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Student perceptions of General Music Education in Chinese Universities

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Abstract: The expansion of aesthetic education in Chinese higher education has strengthened the role of general music education, particularly through public art courses for non-music-major students. However, greater institutional emphasis does not necessarily lead to sustained student engagement. This paper synthesizes existing literature on Chinese university students' perceptions, motivation, musical preferences, cultural participation, and experiences of general music education. The review identifies a persistent value–engagement gap: students generally recognize the personal, emotional, and cultural value of music, but their interest does not always translate into strong confidence or sustained participation in formal music education. Students' musical lives are increasingly shaped by digital platforms, social networks, and popular culture, while traditional Chinese music may be culturally respected without becoming part of everyday musical practice. Drawing on Expectancy–Value Theory, musical identity, cultural participation, and student-centred pedagogy, the paper argues that student engagement reflects the interaction of motivation, institutional positioning, informal musical environments, repertoire, and pedagogical design. The findings highlight the need for participatory teaching, stronger curricular relevance, meaningful integration of contemporary and traditional music, and greater connection with students' existing musical experiences.

Keywords: general music education; aesthetic education; student perceptions; Chinese universities; music appreciation

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, music education in China has been increasingly incorporated into the broader national agenda of aesthetic education (meiyu). This policy orientation reflects a movement away from treating arts education primarily as specialist training and toward recognizing its contribution to aesthetic literacy, creativity, cultural understanding, and whole-person development. The 2015 opinion of the General Office of the State Council on strengthening and improving school aesthetic education, together with subsequent Ministry of Education guidance in 2019 and 2023, strengthened the institutional position of aesthetic education across educational levels (Wang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

Within higher education, this policy orientation has been translated into the provision of public art courses. The Guiding Plan for Public Art Courses in National Colleges and Universities presents public art education as an important component of undergraduate cultivation and emphasizes its contribution to aesthetic quality, innovative spirit, practical ability, and personality development (Ge & Lu, 2018). General music education, commonly delivered through courses such as Music Appreciation and related public art offerings, is consequently expected to serve students beyond the population of music specialists. Its principal constituency is the non-music-major student, for whom the university may provide one of the few opportunities for structured musical learning after secondary education (Wang & Teng, 2024).

The institutional expansion of general music education, however, does not necessarily imply equivalent levels of student engagement. Chinese higher education has long been

characterized by the strong institutional position of disciplinary and employment-oriented education. Within this environment, general education may be perceived as secondary to major courses, creating a persistent tension between the policy aspiration of whole-person cultivation and students' immediate academic priorities (Xue et al., 2023; Ge & Lu, 2018; Sun & Cai, 2017). The issue is therefore not simply whether universities offer music courses, but whether those courses become meaningful educational experiences for students.

At the same time, university students no longer encounter music mainly through formal education. Streaming services, social media, short-video platforms, peer networks, and popular culture have become important environments for musical discovery, preference formation, and participation. Research on Chinese students' engagement with European and American popular music illustrates the importance of digital and social environments in shaping contemporary musical consumption (Zhang et al., 2022). Formal university music education consequently operates alongside a large and rapidly changing informal musical ecosystem.

This context makes student motivation especially important. Existing evidence suggests that students' interest in music, their perceived value of music, their expectations of success, and their willingness to engage in formal learning cannot be assumed to move together. Xie and Leung (2011), for example, identified a pattern in which musical interest increased while expectancy declined and perceived difficulty increased across educational stages. The implication is important for university music education: students may continue to value music while simultaneously perceiving formal musical learning as difficult, distant, or insufficiently relevant to their academic lives.

The central problem addressed in this paper is the apparent distance between the institutional importance assigned to general music education and the forms of engagement actually evident in the student literature. The existing literature contains substantial evidence about aesthetic-education policy, public art courses, student motivation, musical preferences, traditional music, and digital musical environments. Yet these strands have generally been examined separately. As a result, the literature has not fully explained why positive attitudes toward music do not consistently translate into strong engagement with formal university music education.

