

Considering the Possibility of “Eastern Aesthetics” in the Context of Chinese Music

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1. “Is a Chinese ‘musical aesthetics’ possible?”

I have been researching the topic of Chinese music within the context of Chinese philosophy. Although I have so far conducted my research while keeping a critical distance from the field of aesthetics, in this paper, I make a challenging attempt to discuss the possibilities of Eastern Aesthetics using Chinese music as an example—which very well may not be an appropriate object for the study of Chinese aesthetic.

Modern Chinese scholars focused on literature and paintings when attempting to explicate the meaning of aesthetics in China. Chinese music, especially pre-modern music, has been studied not only from the perspective of musicology but also from the perspective of literary studies, which analyzes music in relation to poetry. Chinese music has also been studied by historians who have examined the musical system of dynasties. Furthermore, scholars such as myself have studied Chinese music from the perspective of Chinese philosophy, or *jingxue* (經學; the study of the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* and the study of Confucianism). Since ancient times in China, music has been regarded as a form of ritual and part of the Confucian studies. My approach involves synthesizing discussions on the music of Confucian scholars, including their musical temperaments, to analyze what they considered to be the ideal form of music. Few extant recordings or musical scores documenting pre-modern China existed. There are considerable difficulties in researching music that cannot be heard, and therefore, rather than focusing on the music itself, it is better to approach the music by using research methods from adjacent fields.

Since existing research repeats the obvious conclusions that Chinese music “is unlike Western music,” “emphasizes morals over beauty,” and “cultivates the self through music.” Therefore, I did not choose to study the aesthetics of Chinese music. As I will discuss later, the study of Chinese musical aesthetics has been changing in recent years, however, there is a limited range of topics that are discussed in the literature on musical aesthetics, and this range begins with Confucius’s theory of art. *The Analects of Confucius* states, “Begin with poetry, establish oneself with ritual, and complete with music” (興於詩，立於禮，成於樂). This phrase shows that Confucius understood music as the final stage of character cultivation and placed great emphasis on it. It is often cited in order to suggest that *The Book of Rites* (*Liji*, 禮記), which explains the origin of music and its social utility, is also a representative book on Chinese musical aesthetics. Subsequently, Laozi and Zhuangzi rejected Confucian music as artificial music and aimed to create music that could be integrated with the Tao. Wei Dynasty philosopher Ji Kang’s (嵇康) text *The Argument That There is No Sadness or Joy in Music* (*Sheng Wu Aile Lun*, 聲無哀樂論), which was influenced by Laozi and Zhuangzi, is often compared to Eduard Hanslick’s (1825–1904) *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854). Ji Kang is praised highly for his discussion of pure art, as well as music that distances itself from politics and is divorced from human emotions. This is a standard approach within so-called “Chinese musical aesthetics”

research. Therefore, what kind of trajectory has musical aesthetics followed since then? It is extremely difficult to trace the history of music after Ji Kang in existing research. Existing research on Chinese musical aesthetics covers several books about the *guqin* (古琴; Chinese seven-string zither,) such as the Ming Dynasty's *Xishanqinkuang* (溪山琴况). Qin is one of the *qin qi shu hua* (琴棋书画) valued by traditional Chinese intellectuals. It also concludes that Chinese music is “unlike Western music” because it “emphasizes morality over beauty” and seeks to “cultivate the self through music.” Moreover, this conclusion is repeated several times. In particular, using this method makes it impossible to systematically depict how Confucian music theory, which began with Confucius, was passed down through the generations until modern times.

Xiu Hailin,¹ a well-known scholar of the history of Chinese musical aesthetics, refers to *The Book of Rites*, *The Argument That There is No Sadness or Joy in Music*, and *Xishanqinkuang* as the “three books” of musical aesthetics. That is, he sees these three books as foundational texts in the history of Chinese musical aesthetics. The research on Chinese musical aesthetics has developed and evolved based on the “musical aesthetics” represented by these three books, and they continue to portray the splendor of Chinese music and its association with certain moral attitudes. However, rather than following this tradition of research, I determined that it would be better to abandon the concept of aesthetics and instead study music as *jingxue* to more accurately elucidate the nature of pre-modern Chinese music. When I studied abroad in China, I studied in the philosophy department rather than a department that specialized in Chinese musical aesthetics. I likely chose this path because I was tired of the somewhat self-evident arguments that Chinese music is “unlike Western music,” “emphasizes morality over beauty,” and “cultivates the self through music.”

