

# Music education and human flourishing: a meditation on democratic origins

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*This philosophical essay is a meditation on the multiple and contested meanings of the concept of democracy with the aim of redirecting dominant discourses in music education practices and building new capacities for democracy's practical use in music classrooms. Inspired by philosopher John Dewey's travels to China, and his influence on major Chinese thinkers like Hu Shih and Tao Xingzhi, the author plays with the etymological origins of the term 'democracy', finding limited value in its Greek origins, but inspiration in the many ways of referring to democracy in Chinese [Minzhu: 民主 / Pingmin: 平民 / Shumin: 庶民 / Minben: 民本] each of which has the potential to direct and enlarge contemporary instructional practices in formal music education settings.*

## Introduction

Democracy's connection to education is a long one, dating back to the Ancient Greeks and resurfacing prominently a century ago with American philosopher John Dewey as its chief proponent. Dewey spent 26 months in China lecturing about education, several years after his widely acclaimed book *Democracy and Education* (1916) was published in the USA. In both China and the USA however, Dewey's influence on education was profound but short-lived, cut short by the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and USA cold war rhetoric that feared a loss of economic competitiveness from so-called 'child-centred' or 'popular' education (Cremin, 1989). The concept of *democracy and music education*, the primary focus of this article, was celebrated for a brief period in North America, around the 1950s (Mursell, 1955). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the practice of democratic music education never caught on among mid-century music teachers, and the concept has lain relatively dormant until its recent re-emergence among scholars and educators in the last decade (Allsup, 2002, 2004, 2009; Woodford, 2004; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007; Hanzlik, 2010; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010).

Today, confusion surrounding the place and purpose of democracy and contemporary education remains the norm, not the exception (Nussbaum, 2010). Concerning music education and democracy, it has been this author's experience that not only is its conceptual basis quite difficult for scholars and practitioners to grasp, regardless of nationality or culture, its application to classroom practice is often met with hostility by teachers who feel threatened by its populist appeal (Allsup, 2007). I have often heard the hypothetical

comment, for example, that ‘as a music teacher, we can’t vote on what takes place in class, otherwise my students would all want rap and hip-hop’. Or in dialogue with fellow performers I am frequently met with fear by those for whom the protection of honoured traditions is insufficiently safeguarded by commercial or popular interests (cf. Scruton, 2007). In what follows, I respond to these worries by attempting to refocus and relocate the terms of debate. I believe, nonetheless, that today’s renewed interest in democracy and music education signals a growing dissatisfaction with the excesses and abuses of conservative teachings and marks an irrevocable acknowledgement that we live in and learn in an increasingly pluralistic and expansive world.

What might it mean, and what would it take, to make music education more ‘child-centred’, more ‘popular’, more ‘democratic’? In a spirit of cross-pollination and mutual curiosity, music educators might look across physical and conceptual settings for new insights. With Dewey’s travels as inspiration, I look for a fusion of ideas that might advance this long-lasting discussion. What promises and problems does democratic education hold for the 21st century music teacher? What are its ends? What are its means? What might it look like and whom might it serve? This article’s aim is to re-travel this ancient road, guided by old questions in new contexts. As such, I start this inquiry with a look at unfamiliar beginnings, suggesting that the etymological roots of the various Chinese characters [*Hànzì*] that are used to denote ‘democracy’ might, with some interpretation, redirect and refine those discourses that cause music educators so much confusion. Westerners may be surprised to learn that there are more than four ways of referring to ‘democracy’ in Chinese [*Minzhu*: 民主 / *Pingmin*: 平民 / *Shumin*: 庶民 / *Minben*: 民本]. These multiple definitions, I hold, can be used to reshape thinking on this topic. This search and re/search follows naturally from the works of John Dewey [1859–1952] and his students Hu Shih / 胡适 [1891–1962] and Tao Xingzhi / 陶行知 [1891–1946] all of whom wrote, studied, and travelled extensively, together and apart, throughout China and the United States, speaking to teachers about democracy and education (Wang, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

## Method

In this philosophical meditation I compare the way two languages, English and Chinese, express the word democracy with the hope of displacing entrenched meanings around the term. My aim is not to offer a definitive or ‘accurate’ translation of the term, but to play with democracy’s multiple meanings and to build new capacities for its practical use in music classrooms. In this sense, translation becomes an illuminating act, not because it is accurate, but because (like art) it is *in*-accurate, or *extra*-accurate. The comparative analysis becomes a way to reimagine and relocate ossified meanings, noting that word-meanings rest in the productivity of contemporary language systems, whereas the utility or origin of a term is of only limited value.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Minzhu zhuyi*: ‘power of the people’**

