

Performing Arts

Original article

UDC 786, 78.071.2

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-1-171-203>

EDN [YFBIPU](#)



**The influence of sociocultural dynamics
on contemporary Chinese piano performance
and repertoire**



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Abstract. Contemporary piano performance in China has developed within a complex sociocultural environment shaped by both traditional Chinese musical heritage and Western classical traditions. This study investigates how sociocultural dynamics influence the performance practices, repertoire choices,

and creative interpretations of contemporary Chinese pianists. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve professional Chinese piano performers with diverse levels of experience. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis, which resulted in six key themes reflecting the role of social environment, cultural literacy, traditional Chinese aesthetics, Western musical influence, performance strategies, and sociocultural challenges encountered by pianists. The findings reveal that sociocultural contexts strongly shape piano performance by influencing musicians' interpretive approaches, emotional expression, and repertoire development. Participants emphasized that Chinese cultural traditions such as folk melodies, pentatonic scales, operatic elements, and the concept of artistic imagery remain deeply embedded in contemporary piano performance. At the same time, Western classical traditions continue to dominate formal training and repertoire, requiring performers to develop an understanding of Western historical and stylistic contexts. While existing literature often portrays Chinese musical culture as restrictive toward creativity, the perspectives of professional pianists in this study challenge that assumption by highlighting a dynamic process of cultural fusion and artistic innovation. However, participants also identified challenges such as limited access to Western musicological resources and difficulties interpreting Western stylistic conventions. Overall, the findings demonstrate that contemporary Chinese piano performance is not merely a replication of Western traditions but a transcultural artistic practice shaped by the interaction of Chinese heritage, global musical influences, and evolving sociocultural environments.

Keywords: piano performance in China, sociocultural environment, Chinese musical culture, Western stylistic conventions, performance, composition, innovation, music, professional

For citation: Cai, L., & Liu, J. (2026). The influence of sociocultural dynamics on contemporary Chinese piano performance and repertoire. *Contemporary Musicology*, 10(1), 171–203. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-1-171-203>

Исполнительское искусство

Научная статья

**Влияние социокультурных факторов
на современное китайское фортепианное
исполнительство и репертуар**

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Аннотация. Современное фортепианное исполнительство в Китае развивалось в сложной социокультурной среде, сформированной как традиционным китайским музыкальным наследием, так и западными классическими традициями. В статье рассмотрено, как социокультурная динамика влияет на исполнительскую практику, выбор репертуара и творческие интерпретации современных китайских пианистов. Используя качественный исследовательский подход, авторы провели частично структурированные интервью с двенадцатью китайскими пианистами-профессионалами, обладающими различным уровнем опыта. Данные интервью проанализированы с помощью тематического анализа, в результате которого были выделены шесть ключевых тем, отражающих роль социальной среды, культурной грамотности, традиционной китайской эстетики, западного

музыкального влияния, исполнительских стратегий и социокультурных проблем, с которыми сталкиваются пианисты. Результаты показывают, что социокультурный контекст сильно влияет на фортепианное исполнение, воздействуя на интерпретационные подходы музыкантов, эмоциональное выражение и развитие репертуара. Участники подчеркнули, что китайские культурные традиции, такие как народные мелодии, пентатонные гаммы, оперные элементы и концепция художественной образности, остаются глубоко укорененными в современном фортепианном исполнительстве. В то же время западные классические традиции продолжают доминировать в формальном обучении и репертуаре, требуя от исполнителей понимания западного исторического и стилистического контекста. Хотя существующая литература часто изображает китайскую музыкальную культуру как ограничивающую творчество, взгляды профессиональных пианистов в данном исследовании оспаривают это предположение, подчеркивая динамичный процесс культурного слияния и художественных инноваций. Однако участники также указали на такие проблемы, как ограниченный доступ к западным музыковедческим ресурсам и трудности в интерпретации западных стилистических норм. В целом результаты показывают, что современное китайское фортепианное исполнение — это не просто воспроизведение западных традиций, а транскультурная художественная практика, формируемая взаимодействием китайского наследия, глобальных музыкальных влияний и развивающейся социокультурной среды.

Ключевые слова: фортепианное исполнительство в Китае, социокультурная среда, китайская музыкальная культура, западные стилистические нормы, исполнение, композиция, инновации, музыка, профессионализм

Для цитирования: Цай Л., Лю Ц. Влияние социокультурных факторов на современное китайское фортепианное исполнительство и репертуар // Современные проблемы музыкознания. 2026. Т. 10, № 1. С. 171–203. (На англ. яз.). <https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-1-171-203>

1. Introduction

Music is not only a product of personal skill and performance, but also a product of cultural and social development. For instance, social comparison between performers can influence the development of self-efficacy and motivation in an artist. Artists or music performers receiving direct feedback concerning their performance are likely to experience self-efficacy and reap creativity during music composition and performance, as compared to artists or music learners whose efficacy has been compared socially with others (Asmus, 2021; Granot et al., 2021). The influential role of social development or social dynamics in music composition and performance has further gained importance with the rising role of social media in promoting music education. This has been observed in recent qualitative studies reporting how social media or a supportive social environment facilitated knowledge sharing, face-to-face instruction, communication, arousal of learning interest, and improvement of instrument playing skills such as rhythm, fingering, and posture (Lei et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2022). Similarly, participatory and social-interactive aspects are also essential determinants of music performance composition. Indeed, live music performances and concerts afford verbal interactions between the audience and the artists, where the former provides direct reactions like attention, interest, support, displeasure, and pleasure to the latter. Such interactions give artists the necessary feedback to propagate or limit specific music compositions and pieces (Wald-Furhmann et al., 2021; Picaud, 2022). In another interesting example, it is considered culturally unusual for African musicians to number the beats in their music composition and performance—a cultural practice that is an essential prerequisite for classical Indian musicians (Clayton et al., 2020). Thus, the importance of cultural and social developments in influencing music performance, composition, and continuous learning is crucial and undeniable.

