
The History of Historiography Research Process of Ancient Chinese Music Institutions

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Abstract: The academic study of the history of ancient Chinese music began in the 1920s. With the publication of Ye Bohe's History of Chinese Music in 1922, systematic research on ancient Chinese music history was officially initiated. A large number of works subsequently emerged, covering areas such as music theory, organology, archaeology, and related disciplines. With the development of the times and the deepening of scholarly inquiry, a relatively mature research system has gradually formed. Among these, the study of musical institutions constitutes a significant branch within the historiography of music.

Keywords: musical institutions; Music Bureau (Yuefu); Dynastic history; general history

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1. Introduction

Chinese music institutions, as the core carriers of the traditional music system, serve as an important link connecting state ritual systems, musical practice, and social culture. Their development and evolution run throughout the entire course of Chinese ancient music history. A review of domestic research on ancient Chinese music institutions not only helps to clarify the trajectory of academic development and summarize existing achievements, but also provides ideas and directions for future studies.

Based on the existing academic achievements in the study of ancient Chinese musical institutions, this research can be divided into four stages: the first stage spans from the 1930s to the 1960s, characterized primarily by the imitation of “new historiography”; the second stage, from the 1960s to the 1980s, is guided by historical materialism; the third stage, from the 1980s to the early 21st century, focuses mainly on period-based (dynastic) history; and the fourth stage, from the early 21st century to the present, demonstrates a multidimensional and multi-perspective approach to historiographical research.

2. From the 1930s to the 1960s

At the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by Western academic traditions, the concept of “new historiography” gradually entered China. Music historians, building on the positivist tradition, began to emphasize the relationship between music and the social sciences and humanities, as well as the interpretation of history and the social functions of music.

In 1922, Ye Bohe published *History of Chinese Music*^[1], marking the first modern academic work on Chinese music history and initiating scholarly research into ancient Chinese musical institutions. When discussing the development of music after the Qin and Han dynasties, the author included a section specifically addressing the establishment of the Music Bureau (Yuefu). He wrote that “the Zhou dynasty collected folk songs as musical compositions, which was an excellent practice; however, this tradition had long been discontinued since the Qin dynasty. It was not until the reign of Emperor Wu of Han that the Music Bureau was established and many songs were produced”. He also cited Ma Duanlin’s *Comprehensive Study of Literature* to briefly explain the purpose, functions, and institutional organization of the Music Bureau under Emperor Wu of Han. The bureau was tasked with collecting and compiling folk music from various regions, arranging and adapting compositions, and performing them. However, Ye’s work did not address musical institutions or officials from other dynasties, such as the “Taichang Si” (Court of Imperial Sacrifices), the “Jiaofang” (Imperial Music Academy), or the “Liyuan” (Pear Garden) of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

This indicates that Ye’s understanding of ancient musical institutions was still in its nascent stage and remained largely unconscious and undeveloped as a research focus. His attention was primarily directed toward the development of musical culture, musicians, and musical works rather than institutional structures.

Following the publication of Ye’s work, numerous studies on ancient Chinese music history emerged. Among them, Wang Guangqi’s *History of Chinese Music* (1934)^[2] includes a chapter on “The Organization of Ensembles”, providing brief descriptions of Zhou dynasty musical suspended instruments as recorded in Zhou Li and Chen Yang’s *Yue Shu*, as well as Tang dynasty court music instrumentation described in Du You’s *Tongdian*. However, Wang’s discussions remain largely descriptive and lack systematic analysis.

Other important works include Gu Meigeng’s *History of Chinese Music* (1920)^[3], which focused on the lineage of ritual music and briefly discussed the origins of the Music Bureau, emphasizing its role in music collection without in-depth institutional analysis; Tong Fei’s *Tracing the Origins of Chinese Music* (1926)^[4], which emphasized musical theory alongside institutional aspects; Zheng Jinwen’s *History of Chinese Music* (1929)^[5], which outlined music institutions across dynasties, particularly those of the Tang period; Xu Zhiheng’s *A Brief History of Chinese Music* (1931)^[6], which focused on musical systems and genres while mentioning institutional functions; as well as Song Shouchang’s *Overview of Chinese and Western Music Development* (1936), Yang Yinliu’s *Outline of Chinese Music History* (1943), Kishi Shigeo’s *A Brief History of Chinese Music* (1944), and Liu Boyuan’s *Ancient Chinese Music* (1947). All these works, to varying degrees, touched upon ritual music systems and were indirectly related to the study of musical institutions.

Overall, although research on ancient musical institutions appeared during this period, it remained superficial and lacked systematic theoretical frameworks. It was still in an exploratory stage.