Because the concept of democracy for English and Chinese speakers is borrowed from the Ancient Greeks (a terminological inheritance for European languages and a kind of conceptual import for the Chinese), a logical way to begin this re/search is to revisit

its etymological starting point, to search out its roots (Kong, 2010). From the English word democracy comes *demos* which refers to 'people' and *kratos* which means 'power', suggesting rule or power of the people. The term has come to stand for a governmental system by and of the people, a notion of equal citizenship with voting rights, where power or rule of law is self-governed. Across the world, this is the most common understanding of democracy, as a social arrangement that emphasises freedom of choice. In China, the contemporary term for democracy has an analogous sense: *Minzhu zhuyi*, which can be translated into English to mean 'the power of the people'; 'the people decide'; 'the people can be the boss'; or more simply 'rule by the people'. While these renderings in English and Chinese appear straightforward enough, taken literally they cause considerable problems when applied to institutional music education. Rhetorically, what is a music educator to make of the implication that her chorus is an independent form of government, and that her power or authority is checked by the whims of popular suffrage?

Yes, the term democracy [Greek: *δημοκρατία* / *demokratia*] denotes a mode of governmentality; but I agree with Dewey (1927/1954) that 'this is not the most inspiring of the different meanings' (p. 82). The regulation of human affairs through systems of participatory governance is only a *means* toward larger goals. The social arrangements in a democracy, including the public school and its music programme, should help children grow and be socialised in ways that promote the enlargement and enrichment of personal capacities [*κράτος* / *kratos* = self-control, personal powers] so that the results of growth give point and direction to others [*Δεμος* / *Demos* = people, the village]. Like Dewey, I argue that a conception of classroom democracy as *Minzhu zhuyi* or 'the power of the people' is not so much misleading as it is insufficient. The problem is one of terminology. In the popular imagination, we take 'power' to mean control, force or rule. Advancing democratic music education in this sense might lead us to believe that a democratic classroom would be one the teacher turns over her authority and control, so that her students 'become the boss' and rule from the bottom up.

The democratic classroom is indeed one where learners have a stake, a very large stake, in the outcome of their education; it is also a place, we will see, where power is shared and distributed. But having a stake in one's learning is not the same as knowing all that one needs to know to secure a desired end. Learners necessarily require some source of external expertise, and as such, *Minzhu zhuyi* taken literally places undue responsibility for finding this authority in the hands of those least equipped to find it. Dewey often refers to learners as the 'immature' and while this may strike modern readers as old-fashioned or even patronizing, his point is clarity of concept. Maturity in any intellectual subject, skill or understanding takes time, and ideally the wisdom garnered from a life of reflection and practice is offered to the immature in the form of guidance, whether this is parenting or playing the guitar.<sup>3</sup> A democratic classroom depends upon the maturity and wisdom of an 'external' expert to structure learning so that the young can grow beyond what they imagine is possible or what they know given the limitations of their immediate or 'internal' environment. Assuming that authority is not abused, or that authority is not mistaken for control or rule, a democratic classroom is one where teacher authority is *emphasised*, not checked, run away from, or voted out.

I contend that when democracy is understood as 'power of the people' or *minzhu zhuyi* there is undue focus on the word 'power' in its negative sense rather than its positive sense.

Consistently throughout his writings, Dewey refers to power as a *personal* capacity that varies in degree and kind with others. Democracy becomes a *means* for the amplification and enrichment of personal capacities, endowments or 'powers', not merely the *use* of power as force, or the rule of law by a voting majority. When democracy is understood only through the social forms of majority rule, it will certainly bring to mind examples of harm caused to others as privileged groups pursue their self-interests. But, for democracy to be about more than mere idiosyncratic gain or negative freedom – aspects often associated with *laissez-faire* democracy (Pon, 2001) – one must share one's personal capacities with others, while being open to their contributions as well. A democratic music classroom capitalizes on the diverse mix of powers, capacities and endowments (in all stages of growth and maturity) to shape the learning of all.

