The resonances of innovation: Orchestrating a guqin course with the systems model of creativity and a creativity educational model development

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ABSTRACT

Despite traditional music's rich expressive and cultural dimensions, it tends to be overlooked in discussions of creativity, both in academic research and educational practice. This study addresses underexplored dimensions of creativity within traditional music learning practices, filling a notable research gap and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of creativity in higher music education. An innovative course was designed around the learning and performance of the guqin, a niche yet representative instrument of traditional music. It is also a world-renowned cultural heritage inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2008. Numerous elements of creativity learning were systematically and seamlessly integrated into the guqin course. More specifically, this research proposes a dynamic framework comprising three subsystems for guqin learning. It engages individual learners, provides domain- and creativity-relevant knowledge, and establishes a supportive environment for students to encourage self-expression and enjoyment of the creation process. The study adopts a qualitative case study method to explore students' experiences and understanding of the innovative guqin course. Over a 16-week teaching period in a university guqin class, all students (N = 11) participated in the research, providing insights into the learning process and instructional design. The results indicated that the participants' creative thinking and transferable skills improved. The participants also reported that this programme effectively enhanced their motivation, self-efficacy, well-being, and creativity. These demonstrate the great potential for creativity development in traditional music education.

1. Introduction

Creativity in music is frequently associated with Western classical composers and composition-based practices, particularly in music education. However, this view reflects only a narrow understanding of the broader concept (Burnard, 2012; Yung, 2019). Although traditional music is rich in cultural and expressive value, it is seldom a focus in academic or educational discussions of creativity. To enrich the understanding of creativity in music education, this study examines the guqin, a traditional Chinese zither with over three millennia of history and deep philosophical significance in Chinese culture (Henbing & Leman, 2007; Zou, Tsai, &

Wang, 2022). Recognised as part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (Cai & Tai, 2018; Shen et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2003), the guqin is one of the most emblematic traditional instruments. This research can be regarded as a case study that explores whether creativity can be nurtured in traditional music learning and offers evidence for future practices in similar educational settings. Therefore, based on its unique musical and cultural characteristics, this study develops and implements a creativity-centred course design tailored to the guqin. It further proposes a systems model of creativity in guqin learning, which may be applied to other creativity-oriented learning in traditional music. The current study also helps identify whether the absence of creativity in traditional music learning is a misconception. Whether music learning fosters creativity should not depend on the genre or cultural setting but rather on whether the educational practice is creative.

The connection between guqin music learning and creativity is not only because activities such as composing, improvising, performing, and listening inherently allow for creative expression (Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009; Kokotsaki, 2011) but also because of the distinctive nature of the guqin and traditional music. First, unlike most other forms of music, the guqin uses a unique notation system that specifies fingering but does not explicitly indicate rhythm or note duration. This does not indicate a lack of musical rigour (Yin, 2023), rather, it reflects an aesthetic that grants players substantial freedom and space for creativity. It enables them to interpret the music based on their inner state and thus perceive the boundless possibilities of music across time and space (Luo, 1991; Yi, 2017). Second, this traditional art form offers diverse and multicultural musical experiences in today's Western-dominated higher music education, which could positively contribute to students' creative development (Zheng & Leung, 2023). In addition, the aesthetics of guqin music emphasise the concept of *Liubai* (留白), or "Blankness", which can be simply understood as "leaving space". This concept encourages players to engage their imagination, connect spiritually with the music, and pursue deeply personalised expression (Hu, 2002). In this case, the purpose of guqin learning extends beyond technical proficiency to cultivate creativity and spiritual growth (Lee, 2023; Yi, 2017). However, this vision of learning also raises higher demands for guqin education. Elements of creativity learning should be integrated into regular music instruction wherever possible. Educators are expected to impart knowledge of the guqin and traditional music, inspire students' imagination and creativity, and respond to their evolving understanding of the music. Nevertheless, research in the area remains limited. A systematic review of two decades of music education research in China by Yang and Welch (2023) found that piano and vocal studies dominate the field, with no mention of the guqin. Moreover, creativity has received comparatively little attention in music education research (Hallam, 2010). Most creativity research related to music education has focused on piano and vocal music (Zheng & Leung, 2023; Wang, 2024), while few studies have examined creativity in traditional music, especially through a specific instrument like the guqin (Du et al., 2024). In fact, traditional music is often perceived as static and merely replicative of ancestral practices (Yung, 2019).

To address the research gap, this study designs a course that integrates creative education with guqin instruction and implements it in a term-long class at a Chinese university. Through interviews and thematic analysis, the effects of this pedagogical design on students' guqin learning and creativity development will be revealed. This study adopts a systems view of creativity as its conceptual framework. This perspective, developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 1998), suggests that creativity results from a three-way interaction between the individual learner, the specific domain knowledge, and the authority with decision-making power within the field. In contrast to other models of creativity, the systems view especially emphasises that external and internal factors are equally important for the development of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014b). It perceives the emergence of creativity as a holistic operation within a system. Building on Csikszentmihalyi's work, Kuo (2014, 2019) proposed the Imagination and Creativity Systems Model, which is situated within the Asian context. After critically reviewing these two systems models, this study proposes a new model of creativity in guqin education, informed by their theoretical foundations and adapted to the context of music education.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it provides empirical evidence that creativity can be meaningfully fostered through educational practices in traditional music. The new systems model of creativity in guqin education, proposed in this research, is one of the few creativity frameworks specifically designed for traditional music. This model contributes to a richer understanding and conceptualisation of creative learning processes. With appropriate adaptation, it may be applicable to other learning contexts, especially those involving traditional music. Practically, this case study offers a detailed account of how creativity manifests in the guqin classroom. It provides practical suggestions for guqin instruction in higher education, aiming to enhance students' learning experiences and support the development of their creativity. Furthermore, given the guqin's status as a representative form of traditional music and a UNESCO-recognised intangible cultural heritage, this study offers valuable insights for future creative practices in traditional music and cultural heritage education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Infusing creativity in higher music education

Developing students' creativity in music courses is crucial, not only because creativity has been regarded as one of the most important competencies for the 21st century (Wu et al., 2025), but also because creative learning respects student voice and promotes a more democratic model of education (Bolden et al., 2023). Research reveals that embedding creativity education into regular lessons enhances students' creativity (Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020). Well-designed arts programmes also positively affect students' creativity (Clarke & McLellan, 2022). Consequently, integrating creative activities into regular music lessons is strongly recommended (Hallam, 2010). However, nurturing creativity in a formal education setting is not straightforward, as schooling emphasises reproducing existing knowledge, while creativity is about adding something new (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). Furthermore, while most creativity research encourages divergent thinking (Nickerson, 1999), it is often disconnected from students' everyday learning (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014). Such studies are either irrelevant to students' academic programmes or, at best, supplemental to the core curriculum

(ibid.). In fact, embedding creativity meaningfully into daily learning remains a widespread challenge globally, particularly in Asian contexts (Cheng, 2011).

Traditional music education in higher education primarily focuses on the transmission of knowledge and skills, with limited emphasis on nurturing students' creativity (Zhu, 2022). Teaching is predominantly lecture-based. The lack of practical, experience-based activities is also a concern (Wang, 2024; Wang & Chung, 2024). This may hinder the development of students' creativity and prevent music education from fulfilling its broader role in higher education. In addition, while research highlights strong links between musical creativity and students' enthusiasm for learning, self-acceptance, well-being, and social connectedness (Mosko & Delach, 2021; Barrett, 2005), it remains underexplored in the Chinese context (Zheng & Leung, 2023). Most research on musical creativity concentrates on mainstream music disciplines such as piano and voice, with limited attention paid to creativity in traditional music and instruments. As such, it is essential to address the shortcomings of current music education and develop creativity-oriented curricula, particularly in the context of traditional music.

