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*Published in:*

Nordic Journal of Music Therapy

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*

[10.1080/08098131.2018.1508056](https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2018.1508056)

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*Publication date:*

2019

*Document Version*

Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Chen, X. J., & Hannibal, N. J. (2019). Meet Hui in music: A case report of group music therapy for a Chinese male prisoner. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(2), 75-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2018.1508056>

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# **Meet Hui in music: A case report of group music therapy for a Chinese male prisoner**

**Xijing Chen, Niels Hannibal**

## **Abstract**

This case report illustrates the change process of one inmate participant in a group music therapy. The case was selected from a research project of group music therapy for offenders. The participant Hui, a male inmate, participated 20 biweekly sessions of group music therapy for male adult inmates in a Chinese prison. Three methods, music improvisation, music and imagery, and song writing were used in the therapy. Music therapy led Hui (pseudonym) to change from a defensive isolated man into a person who was able to experience and share his emotions with other group members through music. In this case report, we detailed the transformative process of Hui and elaborated the music therapist's reflection from the theoretical and cultural perspectives. Later, the theoretical issues related to treatment in offender rehabilitation context were discussed in-depth. By making the intervention process transparent for the public, we hope this case report can help readers to understand how the effects of music therapy on decreasing anxiety and depression, and improving self-esteem that found in the research may have taken place in the intervention.

**Key words:** group music therapy; prisoner; improvisation; music and imagery; song writing

## **Introduction**

Music therapy has a long history of application in correctional settings (Coddington, 2002; Thaut, 1989). In the recent decades, research and experiences from clinical music therapists have brought the attention and unique contribution of music therapy to offender patients (Hakvoort, Bogaerts, Thaut, & Spreen, 2013; Leith, 2014; Chen et al., 2015; Luik, 2016). In line with the most influential model for offenders' assessment and rehabilitation, risk-need-responsivity model (Bonta, 2007), a variety of goals of music therapy in correctional settings can be categorized either to decrease dynamic risk factors (e.g., aggressive behaviour, substance abuse) or to increase protective factors (e.g., prosocial attitude, empathy). Research shows that music therapy is an effective and powerful tool for offender patients in the most restricted settings in terms of alleviating anxiety, depression, increasing self-awareness and self-esteem, improving coping skills, as well as decreasing aggressive behaviour (Chen, Helen, Aarø, Manger, & Gold, 2016; Hakvoort et al., 2013). In this case report, we present the changing process of one participant in a music therapy group that was conducted as one part of a research in a Chinese prison (Chen, Hannibal, Xu, & Gold, 2014; Chen, Hannibal, & Gold, 2015). The aim of the research was to investigate the effects of group music therapy on alleviating anxiety, depression, and improving self-esteem in prisoners. Two hundred adult male inmate participants were randomly assigned into two groups of equal size. The experimental group received 20 biweekly sessions of music therapy for 10 weeks in addition to standard care, and the control group received 10 weeks of standard care. In the experimental group, 12 therapy groups were formed with 8 to 10 people in each group. The results show that group music therapy significantly decreased anxiety and depression, as well as improved self-esteem of prisoner participants comparing to standard care. More detailed information related to the research question, methods, as well as the quantitative data analysis is presented in a separate article (Chen et al., 2015).

This case report aims to make the intervention process of the research accessible for the public, to demonstrate the music therapy process in a Chinese prison context, as well as to discuss the therapeutic process from cultural and theoretical perspectives. The case was chosen because of the participant's representative characteristics, and the typical dynamic relationships between the participant, group members, and prison guards. The qualitative data of case report were retrieved from the therapist's clinical

notes, session videos, group interview with the participants and individual interview with the prison guards, as well as the participants' therapy diary.

## **Background**

### **Prison administration**

This prison had about 500 inmates divided into eight units. Most of them were offenders with minor crimes, such as theft, robbery, physical attack, illegal gambling, and illegal trades. Prisoners' daily life followed a strict schedule. Every day started with one hour of regulation drill training at 7 o'clock in the morning, the rest of the day was filled with labour work or mandatory education. The subjects of mandatory education included ideological and moral cultivation, political theories, fundamentals of law, and common sense of psychology. Each mandatory course was followed by an exam. Prison guards could arrange group meetings, reading, sports, or watch selected TV news and program in the evening. At leisure time, prisoners could sit quietly in a chair to read a book, write homework or letters but not talk to others. The assessment for prisoners' commutation was based on their scores in exams and their daily behaviour report from prison guards.

