

The Dual Structure of Ritual-Musical Administration in the Qing Inner Court: A Functional Analysis of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices and the Shengpingshu

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Abstract: Ritual-musical administration in the Qing inner court displayed a dual structure organized around the distinctions between the “refined” and the “popular,” and between the “public” and the “private.” By systematically examining the institutional evolution, functional differentiation, and staffing structure of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichangsi, 太常寺) and the Shengpingshu (升平署), this article reveals the logic of rule embedded in the Qing design of ritual-musical administration. The analysis shows that the Taichangsi, the legally designated institution for administering state ritual music, maintained the appearance of ritual orthodoxy through a nominal structure of paired Manchu-Han appointments, while in practice reserving key posts for Manchus alone to secure Manchu cultural predominance. By contrast, the inner-court institution responsible for popular musical performance, which evolved from the Nanfu (南府) into the Shengpingshu, moved from relative openness and inclusion during the Kangxi-Qianlong period to contraction and tighter control from the Daoguang reign onward, a trajectory that paralleled the decline of Qing state power. Together, these two institutions formed a dual administrative system that both embodied the cultural strategy of Manchu rulers and constituted an institutionalized expression of centralized rule in the domain of ritual and music.

Keywords: Qing ritual and music, Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichangsi, 太常寺), Shengpingshu (升平署), Manchu-Han relations, cultural governance

1. Introduction

As a major vehicle for what traditional China regarded as “matters of paramount importance to the state,” the ritual-musical system assumed distinctive institutional forms in Qing political practice. Existing scholarship has focused largely either on the cultural symbolism of ritual-musical ceremonies or on the historical reconstruction of institutional evolution, while paying relatively little attention to the political logic underlying the administrative system. Drawing on officially compiled sources such as the Imperially Commissioned Collected Statutes of the Great Qing (Qinding Da Qing Huidian, 《钦定大清会典》), together with newly discovered archival materials, this article adopts an institutional-historical approach to analyze systematically the division of functions between the Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichangsi, 太常寺) and the Shengpingshu

(升平署) and to examine how Qing rulers used the administration of ritual and music as an instrument of cultural control and identity construction.

2. The Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichangsi, 太常寺): The Statutory Custodian of Elegant Ritual Music (yayue, 雅乐) in Grand State Rituals

In the Qing dynasty, authority over the management of inner-court ritual and music was not concentrated in a single office. Rather, it was organized according to a dual logic that distinguished ritual and elegant music from performance and popular music, and public or state functions from private or imperial ones. These responsibilities were divided between the Taichangsi of the outer court and the Shengpingshu of the inner court, together with the latter's predecessors, the Nanfu (南府) and Jingshan (景山). The two institutions were two sides of the same system: one was responsible for "governing ritual," and the other for "supplying performances." Together they constituted the Qing administrative order for inner-court ritual and music.

As the "foundation of the five rites," the Taichangsi, although institutionally attached to the outer-court bureaucracy, was in practice deeply embedded in the highest-level ritual and musical activities of the inner court. Inherited from earlier dynasties as a state ritual-musical institution, it was defined as follows: "The Taichangsi is in charge of matters of sacrificial ritual and music. The grades of sacrificial animals and silk offerings at altars and temples, the regulations of music and dance, and the periods of purification and fasting all fall under its exclusive jurisdiction.¹" This functional definition established its authority as the institution that set state ritual-musical standards. It exercised exclusive jurisdiction over the management of yayue for state sacrifices, such as those at the Temple of Heaven and the Imperial Ancestral Temple, as well as for major court assemblies, including ceremonies held in the Hall of Supreme Harmony. To project the solemnity and normativity of grand state ritual, the Taichangsi imposed extremely stringent rules on musical use, most visibly through the standardization of the instrument-array system (yuexuan, 乐悬). Court audience ceremonial required that "the Danbi grand music be used whenever the emperor received congratulations in the hall or rites were performed in the palace; its instruments comprised two xizhu, two large drums, two fangxiang, and yunluo.²" When the emperor traveled, the imperial processional escort was to "set up music for leading and welcoming, using two xizhu, six guan pipes, four di flutes, two sheng mouth organs, two yunluo, and one drum.³" Here "Danbi grand music" refers to Danbi Dayue (丹陛大乐), while the instrument lists specify items such as xizhu (戏竹), fangxiang (方响), yunluo (云锣), guan (管), di (笛), and sheng (笙). These detailed rosters of instruments were not merely performance directions. They also embodied the hierarchy of ritual and music, consistently expressing the solemnity and normativity of the yayue under Taichangsi jurisdiction.

