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On Sima Qian's Musical Thought from the "Yue Shu" in the *Shiji*



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Introduction

Sima Qian (145 BC – 86 BC?) was a great historian in Chinese history. Therefore, scholars throughout history have studied his historical thought, but rarely his musical thought, because he is generally considered not to be a musical thinker. In fact, Sima Qian was also an outstanding musical thinker. His musical thought is mainly recorded in the *Shiji*, specifically the "Yue Shu" ("Book of Music"). This article comprehensively discusses his musical thought.

Regarding the article the "Yue Shu" in the *Shiji*, some scholars believe it plagiarized Xunzi's "Yue Lun" ("Discourse on Music") and the "Yue Ji" ("Record of Music" in the *Liji*). This stems from a lack of understanding of the transmission and writing of books during the pre-Qin (before 221 BC) and Han dynasties (202 BC-25 AD) in China. During that long period, the Chinese considered previous books and ideas as public resources, accessible and usable by anyone, and integrated into their own thought and doctrines. Therefore, by the late Warring States period and the Qin and Han dynasties, many thinkers had incorporated Confucian ideals of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and music, or Daoist ideas of tranquility and non-action. Their thought had already integrated Confucian, Daoist, Legalist, and Yin-Yang schools of thought. Similarly, thinkers, historians, and scholars of any school of thought can freely use resources from ancient books when writing, without citing sources. Modern people using concepts of "copyright" and "patent" to examine and criticize the ancients is inconsistent with the historical context. This is a crucial point to remember when studying history: we cannot judge the past by modern standards. Understanding this principle explains

why most of the text and ideas in the "Yue Shu" is the same as or similar to Xunzi's "Yue Lun" and the "Yue Ji" in *Liji*.

This is because Sima Qian agreed with the ideas in these two works, integrated them, and then wrote them down. Of course, the part of the "Yue Shu" that best expresses Sima Qian's musical thought is from the beginning of this book to "There are many such records in the world, so I will not discuss them." It does not contain any text identical to the "Yue Lun" and the "Yue Ji", indicating that it represents Sima Qian's unique perspective.

To study Sima Qian's musical thought, the primary focus should be on this passage, followed by other parts of the "Yue Shu", and then related records in other chapters of the *Shiji*. Furthermore, textual analysis and historical interpretation are essential for discussing these records. Only in this way can we grasp the true nature of Sima Qian's musical thought.

Based on research, scholars believe that Sima Qian's musical thought encompasses the following aspects.

- i. The reigns of Emperor Shun ǳ (birth and death dates unknown) and the Western Zhou Dynasty (approximately 1046 BC-771BC) were both eras of political and musical ideals.
- ii. The principle of music creation is to restraint of personal desires. Sima Qian not only opposed the excessive indulgence of emperors and monarchs in music but also criticized musicians who created new sounds to cater to their superiors. He also criticized the excessive indulgence in music during the Qin Dynasty (221BC-207 BC).

iii. Music and politics are closely related: the state of politics influences and leads to the emergence of different types of music. A stable and enlightened political system is a prerequisite for the rise of good music; only a stable and enlightened political system can ensure that music is "harmonious and upright." Conversely, if the political system is corrupt, licentious music will emerge.

iv. Music is closely related to folk customs and traditions. Sima Qian acknowledged that customs and folk songs varied from place to place. Different regions having different types of music is a normal phenomenon. The central government, guided by the principle of unification, sought to integrate music from various regions and then distribute it for performance, aiming to promote government policies, remedy current problems, and change customs.

From the above, we can see several characteristics of Sima Qian's musical thought:

- i. Integration of Confucian and Taoist thought.
- ii. Absorption of Taoist natural philosophy.
- iii. Innovative transformation through the convergence of Confucianism and Taoism.

Finally, let's discuss the influence of Sima Qian's musical thought. The formation of Sima Qian's musical thought had a profound impact on the development of music in later generations. First, it reconstructed and integrated Confucian and Daoist theories of music. Second, it provided aesthetic enlightenment through the "theory of musical emotion." For example, the famous literary critic Liu Xie (c. 465 AD -?) proposed in his *Wenxin*

Diao long (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) that "poetry is the heart of music, and sound is the body of music," developing the "Yue Shu" view of "unity of sound and emotion" into the creative principle of "emotion as the foundation, sound as the end." Third, it represented a historical breakthrough in music classification. Sima Qian divided music into official music and folk music, with official music further divided into proper music and licentious music. This influenced the classification of music in later generations. Fourth, it influenced music education and practice. Through the practical path of "educating the people through music", Sima Qian's musical thought deeply participated in the construction of the ancient Chinese music education system and the shaping of musical aesthetics. His theory not only injected an ethical core into music education but also promoted the integration and coexistence of refined and popular music in practice, forming a musical practice tradition with Chinese characteristics.

Conclusion

Sima Qian's musical thought occupies an important position in ancient Chinese musicology. He made in-depth analysis and interpretation of music, revealing its metaphorical, social and aesthetic characteristics. His musical thought not only integrates the essence of Confucianism and Taoism, but also emphasizes its social practice and emotional expression. This thought profoundly influenced later generations and played a positive role in promoting the development of musical aesthetics, music education and musical creation. In-depth study of Sima Qian's musical thought helps us better grasp the connotation and characteristics of ancient Chinese.



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