Music Exchange between China and other Asian countries from the 7th to the 9th centuries: Eastern music cultural identity constructed by music gifting

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Abstract

Music gifting among Asian states (7th–9th centuries) was a key diplomatic practice. This study argues that such exchanges transcended mere cultural transfer, serving as strategic tools for political alliance and identity formation. Through analysis of historical records, it reveals how music gifting forged a shared Eastern musical-cultural identity, cementing a cohesive high-cultural sphere across medieval Asia beyond mere entertainment or ritual.

Keywords: Music Gifting, Cultural Identity, East Asian Music Exchange, Tang Dynasty Music

Introduction

The 7th to 9th centuries in Asia were defined by a multi-polar power structure. Major empires—including the *Tang* in the east, the *Abbasid Caliphate* in the west, the *Tibetan Empire* in the center, and the *Uyghur Khaganate* in the north—coexisted and interacted through both competition and cooperation. This era was marked by significant military contests, such as the Battle of Talas, and vibrant economic and cultural exchanges along overland and maritime Silk Roads. The growth of maritime powers like *Srivijaya* in Southeast Asia highlighted the increasing importance of sea trade networks, which began to shape a new economic and political landscape for the region.

Such a political climate directly spurred the flourishing practice of music gifting and endowed it with multifaceted significance. During this period, the act of presenting music as a gift between nations was not merely a form of artistic exchange; it carried rich implications in political diplomacy, military strategy, geographical relations, as well as cultural dissemination and identity.

Music was utilized as a diplomatic instrument while simultaneously being invested with broader ritual and ceremonial functions. The official bestowal and reception of music played a role in shaping a shared East Asian musical and cultural identity, thereby contributing to the formation of a broader East Asian cultural sphere. It should be clarified that, due to limitations in historical sources, the phenomenon of music gifting discussed in this paper primarily refers to musical exchanges between China and other Asian countries from the 7th to the 9th century. As a result, there remains considerable potential for further exploration regarding music gifting practices in ancient Asia.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of music gifting, a pivotal form of cultural diplomacy in ancient Asia, has garnered scholarly attention yet remains peripheral in mainstream musicological discourse. Existing research is predominantly empirical, focusing on isolated case studies of specific events, such as the gift of *Ni shang Yu yi Qu* (Yang, 1962) or *the music of the Pyu Kingdom* (Qin, 1989) to the *Tang* court. While valuable, this fragmented approach has left numerous music gifting events underexplored and failed to generate a comprehensive theoretical framework.

A bibliometric analysis of Chinese academic databases (CNKI) reveals the scope and limitations of current research. A thematic search for "music gifting" yields a modest corpus of approximately 39 journal articles and 14 theses. Broader searches for major related events, such as the *Nanzhao* Fengsheng Yue (32 articles, 3 theses), the Piao Guo Yue (25 articles, 6 theses), and the Nishang Yuyi Qu (68 articles, 3 theses), identify a larger body of 159 relevant publications. Trend analysis (see Figure 1) indicates that research, while intermittent since 1962, has gained slight momentum since 2009, peaking in 2018. This confirms a sustained but niche interest in the topic.

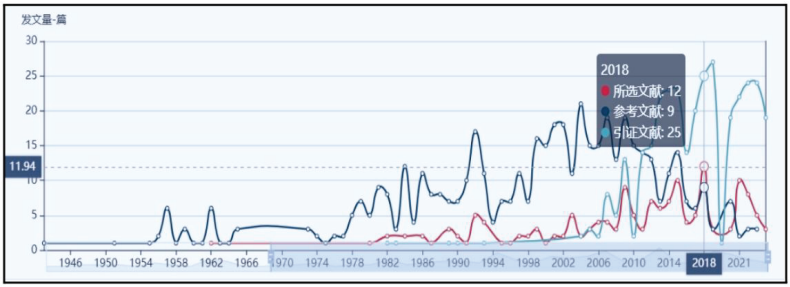

Figure 1: Research Publication Trend
Source: Generated by CNKI Visualization Analysis

The field is highly interdisciplinary, spanning musicology (65.4%), ancient Chinese history, and literature. A citation network analysis (see Figure 2) further shows that research relies heavily on canonical historical texts, such as Ouyang and Song (1975) and Wang (1955), and foundational works, including Kishibe (1973) and Hayashi, (2013). This underscores a methodological reliance on historical philology and textual criticism. Crucially, the most cited case studies are overwhelmingly conce trated in the *Tang* Dynasty (7th–9th centuries), highlighting its centrality as the peak period for music gifting and the ideal focus for this study.

