

COMMENT ON “PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC”

Yuqi Jin

Yuqi Jin, College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5058-3502> |  jinyuqi@zjnu.edu.cn

Commented Article: FAN, Yifan. Philosophical speculation in traditional Chinese music. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e0240069, 2024.
Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14659>.

Received: 01/11/2023 | Approved: 10/11/2023 | Published: 20/03/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n4.e02400127>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.

COMMENT ON “PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC”

Yuqi Jin¹

Commented Article: FAN, Yifan. Philosophical speculation in traditional Chinese music. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e0240069, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14659>.

As Fan (2024) pointed out in the opening, Chinese civilization is often referred to as the civilization of rituals and music, highlighting the enduring importance of music throughout China’s history.

According to records in the *Analects of Confucius*, Duke Zhou “established rituals and created music,” using “rituals” as the fundamental framework to govern the world, considering “rituals” as the primary standard for maintaining social order. In the Zhou dynasty, “rituals” and “music” were closely intertwined, and rulers attached great importance to the social functions of music. They established a strict hierarchy for the application of music, including the use of musical instruments, the size of musical ensembles, and the arrangement of formations. During the Zhou dynasty, the first-ever arts institution in Chinese history was established, with the Grand Master of Music serving as the chief conductor, primarily responsible for the management, education and performance of music. It marked the inception of music education in China, laying the foundation for the professional development of Chinese music and pioneering the field of artistic education in China.

Fan (2024) summarizes the main ideological factors that influenced and shaped ancient Chinese music culture into three major components: Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism) and Buddhist philosophy. Confucian and Daoist philosophical concepts have ancient origins in China. Buddhist thought was introduced during the Eastern Han Dynasty and, gradually,

¹ Yuqi Jin, College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004 – China. ORCID: 0009-0001-5058-3502. E-mail: jinyuqi@zjnu.edu.cn.

it merged and resonated with Chinese culture during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, and the Sui and Tang Dynasties.

The aesthetic ideas about music, in Confucianism and Daoism, evolved from the embryonic stage of ancient Chinese music aesthetics, sharing a common origin. Confucianism primarily inherited thoughts concerning the relationship between music and society, as well as between rituals and music. It focused on the role of music in politics and education, and the pursuit of social harmony through rituals and music, and developed into a systematic philosophy of ritual and music. Daoism, on the other hand, primarily inherited ideas regarding the relationship between music and nature, aiming for harmony between music and nature, and the unity of humanity and the universe. It emphasized the concept of “observing the law of naturalness and cherishing truth,” opposed constraints on human nature and music, and called for music to express the individuals’ natural emotions. It valued authenticity and naturalness and, thus, developed into the philosophy of natural music.

The aesthetic philosophies about music of Confucianism and Daoism often manifest as a dialectical struggle. In the Pre-Qin period, Zhuangzi critiqued Confucianism for constraining human nature and music. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, Ji Kang put forth the idea that “Music is irrelevant to Grief or Joy”, meaning that music is an objective sound, and emotions, like grief and joy, arise in people’s spirits independently, with no causal relationship between the two. He challenged the Confucian “Expression Theory” in the *Book of Music*, which posited that music is an expression of human emotions and reflects individuals’ different emotional states, as well as the “Virtue Epistemology” theory, which suggested that music represents social, political, ethical and moral values. Despite these opposing views, the aesthetic ideas about music in Confucianism and Daoism continued to merge and evolve throughout history. During the Western Han dynasty, the *Book of Prince of Huainan* primarily prominently represented a Daoist perspective while assimilating elements of Confucian musical aesthetic thought. In the Wei and Jin dynasties, Ruan Ji’s *Theory of Music* reconciled Confucian and Daoist viewpoints by defending Confucian rituals and music from a Daoist standpoint, emphasizing naturalness. In the Ming Dynasty, the philosopher Li Zhi fused Confucian and Daoist elements, primarily emphasizing Daoist concepts, such as “observing the law of naturalness and cherishing truth.” He redefined the Confucian Expression Theory to elevate the subjectivity of music (Cai, 2023, p. 9-11).