A richer understanding of democracy in music education will inform us that – contrary to what the superficial or insufficient definition of the term may offer – the teacher plays a pivotal role in designing instruction. A teacher of beginner guitarists, for example, may take forceful command over the technical aspects of playing the instrument and its care. As a seasoned performer and educator, such a democratic instructor may be strict about the position of one's wrist, the fingerings of a chord, and even stricter about the tuning of an octave. But if she is wise, she will look for sources of authority and 'power' that go beyond herself. She will recognise, for example, that her students are experts in the music of *their* time, and that their ears hold more 'power' than their fingers. She will look for sources of authority in books and recordings, as well as community members outside the school. And she will deem her students' likes and dislikes as sources of information and direction. In this vision of democratic music education 'power of the people' or *Minzhu zhuyi* might be reinterpreted to suggest 'powers of persons' – a plurality of means that are animated by the capacities, endowments and desires of the multiple and diverse individuals in a given teacher's charge.

### ***Pingmin/Shumin zhuyi: the principle of the common people***

In the aforementioned rendering, *Minzhu zhuyi* holds that a teacher's carefully tended social arrangements are a means toward greater student growth. This interpretation suggests that even though capacities and powers are unevenly distributed, students can learn more from diverse classroom settings than from those that operate in authoritarian or mono-directional ways. Yet as a guiding ideal, *Minzhu zhuyi* fails to indicate a way of conceptualising the problem of tradition. With so many interests at stake, whose tradition, whose time, and whose place gets studied? A music classroom that samples a little bit of everything (or takes a vote on everything) is unlikely to foster growth in purposeful ways. Even as a teacher must make hard choices about what to teach, it is likely that her expertise was developed in an environment that was decidedly *un-democratic*, one that was shaped by strict traditions handed down from the past, with uniform codes of practice (Schippers, 2009, p. 125). Lacking experience in diverse settings, a music teacher may be incapable of facilitating *Minzhu zhuyi* or capitalising on the 'powers of persons.' What framework puts the learner first? What aspect of democracy governs an individual's right to doubt an authority, or to find an external tradition unhelpful in contemporary contexts? Toward this radical end, I am attracted to another way of saying

'democracy' in Chinese, *Pingmin zhuyi* or *Shumin zhuyi*, both which can be translated to mean 'the principle of the common people' or 'the doctrine of the little people' (Chen, 1919).

Contemporary scholars have claimed that the most significant impact that John Dewey, Hu Shih and Tao Xingzhi had on China was their promotion of this 'principle of the common people' through *Pingmin jiaoyu* [平民教育] or the civilian or commoner's education (Gu, 2001; Hoyt, 2006; Wang & Zhang, 2007). The spirit of this early 20th century movement, occurring at the same time in the USA under the label 'popular education' or the Deweyian tag 'new education' (Dewey, 1938/1988), was an attempt to dislodge the contents of so-called 'classical' learning from its overlarge place in the school curriculum and to replace its elitist ideals with ones that made sense for the much wider non-aristocratic or 'common' population. The notion that schools could restrict access to learning and then make certain categories of knowledge permanent across time haunted scholars like Dewey, Hu and Tao (cf. Dewey, 1931; Hu, 1954; Tao & Zhu, 1923).

Both conservative and progressive educators would agree that a society ensures its continuance in time by handing down its traditions and traditional disciplines so that changing conditions can benefit from the applied wisdom of the past. For conservatives, however, a civilization can only 'survive' change by adopting ideas and practices that have proven timeless; a society that constantly rediscovers or reinvents knowledge is too precarious and needs the protection of an extant authority (cf. Hutchins, 1936/1979; D'Souza, 1991). Dewey cautions against the reification of pre-existing ideas, not simply because they often serve the needs of the elite at the expense of the 'common', but when truths are taken as undisputable and ends in themselves, we foreclose inquiry. Echoing Hu's doctrine of experimentalism [实验主义], it is what we do with the applied wisdom of the past that counts. A culturally detached perspective around what knowledge is worth knowing is still alive in present-day Chinese and Anglo-American music education, I contend, where systems of transmission have stood safely through changing times and tastes by adopting the 'a/popular' or 'conservative' strategy of promoting Western European classical music and little else. The learner in these settings, we will see, is less important than the tradition he is studying.