To ensure the full operation of these ritual-musical functions, the Taichangsi's staffing system displayed two salient features: an integrated bureaucratic structure and parallel Manchu-Han appointments. Together, these features created an operational chain extending from decision-making to execution. The personnel system built on Ming precedents while strengthening a formal structure of Manchu-Han co-administration, yet the distribution of ultimate authority also reflected the Qing court's political logic of "using the Manchus to govern the Han." The official regulations stipulated that there was "one minister managing the affairs of the

Court, concurrently held by the Manchu president of the Board of Rites; one court minister, of the third principal rank, and one vice minister, of the fourth principal rank, with one Manchu and one Han official in each office.⁴ At the apex stood a single minister managing the Court's affairs, a post customarily held concurrently by the Manchu president of the Board of Rites, thereby ensuring that Manchu officials retained ultimate decision-making power over core ritual-musical matters. Beneath this post were the court minister and vice minister, each staffed by one Manchu and one Han official, forming a formally balanced and symmetrical arrangement. Their duties were clearly differentiated. The court minister, as the principal officeholder, was charged "to oversee and guard the altars, temples, and the altars of soil and grain; arrange sacrifices according to the seasonal cycle; promulgate ritual regulations; supply the requisite offerings; and distinguish the categories of ritual vessels." In practice, this meant overseeing and safeguarding sacrificial altars, ancestral temples, and the altars of soil and grain, arranging annual sacrificial observances in seasonal sequence, promulgating the ritual rules governing sacrifice, supplying sacrificial materials, and classifying the categories of implements used in sacrifice. The vice minister, as deputy, was tasked "to present the prayer tablet in advance, inspect the fasting and purification of the officials, and on the day of sacrifice lead subordinates in carrying out the service."⁵ This was more clearly an assisting role, centered on pre-ritual procedural inspection and on-site command during the ceremony. The principle of appointing "one Manchu and one Han" thus created a formal appearance of institutional co-governance, but by reserving the managing ministership for a Manchu officeholder, the system ensured that the Manchu ruling group retained final interpretive authority over state ritual-musical discourse.

At the crucial intermediate level that linked upper-level decision-making to lower-level execution, officeholding again displayed formal Manchu-Han balance. Two Manchu and two Han assistant administrators, all of the sixth principal rank, were appointed to oversee sacrificial specifications, personnel selection, and the auditing of salaries and stipends. The core responsibility for verifying ritual texts and forms, however, belonged to the erudites of the Bureau of Erudition, of the seventh principal rank, with one Manchu, one Han bannerman, and one Han official. Their central duty was "to examine prayer texts and ritual procedures and record them in registers as standards,"⁶ and they were also responsible for guiding and inspecting sacrificial offerings. This arrangement ensured the textual and juridical rigor of ritual-musical activity. Concrete administrative and ritual implementation, meanwhile, was carried out by a finely differentiated body of subordinate officials, among whom the key functionaries were the masters of ceremony and the prayer-reading officers. As the regulations stated, "The masters of ceremony and the prayer-reading officers divided responsibility for assisting ritual department and sequencing the proceedings, preparing objects and cleansing vessels, and practicing the prescribed movements and prayer recitation; during sacrifices each served as an officiant." In personnel terms, the masters of ceremony, all of the ninth principal rank, included two imperial clansmen and twenty-eight Manchu and twenty-eight Han officials responsible for directing ritual performance, with complete parity between Manchu and Han quotas. The prayer-reading officers, also of the ninth principal rank, consisted of one imperial clansman and eleven Manchu officials responsible for reciting the prayer texts. Because major Qing sacrifices, such as the Tangzi rites, often employed prayers in Manchu, this more symbolically charged office was reserved exclusively for imperial-clan and Manchu personnel. In addition, among the clerks-translators responsible for documentary translation, nine were Manchu and one was a Han bannerman. This personnel structure makes clear that beneath the

appearance of "co-governance," the core media through which the highest ritual authority of both state and ruling ethnicity was articulated, namely language and sacrificial proclamation, remained firmly under Manchu control.

