An Audience of One: The Private Music of the Chinese Literati

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Abstract. China’s qin music is historically associated with the literati, who play primarily for themselves as a private activity. While they consider the meaning and significance of the music more important than communicating the musical sound to an audience, they nevertheless also enjoy it as expressive art. This article argues that in playing privately, the player turns inwardly toward himself rather than outwardly toward an audience. In such a performance environment, music and musicality need to be assessed by criteria different from those commonly accepted, which are based on the supposition that music is a social activity with the primary goal of communicating to an audience.

In order to find out what music is and how musical man is, we need to ask who listens and who plays and sings in any given society, and why.
—John Blacking (1928–1990)

If one meets a kindred spirit, then one should play [the qin]; if not, then one had better put it in its cover, and reserve it for one’s own enjoyment.
—Wu Cheng (1249–1331)

What is music? What is meant by musicality? The discipline of ethnomusicology stresses the communicative function of music and its role in society. This premise is the basis on which the nature, function, and aesthetics of music and musicality are studied and assessed, as cited in the first epigraph by the eminent ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1973:32). The premise has not only served the discipline well but also contributed to the intellectual history of society, politics, and economics, to cognitive psychology, and to other lines of inquiry from a unique ethnomusicological perspective. At the same time, the discipline has broadened and deepened our understanding of what music and musicality are.

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This article considers the music of the Chinese instrument called qin (pronounced “chin”), a plucked string instrument known in the West also as the seven-stringed zither, with strings stretched over a smooth, lacquered wooden surface (see figure 1 and note 25). The qin tradition is unusual because the music maker is himself the primary music perceiver.1 The musician makes music mainly to and for himself in private, a performance context that few musicologists or ethnomusicologists take into consideration. Without doubt, there are many situations in which a music maker is alone and the only listener is he himself, as when someone is singing to himself while walking, resting, showering, or practicing a piece of music for amusement or to prepare for a future performance, or in some religious rituals in which the celebrant sings or chants to himself. It will be made clear, however, that the case of qin music is fundamentally different from those situations.

In the course of its long history, the qin was part of an orchestra for court ritual music; it was also used to accompany the singing of refined poetry. Neither of these performance contexts, though documented in history, survives today as a living tradition. This article is concerned with the third and the most prominent performance context, in which the qin is, and has been, played as a solo instrument. As such, the qin is one of the most important instruments in Chinese culture in view of its unbroken history of at least two millennia; the voluminous archaeological, written, and iconic documents; innumerable references in refined poetry and folklore; a vast repertoire preserved in notation; a

Figure 1. Playing the qin. Note the thirteen markers (or studs) along the outer edge of the instrument. From the qin handbook Qinxue rumen of 1864. See van Gulik ([1940] 1969:5, 187)
philosophy of aesthetics; and a theory of performance practice. All these works could fill many library shelves.

The first half of this article presents evidence that many qin musicians largely play in private for themselves or for a small number of “kindred spirits” (figure 2), that this mode of playing is related to the fact that the musicians do not have to cater to an audience or make a living from their music, and that an elaborate philosophy was constructed as the raison d’être of playing. The second half of the article posits that this private mode of playing, in which the primary listener is the musician himself, creates musical characteristics and a musicality that differ from public music, which primarily caters to a large audience.

The Literati

The solo tradition of qin performance is most closely associated with China’s literati class. Robert van Gulik, in his influential book on qin (which he translates as “lute”), the first work in English on the subject and a highly respected one, begins: “The music of the ancient lute [qin] as a solo instrument is widely different from all other sorts of Chinese music: it stands entirely alone, both in its character and in the important place it occupies in the life of the literary
He goes on to say that the qin “has been fixed by tradition as the special instrument of the literary class” (3). For over two millennia, qin playing, the board game of weiqi (known in the West by its Japanese name, go), calligraphy, ink-brush painting, poetry composition and recitation, and other refined leisure-time activities were at the core of literary, or literati, life; the practitioners embraced them as integral to their bonding, central to their sense of identity as a cultural elite, and emblematic of intellectual and moral perfection.

Not only was qin at the core of their life, but the literati also believed that “if one was full of lofty thoughts, whether as a result of inborn genius or after having immersed himself in the classics and literature, one was then capable of painting a nobler picture and playing [qin] music with greater refinement than the man without similar endowment or accomplishments” (Watt 1981:39). Thus, qin playing had a symbiotic relationship with cultural refinement: the one enabled and enhanced the other. Until the twentieth century, high government offices were almost always filled by the literati, who thus occupied positions of power as intellectual, social, political, and economic elites. As qin musicians, they were connoisseurs and amateurs in the best sense of these words. Unlike other kinds of music, qin music played by the literati did not become a commodity with economic value.

In asserting the value of qin playing, the literati constructed an ideology by invoking China’s two main philosophical systems, Confucianism and Taoism. In the simplest terms, to Confucianists, the ultimate goal of playing qin was to build one’s own moral character and personal virtue in order to better serve society. To Taoists, the ultimate goal was to attain self-enlightenment and become one with nature. These ideologies separated qin playing from other kinds of music and elevated it to a stature above and beyond artistic, entertainment, and economic value (van Gulik [1940] 1969:42–48; Liu 2005:11–13).

In achieving these stated goals, the literati maintained that it was more important to discern and contemplate the inner meaning and significance of music than to cultivate the outer manifestations of musical sound; the act of playing and the resulting musical sound were but vehicles toward these loftier ends. This ideology was closely linked to the fact that the literati played the qin primarily for themselves. The celebrated Tang dynasty poet Bo Juyi (772–846), himself a qin player, beautifully captured the spirit of playing the qin for oneself in two of his poems. “Playing the Qin at Night” reads:

The paulownia wood from Shu is dense, the silk strings from Chu produce clear sounds;
I play the slow melodies unhurriedly, ten or so tones in the deep of night.
To the ear they may be plain, yet they please me with deep feelings;
I start and pause at will, not needing or wanting anyone else to hear.2
“Playing the Tune ‘Autumnal Thoughts’” reads:

When I play “Autumnal Thoughts” at leisure on the spur of the moment,
The tune is clear, the sound frank, the lingering tones slow and sparse.
More so each day I am pleased that no one hears me,
For I myself alone know the integrity of my playing.3

The renowned Song dynasty literatus Ouyang Xiu (1007–72) wrote, “One need not know many tunes; in studying the lute the most important point is to learn to find satisfaction in playing” (cited in van Gulik [1940] 1969:20). The Yuan dynasty philosopher Han Xing (1266–1341) wrote a poem particularly favored by the contemporary qin master Tsar Teh-yun (1905–2007), who copied it in her exquisite calligraphy.4 It reads:

If I play, it is not for others, not even for Zhong Ziqi;5
I sit before my instrument and my fingers move over the strings of their own accord.
“Flowing Streams” and “High Mountains” are in my thoughts.
Why would other people need to know that?6

The same sentiment was expressed in “Ten Rules for Playing the Lute,” an essay by Wu Cheng (1249–1331), part of which is quoted as the second epigraph at the beginning of the article. Rule 10 reads: “Playing the lute is meant for nurturing one’s nature, therefore one should not aim at acquiring fame by it. If one meets a kindred spirit, then one should play; if not, then one had better put the lute in its cover, and reserve it for one’s own enjoyment. If one plays the lute before people who do not like it, or before disorderly and vulgar persons who boast of their qualities, how can one not be ashamed? In such a case one cannot but hastily conceal the fact that one plays the lute” (cited in van Gulik [1940] 1969:75–76). The extreme case was the recluse Taoist poet Tao Qian (365–427), who reportedly possessed a qin without strings and famously wrote in a poem, “I have grasped the deeper significance of the qin; why should I strive after the sound of the strings?”7

Since playing qin was mainly for himself, the qin player strove for an aesthetic of musical sound that turned inward toward himself, rather than one of overt expressivity capable of reaching others. The depiction in many ink-brush paintings and woodcut prints of qin players playing alone, either in their study or amidst the beauty and grandeur of such serene natural surroundings as mountains and streams, away from other people, underscores this ideology (figures 3 and 4). While some of these depictions may represent the artists’ romantic notion of the proper performance environment, they nevertheless crystallized a belief and an ideal that resonated among qin players.

