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CONSTRUCTING 'CULTURAL IDENTITY' IN MUSIC EDUCATION: FUNCTIONS, PATHWAYS, AND REFLECTIONS

Wang Chenyu

Associate Professor, Ph.D

1. Graduate School of China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences

Shen Yi

Lecturer, Master Degree Candidate

School of Music Shanghai University(Shanghai ,China)

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Abstract

This paper aims to systematically explore the core concepts and practical pathways for constructing "cultural identity" in music education. The article first elucidates the three core functions of music education from a functionalist perspective. Subsequently, based on a pathway approach, it proposes systematic innovations across three levels. Finally, the paper introduces critical reflections, pointing out the need to guard against the potential tendencies of essentialization and labeling in cultural identity construction, as well as the power relations implicit within them. It advocates for an open, dialogic, and reflective music education practice that respects cultural hybridity, with the goal of enabling music education to truly become an important pathway for promoting deep cultural understanding and cultivating a healthy cultural subjectivity.

Keywords: music education; Cultural identity; Function; route; reflection

I. Functionalism: The Core Functions of Music Education in Constructing Cultural Identity

(I) Emotional Foundation Function: Shaping Cultural Belonging and Emotional Bonds

Within the various functions of music education in constructing cultural identity, the emotional foundation function occupies a central and primary position. It operates not through rational knowledge indoctrination but by leveraging music's direct, affective power to establish a profound and enduring emotional bond between the individual and their culture, ultimately fostering a sense of cultural belonging that is "prior to reflection." The realization of this function is rooted in the nature of music as an "emotional symbol" and its inherent connection to human memory and experience.

The primary pathway lies in the early immersion in and emotional awakening of one's "musical mother tongue." The lullabies, nursery rhymes, and festive ritual music encountered in early life, particularly within informal educational spheres like family and community, constitute an individual's initial "sonic home." These melodies, rhythms, and timbres, intricately intertwined with the tones of a specific dialect, the presence of loved ones, and the essence of the native land, become cultural codes etched into bodily and emotional memory. For instance, an ancient folk song sung in dialect carries meaning far beyond its pitch and lyrics; it conveys the warmth of ancestors, the character of a region, and the historical echoes of a community. Through repeated listening, imitation, and internalization of these sounds, individuals unconsciously complete the initial emotional anchoring to their cultural roots. This sense of familiarity and security triggered by sound forms the most primordial, rationally irreplaceable cornerstone of cultural identity.

Furthermore, collective musical practice serves as a key mechanism for strengthening this emotional bond. When people sing, play, or dance together in a

shared time and space—such as in a choir, a folk band, or community festival dances—music transcends individual expression, transforming into a powerful social adhesive. Within unified rhythms and harmonious sounds, individual breath, heartbeat, and emotional rhythms become synchronized, producing what psychology terms a "communitas" experience. This highly coordinated collective practice not only creates intense immediate emotional resonance and pleasure but also deeply inscribes a sense of "we are one" within participants. Activities like class choir performances, rehearsals of traditional music ensembles in schools, or ritual dances in villages repeatedly enact this process, translating abstract cultural identity into tangible collective emotional energy, allowing individuals to affirm their cultural position within the sound of "us."

(II) Cognitive Construction Function: Providing Cultural Knowledge and Frameworks of Meaning

If the emotional foundation function of music education awakens the sense of "who we are," its cognitive construction function strives to answer the rational question of "why we are this way." Transcending emotional resonance, it treats music as a unique cognitive symbol and system of meaning, systematically transmitting specific cultural knowledge, worldviews, and modes of thinking to learners, thereby providing them with a structured cognitive framework for understanding their own culture. This function elevates cultural identity from a spontaneous emotional attachment to a conscious cultural understanding and identify with of meaning.

