

# East meets West: Learning-practices and attitudes towards music-making of popular musicians

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*Learning-practices of popular musicians are a prominent theme in Western music education literature; however, there appears to be a shortage of such literature in Asian countries. With the aim of comparing East and West, a qualitative study was conducted to investigate the learning-practices and involvement in music of Hong Kong popular musicians. Since Hong Kong is a former British colony, the study intended to investigate whether these practices resembled Western practices, or if they were derived from elements indigenous to Hong Kong. Interviews and observations of the informants' performances and rehearsals were used to obtain data. It was found that all the informants learned mainly in an informal way and participated actively in music-making – similar to the Western popular music-making scenario – but the shadow of the mentor–apprentice learning relationship inherent in Chinese culture also appeared. Lastly, achievement-driven motivation in learning, which is prevalent in Chinese society, was also found among the informants in the present study. This may not be a significant finding in the context of popular music generally, but it is an issue in which Asian educators may be interested.*

The learning-practices and attitudes towards making music of Western popular musicians have been a popular topic among researchers and music educators for more than two decades. Whilst Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991) were the pioneers in unveiling the life and learning-practices of popular musicians, Green (2002a, 2002b, 2004), Rodriguez (2004) and Woody (2007) proposed a way of applying these learning-practices in music pedagogy. Recently, music educators such as McPhail (2013) and Robinson (2012) have explored new research angles, such as the interrelationship between informal and disciplinary knowledge, as well as the way in which popular musicians teach. Although this theme of using popular music in music education has attracted considerable attention in the West, most music educators in Asian countries seem to lack enthusiasm for the idea. Exceptions include Sarrazin (2006), who discussed India's popular film songs in the classroom, and Ho (2004, 2008), who investigated students' consumption and preferences for popular music in Hong Kong. However, their studies did not take into account the ways in which Asian popular musicians learn, nor the implications for music education. In Hong Kong, for example, over the course of the last decade, scholars who specialise in popular music studies have focused on historical, social and textual analysis, and the discussions have been mainly from the cultural perspective (Huang, 1990, 2000; Ho, 2003, 2011; Wong, 2007; Feng, 2009; Huang & Zhu, 2011; Zhu, 2000, 2011).

The focus of this study was thus to investigate how Hong Kong popular musicians learn their music and how their practices differ from those in the West. Given the particular political background of Hong Kong as a former colony of Britain, the aim was to ascertain whether the learning-practices of local popular musicians resemble Western practices, or if they are derived from indigenous elements unique to Hong Kong. Furthermore, the attitudes of Hong Kong popular musicians towards music-making are also neglected in the existing literature; it was therefore hoped that the findings of the study would fill this gap in the research.

### Research methods

Since the aim of the investigation was to acquire in-depth information on how Hong Kong popular musicians learn and their attitudes towards learning and making music, the qualitative methodology of using semi-structured interviews was deemed to be an appropriate method of data collection. Non-participant observations of the rehearsals and performances of popular musicians were also made in order to supplement and triangulate the verbal data.

Purposive sampling was used to select the informants, using the following criteria: first, informants must have been born and educated from primary to secondary school level in Hong Kong. Secondly, all informants must belong to a band in Hong Kong and they must still be actively involved in music-making and public performance. Lastly, they should all be of a similar age. As I am not personally involved in the popular music field, a comfortable entry point was needed. In cases like this, 'insider' assistance with recruitment has definite advantages (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Based on the above criteria, three bands of six male popular musicians in their mid- and late twenties were chosen. These three bands were recommended by two of my full-time students from the Institute where I teach. These students played with the bands Empty and Killer Soap, but I did not interview them. The band Grand Experience was also introduced to me by one of the students from Killer Soap. As Stock (2004) reminds researchers, 'the interviewer's perceived role as a "music expert" may lead interviewees to see the experience as akin to a test, with the result that they feel uncomfortable or struggle to second-guess the "right" answer' (p. 26). It was hoped that the fact that I was acquainted with somebody in the band would help the informants to feel that I was one of their friends, rather than an academic researcher whom they may have thought 'too high to be reachable'. Two musicians from each band were interviewed. Since they played music on a group basis, it was thought that interviewing two musicians at a time from the same band would furnish a better understanding and also make it possible to cross-check the information they supplied.