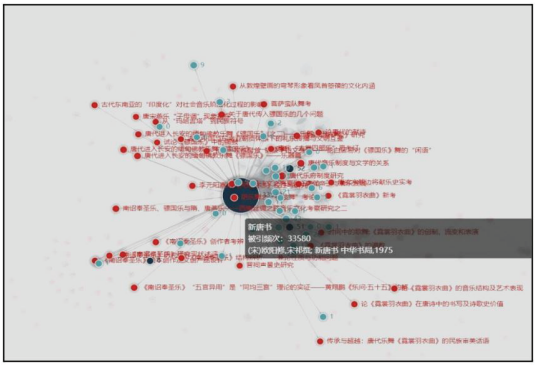

Figure 2: Citation Network Diagram
Source: Generated by CNKI Visualization Analysis

In summary, while prior scholarship provides essential empirical groundwork, it lacks a macro-level synthesis. This study addresses this gap by conducting a holistic analysis of music gifting in 7th–9th century Asia, arguing that it was a strategic political tool instrumental in constructing a shared Eastern cultural identity, moving beyond the prevailing narrative of isolated cultural exchange.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-faceted methodological approach to analyze the phenomenon of music gifting holistically, moving beyond singular case studies.

Historical Philology

The primary evidence is drawn from a critical analysis of Chinese historical texts from the 7th to 9th centuries. Key sources include official dynastic histories such as *Old Book of Tang* (Liu, 1975), *New Book of Tang* (Ouyang & Song, 1975), *Tang Huiyao* (Institutional History of *Tang*) (Wang, 1955),

and *Cefu Yuangui* (Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau) (Wang, 2006). These texts are scrutinized to extract records of music gifting events, including the participants, the musical items gifted, and the documented diplomatic context.

Case Study Analysis

To provide depth and nuance, this research conducted a focused analysis of two seminal music gifting events that exemplify tributary relations with the *Tang* Empire: the presentation of *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* from the *Nanzhao* Kingdom and the gift of *Piao Guo Yue* from the Pyu Kingdom. These cases were selected for their rich documentation and their value in illustrating the diverse geopolitical and cultural motivations behind music gifting.

Result

This paper draws upon classical Chinese documents as its historical source base. To date, I have identified twenty historical records concerning musical gift-giving during this period, from sources including the *New Book of Tang, the Old Book of Tang,* the *Cefu Yuangui,* the *Yuefu Shiji,* as well as various informal notes, such as the *Duyang Zabian* (Ding, 2000), *Chaoye Qianzai* (Zhang, 1979), *Nanbu Xinshu* (Qian, 1958), and *Youxian Guchui* (Ding, 2000).

The earliest recorded instance of musical gift-giving from this period discovered so far is found in New Book of Tang (Ouyang & Song, 1975), Volume 220: "In the fifth year of the Zhenguan era [631 CE], (Silla) presented two female musicians." This event occurred in 631 CE, when the Silla Kingdom sent two court dancers as a gift to the Tang court. Subsequently, New Book of Tang, Volume 222b records: "[They] also presented two dwarves, two Zengqi female slaves, along with song and dance." This event took place between the late 7th and mid-8th centuries, when the Srivijaya Empire (in Southeast Asia) presented to the Tang court two dwarves, two Zengqi women (僧祇女), and their song and dance performances.

During the reign of Emperor *Xuanzong* of *Tang* (712–756 CE), several states from Central Asia presented music to the *Tang* court on five separate occasions. The principal states involved were *Kang, Mi, Shi*, and *Jumi,* and the gifts primarily consisted of female dancers. Subsequently, both official *Tang* histories record two grand musical gift-giving events during the reign of Emperor *Dezong.* In the early 9th century, *Nanzhao* and the *Pyu Kingdom* dispatched large song and dance troupes to the *Tang* court to perform the grand musical pieces *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* (南诏奉圣乐) and Pyu Kingdom Music respectively. Emperor *Dezong* personally attended the Lingde Hall to witness these two performances. These events not only introduced

Southeast Asian musical culture to the Central Plains but also reflected, on a deeper level, the harmonious ethnic relations and friendly interstate exchanges of the time.

Musical gift-giving among Asian states continued until after the mid-9th century, though it gradually declined. During the 860s and 870s, the *Heling* Kingdom (located on present-day Java, Indonesia) presented female singing and dancing performers to the *Tang* court. Although instances of musical gift-giving still occurred thereafter, their frequency decreased significantly. The historical materials collected have now been organized into the table below.