While the relationship between sociocultural dynamics and music composition and performance has been established in evidence-based literature, there is a lack of focus on piano performance, particularly the composition of Chinese piano artists. The paper by Zheng and Leung (2021) which investigated multiple case studies of Chinese piano learning students, found that traditional Chinese culture limits expressive autonomy in the composition and piano performance of budding artists. This is because traditional Chinese classical music is based completely on standardised notations. This means that the tempi, dynamics, and intentions

of the piano artists must be as accurate and faithful to these standardised cultural notations. This limits creativity since performers are restricted to only reproducing traditional Chinese works, rather than deviating and creating any original piano compositions (Zheng & Leung, 2021). Another similar qualitative study by Zheng and Leung (2023), which interviewed Chinese piano professors and artists from Guangzhou and Shanghai found that creativity in piano composition and performance is perceived differently between Chinese and Western cultures. Chinese perspectives of musical creativity are established with the need to respect the past and maintain harmony with nature. In contrast, Western cultures encourage artists to practice creativity by providing unique compositions and solutions within suitable contexts (Zheng & Leung, 2023). However, these studies have focused primarily on the aspect of creativity in music, without emphasising or exploring how the composition, playing styles, and performances of Chinese professional piano artists are influenced by social and traditional cultural factors. Comparing these experiences, with the perspectives held by Chinese piano artists on the contrasting impact of Western cultures in their composition, styles, and performances, can provide profound insights into the sociocultural dynamics underlying the Chinese piano industry. This study thus intends to overcome the identified problem of limited research by exploring how nuances of social and cultural developments, both within and beyond China, have influenced the piano compositions and performances of professional piano artists respectively.

The rationale of this study lies in its ability to provide detailed insights concerning the current status of piano performance and musical composition in China, in light of historical and contemporary sociocultural development. After the introduction of the piano during the seventeenth century in China, several musical pieces have been composed specifically in the country for the new instrument. Despite Chinese piano music being performed popularly in the country, Chinese piano compositions continued to be perceived as foreign to the standard repertoire followed in the West. Despite a willingness between both cultures to learn about each other, there is often a lack of appreciation and understanding of the cultural differences between Chinese and Western piano performances (Tu, 2019; Li, 2021). However, research exploring the experiences or attitudes held by Chinese piano artists. This study is thus rationalised for investigating the perspectives held by Chinese piano artists regarding the influence of sociocultural factors in their

piano performances and composition. Its findings can have useful implications for identifying potential areas of establishing cultural harmony between Oriental and Western music philosophies. Additionally, during the Opium War in the 1840s, piano was disseminated in China by foreign missionaries, which bolstered the establishment of small Western instrumental stores in Chinese coastal cities. Since these historical developments, Chinese pianists have continued to explore the piano with traditional Chinese playing styles. The earliest cultural version of Chinese piano composition is regarded to be the product of Western and Chinese music (Tu, 2019; Cheng, 2021; Bai, 2021). These findings thus contradict existing literature, which shows that Chinese musical cultures are rigid with limited space for creativity. It is therefore reasonable to further explore the perspectives of Chinese piano artists on this cultural fusion, as this will reveal how Chinese piano music serves as a product of historical and sociocultural changes.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the influence of sociocultural dynamics on contemporary Chinese piano performance. It seeks to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To explore the views of Chinese professional piano artists on the impact of sociocultural factors on their performance.
2. To evaluate the views of Chinese professional piano artists on the impact of traditional Chinese social and cultural factors on piano composition, performance and innovation.
3. To assess, from the perspective of Chinese professional piano artists, the impact of comparative differences between Chinese and Western traditional cultures on piano composition, performance, and innovation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sociocultural Influences on Music and Piano Performance

Existing research supports the significant influence of social and cultural factors on music performance. For example, according to Lerch et al. (2019), every musical performance relies on the meaningful interpretation and feedback provided by the listener. The perspectives and responses of the listeners towards musical performance, are not merely dependent on external performance features, but also on internal characteristics, such as their levels of training, personal history, and

cultural background. Listener-focused performance analysis is thus driven by social and cultural aspects of perception, which prompt artists to deliver relevant musical output in their compositions (Lerch et al., 2019). Further, according to Pearce (2018), the syntactical structure of various musical genres and styles varies across diverse musical cultures. Such a structure is learned through cultural exposure which produces observed distinctive features between listeners from various cultures. For this reason, the extent to which the music of any two cultures will be different in the context of rhythm, and pitch, will predict how an individual from one culture will process music from another culture (Pearce, 2018). This means that the cultural differences in musical features such as pitch, rhythm, and tempo between Chinese and Western cultures, influence differences in their piano performances and compositions.

However, research focused on piano performance appears to be scarce. For example, Gorbunova and Hiner (2019) investigated the problems associated with mastering electronic musical instruments, such as the electronic piano, and the role of culture in its performance mastery. The performance of electronic piano instruments requires a combination of the cultural traditions of the performer towards individual acoustic instruments, as well as a creative perspective toward the development, regulation, and management of new or existing timbres. Traditional musical cultures also contribute to the understanding that a musical instrument such as a piano, is a specific physical object that can only be used to generate specific sounds and timbre. However, musical cultures become innovative in the context of electronic versions of traditional instruments and subsequently, prompts the development of a modified piano with multiple keyboards and features to incorporate a multitude of unique sounds (Gorbunova, 2018; Gorbunova & Hiner, 2019). In another study by Lavengood (2019), Western genres known as the '80s sound' emerged, and continue to be attractive, because of cultures related to musical timbre that were popularised by electronic pianos such as the digital synthesiser during that time. Additionally, the 1980s were also characterised by culture-shifting opinions. This was seen in the form of a preference towards creating music that was fresh, loud, ambitious and representative of diverse cultures. As a result, a fusion of genres, such as music that combined rock and rap music emerged. Further, because of the rise of television, and music channels such as MTV that broadcasted music videos and live artist performances, such music also made its way to the suburbs and remote areas. The appreciation and dissemination of a more creative musical culture were

further increased by the development of digital technologies, such as the electronic guitar, synthesiser and electronic drum kits, which began to be widely used in recording studios (Lavengood, 2019). While these findings are historical — and limited in the context of the piano — they demonstrate the importance of culture in defining the perspectives of piano performance and music creation. It is thus evident that social and cultural factors play a significant role in influencing music, in particular, contemporary piano performance.

2.2. Impact of Chinese Culture on Music and Piano Performance

Pianoization refers to the adaptation of melodies originally written for traditional instruments — such as erhu, pipa, guzheng, or Beijing opera vocal lines — into pianistic idioms while preserving their timbral and expressive essence. Composers such as Wang Jianzhong (*Variations on a Theme of the Yellow River*) and Chu Wanghua frequently used Pianoization to imitate sliding tones, ornamentation, and modal inflections characteristic of Chinese folk traditions.

While the piano was introduced by Western culture, the Chinese piano music follows a unique style that reflects the 5000-year-old tradition of the country. The overall culture of China incorporates the diverse heritages of its various ethnic groups. For this reason, piano culture in China is unique and adapted to the distinctive artistic features and characteristics of its local cultures (Ye, 2020; Lu, 2022). Therefore, it is clear that the influence of traditional Chinese culture on piano performance is multifaceted and heterogeneous, retaining regional and local characteristics. Indeed, Liu (2022) notes that Chinese piano music is based on folk songs and Chinese traditional poetry, which reflect the characteristic features of refined intonation and expressive sounds in this genre of music. Chinese music has historically been revolutionised by the composer Chu Wanghua, especially with his piano suite composition *Sounds of the Temple (Capriccio Suite: The Sound of the Linyin Temple)*. This traditional piano piece incorporates the sounds of bells, a slow tempo, major deviations in tone, and the use of polyphonic sounds to imitate other Chinese musical instruments (Liu, 2022). Similarly, Jinjin and Isaiah (2021) postulate that this cultural tradition of harmonizing classical piano music with the works of other instruments is a traditional Chinese music practice known as transplantation or ‘pianoization.’ It comprises retaining the structure and melody of the original piano work while also combining traditional instrumental music

– a practice used prevalently by Chinese composers during the 1980s (Jinjin & Isaiah, 2021). The cross-sectional paper by Lu (2022) further cements these findings by arguing that, while traditional Chinese music is based on a single sound and a historical heritage stretching across several thousand years, Chinese piano music is peculiar since it was introduced by Western traditions. Thus, while Chinese piano music maintains a Westernised harmony, its artistic aesthetics are modified to suit traditional Chinese folk instruments (Lu, 2022). Such modifications establish a platform where piano performance and composition in China are influenced by both Chinese and Western traditional cultures.

2.3. Western vs. Chinese Cultures in Music and Piano Performance

In the field of piano education, diverse cultural traditions bring forth diverse meanings and modifications in the music. For example, within the humanistic tradition of Britain, piano players are encouraged to develop their talents and pianist skills according to their individual strengths. In the United States, however, there is a comparatively weaker emphasis on a classical tradition and music performers are mainly encouraged to play based on personal values and practicality. In contrast, Chinese culture is based on traditional humanistic ideas and thus encourages piano players to cultivate moral values in their performance through education (Ye, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). Such diversity in tradition and culture, however, does not mean that Chinese piano performance or music in general has been completely free from Western influence. For instance, in his book, Wong (2020) notes that since the last century, traditional Chinese music has experienced a process of modernization. This has occurred because a growing number of Chinese composers have travelled abroad to study and create music, leading to the emergence of the modern Chinese orchestra and the reformation of traditional Chinese musical instruments. Indeed, in the cross-sectional study by Lu (2022), which surveyed 87 Chinese college students learning piano, it was found that only 8% of students used traditional Chinese music in their compositions. However, after receiving traditional Chinese music training, approximately 29%, 25% and 21% of students started integrating traditional music while creating their videos, participating in concerts, and arranging of musical compositions. These findings demonstrate the diverse foundations of the Chinese piano industry. Although influenced by traditional culture and history, it also has room to embrace Western traditions and principles. However, the opinions and views of professional piano performers regarding the impact of traditional

Chinese and Western cultures on their composition and performance are missing. This gap thus forms the groundwork of present study.

