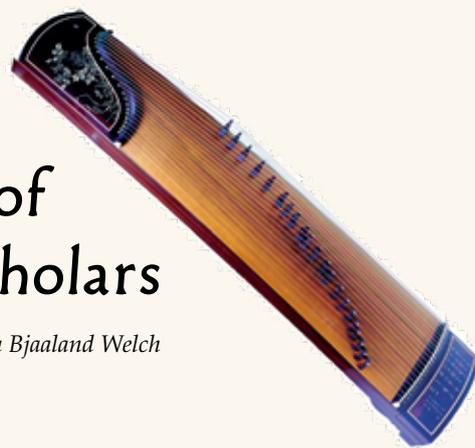


The Chinese Qín (琴)

Exploring an instrument of strings & scholars



By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

The *qín* is an ancient Chinese musical instrument, most often described as a 7-string zither. Textual references to it on bronze vessels date back to the 15th century BCE while the oldest extant example (found in the tomb of the Marquis Yi) dates back to approximately 433 BCE. (As a result, the preface “ancient” or “old” – *gǔ* - is sometimes added to form the alternative name *gǔqín*.)

In traditional China, the Four Arts of the Scholar were regarded as calligraphy, painting, chess and music (which was understood literally to mean playing the *qín*). Playing the *qín* was the height of literati music (*wenren yinyue*), hence the popularity of the *qín* as a symbol of the literati class in Chinese art, especially from the 16th century onwards.

For centuries, the *qín* was the symbol of intellectualism and refinement – a status symbol meant to be played, but unfortunately more often collected and displayed (much like an expensively carved chess set displayed today in a modern drawing room).

The Asian Civilisations Museum has one *qín* on display (exhibited on the 19th century *longyuan* wood day bed), but there are at least two additional depictions of a *qín* in the China Gallery. The first can be found on one of the four sides of the blue and white vase that depicts the Four Arts. The second *qín* is depicted on a small *doucai* cup nearby. One scene on the cup is entitled *Bringing a Qín to a Friend* and shows the popular scene of a scholar followed by his *qín*-carrying attendant. (This small motif reappears frequently in Chinese art from landscape paintings to lacquer trays.) So a few minutes talking about the *qín* can be a useful way to introduce several Chinese and Confucian concepts—yin/yang, heaven/earth, the five basic relationships, the concept of Confucian reciprocity and the idea of *qi*.

All Four Arts of the Scholar have been intimately associated with the concept of *qi* (氣) since at least the Wei Period (220-265 CE). In its simplest form *qi* is understood as breath or energy, or as one scholar translates it, “configured energy”. As applied to the Four Arts of the Scholar, it is the force that begins, sustains and completes creative work. According to Edward Ho, Professor and Head of the School of Music at Kingston University, “All Chinese musical behaviour can be related to *qi*. . . . The most important consideration...is not the question of finger dexterity or any other technical aspect, but the question of how *qi* is manipulated.”

Qi is coupled with *yùn* (韻), a concept meaning resonance or musical expression to create the balanced ideal of *qiyùn*. *Qi* is also understood to represent the male *yáng* principle (the right-hand plucking of the *qín*), while *yùn* represents the female *yín* principle (with the left-hand vibrato and slide movements forming the harmonic).

Visually the *qín* is often described as containing both circular (heaven) and square and flat shapes (earth). According to Nick Pearce,* the usual seven strings are symbolic of the levels of an ordered society, representing



A captive Chinese princess with her *qín*-carrying maid – symbol of the refined life she yearns for in her now-distant homeland. Detail from the scroll, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

from first string to last: the emperor, the officials, the people, public affairs, things, civil affairs and military affairs. In addition, various parts of the *qín* were known by names such as ‘phoenix pool’ or ‘dragon’s gums’. For, as we know, phoenixes and dragons represent female/male, the empress/emperor, the world of birds/world of animals, world of earth and watery bodies/the heavens.

So in the very notion of the *qín* we find the perfect balances and structured order that traditional Chinese felt brought equilibrium, peace and prosperity to the world.

*Nick Pearce, “More Sight than Sound: Extra-musical Qualities of the Qin” in *Orientalia*, Vol. 39, No. 4, p. 41

Patricia Bjaaland Welch, who claims to be tone deaf, had the pleasure of travelling through Northern China in 2009 with Ingrid Maren Furniss, author of a book on music in Ancient China.

Qín photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum