

Questions Arising up from Thinking about Chinese Music

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Abstract: Thinking about Chinese music I am trying to find answers on different questions. 1. What implication on Chinese culture had events in down the history on territory present-day China? 2. What result /from/ syncretism of Chinese music with other phenomena of Chinese culture? 3. What implication on formation of Chinese tonal system had the cyclic principle of tuning? 4. It seems to me the music in Europe reflects an ideal imagination of known world and music change – in some way – according the new recognition of the world. What caused absence of similar evolution in Chinese music? The differences between Chinese and European culture relate to different visions of the category of time, and it has serious consequences in the field of music.

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My thinking about Chinese music has been formed into questions and answers. Especially the questions are very important in connection with this theme. It is possible to feel the significant difference between Chinese and our music but one does not immediately realize why these different feelings are given rise.¹

Question:

Is the geographical isolation of China not the main reason of the difference between Chinese music and music of other cultures?

Chinese territory is considered for “Far East” and in general framework, it is known that geographical obstacles, which the travellers have had to face, used to be really troubling. For instance, Marco Polo’s journey to China lasted three years. On the other side the influence from the West was spread to Chinese territory like to another areas, as well. However, it did not effect or even change the local culture tradition.

Other question:

Could cyclic principle and circumstances, that cause a rise of tonal systems, be a source of specificity of Chinese music?

¹ I thank Ing. Erika Pisarčíková for her valuable comments on the preparation of this report.

Authors addicted to this topic² did not eliminate the possibility that forming of the tonal systems was influenced by the other cultures. According to a legend, the emperor Huang Ti asked his minister Ling Lun to create a tonal systems and he travelled to the borders of barbarian territory to fulfil the requirement. If the impulse to form a tonal systems had been obtained from abroad, it has been influenced by something of domestic culture what has began to connect to special views on application of these tonal systems.

I had been thinking a lot about the issue related to evolution of Chinese music. When I visited China in 2000, I tried to find an answer to the question: *Where in Chinese culture should one look for parallelism in evolution in European music?*

Trying to question musicologists and musical pedagogists, I noticed that they were not really familiarized with these problems. Some of them pointed at the constancy of the ancient principles which was probably caused by doubt about losing identity. During the last millennium there were mostly foreign dynasties ruling in China, and tendency to keep these ancient principles could be understood as an effort to keep the original identity. Be that as it may, this reasoning is not convincing. I have decided to find another explanation.

I have realized that my questioning is directed to details, while the sequences seem to be ignored. To understand Chinese music with its whole context we need to perceive its functioning, and its various links as Picken declares:³

The ancient Chinese writer Lu Pu-We expressed himself: “able to speak of music only with a man who has grasped the meaning of the world.” Why was this? It was because the Chinese regarded music as an image of universe. “Music expresses the accord of Heaven and Earth” and “produces the harmony between men and spirit”. Its object was not to please the senses, but to convey eternal truths.

This attitude to music should be accepted as an organic component of whole culture because the culture builds „a roof” above all phenomenon that are complementary connected.

² Kaufmann states: „Ling Lun traveled from the western to the shady northern side of Mount Yuan Yü” (Walter Kaufmann: *Musical Notations of the Orient* Bloomington–London, Indiana University Press 1967, 15). Kárpáti quotes the same mythos as Kaufmann, and in different context adds: “...in this case, exceptionally, the origin myths must be much closer to reality...” (János Kárpáti: *Myth and Reality in the Theory of Chinese Tonal System. Hypothesis for the solution of a triple problem*. In: *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22, 1980, 9). Picken characterizes location where the mythos occurred in detail: “Ling Lun went from the west of the Ta-Hia and came to the north of the valley Yüan Yü”. [...] “Ta-Hia has recently been identified as the country of the Tochars, a people who had lived on the south-eastern border of the Gobi desert at least since the 13th century B.C., acting as agents between eastern and western civilizations.” He continues: „The system of Huang Ti stems from the same root as the (much later) Pythagorean cycle of fifth. From many considerations it is tempting to anticipate the early home of the principles of Chinese music as lying somewhere in the Persian and Mesopotamian region”. (Laurence Picken: *Chinese Music*. In: *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* II (C–E). Fifth Edition. Reprint 1968, 221).

³ Laurence Picken, *ibid.* 219.

I pointed out the next question:

Which phenomenon and impulses could have a significant importance regarding formation of Chinese culture?

Konrad Lorenz says: “progress of human culture offers several noteworthy analogies with phylogenetic development of species.”⁴

Thinking about Chinese culture I would like to assert that the Chinese belong to the very first human group in Eurasia that has started to be differed from the others by specific genetic features. It was proved by American anthropologist Ch. G. Turner II.⁵ Due to study occupied with dental research of Asian populations *Homo sapiens sapiens*, he divided two categories: sundonts and sinodonts. He found out that the second category was separated in China and Mongolia approximately 20.000 years ago! The new category started to differ in cultural way, as well. What is more, especially this cultural difference of sinodonts could be stated as the reason why they did not expand to the closer territories in Asia but to the unknown territories in America.

