

# A Book Review of Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics

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**Abstract:** *The emphasis in this article is laid on reviewing the book Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics, such as the translation, social function, and historical importance of rituals and music, including the most important ideas and arguments in this book and provide some evaluations. This article first introduced the importance of “ritual” and “music” in ancient China, then discussed the feature and application of the book, such as the translating techniques, organization of the contents, and evaluation of the book quality.*

**Keywords:** *book Collections, Chinese Ancient Classics, Ritual and Music*

## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics was published by the New Classic Press. The book was completed by a panel of translation from Nanjing Normal University and New Classic Press. The contents include thirty-four Chinese ancient classics and thirty-six institutions and official positions regarding the rituals and music of China. The chapters are organized chronologically by the following topics: 1. Classics Regarding Rituals and Music, 2. Institutions and Official Positions of Rituals and Music, and 3. Quotations of Rituals and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics.

The author, Dr. Yuanyong Xu, the dean of the School of Music at Nanjing Normal University, specializes in a wide range of issues related to Chinese music, with an emphasis on the study of Chinese music history, Chinese ancient music, and education and research in popular music. He is also the director of the research team of Chinese traditional music, particularly associated with the study of Chinese music history at Nanjing Normal University. A recipient of numerous fellowships and awards to support his research, Dr. Xu received the National Fellowship in Social Science, the National Fellowship in Art projects, the Jiangsu Province Fellowship in Social Science, and more. In March 2019, the English version of Research Overview of Chinese Ancient Music History, a monography with the basic knowledge of Chinese music history and the sequential learning process on Chinese music, was presented at the 48th London International Book Exhibition held at the Olympia Exhibition Center in London. His other publications in Chinese music history include The Studies of Chinese Ancient Music History, The Rheological Study of Folk Song in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Basic Knowledge on Chinese and Foreign Pop Music, The Comparative Study between Chinese and Japanese Music, among others. In 2015, Dr. Xu's The Studies of Chinese Ancient Music History was awarded “Outstanding Scientific Achievement in Humanities and Social Sciences” by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. His current research and teaching interests center on Chinese music education and Chinese music pedagogy.

## 2. The Importance of Rituals and Music

Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics serves as a gateway to the study of rituals and music for Western and Chinese culture, and facilitates the exchange of ideas and information. Rituals and music, referred to as *lǐ yuè* in Chinese, has been a vibrant part of Chinese culture. Rituals were originally used in ancestral and sacrificial ceremonies, worship of ancient sages and masters, and court protocol. Music, including dance, plays an important role to accompany all ceremonies. Within the Chinese cultural tradition, rituals and music developed, and continue to develop, in a variety of directions as diverse dynasties add their rules and necessities to the class system of China. The strict hierarchical structure, corresponding with the channels of an individual's background and establishment of bureaucracy, was a tradition in Chinese ancient society, and was stabilized and strengthened by rituals

and music. People in different ranks conformed with the specific type of rituals and music, such as the services of ceremonies, the regulation of rituals, the genres of music and dance, the types of instruments, and the amount of musicians. Chapter one, "Classics Regarding Ritual and Music," covers themes that include the regulations of rituals, services, ceremonies, and the application of music. To reinforce and develop the system of rituals and music, several dynasties established musical institutions to administrate the application of rituals and the usage of music, which were introduced in the second chapter, titled "Institution and Official Positions of Ritual and Music."

According to Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics, the functions of rituals include standardizing the hierarchical structure and maintaining relations within different grades. Rituals provide individuals with a criterion to understand the classified social status, obligatory duties, moral behaviors, and the responsibilities of incumbencies. Music improves the relationships between the monarch and officials, youths and elders, and fathers and sons. Through music, people become respectful, obedient, and intimate. A ritual is to organize the differentiation, but music is in charge of synthesis. The modalities and functions of rituals and music are different; however, the essence is the same, which is to build a harmonious society. Rituals are the foundation and criterion of the Music. The application, selection, and evaluation of music follows the standard of rituals. Rituals and music are inextricably interconnected and produce a marked effect together.

### 3. The Feature of Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics

The Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics has many advantages. First, the book is organized with a step-by-step approach that transitions readers from one classic to the next. To guide the reader, a firm structure is needed, and important, with chapters and sub-headings organized chronologically and thematically in two overarching sections, which mark shifts in the concept of the "Ritual and Music: Classics Regarding Ritual and Music" and "Institutions and Official Positions of Ritual and Music." Moreover, intended for specialists and general audiences alike, each section of the book is prefaced by a short informative introduction to frame the narrative and provide helpful background information before considering individual rituals and music in different dynasties. The contents range widely, but focus on one ancient classic, an institution and an official position, or a quotation devoted to ritual and music. A detailed quotation at the end of the book will be useful for referencing specific research, projects, and topics. From initial informative introduction, through quotation from every classic, readers can feel confident in developing the knowledge of Chinese music history and learning about Chinese culture.