While most qin players did not go to the extreme represented by Tao Qian or even anywhere near it, there was a tendency among some to deemphasize,
Figure 3. *Playing Qin by the River* (临流撫琴图), painting on silk by Xia Gui 夏圭 (1180–1230). Image provided by the Palace Museum of Beijing, photographed by Sun Zhiyuan, used with the permission of the museum.

Figure 4. *A Scholar Taking a Break from Playing Qin* (停琴高士图), painting on silk by Zhang Lu 张路 (1464–1538). Image provided by the Palace Museum of Beijing, photographed by Zhao Shan, used with the permission of the museum.
even denigrate, virtuosic techniques. To the poet Bo Juyi, cited above, a mere “few tones” were enough to stir up “deep feelings.” “The lingering tones slow and sparse” were enough for the integrity of his playing.

The Artist-Professionals

In contrast to the literati, another group of qin musicians from a different social class long existed in parallel as professional performers on the qin. Primarily playing for others, they aimed to express beauty, excitement, and emotion through the music in order to communicate with an audience. In doing so they developed aesthetic principles and advanced playing techniques. Comparing the two groups, James Watt called them respectively the “orthodox” and the “musical” schools of qin playing (1981:40). Xu Jian referred to them as wenren qinjia, “literati qin connoisseurs,” and zhuanye qinshi, “professional qin masters” (1982:58).8

Among qin musicians in history considered to be literati were those cited earlier such as Tao Qian, Bo Juyi, and Ouyang Xiu, who were known primarily for literary arts. Well-known professionals in history known primarily for their qin artistry include Zhao Yali (563–639), Dong Tinglan (695–765), Xue Yijian (active 742–56), and Chen Kangshi (active 874–88). These practitioners wrote treatises on playing technique, compiled qin pieces into notational collections, and produced original compositions, including some still being played today.9

Liu Chenghua (2005) termed the ideologies and practices adhered to by the two groups wenrenqin (literati qin) and yirenqin (artists qin) and wrote a comprehensive paper expounding their differences in philosophy, performance practice, social function, and artistic goal. He also explained how the two ideologies evolved and interacted through two millennia.10 He summarizes and contrasts the two ideologies as follows:

1. The literati play primarily for themselves; the artists play primarily for others.
2. The literati aim to immerse themselves in music; the artists aim to influence others.
3. The literati play the qin in order to grasp the musical content for themselves; the artists aim to communicate the musical content to others.
4. The literati often play with little physical exertion and use the techniques that are relatively simple and plain; the artists pursue technical proficiency and richness so that the musical content may be effectively expressed.
5. The literati treat the qin as a Taoist or Buddhist apparatus for achieving personal enlightenment and transcendence; the artists treat the qin purely as an instrument to make music.
6. The literati establish their reputation principally through their overall accomplishment; the artists establish their reputation purely on the basis of their musicianship. (Liu 2005:9)11
Even though the two ideologies summarized by Liu are in almost direct opposition, many individual musicians from the two groups in fact straddled both ideologies to different degrees. That is because they interacted closely throughout history, first through the practice of *yaji* ("elegant gatherings" where qin players, which may include those from both groups, get together to play for one another), and second in the flourishing of qin societies in the Ming dynasty, during which distinctive schools of playing were developed, identified, and transmitted, such as the Yushan School (Xu 1982:125). The literati also hired the artist-professionals as their teachers or invited them to entertain guests; conversely, the artists were eager to associate with the literati in order to gain acceptance by the elite society (Watt 1981:48). With these activities, the literati learned and improved the art and technique of qin playing by interacting with artist-professionals. Conversely, the artist-professionals, in striving to elevate their cultural accomplishments and advance their social status, learned the philosophy and ideology of their employers, and many also practiced the finer arts, such as poetry, painting, chess, and calligraphy. As Watt wrote, “By the sixteenth century, it was no longer enough to be a musician. . . . [O]ne had to lay claim to literatus status before the artistic achievement could be recognized” (49). Nevertheless, the tension between the two groups existed because of the different ideologies, the employer-employee power relationship, and the long-held prejudice in Chinese society against artists who received pay for their service to others, however accomplished they were in their art.

Liu traces the history of the relationship between the two camps from antiquity to the present day by identifying well-known musicians as primarily literati or artist-professionals. He and other scholars identify the Ming dynasty (fourteenth through sixteenth century) as a period of transition, when for many qin players, whether literati or artist-professionals, the instrument and its performance became merely symbolic, with much of the original philosophy and theory losing their substance. J. P. Park asserts that “the qin—along with certain types of fashion, gestures, and settings—was by late Ming times a formulaic pictorial motif in popular illustrations; it was another prop that conveyed a figure’s social status and persona,” while the literati’s copious writings on the instrument “utterly aestheticized [the instrument] as an icon of elite fashion” so that “a larger public could enjoy [it] as a leisure pursuit, as a way of developing musical acumen, and asserting their good taste and cultural superiority” (2008:140). A large number of instruction handbooks on how to play the qin were produced during that period. Notwithstanding Park’s theory of the popularization of qin as a mere symbol, there were a few notable qin players in the Ming and Qing dynasties who adhered to ideologies of substance and real artistry, such as Yan Cheng (1547–1625), who established the Yushan school (style) of playing, which has flourished until today.

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Public and Private Qin Music

After the demise of the last dynasty and the collapse of the old literati class in the early twentieth century, the tradition of playing mainly for oneself and not relying on playing qin to make a living was preserved among a few highly accomplished qin players, even though they no longer held lofty social and economic status as their predecessors had in the past. On the other hand, the rise of media technology and the flourishing of a market economy since the 1980s have empowered the artist-professionals to ever more influential heights. By giving public concerts, making commercial recordings, creating qin competitions (or helping to create them, with themselves as adjudicators), and amassing large number of students, they hone their performance techniques and establish themselves as arbiters of qin aesthetics.

Thus, the difference and tension between the two groups have continued through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Gong Yi (b. 1941), a prominent professional qin player, writes disapprovingly of “some people who opine that qin would manifest its unique flavor only if it adheres to its tradition by staying in the scholar’s study and playing in an environment of lofty elegance” (2005:25). He proposes that qin music should be featured in large-scale concerts, on television shows, and in commercial recordings and that these activities need to experiment with new forms of performance beyond simple solo music in order to cater to the demands of today’s audience (27). He is well known for having created and performed a concerto for qin and large orchestra.

Another well-known professional qin player, Li Xiangting (b. 1940), uses colorful metaphors to denigrate those who adhere to the “traditional” performance practice, comparing it to the weaving of “pigtails” by men, a symbol of ridicule and backwardness, or the binding of women’s feet, universally abhorred as barbaric (Zheng 2006:73). He invokes the Darwinian theory of natural selection: “History cannot be stopped, unless you kill it and preserve it as a stuffed animal or a mummy. History changes according to nature. . . . Human society progresses forward naturally, following the law of natural selection” (75).

Wu Zhao (b. 1935), from the literati group, observes that some qin players “may fall into the rut of simply show-off virtuosity at the expense of inner artistic expression” and that “those who promote performing for an audience naturally will demand a drastic increase of the loudness of qin music, . . . which will result in a decrease of the qin’s special ‘flavor’” (2005:22). Apparently in direct response to Gong’s fondness for large orchestras, he warns that when the qin is accompanied by a large ensemble of other instruments, the need to coordinate rhythm and to produce a coherently unified sound will inevitably affect some of the qin’s special and distinctive qualities as a solo instrument characterized by its subtle and ambiguous tones, melodic movements, and irregular and free rhythms.
The contrasting opinions from the two groups are expressed by Liu, who, in the conclusion to his article mentioned above, observes metaphorically that the literati qin “provides the tradition with its basic spirit and soul,” while the artists qin “provides the life and blood” (2005:38).\(^{20}\) Qin scholar and player Lau Chor-wah echoes the same assessment: “One camp has soul but no pulse (life), the other camp has pulse but no soul” (2014:38).\(^{21}\)

The ideology and performance practice of artist-professionals are no different from those of a concert pianist or an opera singer today, or indeed any kind of music that caters to a paying public. Success depends on the musician’s talent and hard work in developing outstanding technique and musicianship, as well as the ability to reach out and communicate with large audiences.