Table 1 Musical Gift-Giving Events from the 7th to the 9th Centuries

No.	Year	Source Text	Event Description
1	631 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Silla* (《新唐书·新罗》)	In the 5th year of *Zhenguan*, Silla sent two female musicians as tribute.
2	670–741 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Srivijaya* (《新唐书·室利佛逝》)	Srivijaya sent two dwarves, two *Zengqi* (僧祇) women, and performers of song and dance.
3	684–690, 710–712 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Rites and Music XII* (《新唐书·礼乐十二》)	The Brahmin Kingdom presented acrobats who danced upside-down on sharp blades, with a *bili* (觱篥) player standing on their stomachs—all unharmed.
4	713 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Kangju* (《新唐书·康国》)	Kangju sent chainmail armor, crystal cups, agate bottles, ostrich eggs, *Yuenuo* textiles, dwarves, and *Huxuan* (胡旋) dancers.
5	713–741 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Mi State* (《新唐书·米国》)	The Mi State offered jade, dance carpets, lions, and *Huxuan* dancers.
6	713–741 CE	**New Book of Tang*: Jumi* (《新唐书·俱蜜》)	Jumi presented *Huxuan* dancers.
7	727 CE	**Cefu Yuangui*: Tributes IV* (《册府元龟·朝贡第四》)	Kangju presented *Huxuan* dancers and leopards.
8	727 CE	**Cefu Yuangui*: Tributes IV* (《册府元龟·朝贡第四》)	The Shi State sent *Huxuan* dancers and grape wine.

9	727 CE	*_Cefu Yuangui_: Tributes IV* (《册府元龟·朝贡第四》)	King A-Hu-Bi-Duo of Shi State sent envoys with *Huxuan* dancers and leopards.
10	729 CE	*_Cefu Yuangui_: Tributes IV* (《册府元龟·朝贡第四》)	The Mi State sent three *Huxuan* dancers, a leopard, and a lion.
11	733 CE	*_New Book of Tang_: Khuttal* (《新唐书·骨咄》)	King *Xielifa* presented female musicians, while chief envoy *Duoboledagan* paid tribute.
12	755 CE	*New Book of the South* (《南部新书·己》)	Kangju presented *Huxuan* dancers known for their spinning movements.
13	762–779 CE	*_Old Book of Tang_: Emperor _Dezong_* (《旧唐书·德宗上》)	Emperor Daizong ordered the release of 32 dancing elephants from Wén Dān (文单) to Jing Mountain, along with falcons and palace maids.
14	766–779 CE	**_New Book of Tang_: Balhae* (《新唐书·渤海》)	Balhae sent envoys 25 times; on one occasion, they presented 11 Japanese dancers.
15	800 CE	*_Old Book of Tang_: Emperor Dezong* (《旧唐书·德宗下》)	_Nanzhao_ presented *Fengsheng Yue* (奉圣乐舞曲), performed at Linde Hall.
16	802 CE	*_Old Book of Tang_: Emperor Dezong* (《旧唐书·德宗下》)	The Pyu Kingdom sent envoys with 12 musical pieces and 35 musicians.
17	820 CE	*_New Book of Tang_: Goguryeo* (《新唐书·高丽》)	Goguryeo sent musicians as tribute.
18	847–860 CE	**Duyang Zabian* (《杜阳杂编》)	A Japanese prince brought precious instruments and music; the emperor hosted a banquet.
19	860–874 CE	*_New Book of Tang_: Southern Barbarians* (《新唐书·南蛮下·诃陵》)	Heling (Kalinga) sent female musicians.

Historical records indicate that many Asian states engaged in this practice during the 7th–9th centuries. In East Asia, four states—*Silla, Balhae, Goguryeo,* and *Japan*—presented music to the *Tang* Dynasty. In Southeast Asia, musical gifts were exchanged by *Srivijaya, Wén Dān, Nanzhao,* the *Pyu Kingdom,* and *Kalinga.* Central Asia saw such diplomatic exchanges from

states like *Kang, Mi, Shi, Jumi,* and *Khuttal.* While South Asia formed a relatively isolated geographical unit, the *Brahmin Kingdom* also sent musical tributes to *Tang* China.