Music to start with functions as a "living cultural encyclopedia," carrying information far beyond its acoustic form. When students learn a folk song, they encounter more than just melody and lyrics. A work song depicting labor encodes a specific ethnic group's mode of production and relationship with nature; the strictly structured musical patterns of Beijing opera

contain the philosophical dialectic of "formula" and "adaptation" in traditional Chinese aesthetics; the complex rhythms of African drum music mapping the precise time concepts and social collaboration logic within a community. By analyzing musical forms, interpreting lyrical texts, and investigating performance contexts and taboos, music education guides learners in decoding a complete cultural grammar. In this process, abstract cultural knowledge—historical memory, ethical concepts, social structures, cosmology—is perceived, understood, and remembered through embodied musical experience.

At a deeper level, the cognitive construction function of music lies in shaping a distinctive cultural "perception-thinking" mode. Different musical systems represent different ways of perceiving the world and organizing experience. The highly developed harmonic logic and thematic development techniques in Western classical music unconsciously convey a linear, analytical mode of thinking that seeks conflict and resolution. Conversely, the emphasis on "linear fluidity" in melodic aesthetics, the pursuit of "interplay between substantial and insubstantial" in timbre, and the tradition of improvisational variation in Chinese traditional music are deeply rooted in a holistic, relational, and dialectical cultural way of thinking. Learning the vibrato techniques of the guqin is not merely acquiring a skill but experiencing what constitutes "vivid rhythmic vitality." Analyzing the strict correspondence between "ragas" in Indian classical music and specific times of day or emotions allows students a glimpse into a worldview that deeply integrates art, nature, and spirit. Thus, the process of music education is also one of guiding learners "to listen and think like a member of that culture," cultivating a aesthetic perception and meaning-interpretation ability inherent to a specific culture.

Ultimately, this cognitive construction leads to the acquisition of cultural interpretive authority. When an individual can use the musical vocabulary and meaning frameworks of their culture to understand, evaluate, and even create music, they cease to be a passive cultural recipient and become an active participant and interpreter of cultural meaning. They can comprehend the historical hardship and emotional tension carried by the "bitter tone" in Shanbei's Xintianyou folk songs, appreciate the melancholy and resistance expressed by the flattened third and seventh degrees in Blues, and discern how specific musical forms are adapted and reinterpreted in the process of modernization. This deep cognitive understanding frees cultural identity from superficial symbolization, establishing a solid foundation of rationality.

(III) Identity Negotiation Function: Facilitating the Integration of Individual and Collective Identities

The identity negotiation function of music education occupies the most complex and dynamic level in the process of constructing cultural identity. It transcends the foundational emotional belonging and the construction of knowledge systems, face the inevitable issues of identity plurality and fluidity encountered by individuals in the context of globalization and modern-

ization. The core of this function lies in providing learners with a safe, creative "third space" within music education, allowing them to explore, adapt, and integrate their individual selves with various collective cultural identities, ultimately forming a dialectically unified identity that possesses both subjectivity and sociality.

In this process, music to begin with serves as a symbolic resource for individuals to express and experiment with identity. The musical preferences of adolescents—whether enthusiasm for Chinese-style rock, indie folk, immersion in K-pop, or classical music—are not merely aesthetic choices but symbolic practices for self-definition, peer differentiation, and seeking group belonging. If music education can provide students with a sufficiently broad musical vision and equitable value judgment, it can support them in attempt to play different "cultural roles" through exposure to diverse musical-cultural symbols, thereby exploring the multiple possibilities of "who I am" and "who I want to be." This exploration is active and experimental, providing rich material for identity integration.

Furthermore, music education guides individuals in achieving the "creative suturing of personal and collective narratives" through diverse musical practices. When a Chinese student practices Western violin repertoire, they are internalizing a cross-cultural artistic expressive skill. When they attempt to interpret the charm of "Er Quan Ying Yue" on the violin or participate in composing contemporary works incorporating pentatonic modes, they are engaged in a deeper identity negotiation: being an individual performer, a learner of the global classical tradition, and a contemporary inheritor and innovator of local culture. Activities like musical composition, improvisation, and arrangement particularly encourage learners to fuse personal experiences, emotions, and multiple cultural influences into a unique musical expression. This process is precisely the integrative act of "personalizing" collective cultural identity and "culturalizing" individual experience.

