

The Development Path of Ancient Chinese Music

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Abstract: This paper explores primitive dance and primitive instruments in ancient Chinese music, focusing on their significance and impact on Chinese cultural and social development. By examining early forms of dance and primitive instruments, it reveals their unique roles as cultural expressions and tools for social interaction in ancient society. The research methodology integrates literary analysis and archaeological findings to deepen our understanding of the evolution of dance and instruments across different historical periods and their cultural significance. The aim of this study is to provide new perspectives and a deeper understanding of ancient music, highlighting its significant contribution to the continuity of Chinese cultural heritage. Through these explorations, we gain insights into how ancient music, through its distinct forms and functions, not only reflected the cultural landscape of its time but also profoundly influenced contemporary cultural identity and societal perceptions.

1. Introduction

China is renowned as an ancient civilization and a land of ritual and education, a title stemming from its long history and rich cultural heritage. Ancient Chinese music, as a vital component of this cultural legacy, not only continues the cultural lineage but also reflects the evolution of social structures and ideological concepts. This paper focuses on two key elements of ancient music: primitive dance and primitive instruments. These elements not only form the core of musical practice but also represent among the earliest artistic expressions in Chinese culture. From the early primitive societies to feudalism and through to today's socialist society, dance and instruments have played varying roles, documenting the trajectory of social change and cultural evolution. Through a deep exploration of these elements, we gain a better understanding of the unique position and value of ancient music in Chinese culture. ^[1]

2. Literature review

The development path of ancient Chinese music can be traced back to primitive society, where music was primarily expressed through primitive dance and instruments. Primitive dance was an essential part of early human life and ritual activities, often accompanying hunting, harvest, and sacrificial ceremonies. These dances reflected early humans' reverence for nature and their joy in life. The instruments used in these dances were mostly simple percussion instruments, such as stone chimes, bone flutes, and clay ocarinas. These instruments were not only tools for musical

performance but also important means for ancient people to record and convey information.

The Neolithic period marks a significant starting point for ancient Chinese music. Archaeologists have discovered early instruments in multiple sites. For instance, the bone flutes unearthed from the Jiahu site in Wuyang, Henan, are considered some of the oldest instruments in the world, dating back about 9,000 years. The discovery of Jiahu bone flutes suggests that as early as the Neolithic period, ancient people had already mastered the techniques of making and playing instruments, and these techniques were quite advanced. In addition to bone flutes, the clay ocarina was also an important instrument of this period. The design of the sound holes and mouthpiece of the ocarina indicates an initial understanding of acoustic principles.

Over time, primitive instruments gradually developed into more complex forms. The bronze instruments of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, such as the chime bells and stone chimes, marked the further maturity of ancient Chinese music culture. These instruments not only played a crucial role in court rituals but also reflected social hierarchies and power structures.^[2] The craftsmanship of the chime bells and stone chimes was exquisite, and their tones were accurate, demonstrating the high level of skill and profound musical theoretical knowledge of ancient craftsmen.

In summary, primitive dance and instruments laid the foundation for the development of ancient Chinese music. They were not only important tools for ancient people to express emotions and engage in social activities but also became the source and driving force for the flourishing of later musical culture. Through the study of primitive dance and instruments, we can gain a deeper understanding of the development trajectory and cultural connotations of ancient Chinese music.

3. Primitive Dance and Primitive Musical Instruments

3.1 Primitive music and dance

Firstly, primitive music and dance refer to the musical and dance forms from ancient times through the Xia and Shang dynasties. These forms combined singing, dancing, and music into an integrated art form. Due to the low productivity and development level of primitive society, the achievements in art were limited and cannot be compared to the artistic accomplishments of today. Representative works of primitive music and dance include "The Music of the Gaotian Clan," "Wax Words," "The Music of the Zhuxiang Clan," "Cloud Gate," and "Xianchi," among others.