2. Chinese music from the perspective of library catalogs: Understanding Chinese music as *jingxue*

Considering the above discussion, is it effective to theorize Chinese music as *jingxue*? From my current perspective, this is an effective method that can contribute greatly to elucidating the characteristics of Chinese music; however, there are some limitations.

First, I would like to use schemes for categorizing Chinese music to examine how Chinese music was perceived in pre-modern China. Chinese categorization methods are not just about categorizing books. Categorization offers us a glimpse into the state of scholarship in pre-modern China. Traditionally, Chinese classics have been classified using a four-part classification method. The *jing* (經) section contains Confucian classics and their commentaries; the *shi* (史) section contains books on history, politics, economics, and geography; and the *zi* (子) section contains books on other Confucian topics and non-Confucian subjects, such as science, art, and religion. Meanwhile, the *ji* (集) section contains poetry collections, complete works, lyrics, and novels. The books included in the *jing* section are studied by *jingxue*, which Confucianism valued most.

For example, the Qing Dynasty's book catalog *Siku Quanshu Zongmu* (四庫全書總目) categorizes books as follows:²

¹ He studied in the Central Conservatory of Music. He has taught at the China Conservatory of Music and the Central Conservatory of Music. He once served as the director of the Music Research Institute of the Central Conservatory of Music.

jingbu 經部： *yilei* 易類, *shulei* 書類, *shilei* 詩類, *lilei* 禮類, *Chunqiulei* 春秋類, *Xiaojinglei* 孝經類, *wujingzongyilei* 五經總義類, *sishulei* 四書類, *yuelei* 樂類, *xiaoxuelei* 小學類
shibu 史部： *zhengshilei* 正史類, *biannianlei* 編年類, *jishibenmolei* 記事本末類, *bieshilei* 別史類, *zashilei* 雜史類 ...
zibu 子部： *rujialei* 儒家類, *bingjialei* 兵家類, *fajialei* 法家類, *nongjialei* 農家類, *yijialei* 醫家類, *tianwensuanfalei* 天文算法類, *shushulei* 術數類, *yishulei* 藝術類...
jibu 集部： *chucilei* 楚辭類, *biejilei* 別集類, *zongjilei* 總集類, *shiweninglei* 詩文評類, *ciqulei* 詞曲類 ...

According to this categorization, music belongs in the *jing* section as a form of *yuelei* (樂類). Moreover, *yishulei* (藝術類) in the *zi* section and *ciqulei* (詞曲類) in the *ji* section contain musical scores and theories of musical instrument performance. The characteristics of the music classified in the *jing* sections of the *Siku Quanshu* are described in detail in the introduction to the *jing* sections of *Siku Quanshu Zongmu*.

We have now distinguished various books and classified only those discussing temperament and clarifying *yayue* (雅樂; the court music) into the *jing* section. All the trivial techniques involved in singing and the inelegant music of instruments were dismissed and classified into two genres, namely, *zayi* (雜藝) and *ciqu* (詞曲). By doing so, it becomes clear that the Tao of great music is equal to heaven and earth, and Zhengsheng (鄭聲; popular and ribald music in Zhengguo (鄭国)) cannot violate great music.²

The above excerpt demonstrates that in pre-modern discussions about music, only the theory of temperament was classified into the *jing* section. Indeed, even when examining only the titles of the books classified as *jing* in the *Siku Quanshu*, it is clear that the main focus is on temperament theory. Indeed, the theory of musical temperament was central to Confucianism, not only in the *Siku Quanshu* but also in bibliographical catalogs and discussions on music contained in official histories. There are many extant texts that contain discussions on the theory of musical temperament, the relation between musical instruments and musical temperament, and the very definition of music itself. If these texts are studied as part of the history of Chinese philosophy, they can be treated as part of *lixue* (禮學, the study of ritual). They can also be interpreted in the context of various issues of self-cultivation, which are important topics in Confucianism. Furthermore, mathematical research on topics such as musical temperament is also effective as a form of research on neo-Confucianism, as it is a form of *gewuqiongli* (格物窮理, meaning “to analyze each thing one by one and figure out *li* [理]”), which was discussed by Zhu Xi (朱熹) of the Southern Song dynasty. In this way, music can open up new perspectives and contribute to the study of Chinese philosophy. In this context, I have engaged in continual research on “music as *jingxue*.”