Popular education or *Pingmin jiaoyu* was meant to examine old traditions and end or amend those that had become inert or too removed from public interest (Whitehead, 1929/1967). I admit that a democratic education that is understood as *Pingmin zhuyi* might appear like another abuse of majority rule, with power taken away from a higher authority and degraded or unappreciated by the whims of the immature and the uncouth. It might also appear that the 'the doctrine of the little people' seeks to elevate the uneducated at the expense of the knowledgeable. But I would like to offer a different interpretation, one that does not confuse 'common' with powerlessness, immaturity or low social status. Democracy understood as *Pingmin zhuyi* asserts the individual's right to doubt (Hu, 1963) on behalf of one's self and the common good. Democratic music education as *Pingmin zhuyi* asserts that an individual learner has a right to a 'useful' education, whether this stems from a classical education or a popular one. By way of example, this means that the classical music conservatory system and the educational machinery that supports it must do a better job of responding to student interests and desires: it might change its guiding ethos from 'conservation education' to a 'common education'.

Consider the difference between a conservatory that acts to preserve a musical tradition and one that acts to educate a musical human. In the former, the musical tradition is sacred, and the student is taught in the service of its history. In the latter, the growing musician is the locus of attention and aid, and the musical tradition serves his personal journey. In the former, preservation keeps tradition safe from change; in the latter, tradition sparks innovation. The 'exercise of the right to doubt, to question, and not be pleased or satisfied with whatever a great master or authority might say' is a radical 'act of courage' (Hu, 1963, p. 295) because even as it has the potential to unglue an individual from the safety of his community, doubt is employed as a means for not just individual growth, but the growth of all. After all, 'it was the spirit of doubt – of what Goethe called the 'creative doubt' – which initiated, inaugurated and animated the classical age of Chinese thought, the age of Lao Tzu and Confucius, down to Mencius, Chuang Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han-fei', wrote Hu (p. 297). To emphasise the point, it was creative doubt, the right to challenge the conserving forces of tradition and external authority which initiated, inaugurated and animated the classical age of European thinkers and writers, like Mozart, Beethoven and Goethe himself.

As such, music education as *Pingmin zhuyi* embraces an individual's sense of 'need' and 'doubt.' It is 'useful' because it assumes that classical knowledge serves purposes beyond those frozen in time. It does not do away with tradition (this is not possible) but allows a tradition to splinter, adapt, radically evolve or (and this is quite possible) remain steadily on its historic course (Hansen, 2001). A musical society that is innovative will invent new classical music educations, as many have already done: today we enjoy all manner of classical folk traditions, classic genres of rock and old-school jazz. A creative musical society will bring about new hybrids, as well, some that will defy easy labels. But innovation does not or will not sound like the classical European models of old – it must reflect the unique needs that grow from Chinese traditions, or British traditions, or Chinese–American traditions as these intersecting fields of knowledge meet with an individual's vision and the larger community in which he lives.

### ***Minben zhuyi*: from the foundation comes human flourishing**

I close this article with a focus on the ends of democratic education, turning to a fourth rendering of democracy that is used in China today: *Minben zhuyi*, which can be translated to mean 'people are the foundation, the basis, the origin'. I find this an inspiring way to capture the spirit of democracy, as it suggests a return to origins, a concern with human welfare, a brickwork of built relationships, a flourishing from the roots up. We are speaking here about a location, a place of concern. *Minben zhuyi* conjures a gravitational pull downward, toward the least of us. By contrast, conservative education 'may be summed up by stating that the centre of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself. On that basis there is not much to be said about the *life* of the child' (Dewey, 1915/2001, p. 23, italics in original).

Better to me than the English version of the word democracy [*demos-kratos*; people-power] this rendering of the Chinese character [民本主义] evokes a richer conception of the social aims of democracy by re/placing our attention away from the lofty heights of classical education, away from the elevating power of great works, away from a preoccupation with

majority power and privilege, and downward toward *life* – toward ideals of cultivation, care and human flourishing. What if children really were the foundation, the basis, our centre of gravity? What if their care and cultivation came first? What would it mean to create a music curriculum in which the fundamentals of music were human and not merely musical?

From the metaphoric perspective of *Minben zhuyi*, democracy is hands-on work – always under construction, constantly made and remade, messy in its repair. This is what is meant when scholars like Dewey, Hu and Tao referred to democracy as a way of life and not a terminus or point of arrival. I would now like to suggest that there are, at least, three important concepts that demand constant evaluation from us as they may be used to shift the centre of gravity toward democratic concerns. I conjecture that a successful interaction of these conditions will direct us to particular ways of living that are captured in the ideal of *Minben zhuyi*.

