A Contemporary History of the Chinese Zheng

Ann L. Silverberg
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note on Romanization, Transliteration, and Translation</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Cultural and Theoretical Context</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Zheng’s History Prior to 1949</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Zheng in Hong Kong, 1949–1979</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Zheng in Taiwan, 1949–1979</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Zheng Music in the “Opening Up and Reform” Era</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Conclusions</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Figures

Figure 1.1: Đàn tranh player 25
Figure 2.1: Tenth-century ensemble with zheng 41
Figure 4.1: Dou Wun singing and playing zheng and clappers in a teahouse, 1975 101
Figure 5.1: Liang Tsai-ping playing a sixteen-string zheng, 1945 122

Music Examples

Example 1.1: Evening Song from a Fishing Boat, beginning (in numeric cipher and five-line notation) 2
Example 3.1: Moon over the Mountain Pass, beginning 66
Example 3.2: Lotus Blooming atop the Water, beginning 72
Example 3.3: Celebrating the Harvest, by Zhao Yuhzhai, beginning 81
Example 3.4: Lin Chong Flees in the Night, by Wang Xunzhi, beginning 85
Example 3.5: Battling the Typhoon, by Wang Changyuan, beginning 95
Example 4.1: Visitors of the Desolate City, by So Chun-bo, beginning 111
Example 5.1: Longing for an Old Friend, by Liang Tsai-ping, beginning 124
Example 5.2: Peacocks Flying Southeast, by Cheng Te-yuan, beginning 135
Example 6.1: Maqam, Scattered Prelude, and Dance, by Zhou Ji, Zhao Guangchen, and Li Mei, beginning 149
Example 6.2: Capriccio for the Great Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor, by Rao Xuyan, beginning 150

Maps

Map 1: Major cities and provinces of China xix
Map 2: The Qin and Han States, c. 350 BCE and the Qin Empire, c. 215 BCE 38
Tables

Table 2.1: Musical works in *Model Zheng Notation*, 1938 54
Table 3.1: Musical works in Cao’s *Method of Playing the Zheng*, 1957 65
Table 5.1: Musical works in Liang’s *Music of Cheng*, 1967 123
Table 5.2: Zheng music classifications and works in van Gulik’s “Brief Note,” 1951 128
In May 2016, I visited a large old apartment in Beijing that was crowded with visiting American college students and their Chinese hostesses. After we finished a grand lunch of dumplings, pastries, and fruit, a young Chinese girl stood up near the kitchen and introduced herself in English. She explained that she would play a traditional piece on the “Chinese piano.” A few minutes later, she sat down behind a worn, old zheng and proceeded to play Battling the Typhoon from memory. I identified the music as a well-known work for solo zheng composed in the 1960s by a female zheng student studying at the Shanghai Conservatory. From my studies, I knew that Battling the Typhoon had been praised by the wife of Mao Zedong, Jiang Qing, and was endlessly heard on the radio during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (ca. 1966–1976).

In 2017, a little less than a year after that memorable lunch in Beijing, I traveled to Greece for the first time. My sister and I solved some of our long-distance transportation problems by hiring a car and driver to take us through mountains and villages to our next destination. On these trips, the car radio played softly, broadcasting our driver’s choice of what sounded like Greek-language traditional and popular music, news, and talk shows. One morning, the radio broadcast suddenly switched to Practical Rhythmic Chinese. I recognized the recordings of Chinese sentences with looped synthesizer backbeats in the background from the text and disc I had bought and used in language study. To my amazement, Battling the Typhoon—the famous zheng piece—followed the speech exercises.

The radically different contexts in which I heard Battling the Typhoon on these two occasions struck me in several ways. First, the girl in Beijing attempted to cross several cultural gaps between her and her audience by identifying her instrument in a way that Americans might comprehend, as the “Chinese piano” and that the piece she would play was “traditional.” The music was, however, actually composed by a specific person only fifty years earlier and the instrument was very little like the piano (at least to me). I spoke with her mother later and learned that the girl was ten

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years old and had studied the zheng for several years; she played it for a hobby and was not planning to make music her career.

Appending the same famous zheng piece to the end of a Mandarin lesson on Greek radio suggests that someone considered this music appropriate for the context; I suppose it “sounded Chinese.” A Chinese person who witnessed the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution would almost surely remember the work, but the Greek Peloponnesian in the spring of 2017 was far distant in time and place: surely the broadcast was aimed at non-Chinese speakers, namely, Greek listeners. For them, Battling the Typhoon surely signified something other than an iconic work celebrating the heroic work of Shanghai longshoremen facing a storm.

In both of these cases, I recognized the music as Battling the Typhoon: the sequence of melodies, rhythms, and harmonies aligned to allow me to conclude that the work I heard was none other. I heard a musical work whose origin I had studied; a piece that I considered to be “the same” despite the two widely dissimilar contexts where I heard it. The little girl, the American college students she played for, and the Greek radio listeners surely understood something very different about the music than I did. The contexts, connotations, and meanings of zheng music have great variety now; how, when, where, and how this plurality developed is the subject of this book.

This book analyzes and interprets the contemporary cultural history of the popular, modernized long zither indigenous to China known as the zheng (the word sounds like “jungle” without the l). It captures historical change from the vantage points of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from approximately the 1920s to the present. Written histories, notated musical repertories, and information about non-notated repertories, interviews, and my roles in China as a researcher and student-observer served as sources for this work.

A microcosm of twentieth-century Chinese history, including modernization, preservation, political upheaval, and plural change can be observed through the modern history of the zheng. The radical changes in the zheng’s repertory and use over the course of the twentieth century show how and why musical traditions and musical works are created and conceived as discrete items. Zheng music provides insight into how improvisation is defined and identified, and demonstrates how improvised, un-notated music differs from the processes of replication and interpretation associated with notated music. This study thus illustrates how music making is shaped and changed by social and political forces, and shows how history is produced and promulgated in modern life.

From a shared heritage on the Chinese mainland, the zheng arrived in Hong Kong well before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; on Taiwan, a new stage in the zheng’s history began with the arrival of the Nationalists in that year. For approximately three decades after 1949, communication between the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan was restricted, so zheng music developed rather independently in all three areas. In the People’s Republic of China, an accepted
historiography of the zheng and a repertory were created, but evidence from Hong Kong and Taiwan indicates that neither this historiography nor the repertory developed necessarily had much historical precedent, particularly not as solo zheng music. The present study broadens the mainland perspective, challenging conclusions such as the zheng’s long use by the rural masses or Chinese “folk.” It pays close attention to distinctions between zheng art as it developed in the three locations.

The study is arranged in seven chapters. The central three (3, 4, and 5) focus on describing and analyzing zheng art as it existed and was practiced in the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan during the period from 1949 to approximately 1979. Chapters 2 and 6 address zheng music in the three areas prior to 1949 and after 1979, respectively. Chapters 1 and 7 provide overall background as well as new theoretical perspectives and conclusions.

China had (and has) rich, diverse traditional music, some of it indigenous and some of it imported and absorbed from other lands over the course of time. In the early twentieth century, Chinese musical traditions were powerfully confronted with Western music. For a time, Western music threatened to supplant Chinese traditional music. During an era when concepts such as “modern,” “progressive,” and “scientific” were often associated with the West, some Chinese intellectuals suggested abandoning Chinese music in favor of Western types. Other Chinese intellectuals and musicians sought a modernized Chinese alternative as an antidote to purely Western music (perhaps best symbolized by the piano, the violin, and symphonic music). As a result, some forms of Chinese music and a number of traditional Chinese musical instruments were called on as potential sites for renovation and renewal. The zheng in particular ultimately melded both “Chinese essence” and “Western means” in such a way that it retained Chinese characteristics while becoming quite modern and notably versatile. The zheng provided a plausible, partial answer to a painful conundrum: How could Chinese music be modernized without becoming completely Westernized? In the process, the Chinese zheng and its music became something of a hybrid or hybrids.

The Chinese zheng is classified as a long bridged zither, and in its most common modern form, it is basically a long rectangular wooden box with a convex top. Twenty-one strings are stretched lengthwise over the top surface and suspended on bridges; each string has a separate bridge. The zheng’s closest American relative is the Appalachian dulcimer, another zither featuring plucked strings stretched across a hollow resonating cavity; this distant cousin has only four strings. On the Chinese mainland, the zheng has roots extending back thousands of years, but the modern Chinese zheng is structurally quite different from those in use in China as recently as sixty years ago. The zheng is said to be indigenous to China, originating among the Han Chinese. Archaeological evidence supports the claim that the zheng was historically present in eastern and southern China. Documents show that the zheng was directly imported to Japan centuries ago, and it is said that it migrated to Korea, Mongolia, and Vietnam over the course of time. Thus, the zheng is a member of a
family of similar musical instruments used throughout East Asia, and in fact in much of the world. In each place, the instrument has a distinct typology, history, repertory, and cultural significance. The putative relationship among the East Asian and Southeast Asian types is explored in Chapter 1 of this study.

In terms of organology, the zheng also fits into a group of three roughly similar Chinese zithers with parallel physical structures and playing techniques. The other two are the seven-stringed qin (with no bridges) and the twenty-five-stringed bridged se. Despite their general similarity, each instrument has a unique history in China. The qin (sometimes spelled ch’in) is relatively small, was historically prominent, and had a large notated repertory of solo music. The se was used primarily, if not exclusively, in Confucian ceremonies. Of the three Chinese zithers, the qin has been most heavily researched, and the se is the most obscure. Only the zheng was subject to modernization in the twentieth century. The qin and the zheng have some shared musical repertory, but the qin has traveled a much different road in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, largely because of its close association with the ruling elites of imperial China. This study contends that because the zheng had neither the elite social associations of the qin nor the se’s connection with Confucian rites, its role and repertory were overall more malleable and more easily modified to suit modern needs.

Most of the zheng’s so-called traditional solo repertory was created in the twentieth century and adapted from music collected in many areas of China. Some items were adapted from qin music, though this relationship was tenuous, especially on the Communist mainland. Along with the “traditional” solo repertory, a history linking the zheng to the laboring classes was construed for political purposes, although it conveyed a relationship that is at best arguable. The music currently played on the zheng includes a large and growing repertory of virtuosic concert solos and concertos, as well as works for zheng ensembles and mixed (multi-instrument) ensembles. Many zheng players nevertheless continue to emphasize the importance of the “traditional” repertory.

The zheng continues to represent Chinese tradition to Chinese people and to others, despite the fact that the instrument and the music it plays have changed tremendously over the past century. The zheng is heard live all over the world today and is also being integrated into many different types of musical ensembles. The instrument may one day be no more exclusively “Chinese” than the violin (or fiddle), which enjoys great status in Western classical music, in traditional Irish music, American bluegrass, and South Asian classical music, to name a few. Like the violin in the early eighteenth century, the zheng’s structure was drastically changed to facilitate changes in musical context and style in the mid-twentieth century: the need for a louder solo instrument that could accommodate new techniques and musical demands was paramount.

