

## **Confucius On Music Education.**

By Ji Yue

In the Western world, when one talks of the history of music education, typically she traces it back to the Renaissance. However, in East Asia, there is a completely different view: Confucius, who lived twenty-five centuries ago<sup>1</sup> and was a grand master of music education. Essentially he had told us everything we need for music education. In this article, we collect a number of his sayings on music education to demonstrate this point.

### **Importance of Music Education**

The most famous saying of Confucius on music education might be: “To educate somebody, you should start from poems, emphasize on ceremonies, and finish with music.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, one cannot expect to become educated without learning music. If you are familiar with the culture of ancient Chinese society, you can easily see from this saying how highly regarded music education was, because the “finish” of something is usually associated with greater significance than other parts. In fact, Confucius always taught his students the “six arts”<sup>3</sup>, the most crucial knowledge and skills in ancient China. These six arts were (in decreasing order of importance): ceremonies, music, shooting, driving, writing, and mathematics.<sup>4</sup> Music was second only to ceremonies. Note that the ancient Chinese societies are called “society of ceremonies”, because they were based on ceremonies, just as the Western societies are based on laws. Hence, the above statement of Confucius has put music education in a position with great importance.

### **Objects of Music Education**

Given the importance of music education, naturally one would think of this question: Who should receive music education? Confucius’s answer to this question was: “There should be no discrimination against anybody in education.”<sup>5</sup> “I never refused to teach anybody paying the tuition with at least *Shu Xiu*.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Confucius never refused to teach students, including those from poor, lower-class families. A good example was Yan Yuan, who grew up in a poor family and never improved his financial situation throughout his short life.<sup>7</sup> Although Yan Yuan had such a financial hardship, Confucius accepted him as a student and soon recognized him as his best student.<sup>8</sup> Confucius loved him so much that he claimed to be “killed” by the news that Yan Yuan died.<sup>9</sup>

There were many other students of Confucius who were from even poorer families. Zeng Shen “often had no food for days” and “had no money to buy clothes for years.”<sup>10</sup> Zhong Gong “was a slave’s son”; his home was “too small to have any furniture.”<sup>11</sup> Confucius never discriminated against them or allowed anybody to discriminate against them because of their financial status.

Similarly, Confucius also taught Gong Ye Chang, who was a prisoner, and Zai Yu, who was “completely worthless like a spoiled wood.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, by his own educational practice Confucius had told us that there should not be any discrimination based on social status, or moral standards, or anything else.

### **Contents of Music Education**

Confucius insisted that we should teach good music. Of course, then there is a question of what is good music. We can learn this from his comments on various pieces of music of his age. The music he liked most was probably *Shao*. After listening to *Shao*, he was intoxicated so much that “forgot the taste of meat for months.”<sup>13</sup> He loved it because it “has both a good connotation and an artistic beauty.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the standard for good music should be two fold: first, its connotation must be of sufficient merit; second, its beauty must be sensible.

Confucius stressed that music without good connotation should be excluded from the curriculum: “Once the music of Zheng is popular, corruptions will be everywhere.”<sup>15</sup> Here Zheng was a kingdom in Confucius’s age, whose territory covered part of today’s Henan Province of China. Its music was famous for being sexually suggestive.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, being sexually suggestive is not a negative property by the standard of modern (western) society. However, by the standard of Confucius's age, it was a sign of bad connotation of music. Therefore, Confucius requested people to "stay away from the music of Zheng," and believed that would be beneficial for all kindoms.<sup>17</sup>

Confucius strongly promoted beautiful music in his own educational practice. While it was impossible to give a definition for beautiful music, he illustrated to us what kind of music he thought was beautiful. In his opinion, a piece of music was beautiful if it had "a magnificent beginning." Furthermore, beautiful music could be "harmonic", "clear", and "smoothly continuous."<sup>18</sup> Hence, music with these properties should be taught to students. His aesthetic standard for music had influenced China in the following two millenniums. In the Qing dynasty (1616 A.D.—1911 A.D.), the official curriculum of music still covered *Shao* as a highly important piece.<sup>19</sup>

### **Methodology of Music Education**

Confucius also told us many effective ways to teach music. For instance, he emphasized that it was extremely important to motivate students. He said that a teacher "should not teach a student anything before he becomes strongly interested in it." The reason is that, once a student gets motivated, he can "understand three times more than what was taught."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the effect of teaching would be much more significant.

Also, he suggested that teaching of new contents should be based on review of old contents. He said that one could become a (successful) teacher after mastering this skill.<sup>21</sup> He loved this approach of teaching because it could bring happiness to students.<sup>22</sup>

Confucius recognized that teaching must not be uniform for all students; in stead, it should be tailored for each individual student. There is a famous story in the Chapter *Xian Jin* of *Lun Yu*: Two students, Zi Lu and Ran You, asked Confucius exactly the same question, but the answers they got were completely different. A third student, Gong Xi Hua, asked Confucius why there was such a huge difference between the two answers. Confucius replied that his answers were based on the different characteristics of these two students.

