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In third century BCE texts such as the *Xunzi* and *Lüshi chunqiu*, authors present a complicated relationship between music and the ruler’s moral and physiological conditions, as well as between music and the state of the cosmos. Music begins to garner even more power not just as a vehicle for or indication of a ruler’s capabilities or moral cultivation, but as an actual agent in and of itself for social change ... only later, in late Western Han and Eastern Han texts, was such a trope elaborated into a “fully fledged history of ancient music, where each title is assigned to a sage from the past, beginning with the Yellow Emperor and ending with Zhou Gong” (pp. 33, 54; italics ours).

According to Brindley, music was “codified” or “canonized” during Zhan-guo (sometimes specified as circa 300 BC), but that assumption relies on
her (mis)translation of the ‘Shun dian,’ where she writes, “Kui, I command you to codify the music ….”

Brindley’s hypothesis seems ill-supported, on several counts: (1) Brindley dates few of the relevant texts on music, seldom tracing cited passages to specific rhetorical contexts meeting particular needs at particular times and places, with the result that her case about changes over time is impossible to prove; (2) Brindley forgets that we have now but a fraction of the number of texts that once existed, which means any dating scheme, even a more carefully laid out scheme, is liable to challenge as but an anachronistic sketch; (3) Brindley’s key terms, including “music,” “codification” or “canonization,” and “cosmos” itself, have blurry boundaries amenable to multiple constructions.

The reader’s confidence further slips when a range of translations are offered for graph le 楽 (“pleasure,” “joy,” and even “happiness”) and when Brindley merges “psychological unity” and “harmony” and (with the latter term in the past, as in today’s world, usually indicating conformity with the expressed will of the powers-that-be within the sociopolitical hierarchy).

As Patricia Crone’s Pre-Industrial Societies indicates, the current tendency to ascribe to early rulers the strong desire to achieve “unity” and/or uniformity among and within disparate social groups is an unfortunate retrojection onto the distant past by those more familiar with the claims of the modern nation-state. Once we realize that, far more intriguing questions loom: “What, then, did they mean to convey when they spoke of ‘oneness’?” and “What methods of governance did they claim would promote the kind of unity they sought?”

Certainly, the comparatively primitive forms of transportation and communication available in the early empires would have made aspirations to totalitarian dictatorship completely ludicrous.

Hence, presumably, the careful arguments for orthopraxy made

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244 The line means instead, “Kui, I appoint you Music Master ….” The chapter is not called the ‘Shun dian’ until the fourth century AD, when the pseudo-Kong version split the ‘Yao dian’ into two parts.

245 Oddly enough, Brindley often provides her literary evidence in non-chronological order.

246 In one example, Brindley argues for the priority of music when the number twelve occurs in connection in the Shangshu dazhuan (almost certainly misdated by her), whereas twelve more probably refers to the twelve months of the lunar year. On that shaky foundation Brindley speculates about “matching up the correct geographic regions of the world with the correct musical styles, and making sure that everything corresponds to the intrinsic sonorities and patterns of the larger cosmos.” (p. 59)

247 Nylan confesses that this question occurred to her quite belatedly, after reading broadly in many sources that proclaim their intention to promote unity and allegiance to unified rule.

for the members of the governing elite alone in the writings by one of Brindley’s favorite thinkers, Xunzi (also known as Xunzi) (?335-?238 BC). In a major corollary, Brindley then posits a “clear, causal relationship between musical style, content, form, and rhythm on the one hand, and bodily and state health on the other,” despite the clear distinction between the unambiguous notions of cause-and-effect and early resonance theories (which receive several mentions in passing in the book, always without explication). Daryn Lehoux’s brilliant book on early Roman cosmology suggests just how much scholars miss when they conflate those two explanatory models.

A lack of clarity as to the book’s purpose compounds the aforementioned weaknesses of the volume. Brindley states that two main contributions of the book, when compared to previous volumes on early Chinese music, are (a) the book’s focus on the “single theme” of “music and cosmology” (p. 9); and (b) its historical perspective (p. 10). She describes her approach to the “single theme” of “music and cosmology,” in her summary of the book’s aims (p. 7), as addressing the questions of how “music served religious views on nature and the human body;” how music was useful to early imperial regimes “that wished to demonstrate their access to and control of natural phenomena;” and how “discourses on music often delineated a psychology and spoke to medical concerns, since bodily systems were also linked to a harmonious cosmos.” These three aspects of “music and cosmology” are too broad to support Brindley’s claim (p. 9) to provide a “focused account” on “specific issues.” Then, too, it remains unclear what the author means by “religious,” “spiritual,” or “supernatural” views in the context of pre- and early-imperial China, or how the terms “nature” or “natural phenomena” as used here relate to the term “cosmos” that Brindley adopts throughout her book but fails to define (see below).

Moreover, Brindley leaves the reader uncertain as to whose “religious views,” “psychology,” and “medical concerns” are her subject of inquiry. In some places she specifies that “intellectuals” are her focus (Prologue, p. x), even if that term does not suit her narrative particularly well. In other passages, however, her phrasing suggests that her analysis may be applied to the general population at large. Page xi of the Prologue, for example, talks of using the book to “gain a glimpse of the changing roles and status

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250 In the nineteenth century, the term described “socially alienated, theologically literate, anti-establishment lay intelligentsia,” exiles from court with independent means—hardly a good description for most thinkers of early China, who were continually angling for court positions, if they did not already have one. See, e.g., Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (New York: Doubleday/Random House, 2006), p. 53.
of music,” without specifying whose perception or how one is to measure the “changing roles and status” under discussion. Similarly page 1 of the Introduction states, “This book will examine music primarily in relationship to one main aspect of life: the spiritual world, which was understood in ancient China in terms of the cosmos around us.” But understood by whom in ancient China, we would ask? And are we in ancient or in early China? Meanwhile, page 10 of the ‘Introduction’ presents the book as asking “not just what music and musical performance meant to people in society” [italics ours].