Centuries ago, during the Tang era (618–907 CE), women entertainers played the instrument for male courtiers, but in the first half of the twentieth century, most zheng players were men. Since the 1960s, the zheng once again became identified as
a “feminine” instrument: that is, an instrument played largely by girls and women. At present, male zheng players are once again growing in numbers and prominence. This study provides insight into how and why the zheng’s modern gender associations developed and changed.

Almost three decades after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949—and the exodus of the Nationalists to Taiwan—Mao Zedong died. Soon after, the “Opening Up and Reform” began. Led by Deng Xiaoping, these reforms opened up communication not only between the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but also between mainland China and the world. Among the collateral results was a massive change and an increase in the plurality of types of zheng music everywhere. The zheng has become the traditional instrument of choice for thousands, if not millions, of Chinese people in recent decades. Among these are children—mainly urban girls—who adopt it as a hobby and potentially as a career option, professionals and teachers who undertake specialized study in zheng music at conservatories and universities, and adult amateurs who seek to make music in their leisure hours.

The zheng has traveled long and far in postimperial China. Today, wherever and whenever a critical mass of Chinese people has settled, the instrument is sure to be found. The zheng is so appealing in timbre and so readily adaptable to different styles of music that it will likely become more and more accepted in the West in mixed ensembles, in like-instrument ensembles, and as a solo instrument (with or without the accompaniment of other instruments). Zheng music is arguably one of the most inherently attractive types of Chinese music. It has been affected by universal cultural and musical processes in its contemporary life, and zheng solo music is essentially a modern art form, despite its ancient origins. This study argues that in the twentieth century, the zheng changed from an ensemble and accompanimental instrument with strong ties to vocal music and a minimally notated repertory to become a full-fledged solo concert instrument with magnificent, virtuosic capacity and a highly developed, large repertory of notated solos, ensemble music, and pedagogical works. The modernized instrument itself has antecedents in at least three zheng variants with regional connections in China.

In China, the art of playing the zheng is now known as “easy on the eyes, easy on the ears, and easy to learn.” Its appealing sonic qualities allow it to function as an unusually user-friendly introduction to traditional Chinese music across cultural divides. Studying this art offers an excellent opportunity to study change in musical repertories as well as providing a means of studying how modernization works (or does not occur), considering why some musical traditions and music have more staying power than others and how history and tradition are assembled. This study ultimately considers the problems inherent in “constructed tradition”; the nature of improvisation; how musical works are identified as discrete items, transmitted, and categorized; and the effects of applying Western pedagogy and music notation to traditional Chinese music.
1
Cultural and Theoretical Context

First Lesson

Near the beginning of my first long stay in China, a graduate student played an important, famous piece of zheng music called *Evening Song from a Fishing Boat* (渔舟唱晚) for me in our teacher’s studio at the Shenyang Conservatory of Music in northeastern China. It was my first day in the studio and my first lesson. I could scarcely follow the numeric cipher music notation in front of me as I listened to the sounds emanating from the zheng. The music began slowly and gently, melodic, tonal, consonant, with exquisite nuances of timbre, and then built to an energetic climax at the end of a thrice-repeated passage that moved faster and faster and suddenly stopped; a sweeping glissando down to a very low pitch followed. Then, a short slow section much like the beginning brought the music to a quiet conclusion.

After she played *Evening Song from a Fishing Boat*, Yuxin told me a legend. Long ago, she said, a master musician brought his instrument outdoors to a remote, quiet spot to play for his own enjoyment and spiritual edification. A peasant gathering firewood overheard the music and exclaimed, “As lofty as Mount Tai!” Startled to find that a rustic had such a profound understanding of the music, the master musician played some more. The wood gatherer commented, “As flowing as the great seas!” The musician had indeed played an iconic piece in two sections called *High Mountain and Flowing Water*. Because the wood gatherer understood and appreciated the music so well, a strong friendship sprang up between the musician and his surreptitious listener. Much later, the musician returned to play for the wood gatherer, believing that no one else had an ear as sensitive as this man’s. He arrived only to find that his favorite listener had passed away. Concluding that his music

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1. The most famous of China’s sacred mountains, Mt. Tai is located in Shandong, a province on China’s northeast coast. It has been a place of worship for at least three millennia and has been climbed by luminaries and rulers including Confucius, the First Emperor of China (Qin Shihuang), and Mao Zedong.
would never again be so deeply understood, the musician picked up his instrument and smashed it to pieces, never to play again.²

The musical instrument involved in this story was the qin: the lofty emblem of China’s imperial elites. Insensitive, ignorant, untutored, I had come to China to learn what I could about the qin’s commoner cousin, the zheng. I made little sense of the music I heard, but fortunately, Yuxin gave no sign of despair. We took the roles of novice student and patient teacher that first day, sitting in the teaching studio of Yang Nani, a master female zheng pedagogue and performer who had been Yuxin’s zheng teacher for several years. Little did I know that *Evening Song from a Fishing Boat* holds an important place in the zheng’s repertory and is considered to be the first true zheng solo. I was taking a one-on-one zheng lesson on the campus of a Chinese music conservatory using notated music that I was expected to learn and replicate quite exactly; all of these factors are utterly obvious and unremarkable but also quite significant: the model is perfectly modern and undeniably Western. A hundred years ago, the men who typically played the zheng performed an unnotated repertory of remembered music, including song, in styles that called for considerable extemporaneous creativity, a far cry from the messages the modern pedagogy I confronted conveyed. The chapters that follow explain how, when, and why the former transformed into the latter.

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². The legend is retold in Zhou Yun, *Guzheng yinyue* [Guzheng music], Chinese Music Appreciation Series (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 2001), 75, and in many other sources.

Example 1.1: *Evening Song from a Fishing Boat*, beginning (in numeric cipher and five-line notation). Source: *Yang Nani guzheng jiaocheng* [Yang Nani’s guzheng curriculum], 106; transcribed by the author.
This book studies the zheng’s journey through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first in the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It has three goals. First, the assembly of the zheng’s solo repertory in the twentieth century yields insight into the problems inherent in employing music notation to capture repertoires held in aural/oral tradition. Like the narratives about the zheng’s history, this repertory forms a precarious link between the past and the present. Despite their tenuous relationship to the past, the narratives and the notated zheng solo repertory are now so well accepted that they have largely overshadowed ideas that do not conform. Second, by examining how the zheng’s musical repertory developed in the twentieth century overall, musicians may consider what a repertory is, how it is formulated, and how its contents may be differentiated; that is, how we know, identify, and distinguish between collections of music and individual musical works. Third, the study will show how narratives and nationalism can affect the art of music, not uncommonly suppressing or filtering materials that do not mesh with ideological and cultural premises. From 1949 to 1979, while the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan were committed to mutual isolation from each other, the two locales developed distinct identities that shaped the role the zheng played culturally, socially, and politically. This factor provides a rare chance to conduct a comparative analysis of how these differences played out in zheng art.

Just as the borders of nations are drawn for political reasons, not cultural ones, even the idea of a cohesive, distinct “national” music culture is essentially synthetic: a modern, intentional construction rather than a natural or inevitable development. The zheng played a role in the process of creating a distinct national cultural life in accord with political policy in the People’s Republic of China and also on Taiwan. Comparing materials from these two places during the three decades when communication between the areas was limited highlights how “new traditions” of zheng art were guided by ideology and politics. As such, these “new traditions” do not literally reproduce or transmit the music of the past; rather, they reformulate or reinvent older music as much as they emulate it. The colonial government of Hong Kong exerted less restraint on cultural processes among its Chinese citizenry, and this allowed for greater freedom in their exercise, and potentially for greater retention of diverse materials. The cultural porosity of Hong Kong and its unique governance perhaps even allowed a more genuine slice of older Chinese music featuring the zheng to be retained than was possible in the People’s Republic of China and on Taiwan.

Narratives by nature leave out incongruent material. Whether spoken or written, histories inevitably select and present some data while ignoring others; the present study is no exception. The processes of seeking materials and the construction of narratives from these materials are organized by the author’s thought process, deeply affected by access to materials, shaped by the nature of language, and subject to all types of external pressures, whether deliberately, consciously applied or simply part of the warp and woof of society and culture. Eventually, the resulting narrative may be further shaped as it is shared with others. There is nothing terribly unusual in
this. What is unusual or even aberrant is the opposite idea: that music or the past or just about any cultural construct is somehow objective, strictly factual, unchanging, and unchanged. The past on the contrary is malleable, sometimes fragile, and often endangered. Endangerment may result from a historian’s conviction that their work represents the past accurately just as much as it might result from a narrative created to conform to a certain line of reasoning.

This study presents a critical analysis pointing toward a radical reevaluation of the zheng and its history. It argues that a narrative about the zheng’s past and the instrument’s “traditional repertory” were produced and promoted in the twentieth century. On closer examination, the generally accepted narrative seems to have resulted in a sort of “historical overshadowing”: difficulty recognizing, understanding, and appreciating concrete evidence of the past precisely because of the influence of the historical narrative. The data the study presents are inevitably incomplete, but provide sufficient grounds for suggesting a considerably different past for the zheng. While obtaining sufficient data to prove all points may never be possible, the study leads to a reconceptualization of Chinese traditional music and how research on it might fruitfully proceed.

An array of scholars in ethnomusicology, musicology, and history have written extensively about “invented tradition” and the way people in the present portray and use the past. In ethnomusicology, Judith Becker, Frederick Lau, Christopher Waterman, and Yu Siu-wah have all contributed to these discussions. Judith Becker discovered that the effort to preserve Javanese gamelan music was spurred by Westernization in the nineteenth century; the result was change in the content of the repertory she studied, its transmission, and its trajectory. With the introduction of music notation, works became codified and stabilized and were transmitted as such. Music that had earlier been malleable and dynamic became replicated and static. Frederick Lau examined the twentieth-century creation of the solo flute (dizi) repertory in the People’s Republic of China, discovering that although it was said to have a “traditional” repertory of solo music, it essentially was not a solo instrument in earlier times. Yu Siu-wah researched Chinese music ensembles in Hong Kong and concluded that many of these groups have a questionable connection to Chinese music dating from centuries past.

In historical musicology, Katherine Bergeron, James Garrett, and Peter Jeffery have examined how sacred music from the distant past was perceived and recreated to serve later purposes in Western Europe. Bergeron examined the work of the French monks of Solesmes designing and producing editions of Gregorian chant that would suggest faithful reproduction of medieval manuscript sources in the nineteenth century.7 The monks’ work involved synthesizing materials from multiple sources and then printing this music for worldwide distribution in the modern world, processes quite unlike those in use in the Middle Ages. James Garrett considered the revival of Palestrina as an ideal type of polyphonic church music in nineteenth-century Germany.8 Finally, Peter Jeffery advocated for the application of ethnomusicological method to the study of Gregorian chant, hoping to reach beyond the bounds of notated sources to earlier music held in aural/oral tradition.9

Historians including Eric Hobsbawm, David Lowenthal, and Terence Ranger have investigated how the past has been reified and reconstructed in a wide range of contexts. Hobsbawm realized that intentionally evoking and invoking the past to provide a sense of stability “invented traditions” that were new, despite being cast as “old” by their inventors.10 In Africa, colonizing cultures celebrated their own past and created traditions for Indigenous peoples for the purpose of controlling them.11 David Lowenthal’s wide-ranging studies of the past consider the functions of personal memory in creating an individual’s identity and sense of self as well as the social construction of history.12 Historical process may be as intimate as a conversation between siblings in childhood or as public as the assembly and editing of history textbooks for use in public schools. It may include the precedents cited to support legislation and the rhetoric about the past commonly heard in the speeches of leaders.

