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GIDP: Applied Intercultural Arts Research (AIAR) – Minor

(I am submitting two separate proposals for consideration as part of the International Society for the Philosophy of Music Education (ISPME) Pre-Conference (June 2–4, 2025) and the MayDay Group Colloquium 36 (June 4–7, 2025), which are being held as a joint conference. Because these are distinct events under the joint program, I am including two separate proposals Below)

1. The proposal for the International Society for the Philosophy of Music Education (ISPME)

Wuwei: A Daoist Framework for Guiding Student-Centered Music Education

Abstract

This project explores the Chinese indigenous philosophy Daoist of Wu Wei (effortless action) as a pedagogical framework for fostering student-centered music education. By integrating core principles such as *Guan* (non-judgmental observation), *Rou* (adaptability), and *Qiwu* (equality), this study reimagines the teacher’s role from an authoritative figure to a facilitator or “light-bringer.”, guiding students toward self-discovery and growth without imposing rigid control. Wu Wei-inspired approaches align instruction with the natural rhythms of learning, thereby fostering creativity, inclusivity, and holistic development. However, accountability-driven systems that prioritize standardization present challenges to applying such approaches. This submission outlines strategies to harmonize structured education (*Yang*) with creative exploration (*Yin*) while maintaining a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Summary of Research

Daoism, as articulated in texts such as the *Daodejing* by Laozi and *Zhuangzi*, emphasizes the interconnectedness and harmony of all things. Central to this philosophy is Wu Wei, which advocates for non-coercive action that aligns with natural processes. Applied to music education, Wu Wei promotes learning environments where students' unique abilities and creativity flourish naturally.

1. Key Principles:

- Guan (Observation): Teachers practice non-judgmental awareness and consider students' social, cultural, and emotional contexts to design inclusive strategies.
- Rou (Adaptability): Educators adopt flexible teaching approaches, adjusting to students' evolving needs while fostering mutual respect and collaboration.
- Qiwu (Equality): This principle calls for rejecting rigid hierarchies and embracing diverse musical traditions and perspectives, enabling equitable learning opportunities.

2. Application in Music Education:

A Wu Wei-inspired classroom balances structure and freedom. For example, structured technical exercises (*Yang*) are paired with student-led creative exploration (*Yin*), promoting both discipline and artistic expression. Teachers act as facilitators, creating opportunities for students to collaborate, improvise, and experiment with diverse musical styles.

Specific Question for Discussion

1. What are the potential limitations of applying Eastern philosophical frameworks, such as Daoism, in predominantly Western-centric educational systems?
2. How does the concept of *Qiwu* (equality) challenge or align with Western ideas of inclusivity in music education?

3. How can music educators balance the philosophical ideals of *Wu Wei* with the structured demands of standardized curricula and assessments?
4. How might accountability-driven systems adapt to support more organic, student-centered approaches like those inspired by *Wu Wei*?
5. How might integrating Daoist principles into music education contribute to interdisciplinary understanding between philosophy and education?
6. How can the philosophy of *Wu Wei* inform discussions about teacher agency and the de-emphasis of authority in educational practices?
7. What are effective ways to introduce students to Daoist ideas in a classroom setting without misrepresenting or oversimplifying the philosophy?

2. The proposal for the MayDay Group Colloquium 36

Teaching Beyond Exams: Elementary Music Teachers' Agency in Northwestern China

Introduction

This study examines how elementary music educators in Northwestern China exercise agency to navigate national curriculum requirements while fostering creativity and preserving cultural heritage. Teacher agency, defined as the deliberate choices teachers make to shape their educational environment (Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015), is critical in overcoming these constraints.

Northwestern China is an ideal setting to explore teacher agency due to its unique cultural, historical, and educational dynamics. The region's rich ethnic diversity and musical traditions challenge educators to balance preserving local heritage with meeting standardized curricula requirements. Its comparatively low socioeconomic status exacerbates resource

shortages, further amplifying systemic constraints and highlighting the need for teachers to adapt and innovate. These factors underscore the tension between standardization and cultural preservation, offering insights relevant to diverse educational contexts. Guided by Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theoretical framework, this study addresses:

1. How do the cultural backgrounds and past experiences of these teachers influence their interpretation and implementation of educational policies?
2. How do teachers adapt their teaching strategies to address systemic constraints while meeting the diverse needs of their students?
3. How do teachers envision future possibilities for music education in balancing standardized curricula with fostering creativity and cultural preservation?

