British Journal of Music Education (2026), 1–21
doi:10.1017/S0265051726101041

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Characteristics, perceptions and challenges of popular music in mainland China's primary and secondary music education: a systematic review

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Abstract
In mainland China, the Ministry of Education's 2012 national music curriculum standards marked a growing policy emphasis on the inclusion of popular music in primary and secondary education; however, the nature and extent of its classroom implementation remain unclear. As such, we conducted a PRISMA-guided systematic review of 30 educational articles published between 2001 and 2024 (20 Chinese and 10 English) to examine the characteristics, student perceptions and challenges of popular music in Chinese school music education. The review provides an overview of the characteristics, student perceptions and challenges associated with popular music in Chinese music education. Our findings indicate that students strongly prefer popular music and seek greater classroom inclusion, yet their exposure appears to be influenced by regional disparities and teachers' musical orientations. Additionally, the narrow definition of popular music insufficiently represents diverse genres and instrumental forms, thereby limiting students' musical exposure. While many studies highlight popular music's potential to enhance student engagement, persistent scholarly concerns regarding curricular alignment, educational value and teacher preparation continue to constrain its implementation. Overall, the review suggests that more systematic pedagogical frameworks and targeted teacher training are required to support the meaningful integration of popular music in Chinese primary and secondary music education.

Keywords: Chinese general education; *liuxing yinyue*; pedagogical method; popular music; systematic review

Introduction

The promotion of popular music in school music education has received attention since as early as the 1960s in many Western countries (Ho, 2017a), reflecting broader shifts in cultural values, youth identity, and educational priorities. As societies became increasingly shaped by mass media and popular culture, music educators began to question the dominance of Western art music as the sole foundation of school music curricula. In response, educators have been encouraged to expand their perspectives by incorporating popular music into their curricula to better address the needs and interests of an evolving society (Green, 2001, 2005, 2008; Jorgensen, 2003). With the rise of student-centred methods, studies have revealed how popular music is widely appreciated in many schools and universities. Empirical research across schools and higher education institutions has consistently shown that popular music is widely appreciated by students and can enhance motivation, engagement, and perceived relevance in music learning (Ho, 2017a; Isbell, 2007; Su, 2007). Beyond engagement, popular music has been recognised for its potential to bridge

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in-school and out-of-school learning contexts, allowing students to draw on informal musical practices developed outside formal education (Cutietta, 1991; Green, 1988, 2006; Springer, 2016). Consequently, informal music learning, pioneered by Green (2001, 2002, 2006), aligns with students' interests, connecting popular and traditional Western music education. As a result, scholars have increasingly advocated for systematic frameworks and adaptable curricula that support the meaningful integration of popular music across primary and secondary education, rather than treating it as a peripheral or supplementary component (Allsup, 2008; Green, 2006; Niknafs, 2019; Weatherly et al., 2025).

Despite the depth and breadth of this scholarship, existing research has been heavily concentrated in Western contexts. Recent work has therefore emphasised the importance of examining popular music education in diverse cultural and educational settings in order to understand how informal learning approaches are interpreted, adapted and constrained by local curricular structures and sociocultural conditions (Weatherly et al., 2025). In particular, Asia has been identified as an underexplored region where the assumptions underpinning popular music education and informal learning may not align neatly with centralised curricula, examination-oriented schooling or culturally specific understandings of music and education.

Within the Chinese context, studies addressing popular music in education remain fragmented, often focusing on isolated curricular discussions, teacher perspectives or policy commentary. This fragmentation is closely related to the broader curricular landscape in which Western classical music and Chinese folk/traditional music have long been institutionally prioritised in school music education, shaping the terms under which popular music is discussed, justified and implemented. To date, no comprehensive and systematic analysis has examined how popular music is conceptualised, experienced and implemented within primary and secondary music education in China. Responding to this gap and to broader calls for geographically inclusive research, the present study turns to the case of mainland China, offering a systematic review of popular music education since its formal inclusion in national curriculum standards.

Historical context and current issues of popular music in mainland China

In mainland China, music education is formally embedded within the broader arts curriculum and is intended to foster aesthetic understanding, cultural literacy and creative expression (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Since the early 1990s, the rapid expansion of Chinese popular music as a mass cultural and entertainment form has generated increasing scholarly attention (Jin, 1994, 2001; Qi, 1994; Ye, 2005). Until the 2010s, with the rise of 'Chinese style' popular songs, research on Chinese popular music began to emphasise nationalisation and complexity, placing greater importance on the elements of traditional Chinese culture within songs (Liu & Yao, 2014; Shi, 2016). This nationalisation involves developing a musical style rooted in folk traditions, drawing on the aesthetic and emotional sensibilities of national heritage (Shi, 2024) and exploring expressive forms and techniques from traditional music culture.

In addition, music education in mainland China is a compulsory subject within the nine-year compulsory education system, encompassing six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. Consequently, curriculum standards, textbook content and instructional expectations for music are most explicitly defined and regulated during these stages, which therefore constitute the primary focus of the literature examined in this study. Following the release of the 2001 music curriculum standards that encouraged multicultural music in classrooms, some popular music began to be included in textbooks (Li, 2023; Lyu, 2019). The 2012 standards (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012) further promoted the integration of popular music, yet the variety of genres in textbooks remains limited, lacking options like rock, blues and electronic music (Liu, 2010, 2022).

Prior scholarship (e.g., Ho & Law, 2012) further points to several unresolved issues in relation to popular music education in the contexts of Chinese primary and secondary

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education that warrant further investigation. For example, Ho & Law (2012) argued that the integration of popular music into Chinese school music education has been guided by its perceived capacity to support values education and cultural understanding. Although popular music has been formally referenced in national curriculum documents for a while, how popular music is defined and represented in terms of terminology, genre scope, socio-historical framing and curricular or textbook treatment remains inconsistent (Wang, 2003; Xiang, 2003; Zhang, 2019). At the same time, while research consistently reports strong student interest in popular music and calls for greater exposure in and beyond school (Ho, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015; Peng & Du, 2013; Su, 2007; Wang, 2012), students' lived classroom experiences and perspectives remain comparatively underexamined in mainland China. Popular music is frequently justified in terms of engagement, relevance and identity formation, yet there is limited empirical insight into how these rationales are realised in classroom practice. Finally, scholars (Cheng, 2020; Dai, 2016; Ho, 2016; Law & Ho, 2015; Quin, 2022; Yang, 2007; Zhang, 2010) have noted persistent challenges in translating policy aspirations into classroom enactment. Although policy documents increasingly encourage the inclusion of popular music, teachers often face constraints related to resources, facilities, familiarity with popular music and pedagogical support, contributing to ongoing tensions between curricular intentions, teacher capacity and students' musical interests.

