

**‘Thunder, Rainbows and Spicy Herbs’:
The Lore of *Qi* and the Tokens of Chineseness
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I’ll confess to a liking, maybe even a yearning, for interdisciplinarity. It seems self-evidently good to me when people get together to find common interests although the objects of their attention may be quite distinct—as distinct as poetry and physical theories, for example. I do think that people in literary studies need to understand the sciences and that people in the sciences need to pay attention to the field of culture, especially since the organization of most American universities encourages these two groups to stay apart. But (if I may make a further confession) when I get an example of an interdisciplinary discussion, my reaction is often one of suspicion. When literary people and physics people talk in the same terms, have they found a common language or are they perhaps just intoxicated with the same ideology? I’ve written this paper to explore my uneasy feelings about one coincidence between the discourses on Chinese aesthetics (the aesthetics of poetry in particular, which I claim to know something about) and on Chinese physics (where I am a curious although underequipped onlooker).

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I’ll start with the aesthetic side of the conversation. It is frequently and accurately observed that music is the only one of the arts to have received a genuine theoretical treatment in early China. The discussions of poetics in transmitted texts are brief and borrow their framework and almost all their terminology from musical theory; painting and sculpture have left behind only a few anecdotes whose meaning is often elusive; architecture reduces to a typology of buildings and functions; the record of appreciation, not to mention analysis, of dance and theater is even scantier. On the other hand, while some of these arts have left more or less durable traces of their practice, the music of early China is quite lost to us: some ingredients remain in the form of recovered instruments, treatises on tuning, and visual representations of performances, but the rhythms, harmonies and melodies are left almost entirely to our imagination.¹ For historical aesthetics, ancient Chinese music presents a mixed profile of feast and famine: the leading genre in terms of normative discussion, perhaps the least well represented in terms of actual works. It is hard to see how much can be concluded from such a fragmentary corpus.

Why should this art have been uniquely favored, and favored in this way? The reason for there being a theory about music is far from being an aesthetic reason: music enters discussions among the learned as a subset of ritual, the only context in which it has its meaning and importance. We cannot let our sense of what constitutes an “art” set the sole horizon for understanding these musical texts. If, instead, we were to consider funerals, hospitality, sacrifice and diplomacy as artforms, music would no longer be alone, though the category of “art” would find itself strangely transformed. In any event, we cannot assume the relevance of a concept of art which would pluck out music and relegate the other facets of ritual to the specialties of economists, historians of religion, political scientists and sociologists. Music writing in early China has its strongest connections to domains other than music itself, and to experiences other than those of pitch, timbre, harmony, rhythm, volume, and so on. Indeed it is still an open question whether the authors of these texts knew much, in a practical way, about music, or simply

argued inductively from what they thought good in a general way for the “tone” of their society down to the particulars of musical styles and decorum.

Music writing is an odd category of text, then, both in terms of its relation to its ostensible subject and of its relation to twentieth-century audiences (Chinese and other). Its main feature is that of talking *about something else*, an act for which the ancient Greeks and Romans employed the term “allegory.” Curiously, those who talk about ancient Chinese musical texts often emulate the gestures of the texts and allegorize along with them. They do not allegorize on the basis of the texts—that would be to take texts talking about something else and, through them, to talk about yet another thing; rather, they espouse the movement of the original allegory and recreate its dynamic, while altering slightly the references, the “other things” to which the discourse on music points.

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The theory of music given in the “Yue ji” is an ethical one.² “All tone emerges from the human heart”³: so the tones made by musicians *express*, in the technical sense of that word, what is in the heart.⁴ They are icons of feeling, they have a necessary and convertible relation to feeling. “[Music] arising from a feeling of grief has sounds that are weak and die away abruptly; that arising from feelings of joy has sounds that are ample and resounding; that arising from a feeling of pleasure has sounds that are burgeoning and scattered; that arising from a feeling of anger has sounds that are thick and harsh; that arising from a feeling of respect has sounds that are straight and plain; that arising from a feeling of love has sounds that are harmonious and gentle,” says the text, focusing on qualities of timbre, rhythm and articulation, what is also in modern (European) musical training called the “expressive” side of performance (YJ, 559-60).⁵ What music expresses is ethos—character, attitude, behavior *in potentia*.