3. From the 1960s to the 1980s

In 1960, Kishi Shigeo’s *Studies on Tang Dynasty Music History: Musical Systems*^[7] was published in two volumes. Based on major historical sources from the Tang dynasty, the author devoted nearly a thousand pages to a detailed examination of Tang musical institutions, including organizational structures, musical officialdom, performers’ roles, and performance systems. This work is considered the first major dynastic study involving musical officials. It primarily discusses institutions such as the Taichang Si, Jiaofang, Liyuan, and other court music departments.

In 1964, Yang Yinliu’s *Draft History of Ancient Chinese Music*^[8] was published in two volumes. This work is regarded as a monumental achievement in 20th-century Chinese music historiography. It systematically explores musical origins, court ritual music systems, folk music forms, and cross-regional cultural exchanges. It also examines the symbolic functions of music in political, religious, and labor contexts, using visual materials such as paintings and sculptures for interpretation. Importantly, it includes comprehensive research on ancient musical officials and institutions, making it the first general history covering musical officials across all dynasties.

Yang’s work provides a detailed analysis of four major Tang musical institutions: the “Grand Music Bureau” , the

“Military Music Bureau”, the Jiaofang, and the Liyuan. He categorizes the first two as government institutions and the latter two as palace institutions, a classification that offers valuable insight into the autonomy and political context of ancient Chinese musical organizations.

In 1975, Zhang Shibin published *An Overview of Chinese Music History*^[9], a systematic historical account organized by dynasties. The book focuses on musical institutions, dedicating a chapter to “Music Systems in the Later Ancient Period”. It traces the evolution of the Music Bureau from its establishment during the Qin dynasty to its expansion under Emperor Wu of Han, emphasizing its core functions: collecting poems, combining music, performing, and organizing musical materials. The work also examines the Qingshang Bureau and the institutional development of the Tang Jiaofang and Liyuan. Although systematic, its arguments are largely based on the collation of historical sources and lack originality.

During this period, research on musical institutions became more conscious and purposeful, with a growing number of monographs and general histories emerging. Many later studies were influenced by the frameworks established by Yang. However, due to historical constraints, the overall volume of research remained limited, and a strong academic atmosphere had not yet formed.

4. From the 1980s to the Early 21st Century

During this stage, the introduction of overseas Sinological scholarship, together with the rise of institutional history and cultural history in China, propelled the study of ancient Chinese music institutions into a phase of comprehensive expansion and interdisciplinary prosperity. In this period, research on music institutions shifted from being a subsidiary of music history to an independent field of inquiry. Diachronic (period-based) studies were carried out in a systematic manner, a large number of specialized monographs emerged, interdisciplinary perspectives began to take shape, and research content became increasingly refined and systematized.

This period witnessed a significant increase in academic output, with deeper research and more self-reflective approaches to musical institutions.

Li Guotao’s *Ancient Music Officials and Ancient Drama*^[10] is a comprehensive study of music officials across dynasties, offering original perspectives, especially on Tang musical institutions. The author argues that the Tang dynasty represents the maturity of the Chinese musical official system, which served as a model for later dynasties.

Sun Xiaohui’s *A Study of the Music Treatises in the Old and New Tang Books*^[11] focuses on the Taichang Si, examining its music structure and administrative mechanisms.

Li Fangyuan’s *A Study of the “Music Treatise” in the History of Song*^[12], analyzes Song dynasty musical institutions from a philological perspective, identifying the Grand Music Bureau as the central institution.

Li Li’s *A Study of Court Music Institutions in the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties*^[13] examines institutions such as the Taiyue Shu, Guchui Shu, Qingshang Shu, and Yuefu, concluding that music development and political systems are interdependent.

Chen Yingshi’s *Two Issues Concerning Zhou Dynasty Music Officials*^[14] reexamines the nature of the “Grand Music Official”, arguing it was a title rather than an institution and correcting previous assumptions.

Following the 1976 excavation of Yuefu bronze bells in Lintong, Shaanxi, scholarly attention to the Music Bureau increased dramatically. Research expanded rapidly, with hundreds of papers published between 1976 and 1990, and many doctoral dissertations focusing on Yuefu. Scholars such as Xu Jiqi and Sun Shangyong conducted in-depth studies on its origins, with some arguing that the institution dates back to the Qin or even earlier periods.

Sun Shangyong’s doctoral dissertation, *A Study of the History of the Yuefu*^[15], focuses on several key issues in the historical development of the Yuefu institution and conducts detailed evidential research on them. These issues include the origin of the Yuefu, the establishment of musical institutions in the early Han dynasty, Emperor Wu of Han’s founding of the Yuefu, and Emperor Ai of Han’s abolition of it. Through systematic analysis, the dissertation outlines the developmental trajectory of the Yuefu in its early stages. At the same time, Sun synthesizes the viewpoints of previous

scholars and, through close examination of historical sources such as the “Yue Jue Shu: Waizhuan Ji—Wu Wang Zhan Meng” and other records, argues that the earliest form of the Yuefu institution can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.