2.2. The connection between the guqin and creativity education

Existing literature suggests a potential connection between guqin music and the development of students' creativity. Its unique notation system, aesthetic principles, and the diverse learning experiences it affords can all contribute to creating processes. First, the notation and playing techniques of the guqin could enhance students' divergent thinking, which is widely regarded as a key component of creativity (McCrae, 1987; Guilford, 1950; Schiavio & Benedek, 2020; Webster, 1990), as its distinctive notation provides fingering instructions without specifying rhythm, thereby offering players considerable freedom for personal interpretation (Yuzawa & Saito, 2006; Wang et al., 2022). It is rumoured that about 1400 years ago, guqin players began to create their specialised music scores, known as Qin Tablature (Jianzipu, 减字谱), which can record the fingering and pitch of the left and right hands in detail (Liu & Liu, 2021). For example, Fig. 1 shows a character from Qin Tablature, in which the four colour-highlighted components are either complete Chinese characters or character fragments, each denoting a particular playing motion for the left or right hand. All of these components constitute an entire character in Qin Tablature. The top portion of the character represents the left-hand fingering, while the bottom section signifies the right-hand fingering. Specifically, the "夕" in pink represents the left ring finger and the blue "九" indicates the number nine in Chinese, meaning that the left-hand fingering requires pressing the ninth Hui (徽) with the ring finger. The Hui are thirteen little white spots on the guqin's surface that serve as positional indicators, similar to fret marks on a guitar. In the bottom section, the green "勹" indicates the right-hand fingering "Gou" (勾), and the purple "三" represents the number three in Chinese. Thus, the right-hand fingering demands plucking the third string with the "Gou" (勾) fingering. Thousands of pieces of music have been recorded by guqin players using this form of notation (Hui & Stock, 2023). For example, Fig. 2 presents a guqin score from the Ming dynasty, composed using the type of character illustrated in Fig. 1. While it is a form of notation, it differs from modern conceptions of a musical score, resembling classical Chinese text in layout and structure. Notably, Qin Tablature records pitch and technique through written characters, but lacks explicit rhythmic markers (Lee, 2023). As such, guqin players are generally required to determine their own rhythms or imitate their tutor's playing (Yu et al., 2021). The absence of rhythmic markings in the Qin Tablature may not be a flaw. On the contrary, the absence of clear rhythmic markings grants the player much freedom (Lee, 2023). Guqin music allows players to vary the rhythm of a piece according to the time, setting, and context of performance, without adhering to a fixed interpretation (Yi, 2017). This encourages players to explore musical possibilities and express their inner thoughts and emotions.

The connection between the guqin and creativity is also evident in guqin music's intrinsic emphasis on imagination, as reflected in its aesthetic principle of Blankness (Liubai, 留白). Rooted in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, the idea of Blankness refers to the intentional use of empty space to evoke harmony and leave interpretive space for the viewer (Battier, Fields, & Liu, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). This principle values Emptiness (Xu, 虚) over Substantiality (Shi, 实) (Zou, Tsai, & Wang, 2022). Such open-ended space invites the imagination, which plays a vital role in fostering creative thinking (Bunce & Woolley, 2021; Eckhoff & Urbach, 2008; Cheng, 2011; Lindqvist, 2003). In guqin music, Blankness is mainly reflected in the lingering tones (Yun, 韵). The musical sound (Sheng, 声), produced by the right hand, has a fixed and clearly recognisable pitch, while the lingering tone refers to subtle pitch variations in the sustained sound (Zou, Tsai, & Wang, 2022). During a guqin performance, the left hand glides along the strings, adjusting their length to modify pitch or gently shaking them to create a pulsating effect, similar to the vibrato of a violin (ibid.). In the art of the guqin, the lingering tones are usually valued more than musical sounds, as these barely audible sounds invite deeper imaginative engagement (Yin, 2023). Moreover, Hu (2002) argues that Blankness enables the performers' creativity to flourish. Unlike

Indicates which finger to use on the left hand

Indicates the position of the left-hand finger

Indicates the position of the right-hand finger

Indicates the right-hand fingering
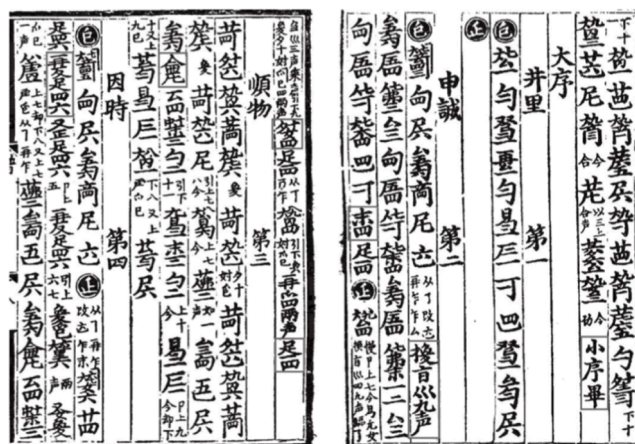
Fig. 1. A character in Qin Tablature.

Fig. 2. Excerpt from the Qin Tablature (Jianzipu) in *Shenqi Mipu (神奇秘谱)*, a Ming dynasty guqin manual. Reproduced from Dai (2024, p. 9).

Western music, guqin music is not entirely governed by rules of sound organisation. In contrast, it highlights freedom and the importance of emotional engagement with the music, encouraging players to give free rein to their imagination and pursue personalised musical expression.

In addition, in higher music education in China, where Western music prevails (Yang & Welch, 2016), the Chinese musical aesthetics represented by the guqin facilitates students' exposure to and understanding of multiculturalism (Mazur, 2015). Based on Zheng and Leung (2023), learning about multiculturalism supports students' creative expression and creative cognitive processes. Ironically, the popularity of the guqin as a homegrown, culturally and musically significant instrument is relatively limited in China. Surveys show that in a country of over a billion people, there are fewer than a thousand well-trained guqin players and fewer than fifty recognised guqin experts (Yu et al., 2021). In stark contrast to this situation is China's 'Piano Craze' between 1990 and 2020 (Bai, 2021). It is conservatively estimated that at least 40 million children in China are currently learning the piano (Wassenberg, 2019). In ancient China, the guqin was closely associated with Confucianism, Daoism, and the upper classes (Gaywood, 1996; Yuxing & Reily, 2018), and was regarded as an art form exclusively reserved for the literati and the elite (Leman et al., 2009; Wen & Chan, 2022). This may explain why the guqin remains relatively obscure in modern Chinese society and education, continuing to be a niche instrument today. Qin Tablature, as discussed above, offers a markedly different learning experience from the Western staff notation familiar to most Chinese students. Consequently, learning the guqin enables students to immerse themselves in a different musical culture, creating opportunities for innovative thinking. In addition, unlike other forms of music, guqin music places particular emphasis on the learner's intrinsic understanding of the spiritual dimension (Luo, 1991). This process relies heavily on the tutor's spiritual communication, conveyed through both verbal instruction and non-verbal cues. As a result, students not only acquire technical skills but also develop a deeper understanding of music, which enables artistic resonance (Zhao, 2019). This suggests that guqin educators should foster more opportunities for student interaction and develop diverse learning activities to deepen students' intrinsic understanding.
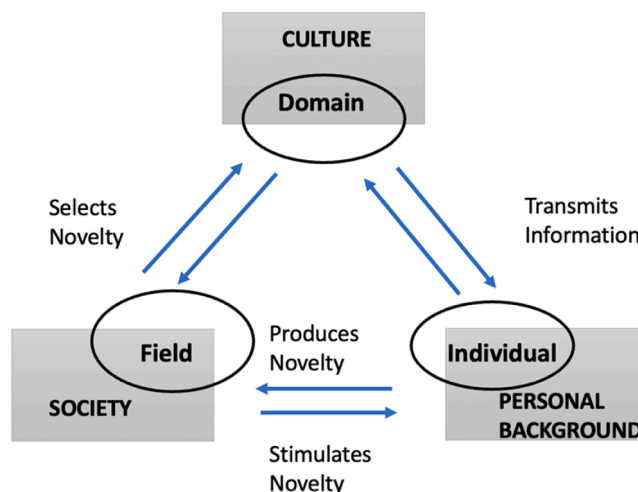

Fig. 3. Csikszentmihalyi's (1998) Systems Model of Creativity.

However, this crucial aspect of guqin learning may have been overlooked in previous educational research and remains a low priority in today's formal music education.

2.3. The nurturing of creativity: a systems perspective

Since the 1980s, creativity research has shifted from studying individual traits to focusing on external influences such as social and cultural context. As a result, a socio-psychological approach to creativity research has emerged (Ryhammar & Brolin, 1999). Notable theories include Amabile's componential model (1983), Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (1998), and Glaveanu's five A's framework (2013). Although several creativity-oriented systems models exist, Csikszentmihalyi's systems model has gained the widest application (Moran, 2009). Csikszentmihalyi argues that creativity is the capability to "add something new to the culture" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998, p.314). As shown in Fig. 3, Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 1998) suggests that creativity consists of three components: the Domain, the Field, and the Individual. The Domain refers to the knowledge of each specific discipline. Creativity does not occur directly within culture, but begins within separate Domains, which collectively make up the culture. Furthermore, creativity is inextricably linked to social context (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). The Field comprises experts and relevant people in a Domain. This means that when a change occurs in a Domain, it must be recognised by those within the Field in order to be considered creative (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In addition, the systems model emphasises the importance of individual factors in the creating process (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014a). Individuals with strong persuasive skills are more likely to gain social support and convince experts in the Field to accept their innovations within a Domain. Moreover, individuals who dare to challenge established rules tend to exhibit greater creative potential (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 2015).

