

## Social Justice and School Music Education in China

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### Abstract

*China is a multi-ethnic nation. However, formal education often neglects differences in ethnicity, and school music education tends to marginalize the musics of ethnic minorities, owing to the government's political ideology of maintaining national unity. Thus, ethnic musics incorporated in teaching materials are often politicized and tokenized, and pedagogies used for teaching ethnic musics in classroom teaching tend to be oversimplified. Addressing social justice in music education is centrally concerned with equity, which I suggest can be promoted by positive changes, including institutional changes, education for music teachers that incorporates learning ethnic musics and pedagogies appropriate to teaching these musics.*

China is a multi-ethnic nation, and the ongoing internal immigration is diversifying students' cultural backgrounds. While the diversity of student cultures and ethnicities are not reflected in the content of school curricula, school music education tends to marginalize the musics of ethnic minorities, and social justice in education has rarely been seriously discussed in China's mainstream discourse. The absence of attention for socially just music education can be attributed to the government's political ideology: maintaining the unity of the nation by assimilating minor ethnic groups into the state. As a result, Chinese ethnic musics have not been well-incorporated into the formal school music education, which is reflected in two major aspects: a tokenized and politicized representation of ethnic musics in school music teaching materials, and oversimplified music pedagogies adopted for minority musics. With a view to promoting equity in music education, I recommend institutional changes at the macro level, education for music teachers that incorporates learning ethnic musics and pedagogies appropriate to teaching them.

### Social Justice and School Music Education in China

Traditionally, social justice refers to the equal distribution of resources and assets (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003), before its dimensions were extended by Nancy Fraser (1999) and Iris Young (1990), who both held the opinion that not only economic redistribution, but also cultural recognition, should be taken into consideration in defining the concept of social justice. No matter in which sense the term is used, equity stands at the center (Benedict, Schmidt, Spruce, & Woodford, 2015). Commitment to social justice reflects a major interest in creating a world that is more humane (Woodford, 2015). However, the issues associated with social justice can be masked and neglected by policies and propagandas, and thus, inequity is perpetuated.

Socially just education features a combination of teaching content and pedagogies in schools, with a view to promoting equity among people from different groups in a society (Roberts & Campbell, 2015). School music education, with its role in the reproduction of mainstream cultural interests and values, is of great importance for the examination of issues associated with equity (Matthews, 2015; McCarthy, 2015; Wright, 2015). Benedict et al. (2015) concluded that for music teachers, engaging in socially just music education is not only a process of enriching knowledge and broadening horizons as educators, but also a manifestation of concerns with equity for those who are excluded from a society.

In China, the need to address issues associated with equity in music education is based on the nation's multi-ethnic reality. Comprised of 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, China is culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse. The largest Han group makes up about 92% of the overall population, and the remaining 8% are splintered into 55 ethnic groups totalling more

than 120 million people. Most of the minority ethnic groups have their own languages, cultural heritages, and religious beliefs. Geographically, more than half of the ethnic minority communities reside in the west and areas close to the border within the Chinese territory. However, as China is now experiencing massive waves of internal migration, and minority groups that used to lived together in homogeneous groups are getting more mixed, the cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom are becoming more diversified (Banks, 2014). China's multi-ethnic reality, coupled with the ongoing internal migration, make the discussion of issues related to equity in music education more urgent than ever before.

However, in China, socially just music education has rarely been the major focus (Ho & Law, 2015). China's educational system features a highly standardized and centralized structure, with the priorities of reinforcing the unity of the nation (Zhang, 2017). Accordingly, cultural diversity is only celebrated in a superficial way, and schools downplay the content associated with ethnic minority cultures and musics. In order to promote equity in music education as a key aspect of social justice, I suggest the acceptance of multiculturalism, education for music teachers that incorporates learning ethnic musics and pedagogies appropriate to teaching them, as major approaches toward socially just music education.

### **Challenges to Socially Just Music Education in China**

School music curricula and pedagogies can be considered as embodiments of mainstream values and cultural interests (Wright, 2015). However, musics of Chinese ethnic minorities have not been well-incorporated into the school teaching materials, and the representation of ethnic musics in the wide-used textbooks is often tokenized and politicized. Besides, the pedagogies applied to teaching ethnic musics tend to be oversimplified.

