Work from Phone: A Snapshot of Non-Tertiary Music Education in China

Shawn Kok

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My first online music lesson in 2008 was, for the lack of a better word, disastrous. Technology was trailing behind the exploding demands of Web 2.0, and professional equipment had not yet been commodified. Preparation for the lesson was technical and laborious, connection (with my students in Australia) was choppy, and the overall experience for both parties was lacklustre. A decade later, in 2018, I was in South China for a series of face-to-face percussion masterclasses. My students were non-tertiary music teachers from across the country. After each masterclass, I would have a few days to rest and travel to the next city for my next masterclass. It was during these days that I would give private lessons to those who were unable to attend my masterclasses in person. I video-called them from my hotel, sent them the materials and recordings from the masterclasses, provided guidance in text, voice messages, images, and videos-all through WeChat, a messenger application on my mobile phone.

I was not just working from anywhere. I was working from my phone.

From Cloud Computing to Work from Phone

The ramifications of ubiquitous connectivity through computing power–known today as the internet–first piqued the interest of academics at the close of the previous millennia, at the advent of the thumb drive, in a world of floppy disks and 256K dial-up connections, or what some would call the steam age of digital technology. In 2004, Hiroaki Ogata postulated the profound concept that would go on to be somewhat of a poster child for ubiquitous learning (Ogata, 2004), ushering in speculations on the possibility of telework and taking work home (Felstead, et al., 2005) and a plurality of scholastic views on online learning (Cope, 2009; El-Bishouty, Ogata, Rahman, Yano, 2010; Yahya, Ahmad, Jalil, 2010; Gwo, Chin, 2011; Ogata & Ousaki, 2012) and online music learning (Brooke, 2013; Hebert, 2008).

Owing largely to geographical, geopolitical, and sociocultural reasons, China diligently woos online connectivity. According to HSBC, China surpassed 100 million internet users in 2005, and today have “more internet users than combined populations of the United States, Indonesia and Brazil, three of the world’s most populous countries.” (2018). The nation also has over 1.96 billion mobile phone subscriptions in 2022 (Statistica, 2022) and accounts for over 10 percent of total mobile phone users globally (Slotta, 2022). As early as 2015, China possessed a vibrant domestic e-commerce environment and online ecosystem (Wang, Wang, Wu. 2015). At the top of 2019, when most parts of the world were showing off their newly-minted 4G status, China was already initialising 5G as a nationwide norm.

My observation tells me it was apparent that when Covid-19 intruded lives globally, most scrambled for independence from (their) conventional modi operandi while China segued–not without grumble–“into” their mobile phones and mobile devices. For the non-tertiary music teacher, this meant that the world was now the office, as long as he or she has a mobile phone or device. In a broad sense, China skipped the “work from home” phase that other parts of the world were coerced into embracing.

How Non-Tertiary Music Teaching and Learning Skipped Work from Home

China’s high number of internet and mobile phone users may be the linchpin of their Work From Phone (WFH) phenomenon, there are however other aspects that are instrumental to this spectacle–the prevalent instructional methods the Chinese from China are exposed to, their music-learning culture, and the learning tools they employ.

Teaching and learning strategies. Despite being vast topics, we can distill from the tenets of pedagogy, andragogy, heutagogy, and gerontology some common factors of how people learn: motivation (to learn), learning styles, and learning experience. In a highly-connected multimedia age, teachers and students alike can draw inspiration and purpose from a wide variety of online resources, ranging from high-quality videos or music concerts to copious amounts of information such as Blogs (web logs) and Vlogs (video logs) of artistes, influencers, and political figures past and present. Mostly, children are instructed by their parents or guardians to learn, adult learners are self-motivated, and senior learners learn to stay connected.

Culture of learning music. At the risk of sounding casual, my teaching experience in China evidenced that the Chinese learn music as how they learn anything else-relying heavily on written instruction such as a manuscript, and relentless practice. They regard the attainment of knowledge to be an individual pursuit, and would spend hours on end observing and mimicking their teachers, reflecting upon their teachings and deciphering their instructions-as part of a self-imposed, necessary intellectual journey they have to make so to become well-learned in the subject. The Chinese character, 悟 (Wu4), often used to measure the success of knowledge transfer and which means to “know”, is made up of left and right components, “heart” and “five-mouths” respectively. While the right component carries a few meanings, such as the five basic elements (gold, wood, water, fire, earth) and the five musical notes in the pentatonic scale, they collectively infer the concept of an ecosystem, which when combined with the left component, means “to know *wholistically*, in the *heart*” (Baidu, 2016).

