



PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

Yifan Fan

School of Music and Dance, Henan Institute of Science and Technology, Xinxiang, Henan 453003 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0224-1453> |  Yifan_Fan0@outlook.com

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Abstract: Chinese civilization has always been known as the civilization of rituals and music, with music playing a significant role throughout the dynasties. The development of Chinese traditional music cannot be separated from the injection of various philosophical ideas and social consciousness. Whether it is the ritual music system of the Zhou Dynasty, the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Warring States period, the metaphysical discussions of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, or the Buddhist philosophy of the Han and Tang Dynasties, each era has played an important catalytic role in the formation of the aesthetic theory of Chinese traditional music. This article summarizes the historical developmental process of Chinese traditional music culture. It also analyzes the construction process of the aesthetic philosophy of Chinese traditional music from the perspectives of the three major philosophical schools: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These three schools have had the most profound impact on Chinese traditional music.


Keywords: Chinese traditional music. Confucianism. Taoism. Buddhism. Aesthetic concepts.

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Resumen: La civilización China siempre ha sido conocida como la civilización de los rituales y la música, con la música jugando un papel importante a lo largo de las dinastías. El desarrollo de la música tradicional China no puede separarse de la inyección de varias ideas filosóficas y conciencia social. Ya sea el sistema de música ritual de la dinastía Zhou, las cien escuelas de pensamiento durante el período de los reinos combatientes, las discusiones metafísicas de las dinastías Wei y Jin, o la filosofía budista de las dinastías Han y Tang, cada era ha jugado un importante papel catalizador en la formación de la teoría estética de la música tradicional China. Este artículo resume el proceso de desarrollo histórico de la cultura musical tradicional China. También analiza el proceso de construcción de la filosofía estética de la música tradicional China desde las perspectivas de las tres principales escuelas filosóficas: confucianismo, budismo y taoísmo. Estas tres escuelas han tenido el impacto más profundo en la música tradicional China.

Palabras clave: Música tradicional China. Confucianismo. Taoísmo. Budismo. Conceptos estéticos.

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PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

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Abstract: Chinese civilization has always been known as the civilization of rituals and music, with music playing a significant role throughout the dynasties. The development of Chinese traditional music cannot be separated from the injection of various philosophical ideas and social consciousness. Whether it is the ritual music system of the Zhou Dynasty, the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Warring States period, the metaphysical discussions of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, or the Buddhist philosophy of the Han and Tang Dynasties, each era has played an important catalytic role in the formation of the aesthetic theory of Chinese traditional music. This article summarizes the historical developmental process of Chinese traditional music culture. It also analyzes the construction process of the aesthetic philosophy of Chinese traditional music from the perspectives of the three major philosophical schools: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These three schools have had the most profound impact on Chinese traditional music.

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INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Chinese philosophy has a long-standing history that can be traced back to primitive religions and nature worship. Similarly, the origin of music can be traced back to the same primitive era as Chinese philosophical culture. The bone flutes unearthed from the Hemudu Culture² site, and the pottery ocarinas and whistles unearthed from the Banpo Yangshao Culture site³ in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, dating back to the Neolithic Age (about 6,000-6,700 years ago), are early musical instruments created by humans in ancient times for accompanying songs and dances during sacrificial ceremonies, witnessing the beginning of the development of ancient Chinese music. "Shang Shu" records "striking stone and beating stone, with beasts joining in the dance," which reflects the people's scene striking stone chimes, dressing up as wild beasts and dancing during sacrificial ceremonies (Confucius, 2017, p. 112).

¹ School of Music and Dance, Henan Institute of Science and Technology, Xinxiang, Henan 453003 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0224-1453>. E-mail: Yifan_Fan0@outlook.com.

² The Hemudu culture refers to the Neolithic culture that existed in the southern regions of the lower Yangtze River in China, dating back approximately 7,000 years.

³ The Banpo Site is located on the east bank of the Chan River in Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, China, and belongs to the Neolithic culture dating back approximately 6,000-6,700 years.

