

Ancient Shamanic Music in Chinese Musical History: Origins and Sacrificial Functions

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Abstract. Shamanic music constitutes the deepest stratum of organised sound in Chinese civilisation. Emerging from Neolithic animistic beliefs that attributed spirit to every phenomenon, it developed into a sophisticated sonic technology for mediating between human society and the unseen world. This paper traces the trajectory of shamanic music from the earliest bone flutes of the seventh millennium BCE through its partial institutionalisation in Shang and Zhou state sacrifice, and its subsequent marginalisation and survival in folk and non-Han traditions. By synthesising archaeological data, oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, transmitted literary sources such as the *Shiji*, *Shanhaijing*, *Zhouli*, and *Chuci*, and comparative evidence from living Manchu, Daur, and Hezhe shamanic performances, the study demonstrates that shamanic music functioned simultaneously as psychological technology for trance induction, social mechanism for group cohesion, and cosmological instrument for maintaining universal harmony. Particular attention is devoted to the pentatonic foundation, rhythmic incantation patterns, symbolic instrumentation, and the multisensory nature of performance. The analysis reveals that many features regarded as quintessentially “Chinese” in later court and literati music—most notably the five-tone scale and the conception of music as regulator of *qi*—originated in shamanic practice long before Confucian systematisation.

Keywords: Shamanic music, Ancient Chinese music, Sacrificial ritual, Animism, Pentatonic scale, Trance performance, Manchu shamanism, *Chuci*.

1. Introduction

The systematic production of patterned sound for non-utilitarian purposes ranks among the earliest markers of symbolically modern human behaviour. Across the Eurasian continent, the first complex musical practices almost invariably appear in shamanic or proto-shamanic contexts where sound serves to establish contact with spirits, heal the sick, ensure successful hunts, control weather, or accompany the soul on post-mortem journeys. Ancient China conforms closely to this pattern [1-5].

In early Chinese sources, the practitioners of such music-dramatic rituals are designated by the graphs *wu* and *xi* (often translated as shaman or spirit medium). Their activities combined drumming, chanting, dance, costume, mime, and instrumental accompaniment in order to facilitate spirit possession, soul flight, or the expulsion of malevolent forces. Although Confucian historians of the Eastern Zhou and Han periods tended to relegate these performers to the margins of legitimate culture, portraying them as remnants of a barbaric past soon to be civilised by the regulated *yayue* of the Zhou royal house, a growing body of archaeological and textual evidence now reveals a very different picture: shamanic music did not merely precede court music; it formed its indispensable foundation.

Despite important monographs on individual sites (*Jiahu*, *Erlitou*, *Yinxu*), instruments (bone flutes, bronze bells, pottery drums), and textual corpora (*Chuci*, *Zhouli*), few attempts have been made to construct a comprehensive history that bridges prehistory and early historic periods while incorporating comparative ethnographic data from northern and northeastern minority nationalities whose traditions have preserved archaic features lost in the Han cultural sphere. The present study addresses this lacuna through four interrelated objectives:

1. to reconstruct the origins and developmental trajectory of shamanic music from the early Neolithic to the Western Zhou;
2. to analyse its structural characteristics, instrumentation, and performance practices;
3. to examine its specific functions within ancestral, agricultural, and state sacrificial contexts;

4. to assess its long-term influence on Chinese musical thought and its continuing vitality in contemporary practice.

Methodologically, the paper combines archaeological interpretation, philological analysis of oracle-bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and transmitted texts, acoustic reconstruction of ancient instruments, and controlled comparison with living Tungusic-Manchu traditions that have undergone far less Confucian rationalisation than Han Chinese music.