For this reason the tone of a well-governed era is joyous and peaceful. Its government is harmonious. The music of a disordered era is angry and thereby [expresses] resentment. Its government is perverse. The tone of a country on the brink of destruction is anxious and thereby mournful. Its people are helpless. The way of sounds and tones is connected with that of governing (YJ, 560).

All tone springs from the human heart; music is that which penetrates the principles of social relation. . . . So one investigates sounds in order to know the tone; investigates tones in order to know music; investigates music in order to know government (YJ, 562).⁶

Iconic expressions such as music are contagious, says the “Record.” When a group of people hears the same sound, they will be influenced by its ethical resonance, and begin to vibrate to the same notes. The semiotic relation of iconicity, a customary part of the “fore-understanding” of most Chinese writing on art, works identically for expression and reception: listening to music that is aggrieved or lustful will cause its hearers to become potentially aggrieved or lustful, as its structures of feeling become familiar, become a part of them.

When shameless sounds affect people, their rebellious *qi* responds to them; the rebellious *qi* manifests itself and thus licentious music arises. When correct sounds affect people, their obedient *qi* responds to them; the obedient *qi* manifests itself and harmonious music arises (YJ, 579).

Thus the “noble person”—the beneficiary of a ritual education in a school claiming descent from that of Confucius—will approach all musical expression with a spirit of watchfulness and, where necessary, resistance.

For this reason the noble person returns his emotions [to correctness] and makes his will harmonious; he adjusts himself to examples and perfects his action. Shameful sounds and disorderly spectacles he does not allow to linger in his consciousness; licentious music and corrupt rites he does not make a part of his thinking... he causes his ears, eyes, nose, mouth, mind, awareness, all the hundred aspects of his body to follow obedience and correctness in accomplishing his intent (YJ, 579-80).

Music, then, expresses ethos, the way people are feeling; for most listeners, it is automatically persuasive, inducing in them the same states of mind it expresses; only a few, specially prepared listeners who seek to regulate their response by reference to the intent of the ancient sages are able to listen to the Sirens without falling victim to their seduction.

Ritual is interested in structures of feeling too. Ritual sketches out exemplary, conventional acts in which relationships among people (host and guest, adults and children, superior and inferior, men and women, etc.) become manifest; as there is a right way and a wrong way of doing these acts, so they too can become a barometer of social relations. If children bury their parents with perfunctory ceremonies and slender outlay, if guests are not welcomed, feasted and courteously addressed by their host, something has gone wrong and will need to be corrected, if a way of life is to be maintained in its proper balance. The relation among the “elements” of music, as the “Yue ji” understands them, parallels the proper relation among the “elements” of society. “[The note] *gong* is the lord, *shang* is the ministers, *jue* is the people, *zhi* is action, *yu* is resources. When these five do not trespass on one another, there are no confused and unharmonious tones.” The purpose of music is to construct a cosmos in which “the Five Colors [perhaps identical with the Five Phases] form a pattern and do not conflict, the Eight Winds [perhaps identical with the Eight Tones] follow their modes and do not mingle” (YJ, 581), and starting from that musical cosmos propose a pattern for the human realm, a fulfillment of ritual ideals.⁷

Music mirrors ritual. But within this mirroring relation is a kind of contrary motion. “Music unites what is similar; ritual distinguishes what is different” (YJ, 585). The statement need not be interpreted with clichéd psychologisms (music unites all humanity, it is a universal language, it is nice to hear music together with others). The difference between music and ritual grows out of their analogy. The first care of ritual is to distinguish the roles to be played and affix duties to each person playing a role. Music, however, in its distinguishing and arranging operates not directly on human beings but on sensory givens whose relationships create an auditory simulacrum of the social world, to which every hearer has, in principle, the same degree of access. We enter into guest ritual

as guest or host, never both at once, but we enter into the hearing of music as similarly situated observers, and the performance addresses each of us as a whole, not as a perspective.

Thus when music is played in the ancestral temple, lord and minister, superior and inferior, all are joined in the hearing of it, and none but is harmonious and respectful; when it is played among the village chiefs and elders, old and young are joined in the hearing of it, and none but is harmonious and close (YJ, 602).