Later chapters evince no greater clarity with respect to whose views on music (or, in some cases, sound) the book purports to analyze. In Chapter 3, for example, the book states, “sound in and of itself … is capable of giving humans efficacious access to and communion with the idealized workings of the cosmos” (p. 77), without specifying what segments of the population were likely to be familiar with, let alone affected by such an idea. Even in the conclusion—where the general reader expects either to see loose ends neatly resolved or explicitly raised as outstanding questions awaiting resolution—there are ambiguous statements such as, “The role of music in the culture of early China was closely linked not just to the aesthetic appreciation of an art form; it entered the realm of the spiritual as well” (p. 159). The phrase “the culture of early China” implies that Brindley is drawing conclusions about Chinese culture in general, at least for the time period the book covers, despite diverse geographical regions and wide divergences in the ways of life most characteristic of those of different social status.

As noted earlier, Brindley’s book would have benefited significantly by greater attention to the probable circumstances prompting the composition of the texts she adduces as evidence, as well as the possible reasons for their production and survival down to the present. Should the textual excerpts be taken at face value, as unproblematic expressions of the beliefs of their writers, or could they have been written for specific, politically or economically expedient purposes? Are there reasons to believe that the excerpts she quotes represent a fair sampling of the texts of the period or reflect a narrow segment of the population? Do the circumstances of authorship and reception suggest that the views of the author(s) put forward have had a significant influence for long periods of time or were the issues discussed of merely fleeting interest? How many of those texts were fashioned in response to court calls to reform current policies? A transparent discussion of such questions might have helped readers understand whether the views about music expressed in the texts Brindley cites may have enjoyed currency only for a small number of people, and thus they are of limited use in determining the dominant “culture of early China” or what Brindley refers to as “the world of early music” (“Introduc-
tion,’ p. 3). Pushing matters further, one may ask what types of music the authors of these texts might have played or listened to in their domestic circles, in contrast to what their writings judged to be suitable music.

As noted above, Brindley’s sloppy use of key terms detracts from her analysis. For example, the word “cosmos” has no direct equivalent in Chinese, but Brindley never explains how she is using the term. The first time the term is mentioned is in the Prologue (p. x): “For many authors in early China, music came to occupy a position of extreme importance in relationship not just to individuals and society, but to the larger cosmos as well,” and, then, further down the page, “Some authors even went beyond figurative associations to assert a primary, functional connection between harmonious music and the inherently balanced patterns or operations of nature and the cosmos.” When read together, these two sentences appear to say that the cosmos refers to something that does not include either society or nature. On page 3, quoting Nathan Sivin, she suggests that the cosmos is an “orderly and harmonious” universe, but if “cosmos” means something like “universe,” it is hard to see how music can have any special relationship to it. In comparing the early Chinese with the ancient Greeks, she evidently equates the cosmos with the visible planets (p. 4). And in her first translation of a passage related to the concept of the cosmos (p. 15), she uses the terms “cosmos” and “Heaven” interchangeably, only to take “cosmos” to mean “the various processes of life and nature” a scant two pages later. The ensuing confusion is profound, and ambiguous terms such as “cosmically balanced” (p. 42), “cosmic psychology” (p. 112), and “cosmic psyche” (p. 116) only add to the puzzle.

Musicologists and sinologues, not to mention curious general readers, will understand that if Brindley had really wanted to discuss “the culture of early China” or the “world of early music,” she would have been eager to introduce a great deal more recent archaeological evidence. She would also have deliberated long and hard about the ideas that court advisors, actual or aspiring, would have tended to express in the sorts of texts that managed to survive long centuries of censorship and catastrophic loss, in possible contrast to the ideas that informed their daily lives. How often do musical instruments appear in elite tombs during Zhanguo through Eastern Han? What role did whistling play in the biographies of heroic figures in Zhanguo through Six Dynasties texts? When do we hear of people dancing and singing within their family circles? How did the grand court entertainments employing music and mime affect home performances for

251 Unfortunately, Brindley fails to observe the crucial distinction between “scientifically excavated” and “market/discovered” (faxian) manuscripts, as with the Shanghai Museum (aka Shangbo) text called “Heng Xian” 恆先 (p. 66). This distinction most archaeologists studying other antique cultures consider to be fundamental.
high-ranking members of the court, if at all? Put another way, the music Mozi condemns is surely not the same music that is on Ji Kang’s mind, when Ji recalls, on the eve of his execution, his proud refusal to teach an admired song to one of his peers. And Xunzi’s pert comments on “dazzlingly seductive appearances” more likely refer to troupes of female entertainers than to music per se. After all, what binds these disparate types of pleasure invoked by the single rubric? Likewise, how does the appearance of he in binomial expressions such as he jing 和敬, he qin 和親, and he shun 和順 shade the single character’s meanings (see p. 139)? As noted earlier, a more thoughtful treatment might have highlighted the disjunctions between potentially warring discourses, rather than presuming a single phenomenon seamlessly integrated and at play in heaven and on earth. It’s even possible that the term qin 琴 refers to a class of instruments, rather than a specific instrument, during the time period covered by Brindley, as she may or may not be aware.

Sadly, this book seems hastily produced, and occasionally a patchwork of earlier scholarship, especially when it comes to describing what’s “excessive” or “depraved” (pp. 133-136). Brindley’s essays in Toung pao and in The Journal of Chinese Religion are relatively focused. Better not rely on this set of summaries. Erica Brindley has done path-breaking work in the past, and she will likely do it again. But this particular effort seems less than inspired; hence our joint disappointment.