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# Dao De Qin: A Case Study of the Guqin

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Dao De Qin:  
A Case Study of the Guqin

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China: Language, Cultures and Ethnic Minorities

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**Abstract**

This is a case study of the guqin that enables the reader to understand the multifaceted history, construction, technique, and ideology behind the instrument. I use my online research of different well-informed sites and scholarly articles as a basis for my research. These different sources allowed me to begin to understand the depth that this ancient zither holds. I quote such sources throughout this essay as they have been written in a very articulated fashion. Through these readings, I was able to interpret my field research regarding the guqin more clearly. My nonstop study of the guqin in this three-week period, with a Confucian scholar (in the old sense of the word), has given me a proper setting to achieve brief understanding of the instrument and the place that it held in ancient society. This essay will enlighten the reader on why the guqin is the most fascinating instrument that society has seen.

### **Introduction**

*“Sitting alone, in the hush of the bamboo; I strum my zither, and whistle lingering notes. In the secrecy of the wood, no one can hear; only the clear moon, comes to shine on me.” (Tángshī sānbái sh•u 1)*

Where the Luo and Yi rivers meet, marks an omphalos of history. We look back to this area of Luoyang province to Neolithic times to trace the origin of the Chinese peoples. The Xia dynasty, 4,000 years ago, marks the commencement of Chinese history. Throughout this expanse of time, China has been a place of continuous change. The constant sinicization of surrounding peoples and the strong foreign influences that changed the Chinese people and their culture has led modern scholars to ask such questions as, “What is ‘China?’ What is ‘Chinese’ history? What does being ‘Chinese’ mean?” The transformations of China since the Xia dynasty through Hu Jintao are apparent in literature and in the daily life of modern China. However, some core elements of ancient China have pierced through the constant whirlwind of change and continue to be perceived as purely Chinese: one such example is the guqin.

Scholars disagree on when the qin was first crafted. Ancient literature identifies the source to Huang Di or Shen Nong about 4,000 years ago. These men are often perceived as mythical figures in Chinese history, resulting in doubts about the date of the qin’s creation. However, it is agreed that in its early stages the qin had a different function and design the qin that evolved over the next 3,000 years.

The most significant changes to the qin body and its ideology took place in the Zhou dynasty; it became a distinct part of the literati's image and lifestyle (thus creating the strong qin lore). Since then and reaching through to modern China, the qin represented much more than just a physical instrument. This elevated existence distinguished the qin's music from all other Chinese classical instruments.

This case study of the guqin will look into many aspects of this ancient zither. Beginning with an analysis and understanding of the physical body of the qin in early history, to deconstructing the structural modern design, the construction of the qin has remained largely consistent since the Shang period. The simple appearance of the guqin is deceptive, due to the complex assembly and the preparatory and environmental factors contributing to the qin experience before the player sits down on their special qin stool; these factors include as the body of the qin, the table in use, and the environment in which the musician plays. Appreciating the design and construction and history of the instrument is prelude to an understanding of qin music and playing the instrument. This paper will explore qin musicology and guqin technique. Playing the instrument is complex. But when used in harmony, it creates a meditatively strong but delicate sound.

The paper will examine the principles of tuning a qin and the qin's playing technique; a symbiosis of the right and the left hand, a technique that is more complex and demanding than is required in the playing of most modern and ancient instruments. While the guqin can be played in simpler fashions, an understanding of its true technique is crucial to playing more advanced songs and to sense the higher

meanings of the qin. This section will conclude with the study of qin notation; a tablature that was originally devised in the Tang dynasty.

The next section explores the origins of the word qin (琴) and how the evolution of this character changed as the instrument itself changed. Comparing instruments, the qin and se (another instrument of ancient China) and their characters, will help the reader grasp the evolution of the qin from its early period. Beginning with its origin, and connecting each dynasty's relationship between the literati and the qin, provides an understanding of its place in society and how its relationship and importance to society changed through time. The exploration of qin history continues into modern and contemporary China, thus exploring the slow decline of qin ideology. In reviewing the relevant stages of society provides the reader a basis from which to understand how the qin was influenced by evolving changes in society and how it, in turn, impacted those changes. This brief look back into history will prepare the reader to recognize the qin's strong ideology, an ideology that has spanned 2,500 years.

The qin's connection to Chinese history is connected to the evaluation of its ideology. After the qin was taken under the literati's wing in the Zhou dynasty, a dogma formed around it that separated this zither-like instrument from other Chinese musical instruments. Scholars in each of the following dynasties added their own interpretations, experiences, and elucidations to this ideology reaching its peak in the Ming dynasty. The majority of this section will cover the philosophies surrounding the qin from the Ming dynasty and earlier times. However, in order to

understand the qin in today's world, where the strong metaphysical aspect of qin playing is largely non-existent, it is necessary to discuss its role in the dynasties that followed the Ming. The historical and ideological sections are linked in one, because the timeline is very important to follow while studying how the lore constantly changed.

I will examine my personal experience of learning to play the guqin in the final section of this study. My teacher is a scholarly artist who has many of the values of traditional Confucian literati, I have observed and experienced some of his lifestyle in ways that possibly mirrors the qin players of old. While living in the modern city of Kunming, I feel a transformation every time I study at my teacher, Shang Chong's house. I will elaborate on my experience of sipping tea while strumming the qin and discussing culture and history with my teacher and his guests. My own experience, combined with the research and interviews I have conducted will create a comprehensive picture of the guqin's role in ancient and modern society.

My conclusion sums up each of these segments and expresses my thoughts about the current state of the qin. I utilize the main points about the physical make up of the guqin and its surroundings, the notation and the technique, the character and its history, the lore surrounding the qin, and my individual experience of studying the qin to express my position of guqin in modern society; despite the qin being one of the most unique instruments the world has seen, its extraordinary influence and its very existence has all but vanished in the last two centuries.

This project provided each of us in this program the freedom to study a topic of our choice; research was encouraged but this project was primarily intended to be a field study. My research progressed as follows: from the beginning of the ISP period I have taken daily lessons from my teacher. We converse during breaks of study and discuss the history and the deeper meanings of the qin. As my Mandarin is limited, I only understand his main ideas, and don't always comprehend the smaller details.

While learning to play the qin, I studied its history and place in history through scholarly articles and online resources. I began with John Thompson's website titled *Silk Qin*; Lao Shing Hon (a prominent Hong Kong director) said this about John Thompson's playing, "Beautiful, supple and with great depth, John Thompson's Song and Ming Dynasty silk string guqin music is a sound from heaven. Today when we are overwhelmed by the modern sound of the metal string 'guqin', we should be very grateful to John who relentlessly brings us back to a deeply moving realm of the ancient Chinese literati" (Thompson 2004). Along with being one of modern day's best-known players and re-constructors of old melodies, Thompson is also a major contemporary scholar on qin history and lore. Along with Thompson's voluminous website, I rely on several other authors. These include James Watt's article, *The Qin and the Chinese Literati*, as well as *Evolving Antiquity: Guqin Ideology and National Sentiment* by Anne Henochowicz. After John Thompson's website, the most helpful source of my understanding of qin narration and wisdom was Robert Van Gulik's *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in Ch'in Ideology*. Gulik was a Dutch diplomat who lived in China in the mid 1900s; he was a

brilliant orientalist and musician, whose exceptionally detailed essay on the qin is the foundational starting point for anyone studying the Chinese lute (guqin).

Once my understanding of the instrument had been fleshed out with these readings, I sought out several individual players and teachers to both enhance my understanding of the qin as well as to add to this study. I spoke briefly about the modern state of the qin with several teachers based in Kunming. I was influenced in the first section from a conversation that I held with a guqin salesman and crafter. However, my main portion of fieldwork was done at a second story apartment off of An Kang Lu with my qin teacher and his guests. The conversation I heard and took part in on a regular basis helped me formulate my own personal thought about guqin's relationship to modernity.

The following pages are based on the information that I have studied, researched, and understood from conversing with people around me. This has all been compiled in a three week period; while my past guitar experience has helped me to progress quickly at studying the qin, it is still an instrument that takes "ten years to fully understand" (Shang 1). Nonetheless, this quick snippet has allowed me a taste into the miraculous world that envelops the guqin and its player. Western philosophy often does not appreciate much of older Chinese metaphysical concepts (Qi, Chinese Medicine, Feng Shui etc.). I ask that my readers approach the subsequent chapters with an open mind in order to appreciate the power behind the qin. Thank you.

**Physical Construct**

*“A monk from Shu, clasping a Luqi zither; descends the west face of Emei peak. He sweeps his hand over the strings for me; and I seem to hear pines sigh in a thousand ravines; and a running stream, that washes the ache from my heart. The faint notes blend with the icy bells. I had not noticed the dusk on the green mountains: How many folds are hidden in the autumn clouds?” (Li Bai 1)*

Before delving into qin thought, it is important to first understand the tangible construction of the instrument. Compared to other Oriental instruments such as the guzheng or Western instruments like the piano, the guqin seems simple; at first glance, it only encompasses the seven strings that lay on a rounded, wooden surface. Understanding the construction of the qin and each individual physical piece surrounding it is important to better appreciate it and move beyond one’s initial impression of a rudimentary instrument. This section details each individual component of the qin and the process of making one; I also elaborate on qin strings, tables, and the rooms which they are played in.

Throughout history, guqin’s have remained relatively constant in shape and construction. The largest difference that scholars have observed from old writings is the difference between Zhou qins (qins from the Zhou dynasty) and the modern construction that evolved during the Han dynasty. When looking to the origin of the qin, some Chinese scholars believe that their ancestors were based in Central Asia; others believe that they were influenced by these foreign styles but still originated in the North of China. Professor Lawergran extrapolates that pre-Han style qins

“might be an intermediary instrument between Central Asian harps and our modern qin” (Lawergén 47). However, John Thompson debates this theory concluding that, “the fact that these particular qin-styles did not continue in use is due to the failed attempt to adapt an original Chinese instrument to a foreign one, or to adapt a foreign instrument to an existing indigenous Chinese one” (Thompson 2004). I believe Thompson’s thinking of the modern design of the guqin is based on a similar shape that was distinctly Chinese from the beginning.

When comparing the shape and size of modern day qins to the qins of Zhou, it is obvious that the length has increased. Scholars surmise that the qins of the Shang dynasty were even shorter. We focus on the Zhou size due to the fact that we have concrete evidence of their measurements. From a size about 25% shorter than our modern day qins, the original length gradually increased until it reached its standard around the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE (Thompson 2004). Further evidence shows that qins were even shorter before the Zhou. Currently the standard for qin length is 125 cm long and 20 cm wide. A vast difference from the Shang dynasty when the width of the qin was around 16 cm (Thompson 2004). This brief summary of the evolution of the qin body is but a fragment of the evidence known from excavation and old qin books, the rest of this section focuses on the modern design.

At first glance it appears that the guqin is carved out of one piece of wood. After detailed observation, one sees that it is actually constructed from two pieces of different kinds of wood. Traditionally the best wood for the top is *Wutong Mu* (recently due to a lack of supply other woods are supplemented) (Shang 2012). In

English this wood is known as Paulownia or Parasol Tree (Latin: *sterculia platanifolia* and *fermiana platanifolia*); it is “deciduous, evergreen in tropics... bark smooth with conspicuous lenticels when young, longitudinally splitting with age...there are six species in China” (Flora of China 2012) and it is apparently the only tree that a phoenix will land on, giving it the nickname *The Phoenix Tree*. *Wutong* is also used for fret boards on Chinese pipas, Japanese kotos, and Korean kayagums. Qin makers take the Paulownia and carve it to form the top a rounded surface. During the process of making the top layer, the crafter “carves inside so that it’s thickest in the middle and tapers slightly towards the ends” (Thompson 1). Such a design allows for some of its unique style of playing and sound (discussed in the technique section). This wood is soft enough to hold the sound while not deteriorating with the constant pressure of strings being pressed on its surface.

