

PEDAGOGY AND MATERIALS FOR TEACHING PIANO TO
CHILDREN IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

by

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ABSTRACT
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This qualitative study compared the pedagogical teaching practices and piano materials used by five Chinese and two U.S. piano teachers. The teacher interviews were conducted in China and the United States based on semi-structured questions and then transcribed, translated as needed and interpreted for common themes. Interviews revealed details about specific pedagogical practices that are different based on the age of piano students, individual teacher ideas about selection of materials, and the impact of developing relationships and motivation for students. The piano materials revealed a lack of different material in the books published in the United States and China. The Chinese materials were identical in content except for the translation of written text into Chinese. Images in the books were also identical. Implications suggest that inclusion of Chinese musical material in the piano books would allow teachers to introduce finger patterns for pentatonic scales and also provide students with an introduction to the harmonic and stylistic characteristics of Chinese music in the early development of piano playing.

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CHAPTER ONE

Rationale

Early Chinese piano teaching activities, (approximately in the 19th century) were started by missionaries from foreign countries. Piano was used as an accompaniment instrument in the music curriculums taught by the missionaries. Clavichord, which was the predecessor of the modern piano, was brought back from European countries to China when the Yuan Dynasty crusaded outside the country. As the clavichord became widely used by the public, people also noticed the importance it had been given in music education. Thus since piano teaching in China has becoming important, the piano teaching materials used in this process are also an important element that should not be ignored.

Children in China were primarily using the John Thompson (1937) Modern Course for the Piano as their elementary piano materials before 1995. As time progressed, the *Thompson* piano books changed. In the early years of the *Thompson* materials, the written materials introduced the basic keyboard techniques and training methods both in a format useful to teachers and with pictures and descriptions specifically meant for children to read by themselves or with the help of their parents. The *Thompson* series of books were arranged by level of difficulty for children to choose and use as their playing developed. The influence from Europe, and later the United States, has opened up the teaching resources and pedagogical choices for teaching piano. The purpose of this study was to discuss and compare the change, development

and functions of piano materials for teaching piano to children. Piano teaching materials from China and the United States were considered.

Literature Review

Different approaches have been identified for teaching piano to young children (age between 4-8), including both group piano instruction and individual lessons. A study by Huang (2005) indicated that group piano classes were better for instruction than individual piano lessons. Cheah (2012) investigated specific models of teacher training for music education primarily focused on piano.

Some schools in China use group piano teaching for students based on the heritage of their own learning. Seldom do piano teachers communicate with each other across school programs or community centers to discuss shared experiences and ideas (Huang, 2005). There is also limited access to master classes for teachers, which would allow them to study with each other. The teaching results sometimes then, are not ideal (Huang, 2005). Piano students in China and the United States often change teachers throughout their development providing a variety of teaching methods.

In the group piano class, students still think independently, and solve problems by themselves as well as offering suggestions to each other. In an individual lesson, the student is dependent on their teacher for support, because group piano learning students could learn from each other during class, and they also have a chance to experience ensemble with each other (Huang, 2005). Group piano classes of 10-12 students are used in some Chinese university programs. Huang (2005) outlined examples of piano class teaching in school, and the methods suitable for school piano

teaching. In Nguyen (2007), "The Effects of Russian Piano Pedagogy on Vietnamese Pianists, with Comparisons of Effects of Vietnamese Piano Pedagogy and UK Piano Pedagogy", the author described differences in culture, teaching styles, and the effect of someone from one culture having to adopt the ways of another, either through colonization, or as in his case through being educated in a totally alien and foreign country: Russia. As in my case of piano study in the United States, the piano pieces used were from European countries or from American composers, and the local teachers taught me to play those pieces by sharing their thoughts, and background/history of the pieces. Their thoughts and perspectives on these works carried a level of depth that was different from Chinese teachers. If a piano teacher in China was unfamiliar with a piece, they would give a simple explanation of the music or leave it out of the repertoire altogether. Nguyen (2007) noted that when students trained in England, Vietnam, and Russia were compared, it was found that the students were influenced by social, political and educational aspects of the teaching environment. Study in the United States could provide knowledge of how to use Western material to teach young children including elements of history, technique, and the music theory included in the material.

Huang (2011) described the connection of Western music and Chinese thought in this way: "It is proposed that Western classical music finds transcultural affinities in Confucian traditional values of artful self-cultivation and virtue, while simultaneously acting as a signifier of modernity and individual creativity," (p.161). In this way, Western music is combined with some Chinese traditional background knowledge. Communist thought has changed regarding Western classical music. "One of the great ironies of

modern Chinese politics is that the Confucian identification of music as a traditional means of training citizens has endured... ” (Huang, 2011, p.166). In Chinese history, Confucianism has influenced educated people from many different parts of China, and in music study, it taught people beauty and methods for teaching and learning. In the *Li Ji* (Book of Rites), Confucian is quoted as saying: “Music produces pleasure which human nature cannot be without. The pleasure of music arises from the modulation of the sounds, and has its embodiment in the movements of the body...” This idea has been brought into music education by teaching students how to feel the music, and what to learn from music, not just learning how to play music, but allowing the spirit of beauty to spread from generation to generation.

Teacher relationships with children can have an impact on music learning.

Children are sensitive based on age and upbringing to the interactions with an adult.