On the other hand, the practices of the literati may be compared to many kinds of noncommercial music making of a private or semiprivate nature, such as lullabies, children’s play songs, amateur folk singing, old-fashioned parlor music making, and some religious rituals. However, there are crucial and significant differences between qin and those activities. First and foremost, the literati play primarily for themselves or a few close friends, not for anyone else. Second, an elaborate philosophy has been constructed around the musical practice, and an established method of playing is documented in a large number of instruction handbooks. Third, the literati share the same repertoire and playing techniques as the artist-professionals and are directly or indirectly influenced by them in performance technique. Some also achieve comparable proficiency in performance while remaining amateurs in their literati status.

There are other kinds of Chinese music that also have parallel groups of amateur and professional musicians in which the amateurs emulate the professionals and share the same repertoires but play mainly for themselves. The most notable example is the “silk and bamboo” music (sizhu) of the Shanghai area, which involves a small number of instruments, ranging from two to eight, playing in ensemble. “Silk” refers to a string instrument that is either plucked (such as the pipa) or bowed (such as the erhu). “Bamboo” refers to the mellow-toned end-blown flute (xiao) and the bright-toned side-blown flute (di). Until recent decades, the literati and the less educated were known to make such music for themselves in parallel with professional groups (Gao 1981:84; Yuan 1987:291).\(^{22}\) However, what distinguishes literati qin musicians from these sizhu musicians is that they developed their own ideologies and other characteristics, as summarized by Liu Chenghua (2005), presented earlier in this article. Furthermore, the literati and the artist-professionals of qin music occupy the same musical sphere, each group claiming to be the principal bearer of the qin legacy (Yung 2009).

Let us leave aside the metaphysical goals constructed by the literati from Confucian and Taoist philosophies—the “spirit” and “soul” as proposed by Liu and Lau—and consider only the immediate and physical experience of music.
making. Does the literati qin tradition indeed lack “life and blood,” as characterized by Liu, and does it indeed have “no pulse,” as declared by Lau?

The perceived weakness of the literati qin is represented by Liu’s opinion quoted above: “The literati often play with little physical exertion, and with the techniques that are relatively simple and plain”; defenders, such as Wu cited above, focus on the qin’s special “flavor” and its “subtle and ambiguous tones and melodic movements, and the irregular and free rhythm.” Although both assessments are valid to a certain extent, they are based on standards established by public music intended for others, those of the artist-professionals, and indeed all other kinds of public music that cater to a paying audience. They do not take into consideration the most important characteristic of the literati qin tradition, namely, the fact that the musicians play primarily for themselves but do not emulate the artist-professionals in their sociological and financial goals. The musical consequence is significant and needs to be investigated.

The second half of this article contends that the literati, notwithstanding their metaphysical goals, nevertheless appreciate and enjoy playing the qin as artistic expression. Because they play qin primarily for themselves as the sole music-perceivers, in isolation rather than in a social context, definitions of music and musicality created for public music no longer apply. To understand and assess music and musicality in the literati qin tradition a new approach is needed; the “life, blood, pulse” of music making must be reassessed.

The Nature of the Tone in Private Music Making

The basic and obvious factors that distinguish qin playing as private music making are those pertaining to musical expression and perception that do not need to be projected to an audience. Being right at the sound source, the qin musician as the lone perceiver can hear the delicate tones produced by the silk strings and the minute variations of loudness, pitch, and timbre that Wu Zhao refers to as the qin’s special “flavor.” The softness of the sound of qin is considered a major flaw when judged as public music; it is also completely drowned out when performed in an ensemble situation. But assessed within the context of private music, softness is not a drawback, and the special “flavor” is justified as a distinctive feature.

As mentioned earlier and shown in figure 2, the literati qin player may sometimes play for a “kindred spirit” in private or play for fellow qin musicians in a semipublic setting called a yaji (elegant gathering). In both cases, the listeners are also qin players who know the music well and hear it in close proximity to the player.

Despite being very soft, qin music still has a range of loudness that, though limited, is sufficient for expressive purposes and perceivable by the player himself.
or someone close by. The degree of loudness or softness of the tone is inherently built into the playing technique to form a compositional framework. To understand this feature requires some knowledge of the most common techniques.

There are four basic plucking and nonplucking tones, here listed in decreasing degrees of loudness. Note that each also possesses a distinctive timbre. These techniques are all specified in the notation.

1. Open-string tone, or san ("scattered" tone): right hand (hereafter RH) thumb, index, middle, or ring finger, plucks an open string.
2. Stopped-string tone, or mu ("wood" tone): left hand (hereafter LH) thumb, index, middle, or ring finger presses a string down to the wood surface while a RH finger plucks.
3. Harmonic tone, or fan ("floating" tone): LH finger lightly touches a string ("floats") at one of the marker points while a RH finger plucks; at the precise moment of plucking, the LH finger lifts up from the string, allowing the harmonic tone to ring out in a clear, bell-like sound.
4. Sliding tone, or zoushou ("sliding hand" tone): after a RH finger plucks to produce a stopped-string mu tone, the LH finger, without leaving the string, slides to and stops at another position or positions along the same string without any further plucking from the RH; a soft tone is produced at each stop.

For each of the above tones, there are further techniques to modify timbres and vary degrees of loudness, as specified in the notation:

1. Plucking with the RH finger's nail part (jiasheng, "nail tone"); for the thumb, it is plucking “inward,” that is, toward one's body; for the other fingers, it is plucking “outward.”
2. Plucking with the RH finger's flesh part (ruosheng, "flesh tone"); that is, in the opposite direction, as in number 1.
3. Producing a tone by plucking with a LH finger. While pressing down a string on the wood surface, a LH finger releases it, producing a san tone. There are three different ways of releasing it, depending on the finger and the string. If it is the outermost string, it would normally be the middle finger, which releases the string by pushing it outward (i.e., away from the player) along the wood surface and letting it go, a technique known as tuichu (pushing out); the action produces a subdued san tone. If it involves one of the inner strings, it would normally be the ring finger, which releases the string by lifting it upward and letting it go, producing a gentle san tone, a technique known as daiqi (fortuitously lifting up). The ring finger may also release the string by pulling it inwardly along the surface, then letting it go, producing a very soft san tone, a technique known as fang (letting go).
4. While the LH ring finger stops the string at a certain point, the LH thumb strikes the same string downward vertically at about a palm's length from the ring finger, producing a very soft tone, a technique called an (press down). A related technique involves the LH ring finger stopping the string at a certain point while the LH thumb plucks the same string, producing a mu tone, a technique called qiaqi (pinch up); the tone differs from mu tones produced by the plucking of the RH
finger (see number 2 in the first list) because the plucking position is very close to the stopping position, resulting in a softer and duller tone than the mu tone produced by the RH. The an and the qiaqi are often sequentially combined: an followed by qiaqi.

5. LH thumb, middle, or ring finger hits a string perpendicularly down at a specified position from midair, producing a very soft tone, a technique called xu'an (empty or virtual an), that is, without the LH ring finger anchoring the string.

6. RH or LH thumb and index finger lift a string and let it snap back onto the wooden surface, producing a percussive sound, a technique called nian (pinching).26

These secondary tone-producing techniques are all written into the notation for the musician to follow, resulting in a great variety of timbres and degrees of loudness. Needless to say, the loudness also varies with the degree of exertion on the part of the player, which is entirely personal and situational and not written into the notation.

In addition to the above, because each string has a different thickness depending on the number of silk strands it consists of, and because of the different widths of the fingertips plucking the strings, a great variety of timbres and minute differences in the degree of loudness is produced. As van Gulik observes, “The same note, produced on a different string, has a different color; the same string, when pulled by the forefinger or the middle finger of the right hand, has a different timbre” ([1940] 1969:1–2). Most of these varieties of timbre and degrees of loudness are at a subtle level perceivable only by the qin player himself or a listener sitting within a few feet of the player. Thus, the expressivity is exclusive to the player himself or to a very small number of listeners.

