

**John Thompson: Translation and analysis of Jao Tsung-Yi's  
"Historical Account of the *Qin* from the close of the Song to the Jin and Yuan Dynasties"**

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In this article Professor Rao Zongyi presents excerpts from major original writings by Song, Jin and Yuan contemporaries about the *qin* (today usually called *guqin* - "old *qin*"). In selecting the writings his focus was developing an historical overview of various trends in *qin* play, and presenting the original writers' own evaluations of the music. He often presents his own explanations of the excerpts, and most likely himself added the punctuation for the original classical Chinese texts. For this task Prof. Rao was, and remains, uniquely qualified due to his encyclopedic knowledge of and access to publications from that period.

One of the most impressive aspects of this article is that, as Prof. Rao states in the last section, until he had actually finished the article, he had not been able to find copies of the two modern compilations that have been made of original source materials from this period, Zhou Qingyun's Catalogue of *Qin* Books (*Qinshu Cunmu*) and his Continuation of History of the *Qin* (*Qinshi Xu*), published in 1915 and 1919 respectively. These two books, though also essential to research in this period, are still difficult to find. In addition, they consist mostly of original texts with no punctuation, making them less accessible to the non-expert.

A complete analysis of the *qin* during any period must include discussions of its relationship with other literati arts such as poetry and painting; but it must also, if possible, examine the music itself in modern analytical terms. Without knowing the actual melodies, it is difficult to make connections between what was written at that time **about** the music and the music as it might then actually have been played. Much of the music was written down in tablature, which tells finger positions and stroke techniques (compare notation, which directly indicates the notes to be played.) A major task today should be trying to determine which surviving tablatures, or which parts of such tablatures, accurately preserve music as played prior to the Ming dynasty. Of course, at the time of writing (the article was first published in 1971) very little of the actual music had been reconstructed precisely according to the earliest surviving tablature.

The other main available modern source for this period is Chapter 6 of Xu Jian's Introductory History of the *Qin* (*Qin Shi Chubian*, 1982, pp. 83-121). Having previously translated this and other chapters of Xu Jian's book greatly simplified the task of translating Prof. Rao's article. Xu Jian's work does include some discussion of actual music; but most of his examples are taken from later handbooks and there is little discussion of how the music might have changed from the Song dynasty, or even from earlier surviving examples of the same melody. For example, Xu Jian analyzes the famous Song dynasty melody Clouds over the Xiao and Xiang Rivers (*Xiao Xiang Shuiyun*), but instead of using as his example the earliest known version, from *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (1425), he uses the greatly expanded version preserved from *Wuzhizhai Qinpu* (1722). In addition, Xu Jian is often not specific regarding the sources of his information. In contrast, a great bulk of Prof. Rao's study consists of quotes from named original sources.

The focus of my own studies, which began in 1974, has been reconstructing and playing *qin* music published during the Ming dynasty, learning about its connections to other literati arts, and trying to trace the sources of this music. In the process I have reconstructed and analyzed about 200 melodies from that period. I have translated Prof. Rao's article (online at <http://www.silkqin.com/09hist/raosong.htm>) in order to gain a better understanding of what people of that time wrote about their music. However, my own expertise being the music itself, my analysis of Prof. Rao's article is to a

large extent based not on Prof. Rao's aims but rather on my own interests: trying to use the surviving tablature to understand better how it might have been played in earlier times, the Southern Song dynasty in particular.

After the general introduction in Section 1, Prof. Rao's article has nine sections covering three phases: "Close of the Song" (i.e., the Southern Song, 1127-1280, but with some basic information about what was brought from the Northern Song); Jin (1115-1260); and Yuan (1206-1280). Prof. Rao systematically presents many writings from that period. What emerges is that, although there was certainly an oral tradition at the time, writers apparently spoke little of this. Instead they wrote so much about tablature (*pu*) that it is not clear to what extent this word refers to the written documents or to the music itself. This is similar to the problem of analyzing music in the Western classical tradition: often when we write about "music" we are actually referring to the written notes rather than the music itself. The earlier the music the bigger the problem with this. In early Western music it is clear that the surviving notation does not indicate all that needs to be played. Most likely the same was true of the common practice in Song dynasty *qin* music. At the same time, it seems quite clear that there were people who insisted that music needed to be analyzed exactly as it was written, even if it was not played that way. And many wrote out of abstract principles rather than from a knowledge of existing musical structures.

