

The Spiritual Core of Pre-Qin Confucian Thought on Rites and Music and Its Contemporary Value

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of contemporary society confronting profound issues such as cultural identity, ethical foundations, and spiritual life, a return to the classical resources of Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music carries significant theoretical importance. This study aims to systematically elucidate the composite structure, spiritual core, and enduring value of Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music that transcends its historical context. The paper first examines the constitutive characteristics of the system of rites and music, revealing it as a product of the philosophical integration of previous civilizations. It demonstrates how the normative function of "rites" (li) and the emotionally moderating function of "music" (yue), through their interactive "mutual necessity," construct an ideal of order and harmony that integrates reason and emotion. Subsequently, the paper delves into its spiritual core, clarifying the unity of moral subjectivity and external norms embodied in the "oneness of ren and li," the path of emotional cultivation and character formation signified by the "beauty of the mean and harmony" (zhong he zhi mei), and the connection between the human and the cosmic achieved through "extending from the human to the cosmos." Finally, the research is dedicated to a modern reevaluation of the spirit of rites and music, exploring its potential intellectual resources for reconstructing contemporary ethical identity, nurturing communal emotional bonds, and promoting the creative transformation of humanistic education. Through an approach informed by philosophical hermeneutics, this study attempts to offer a possibility for in-depth theoretical dialogue concerning the modern transformation of traditional thought.

Keywords: Pre-Qin Confucianism; Thought on Rites and Music; Spiritual Core; Oneness of Ren and Li; The Mean and Harmony (Zhonghe); Contemporary Value

Introduction

Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music represents a core articulation of the early form of classical Chinese civilization. It is not merely a set of ancient institutions concerning rituals and the arts, but rather a comprehensive system of meaning deeply embedded in the foundation of Chinese culture, concerning the construction of order, the cultivation of character, and the understanding of the cosmos. In the contemporary era, where globalization and modernization are intertwined, the socio-cultural sphere presents complex challenges such as value pluralism, identity crises, and the flattening of spiritual life. Relying solely on modern solutions often proves insufficient to fully address these fundamental issues pertaining to human depth and social cohesion. Therefore, the systematic examination and reinterpretation of Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music carries significant academic meaning and necessity. From an academic perspective, it demands moving beyond a superficial historical examination of the rites and music system to delve into its inner philosophical structure and value logic, thereby grasping the essence of the Confucian civilizational tradition. From the perspective of intellectual dialogue, the unique insights embedded in this ancient wisdom—concerning the unity of norms and emotions, the individual and the community, and humanity and the Way of Heaven—provide an irreplaceable classical frame of reference for reflecting on the predicaments of modernity. By refining its spiritual core and reassessing its value within the modern context, this study aims to explore its theoretical potential for engaging in discussions on issues of common contemporary concern.

1. The Composition and Characteristics of Pre-Qin Confucian Thought on Rites and Music

1.1 The Historical Origins and Ideational Integration of the System of Rites and Music

The formation of the system of rites and music was the result of the Pre-Qin Confucians' systematic organization and reinterpretation of the cultural accumulation from the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, particularly the ritual and musical civilization of the Western Zhou. This process was not a simple historical recapitulation but a form of ideational integration characterized by "transmitting but not creating, trusting in and loving the ancients." On one hand, the Confucians acknowledged that "rites" (li) originated from the ritual protocols, customs, and conventions of high antiquity, possessing a profound historical and cultural foundation. On the other hand, they endeavored to strip away their potentially strong early shamanistic overtones and purely external ceremonial nature. The Confucians traced the origin and rationality of "rites" back to the inherent needs of human society and the rhythmic patterns of heaven and earth's operations, which is encapsulated in the idea that "the foundation of rites lies in Heaven's order and the people's constant norms" (li zhi ben, chu yu tian zhi min yi). Confucius's advocacy for "following the Zhou" was, in essence, a rational elevation of the Western Zhou spirit of rites and music, which emphasized "matching Heaven with virtue" and "illustrating virtue and being cautious in punishment," redirecting it toward a value reconstruction centered on "ren" (humanity/benevolence). Although Xunzi asked, "What is the origin of rites? He said: Human beings are born with desires," explaining the origin of rites from the perspective of social function, his ultimate aim remained to "transform one's nature and arouse conscious effort" (hua xing qi wei) and to establish the way of "achieving unity and harmony in community life" (qun ju he yi). Therefore, the Pre-Qin Confucian system of rites and music was a product of the philosophical and ethical refinement of the cultural heritage of previous eras. The core of its ideational integration lay in infusing external normative forms with inner moral rationality and a basis in human nature^[1].