I will describe some of these representative music and dance works in detail:

The Music of the Gaotian Clan: Originating from the Gaotian Clan, known for their singing and dancing prowess, all their dances and songs were created during the labor of the tribe's people. Thus, "The Music of the Gaotian Clan" reflects the scenes of labor and life of the primitive agrarian and pastoral people. This work is documented in "Lǐshǐ Chunqiu - Ancient Music."^[3]

Cloud Gate: Also known as "Cloud Gate Dance," it is traditionally attributed to the time of the Yellow Emperor. The content of this music and dance praises the achievements of the Yellow Emperor, celebrating his creation of all things, unification of the people, and great virtues likened to clouds. This music and dance also served a totemic worship purpose, venerating the cloud totem. In primitive society, the consciousness of worshiping gods and the belief in the animism of all things held significant weight in the minds of the primitive people. They believed that everything was under the control of deities, and thus, primitive music and dance often took "praising the gods" as their central theme.

3.2 Primitive musical instruments

In China's primitive society, several primitive musical instruments were discovered, including

bone flutes, bone whistles, pottery ocarinas, stone chimes, pottery bells, and earthen drums. These instruments can be classified by their playing methods into wind instruments and percussion instruments, or by their materials into categories such as bone, stone, earth, leather, and bamboo.

Representative instruments include the Jiahu bone flute, pottery ocarina, and bone whistle. The "Jiahu bone flute" is the earliest musical instrument discovered in China, unearthed from the Neolithic site in Jiahu Village, Wuyang County, Henan Province. Excavations took place in 1986, 1987, and 2001, with a total of 25 bone flutes discovered in 1986 and 1987, dating back more than 8,000 years. These bone flutes were made from the ulnae of cranes and varied in shape with five, six, seven, or eight finger holes. Some of these flutes could even produce a complete seven-note scale. After the bone flutes were unearthed in 1987, experts at the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics conducted a pitch measurement on these instruments. They played the Hebei folk song "Little Cabbage" on the spot, and the accuracy of the pitch and the clarity of the tone amazed the experts. This suggests that the ancient ancestors had a certain level of understanding of pitch concepts and scale patterns. The excavation of these bone flutes provides significant reference value for today's fields of cultural relics archaeology and ancient music research in China.[4]

From 2070 BCE to 476 BCE, China entered the slave society era, successively establishing the first slave dynasty, the Xia Dynasty (2070 BCE - 1600 BCE), the second slave dynasty, the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE - 1046 BCE), the third slave dynasty, the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE - 771 BCE), and finally reaching the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (771 BCE - 476 BCE). The main focus of musical research during this period remained on music and dance, as well as musical instruments.

4. Historical Evolution of Music and Dance Instruments

4.1 Xia and Shang Dynasties

The music and dance of the Xia and Shang periods were a continuation of the primitive music and dance, with little change in form. However, in terms of content, they reflected a significant cultural shift as society transitioned into a class-based system. During the Western Zhou period, the characteristics of music and dance began to lean towards ceremonial court music. In contrast, the music of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods was distinguished by the doctrines and viewpoints of various academic schools. Representative music and dance works from the Xia and Shang periods include "Da Xia" and "Da Wu." "Da Xia" was a music and dance piece created in the Xia Dynasty to praise Yu the Great for his efforts in controlling the floods. "Da Wu" was composed during the Shang Dynasty to celebrate King Tang's conquest of Jie. In general, these two music and dance pieces praised "people" rather than "gods," marking a departure from the primitive music and dance that focused on worshiping deities. This shift was due to the changing social structure, which altered people's musical concepts.

During the Xia and Shang periods, although relatively few musical instruments have been unearthed, they hold symbolic significance in the history of Chinese musical instruments. Excavated instruments include bronze bells, stone chimes, clay rattles, and notably, the "Tiger Pattern Special Stone Chime."

The "Tiger Pattern Special Stone Chime" is considered a masterpiece among the instruments unearthed from the Shang Dynasty. Discovered in 1950 in Wu Guan Village, Anyang County, Henan Province, this chime dates back over 3,000 years and represents a late-period artifact from the Shang Dynasty's excavated instruments. Crafted meticulously with intricate carvings and a clear tone, it is made entirely of marble. The name "Tiger Pattern" comes from the bold and vigorous tiger motif engraved on its front surface.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE - 771 BCE), which was the pinnacle of culture in

China's slave society, there were six representative ceremonial dances known as the "Six Generations of Music and Dance" performed at the Zhou court.