Artifacts that are preserved may be said to be more constant than narratives about them, but the situation is much more complex when something that was not previously an artifact is made into one. Music held in oral/aural tradition and then notated is such an instance. When it is based on actual artifacts, the history of musical instruments is perhaps more concrete, but what is known about the distribution and use of instruments in the past is limited. With these ideas in mind, the remainder of this chapter introduces the physical structure and cultural role of the zheng and two other, rather similar Chinese zithers. It also provides an overview of the relationship

between the zheng and related instruments in East and Southeast Asia. These details contextualize the zheng broadly and allow for comparison. Finally, current scholarship on the zheng is reviewed.

**Chinese Zithers: The Zheng, the Se, and the Qin**

The zheng is a member of a family of musical instruments known as long bridged zithers dispersed throughout Asia. Most zithers feature strings stretched across a hollow resonating cavity; the strings are plucked, struck, or strummed to produce pitched sounds. In the West, the zither family includes the Appalachian and hammered dulcimers, the autoharp, and the psaltery. There are dozens of types of zithers spread through cultures around the world, but in Central, East, and Southeast Asia, a subgroup of closely related zithers appeared over many centuries; these will be discussed briefly below. The Chinese zheng is arguably the archetype for these long bridged zithers. A long bridged zither is essentially a long, shallow, rectangular wooden box with an arched lid. Strings are stretched horizontally across the lid, and each string passes over a small support (or bridge) that suspends it above the soundboard. The strings are attached to the instrument at either end of the box; the instrument may feature a tuning mechanism that regulates the tension of the strings.

Mainland China, with its long history and shifting borders over the ages, is said to be the historic home of three prominent indigenous zithers originally strung with silk. These are the zheng, the se, and the qin. The zheng and the se are long bridged zithers; the qin has no bridges. Archaeological digs have uncovered early examples of each of these zithers, and each has a separate history and cultural context in China. While this study concentrates on the development of the zheng in modern times, situating it in the context of its nearest organological relatives permits comparison of how the zheng, the se, and the qin traveled through history. In short, while the zheng’s structure, repertory, and cultural context changed greatly in the twentieth century, the se was untouched by modernization and fell into near obsolescence. There are signs that the se is now being revived in ceremonial contexts. In contrast, the qin (structurally unchanged, like the se) endured a long period of overall decline in the twentieth century but has become far better known in recent years. The terminology used to label these instruments and other Asian zithers is historically problematic, because in different times, dialects, and regions, their meaning may have changed.13

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13. Lucie Rault-Leyrat attempts to sort out the filiation and posit the sequential evolution of numerous Asian zithers in her article “Autour du zheng: Un essai de filiation de quelques cithares d’Asie orientale,” *Cahiers d’ethnomusicologie* 2 (1989): 63–73. In modern China, the word *qin* is used as a suffix in the names of a number of musical instruments, including the yangqin (hammered dulcimer) and gangqin (piano). *Qinfang* is a term for a practice room on conservatory campuses, and I have heard the zheng referred to generically as a qin, along the lines of “Put your instrument (qin) over there.”
The Zheng (Cheng, Chêng)

Typically, the modern Chinese zheng is about five and a half feet long and fourteen inches wide, tapering slightly from one end to the other. Its soundbox is approximately five inches deep at the crest of its curved top surface; at the edges, the soundbox is about three and a half inches deep. Most commonly, the zheng has twenty-one strings, but in the first half of the twentieth century and earlier, thirteen- and sixteen-string Chinese zheng were common. As for all bridged zithers, the strings of the zheng are supported by small pieces of wood or other material carved into triangular or V-shaped bridges. Two legs of the triangle rest on the soundboard, and a single string crosses the triangle’s tip; the bridge is held in place by the pressure the string exerts. Tuned to the pitches of a pentatonic scale\(^{14}\) by controlling their sounding length and tension, the zheng’s strings are plucked with the fingers or picks (plectra) to make the instrument sound. Several types of zheng incorporated mechanisms allowing players to access the complement of chromatic pitches familiar in Western music by quickly retuning strings; they were initially designed and manufactured in the late twentieth century but are not in wide use.

The zheng has historically been identified as a Han Chinese instrument, associating it with the ethnic group that represents more than 90 percent of Chinese citizens today. The People’s Republic of China officially recognizes fifty-five minority ethnic groups within its borders. Among these are Koreans, Miao, Mongolians, Naxi, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Yao. Many of the smaller ethnic groups have lived in southwestern China for centuries, concentrated in the modern province of Yunnan. While the Chinese government arguably continues to honor and respect the traditions of these peoples, conflict has sometimes resulted over religious practices, the maintenance of cultural identity, and over modernization more widely. Members of some minority populations have accused the national government of Han Chinese cultural imperialism. The culture of the Han Chinese, because they represent such a large slice of China’s population, sometimes seems to be drowning out minority traditions.

Historically, China was not always ruled by Han Chinese: the Mongol Yuan dynasty ruled from the late thirteenth century CE well into the fourteenth century, before giving way to the final Han dynasty to rule China: the Ming (in power from 1368 to 1644). The Ming empire was overtaken by Manchurians, who established the Qing dynasty and governed China until 1912. Over the course of history, and particularly with the fall of the Ming dynasty, Han Chinese fled mainland China for other lands, including Vietnam and Taiwan, perhaps taking their musical culture and their instruments with them. This is important for several reasons. It suggests that Han musical culture was not necessarily confined to the Chinese mainland, and this raises the possibility that musical instruments (perhaps including the zheng) may have made their way to distant areas as Han people emigrated in centuries past. It is

\(^{14}\) Pentatonic scales contain five pitches within each octave. These pitches are commonly correlated with do re mi sol la in solfège syllables (scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6).
also possible that the shifting borders of China and the incursions and presence of non-Han peoples within China added to, influenced, and perhaps changed musical culture there. Finally, several other zithers closely related to the zheng are found in neighboring regions, and their existence may in part illustrate both the diaspora of Han culture and the interaction of Han and non-Han cultures in mainland China and beyond its borders.

The Se (Sê)

The se is a long bridged zither considerably larger than the zheng, with twenty-five strings. Drawings and photos of the se show a shape that is rectangular with square corners rather than tapered from end to end. Historically used in ritual Confucian music ensembles, the se is now rarely seen and even less frequently used. Specimens can be seen in museums, including the Temple of Confucius in Beijing, where the instruments on display are painted and otherwise heavily decorated. The collections of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Art (Beijing), Henan Museum in Zhengzhou (a replica of an archaeological find), and the Confucius Temple in Tainan, Taiwan, also house one or more se. Both the se and the qin were used in Confucian rituals. The two instruments were considered to be intimately paired, to the point that phrases such as “like the qin and se” and “the qin and the se speak together” are used as metaphors for marital harmony.

Yuan Jingfang notes that in the Shangshu (Book of history), the se, qin, and drum were used to accompany sung poetry; and in the Zhou dynasty, the se and qin accompanied “string songs”; Yuan also refers to the se as a “zither now obsolete.” Another reference book states that after the Tang dynasty, the se was seldom used, but in earlier times, it was used to accompany song. Very little scholarship has yet been conducted on the se, but notated music for it is known to exist from as early as the fourteenth century. Se notation was explored by Walter Kaufmann in his 1967...
This chapter describes and analyzes the zheng’s history in Hong Kong from its earliest known appearance there to approximately 1979, with particular attention to the decades from 1949 to 1979, when communication with the People’s Republic of China was restricted.

Zheng art has long been acknowledged as an import from mainland China in Hong Kong as well as in Taiwan, but the use, history, and repertory of the instrument in the latter locations contrast significantly with mainland practices. Hong Kong and Taiwan share the distinction of their colonial past: Hong Kong was under British rule from 1841 to 1997; Taiwan was ruled by the Dutch for a brief period (1624–1662) and by the Japanese for fifty years (1895–1945); in the intervening centuries, Taiwan belonged to the Manchurian Qing empire that ruled mainland China. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan have a long history of cultural intermingling with mainland China, other areas of Asia, and the West. Immigrants and their descendants have historically far outnumbered indigenous people in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the vast majority of these residents trace their roots to the Chinese mainland. Despite its connection to Britain and to international trade, the majority of Hong Kong’s population—currently more than 92 percent—has consistently been Chinese.¹ Most Hong Kong Chinese trace their roots to the closest mainland province, Guangdong, and these citizens typically speak Cantonese (Guangdong hua). Immigrants to Hong Kong are much more likely than Taiwan arrivals to leave for another place, echoing the city’s reputation as a trade entrepôt. Perhaps because of this, Hong Kong was historically not truly seen as a place with a distinctive heritage and resident population of its own. Hong Kong was a place to come to work, to trade, to serve, but not a place to reside for a lifetime, establish roots, and bring up future generations of one’s family. This changed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Hong Kong almost surely had no zheng or zheng art in its time as a poor island fishing village close to Guangzhou. Fewer than 7,500 Chinese were living there in

1841 when the British first laid claim to it. Britain enlarged its territory in several stages following the Opium Wars, with the eventual result that Hong Kong Island and the surrounding islands and directly adjacent mainland areas were leased to the British for ninety-nine years in 1898. By 1900, Hong Kong’s population had swollen to 300,000. The continued rise of the area as a trading port and population center is legendary and need not be recounted further. Sometime during Hong Kong’s colonial period, the zheng began to be heard among its Chinese population; determining a specific date seems impossible. Not until the twentieth century is there ample documentation that the zheng was played in Hong Kong.

Over the course of its rule, the British government of Hong Kong was generally ambivalent about Chinese cultural manifestations, sometimes choosing to repress certain aspects and sometimes supporting them. There was no concerted effort to replace Chinese culture with British models or convert Hong Kong residents to Christianity. Hong Kong’s British government also took a generally lax approach to immigration, with the result that insurrections, wars, and economic difficulties elsewhere brought waves of people to colonial Hong Kong; most came from mainland China, a majority from Guangdong. The fall of the Qing dynasty in the early twentieth century and the decades of strife afterward moved some mainlanders to seek refuge in Hong Kong in the first decades of the twentieth century. In December 1941, the Japanese besieged and captured Hong Kong weeks after their attack on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor. The city’s population declined sharply while Hong Kong remained in Japanese hands and began to shoot up once again after August 1945, when British troops returned to take control. As the People’s Liberation Army and the Nationalists battled for control of the mainland in the late 1940s, Hong Kong once again functioned as a refuge; at the end of that struggle, hundreds of thousands of additional mainland Chinese arrived. The flow of Chinese mainlanders into Hong Kong was almost unrestricted prior to 1950, and the colony considered itself “a safe and well ordered sanctuary” that “welcomed all who sought asylum,” although the government sought to ensure that arrivals would have a “visible means of subsistence, useful occupation,” and “honest living.” Labor unrest and international politics helped spur efforts to restrict immigration into Hong Kong, but mainland Chinese continued to arrive in surges from 1949 through 1980. At the end of the war in Vietnam in 1975, tens of thousands of Vietnamese fled their homeland and flowed into the colony.