2.4. Research Gap

The findings of the literature review, however, are not free from limitations. Firstly, papers that specifically explored how sociocultural dynamics influenced piano performance and music creation are relatively limited. While research examining the impact of sociocultural influences on traditional Chinese music is abundant, studies investigating these influences in relation to piano music appear to be largely confined to Western contexts. A few studies, however, traced the origins of the piano in China, and how Chinese culture influenced the works of traditional artists. However, these studies are predominantly cross-sectional, descriptive or narrative in nature, with limited exploration of the subjective experiences and opinions of professional piano artists. Similarly, several narrative studies were reviewed regarding the differences between Western and Chinese music cultures, and papers that included the opinions of real-life piano performers and professionals were missing. These limitations therefore motivated the methodological section of this paper.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Trans-culturalism or transcultural music theory is a useful theoretical framework for this study. Trans-culturalism in music talks about how cultures are interconnected via musical expression, embracing diversity and goes beyond geographical boundaries. Therefore, transcultural music is an interesting representation of how global trends, innovative technologies and culturally diverse music practices intersect (Ghvinjilia et al., 2023; Crawford, 2020). This framework, however, must not be confused with multiculturalism. “Multiculturalism” typically refers to a community or society that respects culturally heterogeneous group of people and accepts their existence. In other words, different cultures coexist and maintain their traditional practices in a multicultural society. It is only about the coexistence of different cultures. Trans-culturalism by contrast, emphasises overcoming cultural boundaries and intermingling or merging different cultures (Ghvinjilia et al., 2023; Crooke et al., 2024). This theoretical approach is particularly appropriate in the context of this study as it compares the role of Western and Chinese music cultures in the development and performance of the piano in China. This

theory is well suited to this study, especially since the piano was first a Western invention that was later adapted to represent traditional cultures upon its introduction in China.

In Chinese musical culture, performance practice is inseparably linked to compositional traditions. Much of contemporary Chinese piano repertoire is based on traditional folk melodies, operatic themes, or Western canonical works, making the performer's interpretive decisions dependent on compositional structure. Therefore, this study examines performance together with the repertoire and compositional influences that shape such performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study was qualitative. Such studies are both interpretivist and constructivist. Both these principles work together to explore a topic comprehensively, rather than only identifying relationships or outcomes. The latter approach represents a positivist paradigm. Interpretivism intends to obtain knowledge regarding the different viewpoints held by individuals, while constructivism explores how people make sense of their experiences. In general, it is argued that qualitative research is understood to preserve the subjectivity of participants' experiences, which may also be influenced by researcher bias (Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Haven et al., 2020). This was appropriate for such a study since it aimed to give meaning to the voices of professional piano players in China. This will overcome existing studies' limitations where the authors have mainly relied on objective methods of data collection to try and understand the views of Chinese pianists on how their performance is affected by culture.

3.2. Sampling

The study relied on a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling represents the samples that are selected by the researcher based on what is readily available within their reach. For comparison, another study by Zheng and Leung (2021) examined the relationship that might exist between creativity and Chinese piano performance. The authors included a total of three participants who learned to play the piano and knew them personally. In this context, professional piano players whom the researcher reaches out to for recruitment may also provide additional contacts of other artists who could contribute to the study. Further, another

study that explored the perspectives of Chinese piano students on creativity was conducted by Zheng and Leung (2023), who selected a total of 13 interviewees. Hence, while recruiting the convenience sample for this study, it was considered that the sample size may also fall from three to thirteen professional piano players based on existing research. Professional piano performers who were personally known to the researcher were sent the consent forms, an information sheet, and participation requirements. Upon obtaining their consent, they were requested to provide additional contacts of professional piano players. The final set of 12 interviews was conducted online via WeChat and Zoom, and the responses of the participants were recorded verbatim.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews comprising open-ended questions were utilised for data collection. This is because this interview format encourages participants to provide detailed, subjective, and flexible answers, rather than the rigid, questioning format of closed-ended interviews. Additionally, the interview questions were derived from Zheng and Leung (2023), as well as Zheng and Leung (2021), in which Chinese participants shared how traditional Chinese culture forbade them to innovate or develop a personal style in their piano performance (Zheng & Leung, 2023; Zheng & Leung, 2021). Thus, the questions for this study were derived and modified from these qualitative studies, and outlined in Appendix A. Additionally, thematic analysis was used to evaluate the interview responses. It is a qualitative process by which a large amount of unstructured, subjective data is evaluated for similar and significant patterns and categorised into themes. The researcher first familiarises themselves with the data, followed by identifying codes and reviewing the themes with the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Campbell et al., 2021). The interview responses were, therefore, carefully evaluated by the researcher to identify patterns relevant to the social and cultural influences on piano performance. These patterns were hence combined to form themes which were analysed in relation to the research objectives of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 12 participants were interviewed for this study. They were all professional piano players. While some participants had professional performance

