

Study of Wang Yangming's Philosophical Thought on Music

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Abstract: Wang Yangming's philosophical thought on music is an extremely important part of his teleological system, which profoundly embodies the core philosophical concept of the unity of mind and reason. In Wang Yangming's view, music is not only an aesthetic object, but also a key way to realize personal moral cultivation and spiritual enhancement. His emphasis on ancient music and his suggestions for the improvement of folk music demonstrate his deep insight into the role of music in shaping social mores and cultural inheritance. These ideas not only had a significant impact in his time, but also still provide rich educational resources and practical guidance for modern music education. In this paper, we will look at the origin of Wang Yangming's music thought, "music is the essence of the heart", "music is based on neutrality and harmony", "re-establishing ancient music" and "restoring the true self", as well as a review of Wang Yangming's music thought. "and the value judgment of Yangming's music philosophical thought are discussed and analyzed in five aspects.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; Music Thought; Teleology; Music is the Essence of Mind; Music Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Wang Yangming, known as Shouren (守仁), Bo'an (伯安), and known as Mr. Yangming (阳明), was a native of Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, and was a renowned philosopher, thinker, educator, and militarist in the Ming Dynasty. His main ideas include "Mind is Reason", "Zhi Liang Zhi (致良知)" and "Unity of Knowledge and Action" (知行合一), which philosophically emphasize subjectivity and advocate that people have self-knowledge and the desire to pursue the truth deep down. The desire to pursue the truth. Wang Yangming's musical thought is mainly reflected in his unique understanding and use of music, which is closely related to his philosophical system.

2. The Source of Wang Yangming's Musical Thought

As an outstanding philosopher in the Ming Dynasty, Wang Yangming's teleological thought has not only produced far-reaching influence in the field of ethics and morality, but also put forward unique insights in the field of music aesthetics. To fully understand Wang Yangming's musical thought, it is necessary to start from its philosophical foundation, especially the influence of Confucianism and Taoism on his thought.

2.1. Philosophical Foundations: From Confucianism and Taoism

Wang Yangming's musical thought is rooted in his deep philosophical foundation, which is not only derived from Confucian ethics, but also incorporates certain elements of Taoist thought.

Li Huangming and Li Hongzhuan published "The Clues to the Development of the Songming Ethics Theory of 'Music of Confucius and Face'" in *Philosophical Dynamics* in 2006 (Li Huangming, Li Hongzhuan. Clues to the Development of the Theory of "The Joy of Confucius" in Song Ming Ethics[J]. *Philosophical Dynamics*, 2006, (04): 39-44). Li Huangming

and Li Hongzhuan note that the "music of Confucius" reflects the development of the theory from "no-self" to "self" in the ontology of Yangming's "mind is reason". It is noted that the "music of Kong-yan" embodies in Yangming's ontology of "mind as reason" the duality of the transition from "no-self" to "self", and that when "music" is based on the standard of my "mind", it is "music" of the "self". "When it is based on my mind, it is the joy of 'having a self,' and when it is based on reason, it is the joy of "not having a self.

When "reason" is the criterion, it is the "joy" of "no-self". Based on this, there are two paths of work, namely, "ontological work" and the cultivation of the "correct mind".

In 1997, Jiajun published "An Experimental Study of Wang Yangming's Musical Aesthetic Thought" in *Chinese Musicology* (Jiajun. Trial Discussion on Wang Yangming's Musical Aesthetic Thought[J]. *Chinese Musicology*, 1997, (S1): 101-103.), "Wang Yangming's Theory on the Benefits of Opera" published in *Art Hundred* in 2004(Wang Yingtai. Wang Yangming's Theory on the Benefits of Opera [J]. *Art Hundred*, 2004, (02): 40-42.), Xu Hongtu's "Wang Yangming and Opera" published in *Opera Studies* in 2003(Xu Hongtu. Wang Yangming and Opera [J]. *Opera Studies*, 2003, (02): 82-94), as well as Cai Zhongde's 2004 treatise on the history of Chinese musical aesthetics, both take Wang Yangming as the heir to Confucianism, whose musical ideas must have been based on a further elaboration of the tone of Confucian music theory. Confucianism stood for the preservation of feudal rule, and inevitably, Wang Yangming's musical thought inherited the utilitarian nature of Confucianism.