A single mu (wood) tone, described above, may also be manipulated to produce more complex “ornamented” tones. The four simplest and commonest ones are zhu (sliding tone from above), chuo (sliding tone from below), yin (vibrato, with the LH finger moving up and down, centering on the specified point on the string after it has been plucked by the RH), nao (a special kind of vibrato in which the LH finger moves back and forth only from the “down” direction, with a specific rhythm). These basic techniques have many variations; for example, the vibrato, yin, includes slow, fast, wide, narrow, “flying” (fei), and so on.

The Aesthetic Principle of “Harmoniousness”

Qin masters and scholars throughout history wrote treatises on the aesthetics of qin music. These treatises provide valuable material for the assessment of music and musicality. Among the best known and most widely studied is “Xishan qinkuang” (The Xishan treatise on the aesthetics of qin music) (Xu [1673] 1982) by Xu Shangying (1582–1662), who was an early proponent and
representative of the Yushan school (style) of qin performance, established by his near contemporary and friend Yan Cheng (1547–1625). This school of performance became one of the most important of the last four centuries; the treatise and the aesthetics it propounds greatly influenced qin aesthetics and received much attention and study. An excellent recent English translation is by Tse Chun Yan and Lam Shui Fong (2015).27

The treatise introduces what the author calls the twenty-four aesthetic “qualities” (this English term was chosen by Tse and Lam) of qin music as expressive art. Each of the twenty-four qualities is represented by a single word (a Chinese written character), followed by an explanatory passage in terms of both concrete performative directions and broader philosophical exposition. Tse and Lam’s translation gives the following one-word English equivalents for these qualities: (1) harmoniousness,28 (2) quietude, (3) clarity, (4) distance, (5) antiquity, (6) unadornedness, (7) tranquility, (8) transcendence, (9) elegance, (10) beauty, (11) brightness, (12) luster, (13) cleanliness, (14) moisture, (15) roundness, (16) firmness, (17) grandness, (18) fineness, (19) smoothness, (20) vigor, (21) lightness, (22) heaviness, (23) slowness, (24) rapidity.29

A number of contemporary scholars (Wu 1962; Fu, Ling, and Du 1983; Ling 1984; Cai 1986) have expounded on the meaning and significance of these qualities, among the more recent being Liu Chenghua (2004), who divides the twenty-four qualities into four groups. He classifies the first four (1–4) as the “fundamentals” of qin music aesthetics; the next five (5–9) as overall stylistic qualities; the next five (10–14) as the timbral qualities of individual tones; and the last ten (15–24) as qualities resulting from technical execution of the music at the ornamental, phrasal, structural, and compositional levels.

This article will not delve into the interpretation and meaning of each of the qualities but merely introduce the most important one, “harmoniousness,” which, with good reason, Xu lists as the first of the twenty-four.30 Xu posits several levels of meaning in “harmoniousness,” the first of which may be interpreted as “in-tuneness,” as stated in the opening sentences of the English translation by Tse and Lam: “To achieve harmony, one starts by tuning the strings according to the standard tuning. The pitches are adjusted with reference to stud positions, testing them with the fingers and assessing them with the ears. This is what one means by perceiving and responding harmoniously” (2015:92).31

Xu gives instructions on how to tune as follows: using intervals of unisons, octaves, and fifths derived from the principle of “subtraction and addition of a third,” the musician tunes by reaching concordances between pairs of strings, comparing open-string san tones, harmonic fan tones, or stopped mu tones of one string to another.32 The specific steps may vary, but the results are the same: as currently practiced, after the pitch of one string is fixed, usually string 1 or string 5 (for practical reasons on how the strings are strung), the others
are tuned in concordance with it. For example, if the pitch of string 1 is fixed (normally tuned to two octaves below middle C), then string 4, which should be a fifth higher, will be tuned by reaching concordance between the harmonic fan tones produced by string 1, marker 5 (producing a pitch an octave and a fifth higher than its open-string pitch) and string 4, marker 7 (an octave higher than its open-string pitch). As a way of checking, one can also reach concordance between the wood mu tone of string 1, marker 9 (producing a pitch a fifth higher than its open-string pitch) and the open-string san tone of string 4, and so on and so forth. According to Xu, when perfect tuning is achieved one begets “elegance, gentleness, serenity and moderateness.” These qualities as described by Xu are attributable in part to the special quality of the silk that makes up the strings. Indeed, the qin player derives special satisfaction when perfect harmoniousness among the strings is reached, and the soft sound of the silk gives the player the special privilege of hearing this harmoniousness.

The tuning of the strings is essential and critical for all string instruments. What distinguishes qin is that the silk is sensitive to temperature and particularly to humidity. Because the player breathes on the strings in close proximity, he may need to retune as he plays from piece to piece, sometimes in the middle of a piece. There is thus good reason to emphasize “in-tuneness” as the first level of “harmoniousness.” In public performance, stopping in the middle of a piece to retune must be avoided, but in private music making that is of little concern.

The harmoniousness of strings with intervals of unison, octaves, and fifths is also an idiomatic compositional formula found in almost all qin pieces, in which a tone with a certain pitch played on one string resonates, or echoes, immediately with a tone of the same pitch (or an octave equivalent) played on another string. Often the first tone and the resonating tone are played with differing timbres and loudness using open-string san (scattered) tone, harmonic-string fan (floating) tone, or stopped-string mu (wood) tone.

A particularly beautiful and subtle use of harmoniousness is the resonance between a sliding zoushou tone and an open-string san tone. This is how it works: after a LH finger has stopped at a particular marker while the string is plucked by a RH finger (producing a wood mu tone), the same LH finger, without being lifted, slides up (i.e., to the right) the same string and stops at a point that has the same pitch as one of the open strings. At that point, a RH finger plucks that open string, producing a san tone that resonates with the sliding tone. Even more magical is when the LH finger slides up slowly and without stopping past several points that could match with the san tones of several open strings. A RH finger then plucks those open strings at precisely the moments when the LH finger passes the points on the original string. This technique is called ying-he (resonant harmoniousness). In short, the string along which the LH finger slides serves as a fortuitous sympathetic string that rings out when the resonating open
string activates it. One of the most celebrated pieces, “Xiaoxiang shuiyun” (The mist and cloud over the rivers Xiao and Xiang), uses the ying-he technique extensively.

Additionally, while qin music is basically monophonic, two-tone chords are not uncommon and are used for textural accents, for timbral variation, or as a phrasal marker. Most of these two-tone chords are in intervals of unison, octave (of one, two, or more octaves), fifth, and occasionally third. These two-tone chords often combine san tone, fan tone, or mu tone. Whether these intervals occur as echoing tones or as chords, their concordances have a special appeal for the player owing to their “elegance, gentleness, serenity and moderate-ness” (Tse and Lam 2015:92). Such subtle concordances can hardly be appreciated by an audience unless they sit close enough to hear the softness of such “harmoniousness.”

Xu goes on to explain that “harmoniousness” refers also to concordances between “string and finger,” “finger and tone,” and “tone and thought.” Xu lists the four elements of qin playing that form these three relationships: the musical instrument (“string”); the physical movement of the qin player (“finger”), which activates the string to produce the resulting sound (“tone”); and the mental state of the qin player (“thought”), which conceives of and perceives the tone. As thus formulated by Xu, “harmoniousness” is operative among the musician’s thought, his fingers, the instrument, and the musical sound. An external listener, not being either the musician’s thought or his fingers, is the missing link among the pairs; thus, such harmoniousness would not be perceivable.

One last point in regard to this treatise worth mentioning is that, according to Liu, five of the twenty-four ideals concern timbre: (10) beauty, (11) brightness, (12) luster, (13) cleanliness, and (14) moisture. The meaning of these words as expounded in the treatise and interpreted by later writers is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that when tones themselves could hardly be heard by an audience, subtleties of timbral quality would be even less perceivable. The treatise’s emphasis on timbre further supports the notion that these aesthetic qualities apply only to the qin player within a context of privacy.