From China's unique cultural context, musical thought belongs to the branch of philosophy. During the pre-Qin period, it combined different schools of thought, such as Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism and Legalism, constantly evolving, criticizing and inheriting. Buddhism was first introduced to China in Han Ming Emperor's period (about 67 AD). During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, emperors of the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen Dynasties mostly believed in Buddhism, which led to the rapid development of Buddhist studies in China and strongly influenced Chinese music culture (Wang, 2023, p. 116-120). The influence of Buddhism, combined with China's ancient civilization of rituals and music, and Taoist philosophy shaped people's cultural and aesthetic orientations. This article takes ancient Chinese music as the research object, combined with the historical background. It focuses on how Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other philosophical concepts construct the aesthetic value of ancient Chinese music.

1 DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

From the 21st century BC to the 5th century BC, this period was the era of slavery in China. Compared with primitive society, the development of productive forces in the slave society, the use of copper-based metal tools, and the significant changes in society's economic and cultural aspects led to a considerable advancement of music. In the slave society, the ruling class owned music and used it to consolidate their ruling status. They demanded some slaves to collect and process past and present music. Music became a tool for the ruling class to enjoy themselves (Pingzi, 2017, p. 156-179). The slave class created music and used it to reflect reality and express their hopes, but the slave-owning class controlled the slaves, and their music was more to cater to or praise the rulers. For example, during the Zhou Dynasty, the Six Generations of Music and Dance, used for grand ceremonies and major events, praised the highest rulers of each period, such as Huangdi, Yao, Shun and Yu (Han, 2017, p. 80-89). The Zhou Dynasty also established a hierarchical ritual and music system, which classified the use of musical instruments, the scale of the orchestra and the orientation of the formation. The ruling class used the idea and system of "music" subordinate to "rites" to consolidate their rule and maintain social order (Lü; Li, 2022, p. 69-75).

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, rapid social changes led to the collapse of the ritual and music system. Emerging folk music appeared with its vigorous vitality. The "Book of Songs" appeared during this period and is China's first poetry collection. It accumulated works from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn period, totaling 305 pieces, all of which are songs divided into three categories: "Feng", "Ya" and "Song"⁴ according to different music styles. This shows that music, at that time, had

⁴ Feng is a type of regional music in different areas, Ya refers to court music and songs performed during feasts and ceremonies in the capital city of the Zhou Dynasty, and Song is a type of ceremonial dance and music performed during ancestral worship, mostly praising the ancestors' achievements.

not yet existed independently but it was still combined with poetry and dance (Wang, 2020, p. 245-246).

The Qin Dynasty was characterized by a centralized feudal system, and the emperor established the “Yuefu” (Music Bureau) to oversee the realm of musical culture (Martynenko, 2020, p. 171-175). During the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu expanded the functions of the Yuefu, which significantly facilitated the substantial development of the three major branches of musical arts: vocal music, instrumental music and dance. This expansion fundamentally brought about an unprecedented integration of secular music, courtly elegant music, ritual music and the ethnic minorities’ music (Yu, 2002, p. 74-109).

Music theory significantly progressed during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. Ruan Ji’s *Theory of Music*, Ji Kang’s *On Sound Without Sorrow and Joy*, Shen Yue’s *Music Record* in the *Book of Song*, and Liu Xie’s *Lyrics of Music* and *Tone and Rhythm* in the *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* explored sources, attributes, changes and social functions of music, and related laws from different perspectives. These works provided valuable music theory materials for later generations (Yan, 2019, p. 48-49).

During the Tang Dynasty, political stability, economic prosperity and open policies allowed the absorption and integration of music cultures from other regions. The Tang Dynasty also established a series of specialized music institutions, such as “Li Yuan” (Pear Garden)⁵, “Jiao Fang” (Education Office)⁶, “Da Yue Shu” (Grand Music Bureau)⁷ and the “Gu Chuang Shu” (Drum and Trumpet Bureau)⁸. These institutions trained numerous talented musicians. Tang Xuanzong was skilled in composition and often entrusted his works to the Pear Garden for performance. He also personally taught at the Pear Garden in the imperial court, helping to cultivate many famous musicians. The scale and functions of music education institutions in the Tang Dynasty were huge and comprehensive. The level of education, performance and management reached a historical peak, laying a solid foundation for the future development of music education and development.