1.2 The Normative Function of Rites and the Emotionally Regulative Function of Music

In the composite structure of rites and music, "rites" (li) and "music" (yue) assume distinct yet complementary functional roles. "Rites" primarily manifest as a differentiating normative function. Through a meticulous system of protocols, detailed regulations, and regulations concerning names and objects involved in various aspects of social life—including capping ceremonies, weddings, funerals, sacrifices, court audiences, and diplomatic missions—rites serve to delineate and manifest distinctions among individuals based on kinship, political standing, and social relations, such as closeness and distance, superiority and inferiority, and seniority and juniority. This is encapsulated in the phrase: "to determine closeness and distance, to resolve doubts, to distinguish similarities and differences, and to clarify right and wrong." This function of "differentiating" (bie yi) aims to construct a clearly defined and well-ordered social structure, providing individuals with guidelines for behavior and preventing society from descending into disorder and conflict. The practice of rites exhibits a markedly externally formative and constraining force.

In contrast, "music" (yue) primarily performs the function of emotional regulation and cultivation. The Confucians believed that "music is born from sounds, and its foundation lies in the human mind being moved by things." Music originates from the human mind being stimulated by external objects, and its forms (rhythm, melody, harmony) inherently possess the characteristic of directly appealing to the emotions and harmonizing one's vital energies. The function of "music" lies in "unification" (tong tong), that is, through artistic emotional resonance, it mitigates the psychological estrangement and tension that the differentiation of "rites" might engender, thereby promoting harmony and unity within the community. The "Record of Music" (Yue Ji) states, "Music unifies; rites differentiate. Unification leads to mutual affection; differentiation leads to mutual respect," precisely summarizing their distinct roles. Music takes "harmony" (he) as its highest aesthetic and ethical principle; its purpose is not merely emotional pleasure but also the civilizing effect of achieving "peacefulness of blood and vital energy and transforming customs," enabling people to subtly accept and internalize the spirit of order through aesthetic experience.

1.3 The Ideal of Order and Harmony Constructed through the Interaction of Rites and Music

"Rites" (li) and "music" (yue) do not operate independently; rather, their interaction and organic integration together constitute the generative mechanism for the ideal society and personality pursued by Pre-Qin Confucianism. "Rites" alone risk devolving into rigid formalism and human apathy, while

"music" alone may lead to unbridled emotional indulgence. Only through the "mutual necessity of rites and music for their function" (li yue xiang xu yi wei yong) can a perfect state integrating reason and emotion be achieved. The order constructed by the interaction of rites and music is an ethical order permeated with emotional identification and aesthetic meaning; the harmony it pursues is a dynamic harmony founded upon orderly differentiation.

This interactive relationship is manifested as follows: rites provide the normative guidance and ethical content for music, ensuring that emotional expression does not transgress the bounds of propriety. This is reflected in the saying, "An excess of music leads to licentiousness; an excess of rites leads to estrangement" (yue sheng ze liu, li sheng ze li). Conversely, music infuses rites with vitality and affective power, enabling external norms to touch the human heart and evoke resonance, thereby preventing them from becoming coercive constraints. The highest state of their integration is the realm where "beauty and goodness mutually delight in each other" (mei shan xiang le)—moral actions possess formal beauty (wen) through their accordance with rites, while artistic expression embodies substantive quality (zhi) through its inherent goodness. In the progressive cultivation of the individual, characterized by "being inspired by poetry, established by rites, and perfected by music" (xing yu shi, li yu li, cheng yu yue), one ultimately achieves the unity of external behavioral norms with the inner emotional world, and the harmonization of social order with individual freedom. Therefore, what the thought on rites and music delineates is not merely a blueprint for social institutions, but rather a form of civilization imbued with humanistic spirit and aesthetic ideals. Its core characteristic lies in transforming the normative order of society into an individual's inner life consciousness and emotional needs through cultural cultivation, or "refining with rites and music" (wen zhi yi li yue)^[2].

