

READINGS  
IN  
CLASSICAL  
CHINESE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## *Chapter Thirty-Two: A Condemnation of Musical Performances*<sup>78</sup>

Our teacher Mozi says, “The benevolent surely are those who devote themselves to finding ways to promote what is beneficial to the world while eliminating what is harmful; this is why they are proper models for human conduct throughout the world. If something benefits the world then they will do it. If it does not benefit the world then they will stop doing it. Moreover, when the benevolent think about the people of the world, if there is something that attracts their eyes, delights their ears, pleases their palates, and gives comfort to their bodies but this thing can only be gotten by sacrificing the people’s stock of food and clothing, they will not engage in it.”

And so our teacher Mozi does not condemn music because he thinks that the sounds of bells, drums, zithers, and pipes are not pleasing, nor because he thinks that inlaid and carved patterns and designs are not fine, nor because he thinks that roasts of grain- and grass-fed meat are not delicious, nor because he thinks that high towers, lofty halls, and secluded pavilions are not comfortable. Though his body knows the comfort of such places, his mouth the relish of such food, his eye the fineness of such patterns, and his ears the pleasure of such sounds, nevertheless, he sees that it does not accord with the practices of the sage-kings of old and does not promote the benefit of the people in the world today. And so our teacher Mozi says, “Musical performances are wrong!”

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<sup>77</sup>Mozi shows no evidence of doubting the existence of ghosts and spirits, but the more sociological explanation for ritual sacrifice he offers here anticipates Xunzi’s rich and wholly secular defense of ritual. Cf. Xunzi’s “Discourse on Ritual.” See *Xunzi*, chapter 19, pp. 265–71.

<sup>78</sup>Mozi criticizes the elaborate musical performances that were sponsored by many states in early China. These events included complex and expensive orchestras, elaborate dancing, and often were accompanied by lavish feasts. He argues that these waste vast resources of time, material, and effort without producing any tangible results. He is not directly criticizing music per se. On the other hand, he shows no sense that music serves any useful purpose in life. For a meticulous and incisive study of the production, performance, ritual, and beliefs regarding ancient Chinese chime bells, see Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: Chime Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

Our teacher Mozi says, "These days, when kings, dukes, and other persons of high rank engage in the manufacture of musical instruments as a function of state, it is no simple matter like slicing through water or breaking apart a piece of sod. Rather, they must heavily tax the people in order to enjoy the sounds of bells, drums, zithers, and pipes. If the production of these instruments were truly analogous to the sage-kings' production of boats and carts, then I would not dare to condemn it. In ancient times, the sage-kings did indeed heavily tax the people in order to make boats and carts. But once these were completed and the people asked what they could be used for, they were told that the boats could be used for traveling over water while the carts could be used for traveling over land. By using these conveyances, gentlemen could rest their feet while common people could rest their shoulders and backs. And so why did the people give over their resources in order to produce boats and carts without considering it a burden or an imposition? Because they knew they would get something in return that benefitted them. Now if musical instruments produced a similar return that benefitted the people then I would not dare to condemn them.

"However, the present use of musical instruments imposes three hardships upon the people. Because of the expenditures involved in producing such instruments, those who are hungry are unable to get food, those who are cold are unable to obtain clothing, and those who toil are not afforded a chance to rest. These are the three greatest hardships upon the people. But what if we play the great bells, strike up the drums, sound the zithers, blow the pipes, and dance with shields and battle axes? Will this enable the people to procure food or clothing? I believe that such performances will not produce such results. But let us set aside such concerns for the moment. For now great states attack lesser states and great families assault lesser families, the strong rob the weak, the many do violence to the few, the clever deceive the simple, those of noble rank act arrogantly toward those of humble rank, and rebels and bandits flourish and cannot be stopped. But what if we play the great bells, strike up the drums, sound the zithers, blow the pipes, and dance with shields and battle axes? Will this bring order to the chaos that presently reigns in the world? I believe that such performances will not produce such results."

This is why our teacher Mozi says, "If we look to see whether heavily taxing the people to produce the sounds of great bells, drums, zithers, and pipes promotes the benefit of the people of the world and eliminates what is harmful to them, we see that it offers no such help."

This is why our teacher Mozi says, "Musical performances are wrong!"

Our teacher Mozi says, “These days, when kings, dukes, and great men sit up in their raised halls and broad pavilions and look down upon the great bells, the bells look like nothing more than inverted cauldrons. If there is no one to strike the great bells, how could they take delight in them? The bells must be struck in order to be enjoyed. But they cannot employ the very old or the very young to strike the bells. For the ears and eyes of such people are not sharp and clear, their limbs are not nimble and strong, the sounds they produce are not harmonious, and they cannot follow the complicated turns in the score. And so kings, dukes, and great men must employ people in their prime, for their ears and eyes are sharp and clear, their limbs are nimble and strong, the sounds they produce are harmonious, and they can follow the complicated turns in the performance. If they employ men to make music, then these men must abandon their work of ploughing, planting, and cultivation. If they employ women to make music then these women must abandon their work of spinning, weaving, and sewing. These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people.”

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “Musical performances are wrong!”