The development of music and art, during the Song Dynasty, was inherited from the musical system of the Tang Dynasty. The musical institutions were carried forward, but their functions and scales had declined. During this period, many art groups emerged in society, and they often performed in places, such as “Washi” and “Goulan.”⁹ They promoted the

⁵ “Li Yuan” (Pear Garden) is an institution for training and selecting musical talents.

⁶ “Jiao Fang” (Education Office) is an academic department that leads professional musicians and manages teaching.

⁷ “Da Yue Shu” (Grand Music Bureau) is responsible for music education, professional assessment and artistic performance.

⁸ “Gu Chuang Shu” (Drum and Trumpet Bureau) has a particular focus on the court rulers’ ceremonial music and private ritual activities.

⁹ Goulan and Washi refer to fixed entertainment venues in large cities, and they were also the main performance venues for Song and Yuan Dynasty dramas in urban areas.

development of folk music and folk songs, improved the citizens' spiritual life and promoted the aesthetic experience of music (Tan, 2016, p. 399-410). The development of music during the Yuan Dynasty absorbed the artistic nutrients of Song and Jin dramas, "Nanxi,"¹⁰ and various ethnic folk songs. Yuan opera gradually prospered, and the four masters of Yuan opera, led by Guan Hanqing, emerged, promoting the development of Chinese opera into a mature stage. The court music of the Yuan Dynasty still adopted the music system of the Song and Jin Dynasties. About 37 kinds of musical instruments were used, and stringed instruments still dominated the ensemble of musical instruments. The introduced instruments, such as the huqin and sanxian, began to be widely used.

Traditional values gradually declined during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and court music declined too. Folk entertainment music gradually developed and strengthened, and music trends became more secular. Various types of music, such as folk songs, dances, small tunes, storytelling and drama, became abundant, and the folk artists' and general public's musical activities were very active. At the same time, with the prosperity of music culture and the improvement of printing technology, many musical works were passed down, which are valuable materials for studying the development of ancient Chinese music culture today (Chen, 2017, p. 189-190,2017).

2 CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHY AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

Traditional Chinese music is deeply intertwined with philosophical ideas rooted in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These three influential factors have interacted, collided and integrated throughout history, giving rise to a rich tapestry of philosophical outlooks in different periods. The confluence of these philosophies has left a profound imprint on the field of musical arts in China. The emphasis of Confucianism on social harmony and moral cultivation, the focus of Taoism on nature and spontaneity, and the contemplative and transcendent nature of Buddhism have all shaped aesthetics, themes and expressions of traditional Chinese music. The interplay between these philosophies and musical traditions has resulted in a diverse and multifaceted cultural heritage.

Almost all schools of thought had expounded their views on music as early as the Warring States period. The Mohist school held the viewpoint that ordinary individuals, grappling with inadequate provisions of sustenance and clothing, lacked the requisites to fully engage with and relish music.

Consequently, they championed the "Non-Joy"¹¹ principle, a pivotal tenet within Mohist ideology that opposed musical activities and advocated for the prudent utilization

¹⁰ Nanxi was a local opera genre that emerged in China's southern region from the late Northern Song to the early Ming Dynasty, during a period of 200 years, and was one of the earliest mature forms of Chinese drama.

of societal resources. This perspective essentially contested the inherent worth of music. In contrast, the Taoist school established a profound connection between music and the entirety of the cosmos.

Laozi said, “Great music is imperceptible, great form is intangible,” believing that external forms and techniques cannot express “great beauty” and that artistic expression and technique have limitations. The legalist school valued the rule of law and rights, believing music and art must serve politics. At the time, many music pieces were deemed not helpful to politics, so they easily denied the aesthetic creativity of music (Xiao, 2018, p. 225-226). Among all the schools of thought in ancient Chinese society, only Confucianism combined the music philosophy of ritual and music ethics with the greatest influence, and this influence continued to thrive.