Learning tools and learning experience. Online learning platforms or learning management systems have been around, and today we have plentiful, including Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, Udacity, just to name a few. However, the UX (user experience) and UI (user interface) of these said virtual learning environments gravitate toward the desktop computer or laptop, and cater for the Western part of the world. Another important element of a good learning experience is its sociality, which is also where the above mentioned learning systems suffer, as their classes, assignments, and assessments are undertaken individually and remotely. A third, intricate yet often neglected aspect of learning experience, is what I call “system fluidity in digital learning”, where the number of “moves” such as shuffling between applications or multiple log-ins a learner has to make during a learning phase or lesson disrupts the flow of learning, impairs the acquisition of knowledge, and degrades the learning experience.

The Music Classroom within the Phone

Choose between synchronous and asynchronous learning with a classroom housed in your mobile phone. In a typical music course that I conduct for my China students, class sizes range from eight to over a hundred people. For small class sizes, my classes are delivered through WeChat's video-call function (refer to appendix 1a), and through "Wei1 Shi1" (微师), WeChat's "Zoom" for big classes (appendix 1b). Both formats are housed within WeChat, the former liken to the FaceTime function in Facebook, the latter a virtual platform that dynamically conforms to the size and resolution of the mobile phone or device the student is using. Lessons are brief, usually 15-45 minutes weekly. In exchange for shorter contact time with my students, there is more provision of written instruction, music notation (appendix 1c), audio backing/practice tracks (appendix 1d), and video demonstrations (appendix 1e) pertaining to the learning point(s) of the the lesson, in order to scaffold learning.

Assessment, feedback, and the sociality of learning in the phone. I have a group-chat for every course. The function of these chat groups are two-fold. Firstly, as a "reception counter" for my students where I provide succinct replies to simpler questions, also acting as a catalyst for peer-learning. Secondly, as a safe, conducive environment for constructive discussions that often identifies gaps in learning and serves as feedback for me. Assignments are bitesized, each requiring 15-30 minutes, spread across the number of days between lessons. They are completed in a widget built for WeChat, called "Xiao3 Da2 Ka3" (小打卡). I also provide my feedback and conduct assessments within the widget (refer to image 2a).

Conclusion

With mobile computing technology inexorably becoming more powerful, the mobile phone will soon be, if not already, the "most accessible piece of technology to workers worldwide" (Mendes, 2020). Patterns of work have already changed and are still changing (Mullan, Wajcman, 2017). But while my music classes are suited to WFP, it is hasty to say that the mobile phone will replace the computer as the main interface for work–or the home for the office–until the WFH phenomenon has penetrated even more types of work, especially the ones that function on human connection.

About the author

Shawn Kok is a Fellow of the UBSS Centre for Scholarship and Research and Senior Lecturer at Hitmaker Global Academy. He is on the adjunct faculty with the National Institute of Education Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts and Republic Polytechnic.

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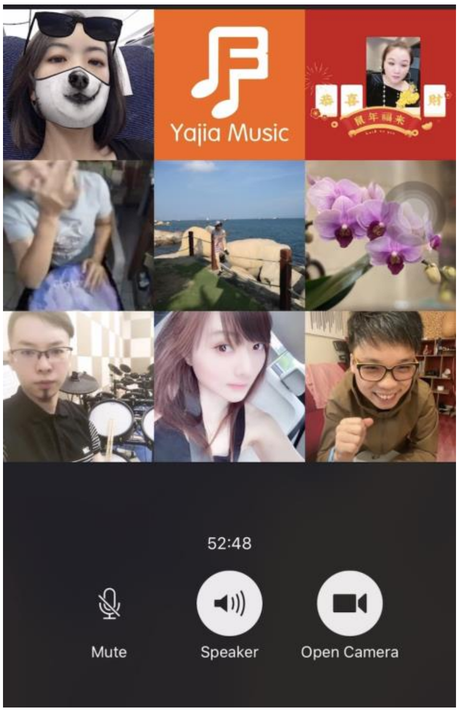
Appendices