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3. Leung, s.v. “Hong Kong,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
With its generally freer atmosphere and cultural plurality, Hong Kong hosted several different types of zheng players and zheng music in the twentieth century. Several types of zheng art directly imported from the mainland continued to be practiced in the colony. During the three decades following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, this variety continued and developed comparatively unimpeded by local political ideology, although a few important government initiatives influenced zheng music in Hong Kong. So Chun-bo and Jason Lau state that it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that zheng music was a factor in the city’s cultural life.

Immigration, popular trends, and market forces were the most important controlling factors in the survival and shape of certain kinds of zheng music and the disappearance of others. The narrative of the history of zheng art during these years is less cohesive in Hong Kong than it is in mainland China or Taiwan: there was no parallel to Cao Zheng’s effort to use the zheng to promote the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology. It seems that notated zheng music was apparently not published in Hong Kong until the 1960s or 1970s; prior to this time, it was imported from the mainland, Taiwan, or elsewhere.

Between 1950 and 1980, the residents of Hong Kong began to develop a sense of local identity, in contrast to the “relatively open refugee society” subject to waves of immigration from the mainland that had prevailed earlier. During these decades, the Hong Kong government sponsored activities honoring and promoting certain aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Among these were radio and television broadcasts of Chinese traditional music that included the zheng. Two men with diametrically opposite careers were selected to participate in this work. They were Dou Wun (1910–1979) and Chen Leishi (also known as Louis Chen, 1917–2010). Dou sang Cantonese narrative songs with zheng and clapper accompaniment on weekly radio broadcasts from the 1950s until the 1970s; Chen apparently appeared on radio and television programs playing the zheng (and perhaps the qin as well) in the 1940s and 1950s. These men were mainland émigrés who came from radically different backgrounds in mainland China, and the music they performed was utterly dissimilar but unified by one important characteristic: it featured the zheng.

Naamyam Accompanied by Zheng: Dou Wun’s Life and Career

Naamyam, a traditional vocal form with instrumental accompaniment, was practiced in Hong Kong in the 1920s and had probably been heard in Hong Kong and the surrounding region for some decades; perhaps more. Dou Wun (Du Huan in Mandarin) was a blind naamyam singer who arrived in Hong Kong in the 1920s and plied his

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trade in the colony for the next fifty years. His work provides a glimpse into a lost art and the lives of the musicians who practiced it.

*Naamyam* is a genre of Cantonese narrative song with accompaniment supplied by a pitched string instrument: the zheng, the two-stringed bowed fiddle yuehu, or the hammered dulcimer yangqin; wooden clappers serve as percussion.¹⁰ *Naamyam* was possibly the most historic type of music involving the zheng heard in twentieth-century Hong Kong. It was performed mainly by blind men and women who were paid by their listeners. Singing *naamyam* was Dou Wun’s chief means of making a living in Hong Kong. His performances were featured in regular Hong Kong radio broadcasts in the 1950s and 1960s, and he was asked to play in several prominent venues in the city afterward.

Dou’s *naamyam* repertory ventured into poetic art and epic storytelling (Bell Yung compares Dou Wun to the blind epic poet Homer of seventh-century BCE Greece), but he also sang far less complex music. According to Bell Yung, Dou Wun sang three types of narrative song: *naamyam* (a term Bell Yung translates as “tea-house songs”); beggar’s songs, or *long zhou*, and brothel songs, known as *banyan*. Yung notes that there is fourth type of Cantonese folk narrative song known as *yue ou*, which was sung by women courtesans (also called “sing-song girls”); thus, Dou Wun did not sing these. Of the types of Cantonese narrative song that Dou Wun recorded, only *naamyam* featured the zheng. When he sang *naamyam*, he usually accompanied himself, playing the zheng with his right hand and wooden clappers with his left.¹¹ When singing beggar’s songs, he played a gong and a drum; for brothel songs, a large bowed fiddle served as accompaniment.¹²

*Naamyam* are of two types: those with lyrical literary texts about love, and narrative songs that tell very long stories, often taking dozens of hours to perform. The most famous of the shorter, lyrical, literary type of *naamyam* is *Wayfarer’s Autumn Lament* (*Ketu qiuhen*), which has a text about lost love reminiscent of the *yue ou* songs of women courtesans but from a male lover’s perspective. Bell Yung provides this *naamyam* as an example of the genre, complete with a recorded example of Dou Wun singing it, a transcription of the vocal line, and lyrics with an English translation.

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¹⁰ Bell Yung, “Narrative Song: Southern Traditions—Cantonese Narrative Song,” in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 7, East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea, ed. Robert C. Provine, Yoshiko Tokumaru, and J. Lawrence Witzleben (New York: Routledge, 2002), 269. Yung noted that the Cantonese term *naamyam* is more precise than *nanyin* (southern tone), which refers to a much broader repertory of music found over a wider geographic area, in his 2017 lecture on Dou Wun at the University of British Columbia. Bell Yung, “Hong Kong’s Folk Music and Local Culture: The Art of a Cantonese Blind Singer” (lecture delivered at the University of British Columbia, September 21, 2017, UBC Hong Kong Studies Initiative), accessed June 2, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7__fH6RLWw. Dou Wun sang *de shui nan yin* (地水南音), the type local to the Pearl River delta region.

¹¹ Yu Siu-wah mentions that Dou made recordings with a yehu player in the 1960s and 1970s; see Yu, *Yue you ruci* [Such are the fading sounds] (Hong Kong: International Association of Theatre Critics, 2005), 121.

¹² Yung, “Hong Kong’s Folk Music and Local Culture.”
in his article on Cantonese narrative song in the East Asia volume of *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*.13

Dou begins his performance of *Wayfarer’s Autumn Lament* with a prelude lasting about thirty seconds on the zheng and clappers, ending with a tremolo and short glissando on the zheng. He sings the first line in free rhythm, with no accompaniment, and then proceeds to sing with both zheng and clapper for the remainder of the example. The performance is quite rhythmic, with the zheng and clappers knitting together the whole and the zheng filling in between words and vocal phrases. The zheng sounds repeated pitches, produces strumming effects, short glissandos, and small scalar passages in the first ten lines; the vocal part predominates and controls the accompanying instruments’ appearances throughout. Most of Dou Wun’s available recorded repertory of *naamyam* shares these characteristics.

The lyrics of *naamyam* are organized into an opening couplet followed by quatrains, with accents and a rhyme scheme that reflect the sound of Cantonese in rhymes as well as conveying the nine tones of the language.14 The melody of the quatrain is the basic melodic structure used in all *naamyam*; the opening couplet is set to the melody used in the quatrain’s second and fourth lines. Each line is seven syllables long, grouped into phrases of four and three syllables. Obviously, this is a complex structure. *Naamyam* singers improvise in performing long stories within this framework. Some short sections of the story are told in spoken prose, and others are communicated in longer sung passages in verse. Singers may modify the story’s plot, improvising their choice of words and phrases. At times, Dou created new *naamyam* texts that reflected the news of the day and other events. Surely Dou Wun gained much respect for his mastery of all these techniques and their combination as well as for his memory of stories and texts. For blind musicians of Dou’s era, learning how to perform *naamyam*, remembering its extensive repertory, and learning how to apply artistry in improvising and adjusting texts and music involved a combination of memory and creativity that could only by transmitted and absorbed through

oral/aural transmission. Dou Wun’s *naamyam* singing was truly a prodigious feat. Dou’s zheng playing to accompany his *naamyam* singing has a tenuous link with other forms of twentieth-century zheng music, but his work may be representative of music—song accompanied by the zheng or another pitched instrument—formerly in far wider use in mainland China, on Taiwan, and in other areas where Chinese people settled.

Pictures and videotape of Dou Wun playing at the Fu Long Teahouse in 1975 show that his zheng had thirteen metal strings, a moderately arched soundboard, and tuning pegs inserted directly into the soundboard vertically. The bridges were loosely connected to each other with a cord. This zheng is most like the third type of zheng Cao Zheng described and illustrated with photographs in his *Method for Playing the Zheng*, first printed almost twenty years before Dou made his *naamyam* recordings for Bell Yung. Cao showed one type with thirteen strings and two with sixteen; the last of these had vertical tuning pegs and metal strings. While Dou’s zheng had vertical tuning pegs, it featured only thirteen metal strings. It was not much like the new zhengs being built on the mainland from the 1960s forward: his instrument lacked both the S-shaped tail nut and the newer tuning system with pegs inserted horizontally into the head of the instrument. Dou played with picks attached to the thumb and index finger of his right hand, and it seems that the tip of right little finger (pinkie) was pressed to the zheng’s head, supporting and stabilizing his plucking fingers and perhaps orienting his hand position, helping him pluck strings in a limited ambit. Because Dou’s left hand was occupied with playing wooden clappers, the nuances found in some other types of zheng music were not possible: the left hand could not “supplement the sound” (*busheng*) with vibrato or portamento, and so on, as found in most music for the solo zheng and shown and explained by Cao Zheng in his *Method for Playing the Zheng*. Ethnomusicologist Bell Yung recorded dozens of hours of Dou Wun’s performances in 1975 and finally persuaded the musician to relate his life story as a *naamyam* performance. This autobiography provides important clues as to the nature and status of *naamyam*—and thus the use of the zheng as an accompanying instrument in traditional vocal music—in the Pearl River delta area, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong.15

Born into a peasant family near Guangzhou in 1910, Dou Wun began to lose his sight at age three. After flooding further destroyed his family’s means of sustenance and his father died, he was given to a blind fortune teller when he was a small child. Three years later, he deserted the fortune teller and began learning to sing *naamyam* from a man named Suen Sang, apparently finding him among the blind singers of Guangzhou. Suen Sang refused to teach the boy how to play musical instruments,

15. *Shiming ren Dou Wun yiwang piaobo hongchen hua xiangjiang* [A blind singer’s story: Blind Dou Wun remembers his past: Fifty years of life and work in Hong Kong], Bell Yung, producer, Ringo Tang, director, recorded in 1975 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of History, Leisure, and Cultural Services, 2004), DVD (notes by Bell Yung).
reasoning that singing naamyam was more refined. Should he learn to play, the boy might “forget about singing naamyam.” 

Functioning as an accompanist would leave him with leftover food only, as singers ate first. Learning to sing naamyam would allow him to work independently and provide a better living.