Barrett & Baker (2012) found:

When asked to describe the qualities they thought a good teacher should have, James, for example, responded, ‘I don’t know. I never had much school or anything, really. So’. After a more detailed explanation of the question, he commented, ‘Ohhh, well, I like it when they’re straight-forward, and they’re not mucking around about things, you know. Yeah’...” “Toby further noted that a teacher must be ‘nice and polite and doesn’t growl, if you do something wrong, and just teaches you what you want to be taught’. (p.244)

Motivation to learn can come from many sources including parental desire, child interest and teacher support.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Piano in China has become an important area of learning for children. This is a comparative study of the piano method books, materials and pedagogy for teaching piano to children in China and the United States. Seven piano teachers were selected to participate in this qualitative study. The materials have been collected and examined to determine how technique is developed and when music theory and musicianship are introduced to children. The comparison of materials and methods will allow Chinese piano teachers to understand how their teaching is similar to or different from that of U.S. teachers.

Semi-structured interviews following the practice of Fontana & Frey (1994) were completed with each of the participants following the questions in the appendix. Interviews in China during the summer 2014, ranged in time from 25-45 minutes and were set in convenient locations. I interviewed Christina in an ice-cream store, Grazia in a small dessert bar in a shopping mall and Coco in my home. I interviewed Zheng and Mrs. Yang individually at the office in their school. These two teachers are in the same school, and they share the same office. These were all first time interviews. Then I used “WeChat” to ask each person some additional follow-up questions online once I returned to the United States. Further follow up questions to clarify random information for each person was achieved through “WeChat”. Interviews in the United States took place in the fall of 2014. I interviewed Mary for about 40 minutes, in her office, which is

also her teaching classroom. My twenty minute interview with Jane took place in Starbucks.

The interviews were audio recorded using an iPhone in both China and the United States. The five Chinese piano teachers and I then used “WeChat” text messages to connect with each other for follow up material. After interviewing the teachers in Chinese, I transcribed all the information into a notebook, and then I translated the interview information into English. The two teacher interviews in the United States were conducted in English and transcribed for content. Open coding based on the techniques of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) were used and margin notes created to identify themes. Piano materials were analyzed guided by techniques in Hodder (1994) to identify similarities and differences.

Participants

Chinese Piano Teachers

Christina is a piano teacher from Shijiazhuang city, and she has taught piano for 6 and a half years. Most of her students are 5-6 years old, the youngest being about 3 years old. She graduated from Yanshan University which is in Qinhuangdao city in Hebei province. She taught piano in Zhongheng Art School and Yunsheng music institution in Qinhuangdao city while in her university program. After graduating from university, she came back to Shijiazhuang city and taught piano with a primary focus on musicianship. She stated “I’m very strict to students. I have my own rules and attitude when I’m teaching piano lessons.” She uses *Mikrokosmos* from Bartok Bela, *Czerney*,

Zweistimmige Inventionen from Bach, the *Bastein* series, and *Beyer* to teach her students.

She chooses some new materials each year which she has found through colleagues or other recommendations. Her focus for most of the materials is the interests of the children. She really likes to use the *Bastein* series to teach piano because this material is very interesting to children. For instance, it introduces some knowledge about the “black keys” early in the material. This material series is very comprehensive including technical skills, music theory, basic music knowledge and sight reading. It also includes strong musicianship material.

Coco has only taught piano in Shijiazhuang city for 4 years. Her teaching also includes musicianship along with piano. She taught students from 4-6 years old, as well as some adults. She said: “some students think I’m strict, some think I’m gentle. I can change my way of teaching to adjust to different kinds of students.” She uses a variety of materials to teach piano including: *Tan er ge xue gang qin* (Playing children’s songs to learn piano), *Thompsons*, and *Duvernoy*. She thought the *Duvernoy* material was more interesting than Czerny 599, and very melodic.

She usually suggests her students take the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) grading examination as a form of competition every year. This is also a good opportunity for children to show their development in public. ABRSM has 8 levels, and is a difficult exam for piano, even at the 1st level. All the judges are from Western countries. The exams include: music theory, sight reading, and solfeggio. Most of the musical selections are contemporary pieces. The total score is based on 150, and

the qualified passing score is 100. This is more comprehensive in comparison to the piano exam in China. There are more students who take this exam in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Grazia taught piano and musicianship for 3 years. She taught a high school student some Improvised accompaniments to prepare for going to university. Besides teaching in Shijiazhuang, she also taught in her hometown of Qinhuangdao city. In the beginning, she taught 1st and 2nd grade elementary students who had some piano basics. Then she taught some higher level students and other students who had never learned music formally. She said she is like a chameleon. For some students that are not very confident, she will encourage them. On the other hand, she will also control some students who are over confident in their abilities. She uses *Lemoine*, *Czerny*, *Mikrokosmos* from Bela Bartok, the *Bastein* series, *Bach* and *Thompson*.

She has her own way of teaching piano without materials. She will teach children staff notation, and a "12345" finger position. These five notes, without "6 & 7" allow children to remain in basic hand position. She writes some simple melodies by herself to let children play using only the right hand. Then she chooses music from the *Thompson* materials to let children play the right hand part, while she plays a left hand part to accompany them. She also has children play descending scales from "17654" since they have the same hand position. She then chooses music which is full of technical skills for the children, because she thinks children thrive on the challenge.

