

## **Analysis of the Transformation of Elegant and Popular Music from Zhou to Han Dynasty Based on the Nature of Musical Entertainment**

Min Cheng\*

Fuyang Normal University, College of Music and Dance, Fuyang, Anhui, 236041  
chengminnn@yeat.com

**Abstract:** During the development of Chinese music history, the debate and research of the relationship between "elegance" and "popular" have never ceased. The development of ancient Chinese music has always involved arguments between "elegance" and "popular", and it can be said that the paradox of coexistence between the elegant and the popular has always existed in China's long-standing music culture. In ancient China, since the ritual music system established in Western Zhou Dynasty, the contradictory coexistence of elegance and popular has always been in constant struggle, and at the same time, in this struggle, elegant and popular music have also been able to integrate and develop. This paper, based on the issues of struggle and integrated development, focuses on the analysis of the changes between elegant and popular music from the Western Zhou's ritual music to the Han's music, starting from the perspective of ancient Chinese music and the nature of musical entertainment.  
**Keywords:** Music in Zhou Dynasty; Music in Han Dynasty; Elegance and popular

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Over two thousand years ago, during the Pre-Qin period, the so-called "elegance vs. popular" debate had already emerged in the history of Chinese music. This struggle mainly began with the establishment of ritual music system during the Western Zhou Dynasty. At that time, there were mainly two types of ancient music: one was "court elegant music", and the other was the gradually rising "secular music". Especially with the continuous growing of "secular music," it gradually began to have a significant shock on "court music", and also had far-reaching effects on the music culture and musical life of the late Pre-Qin period and later ancient societies (Chen, 2020; Liu, 2020).

Elegant and popular music, as the emotional expressions of people's spirit, have had a significant impact on people's lives and even continue to exert far-reaching influence today. It can be said that elegance and popular can be considered the most stable aesthetic standards and value measurement criteria deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people throughout history (Wang, 2012 ; Yang, 2019). At the same time, they are

also essential forces influencing the development of Chinese music culture, Chinese cultural progress, and literary evolution. Starting from the perspective of the nature of musical entertainment, this article focuses on the analysis of the changes between elegant and popular music from the Western Zhou music to the Han music.

## 2. THE CONNOTATION OF ELEGANCE AND POPULAR IN MUSIC CULTURE

Looking at the development history of ancient Chinese music culture, since the establishment of the ritual music system in the Western Zhou Dynasty, the distinction between "elegant music" and "popular music" began to appear in the music field. "Elegant music" mainly refers to music used in formal occasions in ancient society, such as large-scale sacrifices and ceremonial activities, including military music performed for court rituals and activities that receiving distinguished guests (Li, 2012). In contrast, "popular music" refers to music used in leisure, entertainment, and banquets in more casual settings. These pieces are usually popular music widely spread among the general public. With the development of times, "elegant music" gradually transformed from courtly formal music to classical music by the modern era, while "popular music" evolved from folk entertainment and leisure music to popular music (Chen, 2012).

## 3. CHANGES IN ELEGANCE AND POPULAR FROM ZHOU MUSIC TO HAN MUSIC

### 3.1 Music Reformation from Western Zhou to Warring States Period

(1) Entertainment and Politics in Western Zhou Music: In ancient China, elegant music was actually the result of the integration of music culture and political education. Since the emergence of the state, due to the influence of the hierarchical concept in feudal society, the sacrificial activities and other behaviors of ancient dynasties have been more or less embedded in the art of music. It is because of this factor that the function of ancient Chinese music has become more diversified and the divergence of elegance and vulgarity in ancient music has been derived (Antoshko, 2020; Han, 2013).

In the Zhou Dynasty, elegant music included not only sacrificial music but also music performed during court ceremonies, village archery events, and military grand ceremonies. The name "Zhou elegant music" comes

from the meaning of "elegant and pure" in the lyrics and is directly related to the hierarchical system of Western Zhou rites and music. In fact, the rites and music of the Western Zhou Dynasty were inherited from the Emperor Huangdi's "Yunmen", Emperor Yao's "Da Xian", Emperor Shun's "Jiu Shao", Emperor Yu's "Da Xia", and Emperor Tang of the Shang Dynasty's "Da Jie", as well as the Zhou Dynasty's "Da Wu". Therefore, Zhou music is also known as the music of the Six Dynasties (Guo, 2005; Han, 2001). The "music of the Six Dynasties" was grand in scale and served a moral education function, based on the inheritance and continuation of previous generations.