Although all the members of the three bands were in their mid- or late 20s, the bands themselves were at different stages of recognition or maturity. For instance, Empty was just starting to take off in the popular music scene, while Killer Soap was already a successful band which represented China at the World Battle of the Bands in London in December 2008. The last band, Grand Experience, was a new band at the time of interviewing and in the end only stayed together for a year and a half.

All informants were interviewed using the same set of questions so that comparisons could be made (Appendix 1). They were asked questions concerning how they learned to play their instruments, why they were still in the group, and about how they practised and the amount of time they spent rehearsing. Although the questions had been prepared beforehand, digressions, following the direction in which the informants were heading, were still possible (Hatch, 2002). This enabled me to acquire a clearer understanding of the verbal data they were providing. Sometimes the sequence and the wording of the questions would be varied depending on the informant. Also, informal conversations were sometimes conducted before the start of the interview in order to break the ice, on subjects such as how they met.

Non-participant observations were also made of the ways in which the participants made music or performed or rehearsed. As mentioned earlier, the data acquired during these observations were used to supplement and crosscheck the verbal data provided by the informants in the interviews. These non-participant observations were thus carried out during the informants' rehearsal and performance sessions. I made one observation of a band making music and rehearsing in their studio. Three sets of observation data were thus obtained, one from each band. I also conducted one extra observation of Empty, since they invited me to attend one of their public performances in a shopping centre.

For the purposes of analysing the data, firstly, a review of Western literature on popular musicians' learning-practices and their attitudes towards music-making was conducted. The transcriptions of the interview data were then read carefully, with items of importance being underlined and notes made in the margins. At the same time, the written data were cross-checked against the observation data contained in the observation notes. When these two processes had been completed, it was possible to make a comparison between the literature review data and the findings of the present study in order to identify similarities and differences between Western musicians and the Hong Kong musicians in these two main areas. Two themes which appeared to be unique to the current study emerged: i.e. the categories of learning from mentors and achievement-driven motivation.

### **Learning-practices of popular musicians in the West**

From the Western literature, it appears that musicians in the popular music field acquire their musical skills mainly through informal learning (Finnegan, 1989; Cohen, 1991; Green, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Rodriguez, 2004; Woody, 2007; Robinson, 2012; McPhail, 2013). In the early learning stage of the popular musician, copying recordings by ear is the most common and usually predominant learning-practice (Bennett, 1980; Finnegan, 1989; Green, 2002b). Self-learning is also recognised in Western literature as a learning method used widely in the popular musicians' world. Across the Atlantic, the learning-practice of rock musicians in the USA is similar to the above. Normally a musician learns a song from a recording by sitting in front of a stereo with his/her guitar and playing along with the record over and over again. This allows players to learn at their own pace by a process of repeated listening and playback. This informal method of learning by aural copying is an 'essential trait and is not to be overlooked' (Bennett, 1980, p. 132).

Although many popular musicians rely solely on this process of self-learning, sometimes this method of learning is supplemented by private lessons (Bennett, 1980;

Finnegan, 1989; Cohen, 1991; Green, 2002b). In Milton Keynes in the UK, among 200 or so members of rock, jazz, folk, and country and western bands, the majority (particularly those playing in rock bands) 'classed themselves as either totally self-taught or (less often) as mainly self-taught, supplemented or initiated by some private lessons' (Finnegan, 1989, p. 137).

Learning from/with others, especially one's peers, is a feature of informal learning in the Western world which complements the self-regulated learning mentioned above. This peer-directed learning in the popular musicians' world 'involves the conscious sharing of knowledge and skills, or even explicit peer teaching, through, for example, demonstration of a rhythm or chord by one group member for the benefit of another' (Green, 2008, p. 7). Learning from and with peers can also create a stronger motivation to participate in making music. Pitts (2005) found with her informant groups that 'the social aspect of rehearsing with friends emerged as a strong reason for participation' (p. 57).

