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Hadzhosa D. R.

Independent researcher (ethnomusicology and religious studies),

Senior Lecturer

Kyiv University of Law of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF GUQIN TRADITION (古琴): LANGUAGE, MUSIC, PHILOSOPHY AND THEIR PROFOUND RELATIONSHIP

Among the vast number of ancient Chinese musical instruments that embodied the concordance of philosophy, language, religion, and music, one can single out one special one: the qin (琴), also known as the guqin (古琴).

It is an absolutely unique musical instrument, both in its simplicity yet exquisite in its structure and in its almost three thousand-year history of transformations that reflected the dynamics of changes in philosophy, religion, and the state, nonetheless preserving the integrity and continuity of its tradition. [1, p. 83; 2, pp. 95–96].

During its centuries-long history, the civilization of China created an extremely complex and diverse system of music that included both the musical instruments themselves, the theoretical concepts corresponding to them, unique aesthetics, and a special system of philosophy that explained the place and functions of these instruments in the broader structure of ancient Chinese cosmological views.

The Western mind tends to differentiate between aspects of aural experiences/musicality, philosophy, language, and religion and tends to perceive them as separate cultural phenomena and separate them into distinct worldviews. But as we can see from the example of ancient cultures, these phenomena were intimately intertwined in a single worldview system. Perhaps most clearly, we can see it in ancient Chinese culture.

But for the better understanding the main cultural aspects of the tradition can be relatively divided into: 1. Philosophical and religious; 2. Linguistic; 3. Musical.

Philosophical aspect

Ancient Chinese culture developed a fairly extensive system of music theory (音樂 yīnyuè), which, as noted above, was inextricably linked to philosophy and integrated into Chinese cosmology. This is, perhaps, most evident in the Confucian tradition, which placed great emphasis on ritual (禮lǐ), which accompanied various aspects of social life. It can be said that music was an integral part of ritual; therefore, it was almost of same nature, making so-called "ritual-music" (禮樂lǐ-yuè) [6, p.28].

Earliest, both philosophical and cosmological, but also practical ("scientific") foundations of ancient Chinese music were concepts: "12 lǜ" (十二律shí'èr lǜ), "6 chords" (六律liù lǜ); "5 notes" or "5 tones" (五聲wǔ shēng), which constituted the Chinese pentatonic system (宮gōng, 商shāng, 角jué, 徵zhǐ, and 羽yǔ), and "8 sounds" (八音bā yīn), which was a specific classification of musical instruments by the materials of their construction. In the "Fengsu Tongyi" (風俗通義; lit. 'Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Mores'), a source of the Eastern Han (東漢Dōng Hàn, 25–220 CE), we find a list of these "five tones" and "eight sounds": «聲者，宮、商、角、徵、羽也。音者，土曰埙，匏曰笙，革曰鼓，竹曰管，絲曰絃，石曰磬，金曰鐘，木曰柷» [3, 風俗通義Fēngsú Tōngyì, 聲音 ShēngYīn : 4].

These principles/concepts were not simply derived from calculations, from the realm of "earthly things", but were correlated with the "heavenly realm" (天Tiān) [2, pp. 51,96; 6, pp.24–27], as Aalst aptly emphasizes in his classic work: «A certain note is taken as the base; sounds are fixed, and receive names; comparisons are drawn between the notes and the celestial bodies; music becomes a necessity in the State—a key to good government.» [7, p. 4].

We can clearly see in ancient Chinese sources the ritual/religious foundations for the use of pentatonic. Thus, "The Book of Ritual" (禮記Lǐjì) reads: "...then the saints (聖人shèng rén) appeared... and gave five notes (五聲wǔ shēng)" (禮記Lǐjì, 樂記yuè jì: 42.4), also: "(five notes) like five colors (五色wǔ sè) – form a complete whole... the lengths of all the notes have their own fixed measurements, without any uncertainty..." [3, 禮記Lǐjì, 樂記Yuè Jì: 31]. And in the "Book of Rites" (大戴禮記DàDàiLǐjì) we see: "...the sages (聖人shèng rén) established five customs (五禮wǔ lǐ)... and five harmonious sounds (和五聲hé wǔ shēng) to guide the spirit of the people." [3, 大戴禮記Dà Dài Lǐjì, 曾子天圓Céngzi Tiān Yuán: 7].