Second, this book is accessible for all college levels of readers, which would be appropriate for either a lower or upper-division history course. The content is a fascinating and a well-written resource to use in any music history or Chinese culture course. Also, the book is a thoughtful introduction to the study of rituals and music. An initiate of musicology and ethnomusicology will find Xu's publication an excellent and inspiring resource for a better-informed understanding of Chinese music history and rituals and music. Additionally, though the book is not an exhaustive source on the Chinese history, the text provides a detailed overview that would benefit a lower-division thematic course on the Chinese history.

Third, to further enhance the understanding and communication between and among the scholars studying Chinese Music from different cultures, the author collects the most important Chinese philosophers and discusses their ideas regarding rituals and music, covering topics ranging from people's everyday life to spiritual life. For example, Mencius claimed that the livelihood of the people is the primary concern of leaders governing a country. The essence of Confucianism are rituals, music, and benevolence, which guide individuals to be honest, friendly, modest, and courteous. Xunzi believed that music can influence one's emotion and behavior; therefore, applying "good music" to educate people was important to his philosophy. Laozi stated that silence is the superlative sound and music should not be used as entertainment. Mozi was an anti-music philosopher, who believed that music would influence people's daily life negatively; also, he believed it is unable to satisfy an individual's need. Although Han Feizi opposed music, he indicated that music could relax people, enhance relations, and meliorate efficiency. These examples provide a specific illustration of how Xu included various philosophers' ideas on rituals and music in various dynasties as tools to help develop the understanding of Chinese music history.

Finally, Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics includes Pinyin, Chinese characters, and original texts in such a way as to keep the reader motivated and active in the learning process; specifically, this collection aids foreign readers with contacting the core of the Chinese culture.

The book contains Pinyin and other Chinese characters in aims of understanding the profound and mysterious Chinese culture and language. Some of Chinese characters are without the most relevant English translations, therefore the foreign readers may face some difficulties in understanding the meaning and the connotation behind the literal translation. Accordingly, the author utilizes the transliteration to convert words into Pinyin in phonetic sound, and then follows the interpretations and descriptions consequently.

“According to The History of Yuan’s dedicated section to the division, in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of the era named Zhuyuan (1271), the yù chén yuan (an institute for handling court music) was established and administered by three officials.”[1]

Similar to English, Chinese includes words or expressions that have the same or nearly the same meaning as another. For instance, because the Chinese character “繁” and “蕃” can be interchanged in some contexts, the readers may see “春秋蕃露” (Luxuriant Dew of The Spring and Autumn Annals) instead of “春秋繁露”. To be clear, the author includes Chinese characters in the texts.

“According to the annotated catalogue of Complete Library of the Four Treasuries, regarding the Chinese title of the work, it was said the Character written “繁” had the same meaning as “蕃”, the two ancient characters connected somehow, but the true meaning of the title was quite the mystery.”[2]

In addition, the book cites the original texts from Chinese ancient classics, which includes quotes from The Bilingual Reading of the Chinese by James Legge. Moreover, to help the foreign readers to have a better understanding of the original text, the translators convert every quotation into the modern spoken form of Chinese, and then translate it into English.

#### **4. How Might an Instructor Use Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics?**

For history teachers looking to enhance their general knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese music, Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics is an attractive option. The book is brief and its information is easy to follow, which is helpful for numerous types of projects, research, and courses. Moreover, this book is well suited for teachers or researchers with little or no previous experience in Chinese culture.

For those looking for a historical interpretation or a straightforward “how-to” guide to bring into their classroom, it has many excerpts that would enhance lessons on the subject of rituals and music. The book is successful in its aim of equipping readers with an expanded understanding of rituals and music in each domain it tackles. The step-by-step approach, clear language and organization, and attention to detail provide instructors with a source to consult with when teaching Chinese history. Passages such as the following can be used to help students think more critically about rituals and music and the beginnings of Chinese culture:

“There are detailed and strict regulations for intellectuals, such as when first meeting, the politeness between guest and host, proper topics of conversation, and when bidding farewell.”[3]

#### **5. Conclusion**

Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the connections between ritual and music and the cultural system that shaped Chinese people’s everyday life and customs. In just over 100 pages, the single-volume book maps more than thousand years of the Chinese music history from Pre-Qin to present, and it concludes with a chapter on quotation of ritual and music from Chinese Ancient Classics. Most of the pages in this book do not read like a typical twentieth-century textbook. They are somewhere in between a tool book and reference material, with a column-style layout and use of bullet points. The book explains rituals and music in a manner that is light-hearted and easy to follow, which is an ideal and highly-recommended text for anyone of any background wanting to become proficient in the reading and understanding of Chinese culture and music history. For instructors teaching Chinese Music History to students new to higher education, The Collections of Rituals and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics offers a good starting point as a core text and should definitely be considered.

**References**

- [1] Yuanyong Xu et al., *Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics*, trans. Wu yiyao et al. (UK: New Classic Press, 2019), 57.
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- [3] Yuanyong Xu et al., *Collections on Ritual and Music from Chinese Ancient Classics*, trans. Wu yiyao et al. (UK: New Classic Press, 2019), 6.