



Perspectives on the Kaihuang Music Debate: A Political and Musical Analysis

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Abstract

The Kaihuang Music Debate, spanning thirteen years during the Kaihuang era of the Sui Dynasty, was a grand musical event that attracted extensive participation from both the imperial court and the public. The event included various participants, such as the emperor, court officials, and musicians from diverse backgrounds. During the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, the continued fragmentation led to each dynasty developing its unique form of court music. After Emperor Wen of Sui established the Sui Dynasty, these differences became evident in the Kaihuang Music Debate. The debate featured diverse opinions and ongoing arguments. During the Zhou dynasty, people tended to admire the ancient music from the pre-Qin period, while those of the Liang dynasty favored the ancient music of the Wei and Jin periods. During the Qi dynasty, people were more inclined towards the "Luoyang Old Music" of the Northern Wei, while those from the Chen dynasty considered themselves as inheritors of the Liang music. Throughout the debate, the views of participating representatives such as Su Kui, Wan Baochang, Zheng Yi, and He Tuo were reflected in the discussions at various points. Ultimately, Emperor Wen of Sui adopted He Tuo's proposal of the "Yellow Bell, One Tone" (Huang Zhong Yi Gong). While the main theme of the debate was the formulation of court music, it covered a wide range of topics, including "politics and music relations," "ancient and modern relations," and "elegance and vulgarity relations." Among these, the relationship between politics and music was particularly significant and forms the focus of this article. This study briefly analyzes the political stances and musical value clashes of various figures during the first and second stages of the thirteen-year Kaihuang Music Debate, examining their impact on both political positions and musical perspectives.

Keywords

Political-musical perspective, Kaihuang Music Debate, timeline, participating representatives

1. Research Value

Building upon the study of the Qin Gong Zhongpei, the authors developed an interest in the Western Zhou ritual music system. Topics such as ritual and music creation, the collapse of rituals and deterioration of music, and musical ideology became focal points of investigation. The author recognized the ritual music system as a long-standing river running through the history of Chinese music development. Departing from the conventional perspective, the author divided ancient Chinese music into the territories of ritual music and folk music, using the Western Zhou "ritual music system" as a starting point for research. The Kaihuang Music Debate marked a significant event in the Sui Dynasty, symbolizing the establishment of ritual and music. In this era, the ritual music system gained deeper

significance. The selection of musical instruments and the arrangement of music reflected the societal trends and cultural tastes of the time. Although the "Yellow Bell, One Tone" chosen by Emperor Wen of Sui at the end of the debate did not last long, its process held far-reaching significance. Emperor Wen of Sui meticulously organized the event, bringing together officials, scholars, and musicians from various regions to collectively participate. They were not just practitioners of music but also inheritors of rituals and music, blending musical tones with ceremonial rites, and creating solemn and dignified musical compositions that showcased the brilliance of Chinese ritual music civilization. Taking the example of Zheng Yi's proposal of "Eighty-Four Modes of Folk Music" during the conference, it had a profound influence on the development of music in the Tang Dynasty.

Zheng Zuxiang described this event as a crucial milestone in the history of music, characterizing it as "a rare, high-level music-focused discussion within the ruling group." Due to the brevity of historical descriptions, and textual errors, combined with readers' cognitive perspectives and subjective preferences, there exist inaccuracies in these historical records. Consequently, the historical community has had differing opinions on the participants and their motivations.

Scholars in discussions mentioned the political use of ritual music to emphasize the authority and power of rulers, contributing to the stability of social order. Some argued that ritual music is not entirely influenced by politics, as it holds an independent position in cultural heritage and aesthetic pursuit. Others contended that ritual music itself embodies rich aesthetic emotions, surpassing the realm of politics, and should be understood from an artistic perspective. This debate stimulated further contemplation, sparking exploration into the significance of ritual music during the Kaihuang era of the Sui Dynasty. Such endeavors are conducive to analyzing historical figures more objectively and comprehensively, aiding in reconstructing the historical landscape of the Kaihuang Music Debate amid disruptions from concise historical records and textual errors. Therefore, the complexity of this political-musical relationship holds valuable research potential.