Ultimately, effective identity negotiation leads to a hybrid, situational cultural identity. It is not a choice between pure, mutually exclusive identities but cultivates an inclusive "both/and" capacity for identification. Individuals become able to flexibly and confidently mobilize their multi-layered musical literacy and identity awareness in different cultural contexts: singing local folk songs at family gatherings, interpreting works by national composers in international exchanges, fusing global elements in personal creation. By affirming the legitimacy of such hybridity and fluidity, music education helps learners move beyond essentialist identity anxiety, constructing a healthy, modern cultural subjectivity that is rooted locally, oriented globally, and capable of evolving throughout one's life.

II. Path Theory: Multiple Pathways for Constructing Cultural Identity in Music Education Practice

(I) Curriculum Content Level: From "Singular Canon" to "Polyphonic Plurality" in Text Selection

The evolution of music education at the curriculum content level profound reflection the shift in socio-cultural idea from static closure to dynamic openness. The traditional model often adhered to a "singular canon"

principle, its core consisting of a highly canonized, authoritative set of musical works and knowledge systems. This selection served to establish aesthetic standards and consolidate national identity in specific historical periods, but it invisibly constructed an invisible cultural wall, excluding a vast array of vibrant local, marginalized, and cross-cultural musical practices from the palace of formal education, essentially transmitting a singular, hierarchical cultural value system.

With the deepening of cultural globalization and postmodern thought, the limitations of this "singular canon" paradigm have become increasingly apparent. The core direction of contemporary music education curriculum reform is precisely towards a practice of "polyphonic plurality" in text selection. "Plurality" manifests in geographical, historical, and social breadth: the curriculum includes not only Western classical and Chinese traditional masterpieces but also systematically incorporates traditional music of world peoples, regional folk music, urban popular music, and contemporary experimental music, forming an equitable juxtaposition of a "world music map." "Polyphony," however, emphasizes a deeper pedagogical philosophy—it is not merely a simple accumulation of repertoire but intentionally creates a "dialogue" among musics of different cultural backgrounds, aesthetic concepts, and social functions within the curriculum. For example, juxtaposing an Italian opera aria, a Beijing opera aria, and Javanese gamelan vocal chanting to discuss "vocal expressiveness"; or connecting African drumming, Chopin's mazurkas, and electronic music beat design from the perspective of rhythm. This "polyphonic" arrangement aims to break aesthetic hegemony, guiding students to recognize the diversity and relativity of musical cultures, and to understand that every music is a product of its specific cultural context, possessing its own unique system of meaning and value logic.

Achieving the shift from "singular" to "polyphonic" involves far more than expanding a repertoire list. It requires educators to fundamentally rethink the cultural politics of the curriculum, transitioning from the authoritative role of "transmitting the canon" to the facilitator role of "building a platform for dialogue." This means balancing local and global, traditional and modern, artistic and everyday elements when selecting texts. The ultimate goal is for students, through listening to and understanding this rich "polyphony," to deepen their "depth" of cognition regarding their own cultural traditions while simultaneously developing a "breadth" of sincere respect and understanding for other cultures. Within this framework, students gain access to diverse musical "texts" in a safe, open educational space, thereby providing the most fertile ground for their individual cultural negotiation and creative integration in broader life. The music curriculum itself thus transforms from a repository transmitting fixed knowledge into a vibrant "polyphonic" field that stimulates cultural understanding and critical thinking.

(II) Teaching Methodology Level: Paradigm Shift from "Knowledge Transmission" to "Cultural Experience"

In traditional music teaching, "knowledge transmission" occupies the central position. Classes often revolve around the one-way instill of systematic knowledge such as music theory, sight-reading, and technique, placing students in a passive receive role. While this paradigm consolidates foundations, it tends to reduce music to decontextualized techniques and symbols, difficult to reach its deeper cultural significance and emotional resonance.

