A Brief Inquiry into The Evolution of *Qin* Culture in The Western Han Dynasty: A Case Study of Marquis Liu He of Haihun

淺探西漢琴文化的流變：以海昏侯劉賀為例

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Brief Introduction to the Tomb of the Marquis of Haihun and the Study of Liu He

Since 2011, a salvage archaeology project has been conducted in the area of Guanxi Village, southeast of Datangping Township, Xinjian District, Nanchang City, China. This archaeological endeavor focused on the excavation of a Western Han tomb, later identified as the Tomb of the Marquis of Haihun 海昏侯墓. Over the course of nearly a decade of excavation, preservation, and material organization of the tomb, archaeologists have uncovered a large number of artifacts and precious materials, including bamboo slips and other invaluable items. This remarkable discovery within a well-preserved tomb yielded over 10,000 artifacts, significantly enriching our understanding of the aristocratic life, rituals, technology, history, and various other aspects of the Marquis of Haihun's kingdom and the broader Western Han era.[1] As a result, this site has been made available for scholarly inquiry and has extensively facilitated further study and analysis.

Recent scholarly research has conclusively identified the occupant of the tomb as Liu He 劉賀 (92-59 BCE). The grandson of Emperor Wu of Han (156-87 BCE), Liu He became the King of Changyi kingdom 昌邑國 in 86 BCE following the death of his father, Liu Bo (?-86 BCE), the fifth son of Emperor Wu. The year 74 BCE marked a significant turn of events when, following the sudden demise of Emperor Wu's successor, Emperor Zhao (94-74 BCE), the influential regent Huo Guang (?-68 BCE) appointed Liu He as the new successor. However, Liu He's tenure as emperor was brief and bewildering. As recorded in *Hanshu*[2]:

> [Liu He] King received the imperial seal and seal cord and succeeded to the position and title of emperor, but twenty-seven days after he was set up, because his conduct was so disorderly and scandalous. The general in chief Huo Guang consulted with the other ministers and requested the empress of Emperor Zhao the Filial to remove him from the position and send him back to his former kingdom [Modified].[3]

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[1] "Marquis of Haihun's Tomb of the Western Han Dynasty in Nanchang, Jiangxi: Jiangxi Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, Nanchang Museum and Xinjian District Museum," *Chinese Archaeology* 17, no. 1 (December 1, 2017): 59.

[2] *Hanshu* 汉书, also known as *The Book of Han* or *The Book of the Former Han*, was written and compiled by Ban Gu (32–92 CE) and other members of the Ban family. It is one of the earliest transmitted texts covering the early imperial history of China, spanning the Western Han Dynasty and the Xin Dynasty.

[3] Gu Ban, "Han Shu 63: The Biographies of the Five Sons of Emperor Wu," in *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han*, trans. Burton Watson, Translations from the Oriental Classics (Columbia University Press, 1974), 71.

王受皇帝璽綬, 襲尊號. 即位二十七日, 行淫亂. 大將軍光與群臣議, 白孝昭皇后, 廢賀歸故國.[4]

Liu He is explicitly characterized by traditional historical assessments as a morally corrupt and inept emperor. The authors of *Hanshu* portrays him as someone "[who] behaves in a reckless and deluded manner, disregarding what is proper and ritually correct for an emperor and throwing into confusion the statutes and regulations of the Han" 荒淫迷惑, 失帝王禮誼, 亂漢制度.[5] It records that during his 27 days on the throne, he committed a total of 1,127 absurd acts—an average of 41 per day, meaning he supposedly made more than one mistake per hour. Following his deposition from the throne, he was stripped of his imperial status and declassed from royalty to commoner in Changyi. After nearly a decade of living a low-key and uneventful life, he eventually dispelled the suspicions that Emperor Xuan (91– 48 BCE), his successor, had held against him: fears that Liu He might return to compete for the throne. In 63 BCE, Emperor Xuan sent Liu He to the southern regions, appointing him as the Marquis of Haihun, a small kingdom in present-day Jiangxi Province.