**Visual, Tactile, and Kinesthetic Elements**

In public music making, the aural element is paramount; the audience’s visual perception of the performer may play a secondary and supplementary role, although in a large concert hall, the visual role is likely to be negligible. The passive audience certainly does not share any of the tactile and kinesthetic sensations experienced by the musicians. However, the visual, tactile, and kinesthetic expressivity is very much perceived by the performing musician because of his own close proximity to the instrument. This is particularly so in a private setting.
when the musician is not distracted by an audience and focuses his attention entirely inwardly on himself and his music making.

Chinese writings about qin music clearly reflect an interest in the visual element of a musical experience. Earliest are verbal descriptions involving visual images drawn from nature, such as “Rules on Playing Qin” by Xue Yijian (active in the eighth century CE): “The movements of the two hands should complement and support each other, like a pair of phoenixes now dancing, now flying side by side” (see Jiang [1590] 1982:202).38 “Finger Techniques According to Cheng Yujian” (active in the early twelfth century CE) explains a few well-known finger techniques using poetic images: boci, also pronounced bola (RH index and middle finger straightened and held together, brushing one or two strings, first inward, then outward, using wrist motion) as “a fish flapping its tail”; the afore-mentioned nian (RH or LH thumb and index finger picking up a string and letting it snap back onto the fingerboard) as “a phoenix picking a flower with its beak”; and xuchuo “virtual chuo,” also called cangtou (hiding head) or wutou (no head) (LH thumb slides from left to right along a string, starting from midair so that the initial contact with the string is not specified and not to be noticed, but sliding to the right and stopping at a prescribed position), as “a flying seagull landing on water” (156, 157).39

Many later handbooks include graphic sketches of animals’ natural disposition to illustrate hand postures and movements. Among the earliest extant handbook with such illustrations is Taiyin daquanji (Grand collection of old sounds).40 For example, the execution of several harmonic fan “floating” tones in succession is illustrated by a butterfly hopping from blossom to blossom, indecisive as to which one to land on, and by dragonflies hovering over water, occasionally dipping down to the surface. The following techniques have all been mentioned earlier: boci is illustrated by a fish flapping its tail; nian mentioned above is illustrated by a wild goose with a weed in its beak (figures 5 and 6); xu’an (LH thumb, middle, or ring finger hits a string at a particular position perpendicularly down from midair, producing a quiet tone) is illustrated by a woodpecker pecking at a tree trunk. A movement not mentioned earlier, qicuo (RH thumb and middle finger plucking two strings at the same time, with the thumb outward and the middle finger inward), is illustrated by a dragon with an outstretched claw clasping a piece of cloud (figures 7 and 8).41

Given the examples of visual images, one can understand how the surface of the instrument could be considered a “stage”: a roughly rectangular space with seven strings placed so that the lowest-pitch string is farthest away from the player, the highest-pitch string closest, forming the depth dimension of the stage. From the right end to the left end along the outer edge of the instrument the thirteen inlaid markers guide the LH’s movement in the width dimension. Thus, the “stage” is set upon which the two hands can move in all three dimensions.
Figure 5. A line drawing of the technique nian. The text across the top reads “Right hand thumb and index finger in the posture of a wild goose holding a weed in its beak.” The text in the bottom, to be read vertically from left to right columns, reads “Nian, the notational symbol is nian; use two fingers pinching a string, lifting it, and let it go, producing a sound.” From the qin handbook Wenhuitang qinpu of 1596. See van Gulik ([1940] 1969:122).

Figure 6. A line drawing of two wild geese, one holding a weed in its beak. The character at the lower right-hand corner is the notational symbol for nian. From the qin handbook Yangchuntang qinpu of about 1625. See van Gulik ([1940] 1969:118).
Figure 7. A line drawing of the technique qicuo. The text across the top reads “Right hand: a flying dragon clasping cloud.” The text across the bottom reads “Thumb and middle finger performing qicuo.” From the qin handbook Tianwenge qinpu of 1876. See van Gulik ([1940] 1969:118, 187)

Figure 8. A line drawing of a dragon with its right claw clasping a piece of cloud. The character at the lower left-hand corner is the notational symbol for qicuo. From the qin handbook Yangchuntang qinpu of 1611. See van Gulik ([1940] 1969:118, 121–23)

The RH moves back and forth in the depth dimension as it plucks the seven strings; it stays mainly on the right end of the stage about halfway between the bridge and marker 1 but occasionally drifts slightly toward the center or to the right end in order to vary the timbre of the tone. However, for a technique such as the afore-mentioned nian (phoenix picking up a flower) or boci (a fish flapping its tail), the RH ventures into the height dimension.

The LH moves much more widely and actively across the entire stage, not only ranging through the depth and width dimensions but also sometimes venturing into the height dimension with harmonic tones (butterfly hopping from blossom to blossom, dragonfly hovering over water), nian (wild goose holding a weed in its beak), xu’an (woodpecker pecking a tree trunk), xuchuo (flying seagull landing on water), techniques mentioned earlier.

In an earlier publication, using the piece “Three Plays on the Theme Plum Blossoms” as an example, I analyze the choreography by tracing the movement of the LH across the two-dimensional space from the beginning of the piece to its end, pointing out notable patterns not unlike those that a choreographer conceives for a dance (Yung 1984:508). However, the dance of the hands, in terms of both their spatial movements as a piece proceeds and the individual postures and movements at a particular special position, is appreciated mainly by the performer himself and by listeners only if they sit close enough to the instrument.

The description of the several techniques given above illustrates the variety of tactile and kinesthetic elements in qin playing. These include the RH’s basic techniques of plucking, explained earlier, and more complicated ones such as the earlier-mentioned qicuo (RH thumb and middle finger plucking two strings at the same time, producing a chord). A few others worth mentioning are tan (middle and/or index finger flicking out forcefully across a string, either middle finger alone or both fingers in quick succession) and lun (ring, middle, and index fingers plucking outward in either slow or quick succession), which employ different tactile interactions with the strings.

The LH engages in an even greater variety of tactile interactions when performing, such as the many techniques of plucking (qiaqi), pulling up (nian, daqi), pushing out along the wooden surface (tuichu), pulling in along the wooden surface (fang), and striking down (xu’an), as well as several kinds of sliding to produce ornamental notes, including zhu, zhuo, yin, and nao. Of the many kinds of yin (vibrato), van Gulik describes the remarkable dingyin, or “stationary” yin, for which “the vacillating movement of the finger should be so subtle as to be hardly noticeable. Some handbooks say that one should not move the finger at all, but let the timbre be influenced by the pulsation of the blood in the fingertip when it presses down the string onto the board a little more fully and heavily than usual” ([1940] 1969:132). The dingyin technique is an extreme case of tactile perception.42

In my 1984 article, I proposed a kinesthetic principle for the RH that may be called “naturalness.” Cai Zhongde, in his study of Xu Shangying’s “The Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music,” also refers to “naturalness” and gives a poetic but useful explanation of it for qin playing. In discussing Xu’s reference to “beauty” in the timbral quality of “moisture” (number 14) and the technical quality of “roundness” (number 15), Cai asks, “What is ultimate beauty?” and answers, “It is purity, naturalness, and wondrousness” (1986:73). He then explains “naturalness” as follows:

Pressing down a string with force but without conscious effort; executing finger movements freely without leaving a trace; a finger going where one intends it to as if by itself; a finger arriving as one intends it to as if by itself. Everything happens of its own accord without revealing how, giving delight through the lack of traces and wonder through its heavenly order; an atmosphere of quiet relaxation and self-containment, the ultimate refinement and cleverness, yet with no appearance of being clever, attaining ultimate plainness and genuineness. That is the sound of nature (being natural). (1986:73)

My example of naturalness refers to plucking action: after a finger plucks outward, the “natural” kinesthetic tendency is to follow it with an inward-plucking action. To put it another way, our muscle control is such that two successive inward-plucking or two successive outward-plucking actions would feel “less natural” because such an action requires conscious effort. By alternating inward and outward action, one moves without thinking, hence, is “natural.” Or, as Cai terms it, the action is “without trace.” The notation demonstrates again and again the consistent alternations between opposing movements of the finger action (Yung 1984:512–13). The outward- and inward-plucking actions would produce different timbres because of the use of the fingernail or the fleshy part of the fingertip. My point is that the kinesthetic feeling of naturalness may well override the composer’s choice of timbral difference. It goes without saying that this sense of “naturalness” in all its “delight” and “wonder” belongs exclusively to the qin player himself and no one else.