The Confucian music philosophy originated from Confucius, who inherited the “ritual and music” ideology of the Western Zhou Dynasty and further improved and developed it. Confucianism regards “ren” (humaneness) as the highest standard of social and moral values, emphasizing moral and artistic education. Confucius also compiled the earliest collection of poetry in China, the *Book of Songs*, which includes many ancient folk songs and literary works. Confucius had a concise summary of the aesthetic style of the *Book of Songs*: “To summarize the Book of Songs, consisting of three hundred poems, in one sentence, it would be ‘The thoughts expressed in these songs are sincere and free from deceitful intentions.’” (Xu, 2020). The content and music of the “Book of Songs” are unified, expressing healthy and harmonious characteristics. For example, Confucius believed that “*Guan Ju* is music that is pleasant but not lascivious, and mournful but not hurtful” (Zhong, 2013, p. 114). Human emotions must arise naturally and be freely expressed in a balanced and harmonious way without going to extremes. This is consistent with the “Zhou Li,” which states: “Forbid licentious, excessive, ominous, and disrespectful sounds” (Zhou, 2022, p. 55).

Mencius was the principal inheritor of Confucius’ ideas and believed that the humans’ aesthetic sense has universal social significance; the aesthetic activity of music is not limited to the minority, but belongs to the entire society. Xunzi’s concepts of music also developed Confucius and Mencius’ ideas, but there are also differences. Academic Refinement: within his work *On Music*, Xunzi astutely observed that music stands as the “[...] grand unifier of the world, a benchmark for harmony, and an element deemed indispensable by humanity” (Xunzi, 2017, p. 62). He believed that changes in a person’s voice, behavior, character and spirit could be expressed through music, and after being expressed, they must be guided. Otherwise, confusion and chaos may result. Therefore, the ancients created the music of “Ya” and “Song” to guide people and used the concept of “rituals and music” to educate the people, which are in line with the nature’s laws (Lu, 2022, p. 89-97). In addition, Xunzi inherited Confucius’ advocacy of “regulating people through ritual” (Analects, *Book of Yong*)

and emphasized the meticulous regulation and shaping of human emotions and behavior through the application of ritual and music systems, thus achieving the Confucian ideal of governing the country through ritual and music.

Based on a profound understanding of the value of “music education,” Xunzi also actively criticized the “anti-music” trend represented by Mozi, firmly defending the Confucian ideal of ritual and music education through practical actions. Xunzi’s conception of music education exerted a significant influence on the *Book of Rites*, notably discernible in the *Record of Music* section. This influence laid the groundwork for the subsequent development of Confucian perspectives on music education. Later, most Han Confucians inherited and developed Xunzi’s theory of natural human nature, constructing their music education ideas on this philosophical foundation. They mostly believed that ritual and music education compelled individuals to change their inherent nature and gradually move towards goodness through a mandatory approach. They viewed education as a set of external behavioral norms that must be followed, established by sages through observing and emulating the heaven’s and earth’s principles.

The pre-Qin Confucians regarded “music education” as a method of moral cultivation because “music education” is distinct. In contrast to “ritual,” the characteristics and functions of “music”, in Confucian moral education thought, can be summarized in three aspects. First, “music” allows for expressing and transmitting one’s passionate emotions, enabling the manifestation and fulfillment of one’s instinctive vitality. This, in turn, promotes inner emotional harmony and facilitates interpersonal emotional communication and resonance. On the other hand, “music” guides human emotions through art forms, such as sound, melody and rhythm, playing a role in purifying and restraining desires and encouraging contentment without indulgence. Second, the essential characteristic of “music” is “emotion.” *The Book of Rites* states, “Music is that which does not change emotions” (Wang, 2021, p. 26). Music directly expresses a person’s nature and emotions, free from artificial or contrived elements. It cultivates virtues in individuals through nurturing their nature and emotions and is a more natural approach that conforms to the laws of human development. Third, “music” can promote harmony through unity. *The Book of Rites* states, “Music brings unity, ritual brings the difference. Unity leads to familiarity. The difference leads to respect” (Wang, 2021, p. 42). “Music” can merge people’s emotions, and when emotions are merged, people naturally feel a sense of affinity. Therefore, “music” can regulate and mitigate the hierarchical differences and inner estrangement brought about by the compulsory norms of “ritual,” facilitating interpersonal relationships and emotions across various social strata.