In contrast the bottom piece of wood is traditionally *Zi Mu*: Chinese Catalpa (Latin: *Catalpa Ovata*). This wood originated from “a small deciduous tree that typically grows to 30’ tall and as wide with a spreading crown...it is native to forested areas in western China” (MBG 2012). It is a much harder wood than the *Wutong*, and it appears to be flat. The inside is, however, slightly rounded mirroring the top layer that it faces. These structural designs are crucial to delivering the qin’s acoustic range and sound. A common trend in modern day qin making is the recycling of unique woods found in China; the most common example is using the wood of old temples for its strong spiritual value. Whatever wood is used, it must be dry and lacking sap; if not, the potential for cracking is high.

Many elements went into the thought process of designing the guqin's original shape. When talking with my teacher about the qin's history he told me that the guqin's rounded sides and the contrast between soft and hard woods was due to the influence of Yin and Yang. This idea of Yin and Yang can be visualized in many different senses according to my teacher: the top layer of wood is soft thus harnessing the Yin, whereas the bottom layer is hard, Yang...the top *receives* one's hands, Ying, and the bottom *creates* the sound, Yang. Another interesting concept that Shang Laoshi expounded on is how the relationship between the player and the qin itself can also be visualized in the same metaphor. He described how the qin's original construction was designed to mirror the shape of a human; the wider end where the strings are tuned is the base (the legs) and the opposing end where the strings wrap over the top is one's head (Shang 2012).

The guqin crafter lays lacquer on the top layers of these two pieces of wood. Sap from lacquer trees allows for the qin surface to be hard enough to press down firmly upon but soft enough so that it may produce sound. The process of lacquering a qin is not easy. First, four layers of raw lacquer are mixed with a special powder. This powder originally consisted of ground up deer horn; it is considered the finest to strengthen and hold the lacquer in place. This being said, *gypsum* is now often used, but this substance is a terrible replacement. While it originally works well, time will soon chip off the important layers of lacquer. After the first layer has been applied and dried, another four coatings of clear lacquer are applied. The process of this varnish drying is called polymerization; this forms a hard, but natural coating over the qin; this sheet is resistant to water and other acerbic substances. Well-

trained qin musicians all say that the sound of the instrument polishes with time. A possible reason for this may be that the lacquer will loosen; which in turn allows for freer vibrations. (Thompson 2004). Lacquer cracks (in a manner that does not negatively impact the playing or sound produced) over very long periods of times. The marks that appear are called *Duanwen*. Qins that naturally have such markings defines old age and are highly prized among collectors. Recently there has been a trend to fake the *Duanwen* on the surface of qins. Such imitations are still sold at a high price, but don't nearly match the value of the qins of old. The most expensive guqin that was auctioned off in 2010 has such markings appearing on the surface of the lacquer. This qin that once belonged to Emperor Qianlong sold for approximately 8.7 million dollars (Luxary Insider 2010).

Most guqins have a standard design. The qin I purchased is slightly different and lacks some of the traditional aspects, but for the purposes of this essay I will cover the conventional qin. Much of the descriptions that I use in this portion of the physical construct section come from the *Taiyin Duanji (The Great Collection of Superlative Sound-* A qin handbook written in the Song dynasty), which is brilliantly translated and drawn (from the Ming dynasty re-print from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century) on John Thompson's website. As described above, two pieces of wood combine to make the qin; this fashioning of separate pieces leaves a hollow space inside creating the sound box. There are two holes in the bottom of the qin that expose the inside of the body. The longer hole, which is close to the tuning peg side is called *Chi Kuo* or *pool*; this hole can be rectangular or round and measures 2.5 cm in width and 20 cm in length. This hole shows the wood from the upper board of the qin; this

space often holds the signature of the craftsman who made the qin. The smaller sound hole is called the *Zhao Kup* or *Pond*; the *Pond* is always shorter in length but the size is not as defined as the *Pool* (Thompson 2004).

Inside the qin, located next to the sound holes, are traditionally carved grooves designed to resemble “onion flakes” (Thompson 2004). These are called the *Nayin*. Their purpose is to keep the sound resonating for as long as possible. Qin luthier of Vaux-sur-Morges, Luc Brenton, said, “the purpose of the *Nayin* should be to reinforce the fundamental of a note (any musical note consists of the fundamental plus the overtones which give it color)” (Thompson 2004). Another tool that create these overtones are called *sound posts*. The post next to the *pool* is called *The Pillar of Heaven* and the post next to the *pond* is called *The Pillar of Earth*. However, the pieces are very rare to find in qins, for some reason they are not included in the design of modern qins and have been taken out of older ones.

The *Phoenix Legs* pegs are placed about 30 cm away from the left hand of the qin (left side to someone playing the qin). These pegs hold the qin up giving it the unique slant of raised on the left side and gradually decreasing to the right. The seven strings are wrapped around these pegs, giving them tension to make sound; strings 1,2,3, & 4 are wrapped on the far peg and strings 5,6, & 7 are wrapped on the near peg. The pegs go through the bottom board and are glued to the underside of the top board. Each of these *Legs* protrudes about an inch from the bottom of the lower side of the qin.

The tuning pegs (*Zhen*) are located underside of the right end of the qin (the word *Zhen* is only used to describe the qin's tuning pegs). Traditionally these were called the *Precious Pegs*. On most qins these pegs are made of wood. However, on some ceremonial qins they can be constructed from crystal, jade or ivory (Thompson 2004). Each peg is about an inch in length and 2 cm in width. Tied tightly around the top of the peg is a grouping of string, formulating one thick string, that goes through a small hole through the body of the qin. This forms a small loop through which the ends of the silk strings are fed to create tight tension and in turn the ability to tune. The pegs are carved so that the outside has a texture that one can grip so as to turn the peg. The inside of the pegs are hollowed out, allowing for the string bottom side of the string (topside being the end that attaches to the silk plucking strings) to feed through the hole and reach down about 3-4 inches. Attached to these hanging strings are decorative, traditionally, silk tassels. It is more and more common now to see these tassels made from synthetic material. These pegs fit in a rectangular or circular carving called the *Peg Pool*. In some older qins legs protrude out of the far right side of the qin; these are called *Duck Paws* or *Peg Protectors* (Thompson 2004). When the guqin is played, the left side rests on the table but the far right side (just next to the tuning pegs) is off of the table allowing for slant and support; it would be fatal to the tuning pegs if pressure were applied while they were resting on the surface of a table. If the qin is mistakenly placed on the right side of the table, the *Peg Protectors* protect the tuning pegs from being damaged.

A carving on the bottom left is called the *Scorched Tail*. The design is purely aesthetic having no impact on the sound or the playing of the instrument and its figuration differs depending on the qin. Adjacent to the *Scorched Tail* are what is called *Lower Gums*. This name describes the area of wood that separates the bottom and top of the qin. Usually there is no design in this region; it is simply a way to identify that part of the instrument. The *Dragon Gums* is a carved area on the far left side of the qin above the *Lower Gums*. The *Dragon Gums* is an area of wood that is raised just slightly higher than the rest of the top surface. It is located at the very end of the left side of the qin and is raised between the *Corner Hats* (discussed below). The strings go over this minute lip that that forms the bridge of the guqin. The bridge causes the strings to stop vibrating. The name “*gums*” seems curious, but when observed closer one can imagine that the strings running over this section of wood resembles 7 teeth over dark gums; revealing the strong sense of imagery portrayed in qin lore.

(Appendices 1)

The *Dragon Gums* leads this examination onto the topside of the guqin; the part of the qin that is most addressed by the player. The *Corner Hats* border the very left end of the qin on the near, far and left side. These small outcroppings of wood are purely for aesthetic value and most qin’s *Corner Hats*’ differ slightly in appearance. Moving about a quarter of the qin’s area we explore the different visual features of the qin. A small cutout on both far and near sides gives the qin one of its unique appearances. This design is called the *Waist* of the qin. The *waist* is a small

circular notch that runs about an inch into the body, and about 2 inches across; this ends just in front of the 12<sup>th</sup> stud (discussed below). The long area of wood that makes up three quarters of the qin passed the *waist* is called the *Phoenix Wings*. Other indents on the right side of the qin (that look similar to the *Waist*, but are in fact longer) are called the *Shoulders*. The *Shoulders* start at the 3<sup>rd</sup> stud (discussed below).

About 10 cm from the right end of the qin is the *Mountain*. This piece of wood is attached to the main body, and is curved to fit comfortably on the curved top piece of wood. Made from the same piece of wood is the *Dew Collector*; while the *Mountain* rises a couple centimeters off of the body, the *Dew Collector* lies flat behind it (extending towards the right end of the qin). Where the *Dew Collector* and the *Mountain* meet, strings (which are tied to the *Precious Pegs* below) are fed through small holes and then extend so that their loop reaches the top of the *Mountain*. The point where they are plucked is fed through these loops and is called the *String Eyes*.

The most heated debate about the modern qin is about the strings; silk or metal. From its beginning in ancient times right through to the 1960s, qin strings were made from silk. The *Narrative of the People of Qi*, tells us that “Silk from silkworms (fed on the leaves of the) *zhe* tree (cudriana) is suitable for (qin) strings; (the sound is) light, clear, resonant and penetrating. It is better than any (other) kind of silk string” (Thompson 2004). These strings are made from twisted silk that are dipped in a glue-like substance. The actual dimension of these strings differ;

usually the full length of silk strings are around 250 cm, but the actual vibrating part only reaches around 113 cm (this includes the area of string from the *String Eyes* to the *Dragon Gums*). The rest of the string wraps around to the bottom of the qin and is then coiled around the *Phoenix Legs*. The diameters of the strings ranges on string choice; there are four different levels of strings. However, the standard thickness of the 1<sup>st</sup> string is 1.64 mm whereas the 7<sup>th</sup> string gauges about .85 mm (Thompson 2004). Each string from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> gradually decreases with thickness and thus their pitch gradually gets higher. The average life of strings is about seven years, but they have their warmest sound from around their 2<sup>nd</sup> to their 5<sup>th</sup> year of use (Thompson 2004).

Throughout history stringed Chinese instruments have all been called *sixian*, meaning silk strings. When used on a guqin, these silk strings have a very different sound and as feel. Thompson notes that the sliding on silk strings is called the *qi* of the qin (the internal energy); and goes on to elucidate that the silk string is the most vital aspect of the qin because it gives such strong rich overtones, overtones that metal strings cannot achieve (Thompson 2004). The use of silk was used up until the Cultural Revolution. During this time of change in Chinese history, metal became the standard of qin strings. The reasons are ambiguous, but one can speculate that the Cultural Revolution's objective was to purge traditional, culture from Chinese society. Silk strings represented a traditional characteristic of the instrument. Along with being associated with historical times, silk strings also are amalgamated with inward and traditional meditative qualities. Such spiritual thinking was strictly forbidden during this destructive era.

Some posit that silk strings are the essence of inward illumination, metal strings represent a newer, louder sound that is ideal for performance; further they embodied reform. Metal strings wrapped in nylon are most commonly used in modern day performances. Qin makers are hesitant to install amplification within guqins, thus making performance hard. One must either play with a different, louder style or attempt to position a microphone under a qin (which has continued to present significant challenges in the goal of achieving an ideal sound). However, both types of strings have their own disadvantages. Besides not being able to achieve the subtle rich overtones that silk strings produce, metal strings may also damage the lacquer on the qin surface and are also believed to cause structural damage to the body (Thompson 2004). Silk strings, while not as audible in a performance setting, are also easier to break. The choice between metal or silk strings is up to the player; each string choice has its advantage and disadvantage, and some even say each choice has its own distinct style of playing. Lastly, the *Taiyin Daquanji* tells us that: “1<sup>st</sup> string belongs to earth; 2<sup>nd</sup> string belongs to gold; 3<sup>rd</sup> string belongs to wood, 4<sup>th</sup> string belongs to fire; 5<sup>th</sup> string belongs to water; 6<sup>th</sup> string has a scholarly sound; 7<sup>th</sup> string has a military sound” (Thompson 2004). These associations were given to these strings due to the sound that the literati though were fitting. I will discuss the sound and technique based around the strings in the next section.

Running down the far side of the qin, circular helpers are placed alongside the 1<sup>st</sup> string are called *Hui*. In English these small circular helpers are described as studs. Made traditionally from mother of pearl or gold leaf (on cheaper qins these

are fake or painted on), the *Hui* mark the harmonic nodes of the qin. Harmonics in relation to the qin is a note played along these nodes where one prevents the vibration or overtones of the given string, and in turn one hears the dominating lowest-pitched overtone. The use and method of playing such notes will be elaborated on later in the study.