Csikszentmihalyi's systems model places creativity in a social and cultural context and coherently reveals how people can contribute to it. It emphasises the impact of the environment on the individual, and the importance of taking initiative to cultivate creativity within its dynamic structure (Mockros & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In particular, the Field element is linked to the assessment of creativity and creates a continuum (Moran, 2009). In educational settings, especially in Chinese higher education, tutors' feedback has a significant impact on students' self-regulated learning (Tian et al., 2025). For this reason, Csikszentmihalyi's systems model was adopted in this study, as it directly reflects students' interactions with instructors and domain knowledge, enabling a structured and practical exploration of creativity in guqin learning. However, although the systems model is comprehensive and integrative, it might need further contextualisation in educational settings. In addition, multiple studies have identified differences in how creativity is conceptualised and approached in Eastern and Western societies (Rudowicz & Yue, 2002; Niu & Sternberg, 2006). Applying Western theories of creativity to another context may require careful adaptation.

Kuo (2014, 2019) captures the inadequacy of the systems model of creativity in educational settings and proposes an Imagination and Creativity Systems Model based on Csikszentmihalyi's (1998) framework. This model complements the use of the systems model in the Eastern educational environment, particularly in Chinese societies. Additionally, it integrates key insights from Amabile (1983) and Sternberg and Lubart (1991), which strengthens its theoretical foundation (Kuo, 2011). In Kuo's model, imagination and creativity
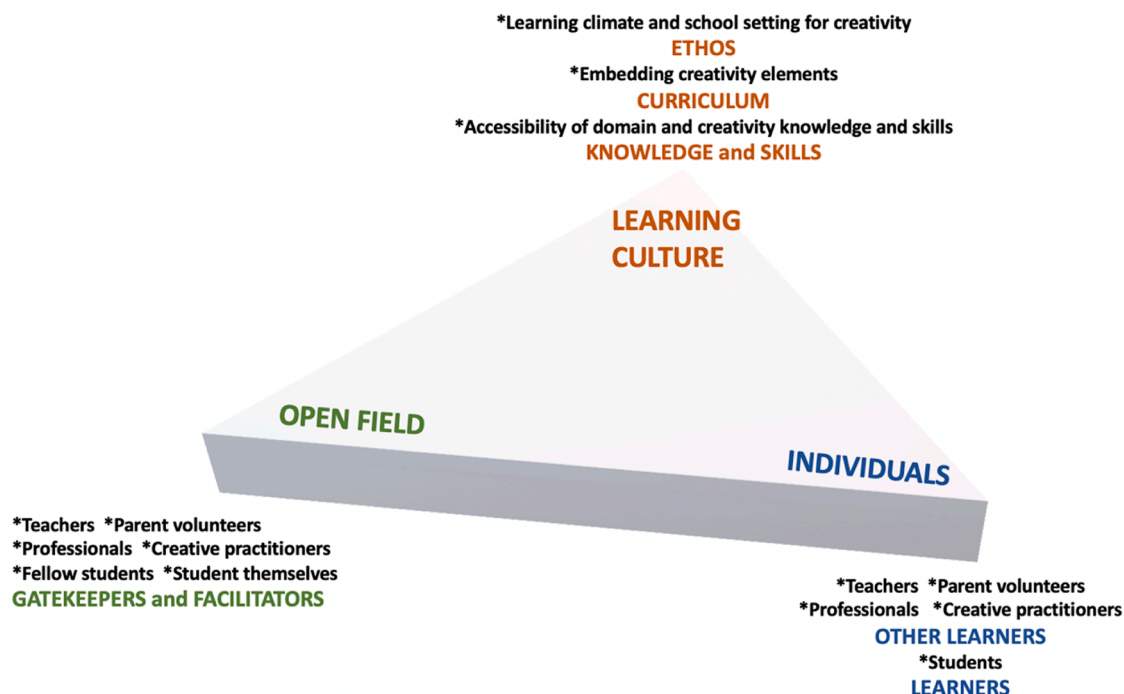

Fig. 4. Kuo's (2019) Systems Model of Creativity and Imagination.

educational practice consists of three main interconnected and mutually causative dynamic systems: the Learning Cultures, the Learners, and the Open Field (see Fig. 4). Kuo (2014, 2019) expanded the scope of the Individual by coining the concept of Learners. This concept extends the scope of creativity education beyond students and classroom learners to include professionals, creative practitioners, volunteers, parents, and others. Kuo (2014, 2019) contextualised the concept of Domain in educational settings to develop a Learning Culture consisting of three factors: *Ethos, Curriculum and practice*, and *Skills and knowledge*. The original Field was reframed as the Open Field, composed of *Gatekeepers, Facilitators*, and *Contestation*.

It can be argued that Kuo's (2014, 2019) model provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the three elements of creativity in the educational environment. However, as shown in Fig. 4, Kuo's model presents a static triangular representation. While this effectively demonstrates the equal importance of the three elements, it seems to overlook the dynamic forces among them. Furthermore, Kuo's model primarily focuses on listing elements, but there remain gaps in its applicability to concrete music education practice. Hence, drawing on Csikszentmihalyi (1998) and Kuo (2019), this study formulates a music course design that systematically integrates creativity education into guqin teaching. It also proposes a systems model of creativity for the guqin, aiming to provide a holistic description of creativity within a guqin programme. Additionally, the key components of Amabile's (1983) Componential Theory of Creativity, including creativity-relevant skills and domain-relevant skills, together with the concept of mini-c proposed by Beghetto and Kaufman (2007a), have contributed to the development of the new model. Although the new model is designed for guqin education in the current study, it is believed that it can also be applied to broader music education contexts with appropriate modifications.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Due to the small class settings, a total population sampling approach was employed, including all 11 graduate students (aged 22 to 24) from the music department of a Chinese university. An elective course on Chinese guqin music and performance was offered at this university. After thorough discussions with the researcher, the course instructor showed great interest in participating in this study. All students enrolled in this course were invited to participate in this study voluntarily. The participants were music students from different majors, and their background information is shown in Table 1. They were notified of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. All the students volunteered to participate in the research and did not receive compensation (Gralewski, 2019). In addition, the participants were guaranteed that their identities would remain confidential. No conflict of interest was detected, as the researcher did not evaluate or affect their course grades.

3.2. Case study method

As a widely used empirical method in the social sciences, the case study method offers a contextualised, in-depth, and nuanced investigation of a specific real-world phenomenon (Goodrum et al., 2022; Yin, 2017; Chapleo & Simms, 2010). It yields insights that extend beyond the individual case, providing valuable information applicable to other contexts (Yazan, 2015). This approach is extensively employed in various forms of music research (Barrett & Conway, 2014), such as studies on the integration of informal music learning into secondary school classrooms (Vasil et al., 2019) and on the impact of music teaching on young people from refugee backgrounds (Crawford, 2017). Researchers have also successfully exploited the case study method to investigate the phenomenon of integrating creativity elements into music education. For example, Zheng and Leung (2021) examine the facilitation of creativity in piano courses within Chinese higher education. Coulson & Burke, 2013 present a detailed exploration of how creativity could be promoted in American primary school students by establishing improvisation and creativity programmes. Hence, the case study method was adopted to enable a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of creativity within guqin learning for university students.

3.3. Course design and delivery

Elements of creativity learning were added to the traditional guqin curriculum to promote students' creativity during their guqin learning. The course lasted for an entire academic term with a total of 16 lessons. The course instructor was a professor of musicology with extensive experience in teaching the guqin and had formulated a curriculum for it. This study seeks to integrate creativity

Table 1
Background on participants.

	Gender	Age	Study Level	Major enrolled with
Students	Male: 1 Female: 10	22–24	Master's: 11	Ethnomusicology: 3 History of Western Music: 1 Piano: 2 Vocal Music: 2 Dance: 1 Arts Management: 1 Dulcimer: 1
Total				11

education into the guqin curriculum seamlessly. The main content of the enhanced course included the history, culture, etiquette, and basic techniques of the guqin, along with instruction in four representative guqin pieces. The specifics of the integrated course design are shown in Table 2, with the key creative elements summarised in the last column.

Table 2
Integrated Couse Design.

