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Teaching Cantonese Opera in Schools for Cultural Identity: A Multiple Case Study in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China

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Abstract

Since the return of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, Cantonese opera has been included in the Special Administrative Region's school music curriculum. In 2017, the Government of Guangdong Province issued an ordinance to promote the transmission of the traditional music genre through all channels, including school education. Cantonese opera has been officially included in the policy agenda of both Hong Kong and mainland China, to preserve it and to promote national and cultural education in schools.

Hong Kong people have been facing a challenge of identities. The initiative to develop Moral and National Education as compulsory subjects in schools in 2012 was opposed by younger generations. This was one of the reasons for the protest event "Occupy Central". At present, there appears to be conflict between younger generations striving for their "Hongkongese" identity, and another group that embraces and defends their Chinese national identity. A broad-based concept of national education has been proposed, which is a comprehensive model that should include national, political, social and cultural identity. As Cantonese opera is an art form replete with Chinese cultural elements, and thus suitable for promoting Chinese cultural identity.

This paper reports part of a larger study examining the extent to which learning Cantonese opera in Hong Kong and Guangzhou schools may contribute to the development of Chinese cultural identity in students. Based on the Social Identity Theory, a multiple-case study in which four schools (2 primary and 2 junior secondary) from both cities will be implemented from November 2020 to May 2021. The major purpose of the study is to investigate how teachers in both cities develop students' cultural identity through teaching Cantonese opera in schools. Researchers will visit the schools regularly over three months, observe the classes and interview teachers in semi-structured format and students in focus groups for feedback and reflection on students' development of Chinese cultural identity.

Initial findings reflect that: 1) teachers from the two cities perceived differently in the goals of teaching Cantonese opera in music classes, and 2) teachers' training may impact on the quality of teaching in developing students' cultural identity. This study will provide insights for nurturing cultural identity through traditional music learning in schools, which is a common issue in global music education.