

The Argument of the Legend of the Yellow Emperors Development of Chinese Music Culture

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Abstract: Distant legends recount the Yellow Emperor's contributions to Chinese music culture. These narratives, which intertwine historical facts with mythical elements, should not be uncritically accepted as definitive accounts of his achievements. Instead, they require careful analysis through a scientific lens to assess their authenticity. By adopting a historical and dialectical approach, the Yellow Emperor's role in the development of Chinese music culture can be more accurately understood.

Keywords: Yellow Emperor; Music; Reality; Contribution

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1. Introduction

The Yellow Emperor, the cultural ancestor of the Chinese nation, pioneered in various fields, illuminating the dawn of Chinese civilization. Historical records recount the legend of the Yellow Emperor's establishment of music culture, which later generations often cite to affirm his contributions to music. However, it is undeniable that historical legends are heavily influenced by imagination and superstition. These accounts should neither be blindly accepted nor outright dismissed. To accurately position the relationship between the Yellow Emperor and Chinese music culture, this article reviews relevant historical legends and then examines the historical traces of music culture to determine the authenticity of these legends.

2. The legend of the Yellow Emperor developing Chinese music culture

2.1. The legend of the Yellow Emperor making drums

In the 26th century BC, Xuanyuan was the central emperor and the supreme ruler of heaven and earth ^[1]. At this time, a demon named Chiyu emerged in the South. He was ambitious and first used force to conquer the Miao people in the south, forming a fierce army. Then, he attacked his ancestor, Emperor Yan, using force, driving him from the South to Zhuolu (present-day Zhuolu, Hebei). With no other choice, Emperor Yan sought help from the Yellow Emperor, Xuanyuan.

When the news reached the Yellow Emperor, he was furious. He decided to conquer Chiyu by force. Thus, a bloody battle broke out in the Zhuolu field. The Yellow Emperor's army was overwhelming, and Chiyu's resistance was fierce. The two sides fought fiercely and could not tell who was winning.

The prolonged war had drained both sides of their resources, and the Yellow Emperor could not quickly subdue Chiyou's forces. What could he do? The Yellow Emperor then thought that if he could create a drum that produced a loud sound, it would boost his army's morale and dampen Chiyou's troops' fighting spirit, leading to a decisive victory over Chiyou. However, what material should be used to make such a large drum? He then thought of the monster Kuai on Liupo Mountain in the East Sea. Thus, he ordered his divine soldiers to strip Kuai's skin to make a large drum and to use the leg bones of the Thunder God to make a pair of drumsticks.

After the large drum was completed, the Yellow Emperor ordered it to be placed on a war chariot and had the mighty Chang Bo beat it. Chang Bo, with immense strength, swung his arms and beat the drum nine times, producing a thunderous sound that echoed through the mountains and valleys, darkening the sky and earth. The morale of the Yellow Emperor's army soared, and they charged towards Chiyou's position with loud shouts. Chiyou's troops were suddenly terrified by the drumming, trembling, and fleeing in fear. When Chiyou retreated to Ji Zhou with his army, he was finally captured alive by the emperor's forces and beheaded. After that, the Yellow Emperor often used drums to encourage his soldiers in the war and won many victories.

2.2. The legend of the Yellow Emperor ordering laws to be made

In ancient times, our ancestors often danced and sang joyfully to celebrate their hunting successes and express their happiness. However, due to the lack of a unified musical system at that time, the songs they sang were inconsistent and unpleasant to listen to^[1]. What could be done? The Yellow Emperor summoned Ling Lun and instructed him to find a solution to the music issue.

