**A Dual-Process Model of Xunzi’s Philosophy of Music**

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Abstract: Music, alongside ritual, plays an important role in Confucian moral education. Among all the Confucians, Xunzi gives music the most radical ability to transform people, and this is striking given his pessimistic view of human nature. Though he set the standard for Chinese aesthetics for millennia, there’s no systematic account that brings together Xunzi’s various commitments: that only music from virtuous previous dynasties are morally conducive, that music can bring about lasting character change, that even those uninterested in moral cultivation can benefit from music, and that the *junzi* (“gentleman”)and the *xiaoren* (“petty man”) derive joy in different ways while listening to music. In this article, I explain why currently existing accounts can’t capture all the commitments, and I turn to analytic aesthetics to provide a new *Dual-Process Model* of Xunzi’s philosophy of music. Jenefer Robinson’s discussions of “the Jazzercise effect” and emotional misattribution will be key in the new account.

Key Words: Xunzi; Philosophy of Music; Chinese Aesthetics; Moral Psychology

**1. Introduction**

Art is an important feature of Confucianism, and music is at the center of Confucian aesthetics. Though this is in part because the ancient Chinese, like the ancient Greeks, thought music reflected the order of the cosmos, the more important feature of music was that it aided moral cultivation. From the eleventh century BCE, the term *li* (ritual禮) was joined with the term *yue* (music樂) to create a hybrid term, *liyue*, to signify the “ultimate means to achieve order” (Zuo 2020, 277). Like ritual, music was justified and valued because of its contribution to social cohesion and development of moral character. So, for example, when Mozi (c. 470 – c. 391 BCE), the earliest recorded consequentialist, argues to discontinue musical performances saying that its benefits don’t justify the expenditures in labor and materials, Xunzi (c. 310 – c. 238 BCE), a Confucian, defends music by appealing to its value as a social tool. Confucians considered music a “guide to achieve perfection,” a necessary element of the proper development of a moral agent. Like Plato who believed that musical education ought to be a part of a child’s development, Confucius taught that “an aesthetic education that places music at its core ought to be the foundation of a “humane” (*ren* 仁) society” (Tan 2015, 185).

Though it is clear *that* music plays an important role in Confucian moral education, it is less clear *why* Confucians thought music is related to morality. All three classical Confucians (Confucius, Mengzi, and Xunzi) admit a connection between music and morality, but they don’t explain in detail why music is supposed to be helpful for moral cultivation. For instance, it is well-known that Xunzi, who thought humans were naturally “evil,” gives music a prominent role in a well-ordered state (Stalnaker 2006, 180-3; Virág 2017, 183). In an essay devoted to music, he gives music a magic-like quality in its ability to transform people. However, Xunzi is very brief on how music does what it does, and philosophers note that “the theory is not worked out in great detail and leaves many questions unanswered” (Harold and Hutton 2016, 275). Many note the special way in which Xunzi talks about music, but a precise account of his philosophy is still lacking.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Xunzi’s philosophy of music is not worked out in great detail as the essay argues for many different things. Xunzi’s “Discourse on Music” is foremost a defense of music’s value against Mozi’s criticisms. Xunzi also makes a connection between music and the emotions by way of *qi* (氣), a primal psycho-physical force that permeates all things in the world, argues that only music from virtuous previous dynasties are morally edifying, and suggests that the morally cultivated *junzi* (“gentleman” 君子) appreciates music in a way that is different from the way the uncultivated *xiaoren* (“petty man” or, literally, “small person” 小人) does. Given all these commitments, it is understandable that a single account accommodating everything Xunzi says about music has not been formed.

Xunzi’s philosophy of music is a spirited exploration of music’s benefits, and it set the standard for millennia of Chinese philosophy of music, so it is important that we fully understand his view. His thoughts are also philosophically interesting because his views on human nature confine the parameters within which music must be efficacious. Xunzi argued that “human nature is evil,” so his explanation of how music morally improves people cannot rely on prior moral motivation. Xunzi’s philosophy of music shows how an aesthetic practice can impact even those who might be initially uninterested, and even hostile, to its effects.

So, my goal is to apply theories from analytic aesthetics to Xunzi to see how they might shed light on Xunzi’s thoughts. I’ll eventually conclude that theories that focus on physiology and emotions, such as Jenefer Robinson’s philosophy of music, can help to explain music’s moral effects on us, but only if we include emotional misattribution as a crucial feature.

In the next section, I’ll provide a brief historical context leading up to Xunzi’s “Discourse on Music.” Section 3 discusses previously proposed accounts: the hydraulic model, the symbolization model, and the stimulus-and-response model. Section 4 lays out the *Dual-Process Model* and applies Robinson’s philosophy of music to what’s been said of Xunzi’s commitments. Section 5 discusses what the Dual-Process Model can show more generally about the moral and psychological work music can do. Section 6 concludes.