2. The Spiritual Core and Value Orientation of the Thought on Rites and Music

2.1 The Oneness of Ren and Li: The Unity of Moral Subjectivity and External Norms

The key to the thought on rites and music transcending formalism lies in the establishment of "ren" (humanity/benevolence) as the inner spiritual foundation of "rites" (li) at its core. Confucius's rhetorical question—"If a man is not ren, what has he to do with rites? If a man is not ren, what has he to do with music?"—fundamentally ties the vitality of rites and music to the moral sentiments and self-awareness of the practicing subject. "Ren," as a universal moral potentiality rooted in the human heart (exemplified by the dictum "Practicing ren depends on oneself"), provides the value source and motivational mechanism for the external norms of rites and music. This transforms "rites" from a coercive social constraint into a pathway for self-realization, encapsulated in "overcoming oneself and returning to rites constitutes ren" (ke ji fu li wei ren). The so-called "oneness of ren and li" signifies that external normativity (rites) and inner moral subjectivity (ren) form an interdependent and mutually achieving dialectical relationship. The practice of rites is the necessary field wherein the heart of ren is manifested, objectified, and concretized; conversely, the cultivation and expansion of the heart of ren endow rites with genuine life and meaning, preventing their degeneration into empty formalities. Although Xunzi emphasized the transformative function of rites in "transforming one's nature and arousing conscious effort" (hua xing qi wei), his assertion that "rites are a form of nourishment" (li zhe, yang ye) equally points to ritual forms ultimately serving the regulation and elevation of human emotions and needs. Therefore, the spiritual core of the thought on rites and music lies primarily in this model of ethical construction, which proceeds from the inner to the outer and integrates both, pursuing the unity of social order with the moral life of the individual^[3].

2.2 The Beauty of the Mean and Harmony: Emotional Cultivation and Character Formation through the Edification of Rites and Music

The specific process of edification through rites and music, as well as the shaping of the ideal personality, takes "the Mean and Harmony" (zhong he) as its fundamental principle and ultimate realm. "The Mean" (zhong) signifies the appropriate measure, avoiding excess or deficiency, while "Harmony" (he) signifies the harmonious unity of diverse elements. Within the system of rites and music, "rites" (li) are primarily responsible for "regulation" (jie), establishing boundaries for emotions and behavior to prevent them from becoming wanton or biased. This is reflected in the idea that "in the practice of rites, harmony is to be prized," yet "to know harmony and seek it for its own sake, without regulating it by rites, is not feasible." "Music" (yue) is primarily responsible for "harmonization" (he), guiding and reconciling emotions so that they may achieve a state of smoothness and balance through immersion in art. This is encapsulated in the notion that "music is the harmony of heaven and earth."

Rites and music jointly act upon the human emotional world. Their goal is not to suppress emotions, but rather, through the cultivating process of "attaining the Mean and Harmony" (zhi zhong he), to transform natural emotions into "virtuous emotions" (de xing zhi qing) imbued with ethical depth and aesthetic quality.

This path of edification aims to cultivate the junzi personality, characterized as being "refined in substance and cultivation" (wen zhi bin bin). An individual's natural substance (zhi) must be adorned and shaped by rites and music (wen) to transcend a state of crudeness; conversely, the adornment of rites and music must be rooted in inner virtue (ren), lest it degenerate into mere superficial decoration. The formation of personality is precisely achieved through the continuous cultivation of "being established by rites and perfected by music" (li yu li, cheng yu yue), whereby external norms are internalized into life instincts and emotional expressions all conform to proper measure. This ultimately leads to the state of freedom and harmony described as "following the heart's desire without transgressing the rules" (cong xin suo yu bu yu ju). The "Beauty of the Mean and Harmony" (zhong he zhi mei) thus serves not only as a criterion for artistic evaluation but also as an embodiment of personality perfection and spiritual freedom. It signifies the cultivation goal toward which the edification of rites and music directs the individual—the profound unity of emotion and reason, nature and culture^[4].

2.3 Extending from Humanity to the Cosmos: The Integration of the Order of Rites and Music with Cosmic Ethics

The ultimate foundation and value orientation of Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music were not confined to human society and its ethics. Through metaphysical construction, this thought connected its principles of order with the cosmic substance, thereby endowing them with sacredness and universal necessity. The Doctrine of the Mean states: "Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused, it is called the Mean (zhong). When they are aroused and each attains its due measure and degree, it is called Harmony (he). The Mean is the great foundation of all under heaven; Harmony is the universal path (da dao) all under heaven should follow." This elevates the human state of "the Mean and Harmony" to the fundamental principle and the path of actualization for the existence of all things in heaven and earth. From this perspective, the order (differentiation) and harmony (unification) embodied by rites and music are seen as the manifestation and practice of the natural cosmic order (referred to as "Heaven's order" or "tian zhi," and "Heaven's sequence" or "tian xu") within the human realm.