Together, these gaps generate both conceptual ambiguity and practical ambiguity in the context of primary and secondary popular music in mainland China. Conceptual ambiguity concerns what popular music is understood to be within school education, while practical ambiguity concerns how it is used in classrooms and toward what educational outcomes. These conditions motivate the need for a systematic review under explicit operational definitions to clarify the characteristics, perceptions and challenges of popular music in Chinese primary and secondary music education.

Purpose of the study

Our study aims to further examine three interrelated dimensions of popular music in general music classrooms following its formal inclusion in China's national music curriculum standards: its characteristics, perceptions and challenges. The characteristics of popular music in Chinese primary and secondary music classrooms are understood in operational terms as how popular music is defined, framed and represented within formal school contexts, including its terminology, genre scope, socio-historical positioning and treatment in curricula and textbooks. Perceptions refer to how popular music is experienced and understood by students and teachers in classroom settings, encompassing students' reported engagement, preferences and learning experiences. Challenges relate to the practical and pedagogical issues associated with classroom enactment, including instructional purposes, teaching approaches, resource constraints and reported difficulties in implementation.

For the purpose of this review, 'general music education' refers specifically to classroom-based primary and secondary music instruction. We excluded studies focusing exclusively on extra-curricular, school-wide or non-instructional uses of popular music (e.g., sports events, morning exercises or campus cultural activities). As such, we employed a PRISMA systematic review (Moher et al., 2015) to focus on the emergent research regarding popular music in general music education in China. Our goal is to provide an overview of popular music in general music classrooms in China. The systematic review approach was employed to (1) uncover the relevant evidence; (2) establish the quality of evidence, and address any variation; (3) identify and investigate conflicting results; (4) identify gaps, deficiencies and trends; and (5) identify and inform areas for future research (Munn et al., 2018).

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Through a systematic review of existing literature, the study sought to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: *How has popular music been characterised in general music classrooms in Chinese primary and secondary education since its formal inclusion in the national curriculum (2001–2024), particularly with respect to terminology, genre scope, socio-historical framing and curricular representation?*

RQ2: *What are students' perceptions of popular music within classroom-based primary and secondary music education in China?*

RQ3: *What are the challenges of integrating popular music in general music classrooms in Chinese primary and secondary education?*

Methodology

We employed a systematic review adhering to the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) in this study to facilitate the replication of the search strategy and enhance the reliability of the study findings. The search was limited to articles published from 2001 to September 2024, as the recognition of popular music in Chinese general education began with the 2001 music curriculum standards (Li, 2023; Lyu, 2019). We included literature in both Chinese and English, targeting popular music research in China as well as internationally published research related to this topic. Chinese sources were obtained from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), while English literature was sourced from ERIC and Google Scholar. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles. Additionally, we performed hand searches of key journals and utilised reference lists to capture relevant grey literature.

Search strategies

We employed a two-stage search strategy for each language track. First, an initial broad title-level search was conducted to gauge the overall volume of relevant literature. In CNKI, a title search for 'popular music' ('liuxing yinyue') and genre-related terms returned 438 records, while the English-language search (ERIC and Google Scholar) yielded 165 records.

Second, to identify studies relevant to China's primary and secondary music education, we refined the search using combinations of thematic and keyword filters. To avoid excluding studies that examined specific popular-music genres without explicitly using the term 'popular music', we adopted a two-pronged approach: (1) constructing Boolean search strings that combined umbrella terms with genre-specific keywords, and (2) supplementing database searches with targeted genre searches and manual backward and forward citation checking of included articles and key journals.

Thus, for English studies on popular music in Chinese music education, we employed key terms of (popular music* OR hip-hop* OR rap* OR rock* OR jazz* OR blues* OR electronic* OR folk* OR R&B*) AND (China* OR Chinese*) AND (education* OR School* OR primary school* OR secondary school*) to search in ERIC and Google Scholar. All Chinese-language literature we selected were collected in two high-impact academic journal source subsets: the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and Core Journals of China (CJC) to ensure the representativeness and recognition (Yang & Welch, 2023). A key term search strategy was employed to search the literature on database. We refined our search with the terms 'music education (yinyue jiaoyu)* OR School (xuexiao)* OR primary and secondary school (zhongxiaoxue)* [Theme] AND popular music (liuxing yinyue)* OR hip-hop (xiha)* OR rap (shuochang)* OR jazz (jueshi)* OR blues (bulusi)* OR electronic (dianzi)* OR folk (minyao)* OR R&B (jiezou landiao)* [Keyword]'

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for articles published between 2001 and 2024. The terms in parentheses indicate their commonly used Chinese translations.

It is worth noting that though informal music learning was a key theoretical lens in this study, we did not conduct a separate search using 'informal music learning' as a standalone keyword, because our focus was specifically on popular music in school-based general music education. In the Chinese literature, discussions of informal learning in music education are typically embedded within studies that explicitly reference popular music genres or classroom use. To reduce the risk of omission, we also conducted backward and forward citation checking of key studies on popular music and informal learning in school music contexts. This boundary is acknowledged as a methodological consideration of the review.

Eligibility criteria

To further narrow the scope of the review, we established criteria based on our research questions. Included articles must meet the following criteria: (a) Educational Context: focus on non-tertiary, primary and secondary music education; (b) Population: involve elementary and secondary school students or teachers; (c) Content: examine the role of popular music in general music education; and (d) Outcomes: address current challenges while offering pedagogical suggestions. Papers were excluded if they (a) were theoretical or philosophical articles that did not articulate explicit practical implications for primary and secondary music education (e.g., guidance for classroom teaching, curriculum or repertoire selection, teacher preparation, assessment or school-level implementation); (b) were literature reviews that offered no new perspectives on popular music; or (c) focused exclusively on the historical or cultural development of popular music without reference to educational contexts; though such studies were excluded from the formal synthesis due to their lack of education-situated or actionable evidence, they were consulted as contextual background to inform our interpretation of how popular music is positioned and discussed within music education research.

We made an a priori decision to exclude dissertations, master's theses, conference proceedings and book chapters in order to focus the review on formally published journal articles that follow consistent peer-review and editorial processes. This restriction reduced heterogeneity in reporting and improved comparability for coding and synthesis, while also keeping the review scope manageable. We acknowledge this as a limitation and recommend that future reviews incorporate grey literature. To mitigate publication bias, we supplemented database searches with hand searches of key journals' reference lists and the bibliographies of review articles.