**2. Historical Context**

Mozi, speculated to have been a charismatic carpenter-turned-philosopher, criticizes Confucianism in part by highlighting its wastefulness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Mozi advances a consequentialist ethics, and he outlines food (wealth), population, and social order as the three benefits that our actions ought to maximize. The complaint was that Confucian rituals—and the elaborate musical performances that went with them—required expensive materials and prevented people from working without providing tangible benefits such as food, shelter, and clothing.

To be clear, it wasn’t that Mozi was against music in general. Rather, it was the grand, state-sponsored musical performances with dozens of musicians and dancers that Mozi condemned (Fraser 2016, 222). Confucian rituals that involved music in this capacity weren’t moderate in expenditure, a general injunction Mozi had for the government. We also shouldn’t extract from his conclusion that Mozi was blind to aesthetic value or that he didn’t see the role of pleasure in a good life.[[2]](#footnote-2) We might even read Mozi as someone who is *overly* sensitive to music’s pleasure-giving capacity, worried that pleasure is a distraction from productive work. But centrally, Mozi’s claim was simply that music doesn’t contribute to the goods recognized by his consequentialist ethics as to justify its expense.

Art and aesthetics are important to Xunzi—he mentions beauty (*mei* 美)much more than the other Confucians—and he makes an impassioned defense of music in his “Discourse on Music.” Xunzi broadly stays within Mozi’s consequentialist framework (Fraser 2016, 227) and argues that music provides benefits that Mozi is overlooking, the most important being moral education, which leads to social order. Xunzi explains not only why musical performances are worth the expenditure, but also why the pleasure afforded by music isn’t dangerous. This, I think, is why he makes much of the pun between “music” and “joy” (more on this below).

Xunzi’s philosophy of music is built on the premise that human nature must be reshaped through forces external to the self and that music is well-suited to improve human’s innately bad nature (Virág 2017, 182). Xunzi believed that humans are born with desires and the tendency to act selfishly in order to satisfy those desires (19.1-6). Humans are thus predisposed towards chaos, so Xunzi considered music, alongside ritual, to be a kind of social tool to control humans’ impulses (20.2).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Music, then, is a critical part of Xunzi’s moral, political, and social philosophy, but it isn’t easy to understand just how Xunzi thought music goes about changing people. According to Xunzi, goodness is a product of deliberate effort, so humans need to act against their nature in order to be morally good (23.1; 23.13-18). Xunzi compares moral cultivation to straightening crooked wood, the craft metaphor highlighting not only how unnatural and difficult the process is, but also how moral cultivation requires practice, skill, and expert guidance. At the same time, he writes that music “has the power to make good the hearts of the people, to influence men deeply, and to reform their manners and customs with facility” as “sounds and music enter into people deeply and transform people quickly” (20.21-22). But how did Xunzi think music manages to do this? After all, straightening wood is neither quick nor easy. In the next section, I’ll introduce a few available accounts.

**3. Overview of Currently Existing Accounts**

**3.1 The Hydraulic Model**

Paul Goldin (1999, 2005) interprets Xunzi to be arguing that music is morally beneficial because it serves as an emotional outlet, a channel through which we can express ourselves in a healthy way. He says Xunzi’s opening to “Discourse on Music” is one of the most important passages in the history of Chinese aesthetics because it is “the most comprehensive explanation of the origins of music in the irrepressible human urge to express emotions” (2015, 47).

“Discourse on Music” begins with the claim that music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. Often noted is the fact that Xunzi is punning here on the double music/joy meaning of樂 (*yue*/*le*). But the philosophically rich question is how seriously the “music is joy” claim should be taken beside the pun. Xunzi’s writing suggests that the claim goes beyond mere word play since he continues that “people cannot be without music” because “if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement” (20.1-3). The main idea is that people are bound to have “dispositions to like and dislike things” and “if they are allowed no happy or angry reactions, then there will be chaos” (20.98-100).

The “hydraulic model” of human emotions requires that there be suitable outlets for emotional expression lest pressure builds. The problem isn’t the fact that humans are filled with emotions, but that unreflective and uncontrolled outbursts may cause harm, especially if our emotions tend to be roused by our desires for scarce goods (Goldin 2005, 35). If music can serve as an effective outlet by helping people release their emotions in psychical catharsis, it might help forestall violent outbursts resulting from the suppression of these emotions. Music—and arts and ritual in general—allow humans to express their emotions in an orderly way, becoming free of certain emotions without jeopardizing order. By highlighting the sage’s role in coming up with music, Xunzi explains that music was devised to answer our need to express ourselves.