experience of nearly six years, others reported careers spanning 10, 20, and almost 50 years. For more natural language—just “two participants” also shared they had been teaching the piano professionally. The participants’ interviews were analysed using NVivo. A total of six themes were identified (*Table 1*). Appendix B outlines the themes and corresponding significant statements of the participants in detail.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Themes	Codes
Impact of Social and Cultural Factors on Piano Performance	Cultural literacy is important for appreciating piano and musical performance.
	Understanding cultural factors also helps to disseminate music.
Impact of Chinese Culture on Piano Performance	Chinese culture encourages emotional expression during piano performances.
	Chinese culture reflects folk traditions and instruments during piano performances.
	The Chinese culture has instilled the use of the pentatonic scale in piano performance.
Cultural Influence of Piano Performance Strategies	Chinese culture influences piano performance through family education, policy support, stress relief, and political education.
	Focus on hearing to improve rhythm and emotional expression of piano performances.
	Use rhythm exercises to overcome technical difficulties.
	Engage in reading to improve understanding of a piano work.

Impact of Western Culture on Piano Performance	Western artists created diverse piano pieces reflective of their personalities.
	Need to understand the style of the Western artist and the background behind the piano piece.
	Important to research Western culture since the piano is a Western instrument.
Western vs. Chinese Culture in Piano Performance	Chinese culture pays more importance to rhythm and melody
	Western culture is more structured, and Chinese culture is more liberal in piano performance.
	The blending of cultures is appreciated.
Sociocultural Difficulties During Piano Performance	Lack of knowledge of Western artists
	Difficult to grasp Western piano style
	Need to research and train extensively

4.2. Impact of Social and Cultural Factors on Piano Performance

Participants collectively agreed on the significant role of social and cultural factors in influencing music, particularly piano performance (Appendix B). For instance, Participant 9 took the example of a Chinese piano piece ‘Pi Huang’ and how it represented “musical elements of Peking Opera Xi Pi and Er Huang, and used the yin and yang of ancient Chinese culture.” Additionally, he said: “This piece of music is enough to illustrate that music without cultural and social development has no soul. Performers must also enrich their cultural literacy before they can use their professional skills to interpret the works more deeply.”

Indeed, the importance of cultural literacy in appreciating music and piano performance was also sounded by Participant 3: “Social environment, people’s comprehensive cultural literacy, economic development level and other factors have an impact on the popularization, appreciation and piano education of music.” Similarly, Participant 4 and Participant 11 claimed that: “Cultural and social factors play an integral role in music, especially the piano. They not only shape the shape and style of music, but also affect the spread and reception of music” and “piano education activities can encourage people to create and spread culture.” Overall, participants

agreed that cultural literacy is essential not only for understanding the meaning of piano works, but also for appreciating and spreading the music and cultural history to others.

4.3. Impact of Chinese Culture on Piano Performance

Additionally, there was a consensus among participants that traditional Chinese cultures played a significant role in influencing their piano performance (Appendix B). In this regard, Participant 11 gave the most comprehensive explanation of how strongly Chinese culture influences piano performance in three main ways: “First of all, Chinese piano performance and creation not only absorb Western piano art but are also deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, with keynote music creation as the mainstream. Secondly, Chinese piano performance and creation are adapted from excellent folk songs, ancient songs, and operas, showing strong national characteristics. Finally, while inheriting tradition, Chinese piano performance and creation are also constantly innovating.” According to Participant 4, Chinese culture is also reflected in piano performance in terms of emotional expression: “In characteristics, Chinese piano performance pays more attention to expressing emotions and artistic conception. Chinese piano works incorporate elements of traditional Chinese music, giving the works distinctive national characteristics.” Participants 12 and 9 expressed their preference for Chinese culture when innovating or creating their piano compositions, because “If we understand the development of social history and culture, then piano performance will be more profound and touching” and also because “Chinese folk instruments and folk songs provide rich creative materials for the development of Chinese piano music. People can imitate the timbre of the Pihuang tune, the melody of folk songs, and the magnificent momentum of folk orchestras through the piano.” Interestingly, in addition to the characteristic inclusion of the “pentatonic scale”—as stated by Participant 8—Participant 9 shared that Chinese culture also influences piano performance “through family education, policy support, stress relaxation, political education.” They reasoned that the strong representation of national culture and emotional expression encourages parents to teach piano to their children, leading to educational policies and competitions to encourage piano performance and appreciation among the masses.

4.4. Cultural Influence of Piano Performance Strategies

Chinese culture also influenced the types of techniques participants used to improve their piano performance or support further piano learning (Appendix B). Participant 2 placed a strong emphasis on the importance of “hearing” in improving the rhythm and emotional expression of piano performances. The reason being, “hearing should always be put first to guide all practice and performance; pay close attention to the rigour of rhythm; observe life, gain insight into human nature, and experience emotions, so that music can be scientifically understood and accurately expressed during the performance.” In contrast, the importance of reading was raised by Participant 7, who claimed that “basic exercises for daily scales, arpeggios, and chords: deepen your understanding of the performance of the work and the musical processing of the work through literature reading.” Therefore, culture also played an important role in shaping the types of techniques participants used to improve their piano performance.