Study selection

The search through identified databases yielded 54 Chinese articles and 24 English articles. After duplicate removal of 9 articles, 69 articles remained, and their titles and abstracts were screened independently by two researchers to assess initial eligibility. Thirteen articles were excluded at this stage because they clearly fell outside the predefined eligibility criteria.

56 articles in both languages were screened independently by two researchers for full-text assessment. After the initial screening, 11 articles were excluded for not aligning with the research questions, resulting in 45 articles for full-text evaluation. At this stage, each article was assessed for substantive relevance to the research questions. Articles were mapped only to the RQs they explicitly addressed (e.g., definitional or curriculum-related content for RQ1; student survey or interview data for RQ2; discussion of barriers or teacher preparation for RQ3). This relevance-driven approach reduced the risk of overgeneralisation and strengthened the validity of the RQ-specific syntheses.

Any ambiguous cases were independently reviewed by two authors using a standardised decision form. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with a third author adjudicating

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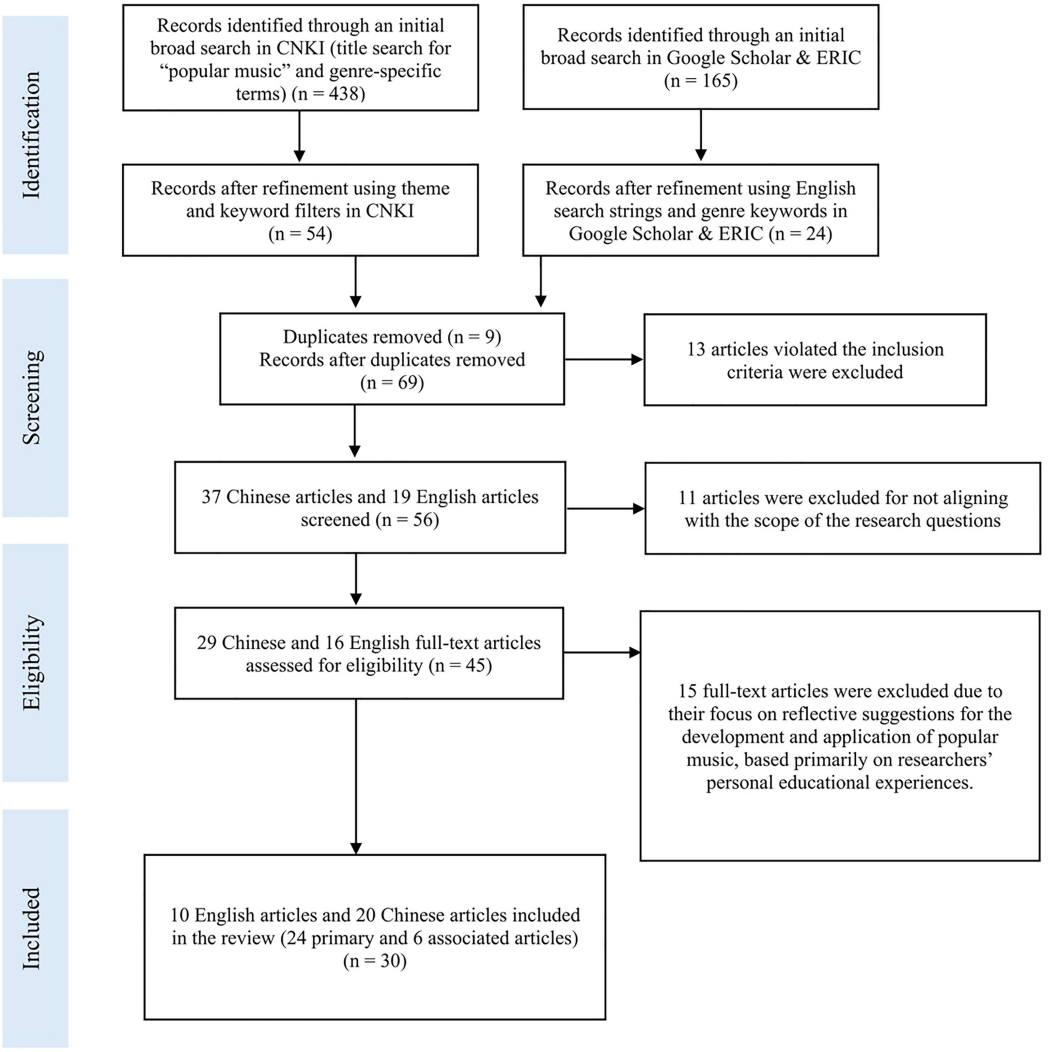


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the review.

when necessary. All decisions and rationales were documented and are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Data charting

Following full-text screening, 45 Chinese- and English-language articles were assessed for eligibility (see Figure 1). To enhance reliability and transparency, we developed a standardised data extraction checklist prior to full-text review (Table 1). The checklist was designed to: (1) capture core descriptive characteristics to enable comparison across studies; (2) systematically extract evidence relevant to the review constructs of 'characteristics' (how popular music is defined or categorised) and 'perceptions' (how it is used, perceived or evaluated in educational contexts); and (3) record study type and contribution (empirical research vs. reflective or commentary-based work).

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Table 1. Standardised data extraction checklist

Category	Data extraction item
Bibliographic information	Author; Year; Journal/Publication format
Context	Country/region
	Educational level (primary/lower secondary/upper secondary)
Research focus	Study aim(s) and research questions
Methodology	Study design (qualitative/quantitative/mixed/reflective/commentary)
Participants	Sample characteristics (N, age, teachers vs. students, urban/rural)
Data collection methods	Surveys, interviews, classroom observation, document analysis, etc.
Instruments	Key measures or instruments (if applicable)
RQ characteristics	How 'popular music' was defined or operationalised
RQ perceptions	Reported functions/uses or perceptions of popular music
Findings	Main findings and pedagogical implications
Limitations	Limitations reported by the authors
Framing	Notes on theoretical framing and policy references
Contribution type	Primary empirical evidence vs. reflective/experience-based commentary

We excluded 15 articles that focused solely on researchers' personal educational experiences or took the form of purely reflective essays from the primary thematic synthesis, as these works typically lack systematic methodological procedures, sample descriptions and verifiable data necessary for reproducible synthesis and for evaluating contributions to the constructs of interest. To avoid discarding potentially useful insights, we recorded these items using the 'contribution type' flag and consulted this information during the interpretation phase to help contextualise findings; however, they were not entered into the formal coding matrix nor treated as primary evidence. This approach preserves the interpretive value of practitioner insights while maintaining methodological comparability across the studies used for synthesis.

One author completed the data extraction checklist for all eligible full-text articles, and a second author independently verified each entry against the source texts. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, with unresolved cases adjudicated by a third author. In total, 30 articles were included in the final review, of which 24 were classified as primary sources and 6 as associated contextual references.

