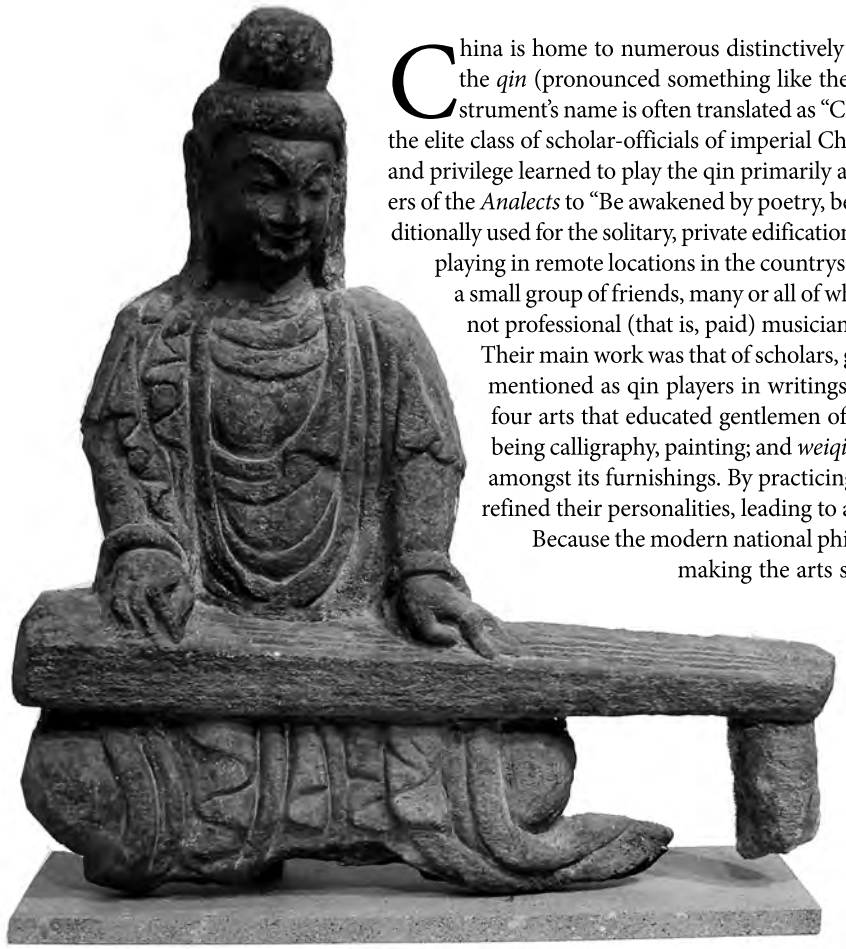
The Qin China's Most Revered Musical Instrument

By Ann L. Silverberg

Editor's Note: Readers can visit the EAA spring online supplement for audio and performance examples of the music specifically discussed in this essay.



Rock carving of a *bodhisattva* playing a guqin, found in Shanxi, Northern Wei dynasty (386–534).
Source: http://tiny.cc/5rh6sw.

China is home to numerous distinctively Chinese musical instruments, but none is more revered than the *qin* (pronounced something like the English word "chin" and sometimes written "ch'in"). The instrument's name is often translated as "Chinese lute" or "ancient lute" (*guqin*). The qin is associated with the elite class of scholar-officials of imperial China, and it boasts a history of thousands of years. Men of rank and privilege learned to play the qin primarily as a means of self-cultivation. Confucius admonished the readers of the *Analects* to "Be awakened by poetry, be established by ritual, be perfected in music."[1] The qin was traditionally used for the solitary, private edification of the player, and thus there are many depictions of qin players playing in remote locations in the countryside, often in the mountains. At most, qin enthusiasts played for a small group of friends, many or all of whom probably also played the instrument. Qin performers were not professional (that is, paid) musicians, though they apparently took great care to learn how to play. Their main work was that of scholars, gentlemen, and officials. These men—women are almost never mentioned as qin players in writings or portrayed in pictures—undertook qin study as one of the four arts that educated gentlemen of their class and rank were expected to master, the other three being calligraphy, painting; and *weiqi*, an ancient form of chess. A true scholar's study included a qin amongst its furnishings. By practicing the qin and learning to appreciate its music, scholar-officials refined their personalities, leading to a more harmonious world.