In addition, during the Zhou Dynasty, there emerged the "Zheng, Wei Songs," a collective term for folk songs that circulated in regions like Zheng, Wei, Song, and Qi. These songs differed significantly from the characteristics of courtly music (Ya Yue). The Zheng, Wei Songs were short, segmented in form, and characterized by unrestrained and undisciplined musical styles, lacking profound themes of praise. As a result, Confucian scholars often viewed them as "songs of a dying state," contributing to the accelerated decline of ceremonial music and etiquette ("Li beng yue huai").

Furthermore, the Zhou Dynasty established specialized music institutions. The "Da Si Le" (Grand Minister of Music) was the overall title for the music institution of the Zhou court, presided over by the Chief Musician. This marked the earliest known music education institution in Chinese history, focusing on the teachings of "Ya Yue" (court music). The establishment of these music institutions during the Zhou period coincided with the emergence of poetry collections such as the "Book of Songs" (Shi Jing), compiled and edited by Confucius, and the "Chu Ci" (Songs of Chu), a poetic genre created by the Warring States poet Qu Yuan, featuring famous works like "Li Sao," "Tian Wen," and "Jiu Ge."

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, an era marked by unprecedented intellectual vigor, various schools of thought debated the social role of music, contributing to a diverse intellectual landscape known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought." The major schools included Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism, each presenting their theories and viewpoints on music.

Confucianism, represented by figures such as Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, emphasized the societal and educational functions of music. Confucius believed that "there is no better way to change customs than through music" and stressed the importance of music in governing people peacefully. He proposed the study of "rites, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics."

Mencius advocated the theory of "human nature is inherently good" and promoted the idea of mutual enjoyment of music between rulers and the people. He believed that "words of kindness are not as effective as the deep impact of kind sounds," emphasizing the importance for a ruler to deeply connect with the hearts of the people.

On the other hand, Xunzi argued the theory of "human nature is inherently evil" and acknowledged the necessity of music as a means to alleviate human emotions. He strongly opposed the Mohist idea of "rejecting music," asserting that music is indispensable for human expression and cannot be discarded.

These philosophical debates and insights into the role of music reflected broader discussions on governance, ethics, and human nature during this pivotal period in Chinese history.

The representative figure of Mohist music philosophy is Mozi, who advocated "Non-Music," considering music to be harmful and of no benefit. He opposed music's societal function by positing a stark contrast between spiritual and material realms, completely negating its social utility.

In Daoist music philosophy, the representatives are Laozi and Zhuangzi. Laozi, a philosopher from the Spring and Autumn period known for the "Tao Te Ching," rejected artificial music, promoting the concept of "Dao follows nature, action through inaction," and advocating for the viewpoint of "great music seeks silence." Zhuangzi, author of the book "Zhuangzi," also opposed artificial forms of music, proposing a natural and spiritualized approach to music.

4.2 Qin and Han dynasties

From 221 BCE to 220 CE, China entered the feudal society of the Qin and Han dynasties. During this period, a music institution known as the "Yuefu" emerged, evolving from the Zhou dynasty's "Da Si Le" music institution. The Yuefu music institution was established early in the Qin dynasty and continued into the Han dynasty. Its role was to collect folk music, create and record lyrics, adapt melodies, and arrange musical instruments. During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, Li Yannian served as the highest leader of the Yuefu institution, making significant contributions to its development.

Music during the Qin and Han periods primarily consisted of song and dance performances. This form of music underwent significant changes from primitive dance music, evolving into a more refined and comprehensive art form characterized by vivid performances. Thus, music and arts reached a higher stage of development during this period. With political stability and economic prosperity in the Han dynasty, new forms of music such as Xianghe songs and Guqin music emerged as the highest forms of music and dance. Xianghe songs initially referred to folk music in northern China during the Han dynasty, evolving through stages from simple chanting (referred to as "Tu Ge") to more developed forms known as "Dan Ge," and ultimately to the highest form known as "Xianghe Da Qu" (grand songs of harmony).

Guqin music, on the other hand, utilized percussion and wind instruments in ensemble performances. Traditional musical instruments included bamboo flutes and transverse flutes, among others.

4.3 Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties period

From 220 to 589 CE, China entered the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties period. This era witnessed the development of music characterized by the integration of folk music, court music, minority ethnic music, and Buddhist music, resulting in a significant cultural fusion in musical expressions. One prominent form that emerged was the "Qing Shang Music," which was the primary form of folk music from the Han dynasty. "Qing Shang Music" encompassed ancient tunes from the Central Plains, Wu songs from Jiangnan, and Western melodies from Jingchu. It consisted of three modes: Ping Diao (even tones), Qing Diao (clear tones), and Se Diao (silk-stringed instrument tones), which were derived from the "Xianghe San Diao" (three modes of harmony).