The "Record of Music" (Yue Ji) articulates this cosmological vision of "harmony between heaven and humanity" (tian ren xiang xie) even more systematically: "Music is the harmony of heaven and earth; rites are the order of heaven and earth." Here, rites and music are endowed with the mediating function of communicating between heaven and humanity. The human activities of composing music and instituting rites are, in essence, acts of emulating and conforming to the yin-yang rhythms of heaven and earth. Conversely, the achievement of an ideal order of rites and music can, in turn, promote harmonious resonance within the cosmos. This is encapsulated in the idea that "the sages created music to respond to heaven and instituted rites to match earth." This elevates the Confucian thought on rites and music beyond a mere theory of social ethics, transforming it into a cosmic ethical perspective that "extends from humanity to the cosmos" (you ren ji tian). The cultivation of rites and music by individuals and their implementation in society possess not only significance for human edification but are also incorporated into the grand narrative of participating in and sustaining the great transformative process of the cosmos. The highest manifestation of the spiritual core of rites and music lies precisely in this integrative mode of thinking that embeds the human way (ren dao) within the cosmic way (tian dao), thereby granting the human order a foundation of transcendental value. Its value orientation points toward an ultimate ideal order characterized by the harmonious coexistence of heaven, earth, and humanity.

3. The Modern Reevaluation of the Pre-Qin Spirit of Rites and Music

3.1 The Thought on Rites and Music and the Potential for Reconstructing Contemporary Ethical Identity

Ethical life in modern society faces challenges such as the expansion of instrumental rationality and the fragmentation of identity brought about by value pluralism. The structure of the "oneness of ren and

li" (ren li yi ti) within Pre-Qin thought on rites and music offers a unique perspective for reflecting upon and potentially reconstructing ethical identity. It grounds the establishment of ethical identity in a dynamic process of unification between inner moral self-awareness (ren) and external civilized norms (li), rather than relying solely on external authority or abstract dogma. The system of norms represented by rites provides a predictable, symbolically rich common framework for social interaction, facilitating the formation of stable social expectations and role perceptions—this constitutes the objective, formal dimension of "identity." Conversely, the moral subjectivity and capacity for empathy emphasized by ren (exemplified in the principle: "One who wishes to establish oneself seeks also to establish others; one who wishes to advance oneself seeks also to advance others") requires individuals, while adhering to public norms, to maintain inner value reflection and ethical concern for others—this constitutes the subjective, motivational dimension of "identity." This structure suggests that a sound and vital ethical identity necessitates maintaining a creative tension between shared civilized forms and individual moral autonomy. The pursuit of being "refined in substance and cultivation" (wen zhi bin bin) inherent in the thought on rites and music can also be viewed as a classical corrective to tendencies in modern society towards either ethical formalization (possessing wen without zhi) or ethical subjectivization and privatization (possessing zhi without wen). It points toward a possible reconstruction of identity that integrates form and spirit, the public and the individual.

3.2 Emotional Governance and the Resources of Rites and Music for a Communal Spirit

Modern public life and the sustenance of community often confront difficulties such as emotional estrangement and the fragility of value consensus. The thought on rites and music, particularly its dimension of "music" (yue) and the mechanism of the "mutual necessity of rites and music," harbors rich resources for "emotional governance" (qing gan zhi li), offering a classical paradigm for contemplating the affective foundation of a communal spirit. The system of rites and music acknowledges that emotions are inherent to human nature (as in the saying, "music springs from within"). Its aim is not suppression but guidance and elevation. The "unifying" (he tong) function of music lies in its capacity to create a space for emotional resonance that transcends individual differences through aestheticized emotional expression and shared experience, thereby fostering a sense of affinity and unity among members of society. This kind of harmony (he), based on emotional integration, differs from bonds formed through rational contract or the calculation of interests; it infuses the community with a gentle yet enduring emotional cohesion^[5].

