



THE PROFOUND ROLE OF MUSIC
IN CHINESE CULTURE
AND THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF ABSOLUTE
PITCH

5000 YEARS OF THE MUSICAL METAPHOR

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Among the earliest artifacts of Ancient Chinese culture are neolithic musical instruments--clay ocarinas and bone flutes--found in still playable condition in Banpo, Jingcun and Hemudu. The earliest known records, the Shang dynasty oracle bones, contain reference to music and its function (De Woskin, 1985:33). Clearly, music has been a vital and fundamental part of Chinese culture since its inception in the mythical past.

Imagine my shock and perplexity, then, when I read the following quote from the forward to Walter Kaufmann's "Musical References in the Chinese Classics" (Indiana University, 1976) written by a native Chinese musicologist, Professor P'ao-Che'n Lee, Chairman of Chinese Oriental Studies at the University of Iowa, and former Dean of Studies of National Conservatory of Music in Chungking: "Of all the arts of China, music has been the most neglected...Many Chinese scholars think of music in the same attitude Confucius thought of gods, that is, 'to respect gods and spirits, but keep away from them.' An eminent Chinese scholar told me the way he studied the Chinese Classics was to skip and ignore all musical terms...when he ran into them". This is quoted by Fritz Kuttner, recounting his own shock and consternation upon encountering this attitude when he first went to China to teach Western music in 1944 (Kuttner, 1990:229). What could have happened over the long millennia to bring about this decline?

To answer this question we shall first have to fully uncover the role of music in Chinese thought, see how this role was later

adopted by the Confucian bureaucracy, and see if we can find any clues with which to at least formulate a theory. The fact that a summary of 5000 years of any culture's music as an entirety is even possible is remarkable, and I think unique to the case of China.

The "invention" of Chinese music is attributed to the mythical Fuxi and his (depending on the version of the myth) consort, sibling or successor, Nuwa. Fuxi invented the long zithers 'qin' (at first 5 and later 7-stringed) and 'se' (25-stringed), the 'xun' (vessel flute) and composed the hunting dance-song 'jiabian'. Nuwa contributed the 'shenghuang' and the 'guan' (jews harp and transverse flute, resp.) and a third deity, the ox-headed Shennong, the 'yue' and the 'tugu' (reed-type vertical aerophone, perhaps similar to a krumhorn, and the clay drum) (Tagore, 1856/1986:22 (Liang 1985:356)).

Although the first sovereign and forefather of the Han people Huangdi, was human, accounts of the Xia dynasty are legendary and semi-mythical. Known as the 'Yellow Emperor', first of the 'Five Kings', he was widely praised as a righteous and benevolent ruler. His interest in music was profound. Under his rule first emerged an elite gentry class (Liang 1985:37).

Huangdi sent his official Minister of Music Lin Lun "west" to find the standard pitches. He found them near Ruanyu Mountain in Daxia.¹ There he cut a length of bamboo from a uniform

¹ Had this proved to be a district of Bactria as Giles suggested, it would have opened the door on some interesting speculation concerning a Greek (i.e. Pythagorean) connection to

section, blew on it, and called the result "huangzhong" (the 'yellow bell' tone). A male and female phoenix were singing in the valley and when Lin Lun cut eleven more bamboo 'pipes' relative to the first one, he discovered that six of the pitches were those of the male phoenix and the other six were of the female. He named all the notes individually² and the six male notes he called the "Lu"³ (Sachs, 1943:114) (De Woskin, 1985:40).

From this seemingly quaint tale we can glean enough insight into Chinese musical thought to last us the next 4000 years. First, of course, we notice the obvious introduction of myth & magic and an immediate resemblance to our own familiar tales of heroic quest. But why would an emperor require pitch pipes or a Minister of Music, in the first place? Why do they have to be derived from a 'huangzhong'? What are those birds squawking about anyway?

The phoenix (along with the dragon) is an important animal in ancient Chinese beliefs being considered a granter of vitality and fertility (Van Gulik, 1969:104). In female and male we have yin & yang. "...the yin & the yang will blend all in harmony, the sounds flowing forth like light..." (Watson, 1968). It is

the derivation of the lulu; Otto Franke proved it to be southeast of the Gobi desert in the land of the Tochars (Sachs, 1943:114).

² See appendix.

³ Later the female notes gained "lu" status so that the chromatic scale is now the "lulu"; for the whole story Sachs 1943:115-6.

the answer to the other two questions however, that gives us insight to the profound role of music in the mind-set and daily lives of the Chinese people.