For daily administration and logistics, one Manchu and one Han registrar managed documents and archives; one Manchu treasury keeper was solely responsible for funds, grain, and material supplies; two storehouse attendants assisted in managing materials; and among the clerks-translators responsible for documentary translation, nine were Manchu and one was a Han bannerman. All of these posts were of the ninth principal rank. Particularly striking is that at this level both the treasury keeper, who controlled fiscal resources, and the prayer-reading officers, who intoned the sacrificial texts, were posts monopolized or dominated by Manchu officials, while the clerks-translators responsible for documentary translation were likewise overwhelmingly Manchu. This staffing pattern clearly shows that the Taichangsi not only built a complete operational chain extending from ritual performance to administrative logistics and from high-level decision-making to lower-level implementation, but also, beneath the surface of Manchu-Han co-governance, kept firmly in Manchu hands the institutional core involving real fiscal power, language and script, and the privilege of sacrificial proclamation.

Within the extensive bureaucratic apparatus of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichangsi), there was also a specialized implementing body—the Bureau of Divine Music (Shenyueshu, 神乐署)—which served as the principal site for rehearsal and personnel training in state ritual music (yayue). As the sources record, “The Shenyueshu had one superintendent, rank 6a... all were Han Chinese officials concurrently attached to the Taichangsi. They were responsible for the various forms of music used in suburban, temple, and sacrificial rites.⁷” Another record states: “The Shenyueshu had one Han Chinese superintendent, two deputies, five pitch-regulating officials, and twenty-three music masters, who oversaw the rhythm and tempo of music and dance and instructed the music-and-dance trainees. Ninety ritual attendants, 180 musicians, and 300 dancers were all attached to it. Whenever memorials concerning sacrifices were submitted, the Board of Rites fixed the sacrificial dates in the preceding year and notified the Taichangsi.⁸” In organizational terms, the Shenyueshu was headed by one Han Chinese superintendent (rank 6a) and two deputy superintendents, who were responsible for the daily management, discipline, and attendance of the music-and-dance trainees. Five pitch-regulating officials and twenty-three music masters, dispatched by the Taichangsi, were then charged with “overseeing the rhythm and tempo of music and dance and instructing the music-and-dance trainees.” Rather than handling routine administrative affairs, they focused on rehearsal and musical direction, ensuring that performances conformed to prescribed standards of pitch and rhythm. The performing personnel themselves consisted of approximately ninety ritual attendants, 180 musicians, and 300 dancers. This professional corps of nearly 600 members fell entirely under the authority of the Shenyueshu, forming a large imperial performing ensemble. This two-tiered system—whereby the bureau was institutionally subordinate to the court while technical specialization was concentrated within the bureau—effectively separated administrative decision-making from technical training and ensured the professional management of a large body of performers. Using the Shenyueshu as its institutional platform, the Taichangsi adhered strictly to the principle that “rites followed the Zhou system, and music followed ancient models” in selecting and training musical personnel. To guarantee the quality of yayue performance, the Taichangsi imposed stringent entry requirements on rank-and-file music and dance personnel. For example, the musicians who performed

