The Original Concept of Sound Material in Chinese Music

Sheng (声) and Yin (音)

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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 Zhan (左传), 'Zuo’s commentaries on history', Zuo Zhiuan (左传) (5th century B.C.) mentions wu sheng (五声), liu lü (六律), qi yin (七音).

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.