Goldin appeals to the Guodian Manuscripts— previously unknown Confucian texts which were newly discovered in a tomb in Hubei province in 1993—to clarify the Confucian understanding of emotions and moral development around Xunzi’s time. When met with external stimuli, we respond to reality in a way that manifests our unsettled internal states, exhibiting our emotion (*qing* 情). “Knowing one’s *qing*” is a crucial first step towards moral development, which is to say that knowing how one tends to respond to certain external stimuli is the beginning of a moral education (Goldin 2005, 39). Engaging with music—either by listening or by performing—is a way to regulate one’s desires, which provides more control over how one responds to other external stimuli; it helps individuals by giving them a controlled way to express, or otherwise work through, emotions, which contributes to overall wellbeing (Harold and Hutton, 2016, 279).

In a related vein, we might think that music helps with emotional regulation by giving us different desires which it is able to fulfill. Consider how we crave musical works to end at the tonic, returning to the note or key it began in, or how we expect certain motifs to repeat throughout a longer work. Music can set up local desires by activating particular expectations. Robinson writes that even though music doesn’t present us with situations that would be genuinely significant to us (in a way that would warrant emotional responses), it does present us with *musical* events that we are “programmed to respond to affectively,” including “the novel, the unexpected, and that which either gratifies or thwarts [our] desires and goals” (2016, 385).

Music’s ability to emotionally regulate or induce reactions from us are well-documented, and catharsis or emotional satisfaction might very well be a key feature in explaining how music helps us morally improve ourselves. But appealing to these phenomenona doesn’t explain why Xunzi thinks only orderly music is effective for moral cultivation. We might think an emotion like anger finds its best expression in loud and frantic music, but Xunzi argues that such music would make people morally corrupt.[[4]](#footnote-4) Xunzi implies that emotions, whether positive or negative, need proper, ordered expression, meaning we are not to seek catharsis by any means.

Furthermore, Xunzi believed that only the ancient music from the Zhou dynasty or music based on the *Odes* had a positive effect on one’s character; music from “a disordered age” is deleterious because it is “licentious” (20.224-226). Music was either proper or corrupt, and Xunzi doesn’t seem to think that *any* controlled expression of emotion or emotional satisfaction will do since he writes that if [joy] “takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos” (20.6-7).

Perhaps Xunzi’s view was that music from Zheng and Wei—the corrupt dynasties—simply did not give rise to controlled, and therefore morally conducive, expressions of emotions. The moral benefit of music came from its cathartic power, and only music from virtuous origins that are balanced, peaceful, solemn, and majestic must have been attributed such therapeutic power; Xunzi warns that music from immoral regimes lead people to become “dissolute, arrogant, vulgar, and base” (20.74-75). Xunzi might have simply thought that only music from the virtuous dynasties were good at morally improving people—and this is one way the hydraulic model can accommodate why only certain music are fit for moral education. Music is embedded in culture, so when Xunzi judges music from corrupt dynasties to be bad, he’s judging it both as a sonic structure and a cultural artifact that doesn’t lead to good outcomes (Harold and Hutton, 2016, 352).

Still, the hydraulic model seems more like a beginning point of understanding Xunzi’s philosophy of music than a full account. Xunzi compares moral cultivation to the process of straightening wood, suggesting that moral improvement involves an active reshaping of character. Catharsis aided by the right music may be part of this process, but it is unlikely to form the whole process. It is one thing to release pent up emotions, but it is another thing to develop a virtuous disposition, especially when one’s underlying disposition is selfish.

Besides, it seems that Xunzi thought the ancients somehow managed to zero in on the kinds of music that were morally beneficial. After all, he appeals to *qi* when explaining how music affects humans, suggesting a kind of deterministic working of music, and he doesn’t think social conventions are arbitrarily chosen (Goldin 1999, 74). If Xunzi thought that the ancient sages got something objectively right about music—that they somehow struck upon sonic forms that happen to positively affect humans—then we should look to music’s intrinsic features to explain how music manages to morally improve people. We’ll turn to such an attempt next.

**3.2. Symbolization Model**

Another way to understand music’s moral relevance is to see music as a symbol or model for a moral life. Like the ancient Greeks who pointed out that both music and the cosmos are organized by ratios, the ancient Chinese connected the pentatonic scale to the Five Elements (wood, metal, fire, water, earth) out of which everything is made (Huang 1963, 52). Xunzi connects music to *qi*, which correlates music to *yin* and *yang*, interconnected forces that order all existence and change (Wiant 1965, 135). Furthermore, Xunzi writes:

The phenomena of sounds and music are these: the drum is great and magnificent. The bell is expansive and full. The stone chimes are restrained and orderly. The *yu, sheng, xiao, he, guan,* and *yue* [wind instruments] are energetic and vibrant. The *xun* and *chi* [ocarina and flute-like instruments] are rolling and undulating. The *se* is serene and relaxed. The *qin* is soft and gentle. Song is pure and penetrating.