Musical notation systems

Chinese culture is abundant with musical notation of different forms. Depending on the period of use and origin, two categories of notation can be distinguished: 1) modern, Western forms; 2) authentic Chinese classical forms. Nowadays, in Chinese music, forms that have been borrowed from the West are now mainly used: 1) staff notation; 2) and the so-called "numerical notation" or "numbered musical notation" notation jianpu (簡譜 / 簡譜 lit.'simplified notation'), which were adapted and basically used as staff notation. Ancient forms include a large number of notations depending on the tradition of the musical instrument, in particular: Gongche pu (工尺譜), Suzipu (俗字譜), wenzipu (文字譜), and, finally, jianzipu (減字譜), which are most relevant for our topic.

Within the Taoist tradition of Chinese sacred music, a neumatic musical notation was developed, which we find recorded in the "Rituals of Jade Sounds" (《玉音法事》Yuyin Fashi, 1111–1118), a Taoist source of the Song Dynasty (960–1279). And at approximately the same time, was created the "suzipu" (俗字譜 sùzìpǔ) notation, which is associated with the work of Jiang Kui (姜夔c.1155–1221) and which was used in the context of the poetry of "shi" (詩) and the Xiao flute (簫). It was most likely used as a fingering notation (指字zhǐ zì).

If we try to go beyond the borders of China and look for similar music notation systems, we find a lot of resemblances with the shakuhachi tradition

(尺八, Japanese: shaku-hachi, Chinese: chǐ-bā). Akin to the suzipu, the tradition of Japanese shakuhachi flute has developed a specific script for transmitting the so-called honkyoku (本曲, literally: "basic passages", "basic melodies"), the central spiritual works of the suizen (吹禪, Chinese: chuī-chán), a sub-branch of Zen Buddhism. This notation uses the Japanese katakana alphabet as its basis, with additional symbols denoting octaves, note duration, and other possible guiding commentary alongside the particular piece of honkyoku. In this way, the katakana symbols are being used to indicate specific holes in the flute (regardless of the length of the particular instrument), not the notes/pitches themselves. We can define this system as an "applicature" (fingering system). But unlike the Chinese "suzipu" it has shown historical stability.

These notations, although representing different cultural spaces, both have much in common. In particular, they function as a "musical foundation" (骨幹音 gǔgàn yīn), meaning that they reflect only the basic, supporting nuances when recording and performing music. We can say the same about the later guqin notation, which does not clearly record the rhythmic component [5, pp. 46–47] and other nuances that were hereditary in nature, i.e., passed down from master to student.

It should also be understood that, similar to the tradition of suizen performing meditative honkyoku pieces on the shakuhachi flute, the tradition of performing on the qin is also both a musical and spiritual practice that requires a special musical notation that can preserve the defining features of tradition and its core nuances.

Guqin notation

The guqin was forced to use a more complex system of notation, dictated by both the structure of the instrument itself and the complex tradition of performing on it, while preserving (trying to preserve) its philosophical, mythological, and spiritual aspects of this tradition [see 5, p. 52; 8, pp. 61–64, 90].

Therefore guqin notation is specifically designed for the qin. And unlike Western music notation, which indicates exact pitch and rhythm, guqin notation is more of tablature that conveys information about finger positions, string numbers, and various playing techniques. This unique notation system allows for a more direct representation of the physical aspects of playing the guqin. For example "“mood” of a composition is prescribed by its programmatic title” [1, p. 84].

Before the current tablature form, instructions for qin were written in a longhand form called "wenzi pu" (文字譜/文字譜, lit. "written notation"). Special terms and explanations have been used to instruct the player on how to play a piece. Later forms of notation were called "jianzi

pu" (減字譜, lit. "reduced notation"). This form was very successful, and beginning from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) onwards, a great many qinpu (琴譜, collections of qin musical pieces) emerged.

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