### **Time settings for therapy**

The music therapy took place twice a week for 20 sessions. Each session lasted for one and a half hour. Due to holidays and events, the duration of the treatment was prolonged to 12 weeks for ensuring 20 sessions of therapy. The participants were told that music therapy could not replace their work assignment before their decision for participation. Therefore they still needed to fulfil their daily labour work tasks after the therapy if they took part in the study. Sometimes, a few inmates came to therapy after finishing their night shift work although they could skip the therapy for sleep.

### **Setup of the room**

The therapy took place in a 70 square meters' activity room. The equipment and instruments for therapy included one stereo, one electronic piano, two guitars, one set of hand glockenspiel, and percussion instruments such as Djembe drums, cymbals, tambourines and xylophones. The seats in the room were placed in a circle.

### **Treatment philosophy**

The therapist (X.J.C) is influenced by existential-humanistic models (Schneider & Krug, 2009; Schneider & May, 1995) and Yalom's group psychotherapy theories (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). She believes that through establishing an equal and respectful environment, the group members will be able to experience autonomy and ownership of themselves. Then, the group connection, communication, and support emerged in therapy group can empower individual to connect and explore inner world, and to express it authentically to others. The issues and interpersonal conflicts occur in group provide opportunities for group members to increase self-awareness and understanding for themselves and others. Their interpersonal skills and social functioning may gradually develop through processing multiple issues in group. All these theoretical assumptions were integrated in her music therapy intervention. Music activities (i.e., improvisation, song writing, and music and imagery) were applied to realize the following goals for achieving the above-mentioned research aims:

- To provide a reliable, predictable environment with a clear structure and rules.
- To facilitate nonverbal emotional expression and catharsis.
- To facilitate self-understanding, awareness, and empathy.
- To facilitate group connection and communication.
- To develop group members' interpersonal skills.
- To increase the sense of autonomy and self-esteem.

### **The introduction of the group**

This music therapy group consisted of eight members. Their ages ranged from 22 to 56. Five of them were convicted for theft, two for physical attack, and one for illegal gambling. They claimed that they came to music therapy because of their preference for music and curiosity for music therapy. One man hoped that music would alleviate his insomnia symptoms.

Hui, a 30 year-old man, was a recidivist who had been in and out of prison for eight times. He had one and half years of a sentence because of theft. Although he claimed that his left leg was painful and refused to do any labour work, physical examinations showed no physical problem with his leg. He had previously tried to commit suicide twice which made him a particular concern for prison guards. He said that he came to music therapy because he liked music.

Two prison guards Zhang and Liu watched the therapy alternately according to their work shift. Zhang was a 44 year-old guy who had worked in this prison more than 20 years. He was a veteran before he became a prison guard. Liu was a 25-year old man who graduated from college three years previously. He had recently obtained a psychological counsellor certificate and planned to be a psychological counsellor in this prison.

## **Treatment process**

### **Phase one: connect with emotion**

In the first session, prison guard Zhang led the group walked into the therapy room. The whole group stood straight next to the wall and waited for the prison guard's order. "sit!" Zhang said. The whole group sat down in a circle, and spoke to the therapist in one voice: "good morning, teacher!" Hui was the only one who did not make the sound. Then, Zhang sat outside of the circle and watched the group.

The therapist introduced music and imagery to them. As a warm up activity, group members were invited to draw different colours in a circle to match their emotions while listening to four short music pieces. Hui chose white colour to cover the whole white paper, and said "I didn't feel any difference or anything in the music, so I used the white colour. There was nothing but emptiness." In the latter music imagery experience, he kept his eyes wide open during the whole process and only drew several random white lines on the paper afterwards. Prison guard Zhang mocked him and said "yeah, he can't feel anything anymore because he has been here eight times!" Hui did not say anything afterwards but kept silent in the rest of the session.