He Jing published "On the Integration of Wang Yangming's Psychology into Taoism" in the *Journal of Ningbo University* (Social Science Edition) in 2006 (He Jing. On the Integration of Wang Yangming's Psychology into Taoism[J]. *Journal of Ningbo University* (Humanities Edition), 2006, (01): 94-97+143.) is an article which mentions that Wang Yangming held a renouncing attitude towards Taoism. He rejected Taoism's aim of abandoning human relationships and eliminating worldly affairs, but affirmed its philosophy of health maintenance and the theory of mindfulness. However, his philosophy of mind incorporates Taoism's theories of

Taoism, mindfulness, the realm of tranquility, and internal and external cultivation.

To summarize, it is generally believed that Wang Yangming's philosophy of music is a rich and complex system that integrates Confucian moral ethics and Taoist natural philosophy. In this system, Wang Yangming's utilitarian approach to music

2.2. Theoretical Foundation: "Mind is Reason"

The theoretical foundation of Wang Yangming's music thought is mainly based on his system of teleology, which emphasizes that "the heart is the reason", i.e., he believes that the reason of all things in the universe exists in the human heart, and that the heart and the reason are united. In Wang Yangming's view, music is not only an external art form, but also a direct manifestation of inner emotion and moral cultivation. He believed that music could directly influence the human mind and thus regulate the emotional and moral state of human beings.

Xue Ting published her master's thesis, "A Study of Wang Yangming's Philosophical Thought on Music in the School of Mind" in 2011 (Xue Ting. *Research on Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Music* [D]. Zhejiang Normal University, 2011.) mentions that "the heart is the reason" literally means "the heart is the reason". Yang Ming firstly acknowledges that "the mind is reason" and emphasizes precisely that "there is no reason outside the mind", and at the same time exclaims: "This is a long time ago, and it is not possible to understand it in a single word. Today, I am going to speak on the question. And such as serving the father, not to go to the father to seek a filial piety reason; serve the king, not to go to the king to seek a loyal reason; make friends and rule the people, not to go to the friends on the people to seek a faith and benevolence reason; are only in this heart, the heart that is the reason also. This heart is not obscured by selfish desires, which is the Divine Principle, and does not need to be added to outside. With this pure heart of the Divine Principle, to serve one's father is filial piety, to serve one's ruler is loyalty, and to make friends and govern one's people is faith and benevolence. Only in this heart to remove human desires and keep heavenly reason is to work hard." (Chen Rongjie, *A Detailed Annotated Collection of Commentaries on Wang Yangming's Biographies*, Taipei: Student's Bookstore, 1983 edition, p. 30.)

Zhou Yangping published his master's thesis, "A Philosophical Study of Wang Yangming's 'Music'" in 2019 (Zhou Yangping. *Philosophical Research on Wang Yangming's 'Music'* [D]. Guizhou University, 2019.) briefly explains the logical relationship of "mind is reason": first, literally, "mind is reason" can be introduced as a sufficient condition for reason. Second, from the proposition that "there is no reason outside the heart", it can also be deduced that the heart is a necessary condition for reason.

Du Wei published "On the Intrinsic Connection between Modern Chinese Aesthetics and the Confucian Study of the Nature of the Heart" in *Literary Review* in 2015 (Du Wei. *On the Intrinsic Connection between Modern Chinese Aesthetics and the Confucian Science of Mindfulness* [J]. *Literary Review*, 2015, (04): 126-135.), an article which mentions that Wang Yangming said, "The human heart is heaven and abyss. The essence of the heart is nothing that should not be, originally a heaven, but only for the obstacle of selfish desires, then the essence of heaven is lost. The reasoning of the heart is infinite, and it is originally an abyss. If it is obstructed by selfish desires, then the essence of the abyss is lost. Now,

when we realize our conscience and remove all these obstacles, our essence will be restored, and we will be the heaven and the abyss." Here, Wang Yangming expresses three meanings: first, the human heart is reason; second, when the human heart is blocked by selfish desires, people lose their moral nature; third, to realize one's conscience is to remove the blockage of selfish desires, and to restore one's original heart essence.

