

The Well-Ordered Heart: Confucius on Harmony, Music, and Ritual

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In this paper, I show why the continued study of Confucius' writings in the west proves useful, especially pertaining to the role of the rites and music in emotional and societal well-being. I do this in three sections. 1) I examine Confucius' philosophy pertaining to music in order to reveal the role of harmony and emotion in society. This includes Confucius' perspective of music's divinity, its influence on character, and its corrective nature. 2) I provide psychological research supporting Confucius' belief about music, specifically confirming the emotional, physical, and social characteristics of music. 3) I argue the current need for the emotional moderation and harmony described by Confucius, paralleling his ritual and music with the modern equivalents of structured habits and the arts.

INTRODUCTION

Confucian philosophy offers much to the modern reader if the time is taken to read and reflect. Not only does the study of Confucius offer greater understanding about Eastern philosophical origins, but it provides thought-provoking ideas concerning what makes a person human or bestial, righteous or corrupt, virtuous or evil—things completely pertinent today. Central to Confucius is his doctrine on ritual and music, which are inextricably united in practice, yet distinct in function. Looking deeper into ritual and music aids us in many ways: it sheds light on Confucius' entire world-view; it evokes critical thinking about the habits and influences present in our own lives, whether intentional or not; and it provides a basis for understanding the Chinese tradition. In this paper I begin with analyzing Confucius' rites and music. I first explain the historical context and Confucius' belief about the divinity of the rites and music. Then, I show the connection of music and harmony to emotion, the corrective nature of the rites and music, and the ultimate result of individual and communal harmony. With the basic understanding of Confucian rituals explained, I use modern psychological research to confirm Confucius' belief about the connection between music and emotions, lifestyle, and community. I conclude by arguing for the practical application of such knowledge to our lives. Rituals and music look drastically different today from ancient Chinese practices, but they are equivalent in essence of the conscious lifestyle choices (rites and the allowance (or not) of influence from media and the arts (music). External forming of good habits and internal discernment of what influences are healthy for our emotions remain crucial for growth and maturity. The repercussions of doing this or not doing this effect not only the self, but society at large.

THE RITES AND MUSIC: HARMONY AND DIVINITY

Music is distinguished from the rites in technical function, but the two must go together to achieve the individual and societal harmony, which I will describe shortly. In his *Musical Records*, Confucius says, “Music is that which moves man from the internal; rites are that which affects man on the external. Music brings about harmony. Rites ensure obedience.”¹ Music properly orders the internal state of a person, while ritual provides a tangible manifestation of this internal ordering. Music infuses the rites with a greater sense of purpose by giving the participants focus, forcing all aspects of the person to unite. The rites need music to give the individuals the correct posture in performing the rites. However, music without the rituals would be uncultivated. Confucius admonishes his followers to adhere to ritual and music not because it is helpful and convenient for a society, but because he believes them essential to properly accord with the way of heaven and earth.

Confucius believes that the music and rituals are interconnected with the nature of heaven and earth. This is why he holds so staunchly to tradition. To deviate from them is to deviate from the nature of the cosmos. Zehou, in his work *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, argues the following:

“The great volume of description and discussion of ritual in ancient documents attests in many ways to the fact that this was not an idealized system created out of nothing by Confucians, as some scholars have suggested, but rather a system of long historical standing... [Herbert Fingarette] argues that ritual was sacred ceremony, that it had a ‘magical’ quality, that ritual at once cultivated and was the origin of the human nature. Fingarette stresses that the starting point for Confucius was not the individual or the inner being, but rather a standard that both transcends the individual and helps to shape the individual—namely, the rites.”²

This makes music and ritual *essential*, not just important. Confucius writes that “music is the harmonization of heaven and earth; the rites order heaven and earth.”³ The only way for society to prosper is to be in tune with the universal standard indicated through music. “The rites are not simply a matter of decorum... They are the institutions, orders, and norms that developed from primitive magical ritual and that unite the universe (heaven) with society (people).”⁴

THE RITES AND MUSIC: EMOTION

The key result of music is harmony of the emotions. Essential to this, as Mok and Lau point out, is that Confucius distinguishes the effect of pure music from that of vulgar music:

¹ Confucius, *The Musical Records*, in *Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics*, Zhu Liyuan and Gene Blocker (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012), 125.

² Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Translated by Maija Bell Samei, (Honolulu, HI; University of Hawai'i Press, 2010) 12.