Mapping articles to research questions

Each included article was assessed for its relevance to the three research questions during the data charting process. Articles were not assumed to contribute to all RQs by default; instead, they were mapped only to those questions that they substantively addressed. For each article, we examined whether it contained content relevant to (a) the definition, categorisation or curricular positioning of popular music (RQ1); (b) students' perceptions, preferences or learning experiences (RQ2); and/or (c) challenges related to integrating popular music into school music education, including teacher preparation, curriculum constraints or policy issues (RQ3). Articles that addressed more than one research question were included in multiple analytic streams. When an article was relevant to two or three RQs, 'distinct data segments' (e.g., definitional discussions, student survey results or teacher-reported challenges) were extracted and coded separately under the corresponding RQ fields in the standardised checklist, rather than treating the article as a single unit of analysis. Content that was not relevant to a given RQ was not entered into that RQ's synthesis.

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Table 2. Themes, categories and codes in data analysis

Themes	Categories	Codes
Characteristics	*The Origin of Popular Music*	Originated in Western society, a component of Western musical culture, Chinese translation term of 'liuxing yinyue'
	Key Features	Broad accessibility, commercial orientation, contemporary context, entertainment value
	The Historical Development Within the Social Context in China	Chinese composer Li Jinhui, 1920s, 'Chinese popular music', the cultural integration, patriotism, 'popular propaganda songs', Chinese nationalism and Communist values
Perceptions	*Preference for Popular Music*	Prefer popular music over traditional Chinese music and Western classical music, a desire to engage with popular music, cultural relevance, learning motivation, the functions of popular music and the ways for exposure
	Regional and Educational Disparities	Musical education quality and accessibility, a disparity in the quality and appeal of music education
	Disconnect Between Curriculum and Student Interests	A lack of interest in the music taught, the rare integration of popular music
Challenges	*Concerns about Negative Influences of Popular Music*	Inappropriate exposure, the lack of critical appreciation skills among adolescents, include unhealthy messages, lowering students' values and aesthetic standards, diminish public musical standards, a teaching method rather than a central focus
	Lack of Teacher Training in Popular Music	Teachers' aesthetic standards, misguided analysis, a lack of training and relevant teaching experience
	Theoretical and Cultural Gaps	Prioritise classical and folk traditions, educational value

Several procedural safeguards increased confidence that each RQ was adequately supported: (1) targeted search strings (including genre- and informal-learning terms) and citation chaining reduced the chance of omitting relevant studies; (2) one author completed extraction and a second independently verified entries to ensure completeness and correct mapping; (3) all mappings and key extraction decisions were discussed and, when necessary, adjudicated by a third author. For each research question, we then conducted a focused thematic synthesis using only the articles or data segments mapped to that question. This approach ensured that the findings for each RQ were grounded in directly relevant evidence, while allowing individual articles to contribute to multiple questions when appropriate. We acknowledge that the number and depth of studies varied across RQs, and we report these imbalances transparently in the results.

To analyse the reviewed articles, we then applied thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to link and contrast the objectives, methodologies and themes across studies (Table 2 presents the themes, categories and the codes we finalised in the data analysis). Clarke and Braun (2017) describe thematic analysis as a method that offers theoretical and practical flexibility, allowing for variation in research questions, sample size, data collection methods and approaches to meaning-making (p. 297). This method enables the identification of patterns within and across data, reflecting participants' lived experiences, perspectives and behaviours (Clarke & Braun, 2017). We used our existing field knowledge to inform theme development for further analysis and coding.

Trustworthiness and rigour

The validity of this systematic review is supported by a specific selection process (e.g., PRISMA) for included studies, ensuring methodological quality through established criteria such as population and review outcomes. This enhances the credibility of the findings and allows for broader

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generalisation across diverse educational contexts. In addition, each of the included studies was carefully reviewed independently by two of the authors, who specialise in music education and are familiar with China's context. During the literature coding process, all authors collaboratively coded the identified articles and discussed the results. Finally, we summarised the findings based on themes and categories: I) the current characteristics of popular music in China's context; II) students' perceptions of popular music in Chinese school education and III) the challenges of integrating popular music into Chinese classrooms.

Results

Descriptive overview

A total of 30 articles, comprising 20 Chinese-language articles and 10 English-language articles, were compiled in Table 3. We identified five main themes based on the content: (a) educational value of popular music; (b) pedagogical strategies; (c) reflections on teaching deficiencies (why popular music is needed); (d) students' music preference and in-school music learning; and (e) the challenges and dilemmas of integrating popular music; and categorised these articles based on the five themes. Articles were categorised based on these themes, with many addressing multiple areas. Most studies focused on Chinese secondary schools. The review findings provide a nuanced understanding of these 30 selected articles.

The current characteristics of popular music in China's context

As this is the first systematic review on popular music in China, we believe there is a need to clarify the question of 'What is popular music?' in the Chinese context. Our literature review reveals diverse definitions and characteristics of popular music (Cheng, 2020; Ho, 2017b; Li & Hu, 2020; Peng & Du, 2013; Su, 2007; Wang, 2009; Ye, 2005). First, popular music was considered to have originated in Western society and to be an important component of Western musical culture (Ho, 2017b; Li & Hu, 2020; Ye, 2005). Therefore, the Chinese term 'liuxing yinyue' was a direct translation from the English terms of 'popular music' and 'pop music' (Cheng, 2020; Peng & Du, 2013; Ye, 2005). Based on the literature regarding the terms of popular music, we can identify several key features of how Chinese scholars view popular music:

a) ***Broad Accessibility*** (Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Peng & Du, 2013; Su, 2007; Wang, 2009): Designed for widespread enjoyment, it is not limited to any specific class or elite audience.
b) ***Commercial Orientation*** (Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Peng & Du, 2013; Ye, 2005): Often produced as a commodity, it relies on mass media for promotion and distribution, making it commercially viable.
c) ***Contemporary Context*** (Ho, 2017b; Li & Hu, 2020; Peng & Du, 2013; Wang, 2009): Popular music reflects contemporary social trends and cultural dynamics and evolves in response to changing cultural environments, including urban settings.
d) ***Entertainment Value*** (Li & Hu, 2020; Su, 2007; Wang, 2009): Prioritising engagement and enjoyment, it serves as a primary form of entertainment and social expression.