Mrs. Yang taught piano for 9 years in Shijiazhuang city. She was a piano teaching assistant when she was in university. She also taught electronic class piano lessons at

university, and is currently teaching musicianship as well. Her students include 4-6 years old and some adults. She said: "I can be like a friend with my students. I always encourage them and emphasize technique practice to them. Her choices for materials include *Thompson, Bach, Quweigangqinjiqiao* and *Beyer*.

According to Mrs. Yang, "I remember the first time when I taught a child piano. He seldom talked with me. He often sat next to his mom, and he seemed like he didn't want to have any contact with me. I called his mom after class and I asked, 'Does he like me?' His mom told me, 'He likes you, and he really wants to learn piano with you. He's not very active, but he wants to try his best to do everything well.' Then next time when we had class together, I told him if he understood what I taught him in class, he could tell his mom that he got it. When he told his mom that he knew it (knowledge), I knew he understood the ideas. If some children are too active, I'll find some ways to let them be quiet sometimes. I want them to keep a balance of using their energy during piano learning. "

Zheng has taught piano for more than 7 years in Shijiazhuang city. She also teach music lessons in elementary schools, music appreciation lessons in high schools and some music classes for passing exams to go on to universities/colleges. Most of her students are elementary school students, and some are high school students, but adults are seldom. She said she is a patient teacher for teaching children piano. She is very friendly, and she told me she loves to study. She always keeps moving forward to achieve new goals in her life. The materials she used are *Czerny 849, Czerny 599, Beyer, the Bastein series, Lemoine, and Thompson*.

She thought learning music without a music atmosphere is like learning language without an appropriate language environment. For instance, Chinese students want to learn better English, so schools will find some foreigners from English speaking countries to teach them. I think the same is true for learning music. She said like some people thought some music institutions are a good environment for learning music, but she thought the institutions are only interested in money. She said: "I think the best music environment is from family and daily life. For example, I have a friend, his family members all work in hospitals (doctors or nurses), but they all love music. Sometimes I think they are better than some musicians at understanding music. There's one big CD wall in their apartment. They listen to music every day, and that is the first thing they do after work each day. I think their children must be talented in music. So when I teach children piano, I will make piano lessons more musical and interesting for them. I also will suggest to children's parents that they make a music atmosphere as much as possible at home for their children.

Zheng and Christina were my high school classmates who I knew had gone on to university for music education. Grazia was introduced to me by Christina who is her current colleague. Mrs. Yang was a current colleague of Zheng. Coco was introduced to me by my grandmother and became a friend who I knew taught piano.

United States Piano Teachers

The two American teachers were introduced to me by my advisor. She knew both had been teaching piano but for very different numbers of years.

Mary teaches students as young as K5 up through adults in their 60s, but the average age is 7 years old up through high school. She also teaches piano to undergraduate music majors at a university. She has taught piano since she was an undergraduate student which is now more than 30 years. She used to live in Washington D.C., where she spent most of her early adult life, but now she is teaching piano in the Midwest. Besides piano teaching, she also teaches composition, improvisation and music theory within her piano lessons. She has used the *John Thompson* materials but now uses *Bastien, My first piano adventures*, and *Alfred Premier Method* to teach. She also uses Hanon and Czerny exercises as well as classical piano repertoire.

She said the materials nowadays are really different from what she used when she was a younger teacher. Every note had finger numbers above them and students were expected to memorize all the music theory that appeared in the materials even if they did not understand what that meant or if they did not yet know how to read music. When the music got harder, they sometimes did not know how to play it. It progressed very fast which was not good for less talented students. But now, in music materials, they encourage critical thinking through introduction of theory concepts. She also thought “they move at a slower pacing than the method book that I used when I was a kid.” And she also thought “Kids are more capable of doing things. Kids can do more things even than the method book thinks they can. The method books got easier, slower, but in some way they got better. They use multiple keys to let kids to move on the keyboard a little more, not just on Middle C.”

Jane currently has 6 students, two of whom are 16 years old right now, and the other four students range in age from 7 to 15 years old. She has taught piano for 4 years. She started in 2010 while she was completing her music education degree. She teaches choir classes at an area high school besides piano teaching. Within piano lessons, she also taught music theory to her students. The materials she is using currently are *Faber and Faber Piano Adventures* pack. It includes lesson book, technique book, performance book and theory book. Another book for warm-up and exercise is called *A Dozen a Day* (Burnam).

She compared the differences of piano learning between high school students and young children. She said for her high school students, she can put more responsibility on them compared to young children: "Put a little more responsibility on them (high school students)... They are older and more mature. Sometimes it is hard (to teach high school students) when they don't have good practice this week, and they come to the lesson unprepared. It's really disappointing because you know they are capable to do it... that's why you still do it." It is obvious to see that she put more expectation on older students. For young children, if they come back to lessons after a week of practice without playing very well, she may encourage parents to guide them more on practicing piano during the week. Because they are young, they are not always able to take responsibility for practicing compared to older children.

CHAPTER THREE

Seven piano teachers became the interview subjects for this study. They shared information about their background, teaching practice, and piano materials. This chapter includes information from the teachers, which helped to outline a comparison of these ideas.

Piano Teachers from China

These are the five Chinese piano teachers that I interviewed in China during the summer of 2014. They all shared their own experiences of piano teaching and their music philosophy. They were all talking about how to choose materials for different levels of children.