During the 1920s, with civil war affecting Guangzhou’s stability and thus making it hard to find work, Dou joined some other blind musicians leaving Guangzhou for Macau and ultimately arrived in Hong Kong in 1926, when he was sixteen years old. His singing made him popular, but he also became an opium addict. He worked on the Kowloon Peninsula, in Yaumati, Mongkok, and finally on Temple Street in an entertainment area with numerous brothels and opium dens. In 1929, he met a professional singer, fell in love, and married her. Their children did not survive childhood. In 1935, the Hong Kong government banned prostitution, making it difficult for Dou to find work; his mother, who had joined her son in Hong Kong, passed away in 1940.

The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during the Second World War brought Dou Wun new hardships: his wife died and food was scarce. To survive, he began to perform in a duet with a female Cantonese opera singer, a fate his naamyam teacher had warned him against. When peace arrived, Dou was able to resume singing naamyam to provide for himself for some time. Dou Wun reported that as tastes changed in the 1950s, it once again became difficult for him to find work. Although it is not possible to pinpoint exactly why musical tastes changed in Hong Kong, the influx of hundreds of thousands of mainland Chinese arriving from the People’s Republic of China with the end of the Civil War in 1949 may not have been inconsequential. This and the arrival of radio broadcasts and recordings of Cantonese popular songs surely had some effect on the market for naamyam. The woman Dou accompanied singing Cantonese opera songs left him in 1953. In the autumn of 1955, Dou Wun was hired by Radio Hong Kong to perform on weekly broadcasts, which provided him with a stable living. The job lasted until 1970, when the program was abruptly cancelled. Dou found himself singing on the streets, which he found shameful.

A businessman who had heard Dou on the radio invited him to sing privately on an ongoing basis, which was a great help to Dou. In the 1970s, scholars and officials began to take an interest in naamyam, and so Dou was invited to sing in venues such as the City Hall Concert Hall, the Goethe-Institut, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Bell Yung attended some of these performances and masterminded the project of having Dou sing and record many hours of naamyam in an old-fashioned teahouse similar to the authentic contexts where Dou had originally performed. Yung recorded dozens of hours of Dou Wun’s nampaam singing at the Fu Long Teahouse in the spring of 1975, as well as other types of songs. Dou concluded this work by

17. Shiming ren Dou Wun [A blind singer’s story], notes by Bell Yung, 15.
singing his autobiography in *naamyam* form at the teahouse. Dou Wun died in 1979, marking the end of the type of *naamyam* he practiced as a living art.18

Dou’s economic status rose and fell several times during his lifetime. He was extremely grateful to his teacher for insisting that he learn to sing *naamyam*, stating that he owed Suen Sang “ten thousand yards of gratitude.”19 He was generally able to make a living as a *naamyam* singer in familiar contexts until the 1950s. In the mid-1950s, he was still sufficiently admired for his *naamyam* singing to be hired to sing for radio audiences, possibly presenting this traditional Cantonese art as a novelty or respite to listeners otherwise inundated with other types of music. In the 1970s, Dou’s music making was recorded and studied as one of the last living representatives of a vanishing art. Dou Wun’s work, his life story, and his repertory indicate that *naamyam* accompanied by the zheng was heard in a broad spectrum of contexts in Hong Kong from the 1920s through the 1970s.

**Chen Leishi, Literatus at Large**

In the 1940s, about a decade before Dou Wun began his long series of *naamyam* broadcasts on Hong Kong radio, Chen Leishi (1917–2010, also known as Louis Chen) began to appear on Hong Kong broadcasts playing the zheng.20 Other than playing the zheng, Chen Leishi’s career as a musician was quite unlike Dou Wun’s. Chen’s long life began on the Chinese mainland and ended in Malaysia, with periods of residency in Hong Kong intervening. Biographical information about Chen is scarce; there is some evidence that he was born in Chaozhou, and he is often referred to as a Chaozhou zheng player.21 According to Cheng Deh-yuan, Chen resided for a time in Nanyang (Henan) and advocated for folk music (*minzu yinyue*).22

Chen Leishi must have come from an open-minded family of considerable means that valued scholarship, as he studied Chinese history in Beijing at Yenching University, a selective, progressive university formed from the merger of several

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18. Following on the heels of Bell Yung’s work with Dou Wun, the *naamyam* master became something of a folk hero.

19. *Shiming ren Dou Wun* [A blind singer’s story], notes by Bell Yung, 9.

20. Lau, “Zheng Music in Hong Kong,”16. Chen played on the radio as well as television; no precise dates for these broadcasts have yet been located.

21. Liner notes by Liang Tsai-ping to a recording he made with Chen indicate that he was born in Chaozhou and living in Malaysia c. 1978. Liang also styles Chen “the leader of the Southern school” centered in Chaozhou and Shantou. See *The Cheng: Two Masters Play the Chinese Zither*, Louis Chen and Liang Tsai-ping, performers, Lyrichord presents Outstanding LP Albums of Chinese Music (New York: Lyrichord Discs, Inc. [1978]). Lyrichord Stereo, LLST 7262 [liner notes by Liang Tsai-ping]. Other sources refer to Chen as a Chaozhou zheng player. See Zhongguo minzu guanxian yue xuehui, *Hua yue dadian guzheng juan*, 1:575; and So Chun-bo, *Zhongguo Zhengyi Daquan* [A complete guidebook of the arts of Chinese guzheng], part 2, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Guzheng Academy, 2005), 39. Jason Lau refers to Chen both as a Chaozhou and as a Cantonese musician. See Lau, “Zhen Music in Hong Kong,” 15, 18.

Conclusions

During the twentieth century, every aspect of the zheng and its music was transformed. Its context, repertory, structure, and players changed, as did the means of transmitting and teaching zheng music. While some vestiges of the instrument’s earlier use and music were still present, by and large, the zheng and its music—solo music in particular—owe far more to twentieth and twenty-first century developments than they do to earlier times. This chapter demonstrates how the data supplied in the preceding chapters supports a new understanding of the zheng’s development, history, and cultural roles. It returns to three themes mentioned in Chapter 1: first, the way new repertories of zheng music were created and the influence of music notation on the zheng’s musical repertory; second, the significance of the contents of these repertories and how repertories and works are differentiated; lastly, the constructed nationalist narratives about the zheng developed in the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. No competing narrative about the zheng was developed in Hong Kong. Instead, Hong Kong was the site of several different approaches to the zheng that provide valuable evidence countering the narratives stemming from the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. The chapter closes by positing a new narrative about the zheng that incorporates these perspectives while suggesting a more critical approach to evidence that may encourage better future research on Chinese traditional music.

Creating New Repertories, Using New Notation

The People’s Republic of China

Cao Zheng was a central figure in the creation of a cohesive sense and narrative of the zheng’s repertory, pedagogy, and history on the Chinese mainland. He was the major figure in developing the instrument’s pedagogy and establishing conservatory-level curricula and teachers for the zheng. Cao Zheng likely provided the main impetus behind the development of much of its notated solo repertory. The introduction to Cao’s *Method of Zheng Playing* (1957) and its one-page history of the zheng give the impression that the instrument—or, more properly, various zheng-like
instruments—were historically widely known in mainland China and beloved among the laboring people: he states that it had become a “local” (difang, 地方) instrument in Henan, Shandong, Guangdong, Yunnan, Zhejiang, “and so forth,” though he offered no specific proof of this. Somehow, the zheng had to be linked to the working classes—the laborers—and somehow it needed to have a repertory that reflected this background and could thus speak to and for the new nation as a whole. Writing in the first decade after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Cao Zheng had a sharp understanding of the new Communist order, and he must have known that a strong argument needed to be made to ensure the zheng’s place in that new order. As a young man, Cao Zheng had gone to Beijing to study classical Chinese literature. Presumably, he knew the sources of the quotations he cited in his one-page history, which included references to the zheng being used in the ancient state of Qin, home of China’s legendary First Emperor (in modern Shaanxi Province) and ancient poets.

It was no small thing to state that the laboring classes had long loved the zheng when there was little or no evidence of this, in documents or otherwise. The references to the “true music of Qin” that included the zheng said nothing about who those musicians were, though the ensemble described featured a variety of instruments and singing was part of the music making. The courtesan zheng players of the Tang and Song eras were soloists, but classifying them as “laborers” seems specious. The subtleties of just who would have owned a zheng, played it, and written about it in imperial China were too complex to include in Cao Zheng’s précis of the instrument’s history. He took the risk of embellishing the past of the zheng so that it could survive in the present and (potentially) be led into the future. With only one extant score specifically including the zheng from the nineteenth century (Rong Zhai’s 1814 Thirteen Suites for Strings), numerous references to the instrument being “saved” or “rescued” by twentieth-century reformers, and no body of evidence indicating widespread use of the zheng in the nineteenth century, it seems clear that the zheng’s actual history was quite different from Cao Zheng’s portrayal and quite possibly did not involve much, if any, solo music. Lack of a specific, incontrovertible recent “past” was an advantage for the zheng in the twentieth century. It allowed the reformers to mold its repertory and alter its cultural role. This helped keep zheng art alive in the new People’s Republic of China; otherwise, it stood to be rejected or perhaps marginalized as irrelevant. In contrast, the se became virtually obsolete, and the qin was comparatively left alone.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong was much more culturally and socially open and hospitable than the People’s Republic of China or Taiwan from 1949 to 1979. The British government forced no particular cultural ideology on the colony’s Chinese population. Because of this relative openness, zheng players as diverse as Dou Wun, Chen Leishi, So Chun-bo, and Choi Ngar-si made careers as musicians in the city, as did Xiang Sihua.
after leaving the mainland (and before moving to Canada). The eldest of them, Dou Wun, was a mainland émigré blind from early childhood. The massive repertory of Cantonese narrative song specifically known as *de shui naamyam* became his particular area of expertise; he played the zheng and clappers as he sang these songs, flexibly combining specific musical and linguistic structures, arranging and rearranging texts old and new as he sang. Chen Leishi was from an utterly different walk of life: with at least some college education, if not a degree, he was described as a *wenren* (literatus) and taught at the college level, performed, recorded, lectured internationally, wrote about Chaozhou *ersipu* notation, and owned an impressive collection of qin and zheng. Chen contributed a number of transcriptions of qin music to the repertory of the zheng. So Chun-bo promoted the zheng extensively in Hong Kong, performing, teaching, and organizing concerts. One of the first Hong Kong composers of solo zheng music, So also led a zheng ensemble, wrote a comprehensive book and anthology of zheng music, and posited the existence of a Hong Kong zheng school, or *liupai*, in 2001. Choi Ngar-si learned multiple instruments in her youth, played recitals with her sister (who played the pipa), wrote a beginning method book for the zheng, and (like So Chun-bo) founded a successful zheng studio and a zheng ensemble; Choi also played in the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra.

