

Spotlight : GUQIN (ANCIENT ZITHER)

By Anne Tan



*Fig 1. Guqin
17th-18th Century, Kangxi Period, China
Top Board: Fir Painted with Black Lacquer, Bottom Board: Chinese Catalpa Wood
Asian Civilisations Museum*

The *guqin* (古琴) is the modern name for a plucked seven-string fretless Chinese musical instrument of the zither family. It has existed for over three thousand years and represents China's foremost solo musical instrument tradition. It is sometimes described as “the father of Chinese music” (国乐之父) or “the instrument of the sages” (圣人之器).

According to tradition, the *guqin* originally had five strings, representing the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Later, Zhou Wen Wang (周文王) added a sixth string to mourn his eldest son, Bo Yikau (伯邑考), who had been executed by King Zhou, the last king of the Shang dynasty. His second son and successor, Zhou Wu Wang (周武王), added a seventh string to motivate his troops into battle against the Shang and eventually defeated them. Ancient *qin*-like instruments with ten or more strings have been found, but the modern form which comprises seven strings has been standardised for about two millennia. Hence, the *guqin* also came to be known as *qixianqin* (七絃琴, “seven-stringed instrument”).

Originally, this instrument was called *qin* (琴), but by the 20th century this term had come to apply to other musical instruments. The prefix “*gu*” (古, “ancient”) was later added for differentiate this instrument from the others.

Description

The *guqin* has a range of about four octaves, and its open strings are tuned in the bass register. Its lowest pitch is about two octaves below middle C.

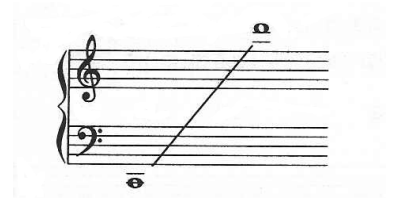


Fig 2: Note Range of a Guqin

The *guqin* has seven strings and thirteen dots called *hui* (徽, “insignia”), which indicate pitch positions. Until the Cultural Revolution, the strings were made of twisted silk, but today, most players use nylon flatwound steel strings. This was due to the scarcity of high-quality silk strings and to the steel strings' greater durability and louder tone.

The *guqin* produces three categories of sounds. The first is *san yin* (散音, “scattered sounds”). This is played with the right hand which plucks open strings individually or in groups to produce strong and clear tones. The second is *fan yin* (泛音, “floating sounds”). The player lightly touches the string with one or more fingers of the left hand at a position indicated by the *hui*, plucks, and lifts, creating a light, floating sound. The third is *an yin* (按音, or “stopped sounds”). The player presses on a string with a finger or thumb of the left hand until it connects with the top board, then plucks with the right hand, after which the player's left hand often slides up or down, modifying the pitch and creating a variety of ornaments and vibratos.

The *guqin* is often used as a solo instrument, due to its quietness of tone. It can, however, be played together with a *xiao* (簫, “end-blown bamboo flute”), with other *guqin*, or played while singing. In olden times, the *se* (瑟), a long zither with movable bridges and twenty-five strings, was frequently used in duets with the *guqin*. Sadly, the *se* has not survived, though some duet tablature scores for the instruments have been preserved. The master *guqin* player Wu Jinglüe was one of only a few in the 20th century who knew how to play it together with *guqin* in duet.

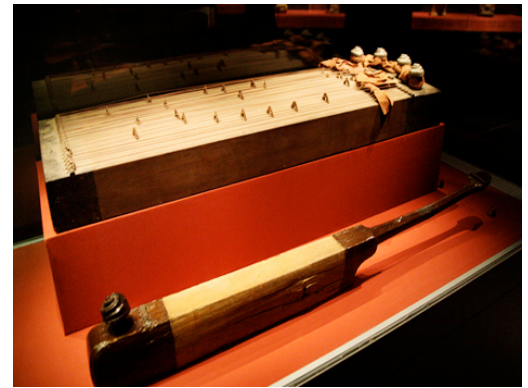


Fig 3: *Se*

Purpose

The *guqin* has traditionally been considered an instrument of culture and refinement, as evidenced by a quote from the Book of Rites: “A gentleman does not part with his *qin* or *se* without good reason.” (士無故不撤琴瑟). It was played by officials and scholars in small rooms or outdoors in places of natural beauty. Playing the *guqin* was one of the four arts (the other three being calligraphy, painting and the game of Go), that Chinese scholars in the past were expected to master. According to tradition, it required twenty years of training to attain proficiency.

The *guqin* was also played in a ritual context, especially in *yayue* (雅樂), in China. *Yayue* was a form of Chinese classical music, originally performed at the imperial courts. It was established in the Western Zhou dynasty. Together with the law and rites, it formed the formal representation of aristocratic political power.

Relevance to the 21st Century:

In 1977, NASA embarked on an interstellar space exploration by launching the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecrafts. Each spacecraft carries the Golden Record, which is a 12-inch gold-plated copper disk containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. The purpose of the Golden Record is to communicate a story of Earth to extraterrestrials which may encounter the spacecrafts.

One of the selected musical works to be included in the Golden record was a recording of “Liu Shui” (流水, “Flowing Water”), performed by Guan Pinghu. The reason for this selection is because the tonal structure of the instrument, its musical scale, is derived from fundamental physical laws related to vibration and overtones, representing the intellectual capacity of human beings on this subject.

Today, there are fewer than one thousand well-trained *guqin* players and perhaps no more than fifty surviving masters. The original repertory of several thousand compositions has dwindled to a mere hundred works.

References:

- 1) New World Encyclopedia – Guqin: <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Guqin>
 - 2) Guqin by UNESCO: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00061>
 - 3) Guqin by Cultural China: <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/94Arts2217.html>
 - 4) Text Lectern at the Literati Section in the China Gallery, Asian Civilisations Museum.
 - 5) Voyager – Mission Overview: <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/mission/index.html>
 - 6) Voyager – The Golden Record: <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>
- Figure 1: “Guqin” photo by Anne Tan. 2012
- Figure 2: “Note Range of a Guqin” from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qin_note_range.PNG#mediaviewer/File:Qin_note_range.PNG
- Figure 3: “Se” from <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/94Arts7569.html>