Three gaps are particularly important. First, the student perspective remains less integrated than the policy perspective. Policy research establishes why aesthetic education matters institutionally, but it cannot by itself establish whether students experience public music courses as relevant or meaningful. Second, the literature often treats musical interest and educational engagement as closely related outcomes, even though available evidence suggests that they may diverge. Third, contemporary musical life is increasingly located outside the classroom, but the implications of this shift for curriculum design and cultural transmission have not been sufficiently synthesized.

The present paper therefore conceptualizes the central problem as a value–engagement gap: students may recognize the value of music and participate actively in musical life while showing weaker confidence, lower curricular priority, or limited engagement with formal university music learning. This gap provides a more precise analytical starting point than the broad claim that students are simply uninterested in music.

This review addresses four questions:

1. How do Chinese university students perceive the value and relevance of general music education?

2. Why does students' interest in music not necessarily translate into sustained engagement with formal university music education?

3. How do contemporary musical preferences, digital musical environments, and attitudes toward traditional Chinese music shape students' engagement with general music education?

4. Which features of pedagogy, course design, and institutional provision can strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of general music education for non-music-major students?

This paper makes four principal contributions. First, it places the student experience at the centre of the discussion of Chinese higher music education, complementing policy-oriented accounts of aesthetic education. Second, it distinguishes musical value from formal educational engagement and uses the value–engagement gap as the central organizing concept. Third, it integrates formal and informal musical environments by considering digital media, peer networks, and popular culture alongside university courses. Fourth, it connects the literature on traditional music with the literature on pedagogy and motivation, showing why cultural recognition does not necessarily produce cultural participation. Together, these contributions provide a more integrated account of the conditions under which general music education can become educationally meaningful for non-music majors.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the policy and institutional context, the development of general music education for non-music majors, student perceptions and motivation, and musical preference in the digital environment. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 explains the review and analytical approach. Section 5 synthesizes the principal findings. Section 6 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the broader literature. Section 7 develops implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practice. Section 8 identifies limitations and future research directions. Section 9 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Policy and Institutional Context

Chinese higher education has progressively embedded aesthetic education within a whole-person cultivation ideal. The policy trajectory emphasizes that music, dance, fine arts, and related disciplines should contribute not only to specialist artistic development but also to broader aesthetic ability and creativity (Wang et al., 2025). The public-art-course framework consequently gives universities a formal mechanism through which non-specialist students can encounter the arts (Ge & Lu, 2018).

General music education occupies a distinctive position within this framework because it can reach students who have no intention of pursuing music professionally. Music Appreciation and related courses can introduce listening, musical concepts, cultural contexts, repertoire, and participatory activities without requiring specialist training (Wang & Teng, 2024). Their educational justification therefore rests less on occupational preparation than on broad cultural and personal development.

Nevertheless, institutional provision takes place within a higher-education system in which disciplinary specialization remains highly salient. Research on general education identifies tensions between broad educational objectives and a majors-first orientation (Xue et al., 2023; Sun & Cai, 2017). Public art courses may consequently be treated as peripheral when students evaluate courses primarily through the lens of examinations, employment, professional qualifications, and major-related competence. This institutional positioning matters because perceived curricular legitimacy can affect the amount of time, effort, and attention students are willing to invest in a course.

2.2 General Music Education for Non-Music Majors

The literature portrays general music education as a broad rather than specialist form of musical learning. Its intended outcomes include aesthetic appreciation, cultural understanding, emotional development, creativity, and exposure to musical diversity. This orientation is consistent with the broader aims of public art education (Ge & Lu, 2018; Wang & Teng, 2024).

The principal challenge is that the goals of general music education are often expressed at a high level of abstraction. Students may understand that music contributes to personal development without seeing how a particular course relates to their everyday experiences or future academic lives. When the curriculum is dominated by information transmission, historical survey, or passive listening, the distance between institutional purpose and student experience may become greater. The literature therefore increasingly points toward course design and pedagogy as mechanisms through which broad educational goals are translated into actual engagement.