2. Domestic Research Status

With a focus on the "political-musical perspective" in the study of the Kaihuang Music Debate, the author has classified existing research into two main categories. The first category involves studies on the musical aspects discussed in the debate, such as Li Shigen's "A Grand Debate on Tuning in the Sui Dynasty: The Kaihuang Music Debate" and Shen Yi's "Research on Courtly Elegant Music in the Sui Dynasty." The second category addresses the cultural aspects of the individuals participating in the debate, including Ma Tiehao's "Classical 'Strata': Cultural Identity Issues in the Kaihuang Music Debate" and Wang Lizeng's "The Kaihuang Music Debate and Early Sui Politics." Throughout these scholarly discussions, the political implications of ritual music have garnered widespread attention. A young scholar, Zhang Hangqi, introduced a novel perspective, suggesting that music during this period was not isolated but intricately linked to social and political dynamics. According to her, the artistic expressions chosen by musicians at that time were, in fact, responses to the political power of the era. She argued that ritual music played a crucial role in ancient Chinese political life, transcending its status as a mere musical form and becoming a symbol of rulers' authority. In ancient courts, the performance of ritual music often accompanied significant political ceremonies, symbolizing the ruler's dignity and influence. This "political-musical relationship" profoundly influenced the political structure and cultural concepts of ancient society, leaving a rich historical legacy for future generations.

This unique perspective has resonated within the academic community, becoming one of the new angles in the study of music history. While Zhang Hangqi's research primarily focuses on Emperor Wen of Sui in a decision-making position, the author plans to adopt a political-musical perspective, exploring the other participants in the Kaihuang Music Debate in chronological order.

3. Main content

In his article "Right and Wrong in the Kaihuang Music Debate and Others," Mr. Zheng Zuxiang pointed out that discussions on the Kaihuang Music Debate are often based on multiple perspectives, and the timeline is not always clear. He briefly outlined the development process of the Kaihuang Music Debate in chronological order based on the "Music Records" in the "Book of Sui." However, in 2014, the discovery of the "Zheng Yi Tomb Inscription" in Xi'an became a crucial basis for challenging Zheng Yi's "chronological discussions on music" as presented in the "Book of Sui." Since then, discussions about the Kaihuang Music Debate have deepened, and the timeline has become more precise. In Zhang Hangqi's research, she delves into the impact of Emperor Wen of Sui's "political-musical

perspective" on the Kaihuang Music Debate. In her work titled "People and Events in the Kaihuang Music Debate – A Discussion on Emperor Wen of Sui's 'Political-Musical Perspective,'" she explores the theme based on the new timeline for the first time. The time process of the Kaihuang Music Debate studied in this article roughly follows the timeline presented in Zheng Zuxiang's work. After correction based on "Zheng Yi's Tomb Inscription," it serves as the basis for the phased research.

3.1 First Phase: Representatives presenting viewpoints

3.1.1 Year 2 of Kaihuang Era

Yan Zhitui proposed using the music of the Liang Dynasty to restore ritual music, but Emperor Wen of Sui rejected the proposal, stating that Liang was a fallen state, and its music represented the sounds of a fallen state. Yan Zhitui, known for his erudition, was recognized by Xiao Yi, the Prince of Dongping in Liang, and became the Senior Statesman at the age of nineteen. He later learned that Chen Baxian deposed Emperor Jing of Liang and declared himself ruler. Yan Zhitui's deep emotional connection to Liang was evident, and in his perception, Liang's music, as a spiritual symbol, was the most orthodox and qualified to become ritual music.

3.1.2 From Year 2 to a few years before Year 7 of the Kaihuang Era

Various representatives expressed their views, but none were accepted by Emperor Wen of Sui. The main participants in this phase were Zheng Yi, Su Kui, and He Tuo.