Music transcends the social parceling out of roles—by interiorizing and formalizing the system of roles and holding it up for universal contemplation.

Music is the perfection of ritual, a model of ritual without the friction of real human beings. Ritual is always a dicey thing, it may or may not come off—sons may not turn out filial, people may marry the wrong people, guests may assassinate their hosts, a diplomat may have too much to drink and flub an important speech, and so on.⁸ But music is a structure of signifying differences and relations (pitch series, tempi, sensory inputs such as “harshness” or “weakness,” etc., all brought to further articulation by musical theory). Musical theory, as evidenced by the “Yue ji,” exists to assure that the differences and relations are maintained without decay, and to warn against the consequences of letting them lapse. That is a relatively simple business—easier in any case than maintaining a social structure.

3

Given the presumable original readership and authorial base of the *Li ji* and associated texts, it is not surprising that music should have offered the most attractive model for resolving basic issues in what we call aesthetics—questions of the effect of art on its public, the relationship between the sensory and the moral or intellectual domains, the interpretation of form as meaning, the place of artists in society, the relation among the different arts, the grounds of interpretation and reception, and so on. It is, as we all know from reading Chinese aesthetic writings, an immensely prestigious and authoritative model, but it is so most of all under certain conditions specific to the Chinese classical age—we might narrow that down and say, specific to the three-hundred-year period from late Warring States (Xunzi, d. -238) to middle Han (*Baihu tongyi*, +79). As history moved on, terms in the relational network surrounding music shifted and came to be understood in different ways; sometimes these shifts revealed cracks and compromises that had been there all along in the original, classical formulations. Whatever intellectual harmony was achieved by the synthesis of middle Han concerns about music, it was predicated on a certain momentary consensus of the learned and the powerful, and mingled pragmatic and nostalgic thinking.

Moreover, as music was adapted to furnish the vocabulary for other realms of artistic experience, such as poetry, some parts of the logic that underpinned musical theory had to be altered, sometimes in clumsy ways. The signs of this “re-engineering” of an old theory for new purposes are sometimes quite visible, sometimes rather discreet. To make the most of them for examining the history of aesthetic thinking in China, we should, it seems plain, concentrate on those points and articulate those aspects that do *not* make for a smooth transition between domains; only that will recapture the asymmetry

between the successive states of aesthetic thinking, the historical transformation of its terms. But this has not happened. It is worthwhile asking why it has not happened—asking what, in our immediate context, blocks us from seeing the differences that might otherwise be recognized as relevant.

To take one example, the crucial introductory statement at the beginning of the “Yue ji,” giving the argumentative basis for every further consequence that that text puts forth, is: “Feeling is moved inwardly; thus it takes shape in sound” (*qing dong yu zhong, gu xing yu sheng*, YJ, 560). The “Great Preface” to the *Book of Odes* (*Shi jing*) adapts the sentence to make it read: “Feeling is moved inwardly and takes shape in speech” (*qing dong yu zhong, er xing yu yan*).⁹ This is more than a mere quotation; it attempts to repeat an earlier experience or to invoke a recognized authority, in handling the interpretation of poetry as analogous or subsidiary to the understanding of music. In the new utterance, the word “sound” has been replaced by “speech.” But is sound the same thing as speech? Do they function alike? Does not speech introduce new dimensions, such as meaning and reference and all the games we can play with them, while also pushing to the side many of the features characteristic of music (its direct evocation of emotional states, its mathematical structure, its methods of achieving expression, its performance traditions)? It’s not as if you could simply plug in the term “word” wherever a musical treatise says “note,” and hope to get a text of poetic theory thereby. Whether we say “yes” or “no” to the equivalence of “speech” and “sound,” the substitution of one for the other would seem to have far-reaching consequences for both arts, for the idea of language, for all the unavoidable aesthetic questions mentioned earlier.