To summarize, Wang Yangming's music thought is based on a profound philosophical foundation, in which the concept of "heart is reason" is the core of his music philosophy theory. Wang Yangming believed that music is not only an expression of art, but also a reflection of inner world and moral cultivation. His musical thought not only reflects the inheritance of the Confucian tradition of "music education", but also demonstrates the absorption and integration of Taoist thought.

3. Connotation of Wang Yangming's Philosophical Thought on Music

3.1. "Music is the Essence of the Heart"

Wang Yangming's philosophical thought on music mainly centers on the philosophical proposition that "music is the essence of the heart". In Wang Yangming's view, music, as the highest realization of individual life, is the unity of sensibility and rationality, the self and the world.

In 2006, Chen Lai published his treatise *The Realm of Nothing: The Spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy* (Chen Lai. *The Spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006.02.) contains a subsection on the idea that "music is the essence of the mind". He compares and contrasts "music" and "knowledge", "Knowledge" is originally a category of intellectual function, but Yangming has transformed it into the essence of the heart. Yang Ming transformed it into the essence of the mind. Joy is a category of emotional experience, which Yang Ming also transformed to be the essence of the heart."

Meng Peiyuan, in his book *The System of Categories in Rigaku* (Meng Peiyuan. *The System of Categories in Rigaku* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1989.07.), he argues that "Wang Yangming's direct reference to music as the heart essence, or the realm of the essence, combined with his doctrine of conscience, further elucidated the principle of the subject of aesthetics. Conscientiousness, in general terms, is called 'sincerity' because it is 'actuality'; 'benevolence' because it is 'physiology'; and 'joy' because it is 'realism'. In terms of its being a 'real reason', it is called 'sincerity'; in terms of its being a 'physiology', it is called 'benevolence'; in terms of its being an 'emotional reason', it is called 'joy'. Separately, there are the distinctions of sincerity, benevolence, and joy, but together, they are just one conscience." He believed that the music of the essence is "true music" and the music of the seven emotions is the popular expression of the music of the essence, and that the two are the relationship between body and use.

Wu Zongli published his master's thesis, "A Study of Wang Yangming's 'Music is the Ontology of the Mind'" in 2017 (Wu Zongli. *Study on Wang Yangming's 'Music is the essence of mind'* [D]. Nanjing University, 2017.), Wu Zongli argues that, first of all, Yangming's idea of "music is the essence of the mind" cannot simply be regarded as a continuation of "Kong Yan Le Shi", and Yangming's discussion is different from the traditional philosophical form

of “music” thought. Yangming's discussion is different from the traditional philosophical form of “music” thought, so it should be interpreted on the theoretical structure of Yangming's psychology, and the thought of “music is the essence of the heart” is the dynamic development of his doctrine; secondly, the value of the thought of “music is the essence of the heart” focuses on teaching people to pursue the “true self”. Secondly, the value of the idea of “music is the essence of the heart” focuses on teaching people to search for the “true self”, which cannot be generalized by the realm of sages; finally, Wang Yangming's idea of “music is the essence of the heart” should be examined from the perspective of the synthesis of the historical origin, practical foundation, and the influence of the later scholars, so that we can see the profound connotation of the idea rather than an empty phrase. Wang Yangming's idea of “music is the essence of the heart” can be seen as a profound meaning rather than an empty phrase.

Wang Yangming's idea of “music is the essence of the heart” elevates music to the level of philosophical ontology, reflecting the profound connotation of his teleological thought. In Wang Yangming's view, “the heart is the reason”, meaning that the heart is unified with the reason of the universe, and that music is not only an enjoyment of the senses, but also a manifestation of the heart's harmony with the reason of heaven. This idea was applied in music creation and appreciation at that time, emphasizing that music was closely linked to the inner nature of the human heart, and that harmony and enhancement of the mind could be achieved through music cultivation.

3.2. “Music is based on Harmony”

In the aesthetic category of Confucianism, “neutralization” is a way of dealing with the world and ruling the world on the aesthetic level with the meaning of “the middle ground”. Wang Yangming's writings on the aesthetic principles of music are very few, only a dozen or so paragraphs. This is not commensurate with the large number of poems and texts he left behind, but in his few treatises on music, he shows us the Confucian idea of “to neutralize and to harmonize” music.