Furthermore, Confucian philosophical aesthetics emphasizes the concept of “harmony.” As stated in the “Zuo Zhuan,” the sage kings orchestrated a balance among the five flavors and the harmonious interplay of the five musical notes to pacify their hearts

and establish effective governance. This means that using “he”, as the basis for music, can calm the rulers’ hearts and lead to moral harmony, which in turn leads to political harmony (Liu, 2020, p. 66). The essence of “he” is a complementary and mutually beneficial way of thinking (Hwang, 2010, p. 153). At that time, people had already realized that changes in “sound” could affect people’s emotions and improve their morality, and even make the people “have no fighting hearts,” thereby consolidating political power, which is known as “political harmony.” The aesthetic standard of “moderation, justice, and harmony” was inherited by Confucianism, leading to the formation of the ideas of “harmony in music”, “harmony in the heart” and “harmony in politics.” The Confucians particularly opposed overly complex and ornate music. The “Li Ji” once pointed out that “[...] the music of the Sang and Puyang regions is the music of a ruined state. It leads to the collapse of governance and the flow of people. It promotes private interests by deceit and cannot be stopped” (Wang, 2021, p. 56). In addition, Confucians also emphasized the importance of organizing melody and harmony, requiring that the organization and movement of each note be based on a central note to achieve unity (Xunzi, 2017, p. 98).

3 AESTHETIC PURSUIT OF MUSIC IN DAOIST PHILOSOPHY

The prominent representatives of the aesthetic thought of Daoist music are Laozi and Zhuangzi, whose main musical ideas center around the pursuit of natural beauty. In Laozi’s philosophical concept, everything originates from the “Dao,” and the essence of the “Dao” lies in nature. In his *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi proposes the concept that “An individual’s moral character and talent should be pure and untainted like white, limitless and unconfined like spaciousness, perfected through the refinement and accumulation of time like a great tool, precious and rare like music, and ubiquitous yet elusive like a great image” (Laozi, 2021, p. 9), in which “precious and rare like music” is a crucial point in Daoist music aesthetics. It means that the most beautiful sound should be rare and elusive. Laozi believed that unprocessed and natural music is precious and rare, and it perfectly embodies the “Dao” thought in music. In Chapter Two of the *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi mentions,

All under heaven recognize beauty as beauty, yet this itself becomes ugliness; all recognize goodness as good, yet this itself becomes ungood. Thus, being and non-being give birth to one another, difficulty and ease complement each other, long and short contrast each other, high and low incline towards each other, and sound and voice harmonize. Precedence and sequence follow one another (Laozi, 2021, p. 5).

“Sound and voice harmonize with each other” is the criterion for judging music, which represents the natural harmony between sound and voice and is also a manifestation of the “Dao” (Lu, 2020, p. 61-62).