Oddly, though, this is not what happens when people note the relationship between poetics and musicology occurring in these very texts. Kenneth DeWoskin observes that the “Great Preface” quotes the “Record of Music” and the *Book of Documents* in order to rank poetry below music and dance in a hierarchy of expressive arts: where words “are not sufficient,” as the “Great Preface” puts it, people resort to more and more effective means and eventually find themselves singing and dancing.¹⁰ The relationship of “speech” and “sound” is one of lesser to greater: in poetry, and most of all in song, “speech” casts off its limits and approaches, or stimulates, “sound.” Focusing on the “Yue ji” and its statement that “feelings are moved within and take shape in sounds,” DeWoskin points out that “the structure of this sentence and the strategy of its argument are identical to that [*sic*] ... from the ‘Great Preface.’”¹¹ The parallelism is observed; but not the asymmetry. It is as if the normative claims of the “Yue ji” had been taken on board even as the text was subjected to philological examination. Verbal art is valuable insofar as it reproduces the structures of music; that whereby verbal art exceeds music is not important. Because the text assimilates poetry to music, the reader does the same, noting only the features of the terms that favor assimilation. A great many other scholars who have noticed the influence of musical terminology on poetics “take it straight” in just this way. A continuity between poetics and musical theory confirms, as it were, in the metacritical realm, the continuities that musical theory tried to establish between emotion, expression, and reception; between sensory experiences and their meanings; between the impulse to utter sounds and the appeal of a structuring milieu of musical sound.

The assimilation of poetry to music—and the neglect of the remainders, the points on which poetry does things that music cannot do and music does things that poetry

cannot do—is a crucial point on the pathway that connects several different realms in the larger universe of Chinese aesthetic thought. On one side, it relates to the characterization of Chinese and other East Asian understandings of literature as being in essence “affective-expressive” systems of thought, centering on the lyric as the genre that tells us the most about literature (or this or that national literature under consideration). Earl Miner has provided the most wide-ranging, nuanced and thoughtful exploration of the implications of this priority accorded the lyric.¹² As Miner points out, the literatures of Europe are exceptional in treating drama as the central genre and point of reference in literary theory. Distinctions that have supreme importance for European-derived poetics, such as those of fact and fiction, self and role, narrator and character, do not bear such weight in other traditions, and the whole problem of “representation” needs to be scrutinized before one can insert it blithely into a new context such as the Chinese or Japanese. Although Miner does not say so, it would be easy to show that the primacy of lyric among literary genres in China (and thus, with historical adjustments, in nations that share the Chinese cultural heritage) derives from and is explicable by the primacy of music over other arts, particularly literature. If one wants to get to the core of the “affective-expressive” theory in poetics or aesthetics, one has to go to music, which means going to the “Yue ji” and its endlessly reiterated statement “Feeling is moved within and takes shape in sound.”

Another direction one might go from the coincidence of poetry and music would be to explore just what ancient musical theory had to say about “sound.” Apart from its social consequences (the diagnosis of sound as index of ritual and political conditions), “sound” is also a physical thing and an ingredient in the understandings that people fashion of the physical world. Physical understanding proceeds, as we know, through the adoption, critique and tweaking of *models*—polyvalent, abstract sketches of things, process and relations that may be put to all sorts of new uses.

In their outline of Chinese physical acoustics, Joseph Needham and Kenneth Robinson lay down first of all that

The background for Chinese acoustic thinking was largely determined by a concept which stemmed from the vapours of the cooking-pot, with its fragrant steam for which the word was *qi*. We have already had occasion (*Science and Civilisation in China*, vols. 2 and 3) to enlarge on the significance of this basic concept of Chinese pneumatism.... [The concept of *qi*] moulded Chinese thinking from the earliest times, just as form and matter dominated European thought from the age of Aristotle onwards. ... From the earliest historical periods the Chinese were concerned with a synthesis of sound, colour and flavour, responding to the synthesis (almost an orchestration) of Nature manifested in thunder, rainbows and spicy herbs. One *qi* rises up from the earth to heaven like steam from cooking-pots; another descends from heaven to earth, like ancestors spreading their reinvigorating influence. Their intermingling produces wind, wherewith heaven makes music... Such was the environment which brought forth their organic philosophy.¹³