Scholars debate when *Hui* first came into use. Some academics say that qins from the Zhou dynasty were lacking *Hui*. The reasoning behind such questioning lies in the fact that some ancient dictionaries also refer to this word with the meaning of tassel. Much of the early use of this word in literature is vague and may refer to either the stud or the tassel. We first see *Hui* mentioned in literature in the *Huainanzi*, a book of 21 compiled essays written in the court of Liu An. This following passage dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, “A blind man, who now cannot tell day from night or white from black, when he puts his hands on a qin and plays the strings, considers his playing and repeats (goes back to?) the hui, plucks and strums as his hands flying around, without losing track of any of the strings” (Thompson 2004). The passage has been analyzed and defined by different scholars to mean either the studs or the tassels. The first evidence of stud is the depiction of the seven sages from the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. While studs are definitely visible on the qin in the painting, we are still unsure of what these nodal points were called at this time in history. Here I will include another small segment from the *Taiyin Daquanji* (that John Thompson has so meticulously translated);

“The first stud, called taizou, responds to the regulation of the first month; its sound is mi...The second stud, called jiazhong, responds to the regulation of the second month; its sound is mi...The third stud, called guxian, responds to the regulation of the third month; its sound is do...The fourth stud, called zhonglü, responds to the regulation of the fourth month; its sound is sol...The fifth stud, called ruibin, responds to the regulation of the fifth month; its sound is sol...The sixth stud, called linzhong, responds to the regulation of the sixth month; its sound is do... The seventh stud is in the junju (master's residence); it is 以象閏 used like an intercalary month ...The eighth stud, called yize, responds to the regulation of the seventh month; its sound is re...The ninth stud, called nänlü, responds to the regulation of the eighth month; its sound is re... The 10th stud, called wuyi, responds to the regulation of the ninth month; its sound is do...The 11th stud, called yingzhong, responds to the regulation of the 10th month; its sound is la...The 12th stud, called huangzhong, responds to the regulation of the 11th month; its sound is la...The 13th stud, called dalü,

responds to the regulation of the 12th month; its sound is do." (Thompson 2004).

From a player's perspective, these nodes are helpful in orienting one's left hand on the strings. While guqin masters may be able to play a qin without *Hui*, it would be impossible for an amateur to be accurate in his/her finger placement.

(Appendices 2)

Armed, now with a good understanding of the physical body of the guqin it is possible to elaborate on the exterior, tangible aspects that surround the qin. While such externals may seem inconsequential, my teacher along with other scholars stresses their importance. Most important to note is the guqin table. Most quotations in literature describe such tables as *qin tan*, or qin alters. The height and width of such a table is crucial to allow the player to strum the qin to its full potential. If the table is too short, the player will have trouble fitting his legs comfortably under it; resulting in an awkward manner of playing. If too high the player's hands will be held at a wrong angle. The table's width is also critical. The right of the qin must rest off of the side of the table, but the left side of the qin must reach the far left end. The tables are made from various woods and include a variety of designs. (ex. Rosewood with a mother of pearl design)

Jim Binkley's translation of the Yu-ku-chai qin-pu provides insight into the building of these unique surfaces. In the *Portable and Studio Tables and Stools* section, he describes two types of qin tables: a portable, while the other remains in a stable location. Both should reach about two feet one-two inches tall. The length of

the table should be around four feet two inches and only one-two feet wide. Blinky details the design of these tables in the following passage:

“In the center space (in the frame) put a cross-piece [one inch or so square]. This piece divides the inside into left and right. [The left space should be three feet, three inches. The right space is about five inches.] At the ends of the center cross-piece there should be two short pillars [each of which is five inches long, and one inch square]. (At the bottom) it should have a horizontal shelf. In addition, make a box that should be embedded on the left. [The box contains sound.] Also make two triangular shapes as frames. Each has three feet at its corners [about one and a half inches square]. These go on the left and right and make a support for the table’s surface (the top frame piece). This should be uniformly tall. [The top frame piece of the table and these triangle-shaped frames should together be about two feet one or two inches tall.] The left frame piece should also have a horizontal supporting shelf that should be level with the other cross piece. Taken together these shelves support the box” (Blinky 1975).

The difference between the two types of tables is that the portable table is considerably narrower than the studio table. Since the qin is a naturally quiet, these hollow compartments act as sound boxes, and are crucial to amplifying the released reverberation. While wood is and has been the standard material for qin tables for centuries, Literati players from the Han and Qin dynasties were known to use hollow bricks as their surfaces (Watt 81). The *Tianyin Daquanji* describes the area that one is intended to sit on as *qin couches*. The description is ambiguous, but we can understand that the top and the bottom are both intended to be round. However, nowadays qin seats resemble piano stools.

The ideal playing environment is based on what the player hopes to achieve with their playing. That said, the essential requirement of the playing environment is that it must be quiet. If one is playing the qin for oneself, and one's inner essence (as it is meant to be played), a secluded place is essential. Such seclusion should not be disturbed by the presence of other people or loud sounds. Giving a qin recital requires a room with adequate acoustics so as to better amplify the qin. The only alternative to a room lacking excellent acoustics is an amplification system.

Throughout history, qin artwork has depicted as romantic scenes of sages plucking their instruments, alone in nature. While these images may be attractive, they are a fantasy. Attempting to play a qin in one's lap, as these sages are depicted to do is near impossible. Each stroke, push, and pull shifts the qin in different directions. Unless this is an especially quiet region, the quiet and deep sounds generated by the qin would be drowned out in the average natural space. Unless one

could find a place where the only natural sound was a few birds that would chirp along in accompaniment, and either a natural table or a portable table is provided, I would advise against attempting to duplicate the idyllic depictions. The ideal location for qin playing is in a hushed setting and surrounded by one's books, calligraphy, chessboard, paintings, and facing one's garden. This setting mirrors the values that Confucius listed for a literati qin player. If played as I have as depicted, one will be following tradition as well as being able to feel and hear the rich undertones that are produced by qin playing.

In conclusion I wish to return to the anomaly that the qin is so often perceived as a simple instrument. It should now be evident that the intricacies of the instrument, the playing environment and the externals that enable a true appreciation of the qin's sound and music make it anything but a "simple" instrument. From the process of building one of these unique zithers to the way it is placed on its particular table reveal how small changes will impact the sound and manner of one's playing. Every instrument has its own unique playing requirements. However, it is the minimalism that the qin harnesses and embodies that makes its beauty root from this simplicity. When every one of these components is just right, one merely sits at a table and breathes through the qin. Engaging in the world of this instrument is the actual technique itself. The following section describes the many facets that go into qin playing.

**Technique**

*"Emotionless the mood of your 'seven-strings'; in the quiet, I sense the cool of the 'Wind through the pines'; I am one who loves the ancient tunes; there are few now who can play them." (Liu Changqing)*

The physical study qin is important to understanding what one is dealing with when playing. Sun Tzu tells us that we must know our weapon and our self to be able to defeat our enemy. This strategist and philosopher's teachings can be interpreted in many ways. I use this teaching to help orient oneself with the guqin. After one understands his weapon (the qin), he must then understand himself. This section will cover the technique around playing and understanding qin methodology. From the subtly different and advanced technique that goes into playing simple songs, one can understand why the qin is one of the most difficult instruments to learn. I will begin by explaining the tuning and the finger technique. Then I will transition to describing the complicated yet beautiful qin notation. Through this passage I will attempt to give a small introduction to what is actually needed to learn how to play the guqin.

During the Zhou dynasty, the guqin was played in a very simple manner. It was originally just played using open strings. This means that only the right hand was used and only a total of seven notes were in one's repertoire. Once the qin evolved to become an individual instrument, a far more complex playing methodology developed. The first process to complete before playing is tuning the qin. A player with perfect pitch or with a strong understanding of the resonance that

each individual string produces will be able to pluck each string and tune by ear. Since most of us are not as gifted or talented, we must resort to other means. When learning how to play the guqin, one traditionally sits across from their teacher and copies what is played. This also applies for tuning; the teacher will tune a string and his/her student/s will follow. For fine-tuning one uses harmonics to achieve a near perfect sound.

Most songs use a standard tuning, however, some songs use alternate tunings. Standard tuning is as listed here: 1<sup>st</sup> string B, 2<sup>nd</sup> string C#, 3<sup>rd</sup> string E, 4<sup>th</sup> string F#, 5<sup>th</sup> string G#, 6<sup>th</sup> string B, 7<sup>th</sup> string C#. One can see by looking at this tuning that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> string share the same note, as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> strings; these equalities are helpful when tuning the qin. Other examples of tunings are *Huangzhang*, *Guxian*, and *Mangong*. These tunings slightly vary from the standard giving a subtly different feel to their tunes (Thompson 2004). Originally musicians disagreed about if the main pitch in the standard tuning whether or not should be on the third or first string. Different examples of this include the songs 忆故人 (*Remembering an Old Friend*) and 平沙落雁 (*Wild Geese Descending Upon a Sandy Shore*). 忆故人 is noted in a C scale. This means that strings one down are notated as 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2...or Do, Re, Fa, Sol, La, Do, Re. In Contrast, 平沙落雁 uses an F scale: 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6...or Sol, La, Do, re, Mi, So, La. It may seem like these are two totally different tunings, but in actuality, “in pitch these two tunings are identical: the difference has to do with which pitch is (or should be) the most

important one” (Thompson 2004). So one does not need to change tunings based on these scales, they are just noted differently in qin song books (and can make learning a new song using a different scale rather like a headache).

The tuning method is detailed on Thompson’s site. I will not include the mathematical elements behind each pitch but I do include his descriptions of how harmonics are played and the two ways to tune the qin. This segment may be hard to imagine without a qin in front of you. First I will include a small passage about harmonics:

“When harmonics are played the string must vibrate on both sides of the place where the left hand lightly touches the string, which means a clear harmonic sound can be gained only if the ratio of the vibrating length of the string on one side of the finger to that of the vibrating length on the other side is a simple fraction. Thus the divisions are in half ( $1/2$ ), half again ( $1/4$  and  $3/4$ ), then half again ( $1/8$ ,  $7/8$  --  $3/8$  and  $5/8$  are omitted); in thirds ( $1/3$  and  $2/3$ ), then this is halved ( $1/6$ ,  $5/6$ ); and finally in fifths ( $1/5$ ,  $2/5$ ,  $3/5$ ,  $4/5$ ).”

(Thompson 2004).

This demonstrates that while harmonics may be played in any position on the qin’s strings, if played on the *Hui* they produce the most distinguished sound. The player

should first tune without harmonics in this fashion:

1. "Bring the 7th string in tune with the 4th string by having the open 7th string have the same sound as the 4th string stopped in the 9th position.
2. Tune the 5th string by having the open 7th string have the same sound as the 5th string stopped in the 10th position.
3. Tune the 6th string by having the open 6th string have the same sound as the 4th string stopped in the 10th position.
4. Tune the 1st string by having the open 4th string have the same sound as the 1st string stopped in the 9th position.
5. Tune the 2nd string by having the open 4th string have the same sound as the 2nd string stopped in the 10th position.
6. Tune the 3rd string by having the open 3rd string have the same sound as the 1st string stopped in the 10th position."

(Thompson 2004).

If one wants to further tune the qin to achieve an even more clean sound, harmonics

must be used. There are different ways and orders in which to follow this process but the one listed below is the most coherent:

1. "A harmonic played on the 7th position of the 7th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 9th position of the 4th string.
  2. A harmonic played on the 7th position of the 6th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 9th position of the 3rd string.
  3. A harmonic played on the 7th position of the 5th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 9th position of the 2nd string.
  4. A harmonic played on the 7th position of the 4th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 9th position of the 1st string.
  5. A harmonic played on the 9th position of the 7th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 10th position of the 5th string.
  6. A harmonic played on the 9th position of the 6th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 10th position of the 4th string.
- ☐(Note: A harmonic on the 9th position of the 5th string will not have the same sound as a harmonic

played on the 10th position of the 3rd string.)

