

The Contribution of Confucian Music Thought System to Chinese Ritual and Music Civilization

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Abstract: *Confucian music thought, a cornerstone of the Confucian tradition, has profoundly influenced China's ritual and music culture for over two millennia. This paper examines the ideas of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi on music, emphasizing their focus on its social, educational, and aesthetic functions—guided by core principles such as the “integration of ritual and music,” the ideal of “perfection in both goodness and beauty,” and the concept of “harmony without uniformity.” Furthermore, it explores how these philosophical tenets were manifested in historical Chinese musical practices, spanning court ceremonies and folk traditions from the Zhou to the Qing dynasties. Ultimately, revisiting Confucian music thought today serves to draw upon traditional wisdom in guiding contemporary music development and perpetuating the legacy of Chinese ritual-music culture.*

Keywords: Confucian music thought, Ritual and music civilization, Social function, Educational function, Hierarchical concept.

1. Introduction

Confucianism has influenced the political, social, and cultural development of China for more than two thousand years. Confucian music thought, as an important component of the Confucian ideological system, has become a key element of Chinese ritual and music civilization and exerted a profound impact on the development of Chinese thought. A systematic sorting out and analysis of Confucian music thought are of great significance for the creative transformation and innovative development of contemporary music culture. In the process of music development in the new era, integrating, inheriting, and carrying forward the beneficial elements of Confucian music thought also have a positive significance for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

2. The Connotation of the Confucian Music Thought System

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, China's cultural and ideological spheres were unprecedentedly active, forming a prosperous situation of “numerous scholars emerging and a hundred schools of thought contending”. Many schools representing different classes and political forces appeared, among which the Confucian school was an important one.

The connotation of the Confucian music thought system represented by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi can be summarized in the following aspects:

First, it emphasizes the social function of music and affirms music's role in establishing normal social order and transforming social customs. Confucius took the norms of “li” (ritual) as the criterion for human behavior, stating: “Look not at what is contrary to ritual; listen not to what is contrary to ritual; speak not what is contrary to ritual; do not what is contrary to ritual.” In Confucian thought, “ren” (benevolence) is regarded as the highest criterion for judging things. Confucius said: “Benevolent people love others”, which was an unprecedented humanistic criterion in Chinese history.

In Confucian ideology, music serves ritual—that is, music

must be subordinate to ritual. Specifically, through different specific decorative regulations, the boundaries between nobility and inferiority, superiors and subordinates, relatives and strangers are distinguished. Therefore, he condemned the Ji family's ritual-transgressing behavior in music and dance activities.

Based on this criterion, Confucius said: “What has a man to do with ritual who is not benevolent? What has a man to do with music who is not benevolent?” Precisely based on this understanding, Confucius highly praised the Shao music, regarding it as reaching the realm of perfection in both goodness and beauty. Mencius viewed music from the perspective of his theory of benevolence and righteousness, holding that music is an artistic form expressing benevolence and righteousness and serves them. He believed that if one embodies benevolence and righteousness, joy arises from within; once this joy is expressed, one will naturally dance with hands and feet. In other words, people who possess benevolent and righteous thoughts and behaviors can experience the pleasure of music.

Xunzi built his own system based on Confucian thought while absorbing the essence of other schools. In terms of music thought, Xunzi directly inherited the Confucian school and enriched it. His main views on music are recorded in Discourse on Music and Enriching the State. Most of the text in Discourse on Music is directly quoted from The Book of Music, and it mainly elaborates his views on music against Mozi's thought of “rejecting music”, arguing that music can encourage people to strive for progress, unify them under the same great way, and enable them to cope with any changes in society.

Second, it attaches importance to the educational function of music. Confucius noticed that music can exert a spiritual influence on people and thus has an educational role; meanwhile, he believed that music exerts a profound impact on people's ideological cognition. He said: “There is nothing better than ritual for stabilizing the ruler and governing the people; there is nothing better than music for transforming social customs and changing habits.” He clearly distinguished the different roles of ritual and music. For example, he said: “Those who were advanced in ritual and music were the

common people; those who came later in ritual and music were the gentlemen. If I had to use one, I would follow the former.” (The Analects·Advanced) This means that he advocated selecting talents based on whether they had received education in ritual and music, preferring those who had received such education despite their humble origins to those who were of noble birth but had received the education later. Xunzi also believed that music is necessary for society, because listening to “elegant and eulogistic music” can broaden people’s minds, thereby enabling them to conquer enemies externally and practice modesty and harmony internally. Music has the power to influence people, so the “ancient kings” valued “ritual and music” and despised “evil music”.

Third, it emphasizes the aesthetic function of music. The Book of Music put forward the proposition of “things moving the heart and feelings being aroused” regarding the origin and function of music, that is: “All music arises from the heart; the movement of the heart is caused by things.” This is the earliest theoretical generalization of the relationship between the heart and things in the origin of music in China. It points out the characteristic of poetry and music expressing emotions, negates the views prevailing at that time that music originated from imitating nature or yin and yang, and contains materialistic cognitive elements.

In addition, The Book of Music proposed that “music unifies, while ritual distinguishes”, holding that the characteristic of music is “harmony” and its purpose is “promoting unity”—that is, through the performance of music and dance, people of different backgrounds can achieve emotional integration.