The aesthetic thought of music proposed by Laozi is based on philosophical considerations, while Zhuangzi further specifies and elaborates on the Daoist music aesthetics. He rejects the Confucian concept of ritual music and believes that “[...] in darkness, one alone is perceived; in silence, one alone is heard” (Zhuangzi, 2021, p. 49). Additionally, he proposes, “When it comes to the sounds of the earth, all the various openings serve as instruments; when it comes to the sounds of humans, the best instrument is the bamboo flute. I dare to ask, what is the instrument of the sounds of heaven?” Specifically, “the sounds of the earth” refers to the sounds emitted by various orifices in nature, while “the sounds of man” refers to the sounds produced by various artificially-made instruments. “The sounds of heaven” refers to the nature’s sounds, which are equivalent to the Dao, the metaphysical source of all sounds. “The sounds of heaven” are unique and diverse and are based on the natural form of things. True beauty exists in the heaven’s sounds, and only by viewing music from the perspective of the Dao, we can appreciate its “comprehensive and grand” aesthetic characteristics. While traces of “humanity” could be discerned in the early Daoist perspective on music, during Zhuangzi’s era, Daoism fully rejected the objective reality of “music” and the interactive bond between humans and musical elements. The Daoist musical ideology centered around the concept of “the unity of heaven and man,” where the emphasis predominantly rested on the “heavenly” standard, necessitating human comprehension of this underlying principle (Zhao, 2023, p. 76). Its pursuit of “harmony” is different from the Confucian concept of “ritual music,” which emphasizes the regulation of human behavior to achieve harmony. Instead, it highlights the pursuit of natural music, where music must conform to the heaven’s will and follow nature. As Zhuangzi stated in “Tian Yun,” “The ultimate music must first conform to human affairs, follow the principles of heaven, perform the five virtues, respond to nature, and then coordinate the four seasons, harmonizing all things” (Chen, 2007, p. 33).

The philosophy of Taoism has played a significant guiding role in the development of Chinese traditional music. The emphasis on naturalism and artistic conception, in Chinese traditional music, is primarily inherited from Taoism. As one of China’s oldest plucked string instruments, the guqin is known as a “gentleman’s instrument”, Taoism profoundly influences its representation of guqin culture. Guqin culture has always emphasized artistic conception, pursuing natural simplicity, tranquility and emptiness, and avoiding extremes of joy and sorrow. This pursuit aligns with Taoist ideals and reflects Taoist music aesthetics (Zhao, 2021, p. 73-77). During the Tang Dynasty, Dong Tinglan composed the qin piece “Yizhen,” intertwining aesthetic sensibilities with psychological realms in a mutually resonant manner. Through an aesthetic appreciation that embraced purity of heart and contentment with modest desires, Dong sought to attain a state of tranquil serenity in the mind. “Xingzhuang Taiyin Xupu”¹¹ remarks in the exegesis¹²: “The rise and fall of the past and present are as simple as turning over

¹¹ A collection of qin scores compiled by Xiao Luan (1487—1561) during the Ming Dynasty.

¹² Exegesis: Exegesis refers to the explanatory text written after the title of a qin piece and before the musical notation, providing insights and explanations about the qin composition.

one's hand, and the blue mountains and green waters remain unchanged. The gains and losses, rights and wrongs of a thousand years are all surrendered to a conversation among fishermen and woodcutters." The melody flows gracefully, the sentiment runs deep, painting a picture of fishermen and woodcutters amid blue mountains and green waters, exuding an air of leisurely contentment. This profoundly reflects the Daoist philosophy of tranquility and non-action (Xu, 2023, p. 46).

Before playing the guqin, people would bathe, change clothes and burn incense in ancient times. These three things were done to achieve a natural, peaceful and carefree state when playing the guqin, free from worldly constraints. Bathing was to remove dirt from the body and achieve physical and mental purity. Changing into loose-fitting clothes was to help the body relax and eliminate physical constraints, seeking spiritual relaxation. Burning incense was originally a sacrificial ritual. People burned incense before playing the guqin to create a quiet and elegant environment, seeking the artistic conception of tranquility. As the incense smoke drifted, the player's mood could be relaxed, striving for "harmony between man and nature."

4 BUDDHIST THOUGHT AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC

The introduction of Buddhism to China brought about profound changes in the development of traditional Chinese music, complementing the influences of Confucianism and Taoism. The arrival of Buddhism in China occurred during the Eastern Han period. Its influence continued to grow during subsequent dynasties, such as Wei-Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, and reached its zenith in the Sui and Tang Dynasties. As Buddhism took root in China, various schools of thought emerged, including the Tiantai School, Huayan School, Chan School and Pure Land School. Among these ones, the Chan School, known for its emphasis on meditation and direct experience, gained the most popularity.

