

Cultivating the Child through Li Yue: Aesthetic Education and Music-Drama Integration in Early Childhood

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Abstract: Rooted in Pre-Qin Confucian thought, the traditional concept of Li Yue (ritual and music) provides a unique framework for understanding how emotions are regulated and character is built. Moving beyond historical and political analyses, this study translates these ancient principles into modern preschool practice. Classical texts like the Liji and Yueji show that ritual (li) sets external behavioral boundaries, while music (yue) nurtures internal emotional balance. The study takes this theoretical foundation and applies it to today's kindergartens through integrated music-drama activities. By pairing the structural rules of drama (such as role-play) with the emotional resonance of music, teachers can help young children manage their feelings and develop better character. The results indicate that when put into practice through music and drama, this ancient aesthetic model provides a highly effective, whole-person approach for modern early childhood education and teacher training.

Keywords: Li Yue; Aesthetic education; Emotional regulation; Character cultivation; Music-drama integration; Early childhood education

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1. Introduction

The Zhou people saw an elegant life as one guided by rituals and music. For them, this meant blending rational order with aesthetics and political ethics^[1]. Over time, Confucius and his followers expanded this ritual-music system. It stopped being just a set of ceremonies and became a broad educational philosophy designed to shape harmonious individuals.

Most current research on Li Yue focuses on its macro-level political or ethical impacts. Scholars have rarely asked how ritual and music actually work together at the psychological level to manage emotions and build character. More importantly, there is a clear disconnect between these ancient ideas and modern teaching practices. Today's kindergarten art classes often split music and drama into separate subjects. Even

when they are taught, the focus is usually on learning a specific skill rather than growing emotionally or morally. The authors want to bridge this gap. By looking closely at how external rituals and internal musical experiences interacted in pre-Qin texts, this study aims to bring the wisdom of ancient Chinese aesthetics into modern kindergartens using integrated music-drama activities.

2. The theoretical foundation of Li Yue aesthetic education

2.1. The origin and development of the Li Yue system

While the Western Zhou Dynasty first used Li Yue to keep social order, Confucius (551–479 BCE) turned it into a tool for personal growth. Living in chaotic times, he believed that moral renewal had to start with the individual. He noted that a person guided by Li and perfected by Yue could be considered truly complete^[5]. In his view, the two elements did different but equally important jobs. Li gave people the outward rules for proper behavior, and Yue worked on the inside to calm and harmonize their feelings. This dual approach shifted the focus of education away from strict punishment toward moral and aesthetic influence^[4].

2.2. How Li and Yue work together

Ritual and music form a dialectical pair. On the outside, ritual creates order. It does this through specific behaviors, social boundaries, and symbolic acts. The Liji notes that proper ritual requires a person's demeanor to be "well regulated and urbane"^[6]. These are not just random rules; they are aesthetic guidelines that shape how people interact in society^[3].

Music, on the inside, deals with human consciousness. The Yueji makes this clear: "Music is born from the heart. When the heart is moved by external things, it finds expression in sound"^[7]. This simple statement captures the core of Confucian music aesthetics. Music starts with human emotion. If guided correctly, it can take those raw feelings and refine them for moral purposes.

3. The mechanism of emotional regulation in Li Yue aesthetic education

3.1. Changing raw emotions

At the psychological level, the main job of Li Yue is to take raw, unfiltered emotions (qing) and turn them into refined moral feelings. Pre-Qin thinkers knew that people are born with natural reactions like joy, anger, and sorrow. If no one manages these reactions, society falls into chaos, a point the Yueji explicitly warns about^[7].

Because of this, music education acts as a channel. It guides intense emotions into harmonious expressions. When people listen to or perform refined music, they learn to control their reactions. They reach a state of balanced equilibrium, which Confucians call "the mean" (zhongyong). Traditional Chinese music philosophy relies heavily on this idea, using aesthetic experiences to clean and elevate the mind^[9]. For young children today, this mechanism is incredibly useful. It gives them a way to handle big, overwhelming feelings and build emotional resilience.

3.2. Showing inner harmony through outer ritual

Music calms the inside, but ritual gives that inner calm a way to show itself on the outside. The Liji points out that rituals help clarify social roles and teach people how to treat one another^[6]. Rather than seeing these

forms as strict limits, people should view them as aesthetic experiences that shape how a person feels and senses the world.

When one puts music and ritual together, one gets a complete learning environment. The Yueji puts it beautifully: “Music is the harmony of the universe; ritual is the order of the universe. Harmony brings things together; order distinguishes them” ^[7].

4. Character cultivation and modern application in early childhood

4.1. From the Junzi to the modern child

Growing a junzi was the end goal of Li Yue education. This happens through “aesthetic moral development,” where a person builds character by constantly engaging with beauty and harmony. Confucius said a junzi must be broadly learned in culture but restrained by ritual ^[5]. One cannot separate aesthetic growth from moral discipline.

In today’s preschools, the modern version of the junzi is a well-rounded child. This is a child who has cognitive skills, yes, but also emotional intelligence and a sense of right and wrong. Modern preschool programs often suffer from over-specialization and a lack of emotional depth. The Li Yue model offers a strong alternative to this fragmentation, echoing modern calls to reconnect emotion, art, and education ^[10].

4.2. Bringing Li Yue into kindergarten music-drama

The basic idea of Li Yue—matching outer order (Li) with inner feeling (Yue)—fits perfectly into integrated music-drama activities in kindergartens. Modern music education theory supports this, showing that combining these arts creates a powerful tool for building character ^[2].

In the classroom, drama naturally takes on the role of Li (ritual). When children do dramatic play or act in a musical, they have to step into specific roles. They must follow the story’s structure and obey the rules of the stage. This is exactly what Li does: it sets external order and teaches social propriety. By playing different roles, kids learn how to share, resolve fights, and understand boundaries. The drama gives them a safe, structured space to practice self-control and figure out how to get along with others.

Music, on the other hand, does the work of Yue. The background tracks, rhythmic chants, and songs used during these plays hit the children’s emotional centers directly. Just as the ancient texts say music harmonizes the heart, the music in a drama helps kids manage the strong feelings that come up while acting—like excitement, fear, or frustration. The beat and melody guide them back to a calm state, letting them express complex feelings even if they don’t have the words for them yet.

5. Conclusion

Looking back at the Li Yue aesthetic tradition, a highly intricate system for managing emotions and building character in pre-Qin thought can be seen. Ritual provides the outward rules, and music nurtures the inward harmony. But this is not just history. By translating these ideas into integrated music-drama activities, teachers can build better, more complete learning spaces for young children. In the modern classroom, drama acts as the “ritual” that teaches social behavior, while music provides the “harmony” that regulates feelings. Education today often struggles to develop the whole child. The Li Yue approach reminds people that true learning involves the entire person. Through music and drama, an ancient tradition finds a vibrant new life in

21st-century kindergartens, helping teachers guide the deep work of human cultivation.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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