In the following sessions, clear group rules were established for everyone (including the prison guard) in the room, such as agreement on confidentiality, prohibition of insulting language or behaviour, and only one person to talk at a time. Hui continued his statement of insentience in verbal discussion and showed no interest in others' sharing. However, in a musical improvisation, when others were playing instruments almost on the same speed and rhythm, he tapped several crescendos on a small tambourine with no stable rhythm. One group member commented his music was "timid and anxious". Another one said that his music sounded like he wanted to say something. Hui responded, "I was just playing. I have nothing to say."

### **The music therapist's reflections**

For these group members, the sense of being a unique individual was deprived by their uniform and unified actions as one identity, prisoner. Although the therapist strived to establish a favourable therapeutic milieu through establishing clear group rules, encouraging personal expression, and facilitating interpersonal interactions verbally and musically, the ideal group environment characterized by respectful, trustful and supportive social interaction was contradictory to the environment in the prison's daily life with strict hierarchies and disciplines. It was obvious that their initiative for expression was inhibited under the prison guard's supervision.

Hui behaved very defensively and rebelliously. He refused to say hello to the therapist and claimed not to have feelings at all; he kept his eyes open in the music imagery experience, and was reluctant in verbal discussion. However, the emotional isolation claimed in his words did not impede his emotional experience in music. His music improvisation precisely expressed his emotion so that it was noticed and reflected by other members. Although the prison guard's cynical attitude blocked his verbal expression, he was still able to experience and express his feelings through music.

### **Phase two: experience and explore inner world**

After the group rules had been established, group members became more actively involved in the musical activities. They started to explore different instruments with various speeds, rhythms, and dynamics, and they felt more comfortable to use music to express themselves; they also tried to interact with each other in music improvisation. Interestingly, sub-groups were formed in music improvisation and verbal discussion parallelly. Members were grouped based on their similarities in life experience, educational level, and economic statuses. However, Hui was outside of any sub-group.

In session 7, prison guard Liu came with the group. The whole group seemed more relaxed under Liu's supervision. After a few minutes of discussion, the group decided to improvise music. The music started with chaos that everyone was playing an instrument loudly with an excited facial expression except Hui. After a while, music gradually slowed down to match the therapist's stable pulse on a djembe. During this moment, members searched for musical connections with each other through imitate others' rhythm or musical dialog. Several different music dynamics coexisted within one beat. Later, this short period of harmony was replaced by another round of outburst with a big crescendo. Hui became challenging both in music and verbal discussion. In

improvisation, he either kept quiet or knocked cymbals and snare drum with a sudden big sound to interfere in group's improvisation from time to time; in verbal discussion, he criticized others as being weak and incompetent when they shared their worries for family, good memories, or visions of future. Instead of arguing with him, more and more people started to ignore his comments and isolate him.

The therapist noticed that his chair was out of the circle, and he was reclining on the chair with arms crossed. His upper body was leaning to the door while his left leg extended towards the group. The therapist told the group members about her observation and invited them to imitate Hui's posture and to feel their body and emotions when doing it. One man said that he felt very uncomfortable to keep one leg stretched for a long time. Prison guard Liu said that he felt his body parts were fighting, one part wanted to stay, but another part wanted to escape. Some people felt anxious and unsafe as if their body was prepared to leave in any minute. Hui seemed very surprised by these comments. The therapist suggested the group could use musical improvisation to express feelings to this posture. Their music was slow and lacked of energy, several instruments played various rhythms in a very disharmonic way. One man played cymbals with random rhythms in a similar way as Hui did in his previous improvisation. Hui quietly listened to others' playing. Later, one man commented the music was sad combined with feelings of uneasiness and discomfort.

In the following session, the group did music and imagery. Hui drew a tiny grey person and a colourful bird under grey sky using very thin lines. He described that he was playing with the bird outside of the prison. However, the verbal discussion remained on a superficial level, and he did not articulate his feelings. One person said to Hui that he liked this painting much better than the one only with white colour, because he could see some colours and understood the contents. It was the first time for Hui to receive a positive verbal comment from other group members.