Confucius realized that teaching should be a gradual, step-by-step procedure. He never pushed his students too much in his instructions. In teaching, he always led students patiently. The progress he made was not necessarily fast, but always steady.<sup>23</sup>

Confucius also realized that teaching and learning must be consistent with practice. He even said that “it would be a shame to talk of anything beyond one’s own practice.”<sup>24</sup> He himself followed this rule faithfully. One example was that, as a music teacher, he composed music for all the three hundred and five poems in *Shi Jing*, the first poem collection in the history of China.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, Confucius was not only a great philosopher, but also a great music teacher. He left with us many insightful comments on music education. Specifically, he articulated about the importance of music education. He requested that music education should be open to all people, without any discrimination based on financial status, social status, or anything else. He told us that we should teach good music, and showed us what kind of music was good. To teach good music, we could use a lot of effective approaches invented by him.

In most parts of today’s world, music education is viewed from a Western position. The goal of this article is to provide an alternative view based on the Eastern Asian culture. We believe that, in an age of globalization, music education should be viewed from different angles, using the value systems of different cultures. We hope this article will be a first step towards this goal.

## Notes

1. Most people believe Confucius was born in 551 B.C. and died in 479 B.C. (Feng 1948, Wang 1964). However, some believe he was actually born in 550 B.C. (see Wu 2002).
2. See the Chapter *Tai Bo* of *Lun Yu*. Interested readers can refer to, e.g., Yang 2006.
3. See the Chapter *Biography of Confucius* of *Shi Ji*: “Confucius taught students poems, writing, ceremonies, music, etc. There were about three thousand students in total. Seventy-two of them learned all the six arts.” Interested readers can refer to, e.g., Sima 1988.
4. The definition of “six arts” is from the Chapter *Bao Shi* of *Zhou Li*. Interested readers can refer to, e.g., Sun 1987.
5. See the Chapter *Wei Ling Gong* of *Lun Yu*.
6. This statement is from the Chapter *Shu Er* of *Lun Yu*. Here *Shu Xiu* refers to a type of dried meat. It was often used as a valuable gift in the age of Confucius.
7. According to the Chapter *Yong Ye* of *Lun Yu*, Yan Yuan “eats a bowl of food, drinks a ladle of water, and lives in a shabby house”. In the Chapter *Xian Jin* of *Lun Yu*, Yan Yuan died but his family was too poor to buy an external coffin (Guo) for him. In the age of Confucius and Yan Yuan, a dead body was normally placed in two layers of coffins, one internal called “Guan” and one external called “Guo”. Only really poor people were buried with just an internal coffin.
8. According to the Chapter *Yong Ye* of *Lun Yu*, Yan Yuan “remains perfect for months”, but other students of Confucius “at best is so once a day.”
9. See the Chapter *Xian Jin* of *Lun Yu*.
10. See the Chapter *Rang Wang* of *Zhuang Zi*. Here *Zhuang Zi* is Chinese classic widely believed to be written by the great philosopher Zhuang Zhou (369 B.C. – 286 B.C.). Interested readers can refer to Chen 1983.
11. See the Chapter *Fei Shi Er Zi* of *Xun Zi*. Here *Xun Zi* is Chinese classic written by the great philosopher Xun Kuang (313 B.C. – 238 B.C.). Readers can refer to Wang 1954.
12. See the Chapter *Gong Ye Chang* of *Lun Yu*.
13. See the Chapter *Shu Er* of *Lun Yu*.
14. See the Chapter *Ba Yi* of *Lun Yu*. In comparison, Confucius thought another piece of music, *Wu*, did not have a sufficiently good connotation, although it was very beautiful.
15. See the Chapter *Wei Ling Gong* of *Lun Yu*.
16. In the Chapter *Li Yue* of *Bai Hu Tong*, Ban Gu (born in 32 A.D., died in 92 A.D.) explained that “the people of Zheng made music to seduce the opposite sex, and thus the music of Zheng is all erotic.” Readers can refer to Chen 1994.
17. See the Chapter *Wei Ling Gong* of *Lun Yu*. This was part of Confucius’s answer to Yan Yuan’s question.
18. See the Chapter *Ba Yi* of *Lun Yu*.
19. See the Chapter *Yue Zhi* of *Qing Shi Gao*. Here *Qing Shi Gao* was an official history of the Qing Dynasty, edited by the Institute for Qing History (IQH) and first published in 1927. Readers can refer to IQH 1977. Nevertheless, note that the *Shao* taught in the Qing Dynasty might be different from the original version.
20. See the Chapter *Shu Er* of *Lun Yu*.
21. See the Chapter *Wei Zheng* of *Lun Yu*.
22. See the Chapter *Xue Er* of *Lun Yu*. Confucius made an analogy, saying that the happiness obtained this way was just like meeting an old friend coming from far away.
23. This observation was made by his students. See the Chapter *Zi Han* of *Lun Yu*.
24. See the Chapter *Xian Wen* of *Lun Yu*.
25. *Shi Jing* was a collection of poems authorized in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., and compiled by the officers of Zhou dynasty. The fact that Confucius composed music for all the three hundred and five poems in *Shi Jing* was recorded in the Chapter *Biography of Confucius* of *Shi Ji*.

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