Because the modern national philosophy of the People's Republic of China is heavily invested in making the arts serve the masses, and the qin has historically been connected with wealth, high social rank, and classical Chinese poetry and language dating from the Chinese Empire, the qin has had limited appeal in contemporary China. After the end of the Imperial Era a hundred years ago, few expert qin players passed their knowledge and skills on to younger students. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there were "perhaps no more than fifty surviving masters" of the qin in 2008.[2] Only a handful of young people are pursuing qin study at Chinese music conservatories nowadays. Nevertheless, the music of the qin is widely known if not commonly heard in person. The qin is familiar to many Chinese because it is often referred to in classic poetry and prose, and it is frequently portrayed in Chinese paintings.[3] Antique qins are bought and sold as artworks in and of themselves, and a recent article that appeared in *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* stated that a qin once owned by a Song dynasty emperor fetched $22 million in 2010.[4]

Heavily researched both in China and in the West, the qin is one of a large, important family of Asian zithers—musical instruments with strings stretched across a long, hollowed-out resonating chamber.[5] Members of the qin's extended family include the Japanese *koto*, Korean *kayageum*, Mongolian *yatga,* and Vietnamese *dan tranh*. The qin is in the shape of a relatively shallow, narrow, and roughly rectangular wooden box approximately three feet long, which tapers from end to end and has a slightly convex upper surface. Seven strings made of silk are stretched across the top, and thirteen round markers are inlaid into the instrument's top surface at intervals along its length. These markers show where the fingers of the left hand hold strings against the top surface of the qin, allowing many different pitches to be produced by each string by changing its vibrating length; the strings are plucked with the fingers of the right hand. The qin is easily distinguished from the louder, deeper, and currently more popular Chinese zither known as the *zheng,* which has bridges (small, V-shaped pieces of wood) that suspend twenty-one strings above the zheng's top surface: the qin has no bridges and only thirteen strings. Qins commonly have the names of their makers and the names of their owners over the generations engraved into the outside bottom panel of the instrument, along with poems. As a qin ages, the varnish covering the qin acquires tiny cracks, lending further beauty and significance to the instrument.

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The qin itself is rich in symbolic meaning, and so is its music. For example, the curved top of the qin is said to represent heaven; the instrument's flat bottom represents the earth. Two holes in the bottom panel of the qin allow the sound to project to some extent; these are referred to as the "phoenix" and "dragon" pools. Like the heavens and the earth, the phoenix and dragon are opposing but complementary ideas. The ubiquitous influence of the Confucian/Daoist concepts of yin (positive, masculine, bright) and yang (negative, feminine, dark), whose balance is crucial in Chinese cosmology, is evident in these pairings. These ideas and others like them are echoed in the terminology used to describe the way sounds are produced on the qin.

Qin music is subtle, utilizing three basic types of sounds with many nuances and much symbolic value. One type of sound is made by plucking a string with a finger of the right hand with no interference from the left hand. These are known as *sanyin* (open) sounds, which are said to represent earth. Another type of sound is the closed, or stopped, *an* sound. The player presses the string against the qin with a finger of the left hand while plucking with the right, producing sounds with higher pitches and a somewhat different timbre than the open sounds. These sounds are called *anyin*, or stopped sounds, and symbolize people. Sounds made with the left-hand fingers very lightly touching the strings at specific points, known as nodes, and the right hand plucking, creating high ethereal tones known as harmonics, represent heaven and are called *fanyin*. Humans live and act between the earth and the heavens, just as the stopped-string *an* sounds are differentiated from the earthy, open sanyin sounds and the ethereal fanyin tones.

The music of the qin is so unlike Western music in meaning and sonic content that it offers an opportunity to think about what music actually is (and what it is not), which features make individual works recognizable as distinct entities, and what music means. In the West, live music may be listened to by a large group of people who sit passively at concerts and simply find the music entertaining. A great deal of instrumental music has no specific meaning beyond its sounds and their structure; music that is sung—vocal music—is said to mean what the words tell us it means. These concepts are radically different from the venerated and venerable solo music of the qin. The music of this ancient instrument is often imbued with literary references, suggesting ideas beyond sounds that the listener ideally will be able to discover simply by listening.

