

Passing on the Heritage

The Propagation of China's Ethnic Minority Music through School Art Education

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The Announcement of the First Catalogue of National Intangible Cultural Heritage published by the State Council of the People's Republic of China on May 20th, 2006, lists 518 items in 10 categories in the first catalogue of National Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the Folk Music and Dance Category, 41, or 36.28%, of the 113 items listed are items of the ethnic minorities. Of these, the Art of Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang and Mongolian Traditional Folk Long Song have been identified as "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" by the UNESCO. According to information released by the Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Conservation Center, the second catalogue of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage will be submitted for assessment in 2007, with the result to be released in 2008, when more ethnic minority items will be added into the National Conservation Catalogue.

I. Issues facing art education in schools in ethnic minority areas

The music of China's ethnic minorities is undoubtedly an important component of China's diverse intangible cultural heritage. As such, its conservation has received unprecedented attention. What we need to address today is to take action: How to carry out the conservation. In her article *What Can We Rely on to Save Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Juan Fan points out that "a study of international models shows that there are currently two methods for conserving intangible cultural heritage. With regard to intangible heritages that are endangered of extinction and are difficult to promote, the 'museum' approach is the only way to conserve the nation's 'memory', which requires government support. The other method, suitable for conserving vitality-rich intangible cultural heritages, is to resort to market mechanisms for their conservation, which means to tap their commercial value as far as possible and promote them on the market." These two methods proposed in the article are the preferred approaches that draw the best favor and funding in China and overseas. However, appropriate means should be applied for conserving cultural heritages of different forms. The characteristics of oral and intangible cultural heritages determine the need for a special approach for their conservation that is "active inheritance". The "museum approach" can retain the memories of a nation but cannot retain the nation that bears the "memories." Relying on market forces for conserving cultural heritage often focuses on its commercial value, which results in some cultural sites that are stripped of the soul and essence. It would be difficult, by merely applying these two methods, to realize the ultimate goal of conserving intangible cultural heritage -- sustainable inheritance and propagation of the heritage. Conserving intangible cultural heritage is a huge project of systems engineering that requires multiple approaches to attain the objective of sustainable inheritance and propagation. Of these approaches, propagation

through education is most important and effective.

Traditionally, ethnic minority music was passed on among its people in an informal manner. In the process of China's modernization, it has become increasingly difficult to adapt this approach to the ever-changing social environment, and the links in the informal propagation among the people appear increasingly fragile. Nowadays, school education is a major avenue through which people obtain knowledge, so the propagation of ethnic minority music should not totally deviate from this mainstream of cultural inheritance and propagation. How to actively incorporate the propagation of ethnic minority music into school education in a timely manner to make it an organic part of the process of active inheritance and propagation? This is a question that art education in the schools of ethnic minority areas must address today.

II. Passing on ethnic minority music through school art education is an important approach to cultural heritage conservation

Since the 1980s, many local governments in China have made great efforts to protect the ecosystems that support the music and culture of ethnic minorities. Funds have been invested to support ethnic minority folk musicians through such means as living subsidies, reduction in or exemption from the load of voluntary work and performance bonus, all effectively improving the living conditions of these music "propagators". However, with the loss of the original ecosystem that supported ethnic minority music, merely relying on a "blood transfusion" approach to sustain natural propagation through folk culture can only delay but cannot prevent the music from extinction. In his *Chinese Ethnic Minority Music and its Role and Position in Music Education in the Context of the World's Multi-Culturalism*, Zuyin Fan states, "as the economy develops, ethnic groups' original way of production and life (including some folk-customs) has changed dramatically, leading to rapid extinction or gradual decline of music that originated from the way of production and life, such as the Rice-Husking Song of the Jingpos, the Bride's Weeping Song of the Tujias, etc. Even such highly popular music as the Muqam of the Xinjiang Uyghurs, the Traditional Folk Long Song of the Mongolians and the Big Song of the Dongs, have seen their popularity declining severely among the local people, as a result of young people leaving home as migrant workers in cities or due to breaking of the traditional links of culture propagation. In his *Report on Survey of Xinjiang Uyghur College Students' Knowledge of Muqam*, Bin Cui from Xinjiang Normal University describes, "I remember a Muqam expert telling us at a meeting that when he asked Uyghur college students about their basic knowledge of the Muqam, few of them were able to give right answers. Faced with these college students, who were adept in singing and dancing, the expert became speechless. Offspring of the hometown of Muqam, unexpectedly, are so unfamiliar with the musical gems created by their ancestors over generations, and then what else could be more worrying than the scene in sight? Figures from *How Many Students Can Sing Their Native Folk Songs* by Jun Li of the Guangxi Guilin Ethnic Normal College indicate only 3% of the Zhuang and 5% of the Yao students in the college can

sing folk songs of their hometown. The above is a true picture of the situation facing the inheritance and propagation of minority music today. The main problem lies in a serious mismatch between the propagation of this cultural wealth and the present school education, especially the system that provides basic education. Therefore, school education, by passing on the heritage, must be actively involved in conserving ethnic minority music.