Zheng Yi, a prime minister during the reign of Emperor Jing of Northern Zhou, later assisted Yang Jian in establishing the Sui Dynasty. He played a significant role in the foundation of the Sui Dynasty and proposed the "84 Modes," laying the foundation for the prosperity of Tang Dynasty music. Su Kui, the son of the prime minister Su Wei, held multiple positions due to his father's influence. While many courtiers supported his proposals, they were set aside because his advocacy for the use of the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale fell short of Zheng Yi's seven modes. He Tuo initially served under Xiao Yi, the Xiangdong Prince of Liang. After the fall of Jiangling, he was appointed as the National Scholar in the Imperial Academy by Emperor Wu of Zhou. When Emperor Xuan of Zhou ascended to the throne, he sought to confer titles on five concubines simultaneously. He Tuo objected to Xin Yanzhi's suggestion, indicating that there was nothing objectionable about it. This incident illustrates He Tuo's ability to understand and cater to the ruler's intentions. In the first year of Kaihuang, he was appointed as the National Scholar, and his theory of "Yellow Bell, One Gong" became one of the most significant musical theories in the Kaihuang Music Debate (Long Chengsong, 2019). Through this theory, he closely linked music with politics, although Emperor Wen of Sui did not immediately adopt it.

3.1.3 Year 7 of the Kaihuang Era

Emperor Wen of Sui ordered Niu Hong, Xin Yanzhi, He Tuo, and others to discuss the formulation of ritual music, but there was no progress over the years, which made him very dissatisfied. He remarked, "I have received the mandate of heaven for seven years, and the Yuefu still sings of the merits of previous dynasties. Is this right?" (Long Chengsong, 2019).

3.2 Second Phase: "Yellow Bell, One Gong," Integration of Politics and Music

3.2.1 Year 9 of Kaihuang Era

Following the subjugation of the Chen Dynasty, the Sui Dynasty acquired the traditional music of the Song and Qi Dynasties. Emperor Wen of Sui established the "Qing Shang Office" specifically for this purpose and bestowed upon it the title of "Orthodox Sound of China" (Zhang Hangqi, 2021). The term "Huaxia" had already emerged during the pre-Qin period. Initially, its primary meaning referred to the political core area of the Zhou Dynasty, namely the Central Plains region. The "Huaxia people" denoted the ethnic groups living in this area, which later became known as the Han Chinese (Zhang Mengrui, 2023). At this moment, Niu Hong submitted a memorial requesting the formulation of ritual music for the Sui Dynasty based on the content of the music from the fallen Liang and Chen Dynasties. However, Emperor Wen of Sui still rejected the proposal. Niu Hong initially served as an Officer in the Ministry during the Northern Zhou period, later transferring to the position of Assistant Officer in the Ministry. During the transition from Zhou to Sui, he played a leading role in ritual music and served as the Minister of Ceremonies in charge of the music debate in the sixth year of Kaihuang. The contributions of Niu Hong to the field of musical culture are not highly regarded by later generations, and there even exists a certain degree of misunderstanding (Li

Bo, 2020). In fact, during the second phase of his discourse on music, he composed the article "Ding Yue Zou," which represents his organization and assessment of the historical development of music creation through the ages (Li Bo, 2019). He was the pioneer in revealing the unique cultural and political values of the Kaihuang Music Debate. Following the "historical perspective on music," he presented clear propositions on palace tones, ritual music tuning, and other aspects, incorporating the ideas of Zheng Yi and He Tuo. Summarily, he was a promoter and implementer who institutionalized and ritualized the achievements of the Kaihuang Music Debate.

3.2.2 Year 10 of the Kaihuang Era

Su Kui submitted a memorial to the Emperor, "Remove the Xiaolü mode from the clear tones, and still use Ruibin to transform the Gong mode." All agreed. Suo Kui and Zheng Yi discussed together, hoping to actively establish a regulated octave system based on shu, in order to standardize the musical pitch. Since the musical scale had long been lost at that time, Zheng Yi, Suo Kui, and others saw the opportunity to restore it and believed that the musical scale could be established (Wei Zheng, 1973).

Following Zheng Yi's completion of the music, Emperor Wen of Sui sought the opinion of Wan Baochang. Wan responded, "This is the music of a fallen state; should Your Majesty listen to it?" (Zheng Zuxiang, 2001). He also expressed dissatisfaction with the returned musical pitch by Zheng Yi. Subsequently, Wan Baochang, following the imperial decree, formulated the pitch standards and used them as the basis for tuning musical instruments.