After Ling Lun accepted his mission, he spent day and night thinking and traveling. One day, he arrived at a valley by a stream on the northern side of Kunlun Mountain. There, he saw the green bamboo swaying in the wind and birds flying and singing joyfully in the bamboo grove. Inspired, he decided to use the green bamboo from Kunlun Mountain to create musical scales. He cut down twelve green bamboos from the mountain, removed the joints, and selected one section of each bamboo to make twelve pipes. When blown, these pipes produced sounds, but they were unpleasant to the ear. Just as Ling Lun was at a loss, a pair of phoenixes with spread wings flew over. The front phoenix called six times, and the rear phoenix also called six times.

2.3. The legend of the Yellow Emperor's creation of the music "Qingjiao"

According to legend, during the Spring and Autumn period, Duke Ping of Jin was a great lover of music. One day, Duke Ling of Wei visited Jin. Duke Ping hosted a banquet at the Shiyi Terrace^[1]. During the feast, Duke Ling, to express his gratitude for the hospitality, asked Shi Juan, who accompanied him, to play a piece called Qing Shang on the Se. After completing the performance, Duke Ping asked his musician, Shi Kuang, if there was any piece more moving than this. Shi Kuang replied "There is one, Qing Zheng, which is even more poignant." Duke Ping then asked Shi Kuang to play Qing Zheng. Shi Kuang brought out his Se and played it with great skill.

This piece of music is indeed more touching than Qing Shang. Duke Ping of Jin, Duke Ling of Wei, and all the guests at the banquet were delighted. When the music ended, Duke Ping of Jin moved and toasted Shi Kuang, as well as said, "Could this Qing Zheng be the most moving piece of music in the world?" Shi Kuang replied, "No, it is far less moving than Qing Jiao!" Duke Ping of Jin responded, "That's great. Please play Qing Jiao once more." Shi Kuang quickly shook his head and said, "Absolutely not. The Qing Jiao, created by the Yellow Emperor when he met the gods on Mount Tai, is too profound for you to listen to. If you insist on playing it, it will bring disaster." Duke Ping of Jin insisted, and Shi Kuang had no choice but to comply, playing Qing Jiao.

3. The argument for the truth of ancient legends

3.1. On the argument of the Yellow Emperor's drum making

The legend of the Yellow Emperor making drums provides us with several pieces of information that can be used to argue:

- (1) The time when the Yellow Emperor made drums is about 5000 years ago.
- (2) The drum made by the Yellow Emperor was made of the skin of a wild animal called "Kui".
- (3) The drum made by the Yellow Emperor was put on the war chariot, indicating that it could be moved as a whole.
- (4) The drum made by the Yellow Emperor used the leg bones of wild animals as the drumsticks.
- (5) The drum made by the Yellow Emperor has a loud sound and has the power to deter people.
- (6) The purpose of the Yellow Emperors drum was for war.

Does this information align with the historical evidence of early human drum-making? To answer this, it is helpful to explore the history of music and the cultural significance of drums. A logical starting point is the concept of the twelve tones. "The science of music" refers to a system that defines musical pitch using numerical methods based on specific intervals ^[2]. According to ancient Chinese texts, there were dozens of different names for drums, and their varieties were diverse. Ancient documents such as the Book of Documents, The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lu, The Book of Songs: The Great Odes, Li Si's Memorial on the Expulsion of Guests, and Sima Xiangru's Zixu Fu from the Han Dynasty all mention drums made from crocodile skin ^[2]. This indicates that drums played a significant role in prehistoric music.

In 1959, two pottery drums were discovered in a large late-period tomb at the Dawenkou site in Taian, Shandong. These drums were located at the eastern corners of the pit ^[3]. The vessels were wide-shouldered, thick-necked, open-mouthed, and small flat-bottomed pottery jars, approximately 30cm tall and 13cm in diameter. In 1980, a wooden alligator drum was discovered in a large tomb at the Taosi Cemetery in Xiangfen, Shaanxi Province ^[2]. During excavation, it was found alongside a special bell, with alligator skin and bone plates scattered inside the drum. It is confirmed that this is the drum of the divine alligator mentioned in ancient texts. The drum frame was hollowed out from a natural tree trunk.

