



University  
of Glasgow

Pearce, N. (2008) *More sight than sound: extra-musical qualities of the Qin*. *Orientalism*, 39 . pp. 40-46. ISSN 0030-5448

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/25439/>

Deposited on: 09 March 2010

# More Sight than Sound: Extra-musical Qualities of the Qin

Nick Pearce

There is a rich literature in both Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Western languages concerning the zither-like musical instrument called the *qin* or *guqin* (Figs 1 and 1a). Most of the literature centres on the playing tradition, including tablature, playing techniques and the history of the instrument in real and mythological terms. Much less discussion has involved the purely visual qualities of the instrument and its music. By visual, I do not mean just the construction of the instrument and the naming of its various parts, topics that have been regularly discussed; rather, I am referring to aspects of the instrument that emphasize a close relationship with both painting and ideas that have their ori-

gin in Chinese visual culture. The relationship is based not only on the fact that the *qin* appears in a large number of landscape and figure paintings – particularly from the 16th century onwards – but also on the numerous visual references and symbolic meanings shared by the instrument and certain pieces written for it. It is this aspect which will be explored in the present article.

The *qin* has long been recognized as an instrument indigenous to China and one with an ancient pedigree. From inscriptions on early bronze vessels, it can be traced to about 1400 BCE. Chinese creation myths would take the instrument back even further, for its invention is attributed to a number of mythical figures. It has variously been associated with Fu Xi, the father of measures and systems; Shen Nong, who gave China its agriculture, husbandry and sericulture technologies; and the sage-emperor Yu Shun, who, according to the *Yueji* (*Book of Music*), invented the *qin* to accompany the singing of the *Nanfeng* (*Southern Airs*) collected in the *Shijing* (*Book of Odes*). Linking the *qin* with Fu Xi emphasized the relationship of the mathematical system to that of music; with Shen Nong, the connection was made to the manufacture of silk, the traditional material used for the strings of the instrument and the cultivation of which was a defining characteristic of the Chinese. In addition to the silk for the strings, the wood for the body of the instrument was significant, as was the shape of the instrument. Again we look to mythology and to Shen Nong, who ‘... made a *qin* from the wood of the *tong* tree (or *wutong*, the Chinese parasol tree). It was three *chi*, six *cun* and six *fen* long (3 feet, 6.6 inches long), representing the number of days in a full year. It was one and eight-tenths of a *cun* thick,

(Fig. 1a) Detail of the *qin* in Figure 1 showing the inscribed title



(Fig. 1) Yu Shun *qin*  
Qing period, 18th century  
Wood with cinnabar lacquer  
Length 112 cm  
Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland (1912-805)



(Fig. 2) Page from the qin compilation *Shenqi mipu* (*The Mysterious and Marvellous Tablature*), 1425

symbolizing the multiplication product of three and six. Above it was circular and gathered in, following the model of heaven. Below it was square and flat, following the model of earth. Above it was broad, while below it was narrow, following the model of the rituals between superiors and inferiors ...' (translated by Timoteus Pokora, in Pokora, p. 181). The *qin*, then, has been intimately connected to Chinese culture from the very beginning.

Every part of the instrument is named. While some of the terms are purely descriptive, others have more transcendent associations. The usual seven strings are symbolic of the levels of an ordered society: the first string represents the emperor; the second, the officials; the third, the people; the fourth, public affairs; the fifth, things; the sixth, civil affairs, and the seventh, military affairs. The two sound holes on the back of the *qin* are called *longchi* (dragon pond) and *fengzhao* (phoenix pool), while other parts of the instrument have further correlations with the dragon and phoenix, namely *feng'e* (phoenix forehead), *longyin* (dragon's gums) and *jiawei* (scorched tail). The

origins of these associations are complex, but on a basic level they relate to the ancient Chinese belief in the dragon as the spirit of the water and the phoenix as the firebird. Both are bringers of vitality and fertility, and embed the *qin*, once again, in China's creation myths. The terms are also highly visual, conjuring up evocative images from the natural (and supernatural) world. A strong visual component is also found in the tablature for the instrument and in descriptions of performing practice, aspects that will be touched upon below.