Wan Baochang, originally from the Liang Dynasty, became a musician due to his father's association. When Northern Zhou conquered Northern Qi, he was a musician. Even after the Sui Dynasty was established, and Yang Jian ascended the throne, Wan Baochang remained a musician. Although he was highly knowledgeable about musical pitch, his opinions were rarely adopted due to his low political status and jealousy of Su Kui.

3.2.3 Years 12 to 13 of Kaihuang Era

He Tuo submitted a memorial to discuss the formulation of ritual music and proposed the "Preservation of the Three Modes" and the suggestion of "Yellow Bell, One Gong." Believing ancient music was overly complex, he aimed to simplify it by using only one uniform pitch and three tones. Niu Hong memorialized in favor of using Zheng Yi's old work, the "Xuanxiang" mode, as the palace tone. Emperor Wen of Sui still remembered He Tuo's previous remarks and ordered not to use the "Xuanxiang" mode. Niu Hong and others then extensively discussed the use of "Yellow Bell, One Gong" (Zheng Zuxiang, 2001). At this point, the formulation of ritual music had escalated into a political issue, leading to proposals that each party should arrange the music first before selecting the best.

3.2.4 Year 14 of Kaihuang Era

He Tuo's "Yellow Bell, One Gong" was completed ahead of the others. He Tuo was concerned that the quality of the music would become apparent after various parties attempted to perform it. Therefore, he emphasized that the "Yellow Bell" symbolizes the virtue of a monarch. Using persuasive language, he successfully influenced Emperor Wen of Sui, who was very satisfied after listening. Ritual music was finally settled.

In summary, the author believes that the Kaihuang Music Debate, spanning thirteen years, witnessed each participant expressing their stance and propositions. However, due to Emperor Wen of Sui favoring auspicious signs, the debate did not reach a comprehensive conclusion and concluded hastily. After the music debate, there were various opinions in both the court and society. Some might consider Emperor Wen of Sui's favoring of auspicious signs as a sign of great prosperity under his rule. Others may view it as a political maneuver using auspicious signs to suppress dissenting voices. Regardless, the role of ritual music in politics cannot be ignored. It is both the soul of ritual music and the dignity of rulers. The positions and debates of the individuals involved also provide a favorable opportunity to re-examine the status of ritual music itself and its impact on politics.

4. Participants' Comments

In the historical debate, some scholars believe that participants like the folk musician, Wan Baochang, attended the meeting out of a love for musical culture, aiming to uphold their viewpoints and revive the "Orthodox Sound of China" in their hearts through this conference. On the other hand, another group of scholars suggests that individuals like Su Kui were more motivated by political power and status, attempting to establish greater influence within the ruling group. However, considering their true motives from the perspective of "political music", it is possible that their intentions were a mix of a desire to revive orthodox ritual music and considerations of political interests. This complex background perplexes historians in interpreting this period of history. Regardless of the motives, the impact

of the Kaihuang Music Debate has deeply rooted itself in the development of music, becoming an intriguing chapter in music history that inspires later generations to reflect on the relationship between music and power, art, and politics.

The Kaihuang Music Debate, as a historical event, not only left its mark on political and musical aspects but also prompted scholars to conduct a profound examination of the entire ritual music system that runs through Chinese civilization. During this grand event, Emperor Wen of Sui not only emphasized the importance of formulating ritual music but also recognized the influence of ritual music on the state and social order. These aspects have become essential references for future scholars studying the evolution of ritual music systems and provide valuable clues for understanding the profound connotations of ancient music culture.

The conclusion of the Kaihuang Music Debate does not signify the end of the musical disputes; instead, it marks a fresh beginning. The flourishing culture of the Sui Dynasty injected vitality into musical arts. Different regions and genres of music blended, giving birth not only to numerous colorful musical compositions but also demonstrating a trend of cultural integration. The persistence of individuals in the Kaihuang Music Debate, each adhering to their perception of the "Orthodox Sound of China," laid a solid foundation for the vibrant musical culture of the time.

In summary, examining the viewpoints of the participants in the Kaihuang Music Debate through the lens of the fusion of politics and music makes historical figures more vivid and realistic. It also challenges us, in the modern era, to conduct research through interdisciplinary approaches, discovering the broader impact and significance of major events in music history, such as the Kaihuang Music Debate.

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