By the time of the Song Dynasty, the term "Buddhism" in China often referred specifically to the Chan School, which became the dominant school of Buddhism in later ancient Chinese society. Consequently, the Chan School exerted a significant influence on the Chinese literati's lives. Accompanying themselves with the qin, a traditional musical instrument, literati and scholars integrated meditation, poetry recitation and qin playing into their daily routines. This integration led to the creation of a vast body of poetry that reflected the spirit of Zen Buddhism. Combining music, meditation and poetry allowed literati to self-reflect, cultivate inner tranquility and explore profound philosophical concepts. With its ethereal tones and expressive capabilities, the qin served as a medium through which they sought spiritual enlightenment and conveyed their insights into the nature of existence. In this way, Buddhism played a vital role in shaping the aesthetic principles, themes and artistic expressions found in traditional Chinese music. It infused music with introspection,

contemplation and a quest for transcendence, contributing to the unique and profound character of the Chinese musical traditions.

According to the Chan School of Buddhism, the “mind” is the fundamental condition for all phenomena and things in the world. “All dharmas arise from the mind,” and the mind is emptiness and stillness. Therefore, all sensations and things that the mind perceives are illusory and empty, and this “emptiness” does not mean that external things are “nonexistent,” but rather that the external world, perceived by the mind, is both existent and nonexistent, and what exists is only its superficial form, while its essence is nonexistent. Influenced by this idea, traditional Chinese music values “emptiness” or “etherealness.” People believe that the charm of music mainly comes from the unique flavor emitted in the melody expressing the theme rather than the theme itself (Wang, 2003, p. 23-25). The instrument that best represents this aesthetic pursuit is the guqin, which is highly adept at expressing “emptiness”, “distance”, “space” and “quietness”, creating a sense of ethereal beauty through the use of “nothingness.” The aesthetic proposition of “the way of sound can communicate with Zen” is based on the interaction between these sounds and the spirit of Zen (Yin, 2022, p. 68-69).

Another defining attribute of Zen music is its profound emphasis on mental perception. Rooted in Zen Buddhism, this emphasis on perceiving with the mind engenders the musical concept of “mindful perception.” It entails not solely relying on sensory intuition when engaging with music, but more crucially, engaging the faculties of the mind itself. The phrase “Silent Thunder” constitutes a poignant Zen Buddhist metaphor, inviting one to listen to the resounding thunder in a state of silence, akin to comprehending the resounding silence of an unstruck bell as a metaphor for the entire universe. This perspective asserts that through mindful listening, one can immerse oneself in the boundless expanses of nature’s quietude, thereby venturing into a realm transcending mere intellect and utilitarianism. This encapsulates the essence of “sudden enlightenment,” a quintessential principle of Zen Buddhism.

As it is widely acknowledged, Zen Buddhism espouses the concept of “sudden enlightenment.” Its practice aims to progressively transcend conventional knowledge and the superficial aspects of cognition, culminating in a direct communion with the intrinsic nature of phenomena—often referred to as “Suchness” or “Self-Nature” in Buddhist teachings. This understanding invariably leads to a rejection of convoluted forms. Consequently, Zen Buddhism frequently employs succinct and unmediated methodologies like “shouting” and “swift blows” to guide its adherents (Sun, 2017, p. 62-63). These approaches are geared towards breaking the fetters of appearances, which include transcending the confines of language and conventional binary thought processes, ultimately facilitating the attainment of “transcendent wisdom” — an unmediated realization of the intrinsic essence. In parallel,

traditional Chinese music has perpetually underscored the significance of direct perceptual encounters, akin to the emphasis of Zen Buddhism on “directly pointing to the inner self”. Both domains penetrate beyond the surface veils of phenomena to access their essence. Traditional Chinese music surpasses linguistic boundaries, much like “mindful perception” of Zen Buddhism. Both are fundamentally ineffable, and both are directed inwardly. At the zenith of their spiritual realms, traditional Chinese music champions an unrestrained sense of self-expression, transcending material and spiritual confines, while seeking a state of ethereal contemplation and intellectual liberation. In this, it mirrors the aspirations of Zen Buddhism. This convergence of ideals partly elucidates the permeation of Zen Buddhism into the fabric of traditional Chinese music (Wu, 2021, p. 133-138).

