

## Chinese Culture in Japan: The Qin and The Literati

Bell Yung and J. Thomas Rimer

During much of her history, Japan was in the larger cultural orbit of China and Chinese culture; indeed, in the arts at least, China remained the model, particularly in poetry and painting, from about the fifth century down until the middle of the 19th century. The opening of Japan to the Europe and the United States soon caused a new and powerful interest in Western culture which eventually replaced the appeal of the Chinese tradition. Until that time, however, classical Chinese remained the language of educated people, at least for literary purposes, in somewhat the same fashion that Latin was the language studied by educated people in Europe at the same period. Anthologies of Chinese poetry were widely read and memorized, and such great poets as Du Fu and Su Dongbo were as much revered as any writers in the Japanese pantheon; indeed, Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), whose haiku and travel diaries remain among the most moving and significant works composed in the Tokugawa period, was deeply influenced by classical Chinese poetry and often reworked passages from these poems into his own writings.

One important factor that helped to foster the development of a uniquely Japanese culture involved the persistent realities of geography. Countries such as Korea and Vietnam, also in the Chinese cultural orbit, borrowed musical, artistic, and literary forms and ideals extensively, and more or less on a continuous basis, from China. Japan, separated by treacherous seas and difficult travel conditions, had far more sporadic contacts with China, occasionally intense, sometimes virtually non-existent, for much of her history. Thus, Japan's culture managed to develop often quite independently from that of China. While remaining a reference point, China was never to play the kind of consistent and dominant role seen in counties and areas in her inner orbit.

One period when intense interest in Chinese culture helped define the Japanese arts was in the Heian period (791-1185CE), when the Japanese court admired and emulated the Chinese arts to a high degree. In the fiction of the period, for example, the qin appears as a musical instrument of high distinction in such works as *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) by Murasaki Shikibu, a work dating from around 1002, and in Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book* (*Makura Sōshi*) written in roughly the same period. The musical works played on the qin, usually of Chinese origin, were highly regarded for their emotional depth and evocative nature, somewhat in the same fashion that European classical music has long held high prestige in the United States, as a sign in performer and listener alike of taste, education, and artistic sensibility. This is not

surprising because in China, the qin was intimately and exclusively associated with the refinement and sophistication of the literati.

The qin, or seven-string zither, is widely acknowledged to be the most important musical instrument in China. This claim has many reasons: its long and continuous history, its unique performance practice and social status, its rich lore and ideology that are preserved in both oral literature and an enormous amount of written and pictorial sources, its vast repertory recorded in a special notational system, and its aesthetics.

Archeological and literary evidence testifies that the qin existed, with a construction similar to the one found today, at least two thousand years ago. While many instruments in the world are as old, few can claim the unbroken continuity of the qin tradition, a continuity which underscores its generally conservative nature. The tradition has retained much that is archaic, including its performance practice, social context, repertory, and notational system.

During its long history in China, the qin has been performed as a solo instrument, and used as part of an ensemble for state ritual music and as an accompaniment for the singing of refined poetry. The latter part of the Han dynasty (206 B. C. to 220 A. D.) witnessed its gradual rise in importance as a solo instrument, indicated by an increasing number of compositions that explored technical brilliancy as an artistic expression, and the appearance of virtuoso performers such as Cai Yong (132-192) and Xi Kang (223-263). In whatever context it was performed, the qin and its music have, since antiquity, been associated intimately and exclusively with China's small and elite class of the educated and privileged.

Because of its close association with the literati, a large amount of writing throughout Chinese history bears on the instrument, its music, its technique of performance, and its lore and philosophy. Some of the better known writings include the philosophical essay *Qinfu* (Poetical Essay on Lute) by Xi Kang, translated into English by Robert Van Gulik. Among the most important written sources are more than one hundred collections of musical notation, the oldest extant one dating to early 15th century, that preserve an extensive repertory of over three thousand items. These collections are labeled by Western scholars as "handbooks" because many of them also contain essays on the philosophy, aesthetics, and theories of qin music, and practical instructions on performance: ranging from the construction and repair of the instrument, tuning of the strings, to detailed explanations on the notational system and playing technique.

This body of written material is not only important to our knowledge of the musical tradition historically, philosophically, and theoretically, but also as a valuable and unique source for our understanding of Chinese culture in general. One such handbook, the

Mei'an Qinpu (The Plum Room Qin Handbook, 1931), has been translated into English and published in the West by Fredric Lieberman.

An important ramification of the association of qin music with the literati is the emphasis the musician places on the literary content of a composition in his appreciation of qin. As Robert van Gulik writes, "special care is given [in the handbooks] to describing the mood the composer was in when he created his music, and what thought he wished to express in his compositions. It is the highest aim of the player in his execution of the tune to reproduce faithfully the mood of the composer"(Gulik 1969, 88). The literary content of a composition, which inspires the "mood," is closely related to China's history and philosophy, and is prescribed by a programmatic title of the composition, and, in most handbooks, also by a literary preface that accompanies the musical notation. The primary aim of a performance is to understand the literary content and evoke the prescribed mood in performance; the music sound itself is but a vehicle by which to arrive at that aim.

When the qin was introduced into Japan during the Heian period, the philosophy and performance practice came along with the instrument, playing technique and repertory. However, in the long medieval period, when Japan was engulfed in a series of civil wars, there are far fewer references in the writings of the time to the qin and, indeed to music in general, although it certainly seems that there were those who continued to master this now venerable instrument and pass on their skill through teaching pupils from one generation to the next.