### **The music therapist's reflections**

As the whole group became more interactive and dynamic, Hui also became more actively involved in the group by his own way. His unconscious inner confliction was externalized in his music, body posture, and his verbal attacks toward others. He was eager to connect to others but fear to the unknown danger. The therapist invited the whole group to observe and feel his posture which facilitated him to increase self-



awareness of here and now as well as the sense of being listened and understood. The group was able to meet Hui in music, and gave him their feedback and insights. The whole group provided a musical mirror for him to “see” his own feelings, and helped him to unfold his underlying feelings which were presented later in his colourful paintings.

It was notable that the second prison guard, Liu, was able to fit in the group as an equal and active member. His non-judgmental attitude accelerated the group process.

### **Phase 3: face the existential givens**

As the sessions continued, more members became actively involved in the group through different ways. Some wrote lyrics and brought them to the therapy room for song writing; some asked the therapist to teach them musical skills. They felt more comfortable sitting in a circle, talking about their personal issues and giving feedbacks to others. As a result, the conflicts and arguments became more obvious and common in the group process.

Two group members were transferred to another prison very early in the morning before the 16<sup>th</sup> session. This kind of transfer normally did not have an advance notification in case of any unexpected incidence (e.g., prison break). Many prisoners wanted to be transferred to another prison because the chance of getting a commutation (a decrease of the sentence’s length) was higher in there.

At the beginning of this session nobody wanted to talk. The therapist suggested the group to write a song about their feelings. Everyone could either choose lyrics slips printed with a poem or a line of lyrics on each slip or wrote lyrics.

The group collaboratively composed the lyrics:

*In my ordinary life I have you, although you are just a broken wooden guitar.*

*I sing an unwanted song; before it blossoms, it has withered.*

*I was an aspiring boy who admires the wild geese flying to south.*

*My beloved girl, how do you look like now?*

*Life is like a ruthless knife, who cares how bitter my heart is.*

*This road is rugged and bumpy; I don’t want to continue my life in here anymore.*

*I want a wonderful future; I don’t want to continue my life in here anymore.*

*Who will remember I have been to this world?*

According to the lyrics, we combined the melody of two Chinese pop songs named “Old boys” and “God’s will” to sing. Sadness surrounded the whole group when we were singing the song together.

Gao (A 56 year-old man who was in convicted for illegal gambling) said that he felt angry but powerless, he could not control anything in here. Some prison guards were very mean to him. Other members said that they missed their family, and someone thought of life outside with a helpless sigh.

Hui responded to the group, “I am very calm, and I can get used to any place as my inner world is peaceful.” Gao pointed out that Hui was faking his calmness as he pretended being a cripple, and he was only a coward and escaper. Hui argued back that he did not fear of anything including death as he had tried to kill himself several times. Gao refuted, “I have been through the culture revolution, a lot of people committed suicide, are they all heroes?” He thought it was braver to live than to commit suicide, because suicide was a coward’s behaviour for avoiding the troubles. The tension between Hui and Gao was building up. Hui seemed agitated, his leg was trembling. Prison guard Zhang became alert and stood up from his seat.

The therapist invited the group to play music to reflect their verbal discussion. Hui quickly grabbed a big djembe and beat it very hard with a very fast speed. The other members followed Hui’s drum, also played instruments with very loud sounds. The sounds in the room became unbearable for prison guard Zhang so that he had to cover his ears. He was very upset about the noise and motioned the therapist to stop the music. She smiled at him to reassure him. About 5 minutes later, the improvisation faded to an end as Hui stopped his drumming.

In the later discussion, the therapist asked about their feelings and thoughts on this improvisation. Hui said that he liked the huge sound on drum as if he was shouting, and he liked the group were drumming together with him so that his was able to make much bigger sounds. He felt better after he got something out of his chest, although he was not sure what the feelings might be. The therapist reminded Hui that he was the one who led the whole group’s improvisation. Others agreed. One guy was very excited after the improvisation and said that he felt so powerful. People laughed. One man said that he would like to have a drink with Hui after they got out (A way to show his care

and goodwill to Hui). Prison guard Zhang kept standing position with his arms crossed, and was very serious when he listened to their discussion. Later in the discussion, the group talked about the reality in prison, the sad and helpless feelings in this place, and how could they deal with it. People shared their thoughts and means. Hui also contributed several ideas.