Simultaneously, the "regulating and refining" (jie wen) function of "rites" (li) ensures that the public expression of emotions assumes appropriate forms and respects necessary boundaries, preventing emotional indulgence from descending into irrational excess or eroding public order. What the combined action of rites and music achieves is a public emotional culture that "originates from emotion but is bounded by ritual propriety" (fa hu qing, zhi hu li yi), one where reason and emotion are integrated. This culture emphasizes that the healthy sustenance of a community requires not only mutual respect and the delineation of rights based on norms (rites), but also mutual care and a sense of belonging grounded in emotional resonance (music). For contemporary society, the thought on rites and music suggests that the reconstruction of community necessitates not only institutional design and the coordination of interests, but also attention to cultivating shared emotions and cultural forms that can nurture public reason and promote social solidarity. This offers a pathway for forging more resilient bonds of connection within the modern landscape characterized by coexisting differences.

3.3 Pathways for the Creative Transformation of the Culture of Rites and Music within the Perspective of Humanistic Edification

The thought on rites and music is, in essence, a comprehensive system of humanistic edification (ren wen jiao hua). The key to realizing its contemporary value lies in breaking free from the pattern of materialistic restoration of antiquity and, instead, exploring the creative transformation of its spirit within the perspective of "humanistic edification." The core of this transformation involves extracting the wisdom embedded in the thought on rites and music—namely, the principle of "transforming people through culture" (yi wen hua ren)—from its specific historical embodiments and applying it to the cultivation of the spiritual world and the holistic formation of personality in modern people^[6].

One pathway for this transformation lies in re-examining the modern significance of "rites" (li) as a form of civilized upbringing and behavioral aesthetics. This does not entail reviving ancient rituals, but rather extracting the spirit inherent in "rites"—concerning a sense of propriety in interpersonal interactions, a regard for ceremony, and respect for things and others—and transforming it into a

component of modern civic virtue and the aesthetics of daily life, thereby countering the coarsening of life and the anomie of behavior. A second pathway lies in promoting the idea, embedded in the tradition of "music education" (yue jiao), that art is closely linked to the cultivation of character. This involves advancing various forms of arts education beyond the mere transmission of technique or entertainment functions, placing greater emphasis on their edifying role in cultivating temperament, harmonizing the mind, and elevating the realm of life. This deeply resonates with the modern concept of holistic education. Ultimately, the goal of this creative transformation is to foster a new practice of "humanistic cultivation" (ren wen xiu yang). Such a practice encourages individuals in modern life to actively seek a form of holistic spiritual cultivation that integrates rational norms, emotional refinement, and aesthetic pursuit. It aspires to help individuals, amidst the busy and fragmented rhythms of modernity, rediscover a state of harmony and equanimity characterized by "the Mean and Harmony of emotion and reason" (qing li zhong he) and the integration of "refined substance and cultivation" (wen zhi jian bei). This transformation is not a direct application of the classical system, but rather a profound dialogue and renewal between its spiritual core and the cultural needs of modern society.

Conclusion

Through a layered analysis of the compositional characteristics, spiritual core, and contemporary significance of Pre-Qin Confucian thought on rites and music, this study reveals that this ideological system constitutes a multi-dimensional framework. It is grounded in "ren" (humanity/benevolence) as its foundational value, employs "rites and music" (li yue) as its practical vehicles, takes "the Mean and Harmony" (zhong he) as its ideal realm, and ultimately aspires toward "harmony between humanity and the cosmos" (tian ren he xie). Its contemporary value does not lie in the reinstatement of specific ancient rituals, but rather in the enduring wisdom embedded within its deep structure: the wisdom of mediating reason and emotion, balancing norms and freedom, and integrating individual identity with a communal spirit. The thought on rites and music suggests that a healthy civilized life requires, alongside the construction of institutions, the careful cultivation of an emotional culture and human relationships that correspond to them. It also implies that the fullness of personality necessitates, within the process of socialization, the simultaneous deepening of inwardness and elevation through aesthetic refinement. Building upon this foundation, future research could undertake further cross-cultural comparative philosophical dialogues, exploring the similarities and differences between concepts such as the relational self and emotional rationality found in the thought on rites and music and those of other civilizational traditions. It could also delve deeper into specific socio-cultural domains, investigating how its spirit might be more subtly integrated into modern educational design, the shaping of public culture, and reflections on individual life practices. Such efforts would aim to achieve a creative renewal of this ancient intellectual resource on the basis of critical inheritance, thereby opening broader pathways for its potential contribution to shaping the future spiritual landscape of human life.

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