Teaching materials often reflect interests of the dominant group in a society, and thus, contribute to social reproduction and the reinforcement of social hierarchy (Banks, 2006). Zhang (2017) examined musics incorporated into school textbooks, and suggested that when taught in an appropriate manner, authentic musics are conducive to strengthening ethnic identity, since these musics are composed and practiced by cultural insiders and rooted in original living traditions of minority people. However, in the music textbooks that are widely used in elementary and middle schools, authentic minority musics rarely exist. Instead, the alleged minority musics taught in schools were composed after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 by the Han musicians, who were in charge of designing music textbooks (Zhang, 2017). These newly created musics, which feature a combination of traditional folksong styles with lyrics that are reinvented, have been represented in a way that could easily mislead students into believing the originality and authenticity of these musics. Besides, knowledge associated with minority musics and cultures are insufficient compared to the content that centers the Han cultural heritage. While musics incorporated into school teaching materials reflect the ideology of the dominant group, minority musics are significantly marginalized in school music curricula.

Another salient issue with music teaching materials is that the representation of ethnic musics tend to be tokenized and politicized. Cultures should not be viewed as static, since they are constantly in the dynamic process of changing (Hess, 2018). Nevertheless, Chinese minority cultures are reduced to a limited number of symbols in the music classroom. For example, musics specifically selected to represent ethnic cultures distort reality by portraying ethnic minority people as always happy and satisfied with their lives (Zhang, 2017). Images of grassland and horses are always associated with Mongolian songs, while the traditional musical instrument, the *dongbula* lute can be easily related to Xinjiang music (Baranovitch, 2003). These stereotyped representations of minority musics not only give rise to misunderstandings and distorted perceptions about ethnic minority people among students, but also reinforce ethnic stereotypes.

Furthermore, classroom music that aims at representing ethnic minority cultures is, to a large extent, politicized (Brand, 2003). The politicization of ethnic musics is reflected in the

patriotic themes explicitly indicated in some of the musics included in the teaching content (Zhang, 2017). Mu (1994) suggested that “revolutionary folk songs,” which refers to the adapted traditional ethnic musics that “praise socialism, communism, the government and its policies,” make up the majority of repertoires incorporated into school teaching materials (Mu, 1994, p. 305). While sustaining the unity of the nation has been the utmost goal for the government, musics selected to represent ethnic minorities fail to celebrate cultural pluralism, but rather serves as a means for disseminating political propaganda.

The oversimplified music pedagogies applied to the teaching of traditional ethnic musics, which greatly limits students’ experience with learning ethnic musics, is another challenge facing school music education. In China, music teaching at elementary and secondary level mainly takes the form of music appreciation and singing (Brand, 2003), and there is rarely any in-depth connection made to the cultural backgrounds from which the musics originate. Even though learning to play ethnic musical instruments is encouraged by the Minister of Education, owing to a lack of music teachers’ education and limited credit hours for instruction, students scarcely have opportunities to learn to play these musical instruments. The tokenized and politicized representation of ethnic musics, coupled with the oversimplified music pedagogies, remain major challenges facing school music education in China.

### **Suggestions for Bringing Social Justice Into Chinese Music Education**

In order to promote equity in music education as a key aspect of social justice, I recommend the acceptance of multiculturalism in school music education, education for music teachers that includes learning ethnic musics and pedagogies appropriate to teaching these musics. Dealing with issues associated with injustice requires pondering over potential changes at the macro level in a society (Väkevä, Westerlund, & Ilmola-Sheppard, 2017). In China, promoting equity in music education calls for a removal of political propaganda contained in musics, and applying a multicultural approach through the incorporation of genuine ethnic musics.

Multicultural music education features the teaching of music from various ethnic backgrounds with a view to understanding cultures, customs, and pedagogies related to the musics (Karlsen & Westerlund, 2015). Multiculturalism in music education is centrally involved with the implementation of culturally relevant teaching, which centers the teaching of musics relevant to students’ background (Roberts & Campbell, 2015). With a goal of bringing forth societal changes by means of empowering students of diverse backgrounds, multicultural music education is also concerned with the inclusion of national ethnic minorities whose cultural heritage is excluded from the formal education (Roberts & Campbell, 2015; Hebert, 2010). Owing to its privilege of celebrating ethnic musical heritage, multicultural music education can be a powerful tool for the promotion of equity. Therefore, pursuing socially just music education should be premised on the implementation of multiculturalism at the institutional level.