Our teacher Mozi says, “Now let us suppose that the great bells, drums, zithers, and lutes have all been properly prepared. What pleasure would kings, dukes, and great men find in reverently listening to them all by themselves? Their enjoyment must come from listening to them in the company of common folk or gentlemen. But if they listen in the company of gentlemen, then those gentlemen must neglect the business of governing. And if they listen in the company of common folk, then those folk must abandon their proper work. These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people.”

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “Musical performances are wrong!”

Our teacher Mozi says, “In ancient times, Duke Kang of Qi<sup>79</sup> found excitement and delight in the performance of the Dance of Wan.<sup>80</sup> The performers of the dance were not permitted to wear coarse and simple clothing nor could they eat plain or common food because it was said that, ‘If their food and drink is not fine, their faces and complexion will be unworthy to

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<sup>79</sup>Ruler of the state of Qi. His reign dates are 404–379 B.C.E.

<sup>80</sup>A choreographed performance with musical accompaniment. For a description, see Waley, *The Book of Songs*, pp. 338–40.

look at. If their clothing is not fine, their figures and movements will be unworthy of view.' And so their food had to be only the finest grains and meats and their clothing had to be only embroidered silk. They never worked to produce their own food and clothing but always were supported by the work of others."

This is why our teacher Mozi says, "These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people."

This is why our teacher Mozi says, "Musical performances are wrong!"

Our teacher Mozi says, "Now human beings certainly are different from the various kinds of birds, beasts, and bugs that one can find in the world today. The various birds, beasts, and bugs rely upon their feathers and fur for their clothing, their hoofs and claws for their leggings and shoes, and grass and water for their food and drink. And so even if the males do not plough and cultivate the land and even if the females do not spin and weave, these creatures are still assured of having food and clothing. Human beings differ in this respect. Those who labor upon the land survive, while those who do not perish. If gentlemen do not exert themselves in pursuing their duties at court, then the laws and administration will fall into chaos. If common folk do not exert themselves in carrying out their work, there will not be enough material goods.

"Now if men of rank and gentlemen in the world today believe that what I say is not true, let us try enumerating the allotted tasks that are pursued throughout the world in order to see the harm done by musical performances.

"Kings, dukes, and high officials begin their work at court early in the day and retire late in the evening, listening to litigation and carrying out the administration of government—these are their allotted tasks. Men of rank and gentlemen exhaust the strength of their limbs and exert every ounce of their wisdom attending to their official duties at court and collecting taxes and levies out in the passes, markets, mountains, forests, lakes, and rivers in order to fill the state's granaries and treasuries—these are their allotted tasks. Farmers go out to the fields at dawn and return at dusk, ploughing, planting, cultivating, and reaping great harvests of grain and other produce—these are their allotted tasks. Women rise at dawn and retire in the evening, spinning and weaving to produce hemp, silk, linen, and other types of cloth—these are their allotted tasks.

"Now if those who serve as kings, dukes, and high officials delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not

be able to begin their work at court early in the day and retire late in the evening, listening to litigation and carrying out the administration of government. As a result, the state will fall into chaos and the altar of grain will be in jeopardy. If men of rank and gentlemen delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not be able to exhaust the strength of their limbs and exert every ounce of their wisdom attending to their official duties at court and collecting taxes and levies out in the passes, markets, mountains, forests, lakes, and rivers in order to fill the state's granaries and treasuries. As a result, the granaries and treasuries will not be full. If farmers delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not be able to go out to the fields at dawn and return at dusk, ploughing, planting, cultivating, and reaping great harvests of grain and other produce. As a result, the supply of food will be insufficient. If women delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not be able to rise at dawn and retire in the evening, spinning and weaving to produce hemp, silk, linen, and other types of cloth. As a result, there will not be an adequate supply of cloth. What is the cause of great men abandoning the administration of the government and the common people neglecting their work? It is music!"

This is why our teacher Mozi says, "Musical performances are wrong!"

Our teacher Mozi says, "How do I know that this is so? Among the works of the former kings, there is the following in Tang's *Official Punishments*,<sup>81</sup>

To allow constant dancing in one's hall is called *Shamen's Fancy*. If gentlemen commit this offense they are to be fined two bolts of silk. If it is a commoner, the fine is two hundred measures of yellow thread.<sup>82</sup>

The text goes on to say,

Alas! The dancing goes on and on! The sound of the pipes is loud and clear! The Lord on High no longer supports him. He

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<sup>81</sup>There is no such section in the present *History* but in the chapter called "Instructions of Yin," there is a passage that shares much of the language and general thrust of Mozi's quotation. See Legge, *The Shoo King*, p. 196.

<sup>82</sup>The text of the last line is garbled and the translation is tentative.

will lose the nine realms.<sup>83</sup> The Lord on High no longer accommodates him and will send down a hundred calamities. His family will be ruined and annihilated.

If we look into why he lost the nine realms, we see it is simply because he promoted musical performances. The *Wu Guan*<sup>84</sup> says,

Qi<sup>85</sup> then abandoned himself to lust and music; he drank and ate in the wilds. Qiang! Qiang! The flutes and chimes sounded vigorously! He sank, besotted with wine! He ate gluttonously in the wilds! The Dance of Wan was elegant and fine and its performance was heard in Heaven. But Heaven did not approve.

And so, above, Heaven and the ghosts did not approve and, below, the people were not benefitted.”

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “If men of rank and the gentlemen of the world really want to promote what is beneficial to the world and eliminate what is harmful to it, then they will prohibit and put an end to this thing called music!”