In addition, some articles reviewed the historical development of popular music within the specific social context in China (Ho, 2017b; Peng & Du, 2013; Ye, 2005). The origins of popular music in China can be traced to the early works of composer Li Jinhui in the 1920s, who is considered the founding figure of the genre (Peng & Du, 2013; Ye, 2005). As a result, in China, there is not only the genre of 'popular music', but also specifically 'Chinese popular music' as it highlights the cultural integration of popular music in China. Historically, many popular songs were used to promote patriotism and military themes. Over the years, these songs have developed into 'popular

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Table 3. Content overview of selected Chinese and English articles

Literature	Research type	Research methods	Educational setting	Theme	Language
Chen (2017)	Non-empirical study	Literature review; pedagogical suggestions	General	Reflection	Chinese
Cheng (2020)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	General	Educational value; reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Dai (2016)	Non-empirical study	Sociological analysis; Pedagogical suggestions	General	Challenges and dilemmas; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Gao & Bai (2013)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	General	Pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Guo (2012)	Non-empirical study	Comparison and reflection of music education	Elementary school and secondary school	Reflection	Chinese
Li (2003)	Non-empirical study	Literature review regarding the development and recognition of popular music in China; pedagogical suggestions	Elementary school and secondary school	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Li (2011)	Non-empirical study	Analysis of the current problems of music appreciation; pedagogical suggestions	General	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Li & Hu (2020)	Non-empirical study	Literature review; pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school (adolescent students)	Educational value; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Li & Li (2007)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Liu (2010)	Non-empirical study	Analysis of the current state of education; pedagogical suggestions	General	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Peng & Du (2013)	Quantitative study ($N = 50$)	Survey on students' music preference	Elementary school and secondary school	Music preference; educational value	Chinese
Su (2007)	Quantitative study ($N = 396$)	Survey on students' music preference; pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school and university students (youth students)	Music preference; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Wang (2009)	Non-empirical study	Teaching strategies	Secondary school	Pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Wang (2012)	Quantitative study (two classes)	Survey on whether students like music lesson; observation; pedagogical suggestions	Elementary school and secondary school	Pedagogical strategies	Chinese

(*Continued*)

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Table 3. (*Continued*)

Literature	Research type	Research methods	Educational setting	Theme	Language
Wang (2016)	Non-empirical study	Literature review; pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school (adolescent students)	Educational value; reflection	Chinese
Wang (2018)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Yang (2007)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	Elementary school and secondary school	Educational value; reflection	Chinese
Ye (2005)	Non-empirical study	Theoretical review; pedagogical suggestions	General	Educational value	Chinese
Zhang (2005)	Non-empirical study	Pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school	Pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Zi (2011)	Non-empirical study	Analysis of problems in the implementation of aesthetic education in school music; pedagogical suggestions	Secondary school (adolescent students)	Reflection; pedagogical strategies	Chinese
Ho (2014)	Quantitative study ($N = 2971$) & qualitative study ($N = 14$)	Mixed methods; survey & semi-structured interviews	Secondary schools (students and teachers)	Music preferences; in-school music learning	English
Ho (2016)	Quantitative study ($N = 2423$) & qualitative study ($N = 55$)	Mixed methods; survey & semi-structured interviews	Secondary school	Music preferences; in-school music learning	English
Ho (2017a)	Quantitative study ($N = 6780$)	Survey	Secondary school	Music preferences; in-school music learning	English
Ho (2017b)	Non-empirical study	Literature review; content analysis	General	Educational value	English
Ho (2022a)	Quantitative study ($N = 1958$)	Survey	Secondary school	Music preferences; in-school music learning	English
Ho (2022b)	Quantitative study ($N = 1083$) & qualitative study ($N = 53$)	Mixed methods; survey & semi-structured interviews	Secondary school	Music preferences; in-school music learning	English
Ho & Law (2006)	Qualitative study (the school principal and the music teacher; 24 students' written assignments)	Semi-structured interviews; analysis of students' written assignments	Secondary school	Educational value; reflection; music preference	English

(*Continued*)

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Table 3. (*Continued*)

Literature	Research type	Research methods	Educational setting	Theme	Language
Law & Ho (2015)	Quantitative study (N = 1730) & qualitative study (N = 60 students & 18 teachers)	Mixed methods; survey & semi-structured interviews	Secondary school	Music preferences; in-school music learning; challenges and dilemmas	English
Poon & Chen (2023)	Qualitative study (N = 19)	Cross-case analysis; semi-structured group interview	Junior high school (form one and form two students)	Pedagogical strategies	English
Quin (2022)	Qualitative study (a music class containing a mixture of 12 students)	Qualitative case study; class observation	Secondary school	Reflection; challenges and dilemmas	English

propaganda songs' in the promotion of the Chinese official departments, state media and educational institutions, to reinforce Chinese nationalism and Communist values (Ho, 2017b). In this regard, we identify that Chinese popular music, particularly these popular propaganda songs, serves a social function and carries social responsibility to a certain extent.

Regarding the genres of popular music, the first aspect is the definition of popular music in its various forms. Popular music serves as an umbrella term encompassing different musical styles such as jazz, blues, folk, rap and electronic music (Cheng, 2020). Li and Hu (2020) further noted that popular music includes not only popular songs but also various instrumental forms such as light music, jazz, disco, tango and waltz. Li and Li (2007) emphasised that 'popular music' should not merely be synonymous with popular songs; it should also encompass accessible piano compositions, classic film scores and light music. Ho (2017b) highlighted that Chinese popular music spans a range from revolutionary songs to contemporary Chinese hip-hop. Overall, the literature provides limited descriptions of popular music genres within primary and secondary music education, with the term 'popular music' primarily referring to well-known and widely recognised popular songs (Ye, 2005). This perspective tends to overlook the role and significance of instrumental works within the realm of popular music, reflecting a somewhat narrow understanding of the expressive forms of popular music. Furthermore, in practical education, there is a notable issue regarding the limited representation of popular music styles in primary and secondary music education textbooks in China. Music teachers often lack teaching resources related to genres such as rock, blues, folk, country, punk, alternative, heavy metal and electronic music (Cheng, 2020; Li & Li, 2007; Liu, 2010).

From the students' perspective, while they exhibit diverse musical preferences, they tend to favour popular songs from mainland China (Putonghua) over those from South Korea, Japan and Western countries, as well as Western rap and hip-hop, blues, jazz and rock music (Ho, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2022a, 2022b; Law & Ho, 2015). Additionally, popular music from mainland China is sometimes distinguished from pop songs originating in Taiwan and Cantonese songs from Hong Kong and Macau. As Ho (2017b) emphasised, the incorporation of popular music into school music education serves to convey the aspirations of the Chinese socialist dream and an aspiration for nation renaissance, which include values rooted in Confucianism and the concept of a harmonious society. Nevertheless, students also demonstrate a strong preference for Taiwanese pop music, particularly songs by Jay Chou (Ho & Law, 2006). Many outstanding Taiwanese pop

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songs have been incorporated into official textbooks in mainland China. The inclusion of these Taiwanese songs aids students in navigating the tension between their newly acquired personal autonomy and the collectivism inherent in socialism (Ho, 2017b).

