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THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETY

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Abstract: Musicality is a vital practice for becoming the voice of the voiceless in marginalized communities. It extends beyond instruments merely labelled as drums and bells, embodying instead the art of restoring harmony to a broken world. This paper argues that musicology, in any cultural setting, offers a profound pathway toward social prosperity. Unlike contemporary Western music, Chinese musical traditions are deeply rooted in a selfless aspiration to exemplify moral and cultural excellence through performance. This research explores how music fosters hope, healing, and peace, particularly through the act of attentive listening. It examines methods of cultivating harmony via musicology, engaging with the diverse artistic expressions found in the Chinese context. The study traces the historical foundations of Chinese music, drawing upon literary sources—especially those informed by Confucian principles—and evaluates the balance between theory and practice within this tradition. Emphasis is placed on practice as the transformative element, surpassing mere theoretical engagement. Finally, the discussion turns to the challenges of the technological age, where a blurred, fragmented world compels reimagining musicology not merely as academic inquiry but as a therapeutic and transformative practice capable of renewing hope, fostering healing and nurturing peace.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Chinese Music, Confucian Principles, Harmony, Historical Foundations, Hope, Music, Peace, Practices Therapeutic Power*.

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1. Introduction

What role can music play in addressing the crises of our age such as political instability, economic injustice and social trauma that have disrupted the world's harmonious order? Can it reshape the tension created by technological noise and human-driven corruption? Musicology offers a rich framework for engaging with these questions, serving as a conduit for aesthetic values that seek to restore balance. Through lyrical heritage, performance and art, music can convey messages of liberation from unjust systems and structures. A striking example of this transformative potential is found in the sixteenth-century Chinese classic Xi You Ji (Journey to the West). Over centuries, this narrative evolved from literature to film and eventually into song, becoming a cultural force against injustice and a subtle instrument for reflecting the political realities of its time (Qian, 353). Rooted in Chinese traditions and infused with Confucian principles (Harrison, 75), such works reveal how literature and music together can address difficult worldly conditions while promoting hope, healing and peace.

This study employs music as a discipline that responds to particular social needs while also inviting listeners to engage in self-cultivation (Kramer, 126). The act of singing and contemplating the richness of composition and lyrical depth not only shapes thought but transforms lives (Ho, 242). In its truest form, music functions as a collective, transformative agent rather than a vehicle for individual gain. Historically, Chinese musical traditions reflected a holistic vision in which harmony between humans and nature—central to the teachings of ancient sages—was cultivated through artistic practice. In these settings, audiences were not passive spectators; they became participants, engaging emotionally and physically in the collective acts of music-making (Peng et al., 202). This harmony between humanity and nature is deeply embedded in Chinese music (Jie, 41). Yet, as Bin Chen (2022) observes, the centrality of such values has diminished in the contemporary era, overshadowed by technological advancement and commercialization (39). Where once music, art and theater served to elevate aesthetic and moral

sensibilities, they now often serve as tools for market growth. The music industry, increasingly integrated into the digital economy, prioritizes profitability over social good. As a result, the capacity for "imperative imagining"—the creation of music for the collective betterment of the world—has been eroded, with entertainment overshadowing the pursuit of harmony.

In earlier times, music could transform collective sorrow into joy, a process often enriched by religious and philosophical perspectives (Adkins, 100). Today, however, this contemplative dimension is largely absent, narrowing music's social impact. To recover the beauty of musicology as it once connected heaven, earth and humanity (Aalst, 4), we must reexamine how these principles can be applied in a modern context. Jianping Gao (2018) describes ancient Chinese music as "anthropo-cosmological" (127), reflecting a divine connection between human beings and the cosmos. This conception integrated music into the moral fabric of society, positioning it as both an aesthetic and unifying force (Chen, 2022, 37). China's diverse array of more than 600 traditional instruments (Jin, 52) speaks to a heritage in which music was deeply intertwined with national well-being. Historically, songs played roles not only in cultural life but also in shaping political outcomes, including boosting morale in times of war (Gao, 128, 131).

2. Tracing Harmony: Confucian Ideals in Chinese Literary Tradition

Chinese history preserves a vast body of ethical thought, deeply rooted in Confucianism and Daoism, which shaped the nation's vision of success and prosperity from the Pre-Qin period through the Qing dynasty (1616–1911) (Zhu, xiv). A central question arises: what makes ancient Chinese literature so significant in shaping a harmonious existence? Zhiping Liang (2023), a noted jurist and professor of law and culture, observes that ancient Chinese society placed greater emphasis on moral cultivation than on punitive law. While legal structures were acknowledged as useful for maintaining order, harmony itself was seen as arising not from legislation but from selfless conduct. For centuries, Chinese sages

upheld selflessness as a core virtue (200). From this perspective, harmony in the Confucian sense cannot be preserved by maintaining the status quo; rather, it is grounded in moral values and alignment with the natural order (Li, 9).