The academic studies on the Yuefu published during this period can generally be divided into five categories. The first view holds that a Yuefu institution already existed during the Qin dynasty and was inherited without major change in the early Han period, only to be expanded and further developed under Emperor Wu of Han. This position is represented by scholars such as Kou Xiaoxin (1978) and Zhao Shengqun (1988). The second view suggests that although the term “Yuefu” existed during the Qin and even the Warring States periods, it originally referred merely to offices responsible for musical instruments, such as bell officials or storage bureaus. According to this perspective, prior to Emperor Wu, the Yuefu primarily managed the production and supervision of instruments, while after his reign it assumed additional responsibilities for court entertainment music. Li Wenchu (1986) represents this view.

The third perspective argues that the Yuefu was first established by Emperor Wu and constituted a new type of musical institution. Unlike the “Taiyue”, which was responsible for ritual and sacrificial music, the Yuefu specialized in non-ritual court performances. This interpretation is exemplified by Ni Qixin (1991). The fourth view maintains that the Yuefu had already been established before Emperor Wu, and that his “establishment” of the Yuefu should be understood as a reorganization and expansion of its functions rather than its initial creation. Scholars such as Wang Yunxi (1998), Zhao Minli (2001), and Sun Shangyong (2002) support this interpretation. The fifth perspective emphasizes that Emperor Wu’s actions not only expanded the institution but also fundamentally transformed its nature, status, and functions. Representatives of this view include Chen Sihai (2004) and Wang Fuli (2006).

The debates surrounding the establishment of the Yuefu have significantly advanced the study of Qin-Han musical institutions, promoting deeper analysis and improving the overall level of research in this field. During this period, scholarly interest in the Yuefu extended to later dynasties, including the Wei-Jin, Sui-Tang, and Song-Yuan periods, making musical institutions a central topic in the study of Chinese music history.

However, it should be noted that many studies tend to treat the institutions and musical officials of each dynasty as a unified whole, without sufficiently considering the historical evolution and transformation of these institutions across different periods. As a result, changes within individual dynasties and the continuity between successive dynasties are often overlooked.

5. From the Early 21st Century to the Present

During this period, research perspectives were further broadened, methodologies became more diverse, and a theoretical framework gradually took shape. The focus of study shifted from court institutions to broader socio-cultural systems, marking a transition from “institutional textual criticism” to “cultural interpretation”. Since the early 21st century research in this field has expanded rapidly with scholars exploring a wide range of topics, including Zhou education systems, Qin-Han Yuefu, Wei-Jin-Northern-Southern dynasties, Sui-Tang, Liao-Song-Jin-Yuan, and Ming-Qing musical institutions.

For example, Li Ruihao’s thesis on Northern Song music education examines the educational functions of institutions such as the Taichang Si and Dasheng Fu. Ren Meng’s study on Han-Wei music institutions analyzes the transformation from collective poetry collection to individual lyrical creation^[16]. Li Jun’s research on Tang court music uses philological and archaeological evidence to trace institutional development^[17]. Zhang Zhao’s work examines music dissemination in the Song dynasty, focusing on different groups of musicians and their roles^[18]. Zuo Hanlin explores the relationship between Tang music systems and literature, demonstrating how musical institutions influenced poetic development^[19].

The diversification of research perspectives and methodologies is a defining feature of this stage. With the introduction of a social-historical perspective, scholars began to pay attention to the identities, family backgrounds, and living conditions of musicians, as well as the interactions between music institutions and folk music. From the perspective

of cultural exchange history, studies have focused on the connections between Tang dynasty music institutions and Huyue, Sogdian musicians, as well as the dissemination and influence of ancient Chinese music institutions across East Asia. A regional-historical approach has moved beyond the confines of central court institutions to examine local and popular organizations, including ritual music institutions at the prefectural and county levels, academy-based music societies, and temple music organizations. Meanwhile, the application of digital technologies has facilitated the construction of historical databases; scholars have employed quantitative analysis and visualization methods to study the evolution of music institutions, thereby enhancing the scientific rigor and systematic nature of research.

In addition, comparative studies have gradually emerged. By comparing ancient music institutions in China with those in East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, scholars have explored pathways of cultural exchange and transmission, promoting the internationalization of research on ancient Chinese music institutions. Research in this stage has not only expanded scholarly perspectives and introduced methodological innovations, but has also established an independent paradigm of Chinese music institutional history that integrates evidential precision with theoretical depth, thereby advancing the comprehensive deepening of the field.

