

The Transition of Early Chinese Ritual and Music Systems after Ritual Institution by Duke of Zhou

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Abstract: “For the courses to be pursued by men, the influence of music is great”. This quote is from Yue Ji: The Origin of Music chapter, where “Yue” refers to the ritual and music system, a significant political institution in the pre-Qin period of China. The scholarly understanding of “Li and Yue” dates back to the Xia and Shang dynasties. Originally, “Li” referred to ancient sacrificial practices, gradually evolving into a fundamental aspect of feudal hierarchy, while “Yue” was developed specifically to accompany the various rituals performed by aristocracies ^[11]. Drawing upon the historical context, lessons of history, and the needs of governance, the sages of ancient China, culminating in the Zhou Dynasty, formulated a comprehensive system of rituals and music (Li and Yue). This system not only reflects social hierarchy and order but also carries the functions of cultural transmission and moral education, which is significant for understanding the development of ancient Chinese society and civilization, as well as contemporary cultural identity and inheritance. Therefore, research on the rituals and music system has remained a popular topic in academia ^[12].

1. Introduction

The roots of ritual and music run deep from ancient China. Early Xia and Shang Dynasties witnessed the concurrent practices of ritual and music in diet and sacrificial activities. The systematic sacrificial ceremonies in oracle bones and bronze inscriptions in Yin Ruins recorded the application of music in sacrificial activities. However, during the Xia Dynasty when people “honored life” and the Shang Dynasty when they “revered spirits” in their religious beliefs, the concept of a politically significant “ritual and music system” had not yet emerged ^[9]. It was not until Duke of Zhou’s institution of ritual and music that political content was infused into the ritual and music system, marking the formal establishment of “ritual and music” as a means to “govern the country, stabilize the state, order the people, and benefit future generations”.

2. The Early Development of Xia and Shang Ritual and Music Systems

Shuowen Jiezi states: “Li is the guideline for behavior; people who act in accordance with the ritual system can attain blessings.” It can be seen that “Li” did not signify hierarchy and ethics at first, but its original meaning was objects used in religious rituals to worship gods. Over time, it extended to refer to the act of worshipping gods. The emergence of class societies gradually

transformed it into a system of social status in slave and feudal societies and eventually evolved into etiquette governing people's daily behavior ^[8]. As for "Yue", due to the limited productivity and a lack of effective understanding of nature in ancient times, people were unable to fight when facing harsh living environments, so they could only pray to heaven for peace through witchcraft ^[5]. In the Ancient Music chapter of Midsummer Almanac of *Master Lv's Spring and Autumn Annals*, it is recorded that "In ancient times, during the rule of Lord Zhu Xiang, there were frequent strong winds, causing an excess of yang energy. This led to the scattering and disintegration of all things, preventing fruits from ripening. As a solution, the scholar Shi Da created the five-stringed se (se: a twenty-five-stringed plucked instrument) to harness yin energy and bring stability to all living beings." Therefore, music in China, at its inception, was intertwined with witchcraft and had a significant impact on people ^[6]. The social nature of private ownership in the Xia and Shang Dynasties marked music and dance with deep class imprints. The music and dance of these periods, such as "Daxia" and "Dahuo", differed significantly in nature and content from primitive music and dance. They reflected the qualitative change in music content after the establishment of private ownership and became tools and means for emperors to extol their virtues ^[2].

3. The Establishment of Ritual and Music Systems in the Western Zhou Dynasty

3.1. Historical Background of "Duke of Zhou's Ritual Institution"

Agricultural economy and farming civilization were the basis for the emergence and development of ritual and music culture ^[3]. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the improvement of farming tools and crops and the introduction of new technologies made agriculture flourish, and the technology was fully developed. People comprehensively understood the increasingly complex changes in nature and society, and their selfish desires swelled ^[4]. When their desires were not satisfied, contradictions would become increasingly apparent. In 1046 BC, King Wu of Zhou finally overthrew the Shang Dynasty and established the Western Zhou Dynasty. After establishing his rule, King Wu faced a turbulent society. He sought to win over and reward suitable officials and allies, and remnants of the previous dynasty sought opportunities to rebel, leading to ongoing conflicts among the subjects. In response to these numerous contradictions, the Duke of Zhou decided to transform the ritual system from the religious domain into the basic social norms governing various aspects of aristocratic society and national political life, to alleviate tensions among different classes, balance the power of the nobility and vassals, and ensure the hereditary position of the Zhou monarch as the co-ruler ^[10].