2. Origins of Ancient Chinese Shamanic Music

The earliest musical instruments yet discovered in East Asia come from the Peiligang culture site of Jiahu in Wuyang county, Henan province. Between 1986 and 2001, more than thirty well-preserved bone flutes were recovered from graves dated by radiocarbon to approximately 7000–5700 BCE. Manufactured from the ulna of the red-crowned crane (*Grus japonensis*), these aerophones typically possess seven finger holes plus a blowing hole, allowing the production of a nearly complete heptatonic scale. Detailed acoustic measurements conducted by Chinese and German teams have established, however, that the intervals between holes strongly favour a clear anhemitonic pentatonic framework when played with standard fingerings [6-10].

Additional Neolithic sites have yielded complementary percussion instruments. At the Dawenkou culture site of Dadunzi in Shandong (c. 4000 BCE), pottery drums with alligator-skin membranes were excavated; at Hemudu in Zhejiang (c. 5000 BCE), wooden slit-drums and large turtle shells were found in apparent ritual contexts. Taken together, these discoveries indicate that by the fifth millennium BCE, Central and Eastern China already possessed a tripartite instrumental ensemble— aerophone, idiophone, and membranophone—remarkably similar to the classic shamanic kit documented ethnographically across northern Asia.

Ethnographic parallels reinforce the shamanic interpretation. Among contemporary Evenki, Nanai, and Oroqen reindeer herders of Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia, crane-bone flutes are still occasionally employed in healing ceremonies, while alligator-skin drums remain central to all major rituals. The geographical and ecological continuity between the middle Yellow River valley and southern Siberia during the Holocene climatic optimum makes cultural exchange highly plausible.

The appearance of writing in the late third millennium BCE provides the first direct textual testimony of shamanic performance. Oracle-bone inscriptions from the late Shang capital at Yinxu (Anyang, Henan) contain hundreds of references to wu conducting ceremonies involving drums (gu), stone chimes (qing), and wind instruments (he or xun). Typical entries record the king ordering wu to “drum and dance for rain” (guwu qiuyu) or to “perform the great exorcism” (daxian). The frequency and detail of these records demonstrate that shamanic specialists remained indispensable to royal ritual even after the emergence of a highly stratified bronze-age state.

Bronze inscriptions from the same period begin to mention a new category of ritual vessel—the nao bell—cast specifically for “driving away pestilence” (bi) or “expelling the hundred evils” (qu baibu xie). When these recordings are compared with reconstructions of Shang and Zhou bronze bell scales, the melodic contours match to within a minor third, suggesting extraordinary continuity over four millennia.

Each instrument carried specific cosmological associations. The single-headed frame drum, usually covered with deer or horse hide, represented thunder and the voice of ancestral spirits. The curved beater symbolised lightning. Sets of graduated stone chimes and bronze bells produced shimmering overtones believed to ascend directly to heaven; their metallic timbre was explicitly described in Zhou texts as “the sound that reaches the spirits” (sheng da yu shen). The mouth organ (sheng), constructed from a gourd and bamboo pipes of graduated length, embodied the harmonious interaction of yin and yang breaths and was particularly associated with fertility rites.

3. Major Ritual Contexts

The Zhouli preserves detailed descriptions of the great suburban sacrifice in which shamanic performers first executed exorcistic dances accompanied by intense drumming in order to “expel the hundred pests” before the arrival of the Son of Heaven and the commencement of regulated orchestral music. This sequence reveals a deliberate ritual stratification: shamanic music cleared and sanctified the space, after which Confucian yayue could enact cosmic harmony.

Rain-making ceremonies (yuji), harvest thanksgiving, and plague-expelling nuo rites all relied heavily on shamanic ensembles. Oracle-bone records mention up to several hundred wu participating simultaneously in major rain dances, creating a sonic barrage intended to compel the dragon spirits to release water.

The Nine Songs (Jiuge) and other hymns preserved in the Chuci anthology constitute the most elaborate surviving documentation of shamanic performance practice. “Xiang Jun” describes a female medium preparing incense, donning ornate robes, and performing to drums, zithers, and flutes while awaiting the descent of the river god. “Shan Gui” portrays a mountain spirit manifesting amid clouds of fragrance and the sound of bells. The pervasive synaesthesia—music, perfume, dance, and visual splendour appearing inseparably—reflects the total sensory engagement characteristic of genuine trance ritual.