7. A harmonic played on the 9th position of the 4th string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 10th position of the 2nd string.
8. A harmonic played on the 9th position of the 3rd string should have the same sound as a harmonic played on the 10th position of the 1st string.
9. The same results come from testing the harmonic positions at the player's right end of the qin, as follows”

(Thompson 2004)

Using this routine will enable the player to accurately tune their qin. Other methods for the lazy player is to record a properly tuned qin and then copy their own qin's strings to the tunings of the recorded version. Yet another technique is to listen to a qin tune and wait for the anticipated open string, once heard the player should also play that string and judge whether their string is sharp or flat; then continue to use this system to tune.

Before setting one's hands on the instrument to play a piece, the individual player must sit in the proper position. If one's elbows are at one's side, their hands should be able to reach strait out to the qin and fall in the proper place. The right hand is intended to rest in between the first *Hui* and the *Mountain*, and the left

hand's 3<sup>rd</sup> finger should fall at the 8<sup>th</sup> *Hui*. One's back should be strait but relaxed at the same time. The player is supposed to sit and allow his/her mind to find a place of peace; this will allow the body to relax and the music to flow. Once this state is reached, the player should lightly lift their hands above the qin. Then in a soft birdlike fashion, one should let their wrists lead and fingers thus pointing up while they bring their hands down to the qin. Once this action is performed, the playing may begin (Shang 2012).

Since the qin is a spiritual instrument, one should try and visualize the scene that your music is accompanying. Such visions will help the player to play a truer tone to his/her own interpretation. Breathing is also often overlooked requisite for good qin playing. Besides helping the timing of a piece, breathing also allows the player to relax and delve into hidden aspects of the qin music. The playing of the guqin will not only regulate one's breathing but also improve blood circulation (Gulik 428).

Both the right and left hand are used. The right hand primarily plucks the strings while the left hand presses on the strings activating certain points along the body of the qin. In this method the right hand is making all the sound. However, there are exceptions where the left hand may for example tap hard on a string and create a sound without the right hand being used. The other instances will be covered further during the notation segment of this section. Before going into details about finger techniques we must first understand what fingers are used.

Starting with the right hand: the thumb, first finger, and middle fingers are the joint's knuckles used most. There are, however, exceptions; when strumming a certain string with the right hand to achieve the sound of a quick succession of notes, one will use either or both the ring and pinky finger. I will first discuss most simple motions performed with the right hand. The first motion entails the thumb resting close to the tip of the pointer finger; the thumb pushes the first finger forward thus getting more power than with only the first finger. However, there is also a stroke that includes just the first finger pushing forward on the string or pulling against it. There are similar motions of unsupported fingers that follow for the middle and ring finger. When the thumb is used, one should turn one's hand more horizontal than in previous techniques.

All the fingers of the left hand, with the exception of the pinky, used. The pinky is only used for difficult or unorthodox songs. The thumb and the ring finger are most commonly used, but their technique and positioning are quite different. When the thumb is placed on the qin, the small space of skin between the right side of the thumb and the ball of the thumb is placed on the string. The angle should be a diagonal in relation to the string. It takes practice, but when the thumb is placed on the string, one's hand must be relaxed. With the thumb slightly under the fingers all are comfortable and pointed at the opposite side of the qin. The space between the thumb fingers is called *Hu Kou* or *Tiger's Mouth*. This space should be roughly 2 inches in width. Another common position for the left hand uses the ring finger;

with one's hand leaning slightly towards the left side of the guqin, the left side of one's ringer will be applied to the string. The names and rest of the movements that are shown below are taken from Gulik's study on the qin. The notation alongside them is discussed covered in the next part of this section.

Playing the qin is more than simply plucking and sliding on strings. One of these is the vibrato that is done with the left hand. One complex playing technique is the vibrato, which requires the skilled and sensitive use of the left had. Vibrato is "a slightly tremulous effect imparted to vocal or instrumental tone for added warmth and expressiveness by slight and rapid variations in pitch" (Merriam-Webster). Compared to most instruments that only have a few forms of vibrato, the guqin boasts 26 different variations. Each sound is ever so slightly different from the last. To the untrained ear, they are all close enough to be the same technique. Other complex qin playing techniques are "rhyming, leading figure repetition, parallel development, recurrence and so forth" (Thompson 2004). Such methods of playing give order to qin theory. Without such patterns, qin playing would sound random. The simplicity and subtle beauty behind each note is what makes the guqin unique. Each note has its unique essence. Once one appreciates that each tone of the guqin should evoke a different emotion, then a player can commence strumming. This concludes the discussion on qin technique. Fully understanding qin methodology, however, requires a sound grasp of qin notation.

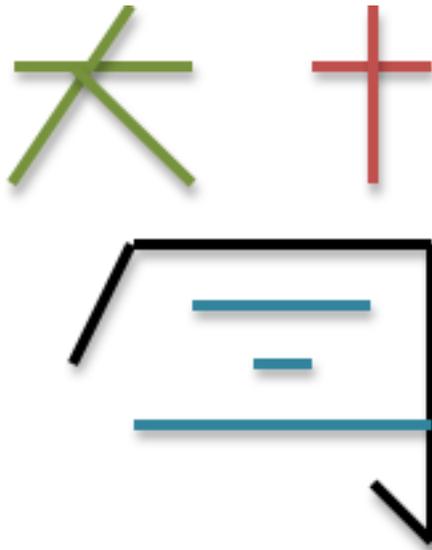
The oldest songs that used qin notation date back to the Tang dynasty (Gulik

412). While this is not the oldest example of musical notation, it is the oldest musical notation that has maintained its original style without any change. This form of notation in the world of music is known as tablature. Tablature differs from traditional western stave notation in that it is “an instrumental notation indicating the string, fret, key, or finger to be used instead of the tone to be sounded” (Merriam-Webster). In this way the symbols shown on qin music sheets, don’t simply show the notes, they also instruct the player where to place their fingers and how to pluck the string. The combination of symbols and characters form a composite character (known as *jianzipu*); this representation might seem complex and hard to sight read at first, but after constant practice it is easily identified.

Each symbol combines of four different. The largest and most distinct part is the center character; this part shows either 1-7 using Chinese characters. This represents the string to be plucked (1<sup>st</sup> being lowest...7<sup>th</sup> being highest). Surrounding this number is a symbol that is directed towards one’s right hand. There is a large range of possible symbols in use (see examples below). With an understanding of these two symbols the player knows the manner in which to pluck the string and which string should be in contact. If the notation indicates that the musician should play an open string (playing with only the right hand and not pressing down on any part of the qin with left; open notes are the loudest and most distinct sounds that can be produced from stringed instruments) then these will be the only two characters shown.

When the notation requires the left hand to come in contact with a string, it will position two smaller characters above the larger one. Top-left are ranges of possibilities that may be shown; each of these characters indicates which finger of the left hand should be used. However, there are some characters that indicate that one should use a knuckle instead of a finger. Top-right shows where the left hand should be placed in relation to the *Hui*. These will be Chinese characters listing 1-13. When the placement is not directly on a *Hui*, certain strokes will represent different placements. For example, sometimes two small numbers are shown in a vertical fashion. This means that the finger should be placed somewhere between these two numbers. There are other symbols that represent different placements besides the one just listed (detailed below).

*(The diagram below illustrates a simple jiangzipu)*



The blue line is the character *San* or 3 and is placed in the center, which indicates that the musician play the 3<sup>rd</sup> string. The black line outlining the *San* is a *Gou*. This symbol indicates the player to place his middle finger on the third string and pull towards oneself. This creates a more muted sound than a different pluck where one uses their nail instead of skin. After the string is pulled, the player's middle finger will stop on the string below the one plucked, stopping, in this case on the 4<sup>th</sup> string. The player lifts his finger off of this string before playing the next note. The character on the top right is in this example called *Da Zhi*, which instructs the musician to place their thumb on the third string forming the *Hu Kuo* with one's hand. The *Shi* character for 10 that is on the right is the *Hui* indication. In conclusion, the player looking at this character will understand that they should play the third string using their middle finger in a *Gou* manner, while the thumb is applied to the tenth stud.

Once one becomes accustomed to reading these characters and understands the common patterns in qin finger technique, reading a sheet of *jianzipu* becomes fairly easy. My teacher has strong musical talent (being able to play pipa, piano, as well as the guqin) is able to look at a sheet of this music and sing the melody. The complicated aspect of *jianzipu*, however, is the significant quantity of different forms. All qin handbooks have introductions describing the history, the makeup and

the characters of the qin. It is a rule that these handbooks must contain at least 150-200 different *jianzipu* (Gulik 127). Some of these characters those illustrated above. For example the *Shao Shi* character indicates a short pause in the music. Other characters may show advanced techniques that involve solely the left hand like a hammer on or a pull off. The diagrams below are 54 different characters drawn and detailed by Gulik from his essay.

(Appendices 3)

Originally, these characters were the only kinds of characters used in qin books. However, in the late Qing dynasty other forms of notation were added to accompany these *jianzipu*. In my collection of books, there is a line of numbers that are spaced accordingly. The characters are shown below each number. These numbers are representations of the musical note itself. For example if the song is using an F scale and the 3<sup>rd</sup> string is plucked at the 7th *Hui*, the book will show a “5” on the top line, and a composite character similar to the one drawn above below. These sometimes have dots under them; if the dots are spread out they call for a slower tempo, if close together, then it is a faster section. These two forms of notation are very helpful when one is deciphering a qin piece. Sometimes the *jianzipu* are incorrect and the player can use the other numerical notes to translate properly. In other instances if the player wants to change the tune to a different position on the guqin, they will look at the numerical note and mimic that in a different octave. Last week, my teacher was teaching me 梅花三弄 (Three Variation of Plum Blossom Theme; a very popular qin tune), and when we were deciphering

the harmonic introduction he decided that the octave was off. Based on the numerical notes he was able to easily find a different position to play. It was only in 1931 that stave notes were added to qin handbooks. This proved more complicated in many situations because new notes had to be invented since Western notation was not totally applicable (Gulik 144).

Old Guqin handbooks are considered a form of art. The introductions to these books were called *chi fa*. These hold a section called the *shou shi* that depicts proper hand posture (Gulik 127). These drawings of hand positions are juxtaposed against scenes of nature. Examples of these images are a bird picking up grass to make a nest, or a crab scuttling along a beach while eating. In addition to these illustrations, a poem beneath it explains what the animal is doing. Juxtaposed alongside the natural depictions are illustrations of the hand positions. Under these is a description of what the hand should do, as well as how it mimics what is adjacent.

(Appendices 4)

The illustration below is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> folio of the *Taiyin Duanji*. The image on the left depicts the *Shangyang* bird hopping around in a dancing manner. The translation of the characters below reads: “There is a bird that only has one foot. It is a smart bird that can predict rain. When the skies are bound to pour down in a long, heavy rain, (the bird) rouses up his feathers, taps, and dances. Bend the ring finger as you approach the string. They are all investigating irregularities as they lift their wings” (Thompson 2004). On the right, the characters under the hand tell us, “Pulling the string inward is called *Da*. Pushing the string outward is called *Zhai*.”

Together pushing then pulling is called *Dazhai*" (Thompson 2004). Looking at the image of the hand in comparison to the bird, one can see that the finger positioning resembles the bird's head down and wings up. The sound produced also imitates the sound of a bird's feet tapping on the ground. The detail in this qin handbook from the Song dynasty is incredible. Not only are the details of the hand gestures with animals portrayed perfectly, but even the boarder of the page has been inlayed with delicate, beautiful designs. These prints from old handbooks are now reprinted and displayed in all modern handbooks. Such artwork further shows the deeper meaning of the qin that will be covered in the ideology section.

The process of bringing the written *jianzipu* to live music is called *Dapu*. This phrase can simply be interpreted as the playing the music that one sees. Traditionally, students would sit across from their teacher and mimic his movements. This mimicry would allow the student to understand the subtleties in hand technique and allow one to observe a better qin player. When teachers are not present, however, the tablature was used to clarify what the player was taught. These characters also allow one to learn older or different variations of a piece. However, *Dapu* gets more complicated when your own ideas infiltrate the notes on the page. Thompson tells us that "recreating is 'free *Dapu*': putting the emphasis on using the material to create one's own music, thus making the *Dapu* part of a continuously developing tradition" (Thompson 2004). This concept of free *Dapu* is important to understanding qin improvisation.