2.3 Student Perceptions, Motivation, and Engagement

Student perceptions should be distinguished into at least three related dimensions: value, expectancy, and engagement. Value concerns whether students consider music worthwhile or meaningful; expectancy concerns whether they believe they can succeed in musical learning; and engagement concerns the behavioral and cognitive investment they make in formal learning. These dimensions can reinforce one another, but they can also diverge.

The evidence from Chinese students is particularly relevant because it documents a divergence between interest and expectancy. Xie and Leung (2011) found that interest could increase even as expectancy declined and perceived difficulty rose. University-level evidence similarly indicates that students recognize music as useful for singing, emotional regulation, and accessible cultural participation (Ren, 2024). These findings caution against interpreting weak classroom engagement as evidence of a general rejection of music.

Teacher-side evidence further suggests that pedagogical reform can produce positive classroom outcomes. Lyu (2025), for example, reported positive attitudes among two Chinese music teachers following curriculum reform, with teachers identifying beneficial teaching and learning outcomes. Although teacher evidence cannot be directly equated with student evidence, it supports the proposition that instructional design is an important part of the engagement process.

2.4 Musical Preference, Traditional Music, and the Digital Environment

Students' musical preferences are formed across multiple cultural environments. Digital platforms make music continuously available and facilitate rapid movement between genres, artists, communities, and cultural traditions. Zhang et al. (2022) showed the importance of social media and digital platforms in Chinese students' engagement with European and American popular music. The university classroom therefore competes not only with other courses but also with an extensive informal musical environment that is immediate, personalized, and socially connected.

Traditional Chinese music presents a related but distinct issue. The literature indicates that cultural importance and everyday participation do not necessarily coincide. Students may recognize the cultural significance of traditional repertoire while having limited familiarity with it or preferring contemporary genres in their everyday listening. Research on Chinese musical learning also indicates that tutors, peers, and broader educational-cultural influences shape engagement with Chinese works (Liu, 2024).

The implication is not that contemporary preference should replace traditional repertoire. Rather, the literature suggests that cultural transmission is more likely to become meaningful when traditional music is connected to students' existing musical identities and

experiences. Ho (2014, 2017), Law and Ho (2015), and related work on music preferences provide evidence that repertoire choice is closely connected to students' experiences and social environments.

2.5 Synthesis of the Literature and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reveals four linked conditions. First, policy gives aesthetic education and public art courses substantial normative importance. Second, institutional structures can nevertheless place general music courses at the margins of students' academic priorities. Third, students may value music without possessing strong expectancy for formal musical learning. Fourth, students' musical lives are increasingly shaped outside the classroom, while traditional music may remain culturally legitimate but experientially distant.

These observations suggest that the relevant research problem is not simply whether students like music. The more analytically useful question is how value, expectancy, informal musical participation, cultural repertoire, and course design interact to shape formal engagement. This synthesis motivates the theoretical framework developed below.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Expectancy–Value Theory

Expectancy–Value Theory provides the primary motivational lens for interpreting the literature. The framework distinguishes the value students attach to an activity from their expectations regarding successful performance. Applied to general music education, this distinction is especially useful because students can regard music as enjoyable, culturally meaningful, or emotionally beneficial without necessarily believing that they are capable of learning musical skills or mastering unfamiliar repertoire.

The Chinese evidence makes this distinction empirically relevant. Xie and Leung (2011) identified increasing interest alongside declining expectancy and rising perceived difficulty. Liu (2024) similarly showed that tutor, peer, and broader educational-cultural influences can affect engagement with Chinese works. The framework therefore helps explain why increasing musical interest does not automatically result in greater formal engagement.

3.2 Cultural Participation and Musical Identity

A second perspective concerns cultural participation and musical identity. Musical preferences are not merely choices among sounds; they are embedded in social relationships, cultural familiarity, personal experience, and everyday media environments. When students encounter music through peers, digital communities, and popular culture, these environments contribute to the development of musical identity outside formal education.