3. The Influence of the Confucian Music Thought System on Chinese Concepts of Ritual and Music

The core of Confucian music thought is the thought of ritual and music, which holds that music is subordinate to ritual and serves it. Music and dance activities themselves must also embody the norms and requirements of ritual; therefore, in such activities, the boundaries between different groups of people (nobility and inferiority, superiors and subordinates, relatives and strangers) need to be distinguished through different standards, forms, and contents. The strong hierarchical concept embodied in the Confucian music thought system has also become an important part of Chinese concepts of ritual and music, exerting a far-reaching influence on the development of music in later generations.

Influenced by Confucian thought of ritual and music, Yanle (banquet music) and Yayue (elegant music) in the court music of the Tang Dynasty were different musical forms used in national ritual activities. This classification of music was influenced by the Confucian music thought that “music is subordinate to ritual”. In the development process, Yayue gradually combined with the rulers’ ideology; at that time, music was also used as a means to embody the dignity and legitimacy of the rulers. Precisely because of its symbolic significance, Yayue gradually became an aspect of political culture. This was also influenced by Confucius’ emphasis on the social function of music—its role in establishing normal

social order and transforming social customs.

Confucian music thought has also profoundly influenced the field of music criticism. Evaluations of music in ancient China have always been influenced by Confucius’ views on the Shao and Wu music. When commenting on the Shao and Wu music, Confucius made different judgments, holding that the Shao was “perfect in goodness and also perfect in beauty”, while the Wu was “perfect in beauty but not perfect in goodness”. “Goodness” refers to the political and moral standards of music, and “beauty” refers to the artistic standards. This music criticism thought has influenced the criteria for judging music value today, and the principle of “perfection in both goodness and beauty” has become one of the important standards for music evaluation today.

The core of Confucian music thought is a set of musical ideological concepts based on ethical and moral theories. Confucianism holds that music is an essential accomplishment of the literati class—that is, starting from music, it puts forward a relatively systematic and innovative ideological cognition system for governing the country and pacifying the world. This thought has never disappeared in the dynastic changes of Chinese history; even in the Qing Dynasty ruled by the Manchus, the ruling ideology was influenced by Confucian music thought, and music was closely linked to governing the country.

4. The Influence of the Confucian Music Thought System on the Practice of Chinese Ritual and Music

The hierarchical concept of Confucian music thought has also had an important impact on the practice of ritual and music in later generations.

The Bayi (eight rows of eight dancers each) was the largest form of music and dance performance in the Western Zhou Dynasty, which could only be used by the highest-ranking people and was a symbol of hierarchy. This form of music and dance was influenced by the Confucian hierarchical concept.

The Zuobuji (standing music troupe) and Zuobuji (seated music troupe) in the Sui and Tang Dynasties were important manifestations of the hierarchical concept in Chinese concepts of ritual and music: the standing troupe was considered inferior, the seated troupe superior, with clear hierarchy, and the lowest status belonged to the performers of Yayue. Obviously, this practice was influenced by the clear hierarchical concept in Confucian music thought.

The music institutions of the Sui and Tang Dynasties—the Taichang Temple, Jiaofang (Royal Academy of Music), and Liyuan (Pear Garden)—were established to meet the needs of court Yanle. These high-quality music institutions served only the rulers, and ordinary people had no right to enjoy them. Although the court of the Sui and Tang Dynasties had its own affiliated music institutions which promoted the development of Tang court Yanle and music in later generations, they were a symbol of the hierarchical concept at that time.

In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the forms of ensemble music in the court and among the people had their own

characteristics: court ensembles had a large number of performers and a grand scale, focusing on momentum; folk ensembles were mainly small-scale combinations. This was influenced by Confucian music thought.

An important symbol of music in the Song and Yuan Dynasties was rhythmic harmony, especially for court music, where the lyrics and the expressed emotions were unified, and the inner cultivation and moral character expressed in the works could perfectly interpret the musical works. Court music in the Song and Yuan Dynasties attached great importance to whether the rhythm was harmonious; only in harmonious music could people feel the beauty of music. Whether it was the stylistic differences between northern and southern songs or the mixed performances from different regions, court music in the Song and Yuan Dynasties showed a high degree of integration of musical style and aesthetic taste. This practice was deeply influenced by Confucius' thought of "harmony without uniformity".

In the court banquet music of the Ming Dynasty, there were distinctions between grand banquets, medium banquets, regular banquets, and small banquets; each type of banquet used music and dance, but with slightly different specifications, rituals, and music. The obscene dances and music of the Yuan court were eliminated, and some elements of traditional Yayue were retained. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty attached great importance to learning from Han culture and inherited Confucian music thought; therefore, in their ruling order, they basically copied the Yayue system of the Ming Dynasty.

Confucian music thought has exerted an extremely far-reaching influence on the development of Chinese music culture. Its rich ancient aesthetic thoughts have left a precious cultural heritage for us Chinese people. Today, the purpose of studying Confucian music thought is to add the reasonable connotation of excellent traditional Chinese culture to the development of music at present, find the correct development direction for Chinese music, better inherit Chinese music culture through such research, and continuously carry forward Chinese ritual and music civilization.

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