### **The therapist's reflections**

The sudden departure of two group members brought the sadness and powerless feelings to the rest. Composing and singing their song assisted them to process these feelings. It followed by the meaningful verbal discussion in which the group members authentically expressed their anger, helplessness, loneliness, and anxiety.

Hui repeated his avoidance pattern, but Gao's confrontation stimulated his anxiety and anger. Instead of acting out physically (Hui's leg started to trembling), he faced his strong suppressed emotions in music improvisation. Moreover, the music allowed the whole group to catharsis their feelings in an acceptable way rather than violating the code of conduct. The conjunct music playing enhanced the mutual understanding and trust between group members, thus they were able to face and deal with here and now problems collaboratively after the improvisation.

### **Ending**

In the last four sessions, group members still had disagreements from time to time. However, they could express their own feelings as well as listen to others patiently. They could allow different opinions coexist, and showed more respect to others' thoughts. Hui showed more interests and patience when listening to others' thoughts. Sometimes, when he was challenging someone's opinion, members laughed it off as if they knew Hui would do so. The group also talked about how to use music in their daily life. Hui said that he would like to listen to more music after he went out, and he would also like to write some lyrics for songs.

## **Summary**

### **Hui and the group**

Hui was a depressed and isolated man before he came into the group. He tried to avoid problems by blocking his emotion and alienating himself from others. In the therapy, he continued this avoidance pattern in his verbal discussion. Yet his music which

represented his feelings was recognized by other members. The musical feedbacks of the group to his discomfort body posture helped him to experience his inner confliction through the “musical mirror”, thus increased his self-awareness (interpersonal learning; emotional expression). Encouraged by others’ music, he started to take risk to face the blocked deep feelings through music (sense autonomy, group connection and communication). He transformed his anxiety, anger, fear, and other deep feelings into aesthetic musical creations which allowed him to experience them on a new dimension and depth. This process not only helped him for catharsis, but also brought him the sense of autonomy, and the ownership of his feelings, hence facilitated his personal growth (self-esteem). As a result, he showed more interests to build connections with others and wanted to continue his inner world exploration in songs.

The abstract and multi-layered characteristics of music allowed simultaneous expression and communication of various unique thoughts and feelings from the group members. Music as a free practice (Tuastad & O'Grady, 2013) facilitated the group’s development. The whole group learned to contain conflicts and constructively work them through, consequently increased their self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills.

### **The prison guards**

The prison guards who represented the whole prison system had a powerful influence on the therapy (Dvoskin & Spiers, 2004). The verbal discussion related to prison system or prison guards usually was inhibited by the more serious prison guard Zhang. Music became the main language for the whole group to express authentic emotions. The members were more comfortably and actively involved in the therapy both verbally and musically when they were with prison guard Liu who showed more respect and care to them.

Observing therapy might have changed the view and attitude of prison guards toward prisoners. Prison guard Liu said that these dangerous dirty bad guys in his previous impression became ordinary human beings with emotions and weaknesses. Before, he was feared that if he showed softness and care, he might lose his power on these prisoners. But in fact, after the therapy, prisoners showed less rebellion and more respect to him in daily life.

## **Discussion**

The application of music therapy in prison is challenging due to its unfavourable therapeutic environment and the complexity of prisoners' psychological and behavioural problems. Two influential principles for offenders' rehabilitation guide the music therapy practice in prison. First, the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (Bonta, 2007; O'Grady, 2009), mainly focuses on the offenders with high reoffending risk, and targets on their criminogenic needs (including dynamic risk factors and protective factors) for ultimate recidivism reduction. The treatments based on RNR model address that to maximize the treatment effects (i.e., reducing reoffending risk), the behavioural modelling and reinforcement should match offenders' learning style. On the other hand, the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007), addresses the offenders' human needs. The treatments enlightened by GLM target on developing offenders' knowledge and skills to meet their needs in a socially acceptable way instead of crimes. Music therapy tends to consider either or both of offenders' criminogenic and human needs into the therapeutic goals, such as to alleviate anxiety and depression, increase self-esteem, empathy, reduce aggressive behaviour, substance abuse, and improve coping skills.