Overall, this period is characterized by interdisciplinary research, incorporating perspectives from communication studies, literature, and education.

6. Conclusion

Over the past century, domestic scholarship on ancient Chinese music institutions has progressed through four stages—initiation, foundation, prosperity, and deepening—yielding abundant research and forming a clear academic trajectory alongside a relatively complete research system. In terms of scholarly development, the field has undergone a transformation from being “subordinate to general histories” to becoming an “independent domain”, gradually establishing a four-stage, progressive path of academic evolution.

From the perspective of content development, research has moved from early descriptive accounts of institutional names and functions to in-depth analyses of operational mechanisms, the “yueji” (musician registration) system, and performance systems, ultimately advancing toward holistic interpretations encompassing state ritual systems, imperial power, social structure, and cultural exchange. The focus of inquiry has continuously deepened and become more nuanced. In terms of methodological evolution, approaches have developed from a singular reliance on textual criticism to a pluralistic system integrating documentary and archaeological evidence, interdisciplinary collaboration, and digital applications, achieving simultaneous enhancement in both empirical rigor and theoretical sophistication. Regarding research scope, the focus has expanded from a “court-centered” perspective to a “society-wide” framework, with objects of study extending from central court music institutions to local and popular musical organizations, thereby forming an integrated research paradigm that encompasses both “elite ritual music” (Yayue) and “vernacular music” (Suyue).

In terms of dynastic distribution, research has been highly concentrated on the Han and Tang dynasties, with studies on the Song dynasty becoming increasingly mature. Research on the Ming and Qing periods, the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the pre-Qin era, and the Liao, Jin, and Yuan periods has gradually been supplemented, forming a continuous chain of institutional music history from antiquity to the Qing dynasty. In terms of scholarly contribution, researchers have clarified the complete genealogical evolution of ancient Chinese music institutions and revealed the deep interconnections between music systems and politics, ritual order, society, and culture. This body of work provides an institutional basis for understanding the core characteristics of Chinese music—namely, the integration of elegance and popular forms and the parallel emphasis on ritual and music—and has ultimately established a distinctive, China-centered paradigm for the study of music institutional history.

Although domestic research on ancient Chinese music institutions has achieved remarkable results, several shortcomings and weak links remain. First, regional studies are uneven: while research on the Central Plains and central court music institutions is relatively comprehensive, studies on frontier regions and the music institutions of ethnic

minorities remain insufficient, and a balanced regional framework has yet to be established. Second, research on folk music institutions is still inadequate. Despite recent expansion in scope, studies of local prefectural and county-level ritual music institutions, folk music societies, and temple-based music organizations lack depth and systematic, specialized outputs. Third, comparative studies remain at an early stage: comparisons between China and other East Asian countries are scattered and lack a coherent analytical framework, making it difficult to reveal the international influence and transmission pathways of ancient Chinese music institutions. Fourth, there is still room for theoretical innovation. Existing research tends to emphasize empirical textual criticism, while offering limited theoretical synthesis of institutional logic and patterns of evolution, and lacks broadly applicable theoretical frameworks. Fifth, there remains untapped potential in source exploration: scattered, excavated, and foreign-language materials have not been fully collected and utilized, and the development and application of digital historical resources require further advancement.

In light of the current research landscape and broader academic trends, future studies on ancient Chinese music institutions may achieve breakthroughs and further development in several directions. First, greater attention should be given to regional and ethnic minority music institutions, with a focus on frontier areas to clarify their developmental trajectories and functional characteristics, thereby improving the overall regional research framework. Second, research on folk music institutions should be deepened through systematic analyses of the operational mechanisms of local ritual music institutions, folk music societies, and temple organizations, as well as their interactions with court institutions, in order to construct an integrated “court–local–folk” research system. Third, comparative studies should be advanced in a more systematic manner by strengthening comparisons between China and East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, exploring pathways of cultural exchange and transmission, and enhancing the international dimension of the field. Fourth, theoretical innovation should be reinforced by building on empirical research to develop more robust theoretical generalizations regarding institutional logic and patterns of evolution, and by constructing broadly applicable analytical frameworks. Fifth, efforts should be intensified in the exploration of historical sources and digital applications: scattered, excavated, and foreign materials should be systematically compiled, historical databases improved, and digital technologies—such as quantitative analysis and visualization—more widely employed to enhance both the scientific rigor and efficiency of research. Finally, deeper interdisciplinary integration should be promoted through collaboration with disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, art studies, and archaeology, thereby expanding research perspectives, enriching content, and advancing the study of ancient Chinese music institutions toward greater depth and broader scope.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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