

MUSIC OF CHINA

Chinese music history must be approached with a certain sense of awe. Indeed, any survey evokes the music of a varied, still-active civilization whose archaeological resources go back to 3000 BCE and whose own extensive written documents refer to countless forms of music not only in connection with folk festivals and religious events but also in the courts of hundreds of emperors and princes in dozens of provinces, [dynasties](#), and periods. For all the richness of detail in Chinese sources, however, it is only for the last segment of Chinese music history—from the [Song dynasty](#) (960–1279 CE) to the present—that there is information about the actual music itself. Yet the historical, cultural, instrumental, and theoretical materials of earlier times are equally informative and fascinating. This mass of information can be organized into four large chronological units: (1) the formative period, from 3000 BCE through the 4th century CE, (2) the [international period](#), from the 4th through the 9th century, (3) the [national period](#), from the 9th through the 19th century, and (4) the “[world music](#)” period of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Formative period

Ancient artifacts and writings

Chinese writings claim that in 2697 BCE the emperor [Huangdi](#) sent a scholar, Ling Lun, to the western mountain area to cut bamboo pipes that could emit sounds matching the call of the [fenghuang](#), an immortal bird whose rare appearance signaled [harmony](#) in the reign of a new emperor. By imitating the sound of the bird, Huangdi made possible the creation of music properly pitched to harmonize his rulership with the universe. Even this symbolic birth of music dates far too late to aid in discovering the melodies and instrumental sounds accompanying the rituals and burials that occurred before the first historically verified [dynasty](#), the [Shang](#) (c. 1600–1046 BCE). The sounds of music are evanescent, and before the invention of recordings they disappeared at the end of a performance. The remains of China’s most ancient music are found only in those few instruments made of sturdy material. Archaeological digs have uncovered globular clay [vessel flutes](#) (*xun*), tuned [stone chimes](#) (*qing*), and bronze bells (*zhong*), and the word [gu](#), for drum, is found incised on Shang oracle bones (turtle shells and ox bones used by rulers for ritual [divination](#) and sacrifice to obtain the grace of their ancestors).

The earliest surviving written records are from the next dynasty, the [Zhou](#) (1046–256 BCE). Within the famous books of the period known as the [Five Classics](#) (*Wujing*), it is in the *Liji* (“Collection of Rituals”) of the 6th–5th century BCE that one finds an extensive discussion of music. The *Yijing* (“Classic of Changes”) is a diviner’s handbook built around geometric patterns, [cosmology](#), and magic numbers that indirectly may relate to music. The *Chunqiu* (“Spring and Autumn [Annals]”), with its records of major events, and the *Shujing* (“Classic of History”), with its mixture of documents and forgeries, contain many references to the use of music, particularly at court activities. There are occasional comments about the [singing](#) of peasant groups, which is an item that is rare even in the early historical materials of Europe. The *Shijing* (“Classic of Poetry”) is of equal interest, for it consists of the texts of 305 songs that are dated from the 10th to the 7th century BCE. Their great variety of topics (love, ritual, political satire, etc.) reflect a viable vocal musical tradition quite understandable to contemporary audiences. The songs also include references to less-durable musical relics such as flutes, the mouth organ (*sheng*), and, apparently, two types of [zithers](#) (the *qin* and the *se*).