The title of Section 2, Prevalent *Qin* Tablature after the Song Court's Move South, is somewhat misleading, as it actually concerns tablature that had been brought south from the Northern Song. Here Prof. Rao shows that during the Northern Song dynasty a considerable effort was made in the court either to write down a tradition of *qin* music that was already highly venerated, or to preserve and perhaps re-copy surviving tablature. This formed what came to be known as Inner Chamber Tablature (*gepu*). At the same time there was also clearly an oral tradition of *qin* play. Quite possibly what survived of this is what came to be known as River-West Tablature (*Jiang-xi pu*). If *Jiang-xi pu* music was closer to oral tradition, then it may have been more flexible and open to change. However, perhaps the use of "*pu*" in the name suggests that this music, too, was being written down. As it came to be written down it presumably would then have been discussed in terms similar to those applied to *gepu*. As Prof. Rao shows, much of this tablature was taken south after 1127, and it is quite possible that some tablature from both of these traditions survived long enough to be incorporated into the famous Southern Song collections, some of which were in turn almost certainly incorporated into some of our surviving Ming dynasty handbooks. However, at present there is not sufficient evidence to make one confident that any specific surviving tablature will eventually be conclusively shown to be exactly the same as any tablature known to have existed during the Northern Song.

Prof. Rao in Section 3 shows that under the Jin the *qin* continued to flourish in the north (the capital was still Kaifeng). Section 4 gives details of interchange between north and south, while Sections 5 to 7 focus more specifically on activities in Hangzhou. Although once again it is difficult to know about the oral traditions from that time, Prof. Rao's examination of the commentary on the spread and preservation of tablature shows what a high regard was placed on the tradition both for tradition's sake and because of the beauty of the music that was being played. The most important potential sources for actual music seem to be the following:

1. Rosy Haze Grotto Handbook (*Zixia Dong Pu*); 468 pieces in 13 folios  
This handbook is connected to the famous 13th century *qin* player and high government official, Yang Zuan. Prof. Rao relates stories both that Yang Zuan compiled old tablature and that he tried to destroy it; according to the latter story it was preserved by his house guest (*menke*) Xu Tianmin. Perhaps some of the music in this handbook was played by Yang Zuan himself, or modified by him, or even composed by him. It was hand-copied, not printed, so there would not

have been many copies. Nevertheless, Rao presents evidence from book catalogues that this book, or at least part of it, was available in a few libraries through most of the Ming dynasty. If so, this increases the likelihood that pieces from it were copied into surviving *qin* handbooks.

2. Handbook from Beyond the Haze (*Xiawai Pu*); 15 melodies or sets of melodies.  
Prof. Rao presents several references to this book, said to have been compiled by Jin Ruli, a student of Xu Tianmin. Two points are of particular interest. Most tantalizing is the fact that Prince Zhu Quan in compiling *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (1425) called the melodies of folios 2 and 3 Celestial Airs from Beyond the Haze (*Xiawai Shenpin*). In addition, in Jin Ruli's book the melodies are said to have been grouped into sets of three, called modal introductions (*diao*), modal meanings (*yi*), and melodies (*cao*) respectively. This is a format followed in a number of later handbooks, where a major melody is usually part of a set of three. First is a brief melody giving the "significance of the mode" (*diao yi*); then comes a melody usually in three sections and usually called a prelude (*yin*) or an intonation (*yin*); then comes the main composition itself.

Related to these two handbooks is the question of to what extent any particular Ming dynasty *qin* tablature represents the contemporary evolution of that particular melody, or to what extent it may be relating an earlier way of playing it. Resolving this question is the key to re-creating melodies as they may have been played in the 13th century or earlier.

The best example of a handbook that seems to be trying to preserve ancient tablature is also the earliest major *qin* handbook to survive intact: *Shen Qi Mi Pu*. A main reason for its survival is that it was apparently the first handbook to have been printed rather than handcopied. It has 64 purely instrumental *qin* melodies said to have been compiled from earlier sources. Reconstructing music as played during the Song dynasty must begin with this handbook. But to put this in context its melodies must be compared with Ming dynasty handbooks that more likely reflect a changing tradition, and with the earliest surviving handbooks collecting *qin* songs.

Learning about changes in *qin* melodies can perhaps best be done by examining the best known *qin* tradition from that period, the Xu Family Orthodox Tradition (*Xumen Zhengchuan*), said to have begun with Xu Tianmin, the student of Yang Zuan also credited with having preserved the Handbook from Beyond the Haze. Based on Prof. Rao's information, the earliest surviving handbook to refer specifically to the Xumen tradition is *Qinpu Zhenchuan* (1547 and 1561).

In Section 9 Prof. Rao shows that the Xumen tradition was very active during the Yuan and early Ming dynasties. Unfortunately it may be impossible to know just how the music changed during this period. Some of it certainly was written down between the time of Xu Tianmin at the end of the 13th century and 150 years later, the period from which the first relevant handbooks survive; but whatever was written was handwritten only, and one can only speculate as to what extent the tablature from actual surviving handbooks reflects changes in the tradition and to what extent it preserves actual southern Song tablature.