Mrs. Yang

Mrs. Yang is a piano teacher from the northern part of China who is in her early 30's. She has taught piano for 9 years. She was a piano teaching assistant when she was in university, at the same time, she taught music theory class and solfege during school time. She also taught electronic piano in a university cultural program for older men. When she became a formal piano teacher, she taught students between 5 to 7 years old, and also some adults in individual lessons. Right now, she is primarily teaching students between 4 to 13 years old and some students who are preparing to go to art universities. When she has time at school, she likes to share ideas with colleagues about how to choose piano materials for her students. She found most of the time she was thinking about materials related to elementary levels for her students, as well as thinking about choosing some Chinese piano music. She said:

After learning 儿童钢琴初步教程 (*translate: Children's Piano initial tutorial volume*) and *The Thompson's*, I suggest students to learn some *Bach* and *Beyer*. Also 趣味钢琴技巧 (*Fun piano skills revision*) is a good choice. (Most of the time) I'll choose materials that I think are good for children to learn.

She also has some of her own opinions about what kind of materials are more suitable for children to use. She said:

I think first of all, the materials should be interesting for children to use, for example, colorful pictures, interesting photos that they use in the materials. Secondly I think materials should have different levels for different students. For children, it should be easier and good connections between each part in materials or between materials. It should let children feel that they can reach their goals after making their effort of learning. Thirdly, the annotations in the materials (especially for children) should be more detailed and accurate. It's really important for the beginners to learn piano. They shouldn't learn mistakes at their first step.

She also feels the materials directly contribute to technique. She said:

When I am using materials to teach, I'll focus on technique practice and basic skills practice for every lesson. For instance, I need children to concentrate more on his/her palms when they practice, then I'll choose some pieces to support their hands to stand on the piano, such as chords or intervals practice or some music including some of these parts. Starting from small intervals (like thirds) then get larger intervals that they can handle. After chords or intervals practice, I'll let my students do some scales practice to reinforce with each practice. If you want to get better about your piano study, you should always let yourself slow down when you practice your basic techniques, that's what I always told my students. And I always choose some materials or music that I think I want them to practice and improve their piano skills.

Mrs. Yang taught piano technique during her class, but she also shared some ideas about how to get music theory involved in her lessons:

During my piano lessons, I'll do music theory at the same time. I won't teach individual music theory lessons, but I'll base it on each student if they have some theory problems when they practicing piano. For example, some students will have piano exams within a couple days, and they need some scale practice, I'll

let them start from different keys (tones) to let them memorize what they are playing, then they will get more familiar about scales in different tones. Music theory needs to be repeated all the time, it's not easy to learn, I always repeat in my lesson about what I taught from last time, like key signature, sometimes you have to say several times then they (students) will notice and correct the key signature problems.

Ms. Yang does not recommend to her students that they listen to CDs or recordings before they start to learn a new piece, nor does she play a piece completely for them in the beginning. She prefers that her students learn pieces by themselves at first.

Christina

Christina is a piano teacher from the northern part of China, where she has taught piano for 6 and a half years. She was teaching piano in piano studios and some music institutions after she graduated from university in China. She also taught music theory and solfeggio. Most of her students are approximately 5-6 years old, the youngest being about 3 years old. She said: "I'm very strict to my students. I have my own rules to teach piano."

Christine described her approach to a lesson with her students. She said:

I think every piano teacher should have their own methods to teach piano. I recommend piano teachers use *Bastein* (to teach piano). The arrangement in the book is fantastic. I will follow what is in the material to have my piano lessons. *Bartok* (Small Universe) is novel compared to what I used (*The Thompson's*) when I was learning piano in my childhood.

Without specifically being asked about piano materials, Christine shared wealth of ideas about the materials she uses. "In *The Thompson's*, students will learn 'What's Middle C?' and 'Where it is on the keyboard?' in **Lesson 1**. In *Bartok Lesson 1*, it will guide students

to know about the piano, (it is) to know about this instrument. The perspective is very different.” New ideas are emerging on the sequence of teaching ideas for early piano development. Christine continued to describe the *Bartok* materials.

It tells students the arrangement of black and white keys on the piano. And it started with black keys to introduce in the book. Children will find the black keys are in groups on the keyboard. They find that is interesting, and it is much easier for them to memorize the position of each note on the keyboard. I found it is also helpful to them to remember the white key notes.

The new materials make it easier for children to learn the notes on piano, and to remain focused while concentrating on piano lessons every time. “After this process, I will teach key signatures and tempo and so on. They are all in the book, beginning from easy levels to teach children.” Current piano materials tend to be designed with more musicianship skills in mind. Christine described:

There are 5 packs in *Bastein*, each one has 4 sections, which are: *Basic*, *Technique*, *Theory* and *Performance*. I use all of them each time in my piano lessons. For instance, if I will teach *note groups* on the keyboard, it asks children to play one note on the piano. I will teach them note names of different notes in music theory, and also teach them how to play it. I should use the *Technique* book to teach children how to play them. The four books are always packaged together when teachers use them to teach piano. It’s a new material in my city; it’s not as popular as *The Thompson’s*.

Christina likes the new concept free movement in hand-shape compared to the old way of holding the hand as if it held a ball, as she learned when she was young. Today, teachers require children to keep their hands relaxed when they are playing piano.

Zheng

Zheng has taught piano and musicianship in Shijiazhuang City for more than 7 years. Most of her students are from elementary school (5-10 years old). She also taught some adults piano, but it is very rare. She said: “Many students thought I was repeating the same questions too much during class. I think this is part of my personality (laughs). I have a lot of patience for my students and I like to study myself as well.”