Two legendary stories illustrate how non-musical ideas may be derived from experiencing the music of the qin as a listener or qin player. In an often-heard legend said to date from centuries before the Common Era (and still told by musicians today), a qin player named Boya played a famous qin piece known as "Lofty Mountain Flowing Water" while visiting the remote mountains and was overheard by an ordinary worker, whose name was Ziqi. Boya had imagined he was playing the qin for his own private enjoyment, and discovering that his music making was being overheard, Boya demanded that Ziqi tell him the meaning of music. "As lofty as Mount Tai!" responded Ziqi. After playing the second ("Flowing Water") section of the music, Boya once again asked Ziqi his impression of the music. "Flowing like the great seas!" Ziqi answered. Finding such an empathetic listener, Boya forgave Ziqi for his impudence and traveled far each year to play for Ziqi, who never failed to grasp the meaning of the qin compositions Boya played, greatly pleasing both men. Finally, Boya made his annual journey and learned that Ziqi had died in the interim. Realizing that he would never again find a listener as understanding as Ziqi, Boya picked up his qin and smashed it, never to play again.

A story recorded in the *Shiji* (historical records) concerns the great sage Confucius (551–479 BCE), who is said to have played the qin himself. When Confucius had practiced a particular piece for some time, his qin teacher suggested that he move on and learn a new work. Confucius said that he had not yet mastered the piece's external form. After more practice, the teacher contended that Confucius had learned the piece's external form and could now learn another work. Confucius replied that although he had mastered the piece's external form, he had not yet understood its internal meaning. After additional practice, the teacher said that Confucius had learned the internal meaning of the piece and surely could now begin learning a new work. Confucius replied that he had not yet understood the piece's humanity. After still more practice, Confucius said that he had finally grasped the piece's humanity and that it referred to Emperor Wen. Confucius's teacher told him that the composition was indeed about Emperor Wen, as his own teacher had once told him.[6] These tales show that qin music is only partially understood when its sonic content is heard and/or produced efficiently. The ultimate goal of listening to and playing qin music is understanding rather than imitation, empathy rather than mere appreciation of sonic beauty.

The qin.
Source: http://tiny.cc/94l6sw.

Links to Internet Materials for The Qin
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The famous painting *Ting Qin Tu* (*Listening to the Qin*) by the Song Emperor Huizong (1082–1135). Source: http://tiny.cc/3dk6sw.

INTRODUCTION TO THE QIN

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity site includes a short description of the qin, photographs, and a brief video (just over four minutes) narrated in English. The music includes singing with the qin, and some strains of Yang Guan San Die are heard in the background. Playing techniques and some of the symbolism involved in the qin's construction are also discussed.
URL: http://tiny.cc/p7cksw

CONTEXT, HISTORY, AND SYMBOLISM OF THE QIN

Wang Fei and her sister Annie have created three short, seven- to ten-minute, videos introducing the qin in English, explaining its context and history, and offering several performances. For parts two and three, search "English guqin presentation by Wang Fei." URL: http://tiny.cc/z6cksw

PERFORMANCES

"Parting at Yang Guan
Many versions of Parting at Yang Guan are available on the Internet, some with other instruments added, some with singing, and some accompanied by static photographs. Here are three, selected from those that seem to be credible performances showing a solo performer at work:

An expert player performs "Parting at Yang Guan" in a concert-like setting. Captions in Chinese discuss Wang Wei's poem. Good close-ups of hands; roughly five minutes long. URL: http://tiny.cc/l8cksw.

Live video recording (by an amateur) of expert performer Wang Peng playing "Parting at Yang Guan." There is some extraneous noise, but the video also features good close-ups of hand positions. About seven and a half minutes; no narration. URL: http://tiny.cc/5g7uuw.

In this seven-minute video, the qin soloist plays and sings words of Wang Wei. URL: http://tiny.cc/29cksw.

