SELF-INSTRUCTION AMONGST CHINESE HIP-HOP MUSICIANS: REFLECTIONS ON INFORMAL MUSIC LEARNING IN CHINA

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Abstract

Academic studies of music education in the subject of hip-hop have grown over the last several decades due to the genre's growing appeal among young people worldwide. In the Chinese context, hip-hop music was developed only in the last few years. Although experts in a variety of fields such as educational and musical areas have begun to pay more attention to hip-hop music in the last five years, there is almost no research on the learning patterns of hip-hop musicians in the Chinese context.

This study examined the musical learning experiences of eight Chinese hip-hop musicians by using semi-structured interviews to understand more about their learning styles, learning pathways, and attitudes to school music instruction. Outcomes suggested that Chinese hip-hop performers predominantly learned music through informal music learning practices, including listening, imitation, individual practice, and independent composition. Additionally, the research identified a positive and mutually reinforcing relationship between informal music education and music education in schools. Finally, the paper compares and evaluates the current findings with prior scholarship on informal music learning and school music education, and made recommendations for school music education and future academic research in the Chinese setting.

Keywords: *Hip-hop music, informal music learning, school music education*

Introduction

In spite of the worldwide popularity that hip hop music enjoys amongst young people, the idea that this style of music should be taught in schools as part of a music education has not been so widely accepted. As a result, hip-hop music has not yet been universally and formally integrated into compulsory school music education. As a result, students who enjoy working with hip-hop music as a genre, have mainly developed talents and acquired knowledge through informal music learning environments and methods (Hargreaves, Marshall & North, 2003). This paper examined and sought to better understand the informal music learning practices of hip-hop musicians within the Chinese context.

In comparison to more conventional musical genres, pop music is often regarded as being more rhythmic, lively, rustic in sound, and more relevant to daily life (Hu, 2018, Huang, 2020). Hip-hop, and in particular rap music, has received particular attention from mainstream society in recent years as a prominent form of expression. Known for its distinct rhythm and daring mode of self-expression, rap music is considered to be a favorite musical genre accounting for 55% of the Top 20 best-selling albums in the United States in 2019, with rapper Post Malone's *Hollywood's Bleeding* topping the list (BuzzAngle Music, 2019).

Guo (2018), argued that the lyrics of hip-hop music were rich in substance and able to reflect many social issues, and subsequently demonstrated the educational value of rap

music by practicing it in the classroom. The primary point argued here was that hip-hop music not only helped and encouraged students to improve their writing skills, but it also helped them to better understand black history (as cited in Anderson, 1993). Since this time, a number of further studies have argued for the benefits of incorporating hip-hop music into school music education through both theoretical study and practical teaching. However, this is not an argument that is universally accepted with authors such as Peteet et al. (2021), highlighting the fact that a percentage of contemporary music, particularly rap music, is saturated with negative messages regarding alcohol, cigarettes, and a range of illegal activities including suicide; an issue that is especially detrimental to teenage audiences. Certainly, since its inception, hip-hop has served as a vehicle for African American youth to vent their displeasure about their social status and their struggle for equal rights (Evans, 2019; Cai, 2020), and although society can be said to have evolved and many of the original political struggles and social injustices have been addressed, hip-hop music retains its rebellious nature. In some instances, this rebellion has evolved into an adolescent revolt against parental oppression and discipline (Liu, 2011). Developmentally, teens progress through a period of rapid increased self-awareness and role experimentation, and negatively charged music and rebellious lyrics can intensify their attitudes against parents and teachers, resulting in unpredictable behavior (Gu & Qiu, 2018). Hence, the topic of whether or not hip-hop music should be included in formal music education in schools remains open to discussion.

A similar issue was recognized in China with the debut of the first hip-hop internet variety show, *The Rap of China*, in 2017 attracting an audience of over 3 billion (Zhang, 2019) and an online survey by Wang (2018) found that teens made up 96.7% of the audience. Media responses to the show accentuated and exposed the private lives of the featured performers and their involvement in fighting, drug use and marital affairs resulting in authors such as Gu and Qiu (2018), arguing that involvement in hip hop impacted on healthy development and as a result, China's government tightened its censorship laws over around hip-hop music (Luo & Ming, 2020). In contrast, government officials also recognized that hip-hop music with positive content could effectively promote national programs and mainstream social ideals among young people (ibid.). In spite of the Chinese government's support for positive hip-hop, rap is still not yet officially incorporated into Chinese Music Education (Lv, 2019). Contrary to expectations, numerous youthful hip-hop musicians have arisen in recent years in China, with most young pop musicians being self-taught (Green, 2017; Kruse, 2018).