Children are able to relate music to their own life experiences to understand what a composer was trying to create. Zheng finds: “It’s very important [for children] to distinguish different music styles. The most obvious difference between Chinese and Western music is mode. They can tell the difference from listening to music. No matter Chinese music or Western music, they all come from life.” Composers around the world use similar ideas to create music:

For instance, *waltz* comes from western culture; there is no *waltz* in China. They need teachers to explain this to them. For Chinese dancing, music is *Yang Ge*, normally *Yang Ge* is two beats or four beats. That’s the difference of dance music between Western countries and China.

Zheng also gave an example called *Title Music*. She said:

This kind of music has very clear purpose for students to practice. For example, *Ju Hao Xiang (Bugle Rang)* from the *Thompson’s* has pictures to illustrate to students. Most students won’t think that *Bugle* sounds like singing with melodies. Teachers need to explain or play some related videos for some students who are not familiar about Bugle Ringing.

According to Zheng and others, learning music is similar to learning another language. The support and atmosphere for learning is important. Parents and families are a key component:

I have a friend, whose family members are all doctors, but they all like music very much. Sometimes I felt they knew more music than the people who learned music with me. They have a CD wall at their house (a side of wall at their home is full of CDs). The first thing for them every day is listening to music.

Zheng feels the atmosphere she creates for teaching then is helpful for children to learn music. She uses various ideas in her teaching and also suggests parents create some music atmosphere at home for their children.

Zheng thought building a musical environment was very important for children to learn piano. She compared learning music with learning a language, and she felt they are very similar. People need a rich environment to learn language as well as music.

Grazia

Grazia has been a piano teacher for about 3 years, and grew up in the northern part of China. She taught piano both in her hometown, as well as another city in northern China. When I interviewed her, she was teaching in Shijiazhang. In the beginning of her career, she was teaching students from 2nd and 3rd grade basic piano. As her piano skills improved, she started to teach some older students whose piano level was higher than the students whom she taught before, and she also started to teach some students who had never learned music before. Grazia said: "I think I'm like a chameleon, I'll encourage students who have no confidence, and also find some ways to

find a balance for some students who have too much confidence to make mistakes when they are playing piano.”

She identified pedagogical learning that had come from the school where she studied but she also noted: “I have my own teaching style. First of all, I’ll simply introduce the staff to my students, and then I’ll introduce ‘12345’ the five basic notes to them without ‘6 & 7’ (so it won’t require change in finger positions), and also I’ll teach them how to count lines and spaces on the staff.” This provides the basis for technique. She added: “Sometimes I wrote short melodies by myself (only for right hand), after students were familiar with how to play five notes with their right hand. I also pick some pieces from *The Thompson’s* to only have the student play the left hand part, or sometimes I will play the right hand to accompany them.” The technique then is similar for the left hand development. As students progress then Grazia stated: “I’ll always choose some hard pieces for my students, especially for young students who like a challenge.”

Part of teaching is matching the music to the students. Grazia told me: “I’ll choose different styles of pieces for students who have different personalities. For some students who are very active in class, I’ll choose some pieces that suit their characteristics, otherwise it’s very hard for them to concentrate on class.” She gave some ideas about how she teaches piano saying:

At first, I’ll talk about music terminology, and then I’ll analyze what mode the piece is in with students, because major and minor pieces have a different feeling when you hear them. Then we’ll talk about the beat within the piece, and some special rhythmic mode in each piece. I also need students to sing melodies when they are playing. It really helps them for playing piano.

Analyzing the piece allows the student to be aware of what is needed to play it. She said: “Sometimes the right hand is staccato, and the left hand is legato. It’s easier if both hands move in the same direction, or to the same rhythm. That’s why I suggest students practice both hands separately.” This is particularly important for pieces such as *Minuet* by *Bach*. “I may also suggest students add a note for pause in music” which helps to develop musicianship and expression.

Grazia said that there are some disadvantages to using the Orff Teaching Methods; one of the disadvantages is the use of *Ta Ti* rhythmic syllables as a teaching method. Children in music classrooms can learn rhythms in this way, and it may also be easier for children to memorize rhythms, however this is not always good for piano teaching. *Ta Ti* rhythmic syllables can be hard to use to describe some difficult rhythms during piano study, and it also may take children a long time to internalize the actual rhythmic feeling once they stop using the syllables.

Coco

Coco taught piano for 4 years, while also teaching music theory. She only taught piano in her hometown Shijiazhuang City. Besides teaching students between 4 to 6 years old, she taught adults. She said: “Some students thought I’m very gentle, some students thought I’m very strict to them when I was teaching. I’ll adjust my teaching style to different students.”

Coco gave some examples about how to teach music theory during her piano lessons. She said:

We have music enlightened class in my city. They will use *Orff Teaching Methods* to teach music. But there is one problem that is after learning *Orff*, students will feel bored learning piano. Because children won't be asked too much during *Orff* study, (children mostly are playing music games during *Orff* classes), they don't have too much requirement for children to do. I think if I knew more about *Orff Teaching Methods*, I could use more during my piano lessons. For example, 'mi' is the kitten living on the first floor. They will draw *staff* on the ground to let children to find notes.