ADDITIONAL QIN MUSIC

"Flowing Waters"
A performance of "Flowing Waters" by qin master Lui Pui-Yuen, this seven-minute video demonstrates many guqin techniques and sounds, including san yin, an yin, and fan yin (no narration or captions). URL: http://tiny.cc/xodksw

"Evening Song of a Drunken Fisherman"
This is a four-minute performance of a famous qin work, "Evening Song of a Drunken Fisherman" by Lui Pui-Yuen (no narration or captions).
URL: http://tiny.cc/tpdksw

IMAGES OF THE QIN

To explore images of the qin in art, visit the website of New York's Metropolitan Museum (www.metmuseum.org), and search the collection for "qin (seven-stringed zither)." You will find photos of qins as well as artwork portraying playing qin players. URL: http://tiny.cc/1ncksw

ARTstor, available only by subscription, contains numerous images of artworks showing qin players and qins. Because "qin" is also the name of the famed first emperor of China, you will find much unrelated artwork as well.
URL: http://library.artstor.org/

In the story of Boya and Ziqi, the ability to understand what is being played without prior explanation is considered to be a sign of great sensitivity on the part of the listener, and the meaning of the music is clearly a depiction of some natural scene, in this case a lofty mountain and flowing water. The empathetic listener, who is either the performer himself or a close friend of the player (and likely to be a person who plays the qin also), is the best audience for qin music, and it is clear from this legend that to be overheard playing the qin is usually not a good idea. One should not play for the uninitiated, who are unlikely to appreciate or understand qin music. Qin music is consistently connected with an image, an idea, a story, and/or a poem; it is not an abstract creation to be appreciated for its sound and structure as such but is rather a guide to non-musical concepts—perhaps even the "humanity"—the music is said to convey. In the story about Confucius's efforts as a qin player, he has completed learning the music when he has understood the full (non-musical) meaning behind the sounds he creates with the instrument. In Confucius's case and in the legend of Boya and Ziqi, divining the generating idea behind the music is all-important.

One of the famous works of qin music is called "Parting at Yang Guan" or "Yang Guan San Die," based on a poem by the great Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei (699–759 CE). A translation of the poem reads as follows:

Mild and fair, the season is spring.
In the city of Wei the morning rain wets the soft dust.
At the guest house, green, green are the fresh hues of the willows.
I urge you to empty another cup of wine.
West of Yang Pass there will be no more old friends.
Frosty night and frosty morning.
Going far away, far away,
A long journey beyond the edge of the sky.
Reluctantly this body is driven,
Enduring hardship, enduring hardship, always enduring hardship,
Do take care, do take care.
In the city of Wei the morning rain wets the soft dust.
At the guest house, green, green are the fresh hues of the willows.
I urge you to empty another cup of wine.
West of Yang Pass there will be no more old friends.
Lingering and loving we can't bear to part,
Tears dampen the handkerchief.
We shall no longer be able to care for one another,
How sad, how sad,
I shall think of you day and night.
We are like stars at the opposite shores of heaven,
Whom shall I turn to, whom shall I turn to, whom shall I turn to now?
I shall think of you, think of you.
In the city of Wei the morning rain wets the soft dust.
At the guest house, green, green are the fresh hues of the willows.
I urge you to empty another cup of wine.
West of Yang Pass there will be no more old friends.
The fragrant grass spreads like a soft carpet.
Fine wine, fine wine,
My heart is drunk before I take a drop.
Galloping steeds, galloping steeds,
When will I hear your homebound chariot?
How many rounds of drink can we endure?
A thousand rounds will come to an end,
Not an inch of grief will disappear, endless grief,
We are as far apart as the sky of Chu and the waters of Xiang.
Promise to write soon,
With your letter, with your letter, with your many letters,
It will be like being together, being together.
Alas!
After today's parting we can only think of one another, and meet often in dreams.
I shall wait for messages from the wild geese.[7]

Screen capture from the video on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity website at http://tiny.cc/vim6sw.

This beautiful text demands some explanation. Two close friends journey to Wei, where one of them is under orders to take a post even further west on the remote frontier. The friends must part, and both know that the chances of meeting again are small: to go to Yang Guan (Yang Pass) is perhaps to be gone forever. Thus, three times the thoughts return: drink one more cup of wine, say farewell, part ways, mourn separation from a dear friend.[8]

In imperial Chinese society, cultivating knowledge and skills such as playing the qin was a means of bettering oneself as a person in keeping with Confucian philosophy. . .