**Taiwan**

On Taiwan, zheng music had two main features during the decades of separation from the mainland and Nationalist martial law; both are related to the career of Liang Tsai-ping, an immigrant to Taiwan and a member of the ruling minority who had come from the mainland in the wake of the Nationalists’ defeat in 1949. Liang notated, collected, transcribed, and composed music for the zheng. He featured items that he had incorporated in his 1938 *Model Zheng Notation* anthology in *Music of Cheng: The Chinese Sixteen-String Zither*, a book that became a staple among Taiwanese students and went through numerous reprints in the 1960s and later. As the title of this work states, Liang played the sixteen-string zheng (with strings of steel), and he played this type of zheng throughout his life. These two elements—Liang’s music and his advocacy of the sixteen-string zheng—lent zheng music a conservative aura on Taiwan. Mainland changes in technique and repertory, along with the new twenty-one string zheng, were forbidden, and began to be accepted only in 1980. Liang was a major figure in the transmission and pedagogy of zheng music in Taiwan and traveled abroad as a performer, lecturer, and teacher.

**Content and Meaning of Repertories, Works, and Labels**

The lack of a well-documented, obvious history for the zheng was a particular advantage for musicians such as Cao Zheng. Cao Zheng and his contemporaries were able to carve a new, safe path for zheng art through a variety of political and
cultural minefields in the twentieth century. Creating a colorful repertory of solo music from the traditional music of various regions of China and applying it to the zheng gave the instrument some credibility as a “folk” or “ethnic” instrument (民族乐器) reportedly beloved by the laboring class of Chinese people everywhere. This was an important step in keeping zheng art alive in the People’s Republic of China; otherwise, it might be rejected or perhaps marginalized as irrelevant. Cao Zheng and his comrades reframed the role and history of the zheng to suit the ideological agenda of the Chinese Communist Party in the mid-twentieth century. On the Chinese mainland, music-collecting activities (caifeng), transcription, and adaptation of extant music for the solo zheng resulted in the compilation of a repertory of zheng music that was classified and labeled by the region where it was collected and presumably transmitted historically.1 The resulting liupai repertories were the hallmark of the work of Cao Zheng and his followers.

When Cao Zheng wrote his Method of Playing the Zheng, he mentioned no “schools” or liupai. In his anthology, he included music from Chaozhou, Henan, Shandong, and the Hakka (Kejia) people. Conservatory zheng students and teachers began to notate music for solo zheng as curricula were instituted. Han Mei provides considerable information about the process.2 Wang Xunzhi (at the Shanghai Conservatory) worked on developing notated solos and fingerings with his students. Xiang Sihua reported that she participated in caifeng activities at the Shanghai Conservatory in the summer of 1960.3 Caifeng, literally “collecting the winds,” has an old and important connotation in China: the term describes the process that led to the assembly of The Book of Songs (Shi jing, 诗经), one of the Confucian Five Classics. When students and teachers went out to find, learn, record, and transcribe songs and other music from among the “folk” of the New China, they were honoring their music, making it important, constituting the artistic canon of the new society. A large number of works were notated, classified by region, and finally ranked in order of difficulty at the 1961 Xi’an conference on zheng repertory and pedagogy.4 At some point, around the time of the 1961 conference, the idea of regional zheng schools took hold. According to Cao Zheng, the choice of liupai and pai was a conscious application of terms designed to attach importance to these concepts in zheng music, but this further obscured the origins of zheng solo music:5 it does not show the divergent types of music that the caifeng activities assembled.

1. The number of liupai varies depending on the writer. Most commonly, there are at least four: Chaozhou, Hakka (Kejia), Henan, and Shandong.
3. Xiang Sihua, Xiang Sihua yanzou Zhongguo zhengpu, 118.
Liupai means “school” or “sect,” and the term is used in Beijing opera to indicate the interpretive composition and performance style of a master.\(^6\) Pai connotes “style” or “school” and has been applied to various bodies of qin music organized by region.\(^7\) To be sure, a fraction of the zheng’s solo repertory came via transfer from the repertory of the qin, but this music was not among the works assembled from caifeng activities. Using the term liupai loosely in regard to zheng music understandably creates confusion. The problem with describing works collected within or originating from a region as a liupai is that it implies that there was a school of solo zheng players who shared repertory and performance techniques. In zheng music, liupai seems to function best as a means of grouping works from a certain region of China (or, in the case of the Hakka, a particular population).

Although mainland Chinese zheng experts used the term liupai to group music by region, the term was nowhere to be found in the descriptions and collections of Liang Tsai-ping (Model Zheng Notation, 1938; Music of Cheng, 1960s), Cheng Deh-yuan (Cheng Music of China, 1977), or in van Gulik’s list of different types of zheng music.\(^8\) In his 2006 Chinese University of Hong Kong thesis, Jason Lau argued that the mainland zheng liupai are a post-1949 development.\(^9\)

Erroneous perceptions of the import of the word liupai and the relationship of these repertories to the history of zheng music does not mean that the process of collecting, notating, and recording the music or adapting it for performance on the solo zheng is or was bad or wrong. On the contrary, it is very likely that some or even most of this music would otherwise have vanished with the musicians who knew and performed it. The work Cao Zheng and the other zheng experts (along with their students) accomplished in collecting and preserving Chinese traditional music by converting it into zheng solo music was quite valuable. It was no more and no less destructive than the work of Béla Bartók, Frances Densmore, the Lomaxes, Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and John Wesley Work Jr., as they collected music held in aural/oral tradition and transferred it to music notation and recordings. At the 1961 Xi’an conference on zheng teaching materials, a great deal of the adapted traditional music that had been collected and notated for the zheng changed hands. The conference attendees also agreed on the need to distribute and teach this repertory nationwide. The conference leaders even worked out a means by which teachers could participate in exchange visits to other conservatories so that local faculty would not be burdened with teaching music they did not already know; students would benefit from interacting with an authentic “bearer” of this music.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, 82–83n170.


\(^10\) Han Mei, “The Emergence of the Chinese Zheng,” 122.
Index

A Bing, 186
Adriaansz, W., 19
Afghan music, 162

All Birds Honor the Phoenix (Bai niao chao feng; musical work), 54, 65–66, 123, 128, 129, 137
All Things Under Heaven in Harmony (Tian xia tong; musical work), 61, 65
Ambushed on All Sides (Shi mian mai fu; musical work), 128, 138
Amiot, Joseph Marie, 42
An Kiok, 22
Ancient Tunes from Central China (Zhongzhou Gudiao; Wei Ziyou), 51, 57
Anhui, 61, 162
“Asian Masters” series (recordings), 162
Au Kwan-cheung, 159
Australia, 28, 146, 171, 195

baban (eight section music), 65, 68–69, 71n47, 74, 77, 80, 92, 155
Bach, Johann Sebastian, 180
“Back Step Cindy” (musical work), 171
Bai Juyi, 63
Baidai Company, 52, 55, 57
Baked Cakes and Donuts (Shaobing youtiao; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 122, 123
banyan (brothel songs), 100, 183
Bartók, Béla, 177
Battling the Typhoon (Zhan tai feng; Wang Changyuan; musical work), x–xi, 93–95, 96, 124, 143, 164, 189
Beating Clothes (Dao yi; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 52, 57, 122, 123, 137
Becker, Judith, 4, 180
Beijing, x, 14, 44, 45, 49; First National Music Week in (1956), 81; Liang Tsai-ping in, 120, 122; music reform in, 49–50, 51, 54, 105, 109, 131–132; and northern school, 106; promotion of zheng in, 51, 52, 60
Beijing International Guzheng Festival (2009), 156
Bergeron, Katherine, 5
Blooming Lotus Variations (Chu shui lian bian; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 123
Book of Songs (Shi jing), 176
Boston Guzheng Ensemble, 124, 195
Boston Pops Orchestra, 194–195
Brazil, 171
“Brief Note on the Chinese Small Cither” (van Gulik), 33, 125–133, 138, 169, 178
Britain, 45; and Hong Kong, 35, 97, 98, 141, 174
Buck, Pearl S., 120
Buddhism, 16, 44, 118, 168; and yatga, 23, 24
Buryat epics, 23, 30
Busy Weaving (Fang zhi mang; Liu Tianhua; musical work), 112, 171
Butterfly Loves Flowers (Die lian hua; musical work), 65, 75, 77, 78, 91
Canada, 156, 162, 165, 170, 175
Cantonese language (Guangdonghua), 97, 101

Cantonese music (yuequ, yuediao), 103, 106, 159n69; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 113, 134; in Hong Kong, 108, 109, 160, 162, 163, 164, 175; van Gulik on, 138, 139. See also naamyam

Cao Dongfu, 69–72, 133, 155, 178, 180, 182, 193; and Cao Zheng, 62, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 79; and Choi Ngar-si, 162; and Cultural Revolution, 91–92, 187, 188; rehabilitation of, 142–143; works by, 70–71, 82, 91, 124, 143

Cao Zheng (Guo Qiguang), 56, 57, 60–67, 105, 125, 190; biography of, 60–61; and Cao Dongfu, 62, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 79; and CCP, 61, 63, 96, 99, 174; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 112, 113, 134; and Choi Ngar-si, 112, 162; and Cultural Revolution, 87, 89, 178, 187–188; and Dou Wun, 133, 185; and Evening Song from a Fishing Boat, 53, 60, 136, 143n10; and Guo Ying, 75, 77–78; on history of zheng, 32, 51, 184; later career of, 79–80; and Liang Tsai-ping, 105, 106, 111, 121; on notation, 107–108; and qin, 105, 106, 107, 112, 159, 160, 184; and So Chun-bo, 110, 111; and zheng diaspora, 169

Chen Anhua, 190

Chen Leishi (Louis Chen), 104–108, 114, 155; adaptations by, 178; and Chaozhou music, 104, 106; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 106, 134; and Dou Wun, 99, 110, 175, 185; in Hong Kong, 99, 110, 159–160, 174, 175, 185; and Liang Tsai-ping, 105, 106, 107, 111, 121; on notation, 107–108; and qin, 105, 106, 107, 112, 159, 160, 184; and So Chun-bo, 110, 111; and zheng diaspora, 169

Chen Lili, 168

Chen Yanzhi, 33

Cheng, The: Two Chinese Masters Play the Chinese Zither (recording), 106–107

Cheng Deh-yuan (Te-yuan), 32–34, 168; and Chen Leishi, 106, 134; and Evening Song from a Fishing Boat, 134, 136; and Liang Tsai-ping, 124; works by, 113, 134–135, 138, 166. See also Cheng Music of China

Cheng Music of China (Zhengyue lilun yanzou; Cheng Deh-yuan), 32–33, 106, 112–114, 136, 138, 166, 177; titles of works in, 129–130; vocal music in, 178

Cheng Shui-Cheng, 167

Ch’engt’ang school, 135

“Cherry Blossom” (“Sakura”; song), 161

Chiang Ching-kuo, 115, 120, 141

Chiang Kai-shek, 35, 51, 59, 115, 117–120, 139

Chiang Kai-shek, 35, 51, 59, 115, 117–120, 139

Central Conservatory of Music (Beijing), 69, 91, 107, 144, 151–152, 156; Folk

Index

Music Research Institute of (minzu yinyue yanjiusuo), 71, 107

Chan Kwok-Hing, 166

Chang Li-chuang, 190

Chaomei Music Society (Guangzhou), 49, 73

Chaozhou music, 65, 79, 80; and Cao Zheng, 113; and Chen Leishi, 104, 106, 160; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 113, 134; improvisation in, 76–77, 78; as liupai, 106, 161, 169, 176; and New Zheng, 90, 155; notation for, 175; in Singapore, 78, 107, 108; So Chun-bo on, 162; xianshi music of, 75–78, 107, 160, 178, 181, 183; zheng in, 178, 187