I must say here that I am by no means trying to mislead the reader into thinking there is but one form of Chinese music that has endured unchanging through the ages. There were (and are) two overall designations of music: "ya-yue", (often accompanied by 'Kunqu'-mime & opera) the music of the literati, and "xu-yue", folk or common music (Tran, 1985:83)(Sachs, 1943:105)(Van Gulik, 1969:37-39). Most records, and therefore most of my discussion, concerns "ya-yue", but I will quickly try to give an overview of the role of "xu-yue".

The close inspection of this folk music soon brings to light an odd irony-the most renowned and historically significant contributors to the Chinese musical heritage were not professional musicians at all, but aristocrats, noblemen and other members of the educated elite. Professional performers fell into two groups, those that played "good music" (i.e. aristocratic music) for hire, and those that played "bad music", music that suggested socially unacceptable sensuousness or contained profane language or gesture (Liang, 1985:20). These latter musicians were among the lowest class of people in society, the "mean people", forbidden to serve in government or even to take the state exams (Spence, 1990:88). The political content of their music was taken seriously, however, and their songs catalogued as an indication of public opinion. Work songs,

love songs, wedding and funeral songs, the folk melodies were considered a legitimate source for inspiration and development (De Woskin, 1985:33)(Thrasher, 1985:pp3-11)(Tran, 1985:79).

"To the Chinese, music not only exists in harmony with nature: it is organically integrated with the cosmological universe..." As for science and mathematics, "The Shiqi (1st c. B.C.) states 'When numbers assume form, they realize themselves in musical sound.'... Musical discussions inevitably involve principles such as the yin/yang duplicity and the five elements" (New Grove Dictionary, 1980, V.4:261). The stars, the planets, the seasons,"...all produce sound. The sounds issue harmony, and that creates accord. From this harmonious accord was born music, set down by the sage rulers." (from "Lu-shih Ch'un-Ch'iu" in De Woskin, 1982:56).

It was the ruler's responsibility to transmit this harmonious accord throughout his realm. Thus he must tune the "huangzhong" to the cosmos, the remaining pitches to the "huangzhong", and all the instruments of the realm to the standards. "That is why the former kings organized music and so governed by force of example [i.e. by sympathetic magic]. If these were good, the activity of the people mirrored his moral power" (from "Yueh-Qi" in Needham & Robinson, 1962:148). "Music is the means by which the sage stirs heaven and earth, moves the ghosts and spirits, shepherds the multitude of men, and completes the natures of all diverse things." (from "Feng-su t'ungi" in De Woskin, 1982:41).

The fundamental nature of music as an a priori concept was firmly established, even in the time of the semi-mythical 5 kings, and remained unchanged through the millennia. This is why "every feudal state, dynasty and republic throughout history [has] established an official... 'bureau of music'" (Liang, 1985:12). Among the first things a new ruler did was to re-tune the 'huangzhong', as it was believed de-tuning had brought about the decay and demise of the old regime.

The most representative music (with dance) of the Xia dynasty was the "Grand Xia" composed in honour of founding Emperor Yu's implementation of flood control. This established a form of ritual-ceremonial music which was handed down, along with the 'Grand Xia' itself, to later dynasties. Yu's son Qi, half-god and able to ride dragons to heaven, transcribed melodies he heard there which were not only passed down, but found their way into 'qin' zither to be 'rediscovered' by 'superior men' in later eras. In total contrast to these two was the degenerate Emperor Jie, who indulged in licentious music and excesses of all sorts, including size and number of instruments in this period. Later accounts (possibly exaggerated) assure us that this type of music brought about the end of the Xia reign (Liang 1985:41-42). To sum up this section of my account, "Since the Ancient Emperors and the Enlightened Rulers, the heart has been rectified and the person has been cultivated, the State has been regulated and peace has been brought to the realm by the right sounds...and by these alone" (Van Gulik, 1969:82).

From the Shang onward we can rely on archaeological evidence and original sources for most of our knowledge. Panpipes, end-blown flutes, mouth organs (designed to deliberately play more than one note at a time) zithers, stone chimes, bronze bells and drums were the instrumentation of the ritual dances, whose purpose was to call upon ancestors to intermeditate between the people and the Supreme Being to bring rain, victory, or other blessings. Shamans came from the noble class, were of both sexes and it was essential that they be competent dancers & musicians (Liang, 1985:49-50)(Kuttner, 1990). Female Shamans were especially vital to rain and other agricultural rites; the early Shang ^{were} ~~was~~ allegedly matriarchical.