Zhonghe Shaoyue (中和韶乐) in sacrificial rites had to be carefully selected from respectable families in designated regions: “Select promising sons registered as commoners from Zhili and Shandong... over fifteen and under twenty years of age, and versed in tonal principles.⁹” Restricting recruitment to “Zhili and Shandong” was intended to ensure a pronunciation close to that of the Central Plain, while the criterion of “promising youths registered as commoners” removed the stigma attached to the low-status classification of hereditary musician households, thereby ensuring from the outset the unblemished social standing of those who served in state sacrifices. At the same time, to prevent errors in ritual performance, the Taichangsi established a strict scheduling regime. In the management of pitch standards and instruments, the pitch-regulating officials were charged with “overseeing the rhythm and tempo of music and dance and directing the duties of the performers,” and were required to recalibrate the pitch of instruments in storage on a regular basis so that instruments of “metal, stone, silk, and bamboo” conformed to state pitch standards. At the level of implementing major ceremonies, records also note that “five days before a grand sacrifice... the musicians rehearsed in advance at the Shenyueshu.¹⁰” This meant that, on the fifth day before the sacrifice began, all music-and-dance personnel had to complete a full dress rehearsal in costume and makeup at the Shenyueshu; only after passing inspection by the minister of the Taichangsi and the pitch-regulating officials were they permitted to appear in the formal ceremony. Taken together, musical pitch assessments and preliminary dress rehearsals minimized technical errors in ritual-musical performance to the greatest extent possible, demonstrating the exceptional rigor of the state’s management of ceremonial music.

3. The Shengpingshu (升平署): Institutional Evolution and Functions in the Provision of Vernacular Performance in the Inner Court

Unlike the Taichangsi, whose administration of ritual court music was tightly controlled, the inner-court performance institutions under the Imperial Household Department—the Nanfu and its successor, the Shengpingshu—underwent sweeping institutional changes as imperial priorities shifted. This evolution clearly reveals the historical trajectory through which Qing inner-court ritual and music administration moved from “high-Qing expansion” to “late-Qing contraction.”

3.1 The Precursors of the Shengpingshu: Nanfu (南府) and Jingshan (景山)

The Qing system for administering inner-court performance began to take shape under the Kangxi emperor and reached its peak under Qianlong. To meet the rapidly growing demand for court entertainment and ceremonial display, the Qing court broke with the single-institution model of the Ming Jiaofangsi and established two separate bodies under the Imperial Household Department: the Nanfu and Jingshan. Available evidence suggests that the Nanfu was first established during the Kangxi reign. Located on the west side of the southern entrance to Nanchang Street, outside the Xihua Gate of the Forbidden City and adjacent to the offices of the Imperial Household Department, it served as the command center and principal rehearsal venue for inner-court performance. Because it stood to the south of the palace compound, it came to be popularly known as the Nanfu.¹¹ Jingshan, by contrast, was located behind Guande Hall on Jingshan in the northern part of the imperial city and functioned primarily as a residential and training site for some performers. This north-south

spatial arrangement separated performers geographically and, in practice, reflected the fact that by the mid-Qing a single site could no longer accommodate the large number of court performers.

At Jingshan, the staff establishment comprised one superintendent, of the seventh rank, responsible for guard and attendance duties and receiving a monthly stipend of 5 taels of silver, 5 hu of grain, and 1 tael as an expense allowance; two headmen, both eighth-rank eunuch attendants, each receiving 3 taels of silver, 3 hu of grain, and 0.733 tael as an expense allowance; acting headmen, without formal rank or fixed quota, who received the same stipend and allowances; and eunuchs, likewise without fixed quota, each receiving 2 taels of silver, 1.5 hu of grain, and 0.666 tael as an expense allowance. Personnel granted additional monthly silver by imperial favor were likewise not fixed in number, while those granted rank by imperial favor received silver, grain, and expense allowances according to rank.¹² This staffing pattern reveals a three-tier administrative hierarchy consisting of superintendent, headman, and eunuch. At the Nanfu, the establishment included one seventh-rank superintendent, likewise responsible for guard and attendance duties, with a monthly stipend of 5 taels of silver, 5 hu of grain, and 1 tael as an expense allowance, along with four eighth-rank headmen, each receiving 4 taels of silver, 4 hu of grain, and 0.733 tael as an expense allowance.¹³ In both institutions, the hierarchy was relatively simple from top to bottom and, unlike the Taichangsi, did not specify separate staffing quotas for Manchu and Han personnel.