Propagating ethnic minority music through school education is an important strategy for the active propagation of the music of ethnic minorities today. In this effort, music teachers in primary and secondary schools are not only individuals who pass on the music of ethnic minorities, but are also the seeds for its mass propagation. As such, music teachers in primary and secondary schools in areas where ethnic music spreads should not only possess sound knowledge about the theory of music education and educational skills, but also considerable knowledge and skills of ethnic music, as well as a sense of responsibility with regard to the propagation of their folk music. Educating “seed” music teachers is the key to realizing the sustainable inheritance and propagation of the music heritage of ethnic minorities. This approach sets new requirements for reforming the current criteria for training teachers of ethnic minority music, as well as approaches to training these teachers. One of the major tasks of the music faculty of teachers colleges in ethnic minority areas is to train music teachers for elementary education, which should play the role of an incubator for propagating ethnic minority music through school education. With their special position and function in propagating culture through school education, art colleges in ethnic minority areas should make efforts to develop a system of education, research and practice for propagating the unique musical heritage of their areas to form their own unique, multi-facet conservation systems. Art education in school, through participating in the propagation of ethnic minority music, can help change the current state where ethnic music is propagated only by individual musicians and associations, which would contribute to making ethnic music a living component of the diverse culture of mankind and to recognizing the cultural value of ethnic minority music incorporated in the mainstream culture.

III. Propagation of ethnic minority music through school education helps students develop a proper sense of aesthetics

In school art education, students’ sense of aesthetics should be established based on an appropriate awareness of cultural diversity. Prior to 1990s, professional music education in art colleges had adopted the western music education system as its model. The result is as Zhentao Zhang states in the preface to his *Temperament Theory Research on Sheng and Wind Instrument Phoneme*, that “students’ knowledge structure arising from the contemporary, but erroneous approach to the teaching of traditional culture basically can be described as follows: they are ignorant of traditional music, even harboring a superficial notion about its being backward. This system does not consider understanding of tradition as the standard for judging if a knowledge system

is complete. Isn't it an indication of today's poverty of knowledge? And isn't it unbecoming that, under this system, doctoral laurels are regularly being bestowed upon students soaked in foreign theories? Should this phenomenon be described as the "poverty of the doctoral degree holder," or as the "poverty of the doctoral degree?" When working in ethnic minority areas, I noticed a popular phenomenon: when studying music at college, the original musical perception of some outstanding young people from ethnic groups well-known for their music and dancing has not been further strengthened and sufficiently developed. Rather, they unconsciously go astray, losing the ability they once possessed in maintaining their own characteristics while acquiring new knowledge. From the perspective of the education process, the main reason for their failure has nothing to do with the interaction between teachers and students or the effort they have made. Rather, it is due to a wrong attitude toward music -- musical monism based on the Euro-centric mentality and perception -- that has led to their failure. Nearly all teachers who teach these ethnic minority students, whether they are Hans or of other ethnic groups, have an education background based on the traditional European music education system. Some teachers even felt very proud of their "attitude toward music" being thoroughly reformed, and then used their own experience to reform ethnic students' original attitude toward music.

A proper sense of aesthetics on music is determined by a proper attitude toward music, which is an important prerequisite for the students' full development. If courses on the music of ethnic minorities and related courses are able to play an effective role in cultivating an appreciation of multi-culturalism, students will be able to appreciate the its charm, and to critically examine their seemingly reasonable, yet narrow sense of aesthetics. Bringing ethnic minority music into educational activities will, first of all, help students understand that the value of music cannot be classified as high or low. In the past, the reason why we did not pay adequate attention to ethnic minority music in our art education is not because it did not have sufficient artistic value. On the contrary, the reason lies in the fact that many of our music teachers did not have a sufficient understanding of the value. Secondly, it helps students understand that ethnic minority music is a component of Chinese culture as well as of the culture of mankind. It reflects the richness of China's ethnic music and the diversity of the music of mankind, and above all, it preserves the precious cultural genes for creating the music of the future.

IV. Organic integration of school art education and propagation through folk culture

School education is a goal-oriented, planned and organized training activity. The propagation of music through folk culture, on the other hand, is practice-oriented not emphasizing knowledge from the textbook. According to the character of the learner, folk artists developed a series of propagation techniques, including a unique terminology of music performance. As today's school art education lacks contents relating to intangible cultural heritage, it is difficult for learners to be aware of the

crisis resulting from the potential loss of their spiritual home and ecosystem. The many incompatibilities and conflicts between propagation through folk culture and the modernization process also produce a crisis of losing the spiritual home. Therefore, participation in the active propagation of ethnic minority music in present school education and the effective combination of traditional folk techniques with modern education methods should be appropriate measures.