Moreover, when creating elegant music in the Zhou Dynasty, many elegant and solemn poems and music were emulated, such as the Da Ya and Song works which is mentioned above in the "Book of Songs". This new elegant music system was formed by the Western Zhou court on the basis of integrating the past and the present. It also contributed to the elegant style of the Zhou Dynasty's prosperous era and had a certain entertainment function at that time. Consequently, the eight musical instruments of Zhou elegant music became popular, and a series of civilian "Xiao Ya" music emerged (Huaru, 2019; Ludden, 2013). The lyrical and entertainment functions of the Xiao Ya music in the Zhou Dynasty were more prominent, and Xiao Ya can be considered a combination of Da Ya and folk wind music. At that time, the ruling class was usually the largest demander and the most advantageous advocate for recreational music, especially in the Western Zhou Dynasty. Because the courtiers were not satisfied with the new elegant music system, they paid particular attention to the collection and transformation of folk music, which led to the emergence of the "National Style" in the "Book of Songs". The transformation of the National Style in the Western Zhou music system was significantly influenced by elegant music, especially the elegant music of the wind poems' melody. Therefore, looking at the Zhou music system, there was not much contradiction or struggle between elegant and popular music. The political education and entertainment functions of Zhou music developed relatively balanced. Compared with the later popular music, elegant music referred more to the music of the Six Dynasties, such as Ya, Song, and the elegant music of wind, which were all part of the Zhou music system. This is the "elegant music" pursued by Confucianism. Thus, the court elegant music of the Western Zhou period had obvious political education functions and secular entertainment features (Cai, 2004).

(2) "New Sound" and "Ancient Music": With the development of ancient society and the progress of culture, the original music forms also changed

accordingly. After the Western Zhou Dynasty, during the mid-Spring and Autumn period, Chinese society was turbulent and complicated. Ancient society gradually moved from a slave society to a feudal society. In the early feudal society, the ideological contention of a hundred schools of thought promoted development in many aspects, and the music field also began to see a competitive situation among various powers.(Thrasher, 1981)

At that time, with the competition among various powers in society, the Zhou rituals were challenged, and the related music system also began to change. The development of music culture presented a phenomenon of "ritual collapse and music breakdown." During this period, the elegant music originated from the Western Zhou Dynasty was considered to be a thing that stifled the nature of music and gradually lost its inherent charm. The elegant music of the Zhou Dynasty could not adapt to the developing needs of society, so new music forms began to emerge.(Yu & Chonpairot, 2021)

The music of Zheng, Wei, Qin, and Chu emerged one after another, especially the music of Zheng and Wei, which continued the rivalry between elegant music and popular music. "Zheng-Wei Music" refers to the folk music of the Zheng and Wei states. As vassal states of the Zhou Dynasty, "Zheng-Wei Music" inevitably retained the strong style of Shang music. The music style was lively, passionate, and had a faster rhythm, full of a strong romantic atmosphere (Huang, 2019; Mackerras, 1988). This kind of Shang music legacy, later called "New Sound", was more open and free. By the Warring States period, there was a coexistence of "Zheng-Wei New Sound" and traditional elegant music called "Ancient Music".

The emergence of "Zheng-Wei Music" during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods was an inevitable trend in the transformation and development of music. On one hand, the feudal rulers of the Warring States, in their pursuit of luxury and pleasure, played a significant role in promoting the emergence of the "New Sound." On the other hand, the development of popular music was even more extensive:

First, the decline of the Zhou Dynasty allowed the rise of various vassal states, leading to the development of their music, which eventually replaced the mainstream position of Zhou music. For example, Qi music from the State of Qi, Qin music from the State of Qin, and Chu music from the State of Chu emerged and developed during the independent development of these states. They also blended and developed during the process of wars and trade between these states. Second, the emergence of "New Sound" gradually broke the constraints of the music system and ancient musical norms. As described in "Lüshi Chunqiu", the Song Thousand

Bells, Qi Dalü, and Chu Wuyin expressed the loss of music's enjoyment. Third, music art gradually became more accessible, especially the musical tastes of the people in various vassal states played a leading role in the development of "New Sound". "Xia Li Ba Ren" and "Yang Chun Bai Xue" are typical explanations of this phenomenon, indicating that during this period, popular music began to be accepted by the general public, and this accessible, easy-to-understand popular music started to spread rapidly in society. Fourth, a large number of new melodies began to emerge, and the appearance of these new melodies also gave birth to many new songs and poems. For example, the music recorded by Pang Juan in "Yue Shu" when Wei Linggong heard the drum and zither is an example of the New Sound (Vance & Eads, 2014).

