

# Cultural colonialism, academic rigor, or both? A study of ABRSM examinations in Northern China

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# Abstract

As one of the most popular international music assessments worldwide, the UK-headquartered Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) exam has gone beyond gaining a firm foothold in China. In the last 12 years, China has consistently maintained its position as the fastest-growing market for ABRSM exams, doubling in number every three to four years. This study, involving interviews with three music teachers from Northern China, addresses the impact of ABRSM exams on music teachers' perceptions of and their adaptations to a non-Chinese pedagogical approach (specifically), and music education in China (generally), particularly in terms of cultural colonialism. For this study, cultural colonialism means a dominant group (here, a British music exam) attempting to appropriate its musical culture into another – here, Chinese music education. For the UK-based ABRSM, the fast growth of this Western music exam has resulted in unexpectedly huge—and still growing—financial benefits.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Chinese music teachers' experience with, and perceptions of ABRSM exam in terms of academic rigor and cultural colonialism in music education in China. In particular, this research addressed the following questions: (1) From Chinese music teachers' perspectives, how rigorous is ABRSM exam? (2) How do Chinese music teachers feel about this British-based music exam system as a means of cultural colonialism in China?

This study used an instrumental case study design. According to these three teachers' thoughts and insights, they noted that ABRSM is highly recognized internationally, and its academic rigor and emphasis on standards has changed their traditional ways of music teaching. Further, the participants stated they would like to see some Chinese music included in the Western-music-focused syllabus. Identified disadvantages and problems, such as unbalanced repertoire (related to cultural colonialism) and exam anxiety (from the stress placed on passing the exam), had not occurred to these teachers before the interviews but they did not seem bothered by them. It should also be noted that ABRSM's education space—as a means of cultural colonialism—is being planted in music classes across China wherever the ABRSM syllabus is being taught.

# This research could be applied to

- Music teachers to think about the role of western music in their class;
- Out-of-school music teachers to think about their professional development;
- International music exam teachers and takers to reflect the exam itself.