4.5. Impact of Western Culture on Piano Performance

Similar to Chinese culture, participants also shared how heavily their piano performance was influenced by Western culture (Appendix B). A key feature was that Western artists seemed to create diverse piano pieces, which reflected their unique styles, emotions and journeys. This was specifically stated by Participant 3, who said that “the American composer Gottschalk combined his experience of travelling in Central and South America to create piano music in various styles. In the études of the Ukrainian-born Russian composer Kapustin jazz musical elements are incorporated into the works, making them highly engaging.” Due to such diversity, participants, including Participant 8, stated the importance of first understanding the style of the Western artist and the background of the piano piece: “Yes, most of the piano practice works are Western works. It is necessary to consult information to understand the creative background of the works, and to study the composer’s style to create an artistic image that is in line with the spirit of the original works.” Participants 2 and 4 shared that “the piano itself is a Western instrument, and this factor must be incorporated into all aspects of piano playing and teaching,” and “in the process of interpreting works, it is necessary to continuously research and learn about the Western historical and cultural background, to have a deeper understanding of different style works to achieve better performance results.”

Therefore, Chinese piano professionals were already familiar with the impact of Western culture on piano performance. Rather, they appreciated how Western piano music is equally diverse and reflects the composer's history, style, journeys, emotions and feelings.

Participants reported that their regular performance repertoire typically combines Western classical works — such as Beethoven sonatas, Chopin nocturnes and études, Debussy preludes — with representative Chinese piano works, including Chu Wanghua's *Sounds of the Temple*, Wang Lisan's *Shepherd Boy*, and Tan Dun's *Eight Memories in Watercolor*. Several interviewees estimated that Western repertoire forms approximately 60–70% of their formal training programs, while Chinese works account for 30–40%, especially in competitions that emphasize national style.

4.6. Western vs. Chinese Culture in Piano Performance

Participants also shared several examples of how Western and Chinese cultures influence piano performance in different ways (Appendix B). One major difference, pointed out by Participant 4 was that Chinese piano works “use melodies and harmonies with national characteristics, which have a strong Chinese flavour”, while “Western piano works focus on harmony and technique, and the composers have different personalities and different styles of works.” Similarly, Participant 8 shared: “The piano art system, style genre, composer personality established by Western culture lays the foundation for my personal performance and teaching abilities. Chinese works usually pay more attention to the beauty of melody lines and charm.” Participant 11 shared that, “in terms of rhythm, Western music usually has strong and weak sounds that appear regularly and are divided into measures. Chinese music is different in that it has a free rhythm, like Sanban, which has no rules at all.” This means that while Western piano music may be more rigid and structured in its composition, Chinese piano does not always follow specific rhythms and “uses lines as the main means of expression, shaping the language characteristics of cadence.” Participant 1 shared that “Today, when cultural diversity is booming, such collisions and integrations have injected unprecedented vitality into the development of music, adding more cultural experiences and repertoire choices for performers.” Therefore, there was an agreement that while Western and Chinese cultures influence piano performance in different ways, the practice of blending these traditions to create innovative piano works was also being appreciated.

4.7. Sociocultural Difficulties During Piano Performance

Participants also shared that they encountered some challenges when they tried to develop their piano style while using both Chinese and Western cultural influences (Appendix B). One challenge was that since Chinese artists did not know Western artists, they often found it difficult to effectively represent the emotions or intentions of the composer when performing Western works. This issue was articulated by Participant 8, who said: “When studying Western piano works, we often encounter scores with incomplete markings. It is difficult to accurately express the composer’s intention for such works. The fundamental reason is that we do not have enough understanding of the social culture of various historical stages in the West.” A similar problem was expressed by Participant 4, who noted: “When playing Western works, it is difficult to grasp the styles of each composer’s works well, and you will also encounter many difficulties in performance skills.” The only solution to these difficulties was extensive practice and research into various piano composers, as stated by Participant 2: “The incompatibility between Chinese piano creations and arrangements, harmony, temperament, musical style, etc., and the fixed structure of the piano keyboard has resulted in technical difficulties in performance. Practice hard to adapt.” Similarly, Participant 12 also shared that “During the learning process, I needed to consult different materials, such as articles and videos, to supplement my cultural deficiencies...”

5. Discussion

Participants shared that professional piano players need to develop cultural literacy because some Chinese piano works reflect ancient stories and cultural heritage. This was also reviewed by Hu and Zheng (2024), who studied how the piano teaching has become more innovative in higher education institutions. These courses generally teach about the origins of a particular piano composition or artist by integrating it with the political ideologies and discourses of their time. By contrast, participants also shared that sociocultural factors help to disseminate piano music increasing people’s awareness of their national culture and its influence. Similarly, Pereverzeva et al. (2018), as well as Hu and Zheng (2024), shared that when piano music is integrated with different cultural and technological media, it can support cultural dissemination in universities and colleges. Such integrated music sounds diverse and rich, and appeals to audiences with varied tastes. Participants believed

that Chinese piano music is a reflection of folk music, history and opera music, and also reflects national characteristics through melodies and rhythms of emotional expression. Indeed, this was also supported by Liu (2022), who noted that Chinese piano music is strongly influenced by folk songs and traditional Chinese poetry. These instil the expressive sound quality and refined intonation for which Chinese piano music is known. Interestingly, participants seemed to enjoy how the Chinese culture influenced their piano performance. The elements of Chinese culture in piano music instil patriotism, and the inclusion of various folk instruments also enables artists to express their emotions freely. These findings were similar to Jinjin and Isaiah (2021), who highlighted the feature of ‘pianoization’ or musical transplantation in Chinese traditional piano music, in which classical tunes are combined with the sounds of other folk instruments. This helps artists retain the melody and structure of the original composition while also making room for innovation and creative expression by including other instruments.