She also shared: "I think learning piano is not only technique study, it also should add musicianship study in the learning process." This could be facilitated by adding some of the Orff techniques to practice. Parents are often interested in having their children learn piano for fun, so selection of material is critical. Coco stated: "Some difficult materials are only suited for some students who want to learn. Many children like to learn fast and interesting pieces" however this can create technical issues that require children to work on *Etudes* in every lesson. This allows for finger practice children need to build technique. She said: "They can start with simple *children's songs* to find pitch. I suggest children sing while they play at first. After half to one year, I'll add *Etudes* for them." This allows for developmental progress. Coco found teaching beginning students the hardest, because it involved not only teaching musical knowledge, but also the starting point for technical experience.

She also explained: "I think no matter what materials teachers use, the key point is to let children trust you and build good communication with them and parents." Children adjust to individual teaching styles as they progress.

Coco also supports her students toward success with the piano grading examination in China when she said: "China every year has piano grading examination. It

is just like a piano competition. Learning piano with me, I will give them (the students) the opportunity to show themselves that they can do it.”

Summary of Chinese Teachers

The piano teachers from China all presented different perspectives on teaching from hand-shape to learning environment, and including specific ideas about teaching methods. Their ideas, while similar in some cases, are all unique and impressive, bringing up very important points in piano lessons for children.

United States Piano Teachers

These are the two American piano teachers who shared their ideas based on their piano teaching experiences. They represent very different backgrounds in years of experience and choices for their teaching.

Jenny

Jenny has been teaching piano for a very long time (approximately 30 years). She has been teaching since she was an undergraduate student. She used to live in Washington D.C. where she spent her early adult life. She said that students were different there— they were more serious about learning piano and they needed really good studios. She taught children as young as Kindergarten when they started school up adults (some are in their 60s). The most common age is 7 years old through high school (7-18 years old).

She explained how to choose materials for her students by saying: “I choose materials based on the age of the students, and whether the students show a lot of musical aptitude or not. Generally I tend to use a lot of rote listening like Suzuki. I do use

a lot of ear training. With the little kids like 5 years old, I show them where the keys are on the keyboard and we will figure out what song they hear.” Jenny would sing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* to the child and they would play it back. “Any little song (like *Bingo*, *Mary Had A Little Lamb*) they know, we learn by ear first, and then I introduce them to reading it.” At that point, Jenny might move a student to the *Bastein Method 1* which is very popular for young beginners or *My First Piano Adventures*, by Randy and Nancy Faber for the really young beginners.

As students progress such as “when a child reaches 7 years old, I’ll use the traditional methods. I usually use 1 of 3 methods that on the market now, most is *Alfred’s Premier Piano Course*. I like that one because it moves at a very good pace. The music is excellent and it has the CDs.” Many of the newer methods books include material on CD for students to use while learning. “I love using the CDs with young beginners because it trains their ears. Also they can listen to the songs and practice rhythms with the CD. They can clap along, then play without the CD, but it gives them some good performance models.” The inclusion of CDs is a relatively new idea:

For a long time people thought that children shouldn’t listen to the music before they play, I just don’t believe that. If you listen to the music, obviously you relate to the music on that page. Old methods were based on reading music; new methods in US all have a CD, that let you listen to the songs, and the accompaniment. I use the lesson book, theory book, and performance book, or some of the children like the classical themes book or pop if they like *Disney*.

Jenny noted that the pace of piano teaching materials has changed since she was young. Materials now are much slower paced which is better for children with less dedication. She noted however, “I think we’ve gone too far the other way, kids are

capable of more things than the method books think they can.” While the methods books got easier and slower, in other ways they improved. The materials use multiple key signatures to let kids move on the keyboard beyond Middle C position:

When I was a kid, I learned they had numbers on every single note like Old *John Thompson*. It’s awful even if a child didn’t know how to read, they just learned the pieces by reading numbers. When the music got harder, they didn’t know how to play it.

Jenny has some of her own opinions about the difference between children and adults learning piano. She said: “Children have no expectations. They don’t know when they are doing poorly. Adults are very cautious, and they don’t like to be doing poorly. When people get older, their muscles get tight, and won’t play very well. Children are very adaptable.” These issues create as much challenge for the teacher as for the student. “Adults always will say ‘I know it should sound better, and I don’t know why’” because they understand what it should be. “I’ll tell my adult students ‘why don’t you just stop talking about why you are doing so bad, and just sit down and play’. If they stop talking like that, then they do better.” Adults need encouragement just like children but they also need to be challenged. “Little kids will try anything, but my adult students are very reluctant to create anything.” Jenny tells them that wrong notes are just more creative when trying to compose or improvise. “Adults also need rewards though I don’t know what kind of reward it should be. One of my adult students said ‘Can I have a sticker?’ when she saw I have stickers on my wall for kids. Everybody loves rewards.” Adults grasp ideas of music theory much easier than kids, “because they have a greater intellectual capacity.”

Jenny compared the materials that she used before to those she uses now. She said: “The materials move at a slower pacing than the method book that I used when I was a kid. It used to move very fast which is not good for less talented students.” She also added: “The method book used multiple keys to let children move on the keyboard a little more, not just on Middle C. When I was a kid, I learned that they (keys) had numbers on every single note.”

Jane

Jane has taught piano for 4 years, starting in 2010. She has students from 7 years old to 16 years old. She said: “The highest level of my students is 3A (in the piano book series). I don’t have a lot of advanced students.”

She gave me an example of how she taught piano by saying:

I use *Piano Adventures* levels to teach, one for technique, another for lessons. Theories go with each song of the lesson book to work on the technique. The theory and the lesson book are at the same pace. The performance book has units that work on the new aspect of piano. They all follow along together. I’ll go over all of the books within a lesson. I teach half hour lessons once a week.

