

# **Addressing subconscious discrimination among Han ethnic students through participatory music**

**Xiaolong He**  
**Western University**

## **Introduction**

Subconscious discrimination towards marginal groups, especially ethnic minorities, is a serious issue among Han ethnic group; the ethnic majority in China. The new national education document showed that the boarding schools in the ethnic minorities' region will be established as a long-term plan to "eliminate effects of radical religion ideas from children's families" (The Material, 2017, p. 232). This discrimination also affects the relationships among Han ethnic people in China. Two devastating accidents of buses plunging into river showed the antagonism of people and the tendency of falling apart of Chinese society. Barriers among people, such as classes and ethnic contradiction, has been proved that could lead to catastrophes such as cultural revolution.

## **The purpose of the project**

Chinese students have to recognize the ethnic barrier before addressing it. A concept lost on many people in China: social justice. Social justice highlights the fair and just relationships between people and societies. A lack of justice creates barriers mentioned above, leading to discrimination, some of which are subconscious. Those subconscious discrimination strengthens people's scorn for social justice. This project aims to acquaint Han students with the educational status quo of ethnic minorities by learning their folk music in order to address discrimination.

To better understand those barriers, I recently had dialogues in an English conversation program with some Han students in Canada. The question hanging over me is why they tend to hang out with Chinese students instead of those from other countries. They told me that the reason was different traditions; after all, they blamed on the white privilege. When I asked the "why" questions, they told me that the reason was obvious, so they did not want to answer that. The silence also occurred when I presented my research about the educational status quo of ethnic minorities in China. I found that the more they dodged talking to students from other countries, the bigger the isolation would become.

The similar situation occurs between Han ethnic and ethnic minorities. As I interviewed an exchange Tibetan student, he told me that most of the teachers in colleges hold the ingrained

prejudice to ethnic minorities students. Under the flawed concepts lies in Chinese educational system, those teachers have little autonomy and they also have little knowledge about the status quo of ethnic minorities. I believe that one of the important reasons derives from the education that we have been receiving. The propaganda-style education imparts ignorance about the minorities' tradition; accordingly, the education policy thwarted the interaction between them. To address those discrimination, I believe that teachers' role is crucial. Next, I will frame the literatures about participatory music before describing my project.

### **Review of literature**

In terms of the status quo of education in China, I will quote from newspaper articles. The boarding schools had been considered as a convenient way for the students whose parents were working outside the city or whose homes were far away from the schools. Those boarding schools have a new function, which is to "assimilate and indoctrinate children at an early age, away from the influence of their families" (Qin, 2019, p. 5). Regarding the recruited teachers in Chinese inner cities, "Last year, nearly 90,000 were brought in, chosen partly for their political reliability, officials said at a news conference this year" (p. 5). The details of the official documents and with the commentary of those articles shows that the division between ethnic minorities and Han ethnic people seems to be becoming bigger than before.

As to decolonizing music education, the heart of my project is similar with what decolonizing music education suggests. The diversity of music in schools could develop "students' unique relationships with music" (Bradly, 2012, p.5). Music education philosophy could also involve critical pedagogy that "provides an approach to decolonizing educational theories and practices" (p.11). It's noticeable that decolonizing pedagogy could be "implicated in students' identity construction" (p.16).

Regarding participatory music, a case study of community music therapy gave me inspiration. Participatory music aims to create an environment; it is more "than about creating an artistic product" (Mitchell, 2019, p. 25). The unique project, the Coffee House, shows that "values of the participatory field were evident in that a musical culture in which success is defined by participation was embodied" (p. 14).

This literature helped me frame my work. Through the official documents, I became acquainted with the barriers between ethnic minorities in China and Han ethnic people; decolonizing pedagogy gives me an avenue to find the heart of my project; participatory music making keeps reminding me that the principle of my project is to release pressure by creating an environment that students can react. Next, I will introduce the project through two factors: how to organize a teachers' team and what to learn.

### **The plan of the project**

In general, with the goal of helping students recognize the barriers between ethnic groups, the mode of the project borrows some ideas of El Sistema, which provides a teaching method different from the Chinese unifies curriculum. This project offers students a progressive learning method that they can choose music they like, such as Uighur folk music. Money should be raised from donations and be overt to the society according to related Chinese laws. Recruiting volunteers is difficult, because those students who have music skills tend to work for music training schools with salary. But we can recruit volunteers from students' families, who are not working full-time who can donate their spare time organizing and cooking.

The heart of this project is having dialogues with teachers and students. First, the teachers must avoid indoctrination which is the teaching method of almost all the schools in China. Indoctrination is utilized because of the exam-oriented education. The assessment of my project will be through concerts and festivals. So, teachers should realize that this project is to decrease students' pressure and get rid of the inertia of indoctrination from the education that they have received. Second, teachers should respect students' opinion whilst keep sticking to the schedules. In this project, before students choose ethnic folk music, teachers should give information about the context of those music and encourage them to listen to them. Finally, I will keep looking for some articles related to participatory music that they cannot search for in China, to facilitating teachers reflecting themselves through various teaching experience.

Before having dialogues with students, teachers should research and analyze students' music level. Similar with El Sistema, this project divide students into two groups based on their musical level in ensemble practices; the two groups are combined in choir practices. The goal is to guarantee that no one is left out. In this case, teachers have dialogues with the students in choir practices about ethnic minorities' music and their cultures. If those students hold discrimination to ethnic minorities, teachers should talk the students through the importance of respect and the negative of discrimination. Some discrimination are subconscious, so teachers should observe students' behavior in learning ethnic minorities' music classes.

This project is based on creating a collaborative environment for students, with addressing subconscious discrimination as an important function of it. Since there is no El Sistema or similar musical organization in China, this could be a pilot project. To my mind, teachers' role should be similar with a coordinator, which means they should control only the time and encourage students to talk. To initiate this project, I will have dialogues with teachers in the very beginning. If the teachers can not get rid of the indoctrination-style teaching method, the pressure from teachers will drive students away. If the teachers can not handle the relationships between students, barriers will occur in these classes. It is obligated for me to change the educational situation that shatters Chinese students, because, quoted by Martin Luther King Jr, "He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."

## Resources

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<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/university-01102019170935.html>

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