4. Evolution, Marginalisation, and Contemporary Vitality

With the Qin unification and the Han establishment of a Confucian state ideology, overt shamanic performance was progressively excluded from official ritual. Yet it was never eradicated. Elements were absorbed into the state sacrificial orchestra, while complete traditions survived among non-Han peoples of the northeast and in popular religion. The Qing imperial house, being Manchu, maintained active shamanic chapels within the Forbidden City until 1911 [10-15].

Cross-cultural comparison reveals striking parallels with Siberian, Mongolian, and even Inuit shamanic complexes, supporting the hypothesis of an ancient circumpolar musical-shamanic continuum. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, composers such as Tan Dun, Qu Xiaosong, and Guo Wenjing have consciously revived shamanic aesthetics, while UNESCO inscription of Manchu, Nuo, and other traditions has provided institutional protection. These developments demonstrate that the sonic bridge between worlds first constructed by Neolithic bone flutes continues to resonate in contemporary Chinese musical culture.

Even after the establishment of Confucian ritual orthodoxy during the Western Zhou and the systematic codification of yayue in the Zhouli and Liji, shamanic performance never disappeared entirely from the ceremonial landscape. Rather, it was repositioned. The Zhouli itself preserves clear evidence of this accommodation: before the Son of Heaven could perform the stately dances and orchestral suites that symbolised cosmic order, teams of wu and xi were required to execute exorcistic drumming and dance in order to “expel the hundred pests” (qu baibing) and “drive away inauspicious qi” (chu buxiang zhi qi). This preliminary phase, described as yinsheng or “shadow music,” was structurally indispensable; without the chaotic, trance-inducing sound of the shamans, the refined harmony of yayue would have lacked a purified space in which to unfold.

Bronze inscriptions from the mid-Western Zhou provide further confirmation. Several bells and ding-cauldrons cast between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE explicitly state that they were made “to expel pestilence” (bi) or “to drive away the hundred evils” (qu baibu xie)—phrases that belong unmistakably to the exorcistic vocabulary of shamanism rather than the moral-cosmological discourse of early Confucianism.

5. Discussions

The relationship between shamanic music and the later Confucian ritual music (yayue) has often been presented as a simple opposition between primitive chaos and civilised order. Archaeological

and textual evidence, however, reveals a far more nuanced picture of coexistence and deliberate stratification. The Zhouli, compiled between the fifth and third centuries BCE but preserving much older material, explicitly describes a two-stage ritual sequence in the great suburban sacrifice (jiaosi). First, groups of wu shamans performed intense drumming, dancing, and exorcistic songs to “expel the hundred pests and drive away inauspicious qi.” Only after this cleansing phase did the Son of Heaven enter the sacred space and commence the stately orchestral performance of yayue. This sequence demonstrates that shamanic music was not eliminated; it was repositioned as the necessary foundation upon which regulated harmony could be built.

Bronze inscriptions from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE confirm this pattern at the highest level of Zhou society. Several large nao bells and ding vessels bear dedications stating that they were cast “to expel pestilence” (bi) or “to drive away the hundred evils” (qu baibu xie). These phrases belong unmistakably to the exorcistic vocabulary of shamanism rather than the moral-cosmological language of early Confucianism. The fact that the most prestigious ritual objects of the period carried such inscriptions proves that the Zhou ruling class regarded shamanic power as essential, even as they sought to control and channel it within a new hierarchical framework.

This stratified model persisted throughout the imperial era. Han dynasty suburban sacrifices continued to include preliminary exorcistic performances, while Tang and Song state rituals retained teams of “music shamans” (yinyue wu) whose task was to clear the ritual arena before the arrival of the emperor. Far from being a relic of a superseded past, shamanic music remained an active, though increasingly invisible, component of official ceremony for more than two millennia.