These conditions produced, in Needham’s view, a physics and an acoustics that were “if not analytical, highly pneumatic” (ibid., p. 135). For this physics, “a universal

continuum and the reality of action at a distance by wave transmission” are not far-fetched ideas, but regular presuppositions. “Their universe [sc. of the Chinese] was a continuous medium or matrix in which interactions of things took place, not by the clash of atoms, but by radiating influences. It was a wave world, not a particle world.”¹⁴ As in this last citation, Needham frequently contrasts the thought-world of Chinese physics with that which he attributes to ancient, medieval and early-modern Europe, where science treats only isolated entities (things, categories, atoms, stimuli, responses) acting on one another by direct contact. Given the assumption that the basic character of physical reality was “pneumatic,” Needham sets acoustics, and within acoustics the particular domain of resonance phenomena, at the center of Chinese scientific exploration. Resonance is what allows one to see “sound and taste [as] linked with government not by mere fantasy but by a correlative sequence” (ibid., p. 205), correlation being another characteristic feature of Chinese efforts to understand the physical world. And this identification of a “wave” model for understanding the physical and social worlds, once made into a token of a specifically Chinese mode of understanding, allows Needham to respond to the problem of Chinese science as it appeared to his age—namely, why did China not have its scientific revolution?—as a consequence of the choice of models.¹⁵

So dominant in Chinese thought was the conception of wave-motion that it seems sometimes to have acted in an inhibitory way upon the advance of scientific knowledge. Traditional natural philosophy in China conceived of the whole universe as undergoing slow pulsations of its fundamentally opposed but mutually necessary basic forces. As the radiating mutual influences of individual things were pulsatile also, it was entirely in accord with the grain of Chinese philosophical thinking to envisage intrinsic rhythms in natural objects. . . . But this very organic world-view was not altogether propitious for scientific investigation, at any rate in physics, since chains of causes always led back to individual objects the intrinsic rhythms of which were liable to remain inscrutable.¹⁶

The wave pattern worked too well; joined with categorical correlation, it left nothing unexplained; so it accounts, in the history of ideas, both for the early glory and the latter stagnation of Chinese science, as well as predicting for it a rosy future in a post-Newtonian world where interacting waves and force fields are more interesting than billiard balls rolling on determinate paths.

Connecting, then, Needham and Robinson’s account of Chinese physics as “pneumatic” and “resonant,” thus highly prone to seize on musical phenomena as confirmations of its basic hypotheses about matter, with DeWoskin’s observations on the prestige of music above all other arts, one has a kind of theoretical bridge whereby one can go from the cosmology of ancient Chinese belief to the physical modeling used by Chinese natural philosophers and thence to the performance of music in the courts of early China, the digests of musical protocols in ritual books and, finally, the consequences of the many-layered musical metaphor for morality and poetics. The last pier of the bridge, at least as it will be built in this context, is none other than Miner’s characterization of East Asian literary mind as an “affective-expressive” one. Not lyricism but music gets us there. Chinese music—the ancient music, with all it stands

for—serves (recognized or not) as a totem or icon of Chinese identity, whether in the scientific, the moral, or the aesthetic realm.

4

The series of hypotheses and relays I have just described as making up this “bridge” are appealing to many scholars of Chinese literature, art and philosophy. I have not ever seen the dots connected in quite this manner, but I am happy to offer the construct as a gift to those whose research is often driven by the questions: *what holds Chinese culture together? What is Chineseness? Is there an identifiable factor that account for Chinese culture in its many realizations, pervades all of them while being absent or subdominant in the other cultures of the world?*

Such questions have, I submit, often greatly influenced the choice of evidence and the style of argument in those works of scholarship which have guided the twentieth century (in all its languages) in the understanding of China. Needham, in his chapter on acoustics, seeks to show the indigenous Chinese character of the Pythagorean scale and equal-temperament tuning. (The so-called Pythagorean scale, he concludes, developed differently in Greece and China from an original Babylonian stimulus, and the mathematics used in the Chinese version does not reproduce that used in the Greek. Equal-temperament tuning was one result of a lifetime of musical-mathematical research by the Ming prince Zhu Zaiyu [1536-after 1603]). Conceding priority in some domains to the Babylonians, whose discoveries were carried eastward and westward, Needham nonetheless anchors Chinese musicology in the cosmology and beliefs “which stemmed from the vapours of the cooking-pot” with its *qi*. At the other end of our bridge, Miner is concerned lest we bind Chinese lyrical aesthetics to the unforgiving rack of Aristotelian mimesis, misconstruing the utterances and expectations of an “affective-expressive” economy of meaning as those of a representational agenda. Let the Chinese be Chinese, both say to the unacculturated reader. There is certainly both representational fidelity and ethical legitimacy in these arguments. That the language used to describe music, morals, weather, history, and electricity in China is basically one of waves and influences is not just a half-truth; that people seeking to broaden their cultural horizons are not well advised to start with the assumption that everything in their home culture must be replicated in the other culture is good advice.

