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THE DILEMMA AND OPPORTUNITY OF MUSIC STUDENTS UNDER CHINA'S COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: This study examines China's college entrance examination (Gaokao) system, analyzing cultural barriers and regional disparities faced by music students through provincial admission data and case studies. The Gaokao mechanism disproportionately disadvantages talented musicians, reducing the nation's musical talent pool. Art educators explore the root causes of this educational dilemma while highlighting opportunities arising from Gaokao reforms and digital technologies. Research reveals that in Henan Province in 2024, approximately 12% of top-scoring art candidates failed to gain admission due to failing cultural score thresholds, with remote region students being admitted at one-third the rate of urban peers. Policy adjustments (e.g., merged admission batches) and market shifts (e.g., digital music industry expansion) are reshaping career pathways for music professionals. The paper advocates reforming the Gaokao system to ensure fair talent selection and enhance training effectiveness.

Keywords: Music Candidates, College Entrance Examination System, Cultural Threshold, Regional Fairness, New College Entrance Examination Reform, Digital Music Industry.

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1 INTRODUCTION

China's National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) system, serving as the core mechanism for talent selection in higher education, profoundly shapes the ecosystem of art talent cultivation. With 13.35 million applicants registered for the 2025 Gaokao—down 70,000 from 2024 and marking the first decline in a decade—the trend reflects public scrutiny over the return on investment in higher education—. Undergraduate tuition fees have surpassed the "10,000 yuan era," exemplified by Nanjing Media University's broadcasting program charging 50,000 yuan annually. Approximately 33% of graduates enter unrelated fields, with liberal arts majors earning significantly lower starting salaries than STEM graduates. Music students face even steeper challenges: competing demands between specialized training and mass appeal, coupled with regional disparities in educational resources. This study analyzes admission data from Henan Province and other regions, integrating new Gaokao reforms with cultural industry transformations to propose sustainable development strategies for music students. [1]

2 THE CORE DILEMMA OF MUSIC STUDENTS

2.1 CULTURAL THRESHOLD

The longstanding issue of admission score thresholds for cultural subjects has long constrained the selection of professional talents. Since China's modernization and enrollment expansion in 2004, this challenge has persistently affected art students in music and fine arts. Drawing from my personal experience, when I took the 2018 college entrance exam, music candidates from my home province of Henan Province needed not only artistic talent and provincial competition rankings but also a minimum





score of 340 in core academic subjects to qualify for specialized music academies or comprehensive universities' music departments. Art students faced an intense three-month crash course in Chinese, math, and English during their final year of high school after exhausting piano practice and competitions. The reality proved daunting: even those with exceptional artistic skills couldn't achieve the provincial cutoff score of 340 in core subjects, forcing them to either repeat senior year or abandon their college applications. Meanwhile, less talented students gained admission through strong academic performance in these subjects—a bizarre reversal where art students ended up being rejected while non-artists were admitted. This stark contrast highlights the critical hurdle art students must overcome to gain university admission.

In China's high school education system, Henan Province holds a distinctive position. Firstly, situated in central China, it shares cultural roots with traditional Chinese traditions. Secondly, the province boasts a massive population, with millions annually taking the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and hundreds of thousands pursuing artistic studies. This includes vocal and instrumental music majors, performance specialists, Chinese painting and oil painting students, as well as graphic design and illustration majors within fine arts programs. Beyond traditional art disciplines like sculpture, a significant number of engineering students also participate in art entrance exams, forming another crucial demographic. This article primarily examines their challenges and explores potential solutions that come to mind.

Taking Henan Province as an example, the 2024 provincial control line for art undergraduate programs requires a cultural score of 300 points (for liberal arts) /200 points (for science) and a professional score of 200 points. However, music candidates, who engage in prolonged professional training (with daily practice time ≥ 4 hours on average), spend less than 60% of their time studying cultural subjects compared to regular students. This results in high-scoring music majors being denied university admission due to inadequate academic performance: -Data from Henan Institute of Engineering's 2024 art batch admissions shows that while the minimum cultural score for performance majors is 465 points, 12% of candidates failing to meet the provincial control line still ranked within the top 20% in professional scores. -In 2023, Zhanjiang University of Science and Technology had 80% of its degree vacancies filled by music candidates, primarily because those failing to meet academic standards abandoned their applications.

As shown in the figure, not only performance majors (such as music performance, which is actually a music major), but also visual communication and environmental design majors in fine arts have experienced a phenomenon of high ranking in professional courses but failing to pass the exam. This phenomenon accounts for about 10%, indicating that there is a large number of talent mismatch and talent waste in China's college entrance examination.

TABLE1: COMPARISON OF CULTURAL SCORES FOR ADMISSION TO SOME ART MAJORS IN HENAN PROVINCE IN 2024

name of major	Provincial control lines (cultural/professional)	Minimum cultural score for admission	20% failure rate before professional courses
perform	265/200	465	12%
Visual communication design	300/200	453	9%
environmental design	300/200	471	7%

Data source: Henan Institute of Engineering enrollment data in 2024. [2]

This case reflects the structural contradiction between artistic talent and academic foundation under the current system. In addition, the admission rate of art candidates in undergraduate schools in Henan province is only about 35 percent, so it is a difficult goal for most students in Henan to study in their ideal schools.