During the Nanfu-Jingshan period, upper-level administration was organized through a Nanfu-Jingshan Affairs Office staffed by two concurrently appointed directors, three concurrently appointed assistant directors, six clerks, and one supervisor.¹⁴ The most distinctive feature of personnel management was the coexistence of a dual-track system of inner-school (neixue, 内学) and outer-school (waixue, 外学) training, which served as an important channel through which the Qing court recruited performance talent from Jiangnan. The inner-school track consisted mainly of young eunuch-performers selected by the Imperial Household Department and housed within the Nanfu. They were the formally enrolled personnel of inner-court performance, serving the palace for life. Although they were legally bondservants, rigorous training often brought their skills to a level comparable to that of professional actors. The outer-school track, by contrast, was a distinctive form of training in the flourishing Kangxi-Qianlong era that drew on performers with civilian household registration. During his six tours to Jiangnan, the Qianlong emperor came to hold Kunqu (昆曲) and regional operatic traditions of Suzhou and Yangzhou in especially high regard and accordingly ordered offices such as the Suzhou Imperial Textile Office and the Lianghuai Salt Administration to select large numbers of outstanding civilian performers for palace service. These renowned Kunqu masters and elite actors from Jiangnan were classified as “outer-school” performers and housed mainly in the Jingshan area.¹⁵ They retained their commoner household registration and received generous remuneration in silver and grain. In ordinary times, they were responsible for training the inner-school eunuchs; during major celebrations, they shared the stage with them in court performance. At their height, the combined Nanfu-Jingshan establishment comprised more than 1,000 personnel. Their administrative structure had a distinctive character: they functioned not only as performance organizations but also as large-scale training institutions, much like modern performing-arts companies.

3.2 The Establishment and Development of the Shengpingshu

From the late Jiaqing reign through the early Daoguang reign, the declining strength of the Qing state, together with the Daoguang emperor's personal commitment to frugality, made the maintenance of the large Nanfu and Jingshan establishments a heavy fiscal burden on the Imperial Household Department. This context precipitated the largest institutional reform in the history of ritual-musical administration within the Qing inner court.

In June 1821, the first year of the Daoguang reign, the emperor, almost immediately upon taking the throne, ordered the abolition of the Jingshan establishment and the transfer of all of its personnel and functions to the Nanfu.¹⁶ This measure ended the century-long dual-office arrangement and marked an initial concentration of administrative authority. Yet it was only the prelude to further reform, for the Nanfu still retained a large number of civilian-registered outer-school (*waixue*, 外学) performers. A fundamental turning point came in 1827. Citing the need “to curtail entertainments and uphold frugality,” the Daoguang emperor renamed the Nanfu the Shengpingshu and carried out sweeping personnel reductions.¹⁷ At the core of this reform was the removal of civilian-registered personnel: large numbers of outer-school instructors from Suzhou and Yangzhou were dismissed and repatriated, while only a very small number—those of exceptional skill who had also proven dutiful in service—were retained and reassigned as Suzhou-origin instructors attached to the Archives Office. In effect, the Qing palace performance institution shrank almost overnight from a large organization that openly drew on talent from outside the court into a closed service institution dominated by eunuchs and household bondservants. The change in designation from the more administratively weighty *fu* to the lower-ranking *shu* likewise symbolized a contraction in political status and administrative authority. Although the restructured Shengpingshu was smaller in scale, its administrative system became more hierarchical and tightly controlled, and it gradually developed a distinctive operating logic suited to the political environment of the late Qing court.

Administratively, the Shengpingshu was fully subordinate to the Imperial Household Department. Unlike in the Qianlong reign, no high-ranking concurrently serving minister was appointed to oversee it;¹⁸ instead, it was placed directly under a superintendent eunuch of nominal seventh or eighth rank. Its internal organization was nevertheless complete. At the managerial level, a superintendent eunuch and senior eunuchs oversaw the daily scheduling of performances, rewards and punishments, and the disbursement of stipends and grain allowances. One especially noteworthy feature is that, during the late Qing period when Empress Dowager Cixi dominated court politics, Shengpingshu superintendents such as the later Chief Eunuch Da Li¹⁹ often wielded practical influence far beyond their formal rank because they had direct access to the sovereign. The next tier included the Office of Finance and Provisions, which managed finances, stipends and grain disbursements, and procurement; the Archives Office, which kept scripts, playbills, facial-make-up designs, and administrative documents; the Zhonghe Music Office, which oversaw ritual genres such as Zhonghe Shaoyue (中和韶乐) and Danbi Dayue (丹陛大乐); and the Shifan Music Office, which specialized in instrumental wind-and-percussion performance. This “small but complete” design enabled the Shengpingshu to sustain frequent court performances at relatively low personnel cost.