And yet—here is where I turn to detecting the vices in the virtues as well as the virtues in the vices—the building up of this many-layered account of Chinese cosmological identity leaves little room for internal difference: if anything in the Chinese accounts of these matters fails to harmonize with the grand picture, as do for example the implications of substituting “speech” for “sound” to yield a text on poetics, these details are shrugged off, they become minor inconveniences, something a well-prepared scholar knows to ignore because they can’t be meaningful. Chineseness acts as a context of contexts, it suspends all lesser negotiations. I think—though I do not have the space to show this here except by a single symptomatic example—that this gesture, which starts from a consciousness of cultural blindness and the good, the eminently good impulse to see the world as others see it, nonetheless impoverishes our account of China by granting automatic plausibility to the voices formerly raised on behalf of the ancient sages and the forces of Culture. Those voices are not the only voices in ancient China; possibly not even the best ones to learn from.¹⁷ The subsumption of all contradiction in

an overwhelming aesthetic unity also ends up looking like a new means of privileging the Euro-American self-description, for do we not look benignly on our modern home cultures as capable of accommodating dynamic opposition, making what progress we do make specifically through the absence of an all-embracing consensus?¹⁸ In that way, modern culture, the culture that is still a going thing, international culture, is a system of mutually discrepant systems, and any system that aspires to freedom from contradiction will be a folk culture (or something more threatening if its exponents possess arms, media outlets and a bureaucracy). The reduction of Chineseness to *qi*, and of the differences between Europe and China to a particle/wave duality, seems to have some destructive potential.

One could—using the tools against those who employ them—take the equation of Chineseness with a vibratory ideology and reduce its central argument to that of the ancient musicologists: “Feeling is moved within and takes shape as sound.” The account of Chinese thinking as a structure of resonant waves coincides with a claim that what is most important about Chinese culture comes, like feeling, *from within*—from within China—and takes shape as successive propagations outward of an idiophonic impulse.¹⁹ (Idiophones, in the classification of musical instruments, are sound sources that, like bells and drums, both generate and resonate vibrations; a chordophone, such as a violin, generates vibrations on its strings but gives them resonance through a soundbox.) To understand what is going on, what is being expressed, you follow the waves back to their source. Certainly, in the “Yue ji,” it is admitted that vibrations travel both from inner to outer (expression) and from outer to inner (reception). But in this enlargement of musical resonance, the movement from inner to outer clearly dominates. Expression is primary and active; reception, secondary and passive. The consequences of adopting such a pattern of thought as a general theory of culture are drawn for us in a Han-dynasty text closely tied up with the *Li ji*, the *Baihu tong* (Comprehensive discussions in the White Tiger Hall), said to be the concluding report of an assembly of scholars held to debate the interpretation of problem passages in the Classics in +79. Coming to the places where the *Zuo zhuan* and *Zhou li* mention the performance of music of named barbarian tribes, the scholars ask:

Why is it that it is said that “the music of the Four Yi was performed”? – [The answer is that] the virtue [of the Sages] spread so far as to reach [even] them. . . . The *Discussion of the Origins of Music* [*Yue yuan yu*, a lost work] says: “On receiving the mandate, [the ruler] has the six types of music performed. He rejoices in the music of the Former Kings. This demonstrates that he follows the precedents [*you fa*]. He raises up that [music?] which he himself has initiated, to show that he possesses internal order [*you zhi*]. He raises up the music of the Four Yi, to show that [his] virtue spreads so far as to reach [even] them.”²⁰