After 1600, however, when Japan became peaceful under the Tokugawa regime, interest in classical studies began to develop in new and fresh ways. Although the Tokugawa Shoguns largely cut their prior ties with Europe, they did maintain rather close ties with China through the port of Nagasaki, where books, paintings, even musical instruments could be located and purchased. These opportunities helped stimulate an interest in the Chinese arts that continued to grow and develop steadily for some two hundred years. Indeed, there developed in Japan what we might term as a "cult of the literati," no doubt a direct influence of the qin's social position in China. Many Japanese artists and intellectuals took as their model the figure of the Chinese gentleman who revered contemplation and an indulgence in the arts, whose status as an amateur might give his artistic works a depth and beauty not available to "mere" professional artists or musicians. [Indeed, one of the most beautiful and admired forms of painting in the period is referred to as nanga or bunjinga.](#) The term nanga means "Southern-style painting," a reference to the style of literati art created in the Southern Sung period (c.1120-1279CE) in China; bunjinga means literally "painting of the literati."

It was through such contacts that the qin re-emerged as an important instrument for sophisticated music lovers. Qin handbooks for the instrument were newly imported from Nagasaki, and there were teachers of the instrument in Edo, possibly elsewhere. Many learned to play the instrument, but perhaps the most distinguished musician of the period, and a literati figure in every sense of the word, was Uragami Gyokudō (1745-1820). His reputation as a poet, and painter was high, but he was primarily known as a musician, and his performances on the qin were legendary. His life and work is emblematic of the importance of Chinese musical and artistic culture in Tokugawa Japan.

In many of his poems, often written in classical Chinese, Gyokudō created a persona for himself, that of a scholar-musician.

*For ten thousand sen*  
*I bought a old qin,*  
*For one thousand sen*  
*I bought old books.*  
*At dawn,*  
*I play by the faint light of my window,*  
*At dusk,*  
*I read by the lamplight in the cold.*

Gyokudō not only performed the classic scores for the qin, but he wrote music for the instrument himself. The first edition of his music appeared in 1789, and it was reprinted two years later. Accompanying the musical notations is an explanation of how he adapted ancient Japanese melodies for performance on this most Chinese of instruments. As one of his pupils wrote, "Gyokudō's fame is unsurpassed. He is versed in the four talents of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and qin music, the last being his specialty."

Gyokudō's music performances were considered so special that those friends who particularly appreciated his musical talents, found their way to him.

One monk-poet wrote that:

*To locate where you live,*

*I merely listen  
For the sound of your qin  
carried in the wind.*

This is, of course, a poetic exaggeration, since the sound of the qin is quiet (much more so than that of the European clavichord) but the inference of Gyokudō's great skill as a supreme musician is clear.

In about 1794, Gyokudō, now a widower, who had been receiving a stipend as a bureaucrat from the daimyo of his domain, gave up his official position (and his salary) and set out to adopt the life style of a Chinese gentleman, roaming throughout Japan with his two sons, painting, and performing on the qin, supporting himself by giving music lessons. Here is how he described himself:

Gyokudō the qin player has not one penny

But only a precious qin, a winecup, and a few paintings.

Yet whoever knows how to face the soundless strings in silence

Lives as a companion of the Emperor Fu Hsi.

Traveling all over Japan, he found many students and did much to increase the understanding of these ancient musical traditions. His interior feelings found expression in his poetry and well as in his painting.

Toward the end of his life, Gyokudō became friends with another celebrated wanderer, the painter Tanomura Chikuden (1777-1835). Like Gyokudō, Chikuden began his career in service to his daimyo, but, disillusioned with bureaucratic life, he too became an artist-recluse. [Here is how Chikuden described his meeting with Gyokudō, who stayed with him in Osaka for a month.](#)

In the winter of 1807, Gyokudō, who was skilled at the qin, met with me [at my retreat], and we lived there, eating and sleeping for more than forty days. He was then in his sixties; his hair was white and his beard long. Yet he still looked young and sang quite well; he was not bothered by the hollows where his teeth had fallen out. He was marvelous. He especially loved sake, and after he drank, he would compose short poems each of which contained the word "qin." He would also paint landscapes that were not formal but showed attractive taste. Occasionally I would compose some Chinese regulated-verse poems and Gyokudō would play the qin to harmonize with the words.

Toward the end of his life, Gyokudō went to live in Kyoto, the old imperial capital, possibly to be with his son, who married there. It was at this time that he devoted increasing energy to his painting, and the ink paintings he created, in the Chinese nanga style, are among the most admired works of their time.

Gyokudō serves even today as an eloquent reminder of the importance of the creative impetus brought to traditional Japanese culture by the Chinese example. For him, all the arts which he practiced were intimately related together, yet playing the qin remained at the center of his activities; he even signed his paintings "Gyokudō the qin player." He deeply subscribed to the Chinese belief that the music of the qin could lead to true enlightenment.

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## **Suggested Reading**

### **The qin in China:**

Gulik, Robert van. *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: an Essay in Qin Ideology*. Tokyo: Sophia University Press/Charles E. Tuttle, 1969 (reprint of original 1940 edition)

*Hs'i Kang and his Poetical Essay on the Lute*. Tokyo: Sophia University Press/Charles E. Tuttle, 1969 (reprint of original 1940 edition)

Lieberman, Fredric. *A Chinese Zither Tutor: the Mei-an Qin'p'u* (translation with commentary). Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983

**Japanese music (general studies):**

Malm, William. *Traditional Japanese Music and Musical Instruments*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 2000 (revised edition)

Uragami Gyokudō

Addiss, Stephen. *Tall Mountains and Flowing Waters: the Arts of Uragami Gyokudō*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.