Some studies too readily equate the Shengpingshu with a mere opera troupe, but this is, I would argue, a misreading. As the institution responsible for providing ritual and musical services within the inner court, the Shengpingshu in fact exercised authority over an extremely important segment of court ritual music. It maintained a dedicated Zhonghe Music Office. Although Zhonghe Shaoyue at state ceremonies such as sacrifices to Heaven and grand court audiences was administered by the Taichangsi, the ritual music used in the imperial family's private inner-court spaces—including banquets in the Palace of Heavenly Purity, birthday celebrations for imperial consorts, weddings of imperial princes, and the emperor's daily routines—such as Zhonghe Shaoyue and Danbi Dayue, was performed by eunuchs from the Shengpingshu²⁰'s Zhonghe Music Office. For example, at the Lunar New Year, the emperor received congratulations in the Hall of Supreme Harmony to music administered by the Taichangsi, but once he returned to the Palace of Heavenly Purity for a family banquet, the music shifted to that of the Shengpingshu. This division of labor, in which the Taichangsi managed ritual music in the outer court while the Shengpingshu managed it in the inner court, embodied the distinction between “public and private” and between “state and household” within the Qing ritual-musical order. By the Xianfeng, Tongzhi, and Guangxu reigns, the personnel cuts of 1827 had produced a chronic shortage of highly skilled instructors from outside the palace. The performance standards of the Shengpingshu's inner-school (neixue, 内学) eunuch actors declined sharply, and they were increasingly unable to satisfy the tastes of the ruling house, especially Empress Dowager Cixi. To address this administrative dilemma, the Shengpingshu developed the innovative chuanchai (传差) system, that is, a summons-based arrangement under which outside troupes rendered court service. Rather than keeping civilian performers inside the palace as outer-school (waixue, 外学) performers, as had been done under the Qianlong emperor, it shifted to a model of temporary recruitment. On major ceremonial occasions, the court directly summoned famous civilian opera troupes from the capital—such as the then-flourishing Sanqing and Sixi troupes, and later renowned actors such as Tan Xinpei—to enter the palace and perform; once the performance was over, they left the palace and were rewarded on a per-performance basis.²¹ This institutional innovation not only avoided the fiscal and security risks of maintaining a large body of civilian-registered instructors, but also successfully brought the finest achievements of late Qing Peking opera within the orbit of court service, thereby realizing a managerial logic of “not seeking ownership, only use.”

4. Conclusion

The transition from the Nanfu and Jingshan to the Shengpingshu was more than a simple change in name; it represented a reform of the administrative system itself. It marked a broader shift in the Qing inner court's management of ritual and music, from a model characterized by expansion amid dynastic prosperity and the co-flourishing of refined and popular forms to one defined, in the late Qing, by contraction and pragmatism. As the final institutional expression of this transformation, the Shengpingshu relied on a highly centralized system of eunuch administration and the flexible mechanism of chuanchai (传差), or ad hoc service assignments, to sustain, with considerable difficulty, the decorum and order of imperial ritual and music during the dynasty's last century. The dual structure of ritual-musical administration that the Qing court built through the Taichangsi and the Shengpingshu was both an institutional innovation rooted in the traditional conception that refined and popular forms should be separately organized and a concrete vehicle for the cultural strategy of Manchu rule. This system reached peak effectiveness under the Kangxi and Qianlong

emperors through the integration of resources, but by the late Qing it had fallen into difficulty under the combined pressures of fiscal retrenchment and a breakdown in the cultivation and replacement of skilled personnel. The arc of its rise and decline not only illuminates the distinctive features of Qing cultural governance, but also offers a revealing case through which to understand the relationship between ritual, music, and politics in traditional China.

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