Ancient Chinese thinkers clarified that harmony was neither simple accord nor conformity, as some Western philosophers—such as Martha Nussbaum, Karl Popper, and Max Weber—might define it (12). Instead, it involved self-denial and living as a moral and wise being. This distinction reflects a broader difference between the Western architectonic tradition, which privileges rationality and logic, and the Asian organic tradition, which tends toward holistic, emotive, symbolic, and intuitive approaches (Chia, 58–59). In the Chinese context, practice and lived experience carried more weight than abstract intellectual principles. For Confucianism, harmony and peaceful existence rested on three interrelated spheres: heaven and earth, humanity, and society. Moral cultivation involved understanding the relationship between these realms, thereby forming the basis for exemplary personal conduct. Such individuals were expected to unify the cosmic, human, and social orders, linking external governance with inner moral discipline (Ge, 179).

Remarkably, the pursuit of moral perfection began even before birth. During the Western Han dynasty, the scholar Jia Yi proposed that moral education should begin in the womb, since a fetus could be influenced by maternal emotions (Ko, 63–64). Expectant mothers, therefore, bore responsibility for nurturing future moral exemplars. In Confucian thought, this lifelong process of cultivation was measured by one's deeds, which served as evidence of the good one had nurtured. Yet, the persistence of disharmony raises a question: if moral cultivation begins so early, why does evil persist? Chenyang Li (2020) explains that it ultimately depends on individual willingness to embrace and practice these principles. This is not unique to Confucianism; Christianity, for example, similarly hinges on personal acceptance of divine truth (167). Both traditions stress self-discipline as the means to transcend selfishness—what Shapshay (138) calls "stepping out of one's habitual egoism"—and to attain a state of

"no-self" (Chan, 84).

Such transformation is not achieved merely through external norms or institutional structures; it begins internally and extends outward. A ruler, for instance, should first embody these principles within family life before applying them to community governance and, ultimately, to the wider world (Chen, 186). While the transcendent principles of harmony are constant, their application must respond to the specific needs of each context (Li, 167–168). Thus, the historical record reveals that Confucian harmony was not an abstract ideal but a practical ethic, beginning with inner cultivation and extending to social and political order. The following section explores how these principles have been expressed and transmitted through cultural mediums—particularly music, poetry, and visual art—as vehicles for reimagining harmony in both historical and contemporary settings.

3. Peace and Harmony Through Art Forms

In its truest sense, music is an art form rather than mere sound (Gu, 101). Yet in the present day, it has often been reduced to a performance stripped of deeper meaning. From an Asian perspective, this original meaning has been eroded. This raises an important question: What role can music play in cultivating harmony in the world? One might further ask about its significance in state affairs, religion, and culture as a truth-seeking practice. In the Chinese context, historian and philosopher Erica Fox Brindley (2012) notes that during the Zhou dynasty, official music was performed not only to promote harmony in spiritual realms and ancestral rituals, but also to reinforce cultural continuity and loyalty to the dynasty (27). Political harmony, she argues, depended on a meaningful form of musicology—one that guided rulers to embody virtue through practice. Conversely, music devoid of moral intention or disciplined practice could corrupt leaders and undermine the prosperity of the state (39). This erosion of purpose is evident in much modern music, which often caters to individualistic desires and has been commercialized into an industry.

Religious traditions also underscore music's liberating role. In the Korean context, Minjung theology seeks to free people from oppressive structures. Theologian Sebastian C. H. Kim (2015) describes how Minjung artists during labor movements employed drama, music, painting, and poetry to amplify marginalized voices and challenge injustice (128). While earlier sections examined harmony in Chinese literature, it is equally important to see how these ideals are practiced. Literature holds significance only when it has real-world application; otherwise, theory remains disconnected from lived experience. Michel Foucault reminds us that knowledge, in the Western scientific tradition, is often neutral, detached from truth, and susceptible to being wielded as a tool of power (Markula, 62). This dominance of theory over practice prompts the question: How can we bridge the gap?

Philosopher Sami Pihlström (2024) advocates using the arts and humanities to "practice truth" by engaging literature with the multilayered realities of human life (291). This distinction between theory and practice becomes clear: theoretical work without societal engagement remains abstract, while practical artistic expression has existential weight and can transform communities. For such transformation, sincerity is essential—not merely as an individual trait, but as a way of aligning with the "Way of Heaven." Mencius describes this through the cultivation of *Ren* (benevolence) and *Yi* (righteousness), with sincerity and seriousness as the keys to bringing these virtues into practice (Liu, 375). Confucius similarly taught that music should foster peace and harmony, never serve destructive ends. He advised, "Let a man be first incited by the Songs, then given a firm footing by the study of ritual, and finally perfected by music" (VIII.8, 34). Ritual and music, in this sense, extend beyond formality—rites are not mere propriety, and music is not simply drums and bells (Zhu, 66).