	Lesson	Guqin Music Education	Creativity Education	Key Creativity Elements
1	Course Overview	History, culture, and construction of the guqin	1. In addition to enrolled students, the course is open to faculty members and other students with an interest in the guqin. 2. Creative space is established and run throughout the term.	**Individual**: Learning with peers who share similar passions. **Field***: The *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant Knowledge**
2	The Score and Tuning Methods	Recognising the Qin Tablature and tuning guqin strings.	Elements related to guqin music, including Chinese rituals, mythology, and tea ceremonies, are integrated into guqin instruction to enrich students' understanding.	**Domain** (*Skills and Knowledge*): Multiple perspectives for comprehensive Domain understanding.
3	Guqin Etiquette	Sitting posture and hand gestures for playing the guqin.		
4	Fingering	Learning fingerings such as Mo (抹), Tiao (挑), Gou (勾), Ti (剔).	Independent practice and exploratory creative attempts are encouraged.	**Field**: The instructor acts as both *Gatekeeper* and *Facilitator*, and the *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant Knowledge**
5	The Guqin Piece *Fairy Old Man* (仙翁操)	Learning guqin techniques and fingering combinations.	1. Students are encouraged to explore their inner emotions through the practice of guqin pieces, helping them express themselves both emotionally and creatively. One-to-one targeted tutoring is also provided to deepen their intrinsic understanding. 2. A Yaji concert follows the learning of each guqin piece, offering students a chance to perform and reflect. 3. The creative space takes the form of a collaborative learning environment to promote peer interaction and the mutual exchange of guqin techniques and musical insights. 4. Students are guided to integrate their existing knowledge with guqin music to create new works and subsequently perform them at the Yaji concerts.	**Domain** (*Curriculum and Practice*): Enhancing and innovating performance practices. **Domain** (*Ethos*): Dispelling the myth that music is class-bound. **Field**: The instructor acts as both *Gatekeeper* and *Facilitator*, and the *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant Knowledge**
6				
7	The Guqin Piece *How I Long for You* (长相思)	Learning guqin techniques and fingerings, such as Cuo (撮), Zhu (注), Gun (滚) and Fu (拂).		
8				
9	The Guqin Piece *Ode to Autumn Wind* (秋风辞)	Learning new piece and review fingerings.		
10	The Guqin Piece *The Moon at the Fortified Pass* (关山月)	Learning guqin techniques and some more advanced fingerings, such as Yin (吟), Nao (猱).		
11				
12	Visit to a Guqin Learning and Production Organisation	Experiencing guqin making	Students gain multifaceted perspectives on the guqin through interactions with makers and practitioners.	**Individual**: Learning with peers who share similar passions. **Domain** (*Skills and Knowledge*): Multiple perspectives for comprehensive Domain understanding. **Field***: The *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant Knowledge**
13	Practice for the Final Yaji Concert	Students select their favourite guqin pieces to practice and prepare for a performance at the final Yaji concert.	Students are encouraged to engage creatively in their performances and to collaborate with peers from other disciplines in integrating diverse art forms into guqin music.	**Individual**: Learning with peers who share similar passions. **Domain** (*Curriculum and Practice*): Enhancing and innovating performance practices. **Field***: The instructor acts as both *Gatekeeper* and *Facilitator*, and the *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant and Creativity-Relevant Knowledge**
14				
15				
16	Final Yaji Concert	Students perform their creative guqin pieces and share their insights on guqin music with the audience.	The course challenges the perception of guqin as an elite art form by inviting a diverse audience to participate in the final Yaji concert. The inclusion of a free sharing session provides a platform for both students and audience members to express and exchange their creative ideas.	**Induval**: Diverse audience **Domain** (*Curriculum and Practice*): Enhancing and innovating performance practices. **Domain** (*Ethos*): Dispelling the myth that music is class-bound. **Field***: The *Contestation* is set up. **Acquisition of Domain-Relevant and Creativity-Relevant Knowledge**

3.3.1. Individual

The concept of the Individual is extended to the public, including professionals, creatives, and community members beyond the students and learners in the classroom. First, university students and faculty interested in the guqin but without prior opportunity to enrol were invited to participate in the course. Second, in the twelfth lesson, *Visit to a Guqin Learning and Production Organisation*, guqin practitioners and makers, who are also part of the learners, shared their knowledge and experiences with the students. Third, the final lesson expanded the audience beyond the class to include the public. Students took the initiative to promote the concert on their social media platforms, inviting anyone interested in guqin music to attend and encouraging them to share their learning experiences, listening to, or appreciating the guqin (see Fig. 5). In this way, the concept of the Individual in this study extends to the public, as diverse learners and participants enrich the meaning of this educational practice (Kuo, 2014, 2019).

3.3.2. Domain

For Domain, this study follows Kuo's (2014, 2019) model, with the three foci of *Ethos, Curriculum and Practice*, and *Skills and Knowledge*. Regarding *Curriculum and Practice*, the course design incorporates four Yaji (雅集), which are similar to concerts. Yaji originated in ancient China as gatherings of literati in which they recited poetry, engaged in painting, and appreciated various forms of art (Hui & Stock, 2023). In modern guqin education, the name Yaji has been adopted for guqin performances and concerts. In general, even when included in a guqin course, a Yaji is usually held only once, typically in the final lesson. This creative guqin course, however, organised a Yaji concert after each piece was learnt, and once more at the end of the term. This provides students with more opportunities to express their creativity, explore the stylistic nuances of these guqin pieces, and share their intrinsic understanding with their peers (see Fig. 6). In addition, *Curriculum and Practice* emphasises the need to promote a project-oriented teaching model (Kuo, 2019). Students were required to perform a complete and creative guqin piece at the final Yaji concert. They were encouraged to collaborate with peers from different disciplines to integrate various art forms into their guqin performances (see Fig. 7). This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches their performances but is also expected to have a positive impact on their creativity. In addition, the integrated course encouraged students to explore innovative forms of guqin performance to attract greater attention, as the course design extended the scope from individual learners to the general public, allowing their creative work to be shared with a broader audience.

Skills and Knowledge emphasises the importance of providing sufficient material in class to support learners' comprehensive understanding of the Domain. The course is designed to flexibly utilise learning spaces and resources (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014), aiming to optimise the delivery of knowledge and enhance students' intrinsic understanding of the guqin. The second and third lessons incorporated traditional Chinese rituals, myths, and tea ceremonies associated with the guqin. For example, when introducing the construction of the guqin, the instructor explained that the two sound holes on its back were named dragon pond (Longchi, 龙池) and phoenix pool (Fengzhao, 凤沼), using these features to illustrate the ancient Chinese beliefs that "the dragon is the spirit of water and the phoenix is the firebird" (Pearce, 2008, p. 41). The instructor also encouraged students to engage in a full discussion of the concept of Blankness (Liubai, 留白). In the twelfth lesson, an activity involving guqin making was added to the students' regular study (see Fig. 8). They were introduced to the operation of a guqin learning organisation and engaged in hands-on guqin making. These experiences allowed them to interpret the guqin from new perspectives and deepen their intrinsic understanding, fostering a more comprehensive appreciation of the Domain.

The *Ethos* signifies the learning atmosphere that should be fostered to encourage the development of creativity. In the feudal period of China, the guqin was a musical instrument associated with social class (Wen & Chan, 2022). This may reinforce the stereotype that the guqin is a musical instrument exclusive to the nobility and the elite. To address this, the curriculum is designed to incorporate Yaji activities and to promote open dialogue and exchange among the students, their peers, and the audience. By successfully presenting the guqin at the Yaji, students may realise that, with practice, ordinary people are capable of performing a full repertoire of guqin pieces. By interacting with a more diverse audience, participants may recognise that anyone can appreciate guqin music and share their perspectives on it.

Fig. 5. Students and members of the public exchange their views on the guqin at the Yaji concert.
(Source: Chen, 2022b)

Fig. 6. Two students are practicing the guqin.
(Source: Yu, 2022)

Fig. 7. Two students are performing a creative piece that integrates guqin and vocal music at the Yaji concert.
(Source: Chen, 2022a)

Fig. 8. Students are working on a step in the guqin-making process in Lesson 12.
(Source: Wang & Yang, 2022)

3.3.3. Field

Creativity is more of a value judgement than a personal trait, and those who make such judgements collectively constitute the Field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Kuo (2014, 2019) further refines the role of the experts in the Field by breaking it down into *Gatekeepers, Facilitators*, and *Contestation*. In this study, the role of the instructor as a gatekeeper is extremely important. As mentioned earlier, guqin music places great emphasis on intrinsic understanding. Therefore, after delivering explanations to the whole class, the instructor devoted time to individually coaching each student based on their learning progress and understanding. By addressing the students' questions one-to-one, the instructor aims to assist the students in fully understanding the domain-relevant knowledge. Students are encouraged to express their emotions and thoughts freely through guqin music and convey them in a sensory and artistic form. At the same time, the instructor acts as a facilitator, identifying, acknowledging, and nurturing students' mini-creativity, which may appear insignificant in the Domain but is meaningful for learners. Creativity in educational settings is closer to mini-c in the multiple c model (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007a). It implies that creativity in the educational Domain is a type of creativity beneficial to individual learners but does not necessarily act on the Domain (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007b). Hence, instructors should recognise and value

students' mini-c creativity, using it as a starting point to inspire further creative thinking. Creativity-relevant knowledge is also imparted in this process.