There is considerable debate about the role of improvisation in qin music. Some schools of thought opine that one should only written notes, maintaining the tradition. Other schools believe that improvisation is more proper. Comparing the new qin handbooks from the original 100 we see changes in the melodies. This shows that there has been freedom of interpretation that has driven these modifications. However, most qin players agree that certain rules should be followed when improvising; such playing techniques will keep one's musical sound proper and not sporadic. Different forms of improvisation have been labeled in different ways. *Interpretation* allows the performer, while mostly adhering to a classic piece, some impulsive creativity. *Free interpretation* states that the player intentionally changes the music while playing. *Structured improvisation* allows the player to spontaneously change what he/she is playing or reformat the music in someway. *Creative improvisation* and *free improvisation* are very similar in that the player will intentionally avoid the structure of the given piece of music and avoid most rules that define proper improvisation (for example rhyming) (Thompson 2004). Players are first taught to follow the qin books exactly. After time one's own style will emerge in the song being played and forms of interpretation seem inevitable.

Qin technique is such a vast area of study that it is hard to do it justice in a short paper such as this. This past section has provided a small insight into hand technique, qin notation and improvisation. While there are many more aspects of technique that are not described, these three fields make up a large portion of what must be understood. This brief understanding will give the player an understanding

of qin theory and hopefully spark one's interest in delving further into guqin methodology. The immense amount of technique in relation to the qin is due to its age and history. Beginning around 4,000 years ago, the guqin has accumulated mass amounts of ideology and history. The understanding of the guqin's history is covered below; understanding its narration through time will provide better insight into why the technique is so complex.

### **Historical Ideology**

*"Our host brings wine, for merry-making tonight; And bids the guest from Guangling, to play upon the zither; Moonlight bathes the city walls, crows fly mid-air; Frost petrifies ten thousand tress, wind pierces our robes. But the copper stove gleams bright, and candles add their shimmer; first he plays Lu Water, then The Princess of Chu. As the first note trembles, all else falls silent; From the whole company not a word, till the stars begin to pale. The thousand miles to Qinghuai, I was sent by the Emperor's mandate; on such a night I venture to speak of, retiring to the mountains and the clouds" (Li Qi)*

Through most of Chinese history, the guqin has been a strong presence in society. While other instruments, such as the *erhu* or the *pipa*, symbolize Chinese classical music the qin is the only instrument that is purely Chinese; most of the other instruments originated in central Asia. The qin, however, has remained purely

Chinese since its dawn in Neolithic times. This section explores how the qin has evolved throughout its existence. Starting from the *Shang* dynasty and ending in the present, I intertwine the qin lore with the historical data. This connection is vital to allow one to juxtapose time periods against different points of the ideology's change.

The guqin's origins are uncertain. Legend tells us that the qin was originally invented 4,000 years ago. However, there are three different stories that list different crafters of the first qin. One story points to the Fu Xi. The story behind *Fu Xi* (or his personal name *Tai Hao*) states that for enjoyment he needed a musical instrument; "While traveling in the eastern mountains he saw a *tong* tree. There were several birds in the tree and in particular two large ones underneath. He then spoke to 句芒 *Jumang*, the deity of the tree, who said they were phoenixes. They studied the shape and sound of the wood, with Fu Xi eventually using it for qin construction" (Thompson 2004). However, based on the *Qin Shi Xu's*, we understand that this instrument was actually called a *li* and had 27 strings.

Another account describes *Shen Nong* (referred to in ancient literature as *Yan Di*) as the creator of the guqin. Stories from the Han dynasty tell us that this figure was originally the god of farming who was based around the Yellow River basin. *Shen Nong* apparently had a strong knowledge of silk, and because of his godly power was able to invent the qin. Some accounts tell us that the instrument was, however, a 5-string *se* (*se* are discussed below).

Professor Frederick Lau (professor of ethnomusicology and director of the centre for Chinese studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, CRIENGLISH 2011) separates the history of *guqin* into three eras;

“The first period, from antiquity to 221 C.E., was dominated by stories about the mythical origin of the instrument. Archaeological discoveries of the *guqin* dated from the Shang dynasty confirmed that the instrument had existed as early as the fifteenth century B.C.E...The second period dates from around 221 B.C.E. in the Qin dynasty to 907 C.E. in the Tang dynasty. During this period, *guqin* music was influenced by Confucian ideology, the Daoist philosophy of noninterference and simplicity...the third period, from the tenth century to the twentieth century, a proliferation of *guqin* compositions and refinement in playing techniques emerged...it was during this period that aesthetic considerations became the most important aspect of *guqin* playing” (Lau 121-122).

While I believe that professor Lau’s findings aren’t precisely accurate, this division of the periods of the *qin* are accurate and useful enough when describing the timeline behind its history. Beginning with the first period, the segment below looks at the *qin*’s mythical history through the end of the Zhou dynasty.

*Xuanyuan Shi* (The Yellow Emperor), chief of the legendary Five Emperors is also credited as an original builder of the guqin. This character “has been regarded as the primogenitor of the Chinese nation” (Cultural China 2007). Legend describes his organization of musical notes and modes, and with these he wrote certain melodies. It is said that *Xuanyuan Shi* built a qin that he named *Di Zhong* and which he used “to play melodies in the saddest mode” (Thompson 2004). These three stories are regarded as myths in qin history. No one knows the actual creator, but these characters are all attributed by legend.

The first physical evidence of the guqin is from *gu wen* script on Shang oracle bones. While these bones of divination show us the character of the qin, its history at this point in time is still uncertain. The physical inscription shows graphs for music depicting “two pieces of twisted string (𠄎, probably silk) over wood (木)” (Thompson 2004). These oracle bones can only tell us so much about the qin’s role in Shang times. It was only in the *Book of Songs* (6<sup>th</sup> dynasty BCE) that we first have more conclusive writings about the qin. However, this source is still somewhat ambiguous because of the use of qin and se, either as one word or next to each other. To understand the early development of the guqin we must look at the relationship of these two instruments and their characters.

Since the information surrounding these two instruments are from such an early point of history, the details that we know today is somewhat unclear. There’s strong evidence that tells us that many different forms of zithers existed in the Shang dynasty. The combinations of the characters qin and se (*qinse*) may well have

been a broad word that describes zithers in general; another meaning we see for *qinse* is martial harmony. Robert Gulik compared the evolution of the character's *qin* and *se* that were found on oracle bones, bronzes, and ancient dictionaries and came up with a intriguing conclusion. Going back dynasty-by-dynasty these characters appeared to become more similar, thus Gulik extrapolates that they were once the same character. This character tells us that these two instruments were both one and the same. The list of characters is attached below.

(Appendices 5)

During the Shang dynasty as well as early in the Zhou, this instrument was part of the Chinese orchestra. It seems that it was used in both personal settings as well as orchestral; over time these two instruments diverged to allow for a vaster range of sounds. Once the initial separation was made a *qin* emerged as a fretless zither with had five strings and no movable bridges. The *se* became an instrument of 25 strings; each string had a movable bridge under it (Dr. Tong Kin-Woon 2012). Evaluating the findings of Gulik and Dr. Tong Kin-Woon, we understand that in pre-Han times, the word *qin* may simply mean “an instrument without frets.” Whereas *Se* meant “an instrument with frets.” Today, we might identify similar factors of the original instrument that was the combined *qinse*. An example of this is the *Hui*; these studs may take the place of where bridges used to reside, showing that this compound instrument could very well be the guqin's ancestor.

The first physical qins that have been excavated differ slightly in shape from the modern *qin* (first evidence is of modern shape dates to about 7<sup>th</sup> century CE;

writing shows these qins actually originated earlier, probably around the time of Xi Kang). These qins from the Eastern Zhou dynasty are considered the ancestor of the modern qin and therefore are considered a form of the qin itself. Once the qin became a separate instrument from the *se*, it still remained part of the Chinese orchestra. However, the qin is a quiet instrument and therefore the style that was played in this setting differed greatly than what we hear today. The Chinese orchestra consists mainly of instruments that over power volume. To compensate 12 qins were used during Confucian ceremonies of the Zhou dynasty (Gulik 389). The style was much simpler in this setting as well. When one lays their left hand on the qin to play relatively higher note, the frequency and volume also depletes. As a result, the 12 qin players of the orchestra would mainly play open strings (only with right hand) and in unison to create a louder sound.

Thus began the division of the guqin. Looking back on this history, we separate the qin into two categories, orchestral and solo. The orchestral qin was played as described above. This qin category is also labeled as vocal since some pieces were accompanied with singing. However, this division of qin was much more rudimentary and died at the end of the Zhou dynasty. The other category is described as the solo or instrumental (Watt 1). This style was much more complicated, and is also the sound that we hear today in the modern qin style. Originally, the solo form of qin was played either during solemn occasions, during banquets, or for one's own enjoyment (Gulik 389).

During this time much interest was paid to the guqin in a different manner to the rest of Chinese instruments. The solo qin was taken under the wing of the Chinese literati to grow as the most unique instrument of China. This original metaphysical evolution of the qin is one of the largest mysteries for scholars to speculate about. Why did qin lore originate? Why did its music “disperse the darkness of the mind and calm the passions?” (Gulik 340). I attempt to answer these questions in the following section.

While the qin is a quiet instrument, it was also more expensive than other Chinese instruments like the *erhu*. It is also a very difficult instrument to build properly. Its written music is hard to read (especially if one cannot read Chinese characters) and a teacher that is not a high-class scholar was hard to find. Lastly, qin technique (as described above) is very difficult. This created a very small group of people who were actually able to buy and learn how to play the qin. These people were almost always of from an elevated and highly educated strata of society; “its study belonging by right to those whose studies are concentrated on literature and wisdom” (Gulik 399). One of the most well known figures in history who strongly endorsed the playing of the qin and its esoteric was Confucius. It is said “the sound of the guqin was so mesmerizing that it caused Confucius to ignore even the good taste of meat” (Lau 123). While not much is known of the great sage’s playing, it is well known what main teaching he developed. Confucius stated that to be a true scholar, one must be able to play the guqin, play chess, write calligraphy, and paint; the phrase that was produced is known as *qin xi shu hua*. This teaching spread

throughout the society of the literati and the qin soon became one of the most essential parts of a library of the Chinese scholar.

This adoption by Confucian scholars of society brings us to the second section of the qin's history. This qin lore grew due to three different factors of society. The first, briefly explained above is the Confucian ideology surrounding the qin. The second is Daoist; the Daoist scholars and recluses of this time juxtaposed their religion around the music and power that the guqin produced. Third was a psychological; scholars who used the lute as a symbol to elevate themselves within the social order. Gulik sums up the Confucian's view by saying, "purity of nature is one of the accomplishments of the Superior Man. He reaches this state of perfection by a cultivation of the person, and by rectifying the mind. The Superior Man should always preserve this purity intact. Then he becomes ideal Statesman and ideal Ruler" (Gulik 426). The Confucians appreciated the purity behind the qin in relation to history as well as its restraining of low desires.

Some scholars did not understand the music or the deeper meaning behind the guqin. These individuals would hang the instrument on their wall as a symbol of their status. The image of the qin in one's house signified the scholarly level that one had achieved; this symbol would convince others who gazed upon the given scholar's library and possibly the scholar himself that he was a proper literati of the time. More interesting than such mockery, however, is the Daoist interpretation of the qin.

The Daoist philosophy delves deeper into the spiritual world of the guqin.

However, before understanding this connection, we must first look at the primary ideology behind Daoist belief; Gulik describes the Daoist priests as preaching, “human nature is considered from a cosmic point of view...the Universe is a manifesto, one peculiar aspect, of an all pervading, supernatural agency, indicated by the term Dao, which gave its name to the system...reaching the highest state of bliss and deliverance...the utmost simplicity, both in mental and physical aspects” (Gulik 428). These minimalists believed of the playing of the qin as a form of meditation. It became “a means for communicating directly with the *dao*” (Gulik 428). This idea shows that the playing of the qin and one’s internal *breath* had become one. Many of the Daoist point of views mixed well with the classical literati’s and so they were embraced. Looking through the songs produced from this time, we see that many were written directly with Daoist scholars in mind; Cheng-Weng wrote *Lei Zi’s ‘Riding on the Wind’*, and Mao Min Chung wrote *Zhuang Zi’s ‘Dreaming of the Butterfly’*” (Gulik 429). Whether Daoist or not, many qin songs share names with popular poems from early periods in history.