One musical dance that dates from the Shang or early Zhou periods is the notorious "Mulberry Grove". There are two forms of this, 'shanglin' and 'shangjian', and even scholars confuse them. Liang Mingyue (Liang, 1985) does not note the difference, so I refer to De Woskin (De Woskin, 1982:93, fn. 17), wherein 'Shanglin' is a rain dance and 'Shangjian' is the salacious music commissioned by Zhou, last king of the Shang, and composed by Music Master Yan who drowned himself upon completing it. I will return to this topic shortly; note that the first two dynasties in Chinese history have now met their demise through the adoption of incorrect (i.e. philosophically inappropriate*) music (De Woskin, 1982:93-94).

* 'Appropriateness' in Chinese music is the subject of Marjory Bong-Ray Liu's excellent essay (Liu, 1985:pp9-31).

The subsequent Zhou dynasty, overlapping the "Spring and Autumn" period, was the longest in Chinese history. It marked the consolidation of the literati class, is generally regarded as a golden classical age, and also encompasses the so-called "Period of One Hundred Philosophers", most notable among whom are Laozi (Lao Tse), Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) and, of course, Confucius.

So far in my account I have said little of the social condition—the strife, the disease, periods of famine and constant ⁾ _^ ~~was~~ which were always a very real aspect of life in China (and the world as a whole). "Essentially all the philosophers of ancient China addressed the same problem: how is man to live in a world dominated by chaos, suffering & absurdity? Nearly all answered with some concrete plan of action [to reform the individual and society] to free the world from its ills." (Watson, 1968:3). It is beyond my scope now to sufficiently compare the various schools of philosophy that arose. I must mention Mozi (Mo-tzu) because he had many followers and he wrote a book entitled 'Against Music' deploring the opulence of certain musical (ya-yue) practices of his day (Watson, 1963:pp110-116), the other three rejected his ideas, especially Zhangzi who called them 'unhuman' (Watson, 1968:79).

Confucius was interested in putting 'the Tao' (the way) into practice for the greater benefit of society. He compiled the "Shijing" ("Book of Odes"), 305 songs he picked from some 3000 held in feudal archives, "to keep one's mind without depraved thoughts" and "maintain correct feeling". The use of music,

especially 'xuyue' of the countryside, as a social barometer is well-documented up to this point (Sachs, 1943:113)(Liang, 1985:19,55). It was used in magic as well, such as in the divination of surnames: "Confucius blew the pipes and thereby knew he was a descendant of the house of Yin" (from "Lun-Leng" in De Woskin, 1982:79).

The efforts of Confucius took another three hundred years to come to fruition. First the Legalists won out and established the Qin dynasty, endeavouring for a time to burn all the old books and bury (quite literally) the scholars. My sources were not specific regarding the music of this period as it pertains to my general theme but I did find this: when the Qin rule came to an end, the new Han rulers spent a great deal of time, energy and money trying to re-establish the correct standard pitch (De Woskin, 1982:81), inventing an entire pseudo-science called "watching the ethers" (fully described and de-bunked in Kuttner, 1990:203-209) to do so. At least 35 pitch reforms occurred between the late Zhou (1075-256 B.C.) & Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) dynasties (Sadie, 1980:V.4:261). The loser of a court battle over proper bell-casting was made to work in the imperial stables (Kraus, 1989:22). "Confucian officials doggedly pursued the correct music over two millennia" (ibid, op. cit.:22). This lack of an accurate 'huangzhong' was seen by many as being at the root of all the turmoil that followed, the influx of foreign rulers and the split into north and south.

These centuries were not without high points: the arts and

literature all flourished under the cultural openness of the Tang and subsequent Five Dynasties period, but all this did was to destroy the tradition of "correct music" and add fuel to the fire when the debate was taken up again in the Song dynasty (960 A.D.)(Pian, 1967:1). This was the beginning of the Neo-Confucian era.

The nature of Confucianism is such that it endured through all of China's changes. It would be erroneous to say that Confucianism itself did not change, but the basic concepts of morality, filial piety, and government that changed the least were its self-perpetuating strengths (Shyrock, 1966). It is widely agreed that Confucianism is the greatest single influence on Chinese culture. To discuss the entire Confucian era metaphorically it is possible through examining Confucianism's greatest single symbol. It happens, by no mere coincidence, to be a musical instrument: the 'qin' (7-string zither).