Given that most schools in China lack any formal means by which students can be taught hip-hop music, (Sullivan & Zhao, 2021), it is reasonable to believe that the majority of hip-hop musicians in China develop their musical skills through self-directed informal music learning practices that take place outside of schools or other formal educational institutions. Therefore, whilst research into pop musicians' formal and informal learning practices have been undertaken, there have been limited studies on music education specifically for hip-hop musicians. In particular, there is no published material discussing hip-hop musicians' musical learning approach in the Chinese setting. Therefore, this study aims to examine the ways and channels via which young Chinese rappers improve their abilities. The study was therefore designed to explore how Chinese hip-hop musicians learned their musical abilities, and to explore their attitudes towards formal educational settings.

Literature Review

In many countries more traditional teacher-centered pedagogies remain (Green, 2017). Lamont, Hargreaves, Marshall, and Tarrant (2003), found, for example, that the monotonous nature of school music's content and format frequently resulted in a misalignment between school music and students' interests (see also Kuang (2021). However, the rapid increase in technological advances has meant that children are no longer exposed to music exclusively in the music classroom. Students frequently employ the internet to find and listen to popular music genres, with an estimated 66% of teenagers reportedly listening to music on a regular basis using a wide range of media (Rideout, 2016 cited in Peteet et al., 2021). In turn, this has facilitated the growing interest in the role of informal learning in music education (Lill, 2015), with numerous scholars exploring ways to incorporate informal learning techniques into the classroom.

Viewed in contrast to informal learning (Yu & Mao, 2005; Liu, 2013), formal schooling has been viewed as having defined objectives and lesson plans, along with rigorous assessment leading to certification. Teaching and learning are seen as being largely homogeneous and primarily concerned with learning outcomes, with students seen as passive participants (Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Wang, 2019). However, students' learning does not take place exclusively in the classroom; every aspect of their lives and every event and experience can in some way enhance their abilities, with some studies estimating that as much at 80% of the knowledge acquired during a person's lifetime, is gained through informal learning (Yang and Yu, 2010; Wang, 2017).

In China, formal music learning is typically based on acquiring knowledge of musical scores and reading notation to help pupils increase their theoretical understanding (Robinson, 2012). However, Green (2017) described informal music learning as "*different means of obtaining musical abilities and information outside of conventional educational settings*" (p.17) and identified how listening and copying recordings, composing and performing, peer-directed and group learning as three of the fundamental ways in which young popular musicians engage in informal music learning practices. Naturally, some researchers pointed out the limits of such an informal music learning mode. Jenkins (2011), for example, argued that learners can be constrained by the kind of music they pick and are less likely to generate informative and insightful musical compositions through listening and imitation. In other words, the quality of the music created in the informal music learning style is not always guaranteed, as generally, it tends to be simplistic and lack creativity. Furthermore, Yu and Mao (2005) pointed out that a peer-directed/group learning strategy can lead to the reception of inaccurate information or knowledge and it's spread among peers or/and groups. In the absence of experienced musicians or professional 'teachers', learners often do not have a criterion to assess whether the "knowledge" they are exposed to is correct in their informal music learning progress (Green, 2017).

However, with the advancement of internet technology and the global rise of online courses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Alam, 2020), a wide range of music courses that more usually take place in formal learning venues are being uploaded onto various online video platforms, enabling learners to view many instructional videos recorded by experienced teachers via the internet (Wang, 2020). Therefore, given the contemporary social setting, some of the limits stated by scholars who have questioned informal music learning techniques may be no longer as prevalent as they were a decade ago.