Group learning is an essential aspect of learning for Western popular musicians (Bennett, 1980; Cohen, 1991; Finnegan, 1989; Green, 2002b, 2008). Green (2008) explains that group learning is where there is 'no *conscious* demonstration or teaching as such, but where learning takes place through watching and imitation during music-making, as well as talking about music during and outside of rehearsals' (p. 7). Therefore, learning in a group is a kind of natural interaction or exchange of ideas. In band rehearsals, Green (2002b) explains, 'skills and knowledge are acquired, developed and exchanged via peer direction and group learning from the very early stages, not only through playing, talking, watching and listening, but also through working creatively together' (p. 79). Therefore, the band members do not simply learn their parts on their own. Instead, at every stage of their band's rehearsal they are working collectively to acquire skills and compose together.

As Robinson (2012) concludes, popular musicians are 'often largely self-taught, typically employing 'informal' learning practices such as listening to and copying recordings, watching – and getting advice from – other more experienced players, as well as joining bands, rehearsing and performing with peers' (p. 360).

### **Attitudes towards music-making**

Previous research has shown that popular musicians participate actively in their music-making with love, passion and great enthusiasm. The learning activities engaged in by popular musicians 'seem more intrinsically motivating than the solitary, technique-intensive, notation-based practice that teachers ask formally trained music students to do' (Woody, 2007, p. 35). It has been found that one of the most important aspects of making music for popular musicians is to be 'on fire' (Finnegan, 1989; Green, 2004). One popular musician went so far as to affirm, '... if I had died at that point, at any time when I was playing, I couldn't have died doing anything better ... I'd have been completely fulfilled ... doing my utmost for something I believed in, you know, it was great' (Green, 2004, p. 236).

In fact, the way musicians practise their music and the number of hours they spend on it can also reflect their level of devotion to and involvement in music-making. Generally speaking, people may adopt a productive attitude towards participation in making music and devote time to practising; on the other hand, they may adopt a more receptive

attitude and enjoy listening to music. However, the ways in which popular musicians practise are very different from those of formally trained musicians. The practice sessions of popular musicians are 'marked by a real musical context' (Woody, 2007, p. 34), rather than by spending time in a practice room for an isolated practice session. Unlike classical musicians, who may spend time practising scales, arpeggios and other technical studies, popular musicians do not intentionally use exercises to develop their techniques but focus more on the expression of the music. Therefore, the music they play is 'real music', rather than scales and technical exercises (Green, 2002b). Generally speaking, popular musicians are active music-makers in that they both play and create music, although the amount of time they devote to practice or rehearsal may vary. They enjoy making music with their friends and they feel good during both rehearsals and performances.

## Findings

### *Empty*

At the time of the present study, Empty's career was just taking off. The band produced their first CD in 2009 (Audio example 1), and subsequently received many invitations to perform in various shopping centres. The members rented a studio and lived together in it. The studio had a small room with a computer and various pieces of recording equipment. One of the informants – David – was a singer in the band, while another (Martin) played the guitar. The band practised or rehearsed together nearly every day even though all the members had jobs. They were able to practise five days a week because they lived together in their studio. Sometimes they could practise up to four or five hours a day but they did not deliberately set a schedule. Martin thus had a very realistic view of practising and preferred to take breaks in order to maintain his enthusiasm for music rather than pushing himself to practise:

Because music is a 'dead' thing and we are living human beings, I don't think we should push ourselves too hard in order to do so [to practise]. [You] may get half the result with twice the effort. In light of this, I prefer to take a good break for a night and then we can do it the next day. This allows us to sustain our passion for music . . .

Concerning his learning-practices, Martin explained how he learned his first wooden guitar:

I was first in touch with guitar [when I was] in Form 2. I didn't like playing it because I couldn't play it [well]. On the whole I felt that I played it badly. When I was in Form 3, I started to learn it seriously . . . I learned from a tutor. [I] would pay, learn, practise, and demonstrate it [to the tutor].

After a year of paying a tutor to teach him how to play his wooden guitar, Martin began learning to play the electric guitar with another tutor, and continued for 7 or 8 years, after which he started to learn on his own: 'I watched a DVD showing how to play guitar. I imitated the others . . . I regarded the DVD as my 'tutor'. Martin started to compose when he was in Forms 4 and 5: 'I was jealous of others who could write really tuneful songs

which everybody praised [for being so tuneful]. I really hope that one day people will praise the songs I compose. This is my motivation.'