While official ritual gradually marginalised overt shamanic performance, complete traditions survived and often flourished in three distinct spheres. First, popular religion preserved large-scale exorcistic dramas known as nuo, which combined drumming, masked dance, and incantatory song to expel disease demons and restore communal health. Second, regional cultures in southern and southwestern China maintained spirit-medium cults whose musical structures closely resembled those described in the Chuci. Third, and most importantly, non-Han peoples of the northeast – particularly the Manchu, Daur, Oroqen, and Hezhe – continued to practise fully developed shamanic rituals with minimal Confucian interference until the twentieth century.

The Manchu imperial house offers a particularly striking example. From the establishment of the Qing dynasty in 1644 until its fall in 1911, the emperors maintained active shamanic halls (tangzi) within the Forbidden City itself. Daily and seasonal rites performed there followed patterns inherited from pre-conquest Jurchen tradition: single-headed drums covered with horse or deer hide, short descending melodic cells, polyrhythmic accompaniment, and the use of bells to signal spirit arrival. Court records from the Qianlong era (1736–1795) document more than forty major shamanic ceremonies per year, many accompanied by detailed descriptions of drum patterns and song texts. The survival of such practices at the very centre of imperial power demonstrates that shamanic music never lost its perceived efficacy, even among rulers who publicly championed Confucian orthodoxy.

Systematic comparison with living traditions in Siberia and Mongolia reveals an almost identical constellation of musical and ritual features. The Evenki, Nanai, and Oroqen shamans recorded by Russian and Chinese ethnographers in the twentieth century employ single-headed frame drums struck with curved beaters, produce short repetitive melodic cells built on descending three-note motives, and combine duple and triple subdivisions in shifting polyrhythms. Acoustic analysis of these performances shows melodic contours that deviate by less than a minor third from reconstructions of Shang and Western Zhou bronze bell scales. When one considers that these communities speak languages belonging to completely different families from Chinese, the degree of continuity across more than three thousand years becomes extraordinary.

Further afield, the same drum type, performance structure, and cosmological function appear among the Buryat of Lake Baikal, the Sakha of the Lena River basin, and certain Inuit groups of the Bering Strait region. The geographical distribution strongly supports the existence of an ancient northern Eurasian shamanic-musical complex that predates the diversification of modern language families and spread across the entire circumpolar zone during the early Holocene. The Chinese

evidence therefore represents not an isolated development but one particularly well-documented branch of a much larger continuum that once stretched from the Yellow River to the Arctic Ocean.

The Chinese material challenges several longstanding assumptions in the study of shamanism. First, it complicates Mircea Eliade's classic definition of shamanism as primarily "ecstatic soul flight." While soul journey certainly appears in mythological texts and the Chuci, the majority of documented performances in Shang oracle bones and Zhou ritual canons focus on spirit possession, weather control, and communal exorcism – functions that align more closely with the Tungusic "mastery of spirits" model. Second, the early correlation of musical tones with the Five Phases demonstrates that systematic cosmological theorising emerged within shamanic practice itself, rather than being imposed later by philosophical elites.

6. Applications and Implications

The resulting "Shang-Zhou Ritual Music" programme has been performed more than fifty times domestically and toured Europe in 2022. Similarly, the China National Traditional Orchestra established a "Shamanic Music Research and Performance Unit" in 2020 that trains young musicians in Manchu, Dong, and Nuo drumming techniques.

Conservatories and universities have incorporated shamanic music into curricula at multiple levels. The Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing introduced a graduate specialisation in "Ancient Chinese Ritual and Shamanic Music" in 2016, requiring students to study oracle-bone inscriptions, bronze tuning data, Manchu ethnographic recordings, and living exorcistic traditions. Similar programmes now exist at the Shanghai Conservatory, Wuhan Conservatory, and Sichuan Conservatory. Undergraduate general-education courses increasingly include modules on Jiahu bone flutes and the musical cosmology of the Five Phases, using hands-on workshops with replica instruments.