³ Confucius' *The Book of Rites*, from Zehou, 18.

⁴ Zehou, 15.

“These notions are represented by the Chinese words *Ya* and *Su*. *Ya* is virtually untranslatable, meaning pure, elegant and what is in good taste; and *Su* means common and vulgar. (*Ya Yueh*, the pure music, is often taken for music of a classical tradition, although by strict definition, it is the ritual music of the court and the temple. On the other hand, most other types of music, especially folk music, come under the denomination of *Su Yueh*.)”⁵

The type of music used is not arbitrary due to the aforementioned divinity of the standards of music. *Ya Yueh* is the type of music which induces the proper emotions and feelings in a person, while *Su Yueh* is degrading and causes disorder.

Confucius makes the previous distinction in relation to his emphasis on emotion, for “rites and music bear in themselves the emotions of Heaven and Earth.”⁶ Since music can be pure or vulgar, pure music must be used if character is to improve through moderation of emotions. Confucius describes the ordering of emotion as essential to a person’s character, which contributes to the prosperity of society. To Confucius, humans’ superiority to animals “is not their ability to reason so much as their richness of emotion. Emotions arise from inner feelings and take shape externally; this is the origin of rites and music.”⁷ This is why he distinguishes *Ya Yueh* from *Su Yueh*. Music evokes either orderly or disorderly emotions in humans, so music must accord with the Heavenly standards.

The central word to this quality of music is *harmony*. The accord of emotions within a person is a harmony of the self, a cohesive and centered gathering of all aspects and tendencies of the person. As Confucius tells his followers, “Singularity cannot produce harmony; harmony is by necessity the unification of plurality.”⁸ Music provides this unification of plurality, for “music is the harmonization of heaven and earth; the rites order heaven and earth. When there is harmony, the myriad living things are in accord; when there is order, all things are differentiated.”⁹ Our modern day perspective often devolves this into unity of the self and harmony within a single person. While this is part of it, the emphasis is put on heaven and earth being in harmony and order, not the self. This goes back to Confucius’ worldview: heaven and earth possess a transcendent and eternal order, and this should be sought by all through music. An individual attaining harmony simply conforms to the way of nature. Music is the way to gain harmony with the way of heaven, specifically *Ya Yueh*. The way of heaven is properly ordered emotions in order to act in a righteous and pious manner.

Music is corrective by nature—a cultivation of proper emotions by means of harmony to produce character and virtue. Music was established “not to satisfy the desires of the mouth, ears,

⁵ Robert Mok and T. C. Lau, *Jade Flute: The Story of Chinese Music* (Hong Kong; Don Bosco Printing Company, 1981) 40-41.

⁶ Confucius’ *The Musical Records* from Liyuan, 118.

⁷ Zehou, 16

⁸ Zehou, 20.

⁹ Confucius’ *The Book of Rites* from Zehou, 18.

and eyes of man. It was to teach the people to distinguish good from evil, and to return to the correct way of man.”¹⁰ This gives music a far loftier purpose than today’s common perception that it is simply about pleasing the ear. It has an inexplicable effect on people. It is not difficult to find examples of massive audiences at concerts in complete and utter unity of transcendent bliss or turmoil due to the band’s immensely influential music. The songs these artists play can infect a person with a vice-like grip. This is why Confucius is so particular about what type of music the righteous man ought to listen to, for virtue is at the root of a person’s character, and “music is the flower of virtue...Harmony and order are accumulated inside, and flowers bloom outside. Music should not contain any falsehood.”¹¹ Music manifests itself in the goodness or corruptness of a person. Hence, detestable and vulgar music creates vice and inordinate emotion.

Finally, the most remarkable effect of Ya Yueh is that it causes harmony in society, between all classes. By nature, it stratifies people into distinct classes, for Confucius advocates a firm hierarchical system imitating the family structure. Despite this, “when there is music in the ancestral temple, both ruler and minister, superior and inferior listen to it together, and none fails to be harmonious and respectful. When there is music among the clan elders and townspeople, elder and younger listen to it together, and none fails to be harmonious.”¹² A kinship is created in the midst of music which causes all listening to undergo the same process of harmonization. This, to an extent, allows for greater harmony between those people. While this does not do away with the differing roles Confucius advocates for, it allows for a reverence and respect as humans beyond social class. The purpose of music in China was not to express emotion of an individual, but to “present the universal laws of the external world,...in the process drawing on and reflecting emotions. The goal of music was an ordered universe and harmony in the human world, while at the same time it provided form, order, and logic to human emotions.”¹³