The highly-respected Orientalist R.H. Van Gulik has done a complete study of the instrument and its literature⁵ (Van Gulik, 1969 and 1969b) which I have referred to already, so I will merely point out a few interesting and revealing facts: the 'qin' is an instrument of the literati. There are very strict rules as

⁵ This otherwise meticulous scholar translates "Qin/Ch'in" as 'lute' and has taken much criticism for this error of judgement. He says he was making a social analogy. In this sense the 'qin' is more like the parlour piano of the Victorian era—a status symbol to be seen and revered, not necessarily played. There are several Chinese instruments which actually are lutes (eg. pipa, yueqin and sanxian). Organologically, the 'qin' is a zither.

to how and when it may be played. It is decorated with dragons and phoenixes. Notation is highly complicated employing terms and concepts that can only be termed 'impressionistic', though the 'qin' predates the term by at least 4000 years. The 'qin' is an instrument in which the universe resonates, the instrument of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove,⁶ in which the Chinese idea of music and Superior Being is manifest.

The Confucian idea maintained its influence until the beginning of the present century. Lack of space forces me to leap over the Liao (916-1125), Song (960-1279), Jin (1115-1234), Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties. The reader will note the overlapping dates which point to political unrest; this is a period of nomadic predominance, Kublai Khan, and Marco Polo's visit. Theatre music was the representative genre (Liang, 1985:14).

Jonathan Spence begins his search for modern China in the latter days of the Ming dynasty. He graphically details how the outside world chipped away at the sleeping dragon and finally blasted its way in (Spence, 1990). Scepticism from within about many of the more fundamental dogma of her culture was far from unheard of in post-Han China (De Woskin, 1982:104)(Kuttner, 1990:203) and she had experienced no lack of invasions, even foreign rulers. Not cannonballs however, but the rapid bombardment of radically different ways of thinking that followed the Opium War of 1839-42 caused an unprecedented culture shock

⁶ See Van Gulik (1969b) pp 13-22 for a complete explanation of the 'qin' and the Seven Sages as the quintessential metaphor of Confucianism.

that "challenged, undermined, or overwhelmed every sphere of social and cultural activity of the old order..." "...within the space of three generations, institutions, customs, and social relationships were changed or refashioned, the classic Chinese literary language was discarded, and traditional music was at first ignored, and then reshaped to meet the Western challenge" (Wong, 1991:37).

And so it seems Fritz Kuttner and Professor P'ao Ch'en Lee were right, traditional Chinese music went the way of the "huangzhong", vanishing into the ethers. And yet the phoenix rises from the ashes: A traditional music revival movement was launched at the turn of the century, the Folk Song Campaign began in 1918 and a modern music department was established at Peking National University (Beida)(Wong, 1991). Beida's first chancellor, Cai Yuanpei (1867-1940) was instrumental in instituting a new Chinese musicology, and the era saw a shift in concentration towards xu-yue, the common music. This however was also countered by a rise in Western training and a corresponding bias, and reached a plateau and stale-mate at the time of the Sino-Japanese war. Musicologists Wang Guangqi and Yang Yinlun spent much of this time researching guess what? Pitch calculation! Mao Zedong in 1942 stated the arts must serve the people and the state, and just prior to the "Cultural Revolution: in 1963 Yao Wenyan used a criticism of a piece by Debussy, written in terms reminiscent of a Confucian lambasting of 'The Mulberry Grove' (the salacious version-see pp 6-7), to smoke out

and eliminate He Luding and his circle at the Shanghai Conservatory (Wong, 1991:46-49). Music still fills the time honoured roles of unifier, social indicator, educator, and political polarizer.

In the past the place of music was indeed fundamental, its role profound. We in the West know from our own history and experience, the stress that modern science has put on our time honoured beliefs. Perhaps it is something like this that is at the root of Professor Lee's eminent scholar's avoidance of all things musical-where once there was greatness there is now a great sadness.

With all its internal concepts of tuning, harmony, rhythm, tension, and resolve, music is a powerful metaphor for society and the human condition. In China it has been more than a metaphor, it has been the model.

APPENDIX A

NAMES OF THE LULU

F	huangzhong
F#	ta-lu
G	t'ai-ts'u
G#	chia-chung
A	ku-hsien
Bb	chung-lu
B	jui-pin
C	lin-chung
C#	i-tse
D	nan-lu
D#	wu-i
E	ying-chung

The starting pitch was F above middle C at the time of Western contact in the Ming dynasty, but fluctuated greatly over the course of history (Sadie, 1980:V.4:262).

Prince Zhu Zaiyu (1536-c.1610) developed the equal-tempered scale in 1584, almost 150 years before Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier". It was considered an intriguing numerological manipulation but had no aesthetic value within Chinese musical concepts and was thus never implemented (Liang, 1985:131).

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