Due to inherent limitations and biases in transmitted sources, historians faced challenges in achieving a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of Liu He before the discovery of the tomb. However, with the increasing discovery of archaeological artifacts and materials, contemporary historians have begun identifying and advocating significantly different, and even contradictory, historical portrayals of Liu He, departing from the interpretations found in traditional transmitted texts. This essay is written within this academic context. With the support of archaeological findings, the life and historical profile of Liu He has been gradually revealed and refined from various perspectives and approaches. Among the thousands of unearthed artifacts, a musical instrument called *qin* 琴 has particularly captured my attention.

The Object: Qin 琴

According to archaeological reports, within Liu He's main tomb chamber there are designated areas for musical instruments and recreational tools located in the North and West Storage compartments. Archaeologists have discovered a comprehensive collection of musical instruments within these storage spaces, comprising two sets of bells, one set of chime stones, *qin* 琴, *se* 瑟, *pai xiao* 排簫, and *sheng* 笙, along with 36 wooden figurines of musicians. Scholars have noted that these instruments could potentially constitute a complete musical ensemble suitable for entertaining at banquets.[6]

[4] *Hanshu* 63B. 2765; All Chinese primary texts are cited from the online database of Scripta Sinica, see Scripta Sinica database, *Scripta Sinica* (Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1984), http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm.
[5] Gu Ban, "Han Shu 68: The Biographies of Ho Kuang and Chin Mi-Ti," in *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han*, trans. Burton Watson, Translations from the Oriental Classics (Columbia University Press, 1974), 135; *Hanshu* 65A. 2944.
[6] "Marquis of Haihun's Tomb of the Western Han Dynasty in Nanchang, Jiangxi," 52.

Inspired by textual analysis methodologies, this essay integrates and analyzes the latest archaeological findings, secondary literature, and transmitted primary sources. Through the lens of musical culture and materiality, I aim to offer a distinct interpretation of Liu He and his life. Meanwhile, I will broaden my exploration of the materiality of *qin* within Western Han society. By examining the *qins' significance* across various themes such as ritual, social order, cultural practice, and social status, I endeavor to contextualize the role of *qin* within different social contexts and scenes, shedding light on its perceptions and significance in the Western Han period.

Figure 1. The Lacquered Qin in the Marquis of Haihun's Tomb (M1:561).[7]

Liu He and His Taste for Music

Before the excavation of Liu He's tomb, historians had scant knowledge of his leisure activities, particularly those related to music. The only textual record was in Hanshu, which records a passage related to Liu He's inappropriate engagement with musical entertainment during his reign as emperor:

> While the coffin of the deceased emperor was still lying in state in the front hall, he [Liu He] had musical instruments brought from the Music Bureau and summoned musicians from Changyi to strike the drum, sing songs, and offer entertainments, and when he had returned to the front hall from the interment ceremony, he had the bells and chiming stones sounded. He also summoned musicians from the altar of the Great Unity and the ancestral temples and had them brought to the covered road at Lake Moushou in the Shanglin Park, where they played, sang, and danced for him, presenting various types of music for his enjoyment. [8]
> 大行在前殿, 發樂府樂器, 引內昌邑樂人, 擊鼓歌吹作俳倡. 會下還, 上前殿, 擊鐘磬, 召內泰壹宗廟樂人輦道牟首, 鼓吹歌舞, 悉奏眾樂.[9]

[7] Guan Li et al., "The Lacquered Wooden Wares Unearthed from Marquis of Haihun's Tomb of the Western Han Dynasty in Nanchang, Jiangxi," *wenwu*, November 12, 2018, 50.
[8] Ban, "Han Shu 68: The Biographies of Ho Kuang and Chin Mi-Ti," 133.
[9] *Hanshu* 38A. 3648.

This incident clearly presents a highly negative portrayal, contributing to the downfall of Liu He's brief political career. However, from the perspective of studying Liu He's relationship with music, this passage provides valuable insights into his aristocratic sensibilities and how music became an integral part of his leisure time and personal life.