David, on the other hand, first learned guitar when he was a primary 6 student: '... my class teacher taught me how to play, and I thought it was very interesting. Now I still sometimes play the guitar but I concentrate on singing ...'. Later, he learned the classical guitar on a group basis for two or three years. He explained that during this time his learning came mainly from listening to songs:

I would try to listen to songs from different genres, including classical and popular. I would sometimes try to analyse a song by analysing the guitar part to see whether there were any special features in the song: for example, the rhythms. I would also notice the instrumentation, and this greatly benefited my composition and performance skills ... I would try out the chords to see whether [the chords I played were] ... correct (the same as in the recording) or not ... I would read the score as well.

It should be noted that both these participants constantly emphasised how much they had learned from their mentors. Martin said, 'He [the tutor] would focus more on inspiring your potential; for example, he would demonstrate something to you and ask what you felt about it ...'. David explained:

My tutor influenced me a lot ... because in the past I did not really understand music, purely playing the guitar. Before I saw music as something very easy, something which didn't have much to it. When he started to teach me, [I] listened to different things (music). Even with songs in the same style, there was a lot to learn from them. I felt that I [had begun to] take music seriously ...

His mentor also taught him how to make music and reminded him that music has 'spirit'; this made him change from reading scores to experiencing music:

He taught me a lot of musical knowledge. But he taught me more about how to make good music. [He] reminded me that music has spirit, referring to the interpretation of a song. Before [when I was] playing in a band, I would play and that was that. But I remember he (the tutor) said we played it so 'dead', without 'spirit', without life ... That changed me, from reading from a score to feeling the music. This change was stimulated by my tutor.

Martin said that every mentor is unique. Some may teach how to improve tone; some may have an influence on attitude towards music. Others may teach different methods of writing music from a theoretical perspective:

He (his first teacher) had a profound influence on me. He expected me to treat music not as music, but more like Buddhism. Buddhism says that every visible thing is empty. He was always asking me what music is ... his question touched my inner self; it seems that music is not only something to be listened to: it's something more. Why did I cry when I heard certain songs at a concert? I still can't work out the answer. Another mentor helped me to find out that the world is so big, beyond my imagination.

However, when asked about his most important learning paths, David maintained that a self-motivated approach to learning is the best one for improving one's musical skills. He thought that it was not enough to rely solely on listening, even with the assistance of a teacher. He could then learn more about a technique by thinking about it on his own. He concluded, 'I think self-learning makes me love music more and more, fostering my interest in music to the greatest extent'. In addition, he would ask for advice from a friend after he had composed a piece.

In short, they both felt grateful to their mentors because they had been inspired by their teaching and challenged by the teacher's questions, gradually becoming aware of how much music meant to them. Their mentors helped them a great deal in polishing their musical skills and techniques, and often inspired them to understand more about the interpretation of music, rather than just teaching techniques. They were encouraged to interpret the music in their own way.

### *Killer Soap*

This band had six members and they rented a small studio in the city centre. Their studio was the smallest among the three bands – around 500 square feet – and they only used it for rehearsals. The studio was so crammed with recording equipment, amplifiers etc, that there was very little space left to move around in. As mentioned above, Killer Soap represented China in the 2008 World Battle of the Bands in London, and has also produced two CDs (Audio example 2). Over a thousand video clips of their various performances are available on Youtube. Their record is 30 concerts in two months. Two members of this band: James and John, who both play drums and guitar, were interviewed.

The band usually rehearsed once or twice a week, apart from when they had a gig coming up, when they could practise up to five times a week. James explained that, '[We have] several shows a day, so having a 'show' is regarded as practising'.

James said that since the backgrounds of all five members of his band were different, they could learn from each other. He is systematic in his thinking, whereas Rocky (another member) is more spontaneous about music. He therefore uses logical thinking while Rocky does everything by 'feel', which means there are often some interesting 'chemical reactions' between them when they are composing a new song. During one of the observations, the band spent over half an hour finding an accompaniment for just two bars of melody (Audio example 3).