The sounds the *qin* emits are delicate, but capable of great nuance – a reason why, along with its mythological associations, it became the favoured instrument of the so-called literati, or elite class. While the right hand plucks the strings with a backward or forward movement, the left hand stops the strings or touches them to create harmonics, vibrato or glissando. The seven strings of the standard instrument were traditionally made of twined silk of graded thickness and normally tuned to the Western equivalent of g, a, c, d, e, g, a (although there are variations), with a compass of about three octaves. Notation is descriptive, using Chinese characters to direct the player's finger movements and suggest phrasing, style or mood, and rhythm (Fig. 2). These indications – and that is largely what they are – allow each player a great deal of interpretative flexibility. The names applied to create the tones or timbres are highly evocative ('lofty touch', 'clear touch', 'empty touch', 'simple touch', 'antique touch'), again allowing the player freedom of interpretation.

Sometime during the Song dynasty (960-1279), the association of the *qin* with the literati seems to have become ever closer. Previously, the instrument had been part of a ceremonial orchestra played in accompaniment to songs, and was probably not too distinct from other instruments. It was played by both sexes (Fig. 3). However, the subtleties of the sound and its connection with ritual, and specifically with the moral philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE) (who supposedly played the instrument), made it ideal for representing scholarly status and aspirations. The Song



(Fig. 3) *Palace Ladies Tuning the Lute*  
12th century, copy after Zhou Fang (act. 766-after 796)  
Handscroll, ink and colours on silk  
Width 28 cm, length 75.3 cm  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (32-159/1)

also saw the further development of landscape painting that stressed the importance of nature and the place of human beings within it. As painting was often deeply associated with nature, so was music, especially that for the *qin*. Early Chinese speculative thinkers seemed especially committed to the identification of a fundamental order in music (not unlike the Greek Pythagorean

view) and the idea that pitch could be applied uniformly and comprehensively to all the processes of nature that took place in time.

Although its construction and tonal capacity suggest that the *qin* is intended to be played indoors, it is often seen portrayed in painting as the inseparable companion of a scholar-gentleman in a garden or a setting incorporating mountains and streams (Fig. 4). The identification of the *qin* with nature is quite understandable considering the mythical origins of the instrument, as well as the fact that the *tong* tree from which the *qin* was made can often be found in Chinese paintings, leaning against steep precipices.

The literati gradually extended their hold over the *qin*, so that from about the 16th century onwards, it became an instrument exclusive to them. The result was, on the one hand, the association of the instrument with other literary pursuits – in our case, painting – and on the other, as pointed out by James C. Y. Watt, a stranglehold by this social group that almost killed the *qin* as a musical instrument (Watt, p. 38). Not only did a playing tradition develop that ignored phrasing of the melodic line in favour of the qualities of individual sounds (and silences) – a deliberate part of the literati’s esoteric approach – but there was often no need to play the instrument at all. In fact, this seems to have been the ideal. Just as a painting transcended image-making (since a painting could be seen as a mindscape rather than simply a representation of the external world), so the *qin* transcended sound.

Many earlier writings on the *qin* emphasized this absence of sound, and there are poems and essays that describe instruments with no strings. The poet Tao Yuanming (365-427) wrote: ‘Knowing the significance of what is in the *qin*, why labour to bring forth sound from its strings?’ (Kenneth J. DeWoskin, ‘The Chinese *Qin*’, in Addiss et al., p. 25). What became important were not the sounds themselves, if they were made at all, but the after-sounds, the moments of silence. This way of thinking reflects a Daoist approach, which can also be seen in the work of poets like Xiao Tong (501-31). ‘What need is there of silk and bamboo?’, he wrote. ‘Mountains and water have pure sounds’ (ibid., p. 28). Similar ideas were expressed by Bai Juyi (772-846), as found in his poem ‘The Forsaken *Qin*’:

Its jade studs lack not luster though long disused,  
On its red strings dust and dirt have gathered.  
For a long time it has been abandoned  
But its clear sound lingers in the air.  
(Lai and Mok, p. 90)

However, the poet, painter and theorist Su Shi (1037-1101) wrote: ‘If, as you say, music comes from the *qin*, why doesn’t it make sounds when it is in its case? Then if, as you say, music is in the fingers, why not just listen to your fingertips?’ (DeWoskin, op. cit., p. 28).

The rare occasions on which the *qin* was actually played were significant. A number of early texts relate the story of the *qin* player Yu Baiya and his musical companion Zhong Ziqi (11th century BCE), who could immediately understand the inner



(Fig. 4) *Listening to the Qin*  
By Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-25), c. 1102  
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk  
Height 147.2 cm, width 51.3 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing (Gu 5873)

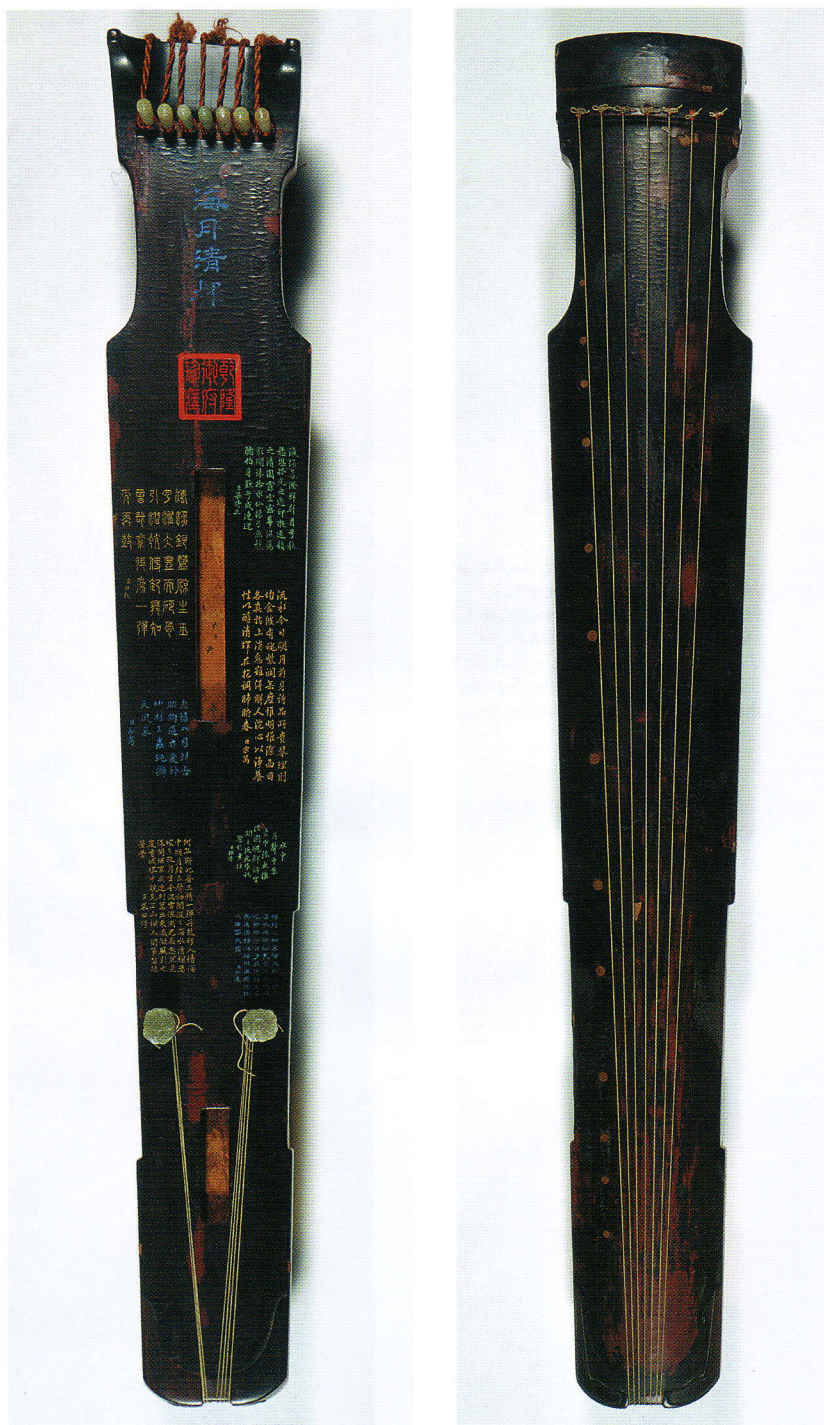
thoughts of his friend purely from the music: 'When Yu Baiya played the *qin* and Zhong Ziqi listened, Zhong Ziqi's thoughts were transported to towering mountains. He exclaimed to Yu Baiya: "How marvellous! With majesty akin to Mount Tai." But in another moment his thoughts were carried to flowing waters: "How marvellous, bubbling and flowing like our mightiest rivers"' (ibid., p. 24). When Zhong Ziqi died, Yu Baiya broke his *qin* and never played again, for he believed that with the death of his friend there was no one worthy enough to hear his music.