2.2 REGIONAL RESOURCE IMBALANCE AND HIDDEN BARRIERS OF INDEPENDENT ENROLLMENT

High-quality music education resources are concentrated in urban areas. In China's second-and third-tier cities, there are virtually no conservatories, and universities rarely offer music or fine arts majors. Major cities' independent admissions programs (such as those at the Central Conservatory of Music and Shanghai Conservatory of Music) rely on mentorship from renowned teachers, access to premium equipment, and exposure through competitions – requirements that small-town students find unattainable. Small cities lack distinguished teachers, have basic facilities, and lack large-scale competitions. Even when competitions do occur in major cities, they often lack recognition in smaller regions. The situation worsens in remote areas: Yunnan Province's county-level high school has only two old pianos with 40% pitch inaccuracies, while Shanghai's key art high schools average one Steinway piano per 10 students. These realities make it harder for art students in smaller cities to gain admission through independent enrollment exams, effectively burying talented musicians from these areas.

Enrollment ratios starkly reflect regional disparities: Among the 2024 freshmen at the Central Conservatory of Music, less than 8% came from county-level or lower regions, while 68% were from first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and





Shenzhen. For three consecutive years, no candidates from provinces like Tibet and Qinghai made it to the final exam list.[3]

2.3 1.3 ECONOMIC COSTS BLOCK THE PATH TO COLLEGE

Music training costs average 30,000 to 80,000 yuan annually. Taking piano lessons as an example, the expenses can be even higher. Many talented students abandon music studies due to the low return on investment, which is truly regrettable. In rural areas of remote regions, the median annual household income is merely 32,000 yuan. This year, a Guizhou candidate had to forgo an interview opportunity because they couldn't afford the 5,000 yuan travel and accommodation costs required for the Shanghai campus exam. Such phenomena demand serious reflection from both the nation and society. The requirements and investments in talent cultivation should be promptly adjusted to meet the needs of music education's healthy development in China.

3 NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MUSIC STUDENTS FACING CHINA'S COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION

3.1 CHINA CARRIED OUT THE REFORM OF THE COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN 2025

The reform of the national college entrance examination did not start in 2025, but will be extended to inland provinces with large populations by 2025. The policy was previously only implemented on a pilot basis in coastal provinces.

The 2025 National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) policy reform introduces diversified pathways for academic advancement, with the new system expanding selection criteria. [4]Starting in 2025, provinces including Henan will implement a "first-choice subject + additional elective" model, eliminating the previous undergraduate admission score thresholds and instead setting provincial control lines based on historical or physics categories. This reform brings three major benefits:

- Reduced academic pressure: Music majors can prioritize history as their core subject (emphasizing humanistic literacy) while combining it with memory-based subjects like politics and geography, avoiding the high-intensity calculations required for physics and chemistry;
- Enhanced comprehensive evaluation: The Strong Foundation Program and university-specific initiatives now open to art students. New universities like Westlake University adopted interview weighting (with professional scores accounting for 70%) to admit Chongqing candidates scoring 677 points;
- Seamless pathway integration: The upgraded vocational-to-undergraduate program connects secondary vocational schools with applied undergraduate institutions. Henan Vocational and Technical College's Music Performance program offers direct undergraduate admission through the "3+Certificate" examination, achieving a 35% admission rate in 2024.

Meanwhile, the new college entrance examination system may introduce new challenges. Take interview-based admissions as an example: Given China's intricate social relationship culture, how can we ensure fair selection? Can the original objectives of this reform truly be achieved? While I recognize these risks, I believe this transformation presents opportunities for musicians. It allows aspiring music students to pursue their education with fresh perspectives and advance their careers.

It has been many years since China's college entrance examination reform was proposed, implemented regionally, and now rolled out nationwide. My hometown in Henan Province—a conservative region—has taken a long time to absorb these changes. Despite being a latecomer, the reform still poses challenges for Henan. The economic disparity between developed regions like Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai and underdeveloped areas remains significant. The completed reforms in developed regions may encounter unique resistance and consequences when applied here. In Henan, where economic development lags behind, most residents work in low-end manufacturing, handicrafts, and agriculture. With limited industrial output, minimal investment in arts, and underdeveloped cultural infrastructure, there are few specialized art schools. As a province with 100 million people, Henan has far fewer music colleges than other provinces, making it harder for locals to gain admission to their desired universities and intensifying competition. Moreover, underdeveloped conditions mean graduates in arts or music face poor job prospects. The market lacks demand for such graduates, leading to high costs and low employment rates—factors hindering regional music development. In terms of career paths, China's better-paying jobs are predominantly in state-owned enterprises, which dominate employment opportunities. However, art-related positions remain scarce in state-owned firms, which prioritize STEM fields. These factors create a vicious cycle in arts education. It is hoped that this reform will break this cycle and inject new vitality into artistic development.





