



## ARTS & CULTURE

# Beijing Music School Helps Autistic Students

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Zu Wenbao is a 23-year-old Chinese villager with autism. He grew up in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang.

Autism is a developmental **disability** that makes it hard for some people to talk with others or learn social skills.

That means it can be hard for a person with autism to find a job or make friends. There are about 14 million people in China with the disorder. But it is not well known and there is not much support for people like Zu. He is nonverbal, which means he does not speak.

For Zu, the recent years of COVID-19 restrictions have been difficult.

But he is doing better now that he is learning music and spending time with other young people at a school called Chen's Studio in Beijing.

Chen's Studio started offering music lessons for people with autism when the pandemic started.

Zu's mother, Zhao Guorong, brings her son to the music school every Sunday so he can study with the teacher, Chen Shensi.

It takes them two hours on three different buses to get to the classroom from their home outside of Beijing.

At the Beijing studio, Zu learned how to play the **keyboards** and sing in a **band** called "Star Kids."

"Without music, without these lessons, he wouldn't have anything," Zhao said. The children he grew up with, she said, all have jobs or go to school. She said her son would not have any people to socialize with if it were not for the music school.

Although Zu is older than the other young people at Chen's Studio, "they all take care of him like he's their brother," Zhao said.

China is making progress in teaching people about autism and offering more support for people like Zu. But experts say there are still millions of children who do not get social or educational support.

Chen knows the young people with autism will have trouble getting jobs, so he hopes music will help them make a living. The Star Kids band has already played some **concerts**.

He did not know much about autism before he started teaching a **bass** player with the disorder in 2020. So, when China put restrictions in place in the early days of the pandemic, and Chen could not teach his regular students anymore, he offered free lessons to those with autism.

"COVID has been hard, and I wanted to do as much as I can to give them **joy** through music," he said.

At the start, it was hard. Chen became **frustrated** when he had trouble communicating with his students. However, it eventually became easier. He said he knows it is hard for them to communicate.

But "to some degree, I think music might be their language."

I'm Dan Friedell.

*Dan Friedell adapted this story for VOA Learning English based on a report by Reuters.*

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## Words in This Story

**disability** -*n.* a condition that limits a person's physical or mental abilities

**keyboard** *-n.* the part of some instruments, like a piano, that has keys that are pushed to play musical notes

**band** *-n.* a group of musicians who play together

**concert** *-n.* a public musical performance

**bass** *-n.* a stringed instrument that plays low notes

**joy** *-n.* great happiness

**frustrated** *-adj.* being upset that you cannot do or complete something

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*We want to hear from you. How is the support for people with autism where you liv*

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