Background

Music education in China is shaped by a high-stakes accountability system influenced by Confucian philosophy and political hierarchical governance. This system prioritizes measurable outcomes in core disciplines tied to the Gaokao policy, such as mathematics and literature, often marginalizing subjects like music. The high stake accountability system limits teachers' ability to foster creativity and cultural awareness, particularly in non-exam-focused subjects like music (Luxia, 2007).

Efforts like the 2001 New Curriculum reforms aimed to promote critical thinking and student-centered learning (Hughes & Yuan, 2005), reflecting global trends while retaining socialist values and centralized control through high-stakes exams (Tan, 2012). These reforms also align with classic Confucian ideals that view music as vital for cultivating joy, moral character, and social harmony (Tan, 2016). However, the exam-driven focus pressures teachers to prioritize test preparation over broader educational goals (Liu & Qi, 2005).

Research highlights that Chinese music teachers often work within a hierarchical supervisory system, where their roles are largely centered on implementing standardized curricula (Miao, 2018). This limits their ability to innovate, presenting obstacles for integrating creativity and cultural preservation into music classrooms (Zhong, 2003; Ma, 2004; Yao, 2005; Ye, 2006).

Methodology

This multiple-case study focuses on four elementary music teachers in Northwestern China, selected through criterion and snowball sampling to represent diverse contexts. Data were collected through ethnographic semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using QSR NVivo (2014).

The study draws on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad of agency to explore how teachers use past experiences (iterative dimension), envision future possibilities (projective dimension), and respond to present challenges (practical-evaluative dimension). This approach captures the complexity of teacher agency in navigating constraints and fostering creativity.

Findings and Preliminary Insights

Although data analysis is ongoing, the following preliminary themes have emerged:

Systemic Constraints and Marginalization

Teachers encounter obstacles from hierarchical frameworks, inflexible curricular requirements, and the marginalized status of music education. Inadequate resources, including instruments and professional training, escalate these challenges, especially in rural regions.

Community Engagement and Cultural Preservation

Teachers collaborate with parents and local musicians to integrate local cultural traditions and project-based activities into their classrooms. These efforts honor students' cultural

identities, instill pride, and strengthen community ties, underscoring the value of local resources in sustaining music education.

Calls for Reform

Participants observed that the curriculum guidelines predominantly emphasize Eurocentric Western music, with certain integration of Chinese folk traditions. While certain folk traditions are selectively included, often reflecting the representation of specific ethnic populations in China, the curriculum lacks the flexibility to empower teachers to design lessons that address specifically the diverse musical needs or cultural backgrounds of their classrooms. Additionally, assessments are heavily focused on singing and restricted evaluation methods.

To address these gaps, teachers advocated for greater flexibility, including project-based evaluations, the autonomy to design curricula, and increased involvement in curriculum development. They also emphasized “bottom to top” leadership, adopting proactive strategies such as building relationships with administrators to navigate systemic constraints for meaningful reform.

Significance of the Research

This study provides international insights into teacher agency within the unique context of elementary music education in Northwestern China. By applying established theories to a non-Western setting, this research contributes to global discussions on teacher agency and offers actionable strategies to empower educators in highly structured systems. It addresses the challenge of balancing standardization with creativity, presenting practical solutions for fostering holistic student development and cultural awareness. While acknowledging that additional themes may emerge as data analysis continues, the preliminary findings provide valuable

guidance for policymakers, administrators, and educators in designing inclusive practices that support both tradition and innovation.

Relevance to the Conference

This study aligns with the MayDay Group's focus on systemic decision-making and policy's influence on teaching and learning. It examines how hierarchical structures and exam-oriented policies shape music education, highlighting the tension between centralized governance and teacher agency. By examining policy, culture, and creativity, the research advocates for empowering teachers and elevating the role of the arts in holistic education.

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