First, democratic music education finds fertile ground in an *environment* that honours multiple endowments, capacities and powers. This environment could be realised when classrooms provide equal access to musical and social opportunities, treat students fairly without prejudice or special favour, and allow for student feedback and input. But the operation of this system is not its final value; rather its workings are simply the best means available for building student capacity. By contrast, conservatory or conservative music education knows a priori what students must do and how they must do it. A democratic environment opens spaces for disclosure and self-revelation. In this setting, the teacher does not know in advance what a given student is capable of doing or being.

Regarding *authority and tradition*, secondly, the teacher in a democratic music classroom must be wise enough to teach the unfamiliar (the unpopular), and brave enough to learn the familiar (the popular). As already mentioned, the democratic music educator is obliged to teach from a position of authority and mastery. She is obliged to share with students her expertise, to make relevant those traditions from the past that she knows well, and to take students to places they cannot get to alone. But she is also obliged to learn new things and to bravely investigate music that is popular with her students, but perhaps outside her training. Making connections across domains of culture and expertise builds student *and* teacher flexibility.

The third condition deals with *learner interest*. Student must be courageous enough to doubt, but not too cynical to try something new. It is important to underscore, however, that ‘the right to doubt’ is not strictly negative; in its best sense, it is a disposition pre/disposed to experimentation. Students have the right to a ‘useful’ music education, which means that the traditions of one generation are to be made available to the next, even if this means alteration and re-adaptation. Students can be expected to approach their investigations with care and respect, of course. Unsurprisingly, many students will find great interest in works from the past, and wish to carry on a particular historic tradition intact.

These three domains do not ‘add up’ to democracy, but are the foundation or basis upon which the cultivation of student growth can be built. To be clear, I am not arguing that conservative music education does not promote growth, rather the learning that takes place in conservative settings is context- and tradition-specific, and thus predictable. The three domains that undergird *minben zhuyi* permit the learner to move beyond established orders to places of unpredictability and innovation.

## Democracy as a way of life

This article began with an image of travelling and re/travelling, searching and re/researching, so it is not hard to segue from a notion of human flourishing to the metaphor of a journey. Of course there are many other ways to imagine education: cause and effect, one-way transmission, master-apprentice, etc. And each of these visions has very practical applications. But the idea of music education as a journey of growth and discovery captures the dimensions of time that are so important for musicians: the past (our inheritance), the present (our funded traditions), the future (our hopes and interests). This vision is profoundly connected to the Deweyian ideal of democracy as a way of living life *through* life. Tao Xingzhi spoke of 'education of life, by life, and for life' (Wang & Zhang, 2007, p. 98) capturing the spirit of incompleteness and wonder that gives direction to our lives.

### Notes

- 1 Some historical context is necessary. Around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Western notion of democracy was introduced to China by Chinese intellectuals and Western missionaries (Gu, 2001; Huang, 1991). After the Opium Wars, many Chinese intellectuals advanced a national self-strengthening movement emphasizing military growth and the development of profit-oriented enterprise. However, the failure of the Sino-Japanese war revealed the limitation of the reform movement without the support of a central government (Leung, 2006). In the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals shifted their attention to Western political systems, particularly socialism and democracy. With contesting ideas about the meaning of Western democracy and no agreed upon terminology to employ, the import was an 'open text', interpreted differently by various Chinese intellectuals (Huang, 1991). In the May Fourth Movement of 1919, democracy was promoted as a radical way to save China from impending political and social darkness (Gu, 2001). Enter Dewey and his travels across China to promote democracy and education.
- 2 This essay comes by way of collaboration between graduate students and researchers at the author's academic institution and Hunan Normal University, China. The collaboration was part of a panel at the ISME World Conference 2010, Beijing, China, titled 'Democracy, Conflict, and Chinese Music Education' featuring the author, Guo Shengjian, Liu Chiao-wei, Sun Xun, and Yu Juan.
- 3 Immanuel Kant used the term 'immaturity' [*Abhängigkeit*] to describe those who spend their lives depending upon the guidance of others, not choosing to exercise their own ability to reason, in his famous essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Maturity is slowly attained once we decide to make use of our own reason, thus claiming our dignity and ceasing to be an unthinking member of 'the machine of society'.

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