In addition, learners should have the time and space for discussions, presentations, and even open competition within the Field. This reflects the core function of *Contestation*. In this study, a creative space was established to serve as a *Contestation*, where learners were free to express their views and ideas about the guqin throughout the term. The diverse range of activities also ensures that students can communicate and collaborate effectively. In the twelfth and sixteenth lessons, additional participants from the Field and members of the wider public were invited to engage with guqin music, offering students new perspectives and allowing them to experience the joy of sharing their performances with others. These intensive activities, in turn, reinforce the instructor's dual role as both a gatekeeper and a facilitator, while simultaneously shaping the concept of creative space.

3.4. Data collection

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Participants were asked questions focusing on three main areas: 1) Individual: Did the instructor provide space for you to freely develop your own approach to learning the guqin? Were you encouraged to co-operate with other students and enjoy guqin music together? 2) Domain: Do you feel that you and your fellow students were able to master guqin-playing skills through practice? Did you develop imaginative and creative skills while learning the guqin? Was the class design attractive? Besides playing the guqin, were there any other activities that impressed you? Do you feel that the instructor provided sufficient learning materials and activities to support your learning? 3) Field: How would you describe the instructor? What was his attitude towards your new ideas for learning guqin? During the interviews, the researcher set aside her own assumptions. Every effort was made to fully understand the participants' perspectives (Chang and Wang, 2021). In addition, the researcher did not limit the students' responses, and they were encouraged to share more of what they wanted to say, even if it might be outside the interview outline.

3.5. Data analysis strategy

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, offering a comprehensive account of the experience and examining the essence of this guqin teaching practice. Dedoose, a cloud-based software platform, was used to support this process (Lieber, Salmona, Kaczynski, Johnson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is distinguished by its flexibility, which enables it to be applied to a wide range of theoretical frameworks. Compared to other qualitative research methods, thematic analysis is particularly suited to an under-explored area such as the current study. Its strengths lie in generating a deep and holistic understanding of the research question while providing a concrete and practical process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The original codes for this study were generated after a thorough review of the 11 interview transcripts. These codes represented the most basic units of meaning in the dataset. Subsequently, the original codes were developed into 32 sub-themes. After further reflection, refinement and categorisation of these sub-themes, 9 secondary themes emerged. Ultimately, 4 overarching themes were identified by synthesising the underlying patterns of the 9 secondary themes: motivation, self-efficacy, well-being and creativity. The overall analytical structure is presented in Table 3. Key findings were derived from systematically coding the data, and illustrative quotations were selected and translated into English where necessary. A detailed example of the thematic analysis process is provided in Table 4.

3.6. Data validity: triangulation

To gain a comprehensive understanding, the case study method relies on collecting multiple forms of data, which need to converge through triangulation (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018; Yin, 2017; Schlunegger et al., 2024). Patton (2015) argues that data could be triangulated in four distinct ways: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. These four forms of triangulation enhance the study's validity, accuracy, and legitimacy (Moon, 2019). In this case, data triangulation and investigator triangulation were used to validate the data. Data triangulation involves assessing the consistency of individuals' statements about the same subject over time. After all the interviews were completed, 11 interviewees received follow-up phone calls or interview transcripts via WeChat, a versatile social media application commonly used in China (Wang et al., 2025). They were asked to confirm whether the researcher had accurately understood their views and whether they wished to add anything to the

Table 3
Thematic structure.

Sub-themes	Secondary themes	Primary themes
External motivator, Self-directed practice, Sense of progress, Taking initiative, Feeling appreciated, Emotional resonance, Willingness to continue learning, Desire to present and share	Proactivity, Relatedness, Urge	Motivation
Stimulate interest, Task ownership, Believe in myself, Peer success boosts self-confidence, Familiarity, Initiating ideas, Sense of mastery	Self-regulation, Empowered learning	Self-efficacy
High degree of relaxation, Relieve stress and anxiety, Calm down, Special sense, Healing, Interpersonal warmth, Fulfilment of learning new music, Impact on lifestyles	Mental state, Self-care	Well-being
Collaboration, Communication, Inspiration, Integration, Open-mindedness, Musical decision-making, Problem-solving, Cross-domain knowledge application, Cross-context knowledge application	Musical innovation, Transferable skills	Creativity

Table 4

An example of the thematic analysis process.

Main Theme	Secondary themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Data extract
Creativity	Musical innovation	Collaboration Integration	1. Collaboration with peers 2. Integration of expressive elements	*"I and another student are going to perform a new form of one of the guqin pieces we learnt in class (Code 1). The first time she just played the guqin, and the second time she played and sang by herself while I harmonised on the chorus part (Code 1). At first, we found this difficult because we needed to figure out how we wanted to set up the harmony part (Code 4). And we also had to work out how to harmonise the volume and tone between us and the guqin (Code 3). We schemed to use a basic canonic melody with quartal and quintal harmony (Code 7). We also added the refrain "ah" (Code 2). Finally, in the interlude, we added the "Gun (滚) " and "Fu (拂) " techniques to create the mood of the song, which is commonly used in the guqin piece "Flowing Water" (Liushui; 流水) (Code 8). Our instructor inspired this idea (Code 6). Also, we adjusted the seats of both of us according to the venue to better control our volume (Code 5)." (Female/24/MA/ Ethnomusicology)*
		Problem-solving	3. Balancing timbre and dynamics 4. Harmony construction difficulties 5. Adapting to performance environment	
		Inspiration	6. Inspiration from instructor	
	Transferable skills	Cross-domain knowledge application	7. Application of music theory knowledge	
		Cross-context knowledge application	8. Application of *Liushui*'s technique in new contexts	

transcript. Based on their feedback, the interview transcripts were adjusted accordingly. In addition, investigator triangulation refers to engaging multiple researchers to validate the same study without prior discussion (Thurmond, 2001). This allows for both the confirmation of findings and the incorporation of different perspectives to increase the breadth of the study (Carter et al., 2014). Thus, the researcher invited two scholars, specialising in creativity studies, proficient in both Chinese and English, and with extensive experience in qualitative research, to independently review the data analysis of this study. They were each given two randomly selected sections of the interview transcripts and asked to analyse them using thematic analysis. After comparing their results with those of this study, both scholars found the data analysis process and findings to be trustworthy and comprehensible.

4. Results

The participants' reflections on the guqin creativity course were collected through one-to-one interviews at the end of the term. After collating and categorising the responses, four primary themes emerged.

4.1. Motivation

In this study, the significant change was first observed in the internal state of the students. After a term of study, the students believed that this innovative guqin course increased their motivation to learn and helped them develop an internal drive. Although they initially chose the course based on varying degrees of interest in the guqin, some students admitted that their motivation was not firmly established. Especially at the beginning, their motivation for learning the guqin was not very strong.

"It is good to learn one more instrument in itself. (I chose this class because) there happened to be a guqin class offered, and I was kind of interested in guqin, so I chose that." (Female/23/MA/Piano)

"(I learnt about guqin) because of a lack of credits, and I was curious about it. Before (I) learnt the guqin, I thought it was a profound and mysterious existence because I usually did not have much chance to approach it and get close to it." (Female/23/MA/Vocal Music)

"When I heard the guqin, I associated it with rituals, nationalism, and other lofty-sounding things, so I was still very distant from it at first. I did not start with the certainty that I had to learn the guqin." (Female/24/MA/Vocal Music)

However, after 16 weeks of learning, all the students noted that they came to enjoy guqin music and that their motivation to learn had increased. They responded positively to the teaching approach, and almost all indicated that they would continue to practise and study the guqin in the future, even after the course had ended.

"I found it hard to get the hang of it at first, but now I think it's not very difficult for me to play a simple piece (of guqin), although I cannot play it very well… I will continue to learn in the future if I am still taught by the current instructor." (Female/23/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

"Guqin should now be regarded as a hobby of mine. After this class ended, I looked for guqin instructional videos on the Bilibili website (a video-sharing website in China) to follow along and continue learning the guqin." (Female/22/MA/Piano)

Students suggested that this shift in motivation could be related to the many concerts included in the programme and the creative space that was provided. The concerts offered an authentic context for them to perform. Unlike concerts in other courses, this programme had multiple concerts interspersed, directly bringing the students immediate feedback. In addition, the creative space worked effectively. The concerts, along with the overall learning environment, created a judgement-free atmosphere. This supported students in expressing and discussing their understanding of the guqin openly and receiving feedback, which contributed to increased

motivation to learn.

"I think Yaji (concerts) are an external motivator for me. Once I thought that I was able to present my playing in front of people and share my thoughts on this piece, I felt very excited, and I felt very motivated to practise the guqin. It's just that you become more disciplined and very proactive about the whole practising thing. Then we have four opportunities to play on stage, and you will obviously feel yourself getting better and better each time, and this also gives me more of an urge to keep learning." (Female/22/MA/ Dulcimer)

"The Yaji concerts in this class are not quite like those I have attended before. Including our whole study of the guqin, you will find that everyone looks at your playing with appreciation. Then we would exchange ideas, often talking about our own thoughts and experiences from the guqin pieces, and I remembered once we talked about some hot topics and some interesting things that were being discussed in society at the time. You know, this (feeling) was very moving." (Female/22/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

4.2. Self-efficacy

Students have commented that the course has afforded them considerable freedom, enabling them to take ownership of their learning and manage their progress. With the freedom to choose their own repertoire, performance style and partners, they learnt more out of interest rather than from the pressure of the instructor or the anxiety of performing on stage. In addition, the course content was neither overly complex nor intimidating. The participants ultimately showed improvement through this positive learning experience.