While not traditionally Chinese, Buddhism became an eminent part of Chinese culture. Thus certain Buddhist interpretations on the qin have been manifested. Many aspects of the guqin fall into a Buddhist realm; the table is often referred to as the *qin tan* (qin alter), ideally placed in a sport of great scenery or a pure setting, there is also a Buddhist-like ritual that happens before one lays one’s hand on the instrument;

“Don ceremonial dress, wash his hands, rinse his mouth,  
purify his thoughts. After having burned incense he may

take the Lute from its cover and place it on the Lute table. Then he should sit down before it in a reverent mood, and regulate his breath and concentrate his mind. His body should be kept steady and erect 'unmoving and imposing like the *Tai Shan*, yet his mental attitude must be humble, 'as if he were standing before a superior" (Gulik 432).

This religious routine has strong relation to the dogma behind Buddhism. While qins were originally not supposed to be played by Buddhist monks, we know that many handbooks and tunes have Buddhist and Indian influences, or were even written directly by monks.

Daoist belief deeply penetrated qin lore. From Daoist time the simplicity of the guqin's sound harnesses a world of complexity. This falls directly into the oxymoronic teachings behind much of Daoism. The study of complexity behind the simple façade of guqin playing was examined at great depths. *Xi Kang's* (one of the seven sages) teacher, *Sun Deng* is attributed to starting the one string qin (Henochoicz 380). One may ask, "What beauty can a single string provide?" However, the essence behind each note produced by the qin should be "as weighty as Mount *Tai* but as light as a goose feather" (Sima Qian). Understanding that each note has such a strong essence opens an exploration into the many possibilities in a single string. Qin researcher Anne Henochoicz asks a valuable question that most likely was also thought about with the early qin sages; "The infinite potential of

musical expression is reduced to a mere hint in the sound of a plucked string; in that case, why bother to play at all?" (Henochowicz 375). In the Eastern Jin Dynasty scholar *Tao Qian* also pondered this question and in response played a qin with no strings or *Hui*. *Tao* claimed that "I have acquired the deeper significance of the qin: why should I strive after the sound of the strings? (Gulik 399). This spiritual understanding shows how far qin lore had come in a millennium.

The Sui and the Tang dynasties mark the next significant juncture in qin history. While notation might have been written before this time, our first records of *jianzipu* come from the Tang and in so doing gives this time great significance; showing the evolution from teacher to student teaching, to player to paper. The first known written piece is called *You Lan* or *Elegant Orchid* (Lau 122). However, during the short Sui and the Tang dynasties there was a influx of foreign influences on Chinese society. Most came from central Asia on the path of the Silk Road. With this influx of foreign influence, much of pure Chinese society seemed to vanish. Even the ceremonial music of court rituals disappeared from the royal halls (Watt 1). For many qin literati, this was a time of dismay. One example of this is *Bai Juyi's* statement on his relation to the guqin,

"Silk and tong wood join to make the qin, inside its boards the antique voices sound. The qin is weak like water, it cannot stir people's passions. Its jade fret marks have lost their shine; dust lives on its vermilion strings. I long ago abandoned my qin, yet its glimmering

tones still linger. I cannot cease to play, Even if no one listens. What caused it to be thus? The *qiang* flute and the *zheng*.” (Dingqiu 1999).

This example describes Central Asian influences disturbing the scholar’s realm. However, *Bai Juyi*, also mentions how the “qin still glimmers and he cannot cease to play.” Even though foreign influences muddied some of Chinese tradition, many aspects of society remained pure. Most literati of this time cherished the because of its pure past.

With the *Weltanschauung* of the qin highly developed at this point, it is relevant to turn to the third era of history which is often referred to as the “peak” or the “golden age” of the guqin. Frederick Lau describes this period of history as “a proliferation of guqin compositions and refinement of playing techniques emerged” (Lau 122). This period was the fine-tuning and large expansion of qin notation, ideology, and identity. It was during the Song dynasty that the ideal image of the recluse qin player developed. The setting and environment became the most important value of the qin player.

During the Ming dynasty, the Khans were apparently not the best appreciators of the music, but made no attempts to expel the sacred Chinese art. There are some accounts, however, of official qin players who were employed by the court. In historical articles about the Ming, culture is often said to have diminished. This was due to the Manchu rule during the Qing dynasty and many blamed intellectuals for the fall of the Ming. If the intellectuals of the Qing praised the past

dynasty, they would have been seen as antinationalist. However this was one of the richest times for the guqin. Robert Gulik uses this analogy to analyze how the Ming's era of qin is viewed; "when a tree is in full blossom, its gorgeous beauty amazes the observer; little does he care what the branches and the trunk look like. With the coming of autumn, the blossoms fall down, then the leaves, and the observer sees the tree in a more realistic way: he sees that here branches are broken, there a stem ends in an abrupt gnarl. The observer will know more but enjoy less" (Gulik 164). This vivid depiction describes how Qing scholars understood the guqin during the Ming dynasty.

The history of the guqin can be followed through the paintings of different artists throughout Chinese history. *Wang Meng*, a famous painter of the Ming dynasty, illustrates the ideal literati of the time. The painting below entitled *Lofty Recluses in Mountains and Valleys* shows a scholar surrounded by nature. While the character is playing the qin, a crane sits next to the books which are piled and listens to the profound music. These symbols "provide the spiritual solace sought by the scholar in his retreat. The crane conveys not so much an imitation of immortality as removal from the world of dust" (Watt 1). Watt continues to describe the connection between qin and painting. The strong musicology that had originally made the qin so unique was almost lost due to the lack of true musicians. Watt connects these two unique arts of the times saying;

"The idea that 'it is not within the melodic line but to the entity itself' is similar to the painting in that brushwork

in the Ming and Qing...the expressive brushwork became more important than the representational content of the picture; hence the movement towards a kind of 'abstract expressionism' which relied on greatly simplified pictorial conventions for any allusion to physical reality. Similarly, the sensuous tones of the qin strings during the same period became predominant in qin music in many regional schools of playing, and the melodic line, which is the other important element of the music, became neglected to the point of almost total disregard" (Watt 1).

Through this depiction of the neglect of theory, the sacred art of the qin was almost lost to imitations. However, the scholars of the time who held onto the true tradition and were talented musicians were able to keep true qin lore from dying out.

(Appendices 6)

It was during the early part of the Qing dynasty that the qin first traveled out of China. Records show that the priest *Xin Yue* fled to Japan. Once there, *Xin* was said to be embraced by the feudal *Lord Itsukiuni*. The qin has stayed in Japan since it was first brought, mainly being played by Buddhist priests (Gulik 400). However, it seems that after the Sino-Japanese war, the number of qin players slimmed to

almost nothing. A comeback has been made since then and the qin is still played in Japan today.

Unfortunately, starting in the late Qing dynasty, guqin lore began its decline. Advancement into modernity left little room for tradition and spiritual awareness. During the 1960s the qin tumbled to its nadir. Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution enforced regulations that were aimed to destroy traditional values and the metaphysical aspects that the qin embodied. Players who breathed true qin ideology did not survive this harsh time. However, the qin did survive by other means. Its rich history remains dense and easily accessible and qin performing has become the popular new concept that embodies the modern qin. It is rare to find a player in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who plays individually as a means to cultivating their spirit. That said, five players stand out as masters of performance from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Guan Pinghu* (1897-1967), *Le Ying* (1911-?), *Pu Xuezhai* (1893-1966), *Wu Jinglue* (1907-1987), and *Xia Yifeng* (1883-1963) (Thompson 2004) have been the strong basis of beautiful qin music surviving today. Recordings from these masters give us insight into the great power which was held within the qin's music.

The long and plentiful history of the guqin will not be forgotten. In 2003, the qin was dedicated as one of the United Nation's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. However, it is evident from these recognitions that the spiritual side of the guqin is buried; "The guqin's traditional function as a means of cultivating moral and intellectual character has almost entirely disappeared. Consequently, this once-complex holistic tradition has been reduced to a

professional performing art” (UNESCO 2004). I believe that our understanding of this history is vital to truly appreciate the guqin as more than an instrument.

The past section follows the qin’s past from Neolithic times until contemporary times. While I have tried to paint a picture of this vast expanse of time, the actual expanse of an un-abridged version of the qin’s history would reach far farther into detail than the sample I have given. However, through my words I hope to have given a small amount of knowledge into the mystic world of the qin that has preceded me by four millennia. A motif throughout qin history is the tie to the literati. Not only did scholars create its lore, but the qin’s fate also lay within these literati; when society pushed them into decline, the qin suffered with them. Through the interpretation of different religions and philosophies of thought, qin lore grew to a point where the guqin seems to be more than an instrument. While many of the instruments of ancient times, their songs, their methods of playing and their ideology has been lost over time, this tool for meditative purposes and a symbol of pure Chinese tradition remains in present in China today. I will conclude this section with a quote from *Zhu Quan* where he states in his preface to *Shen Qi Mi Pu: The Handbook of Spiritual and Marvelous Mysteries* (1425 CE) as it properly sums up the history that has been discussed in poetic fashion;

“As the qin became a physical object, the sages made it in such a way that it could correct purposeful thoughts, provide leadership in worldly affairs, bring accord to the six influences and tune the harmony of the seasons. It is

indeed the divine instrument of heaven and earth, and a most ancient spiritual object; thus it became the music used by sages of our Middle Kingdom to control the government, and the object used by princely men to cultivate (themselves); it is only appropriate to stitched sleeves (i.e., scholars) or yellow caps (Daoists).”

(Thompson 2004)

**Personal**

*"In my later years, I care only for quiet; The ten thousand affairs, no longer concern me. Communing with myself, I find no plan: I only know, I must return to the old woods. A pine wind, will loosen the girdle of my gown; A mountain moon, glitter on my zither. You question me about, success and failure? Listen — a fisherman's song drifting up the estuary!" (Wang Wei)*

As a twenty year old from Los Angeles, California, who grew up listening to the music of Led Zeppelin alongside the strong bass of west coast hip-hop, it may seem strange that I have shown such strong interest in an instrument such as the guqin. This instrument holds such spiritual power and deep ideology is worlds away

from the money driven, atheist land of L.A. During middle school, I started studying guitar. I allowed this Western instrument to metaphysically take me to different places around the world and a range of times throughout history. I studied jazz and surrounded myself with the playing of early American greats like Joe Pass and Wes Montgomery. I then focused on Flamenco and fell in love with the melodies of Andres Segovia and Paco De Lucia of Spain.

The tones of such music still differ greatly from the sound generated on the eastern wind of the guqins. It was not until high school that my interest of anything Sino began. Studying *Kung Fu* inspired my interest in Chinese history, culture and language. While classes on such subjects were limited in my high school, I independently began to expand my breath of knowledge on such subjects. I first heard the guqin's music in *Kung Fu* movies. *Zhang Yimou's* "Hero" depicts an old blind man playing guqin during the Qin dynasty. To the sound of his music, Jet Li and Donny Yen fight a battle within their mind. Jet Li plays a real character in history (one who *Sima Qian* wrote about in the bibliographies section of the *Shi Ji*); he describes how the music of the qin shares the same essence with the inner power that is *Kung Fu* embodies. Another film that inspired my initial interest in qin ideology was *John Woo's* "Red Cliff." This movie depicts two scholars deep in conversation through the music produced from their qins.

These movies lured me into the mystique behind the guqin. However, I was not able to study qin ideology or learn how to play qin music until I travelled to China and began a semester abroad in Kunming. My initial aim was to find a Daoist

teacher in the mountains of *Wei Bao Shan*, Northern Yunnan. When this proved inconvenient, I talked to different teachers around the city of Kunming (Yunnan's largest city) looking for the best teacher I could find in such an urban setting. When looking to buy a guqin the names of several people and connected with a qin teacher who taught out of his house. I set up a meeting with Shang Laoshi and met with him the next day. Upon sitting down in his living room, I knew that Shang Laoshi was the best teacher that I would find. We sat drinking the tea that his wife served, discussing why I wanted to learn the guqin, what could be done in my limited time, and practical arrangements about the following lessons.