This perspective is important for understanding traditional music. If traditional repertoire is presented only as culturally important content, students may acknowledge its symbolic value without integrating it into their own musical lives. Cultural participation therefore requires opportunities for listening, interpretation, comparison, performance, discussion, and personal connection. The relevant educational objective is not simply exposure but meaningful participation.

3.3 Student-Centred Pedagogy and Engagement

The third construct is student-centred pedagogy. The literature indicates that engagement is shaped by what students are asked to do with music, not only by what they are told about music. Courses that recognize students' existing preferences, encourage participation, connect formal repertoire with contemporary musical life, and provide accessible forms of practice can reduce the distance between students' informal musical identities and the curriculum (Ho, 2014; Zhang, 2024).

Student-centred pedagogy also addresses the expectancy component of motivation. When students experience achievable musical tasks and receive meaningful feedback, the formal learning environment can provide evidence that musical participation is accessible. Pedagogy can therefore influence both the value and expectancy sides of the engagement process.

3.4 An Integrative Framework

The three perspectives can be integrated into a single framework. Institutional policy establishes the formal legitimacy and objectives of general music education. Students then enter courses with pre-existing musical identities, preferences, levels of expectancy, and experiences shaped by digital and social environments. Course design and pedagogy mediate the relationship between these student characteristics and formal engagement. The resulting engagement can reinforce or weaken students' perceptions of music's relevance and their confidence in musical learning.

The central proposition of the framework is therefore that the value–engagement gap is not a fixed student characteristic. It is a relational outcome produced at the intersection of motivation, culture, informal musical experience, pedagogy, and institutional context.

4. Review and Analytical Approach

This paper adopts an integrative narrative review approach. Rather than treating the literature as a collection of isolated findings, the analysis reorganizes the available evidence around the four research questions and the theoretical constructs identified above. The reviewed literature covers policy and institutional development, general music education for non-music majors, student perceptions and motivation, musical preferences, traditional repertoire, digital environments, and pedagogical practice.

The synthesis is thematic rather than statistical. Evidence is grouped according to recurring patterns and interpreted in relation to expectancy–value, cultural participation and musical identity, and student-centred pedagogy. Particular attention is given to convergence and divergence across studies, especially where evidence concerns different educational stages. Because several influential studies concern secondary rather than university students (Ho, 2014, 2017; Law & Ho, 2015; Xie & Leung, 2011), conclusions about university students are stated cautiously and are not presented as direct estimates of the university population.

The purpose of this approach is explanatory synthesis: to identify the mechanisms and conditions that help account for the relationship between students' musical values and their formal educational engagement.

5. Findings in the Literature

5.1 A Persistent Value–Engagement Gap

The most consistent pattern across the literature is not rejection of music but divergence between musical value and formal educational engagement. Students recognize music as enjoyable, emotionally meaningful, culturally significant, or personally useful, yet confidence in formal learning can remain comparatively weak. Ren (2024) reports university students' recognition of several benefits of music, while Xie and Leung (2011) document declining expectancy and rising perceived difficulty despite increasing interest in music.

This pattern challenges a simple deficit interpretation of students' engagement. If students' musical value remains positive, then low engagement cannot be explained adequately by a lack of interest. Instead, the evidence suggests that students make distinctions between music as part of everyday life and music as an academic activity. The first can be immediate and self-directed; the second may be perceived as demanding, peripheral, or insufficiently connected to students' major-related priorities.

5.2 Preference Lives Outside the Curriculum

A second finding is the increasing importance of informal musical environments. Digital platforms allow students to discover and consume music according to personal preference, social recommendation, and algorithmic exposure. Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrates the role of social media in shaping engagement with popular music. This environment changes the conditions under which formal music education operates.