"I found this class particularly good because it gave me a sense of control over my learning. The instructor gave us a lot of room to play, for example, in the final concert at the end of the class, I chose my favourite piece to adapt and play." (Male/22/MA/Arts Management)

"I had a particularly enjoyable time in this class because I was completely stress-free. I was in complete control of the pace of my learning, and the content of each lesson was not too difficult, so I mastered it in class. And the instructor responsibly taught us but did not put a lot of pressure on us." (Female/24/MA/Dance)

"These practical activities are of course very helpful to the learning of the guqin. First, these practical activities can stimulate our interest in learning the guqin. Second, for example, the Yaji, although the pieces we prepare for each Yaji as a beginner are not particularly difficult, it is also a stage of exercise for every student, and completing it gives me more confidence to play better." (Female/24/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

Performance anxiety, which is common in instrumental music performance (Hendricks, 2016; McGrath, 2012), was also experienced by the students. They did not initially feel comfortable with public performance. Instead, they gradually gained confidence by successfully participating in several concerts organised as part of the course. Moreover, the sense of familiarity brought about by learning about the guqin from multiple perspectives also played a significant role. These factors collectively contributed to enhanced self-efficacy.

"Learning about the making process of the guqin has brought me closer to the instrument and stimulated my interest in practising it. I felt the same way when I attended the Yaji." (Female/23/MA/Piano)

"At first (I was) a little terrified, just thinking how I could go to a performance of a minimal tune that I had just practised for six months. Later on, I felt that the continuous and intensive concerts were very helpful because I was familiar with what it was like to perform in front of other people at these kinds of concerts over and over again; it made me adapt quickly." (Female/23/MA/History of Western Music)

"It was amazing to see everyone could play a piece that was so perfectly rendered after a term of study. Especially since these people were just your classmates, not guqinists, some of them were even studying music theory and did not have much experience playing musical instruments before. You will think you are okay after you see how well they can play." (Female/24/MA/Vocal Music)

"I benefited a lot from the activity of seeing the guqin being made. I had always thought that the guqin was a very profound and distant instrument, but after seeing it (the process of making it), and even trying to make it with my own hands, plus I've been practising for a long time I felt that the guqin was much closer to me. This experience gave me confidence to learn the guqin well, and then I really did." (Female/22/MA/Piano)

4.3. Well-being

Surprisingly, students reported that the course was effective in relieving their anxiety and enhancing their sense of well-being. This change may be attributed to the process of engaging with music itself. A natural sense of well-being arose from students' increased knowledge of the guqin. What was once perceived as mysterious and complex gradually became more accessible, as they developed the ability to play it with ease through persistent effort. In addition, playing the guqin requires maintaining longer fingernails to pluck the strings directly, which is a unique experience for modern students who are unaccustomed to keeping long nails.

"With the instructor's guidance, I was able to adjust the shape of my hand, the point of force, and the depth of my fingernails, and as my fingernails slowly became longer, I could hear a very different tone coming out of my hands, and I felt a special sense of wellbeing at that moment." (Female/23/MA/Vocal Music)

Although both the guqin and the participants' major professional directions are in the domain of music, they found this elective to

be a relaxing, enriching, and enjoyable course distinct from their core disciplines. The class became a diversion and supplement to their professional studies and provided an outlet for the stresses of their lives and studies.

"The guqin helped me a lot in my postgraduate studies. Whenever I felt anxious about writing my dissertation, I wanted to play the guqin. The guqin is a particularly healing instrument for me, because it is interesting, and it is always something new to play." (Female/23/MA/ History of Western Music)

"By the time I reached graduate school, I had a lot of studying and pressure. So, it was one of the things I counted on every week when I looked forward to coming to my guqin class. Coming to this class was effective in relieving my stress." (Female/22/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

Some students mentioned that the teaching approach in this programme positively impacted their emotional state. The creative space proved effective, and each student received specific one-to-one guidance from the instructor, which contributed to improved learning outcomes. The students found that this proximity and targeted instruction made it easier for them to solve specific technique challenges and gain self-awareness. This awareness is conducive to the students' well-being and intrinsic understanding of the guqin.

"Before that I was of a more closed mind. By taking this guqin class, the instructor pointed out my state of mind through my playing, and then I had tears in my eyes and a feeling of being enlightened. The guqin is a musical instrument that is indeed very closely connected to the human heart." (Female/23/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

"I would find the instructor's teaching method to be very humanistic. For example, after teaching a fingering, he would come down personally to see if each student understood it. I think this approach is quite effective for me, one (reason) is that I get feedback quickly, and the other is that I feel valued and (this is) warm." (Male/22/MA/Arts Management)

4.4. Creativity

In this study, students were encouraged to collaborate with their peers to integrate the guqin with other art forms in creating original pieces. Initially, they found the task daunting, as they had never engaged in such creative practice before. However, through discussions with their classmates and guidance from the instructor, they gradually discovered a way forward. The following two examples are creative works that combine guqin music with vocal music and dance. The students flexibly used various methods to effectively demonstrate their creativity and achieve artistic cohesion.

"I and another student are going to perform a new form of one of the guqin pieces we learnt in class. The first time she just played the guqin, and the second time she played and sang by herself while I harmonised on the chorus part. At first, we found this difficult because we needed to figure out how we wanted to set up the harmony part. And we also had to work out how to harmonise the volume and tone between us and the guqin. We schemed to use a basic canonic melody with quartal and quintal harmony. We also added the refrain "ah". Finally, in the interlude, we added the "Gun (滚) " and "Fu (拂) " techniques to create the mood of the song, which is commonly used in the guqin piece "Flowing Water" (Liushui, 流水). Our instructor inspired this idea. Also, we adjusted the seats of both of us according to the venue to better control our volume." (Female/24/MA/ Ethnomusicology)

"I add my dance to the guqin playing. Guqin music is not like other music. Dance in other music is usually a beat with one or two movements. But the guqin has more freedom, for example, if the player thinks the note should be longer, the sustain will be more. So, I added some of my own design to the process, and it also honed my adaptability. I can adapt my steps to the rhythm of the guqin player." (Female/24/MA/ Dance)

The above example, which combines guqin and vocal music, shows the students' ability to transfer knowledge. They interpreted traditional melodies in new forms and drew on techniques from other guqin pieces, as well as their knowledge of music theory, to enrich their creative works. Another example of the fusion between the guqin and dance serves as a direct reflection of the students' creativity. The guqin dance piece was not merely a production but an act of creation (Chang et al., 2023b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2022), as the student crafted original movements in response to guqin music. In addition, some students reported being inspired to apply their knowledge of the guqin to their core disciplines and even their daily lives. The following two examples illustrate such applications.

"My speciality is the dulcimer. The dulcimer has many Chinese compositions, but the guqin is still superior in terms of Yun (the lingering tones, 韵). After learning the guqin, I have improved my understanding and handling of traditional Chinese music pieces' Yun. I use what I have learnt in this course to improve my dulcimer playing." (Female/22/MA/ Dulcimer)

"It is amazing to say that from time to time, when I practise guqin, I am reminded that actually guqin music and life are very similar. We also need Blankness (Liubai, 留白) in our life, which means leaving space, not doing everything entirely and overexerting ourselves. The life should be very calm, gentle and quiet, just like guqin music." (Female/23/MA/ Piano)

In addition, students specifically mentioned the instructor's encouragement of their creativity and openness to uncertainty throughout the teaching process. These included maintaining a positive attitude towards students' creative initiatives and encouraging them to integrate different art forms.

"I think maybe because we are not professional guqin students, the instructor was very tolerant of some of our little ideas and in-novations. He allowed us to make some adjustments to the original piece according to some of our own ideas. In particular, he encouraged us to incorporate different art forms, such as poetry recitation and dance, into our guqin performances. (The instructor was) very encouraging of this kind of behaviour." (Female/23/MA/Vocal Music)

5. Discussion

The results of the study showed that changes observed in students focused on four areas: creativity, motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being. Based on these findings, a systems model of creativity in guqin education was developed. A detailed discussion is presented below.