The capability of music therapy of integrating the justice departments' perspective and therapeutic goals for mental health might be attributed to the unique characteristics of music and related therapeutic experiences. Music can serve not only as a tool to facilitate offenders' behavioural change (Hakvoort et al., 2013), musical experience as an interpersonal and intrapersonal process also allows offenders to freely perceive, express, communicate, and change emotions through a nonverbal way in a suppressing environment. As a result, offenders can improve their communicative ability and social support, as well as empathy which lead to the reduction of externalizing problems and internalizing problems, and ultimately the reduction of recidivism and the improvement of life quality (Chen, et al., 2016).

In this case report, three music therapy methods were used to facilitate the client perceive, identify, acknowledge emotions, and then support authentic expression. Each music method contributed differently during the various group development stages. Music imagery utilized its metaphorical nature to help the client bridge him with the inner world and deepen his inner exploration; improvisations gave him freedom to experience and explore subconscious and conscious feelings through individual and

group spontaneous musical creation; and song writing enabled him to concrete unconscious feelings and thoughts into words and melodies. As a result, the group built cohesion, decreased their anxiety and depressive symptom, the compliance to treatment was high and drop-out rate was low. Group music therapy has the potential to facilitate therapeutic growth and change even though the external agenda (i.e., prison's correctional function) is the suppressing and dehumanizing, even though the verbal dialogue did not focus directly on a psychotherapeutic agenda, and even though the clients had no explicit knowledge about what psychotherapy is and what it requires.

In addition, the music therapy intervention is grounded in the Yalom's model for curative factors, today named as therapeutic factors, in the group therapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This model describes 12 different factors that add to the therapeutic potential of a group therapy: 1. Cohesiveness (feeling a sense of belonging, acceptance and validation from the group); 2. universality (a shared experiences in the group), 3. altruism (an experience of being able to help others in the group); 4. instillation of hope (the encouragement by other group members); 5. imparting information (psychoeducation); 6. corrective recapitulation of the primary family experience (transferences patterns are altered, childhood experiences are worked through); 7. development of socializing techniques/interpersonal learning (here and now, safe and supportive environment for improving personal behavior and social skills); 8. imitative behavior (develop social skills through modeling process); 9. existential factors (death, being alone, meaning, choice); 11. catharsis (emotional relief); and 12. self-understanding. According to Yalom and Leszcz, these curative factors are what facilitate change in the group therapy. If we look at this case description (as describe above), we witness Hui's change process during his participation in the music therapy group. He was at first withdrawn, had a low self-esteem, and was unable to engage and form relationships. During the therapy, Hui began to receive the input form the surroundings. The other group members showed him new views on him and his actions. He became slowly a part of the group, he began to open, and act differently. He engaged and expressed himself. All these changes were made through the use of music. Music served as a mean to create an environment where it was possible for Hui to show feelings, to receive and give to the group without talking about their content. To our understanding, all the curative factors were in play in this therapeutic process.

According to the latest definition of music therapy (Bruscia, 2014), this approach to treatment used the experience-oriented strategy. Bruscia states that music as a process is where the therapist engages the client in “a music experience designs to allow the client to explore herself” (ibid, p. 181). The music is also seen as a representation due to the products it produces. Bruscia states: “This musical product is a reflection of everything that happened during the process; it documents everything that has been externalised, worked on, and transformed by the music-maker(s) or listeners”. We argue that this case clearly illustrates this.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this case report shows that how the transformative processes of inmates and prison guards can take place through group music therapy in a Chinese prison. It illustrates how the effects of music therapy on alleviating anxiety and depression, and improving self-esteem (Chen et al., 2016) that were found for this therapy may have occurred. We believe that music therapy has potential for helping prisoners mental health even in an institutionalized unfavourable environment, and we hope that this case report will be inspirational for music therapists working in this area.

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