The earliest handbook in the *qin* song tradition is the *Taigu Yiyin* of 1511, compiled by Xie Lin of Huangshan. It has 36 songs; lyrics for at least 20 of them come from the Song dynasty compilation *Yuefu Shiji*; several others are by other known poets, and two come from the Book of Songs (*Shi Jing*). In this way the lyrics seem to have much in common with lyrics for the *qin* songs of Yu Yan, discussed by Prof. Rao in Section 7. In the same chapter Rao also mentions an incident in which the famous *qin* master Wang Yuanliang plays a *qin* melody and the famous Song dynasty loyalist Wen Tianxiang accompanies it in song. Then in Section 8 Rao mentions an incident where the Yuan dynasty *qin* player Xiao Xingyuan of Poyang plays the *qin* to express the sentiments of a poem he has just written. Rao adds that he "suspects Xingyuan studied River-west tablature". This is perhaps connected to Rao's

comment in Section 2 that River-west tablature was highly esteemed by poets. The impression that emerges is that the *qin* song tradition placed much less emphasis on the antiquity of the tablature than did the purely instrumental tradition. Perhaps for this reason, at present there seems to be much less direct information available for trying to reconstruct the Song dynasty *qin* song tradition than there is for reconstructing its *qin* solo tradition.

Clearly, any attempt to recover the tradition of *qin* music as played during the 12th to 14th centuries must consider the conflict within the tradition itself between preservation and development. As shown in the preceding paragraphs, understanding how melodies change must come from comparing versions in different handbooks. This sort of analysis must include looking for changes in modality. In Section 6 Prof. Rao quotes and discusses Song and Yuan commentary on *qin* modality. One issue concerned whether the first string or the third string should be treated as *do* (*gong*). Prof. Rao also briefly brings up some other terms but these are not well explained.

The most detailed effort during the Song dynasty to provide a theoretical explanation of modes in the *qin* music of that time may be the work of Xu Li, whose writings on mode probably date from the end of the dynasty but, as pointed out by Prof. Rao in Section 7, seem to have been preserved in the *Xilutang Qintong* handbook published in 1549. Also relevant may be the work of Chen Minzi during the Yuan dynasty. However, none of these writings is very meaningful without contemporary melodies that have been systematically reconstructed, so that these can provide context for the theoretical writings.

Prof. Rao's article is particularly valuable for pointing out sources that can be explored further; the work of Xu Li is a good example. However, since a discussion of such theoretical writings is best done within the context of what we know of the actual music, I offer the following comments based on my personal reconstructions of the music. The online article *Some Issues in Historically Informed Qin Performance* outlines my methodology in doing the actual reconstructions; another online article, *Modality in Early Ming Qin Tablature*, gives details of the modal basis for my understanding of this music. The latter article resulted from the discoveries I made through applying the principles of historically informed performance in reconstructing over 200 *qin* melodies up through 1614.

The way Ming dynasty tablature is organized shows that at least some musicians understood that modes (*diao*) were based on relative scale and tonal centers. Details of these tonal centers in early *qin* melodies, summarized in the chart at the beginning of my modality article, are beyond the scope of this paper. Here I will just emphasize that this chart was based not on what has been written about these modes, but on actual observation of the music itself. The most important fact that emerged from these observations is that no matter what relative tuning is used on the *qin*, or which string is used as the tonal center, for almost all *qin* melodies at that time the primary and secondary tonal centers were either *do* and *so* (*gong* and *zhi*), or *la* and *mi* (*yu* and *jiao*). This is quite astonishing, suggesting that in Song dynasty China the two most important modal structures were closely akin to the Western major and minor modes respectively.

Unfortunately, although surviving early Chinese literary texts show an awareness of the mathematical relationships of musical pitches, none of the writings discussed and quoted by Rao in this article gives a clear indication that the writers were aware of tonal centers in specific *qin* melodies. In this regard it is good to quote the following from Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*. Volume IV: 1, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 130:

"In China we have to deal with two distinct currents, the literary tradition of the scholars, and the oral tradition of the craftsmen who were expert in acoustics and music. From what follows it will

be seen that the latter must have done a great deal of experimentation, asking questions quite parallel to those asked by the Greeks - but the details were only rarely recorded."

*Qin* music generally developed through oral tradition, then was written down. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that there are problems in taking Song dynasty literati writings on pitch (*lii*) and mode and applying their theories to actual melodies. Such problems can be seen in the articles quoted in section six of Prof. Rao's article. Here are some examples.