Xue Ting published her master's thesis, “A Study of Wang Yangming's Philosophical Thought on Music” in 2011 (Xue Ting. *Research on Wang Yangming's Music Philosophy Thought* [D]. Zhejiang Normal University, 2011.), which mentions that the category of “neutralization” first appeared in the book “Zhongyong”, and that Wang Yangming, faithful to the original Confucianism, inherited the “neutralization” way of “happiness, anger, sadness, and music all in the middle”. Wang Yangming was faithful to the original Confucian text and inherited the way of “neutralization. Because the “music” (music) of the heart's essence contains the “music of the seven emotions” of “joy, anger, sadness, and joy” and the “true music of nature” of rationality and moderation, the former belongs to the “true music of nature”. “The former belongs to the ‘developed’ and the latter belongs to the ‘undeveloped’. Therefore, in order to achieve “true happiness”, we must exercise restraint on “the happiness that has been developed”, that is, we must restrain the overflow of emotional desires, so that it is just right. In this way, the “neutral” joy of “joy without lust, sorrow without sadness” is the “true joy” of emotional joy.

“Joy” is a dimension of the mind, and it is contained in the mind. The heart is the basis of joy, and the neutralization of “joy” is based on the heart and above. According to Wang Yangming, “everything is not outside of my heart”, desires

and the Divine Principle all exist in the human heart, and “harmony of the heart” is the psychological state of keeping good and removing evil and peace after the Divine Principle on the heart and the “conscience”. The “harmony of the heart” is the psychological state of peace and harmony after the realization of heavenly principles and conscience. Therefore, the way of “neutralization” in music out of the heart is inseparable from the work of heart and work. In addition, “Harmony of the heart leads to harmony of music,” and harmony of the heart leads to harmony of music.

3.3. “Reverence for Ancient Music” and “Restoration of the True Self”

By promoting ancient music and improving folk music, Wang Yangming not only demonstrated his deep understanding of the art of music, but also showed that he attached great importance to the role of music in social indoctrination and cultural transmission.

Jiajun's 1997 article “An Experimental Study of Wang Yangming's Musical Aesthetic Thought” in *Chinese Musicology* (Jiajun. *Trial Discussion on Wang Yangming's Musical Aesthetic Thought*[J]. *Chinese Musicology*, 1997, (S1): 101-103.) mentions that Yangming held ancient music in high esteem, and did have the idea of restoring ancient music, but he did not reject folk songs.

Xiao Ying published “Wang Yangming's Aesthetics of the Intentional Unification of Affective Spirit” in *Literature, History and Philosophy* in 2000 (Xiao Ying. *Wang Yangming's Aesthetics of Intentionality and Emotion* [J]. *Literature, History and Philosophy*, 2000, (06): 47-53.) mentioned that Wang Yangming's attitude towards ancient music was one of admiration, and what he expected was the return of ancient music to its original form. Nowadays, the composition of the prelude can improve the aesthetics of the common people by removing the “demonic and obscene words” and “replacing them with easily understandable loyalty and filial piety plots, and through the artistic image of loyal officials and filial piety sons in the operas”, which can not only test whether the hearers have the ability of “perfection” or not, but also improve the aesthetics of the common people. This will not only test whether the audience has the appreciation of “perfection”, but also alert the world to the good and evil, and the self-consciousness of cultivation. Because, in Wang Yangming's view, artistic images have the role of subtle, moralizing and entertaining, through the loyalty and filial piety complex, awakening the subject of the hearer's inner sense of morality, or “conscience”, and ultimately can achieve the “true happiness”, “true self” realm of life, “true happiness”, “true self”, “true self”. The ultimate goal is to achieve the realm of “true happiness” and “true self”, which is beneficial to the moralization of the people and the removal of customs and traditions." It can be seen that Wang Yangming's attitude towards modern music is rounded, inheriting the essence of Confucianism, which emphasizes moralizing over entertainment and utilitarianism over aesthetics.

To sum up, Wang Yangming's ideas on music aesthetics not only reflect his recognition of the independent value of music art, but also highlight his deep insight into the role of music in shaping personal character and social morals. His concept of “true self” closely links music to the inner world of the individual, emphasizing the harmony and elevation of the mind through musical cultivation.

