

Forging People's Temperament Through Music

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(Clearwisdom.net) The ancient Chinese people paid special attention to the effect of music in forging people's character. They promoted the concept that the major benefit of music is education, not to stimulate the people's sensory organs. The ancient people saw "temperament forging" and "education through music" as music's primary function. In *Yue Ji (Note on Music)*, the author said, "The old kings made ritual music to help people restrain and control their extreme desires."

There are different levels of music. Low level music violates the principle of moderation; it sets no boundaries on people's emotional expression and leads people to the extremes of decadence and violence; eventually it leads to the destruction of human character. This kind of music is a curse, causing the downfall of a dynasty. High level music is a manifestation of the universal principles. Enjoying music can influence virtue and one can improve his moral standards; it is a bridge to becoming a good, virtuous person. Tang Dynasty religious scholar Kong Yingda said, "Good music makes people good; bad music makes people evil."

"Music symbolizes harmony of heaven and earth; *li* (1) reflects the order of the heaven and earth." In the book *Yue Ji* the author said, "Music is a manifestation of people's internal virtue; *li* is created to regulate people's behavior." *Yue Ji's* author also believed *li* and music apply to everything in the heaven and earth; they conform to the principle of Yin and Yang; they are even popular among the ghosts and deities. So their impact is profound and far-reaching. Music and *li*

regulate everything in the human world. When talking about music, one cannot avoid *li*. In the Zhou Dynasty, *li* and music were a major part of the education of government officials. One of their main tasks was to cultivate people's characters and temper. For this purpose, officials educate people with *wu li* (five *li*) and *liu yue* (six types of music). The ancient people used music to assist *li* and to teach. The benefit of doing this, according to *Yue Ji*, is, "*Li* regulates people's hearts; music harmonizes people's voices."

Ancient Chinese called good music the sound of virtue. Only this kind of music could be played in temples and halls, and broadcast to the public to educate the people. *Yue Ji* noted, "Virtue is people's original nature; music is a highlight of virtue." In the same book, the author also stated, "Virtue first, technique second," pointing out that the content of music is primary, and technique is less important; virtue and character are the most important. To express the meaning of music, a performer should possess high virtue and character. Only musicians with these qualities can perform music that touches people's hearts.

Confucius in particular emphasized virtue in music. He emphasized that good music can improve people's moral qualities. He once said, "Nothing is more effective than music to improve old traditions; nothing is more relevant than *li* in restricting the rulers and governing the people." Confucius believed that music's highest ideology and artistic value are "compassion" and "beauty." He promoted elegant music that expresses "happiness without excess, sorrow without pain." The essence of elegant music is moderation - gentle, good-natured, and implicit. Such music can change bad tradition and lead people to compassion. The style is humble and tranquil. It's completely opposite to sophisticated music with fancy style that pursues sensational effects.

Yue Ji says, "Music is similar to but different from sound." Only when a sound conforms to the universal principles can it be called music. "A noble man listens to music to learn good values; a base man fulfills his

desires through music."

(1) *li*: per ancient Chinese education: propriety, "a prescribed form or manner governing one's words or actions appropriate to specific situations and relationships", etc.

CATEGORY: Traditional Culture