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties periods, Buddhism developed in China, reaching its zenith during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Buddhism, upon its introduction to China, engaged in philosophical debates with mainstream Confucian values. Due to advocacy of Buddhism for asceticism, which was conducive to feudal rule, it quickly gained traction and blended with other value systems, mutually absorbing and influencing each other. Religious followers, to propagate and promote Buddhist culture

widely, often adapted and innovated upon local folk music, incorporating religious themes as a means and tool to attract and guide believers. It was through the impetus of Buddhist music that music, in the Tang Dynasty and beyond, gradually moved from the confines of rulers' walls into society. Musical artistry also became increasingly folk-oriented and secular.

The formation and development of ancient Chinese music are closely related to the evolution of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. It evolved continuously alongside changes in political systems and economic fortunes, serving as a living witness to history. Similarly, the development of Western musical aesthetics has undergone a long historical process. If we consider Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, as the core of ancient Chinese music aesthetics, then the central concern of Western musical aesthetics is often emotion theory.

From the perspective of emotion theory, discussions in music aesthetics can be traced back to ancient Greece. Aristotle, regarded as the foundational figure in Western emotion theory and music aesthetics, explicitly stated that music is an art of expression, similar to the view of expression in the *Book of Music* of Confucianism. For music, its subject matter is human emotions, and it imitates human emotions in various forms, making it a human-centered art.

With the arrival of the Renaissance, humanist musicians and theorists departed from the medieval music thought tradition centered around theology. Instead, they began to view music as a special means of revealing human nature and expressing inner human activities. This musical aesthetic idea continued into the Baroque period. The Enlightenment movement further propelled the development of emotion theory and music aesthetics by pursuing the optimal representation of emotional expression through music. By the 19th century, Western music aesthetics experienced unprecedented prosperity, and emotion theory music aesthetics reached its peak during this period. Represented by Hegel, idealist philosophy and Romanticism emphasized the significance of musical content. They viewed the content expressed through musical art as a “pure abstract subjectivity,” representing unspoken and abstract emotional experiences within individuals. After the mid-19th century, the emergence of empiricism provided the theoretical foundation for Eduard Hanslick's formalism in music aesthetics, challenging emotion theory music aesthetics. This challenge from formalism led to deeper contemplation of the issue of emotions in music, enriching the understanding of the emotional significance of music. In the face of this challenge, emotion theory music aesthetics continued to evolve and develop.

Chinese and Western people interpret the world and human nature according to their respective cultural spirits, leading to differences in the art they create and the theories that guide that art, which both reflect the world and express their inner selves. Harmony is a highly comparable aspect of Chinese and Western aesthetics. The origins of the concepts

of harmony, in both cultures, are related to music, but Western harmony is explained with clear numbers, emphasizing the scientific nature of music. Chinese harmony, on the other hand, is described using abstract concepts like wind and air, with an emphasis on the political function of music. Due to cultural differences, Chinese and Western concepts of harmony exhibit variations in content, expression and developmental paths. Apart from harmony, traditional Chinese music aesthetics emphasize self-awareness, encouraging listeners to elevate themselves through experiencing the spirituality of music, ultimately achieving unity between the individual and music. Traditional Chinese instrumental music often pursues subtle and restrained forms of expression. In contrast, Western music aesthetics place a greater emphasis on using music to release, purify and transcend the self. It emphasizes understanding the essence of music. Western classical music often uses intuitive sound effects to convey emotions. Audiences perceive the composer's emotions through aspects, such as rhythm, dynamics, melody and harmony. These different approaches reflect the cultural distinctions and the diversity of aesthetic ideas between China and the West.

To sum up, music has gone through a long journey both in China and in the West. Traditional Chinese music emphasizes the ethical and moral contagious role of music art, and theoretically emphasizes the high degree of unity of beauty and goodness, while Western music is based on the entity, form and clear cultural nature. "Harmony", as the common aesthetic condensation, pursued by Chinese and Western cultural ideals, has shown different trends. When it comes to the relationship between man and nature, China advocates the "unity of nature and man", while the West pays more attention to the "separation of nature and man". In terms of artistic expression, China has an "ethical and moral" tendency, while the West advocates scientific cognition. Through a detailed explanation of the three schools of thought of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Fan (2024) has revealed the characteristics of Chinese music and the ideological origin of these characteristics.

REFERENCES

CAI, Z.D. **History of Chinese Music Aesthetics**. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2nd Ed., 2003.

FAN, Y. Philosophical speculation in traditional Chinese music. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, "Eastern thought", e0240069, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14659>.