The Nature of the Instrument

The softness of the instrument is attributable primarily to the silk strings and to the body, which does not produce much amplification of the sound. Furthermore, the delicacy of the silk strings makes them break easily unless they are kept somewhat lax by being tuned to relatively low pitches. Even though there are no prescribed absolute pitches, contemporary instruction books advise that the lowest string be tuned to two octaves below middle C; yet some qin players using silk strings often tune it lower than that, even up to an interval of a major third. The laxness of the strings further reduces the loudness of the tones.
There were no known serious and sustained efforts before the mid-twentieth century to increase the volume of the sound. If such attempts took place, they clearly had little long-lasting effect in altering the basic construction of the instrument or the dynamic level of the sound produced. The fact that attempts to make the instrument louder were not made, or were made without success, indirectly supports the postulate that loudness of sound was not considered important enough to make fundamental changes to the instrument. The softness of the instrument underscores the private function of the performance practice, which, not needing to cater to a large audience, does not require loudness. It also reflects an aesthetic ideal that places little emphasis on the brilliance of sound to impress an audience.

An illuminating comparison can be made with various European instruments, particularly the piano. In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the keyboard instrument developed from the delicate clavichord to the fortepiano and ultimately to the modern piano. Each successive development increased the volume and brilliancy of the tone quality, driven by the bold exploration of individual composers and, ultimately, by their need to satisfy the expectations and demands of an ever-larger audience.

Upon the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Communist ideology denounced the elite status of qin music and promoted the move of the music from inside the scholar’s study outward to the general public. The need to appeal to larger audiences resulted in efforts to make the instrument louder by changing its construction, including its size, tuning mechanism, and, above all, the material used for the strings. After experimentation on different material, including metal and nylon, the preferred strings today have metal cores wound with silk or synthetic material. The overall goals are to produce a louder sound for public performances, to make the string tension less dependent on changes in humidity and temperature and thus able to retain its pitch better, and to make the strings less breakable. The material and the increased tension together produce a more brilliant timbre and higher absolute pitch to serve the new musical style more effectively. The longer reverberating sound also alters the soundscape of the instrument. Such changes, fundamentally altering the nature of musical perception, arose out of the evolution from private music making to public music making (Yung 1989). The universal adoption of electronic amplification in recent decades breaks the ultimate barrier from private to public.

Nevertheless, a small number of qin musicians in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas have continued to insist on using silk strings, resisting large-scale concerts, and in general adhering to the private and personal nature of qin music making. On the Mainland, there is a small resurgence of returning to silk strings of late.
Notation and Compositional Principles

The earliest extant piece of qin music in notation is from the sixth century CE; the notation consists of a narrative of written characters describing finger actions and specifying string numbers and marker numbers. During the next few centuries the notation evolved by developing abbreviated symbols to replace the narrative. The notation, called *jianzipu* (abbreviated written-character notation), dates from 1202 CE (Pian 1967:33) and has remained essentially unchanged. This notation does not show pitch and rhythm, as do Western staff notation and most other notations around the world; rather, it specifies which string a finger is to pluck, which position along the string a LH finger is to stop and to slide, and which RH finger is to pluck and in what way. Some symbols prescribe more complicated movements, as has been described earlier in this article.

The pitches and the many “flavors” of the music as mentioned earlier are thus prescribed by detailed finger movements rather than notational symbols of aural elements, as in Western staff notation. In short, the qin notation bypasses the aural dimension of music and goes directly to the movement of the fingers, prescribing the choreographic and kinesthetic elements of performance. Thus, the notation is developed consistently with the private and personal nature of performance practice rather than the public projection of aural elements to an audience. This system of notation has been sustained essentially unchanged for at least eight centuries, testifying to how successfully it has served the qin player.

The notation occasionally includes verbal descriptions of techniques in addition to or in place of actual directives. For example, the opening phrase of the piece “Changmenyuan” (Lament of Empress Chen) includes the technique called *suoling*, or “a string of tinkling bells” (*Taiyin daquanji* [1413] 1982:58). Suoling is also used and notated in the beginning phrase of the piece “Wuyeti” (Magpies cry in the night). In the piece “Yiguren” (Thinking of old friends), toward the end of section 1, the notation directive for a phrase that involves a series of stoppings and slidings of the LH thumb and ring finger includes the descriptive word *xiexing* (crab walk).

Related to the special nature of the *jianzipu* is the fact that qin composition is not entirely based upon aural structure and design but to some extent upon the choreography of the two hands and the internal kinesthetic sense of “naturalness,” with the result that, as has already been explained, the concern for internal feelings may override considerations of pitch, timbre, and dynamics. It follows that the musical experience is not only aural but also visual, tactile, and kinesthetic—for the performer. I am not belittling the musical-sound structure of qin compositions; examples from small pieces to large-scale ones such as “Guanglingsan” (The assassination of the king of Han) and “Xiaoxiang shuiyun” testify to the complexity of the compositional design in its aural dimension. But
unlike those in Western compositions, the visual, tactile, and kinesthetic elements need to be considered in analyzing the structure of the music. That these additional elements are personal and internal underscores the private nature of performance.48

Metaphors and Programmatic Content

The symbolic representations of some of the finger techniques invoking animals have been mentioned earlier, including dragon, phoenix, wild goose, seagull, woodpecker, dragonfly, butterfly, and fish. Others not mentioned are crane, cicada, tortoise, crow, canary, monkey, pheasant, leopard, dove, and swallow.49 Not all representations of finger techniques involve animals, however. For example, the LH technique of gui, literally “kneel,” instructs the LH ring finger to stop the string not with the fingertip but by bending the two finger joints to stop the string with the flesh of the last segment of the finger. The posture is a vivid representation of “kneeling” on the qin fingerboard (see figure 9). This
technique is applied to positions on the right end of the string, where using the fingertip is very awkward. Hence this technique arises out of practical necessity, but the metaphor anthropomorphizes the posture. In the RH technique of *fu* (prostrate), which always follows the technique of *boci* (a fish flapping its tail) when applied to string 1, the palm in the same sweeping motion after flapping outward rests flat on the wood at the outside edge of the instrument. Using the word *fu* again anthropomorphizes the movement. Finally, a metaphor that is applied as a general term of discourse referring to playing the qin is *fuqin*, where *fu* (a different word from the word *fu*, meaning “prostrate”) means gently stroking as if stroking a baby or a lover.50

For Western concert music, metaphors are often applied to aural elements, such as “feminine ending” for a particular cadential formula or the leitmotif in Wagnerian operas. In contrast, qin metaphors are applied to postures and movements, both figurative and narrative, offering further evidence that the qin musician turns his attention inward to himself rather than outward to an audience.

It has already been mentioned how in many ink-brush paintings of magnificent peaks and valleys, calm rivers and creeks, dreamy clouds and jagged pine trees, one often finds depictions of a lone person contemplating nature with a qin at his side, sometimes with a servant in attendance. Although such romantic depictions of the environment have become standard artistic motifs and may not completely represent reality, they are consistent with the performance practice of playing for oneself rather than an audience.

Chinese instrumental music in general emphasizes programmatic content; the music of qin is no exception. The majority of qin compositions have programmatic titles, along with literary essays that explain the background of the compositions or their narrative content or provide descriptions of a scene in nature. Elsewhere I have written about the performer’s emphasis on the *yijing*, or “mood,” which the programmatic content evokes and the music embodies (Yung 1985). A major goal of the performance is the successful generation of this mood in the performer’s mind so as to guide his playing; conversely, the music will resonate with the mood. Not only does the programmatic content guide the musical sound, but its focus also reflects the belief that musical content is difficult to communicate; rather, it is easier to use the medium of extramusical, programmatic content as a means to communicate the musical sound. This may explain the dearth of analytical discussions of music in historical literature. What is communicable is the extramusical meaning of the compositions through words.