Who made the music of the Yi and Di? – It was the doing of the Former Sage Kings. The Former Kings propagated morals and virtue, tempered Yin and Yang, and their acts enveloped the Yi and Di. Thereupon the Yi and Di experienced peace and joy and came to pay their respects in the Middle Country, and then [the Former Kings] made music to rejoice them withal. . . . The Kings made Yi and Di music, but did not make Yi and Di rites. Why is that? – The

reason is that ritual is something one makes oneself a vehicle [lit., a shoe] of and practices. The Yi and Di people do not have the capability to practice ritual. Music is something the Sages made in order to cause them to rejoice. That is why there is Yi and Di music.²¹

Of course: the music played in a Chinese ritual context could not have come from outside, that would not be appropriate, it would be adopting a bad standard of civilization from people who were one's inferiors in this highly symbolic realm. The pre-Han texts said there was "Yi and Di music" in the courts; as the texts had normative authority over what was now done in courts and ritual occurrences, it would have been too painful to say that the texts were wrong; therefore the text has to be brought in harmony with the big picture, the total cultural context, which says that the Chinese teach the arts of civilization to the barbarians, never the reverse.

The history of Chinese music—actual music now, not normative texts about music—frames with a border of irony this bit of commentatorial sharp dealing. For in every period, going back as far as the time of the classical philosophical schools, what people heard in musical performances was saturated with foreign melodies, foreign instruments, foreign rhythms, even occasionally foreign words. Sometimes a story has to be adapted to explain the imports (stories about the origin of the *pipa*, associated with Wang Zhaojun and Cai Yan, for example). At other times, foreignness is an intriguing dimension of the things being borrowed and can show itself without apology. But music is one of the areas of Chinese culture in which it is least productive to say that "feeling is moved within and takes shape in sound." Not that people in whatever square of earth we are going to call the Chinese heartland were not creating music and teaching it to others; we can only assume that they were; but music, and the accessory domains of poetry and theater when these were set to music, was always one of the areas of lively, mutually beneficial interchange between China and its outsides. Musical theory (having differentiated it from music, we can now put the two together) emerges from an anxiety about new music (the "sounds of Zheng and Wei") and music that betrays a barbarous undecorousness. Theory is there to hold at bay popular, recent or foreign tunes. That is why it starts with the claim of a pure "sound" with an absolute origin in the moved heart. "The origin of all tone is produced in the human heart... Feelings are moved within and take shape in sound."

Another day, Mencius, having an audience of the king, said, "Your Majesty, I have heard, told the officer Zhuang that you loved music;—was it so?" The king changed color, and said: "I am unable to love the music of the ancient sovereigns; I only love the music that suits the manners of the present age."²²

To carry the relation of musical theory and actual music to their point of contact with theories of Chineseness, the authors of works like the "Yue ji" (and I need not repeat the earlier observations about its canonical standing, its influence, its power as norm and model over discussions of aesthetics and cultural value) were not actually sages, Former Kings, or originators of culture. They were not (to give it an extreme formulation which I draw from their own texts) actually "Chinese," if by "Chinese" one means someone who possesses the way of the former kings. Rather, they wanted to be such people, they

searched for their traces and they sought to make their rulers and associates more like such people. The examples of Needham, DeWoskin and Miner show how easy it is to repeat what they said and did. Aesthetic theory should devote its efforts to construing aesthetic models, not be satisfied with repeating them—indeed, the example of music shows how important it is to construe construing as something other than repeating.

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Notes

¹ No “scores” or precise notations are known to have survived from antiquity (the closest thing to an exception being a set of bamboo slips, excavated ca. 1994, that includes the “Kongzi shilun” [Confucius discusses poetry]; now in the Shanghai Museum collections, these documents await full publication). Rare verbal comments in ancient texts on performance and affect do not yet add up to a formula for recovering the ancient music. On the interpretation of the surviving material and literary evidence, see for example Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: The Chime-Bells of the Chinese Bronze Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Laurence Picken, “The Shapes of the *Shi Jing* Song Texts and their Musical Implications,” *Musica Asiatica* 1 (1977): 85-109; Jenny F. So, ed., *Music in the Age of Confucius* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

² See Aristotle, *Politics*, 8 (1339 b 20 – 1340 a 11); Plato, *Republic*, book 7; and for a survey, Warren D. Anderson, *Ethos and Education in Greek Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966). I have previously discussed the “Yue ji” and its relation to poetry in *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 85-101, and will try not to repeat the earlier arguments here. One point to keep in mind however is that the “Yue ji” makes a methodological distinction between *sheng* (here translated as “sound”) and “tone” (*yin*): “sounds” are as it were the raw material of music, “tones” are music’s elaborated, systematized, calculated, ethicized components.