Shang Laoshi's house is an intriguing place. Residing next to major street An Kang Lu, his apartment seems quite humble from the outside. In the back alley from a China Bank, his apartment blends in to the surroundings. However, once inside it seems that you have entered into antiquity. His residence is filled with antiques of all sorts. As a very eclectic musician, Shang Laoshi plays not only guqin, but also pipa, piano, and guitar. However, Shang Laoshi's main art is his painting. Besides the thirteen qins and many pipas that hang around the house on his walls, Shang's own paintings are framed in each room. While he paints images of horses and mountain scenes beautifully, Shang Laoshi's speciality is the *Lao Hu* or the Tiger.

The center room to the left of the entrance is where he receives his many guests and where he paints. Four chairs and a bench line three sides of this room so people may sit and chat comfortably. In the center of the room is a very large, padded. This padding is necessary to have under one's paper when writing

calligraphy or painting in a Chinese style. On one side of this table are his brushes and ink, but the majority is left open providing him space to maneuver. Under the table are large amounts of pipas and guitars. This room is the central point of the house. Work is completed, guests are received, and relaxing is achieved all in this one room.

Adjacent to this room is what appears to be “the room of history.” It is much smaller, and is covered from wall to wall with bookshelves. All the books contain information on Chinese history. In the center are two qin tables. Everyday when I would come to Shang Laoshi’s house we would set up two of his qins and sit adjacent to each other; in this traditional manner we would practice surrounded by wisdom. Small rooms that I never ventured into surrounded this one. However, from the glimpses I saw, each room contained antiques, and the jewelry tin glass cases, which his wife sold. The other room of their house besides the kitchen was to the right of the entrance. Shang Laoshi’s favorite qins are on the walls the walls of his bedroom. He also has a piano, another painting table, a cabinet full of music books, more jewelry, and their bed in it.

It seemed that every corner of the house breathed antiquity. Along with being a musician and a painter, Shang Laoshi’s main business right now is fortune telling and Feng Shui. At least three times a week, couples would sit in Shang Laoshi’s living room while he conducted a mathematical/astrological form of divination. Through all these arts, one understands that Shang Laoshi lives the life of

a Confucian scholar; he performs every aspect of *Qin Xi Shu Hua*. It is for this reason that studying under his teachings was so interesting.

My daily routine allowed me to live somewhat of a similar life. Upon waking up every morning I would practice different forms of calligraphy; both *Kaishu* and *Lishu*. Then I would warm up my hands with certain drills that I had been taught, and practice the past and current songs that he was teaching me. Everyday I would spend reading different literary articles on qin history, ideology, and technique to get the true understanding that was not able to be communicated during class time.

For two hours, six days a week, I studied at Shang Laoshi's house. At first, I learned how to read *jianzipu* and simple drills and songs that only involve open strings. As I practiced everyday, I was able to learn quickly and advance to more complicated songs involving my left hand and many different styles of playing. Throughout my time with Shang Laoshi, I learned *Jiu Kuang*, *Ping Sha Lou Yan*, *Yi Gu Ren*, *Mei Hua San Long*, *Guan San Yue*, along with other simpler songs. He was pleased with these progressions, as I was able to get a brief understanding of these songs as well as learn them in the three weeks that we spent together.

The most interesting aspect of my study was the time spent learning but also partaking in discussion at Shang Laoshi's house. Every class, I practiced and mimicked his movements for the first hour. However, as one must sit erect during the playing of the qin, one's back becomes tired quickly. After the hour mark, I would take a break and go drink tea in the living room. There were only a few days of my study when Shang Laoshi's house was empty of guests. Customers, friends, or

co-workers (people who would do calligraphy for Shang Laoshi, or make his stamps) listened to my lesson and discussed a range of topics in the adjacent room. During my break, Shang's wife served me tea and I sat in one of the chairs. I was always the center of interest and these intellectuals were always patient as they knew my Chinese is only at an intermediate level. I was able to communicate different aspects of my experiences in China, at home in Los Angeles, or at University in Colorado. In return I also learned about the ranging livelihoods of the people I met; their work, personal life, and their relation to my qin teacher. Most interesting, however, was talking about China's history and present society in relation to the United States. While our ideas sometimes clashed, I was always eager to learn from these individuals.

I made new friends and *guanxi* in Kunming through Shang Laoshi's guests with whom I became acquainted. I became friends with the man who makes all of the stamps for Shang Laoshi's works of art. In spending time with him, I met many more artists and learned some of the art of seal carving. Another good acquaintance made in Shang Laoshi's house was a young but well-known calligrapher of Kunming. I was able to learn new perspectives on the calligraphy that I had been taught by Shang Laoshi and others through her teaching.

The atmosphere that surrounded me as I studied music was very encouraging and supportive. I felt that every time I attended class I was transported back in time; through the study of qin musicology, I was able to get a small taste into lifestyles of the the sages of older times. While this was not my aim of study, per se,

it is obvious from the history laid out in the previous section that the world that surrounds the qin is just as important as the instrument itself. Through these means I was able to truly understand the identity of the qin.

### **Conclusion**

*“As the Old Toper whistles and sings, the sounds harmonize with the flowing streams. ¶After the Old Toper leaves, ¶ the void is filled with (sounds of) morning birds and evening monkeys. ¶Mountains sometimes collapse, (and) rivers sometimes reverse course, ¶(but) I think the Old (Toper) is completely ageless. ¶The Old (Toper) now being an airborne immortal, this thought should be with people: ¶Try to listen to listen (to the ethereal resonances) beyond sounds (defined by) finger positions and strings” (Su Shi).*

This study on the guqin has explored many of the facets that make it a unique instrument. While each instrument of different cultures has its own significance, history, and symbolism, the guqin has a distinctive philosophy that surrounds it; the qin is the “only instrument forming the centre of a special system of thought; it is the only instrument the playing of which has been considered from ancient times as a way to Salvation” (Gulik 404). This system of thought was created due to different musical and societal factors that changed throughout the qin’s history.

The first study of the body, strings, and physical surroundings are crucial to

begin thinking about anything technical or metaphysical in relation to this ancient zither. The simplicity that is seen from the outside shows the deceptiveness of the guqin. This is a symbol that constantly embodies the qin; while the looks, sounds, and playing seem simple, the internal aspect is a cobweb of complexity. Beginning with the study of the qin's construction, one is able to begin studying the technique behind qin playing. The notation and theory that dates back to antiquated times of Chinese history, are both intricate and beautiful. The qin handbooks of the Tang through the Ming give us strong insight into the musicology that developed well before these times. Through the study of notation and finger movements, one not only better understands the playing of the qin, but also comprehends the depth in which qin theory covers.

The history of the guqin dating back to Shang times is one of the richest narratives of any instrument. This purely Chinese instrument has its "Tones bequeathed by high antiquity" (Gulik 389); the sound of the qin has been played in vast scenes of nature, in the halls of kings since the beginning of Chinese society, and has been touched by individuals such as Confucius himself. The age of this instrument, its true nature in Chinese society, and strong connections with Confucianist and Daoist literati allowed the qin to express the highest musical ideals throughout world history. The story of the qin winding through time is relatively short in this paper, but it is intended to provide a strong introduction to the qin's path through time.

To depict my own interest and perception of qin music I include the famous story of *Bo Ya* and *Zhong Ziqi*. This is one of the earliest examples of the qin's spiritual lore. The story tells us that *Bo Ya* was one of the best qin players of his time; his playing was so complex that no one understood his music. One day as he played on a riverboat, a nearby woodcutter named *Ziqi* heard *Boya's* melodies. While he heard the music he was able to visualize the exact objects that *Boya's* playing was intended to represent; when *Boya* would try and represent Mount *Tai* in his music, *Ziqi* would replay, "Wonderful, as grand as Mount *Tai*!" When *Boya* would focus and try to epitomize the essence of flowing streams, *Ziqi* said, "vast and swelling, like flowing streams!" The story continues that this friendship grew, as *Ziqi* was the only one who could truly understand the complexity behind *Boya's* playing. When *Zhong Ziqi* died, however, *Boya* was so devastated as the true meaning of his music would never again be truly appreciated that he went into the woods and smashed his guqin. (Henochowicz 378). This story tells us that there is as much an art and ideology behind the listening of the qin as playing it.

(Appendices 7)

I do not claim to have *Bo Ya's* skill at playing or *Zhong Ziqi's* skill at listening. However, I believe that the notes that the qin sings have a powerful, emotional essence. These are meditative sounds that drew me to wanting to learn the qin. I still get chills on hearing or playing the melodies of certain songs. While the ideology is nonexistent in modern society, due to the spiritual decline and rise of technology,

I believe that the qin still strives to release its essence to those who try to listen or play in the proper way.

My objective with this project was to examine the guqin's many characteristics and to try to elucidate the foreign lore to western readers. I have gone into as much detail as my time and resources would allow me. The sources I cite are a source of greater detail for the interested reader.

The qin is a mysterious instrument. While some scholars believe that this mysticism is due only to the fact that legend and myth surround its history, I believe that the guqin still holds many supernatural qualities. This was believed for more than three millennia; it was only in modern times that such ideology is disregarded. These literati understood something about the qin that we in the modern world have lost. To truly understand the guqin as a sage of old, one must leave the fast-paced modern world. In writing this study, I was left more curious. Further research on this topic while studying in a more spiritual location seems necessary to understand what is still a mystery to me.

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**Recommendations for Further Study**

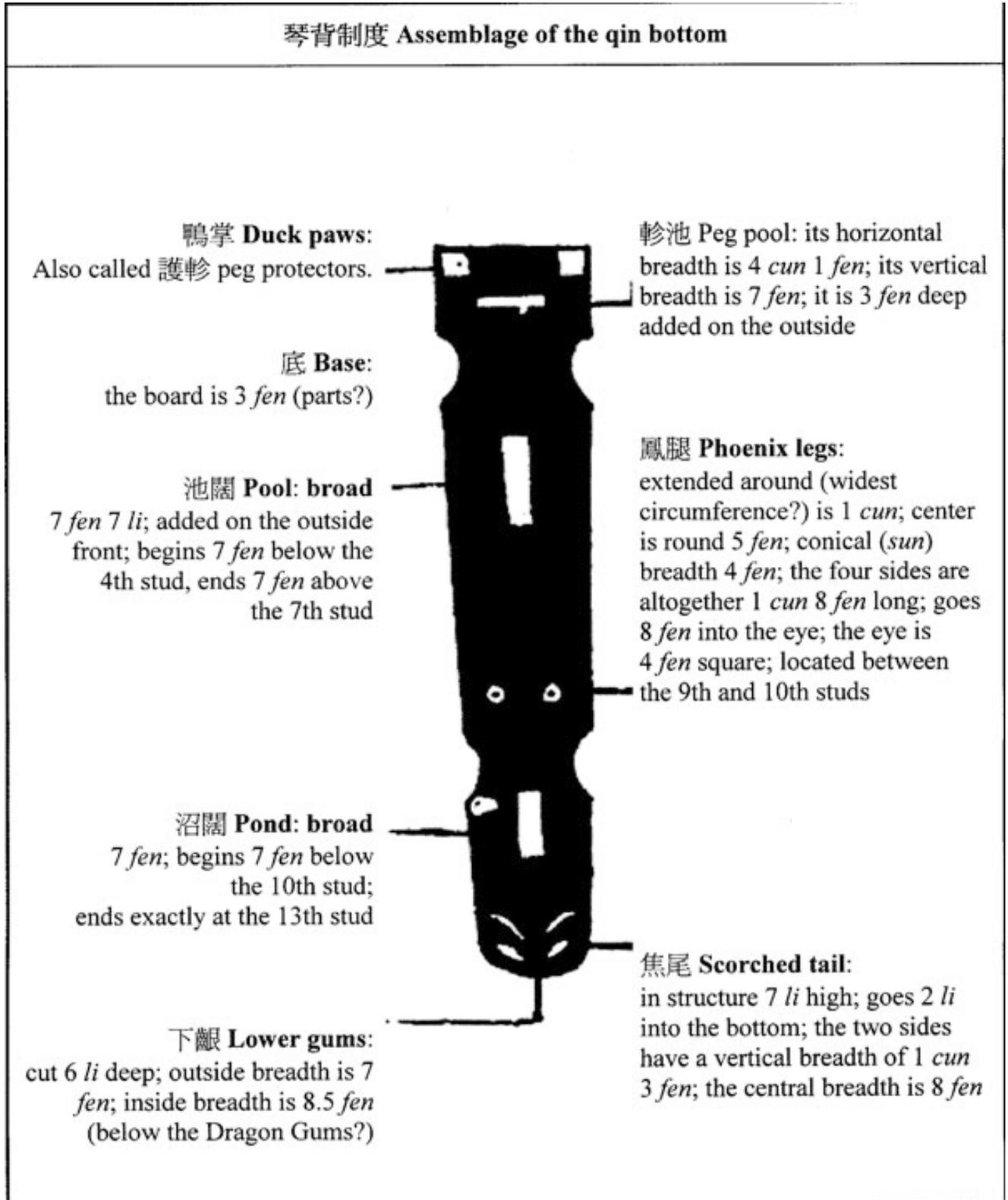
In my conclusion I described that study of the modern day spiritual possibilities of the guqin are of key interest. It might be hard to conduct such studies. One must first have a strong grasp on the Chinese language. Only through strong lingual ties will one's teacher be able to communicate in full depth. I do suggest starting with John Thompson and Robert Gulik's works; after reading through these pieces, one will be ready to begin fieldwork on any topic involving the guqin. I do suggest my teacher, Shang Laoshi, as a start to one's studying. His teaching environment, while not spiritual, has a strong historical feel. He is also a very scholar musician and a good teacher. Shang Laoshi is based in Kunming, Yunnan. His home phone number for further information of lessons is as follows: 18908711068. The teachers on *Wei Bao Shan* seemed adequate at best, but the environment was perfect. The exploration of Daoist temples, in search of a teacher, will allow one to study this mysticism properly. If a translator is needed, hire one for interviews