Popular music in Chinese secondary school music curriculum

In 2001, the Chinese Government stated that music education should be based on students' interests and that quality music from beyond the school environment should be introduced into the classroom to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning and performing (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001). It was only after this decision was made that popular music was formally included in school music classrooms (Hu, 2020), and although popular music has been included in China's compulsory school music education for two decades, it has not become a prominent curriculum element (Law & Ho, 2015). A study of 2,715 secondary school students carried out by Huang (2020), found that only 11.6 percent of students reported any kind of exposure to popular music. Similarly, Hu (2020) found that popular music accounted for only 7 percent of the total repertoire in secondary school music textbooks with most secondary students reporting significant levels of disinterest in learning school music as the popular songs that were included in their textbooks were too outdated or in something other than their preferred style.

Importantly, Gao (2011), commented that the majority of music teachers lacked a comprehensive knowledge of popular music; a significant factor that contributed to the ineffectiveness of popular music within the secondary school music classroom. Other studies have also noted that many secondary school music teachers are themselves only educated in classical music traditions (Lamont et al., 2003; Hu, 2020), and therefore due to a lack of knowledge and familiarity with popular music, many educators become significantly biased against popular musical genres (Law & Ho, 2015; Huang, 2020; Kuang, 2021; Luo & Geng, 2021). As a result, although pop music exists within the scope of school music education in China, its development in formal schooling is still limited.

Hip-hop music in education

Although since the 1990s some educators and practitioners have attempted to incorporate hip-hop music into school curricula (Hall, 2009), and some US universities have introduced hip-hop-related courses (Markarian, 2012), as previously noted, hip-hop has not been formally incorporated into school music programs due to the detrimental effects that hip-hop may have on the physical and mental development of young people. Yet in spite of the negative values often associated with hip-hop music, some authors have argued that a number of benefits are available from incorporating hip-hop music into school music programs and can be a good technique for expanding a range of student skills. For example, Karvelis (2018), altered and purified hip-hop songs that contained inappropriate vocabulary and information, and used these as an effective teaching resource. By analysing rap lyrics that reflect social issues and watching music videos, students were able to hear and discuss social perspectives from different ethnicities, social classes, and economic positions, thereby strengthening their critical thinking skills. Additionally, theoretical knowledge from traditional music classes can be effectively merged with hip-hop music by critically examining the rhythms and timbres in the videos in relation to the images within the video content (ibid). Evans' (2019) ethnographic survey of 30 African American youngsters participating in a music composition project at a Chicago primary school confirmed that music classes that blended formal and informal learning was beneficial at enhancing students' self-awareness and enthusiasm in music lessons while also increasing students' options for self-directed, customised learning.

However, as yet, hip-hop music appears to not be included in any Chinese school music curriculum. According to Lv's (2019) survey of the content of secondary school music textbooks, rap music is not covered in current music textbooks' popular music genres, in contrast to art and national music, which account for around 80% of the content of

music syllabuses. Notably, Ho's (2017) research of 6,780 Chinese secondary school students found hip-hop to be the third most popular style whilst traditional folk music and opera were ranked lowest. A fact that again highlights the discrepancy between music taught in schools and students' preferences clearly exists within Chinese music education.

One significant factor for hip-hop music's slow development in China is that the ideals represented in the lyrics and content can often contradict conventional societal standards (Guo, 2018; Luo & Ming, 2020). Add to this the negative behaviors of certain rappers (i.e., violence, drug addiction, and unorganized personal lives) are seen as representing a risk to the intellectual development and physical health of young people (Gu & Qiu, 2018; Sullivan & Zhao, 2021). Certainly, the Chinese authorities acted swiftly to remove and prohibit what they saw as low-quality songs, Luo and Ming (2020) argued that direct restriction of hip-hop music could actually encourage more young people to seek out and listen to music with warped values.

However, given the acknowledged popularity of hip hop amongst young people, the Chinese Government recognized its influence and educational usefulness (Sullivan & Zhao, 2021). As a consequence, government organizations began purifying, adapting and changing the lyrics of rap songs that did not align with mainstream society's values into positive, healthy content to inspire young people to strive for success and to promote mainstream social ideals. For example, a number of local police agencies combined hiphop elements and rhymed lyrics to create rap songs and music videos with propaganda aimed at promoting social harmony (Luo & Ming, 2020). Moreover, Liu (2014) observed that many Chinese rappers had begun to incorporate dialect into their hip-hop songs, which substantially aided the development of national confidence. However, despite the Chinese government and current scholars' rising acceptance of hip-hop music with positive content (Luo & Ming, 2020), it is still mainly excluded from the traditional music classroom, with the result that, young people who love rap music can only engage in informal self-learning outside of the classroom through the internet or discussion with their friends (Shao, 2017).