Such legends helped develop the *qin* as an instrument whose sound could only be appreciated by the cognoscenti. In fact, as suggested above, the informed listener was as important as the

player. Both were an integral, symbiotic part of the performance, two halves of the whole. Without the two, there was no performance; the music was not complete. These ideas also resonate in the execution and appreciation of painting and its sister art, calligraphy, where the finished work is understood and judged not solely in terms of its subject-matter or technique, but through following the process of its execution and the resulting revelation of the thoughts and qualities of the artist's inner self. The work is only complete, as it were, when there is a direct rapport between artist and viewer, like that between Yu Baiya and Zhong Ziqi. As with the movements of the brush, the movements of the *qin* player, whether rapid or slow; the shaping of his hand and finger



(Fig. 5) Page from a *qin* manual showing the hand movement 'A Crane About to Soar' Reproduced from the Ming period encyclopaedia *Sancai tuhui* (Illustrations of the Three Realms), 1610



(Fig. 6) *Hai yue qing hui qin*  
Southern Song period, 13th century  
Wood with black lacquer  
Length 117.5 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing (Gu 169236)

positions; his touch, and so on, are important elements of a performance. They require absolute concentration on the part of both performer and listener, to the extent that the mind and imagination are engaged with the experience beyond its aural manifestation, much in the way the viewer of a painting is engaged with a work beyond its mere visual aspects.

Nevertheless, the importance of visual references in the articulation of *qin* music is clearly apparent in the playing manuals or handbooks which concentrate on hand movements in performance, rather than pitch or duration as found in Western musical notation. Character symbols direct left- and right-hand finger

movements, phrasing, style and rhythmic suggestions, leaving a great deal of discretion extempore to the performer. Of further interest here are the accompanying illustrations and their imaginative descriptions that use examples from nature to aid mental preparation and create the appropriate model for the hand movement (Fig. 5). 'A Praying Mantis Captures a Cicada' and 'A Crane About to Soar' are two typical examples where the hand gesture is shown alongside the natural scene. As Kenneth DeWoskin has observed: 'These evocative names provide not only a physical reference for the performer to practice the hand movement, but they also provide a meditative context or frame-

(Fig. 7) *Visiting a Friend in the Mountains*  
 Ming period, 16th/17th century  
 Hanging scroll, colour on paper  
 Height 177.8 cm, width 96.5 cm  
 Victoria & Albert Museum (E.422.1953)  
 (Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of  
 the Victoria & Albert Museum, London)



work in which to perfect the postures and movement' (ibid., p. 25). Aids to mental preparation were also used by artists and calligraphers, from the making of ink to the inspiration of appropriate objects on the table or in the study.