The Value of Wang Yangming's Philosophical Thought on

Music

Wang Yangming's philosophy of "mind is reason" provides the theoretical foundation for his music philosophy. He believed that the beauty of music comes from the human heart, and the creation and appreciation of music should be aimed at expressing and feeling inner emotions, which had a profound influence on the development of music philosophy in later generations. Wang Yangming's philosophical thought on music provides rich theoretical resources for contemporary practice of aesthetic education, emphasizing that aesthetic education should focus on the cultivation of human emotions and morals rather than merely the teaching of skills. His reverence for ancient music and his transformation of popular music also reflect his emphasis on cultural inheritance and innovation, which provides valuable ideas on how to carry out cultural innovation today while respecting tradition.

Xue Ting published her master's thesis in 2011, "Research on Wang Yangming's 'Psychology' Music Philosophy Thought" (Xue Ting. Research on Wang Yangming's "Psychology" Music Philosophy Thought [D]. Zhejiang Normal University, 2011.) mentions that its historical significance, from the perspective of aesthetic history, is the continuation of the Confucian aesthetic tradition and the incorporation of the theoretical strengths of interpretation and Taoism. Xiao Ying published "The Renegade Principle of Chinese Music Aesthetics: Music and Non-Music" in Chinese Musicology in 2001 (Xiao Ying. The Renegade Principle of Chinese Music Aesthetics: Music and Non-Music [J]. Chinese Musicology, 2001, (01): 120-128.) is an article which mentions that Wang Yangming's music philosophy of "teleology" is often categorized in the camp of "idealism". It is worthwhile for us to think about whether the ancient thought of Chinese humanism can be interpreted with modern significance and value. In this paper, the author argues that Wang Yangming's philosophy of music is not just a school of thought in the controversial history of classical music, nor is it just a rebellion against heretical musical aesthetics and propositions, but has the potential for modern interpretation, and the content of that interpretation is not limited to music. Hu Huanan's 2006 master's thesis, "A New Theory of Wang Yangming's Psychology" (Hu Huanan. A New Theory of Wang Yangming's Psychology [D]. Hunan University, 2006.) mentions: under the influence of Wang Yangming's "teleology" music philosophy, the "only emotion" trend of music creation and music appreciation is to use music content to illustrate the human heart and the inner emotion of the aesthetic subject. It is an artistic practice of "inequality" through the content of music to illustrate the human heart and the inner emotions of the aesthetic subject. We should actively and critically inherit Wang Yangming, Li Zhi and other people's philosophical thinking of music, conducive to the human nature of the components of the stretch, and abandon the stereotypes, exaggerated aesthetic form. In terms of the criteria for judging aesthetic value, we should affirm the function of music in "describing inequality" and the principle of subjectivity of music, and emphasize "truth, goodness and beauty", harmony and unity.

4. Conclusion

Wang Yangming's philosophical thought on music is an extremely important part of his teleological system, which profoundly embodies the core philosophical concept of the unity of mind and reason. In Wang Yangming's view, music is not only an aesthetic object, but also a key way to realize one's

moral cultivation and spiritual enhancement. His emphasis on ancient music and his suggestions for the improvement of folk music demonstrate his deep insight into the role of music in shaping social mores and cultural inheritance. These ideas not only had a significant impact in his time, but also still provide rich educational resources and practical guidance for modern music education.

Based on previous studies, we can see a multidimensional interpretation of Wang Yangming's musical thought. From a philosophical point of view, Wang Yangming combined music with the ontology of "mind is reason" and put forward the proposition that "music is the essence of the mind", emphasizing the close connection between music and one's inner world. From the perspective of education, Wang Yangming regarded music education as an important means of cultivating emotion and morality, highlighting the role of music in personal cultivation and social enlightenment. From the perspective of cultural inheritance, Wang Yangming's admiration for ancient music and his improvement of folk music reflect the importance he attaches to music in cultural inheritance and innovation. From the perspective of aesthetics, Wang Yangming advocated the pursuit of the neutral beauty of music, which is "sorrowful but not hurtful, joyful but not obscene", and paid attention to the emotional expression and aesthetic value of music.

Although existing studies have provided us with valuable perspectives and insights, they still need to be further explored. For example, studying the effects of music on human emotions and cognition from a psychological perspective, and how these effects echo Wang Yangming's teleological theories, would be a worthwhile direction for further research. In addition, how to combine Wang Yangming's philosophical thoughts on music with modern technology in order to promote the dissemination and development of musical art is also an area that could be the focus of future research.

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