Informal music learning of hip-hop musicians

Although Green (2017) summarized the fundamental practices of informal music learning by popular musicians as listening, imitating/copying recordings, composing, performing, and peer-directed/group learning, her research sample was primarily composed of 'guitar-based pop and rock musicians, and therefore the study's practices and perspectives are not universally applicable to all genres of music learning situations. For example, hip-hop scholars dispute whether listening and copying/imitation can be used as a method of hip-hop learning. Hip-hop musicians in a study by Markarian, (2012) found their inspiration to write in the vocabulary and lyrics of other rappers in order to boost their songwriting ability and Söderman and Folkestad (2004), asserted that hiphop was more than a genre of music; it was an entire, unique culture and therefore hiphop musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds created music that reflected a variety of contemporary societal phenomena and therefore required different learning styles.

From this perspective, hip-hop lacks any form of historical or cultural context in China and so it is difficult to understand exactly how Chinese hip-hop musicians learn, develop and represent their own cultural context. Given the limited use of popular music in Chinese secondary school music classrooms, it would appear that students practically always have to acquire knowledge of hip-hop music outside of the classroom setting. In other words, the overwhelming majority of Chinese rap musicians are self-taught. However, this model of informal music learning is unclear in the Chinese context as

there is no current research that explicitly identifies the specific practices and channels through which individuals in China acquire knowledge and develop skills. Neither has scholarship discussed whether school music education in China contributes to hip-hop musicians' informal music learning.

Research Method

Eight hip-hop musicians, (seven males and one female), residing in mainland China and ranging in age from 18 to 26 years old, were interviewed. The interview schedule was adapted from Green's (2017) interview schedule. It was then piloted and following an appropriate reliability check, a number of questions and translations were modified for increased levels of clarity. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. All participants were musicians with substantial hip-hop learning experiences living in mainland China who were self-taught. All had previously uploaded their rap or hip-hop music to popular online, had spent at least two years studying hip-hop music, and had graduated from secondary schools on the Chinese mainland. The sample consisted of four amateur and four semi-professional musicians. Due to the respondents' geographic location, all interviews were performed either via Skype or Zoom. The average length of the interviews was 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese and all transcriptions were translated using a standard cross translation model (Qin, Cui & Gao, 2023). Ethical approval for the research was given by the host university. The data was subsequently subjected to thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). All transcripts were initially read several times in order to enable a number of initial ideas to be generated. Following an iterative process, we produced three main themes into which all data could be assigned, namely a) the process of informal music education among hip-hop musicians, b) Attitudes of Chinese hip-hop musicians towards formal music education and learning, and c) other required abilities and issues.

Findings

Theme One*: The process of informal music education amongst hip-hop musicians*

With the exception of one participant, who had previously attended a professional music education institution for training during the final stage of their education in hip-hop, all participants reported being self-taught by watching instructional videos on online video platforms. Most of the musicians reported that their preferred way of learning was to watch and 'study' online videos of professional rap musicians and then develop and build on that experience. They expressed a willingness, and stressed the importance of uploading and sharing early versions of their compositions with friends/others within the internet community and recognised the importance of gaining feedback from a *'knowledgeable other' rapper*.

The precise purpose of this sharing to obtain feedback was seen as being important, interesting and varied, but overall, their responses could be allocated to one or more of three categories. First, the suggestions they received from other 'rappers' on how to change or develop their compositions, were frequently tested and then selectively adapted in order to modify their original version. This process enabled them to adopt and adapt the various suggestions and to make the piece 'their own'. That is, through this feedback process, each rapper was able to become increasingly aware of the 'patternings' (Meyer, 1989), within the rap that were distinctive to themselves and to their own original style of composition. As Storr (1960) would argue, it was the knowledge of what others would do that enabled them to better explore and

understand those aspects that made them different. As CC and Zc stated, only musical compositions with a deep connection to the authors' real lives and the socio-cultural environment in which they live will garner widespread recognition in hip-hop communities.