As many scholars have speculated, Liu He's father Liu Bo was likely born of Emperor Wu and Consort Li Furen 李夫人 (fl. 114). Favoured by Emperor Wu, Consort Li and her brother Li Yannian 李延年 (fl. 114) gained imperial favour for their musical talents and performances. Li Yannian, renowned as a singer and composer, was appointed to establish the Music Bureau (*yuefu* 乐府) to entertain Emperor Wu. Given that Liu Bo was the sole son of Consort Li, it is reasonable to argue that Liu Bo may have been influenced by his mother's family, which instilled in him an appreciation for music and dance. As Liu Bo's son, Liu He would have been influenced to some extent by his father and family, placing great importance on musical entertainment. Therefore, it is plausible to posit that Liu He and his father at Changyi had patronized a sizable musical ensemble for their entertainment, becoming such an integral part of their life that they desired to perpetuate these ensembles and music into the afterlife.[10] This argument not only finds textual support in *Hanshu* but is also significantly corroborated by the collection of musical instruments unearthed from his tomb.

According to inscriptions on the artifacts, a significant portion of them—including ceremonial musical instruments excavated in Liu He's tomb—belonged to the period when he was the king of Changyi and may have been inherited from his father.[11] After being conferred to the nobility of Haihun, Liu He brought these instruments, which were crafted in Changyi with him, along with his music band.

Contemporary scholars have tried to categorize these unearthed musical instruments based on their material characteristics and historical context. They argue that instruments such as the bell sets, chime stone sets, and musician figurines belong to a traditional and ritualistic musical system (*liyue zhidu* 禮樂制度) which was inherited from the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), a foundational text of the Zhou dynasty that established an ideal framework of governance, bureaucracy and ritual system.[12] This system established musical and ritual regulations, including "All the lords have suspended musical instruments on three sides" (*zhuhou xuanxuan* 諸侯軒懸) and "*Liu yi*" (六佾), a specific dance formation used in ritual

[10] Qiao Jun, "Archaeological Research on Musical Instruments of the Han Dynasty" (PhD diss., Zhengzhou University, 2020), 225; Zhang Wei and Ke Li, "An Exploration of the Music System in Marquis Haihun State Based on the Music Materials Unearthed in His Tomb," *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music*, no. 03 (July 10, 2019): 28–29.
[11] "Marquis of Haihun's Tomb of the Western Han Dynasty in Nanchang, Jiangxi," 55.
[12] Yan Chen and Fang Wang, "An Analysis of Musical Instruments Unearthed from the Tombs of Feudal Lord Kings in Western Han Dynasty From the Angle of Archaeology," *Academic journal of Zhongzhou* 10 (October 15, 2022): 131; Zhang and Ke, "An Exploration of the Music System in Marquis Haihun State," 26–29; Jun Yang, "The Underground Luxury of a Western Han Marquis: Major Discoveries from the Tomb of the Marquis of Haihun in Nanchang," *Asian Archaeology* 2, no. 2 (2019): 85.

performances for marquises.[13] Crafted primarily from materials like metal and stone, these instruments were used in formal ritual events such as sacrificial ceremonies and court gatherings.

In contrast to these traditional and heavyweight instruments, those made from materials like silk and bamboo, such as the *qin, se,* and *paixiao*, offered greater musical versatility, expressiveness, and portability. These factors contributed to their widespread popularity in daily life, evident across various social classes during the Western Han era and supported by recent archaeological discoveries.[14] The music performed with instruments made from such materials is commonly referred to as folk music (*suyue* 俗樂), distinguishing it from the ceremonial classical music (*yayue* 雅樂) which is emphasized in the *Rites of Zhou*.[15]

Contextualizing Qin 琴 Within A Broader Historical Framework

The discovery of *qin* in Liu He's tomb offers the chance for a fresh perspective on interpreting Liu He's daily leisure activities. Perhaps more importantly, it also further confirms the popularity of *qin* during the Western Han period from an archaeological standpoint. As one of the most representative instruments of folk music, the *qin's* historical lineage can be traced back to the legendary period of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors in Chinese mythology, as recorded by Sima Qian (145 BCE – 86 BCE), the most celebrated historian in Chinese historiography, in his work, *Shiji* 史記:

> In the past, Shun 舜 played the five-stringed *qin*, singing the poem "South Wind," and the world was in order; Zhou 紂 indulged in the music of the northern frontiers, and his body perished and his country fell. What was the grandeur of Shun's path? What was the narrowness of Zhou's path? The poem "South Wind" represents the sounds of growth and prosperity. Shun delighted in it, finding pleasure aligned with the heavens and earth, winning the hearts of myriad nations, hence the world was in order. The music in Zhaoge did not conform to the seasonal rhythms; being from the north symbolized defeat, and remoteness implied crudeness. King Zhou enjoyed this music, which set him apart from the sentiments of myriad domains. The feudal lords did not come to submit to him, the common people did not feel close to him, and the entire world turned against him. Hence, he met his demise, and his country fell [Translation of mine].
> 故舜彈五弦之琴, 歌《南風》之詩而天下治; 紂為朝歌北鄙之音, 身死國亡. 舜之道何弘也? 紂之道何隘也?夫《南風》之詩者生長之音也, 舜樂好之, 樂與天地同意, 得萬國之心, 故天下治也. 夫朝歌者不時也, 北者敗也, 鄙者陋也, 紂樂好之, 與萬國殊心, 諸侯不附, 百姓不親, 天下畔之, 故身死國亡.[16]

In this case, the musical connotations expressed by *qin* were described by Sima Qian as moral, ceremonial, and orderly. It was regarded as an important means of upholding social order, ritual propriety,

[13] Yang, "The Underground Luxury of a Western Han Marquis," 85.
[14] Qiao, "Archaeological Research on Musical Instruments of the Han Dynasty," 145.
[15] Yan and Fang, "An Analysis of Musical Instruments Unearthed from the Tombs of Feudal Lord Kings in Western Han Dynasty From the Angle of Archaeology," 129–30.
[16] Also known as *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Shiji* serves as a model for Chinese official history, covering events from the beginning of recorded history to Sima Qian's own time. *Shiji* 24A. 1205.

and moral virtues. Sima Qian concludes his "Book on Music" (*yeushu* 樂書) in *Shiji* with the following statement:

> In ancient times, the Son of Heaven and the feudal lords never left the courtyard to hear the sound of bells and chimes, while ministers and officials (*qing dafu*) never left the hall to listen to the music of *qin* and *se*. In this manner, they formed habitual conduct aligned with propriety, thereby preventing indulgence in excessive pleasures [Translation of mine].
> 夫古者, 天子諸侯聽鐘磬未嘗離於庭, 卿大夫聽琴瑟之音未嘗離於前, 所以養行義而防淫佚也.[17]

From this passage, it is evident that before the Han dynasty the *qin* was regarded as an ideal and virtuous instrument aimed at preventing moral decay, specifically belonging to the status of aristocrats such as *qing dafu* 卿大夫 and *shi* 士. However, by the Western Han period, this musical instrument, practiced among the *shi* and *dafu* classes, gradually gained popularity within the court and became favoured by emperors and regional lords.

In *Hanshu's* annals of Emperor Yuan (*Yuandi Ji* 元帝紀), at its conclusion, the author Ban Gu (32 CE-92CE) reminisces:

> My maternal uncle once served as a Palace Attendant to Emperor Yuan (75 BCE - 33 BCE). He told me that Emperor Yuan was talented and skilled, adept at historical records. He played *qin* and *se*, blew *dongxiao*, composed music by himself, was accompanied by singing, meticulously arranged rhythms, and reached the pinnacle of excellence even in the smallest details [Translation of mine].
> 臣外祖兄弟為元帝侍中, 語臣曰元帝多材藝, 善史書. 鼓琴瑟, 吹洞簫, 自度曲, 被歌聲, 分刌節度, 窮極幼眇.[18]

This serves as a quintessential example showcasing the prevalence of folk music performed with silk and bamboo instruments, such as *qin* and *se*, within the Han ruling class. Compared to the kings and feudal lords in former dynasties who were required to listen to ceremonial classical music in accordance with the *Rites of Zhou*, as portrayed in transmitted texts, the ruling class of Han not only adhered to these ritual procedures but also patronized folk music from the populace and the *shi* class as part of their daily entertainment. This trend is further substantiated by evidence from the Marquis of Haihun's Tomb, allowing for the discoveries that Liu He not only possessed bells and chimes brought from Changyi for more solemn and ritualistic events but also recruited his own musicians to perform folk tunes on instruments such as *qin* for his entertainment in leisure settings like banquets.