Numerous examples embody this ethos. Korean playwright Kim Chi-ha's *Golden Crowned Jesus* used musical drama to satirize those in power and defend marginalized voices (Kim, 128–129). Feng Gi's *Sonnet of Harmonious Existence* offers an

eco-poetic response to environmental degradation, using lyrical art to break the silence of nature and challenge the machinery of exploitation (Ulysse, 34). These artistic practices—whether in music, theater, poetry, or visual arts—demonstrate the power of creativity to shape society. In many cultures, music has been used to predict weather, accompany harvests, and even guide wartime decision-making (Gao, 129). Unlike Western superhero narratives, which often bestow power on a select few, the creative imagination is accessible to all (Sahi, 152). It transcends language, nation, and culture.

4. Reorienting Musicology Amidst a Troubled World: Hope, Healing and Peace

The modern technological age has not only misunderstood but, in many respects, distorted the language of music in the Chinese context. Today, fascination centers on advanced devices—such as high-fidelity, noise-canceling earphones—where the focus lies on machine-driven sound production rather than the deeper essence of sound. In ancient traditions, this essence was bound to the Greek *pneumatic*—spirit, breath of life, air—associated with the healing of illness. As Jing Wang (2021) observes, this acoustic sensibility in the Chinese tradition has largely lost its presence in the modern world (13). Globalization offers both promise and peril. While it enables the integration of Chinese and Western thought, it also risks eroding the younger generation's connection to their cultural heritage. Many young people in China have gravitated toward consumerist values, adapting to Western influences that—critics argue—can be corrosive to traditional identity. In response, the Chinese government has implemented cultural policies to safeguard youth from such influences (Chrétien-Ichikawa, 136), and schools have introduced curricula promoting Chinese music education aimed at instilling cultural pride (Ho, 242).

Yet institutional efforts alone cannot resolve the tension. Reorienting Chinese musicology toward peace, healing, and hope requires confronting a difficult question: How can this be achieved when the younger generation appears more receptive to

Western lifestyles than to "old principles"? Here, "old" does not mean obsolete, but refers to enduring traditions capable of generating renewal. The answer lies in the lyrical heritage of precepts—ethical and aesthetic maxims that act as a ladder toward moral cultivation. Once an individual ascends through these precepts and proprieties, creating what is good and new becomes a natural outcome (Littlejohn and Li, 37). Two principles are central to this ascent: sincerity and seriousness in the practice of aesthetic virtues such as benevolence and righteousness. Understanding one's aesthetic role in the world is thus essential for fostering harmony and peace.

Confucian classics affirm music's transformative power:

> *Enjoying music can help a person to have more virtue. It can also make people's eyes and ears brighter, blood and spirit more harmonious, customs easier to transform, and the world more peaceful. Therefore, music is a kind of happiness: the gentleman is happy with its Tao, the villain with his desire.* (Chuanbao Tan, 145)

Here, the "gentleman" exemplifies responsibility and moral purpose, while the "villain" seeks only personal gratification. Even amid industrial noise and technological disruption, the sound of nature persists for those attuned to it. To perceive this sound, one must align inwardly with the cosmic order, recognizing that true music reflects the orderly perfection of the universe—and invites human participation in that perfection (Brindley, 113-14).

Still, one may ask how nature's music can be discerned in a world dominated by technological noise. This is one of the central challenges to music's authenticity today. Yet as ancient texts remind us, harmony can be cultivated not by lamenting disruption but by synchronizing oneself with genuine music. Brindley (2012), citing the *Ye Ji* (*Account on Music*)—a compilation dating to the Western Han but rooted in Warring States thought—notes that ignorance of the "heavenly pattern" erodes both harmony and virtue (115). Ancient wisdom warned that no ruler could govern effectively without grasping this pattern (Wan, 111). Real music, embedded in the cosmic forces of heaven and earth, can only be preserved through reverence for these cosmic powers

(Brindley, 115-16). When this heavenly pattern is lost, one's perception of authentic melody—and one's rightful place in the moral order—is obscured by injustice, corruption, and discord. The absence of sincerity and seriousness toward both the cosmos and humanity drains vitality from the moral life. Overcoming this requires self-denial—setting aside selfish desires—to integrate one's being into the heavenly pattern. Only then can musicology serve as a practice of aesthetic flourishing through sound and art, contributing to the betterment of the world. In sum, the value of literature, sound, and art lies not in abstract intellectualism but in their capacity to foster moral and aesthetic cultivation. This is the pathway to authentic music—music that heals, inspires, and sustains harmony amidst the turbulence of the modern world.

5. Conclusion

Music has long stood as a force for harmony and peace, its influence extending beyond aesthetic pleasure to nurture healing, hope, and social cohesion. In the modern era, however, listening habits have shifted toward superficial rhythms—dominated by drums and bells—while the deeper role of music in moral cultivation and reflection has diminished. This erosion affects not only human relationships but also our bond with the natural world, as technological advancements often disrupt ecological balance. Reorienting musicality today requires moving beyond the dominance of Western styles and the industrial cacophony that distorts the "heavenly pattern." Instead, we must restore and preserve aesthetic values in sound and art as instruments of self-cultivation and social renewal. Rooted in authenticity and intertwined with diverse artistic forms, musical practice holds the potential for true transformation—one capable of restoring harmony to both the human spirit and the world we share. The therapeutic power of such music remains a field of exploration for the future.

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