5.1. Creativity

The results of the study demonstrated that the guqin has a positive effect on students' creativity. This finding further supports Yung's (2019) argument that there is great scope for creativity in guqin educational practices, even though the guqin's ideology, repertoire, and performance practices are traditional. More importantly, this study provided empirical evidence for this argument. The current investigation revealed that the guqin influenced students' creativity in three specific ways. First, the distinctive freedom of the guqin, including the particularities of the Qin Tablature and its rhythm, provided students with the flexibility to adjust the repertoire according to their emotional state and practical needs. This underlines that guqin music encourages and embraces the creativity of each player. Second, the guqin exercised students' flexibility, fluency, and originality in creativity, three key indicators commonly used to measure creative thinking skills (Torrance, 1966). By learning the guqin, participants generated more creative musical ideas, which enhanced the fluency of their creative thinking. Participants were able to transfer their guqin skills flexibly to other areas of music learning and apply its quiet and peaceful core of the guqin to their lives, which was beneficial for the flexibility of their creative thinking. Furthermore, participants eventually performed guqin pieces that were different from the previous ones with personal reflection and character. This promoted the development of originality in their creative thinking. In addition, guqin skills complemented the participants' specialisation and promoted transferable skills, especially for those students whose majors were more relevant to traditional music. This appears to be consistent with other research suggesting that regular classrooms well integrated with creativity may result in positive improvements in students' creative thinking development (Dilekçi & Karatay, 2023; Erol et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2023a). In addition, the innovative teaching model of this study restored the students' autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2010), fostering their creativity through the instructor's tolerance of uncertainty and the inclusive ethos of the whole learning process. The results share similarities with the findings of Robinson et al. (2019), Schwenke et al. (2024), and Wang and Tien (2023), all of which suggest that tolerance of uncertainty, an adequate and flexible teaching ethos, and curriculum content designed to foster students' creativity are beneficial, particularly in the context of arts education. However, limited empirical studies have been conducted involving traditional music or a specific musical instrument such as the guqin. Overall, the results of the study showed that even within traditions such as the millennia-old guqin music, students' learning and performance were still based on individual creation. In the process, they needed to consider which elements of tradition to preserve and which to transform. As Yung (2019) asserts, tradition is pregnant with development, and each generation of inheritors incorporates personal creative thinking into the tradition. Creative input in traditional music results from deep personal thought, which can be subtle or subversive. The findings suggest that students' creativity can be developed through guqin and other forms of traditional music, providing a rationale for embedding creativity within traditional music education. This might be the most significant theoretical contribution of this study.

5.2. Motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being

It is somewhat surprising that the results indicate a beneficial effect of this study on students' motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being. Motivation refers to the mental processes that are elicited and sustained to achieve a goal (Schunk et al., 2014; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023), and appropriate motivation increases the likelihood of individuals taking creative risks (Hennessey, 2019). In general, it is widely recognised that intrinsic motivation contributes to the development of creativity, while extrinsic motivation is detrimental (Collins & Amabile, 1998). However, participants in this study described Yaji concerts as an extrinsic motivator, yet they noted that this external motivation enhanced their learning and creativity. This echoes recent findings that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are not complete opposites (Kotera et al., 2023; Gopalan et al., 2017). The concept of creative space runs throughout this guqin course, emphasising the importance of providing a free and friendly environment in which students can work and grow without judgement. In the Yaji concerts, the participants could directly feel their progress and receive encouragement and feedback from their peers, thus engaging more deeply in guqin learning and laying the foundation for creative work. This recognition of self-competence and sense of value reflects the process by which extrinsic motivation promotes the development of intrinsic motivation (Kotera et al., 2023; Ommering & Dekker, 2017). Moreover, while participants defined Yaji concerts as a form of extrinsic motivation, their descriptions reflected characteristics more closely associated with intrinsic motivation. This aligns with Woody's (2021) finding that, even when required to participate in music activities, students still benefit from the inclusion of qualities associated with intrinsic motivation. Hence, it is vital for the development of motivation to foster a creative space that provides positive feedback and supports students' freedom of expression in their daily learning (Gan et al., 2021; Hennessey, 2019).

This study suggests that increased self-efficacy in guqin learning could be attributed to mastery experiences, vicarious experiences,

and appropriate difficulty levels. Self-efficacy represents the belief that individuals can accomplish a general or specific task. People with higher levels of self-efficacy are more inclined to be fully engaged in their work and recover more easily from setbacks (Bandura, 1977; Wilde & Hsu, 2019). The participants believed that the multiple performance experiences at the Yaji concerts contributed to their mastery experiences. Although these achievements were slight, they were effective in helping students enhance their self-efficacy, paralleling the findings of Schunk and Usher (2012), Hendricks (2016), and Gill et al. (2024) that tangible success is direct and robust evidence of self-efficacy. Moreover, students were given the freedom to choose their own repertoire and partners for innovative performances, and they were allowed to learn the guqin at their own pace. These experiences of active mastery in guqin learning proved effective in enhancing students' sense of self-efficacy, which mirrors the findings of Hendricks (2014) and Zelenak (2020). In addition, vicarious experiences can promote students' self-efficacy in guqin learning, although this effect may be less potent than that of active mastery (Hendricks, 2009). Participants reported that witnessing the successful performances of others boosted their confidence in their own guqin learning. In particular, observing peers with similar learning backgrounds perform at Yaji concerts had a greater impact on their self-efficacy than watching demonstrations by instructors or more experienced guqin practitioners. This is in line with Hendricks' (2016) and de Vries' (2013) findings that music students may experience a more significant increase in self-efficacy when observing the performances of peers at similar skill levels, compared to watching those at different levels, including experts. Furthermore, although complex tasks may lead to greater self-efficacy (Zelenak, 2020), this study argues that the participants preferred tasks of moderate difficulty in their daily learning of the guqin. Challenging tasks may cause them to experience anxiety that undermines their self-confidence (Bandura, 1977; Power et al., 2020), whereas moderately difficult tasks may enable them to perform with a manageable level of tension (Usher et al., 2023). In addition, the incorporation of diverse activities introduced multiple perspectives, gradually cultivating a sense of familiarity. Students indicated that this familiarity positively impacted their self-efficacy in learning guqin music. Familiarity implies an understanding of a subject and can evoke a sense of awareness without explicit memory retrieval (Mallik et al., 2023). It may have a vital role in learning traditional music and musical heritage education, as these are distinct from the everyday musical experiences of most students. However, research on the relationship between familiarity and self-efficacy in music education remains relatively limited. In summary, the enhancement of students' self-efficacy mainly arises from a synthesis of involvement with moderately challenging tasks, mastery experiences acquired through Yaji concerts and vicarious experiences derived from seeing peers' performances. The familiarity cultivated through exposure to diverse perspectives may also contribute to their self-efficacy.

Surprisingly, most of the participants emphasised the positive effect of this creative guqin course on their well-being, which had not been hypothesised at the outset of this study. There are three possible explanations for this increase in well-being. Firstly, based on Himonides (2022), one of music's key benefits lies in its positive impact on mental health. Studies show that learning musical
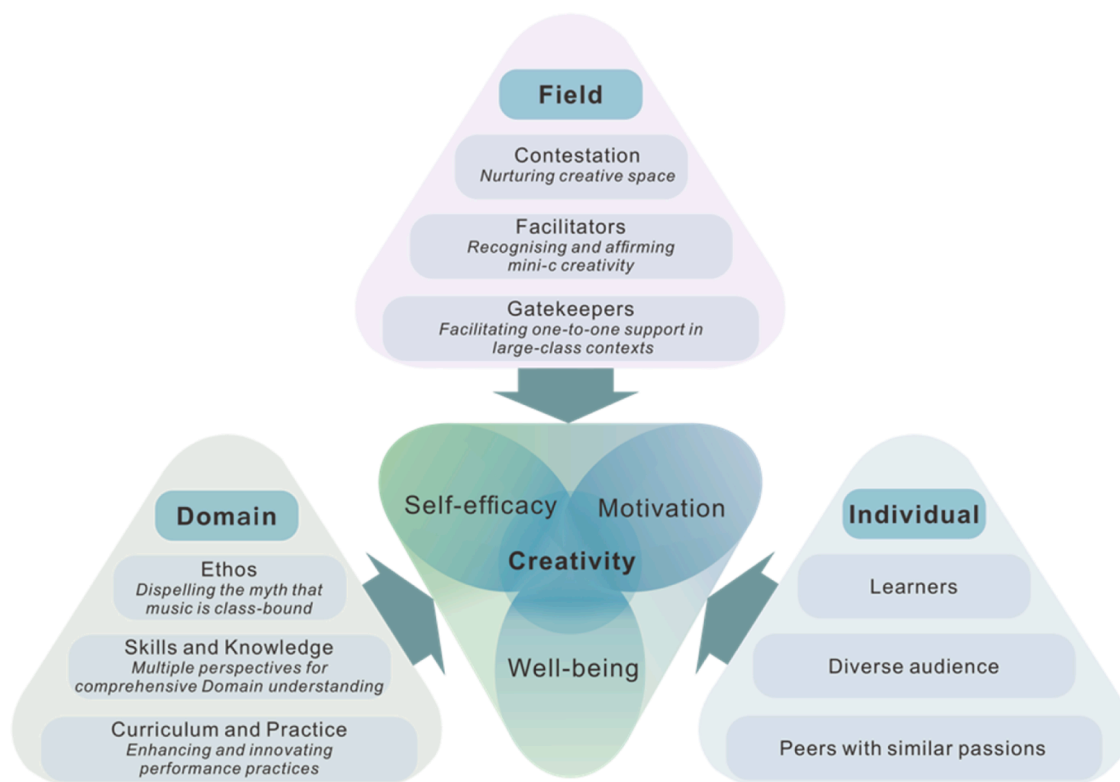