"My music is real, it's about my life, my feelings, my experiences. Isn't keeping it real what hip-hop has always been about? If I write rap songs about drugs and violence, then that's not real hip-hop." (CC)

"But what you end up making has to be your own, it's not negotiable. That's hip-hop, you can't perform someone else' story." (Zc)

Secondly, feedback from others in the online community was also seen as a way identify the skills required to achieve a particular effect within the rap. That is, feedback was used as an opportunity to carry out a skills audit to identify additional areas of knowledge and skill to be developed. Third, the receiving of feedback carried with it the implication that each individual in turn would also contribute feedback to the music created by others, and therefore the musical learning became cumulative.

Thus, the ability to perceive and discriminate the stylistic elements within both their own music, and in the music of others, was honed by listening to the performances of a vast number of accomplished performers. All our participants reported how imitation was a necessary component of learning to rap and covering the music of prominent musicians was an important aspect of developing their own skills and subsequently building and developing their own unique style.

"I build my raps on my own...but I was told by a seasoned hip-hop artist that 'you find a rapper you like the most and listen to his music over and over again. Then try to imitate his style of singing and rapping. Learn from that and learn what's valuable, and then come up with your own thing - on your own". (Biaodi)

Theme Two: *Attitudes of Chinese hip-hop musicians towards formal music education and learning*

The majority of our respondents expressed the view that their experiences with school music classes were limited and that the teaching style and materials utilised in most classrooms in China were outdated and monotonous. As such, they had found all their music lessons to be uninteresting and of no personal use. Four of the musicians recalled how their opportunities for musical experiences at school were frequently substituted for other academic courses, with language learning, mathematics and science being seen as far more important and music tended to be regarded as a subject that was of no real importance, or of benefit to their future personal or working life. One musician reported attending a school that refused to include music on the curriculum.

"I have never had a full semester of music classes. …music lessons were always taken up by other subjects, especially towards the end of the term.

The lessons were taught in a very traditional, we were told by the teacher what to learn and what to sing, and to be honest, I found music class so boring." (Tiger)

"I only had music lessons in primary school, but I didn't learn anything useful. ……sometimes when she (the music teacher) didn't think the syllabus made sense, she just changed the class to self-study, and she allowed us to do homework for other subjects or whatever." (Zc)

Although the majority of participants reported being taught some basic music theory, (e.g., names of notes and pitches) they were never given the opportunity to apply this knowledge in any applied musical context and so this small amount of knowledge proved to be of little assistance in terms of their current musical products.

"The help was minimal. The teacher only taught me what notes should be in what tunes, but not how to put them together to make them sound better. …I didn't realise this until I started creating music and I had to go back and learn some music theory." (Chengye)

Other respondents who had encountered a similar shortage of basic music teaching argued strongly that music education should be taught using a 'bottom up' approach, as opposed to the more traditional 'top down' method. That is, pupils should be taught from the perspective of what they needed to know in order to compose and produce their own musical products, and not according to a set, traditional curriculum that prescribed the musical facts that needed to be learnt. Five of the respondents voiced a degree of frustration around the fact that they could now see (more accurately 'hear') more clearly exactly what musical knowledge they needed to know in order to improve their compositions, and yet they found it impossible to access appropriate teaching.

"I'm trying to teach myself how to arrange music… But it's really hard to learn on my own, I can't understand what the arrangement of notes means, I even want to find a professional teacher to guide me." (Zc)

Two respondents stated that whilst they whilst they had been able to teach themselves a range of musical skills through experimentation and internet sites, this had taken an inordinate amount of time whereas the same results could possibly have been achieved in a much shorter time period if access to a music theory teacher had been available.

One interesting aspect arising from the data was that although all our respondents reported mainly negative experiences of their school music education, they consistently indicated their support for including music education as part of a compulsory curriculum at both primary and secondary level. Regardless of their own experience of music and music education, respondents specifically believed music instruction in schools to be critical for developing pupils' interests and musical aesthetic skills, as well as for enhancing their future life.

"I have to admit that music lessons in schools are necessary. The arts are interconnected and even if you don't want to go into music in the future, learning about music can help with other artistic specialties. The music appreciation component of music classes also helps to improve students' own musicianship and appreciation of music." (D-One)

One respondent went further and claimed that he, and other members of his online Rap community actually regarded music education as being of more value to the individual child than their own music teachers.

