



The Role of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Decolonizing Music Curricula: Intercultural Approaches in School Education

Yuhan Wan

Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London EC2Y 8DT, United Kingdom

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Abstract: This study explores the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), particularly Peking Opera, into elementary school music curricula in northern China to decolonize education and foster intercultural understanding. Using post-colonial theory and intercultural pedagogy, it examines how ICH disrupts Eurocentric dominance in music education and promotes cultural pride. Data from observations, journals, and interviews with 35 students reveal increased engagement and critical re-examination of cultural narratives. The study highlights ICH as a tool for decolonization but emphasizes the need for systemic support and further research on diverse contexts to enhance its application in music education.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage (ICH); decolonizing music education; intercultural pedagogy; Peking Opera in school curricula

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, as internet technology and Industry 4.0 evolve, the push for decolonizing music education has gained momentum. Historically, China, a “cultural and economic powerhouse,” endured nearly half a century of Western colonization, leaving a legacy evident in its music education system. This system has long upheld Soviet and Western traditions, perpetuating colonial epistemologies that marginalize China’s indigenous musical heritage, including intangible cultural heritage (ICH) (Tan, 2021). Such neglect reinforces cultural hierarchies, despite the potential of music curricula to celebrate diversity. Educational decolonization, rooted in postcolonial theory, challenges these structures by integrating diverse cultural knowledge systems and preserving local traditions. This approach is essential to fostering cultural inclusivity, respect for diversity, and empowerment for marginalized communities (Frank, 2023).

UNESCO defines ICH as the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2018). Integrating ICH into music curricula offers an opportunity to disrupt Western dominance, promote cultural pride, and encourage intercultural dialogue. For example, China’s 2022 Compulsory Education Arts Curriculum Standards emphasize the role of traditional culture in building cultural confidence (Ministry of Education, 2022). Achieving this requires adopting intercultural education, which fosters critical dialogue and mutual respect through collaboration across musical traditions. This paper examines the integration of ICH, particularly Peking Opera, into school music curricula as a decolonizing intervention. It focuses on two questions: (1) How does ICH promote the decolonization of school music curricula? and (2) Which intercultural pedagogical approaches best facilitate this process?

2. Literature review

The decolonization of music education arises from postcolonial critiques of knowledge systems that marginalize non-Western epistemologies. Scholars like Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) highlight how coloniality shapes global education, with Western classical music dominating curricula and relegating indigenous traditions to “folk” or “exotic” status (Spivak, 1988). Postcolonial frameworks, such as Freire’s critical pedagogy, advocate for empowering marginalized communities by dismantling these colonial legacies. Incorporating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into music education serves as a key strategy to address historical injustices, as seen in efforts like integrating Jiangnan Sizhu and regional operas into Chinese schools to preserve heritage and strengthen cultural identity (Xie et al., 2024). However, as Bohlman (2010) argues, such integration must prioritize local traditions to challenge colonial power dynamics effectively.

Despite its potential, integrating ICH faces challenges, including superficial efforts that fail to address entrenched biases (Howard, 2016) and practical issues like insufficient teacher training and resource allocation (Reily & Brucher, 2018). Tokenistic inclusion risks reducing ICH to a supplementary role rather than a core curricular component. Sustainable implementation requires reimagining curricula and pedagogy to fully embrace ICH’s richness and diversity. This necessitates context-sensitive strategies and systemic support to ensure ICH is not only preserved but meaningfully integrated into music

education, fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity.

3. Methodology

This qualitative case study explores the integration of Peking Opera as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into school music education, addressing two key research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). Data were gathered over one academic year through field observations, reflective journals from ICH practitioners, and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. Observational field notes recorded lesson structures, teaching strategies, and student-teacher interactions, while reflective notes provided evolving analytical insights. Practitioners kept weekly reflective journals, documenting their experiences, challenges, and cultural interpretations, offering a rich perspective on introducing ICH into the classroom.