On the meaning of the dance: The way of Heaven is all-encompassing. The drum is the lord of the music, is it not? Thus, the drum resembles Heaven. The bell resembles Earth. The stone chimes resemble water. The *yu, sheng, xiao, he, guan,* and *yue* resemble the sun, moon, and stars. The *tao, zhu, fu, ge, qiang,* and *qia* [percussion instruments] resemble the myriad creatures. How does one know the meaning of the dance? I say: The eyes do not themselves see it, and the ears do not themselves hear it. Nevertheless, it controls their postures, gestures, directions, and speed. When all the dancers are restrained and orderly, exerting to the utmost the strength of their bones and sinews to match the rhythm and drum and bell sounding together, and no one is out of step, then how easy it is to tell the meaning of this group gathering! (20.159-1176)

In this passage, Xunzi points out the various “resemblances” between instruments and natural entities, suggesting that the instrumental arrangements in a piece of music symbolize how the natural entities interact with each other—which, in turn, suggests that music’s power to affect humans might in part come from the way it reproduces the metaphysical relations between the entities (Harold and Hutton, 2016, 271). (On the other hand, note how Xunzi describes the dance (which always accompanied music) as “controlling” the body, suggesting that intentional and intellectual recognition of symbolism is likely not what he intends to describe. I will return to this point shortly).

Given that music was seen to be connected to the structure of reality, Xunzi might have thought that music also serves as a model for a way of life, a way that would allow humans to aspire to the same order that explains the cosmos. Music models harmonious change. Regarding the above passage focusing on instrumental resemblances of natural entities, Hutton comments that the “true meaning” of the performance comes from the order it brings to the performers, something that isn’t visible or audible *per se* but discernible from the performance (20.176, fn12). Music is rarely, if ever, enjoyed in the abstract, and when ancient Chinese philosophers discussed music, it was never focused on assessing music taken out of its performative context. Music therefore serves as an apt symbol as well as a practice ground; seeing how the disparate tones and rhythms fit into a harmonious whole, individuals learn first-hand how they themselves would similarly fit into the harmonious social whole.

Xunzi writes that music in the temple among rulers and ministers lead to their being harmoniously respectful, music in the home among father and sons lead to their becoming harmoniously affectionate, and music in the village among the old and the young lead to their becoming harmoniously cooperative (20.17-23). Thus, humans mirror music by themselves becoming (socially) harmonious, and like music which has “a single standard in order to fix its harmony,” people, too, seek a single, unified way to bring order to the myriad changes within them (20.24). Thus, music might be seen as a symbol of both natural and social harmony, and one’s recognition of this might lead one to become harmonious with others after engaging with music. Seeing music as a symbol also helps explain why only music from virtuous regimes would be seen as helpful; only sounds and dances that reflect appropriate relations would inspire individuals to emulate the virtues expressed in them (Goldin 2005, 57).

An account of Xunzi’s philosophy of music focused on symbolization captures Xunzi’s inclination to explain music’s moral efficacy in light of its ability to activate human’s mimetic propensity. It is music’s status as a symbol, and people’s ability (and/or willingness) to imitate the represented relations and practices, that renders music efficacious. I think this a promising line of thought, but the problem is that it doesn’t cohere well with Xunzi’s pessimistic view of human nature. If humans are naturally predisposed towards selfishness and disorder, why would they bother to imitate orderly music? What motivates humans to emulate music’s harmonious structure?[[5]](#footnote-5) How does the underlying metaphysics of the music affect whether or not one is benevolent or selfish?

Perhaps it’s unfair to expect humans to rationally choose to use music for self-cultivation. Afterall, Confucians rely on moral charisma to explain why people would choose to listen to the sage. The “inspiring power of true moral authority” “sounds forth” a leader’s moral charisma such that it echoes in all who hear (Stalnaker, 2006, 188). Virtue just is plain attractive, and even those uninterested in moral cultivation are inclined to feel real admiration for any wise and good sage with whom they interact: “Xunzi thinks sufficient exposure to the *mei*, ‘beauty’ or ‘fineness,’ of noble Confucian conduct will likely kindle a desire to possess such attractive qualities” (Stalnaker, 2006, 188).

In a similar vein, we might think that people would be drawn to music, and be subject to its symbolic power, because aesthetic beauty just is plain attractive. Both Mengzi and Xunzi agree that humans share sensory preferences. “When it comes to sounds,” Mengzi writes, “the whole world looks to Music Master Shi Kuang. This is because ears throughout the world are similar… ears have the same preferences in sounds” (6A7.6-7.8). Xunzi, too, writes that people are “born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds” (23.7-8). Our desire for beautiful sensory experiences might be enough to allure individuals to engage with music.