Appendix 1a – video call on WeChat (screen grab)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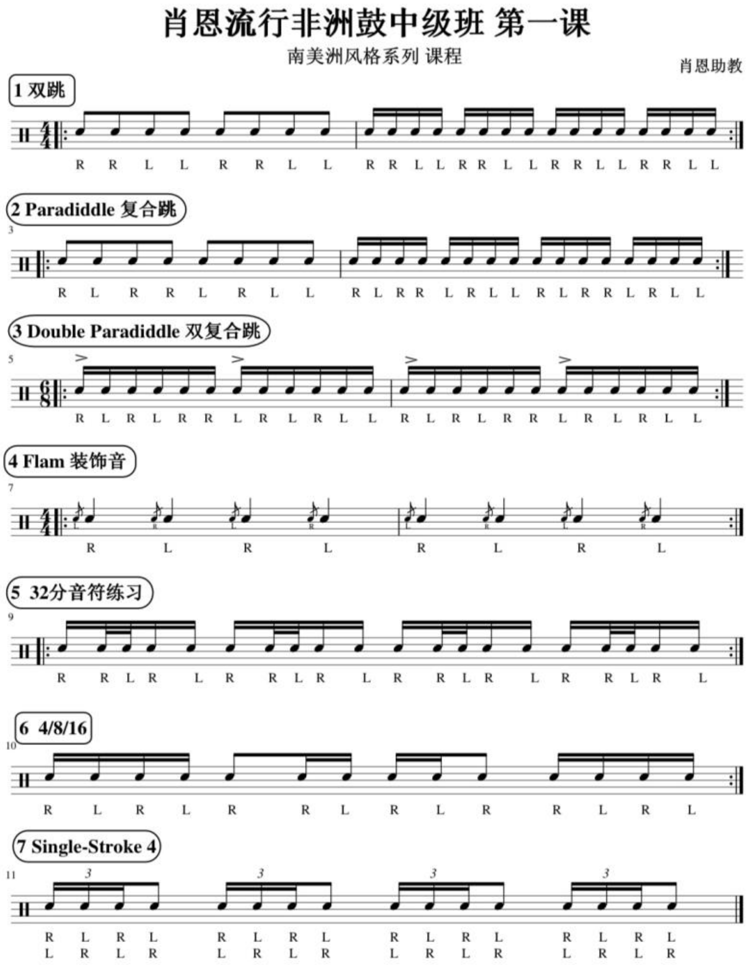
Open Camera

Appendix 1b – “Weishi” (image)

Appendix 1c – music notation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南美洲风格系列 课程
肖恩助教
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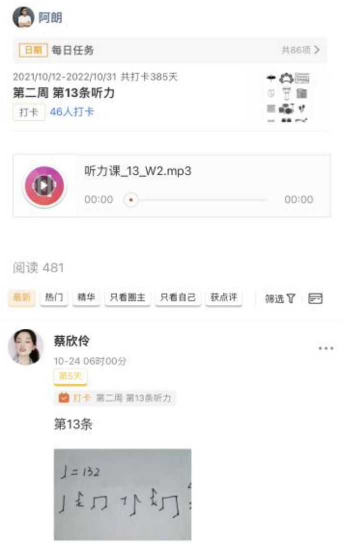
2 Paradiddle 复合跳
R L R R L R L L R L R R L R L L R L R R L R L L
3 Double Paradiddle 双复合跳
R L R L R R L R L R L L R L R L R R L R L R L L
4 Flam 装饰音
R L R L R L R L
5 32分音符练习
R R L R L R R L R L R R L R L R R L R L
6 4/8/16
R L R L R R L R L R R L R L R L
7 Single-Stroke 4
R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L
L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

Appendix 1d – backing track/audio (screen grab)



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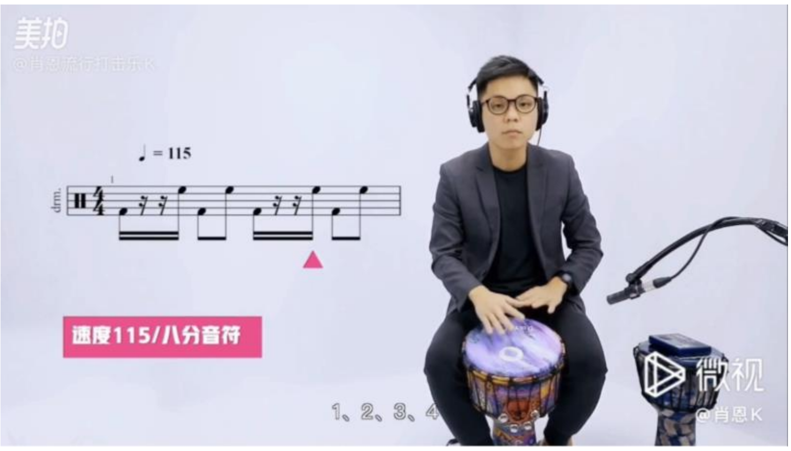
Appendix 1e – video demonstration (screen grab)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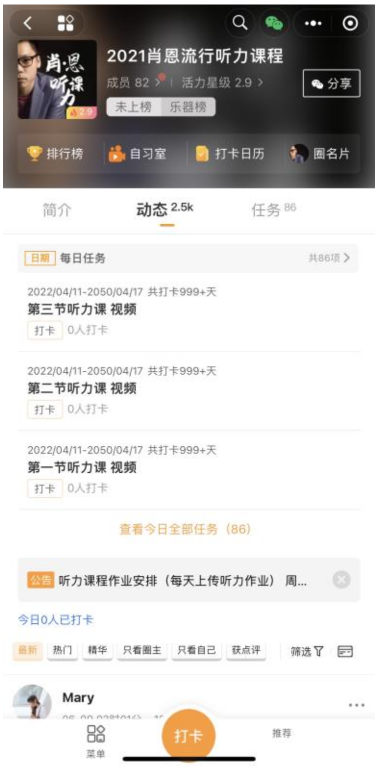
Appendix 2a – widget (screen grab)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