The implication is not that universities should reproduce digital platforms in the classroom. Rather, the curriculum can acknowledge that students already possess musical knowledge and preferences. Starting from these experiences may create entry points into unfamiliar repertoire and concepts. A curriculum that ignores students' existing musical worlds risks making the classroom appear disconnected from the cultural environment in which students actually participate.

5.3 Traditional Music: Respected but Distant

The literature suggests a persistent tension surrounding traditional Chinese music. Cultural policy gives traditional repertoire a prominent role in cultural inheritance and confidence (Wang & Teng, 2024), but students' everyday musical preferences are often shaped by contemporary and global popular culture. Recognition of cultural importance therefore does not necessarily imply familiarity or sustained participation.

This distinction is analytically important. Treating weak engagement with traditional repertoire as evidence of cultural rejection may obscure the educational mechanisms involved. Students may simply lack repeated, participatory, and personally meaningful encounters with the repertoire. Research on Chinese musical learning indicates that teachers, peers, and educational-cultural environments influence engagement with Chinese works (Liu, 2024). Traditional music education can therefore benefit from connecting cultural content to lived musical experience rather than relying primarily on symbolic transmission.

5.4 Pedagogy and Course Design as Determinants

The literature identifies pedagogy and course design as important mechanisms linking student characteristics to engagement. Teacher evidence reported by Lyu (2025) indicates that curriculum reform can be associated with positive classroom experiences. Research on students' musical preferences and learning further indicates the relevance of teachers, peers, and educational environments (Liu, 2024).

Several design principles emerge from the synthesis. First, courses need to establish relevance by connecting repertoire and concepts to students' experiences. Second, participation should supplement passive listening and information transmission. Third, students should encounter achievable tasks that can strengthen expectancy. Fourth, contemporary and traditional repertoire can be placed in dialogue rather than treated as mutually exclusive categories. Finally, digital musical experiences can become curricular resources rather than being treated solely as distractions from formal learning (Ho, 2014; Zhang, 2024).

5.5 Subgroup Variation Is Present but Specific

The literature also indicates that students are not a homogeneous population. Differences may emerge according to prior musical experience, educational stage, exposure to particular genres, and social or cultural environments. However, the evidence does not support reducing the problem to a simple division between students who like music and students who do not. Variation is better understood through the interaction of value, expectancy, experience, and context.

This finding supports a flexible curriculum. A single standardized repertoire or teaching method may not serve students equally well, particularly when students enter the classroom with markedly different musical histories. At the same time, personalization should

not eliminate common cultural learning objectives. The challenge is to create multiple entry points into a shared curriculum.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reframing the Problem: From Student Deficit to Educational Alignment

The synthesis suggests that the common characterization of students as insufficiently interested in music is too broad. The more consistent pattern is a misalignment between students' musical lives and the structure of formal learning. Students may listen extensively, develop strong genre preferences, use music for emotional regulation, and participate in digital musical communities while still perceiving a university music course as peripheral.

This interpretation shifts the analytical focus from student deficiency to educational alignment. The question becomes whether formal courses recognize the motivational and cultural resources students already possess. When course content, learning activities, and assessment are disconnected from those resources, positive musical value may not be converted into sustained educational engagement.

6.2 Explaining the Value–Engagement Gap Through Expectancy and Value

Expectancy–Value Theory provides a useful explanation of why positive interest may coexist with limited engagement. Students may assign value to music while anticipating difficulty or doubting their ability to perform successfully. Xie and Leung's (2011) findings are particularly relevant because they demonstrate that interest and expectancy can develop differently. A university course that emphasizes technical competence without sufficiently accessible learning experiences may therefore reinforce the gap.

The theoretical implication is that increasing value alone may be insufficient. Courses must also support expectancy. Students need opportunities to experience competence, receive constructive feedback, and recognize progress. In this sense, pedagogy is not merely a delivery mechanism; it is part of the motivational environment.