Students' perceptions of popular music in Chinese school education

The reviewed literature (Chen, 2017; Dai, 2016; Ho, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015; Liu, 2010; Peng & Du, 2013; Wang, 2012, 2016; Yang, 2007) presented that regarding students' perceptions of popular music in Chinese school within general education. After our analysis, there are three domains commonly presented in these studies: (a) Preference for Popular Music, (b) Regional and Educational Disparities and (c) Disconnect Between Curriculum and Student Interests.

(a) ***Preference for Popular Music***: Across studies, students strongly prefer popular music over Western classical or Chinese folk/traditional genres, and this preference is linked to their enjoyment of school music lessons (Ho, 2017a; Peng & Du, 2013; Su, 2007; Wang, 2012). Many studies (Ho, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2022a, 2022b; Law & Ho, 2015) indicate a strong music learning preference in school among students for Chinese popular music over traditional Chinese music and Western classical music. A significant majority of students, regardless of their geographic location or education level, expressed a desire to engage with popular music during school music lessons. This trend highlights the cultural relevance of popular music in students' lives, suggesting that it is more than entertainment and expression, but a genre to motivate their learning as well.

(b) ***Regional Disparities in Access to School Music Education***: The reviewed articles (Ho, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015; Peng & Du, 2013) indicate that regional differences emerge in both the sources of musical learning and the extent of students' engagement with music in school settings. Variations in the quality and accessibility of music education are evident, with students in urban contexts reporting greater exposure opportunities within schools. Studies conducted in major urban centres (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha) consistently document strong student interest in contemporary popular music and higher expectations for its inclusion in school music lessons (Ho, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015). In contrast, studies involving students from less urbanised regions suggest more uneven access to diverse musical genres within school settings, reflecting differences in local resources and curricular structures rather than clearly documented differences in out-of-school listening practices (Peng & Du, 2013).

    In addition, some studies suggest that students' perceptions of the quality and appeal of school music education are shaped by regional conditions, particularly differences in school-based resources, curriculum design and instructional support (Liu, 2010; Peng & Du, 2013; Wang, 2012; Yang, 2007), as reflected in students' reported dissatisfaction, disengagement and mismatch between curricular content and musical preferences. This dissatisfaction is especially pronounced among pupils whose listening habits are centred on popular genres. Rather than reflecting a single cause, it appears to stem from limited curricular incorporation of popular music, instructional practices that marginalise contemporary repertoire and teachers' relative lack of repertoire familiarity and pedagogical strategies for adapting popular music to classroom contexts. Where popular music is scarcely represented in lessons, or where teachers are unable or unwilling to integrate it in ways that feel authentic to these students, the perceived relevance and appeal of music classes are substantially attenuated.

(c) ***Disconnect Between Curriculum and Student Interests***: Beyond regional variation, a more pervasive issue identified across the literature concerns a structural disconnect between curriculum content and students' musical interests. Many students report disliking their school music classes due to a lack of interest in the music taught (Chen, 2017; Dai, 2016;

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Liu, 2010; Wang, 2012, 2016; Yang, 2007). These articles reflect that the primary reason students dislike music classes is their lack of interest in the songs included in the textbooks and the repertoire taught by the teachers (Chen, 2017; Liu, 2010; Wang, 2012; Yang, 2007). Based on this, scholars believe that the integration of popular music can enhance students' interest in music classes (Chen, 2017; Liu, 2010; Yang, 2007). However, popular music was rarely incorporated into actual music lessons in China, both in the textbooks and in the teachers' instructional practices (Chen, 2017; Cheng, 2020; Dai, 2016; Li & Hu, 2020; Wang, 2016).

This musical preference among students is closely linked to their teachers' musical tastes and the genres of music taught in the classroom. Chinese music educators face the challenge of expanding students' musical tastes and experiences beyond the styles highlighted by contemporary mass media. This includes not only Chinese classical vocal music and folk music but also Western genres such as rock, blues, jazz and a variety of world music styles (Ho, 2014, 2016, 2022a).

Challenges of integrating popular music in Chinese classrooms

Based on the 30 reviewed articles, we found that popular music in China has gradually gained authoritative recognition and is employed in the music textbooks in Chinese primary and secondary education (Chen, 2017; Dai, 2016; Guo, 2012; Li & Li, 2007; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012; Peng & Du, 2013; Wang, 2016; Yang, 2007), but it still faces scepticism from some educators, scholars, parents and even students (Chen, 2017; Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Liu, 2010; Peng & Du, 2013; Wang, 2016; Ye, 2005; Zi, 2011).

(a) ***Concerns about Negative Influences of Popular Music:*** Though popular music can engage students, scholars caution that adolescents may lack the critical discernment to appreciate popular music during puberty, and inappropriate exposure could exacerbate emotional issues (Chen, 2017; Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Zi, 2011). Popular music's accessibility may promote unhealthy messages, vulgarity and aesthetic homogenisation, potentially lowering students' values and marginalising high-quality genres like art and folk music (Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Liu, 2010; Wang, 2016; Yang, 2007). Thus, in Chinese education, popular music is more often used instrumentally to attract pupils' attention and enhance engagement when teaching other repertoires (e.g., Western classical or Chinese traditional music), rather than being treated as the primary object of instruction, with dedicated teaching of popular-music knowledge and genre-specific skills (Cheng, 2020; Gao & Bai, 2013; Su, 2007). It was also revealed that scholars suggested teachers to use popular songs with 'positive and uplifting lyrics', 'beautiful and smooth melodies' and 'educational significance' (Cheng, 2020; Gao & Bai, 2013; Li & Li, 2007; Liu, 2010; Zhang, 2005). Wang (2012) suggested that music teachers should guide students in analysing their musical preferences, helping them develop their own critical judgements. Other scholars (Li, 2011; Li & Hu, 2020; Liu, 2010; Su, 2007; Wang, 2009, 2016; Yang, 2007) also emphasise that proper guidance from teachers fosters students' aesthetic abilities and helps cultivate positive aesthetic values and attitudes.