The ideology of the noncommunicability of musical sound to listeners is best illustrated by the well-known story of the mythical qin master Boya and his
friend Ziqi, which has been told and retold for two millennia. One version of the story appears as a preface to the celebrated pair of compositions “Gaoshan” (High mountains) and “Liushui” (Flowing waters) in a 1425 collection of notation that reads:

The two compositions “High Mountains” and “Flowing Waters” were originally a single composition. The former aspires to high mountains; its meaning is that one who appreciates mountains is compassionate. The latter aspires to flowing waters; its meaning is that one who appreciates waters is wise. By the time of the Tang dynasty, it became two separate compositions, with no subdivisions within either one. During the Song dynasty, “High Mountains” was subdivided into four sections, “Flowing Waters” into eight sections. According to the “Liezi” chapter in Qinshi [History of Qin, ca. 1084], Boya was good at playing guqin, Ziqi was good at listening. When Boya had high mountains in mind while playing, Ziqi exclaimed, “Lofty like Mount Tai!” When Boya had flowing waters in mind while playing, Ziqi exclaimed, “Vast like the rivers and seas!” Whatever Boya aspired to in his mind, Ziqi knew it in his heart. Boya exclaimed, “Praise be to Heaven! Your heart is identical to mine.” After Ziqi died, Boya broke the strings of the guqin and never played again in his life. That was the origin of the composition “High Mountains, Flowing Waters.”

This story underscores the belief that, unlike other kinds of music that aim to entertain, qin music, with its profound extramusical content, rarely encounters a listener who can understand it. It follows that only the performer himself can understand it fully, a belief that forms the ideological basis for the private nature of qin performance. Narrative stories, dramas, and paintings with themes similar to that of “High Mountains, Flowing Waters” abound, and this belief is still maintained today among some qin players who eschew public performances in part because of this belief.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this article, I call attention to what has been acknowledged as one of the most important kinds of music in China, that of the instrument qin played by the literati, and show that its music has a long history of being primarily played in private, directed not outwardly toward an audience but inwardly toward the player himself. Because of their elite social, political, and economic positions, the literati qin players were amateurs in the best sense of the word; they had the luxury of not needing to cater to an audience and to make a living out of music, nor did they need to seek fame and fortune. They could happily play for themselves or a few close friends who shared their artistic tastes and social status. As well-read scholars and sophisticated thinkers, they developed an ideology of music that was linked to Confucianism and Taoism as the theoretical foundation and raison d’être of their music not primarily as artistic expression or as
entertainment but as a vehicle for achieving personal virtue and enlightenment. As prolific writers, they left voluminous amounts of literature, documenting their conception and evaluation of the music they loved and the many facets of their performance practice.

I argue that, despite the loftiness of their stated goals in playing qin, they nevertheless also appreciated it as expressive art, as testified by the many writings on qin aesthetics, particularly the influential “Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music.” I defend their music from criticisms based upon one’s notion of public music, ignoring the fact that the private nature of their music shaped the expressive elements and musicality differently. Such musicality differs from that which is widely accepted for public music.

The private music of the qin is a unique phenomenon that arose out of a particular time and place in human artistic and social history, with a singular combination of environmental, cultural, and social milieus that sustained and nourished it for two millennia. The collapse of the old literati culture, one of privilege and leisure whose members were also philosophers, poets, painters, and calligraphers, meant the loss of the fertile soil that nurtured the literati qin tradition. The rise of the market economy and technology and the dominance of materialistic culture emboldened the artist-professionals to transform qin music and reincarnate it in a form that is no different from other kinds of public high-brow concert music, with all its accompanying social and musical practices. Under the pressure of these changes, the private music of qin is not likely to survive, with the result that a special way of hearing and its related aesthetic experience may be on the verge of disappearing.

Music in scholarly research has always been conceived of as a medium for social interaction, being assumed, unquestioningly, to be mainly communicative in function at its core. In his article “The Music Compositional Process as a Function in a Nest of Functions and in Itself a Nest of Functions,” Charles Seeger gives a table that lists “some of the principal categories commonly found in music-technical and historiographical literature as points that are locatable” on what he called the “parameters of speech semantic variance defined (or limited) by the terms structure and function” (1977a:143–44). The table includes seven Extrinsic Parameters and nine Intrinsic Parameters. Of relevance here are the Intrinsic Parameters of mainly binary opposites: “Own and not-own traditions,” “Own and not-own tastes,” “Expert and less expert,” “Creative and re-creative,” “Written and unwritten,” “Self-made and made by others,” “Free and priced,” “Traditional and nontraditional,” and “Music-technical functions.” Even with Seeger’s extraordinary insights and vision, he did not include a parameter of “Public and private,” because private music was not known, or worthy of mention or research, in any literature at the time.
Nevertheless, elsewhere Seeger gives some acute observations of private singing in his article “Versions and Variants of the Tunes ‘Barbara Allen.’” The passage is worth citing in full:

The attitude [is] typical of the most admired traditional singer toward the song, [which] tends to the serene and detached, however much force seems to be a natural thing for one to occupy himself with if he wishes. It requires of him no special preparation, effort, or pretense of an organized sort. Difficulty or ease in execution seems not to be a factor. It is not a vehicle for pathos but seems to meet accepted requirements of an ethos. In spite of the often-romantic words, an almost classic reserve is maintained. There is no assumption by the singer of a position above or apart from the tune or text, but, rather, an implicit recognition that “life is that way.” He keeps a straight face and unchanging posture, without attempting to win an audience by smiles or gestures. Yet there is nothing “deadpan” about the sensing. There is usually a difference between singing to oneself and to another person or persons [my emphasis]. Comparatively few singers, I understand, are unaffected by the presence of a microphone. (1977b:287)

Singing of British-American folk songs in rural America cannot be more different from playing the qin in a scholar’s study in old China. Yet the resemblances of Seeger’s observations and some of the points made in this article are striking and worth noting. Regardless of subject matter and cultural context, private music displays some universal features in contrast to public music that deserve some attention.

Half a century after Seeger’s list, “private” music is still not a notable concept in anyone’s consciousness. In the vast galaxy of human artistic endeavors, the private music of the Chinese literati is but a speck of light, a unique and odd comet that may never appear again.

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Notes

1. I use the male pronoun in this article because the vast majority of well-known qin players in history were men. The notable exceptions are Cai Yan 蔡琰 (177–? C.E.), my teacher Tsar Teh-yun 蔡德允 (1905–2007), and the fictional character Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 in the celebrated novel Dream of the Red Chamber.

2. All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated. The Chinese text of the poem is as follows:

   白居易《夜琴》
   "蜀桐木性实,楚丝音韵清。调慢弹且缓,夜深十数声。入耳淡无味,惬心潜有情。自弄还自罢,亦不要人听。"

3. The Chinese text of the poem is as follows:

   白居易《秋思》
   "信意闲弹秋思时,调清声直韻疏迟。近来渐喜无人听,琴格高低心自知。"

5. Referencing the story of the mythical qin player Yu Boya (or Boya) and the listener Zhong Ziqi (or Ziqi). The story goes that when Yu played the pieces "High Mountains" and "Flowing Waters," Zhong immediately understood what the music meant. The story is further discussed later in this article.

6. Translation by Georges Goormaghtigh, although I have altered a few words. The Chinese text of the poem is as follows: 韩性/ 敲琴元不为钟期, 对坐冰絃指自随。流水高山原寄意, 何须更要别人知。


8. A third and much smaller group that differed from these two in social position were Buddhist monks, who neither relied on qin to make a living nor were government officials. Some literati referred to them as their qin teachers. See Xu (1982:84–86).


10. Not everyone agrees with every aspect of Liu’s theory. See, for example, Yao (2011).

11. The Chinese text by Liu is as follows: 1) 在艺术功能上，文人琴重自娱，”，艺人琴重他娱即娱人；2）在艺术效果上，文人琴重自身的融化力，艺人琴重对人的影响力；3）在艺术内容的表现上，文人琴注重“得意”，即弹者自己得领会，艺人琴则注重“表意”，即如何使听者领会；4）在技法应用上，文人琴往往用力不多，技法较为简单、朴素，艺人琴则追求技法的娴熟和丰富，以便妥贴的表现音乐内容；5）在乐器性质上，文人琴更多的将它视为修身养性的道器和法器，艺人琴则更多地或首先将它作为乐器对待；6）在知名度和影响力的形成上，文人琴主要是因人而名，艺人琴则纯粹因艺而名。

12. The yaji tradition continues today.

13. With the advent of recordings and the Internet in recent decades, qin players no longer stick to one school but often imitate masters from different schools; hence the playing styles from schools, though the names are still being invoked, are no longer very distinct.