While all this might signify the closeness of the instrument and its player to nature and thus ideally to inner knowledge, it also disguises the fact that most literati did not actually know how to play. Indeed, the instrument was more collected and displayed than played. Famous *qin* were as prized as paintings and calligraphy, and were treated as such. Instruments were given poetic names, such as the example in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland named after the legendary emperor Yu Shun, which relates it directly to the origins of music (see Fig. 1a). A second title on the instrument refers to its purpose: *Yong yin ke xie* ('Sounds in harmony forever'), a phrase that originated from the *Shujing (Book of History)*. The Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) *qin* illustrated in Figure 6 bears the title *Hai yue qing hui* ('Clear light of the rising moon from the sea'). Along both sides of the sound trough on the back of the instrument are inscriptions by famous previous owners. The presence of the inscriptions here relates directly to conventions in painting and calligraphy, where it was standard practice to apply seals of ownership, signatures and colophons or commentaries to the work itself (see, for example, Fig. 4). The custom was part of a long tradition of connoisseurship, and gave later owners and viewers the opportunity of making a direct link with the work's creator and previous owners, as well as allowing the work to carry its provenance as an integral and growing work in progress, as it were. The use of this artistic convention by the literati on the *qin* equated the instrument with the highest art forms in China – painting and calligraphy. Even the convention of hanging the *qin* on the wall in a vertical manner, as one would a painting, reinforced that relationship.

Descriptive terms used in poetry – another high literati art form – as expressions of deep-felt emotion, such as 'pure', 'delicate', 'pale' and 'faint', were also used to describe

the music of the *qin*. Since the *qin* was the instrument of the gentry its music was peaceful, harmonious and devoid of stress and excitement, descriptions also applied to certain forms of painting.

One particular genre, popular especially in the 16th and early 17th centuries during the late Ming period (1368-1644) and represented here by the work in Figure 7, further links the *qin* to painting. These paintings tend to be formulaic in composition. A scholar sits in a pavilion in his garden or within a much grander landscape, with his scholarly accessories placed on a table next to him. Visible at the edge of the painting is an approaching figure – a scholar friend accompanied by a servant carrying a *qin*. The figures are framed by nature, in this case, overarching trees in the foreground, and dwarfed by the backdrop of a mountainous landscape.

The subject appears again and again in painting, as well as on objects such as lacquer trays and boxes (Fig. 8). The well-known handscroll by Tang Yin (1470-1523), *Tasting Tea*, follows a similar pattern (Fig. 9). A scholar sits in thoughtful mood in a pavilion in his garden, surrounded by scholarly accessories and enjoying the connoisseurship of fine tea. He is soon to be joined by a friend accompanied by a servant carrying a *qin* wrapped in its silk cover. In contrast to the hanging scroll, the surrounding landscape is less dramatic and more intimate, as we peep in through a rocky vantage point in the foreground. This intimacy is, to a certain extent, imposed by the format, as a handscroll could only be enjoyed by a single viewer.

On one level, the instrument is obviously a symbol of erudition, a badge of literati status. I think, however, that its presence also reinforces, by complex poetic references, the purpose or meaning behind this style of painting. Many of these works belong to a genre that married the commemorative portrait with landscape painting. Within the generic formula of the scholar in a pavilion being approached by a friend is a specific individual, usually identified in the inscription, but if not, still identifiable to the person or group of persons who commissioned the work. As Anne Clapp has written in *The Painting of T'ang Yin*: 'This kind of portrait grew into a social institu-



(Fig. 8) Dish  
Yongle period (1403-25)  
Carved lacquer  
Diameter 34.8 cm  
Trustees of the National Museums  
of Scotland (1930-497)



(Fig. 9) *Tasting Tea*  
By Tang Yin (1470-1523)  
Handscroll, ink and colour on paper  
Width 31.1 cm, length 105.8 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing (Xin 87177)

tion in Ming times because it functioned as a public recognition of achievement. The literati accepted and supported it as an incentive to members of their caste to escape anonymity by seeking excellence and conferred it as a reward on those who were successful .... The Ming portrait, like the portrait of ancient China, justified its existence by interpreting its subject as a pattern of moral virtue in the full Confucian sense' (Clapp, p. 66).