In respect to the theoretical exploration of the subject, in his *Considerations on How to Apply Multi-cultural Music Education in Art Colleges in Ethnic Minority Areas*, Lingfei Huang suggests that “the characteristics of ethnic minority music creation dictates that music education in ethnic minority areas should not be confined to the campus and classroom. We should arrange for teachers and students to step out of the school gate in a planned manner into the real-life environment of ethnic music, and to actively inherit and propagate ethnic musics. In addition, we should invite accomplished experts who specialize in folk music research and ethnic minority artists to teach courses or hold seminars, and involve themselves in relevant activities for practice so as to learn systematically in connection with their experience so accumulated.” The music practicing courses may be developed to include “listening to and imitating singing in ethnic minority dialect; music creation (including extempore performing, singing and playing); ethnic minority musical instrument playing; comprehensive courses on singing, dancing and instrument playing; and melody genre analysis”, so that students can get familiar with or grasp the structural characteristics of ethnic minority music. In her *On Contents of Music Education and Curriculum Development in Normal Colleges in Yunnan’s Ethnic Minority Areas*, Hong Jiang proposes that music theory courses in the areas include instructions that specifically address the unique musical scales and melody structure of Yunnan’s ethnic minority music. In *College Music Education and Traditional Music Resources in Ethnic Minority Areas*, Haiyuan Yang proposes “to activate the virtuous interaction between classroom education and culture propagation and change the unilateral and partial skill transmission in the past to an all-round culture propagation mechanism ... Rather than saying it is a process of music learning of students, it would be more appropriate to say it is a complete process to fully understand ‘music as a kind of culture’ ... The structural characteristics of traditional music, which is integrated into the cultural environment it depends on for survival, along with the nature of its oral propagation method, make it impossible for our students to appreciate the overall picture of the culture from textbooks. Only when the barrier between classroom education and traditional music resources is removed will interaction be possible between the two.” Xiao Yang points out in *Several References to Music Education Development in Ethnic Minority Areas* that “one of the major reasons why ethnic minority music has been able to develop till today is that there exists a self-sufficient music propagation system in various forms within the culture of an individual ethnic group. To discover, systemize and study this traditional propagation system should be the starting point of our effort to build an “Ethnic Minority Music Education Based on Ethnic Minority Culture.” The article supports the development of a multi-cultural Chinese education curriculum that

is based on the mother tongue and takes into consideration the cultural development of the world. It also points out that “as to music education in ethnic minority areas, it is especially notable that without a bilingual or multi-lingual environment, education in the mother-tongue would lose its original motivation and significance.”

In the practice of teaching, the Art College of Guizhou University invites folk song and musical instrument masters as teachers to teach *Dong Song* and *Lusheng* classes, in addition to classroom teaching. More attention is paid to art practice and experiencing and understanding the living environment of folk music, encouraging students to participate in relevant ethnic and folk activities as far as possible, such as major folk festivals including the April Eighth festival, the *Lusheng* festival and the *Tiao Hua Po* (Flower Slope Dance) festival. Students are also encouraged to give performances in villages of ethnic minorities, hold antiphonal singing activities and communicate with local folk choruses. Folk singing and musical instrument masters bring to students, to some degree, not only art, but also a full manifestation of culture. For example, in the teaching of the *Dong Song* as a major course, the *Dong Song* performances involve drum-tower antiphonal singing and the *Yuetang Xingge* (Singing in the Moonlit Hall) in villages. Although the songs are melodious in themselves, further explanations and understanding are required to help one appreciate its full beauty and glamour. Xinjiang Art College started an undergraduate Muqam performing course in 1996, and has since revised the teaching syllabus three times. The 1996 version of the syllabus was designed for training singers for the newly established Muqam Art Ensemble of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The 2002 version targeted the training of performers capable of performing the Muqam, a comprehensive genre of music, not merely training for their singing capabilities. Two special courses were set up, namely, the Uyghur Dancing and Uyghur Musical Instrument Playing. The revised 2006 version affirmed the goal of training seed talent for the sustainable propagation of the Muqam. To educate such talent with qualifications both in performing Muqam and teaching music, education in music was added to the curriculum. In the practice of teaching, the college has made efforts to explore teaching methods that are appropriate to features of the Muqam and to follow the principle of combining modern teaching methods with folk propagation skills so as to avoid teaching the Muqam academically. In the teaching of performing, special attention has been paid to the relationship between the study of the “text” (score) and the handling of the “subject” (the object of the music itself) to improve the understanding by students of the structural rule of the Muqam. In actual teaching activities, students can more realistically experience the subjects described in the Muqam and gradually grasp the essence of the artistic style of Muqam. The teaching of singing is mainly delivered through oral teaching to inspire true understanding, supplemented with the reading of musical scores. Uyghur musical instruments are used for accompaniment, focusing on practicing the lyrics together with the melody. The tambourine is used for rhythm when reciting lyrics, with emphasis on understanding the combination of different rhythmic and lyrical patterns. These teaching methods have been proved useful in helping students grasp the key elements of expression that

constitute the Uyghur Muqam genre, such as the microtone, trill, glide, wobble tone, together with various complicated beats and rhythmic patterns and lyric-melody relationships. Through combining classroom education and practice, satisfactory teaching results have been achieved. Three major approaches have been adopted, which are: combining classroom education with field collecting of folk musics; inviting Muqam folk artists to teach in classroom; and going on stage to combine classroom teaching with stage performance.

We hope that, through the concrete steps of involving school art education in cultural heritage protection, the cultural and spiritual essence of the music of ethnic minorities will take roots in the mind of young people and become a cultural heritage that is to be passed on from generation to generation.

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