The Chinese seven-tone scale is a diatonic scale using the relative pitch names *gong shang jiao bianzhi zhi yu biangong*, equivalent to *do re mi fa# so la ti*. In other words, there is no *fa*, even though in *qin* music the note *fa* appears quite frequently, *fa#* almost never. In addition, the names used for the first five strings of the *qin* are the names of the notes in the five-tone scale: *gong shang jiao zhi yu*, that is, *do re mi so la*, but the actual tuning of these strings in standard tuning raises the pitch of the third string half a tone, a fourth interval from the first string, so that if the first string is *gong* the relative tuning is *do re fa so la*. I have never seen an article explaining how this developed, or what actual musical significance this has. Quite likely the answers have nothing to do with theory, but instead resulted from the inspiration and convenience of actual musicians.

Articles quoted by Prof. Rao actually mix these relative pitch names together with absolute pitch names. There were 12 absolute pitches, their names being the 12 bell-chimes in the palace music department, which had to be tuned to whatever the imperial household determined to be the correct pitch. The first pitch is *huangzhong*; the sixth, *zhonglü*, is a fourth interval above it (compare *fa*). The specific issue brought up in Section 7 is whether *zhonglü* could be considered both as the name for the third string on a *qin* and as the relative pitch *gong*. The terms used are never clearly defined, but Rao's examples show that "using *zhonglü* as *gong*" meant using the third *qin* string instead of the first string as *gong*. This would be an interesting argument if the writers went on to apply this to specific melodies. However, since as yet I have not found related commentary saying that such-and-such a melody is bad because it uses a different string as *gong*, or even any commentary that discusses primary and secondary tonal centers, I suspect the argument had little to do with the actual music, arguing only about the names used to refer to these strings.

Related to this, according to the compiler Zhu Quan the first folio of his *Shen Qi Mi Pu* has the most ancient melodies, ones for which he could not find players. It so happens that of the 16 melodies in this folio, all seven using standard tuning are said to be in *gong* mode. The first of them, *Gufeng Cao*, has in fact the characteristics of *yu* mode, but all seven use the third string as *gong*. The second folio has 26 entries in standard tuning; of these the largest modal group is *shang*, with 13 entries. *Shang* mode melodies, which use the first string as *gong*, are particularly associated with certain 13th century *qin* masters associated with Yang Zuan. Does this suggest that the third string as *gong* has more antiquity than the first string? And Prof. Rao presents criticism of Yang Zuan for preferring to consider the third string as *gong*. Why, then, do other accounts say he was enamored of *shang* mode melodies?

Another characteristic of some early *qin* melodies that absolutely needs discussion is the changing third interval in certain modes. Thus *shang* mode melodies in early tablature use the first string as *do* (*gong*) and are generally pentatonic, but in addition they sometimes change *mi* to *mi flat*. Likewise some early melodies that have *la* as the tonal center in some places change *do* to *do sharp*. These changes are such a clear characteristic of mode that it is not possible to understand the mode of melodies in *Shen Qi Mi Pu* and many other Ming dynasty handbooks without taking this into account. Likewise it is crucial to know for how long this characteristic was part of the *qin* tradition. If Chinese writings of that time never mention this characteristic, it suggests once again that the writings were basically for ideological use, with little connection to the music as it was played.

Using as a base the information provided by Prof. Rao, as well as that in Xu Jian's history and in the two collections by Zhou Qingyun, it is now necessary to examine more carefully the original sources in light of the information that has emerged about the surviving *qin* music. In the West such work has occupied hundreds of scholars and musicians over the past century, resulting in a credible reconstruction of Western music from the 13th century and later. A similar effort with Song dynasty *qin* music could result in the re-creation of an even earlier tradition.

### End note

The present paper supplements an online translation of Prof. Jao Tsung-Yi's article "Historical Account of the *Qin* from the close of the Song to the Jin and Yuan Dynasties". Both were written for the 2009 Interdisciplinary, Intercultural International Conference on *Guqin*, Aesthetics and Humanism at Chaoyang University of Technology, Taichung, Taiwan, Friday morning, 24 April.

Three melodies were prepared for presentation at the Friday afternoon session:

1. Exemplary Woman Prelude (列女引 *Lienü Yin*, from 西麓堂琴統 *Xilutang Qintong*, 1549; 3.30)
2. Water Immortal Melody (水仙曲 *Shuixian Qu*, from 五音琴譜 *Wuyin Qinpu* (1579; 5.00)
3. Water Dragon Intonation (水龍吟 *Shui Long Yin*, from 玉梧琴譜 *Yuwu Qinpu*, 1589; 4.30)

The period covered in Prof. Rao's essay includes (with dates, capital city [modern name]):

Northern Song (960-1126; Dongjing [Kaifeng])

Liao (907-1125; various, including Dading Fu - the Central Capital: Zhongjing [Ningcheng?])

Southern Song (1127-1280; Linan Fu [Hangzhou])

Jin (1115-1260; Bianjing [Kaifeng] as well as Zhongdu [Beijing])

Yuan (1206-1280-1368; Dadu [Beijing])