In 1981, a wooden drum was unearthed in the fourth tomb of the fifth district of the Erlitou site in Yanshi, Henan Province. In addition to the wooden drum, other artifacts such as copper bells were also unearthed. The drum is long and cylindrical with a tight waist, about 54cm long and dating back more than 4000 years ago ^[2]. In addition to the above drums, there are also pottery drums unearthed in Leshanping, Yongdeng, Gansu province; Xiaohecun, Zhuanglang, Gansu Province; and Yangshan, Minhe, Qinghai Province. Music archaeology provides us with information and basis for the study of prehistoric drum instruments. The information of drums found in archaeology is very consistent with the legend of drum making by the Yellow Emperor.

To sum up, the legend of the Yellow Emperor making drums is completely consistent with the information of prehistoric drums in music archaeology. We can fully believe that the basic facts in the legend of the Yellow Emperor making drums are true and credible.

3.2. The Yellow Emperor sent people to make laws and legends

The legend that the Yellow Emperor sent Ling Lun to make music provides us with the following information that can be studied and verified:

- (1) Ling Lun made bamboo laws about 4,500 years ago.
- (2) Ling Lun made twelve bamboo tubes and made twelve laws. Among them, six were called "Laws" and six were called "Lu".
- (3) Ling Lun made the law in Kunlun Mountain;
- (4) The purpose of the Yellow Emperor sending Ling Lun to make music was to unify the music and make the music and singing harmonious.

The story of the Yellow Emperor sending people to make laws says that Ling Lun made laws by collecting bamboo

in Kunlun Mountain. This is also not credible. Kunlun Mountain is located in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, with an average altitude of 5500—6000 meters. Its northern slope belongs to a cold and extremely dry area, with barren land and few plants. Only some cold and drought-resistant shrubs and camel hair li can grow, and it is impossible for bamboo to grow here, let alone for bamboo to be harvested and made into music.

To sum up, there is no solid evidence to support the legend in historical records that the Yellow Emperor sent people to create musical scales. The information reflected does not align with what archaeology has revealed^[4]. Therefore, the authenticity of this legend cannot be confirmed. However, the comprehensive analysis of various pieces of information provides us with room for imagination. The legend in “The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lu” about the Yellow Emperor sending people to create musical scales is very similar to the story of Xun Xun creating musical scales three thousand years later. This resemblance raises the question: Is it merely a coincidence, or did Xun Xun draw inspiration from earlier historical or mythological methods of scale construction? After all, our ancestors had already made bone flutes with semitone relationships around eight or nine thousand years ago. Over the approximately three thousand years between the emergence of bone flutes and the period attributed to the Yellow Emperor, is it possible that bone flutes were gradually replaced by bamboo flutes and that a system of twelve musical scales was developed?

Otherwise, it is unclear where the author of The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lu got the idea of the Yellow Emperor sending people to create musical scales. This suggests the story may be based on earlier traditions or facts. So, the possibility that the Yellow Emperor was involved in creating musical scales should not be easily dismissed.

3.3. The argument for the creation of the Yellow Emperors music “Qingjiao”

In the legend of the Yellow Emperor’s creation of the music “Qingjiao”, the following information can be used for further study and analysis:

- (1) “Qing Shang”, “Qing Zheng”, and “Qing Jiao” are three different pieces of music.
- (2) “Qingjiao” was written by the Yellow Emperor when he met all kinds of gods and ghosts on the top of Mount Tai.
- (3) The creation of Qingjiao is about 4,500 years ago.
- (4) Shi Kuang believed that “Qingzheng” was a more beautiful music than “Qingshang”, and “Qingjiao” was a music that could control heaven, Earth, man, and god.