3.2. Content of Ritual and Music Systems

The establishment of ritual and music systems in the Western Zhou Dynasty was closely tied to the goals of consolidating political power. As kinship and feudalism were initially rooted in the core political systems to maintain the stability of the regime and the territory, the ritual and music systems derived from these systems primarily served as a political framework. It delineated the powers and responsibilities of vassal states in specific matters like rituals, ceremonies, and warfare, and allocated resources such as residences, tableware, chariots, standard clothing, musical instruments, and ceremonial attire based on social hierarchies, as well as norms for social life. Furthermore, the ritual and music system served not only as a political framework but also as a set of social behavior norms. Through its symbolic ritual and procedural structural norms, it permeated various aspects of people's lives. Strict regulations governed elements such as timing, locations, participants, attire, positions, wording, processions, and musical performances in ritual and music practices ^[9], imparting strong standardization. Finally, the ritual and music systems were internalized into people's morality through social norms and behavioral practices, aiming to educate and influence society. By incorporating kinship-based ethics such as "respect for elders" and

“caring for kin” into the ritual and music system, people in Zhou reinforced familial cohesion and a sense of community. Individuals living within such familial groups were inclined to prioritize the welfare of the community, which contributed to the cultivation of positive social values. Learning the ritual and music system had a significant educational aspect in ceremonies, particularly in sacrificial rites, weddings, and funerals, all of which were subject to the system’s influence, highlighting its educative significance.

4. Influence of Ritual and Music Systems after the Institution

Overall, the establishment of the ritual and music system in the Western Zhou Dynasty represented a significant adaptation by the Zhou people to the systems and culture of the Xia and Shang Dynasties, which not only consolidated the Zhou regime but also played a vital role. Grounded in the idea of “heaven’s mandate”, the Zhou people actively practiced “virtuous governance” and emphasized the use of ritual and music to regulate society. In the Zhou Dynasty, the ritual and music system developed further, forming a complete ritual system and creating various ceremonies and rituals. These rituals were not merely concerned with external forms and actions but also focused on their impact on individuals’ inner values and character. Musical instruments and music became integral parts of this system, influencing people’s emotions and atmospheres through rhythm and melodies. People received ritual and music education from an early age and shaped their own conduct and habits by learning and following ritual norms. Dance and music also became indispensable elements of social activities and gatherings, fostering a sense of belonging and social identity. Moreover, the ritual and music system exerted a profound influence on subsequent Chinese culture, forming the foundation of traditional Chinese culture and becoming a vital part of Chinese civilization. Numerous classical Chinese texts, such as the “Zhou Yi” and “Shang Shu,” contain descriptions and discussions of ritual and music. Traditional Chinese arts like music, dance, and theater were also influenced by the ritual and music system, carrying rich cultural significance and philosophical traditions.

The ritual and music system underwent a lengthy evolution, originating from the witchcraft and religious culture of the Xia and Shang Dynasties, thriving as the political leadership system of the ruling class in the Western Zhou Dynasty, and suffering destruction during the tumultuous Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods. This marked a ritual transformation from being “commanded by the emperor” to “commanded by the vassals” and further to “commanded by the great officials”^[1]. This process indicated that the Zhou ritual system, which struggled to adapt to societal changes and maintain the authority of the Zhou monarch and his subjects, gradually disintegrated. Therefore, the religious aspects of Chinese ritual and music culture began to diminish, and its role in social governance gradually declined. However, the saying “disintegration of rituals and music” did not entail an actual disintegration. In the turbulent social environment at that time, the political system gradually loosened, and the whole society was opened to a certain extent, which led to more interpretations of rituals and music. Confucianism is a typical example. Confucianism defined the essential features of rituals and, as a principal means of socialization and rationalization, emphasized that “ritual” serves as a universal code of conduct for humanity. It expanded the scope of “ritual” beyond aristocratic life into “commoner’s rituals”^[7]. Consequently, what was once limited to traditional aristocratic culture developed across different layers of society and gradually transformed into cultural norms for the entire society. The disintegration of ritual systems does not mean the disappearance of culture but has been selected by history as a more positive heritage of traditional Confucian culture, which will affect China for thousands of years to come.

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