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews complemented the observations and journals. The first round, held before introducing ICH courses, involved group interviews with students to establish a baseline of their expectations and perceptions. A year later, follow-up group interviews revisited their experiences, while individual interviews with ICH practitioners delved into their teaching methods, integration strategies, and challenges. This multi-method approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of intercultural pedagogy, revealing how ICH can be effectively integrated into school curricula to enhance cultural understanding and engagement.

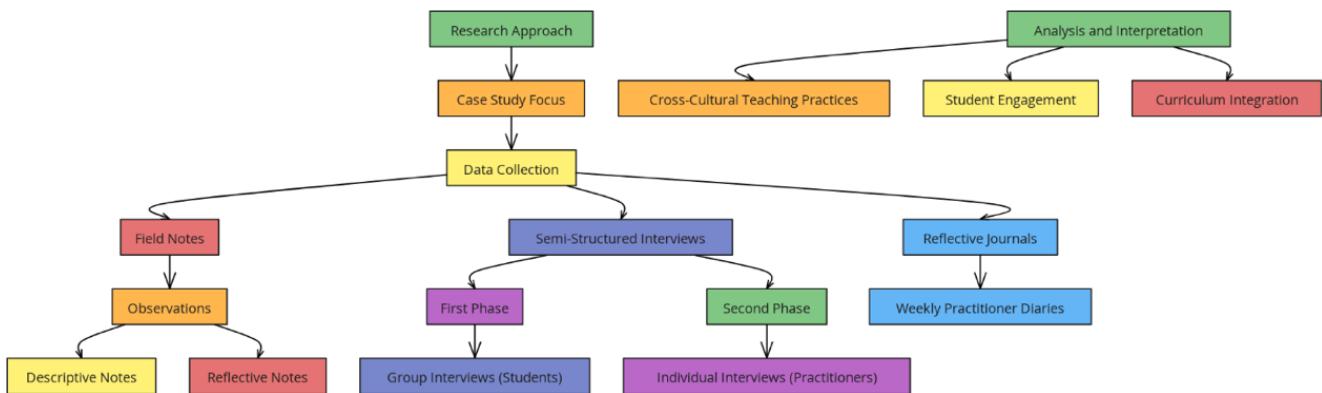


Figure 1. The research design & procedures

4. Sample Selection

This study was conducted at an elementary school in northern China, focusing on integrating Peking Opera into the music curriculum. Participants included a nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practitioner, Professor Wang from the Chinese Opera Academy, and 35 students from grades 4 to 6. Renowned for his expertise in Peking Opera performance and pedagogy, Professor Wang introduced students to this traditional art form, known for its vocal artistry, symbolic gestures, intricate costumes, and accompaniment by traditional instruments like the jinghu and erhu.

Launched in September 2022, the Peking Opera course was part of an extracurricular enrichment program, held weekly for two hours. Voluntary and open to students of varying skill levels, the program emphasized foundational vocal techniques, symbolic gestures, and cultural narratives, fostering both technical skills and an appreciation for the art's historical and artistic significance. Professor Wang's leadership ensured the program was engaging, authentic, and accessible, providing students with a meaningful introduction to Peking Opera.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the educational benefits of integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH), such as Peking Opera, into school music curricula. This approach disrupts Euro-American dominance in education by prioritizing indigenous art forms, fostering cultural identity, and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Student-centered, collaborative, and culturally responsive teaching practices enable active engagement with diverse cultures, positioning ICH as an active contributor to cross-cultural dialogue. These results suggest that decolonization and cross-cultural understanding can be simultaneously achieved through thoughtful curriculum design. However, systemic support, including curriculum integration, resources, and teacher training, is crucial to sustaining such initiatives.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. Conducted in a single primary school with a small sample focused solely on Peking Opera, the findings lack generalizability across different cultural settings or ICH forms. Future research

should expand to multiple schools and diverse ICH traditions to enhance result transferability and address varying teaching requirements. Nonetheless, this work underscores the transformative potential of ICH in fostering educational decolonization and cultural equity, emphasizing the need for institutional backing and culturally responsive pedagogy to sustain these practices.

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