Musical gifts encompassed various elements, including musical instruments, compositions, musicians, dancers, and even animals used in performances—such as elephants, horses, and parrots. Notably, these musical offerings predominantly represented the native traditions of the gift-giving states, showcasing distinct regional characteristics. This deliberate selection suggests that donor states aimed to present their unique musical culture to the recipients.

Discussion

Case Study: The Dual Political-Cultural Functions of Musical Gift-Giving

The following section focuses on a specific instance of musical gift-giving that occurred in 800 CE, analyzing its political-geographical motivations, diplomatic functions, and cultural impact.

In the sixteenth year of the *Zhenyuan* era of Emperor *Dezong* of *Tang* (800 CE), a significant musical gift-giving event took place, in which the *Nanzhao* Kingdom presented the large-scale musical performance *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* (Music in Praise of the Sage from *Nanzhao*) to the *Tang* court. This event was recorded in numerous historical documents. Accounts appear in the Treatise on Music and the Annals of Emperor *Dezong* from the *Old Book of Tang* (Liu, 1975), as well as in the Treatise on Rites and Music and the Records of the Southern Man from the *New Book of Tang* (Ouyang & Song, 1975), with the latter providing the most detailed description. Additionally, records of this musical gift can be found in works such as the *Tang Huiyao* (P. Wang, 1955), *Yuefu Zalu* (Duan, 1985), *Tang Guoshi Bu*, *Duyang Zabian*, and *Tangyin* Guiqian, among others. The event was also described in poems by contemporary writers, indicating that it generated considerable social influence at the time.

The timing and initiator of this musical gift are clearly documented; however, the identity of the creators of *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* remains contested. Current academic discourse primarily includes the following views: authorship attributed to *Wei Gao,* to the *Nanzhao* Kingdom itself, or to a collaborative effort between *Wei Gao* and *Nanzhao* artists. Bai (2018) systematically reviewed these arguments in his article "A Textual Research on the Creator of '*Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue*'", which this paper will not reiterate. Bai (2018) concluded that the official musicians of *Chengdu* Prefecture in the *Jiannan* West Circuit served as the primary creators of *Nanzhao*

Fengsheng Yue. While this conclusion is reasonable, the crucial issue lies in how to define the concept of the ″creator″.

Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue was not a single piece of music or song, but rather a large-scale song and dance performance comprising multiple acts, involving various performers such as singers, dancers, and instrumentalists. In discussing the creators of specific musical pieces, songs, or dances, it is highly probable that they were crafted by court musicians, given that neither *Wei Gao* nor the *Nanzhao* leaders possessed sufficient musical expertise. However, decisions regarding the allegorical meaning and thematic content of the music, the overall structure of the performance, the sequence of musical pieces, and the arrangement of instruments appear unlikely to have been determined solely by the musicians themselves. These elements were more probably orchestrated by a high-ranking director. *Nanzhao Fensheng Yue* carried profound ritual-musical connotations, making it more plausible that it was choreographed under the direction of a regional authority figure, who subsequently presented it to the imperial court as a gesture of loyalty. Given the low social status of musicians at the time, it would have been inappropriate for them to determine the content and form of a musical performance so deeply embedded in ritual significance.

According to records from the Treatise on Rites and Music and the Records of the Southern Man in the *New Book of Tang,* the performance of *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* concluded with thunder drums being struck from the four corners while the performers knelt in a gesture symbolizing *Nanzhao*'s submission to the *Tang* Empire. The musical system employed was also highly elaborate: a modulation between the gong and zhi modes symbolized the submission of the southwestern regions, while a shift to the jue and yu modes represented the moral transformation of the western and northern tribes.

Furthermore, the performance involved the formation of Chinese characters through dance movements. Each character was accompanied by a specific song. For example, when the character "南" (*nan*) was formed, the song *Sheng zhu Wu wei Hua* was sung; for the character "奉" (*feng*), the song *Hai yu Xiu Wen hua* was performed. The five characters of "南诏奉圣乐" (*Nan Zhao Feng Sheng Yue*) thus corresponded to five distinct songs, each praising the achievements of the *Tang* Dynasty.

Additionally, elements such as the "six segments of the dance" (舞六成), the "sixty-four performers" (工六十四人), and the "twenty-eight repetitions in the prelude" (序曲二十八叠) carried profound political symbolism. Nearly every aspect of the performance—including the number and sequence of songs, dances, and musical pieces; the total number of performers; the types and arrangement of instruments; the timing of musical cues; detailed choreography; and even costumes and props—was imbued with political meaning. Even the official historians compiling the Treatise on Rites and Music

remarked that "the complexity of its symbolism makes it hardly worth recording in full" indicating the meticulous and highly intentional design behind the performance. As to who was responsible for these arrangements, this paper argues that it was more likely a high-ranking director rather than the musicians themselves.

