Music and Male Bonding in Ming China

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Abstract
Making friends and making music are two fundamental activities through which people construct their personal identities and social relationships in their historical, cultural, and engendered times and spaces. To probe such activities as revealing facets of Ming history and culture, this essay presents three case studies of Ming men making music and bonding with male friends. To highlight the expressive, cultural, and social significance of music, this essay postulates that music catalyzed male bonding in Ming China by providing a tool, a site, and a process for Ming men to express and negotiate their masculine desires, identities, and roles.

Keywords
music, men, male bond, Ming dynasty

Introduction
Traditionally, China has celebrated men’s deep and genuine friendship with the musical legend of Yu Boya 俞伯牙 and Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期 from the Chunqiu (770 BCE-476 BCE) period.¹ When Boya played qin 琴 (seven-string zither) music to describe lofty mountains or flowing waters, the legend reports, Ziqi would promptly and accurately grasp his friend’s expressions. Through music, the two developed a lifelong bond, and thus, when Ziqi died, Boya broke his qin into pieces, swearing that

he would never play again. No one would understand him and his music as Ziqi did, Boya lamented (Illustration 1).

Read from gender, social, and musical perspectives, the legend provides many clues for understanding music and male friendship in traditional China. By establishing Boya and Ziqi as irreplaceable partners, the legend puts their firm relationship outside institutionalized sites of the court, the home, and the entertainment quarters, where participants’ interactions were defined by social-political hierarchies, intellectual and ideological concerns, heterosocial practices, and economic and productive necessities for individual and familial living. By focusing on music as the element that connects two men outside blood and utilitarian relationships, the legend highlights the role of music as a social glue and raises many questions about its nature and functions. If music is a catalyst, for instance, how does it promote male bonding? What kinds of bonds result, and what do they tell about the individuals, their masculinities, and gendered societies?

To probe these issues of music and male bonding, this paper presents three case studies from late Ming China. Such a case study approach is, needless to say, a research convenience and a reflection of the available data. Though recognized as a significant subject for inquiry in Ming history and culture, music and male bonding presents numerous difficulties for analysis and thus has yet to be comprehensively investigated