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the popular music experienced significant progress compared to the "ancient music" of the Western Zhou Dynasty. However, this progress did not receive the support of most literati, and even encountered criticism from scholars of elegant music at that time. The most representative example is Confucius, a representative figure of Confucianism. As a result, we see the emergence of the saying "Zheng's sound is licentious". Popular music during this period was strongly rejected by elegant music scholars. The phenomenon was directly related to the extravagance and extreme love for music of the ruling class at that time, but it did not stop the trend of popular music gradually replacing elegant music during this period (Wang, 2022).

Despite this, popular music, although it carries a harmonious aesthetic effect, ultimately does not conform to the style of formal ceremonies and thus cannot completely meet the music demands of the secular society. The emergence of the "new sound" effectively filled this gap, as it could satisfy the emerging feudal ruling class's demand for pleasure. After all, the "new sound" is a reflection of people's emotional desires and rooted in entertainment needs. Therefore, during this period, even orthodox ideologies like Confucianism had to admit the view that "music originates from the heart, and people cannot live without music". Eventually, amid the contradictory voices of criticism and acceptance, popular music rapidly developed during the Warring States period. Its presence could be seen in the imperial court and secular society, gradually forming an unprecedentedly prosperous music development scene in the history of Chinese music. There was even a saying at the time that "listening to the music of Zheng and Wei, one never feels tired". The support from the upper levels of the courts of various vassal states made the popular music of this period, with its unique characteristics, gradually appreciated and

accepted by the nobility (Dale et al., 2020).

In summary, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the situation of "the collapse of rites and the destruction of music" had already formed. With the support of the nobility, the popular music represented by "the music of Zheng and Wei" gained ample room for development. It was precisely due to the support from the upper class that the largest and longest-lasting "new sound" movement in the history of ancient Chinese society's music development took place.

This far-reaching music development movement gradually demolished the edifice of the Western Zhou elegant music, and a good situation of "a hundred sounds competing" emerged in the music field. This period confirmed the true transformation of ancient Chinese music from "ancient music" to "new sound", which even had profound impacts on the social, political, economic, and cultural fields at that time and afterwards. It was the groundwork of music development during this period that laid the foundation for the prosperity of Han music.

### 3.2 The Rise and Development of Han Music

During the Qin and Han dynasties, society gradually became a feudal autocracy dominated by the Han ethnicity. After experiencing the transformation of new and old music during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the elegant music of the Western Zhou Dynasty nearly perished. However, the concept of ritual music, which was used to maintain the foundation of the feudal ruling class by the Western Zhou Dynasty was still inherited. In fact, the ruling class of the Qin and Han dynasties placed even greater emphasis on this concept than their predecessors.

In the early Han Dynasty, the feudal ruling class, led by Emperor Wu of Han, began to construct a new ritual music system to better maintain the ruling position of the Western Han Dynasty. During the Western Han period, the court established the position of Taile Commandant, specifically for the management of ritual music, mainly engaging in grand and solemn musical activities such as court sacrifices and feasts. As mentioned in the "Book of Han": "When Han rose to power, there were music masters named Zhi Shi, who served in the Grand Music Office generation after generation, responsible for the ritual music and its tonality. They were able to record the music and dances but could not explain their meanings." This means that the Zhi Shi's mastery of ritual music was not complete, and the performance of ritual music required dedicated musicians and a perfect system of ritual music instruments to be

completed. However, such conditions were not available in the early Han Dynasty. Therefore, the decline of Western Zhou ritual music in the Han Dynasty was also largely related to its technical aspects, specifically:

Firstly, the performance of ritual music requires that both instruments and performance must meet the standards of the five-tone and twelve-tone system. The twelve-tone system emphasizes the generation of tones and the principle of a part of gain and loss, which are difficult to master. It is difficult to grasp its essence, if not a professional musicologist. On the other hand, the singing art of ritual music has even stricter requirements. As described in the "Book of Rites" and "Record of Music," singing ritual songs demands very strict singing techniques. The singing method of ritual songs is vastly different from that of ordinary folk music.