The musical performance of *Nan Zhao Feng Sheng Yue* was renowned for its grand scale, incorporating a large ensemble of singers and dancers, a diverse and numerous array of musical instruments, and a complex structure comprising multiple songs, dance pieces, and instrumental sections, alongside numerous ritualistic actions and segments. Since many studies have already examined its performance format in detail, this paper will not elaborate further on this aspect.

It is particularly noteworthy that upon its presentation, *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* was personally attended by Emperor *Dezong,* who viewed its grand performance at the *Linde* Hall. Subsequently, the work was preserved and continued to be performed in later imperial banquets, as recorded in the Treatise on Rites and Music in the *New Book of Tang*; Ouyang and Song (1975) explain that Emperor *Dezong* assigned it to the musicians of the Taichang Temple, after which it was performed standing during court banquets and seated in palace settings.

Furthermore, musical exchanges between *Nanzhao* and the *Tang* court date back to the reign of Emperor *Xuanzong,* who previously presented the *Nanzhao* ruler Piluoge with "two ensembles of Hubu and Qiuci music" (Ouyang & Song, 1975). This indicates that the musical gift of *Nanzhao Fengsheng Yue* represented a meaningful cultural exchange between Southeast and East Asia, significantly contributing to harmonious ethnic relations at the time.

Influenced by *Nanzhao*'s musical gift-giving, two years later, the Pyu Kingdom presented Pyu Kingdom Music to the *Tang* court, an event that also caused considerable social reverberations. The renowned poet *Bai Juyi* specifically composed the poem "*Pyu Kingdom Music*" to commemorate this event, and *Tang* Ci, then Prefect of *Kaizhou,* presented his "Ode to the Pyu Kingdom's Musical Offering." This indicates that the impact of this musical gift was no less significant than that of the earlier offering from *Nanzhao.*

According to the research of Xu and Li, this musical gift-giving mission was led personally by Prince Shunanda of Pyu, who headed a delegation comprising musicians and attendants. They embarked on their journey between the sixth and seventh months of the seventeenth year of the *Zhenyuan* era (801 CE) (Xu & Li, 2004). During their travels, they met with *Wei Gao*, the Military Governor of *Jiannan,* in *Chengdu. Wei Gao* made certain adaptations to their songs and dances, while also commissioning illustrations of their musical instruments and documenting their dance movements and costume details, which were sent ahead as an advance tribute to the court.

Subsequently, Shunanda's delegation arrived safely in *Chang'an* in the first month of the eighteenth year of *Zhenyuan* (802 CE) and performed grandly within the imperial palace.

As for the musical form of Pyu Kingdom Music, multiple scholarly articles have already explored this topic. Here, I provide only a brief overview: Pyu Kingdom Music consisted of twelve pieces, performed by thirty-five musicians using nineteen types of instruments, totaling thirty-eight individual instruments. Both in content and musical style, it carried distinct Buddhist connotations.

An analysis of the social contexts in which these two instances of music-gifting occurred reveals that both were deeply imbued with political significance. Initially, the *Tang* Dynasty enjoyed positive relations with *Nanzhao.* In the early 8th century, Emperor *Xuanzong* gifted a musical ensemble to *Nanzhao'*s ruler. However, following internal political upheavals in *Tang* China, the *Tibetan* Empire seized *Tang'*s western territories, forcing *Nanzhao* to submit to *Tibetan* hegemony while expanding its own influence. The Pyu Kingdom, in turn, became a vassal state under *Nanzhao.*

As *Tibetan* pressure on *Nanzhao* intensified, *Nanzhao* dispatched envoys to *Tang* China, reestablishing diplomatic ties and forming a military alliance against Tubo, *the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries).* After achieving a strategic victory in 800 CE, *Nanzhao* presented the grand musical performance *Nan Zhao Feng Sheng Yue* to the *Tang* court—a symbolic gesture affirming their realigned alliance. This further strengthened *Nanzhao'*s regional standing.

Still under *Nanzhao'*s suzerainty, the Pyu Kingdom sought to elevate its political status with its own musical mission to *Chang'an* in 802 CE. Following the performance, Pyu musicians instructed *Tang* court musicians in their repertoire—an act of cultural transmission that effectively placed Pyu on equal diplomatic footing with *Nanzhao* in *Tang* China.