Music teachers’ education also plays a significant role for promoting equity in school music education. Central to this idea is significantly reducing prejudice and cultivating the habit of critical reflection. Music teachers should make effort to foster positive attitudes toward ethnic minority students and their cultural backgrounds, since their viewpoints can greatly influence how national ethnic minorities and their cultures are perceived among students (Banks, 2006). Music educators should also be aware that prejudice originates from irrational patterns of understanding the world that is premised on bias, which can contribute to the formation of arbitrary judgement on people based on their socially constructed identities, for example, race, gender, and ethnicity (Mara & Salvador, 2017). Matthews suggests (2015) that identifying prejudice calls for the examination of unjustified assumptions, and the transformation of these internalized biases; on the contrary, violence may occur when deep-rooted prejudices are present (Matthews, 2015). Accordingly, the reduction of prejudice should be the foundation of music teachers’ education.

Unjustified teaching practice limits the opportunities of encountering the abundant musical heritage of human world, and meanwhile disadvantaging certain groups of students in a less conspicuous way (Matthews, 2015; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Thus, cultivating the habit of critical reflection is another important facet of music teachers' education. Critical reflection, which is centrally concerned with fighting against stereotypes, unjustified beliefs, and empowering students by addressing their musical needs, invites the examination of exclusion and inequity in the classroom (Cooke, 2015; Matthews, 2015). Critical reflection on music teaching practice is a vital step toward creating an ideal environment for the celebration of musical diversity.

Being critical also refers to the contemplation of the process of knowledge construction and policies. Music teachers should be alerted to the fact that knowledge is not neutral, but rather "historically specific evolutionary phenomena," that is constructed according to the need of justifying and neutralizing certain values and beliefs (Matthews, 2015, p. 243). It is thus of great importance for music teachers to ponder over music traditions that are privileged in their classrooms, and to challenge their taken-for-granted music teaching practice (Karlsen & Westerlund, 2015). Being critical also means reflecting on policies implemented in school music education. Schmidt (2015) suggests that policies, which tend to disadvantage certain groups of people while privileging the dominant groups of a society, should be evaluated as a science that is constantly in need of deliberation and critique. The reduction of prejudice, coupled with critical reflection in music teachers' education, are core steps toward a more equal environment for music classrooms.

Pedagogic development, which features the diversification of teaching methods and teaching musics from their own epistemologies, is another major facet that is in need of improvement. Oversimplified music teaching methods not only greatly limit students' experience with musics, but also obstruct possible avenues for promoting cultural understanding. Diversified music pedagogies, on the contrary, facilitate the creation of an inclusive and participative environment in the music classroom (Benedict et al., 2015). Accordingly, music teachers should consider how to incorporate various teaching methods that cater to students' needs.

Teaching musics from the musics' own epistemologies is also crucial for pedagogy development. Hess (2018) suggests that musics should be understood from their own cultural context and epistemologies, so that common human emotions shared in musics of different origins can be explored and honoured. However, one of the major problems concerning the teaching of minority musics in China is that these musics are not represented from their original cultural context, but rather the perspective of the dominant group. In this respect, minority musics are portrayed in a way that reflects understandings and perceptions of cultural outsiders. This tendency is what Westerlund and Karlsen (2017) refer to as "ethnicize musics," through which stereotypes about musics and people are reinforced (p. 79). Therefore, music teachers need to pay attention to the cultural context of musics taught in the classrooms, and develop pedagogies to facilitate musical understanding based on the epistemologies of where the musics originates.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing issues associated with social justice in music education is based on China's multi-ethnic reality. Challenges facing school music education can be summarized as politicized and tokenized representation of ethnic minority musics in the teaching materials, and oversimplified music pedagogies applied in the classrooms. With a view to promoting equity, school music education needs to make positive changes. At the institutional level, the political ideology contained in ethnic musics should be removed, and give way to multicultural approach. Music teachers' education, which features reducing prejudice and cultivating the habit of critical reflection, stands at the center of pursuing socially just music education. Diversifying teaching

methods and teaching musics from their own epistemologies are also major facets of pedagogical development.

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