Participants also shared that Chinese culture can influence piano performance as seen in increasing educational policies, the enthusiasm of families and an increase in musical competitions, which collectively work to encourage Chinese students to take up piano learning and piano performances. Similarly, MacIntyre and Potter (2014) also reported that the culture of piano learning and performance was strongly shaped by competitions, grading levels and recitals in formal education, which guitarists do not have to go through. Therefore, pianists demonstrate greater effort to learn and higher introjected regulation during piano study and composition. Further, the participants shared how culture — particularly Chinese culture — influenced the kind of strategies, such as research, listening and exercises, which they used to improve their piano performance and compositions. Indeed, Yin (2023) and Liu (2023) found that young musicians generally play musical exercises repeatedly for practice and performance improvement. As they mature, they use their self-regulation skills such as establishing goals, monitoring their practice, and changing their practice time. This was not observed among professional piano players, possibly due to their experience considering that the above paper explored piano teaching for students.

While participants associated Western piano repertoire with strong individual composer personalities, it should be acknowledged that Western classical music has historically been shaped by influential national schools — such as the Russian,

German, and French traditions — which have also shaped collective stylistic characteristics. Western piano pieces have some specific rules to follow, within which composers and performers may innovate, while Chinese culture does not have such rules but mostly creates piano compositions that are nationalistic and have beautiful or artistic melodies and rhythms. Therefore, Chinese-influenced piano styles may offer composers greater artistic freedom. Interestingly, according to Zhang and Negus (2020) as well as Ye (2020), Western pianists are encouraged to expand their talents and play according to their own preferences, whereas in the United States, there is no classical tradition, and pianists prefer to consider personal values and practicality. In contrast, Chinese culture follows humanism and thus encourages piano players to cultivate moral values in their performance (Ye, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). These findings therefore contradict the literature review in several respects, where it is seen that Western musical cultures can be extremely varied in their impact on piano performances. While the interviewees of this paper did acknowledge the importance of Chinese nationalism and moral thought, their ideas on Western music being structured contrast with current literature. This shows how vastly different are the experiences of actual professional Chinese piano players as compared to existing research. At the same time, participants agreed that cultures are currently being blended to create innovative piano pieces. Indeed, current research proves that in several Chinese piano pieces, such as the *Pi Huang* and the *Moments of Peking Opera*, the harmonic styles of the West are included along with the richness of traditional Chinese piano music (Huang, 2024). In summation, Chinese piano culture is not new to cultural blending and provides sufficient opportunities for artists to innovate their compositions and performances.

Existing scholarship confirms that Chinese students often face limited access to original Western musicological texts, language barriers when consulting primary sources, and uneven exposure to Western historical performance practice. Studies by Wong (2020), Lu (2022), and Bai (2021) note that despite widespread enthusiasm for Western repertoire, systematic knowledge of European musical history and stylistic schools varies significantly among learners. Creating a personal and innovative musical style was further perceived to be different by the participants because of how different Chinese and Western piano styles are in terms of rhythms, melodies, scales, styles and temperaments. These responses were similar to the studies by Zheng and Leung (2021; 2023), which examined creativity and cultural influences

in Chinese piano education. In both these studies, the authors interviewed Chinese piano students and professors regarding how they harnessed creativity in their composition and performance. The participants in these studies shared that Chinese culture encourages only those forms of creativity where the past heritage is reflected. Western piano culture, on the other hand, appreciates pianists for developing unique compositions. Chinese piano culture further requires artists to follow very strict notations, which may limit innovation. These research findings, also highlighting the vast differences between Chinese and Western cultures, contradict interview responses where professional pianists shared that Chinese culture granted them much more freedom to innovate as compared to the strict rules needed to be followed in Western piano culture (Appendix B). This could be because of the role of years of experience since the previous research focused on Chinese piano students. Nevertheless, regardless of professional expertise, participants shared about their inadequate access to and knowledge of Western piano compositions, which restricts innovation and demands further future attention.