Jane works to match the child’s personality and interests with the music she selects. For one child she said: “A third grade boy does theater, sports. He is very outgoing. He likes fast songs. We go back and forth. He picks one piece then my turn, (he always picks the fast one).” Other children have very different needs. Another of Jane’s students, “a middle school girl, is very calm. She’s working on a song called ‘ice-dancing’. The song is very *legato* and smooth. You can see the personality from different types of music they play. Teachers should make balance and challenge for them.” This is her

opinion about picking different music for different children but she has found it to be successful.

Jane also had some ideas about the differences between teaching adults and children. She said: “Some high school students I can put more responsibility and expectation on them compared to young children. Sometimes it is hard teaching older and more mature students if they come to the lesson unprepared, because you know they are capable.”

Summary of U.S. Piano Teachers

The comparison of these two American teachers also gave two different points of view for piano teaching. This is very helpful both for teachers and students to consider in the process of piano study. They made some comparison between adults and children, and also compared materials from older times to more contemporary materials. Both contributed very valuable point of view for music educators to consider.

Chapter Summary

The teachers I interviewed both from China and the United States were all different in terms of their own personalities and the impact this had on teaching choices. The primary ideas I sought to identify related to their choices of different materials for children and how they used those materials for different age groups. They were all using different methods to teach including traditional music education ideas like *Orff*, and individual as well as group teaching. Many identified children’s enjoyment of the material as key to a child’s success. Choice and use of different materials showed some

similarities including the choice of the same materials for different age groups both in China and the United States.

CHAPTER FOUR

In this section, I will discuss the piano materials that teachers identified as those being used to teach different age groups of children. Questions guiding the material analysis include: 1) How the material is arranged, 2) How the materials are chosen to suit the needs of children's learning, 3) How elements of music theory and technique are addressed, and 4) How materials have changed over the years of a teacher's career.

Comparative Materials Published in Chinese and English

Bela Bartok *Mikrokosmos*

One set of piano materials that was available and being used in both China and the U.S. was *Bela Bartok, Mikrokosmos*. The piano materials are published in both Chinese and English editions, which show students basic techniques for piano. All of the materials give examples for children to practice including: melodies, dotted notes, alternate hands, parallel/contrary motion and reflection, change of position for hands, and imitation and counterpoint/inversion. Both books utilize different musical modes with some exercises and canon practice. Other than the written language material in the book, these two sources are identical for musical content.

John Thompson

John Thompson books were also available published in both the U.S. and China. In the material, every single piece has one picture, which is sometimes a line drawing or cartoon-like image (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Basic Page from Thompson Book in Chinese



Other pages such as Figure 2 include pictures that indicate hand positions for students to learn/imitate.

Figure 2. Thompson Book with ascending steps.



Different musical pieces have different goals in the Thompson materials. Some are specifically designed for children to learn music techniques, for instance, *what is middle C?* or *Where is it on the piano?* (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Representative material in the Thompson Chinese edition



Each piece also has an accompaniment (see lower left corner of Figure 4) that teachers can play with children or peers can play together when they are practicing. It also includes exercises for children to practice after every few lessons.

Figure 4. Accompaniment material



The content in both the English and Chinese editions is the same, with the Chinese edition simply translated from the English.

Bastien *Piano Basics*

Bastien Piano Basics includes 4 parts: *technic*, *performance*, *piano* and *theory*. In the *Technic* part, the material shows some basic skills for children to learn and practice, which can then be applied to the rest of the book which is music pieces. The approach seems to suggest learning technic first, and then using it for playing many different kinds of music. The first few pages only give children notes without placing them on staff (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Examples of contoured notation not on the music staff



The same idea is found in each of the *performance*, *piano* and *theory* books. Compared to *Thompson's*, the similarity with *Bastein* is that some pieces also have piano accompaniment parts to play together with children (bottom of Figure 6). *Bastein*,

however is more suitable for young children to use because it has more colorful pictures and the explanation parts are more specific for children to understand. The Chinese edition is also simply translated from the American edition without any changes to the materials in the book.

Figure 6. Bastein material with colorful pictures and piano accompaniment



Additional Teaching Materials from China and the U.S.

Some other materials either in Chinese editions or English editions were analyzed including *A Dozen a Day* which covers technical exercises. According to the author, these exercises are “to be done each day before practicing” (Burnam, 1957). Burnam states “the purpose of this book is to help develop strong hands and flexible fingers. Do not try to learn the entire first dozen exercises the first week you study this book! Just learn two or three exercises” (p.2).

My First Piano Adventure for the Young Beginner (year) contains more music theory for children to use in developing their knowledge about music. It has a lot of practice material like games, which can bring a lot of fun to children’s learning.

Some additional translated materials are found in Chinese editions such as *Duvernoy* and *Lemoine*. They are new materials for children to use in building technical skills compared to *Czerny* and *Bach*, which have been used extensively over the years. The materials include techniques for finger practice. The level of these books appears to be very similar, although they would be harder for beginners to use.

Summary

Piano teaching materials that are being used in the Chinese studios of the teachers I interviewed are translations of materials developed in the United States. In most cases, even the images are the same. None of the materials appear to have been developed specifically for Chinese students.