The prosperity of "Qing Shang Music" during this period earned it the title of "Huaxia Zheng Sheng" (authentic voice of the Chinese). The integration of Buddhist music, including the development of Sanskrit chants, introduced mystical and ethereal elements that emphasized detachment from the mundane world, challenging the dominance of Confucian thought. Representing this shift was Ji Kang from the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, particularly his work "Sheng Wu Ai Le Lun" (Music is Irrelevant to Grief or Joy), which argued that music is an objective entity and that emotions expressed in music are not inherently tied to specific musical elements.

4.4 Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties period

From 582 to 960 CE, China entered the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties period, with a focus on the musical developments during the Tang Dynasty. The highest ritual and music administrative institution of the Tang Dynasty was the Taichang Temple. Under the Taichang Temple, there were offices such as the Dàyuèshǔ (Office of Music), Gǔchǔshǔ (Office of Musicians), and additionally, the Jìàofáng (Palace Music Bureau) and the Lǚyuán (Pear Garden), which were crucial musical institutions of the Tang Dynasty.

The Dàyuèshǔ primarily supervised yǎyuè (court music) and yànyuè (banquet music), and was responsible for training and assessing musicians. It was the largest music institution in China's history in terms of scale and quality, with tens of thousands of personnel under governmental jurisdiction. The Gǔchǔshǔ oversaw ceremonial music for processions and court rituals, also managing theatrical performances with hundreds to thousands of participants. The Jìdǎofáng was a palace-controlled institution for training and cultivating musicians, operating both inside and outside the palace walls.

The Lǚyuán, established by Emperor Xuanzong within the imperial court, focused on the study of fǎqǔ (Buddhist hymns) and instrumental music. It was personally instructed by Emperor Xuanzong, hence often referred to as "Emperor's Pear Garden Students." During the prosperous Tang era, yànyuè reached its peak, originating from ancient court music of the Zhou Dynasty. Due to social and ruling class interests, yànyuè evolved to encompass both broader and more specific forms. Broadly, "yàn" refers to music used during feasts by ruling classes, while specifically, "yàn" music denotes one of the nine categories of music during the Tang era.

Tang court yànyuè was divided into "zuòbǔjǐ" (seated performance) and "lǐbǔjǐ" (standing performance), reflecting the comprehensive development of court music and dance during the flourishing Tang period. Influenced by the integration and development of Buddhist music during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Tang Dynasty witnessed the emergence of "bìānwǎn" (narrative songs) in Buddhist temples. These were narrative musical forms designed to propagate religious doctrines, blending folk and religious music elements. The famous "The Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Coat" was adapted by Emperor Xuanzong from the Indian Buddhist hymn "Brahman Melody."

4.5 Song, Jin, and Yuan periods

From 960 to 1368 CE, China entered the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods, during which significant changes occurred in musical forms. Following the Tang Dynasty, subsequent dynasties could no longer sustain the costly court music and dance due to financial constraints. Feudal rulers ceased investing heavily in music, causing court musicians to lack economic support. Many musicians thus turned to the folk sector, marking the unprecedented rise of folk music.

During this era, fixed music performance venues such as "wǎshè" and "gōulán" emerged, along with numerous music guilds. The increase in folk artists diversified musical forms, with "shuōchàng" (narrative singing) becoming the predominant form of music in the Song Dynasty. Various forms of shuōchàng, such as "chàngzuàn," "zhūgōngdiào," and "huòlángér," showcased the richness and diversity of Song Dynasty music. These narrative forms combined music with storytelling, expressing themes through both spoken word and sung lyrics.

For instance, "zhūgōngdiào" was a large-scale narrative singing form characterized by its diverse tonalities, connecting many melodies from different tonal systems in its performance. This polyphonic narrative musical form was renowned for its grand structure and rich melodies. One of the most complete surviving works of "zhūgōngdiào" is Dong Jieyuan's "Xī Xiāng Jì Zhū Gōng Diào" from the Jin Dynasty.