Tracing back through the annals of Chinese music history, the enduring artistic creations that stand as timeless masterpieces often emerge from artistic experiences akin to “sudden enlightenment.” During the Song Dynasty, Cheng Yujin eloquently conveyed in his treatise *On the Qin* that “[...] mastering the Qin instrument resembles the introspective journey of Zen meditation. Following years of dedicated refinement, a moment of sudden realization transpires, leading to comprehensive and skillful mastery in all facets of performance” (Gao, 2020, p. 148). This instance of sudden realization embodies a state of “sudden enlightenment.” In instrumental practice, practitioners frequently encounter “accidental attainment” representatives multiple times, where insights are gained without deliberate intention. It is essential to acknowledge that, even though sudden enlightenment may manifest unexpectedly, accidentally and devoid of conscious striving, its inception inherently entails extensive groundwork and sustained preparation. The “accidental attainment” phenomenon symbolizes an abrupt and transformative shift that materializes after an extended period of diligent and unwavering practice.

Alongside its impact on traditional Chinese music and its integration with Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhist thought significantly influenced the development of religious music and dance. As Buddhist beliefs spread widely, practitioners sought to engage believers by adapting and innovating local folk music, incorporating religious themes and content. This practice served as a means and tool to attract and guide individuals on their spiritual path. Furthermore, Buddhism fostered the rapid development of ritual ceremonies and activities, which often included artistic expressions, such as music, drama and acrobatics. These art forms encouraged people’s participation in Buddhist rituals and deepened their understanding of the teachings. By incorporating music and dance into religious practices, Buddhism enhanced the aesthetic experience and created a powerful means of conveying spiritual concepts and inspiring devotion.

Additionally, Buddhist thought played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating ancient music. As Buddhism embraced local cultural practices, it contributed to safeguarding

traditional music forms that might have otherwise been lost over time. Notably, some of the earliest surviving rap books, known as “Bianwen,” were used in Buddhist contexts. Works like *Qiu Hu Bianwen* and *Zhang Yichao Bianwen* represent rap music employed in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, demonstrating the integration of music and religious practices in ancient China. In summary, the influence of Buddhism on traditional Chinese music extended beyond philosophical ideas. It spurred the development of religious music and dance, promoted folk music traditions and actively preserved ancient musical forms. The interplay between Buddhism and music enriched cultural expressions and deepened the spiritual connection between individuals and their beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese traditional culture is a multifaceted mosaic woven from diverse components, with music serving as a central thread. Stretching across more than two millennia of history, the philosophical doctrines of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have profoundly influenced the fabric of Chinese traditional music aesthetics. This fusion of philosophical currents within Chinese traditional music has engendered a distinctive musical vernacular, replete with expressions and forms that echo the values, tenets and spiritual aspirations embedded within Chinese cultural identity. The philosophical underpinnings have imparted a sense of equilibrium, unity and awe into the aesthetic domain of Chinese traditional music, accentuating the interplay between humanity, the natural world and the cosmic realm. This holistic perspective reverberates throughout the diverse genres, instruments and performance modalities, encompassed by traditional Chinese music, eliciting a profound resonance in emotional and cultural realms. In summation, the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have seamlessly interwoven with the aesthetics of Chinese traditional music, resulting in a complex and interlaced framework that continues to mold its evolution. The amalgamation of these philosophical traditions has nurtured a distinct musical heritage that mirrors the quintessence of Chinese culture, captivating and inspiring audiences across the globe.

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