However, it must be noted that the academic view of the *Siku Quanshu Zongmu*, which treats

² *Siku Quanshu Zongmu* (四庫全書總目), *Jingbu Yuelei Xu* 經部樂類序, Taipei: Yiwenyinshuguan, 1964, p.788.

musical temperament as a central issue of “music as *jingxue*,” is nothing more than the academic perspective of the Qing Dynasty. There was also a time when the perspective of “music as *jingxue*” was not limited to the study of musical temperament. For example, *Mingshi Yiwenzhi* (明史藝文志) and *Siku Quanshu Zongmu* excluded books related to the *guqin* from the *jing* sections; they also excluded books on musical instruments, lyrics, and foreign musical instruments. However, in the library catalogs before Qing Dynasty, including *Suishu* (隋書), *Jiu Tangshu* (旧唐書), *Xin Tangshu* (新唐書), *Chongwenzongmu* (崇文總目), *Wenxiantongkao* (文献通考), and *Songshi* (宋史), the scores and books about *guqin* were classified as *jing*. As Naka Junko states, *Suishu Jingjizhi* (隋書經籍志) only mentions *Qinfu* (琴譜); however, *Jiu Tangshu Jingjizhi* (旧唐書經籍志) and *Xin Tangshu Yiwenzhi* (新唐書藝文志) contain numerous *guqin* scores.³ In addition to *guqin* scores, *Suishu Jingjizhi*, *Jiu Tangshu Jingjizhi*, and *Xin Tangshu Yiwenzhi* contain many *guqin* books. *Jiu Tangshu* also places *Waiguojiqiu* (外国伎曲, *The Music from Foreign Countries*) in the *jing* section, and the *Xin Tangshu* includes books about *huyue* (胡樂, foreign music), such as *The Book of Heku* (鞞鼓), in the *jing* section. This is due to the fact that the classifications of *yayue* (雅樂, court music), *suyue* (俗樂, secular music), and *huyue* had not yet been established in the consciousness of people during these times.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the very concept of music as *jingxue*, or scholarship, is nothing more than a set of values within Confucianism. In fact, the perspective of “music as *jingxue*” itself had been dynamically changing under the influence of the perspective of “music not as *jingxue*.”

First, unlike other *jingshu* (經書) (*Shijing* [詩經], *Shujing* [書經], *Liji* [禮記], *Yijing* [易經], *Chunqiu* [春秋]), there is no music book called *Yuejing* (樂經). Usually, when Chinese intellectuals make a claim, they quote passages from classical works that serve as the basis for their claim. *The Four Books* and *Five Classics* have always been valued among the many classical Chinese works. It is not simply that the *Yuejing* has not survived to present times; rather, its existence throughout all of Chinese history is unconfirmed and has only been referred to vaguely. Some believe that parts of the *Yuejing* existed in *Shijing*, and others assert that the teaching on music described in the *Liji* came from the *Yuejing*. Because there was no established scripture, the “music as *jingxue*” perspective itself had the potential to undergo major changes. Music that had not been considered *jing* such as *suyue* and *huyue*, played a major role in this transformation. The musical theories and scores used to play *suyue* and *huyue* were often incorporated into *yayue* and came to have great significance in Confucian music theory.

For example, Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929) of the Qing Dynasty wrote in his book *Zhongguo Jinsanbainian Xueshushi* (中国近三百年學術史, *The Academic History of China's Recent 300 Years*) that Ling Tingkan (凌廷堪), Xu Yangyuan (徐養原), and Chen Li (陳澧) were “the ones who most clarified the principles of musicology among the Confucians of the Qing Dynasty” (清儒最能明樂学条貫).⁴ According to Liang Qichao, the types of music research studied

³ Naka, Junko., “Todai ni Okeru Kinbunka no Seijuku 唐代における琴文化の成熟 (Maturation of the qin culture in the Tang Dynasty),” *Cultural History of the Qin: Soundscapes of East Asia*, edited by Uehara, Sakukazu., Tokyo: Bensei Publishing, 2009, p.164.