Fig. 9. The systems model of creativity in guqin education.

instruments improves emotion regulation in university students and is significantly associated with individuals' subjective well-being (Marcos Treceño & Arias Gago, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, the participants were encouraged to collaborate with their peers and were given the space to create new guqin pieces. This relaxed learning atmosphere and music-making experience effectively helped them manage daily stress and promote positive mental health, aligning with the findings of Kokotsaki and Hallam (2007) and Nwokenna et al. (2022). In addition, the participants reported that the instructor's teaching approach, particularly one-to-one tuition, positively affected their well-being. One-to-one tutoring is common in music teaching and is often considered the most valued learning environment in higher music education (Barrett & Gromko, 2007; Purser, 2005). However, few studies have addressed the importance of offering one-to-one music instruction to all students in large class settings. The findings of this study highlight the significance of creating opportunities for individualised instruction in the guqin classroom. This helps instructors better guide students in navigating the guqin domain (Gaunt, 2011), allowing them to focus on addressing specific challenges and better supporting students in developing their creativity. Moreover, students are more likely to build trusting relationships with their instructors, leading to positive classroom interactions, which enables instructors to better support students in cultivating an intrinsic understanding of guqin music (Gaunt et al., 2012). A supportive environment may further empower students, enhancing their well-being and creativity (Turner, 2019).

5.3. The systems model of creativity in guqin education

By integrating the key elements of creativity derived from empirical studies and its impact on the participants, a systems model in guqin education was developed, as illustrated in Fig. 9. This model is further structured around three essential elements: Individual, Domain, and Field. Each component was expanded into three sub-elements, resulting in a total of nine. It is suggested that the dynamic interactions among these nine factors collectively contribute to motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being. These factors, acting in concert, further foster the development of creativity. In the Individual component, in addition to learners, peers with similar passions and a diverse audience also play important roles. These help learners effectively identify creative collaborators and support the development of the creative space. This study expands the diversity of the audience, thereby empowering students to take initiative in refining their performances. These efforts attract a wider audience and stimulate further classroom discussions and exchanges. Whilst promoting learners' intrinsic music understanding, peers and a diverse audience provide emotional support and vicarious experiences that enhance their motivation, self-efficacy and well-being. In the Domain component, this study introduced improvements and innovations to performance practices, encouraging students to engage in innovative forms of expression. These changes effectively linked the Yaji concert setting with elements of intrinsic motivation, offering students repeated experiences of mastery and significantly fostering their creativity. Activities such as guqin-making and integrating relevant knowledge provided learners with multiple perspectives. This deepened their understanding of the Domain. These diverse viewpoints also supported students in building familiarity with a distant musical heritage, contributing to increased self-efficacy. Collectively, these advances serve as compelling evidence against the stereotype that guqin music belongs exclusively to a particular social class. In the Field component, this study argues that the role of instructors as gatekeepers is crucial. Even in large-class settings, one-to-one personalised guidance should be provided to ensure that students feel seen and supported. This personalised attention benefits the delivery of domain-relevant knowledge and may positively impact students' well-being. In addition, instructors should also be facilitators to recognise and affirm students' mini-creativity. This process entails imparting creativity-related knowledge. Such dialogue and inspiration may enhance students' creativity. Furthermore, the creative space is present throughout. Instructors should defer their own judgement, remain open to students' immature views, and create an environment where learners feel free to express themselves. Activities such as Yaji concerts and guqin-making serve as manifestations of the creative space. These activities contribute to building a relaxed, mutually appreciative learning atmosphere and enrich students' musical learning experiences. Together, these activities helped to cultivate a creative space that improved students' well-being and provided a solid foundation for developing motivation, self-efficacy, and creativity.

When creativity is the intended outcome, it emerges through the interplay of the Individual, the Domain, and the Field in guqin music learning, and is further strengthened by the motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being derived from these elements. This may be because motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being are closely associated with the cultivation of creativity. For example, studies have found that well-being is correlated with creativity (Beresford, Kern, & Jarden, 2025; Holinger & Kaufman, 2024) and that people with higher levels of well-being are likely to be more creative (Acar et al., 2021). Increased intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy have been shown to exert a positive direct or moderating influence on the development of creativity (Tzachrista et al., 2023; Urban & Urban, 2023; Nisula & Olander, 2023). In addition, the participants reported that increased motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being contributed significantly to their progress in guqin learning. This progress may indicate a growth in creativity, as deeper domain knowledge is often needed to foster creativity (Amabile, 1983; Emami et al., 2023). As such, based on the overall findings, a systems model of creativity within the context of guqin education was developed. It is believed that this model, with appropriate adaptation, might be applicable to other types of music education, particularly in traditional music education, as creativity may share common features despite contextual differences (Tereshchenko, 2018).

6. Implications and limitations

The implications are reflected in both theory and practice. In theory, this case study suggests that traditional music may function as a powerful medium for fostering students' creativity. It presents empirical evidence and introduces a new systems model of creativity in guqin education, which could be one of the few creativity models specifically developed for traditional music. This research

embodies Burnard's (2016) argument for a pluralistic perspective on creativity in music education, recognising and valuing diverse creative expression across different cultural and musical practices. It also reinforces the claim made by Hallam and Himonides (2022) that music education practice can be profoundly creative, regardless of the context in which it occurs. Neither genre nor cultural setting necessarily limits creativity in music educational contexts. In practice, the research develops a course design that integrates creativity into guqin music education and proposes a new systems model tailored to guqin teaching. This will offer practical pedagogical recommendations for practitioners of traditional music education and creativity education in three areas: the Individual (learners), the Domain (curriculum content), and the Field (tutors' professional roles and responsibilities). Furthermore, the new systems model of this study builds on the core principles of systems theory, which understands creativity as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction of elements rather than an outcome. In addition, the new model incorporates students' concepts of ethos and creative space, enabling a broader focus that goes beyond the guqin technique to include their attitudes and beliefs about music. This perspective is particularly relevant in guqin and traditional music education, where younger generations often hold stereotypes about the music of the past (Leung, 2018). However, these may have been overlooked in previous research.

Regarding limitations, a single case study method was chosen for a rich and contextualised understanding due to the small sample size and the specific nature of the guqin as a niche musical instrument. There is a misconception that case studies lack generalisation and that single case studies cannot contribute to science (Tsang, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Yin (2017) argues that the focus of case studies is on extending and generalising theories rather than inferring probabilities. Case studies are not designed to generate findings that can be directly applied to other contexts but to illuminate existing theories and provide an empirical basis for creating new ones (Tobita, 2025). In addition, Tsang (2014) suggests that theoretical development and generalisation do not inherently need a multiple-case design. However, multiple cases may offer variations across different contexts. Future research could adopt a multiple-case design or integrate quantitative methods to further enrich the comprehension of creativity in guqin music learning. Additionally, the limited number of male participants constrains the analysis of gender differences regarding the influence of guqin music learning on creativity. Although gender might be a significant variable, this is not the point of this research and no notable gender disparities were detected in the data. Future research should consider recruiting a more balanced sample to examine whether gender plays a significant role in the creativity of guqin learning and how it may influence creativity development.

7. Conclusion

This study explored creativity in traditional music education and how to seamlessly integrate elements of creativity into the regular music classroom. The guqin, an iconic traditional Chinese musical instrument and a UNESCO-recognised element of Intangible Cultural Heritage, was used as the primary instrument for this study. An innovative, creative guqin learning approach through a three-systems perspective is thus developed and implemented. The results indicate that the research successfully balanced creativity development and traditional music learning, as the participants' creativity, motivation, well-being, and self-efficacy were enhanced while mastering the knowledge and skills of traditional music. The three-systems model proposed by this study has been proven as a very effective approach, as it actively engages the Individual, establishing a well-resourced Domain that systematically embeds domain- and creativity-relevant knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it enables the students to experience the creating process in the Field. This study meaningfully transformed tradition into innovation, highlighting the potential of integrating creativity into traditional music education and offering a replicable framework for course design that fosters more holistic, motivated, and empowered learners.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zhengyi Du: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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