Chen Anhua, 190

Chen Leishi (Louis Chen), 104–108, 114, 155; adaptations by, 178; and Chaozhou music, 104, 106; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 106, 134; and Dou Wun, 99, 110, 175, 185; in Hong Kong, 99, 110, 159–160, 174, 175, 185; and Liang Tsai-ping, 105, 106, 107, 111, 121; on notation, 107–108; and qin, 105, 106, 107, 112, 159, 160, 184; and So Chun-bo, 110, 111; and zheng diaspora, 169

Chen Lili, 168

Chen Yanzhi, 33

Cheng, The: Two Chinese Masters Play the Chinese Zither (recording), 106–107

Cheng Deh-yuan (Te-yuan), 32–34, 168; and Chen Leishi, 106, 134; and Evening Song from a Fishing Boat, 134, 136; and Liang Tsai-ping, 124; works by, 113, 134–135, 138, 166. See also Cheng Music of China

Cheng Music of China (Zhengyue lilun yanzou; Cheng Deh-yuan), 32–33, 106, 112–114, 136, 138, 166, 177; titles of works in, 129–130; vocal music in, 178

Cheng Shui-Cheng, 167

Ch’engt’ang school, 135

“Cherry Blossom” (“Sakura”; song), 161

Chiang Ching-kuo, 115, 120, 141

Chiang Kai-shek, 35, 51, 59, 115, 117–120, 139
Index


China Art Troupe, 95
China Conservatory of Music (Beijing), 87, 147, 156, 158, 178, 187, 188
Chinese Academy of Art (Beijing), 8, 49

Chinese Ch’in, The: Its History and Music (Liang Ming-yue), 11, 15, 134
Chinese Communist Party (CCP): and Battling the Typhoon, 94; and Cao Zheng, 61, 63, 96, 99, 174; and Cultural Revolution, 88; and folk music, 58, 132; founding of, 46; vs. Guomindang, 35, 51–52, 58, 59; and Hong Kong, 109, 113, 114; influence on arts of, 59–60, 63; and nationalization, 95–96; and new repertories, 176, 181, 188; and Reform era, 141; and Taiwan, 118; and traditional culture, 47, 184

Chinese Culture University, 136, 171
Chinese Musical Instruments and Pictures (ed. Liang Tsai-ping), 121
Chinese Traveling Music Troupe (Zhongguo yinyue lüxing tuan), 52
Chinese University of Hong Kong, 105, 108, 111, 159

“Chinese Zheng and Identity Politics in Taiwan” (Lai Yi-chieh), 33

Chinese Zheng Zither, The: Contemporary Transformations (Sun Zhuo), 33
Chmelarčík, Jan, 33
Choi Kit-ye, 111, 175

Choi Ngar-si Guzheng Ensemble, 112

chongak (type of kayagūm music), 20
Chongqing, 51, 120, 125
Christianity, 98, 105, 118
chuandiao (linked tunes), 74
Chuang Yi-Kuang, 191n39

Clam and Crane Contend (musical work), 168
class status: and Chinese vs. Western music, 46; and dàn tranh, 26; of Dou Wun, 180–181, 183; and kayagūm, 20; and Korean music, 22; and koto, 18; and music collection, 182–183; of qin, 2, 10, 11, 12, 17, 29, 46, 183, 194; and Thirteen Suites for Strings, 44; and yatga, 23; and young intellectuals, 88, 94; of zheng, xiii, 40, 56, 63, 174, 176, 183–184, 188

Classic of Poetry, 9
clavichord, 42
Clouds and Water (Mist) over the Rivers Hsiao and Hsiang (musical work), 107

Collection of Select Zheng Music (Zhengqu xuanji), 61

Complete Guidebook of the Arts of Chinese Zheng (Zhongguo zheng yi daquan; So Chun-bo), 162, 164
Concentrate (Ning; Li Zhichun; musical work), 167
Confucianism, 9, 26, 138, 159; and CCP, 47; and Guomindang, 46; and origins of zheng, 37, 39; and qin, 8, 11, 16, 56, 127, 134, 184; and se, xiii, 8–9, 56, 184; in Taiwan, 115, 118, 119, 168
Confucius, 10–11, 13, 130
Confucius Mourning over His Disciple Yen-hui (musical work), 130
Contemporary Zheng Compositions, 31
Cultural Renaissance Movement (Taiwan), 118–119

Cultural Revolution, Great Proletarian, 14, 87–95, 108; and Battling the Typhoon, x, xi; and Cao Dongfu, 91–92, 187, 188; and Cao Zheng, 87, 89, 178, 187–188; “Four Olds” in, 88, 91, 92, 96, 142, 143; persecution of zheng musicians in, 84n97, 91–93; vs. Reform era, 141, 142, 143; and repertories, 87, 89, 92, 165, 178; and Taiwan, 118, 119, 132; traditional music in, 35, 87, 91, 92, 96, 183; and women players, 190

Cutting Indigo Flowers (Jian dian hua; musical work), 65, 67, 69, 70, 71, 91

da ban ke (large group class), 140–141, 157
dadiao quzi (great tunes), 70–72, 91, 92, 142, 178, 189, 193
dàn tranh (Vietnamese zither), 18, 24–29, 30–31, 178, 180; and Chaozou zheng, 186, 187

Đàn Tranh Music of Vietnam: Traditions and Innovations (Hung), 25

Dance of the Yao People (Yaozu wuqu; Liu Tieshan and Mao Yuanqu; musical work), 148, 161

Dance of the Yi People (Yizu wuqu; Wang Zhongshan; musical work), 148

Daoism, 16, 44, 118, 168, 186

Datong Yuehui (Great Unity Music Society; Shanghai), 49, 130–131, 181

Deng Haiqiong, 170

Deng Xiaoping, xiv, 35, 141, 142

Densmore, Frances, 177

“Discourse on Chinese Music Reform” (Fei Shi), 46

“Discussion of the History of the Gu Zheng” (“Guanyu guzheng lishi de tantao”; Cao Zheng), 32

dizi (transverse flute), 4, 12, 14, 42, 108, 154

Don ca tài tút (dàn tranh music), 29

Dong Rong Lin, 113
dongxiao (end-blown flute), 74, 158–159

Dortmund Philharmonic Orchestra (Germany), 191

Dou Wun (Du Huan), 99–104, 114, 133, 158–159, 174–175, 178; and Chen Leishi, 99, 110, 175, 185; class status of, 180–181, 183; and types of zheng, 187. See also naamyam

Dragon in the Muddy River (Hun jiang long; musical work), 54, 128, 138
dramatic music (xiqu), 68, 71, 85n102, 107, 145

Dream Image of Life (Hua meng lu; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 122, 123

DuJunco, Mercedes M., 76
dulcimers, xii, 6, 100. See also yangqin

Dunhuang Company (Shanghai), 89

East Is Red, The (song), 61

Egypt, 171

Elegant Harmonies from Henan (Zhong yuan ya yun; musical work), 128

Elegant Orchid (You lan; Qiu Ming; musical work), 11, 14

“Emergence of the Chinese Zheng Zither” (Han Mei), 33

ensembles: adaptations for zheng from, 69, 144, 181; and Choi Ngar-si, 112, 164, 175; and Cultural Revolution, 93; and dàn tranh, 25–26, 27, 28; examples of, 75, 124, 165, 190, 195; fusion, 170; in Hakka music, 74; in Hong Kong, 108, 109, 110, 111, 163, 164, 175; instrumental (bantougu), 70, 71, 182; instruments in, 8, 9, 21, 23, 29, 69, 127, 170, 181; in Japan, 18, 29, 127; nanyin, 158–159; in new repertory, xiii, 154; and So Chun-bo, 111; vs. solo music, xiv, 4, 69, 178, 183, 185, 188; in Tang and Song, 40–41; in Thirteen Suites for Strings, 43, 44; and vocal music, 37, 56, 183; women in, 41

Entering the Palace (Nan jin gong; musical work), 105, 107
erhu (bowed fiddle): in fusion ensemble, 170; in Hong Kong, 108, 110; players of, 47, 48, 73, 110, 144, 186, 190, 191; in PRC reform era, 143, 154, 159, 164n97; in Thirteen Suites for Strings, 43, 45
erxian (two-stringed bowed fiddle), 76, 181
ethnic minorities, 7, 148; in Taiwan, 167, 168, 186
*Evening Song from a Fishing Boat* (*Yuzhou Changwan*; musical work), 1–2; and Cao Zheng, 53, 60, 136, 143n10; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 134, 136; in Hong Kong, 112, 164; in PRC, 65, 66, 67, 86; in PRC reform era, 140, 143, 158, 160, 161, 165; in zheng history, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57

*Falcon Catches the Swan* (*Haiqing na he*; musical work), 84
Fan Letian, 61, 189n31
Fan Shang’e, 84, 85, 170, 189
*Fantasy* (*Huanxiang qu*; Wang Jianmin; musical work), 151
Fei Shi, 46
fiddles: erxian, 76, 181; gaohu, 31; leiqin, 80; yehu, 74, 75, 100n11, 159; yuehu, 100; zhuihu, 70; zhuiqin, 80. See also erhu