6.3 Formal and Informal Musical Worlds Should Be Connected

Digital musical environments have altered the boundary between learning and leisure. Students encounter music through platforms and social networks that allow rapid exploration and personalization (Zhang et al., 2022). Formal education cannot realistically displace these environments, nor should it attempt to do so. Its distinctive role is to provide forms of contextualization, critical listening, cultural interpretation, and participation that informal consumption may not consistently provide.

The strongest curricular response is therefore connection rather than competition. Students' existing repertoire can serve as a starting point for introducing unfamiliar musical concepts, historical contexts, and traditional works. This approach preserves the educational distinctiveness of the university while reducing the perceived distance between classroom learning and everyday musical experience.

6.4 Traditional Music Requires Participation, Not Only Representation

The evidence also suggests that cultural transmission is more complex than the inclusion of traditional works in a syllabus. Students can recognize the symbolic importance of traditional music without incorporating it into their own musical lives. A curriculum that presents traditional music primarily as heritage may therefore achieve recognition without necessarily generating participation.

The literature supports a more participatory approach in which students listen, compare, discuss, perform where appropriate, and connect traditional works with contemporary musical experiences. This does not require abandoning cultural objectives. Instead, it

changes the mechanism through which cultural understanding is developed: from passive exposure toward active interpretation and participation (Wang & Teng, 2024; Liu, 2024).

6.5 General Music Education as a Design Problem Within an Institutional Problem

The combined evidence supports treating general music education as a design problem nested within a broader institutional problem. At the institutional level, public art courses must possess sufficient legitimacy, visibility, and curricular support to be treated as meaningful components of undergraduate education. At the course level, teaching must convert that institutional commitment into relevant and accessible learning experiences. Weakness at either level can contribute to the value–engagement gap.

This interpretation also helps reconcile apparently contradictory findings. Positive policy developments and positive student attitudes can coexist with weak engagement because policy operates at the institutional level while engagement emerges through the interaction of students and courses. The gap between these levels is therefore itself an important object of analysis.

7. Implications

7.1 Implications for Curriculum Design

Curriculum design should begin from the recognition that non-music-major students already possess musical experiences and preferences. Rather than assuming an absence of musical knowledge, courses can use familiar repertoire as an entry point into unfamiliar concepts. This approach can increase perceived relevance while preserving the academic purpose of the course.

A second principle is curricular balance. Traditional Chinese music, Chinese contemporary music, European and American repertoire, and popular music need not be presented as competing categories. Their juxtaposition can enable comparison of musical structures, cultural meanings, production contexts, and listening practices. Such comparative design can make cultural learning more concrete and can reduce the distance between heritage repertoire and students' everyday musical environments.

7.2 Implications for Pedagogy

Pedagogy should address both sides of the motivational equation. To strengthen value, teachers can make explicit connections between musical content, cultural experience, emotional life, and contemporary media. To strengthen expectancy, teachers can use accessible tasks, scaffolded participation, formative feedback, and opportunities for students to demonstrate progress. These practices are consistent with the literature's emphasis on student-centred learning and the role of educational environments in shaping engagement (Liu, 2024; Lyu, 2025).

Participation should also become a more visible component of general music education. Depending on the course, this can involve guided listening, group discussion, musical comparison, digital curation, collaborative presentation, or low-stakes performance. The objective is not to turn every non-major into a performer, but to move students from passive reception toward active engagement with musical meaning.

7.3 Implications for Digital Integration

Universities should recognize digital musical environments as part of students' actual learning ecology. Teachers can use students' digital repertoire as a bridge to topics such as genre, identity, globalization, cultural circulation, and music industries. At the same time, formal instruction can add critical and contextual dimensions that algorithmically mediated consumption may not provide.

7.4 Implications for Traditional Music Education

Traditional music should be taught as living cultural practice rather than solely as historical or symbolic content. Connecting traditional repertoire with students' existing listening habits, contemporary adaptations, performance practices, and cultural contexts can create more meaningful points of entry. This approach is compatible with the cultural-confidence objectives identified in the literature while recognizing that cultural participation cannot be assumed from symbolic recognition alone (Wang & Teng, 2024).