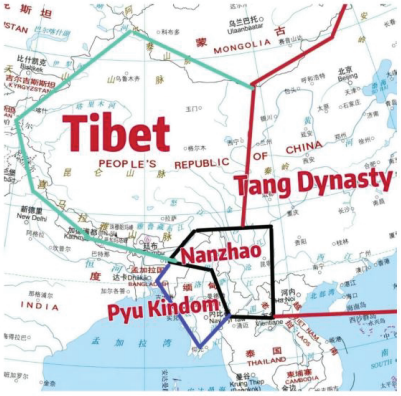

Figure 3 Map of the Political-Geographical Context of Nanzhao's Musical Gift-Giving
Source: The Chinese Society for Geodesy, Photogrammetry and Cartography, Standard Map Service Network (n.d.)

From these two cases of musical gift exchanges, we observe that music transcended its original entertainment purpose to become a diplomatic instrument. Moreover, such "musical diplomacy" possessed significant advantages compared to conventional diplomatic methods.

Through musical gifts, *Nanzhao* restored friendly relations with the *Tang* Dynasty and established military trust. The Pyu Kingdom skillfully utilized musical offerings to elevate its political status.

Consequently, all three parties—the Pyu Kingdom, *Nanzhao,* and *Tang*—established positive diplomatic relations. This demonstrates the unique appeal of music as a diplomatic medium.

Of course, such favorable international relations were not perpetual. In subsequent historical developments, as political landscapes shifted, the strong diplomatic ties built through musical exchanges were ultimately disrupted.

Cultural Interpretation: The Shaping of East Asian Musical Cultural Identity through Musical Gift-Giving

According to the analysis above, the musical gift exchanges of the 7th–9th centuries were both shaped by and actively influenced the political-geographical dynamics of their time. Within the cultural domain, these interstate musical interactions played a pivotal role in constructing a shared East Asian musical identity.

The exchange of musical gifts between ancient Asian states at the national level represented the highest ruler's recognition of foreign musical

cultures, carrying significant cultural and political influence. Many of these musical exchanges sparked considerable social resonance at the time, with foreign music being incorporated into the recipient state's musical system—performed in both court and folk settings—and even appearing in literary works, reflecting broader societal acceptance of foreign musical traditions.

A notable example occurred from the early to mid-8th century, when Central Asian states frequently presented huxuan dancers ("Sogdian Whirl Dancers") to the *Tang* court. The music and dance of Central Asia became immensely popular in *Tang* society, with their instruments, musical styles, and choreography gradually assimilated into *Tang* China's indigenous musical culture.

Chinese rulers also presented musical gifts to Japan and the Korean Peninsula, exerting profound cultural influence. These exchanges served not only as instruments of state diplomacy but also as vital connective threads in the tapestry of Asian musical culture.

In summary, while musical gift exchanges among Asian states were primarily regarded as instruments of political diplomacy in their contemporary context, they objectively exerted profound and lasting impacts on the development of Asian musical cultures. These practices merit further scholarly examination as they represent a dual-faceted historical phenomenon: they can be analyzed both as elements of ancient geopolitical strategies and as catalysts for transnational musical syntheses that shaped Eastern musical identities.

However, the more critical question concerns whether musical gifts were truly equal or whether they implied cultural hegemony. In my view, the political status between the two parties in musical gift exchanges was inherently unequal, manifested in two forms: the more powerful side bestowing music as a reward to the other party, or the weaker side presenting music as tribute to the stronger party. Musical gifts reflected the relative political standing between the parties involved. Yet at the cultural level, both sides in musical gift exchanges were equals – in the vast majority of musical gift incidents, the recipient state adopted an accepting attitude toward the foreign music and would actively perform the gifted musical pieces.

Conclusion

The practice of musical gift-exchange among ancient Asian states functioned as a form of "soft diplomatic instrument." Through both material exchanges (instruments/musical notations) and intangible exchanges (technical skills/aesthetic concepts), it facilitated mutual learning and shared development among Asian musical cultures, collectively shaping what became the East Asian musical sphere. Notably, the win-win diplomatic outcomes achieved

through these musical exchanges embody the same core principles that underpin today's Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiatives.

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Declaration of Generative AI

In the preparation of this work, I used Deep Seek for translation assistance and language polishing to enhance the readability and academic tone of the manuscript. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content meticulously and take full responsibility for the entirety of the work.

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Biography

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