James learned piano from the age of five throughout his primary school years. He first learned to play the guitar when he was 16 or 17:

At first I wanted to try it on my own because others were learning. I bought a guitar but then I discovered that I didn't like playing it . . . [but later on I] asked a girl to lend me her guitar. I downloaded a score from the internet . . . I played and played until I knew how to change chords. I played some more, I learned to play pop songs and then I learned from someone at my church.

Besides the band's weekly practices, James emphasised their eagerness to practise on their own as well:

When you're learning the guitar you need to practise frequently. So I practise like crazy: for example, how to change chords and then remembering how to play all the chords. However, I just practise them without understanding them. I just practise crazily . . . At that time, apart from playing pop songs, I would also play other types of music, such as blues and rock . . . When playing in the bands and trying different music, you explore more . . .

He explained 'I didn't understand [all these techniques], I just practised. But then you sometimes notice patterns appearing, e.g. I chord, V chord and IV chord'. He explained, 'When I was young I knew nothing. But then when I had played for a bit longer and started practising with a band, trying different things [music] . . . you explore more and discover different [musical] cultures'.

James also learned from a mentor after his initial stage of learning. His mentor explained to him the use of chord progressions and the function of chords in different styles of music in popular songs: 'he [the tutor] taught me how to do certain things [in music]. Before that I'd just got it by chance. He taught me systematic things, so you couldn't go wrong . . . He's very smart, he often performs abroad'.

He said that in his early learning stage he started listening, like a child writing a 'copy book', in order to imitate and get to know more 'words'. Later he learned how to compose by listening to a wider variety of types of song. He claimed that by going through this copying process one can develop one's own 'handwriting' (style of music):

But these things [listening and copying] would be done only at the beginning stage because you know this is a very low level. When you want to have more self-satisfaction, you need to create something new, whether in terms of chord progressions or new rhythms . . .

Therefore, he wrote his own songs using certain types of software: 'there are some programs where [you only need to] press [buttons] in order to compose a song. [If] you press chords, it will play it note by note. I add a bit of bass and drums. When you mix it all together it works. [I] could compose a song. I started to compose . . .'

John, on the other hand, started learning in Form 1; a friend gave him some recordings of music by Japanese bands for his birthday. Although he did not know the bands, the recordings impressed him as the playing was so good. He has continued to listen to similar music up to the present: 'I was unconsciously caught [by the music] and it was love at first sight'.

John did not take any tutorials: 'I didn't have any special music tuition [from a private tutor]; like other secondary school students, I played guitar with my schoolmates. I would try to play songs and [read the] score until I knew how to play them'. He borrowed a guitar from his classmates and played simple but tuneful songs. He ignored music theory because he had not liked it in his previous music lessons:

I found it cool [playing in a band]. I borrowed a guitar from my friend. I played the simplest and the most moving songs. Since I didn't like theory in music lessons, I ignored it . . . I just knew how to finger [the fret board]. I would get the correct fingering and that would be that. I played and played and I understood.



John thus learned mainly on his own by playing with friends and listening to songs, although he did attend four guitar lessons at his church simply in order to make friends. Listening and watching TV also helped him to learn: 'I watched TV and listened to songs. Children have always enjoyed listening to Japanese or Western bands. After watching them [how they played], I thought they were really cool'. He would also download scores from the internet:

When we starting playing as a band, [we] played music other people showed us. [I] searched the internet for scores. Although these were 'cover' songs, not our own, [I] would make modifications [to the music] – I made whatever [modifications] I liked. From then on [my music] improved steadily.

John has thus always composed his own music, and playing in a band is a very important part of his life. He said, 'Days when [I am not] listening to songs, not doing gigs, not playing in the band are very dull'.

#### *Grand Experience*

This band rented a studio in a factory in the suburbs for their rehearsals. It was a big studio with a room where they had put the computer and all their equipment. However, unlike Empty, they did not live there. The band had been together for about a year and a half at the time of interviewing. They practised once or twice a week, and each rehearsal lasted 2 or 3 hours. They performed once or twice a month in live music venues or bars. They appeared to take great care with their music. In my observation of one of their rehearsals, the band put in an enormous amount of effort to find a good drum part for a short melodic phrase (Audio example 4). At first, they were dissatisfied with everything they tried. They then stopped and went into another room to watch a DVD of a performance by another band to get more inspiration. There were two informants from this band: Tom, who played guitar and was the lead singer with the band, and Peter, who also played the guitar.