Ritual music is not merely a simple music system; rather, it is a sophisticated system of moral principles with profound thought content. Ritual music is not just for entertainment and appreciation of music. To genuinely appreciate it, one must understand the meaning and connotations hidden within. Sometimes, very specific explanations are required for comprehension. Compared to the musicians of the early Han Dynasty, the musicians in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were equipped with highly advanced tonal skills and profound musical cultural literacy. Thus they were better able to understand the ethical morals contained within ritual music. However, the musicians of the early Han Dynasty could only record the music and dance but could not fully express its meaning. Therefore, ordinary musicians were unable to genuinely restore the ritual music of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.

By the Western Han Dynasty, ritual music had already evolved beyond its traditional definition. On one hand, the Western Han Dynasty had abandoned some of the technical requirements of traditional ritual music. Ban Gu's "Li Yuezhi" recorded several types of ritual music in the Han Dynasty, including temple music created by Sun Shu-tong during Emperor Gaozu's reign, imitating the Qin Dynasty's music; inner chamber music created by Lady Tangshan, as well as sacrificial dance and music during the reigns of Emperors Gaozu, Wen, Jing, and Wu. Additionally, there was the suburban sacrificial music composed by the Music Bureau during Emperor Wu's reign. Therefore, from the perspective of later generations, although the music used in the ancestral temples and sacrificial ceremonies during the Han Dynasty was still considered ritual music, it had significantly changed compared to that of the Western Zhou Dynasty. Taking inner

chamber music as an example, its content was meant to express praise, but the lyrics were applied the style of the Chu region's popular music. In essence, that is transformed a popular music into a ritual music. Although it retained its form, it had lost its original essence.

As a result, many people later criticized the ritual music of the early Western Han Dynasty based on their admiration for the Western Zhou ritual music. For instance, Ban Gu said, "Nowadays, the suburban temples songs of the Han Dynasty have nothing to do with our ancestors, and the eight tones are not in harmony with the bells and pitch pipes. Yet, there are court musicians from the inner palace and the Music Bureau in the imperial Yufu, all of which perform popular music in the Zheng style for the court." From these criticisms, it can be seen that by the time of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, most of the music performed in the court was popular music, even during the sacrificial ceremonies. Although many music ideologists and enthusiasts during Emperor Wu's reign tried to restore the glory of the Western Zhou ritual music through various means, they ultimately could not resist the popularity and growing of the new popular music.

From another perspective, whether there was ritual music during the Han Dynasty is already a relatively complicated question. As Sima Qian in his "Book of Music" avoided discussing ritual music and popular music every time he mentioned them, later generations summarized several types of sacrificial music described by Ban Gu as ritual music. However, Ban Gu did not explicitly state that these sacrificial music used in ancestral temples were indeed ritual music.

In summary, due to the influence of the ruling class, Han music began to exhibit the phenomenon of "integrating popular elements into ritual music." This shows that both the general public and the ruling class cannot live without uplifting and joyful folk music. It is the support of the ruling class that led to the great expansion of the Music Bureau during the prosperous period of the Western Han Dynasty, with Emperor Wu of Han sending officers to collect folk songs.

During the reign of Emperor Wu, the Music Bureau collected folk songs from the Yellow River basin, the Yangtze River basin, and various regions in the north and south, which played a key role in the development of folk music. After Emperor Wu, the successive rulers of the Han Dynasty continued this tradition. That's why the development of popular music in the Han Dynasty reached its peak. Thus, the phrase "popular music flourishes while ritual music declines" embodies the characteristics of



music development characteristics in the Han Dynasty. During this period, music had completely departed from the ritual music standards advocated by Confucianism, allowing folk music to develop, which also enriched the content and form of ritual music.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Chinese culture is great and profound, and so is the country's musical culture. Chinese musical culture has experienced thousands of years of cultural accumulation and historical changes, from slave societies to feudal societies, and then to modern societies. In a way, the development of music in China over the past thousands of years can be seen as a continuous transformation and integration of the contradictions between elegant music and popular music. Through the continuous integration and development of elegant and popular music, we can see the inclusive spirit embodied in Chinese music. The music culture that runs through ancient to modern times not only enriches our culture but also provides a broad platform for the emergence and development of various art forms, allowing different types of music to integrate and develop with one another.

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