### *Appendices*

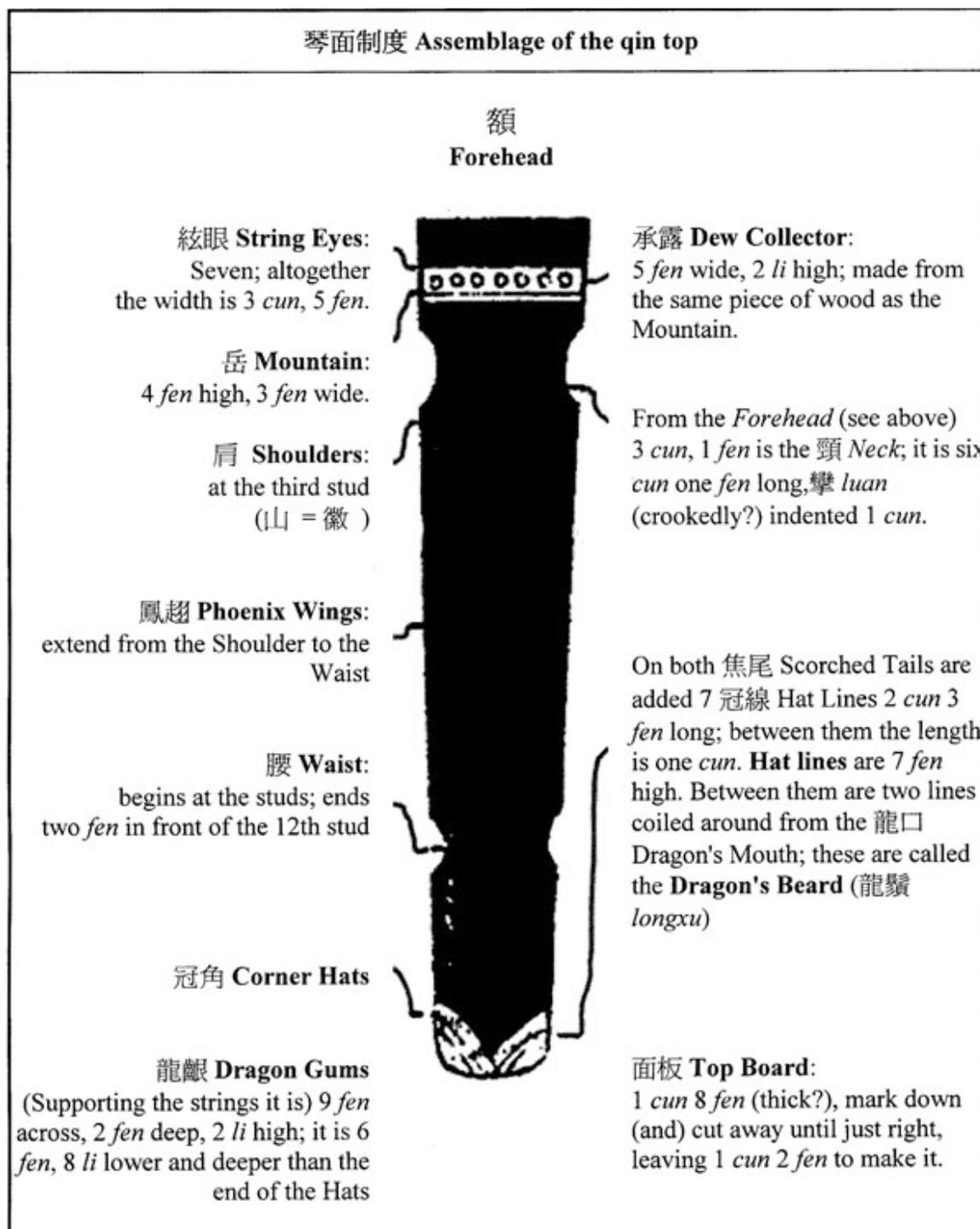
The language barrier was my biggest hurdle during the process of this study. If my Mandarin were fluent I would have learned much more in depth understandings about the history, ideology, and musicology behind the guqin. My communication with my teacher would have been fluid and the many hours of frustration could have been prevented. The language barrier along with not using a translator during most of my interviews prevented me from acquiring the amount of field notes that I would have liked to include. That said, my experience during the ISP was ideal. Along with spending many days writing a paper that further extended my knowledge and desire to learn more about the guqin, I was able to learn how to play a beautiful instrument. Studying the guqin allowed my mind to constantly be in a peaceful state. The following pictures are from the bookmarked places of the study above.



1. Bottom Qin Picture



2. Top Qin Picture

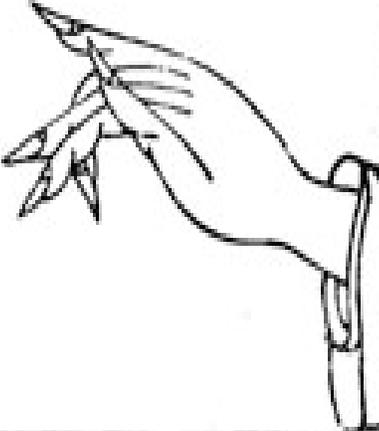


3. Tablature Drawings

1 廿	10 矣	19 券	28 彘	37 中	46 弁
2 毛	11 厂	20 女	29 云	38 夕	47 冎
3 尸	12 早	21 器	30 車	39 卜	48 徠
4 木	13 拳	22 夸	31 璽	40 シ	49 色
5 乚	14 团	23 太	32 重	41 六	50 午
6 勺	15 燕	24 弗	33 爰	42 牙	51 足
7 弓	16 叅	25 冎	34 彘	43 立	52 色
8 丁	17 長	26 筭	35 大	44 隼	53 旡
9 亨	18 合	27 省	36 人	45 卡	54 拙

Figure XIV. Selected chien-tzû, abbreviated signs used in Lute notation.

4. Hand Gesture

<p>商羊飲舞勢</p>	<p>右手名指</p>
	
<p>與曰 有鳥獨足 需而知兩 天欲滂池 奮翼飲舞 出。名。指。以。胸。絃。 象。象。差。而。翼。舉。</p>	<p>打 譜作丁 摘 譜作育 打摘 譜作丁育 向內入絃曰打 向外出絃曰摘 出入二作曰打摘</p>

5. Qin and Se Evolution

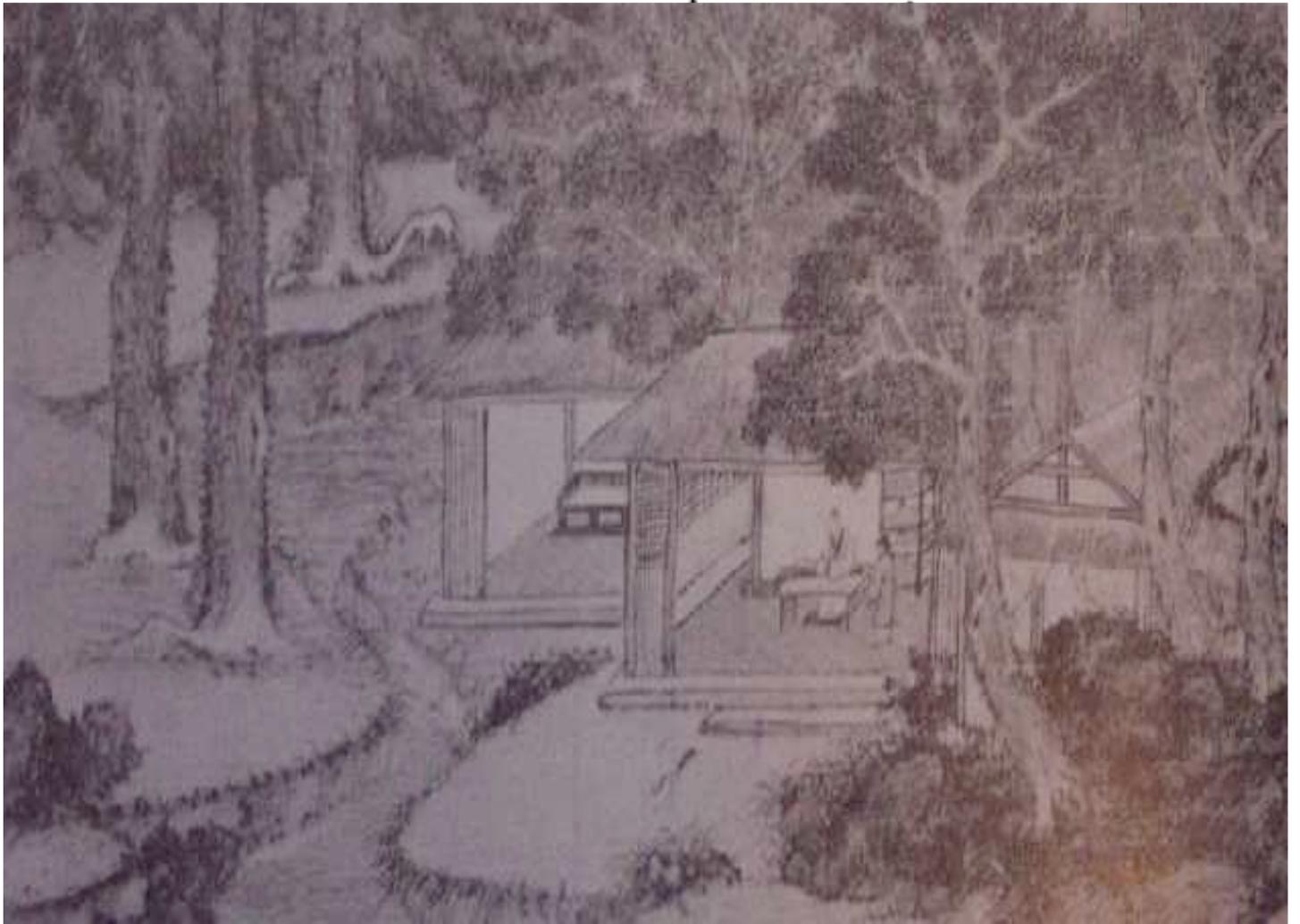


FIGURE V.  
Figure V  
Old forms of the characters for *ch'in* and *sé*.

6. Wang Meng's Painting: *Lofty Recluses in Mountains and Valleys*

7. *Bo Ya Playing to Zhong Ziqi*



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