14. Two noted examples are my teachers, Ms. Tsar Teh-yun (1905–2007) and Mr. Yao Bing-yan (1921–83). Ms. Tsar worked professionally as a schoolteacher and wenshu (somewhat like a private secretary, except the person must be highly accomplished in composing elegant essays and correspondences in classical Chinese that are written in refined calligraphy, all on behalf of his or her employer) in her younger days but later mainly as a homemaker taking care of a husband, raising a son, and teaching qin privately at her home. She was considered one of the most distinguished qin musicians of her generation and venerated by her many qin students. As a literatus, she excelled in poetry composition and calligraphy, largely shunned public performance and recording, and refused tuition payment from her students (Yung 2008:13). Mr. Yao worked all his life as an accountant, accepted very few students, and declined many requests for public concerts, despite his reputation as a performer and his expertise in the so-called dapu process, by which he played centuries-old pieces that were no longer in the living repertoire. He made a conscious decision to remain an amateur, which, as he put it, "allows [me] to choose whichever pieces [I'm] interested in playing and whichever students [I] would accept, decline invitations to perform, and be free from restrictions of all kinds" (Yung 1997:7–8).

15. For changes in qin performance in the twentieth century and beyond, see Yung (1989, 2009).

16. Some notable contemporary qin players, as in the past, could no longer be classified exclusively in one camp or the other. An example is Lin Youren (1938–2013), who may be considered an artist-professional because he was a professor of qin at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and a highly respected qin performer who issued several recordings; yet he identified with the literati in much of his outlook and philosophy. See Gong (2014).

17. An example of qin and ensemble can be found on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcbt7H0kV28.


20. Chinese text: 文人琴 ... 提供了基本的精神和灵魂，艺人琴 ... 提供了鲜活的生气和血脉。

21. Chinese text: 一个是灵魂没有血脉，一个是有血脉没有灵魂。

22. For an English discussion of “silk and bamboo music” of the Shanghai area, see Witzleben (1995).

23. Qin is sometimes played in duet with the equally soft end-blown flute called the xiao.

24. The qin when performed as public music today is almost always electronically amplified. The large number of commercially released compact discs also bypass the issue of softness.

25. On the construction of the instrument, tuning of the strings, and meaning and significance of the markers (sometimes translated as “studs”), see, for example, Lieberman (1983) and Yung (2001).

26. For readers interested in further explanations of these plucking techniques, there are a number of English-language sources available; see Lui (1968), Lieberman (1983) and Yung (1997). Note that Lui and Lieberman used a different romanization system from the one given here.

27. The Chinese characters for this source are 絃山琴況, 徐上瀛, 虞山派, 严澂.

28. Tse and Lam translate this word as “harmony.” I have chosen “harmoniousness” in order to avoid the established meaning of “harmony” in Western music.

29. The twenty-four Chinese words/characters are 和, 静, 澄, 远, 古, 淡, 恬, 逸, 雅, 丽, 采, 洁, 润, 圆, 坚, 宏, 细, 精, 轻, 重, 短, 迟.

30. "Harmoniousness" or "harmony" (he 和) is also used nonmusically in Confucian philosophy as the ideal state of society (see, e.g., Li 2006).

31. The “standard tuning” (zhengdiao 正调) refers to the most common tuning in which the pitch relations among the seven strings are equivalent to those among the Western diatonic scale of (from the lowest string) C (two octaves below middle C), D, F, G, A, C', D'.

32. Xu's text, as translated by Tse and Lam, reads:

The Harmony of open string notes is more important than that of stopped notes. Unlike stopped notes, properly tuned open string notes are harmonious without the need to adjust the positions of the left-hand fingers. Taking turns between main and supporting tones, right hand fingers play open string notes now loudly and again softly, with pitches following the theory of "subtraction and addition of a third." This is the ideal harmony. On the other hand, with reference to stud positions, harmony of stopped notes is achieved by checking whether the pitches at the ninth and tenth studs are in tune with the corresponding open strings. However, if the finger position is not exact or the stud position not precise, the sound only appears harmonious but is not exactly so. Therefore, you should always check the harmonics. If the harmonic notes are not exactly harmonious, you should adjust the strings again, checking the stopped notes and harmonic notes alternately, until proper tuning is achieved.” (2015:92–93)

The method of "subtraction and addition of a third" mentioned in the above text is sanfen sunyi 三分损益, the Chinese equivalent of the Western Pythagorean tuning.

33. For explanation of the markers, or studs, on the qin, see Lui (1968), Lieberman (1983) and Yung (2001).

34. Tse and Lam translate this as "elegance, gentleness, serenity, and modesty” (2015:92).

35. A few transcriptions of qin pieces in Western staff notation published in the West may be consulted as examples. See Lieberman (1983), Lam (1993), and Yung (1997, 2001). Detailed analysis of such "echoes" and "chords" will have to await a future article.


37. Many centuries before Xu's time, a celebrated essay called Qinfu (Poetical essay on the qin), attributed to the great qin master and poet Xi Kang (223–63), heralded "harmoniousness" in a paragraph: "When the lute is tuned to the basic accord, the third and fifth strings are in harmony,
the first and fourth strings control each other. Then all the seven strings resound in harmony, high
and low are in perfect concord. Staccato and legato, beautiful tones are produced in succession, their
natural harmony is all-pervading and highly pleasing” (translation by van Gulik [1941] 1969: 90).

38. Xue Yijian 薛易简 “Qinjue”（琴訣）(Rules on playing qin) was reprinted in
Qinshu daquan (Grand compilation of qin writings) (1590), which was in turn reprinted in Qinju jicheng (Col-
clected materials on qin music) (1980) as volume 5. The Chinese text of this excerpt is
两手相附若双鸾对舞两风同翔.

39. “Cheng Yujian Zhifa” 成玉礀指法 (Finger techniques according to Cheng Yujian). The
Chinese texts of these excerpts are boci泼剌, nian捻: 如风咮啣花; xuchuo虚綽: 势如飞鸥初下.

40. Taiyin daquanji 太音大全集 (Grand collection of ancient tunes) (1413), reprinted in

41. The Chinese characters of the terms mentioned are 泛,泼剌, 捻,虚按,齐撮.

42. The Chinese characters for words and terms mentioned in this paragraph are 齐撮,弹,轮,掐起,捻,带起,推出,放,虚按,注,绰,吟,猱,定吟.

43. The Chinese text is 纯粹, 自然, 神妙.

44. The Chinese text is 所谓自然, 就是按弦用力而不觉, 运指动宕而无迹, 欲去者不期去而自去, 欲至者不期至而自至, 一切莫知其然而然, 有无痕之趣, 天然之妙, 安闲自如之气象, 也就是至精至巧而不觉其巧, 以至返朴归真, 成为天籁.

45. Instruments made in the Tang dynasty (seventh to tenth century), the earliest extant
samples today, have slightly wider bodies than those made since. The increase in loudness compared
to the narrower samples is noticeable but not significant.

46. Shenqi mipu 神奇秘谱 (Wondrous and secret notation) (1425), vol. 2.

47. The Chinese characters for the compositions mentioned in the last two paragraphs are 长门怨,乌夜啼,憶故人,广陵散,潇湘水云. Other technical terms mentioned are 索铃,蟹行.

48. The Chinese characters for the compositions mentioned in the last two paragraphs are 长门怨, 乌夜啼, 憐故人, 广陵散, 潇湘水云. Other technical terms mentioned are 索铃, 蟹行.


50. The Chinese characters for the three terms in this paragraph are 翼, 伏, 推琴.

story is also told in van Gulik ([1940] 1969: 97–98); Liu (2005:11); Park (2008:138); and others.

52. The Extrinsic ones are “Geographical area, “Culture area,” “Political area,” “Social strata,”
“Sex, age group, occupation, etc., “Social function,” and “Focuses of interest.”

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