



COMMENT ON “THE CIVILIZATIONAL RETURN OF EASTERN “RITES AND MUSIC” AND WESTERN “ETHICS” IN MODERN MUSIC EDUCATION”



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COMMENT ON “THE CIVILIZATIONAL RETURN OF EASTERN “RITES AND MUSIC” AND WESTERN “ETHICS” IN MODERN MUSIC EDUCATION”

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Li (2024) confronts a significant issue in contemporary Chinese music education: the absence of spiritual civilization.

Li (2024) contends that current music education emphasizes music technology over music understanding against the backdrop of the industrialization of music production. The intrinsic emotional value of music is eroded, and utilitarianism prevails in music composition and teaching. Modern music education dissects musical elements, divorcing them from musical aesthetics and overly emphasizing the technical aspects of musical works while neglecting the emotional content of music. This gradual shift places the entertainment value of music ahead of its emotional significance. In response to this issue, the author hopes to find a solution by drawing upon Eastern rites, music civilization and Western ethical thoughts.

China’s rites and music civilization emerged with ancient sacrificial rites, playing a crucial role in later governance, social order, cultural development, and more. As rites and music culture progressed to the Zhou Dynasty, Duke Zhou collected and organized the

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cultural content of rites and music from predecessors. Ultimately, he “established rites and created music” for governance and social order.

Confucius devoted his entire life to reviving rites and music culture, advocating for integrating music, aesthetic and moral education. In Confucius’s musical philosophy, music is considered the art of emotions and life, reflecting one’s mental state and emotional changes. Compared to other forms of education, music education directly and vividly promotes the development of moral concepts. Throughout the process of receiving music education, the beauty of music and its intense artistic expressions subtly influence students, leading to a transformation in their behavior. This achieves the educational significance of Confucius’s advocacy for the moral influence of music education.

Confucius promoted “rites” and emphasized that the ultimate goal of rites and music was harmony. He stated, “Rituals must be based on harmony, and comportment must follow principles,” and “Songs and music are the harmony of benevolence” (Huang, 2021, p. 35). Confucius implemented rites and music education to coordinate these elements to educate individuals, ensuring everyone adheres to social order and behavioral norms. In doing so, harmony prevails in interpersonal relationships, society becomes harmonious and the nation attains peace. Confucius aimed for harmony on three levels: personal cultivation in human relationships, political harmony at the national level, and cosmic harmony between humans and the heavens and earth. In summary, Confucius’s “harmony” philosophy encompasses individual moral development, political harmony at the national level, and the cosmic unity of humans with the heavens and earth. As individual cultivation improves, harmonious interactions among people follow, leading to a harmonious society and, with societal harmony, the nation achieves harmony, ultimately reaching the elevated philosophical state of unity with the heavens and earth.

Confucius’s pursuit of harmony in rites and music extends to a higher level, which is the heaven and earth’s harmony. “Music is the harmony of heaven and earth; rites are the order of heaven and earth” (Dai, 2022, p.69). “Rites” represents the order between heaven and earth, while “music” embodies the harmony between heaven and earth. “The mean is the great foundation of the world; harmony is the way of the world. Achieving balance and harmony, the heavens and the earth find their places, and all things thrive.” The world’s fundamental essence is the “mean,” and the universal principles to be followed by all are embodied in “harmony.” Reaching the state of balance and harmony ensures that heaven, earth, and all things achieve a harmonious state. The practice of rites and music aims to achieve this “harmony.” Rites and music can regulate people’s words and actions, making them conform to “rites” and adhere to the principle of moderation. National governance, stable social order and personal cultivation rely on rites and music as carriers, aiming to achieve harmony in human relationships and political harmony between humans and the

heavens and earth. The spiritual elements advocated by Confucius, within rites and music, are precisely what contemporary music and music education lack.

In music education, ancient Western philosophers presented views similar to Confucius’ ones. Aristotle believed music served a specific function in society, aiming to cultivate “noble sentiments for the sake of freedom.” It could enable citizens of the city-state to attain noble sentiments and the “virtue” required by the city-state, and the individual citizens’ collective virtue would contribute to the virtue of the city-state, thus forming a virtuous state. Aristotle affirmed the role of music education in the construction of the city-state. Aristotle argued that the educational function of music is carried out through its “purification” and “imitation.” Firstly, music can purify and elevate one’s inner self, bringing about a sense of tranquility. It makes people “as if healed and purified” because “music, by its nature, belongs to the delightful, and in the harmonious melodies and rhythms, there seems to be a kind of harmony or kinship with the human soul.” Therefore, Aristotle believed that music is closely related to the human psyche. In “Politics” (Volume VIII), Aristotle proposed that music can have a “therapeutic and purifying” effect on individuals, producing a “harmless pleasure.” This indicates that Aristotle believed music could influence the human psyche, treat and purify the soul, generate “harmless pleasure”, and mold the individuals’ moral character, thereby achieving a kind of “virtue” in the soul (Huang, 2017, p. 255).

For the adolescents’ music education, Aristotle believed that cultivating virtue should be integrated into the experience of joy. He thought that “musical training is most appropriate for the character of the young.” By incorporating the cultivation of virtue into music education, the learners can achieve moral refinement through the joy brought about by the rhythm and melody of music. This proposal rejects purely instructive moral education and considers adolescents’ psychological growth, touching on more profound aspects of music education. Additionally, Aristotle advocated for adolescents to participate in musical performances personally. He suggested that the standard for adolescents learning music should be to reach a level of rational appreciation. He opposed turning adolescents into objects of professional music education, stating, “They should not undergo rigorous technical training to participate in competitions, nor should they pursue astonishing and superb performances... The limit should be set where adolescents can appreciate elegant melodies and rhythms” (Huang, 2017, p. 273). Thus, Aristotle’s goal for music education was to enable individuals to achieve an “appreciation of elegant melodies and rhythms” rather than becoming professional performers. The aim is for learners to experience joy in music education rather than undergoing harsh technical training. Actively participating in musical performances can also develop coordination skills, and joining a music ensemble can foster a spirit of teamwork in learners. The learning of music by adolescents should bring joy to both body and mind, enhancing their moral character.

Both Eastern and Western philosophies affirm the crucial role of music and highlight its close connection with ethical morality. Modern music education should integrate the characteristics of Eastern rites and music civilization and Western ethical guidance, considering both Eastern and Western societies' specific social contexts. Reforming modern music education, based on different structural aspects of musical languages, makes it possible to cultivate students' musical literacy and advance contemporary music education.

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