I’ll eventually argue in section 4 that this is how music *initially* takes a hold of us—but that more is needed for music to actually improve us. In particular, though sensory pleasure or music’s symbolic status might explain why we initially engage with music, we need to go further to explain why music is then able to induce or encourage behavioral change. The symbolization model, even in conjunction with the hydraulic model, is unable to explain music’s power if we can’t count on people’s motivation to imitate music’s orderly structure or explain why exposure to music is sufficient to “transform” people’s hearts. In the next section, I’ll discuss one more model—the stimulus-response model.

**3.3. Stimulus-Response Model**

If we can’t rely on rational, self-directed modes of musical appreciation with the aim of moral cultivation, then we need an explanation of music’s efficacy that bypasses the need for agent intention or even awareness. So what about an account that focuses on music as a stimulus that listeners can’t help but respond do?

Curie Virág (2017) thinks Xunzi considers music a technology, a tool that taps into a deterministic cause-and-response scheme. “Discourse on Music” discusses music making people feel emboldened and invigorated depending on the kind of music or context that surrounds them (20.106, 109). Music can also make people become respectful, affectionate, and cooperative (20.17-23), harmonious, ordered, or vigorous (20.63-67), dissolute, arrogant, vulgar, and base (20.74-75), or sad, emboldened, licentious, and invigorated (20.104-109). Xunzi thinks music is “a nearly automatic source of human inspiration” and therefore “a very powerful tool for human government,” “uniquely suitable for affecting the masses of people who will never be able to undertake the full range of Confucian disciplines, especially those dependent on literacy” (Stalnaker, 2006, 183).

Xunzi believes that musical performances can “transform people” by producing certain emotions (Virág 2017, 182). The emphasis on people’s emotional reactions to music implies a passive picture of the self, passive since individuals’ feelings and desires are caused and changed by the presence of particular musical forms (Ibid). Indeed, Xunzi offers a naturalistic explanation by referring to music’s ability to call forth different kinds of *qi* in a listener. Invoking the system of interconnected *qi*, which explains all change in the world, Xunzi explains music’s effect on a person by resorting to a “theory of stimulus and response” and “not one of internalization” (Virág 183).

According to this picture, music doesn’t deeply influence an individual as to change their constitution, but it stimulates the right kind of *qi* that brings forth the ideal emotion for the occasion. The picture might be that we possess multiple ways of responding to external stimuli, and moral cultivation is meant to help us choose among the potential responses, the goal being that an agent will trigger a “compliant” potential instead of a “perverse” one (Virág 183). Music might affect the kind of emotional reaction that comes to the fore of an individual.

Virág pays careful attention to the way music works through the emotions, but she acknowledges that this model is not one of internalization but one of stimulus-and-response, which leaves mysterious how long-term change is possible through music. The goal of Confucian moral cultivation is to acquire *ren* (moral excellence 仁) through study and ritual; anyone, even the uncultivated “petty” person, is capable of becoming a sage (20.287-8). Emotions’ workings must be internalized somehow since the sage achieves a stable level of perspective that is set apart from the “petty” person’s. Does repetition solidify the kind of emotional reaction we bring to disparate external stimuli?

Here, I’d like to bring our attention to how Xunzi describes the *xiaoren’s* (petty man’s) enjoyment of music compared to the *junzi*’s (gentleman’s) enjoyment of music:

And so I say: Music is joy. The gentleman takes joy in attaining the Way. The petty man takes joy in attaining the object of his desires. If one takes the Way to regulate one’s desires, then one will be happy and not disordered. If one forgets the Way for the sake of one’s desires, then one will be confused and unhappy. And so music is the means to guide one’s joy. The instruments made of metal, stone, silk string, and bamboo are means to guide one’s virtue. When music proceeds, then the people will turn toward what is correct. (20.135-142)

I think the comparison Xunzi makes here between the gentleman and the petty man is crucial for understanding his philosophy of music. The morally cultivated person cares about following the Way, whereas the petty person cares only about following their desires. The former recognizes that music—including the ritualistic setting surrounding it—is the proper means to bring one’s desires to align with the Way, and so their experience of music is joyful insofar as it contributes to what they want (attaining the Way). Any joy derived from music for the petty person, on the other hand, has to do with satisfying their in-born desires for pretty sounds, which might even lead them to seek out corrupting music. So, the gentleman and the petty man relate to music differently even though both derive joy from it[[6]](#footnote-6): the gentleman feels joy because they’re guided by virtue, and perhaps because they see how music symbolizes the greater structure of the world; the petty man feels joy because they’re satisfying the universally shared human desire for beautiful sounds.