7.5 Implications for Institutional Policy

Institutional policy should ensure that public art courses possess genuine curricular standing. If general music education is formally endorsed but practically marginalized through limited resources, low visibility, or weak recognition, the policy objective of whole-person cultivation is difficult to realize. Universities should therefore consider teacher development, course quality, facilities, scheduling, student access, and evaluation when assessing public music education.

7.6 A Practical Design Logic

The synthesis can be translated into a simple design logic: recognize students' existing musical worlds; establish relevance; provide achievable forms of participation; connect contemporary and traditional repertoire; and use feedback to strengthen confidence. The purpose is not to maximize entertainment or to replace academic content with popular music. Rather, it is to create a pathway through which students' existing musical value can become sustained educational engagement.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The evidence base has several limitations. First, a substantial proportion of the strongest perception studies concerns secondary rather than university students (Ho, 2014, 2017; Law & Ho, 2015; Xie & Leung, 2011). Although these studies are relevant for understanding motivational and cultural patterns, they should not be treated as direct evidence of the entire university population. Future studies should collect larger and more systematic samples of non-music-major university students across regions and institution types.

Second, the literature uses different definitions and measures of interest, value, confidence, preference, and engagement. This heterogeneity makes direct comparison difficult. Future research would benefit from clearer operational distinctions between musical interest, perceived value, expectancy, behavioral engagement, and learning outcomes.

Third, much of the evidence is cross-sectional or based on self-reported perceptions. Such designs are useful for identifying patterns but provide limited evidence about causal mechanisms. Longitudinal studies could examine whether changes in course design affect expectancy, value, participation, and subsequent musical engagement over time.

Fourth, digital musical environments are changing rapidly. Research based on a particular platform or period may become outdated as students' media practices evolve. Future research should therefore examine digital musical participation as a dynamic component of students' learning ecology rather than as a fixed category.

Fifth, future research should investigate institutional variation. Universities differ in the status assigned to public art courses, the availability of specialist teachers, class size, assessment practices, and access to musical facilities. Comparative research across institutions could clarify how institutional conditions interact with pedagogy and student motivation.

Finally, experimental or quasi-experimental studies could test the mechanisms proposed by this synthesis. For example, researchers could compare courses that integrate students' existing repertoire with conventional appreciation courses, or examine whether participatory learning improves expectancy and sustained engagement. Such research would

move the literature from diagnosis toward stronger evidence about effective educational design.

9. Conclusion

This review shows that student perceptions of general music education in Chinese universities are better characterized by complexity than by simple indifference. Students value music, participate in increasingly diverse musical environments, and can respond positively to well-designed educational experiences. At the same time, expectancy, curricular priority, familiarity with traditional repertoire, and formal engagement do not necessarily develop in parallel.

The central finding is therefore a value–engagement gap. The gap emerges because students encounter music through multiple informal environments while formal university courses operate within an institutional structure that can give general education less curricular weight than specialist education. Expectancy–Value Theory helps explain why positive musical value can coexist with limited formal engagement, while perspectives on musical identity, cultural participation, and student-centred pedagogy explain why repertoire, digital environments, and course design matter.

The evidence suggests that this gap is not an immutable characteristic of students. It is responsive to educational design. General music education can become more meaningful when it connects with students' existing musical worlds, provides achievable opportunities for participation, integrates traditional and contemporary repertoire, and receives sufficient institutional recognition. Such an approach does not weaken the cultural or educational objectives of aesthetic education; rather, it provides a more credible route through which those objectives can be realized (Ge & Lu, 2018; Wang et al., 2025; Wang & Teng, 2024).

The broader implication is that the future of general music education in Chinese universities depends less on persuading students that music has value than on creating educational conditions in which that value can be converted into sustained learning and participation. The task is therefore one of alignment: aligning policy aspirations with institutional support, curriculum with contemporary musical life, cultural inheritance with meaningful participation, and musical interest with students' confidence to learn.

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