⁴ Liang, Qichao., *Zhongguo Jinsanbainian Xueshushi* 中国近三百年學術史 (*The Academic History of China's*

by Confucians during the Qing Dynasty were divided into ancient music and modern musical play, while ancient music was divided into court music and *yanyue* (燕樂). Mao Qiling (毛奇齡; 1623-1716) and Jiang Yong (江永; 1681-1762) in the early Qing Dynasty studied *yayue* and produced excellent results; although they recognized the necessity of studying *yanyue*, they were unable to develop full-fledged research. Rather, it is Ling Tingkan (1757-1809) who pioneered the study of *yanyue*⁵. Ling Tingkan studied *yanyue*, and it is a general term for secular music played at the imperial court during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties. *Yanyue* has certainly not been the center of “the music as *jingxue*” before him. Ling Tingkan says:

In my opinion, when Confucians tried to clarify ancient music, they often lined up millet, cut bamboo, and stuck to their own ideas, instead of thinking about it using *yanyue*. What they say made sense in theory; however, but when you try to actually apply it to music, it becomes like a mountain above the sea where the three gods live, even if you can see it from a distance, you can't actually reach it.⁶

In attempting to restore ancient music, Confucians measured the length of a pitch pipe (flute for tuning other musical instruments) by lining up millet and cutting bamboo.⁷ However, Ling Tingkan asserted that Confucians simply advocated for theories about creating pitch pipes but were unable to apply these theories to real music. Ling Tingkan also resurrected the stigmatized pipa (琵琶), arguing that it was one of the “treasure of the three generations” (三代) and that it was related to the origins of *yanyue* in the Tang and Song dynasties⁸.

Although there are many problems with Ling Tingkan's study of *yanyue*, it is true that foreign musical instruments, such as the *pipa*, which entered Chinese music during the Sui and Tang periods, had a great influence on the theory of *yayue* and changed *yayue* itself. It has also been pointed out that before this, during the Wei and Jin dynasties, as well as the Southern and Northern dynasties, various foreign musical forms and instruments influenced *yayue*, transforming Chinese “tradition.”⁹ Up until

Recent 300 Years), Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 2006, p.312.

- 5 First, *Yanyue* (燕樂) is *yanyue* (宴樂) or *yanyue* (讌樂). During the Zhou Dynasty, *yanyue* was used to entertain guests and was called *fangzhongyue* (房中樂), but later, it was used to refer to eating, drinking, entertainment, and viewing activities in general at banquets and generalize all uses of secular music in the imperial court. Second, it is a general term for secular music used in the Sui, Tang, and Song courts. Third, *yanyue* (燕樂) is the first part of the *jiubuji* (九部伎) or *shibuji* (十部伎) in Tang Dynasty. The second meaning is closest to the *yanyue* studied by Ling Tingkan. *Zhongguo Yinyue Cidian* 中国音樂詞典 (*Chinese Music Dictionary*), “*Yanyue*”, edited by the Music Research Institute, Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1985, pp. 447-448.
- 6 Ling, Tingkan., the preface of *Yanyue Kaoyuan* 燕樂考原, *Zongshu Jicheng Chubian* (Printed book of Yueyatang Congshu 粵雅堂叢書), p.112.
- 7 The specific method for making pitch pipes is not described in detail in the Four Books and Five Classics. Confucian scholars referred to the *Hanshu Lulizhi* 漢書律曆志 etc. and searched for specific methods for creating pitch pipes.
- 8 Ling, Tingkan., “Yanyue Ershibatiao Shuo Shang 燕樂二十八調說上”, *Xiaolintang Wenji* 校礼堂文集, Beijing: Zhonghua book company, 1998, p.156.
- 9 Togawa, Takayuki., *Toshin Nancho ni Okeru Dento no Sozo* 東晉南朝における伝統の創造 (*Creation of Tradition in the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties*), Tokyo: Kyukoshoin, 2015.

now, I have exclusively analyzed texts containing musical theories by pre-modern intellectuals. However, I believe that the true nature of Chinese music can only be clarified by comprehensively examining a variety of other music-related phenomena.

3. The possibility of aesthetics: Comprehensively analyzing the orientations of Chinese intellectuals

In recent years, researchers of Chinese musical aesthetics have also shared an awareness similar to the one I outlined above. In Xiu Hailin's recently published book, he writes,

However, research on the history of Chinese music aesthetics has a long future ahead. Focusing on the “practices of musical beauty and the results of its recognition” that have occurred in history is necessary. Moreover, bringing various types of materials into the field of research and integrating research methods are crucial. This will require a broader perspective for research, and the difficulty of research will also increase. In fact, in addition to research on historical materials that “discuss music” and research on the history of musical aesthetic, there are also many historical materials related to the creation, performance, and aesthetic practice of musical beauty. Furthermore, a considerable amount of historical material remains in this area, and everything that this theory points to, including the common and rare items, is expected to be constantly and deeply researched and further elucidated.¹⁰