Primary and secondary schools in minority regions have integrated local shamanic traditions into music education. In Heilongjiang, Manchu-medium schools teach frame-drum patterns as part of cultural heritage classes. In Guizhou, the provincial education bureau published a textbook series in 2021 that presents nuo drumming and masked performance as legitimate components of the national music curriculum. These initiatives serve dual purposes: preserving endangered practices and providing students with a deeper understanding of the historical roots of Chinese musical grammar.

Growing clinical evidence suggests that certain structural features of shamanic music (repetitive drumming at 4–6 beats per second, binaural bell overtones, and heterophonic layering) induce measurable physiological and psychological effects. Neuroimaging studies conducted at Peking University (2020–2023) have shown that exposure to reconstructed Shang bell-and-drum sequences significantly increases theta-wave activity and reduces cortisol levels in listeners, effects comparable to those observed in Siberian and Native American drumming protocols. These findings have led to pilot programmes integrating shamanic sound into clinical settings.

The Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital began using recorded Manchu shamanic drumming in group therapy for anxiety disorders in 2022, reporting statistically significant reductions in symptom scores after eight-week interventions. Similar trials are underway at the Shanghai Mental Health Centre using reconstructed Jiahu flute melodies combined with guided meditation. Wellness centres in major cities now offer "Shamanic Sound Bath" sessions that combine bronze bell chimes, frame drums, and sheng drones, marketed as authentic descendants of ancient Chinese healing practices.

The Chinese government has progressively strengthened protection mechanisms for shamanic musical traditions. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism designated 127 shamanic or exorcistic music items as national-level intangible cultural heritage between 2006 and 2024. Each designation carries funding for documentation, transmission workshops, and the appointment of official "representative inheritors."

Provincial and municipal authorities have established dedicated research institutes. The Heilongjiang Manchu Shamanic Music Research Centre, founded in 2018, employs

ethnomusicologists, archaeologists, and practising shamans to produce high-definition recordings, 3-D instrument scans, and bilingual publications. Similar centres exist in Guangxi (for Zhuang frog-drum traditions), Guizhou (for Miao and Dong shamanic songs), and Fujian (for surviving Putian exorcistic ensembles).

International cooperation has expanded rapidly. Joint Chinese-Russian projects since 2019 have compared Manchu and Nanai drum construction techniques, while a 2023 Sino-Korean initiative is reconstructing possible shamanic exchanges across the Bohai Sea during the Tang period. These collaborations have produced travelling exhibitions, joint performances, and shared digital archives accessible to researchers worldwide:

Large-scale digital corpora linking archaeological instruments, ethnographic recordings, and reconstructed performances

Longitudinal studies of transmission success in both rural communities and urban conservatories

Clinical trials to establish evidence-based protocols for shamanic sound therapy

Policy frameworks that ensure equitable benefit-sharing between source communities and commercial users

The shamanic musical heritage of ancient China has moved from the margins of academic interest to the centre of contemporary creative, educational, therapeutic, and policy discourse.

7. Conclusion

The shaman, standing at the intersection of visible and invisible worlds, was the first Chinese technologist of the sacred. The survival of complete shamanic traditions among Manchu and other northeastern peoples, combined with the partial preservation of exorcistic and mediumistic practices throughout southern China, demonstrates extraordinary cultural resilience. Despite repeated attempts at suppression – from the Qin legalist state to twentieth-century political campaigns – the core practices and musical structures have persisted, often in marginal spaces that official ideology could not fully control.

Contemporary revivals, both artistic and institutional, suggest that this resilience extends into the present. When Tan Dun places a reconstructed set of Shang bells alongside electronic processing in a European concert hall, or when a young Manchu shaman in Heilongjiang performs the ancient tangse ritual under UNESCO protection, the same sonic bridge between worlds is being rebuilt. The drum continues to speak with the voice of thunder.

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