Many of the paintings were given to, or commissioned by, members of the elite to commemorate significant events in personal histories: birthdays, funerals, official appointments, the conferral of degrees, and so on. They were also produced to mark retirement from office – sometimes a forced retirement. In this latter context in particular, there is perhaps another reason why the *qin* is present, which has to do with some of the music written for the instrument.

*Qin* music is often programmatic, not only in the overall poetic titles, but also within the sequential movements of a work – rather like the Western 19th century programmatic symphony or symphonic poem. Titles and subjects used for *qin* compositions find their equivalents in poetry and painting. Ostensibly, such works are associated with nature, with titles such as 'Dialogue of the Fisherman and Woodcutter' or 'Wild Geese Descending on the Sandbank'. They often reflect loss or parting, such as 'Remembering an Old Friend', or 'Parting at Yang Guan', which are linked to famous poems. The titles resonate with symbolism. On the one hand, the presence of the *qin* in a painting could evoke ideas of loss simply by symbolic reference to the story of Yu Baiya smashing his instrument on the death of Zhong Ziqi. On the other, such titles provided the opportunity for covert metaphors of protest by a wronged official. As Alfreda Murck has written of the *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang* (of which *Wild Geese Descending on the Sandbank* is one scene), such works became 'a paradigmatic subject ... by loyal men who felt wronged' (Murck, p. 42). The wild geese of the title symbolized the travelling man or one without a home or position, and would have been recognized as such.

Arguably then, the inclusion of the *qin* in Chinese painting of the 16th and 17th centuries is not incidental, nor is its signifi-

cance necessarily just an attribute of the scholar. It can signify something more momentous in the life of an individual who was either the recipient of the work or its executant. Either way, such paintings represent a highly personal statement. The existence of musical works for the *qin* bearing the same titles carries the symbolism further and, I would suggest, takes the visual significance of the instrument into another dimension.

For an instrument that was not actually made by the literati (as were calligraphy and painting), let alone always played by them, it is remarkable that the *qin* and its music came to share so many of the artistic conventions and references connected with China's two supreme arts. We must look to the *qin*'s ancient origins and its deep cultural associations for part of the answer, but also to those many inherent subtleties that were so readily translatable into visual and symbolic terms and which therefore transcended the merely physical.

Nick Pearce is Professor of Chinese Art and Director of the Institute for Art History, Department of History of Art, University of Glasgow.

#### *Selected bibliography*

- Stephen Addiss et al., *The Resonance of the Qin in East Asian Art*, New York, 1999.
- Anne De Coursey Clapp, *The Painting of Tang Yin*, Chicago and London, 1991.
- Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China*, Ann Arbor, 1982.
- Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: an essay in ch'in ideology*, Tokyo, 1941 (1969 reprint).
- Walter Kaufmann, *Musical References in the Chinese Classics*, Detroit, 1976.
- T. C. Lai and Robert Mok, *Jade Flute: The Story of Chinese Music*, Hong Kong, 1981.
- Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent*, Cambridge and London, 2000.
- Timoteus Pokora, *Hsin-lun (New Treatise) and Other Writings by Huan T'an (43 BC-28 AD)*, Ann Arbor, 1975.
- University of Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery, *Gems of Ancient Chinese Zithers: Shum's Collection of Ancient Qin from the Last Millennium*, Hong Kong, 1998.
- James C. Y. Watt, 'The *Qin* and the Chinese Literati', in *Orientalism*, November 1981, pp. 38-49.