Additionally, drama became a mainstream development during the Song Dynasty, giving rise to Song and Jin Dynasty operas, Southern Drama, and other theatrical arts. This period also saw the emergence of notable figures and representative works, such as Guan Hanqing's "Dòu É Yuān," Ma Zhixuan's "Hàn Gōng Qiū," and Wang Shifu's "Xī Xiāng Jì." Significant Southern Drama productions included "Jīng Chāi Jì," "Bàiyuè Tíng," "Liú Zhīyuǎn," and "Shā Gǒu Jì."

4.6 Ming and Qing dynasties

From 1368 to 1911 CE, China entered the Ming and Qing dynasties, during which the development of music continued in the footsteps of the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods but flourished even further. The narrative singing music of the Ming and Qing periods continued the tradition of the Song and Yuan periods, evolving to include new forms like "tán cí" and "gǔ cí."

"Tán cí" originated in the southern regions, evolving from the influence of "Táo Zhēn" during the Song Dynasty, with Suzhou tán cí being particularly representative. Notable artists of tán cí included Chén Yùqián, Yú Xiùshān, and Mǎ Rúfēi, collectively known as the "Chén tune, Yú tune, Mǎ tune," each artist presenting unique singing styles, such as the mournful and vigorous "Chén tune."

"Gǔ cí," on the other hand, emerged in the mid-Ming Dynasty in northern China as a form of narrative art that developed from the drum songs of the Song and Yuan dynasties. By this period, gǔ cí further integrated regional dialects, folk songs, and local tunes, resulting in styles like "Méihuā dàgǔ," "Líhuā dàgǔ," and "Jīng yùn dàgǔ."

During the Ming and Qing periods, traditional Chinese opera ("xì qǔ") began with the "Four Great Melodies" of the Ming Dynasty. These included the four regional opera styles of southern China: Hǎi yán qǔán, Yì yáng qǔán, Yú yáo qǔán, and Kūn shān qǔán, originating from the southeastern coastal regions of China. Each melody had distinct characteristics and vocal structures, laying the foundation for future developments in Chinese opera.

Kūn shān qǔán, originating from Kunshan in Jiangsu Province, was particularly influential, also known as "Kūn qǔ" or "Kūn jù." Initially founded by Gù Jiān and later refined by Wèi Liángfǔ, it absorbed the strengths of southern melodies like Yì yáng qǔán and Hǎi yán qǔán while incorporating the rigorous structure of northern opera. This new form, known as New Kūn shān qǔán, emphasized delicate vocal styles with a "silken tone" and was accompanied primarily by flutes, shengs, pipas, and other instruments.

A prominent figure in Ming Dynasty opera was Tāng Xiǎnzhǔ, renowned as a playwright and often dubbed the "Shakespeare of the East" for his masterpiece, "Lín chuān sì mèng" ("The Four Dreams of Linchuan"). This work, also known as the "Jade Mingtang Four Dreams," includes "Nán Kē jì," "Zǐ Chāi jì," "Hán Dān jì," and "Mǔdān tíng," and remains one of the most extensively preserved ancient operatic scores.

Moreover, during the late Qing and early Ming periods, "Luàn tán" emerged as a major development, primarily featuring the "bǎng zǐ qǔán" and "pí huáng qǔán" melodies. Bǎng zǐ qǔán, known as "Qín qǔán," was distinguished by its spirited and forceful characteristics, while pí huáng qǔán encompassed the melodies of Xī pí and Èr huáng, becoming one of the favored melodies in Peking opera. The application of these techniques effectively addressed the issue of vocal gender neutrality in opera.

Representative artists of Peking opera included the early "Three Ding Jia" and later the "Four Great Dan," namely Méi Lánfāng, Xún Huìshēng, Shàng Xiǎoyún, and Chéng Yànqīū. Famous productions from Peking opera included "Kōng Chéng Jì" ("The Empty City Stratagem") and "Zhào shì gū'ér" ("The Orphan of Zhao"), marking the significant cultural inheritance of Chinese intangible heritage through the development of Peking opera.

Ancient Chinese music is a form of music that dates back to ancient China. The history of music carries rich cultural and historical significance, embodying the wisdom and emotions of the Chinese nation. Chinese music history has developed into an indispensable part of our lives today. Even as we trace it back thousands of years, there remain many aspects of its history that have yet to be fully explored and understood. This is a brief description of the development of ancient Chinese music history.

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