CHAPTER FIVE

The purpose of this study was to discuss and compare the change, development and functions of piano pedagogy and materials for teaching piano to children in China and the United States. Interviews were conducted in China and the U.S. with piano teachers and analyzed for common themes. The piano materials these teachers utilized were also reviewed for evidence of pedagogical approach and content.

Through the interviews, different ideas were shared by the teachers about their teaching approach and some similarities were identified. Teacher personality appeared to impact some of the material choices that were made which highlights ideas from Barrett & Baker, 2012. One teacher found it effective to write some simple melodies for children to play to supplement areas of published materials particularly to teach improvisation. Some teachers had a lot of experience in teaching over many years which allowed them to share many of the materials they used and some really valuable advice for teaching and choosing materials.

Christina and Ms. Yang have similar ideas about choosing teaching materials for young children (Cheah, 2012). They both think the materials should be interesting and include colorful pictures for children. Their basic ideas are choosing materials to make children feel like they are playing music games when learning piano lessons. They also think piano pieces should be easy enough for children to handle playing.

There are also some differences between these two teachers. Ms. Yang thought keeping the shape of the hands was really important when playing piano, but Christina

said in her school (the place where she works right now) there is no rules for hand shape. She believed the hands should be free and relaxed when playing the piano.

These two teachers have different personalities, are different ages and have different experiences with teaching piano (Cheah, 2012; Huang, 2005). They also have similarities about piano teaching based in Chinese heritage (Nguyen, 2007), and the need for piano to be fun for young children. They want children to enjoy learning piano. For both, their choice of piano pieces are mostly western compositions for children to learn. They both consider since piano is a western instrument, therefore the pieces for piano should have really good development in western sound (Huang, 2011).

In piano teaching, the teachers were all using different methods. Grazia thought *Orff* Methods did not suit children for learning notes at the beginning stage, but Coco said she would try to learn some *Orff* Methods to use in her piano class in the future. She liked the approach and felt it was really interesting for students to learn music. The Chinese teachers in the study all chose the same materials across different age groups as the American teachers. This may reflect what is available or what is being used in piano pedagogy programs.

Contributions to Music Education

The basic idea that I learned from this research study is the important considerations for choosing piano materials for children, especially for young beginners. I was interested to find that the comparison of materials between Chinese and Western piano books, revealed that the Chinese materials are still “Western materials”, because people in China have simply translated the English into Chinese for children to learn.

Teachers and parents can easily purchase these materials from music stores in China. These materials represent the most basic and important knowledge for children to learn, however they do not include any traditional Chinese pieces. Everything related to the piano materials for children in China is coming from western countries to simply be translated. In my own experience of learning piano, I played some Chinese piano materials but those materials appear to only be available for more advanced students to use. This seems to provide an opportunity for future development of piano teaching materials that would include traditional Chinese melodies.

As I return to teaching piano in China, I hope to focus on choosing both western and Chinese piano materials for children. This lack of traditional Chinese materials for children eliminates an opportunity for Chinese children to learn about the musical elements of their own culture's music (Nguyen, 2007). Adding compositions in traditional pentatonic scales will be helpful for children to develop a sense of the place of the piano in Chinese music. At the same time, I would encourage Chinese composers to create works specifically accessible to young players in both China and the U.S.

Since ancient times in China, children's songs were written for people to sing, but not specifically for the piano. Currently, children in China primarily learn western pieces for piano. It is unclear why Chinese music is not included with western music for children to learn piano particularly when they first start. It may be that Chinese music educators believe piano is one of the western instruments, and since classical music already has a long history in western countries, it provides a strong basis for learning piano.

A challenge to teaching western music is a lack of knowledge by many Chinese of western history or culture (Nguyen, 2007). Explanation of harmonic and stylistic elements for unfamiliar traditions limits the accessible repertoire for piano teachers. Limited or inaccurate information has been shared with students out of a lack of specific background in Western traditions.

For the five Chinese piano teachers, they all have chosen more western music than Asian or traditional Chinese music for children to learn, because they identified the piano as a western instrument. The teachers chose western music because it has a long history, so the whole classical music system is comprehensive in material.

Both American and Chinese piano teachers were asked the question about choosing materials to teach and seeking new materials for teaching piano. Zheng described the music environment and atmosphere as really important for learning piano. Children especially, need time to get to know a teacher and build relationship. Engaging with a music atmosphere can stimulate brain development for young children. Within a music environment, children could learn music by themselves, feel emotionally connected to music and improvising. Other teachers specific techniques such as *Orff*, and described differences between teaching adults and children.

Decisions by Chinese piano teachers about not using traditional Chinese pieces might center on a lack of exposure by former teachers, or decisions by school administration for teachers who work in school-based programs. As future materials are developed, I suggest that Chinese composers should create more Chinese piano pieces for children to use.

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Appendix A

1. What kinds of piano literature materials will you choose to use with children?
And why?
2. How will you choose your materials? On what do you based your decision?
3. Are you able to choose your materials or do you work with other teachers with whom you must discuss this decision?
4. What technique knowledge do you hope to find in the materials? And how will you use it to teach students?
5. How will you use the materials to teach? Are they the primary pedagogical source or do you combine ideas when you are teaching?
6. What's the balance of western music and Chinese music in the materials you use?
How are they arranged?
7. When is the last time you considered new materials that might be available for teaching?
8. What's the difference and similarities between materials nowadays to the materials you used when you were young?
9. Normally when do you introduce music theory to children?
10. Will you use particular ideas to teach particular students? Could you give an example?