Shamanism had an exceptional effect on Chinese culture.⁶ Thanks to its influence it can be declared why the original Chinese religions are not focused only on the worship of gods but they perform the function of cosmology and they try to provide harmony in the universe.⁷ The shamanistic vision anticipates the idea of the genesis of the “Empire of the Middle” or “Celestial Empire” and also explains the latter regard to the star Aurora – the highest point of universe ordering – around which the star sky rotates. Shamanism is also felt in the background of the “universe axis” vision – a fictitious pillar that is sometimes transformed into the form of a sacral mountain, or cosmic tree. Using this “axis” shaman can penetrate into other worlds in order to communicate with celestial and underrate beings (gods and daemons). The universe axis represents the integration of a human being in the fixed order of the universe, and it creates premises for an understanding of Chinese rituals that provide harmony in the universe. If into the square – representing the universe in Shamanism – we contrive the centre as the “universe axis”, we get the Chinese scheme of a scale of five tones and the universe signs which are connected with it. Everything suggests that it was probably Shamanism which ignited the conception of the origin of the universe at the beginning of forming Chinese culture that has been the leading one for all the millennia.

⁴ Konrad Lorenz: *8 smrtelních hříchů* [Die acht Todsünden der zivilisierten Menschheit]. Pyramida, Praha 1990, 58.

⁵ Felix R. Paturi (Ed.): *Kronika Zeme* [Die Chronik der Erde]. Bratislava: Fortuna Print 1995, 467.

⁶ Mircea Eliade: *Dejiny náboženských představ a ideí* II. Bratislava: Agora 1997, 34.

⁷ Mary Schmidt: *Šílená Moudrost: Šaman jako zprostředkovatel skutečností*. In: *Šamanizmus. Rozšířená vize reality* [Shamanism. An expanded view of reality]. Bratislava: CAD Press 1994, 70.

All the time I am searching for the answers to the question:

Which signs and impulses could be significant for the forming of Chinese culture?

To the previous notes I want to add that in connection with shamanism influence should be searched also for the reason why the Chinese art is different from the art of other cultures. I illustrate an example of obtaining visions of whole.

Changes about the idea of the whole in Europe are connected with changes about knowledge of the universe. Imagine for example a conception of the universe resulting from the theory of Ptolemai, Newton, or Einstein. It is known that new knowledge encouraged artists to intuitively create a new ideal of the structure of the whole, so that they could use this ideal to create their works of art. Cognitive processes and also the creation of works of art interlock, and therefore we can speak about their evolution. We cannot speak about evolution in this sense in Chinese art. Just as shamans can move in space without time restriction, so Chinese artists can look for a present vision of the universe in the past.

Worthy of remark is that the vision of the universe to which Chinese artists return in the past is not in conflict with present day scientists' vision about the universe. Fritjof Capra has drawn attention to the fact that the most significant ideas of modern physics find harmony with the ideas of Taoism. Taoism deals specially with harmony on the subatomic level, where elements are destructible and indestructible at the same time; where substance is continuous and also discontinuous, while energy and substance are two different aspects of the same event. Capra quoted the words of Richard Wilhelm that were said by him in the introduction to the translation of I-jing:

eight trigrams... is understood so, that they are in a state of continuous conversion when one is changed to another, so that one event is continuously converted to another in the physical world. This is the basic conception of I-jing. Eight trigrams, these are the symbols for transient phenomena; they are pictures constantly susceptible to change. Attention is concentrated on things not in the state of being – as it is obvious in the West – but on their movements in conversion. And so, eight trigrams do not describe things as they are, but offer a description of their tendencies to a movement.⁸

Johannes von Buttlar adds to this context:

Chinese expression “Tao” was used by the mystic Lao-c’ to express “indescribable” principle of universe – Bohm would say: “to express its implicit order.”⁹

Later Buttlar particularized this Bohm statement:

⁸ Frithof Capra: *Tao fyziky* [The Tao of Physics]. Bratislava: Gardenia, 1991, 218.

⁹ Johannes von Buttlar: *Boh nehrá v kocky. Osud alebo náhoda?* [Gottes Würfel. Schicksal oder Zufall?] Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ 1994, 51 and 56.

We could imagine implicit order as the basic reason, apart from time, that one unit and each moment is shown in an explicit world.

It seems that a return to the past can give to Chinese artists the same impulses necessary to create a vision of the whole as new scientific knowledge to artists in Europe.

On the basis of questions arising from thinking about Chinese music, in conclusion I would like to say that the differences between Chinese and European culture relate to different visions of the category of time, and it has serious consequences in the field of music. Whereas in European culture time is an inseparable part of religion and also of the cognitive process, in Chinese culture religious visions almost fall within the vision of order, and the vision of order works as the basic reason apart from time. That is why works of art by European artists must be changed according to changes in the cognitive process, and that is why works of art in China are insusceptible to such a change. If this vision about the difference between Chinese and European culture should be confirmed, we would have had to face serious consequences related to this phenomenon.