While qin music was largely passed on in aural/oral tradition from teacher to student, "Yang Guan San Die" is preserved in thirty-three notated (written) versions, which date from 1491 to 1922.[9] Two main types of notation have been used to preserve qin music. One type is largely *wenzipu*, or prose descriptions of the music. The other is *jianzipu*, and this type centers around explaining where and how to stop and/or pluck the strings of the instrument via clusters of symbols made up of Chinese characters, abbreviations, and numbers. Neither the wenzipu or jianzipu types of notation provide explicit indications of rhythm showing how long pitches should sound or how fast the music should be played. A performer using wenzipu or jianzipu to recreate a work must, therefore, make these determinations. Thus, widely divergent sonic versions of a single work may be created from the wenzipu or jianzipu notation of the same piece.[10]

Although hundreds of works are preserved in wenzipu or jianzipu notation, performers must study the poetry or concept underlying the music before beginning to interpret a notated work.[11] Recordings have clearly aided (or perhaps even interfered) with the process of musical transmission, which relied on teacher-student relationships for hundreds of years; working from notated versions may only create a work that differs considerably from an interpretation from centuries or perhaps millennia ago. Perhaps a thoughtful qin player would say that as long as the "humanity" of the piece is conveyed, the actual sounds heard need not be exactly the same from player to player.

In imperial Chinese society, cultivating knowledge and skills such as playing the qin was a means of bettering oneself as a person in keeping with Confucian philosophy, which held that bettering oneself as a person would lead to the betterment of the family and, in turn, to the betterment of society, the state, and the world. The value of qin music, then, is not the sound as much as its effect on those who play and hear it. ■

NOTES

1. See Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2010), 47.
2. See the UNESCO site, accessed January 21, 2013, http://tiny.cc/6fcksw, which includes a short description of the qin, photographs, and a brief video narrated in English.
3. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's website (http://www.metmuseum.org) and the ARTstor Digital Library offer access to images of the instrument.
4. Sheila Melvin, "An Ancient Chinese Instrument Is Making a Comeback," *The New York Times,* April 11, 2012, http://tiny.cc/zgcksw.
5. Among the better-known books are Robert Van Gulik's *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in the Ideology of the Ch'in* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1968; first published in 1940) and David Ming-Yueh's *The Chinese Chin: Its History and Its Music* (San Francisco: Chinese National Music Association, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, 1972).
6. The ruler referred to is probably the founder of the Zhou dynasty, often known as Zhou Wen Wang. The eminent scholar Bell Yung provides a translation of this story in his article "Instruments: Qin" in *East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea. The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, eds. Robert C. Provine, Yoshiko Tokumaru, and J. Lawrence Witzleben, vol. 7 (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 160.
7. This translation is provided by Bell Yung, *Garland Encyclopedia,* vol. 7, 162.
8. Internet videos and commercial recordings of "Yang Guan San Die" are numerous: Readers may visit http://tiny.cc/w2z9sw to hear Gongyi perform the work or purchase Liang Mingyue's compact disc of qin music, titled *Yang Guan San Die* (Wergo Germany, ASIN BOOOO69JMB). "Yang Guan San Die" is also included among the recordings supplementing *East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea. The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music vol. 7*, mentioned in note 5.
9. Yung, *Garland Encyclopedia,* Vol. 7, 161.
10. Bell Yung explores this problem and others in "*Da Pu*: The Recreative Process for the Music of the Seven-String Zither," *Music and Context: Essays for John M. Ward*, ed. Ann Dhu Shapiro (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Music, 1985), 370–384.
11. Bell Yung explores the process of recreating works from notation via the process known as *da pu* in *Celestial Airs of Antiquity: Music of the Seven-Stringed Zither of China, Recent Researches in the Oral Traditions of Music*, 8 (Madison: WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 1997). This book is accompanied by a compact disc of performances by Yung's teacher, Yao Bingyan, along with notated versions of the music. "Yang Guan San Die" is not included.

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