When asked about their expectations for the future of school music education in China, both D-ONE and Biaodi both suggested that allowing students to choose the genre of music they were interested in is a key point in order to significantly enhance their interest in music learning and engagement in the music classroom.

"If teachers can share the different musical categories in the classroom, then maybe students can find the genre they identify with and then take the initiative to learn and understand that type of music." (Biaodi)

This technique would not only enable students to obtain a better understanding of various kinds of music, but could also encourage them to participate actively in the process of knowledge acquisition, in terms of learning more about the genre they are interested in.

Theme three*: Hip-hop values and other required abilities and issues*

All the musicians interviewed indicated support for the idea of incorporating hip-hop into school music curriculum. They believed that hip-hop music possesses an inherent educational value. For several of the interviewees, the ideologies conveyed by hiphop

(such as the courage to express one's true self and the determination to pursue one's dreams) are effective and enable students to nurture and develop their own personalities and their sense of self, as well as motivating them to overcome obstacles in their studies and lives in a positive way. Additionally, several participants believed that pupils who mastered hip-hop talents would have a broader range of work options in their future occupations.

"The key is to see how the teacher leads. Because the spirit of resistance in hip-hop music is still existent, in the beginning black youths were fighting for their rights and freedom. But in contemporary Chinese society there are no such social problems and the vast majority of people are living quite happily. So, this kind of resistance can be translated in a school setting to inspire children to fight against the difficulties of learning in order to achieve their goals, which is also a positive mindset." (Zc)

"Because most music teachers in schools are still stuck in their ways that refuse to accept such personalized music." (CC)

"But not all music teachers in Chinese schools know how to rap, and some of them may have a particular prejudice to think that hip-hop conveys rebellious and bad thoughts." (Biaodi)

Along with opportunities to develop musical abilities such as rhythm, and phasing, our participants overall agreed with Green (2017), that listening and copying recordings made by other hip-hop artists improved their levels of audiation and their informal music studies contributed to the development of a variety of derived abilities outside of the musical realm, including developing an ability to express themselves in different ways, and increased their vocabulary and overall language proficiency. They also agreed that hip-hop provided ample opportunities for developing their own compositions and opportunities to perform, with however, one key difference. Whereas in the more formal learning contexts they had personally experienced, composing and listening were seen as being distinct and subsequent parts of a stage process, the majority of our participants argued that in the case of hip-hop, the two processes occurred at more or less simultaneously. That is, whilst in more formal education settings, musical compositions are 'composed' or 'created', the 'performance' occurs as a separate entity, at a completely different time, chronologically and is often carried out by other musicians who attempt to portray/interpret the composition as close to the details represented in the score as is possible. However, in hip-hop, our participants argued that the composition and the performance tended to occur at more or less the same time and one could not take place without the other.

"Having written some of my own songs, I feel like I have become a lot more expressive. If you know me, you know that I'm a quiet person in real life. Rap is more like a safe place for me. I can be brave enough to express what I want to say through music, and I can also write songs when I'm down to let out my feelings." (Chengye)

"You have to compose as a performance - you cannot split the two things because composing is performing and performing is composing." (Zed eX eL)

However, participants also expressed a number of additional worries about the development of hip-hop music in school music education, considering the specificity of hip-hop music in the Chinese context and barriers to incorporating hip-hop into school music classes with the main issue being the rebellious nature of hip-hop misleading undiscerning children.

"As adults, we can make our own judgments and distinguish between lyrics and real life. However, children who are immature and lack judgment may not be interested in lyrics

that are full of principles. Maybe lyrics about drugs, sex, and money are more in line with their image of hip-hop." (D-ONE)

Although this was seen as a possible issue, participants also felt that an experienced teacher could resolve this issue and use this as additional teaching in good citizenship and also through exploring ways to express ideas and opinions in different ways by emphasising the clarity of the message but removing excess aggression. Similarly, participants in our sample rejected the arguments made by Jenkins (2011), that learners were frequently constrained by what was often perceived as a more simplistic style of music, and by Yu and Mao (2005) that peer-directed/group learning strategies led to the reception of inaccurate musical knowledge in the absence of experienced musicians or professional 'teachers'. The latter argument was emphatically rejected by virtue of the fact that members of the on-line learning community were in reality *"the most able and professional teachers"* by virtue of the fact that not only were they the most able and knowledgeable individuals in the style of hip-hop, but also and uniquely, a population of individuals who made their living through their hip-hop compositions.