(b) ***Lack of Teacher Training in Popular Music:*** Music teachers, traditionally trained in the serious and formal aesthetics of Western classical music, often find it difficult to explain popular music in a way that resonates with students. This disconnect creates a gap between teachers' aesthetic standards and the musical preferences of their students (Chen, 2017; Cheng, 2020; Wang, 2016). The core challenges of 'what to teach' and 'how to teach' popular music in classrooms are significant, as Western classical music's analytical methods are generally not applicable to popular music, which operates within a different 'discourse system'

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(Dai, 2016). Additionally, teachers may engage in misguided analysis because they lack sufficient theoretical grounding, and they struggle to select popular music that aligns with students' preferences due to a lack of training and access to appropriate resources (Ho, 2014, 2016; Law & Ho, 2015).

(c) ***Theoretical and Cultural Gaps:*** Here, 'theoretical' encompasses three related domains: (1) pedagogical theories and principles for teaching popular music; (2) frameworks for integrating popular music with Western classical music and Chinese folk/traditional music; and (3) music-theoretical analysis of popular music. Scholars believed the integration of popular music in Chinese education lacks a strong theoretical foundation, making it difficult to balance student demand with Western classical music and Chinese folk/traditional music, especially when teachers valued more for historical and aesthetic significance (Ho, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015; Liu, 2010; Su, 2007; Wang, 2018). Moreover, popular music operates within a distinctive 'discourse system' that calls for analytical approaches different from those traditionally used in Western classical music (Dai, 2016). Whereas classical music analysis has historically emphasised harmonic and formal structures, meaning-making in popular music often centres on lyrics, identity, production practices and social context (Ye, 2005). Because popular music in China has developed through the interaction of Western influences and local musical traditions, tensions and discontinuities between musical cultures continue to shape how it is understood and taught (Peng & Du, 2013; Ye, 2005). Ongoing concerns about commercialisation and entertainment further complicate debates about its educational purpose. Although scholars have proposed integrating popular music with classical and folk traditions to support a more balanced music curriculum (Cheng, 2020; Li & Li, 2007; Su, 2007; Wang, 2009), the field still lacks a coherent framework that articulates how pedagogical aims, integrative curriculum design and context-appropriate forms of analysis might be aligned. As a result, educators are often left uncertain about what aspects of popular music warrant curricular emphasis and how popular music might be taught with conceptual clarity and educational intention.

Discussion

Responding to RQ1, the current characteristics of popular music in general music education in China reveal a multifaceted landscape. Primarily rooted in Western culture, popular music features catchy melodies, relatable lyrics and diverse genres, appealing to a broad demographic and resonating with contemporary audiences. Its historical development reflects significant societal changes, including shifts in cultural values and the rise of digital media. The discourse on popular music genres reveals a narrow definition predominantly centred on well-known songs, often neglecting instrumental forms and diverse styles within primary and secondary music education.

In practice, popular music used in classrooms is largely limited to mainstream mainland Chinese pop songs, with occasional inclusion of Taiwanese pop and a small number of Western popular songs selected for melodic simplicity and lyrical appropriateness. These repertoires emphasise familiarity over genre diversity, resulting in minimal exposure to styles such as jazz, blues or electronic music (e.g., Cheng, 2020; Li & Li, 2007; Liu, 2010). While some overlap exists between students' preferences and teachers' musical tastes, particularly regarding mainstream mainland Chinese popular music, this alignment does not fully translate into classroom practice. Teachers may personally appreciate certain forms of popular music, yet their instructional choices remain strongly shaped by curriculum standards, examination expectations and long-standing pedagogical traditions that privilege Western classical and Chinese folk music. As a result,

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Western classical music continues to dominate classroom instruction not because of a lack of student interest in popular music, nor necessarily because of teachers' personal preferences, but due to institutional, curricular and ideological constraints that define what is considered pedagogically legitimate knowledge in school music education.

Regarding RQ2, students' perceptions of popular music are primarily articulated in relation to its limited presence and treatment within school-based music education, rather than as abstract genre preferences. Across the reviewed studies (e.g., Chen, 2017; Dai, 2016; Liu, 2010; Wang, 2012, 2016; Yang, 2007), students consistently evaluate popular music in terms of whether and how it is included in classroom teaching, textbooks and school music activities. Students' expressed preference for popular music is frequently framed as a response to its relative absence in formal instruction, with many students reporting that school music lessons feel disconnected from their everyday musical lives. Importantly, this disconnect is not only identified analytically by researchers but also explicitly perceived and articulated by students themselves. Across multiple studies, students report dissatisfaction with music lessons that prioritise Western classical repertoire while marginalising the music they identify with in their daily lives. From students' perspectives, this imbalance renders school music education less relevant, less engaging and less reflective of their musical identities. For many students, Western classical music is not rejected per se, but its exclusive or dominant positioning in the curriculum at the expense of popular music shapes their perception of school music as outdated or disconnected from contemporary culture.

Moreover, regional disparities do not appear to operate in a linear or uniform manner. While some studies suggest that students in less urbanised areas may encounter fewer opportunities for school-based engagement with diverse popular music genres, the existing literature does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that this necessarily results in lower student interest or reduced dissatisfaction with a curriculum centred on Western classical music (e.g., Ho, 2016, 2017a; Law & Ho, 2015; Peng & Du, 2013). Rather than indicating diminished preference, these regional differences point to uneven experiential baselines from which students evaluate school music education. How students in different regions perceive the absence or presence of popular music in the curriculum remains underexplored, highlighting the need for regionally sensitive, student-centred empirical research.

Answering RQ3, integrating popular music into Chinese classrooms presents several challenges. There are concerns that popular music may have potential negative consequences on students' moral values and aesthetic standards, for example, through exposure to unhealthy messages (e.g., Chen, 2017; Cheng, 2020; Li & Hu, 2020; Zi, 2011). Furthermore, many educators lack the critical appreciation skills necessary to guide students in discerning the quality of popular music, compounded by insufficient teacher training in this area. The curriculum's emphasis on Western classical and traditional folk repertoires over contemporary genres creates both theoretical and cultural gaps in the treatment of popular music. At the theoretical level, popular music is often positioned outside dominant pedagogical frameworks that privilege notation-based learning, formal analysis and historically canonised works, leaving limited guidance for how popular music can be taught, analysed and assessed within existing curricular models. At the cultural level, the marginalisation of contemporary genres reinforces a hierarchical distinction between 'serious' and 'everyday' music, weakening connections between school music and students' lived musical cultures. As a result, the educational value of popular music is frequently perceived, by curriculum designers and teachers, as supplementary or motivational rather than as a legitimate medium for musical understanding, critical inquiry and skill development.