Tom played with two bands, and had given nearly a hundred performances in the space of just a year. He had started learning the guitar from a mentor in a music studio, but stopped after a year and started to teach himself from books. Unlike the musicians mentioned above, he seemed to have had a less satisfactory experience of a paid tutorial group setting, having lessons along with another learner. The tutor told him how to hold a plectrum but did not teach him any basic musical knowledge, which Tom thought was important. He gave Tom some scores and taught him some rhythms and chords. The tutor would demonstrate how to play and tell him to copy him. After leaving this tutor, he spent two years learning from books, copying guitar-playing techniques from demonstration DVDs:

I read from books. Luckily those books had DVDs with them. They demonstrated so you could listen, and showed you how to play. If there hadn't been the DVDs, I think I would have found learning it more difficult. Music is sound, so just reading books is useless. I relied on these [DVDs] and practised, [learning how to play] it gradually.

After two or three years, he had become proficient enough to stop doing this, and the band was playing his songs. Tom described how he composed his songs:

Sometimes [I] first arrange some beautiful chords, and then I add the melody. This is one [aspect of the method]. The other [aspect] is that when I am composing, I already have a clear idea of what I want to do – usually I have a strong feeling inside myself. If [I] don't know how to arrange [the song], I write it down, I mean the melody, tunes from my mouth. By that time normally [I] will have already thought of the lyrics as well. [I] write it down. After writing it, I use a very simple [recorder] to record it. I leave it for a while . . . after a day or two I listen to it again, to revise it . . .

Tom said that listening to popular music was the main source of his inspiration in composing: 'mainly listen to songs. Listen a lot to different genres of song. I would listen to blues, rock 'n' roll, jazz and even classical music. The more I listen, the more [I can] determine what is good music and what is not'. He added that the more he wrote, the more he improved, 'the more I compose, the more easily and efficiently I can express what I want to say'.

He said that music is 'part of my life . . . if I didn't listen to music, didn't play music, then what would my life be like? I don't know, never tried it. But if [I have music, my life] is much more colourful'.

The other informant, Peter, told me how he came to love music. When he was at primary school, he sang in a competition and everybody said that he was a good singer. In his lower secondary school years, he participated in singing competitions and was the winner for three years running. Everybody praised him and he thought that he had a gift for music. Therefore, when he was in Form 3 he started learning from a girl at church. He said that the girl showed him how to play some chords and he learned by playing after her for two months. Afterwards, he practised on his own and did not take any private lessons.

[I] started to learn it on my own, watching how others played. Actually [I] learned to play the guitar by watching and listening . . . I played for 10 years without taking any formal [guitar] lessons, just [learning] by watching how others played, and I bought some books. I learned it on my own.

He later explained that he learned through the process of watching the live performances of others and listening to CDs. He watched the way other people played and compared it with his own method. He acquired various techniques of using chords from other people. Listening to CDs taught him how to arrange a piece of music: for instance, when and how to insert a guitar part. He also helped the band to arrange the music. As he explained, this arranging process is done as a group:

In fact, the whole band helps to arrange a piece together. Normally one band member will compose [a tune], then the whole band will arrange the piece on the basis of this tune. For example, I might say that I think that at a particular point (in the music) such and such an arrangement would be better, and then we all adjust and modify.

When asked about what motivates him to arrange songs, he replied that the music 'represents our feeling, has a special message, [which] we want to express through the music'. He explained that music gives him 'great encouragement', and that it has even 'changed my character'. He was so enthusiastic that during his first year of learning, he would pick up the guitar and play it whenever he had time, up to the point where, as he described it, people would say he had been 'infected' by music:

The first year I started learning the guitar, I played [so much] that I was 'scolded' by other people: I played too much! [They] said I was 'infected'! But it was during this time of being infected that I became dedicated to playing continually . . .

Interestingly, although Peter had told me he had bought books to learn from, he later explained that in fact he could never have learned how to play by reading books:

What's mentioned in books makes things more complicated. For example, the book taught you how to play a chord. It (the chord) was written out. If you read it and understood it, then you understood; if you read it and didn't understand it, then you didn't understand. In the end, you would have to ask somebody.