Another noteworthy point is that, prior to the Western Han, the portrayal of *qin* often depicted its association with the personal moral cultivation of the ruling class as well as the maintenance of social order within their domains, emphasizing ritual propriety. However, with the increasing popularity of *qin*

[17] *Shiji* 24B. 1237.
[18] *Hanshu* 12B. 638.

and folk music among different social classes during the Han period, the narratives surrounding it diversified. Stories about *qin* recorded in transmitted texts were no longer confined to political contexts but also emerged in settings involving amicable and even romantic relationships.

In Sima Qian's *Shiji*, there is a famous story involving the renowned writer Sima Xiangru (179 BCE - 117 BCE) and his future wife, where Sima Xiangru was invited to a banquet hosted by a wealthy merchant named Zhuo Wangsun (fl.143):

> When the drinking was at its height the magistrate came forward with a *qin* and, presenting it to Xiangru, said, "I have heard that you are fond of this instrument. I wonder if you could be persuaded to amuse yourself with a selection?" Xiangru politely declined, but finally consented to strum a few selections for the company. It happened that Zhuo Wangsun had a daughter named Wenjun (fl. 143) who was very fond of music and had only recently been widowed, and although Xiangru pretended to be playing only out of deference to the magistrate, in reality he used the *qin* to pour out his heart in an effort to win the young girl's attentions. When Xiangru arrived in Linqiong with his carriage riders, Wenjun had heard, he had displayed a figure of most elegant poise and refinement, and now that he was in her own home drinking and playing the *qin*, the young girl secretly peered in through the door at him and her heart was filled with delight; she felt an instant love for him, and her only fear was that she could not have him for her husband [Modified].[19]
> 酒酣, 臨邛令前奏琴曰:「竊聞長卿好之, 願以自娛.」相如辭謝, 為鼓一再行. 是時, 卓王孫有女文君新寡, 好音, 故相如繆與令相重而以琴心挑之. 相如時從車騎, 雍容閒雅, 甚都. 及飲卓氏弄琴, 文君竊從戶窺, 心說而好之, 恐不得當也.[20]

At the end of this story, Wenjun, captivated by Sima Xiangru's skillful *qin* playing, eloped with him and returned to Sima Xiangru's hometown of Chengdu. Unlike the earlier descriptions, in this case, *qin* gradually transitioned from being a solemn instrument of the nobility to a source of daily entertainment for wealthy merchants, literati, and other social elites. The position of *qin* was no longer confined to grand historical narratives concerning social-political cosmology, instead, it became integrated into people's quotidian lives. This gradual transition towards concretization and diversification in the narratives surrounding *qin* further suggests its widespread popularity across different sectors of Western Han society, which is also supported by its increased archeological findings as in the Tomb of the Marquis of Haihun.

Conclusion

Beginning my discussion with the analysis of musical instruments unearthed from Liu He's tomb, I have integrated the most recent archaeological reports, secondary literature, and transmitted historical texts to examine Liu He's life through the lens of musical culture and instruments. His collection of buried instruments continues to hold significant academic value, offering insights into his life and the

[19] Qian Sima, "Shi Ji 117: The Biography of Sima Xiangru," in *Records of the Grand Historian of China, Vol. 2*, trans. Watson Burton (Columbia University Press, 1971), 261.
[20] *Shiji* 70. 4039.

lifestyles of Marquises during his era. Being among the few Western Han marquis-level tombs containing *qin*, Liu He's social status provides an avenue to expand my study of this artifact in tandem with other transmitted texts. Although direct references to Liu He's engagement with *qin* are absent, as Emperor Wu's grandson, the inclusion of *qin* in his tomb substantially enhances our comprehension of the instrument's popularity during this epoch. Hence, capitalizing on this archaeological revelation, I have intertwined my narrative with the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, endeavouring to reconstruct the *qin's* role in Western Han society and deepen our understanding of the prevalent musical culture among both the Han dynasty's aristocracy and populace.

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