³ *Li ji*, “Yue ji,” in Zhu Bin (1753-1843), comm., *Li ji xun cuan* (rpt., Shisan jing Qing ren zhushu series, Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988), 2: 559. This edition henceforth cited as YJ. I have adopted this edition rather than the standard *Shisan jing zhu shu* because of its richer assortment of commentaries, many of which have guided me in points of translation or interpretation here. On the history of the “Yue ji” chapter, involved with the corresponding chapters in *Xunzi* and *Shi ji*, see Jeffrey K. Riegel, “*Li chi*,” in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), p. 296. A parallel derivation of properties of music and musical response from the configuration of the human heart occurs in the recently discovered Guodian text “Xing zi ming chu,” in *Guodian chumu zhujian* (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), p. 180. I thank Michael Puett for pointing out the resemblance.

⁴ The technically philosophical sense of “express,” that is, with connotations developed by a line of writers stretching from Spinoza to Leibniz to Peirce to Susanne Langer.

⁵ This passage from the “Yue ji,” with its synaesthetic word-choices, is a rare thing in early Chinese writing: a description of sensory experience rather than a normative terminology. Such passages deserve to be collected and further analyzed.

⁶ Translation adapted from Saussy, *Problem*, pp. 86-88. (It is always good to rethink one’s old translations.)

⁷ On the relation between musical and social “harmony” (in modern times, a “critical” or disjunct rather than unitary relation), see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie (Gesammelte Schriften 7*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970).

⁸ For a catalogue of ritual disasters, see John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962). On Austin’s bleak sense of humor, see J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁹ *Shi jing*, in Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisan jing zhushu* (1815; rpt., Taipei: Dahua, 1987), 1.1/5a.

¹⁰ Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, 42; Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1982), p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

¹² Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Saussy, *Problem*, should have discussed this book in detail: that I did not is a fault

of the kind that skittish young people trying to prove their “specialist” competence often commit. Here let me make up for it slightly by saying that anyone who reads my book needs to read Miner’s as well.

¹³ Joseph Needham and Kenneth Robinson, “Physics (h): Acoustics,” in Needham, chief ed., *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. IV, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 132-33. I have changed the romanization and brought some information from footnotes into parentheses.

¹⁴ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 4:1, *Physics and Physical Technology* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 14.

¹⁵ On the tradition that expresses itself through this problem, see Nathan Sivin, “Why the Scientific Revolution Didn’t Take Place in China—Or Didn’t It?” *Chinese Science* 5 (1982): 45–66, and Roger Hart, “On the Problem of Chinese Science,” in Mario Biagioli, ed., *The Science Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 189–201.

¹⁶ Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 4:1, *Physics and Physical Technology*, p. 7.

¹⁷ See E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, “Intellectual Dynamics of the Warring States Period,” *Chūgoku shigaku / Studies in Chinese History* 7 (1997): 1-32, for an effort to recover the ancient spaces of dissension.

¹⁸ This topos is so frequent that citing sources is almost unnecessary (one comprehensive though unhelpful reference might be to *The Inside of My Head, September 21, 2001*), but see in particular Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

¹⁹ This observation creates insurmountable difficulties for those who would describe East Asian culture as “developing outside of all logocentrism” (a view adopted by many after a suggestion in Jacques Derrida’s *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967). The power of musical theory in ancient China shows that you can have phonocentrism, and all its effects, without a phonetic alphabet or other appurtenances of a “logocentrism.”

²⁰ Chen Li, ed., *Baihu tong shuzheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shudian, 1994) 1: 107-108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 110-111.

²² *Mencius* 1a, in James Legge, trans., *The Works of Mencius*, in *The Chinese Classics*, vol. V (1895; rpt, Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994), p. 150.