The “practices of musical beauty and the results of its recognition” mentioned by Xiu Hailin are necessary for future research on the history of musical aesthetics, including musical scores and records of traditional *guqin* as well as musical plays. Xiu Hailin's recent work, titled *History of Ancient Chinese Musical Aesthetics* (中国古代音乐美学史, *Zhongguo Gudai Yinyue Meixueshi*, 2020) includes chapters such as “Musical Aesthetics of Musical Practical Experiences in *Yuefuzalu* (乐府杂录) and discusses musical practice and its recognition.” I believe that his research is effective in elucidating the characteristics of Chinese music.

Meanwhile, Yang Sai of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music has taken a different approach than Xiu Hailin. In his book *Original Category Research on Chinese Musical Aesthetics* (中国音乐美学原范畴研究, *Zhongguo Yinyuemeixue Yuanfanchouyanjiu*, 2015), Yang Sai consciously uses Western musical aesthetics to construct the categories of Chinese musical aesthetics. He “uses and compares the thoughts and methods of Western musical aesthetics research” and “seeks to establish a system of categories for Chinese musical aesthetics.”¹¹

To avoid the generalization of aesthetic category theory research, Chinese music aesthetics must pay more attention to mediating categories, which are different from general philosophical categories such as *xing* (性), *li* (理), and *qi* (气), and must be distinguished from musical

¹⁰ Xiu, Hailin., *Zhongguo Gudai Yinyue Meixueshi* 中国古代音乐美学史 (*History of Ancient Chinese Musical Aesthetics*), Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2020, p.19.

¹¹ Yang, Sai., *Zhongguo Yinyuemeixue Yuanfanchouyanjiu* 中国音乐美学原范畴研究 (*Chinese Music Aesthetics Original Category Research*), Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2015, pp.8-9.

technology categories such as musical temperament and tone. Among the mediating categories, we should pay special attention to the original category, which has a primitive meaning. *Yue* (樂; music) and *feiyue* (非樂; deny music) are a pair of original categories that form the core of Chinese musical aesthetics, and the controversies surrounding the music of *Zhuzi Baijia* (諸子百家) was based on these two categories.¹²

Yang cites the Confucian school’s “*yue cong he*” (樂從和, music follows harmony), Mohism’s “*feiyue*,” the Taoist’s “*tianyue*” (天樂, the music of the heavens), or Mencius’ “*yu min tongle*” (與民同樂, enjoy something with people) as original categories, and uniting these original categories was a core category called “*he*” (和). In addition, he says that there were 48 aesthetic categories of music in the pre-Qin Dynasty, 17 in the Han Dynasty, seven in the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, and 28 during the Sui, Tang, and Qing Dynasties.¹³

However, can these attempts really be referred to as aesthetical inquiry? I believe that their attempts were effective for accurately analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of “Chinese music.” However, they only increase the level of understanding of “Chinese music.” What is the point of studying Chinese music in terms of aesthetics (nevertheless, Yang’s attempt is “aesthetic” in that it defines a category)?

At this juncture in my argument, I would like to summarize my thoughts. Within traditional academic classification schemes, music is categorized as belonging to the *jing* section; however, it is only when examining the other parts comprehensively that one can understand the true nature of Chinese music. First, the “music as *jingxue*” perspective has not existed in isolation, and I assert that scholars should pay more attention to music outside of Confucian discussions. Alternatively, it is important to make greater efforts to accurately describe the orientations of Eastern intellectuals who practiced and enjoyed these *jiyi* (技藝, arts) in everyday life, not only in the field of music but also in literature, painting, and even the natural sciences, including as studies of the calendar system and mathematics. I believe that the concept of Eastern Aesthetics can serve an effective role in this endeavor. Rather than applying a predetermined framework from Western aesthetics to Chinese music, scholars should approach Chinese music in a way that transforms aesthetics itself while remaining fully aware of the role that the discipline of aesthetics has played in the West.