What we need is an account that takes the petty man’s sensual interest in music and have music play an effective role in changing their inner constitution and induce immediate change without relying on an independent desire to improve himself. I think Xunzi had a “dual-process” model of musical moral cultivation, a model where depending on where one is on one’s moral education journey, the way music affects one is different. In the next section, I’ll turn to a resource from analytic aesthetics to explain how focusing on both music’s physiological effect on us *and* our proclivity to misattribute the source of our emotions can account for the various commitments Xunzi holds regarding music.

**4. The Jazzercise Effect, Emotional Misattribution, and the Dual Process Model**

**4.1. Music’s Physiological Effects**

Music for Xunzi is a “fool-proof device for eliciting certain uncontrolled responses from the entire body,” and social order is “the result of proper music because the latter necessarily elicits an individual’s appropriate physical responses, such as a reverent attitude and moral behavior, to his or her environment” (Brindley 2012, 108). Xunzi begins his discussion of music with joy, “an unavoidable human deposition,” and argues that joy must be expressed in sound (20.1-2). For the past few decades, analytic aestheticians have debated whether music is capable of expressing anything and how it manages to express non-musical things such as emotions and ideas. To this debate, Robinson contributes an account that focuses on music’s physiological effect on us. She argues that music induces “physiological changes, motor activity, and action tendencies” which are *experienced as* emotions because they induce certain feelings while also encouraging us to view the world in certain ways (2006, 394). Xunzi’s claim that moral cultivation through music involves sympathetic movement and associated emotional responses hasn’t been widely accepted nor explored (Harold 2016, 346), so I’ll apply Robinson’s philosophy of music to Xunzi to propose a new model.

When I listen to upbeat funk and find myself finger drumming the syncopations, I might find myself energized without having tried to explicitly use the music to bring my energy level up. Because music directly affects our bodies, it often also changes our feelings as a result. “As in genuine emotional contagion,” Robinson writes, “these reactions get caused *without* our recognizing what causes them” (2006, 395). It’s not our judgment of music (as happy or good) that affects our response to music. Rather, music directly affects our body, increasing or decreasing heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, muscular tension, and stomach contractions among other metrics (2006, 394). In addition, happy music and sad music induce subliminal smiles and frowns in the form of fleeting, unconscious microexpressions, providing evidence that emotionally tinged music induces physical expressions characteristic of those emotional states (2006, 396).

These empirical findings, and Robinson’s attempt to connect them to music’s psychological effects, offer an account for Xunzi’s theory of music. Music’s direct and emotional effect on us inspires Xunzi to say that music *is* joy; music is experienced *as* joy because music induces physiological traits of a joyful person and encourages us to see the world the way a joyful person would. Robinson’s claim that changes in our emotions and outlook occur without our recognizing what caused them echoes Xunzi’s claims about music’s transformative power; music transforms persons quickly, as if magically, because it works on our bodies, bypassing the cognitive steps of recognition, thought, or belief formation (Robinson 2006, 395). Music’s effect on us seems automatic because it affects us in a way that we don’t quite understand, and our depth of feeling is partly due to the “Jazzercise Effect,” the experience of a physiological aspect of an emotion which only afterwards we affectively label (Robinson 2006, 409).

In fact, Xunzi describes (moral) learning to be a process that involves the whole body: learning “enters through the [gentleman’s] ears, fastens through his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions” (1.145-147). Compare this process to that of the petty man’s, whose learning “enters through his ears and passes out his mouth” (1.148-149). The success of moral learning is in part measured by the body’s reception and reaction, and Xunzi considered music an especially potent tool given the relative ease with which it can induce sympathetic reactions.

Focusing on music’s physiological effect on us allows Xunzi to insist on music’s moral efficacy without relying on people’s moral motivations. If everyone responds to music due to their automatic physiological responses to music, then even people uninterested in moral cultivation can benefit because humans are naturally inclined to react to sound (Brindley 2012, 107). An emphasis on the body’s reaction to sound highlights the sense of immediacy and inevitability with which music affects the body (Brindley 2012, 108). Xunzi attributes to music the ability to activate or subdue certain *qi*, a psycho-physical force; good music induces compliant *qi* to respond from within the body, which leads to orderly conduct, but bad music stirs up perverse *qi,* which leads to chaotic behavior (20.113-117). This is redolent of the way Robinson talks about music’s effect on us. Music induces physiological responses from within the body, which leads to certain moods, which then leads to feelings, outlooks, and actions characteristic of individuals in those moods. Both music and emotion are a process (Robinson 2006, 293), and music helps “train” the feelings and the body in a process that is “automatic” in the sense that it works through sympathetic reaction, activity, and habit instead of any conscious learning of moral principles (Harold 2016, 347).