Contemporary educational concept are driving a profound paradigm shift—from "knowledge transmission" towards "cultural experience." The teaching focus is no longer merely on "knowing what," but on "experiencing what" and "understanding why." This means the classroom becomes a field for cultural practice: students feel music as a living cultural force by exploring the local customs and practices behind folk songs, listening to classics within historical contexts, comparing musical expressions across cultures, and even participating in improvisation and community music activities. Teaching methods subsequently diversified, with strategies like project-based learning, scenario simulation, and interdisciplinary mix being widely employed, aiming to guide students in constructing a holistic understanding of musical style, social function, and cultural value through personal participation and aesthetic immersion.

This shift builds a bridge for students from skill acquisition to cultural understanding, ensuring that music learning ceases to be an isolated skill drill and becomes a vital pathway for cultivating aesthetic judgment, cultural empathy, and creative literacy, ultimately point to the cultivation of a complete personality.

(III) Practical Field Level: Field Expansion from "Classroom" to "Lifeworld"

Traditional music teaching's practical field is largely confined to the physically speaking "classroom" space. Here, instruction is preset and procedural, with knowledge and skill training occurring in a relatively closed and controlled environment. An invisible boundary seem exists between music and the outside world, with students' learning experiences often ending at the classroom walls.

Modern educational concept vigorously promote the expansion of the practical field from the "classroom" to the vast "lifeworld." The core of this transformation lies in recognizing that the essence of music is vivid socio-cultural life practice, not static knowledge confined to textbooks. The reach of teaching therefore extends to concert halls, museums, community squares, folk festivals, digital networks, and even daily family life. Students are no longer merely listeners in the classroom but become explorers, participants, and creators in life's scenes: they might record and study the musical elements in street vendor calls, experience the function of ritual music in traditional festivals, create their own city sound maps using mobile technology, or interact with distant fan communities via social media.

The significance of this field expansion is profound. It breaks down the barrier between art and life, allowing music learning to occur through interaction with the complex, plural realities of the real world. Students can understand music's social functions, cultural meanings,

and emotional power in concrete contexts, thereby transforming knowledge into lived experience and genuine competence, ultimately achieve the educational goal of "unifying knowledge and action" in music education.

III. Reflection Theory: A Critical Examination of Cultural Identity Construction in Music Education

In the process of music education promoting "cultural experience," the construction of cultural identity is often viewed as a natural and positive outcome. However, the perspective of reflection theory subjects this to critical examination, warning us to be vigilant against potential essentialist narratives and power discourses within it.

If mishandled, cultural identity construction in music education can easily slide into a simplified "cultural tagism." That is, solidifying rich, fluid musical traditions into static symbols representing a particular nation or group, complete the designation and indoctrination of a culture by teaching a few "representative" pieces or styles. This mode of construction may complete cultural boundaries, shape stereotypes, and even place and other cultures within a binary oppositional framework, overlooking the complex reality of internal cultural plurality and mutual penetration.

A deeper critique lies in the power relations often implicit within this construction process. Which musics are selected for the curriculum, from which perspective

they are interpreted, and who decides what is "orthodox" or "canonical"—these questions involve struggles of cultural authority, political ideology, and educational policy. It may amplify certain voices while obscuring or co-opting others from marginalized, folk, or subcultural musical practices, thereby constructing a filtered, "official" cultural identity that serves a specific narrative.

Therefore, reflection theory calls for a self-conscious, critical practice of music education. It demands that educators and learners jointly examine the cultural presuppositions and power structures latent in teaching content and methods, maintain openness and dialogicality in identity construction, respect cultural hybridity and individual experiential diversity, making music education truly a reflective space that promotes cultural understanding rather than solidifying cultural barriers.

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