As library catalogs from pre-modern China demonstrate, music is clearly classified as *yue* (樂) within the *jing* (經) section and painting is classified as *yishu* (藝術) within the *zi* (子) section, Chinese intellectuals played *guqin* and the game *go* (碁), practiced calligraphy, and drew pictures at the same time. Additionally, knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, which are placed in the category of *shushu* (術數) within the *zi* section, was also important for Confucianism. Of course, not all intellectuals enjoyed all these art forms. However, at least in Chinese culture, the ideal path was to pass the imperial examination, become a bureaucrat, and work hard while also practicing these skills in one’s spare time. The concept of Eastern Aesthetics provides an effective perspective for demonstrating the comprehensive and integrated attitude displayed toward the arts by pre-modern

¹² Yang, *Zhongguo Yinyuemeixue Yuanfanchouyanjiu*, p.10.

¹³ Yang, *Zhongguo Yinyuemeixue Yuanfanchouyanjiu*, pp.68-69.

intellectuals in China and East Asia.

Researchers from various eras and genres from the East and West participated in a lecture series titled “Eastern Aesthetics as a Field in Progress”¹⁴ that was held by Ding Yi (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) at the East Asian Academy for New Liberal Arts, The University of Tokyo. All of the scholars discussed the concept of “Eastern Aesthetics” from the perspectives of their respective fields. Otabe Tanehisa (the University of Tokyo) said, “In discussions about ‘Eastern Aesthetics,’ both ‘East’ and ‘aesthetics’ are frameworks given by the West. However, Eastern aestheticians have reorganized traditional Eastern thinking through their encounters with the West and have (re)formed Eastern Aesthetics. Through this, they have shown (and will continue to show) Western aestheticians an aesthetic direction different from that of Western aesthetics.”¹⁵ Both Xiu Hailin and Yang Sai, who advocate for Chinese musical aesthetics, must have been influenced by Western aesthetics in some way and have reorganized and reformed Eastern Aesthetics. Having attended these lectures, I also feel that I have begun to recognize some of the underlying characteristics of “Eastern Aesthetics.”

Chen Wangheng¹⁶ (Wuhan University) used the concept of “aesthetics” to analyze the uniqueness of Chinese philosophy while comparing it with Western philosophy, and he is now known as a “pioneer of Chinese environmental aesthetics.”¹⁷ At first glance, the theme of environmental aesthetics, as taken up by Chen Wangheng, may seem unrelated to music or art; however, it is deeply connected to how Chinese people perceive the world. One of Chen’s central claims is about “*jiayuangan*” (家園感, sense of home). According to Chen, “*tianren heyi*” (天人合一, harmonious unity between human beings and nature), which is a concept of ancient Chinese philosophy and cosmology, is “a unity of life found in our experience of the environmental beauty of nature.” Moreover, he states that “this sense of unity—a fundamental motif in traditional Chinese philosophy—is reflected in the expression “*jiaogan hexie*” [交感和諧], namely, a state of harmony and mutual dependence.” He also stated, “The experience of the unity of life by virtue of environmental beauty is thus not only ecological; rather, it is also *about* nature. There is also a cultural and, therefore, human dimension involved. That is, overall, what the “sense of home” means.”¹⁸

The Confucian theory of musical temperament also aimed to create a world in which musical

¹⁴ A lecture and discussion series organized by Ding Yi. It cannot be said that the field currently called “Eastern Aesthetics” has yet been properly positioned. Based on this awareness of issues, this series was held to reconsider the scope and nature of “Eastern Aesthetics.”

¹⁵ The report of the first session of the lecture series “Eastern Aesthetics as a Field in Progress” <https://www.eaa.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/blog/20230126-1/>

¹⁶ The report of the second session of the lecture series “Eastern Aesthetics as a Field in Progress” <https://www.eaa.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/blog/20230210-2/>

¹⁷ Chen Wangheng’s *Dangdai Meixue Yuanli* 当代美学原理 (*Principles of Modern Aesthetics*) integrated Chinese and Western aesthetics and created an aesthetic system based on “boundaries.” In addition, a series of works such as *Zhongguo Gutian Meixueshi* 中国古典美学史 (*History of Classical Chinese Aesthetics*) depict the history of Chinese aesthetics as a complete history, creating new history of aesthetics using his own theory of categories. *Huanjing Meixue* 環境美学 (*Environmental Aesthetics*) by him is the first systematic work dedicated to environmental aesthetics theory in China, and his *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* is the first book exclusively devoted to environmental aesthetics written by a Chinese and published by a foreign publisher.