## Discussion

### *Informal ways of learning*

Although the three bands in the present study were at different levels in terms of their achievement in the Hong Kong music scene, their learning practices were similar. They had all learned mainly in an informal way, through listening to CDs and watching live performances in order to imitate how other popular musicians play or arrange pieces of music. They had also enriched their awareness of music by listening to a variety of musical genres: e.g. jazz and classical music. They had taught themselves by watching demonstration DVDs and reading books, and David sometimes also read scores. However, Tom and Peter stated that reading books had not been at all helpful for their learning, and David had moved on from reading scores to 'feeling' the music more. It thus appears that they found learning by hearing and watching more effective than reading words and descriptions. They also learned from/with the other band members: James explained how they each had different musical abilities, so they could learn things from each other and this caused the 'chemical reactions' in the group. Their learning was therefore also accomplished on a group basis, when all the band members rehearsed together. At the same time as learning, they would talk to each other about ways to improve their compositions.

It should be noted that although we are living in an era dominated by the internet, all three bands emphasised the usefulness of CDs and DVDs. They still listened to CDs, rather than watching Youtube or using internet resources, to enhance their performance techniques and to give them inspiration for musical arrangements. Listening to CDs enabled them to hear the details of the music, e.g. the correspondence or balanced relationship between the parts played by each instrument, the spatial arrangements within the music, which cannot be heard when listening to Youtube because the sound is so compressed. In

addition, they had used demonstration DVDs as a tutor to help them develop their specific playing skills.

#### *Learning from mentors*

Besides learning in an informal way, of the six informants, David, Martin, James and Tom had taken part in private tutorials. Although researchers have found that some Western popular musicians have also had formal lessons, the impression I got from David and Martin was that this method of learning was more prevalent in Hong Kong, and that it may in fact reflect the traditional mentor–apprentice relationship indigenous to Chinese tradition. With the exception of Tom, they all showed a great deal of respect for their mentors. They described in detail how they had learned from their mentors and how their mentors had influenced them to change their views of music, even when they were at a more advanced stage in their music-making careers. For example, Martin's mentor had inspired him to take a more Buddhist view of music. This shows that the *Shi-tu* 師徒 (mentor–apprentice) relationship, in which the mentor inspires the apprentice in his thinking about every aspect of life and the world, which is indigenous to Chinese tradition, still exists in modern Chinese society. The intimate nature of this mentoring relationship is reflected in an old Chinese proverb: 'yīrì wéishī, zhōngshēn wéifù' 一日為師, 終身為父 (Even if someone is your teacher for only a day, you have to regard him as your father for life). This tradition of the old guiding the young in order to inspire them and guide them through life-changing lessons is inherent in Chinese society. It may thus be considered to be a unique aspect of Hong Kong popular musicians' learning-practices.

On the other hand, it may also imply that in the eyes of the Hong Kong musicians who took part in this study, learning in a more formal way is an accepted practice for even popular musicians. It also suggests that if they want to attain a higher level of performance, informal learning methods may be insufficient. This appears to expose a hidden belief among the Hong Kong people, or even among Chinese people generally, that a more formal mode of learning is still essential or even superior.

#### *Proactive attitude*

Like Western bands, all three of the Hong Kong bands adopted a proactive attitude towards participation and learning in music. They were all self-motivated to learn and to refine their music, as well as caring about the expressiveness of music and the message they put across. Whilst David was more concerned with the 'spirit' of music, Tom and Peter composed and/or arranged music because they had strong feelings and messages inside themselves that they wanted to express. When they encountered difficulties in arranging music or guitar playing techniques, they found ways to solve the problem, e.g. by asking a friend or watching how others play. As mentioned above, on one occasion when the members of Grand Experience were dissatisfied with everything they had tried for a drum part, they stopped and watched another band's performance to get more inspiration. In my observation of the rehearsals all three bands arranged the parts for new songs together. They exchanged numerous ideas with each other, and all the members of the band contributed

to polishing the songs. It seems that this exchanging of and experimenting with new ideas together is what helped them to grow.