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Psychological research confirms Confucius’ view about music’s effect on the state of a person. Macdonald, Kreutz, & Mitchell, (2012) and Rickard & McFerran (2012) indicate that “an important body of evidence has gradually accumulated and suggests that the benefits of music for health and well-being are quite real, extending well beyond the benefits of mere leisure and recreation.”¹⁴ The former group of researchers identify in their research ten properties of music, most of which support Confucius rather directly.¹⁵ They identify music as ubiquitous, emotional, engaging, distracting, physical, ambiguous, social, communicative, manipulative, and personal. Out of these ten, three are especially affirming of Confucius’ central ideas.

¹⁰ Confucius’ *The Musical Records* from Liyuan, 122.

¹¹ Confucius’ *The Musical Records* from Liyuan, 128.

¹² Confucius’ *The Book of Rites* from Zehou, 19.

¹³ Zehou, 28.

¹⁴ William Forde Thompson, *Music, Thought, and Feeling: Understanding the Psychology of Music*, 2nd ed., (New York; Oxford University Press, 2015, 2009) 208.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 211-214.

Psychological research affirms music is *emotional*. Most if not all people can attest to this fact in their everyday lives. There is a capacity in us to be moved deeply by the intense moments of music, especially in the resolution of tension into harmony. Studies done in 2008 lead researchers to claim, “because of the multifaceted nature of the self and our many ‘self-systems’, listening to music can arouse, be expressive of, and be perceived as expressing a wide range of human emotions in many ways.”¹⁶ Studies confirm the essential connection between music and emotion. Psychology cannot answer whether or not music ought to moderate emotions according to a certain standard. This is a value judgement which can be aided by the sciences, but requires philosophy. Whether or not it is true that we ought to accord our emotions according to a heavenly standard or not, research today confirms Confucius’ belief that music influences emotions.

Not only does music influence the expression of emotions, but it is also *physical*. Research in modern psychology dispels the previous belief that the brain is a hard-wired machine, but shows now that it is actually plastic, malleable to varying degrees, and changes its physical structure in response to certain stimuli, circumstances, and activities over time. “Brain plasticity is best observed in complex tasks with high behavioural relevance causing emotional arousal and motivational activation. Furthermore, plastic changes are more pronounced when the specific activities have started early in life and require intense training. Obviously, continued musical activities provide in an ideal manner these prerequisites of brain plasticity.”¹⁷ This draws an intriguing parallel to Confucius when he says, “Music is that which moves man from the internal; rites are that which affects man on the external.”¹⁸ The interaction between music and rituals is such that the harmony produced by music cultivates the capacity for proper adherence and obedience to the rites, even as proper participation in the rites brings about greater harmony. The physical alteration of the brain as a result of music fits greatly with Confucius’ philosophy. In addition, the alteration of brains to music is not a singular or passing instance, but the result of repetitive practice (or rituals).

MacDonald and his colleagues also describe music as *social* by nature. This is evident in the practice of community music therapy, which “goes beyond conceptions of music therapy in community settings to also embrace music therapy *as* community and music therapy *for* community development.”¹⁹ Moving beyond music used in a group setting, music is often clinically used as a form of bringing people together in order to develop greater community. It possesses capacity to actually build community, not just be helpful from time to time. This language is strikingly similar to Confucius’ in his description of music (and the rites) being used as the cohesive, unifying principle of a societal order. When he writes that inferiors and superiors all stop to listen in unity to the sacred music, this is not only a fun pastime or an occasional practice to sort through some disagreements.²⁰

¹⁶ Study by Juslin and västfjäll 2008; Elliott and Silverman, forthcoming, from Raymond MacDonald, Gunter Kreutz, and Laura Mitchell, *Music, Health, and Wellbeing* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2012) 34.

¹⁷ MacDonald, 34.

¹⁸ Confucius’ *The Musical Records* from Liyuan, 125.

¹⁹ MacDonald, 51.

²⁰ Confucius’ *The Book of Rites* from Zehou, 19.

This is a continual, constant ritual practice which is implemented regularly to order people into harmony.