The inclusion of Chinese popular music in school curricula has increased, but this integration remains limited, with the pace of educational theory lagging the rapidly changing music industry (Shi, 2024). As a result of the review, we developed a conceptual model to enhance readers' understanding of our findings (see Figure 2). First, we defined popular music within the Chinese context. Then, by examining themes of the reviewed studies, students' preferences for popular music, critiques and suggestions, we identified discrepancies between students' interests and the

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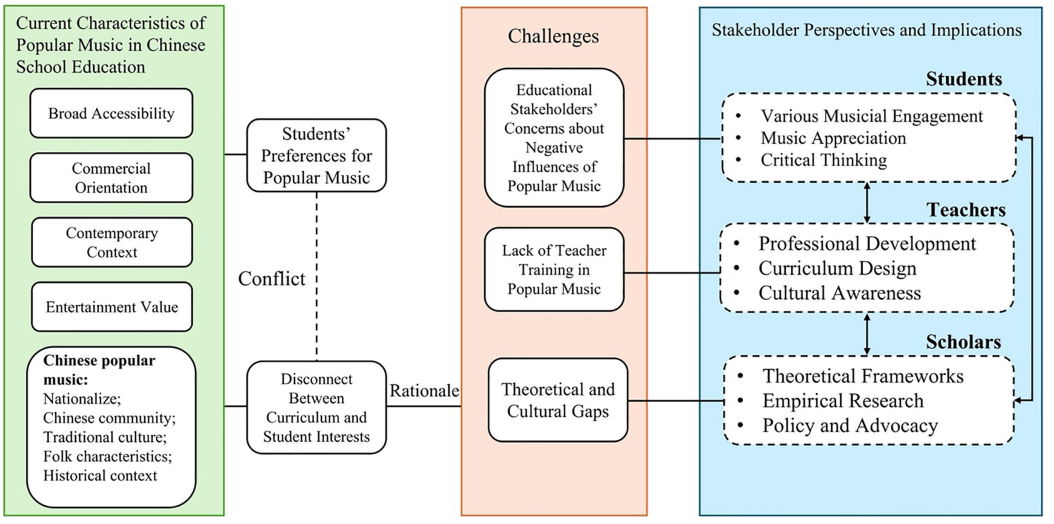


Figure 2. The conceptual model of integrating popular music into primary and secondary education in China.

concerns of scholars, teacher training and curriculum implementation related to popular music. While popular music resonates with students, its educational use is challenged by the slow pace of its incorporation into the curriculum and a lack of systematic approaches.

Chinese scholars largely support integrating popular music into education but express significant concerns. They argue that classical and folk music should remain central in the curriculum due to their historical and aesthetic importance (Liu, 2010; Su, 2007; Wang, 2018). There is caution against over-reliance on popular music to cater to student preferences, emphasising the need to balance it with traditional genres to maintain pedagogical integrity (Li & Li, 2007; Wang, 2009; Ye, 2005). This suggests a potential hierarchy of musical genres among scholars, prioritising nationalism and aesthetic appreciation over commercialism and critical thinking. However, the marginalisation of popular music in favour of older traditions risks reinforcing an artificial divide between 'high' and 'low' culture (Cowen & Tabarrok, 2000). Popular music exists along a cultural continuum, incorporates diverse compositional and production techniques and offers rich opportunities for teaching creativity, music theory and critical analysis. Far from lacking educational depth, popular music enables exploration of complex issues such as identity, social values and media influence (Bennett, 2001; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Ho, 2017b; Shuker, 2013).

Restrictive classroom strategies, such as limiting repertoire to aesthetically 'safe' or uplifting songs, may therefore constrain students' critical thinking and creative development (Moore, 2007). Given students' extensive engagement with music through digital media and everyday listening practices (Ho, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2022a, 2022b; Ho & Law, 2012; Law & Ho, 2015; Peng & Du, 2013; Su, 2007; Wang, 2012), popular music provides a valuable pedagogical resource for developing critical listening through lyric analysis, sociocultural contextualisation, production practices and media critique. In the Chinese context, the educational value of popular music lies not in replicating score-based analytical traditions but in fostering culturally situated, reflective and critically informed musical understanding.

Limitations

Several substantive and methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the volume and depth of evidence varied across the three research questions. While the literature offers relatively richer discussion of curricular characteristics and challenges, empirical evidence addressing students' perceptions and classroom-level outcomes remains more limited. We now explicitly report these

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differences in evidentiary density in the results section and acknowledge that some conclusions, particularly those concerning student experience and impact, are necessarily tentative. Similarly, observations regarding the representation or underrepresentation of specific popular music genres reflect patterns reported in the reviewed literature and curriculum-related studies, rather than comprehensive national data on classroom repertoires. This uneven distribution of evidence reflects the current state of the field and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Second, the existing Chinese-language literature is dominated by pedagogical reflections and conceptual discussions, with comparatively few empirical investigations. As a result, evidence regarding how popular music is implemented in practice, and its effects on student engagement and learning outcomes, remains insufficient. Similarly, claims that popular music may negatively influence students' mental health, moral values or aesthetic development are often speculative and would benefit from systematic empirical validation. Future research should therefore prioritise rigorous investigations of student outcomes, including engagement, creativity, critical thinking, emotional regulation and well-being, while giving greater weight to students' perspectives rather than focusing predominantly on teachers' views.

Several methodological limitations of this review should also be considered. To enhance comparability and analytical consistency, the review was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles. Consequently, potentially relevant dissertations, master's theses, conference papers, book chapters and certain Chinese-language articles lacking substantial citations or practical applicability were excluded. While this decision strengthened the coherence of the dataset, it may have led to the omission of locally grounded or innovative practices documented in grey literature. In addition, language and database selection may have introduced regional and indexing biases. Finally, heterogeneous study designs and reporting practices constrained quantitative synthesis, and although thematic analysis was conducted using a priori coding, double coding and audit trails, interpretive judgement remains unavoidable.

Future reviews would benefit from more inclusive search strategies and greater attention to classroom-based, ethnographic, longitudinal and intervention studies. Mixed-methods syntheses and targeted meta-analyses of comparable outcomes would further strengthen causal inference and advance understanding of the pedagogical roles of popular music in primary and secondary education in China.

Conclusions

In conclusion, integrating popular music into education presents both opportunities and challenges. Further empirical research is needed to understand its impact, specifically focusing on student engagement, mental health and critical thinking. Collaboration among educators, policymakers and musicians is essential to cultivate a rich learning environment that reflects contemporary musical landscapes and honours traditional values. Professional development for teachers is crucial to ensure a holistic and meaningful music education. We believe popular music has the potential to empower students, preparing them to be informed participants in a diverse cultural dialogue.

Note

*Indicates reviewed articles in this study

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Cite this article: Lin Y, Weatherly KICH, and Cheng C (2026). Characteristics, perceptions and challenges of popular music in mainland China's primary and secondary music education: a systematic review. *British Journal of Music Education* 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051726101041

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