<https://philosophy.whu.edu.cn/info/1323/12298.htm>

¹⁸ Chen, Wangheng., translated by Feng Su, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, London: Routledge, 2015, p.39.

temperament and the astronomical calendar would be linked mathematically and where heaven, earth, and the people would be interconnected via the same principle. For example, Liu Xin (劉歆) of the Han dynasty created the *Santong* Calendar (三統曆), and using the concept of *yuan* (元), he created a pitch pipe that emitted a standard tone called the “yellow bell” (黃鐘). He envisioned a world in which the numerical values used in calculations related to the pitch pipe would be mutually related to the calculations of the calendar and weights and measures. His objective was to connect the world of humans and the world of heaven and earth through music. Liu Xin’s ideas on musical temperament and calendars provided a basic framework for subsequent Chinese scholarship.

When viewed *not* from the perspective of the expansive world of cosmic harmony but rather the more microscopic world of harmony among human beings, the role of music in human enjoyment is revealed to be based on the concept “*he*” (和), which frequently appears when Confucians discuss music. Music is often discussed together with ritual (禮樂). Indeed, it can be said that music is a part of ritual and has a role that complements ritual. As the *Liji Yueji* (禮記樂記) states, “Ritual brings moderation to the people’s hearts, and music harmonizes the voices of the people” (禮節民心, 樂和民聲). It also states, “Music brings people together in harmony, and ritual makes people distinguish between the high and low status” (樂者為同, 禮者為異). It continues, relating, “If ritual is properly established, order will be created among people, and if the performance of music is completed, people will be in harmony” (禮義立則貴賤等矣, 樂文同則上下和矣). That is, in a society ordered by ritual, music plays the role of harmonizing and uniting people.

The idea of valuing harmony and enjoyment among the people can also be seen in *Mencius*, *Liang Huiwang xia* (孟子 梁惠王下).

Mencius asked, “I heard that you once said to Zhuang Bao (莊暴) that you like to have fun. Has that ever happened?” The king blushed and said, “What I like is not the elegant pleasures of the former king (先王), but the secular pleasures that are popular among people.” Mencius said, “If the king loves having fun so much, the country of Qi (齊) will soon be stable. The pleasures of today are like the pleasures of ancient times.” The king said, “Will you tell me what it is?” Mencius said, “For example, which is more fun-enjoying music alone or with a group of people?” The king replied, “It’s better to have fun in large numbers.” Mencius said, “Let me tell you, the king, about pleasure. Now, when the king is playing music here, the people will hear the sound of your bells, drums, and flutes, and they will be troubled and wrinkled the bridge of their noses. They will say to each other, ‘The king likes music, but why does he leave us in such a terrible state? Parents and children cannot get along with each other, and brothers, wives, and children are all separated.’ ...The reason why the people are so worried is because the king is not able to enjoy with the people. However, now the king is playing music here in the same way, and the people hear the sounds of the bells, drums, and flutes, and they rejoice and say to each other, ‘The king seems to be doing well. If not, how can he make music?’ The reason why the people are happy like this is because the king is having fun with the people. If you are having fun with the people, you will be a true king.”

While the King is ashamed of his taste for secular pleasures, Mencius looks positively at the fact

that the King can share his pleasures with so many people. It is true that the ideal situation would be to be able to share elegant pleasures with people; however, Mencius believes that being a king is to enjoy things together with the people and not keep pleasures to oneself. In addition, the phrase “the pleasures of today are like the pleasures of ancient times” (今之樂猶古之樂也) was actively quoted in later generations when secular music was incorporated into the theory of court music.

First, the word *mei* (美, beauty) in ancient Chinese includes elements of harmony. Confucius thought that the music of *shun* (舜), which captured *mei* and *shan* (善, morality), was the most ideal music, and placed it above the music of King Wu (武王), which only captured beauty.

Confucius described the music of Shao (韶) by Shun as, “It captures both beauty and moral.” Regarding the music of Wu (武), he said, “It only captures beauty not moral.” (*The Analects of Confucius*, *bayi* 八佾, “子謂韶, 尽美矣, 又尽善也。謂武, 尽美矣, 未尽善也。”)

There are many annotations that interpret *mei* in this context as the beauty of music and dance. Huang Kan’s (皇侃) interpretation of this passage during the Liang dynasty (論語義疏, *Lunyu Yishu*) provides a clue as to what *mei* means:

This passage reveals in detail whether Yu (虞) and Zhou (周) generation’s music is superior. *Shao* is the name of Shun’s music. When saints create music, they create it based on people’s hearts. ...The people enjoyed the fact that Yao (堯) had handed over the throne to Shun and Shun inherited Yao’s virtues. Therefore, Shun ruled the world and created music, which he named Shao. *Mei* (美) means being perfectly suited to the times. Furthermore, *Shan* (善) means that there is no evil in the way things are handled. Even if there is no evil in the way things are handled (*shan*), it does not mean that it perfectly suits the times (*mei*). Even if it is perfectly suited to the time (*mei*), it does not suggest that no evil exists in the way things are handled (*shan*). Therefore, *mei* and *shan* may be different. However, Shao’s music is both *shan* and *mei*. Everyone and everything in the world enjoyed Shun’s succession to Yao. Therefore, Shun followed the people’s will and inherited Yao’s throne. This suited the people of the time perfectly. That’s why Confucius said the music of Shun captured *mei*. Yao handing over the throne to Shun is not a bad way to handle things. That’s why Confucius said the music of Shun captured *shan*.¹⁹

As I explain later, I assert that the fluctuation in the meaning of the word “beauty” itself makes “Eastern Aesthetics” more complex and interesting. Huang Kan’s interpretation of *mei* implies that something conforms with the spirit of the times—that is, it means that something was truly enjoyed by many people who lived in that era.

Huang Kan states that there is also *shan* that is not *mei* and that there is *mei* that is not *shan*. For example, King Wu’s music is *mei* that is not *shan*; therefore, is it possible that there is *shan* music that is not *mei*? Chinese music originates from people’s enjoyment (sound comes from the feeling of enjoyment). In *Liji Yueji*, music is rooted in the fact that people’s hearts are moved by something

¹⁹ Huang, Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu Yishu* 論語義疏, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p.80.

(“樂者，音之所由生也。其本在人心之感於物也。”) As *Mencius* argued, it is most important to enjoy something with many people, therefore, the music that is not *mei* is not music at all.

As Kataoka Mai (International Research Center for Japanese Studies) pointed out, “Terminology and concepts that have been established mainly in Western languages are facing complex problems due to inconsistencies with the societies in which they have been transplanted; moreover, this discrepancy itself is causing us to re-examine those terms and is even motivating progress within various fields.”²⁰ Indeed, when trying to transplant the concept of “aesthetics” to the East, a plethora of complex problems arise.

The concept of “beauty” also causes a complex situation. In addition to the above-mentioned definition of beauty, Li Zehou, in his book *Chinese Aesthetics* (華夏美学, *Huaxia meixue*, 1988), explains the origin of the character *mei* based on the *Shuowenjiezi* (說文解字), stating, “The bigger the sheep, the more *mei* it is.” He states that the word *mei* refers to the deliciousness of an entire sheep; however, he also states that “a person who has become a sheep is *mei*.” The sensuous element (naturalness) evoked by the deliciousness of the sheep and the sociability gained through rituals by those who become sheep—that is, by those who participate in ancient rituals wearing sheep headgear—are two aspects of the Confucian tradition. There are many kinds of interpretations of *mei*, including those of Huang Kan and Li Zehou, and our own sense of the word beauty living in East Asia. Furthermore, a gap exists between *mei* in East Asia and beauty in West. Therefore, by thinking about this issue even a little bit, it is easy to imagine that the words “beauty” and “aesthetics” can give rise to complex problems.

Nevertheless, by introducing the word “beauty,” it is possible to become even more sensitive to the differences in perception between contemporary individuals and ancient intellectuals. Throughout the ages, people have found the sounds of the *guqin* beautiful, have sensed the beauty of nature in landscape paintings, and have been inspired by various Chinese novels. Are the feelings that contemporary people receive from these art forms completely different from those of people in pre-modern times?

As mentioned at the beginning, Chinese music is currently being studied from the perspectives of philosophy, history, literature, and musicology. Research has also been conducted from the perspective of aesthetics. By comprehensively examining not only music but also the various activities that are currently considered forms of art and technology, it is possible to generate a clearer understanding of the reality of music, art, literature, mathematics, astronomy, and more. For this purpose, the concept of “Eastern Aesthetics” is effective. By examining the friction caused by the importation of the concept of aesthetics to the East and other regions around the world and tracing the development of new forms of aesthetics, it may be possible to create a “global aesthetics” that differs from all forms of aesthetics that have come before.

²⁰ The report of the third Session of Lecture Series “Eastern Aesthetics as a Field in Progress.”
<https://www.eaa.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/blog/20230303-3/>

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