Harold and Hutton (2016) have discussed how Robinson’s view might map on to Xunzi. One big difference they point to is the fact that Robinson’s account is a more or less a solo affair. For example, she talks about the Romantics who discussed aesthetics in terms of the individual. But Xunzi[[7]](#footnote-7) believes that there’s something important about listening to music *with other people*. He discusses both performing and listening to music as a group affair, and so it might be that part of what makes music efficacious is the fact that it is a shared experience—partaking in music together, and recognizing it as a shared experience, might help render the performers and audience members achieve social harmony (Harold and Hutton 2016, 274).

While Robinson’s account can certainly be applied to individuals *in* a group setting—each performer or listener being physiologically affected by music separately—the potentially greater effect of musical engagement in a communal setting still needs to be accounted for. Being surrounded by others who are going through similar music-induced experiences can be powerful (this is why attending a concert can be so compelling!). I believe that Robinson’s account can accommodate the communal experience and benefit of music, too. Let me now bring in receptiveness and emotional misattribution as the bridge and use them to further motivate the Dual-Process Model.

**4.2 Emotional Misattribution**

Listening to and playing good music can impact our bodies and feelings in a way that makes us more receptive to moral learning (Harold 2016, 346). The changes in *qi*—something like the “energy” that surrounds us, like mood—can affect our readiness to acquire virtue (Harold and Hutton, 2016, 281). So music can “open us up,” if you will. In addition, I had said that the uncultivated petty man and the cultivated gentleman derive joy from music through different means. Given music’s ability to prime us for morally conducive experiences and our tendency to misattribute the source of our emotions, we can explain how Xunzi’s music-lead moral education would be especially effective in a group setting—and how it can even be sensitive to where one is in one’s moral educational journey.

When people feel emotional without having an immediate or adequate explanation available, they feel the need to come up a story that seems most appropriate, even if the explanation they devise has nothing to do with the origin of the emotion (Robinson 2006, 401). This often leads to what psychologists call *emotional misattribution*. Because people label the inexplicable physiological reaction (experienced as an emotion) in a way that’s congruent with the context they’re in, the explanation for the emotion often gains inspiration from their context (Ibid.).

This happens when we listen to music. We might feel sadder or calmer as a result of listening to music, and given that there’s no reasons that justify the sadder or calmer emotion (it’s not as if we’ve suffered a loss or heard a reassuring thing), we interpret the affective states according to the context in which we hear the music (Robinson 2006, 379). This means that we often appeal to the social context we’re in. If I’m feeling calm and expansive after an organ performance, I might misattribute the source of the soothed feeling to the religious setting as well as the company with which I listened to the organ.

When applied to Xunzi’s thoughts on music, emotional misattribution helps the petty man morally benefit from music because he, upon feeling pleasure from listening to music, mistakenly understands the source of the pleasure to be the communal listening setting. The fact that music is embedded within Confucian ritual practice, which is itself embedded within a value system, leads the petty man to conclude that his positive experience is due to the ritual practice itself being a good and worthwhile thing. The uncultivated man derives joy from sensory experiences that please him and helpfully misattributes this to the nature of music, while the gentleman goes beyond sensory stimuli to derive joy. Through learning—studying the *Odes*, for example—the gentleman could attain a deeper form of understanding, one that builds on the awareness of music’s connection to the cosmos and morality. And this could be how he ultimately “attains the Way” while listening to music, which brings him joy. There is a parallel “dual-process” through which music morally cultivates people, depending on one’s level of moral maturity. Eventually, the petty man will internalize the values he associates with music and come to appreciate the social order that music symbolizes and encourages.

Emotional misattribution might also explain why change from music is lasting. The stimulus model would only reliably change people on a temporary basis, but the benefits arising from misattribution would convince people that music, and the communal practices and values baked into its setting, are worthwhile. This would encourage the petty man to seek out experiences in which music is played, i.e. participate in rituals that are meant to morally educate. Emotional misattribution also explains why not just any music ought to be used for moral cultivation. Since the listeners must connect their positive experiences to the nature of the music (and its surrounding practices), only music from regimes whose conduct is praiseworthy can qualify as a means for moral cultivation.

In sum, the Dual Process model, which focuses on music’s ability to call forth physiological reactions that we experience as emotions, and our tendency to misjudge the source of our emotional reactions, can explain why music can induce behavioral change even for those uninterested in moral education, why its influence is lasting, why only music from virtuous regimes are appropriate, and why music affects individuals differently depending on their level of moral maturity. This is a model that accommodates all of Xunzi’s musical commitments.