6. Conclusion and Future Scope

This paper investigated the influence of sociocultural dynamics in contemporary Chinese piano performance. Interviews were conducted with 12 professional Chinese piano artists. A total of six themes were discovered. Firstly, all participants agreed that culture strongly influenced piano performances and composition, and supported dissemination. Secondly, Chinese culture particularly influences piano performance by encouraging artistic expression and the inclusion of various instruments to reflect folk traditions. This cultural influence was also reflected in the techniques used for improving and innovating performance. These findings therefore show the significant extent to which social and cultural factors influence the performance and composition of Chinese professional piano artists. Additionally, the participants also shared that in comparison to the strict rules and structures of Western cultures, Chinese piano cultures leave more room for freedom. This was an interesting finding because existing literature represents Chinese music and piano cultures as being extremely rigid, with limited creative freedom and a mandatory need for artists to innovate in a manner that represents national culture. This research advances the literature by showing that Chinese music cultures may be misunderstood and misrepresented in mainstream media, and that difficulties

with innovation may vary depending on levels of expertise or professional skills. Future research can, therefore, interview both Chinese and Western piano artists to compare their experiences with integrating non-native cultures into their piano performances. Future research can also be expanded to include music professionals beyond pianists to find out how broadly social and cultural factors impact music, particularly Chinese musical performance and music composition strategies. However, participants also shared that inadequate knowledge about Western culture and artists made it challenging to innovate compositions, even though they appreciated the importance of researching and blending. Therefore, future research must also focus on studying the factors responsible for hindering or supporting Chinese piano artists to innovate their performance and composition, especially in the context of being able to learn and integrate different music cultures. Overall, these findings provide useful implications for future improvements in practice and research.

6.1. Study Implications

The findings of this study hold significance for several purposes. Firstly, the findings have useful implications for amateur or future piano artists in China who wish to learn about the role of Western and traditional Chinese musical cultures, and how they combine with social factors to develop contemporary Chinese piano works. Therefore, future Chinese piano artists need to remember that culture is inseparable from their composition and performance and that they need to appreciate the cultural and social history of a piano composition while mastering it. It is also significant for amateur Chinese piano artists who are interested in social environments that may influence their fusion of Western and Chinese cultures in their future piano works. As per these study's findings, it is recommended that Chinese piano artists who are building their repertoire work in surroundings or environments that offer them sufficient opportunity to research and learn from other cultures. However, participants in this study shared how they found it difficult to understand or learn about incomplete Western compositions. The Chinese government and educational institutions must, therefore, assist artists in obtaining easier access to compositions and music research findings from various cultures that can expand their skills, and innovate their composition and performance.

The findings are also particularly useful for music technicians and digital artists who may be looking for diverse ways by which they can innovate their music through the integration of Chinese and Western music philosophies. Indeed, based on the study's findings, both Chinese and Western cultures include different advantages — such as creative freedom and structural organization — which artists can combine to produce a fusion or novel musical composition. This study is also beneficial for Chinese piano teachers and administrators of musical institutes. This is because they can use the findings to understand how social and cultural factors may be influencing the music performances of their students while identifying opportunities for improvement in the piano skill development process. For instance, it is recommended that teachers and educators provide an environment that strengthens research and offers creative freedom and practice opportunities for piano artists to improve and innovate their performance. Lastly, this study is also significant for policymakers involved in the music and cultural development of China. This is because these findings can provide policymakers with insights into the limitations of traditional Chinese music cultures, and the policy changes that can be considered to encourage the integration of Western musical cultures in the piano industry. For example, professional Chinese piano players shared how they did not always have access to and knowledge of Western piano compositions for innovations. Policymakers and institutions can, therefore, identify ways to increase this accessibility or provide technological innovations that Chinese pianists can use to improve their performance and compositions.

6.2. Limitations

There were some strengths and limitations of this study that serve as references for future research. Firstly, the study only relied on qualitative, interview findings that can be at risk of bias and reliability issues. This, however, serves as a strength considering that there have hardly been studies to explore the experiences and opinions of professional Chinese piano players on the sociocultural implications of their performance. Another limitation was that some of the participants had vast variations in their professional piano experience with some having only six years to some having several decades of expertise. While this did not make the findings very heterogeneous, they do indicate the possibility of time or years of experience as a mediator or confounding factor. Some of the piano professionals also claimed

to be teachers, which indicates another possible mediator. Future research can, therefore, segregate Chinese piano professionals based on their careers and experience to identify how these factors work with social and cultural aspects to influence piano performance, composition and innovation.

Appendices

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How do social and cultural factors influence your piano performance and interpretation of musical works?
2. In what ways does traditional Chinese culture shape your approach to piano playing or composition?
3. How do Chinese folk traditions, scales, or musical aesthetics appear in your performance repertoire?
4. How do Western musical traditions influence your piano practice, interpretation, or repertoire selection?
5. What differences do you perceive between Western and Chinese piano performance traditions?
6. What strategies do you use to improve your piano performance and musical understanding?
7. What sociocultural challenges do Chinese pianists encounter when performing Western repertoire?
8. How do you think Chinese piano performance is evolving in a global musical context?

Appendix B. Themes and Representative Participant Statements

Theme	Example Participant Statement
Impact of Sociocultural Factors	Music without cultural and social development has no soul.
Chinese Cultural Influence	Chinese piano works integrate folk melodies and operatic elements.
Performance Strategies	Listening carefully and understanding rhythm helps interpret emotional meaning.
Western Cultural Influence	Understanding the composer's background is essential for interpreting Western works.
Cultural Comparison	Western music follows structured harmonic systems while Chinese music focuses on melodic expression.
Sociocultural Difficulties	Lack of familiarity with Western composers makes interpretation difficult.

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The article was submitted 08.12.2025;
approved after reviewing 21.01.2026;
accepted for publication 18.02.2026.

Статья поступила в редакцию 08.12.2025;
одобрена после рецензирования 21.01.2026;
принята к публикации 18.02.2026.