In addition, all the band members were proactive about practising and performing music. Whilst James exclaimed, 'I practise like crazy', Peter had been 'scolded' by other people for playing too much! Tom had a record of 100 performances in a year. James said that he would play other types of music, such as blues and rock, in order to explore more musical cultures. Empty practised nearly every day. James and Peter from Killer Soap and Tom and John from Grand Experience practised once or twice a week. However, both these groups said that if they had a performance they might practise up to five times a week. They were active in giving live performances and producing their own records. Even Grand Experience, which was a new band, gave regular performances at live music venues and in bars. Like their Western counterparts, they practised with 'real music', rather than using scales and technical exercises like classically trained musicians.

#### *Achievement-driven motivation*

In Chinese society, achievement-driven motivation is in fact common among all learners (Biggs, 1987; Brand, 2001). According to Lee (1996), 'Asian students are not only diligent, but they also have high achievement motivation' (p. 25). Although the Confucian tradition postulates the intrinsic significance of education, paradoxically it also includes the dimension of the 'external manifestation and utility of education'. In this way, 'the aspiration to extrinsic rewards coexists with the ideal of the external manifestation of a person's internal establishment' (p. 25). Although music learners with achievement motivation are found to be highly motivated and enthusiastic (Brand, 2001), as Biggs (1987) explains, this type of motivation is 'based on competition and ego-enhancement'.

All the informants in the present study showed their passion for making music, but four in particular talked about the satisfaction they derived from obtaining recognition or from their achievements in their learning and music-making processes. David, Martin, James and Peter referred to the boost to their egos which they derived from music-making and live performances, or from winning a singing competition. David was honest enough to admit that at concerts he derived great satisfaction from people's recognition: nodding their heads, applauding and cheering him. Martin simply said that he enjoyed being on stage. Martin was motivated by his desire for recognition and his enjoyment of performing on stage. James also derived satisfaction from the praise given him by others, acknowledging his achievement by saying that his music (CD) was good. This kind of recognition encouraged him to write more music and produce more CDs. Peter's love of music grew after he won several singing competitions at his school. However, it should be pointed out that although achievement-driven motivation is commonly found in Chinese society, it is also quite usual to find that any performer anywhere will thrive on achievement and recognition by others.

#### **Conclusion**

This study investigated how Hong Kong popular musicians learn their music and how their practices differ from those in the West, taking into account the particular political

background of Hong Kong as a former colony of Britain. The results revealed that the informants have active attitudes towards music-making and that they learn mainly in an informal way, similar to that of Western popular musicians.

However, it was found that some of the Hong Kong popular musicians interviewed for this study had supplemented their learning significantly by the more formal method of paying for tuition alongside their informal learning methods. This may be because the traditional mentor-apprentice relationship in learning is still prevalent in modern Chinese society. Or it may be because Hong Kong popular musicians feel that a more formal way learning is still necessary. Finally, achievement-driven motivation in learning is prevalent in Chinese society, and was found to be present among the informants in the present study. This may not to be a significant finding with regard to research in the context of popular music in general, but it may be an issue to which Asian educators should pay attention.

In conclusion, although the results of this study cannot be generalised beyond the six musicians interviewed, the results have highlighted certain aspects of the learning experiences of popular musicians in Hong Kong, and it is hoped that the findings will attract wider attention and interest in comparing the learning-practices of popular musicians in the West and in Asia.

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### Appendix 1. Interview questions

- How did you learn music when you were small/young?
- Was there anyone or any incident who/which influenced you in your music learning and your passion for music?
- How did you learn music in school?
- How did you learn your instruments/singing?
- Why do you still perform/make music?
- Do you like listening to music or participating in music-making?
- Do you prefer reading from musical notation or using an aural method when learning/performing?
- What does music mean to you in your life? Why?

- In your opinion, why do we need music in our society?
- Are you happy with the musical atmosphere and environment of Hong Kong? Why?

### **Appendix II Audio examples**

1. 'Kuaile yuandi' 快樂園地 [Happy Land], an original musical work composed and performed by the band Empty
2. 'Reason', an original musical work composed and performed by the band Killer Soap
3. This audio record is of the band Killer Soap arranging accompaniments to a new song together
4. This audio record is of the band The Grand Experience putting in a great deal of effort to find a good drum part for a short melodic phrase