Discussion

The large percentage of professional hip-hop musicians in our Chinese sample, developed their skills through informal music learning practices, initially by selecting music they identified with and linking up with others online. Echoing the findings from previous studies of informal music learning practices, (Markarian, 2012; Green, 2017) Chinese hip-hop artists repeatedly talked about self-directed learning as the most fundamental way in which they learned hip-hop music without a structured learning approach, or one individual, formal professional mentor. However, according to Kruse (2018), imitating earlier recordings violates "basic hip-hop norms", which refers to the need to keep the originality and personality of hip-hop music (p. 326). However, the hip-hop musicians in our study viewed listening and imitation as a means of honing their own musical abilities, and ensuring their originality. That is, the aim of listening and covering the music of other rappers was not to reproduce their work, but to perfect their own rapping capabilities, and also to identify ways in which they needed to be different and more original (Storr, 1960).

In addition, Kruse's hip-hop artists emphasized their uniqueness in their compositions, and highlighted the value of collaboration in order to boost their skills, our musicians showed a preference for creating music alone rather than cooperatively, placing a higher premium on self-expression in their creative work. It was noted that although musicians shared samples of their compositions with their internet community, the suggestions, criticism and advice they received was not necessarily fully adopted, in case their individual and unique style was affected, or as they termed it 'infected'. Hence, although collaboration was involved in process of learning, our musicians tended to "take comments from others on board selectively", which we argue in some ways is more in keeping with hip-hop's attitude of authenticity and self-expression.

Although all our participants stated that the music education, they had in school was insufficient to assist them in developing their talent for hip-hop, the musicians exhibited a desire for formal music education and a greater understanding of music theory. This could be attributable to the fact that, as Hess (2020) remarked, popular artists who primarily acquire knowledge through informal music learning practices realize that they need to study more about music theory in order to expand their musical skills. In this study, hip-hop musicians participating in post-production and musical arranging placed a premium on learning music theory under the direction of a master, with several of them acknowledging that without the guidance of experienced professionals on how

to learn and comprehend theoretical knowledge, they would have to invest additional time and effort to self-learn such musical knowledge. Hence, musical learning was seen by our participants as being most effective when the individual had a clear idea of what they wanted to learn, as opposed to being told what they should learn.

As previously stated, practically all of the hip-hop musicians in this study obtained knowledge and information about hip-hop music outside of the traditional educational setting through informal channels (i.e., searching for relevant music instructional videos on websites and/or communicating with peers). One key reason for this relates to the fact that the contemporary Chinese school music curricular does not include music which is popular with teenagers, in either the school books or instructional content (Ho, 2017; Lv, 2019). Three significant factors were identified from the interviews that provide possible reasons for limiting the inclusion of hip-hop music in school music lessons. First, some hip-hop lyrics include negative content relating to topics such as drugs, violence, and disruption of societal harmony. Add to this the flawed character of some individual rappers, and this is seen as setting a bad precedent for immature adolescents, inflicting them with physical and psychological harm (Gu & Qiu, 2018; Sullivan & Zhao, 2021). Second, our interviewees stated that music educators in compulsory education schools always lacked a thorough understanding of more popular styles and especially hip-hop music, an issue that resulted in a low degree of status and acceptability for the genre. This links with the argument that such a lack of knowledge can lead to a degree of bias towards music that is popular and beyond their knowledge (Law & Ho, 2015; Huang, 2020; Kuang, 2021).

However, as our participants experienced school music education in their role as a student, the outcomes are essentially presented from the perspective of the music learner rather than the educator. Thus, the argument advanced by Lamont et al. (2003) and Hu (2020) that the explanation for music teachers' lack of knowledge of popular music is that they are primarily exposed to classical music cannot necessarily be corroborated. However, this can possibly be linked to Kruse's (2018) view that music teachers need to keep their professional knowledge and skills up to date with music trends. Therefore, it can be inferred that school music teachers in China often lack attention to the current musical cultures and trends and constantly fail to develop and update their musical skills.