To critically interpret the information presented in these historical legends, it is essential to begin with an examination of the concept of “Qing Shang”, which serves as a foundational element in understanding the musical framework of the period. In the history of Chinese music, “Qing Shang” has several interpretations. The first interpretation refers to a specific musical tone. Shang in Shang Sheng refers to the Shang tone in the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale, which includes Gong, Shang, Jiao, Zhi, and Yu. A mode with Shang as its main tone is also known as Shang mode. The term Qing indicates that the pitch is half a step higher than the original note.

Another interpretation of “Qing Shang” refers to Qing Shang music, a form of traditional Chinese music. Traditional Chinese classical music has roughly three stages of development. The first stage is the ancient music before the Three Kingdoms period, primarily characterized by Confucius’ elegant music. The second stage is the Qing Shang Music of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties. The third stage is the Yan Music, also known as Feast Music, which emerged in the early Tang Dynasty from the integration of Qing Shang music with Western regions’ music^[5]. From the above argument, it can be seen that it is not accurate to say that “Qing Shang” is a musical piece in historical legends. A mode system or a folk music system of an era cannot be replaced by the concept of a single musical piece.

The following analysis will focus on the two key concepts of “Qingzheng” and “Qingjiao”, which are essential for understanding the theoretical and cultural dimensions of early Chinese music. According to the previous explanation of “Qing Shang”, it is not difficult to understand “Qing Zheng” and “Qing Jiao”. In the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale, Zheng and Jiao correspond to So and Mi, respectively. “Qing Zheng” and “Qing Jiao” are modes where So and Mi are raised by a half step.

The above analysis also tells us that the concept of “Qing Shang”, “Qing Zheng” and “Qing Jiao” appeared after the 6th century AD, that is, during the Three Kingdoms, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties period, which is far from the time when the Yellow Emperor was in power. Historically, there is no definitive evidence to confirm whether the Yellow Emperor possessed the talent to compose music. However, based on the preceding analysis, the legend attributing the creation of the music “Qing Jiao” to the Yellow Emperor lacks sufficient credibility.

4. How to understand the contribution of the Yellow Emperor to Chinese music culture in historical legends

This article concludes through argumentation that the legend of the Yellow Emperor making drums is credible; the legend of the Yellow Emperor sending people to create musical scales is theoretically plausible, but there is no evidence to support its authenticity, and the legend of the Yellow Emperor composing the musical piece “Qing Jiao” is not credible. Does this conclusion imply a diminution of the Yellow Emperor’s achievements or a decline in reverence for him? It is important to approach historical legends and the Yellow Emperor’s accomplishments from a historical materialist perspective, employing dialectical and analytical methods to critically examine the relevant historical issues.

The Yellow Emperor held a high position and was highly respected, and his wisdom and abilities undoubtedly played a crucial role in the development of Chinese society. Emperors such as Han Wudi (Liu Che), Tang Taizong (Li Shimin), Song Taizu (Zhao Kuangyin), and Qing Shengzu (Kangxi) each presided over periods of prosperity, making significant contributions to social and economic development as well as cultural advancement. The Yellow Emperor, the progenitor of Chinese civilization, made great contributions. Although later legends have embellished the Yellow Emperor’s image, and it is unlikely that he personally handled every aspect of civilization’s development, he was the leader of that great era, and all the achievements of civilization development are attributed to him. As the renowned Taiwanese scholar Qian Mu said: “The emperor is the founder and pioneer of Chinese civilization. After him, culture gradually developed and was largely established during the Zhou Dynasty. The subsequent figures, including Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, and Duke of Zhou, continued this legacy ^[6].”

5. Conclusion

In summary, when evaluating the achievements of the emperor, excessive focus on the authenticity of specific events within certain legends should be avoided. Instead, his significant contributions to Chinese civilization ought to be recognized and affirmed from a broader historical and cultural perspective. The image of the emperor has transcended historical fact to become a symbol of the collective wisdom of the people and a spiritual icon for the Chinese nation. Thus, the Yellow Emperor endures as an enduring monument in the collective memory of the descendants of Huaxia.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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