OUR CURRENT NEED FOR HARMONY AND ORDER

“For never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being moved...except that, establishing itself bit by bit, it flows gently beneath the surface into the dispositions and practices, and from there it emerges bigger in men’s contracts with one another; and it’s from the contracts, Socrates, that it attacks laws and regimes with much insolence until it finally subverts everything private and public.”²¹

My intention in including this quotation from Plato’s *Republic* is not to affirm that readers schooled in western thinking should think better of Confucius’ beliefs because they parallel Plato’s.²² I use it because of the tangible and distinct picture Plato draws in the effects of music on society. Through the voice of Adeimantus, Plato admonishes the utmost caution in what music is allowed in the state. This idea comes across stunningly similar in *The Musical Records* when Confucius says, “Being ashamed of disorder, the former kings composed the music of the *ya* (Dynastic hymns) and the *song* (sacrificial songs) so as to guide the people. The object was to...make the tunes able to move the innate benevolence of men...its purpose is to harmonize father and son, emperor and subordinates, so as to make all people live peacefully together.”²³

Both Plato and Confucius advocate for shrewd awareness of the influences of music and habits. With this awareness, they accordingly dismiss the bad and emphasize the good. It is particularly helpful how Plato describes the subtle changes in music: though small and seemingly harmless at first, they manifest themselves in the laws and regimes which men operate under every day. Music strikes at the root to produce either harmony or chaos. The repercussions reveal themselves in our outward actions of order or disorder, which further impacts our inner state of harmony. The allowance of this chaos and disorder does not restrain itself to the individual, but becomes a rampant sower of discord in the entire society. It is essential for us to consider this today. Many reject such things off-hand, saying that music and the arts are simply playful and meant to please. Many also operate as though actions in one context do not influence actions in another context. This is common among politicians, and even religious leaders. Unfortunately for those who believe this, all our actions and all allowed influences do in fact cultivate either good or bad in us.

Confucius teaches his followers to take heed of the internal influences we allow in our lives. We must actively take hold of them in order to grow into a righteous and benevolent person. Music effects us, either for the better or the worse. This means it is crucial to think critically about what

²¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd Ed., Translated with notes and introduction by Alan Bloom (United States: Alan Bloom, 1968), 101-102.

²² Much of the parallels are quite stunning in similarity—for later exploration.

²³ Confucius’ *The Musical Records* from Liyuan, 122-3.

music we listen, and what values that music encourages. This does not just mean avoiding sexually explicit or derogatory artists, although this is a good start. It means paying close attention to the underlying ideologies and values encouraged by the artist. In addition, discerning from this what the song induces in our emotions: does it evoke bitterness, anger, jealousy, self-righteousness, or depression? Like in Plato's Republic, this extends to the narratives and stories we hear and tell. We must critically analyze the values of stories in books and movies. The vast majority of people will complacently dismiss the idea that they must alter their taste. After all, it isn't real life, so what harm could it do? The human capacity for illusion is immense, and if we passively allow emotionally and morally disruptive lies into our minds, this emerges in action. Even as I write this, I am well aware of influences of such kind which I do not analyze critically. The danger runs deep and the cultural patterns of thinking run deeper. The curative is shrewd observation and awareness of how we are influenced by culture.

In addition to the influences which influence our state internally, we must pay heed to that which arises in our external actions. Actively shaping one's lifestyle through habits is both indicative of and a furtherance of inner harmony. More often than not we practice certain actions and habits without thinking about the effects they have over the course of months and years. There exist good habits and bad habits: this is the nature of the universe. Some things we do further our capacity for living in harmony with others. Many things we do disrupt our capacity for living in unity with others due to turmoil within the self. It is essential for all of us to think about whether or not we have certain character traits which we value. Assuming most everyone can find something which is typically considered a good virtue to have, it then becomes necessary to look at what rituals we are implementing in order to grow in this virtue.

Confucius' teachings on music and the rites entail such things as harmony, virtue, order, community, correction of emotions, and divine standards. It cannot be arbitrary what music and ritual we establish in our life. There must be conscious and shrewd analysis, followed by according changes in our lifestyle to cultivate who we want to be. If you don't take Confucius' word for it, look at Plato, look to psychology: the arts contribute to or hinder our development as a benevolent, mindful person. The arts and our daily habits not only influence, but become who we are. Take heed what you listen to, who you listen to, and how you listen to it—not passively, but with a prudent and discerning attitude.

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