3.2 EMPLOYMENT CHANGES CAUSED BY INDUSTRIAL CHANGE

Industrial Transformation: The continuous expansion of career boundaries has created new employment opportunities for music graduates through emerging music industries. Digital technologies are revolutionizing music creation and distribution, with Chinese internet giants like TikTok and NetEase Cloud reshaping the industry ecosystem. The digital music market is projected to exceed 200 billion yuan by 2025, opening up unconventional career paths. The rise of independent musicians exemplifies this trend: AI composition tools like Suno AI have lowered production barriers, enabling post-00s creators to earn over a million yuan annually through virtual performances. Cross-industry roles are booming, with positions such as game sound designers and metaverse concert directors seeing 45% annual growth. [5] In response, Communication University of China has launched a "Music Technology" program to meet market demands.

Despite the immense challenges of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in Henan Province, graduates from art programs still struggle to secure better employment opportunities. The deeper issue lies in the region's industrial ecosystem's inability to absorb artistic talents. Henan's cultural industry contributes merely 3.1% of its GDP (compared to the national average of 4.4%), while Zhengzhou's entertainment agencies number less than one-third of Chengdu's. This forces many graduates into low-end service sectors: In 2024, 38% of dance majors from Henan Arts University entered children's dance training institutions, 21% switched to e-commerce live streaming, and only 9% joined professional troupes. More critically, the vicious cycle of credential devaluation and skill mismatch persists. With few high-end artistic positions available, employers typically set "211 university graduates" as a basic requirement, yet actual job duties often demand only vocational school-level skills. A Zhengzhou Art Museum's exhibition planning position requires a master's degree but only basic tasks like "QR code registration and visitor guidance," offering a meager monthly salary of 4,200 yuan—highlighting the severe disconnect between job requirements and qualifications. Furthermore, scarce social capital exacerbates employment disadvantages. Unlike Beijing and Shanghai where art students routinely leverage alumni networks for performance opportunities, Henan graduates heavily rely on limited state-owned institutional resources. Graduates from ordinary families account for less than 5% of state-owned art troupes. This invisible class rigidity forces many "small-town artists"—despite their exceptional skills—to abandon the field due to lack of industry connections. An oil painting graduate from Luoyang Normal University shared: "My graduation exhibition was selected for the National Art Exhibition, yet when job hunting in Zhengzhou, galleries prioritized political-business client connections over artistic merit." To break this deadlock, we need to establish a virtuous cycle for regional art ecosystems. In the short term, strategies like "art + cultural tourism" integration can create jobs (e.g., adding intangible cultural heritage performance roles at Kaifeng Songcheng Scenic Area). Long-term solutions involve cultivating local cultural consumption markets and forging targeted collaborations between art institutions and industry leaders (like the Henan Museum and Zhengzhou University jointly training cultural relic restorers). Only when regional economies provide sufficient value conversion pathways can art education avoid becoming a high-stakes gamble.

In the foreseeable short term, there will be a certain amount of shift in the development of music. For example, digital music industry, music therapy and cultural tourism may occupy a larger space for music employment. The recent controversy over "excessive liberal arts students" [6] highlighted the growing value of STEAM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics). The core competencies of music majors are also evolving: For instance, in music psychology [7]: Huawei Health laboratories recruit music therapists to develop stress-relief audio programs, with preference given to music majors; In cultural heritage digitization: The Dunhuang Academy collaborated with Xi'an Conservatory of Music to rescue ancient musical scores, where 32% of technical team members specialize in music archaeology. While newly added music-related majors may create limited employment opportunities—despite small overall numbers—they still encourage art students to boldly explore and push artistic boundaries. Whether in music, fine arts, or dance, art students must confront the current economic downturn and seek new career paths amid changing circumstances.

In the long-term career and academic development of music students, holistic transformation should be prioritized. Recent studies by scholars indicate that music therapy demonstrates significant effectiveness in stress management and emotional regulation for high-pressure groups [8]. Its application in psychological counseling for high school students, particularly given the rising rates of depression among this demographic, could substantially reduce stress levels. By integrating music therapy into their studies, students may expand their career prospects. Additionally, music plays a vital role in cultural tourism. For instance, Italian opera performances are popular during trips to Italy, while musical dance shows are favored in Russia. The fusion of local culture with music remains underdeveloped in China's music education market. Future opportunities for music students include combining art and cultural elements, such as creating distinctive performances at tourism venues in Henan Province. This approach could enhance their long-term employability in the music industry.





4 CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by music students under China's college entrance examination system stem from two fundamental issues: the rigid education framework and evolving employment dynamics. Academic score thresholds often disregard artistic development principles, while independent enrollment mechanisms fail to bridge regional educational disparities. Music, by its very nature, embodies humanity's emotional expression and creative potential. When institutional reforms adopt a learner-centered approach, these students will transform from "losers in academic competitions" into "driving forces of cultural revitalization." As emphasized in Shenzhen Institute of Technology's 2025 commencement address: "Education should not be a game of parent connections, but rather a platform where every musical note resonates with our times."

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