**5. Expanding on the Jazzercise Theory**

The Dual-Process Model applies a theory from contemporary analytic aesthetics to ancient Chinese aesthetics to help reconstruct Xunzi’s argument for how music can be morally beneficial. However, the model also shows us new things about not only Robinson’s theory, but philosophy of music in general.

First, the model gives us an answer to a more general question: how can music be morally educative? In particular, how can it meet non-moral people “where they are” but also direct them towards having different values? The Dual-Process Model shows that an aesthetic practice can meet people where they are when it provides multiples modes of enjoyment. An already motivated person is more likely to be transformed by a musical experience (e.g. a spiritual person looking for the divine presence, or a Confucian scholar respectful of any cultural artifact from the Zhou dynasty), but as discussed, music can impact even those who are initially uninterested in its positive effects. Sometimes, appealing to physiological changes is the best way to affect behavior. Music had been considered an important part of a holistic education in cross-cultural settings, and having an explanation for how it can encourage people towards new emotions, thoughts, dispositions, and values allows us to see what aesthetic agents have known for millennia.

The model also provides a communal application of Robinson’s otherwise individual-oriented theory. Blasting “party music” can trick my brain into thinking that an otherwise boring activity like cleaning is fun and dynamic. Implement this at a communal scale and we see how the Jazzercise Effect goes a long way in bringing about desired social effects as a result of listening to music. A group of people’s psyches can be manipulated (for better or for worse) through music. Communal music-making and listening are important parts of many cultural practices, the shared physiological and psychological experiences contributing to, or being interpreted as, the sense that one is experiencing something special as a part of their community. Xunzi thought there was something crucial about listening to music with other people, and recognizing music as a shared experience can help the Jazzercize Effect be understood at the collective level.

**6. Conclusion**

Let me recap. In section 2, I’ve introduced Mozi’s criticism of music and how Xunzi inherits the consequentialist framework in which he defends the value of music. After discussing the merits and shortcomings of the hydraulic, symbolization, and stimulus-and-response theories in section 3, I offered a new theory—the Dual-Process Model—in section 4, which argues that depending on one’s level of moral maturity, the way music affects one is different. I appealed to the Jazzercise Effect and emotional misattribution to show how the model applies to our experience of music. I believe the Dual-Process Model accommodates all of Xunzi’s thoughts on music in ways that other models cannot.

Ultimately, Xunzi answers the Mohist challenge that music is a waste of resources with the argument that music is beneficial for individual moral cultivation and societal harmonization. “Music is joy” not because of some deep metaphysical truth, but because of the contingent way in which music—especially the kind that the ancient sages picked out to be played in state-sponsored ceremonies—affects listeners and how we tend to go about making sense of our emotional experiences. Going for older music isn’t just about tradition but about choosing music that brings about desired effects.

Analytic aesthetics provided the tools to help make process in Xunzi’s philosophy of music, but reconstructing Xunzi’s arguments also helped to expand Robinson’s theory towards answering questions about moral psychology and collective musical experiences. This is a win-win because neither cultural framework was reduced to a “means” through which the other might be understood better. I look forward to further fruitful cross-cultural aesthetic research.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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1. See Fraser 2016, p. 222 for an in-depth discussion of Mozi’s “Against Music.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Park 2020 for an argument that Mozi should not be read as a pedantic kill-joy who can’t put aside his utilitarian commitments at the face of aesthetic considerations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Tavor 2013 for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Compare what Aristotle says in *Politics* Book VIII: “everyone when listening to imitations [i.e. music dramatically expressing various states of emotion] is thrown into a corresponding state of feeling, even apart from the rhythms and tunes themselves… we must therefore give some consideration to tunes and rhythms, and to the question whether for educational purposes we must employ all the tunes and all the rhythms or make distinctions… for education, as has been said, the ethical class of melodies and harmonies must be employed”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Xunzi writes in “Human Nature is Bad” that “people desire to become good because their nature is bad” and that “[i]n every case where people desire to become good, it is because their nature is bad,” arguing that our desire to be moral itself points to our bad natures since people only desire what they don’t have (142-3; 134-135). It is tempting to think out that our interest in improving ourselves must point to at least an incipient good nature, but Xunzi disagrees with Mengzi that “[w]hen people engage in learning, this manifests the goodness of their nature” (43-44)— so we shouldn’t conclude that our desire to morally improve ourselves thereby points to our good nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I’m not saying that music literally only brings pleasure or joy. As mentioned before, many other emotions are also elicited by music. “Joy” here is just emblematic of a broader range of emotions. Thanks to a referee for helping me clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. And Mengzi, for that matter— compare *Mengzi* 1B1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I would like to thank Justin Tiwald, So-Jeong Park, James Harold, and two anonymous referees for helpful conversations and feedback on previous drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)