

The Original Concept of Sound Material in Chinese Music

Sheng (声) and *Yin* (音)

L. Seneheweera

Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

Chinese music has a rich and complex history dating back more than two millennia. It is proved with written documents, information from carvings, paintings and oracle bones and musical instruments. Writings preserved on oracle bones (i.e. used for divination) date from the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.). Moreover, the aforesaid documents have discussed basic elements in music such as 'sound', *sheng* (声).

The two terms of *sheng* and *yin* were described as sound materials in Chinese music history. Sometimes these two words refer to the same concepts and sometimes they refer to different concepts. Normally *sheng* and *yin* mean natural sound. Therefore it can be referred as one concept i. e. *shengyin* (声音). Moreover, *sheng* and *yin* refer also to 'tone' *yueyin* (乐音) of music and have been referred to as having the same meaning as *lü* (律).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of these two terms in historical Chinese records.

Methodology

The paper analyzes primary data based on Chinese documents written in the Chinese language, and also uses secondary data.

Results and discussion

It seems the terms *sheng* (声), *yin* (音) and *lü* (律) all indicate musical tone. For instance the book of *Zuo Zhuan* (左传), 'Zuo's commentaries on history', *Zuo Zhuan* (左传) (5th century B.C.) mentions *wu sheng* (五声), *liu lü* (六律), *qi yin* (七音).¹ All of these three terms are musical sound. Sometimes these two concepts are strictly distinguished. For instance the book 'Records of music' *yueji* (乐记) (5th century B.C.)

offers the following comment: "Those who are able to realize *sheng* (声) but not realize birds and beasts, those who are able to realize *yin* but not *yue* (乐) are the common people. Only intellectual gentlemen can enjoy *Yue* (乐) well". It means those who are able to appreciate music, *yue* (乐), will be able to distinguish musical sound, musical tone and music very clearly. According to the above mentioned comment *sheng* (声) equals 'musical sound', *yin xiang* (音响). *Yin* (音) equals 'musical tone', *yue yin* (乐音) and *yue* (乐) equals music, *yin yue* (音乐).

There is another source 'Essay on no sadness or happiness in music' *Shen wu ai le lun* (声无哀乐论 (250 A.D.) written by Ji Kang. In his book, he mentions that the relationship of *sheng* (声) and *yin* (音) is just like the relationship of body and spirit. It is pointed out that *sheng* (声) is the form of music and *yin* (音) is the content of music. However, in certain situations, if the words *sheng* (声) and *yin* (音) combine with a numeral figure the meaning becomes the 'scale' *yinjie* (音阶). For instance, *wu sheng* (五声) with *wu yin* (五音) means pentatonic scale, *wu sheng yin jie* (五声音阶). *Qi sheng* (七声) with *qi yin* (七音) it means heptatonic scale *qi sheng yin jie* (七声音阶). Furthermore the numerical figure has been added to *yin* (音) such as *bayin* (八音) (*ba* meaning eight) as one word. This word was existed in Zhou Dynasty and at that time *bayin* (八音) had been used to divide musical instruments according to the material used for making musical instruments. These eight groups as are follows: gold, *jin* (金), stone, *shi* (石), silk *si* (丝), (bamboo), *zhu* (竹), cucurbit/gourd, *pao* (匏), clay, *tu* (土), leather, *ge* (革), wood, *mu* (木).

Conclusions

According to the above mentioned, the *sheng* (声) and *yin* (音) sometimes overlapped. However it can be seen that these two terms are used for musical sound. These musical sounds produced pentatonic and heptatonic scale in Chinese music.

¹ In Chinese *wu* (五), *liu* (六), *qi* (七) corresponding respectively to five, six and seven.