countries such as Abeles (2009), Valentine (1985) and Werner et al. (2020) have shed light on these persistent challenges. This indicates that there is still a gender gap that needs to be addressed in higher music education. One of the significant challenges that women face in higher music education is the influence of gender stereotypes. These stereotypes shape the perception and evaluation of musical proficiency in China's music industry, which impacts the opportunities and choices available to female music students. For



example, despite more female music students taking piano in Chinese higher education, female pianists are still underrepresented in China (Nie, 2016). Additionally, Chinese musical instruments are often viewed as more suitable for female students, while Western musical instruments such as wind, brass and percussion are seen as more appropriate for male students (Zhuang, 2015). These gender stereotypes further affect the opportunities and choices of music students, discouraging them from pursuing certain fields of study or instruments based on their gender. To address these challenges, it is important to promote gender equality in higher music education and to challenge gender stereotypes that limit women's opportunities in the business. This includes raising awareness of the impact of gender stereotypes on musical proficiency evaluation, providing support for women pursuing non-traditional fields of study and instruments, and creating a supportive environment for women in the classroom and workplace. Gender equality in music education needs to start working in school music education.

Third, despite the expressed political commitment through national policies, China's higher music education still encounters challenges in creating opportunities for music graduates, especially women, to enter and succeed in music professions. Several studies (Ma, 2004; Mei & Yang, 2021; Xie, 2016) have underscored this issue, emphasizing the necessity for Chinese authorities to explore innovative approaches to identify gender identities, practices, and structures within higher music education and address gender inequality. In line with research by Arntz et al (2017) and Jones (2023), it was observed that females exhibited a deeper comprehension of career breaks and tended to make more career compromises by accepting lower-status positions. Additionally, a significant number of women opted for part-time employment, which may be influenced by unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities or even choosing not to return to employment at all (Arntz et al., 2017). To further promote gender equality and employability in China's higher music education, it is crucial to cultivate a more inclusive and diverse curriculum. This can be achieved by incorporating materials from female composers and musicians, providing more opportunities for women to develop their skills and showcase their talents in fields such as music composition, conducting, and music technology. Mentorship programmes, scholarships, and networking opportunities can help achieve this goal. By advocating for gender equality and offering support for women in higher education, China can enhance opportunities for women and strengthen its music education and other music professions. This includes addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and decision-making roles (Kohtamaki et al., 2022; Zhao & Jones, 2017). Encouraging women to pursue leadership positions and providing training and mentorship can help create a more balanced and equitable environment in higher music education.

Addressing the challenges facing women in higher education in China is complex and multifaceted. Policymakers, educators, and society at large must work together to address these challenges. Increasing funding and scholarships for women's higher music education and research, promoting gender equality in leadership positions, and addressing gender bias in hiring and promotion decisions are all potential solutions. Efforts to promote work-life balance and support can also help retain women in academia. It is also crucial to challenge and dispel gender stereotypes that influence the evaluation of musical proficiency and the opportunities



available to female music students. By creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in higher music education, China can promote gender equality and provide more opportunities for women's development in music-related professions.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's education in China has been shaped by the country's traditional cultural and philosophical beliefs, which are often patriarchal in nature. This view has influenced education policies and practices for centuries, limiting opportunities for women to pursue higher education and participate in the workforce. However, in recent decades, China has made significant progress in promoting women's education, including in the field of higher music education. Despite this progress, gender inequality remains a challenge. Women continue to face barriers to entry and advancement in teaching in higher music institutions and in the music industry, including fields such as music composition, conducting, and music technology. To further promote gender equality and employability in higher music education, it is essential to provide opportunities for women to develop their skills and showcase their talents. By promoting gender equality, providing opportunities for women to develop their skills and showcase their talents, and challenging stereotypes, the Chinese Government, music educators, and society at large can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in higher music education and beyond.

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