Although the musicians in this study lacked experience with official school music education, they all agreed all educators associated with music education should take formal school-based music education more seriously. They also emphasized the critical importance of school music education for children's physical and mental well-being but recommended shifting the format of the music classroom from the current teacher-led approach to one that is student-led, in which students are given more opportunity to learn their favorite genre of music. Additionally, considering the popularity of rap among the adolescent population, our participants recommended that music educators should take the chance to use hip-hop to model a positive mentality for young people, contributing to developing their individuality and self-awareness. This opinion is also shared by Markarian (2012) and Evans (2019) who argued that integrating localized hip-hop music (i.e., hip-hop songs that reflect the native culture and are composed in the native dialect) into the music classroom can not only increase students' classroom participation and enthusiasm for learning music but also facilitate the development of a sense of national self-confidence and cultural identity (Söderman & Folkestad, 2004; Liu, 2014). Although this point was not represented in the responses of the participants, this paper suggests that the benefits of 'localizing hip-hop' should be recognized by school music educators**.**

Conclusions

1. Within the context of China, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese hip-hop musicians with the aim of gaining a better understanding of their informal music learning strategies as well as their perspectives and attitudes about formal music education, which had been predominantly school-based. Drawing Green's (2017) summary for popular musicians' informal music learning practices and other academic research on how hip-hop musicians learn (Soderman & Folkestad, 2004; Markarian, 2012; Liu, 2014; Kruse, 2018), this study found a number of similarities and differences in informal music learning methods between hip-hop musicians and other popular musicians (primarily rock musicians). Like other popular musicians, the learning of hip-hop musicians in China generally occurred outside of the school environment. Our musicians were primarily self-taught through internet searches and watching relevant instructional videos rather than being guided by professionals or other experienced musicians in a structured and systematic way. They preferred to develop their skills by studying and practising independently, and were more concerned with the originality and authenticity of their music, and placed more emphasis on the expression of personal emotions and ideas in the process of songwriting.

2. We also found subtle differences between the findings of this study and previous studies on hip-hop music learning, which were mainly reflected in the musicians' learning process. Chinese hip-hop musicians generally considered imitating and covering other rappers' recordings to be an important process in their informal music learning. It both honed and sharpened their rapping skills and helped them to identify and develop their own unique style. By understanding what others did, or more importantly did not do, helped them to create their own distinct, individual style. They also argued that the acts of composing and performing where inter-dependent and simultaneous activities, that could not be separated chronologically. Thus, the ways and processes of informal music learning for Chinese hiphop artists could be best summarised as including: listening to, imitating and/or covering recordings, practising and composing alone, sharing or performing samples of their work with friends and seeking feedback, and selectively taking suggestions and perfecting them to create their unique individual style. Our musicians also felt that overall, music teachers in China did not take school music instruction seriously, as exemplified by ease with which music was frequently replaced by other academic subjects. Added to this was the outmoded content of music lessons, and the homogeneous teaching approach. While our musicians regretted their lack of greater access to music education in schools, they almost uniformly agreed that music education needed to be valued by educators given the way it could influence children's self-awareness and aesthetic abilities.

3. Hence, despite the pedagogical value and possible benefits of hip-hop music for young people, the practice of incorporating hip-hop music into

the school music classroom in the Chinese context has still to face numerous hurdles. First, some hip-hop music retains some characteristics that are incompatible with mainstream Chinese societal ideals. Second, most traditional music educators lack a thorough grasp of the genre, making it challenging to remove, or overcome prejudices and to update their musical experience and knowledge. Additionally, as with earlier studies on informal music learning among popular musicians (including hip-hop), this study's sample group was predominantly male. As a result, this study does not attempt to account for gender differences. Future research could investigate additional facets of this subject, such as how gender differences affect informal learning in hip-hop music and perceptions of formal music education, as well as additional musical roles not discussed in this paper (i.e., instrumentalists and DJs), in order to add variety and complexity to the scholarship on hip-hop music education. Finally, future research might examine feasible solutions to the hurdles to hip-hop music inclusion in school music classes identified in this study, with the goal of supporting hip-hop music development in China.

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