*Fight the Tiger up the Mountain* (*Dahu shang shan*; Zhao Manqin; musical work), 147
film, theme songs from, 165
*Five Classics*, 39, 176
*Flowers on Brocade* (*Jin shang hua*; musical work), 54, 123, 128, 129, 130, 137, 138
flutes, 138; dizi, 4, 12, 14, 42, 108, 154; dongxiao, 74, 158–159; shakuhachi, 18, 19; xiao, 14, 31, 42, 49, 50, 113, 181
folk arts (*minjian yishu*), 59, 62–63, 64, 79
folk music (*minzu yinyue, minjian yinyue, min’ge*): adaptations for zheng from, 144, 145, 148; and *Battling the Typhoon*, 93; and CCP, 58, 132; and *Celebrating the Harvest*, 81, 82; and Chen Leishi, 104; and Chinese vs. Western music, 47–48; and Choi Ngar-si, 162; collection of (*caifeng*), 84, 89, 91, 132, 144, 160–161, 192; and Cultural Revolution, 89, 92; in fusion ensemble, 171; and Hakka music, 74; in Hong Kong, 186; in Korea, 20–21; and *naamyam*, 185; and new solo repertories, 176, 178; and New Zheng, 147, 152, 153; in PRC reform era, 143; problems of transcribing, 179; and qin music, 15, 67, 68; and qin zheng revival, 144, 145, 146; in Taiwan, 186; and *Thirteen Suites for Strings*, 44; in Vietnam, 27; women’s narrative (*yue ou*), 100; zheng’s origins in, 39, 176
Folk Music Research Institute (*minzu yinyue yanjiusuo*; Central Conservatory of Music), 71, 107
Fong, Maple Li, 124, 168
Fou Ts’ong, 84n97
*Four Books*, 39
*Four Lengths of Brocade* (*Si duan jin*; Zhao Yuzhai; musical work), 80
Four Modernizations, 142
Four Olds, 88, 91, 92, 142, 143
Fragrant Breeze Zheng Society (*Xun Feng Zhengshe*), 61, 84n96
France, 45
Fujian, 24, 116, 126
Fujian music, 79, 113, 126, 128, 155, 162; van Gulik on, 130, 138, 139
gamelan, Javanese, 4
Gang of Four, 88, 92, 93, 96, 139, 142
Gao Zicheng, 28, 82, 93, 133, 144, 145
gaohu (bowed fiddle), 31
Garrett, James, 5
Gaywood, Harriett, 33
*Geese Alighting on the Sand* (*Pingsha luoyan*; musical work), 49, 50, 54, 57, 107; in PRC, 66n26, 77; in Taiwan, 123, 129, 130, 137, 138
gender, 29, 31; and piano, 84; and zheng, xiv, 188, 189–191. See also women
General’s Command (musical work), 165
*Gold Embroidered Banner* (*Xiujin pian*; musical work), 143
gongs, 100
Great Leap Foward, 108
Great Unity Music Society (*Datong Yuehui*; Shanghai), 49, 130–131, 181
Greece, x–xi
*Greening* (*Hanayagi*; Minoru Miki; musical work), 146
Gregorian chant, 5
Gu Shengying, 84n97
Guangdong, 68, 148n31; Hakka in, 72–73; and Hong Kong, 97, 98; language in, 97, 101; musicians from, 79, 108, 110; and Taiwan, 116. See also Chaozhou
Guangdong music, 60n8, 113, 162; collection of, 161, 186; van Gulik on, 126, 130; and zheng, 63, 126, 164, 174
Guangzhou, 49, 73, 94, 114, 132, 139; guzheng festival in (2015), 43n25; and Hong Kong, 97; and naamyam, 102–103, 183
guitar, 17, 18, 147, 154
Guo Qiguang. See Cao Zheng
Guo Xuejin, 190
Guo Ying, 62, 65, 67, 75–78, 79, 84, 91, 187
Guxiang de qinren (Old Folks at Home; Stephen Foster; zheng version of), 152, 158
Guzheng duzouqu (Guzheng solos; Liang Tsai-ping), 32
Guzheng yanjiu (Guzheng research; Liang Tsai-ping), 32
Guzheng yinyue (Guzheng music; Zhou Yun), 32
Hae Kyung Um, 21
Hakka (kejia) music, 72–74, 167; and Cao Zheng, 113; and Celebrating the Harvest, 80; and Chaozhou music, 75, 76, 77; and liupai, 176, 177; and Middle State Old Tunes, 161–162; and new form of zheng, 90; and New Zheng, 155; So Chun-bo on, 162
Hakka (kejia) people, 72–73, 116
Han Chinese, 7–8, 56
Han dynasty, 38, 39–40
Han Highlands Old Notation (Han’gao jiupu), 73
Han Houjin, 63
Han Mei, 33, 70, 80, 88n109, 169–170; on Celebrating the Harvest, 71n43; and Cultural Revolution, 91, 93, 96; and đàn tranh, 28, 30; on kotos, 52n54; and New Zheng, 147, 154; on notation, 176; on performances, 153, 155–156; on play and sing (tanchang) groups, 189; on problems of transcribing, 179; and traditional music, 46, 48; on vocal music, 182; on women piano players, 84
Han shu (Book of Han), 63
Han tunes (Handiao yinyue), 77, 78, 160, 161, 162, 192
Hangzhou, 14, 40, 79, 82; 1986 Zheng conference in, 147
harps, 42, 80, 85n104, 146, 150
Harrison, Lou, 121
He Baoquan, 77, 78, 179
He Yuzhai, 73
Henan, 40, 84n99, 162; and Cultural Revolution, 91, 92; musicians from, 57, 82, 104; in PRC reform era, 169; zheng’s origins in, 33, 37, 39, 63, 126, 174; zhuqin from, 80n80
Henan music: and Cao Zheng, 65–66, 73, 113; vs. Chaozhou music, 75; and Cheng De-hyu-an, 113, 134; dadiao quzi, 69–72, 91, 193; and Hakka music, 74; and Liang Tsai-ping, 123, 124; and liupai, 32, 106, 176; and Middle State Old Tunes, 70, 73; and New Zheng, 155; and problems of transcribing, 179; van Gulik on, 128, 129, 138; and Xiang Sihua, 161; in zheng repertory, 31, 33, 51, 55, 126, 137, 139, 192
Her Boudoir Lament (Gui yuan; musical work), 65, 66, 69, 70
High Mountain and Flowing Water (Gao shan liu shui; musical work), 1, 60, 65, 70, 82, 161
History of Music in Sound (anthology), 105, 107
Hobsbawm, Eric, 5
Holo/Hoklo/Hokkien people, 116, 132
Hong Kong, 97–114, 130, 192, 193; and Britain, 35, 97, 98, 141, 174; Cantones music in, 108, 109, 160, 162, 163, 164, 175; and CCP, 109, 113, 114; Chaozhou music in, 78; Chinese University of, 105, 108, 111, 159; development of zheng in, 96, 97–114, 173, 174–175; Dou Wun in, 185, 187; ensembles in, 108, 109, 110, 111, 163, 164, 175;
immigration to, 59, 98, 103, 108–109, 114, 160; and Japan, 35, 52, 97, 98, 103; liupai categories in, 184; music collecting (caifeng) in, 186; musicians from, 155, 156, 162; national music (guoyue) in, 109, 181; musicians from, 155, 156, 162; national music (guoyue) in, 109, 181; and PRC, xi–xii, 3, 35, 97, 99, 103, 108–109, 113, 114, 133, 136, 163, 165; in PRC reform era, 35, 141, 158–160, 162–164, 166, 172; return to PRC of, 141, 163; and Taiwan, xi–xii, 3, 99, 113, 114, 133, 136; women musicians in, 12, 160–162, 188, 189, 190; zheng instruction in, 142, 163; zheng scholarship in, 32, 33

Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 163, 165, 171

Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, 109, 110, 112, 114, 163, 164, 165, 175

Hong Kong School Music and Speech Association, 108, 163

Hong Kong School Music Office, 110, 163

Hong Kong Television Chinese Music Ensemble (Xianggang Dianshitai Zhongyuedui), 110

Hong Kong Zheng Festival (2006), 164–165

Hot Stick Approaches Zheng (Li Zhichun; musical work), 168

Howard, Keith, 21, 22

Hsi K’ang and his Poetical Essay on the Lute (van Gulik), 16, 125

Hsiao T’ung, 40

Hsin-yüeh (Shin’etsu), 16–17

Hsü Ju-hui, 131

Hsu Tsang-Houei, 167

Hua yue dadian guzheng juan (China music canon: Guzheng section), 31, 39

Huế music (nhac Huế), 25, 26, 27

Hunan, 39, 136, 143, 148n31

Hung, Le Tuan, 25–26, 27, 28, 178, 180

Imperial Northern Palace (Bei zheng gong; musical work), 54

improvisation, xiv, 29, 73; in Chaozhou music, 76–77, 78; and Cultural Revolution, 92; and dân tranh, 26, 28; in Hakka music, 74; and naamyam, 158; and new solo repertory, 178, 188; vs. notation, xi, 2, 57–58, 178; and problems of transcribing, 179, 180; and Western musicians, 33, 170

In Remembrance of Song Lan (Yi song lan; musical work), 54, 128

internet, 170, 171

Ja Fuhshi, 105

Jackdaws Sporting on the Water (Hanya xishui; musical work), 49, 50, 52, 54, 57, 108; in PRC, 75, 77; in Taiwan, 120, 122, 123, 128, 129, 138

Japan: and Hong Kong, 35, 52, 97, 98, 103; musicians from, 46, 162; and Taiwan, 35, 45, 52, 116–117; War of Resistance against, 35, 45, 51, 52, 58

Japanese music, 113, 121, 134, 161; ensembles in, 18, 29, 127; qin in, 16–17; zheng in, xii, 156. See also koto

Javanese gamelan music, 180

Jaybirds (musical group), 170

jazz music, 180

Jeffery, Peter, 5

Jiang Baohai, 55

Jiang Qing, x, 93, 94, 95

Jiang Yinchun, 85n100

Jiangsu, 39, 56, 146, 183, 186

Jin Cuitian, 160

Jin Jiabin, 63

Jin Zhuonan, 55

jiuta ensemble (koto, shamisen, shakuhachi), 18, 29

Jones, Stephen, 44, 56, 76

“Julianne Johnson” (folk song), 171

Kam Ming-chiu, 158, 159

Kao, Shu Hui Daphne, 33, 135–136, 166–167, 168

Kaufmann, Walter, 8–9, 39

kayagūm (Korean zither), 17, 18, 19–22, 29, 30, 31, 162; and dân tranh, 24; and zheng, 186, 187

kejia music. See Hakka (kejia) music

Kim Ch’angjo, 20, 30

Kim Jong Il, 22

konghou (vertical harp), 42
Korea, xii, 20–21, 156, 162. See also kayağüm; North Korea
Korean War (1950–1953), 118
koto (Japanese zither), 17, 18–19, 30, 122, 162, 187; and đàn tranh, 24; in ensembles, 18, 29; and ersipu notation, 108; in Hong Kong, 111; and women, 19, 30; and zheng, 52n54, 134, 135, 186
Kouwenhoven, Frank, 182, 186
Kwok, Theodore, 34
“Labor Is the Most Glorious” (song; Huang Zhun), 158
Lai Yi-chieh, 33, 119, 168–169
Lake of Music (Cheng lu li cheng; Chen Leishi; musical work), 107
Lam, Joseph S. C., 11
Lam, Jason Shui-Chung, 33, 34, 99, 108, 159, 163, 165; on liupai, 164, 177
Lau Chor-wah, 13, 16
Leaves Dancing in the Autumn Breeze (Wuye wu qiufeng; musical work), 107
Lee Chae-Suk, 162
leiqin (two-stringed bowed fiddle), 80
Li Bai, 63
Li Ling, 81
Li Mei, 148
Li Meng, 68–69, 71, 73, 76–78, 155, 179, 193
Li Si, 36, 37, 39, 63
Li Zhichun, 167, 168
Liuyang River (musical work), 143, 166
Lomax family, 177
Long March, 52
Longing for an Old Friend (Yi guren; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 122, 123, 124
Lore of the Chinese Lute, The (van Gulik), 9, 16, 125
Lotus Blooming atop the Water (Chu shui lian; musical work), 54, 65, 72, 73, 74, 161; versions of, 193–194
Lotus Blooming atop the Water Variations (Chu shuiliang bianzou; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 122
Lou Shuhua, 130, 158, 162; and Cao Zheng, 52, 54n63, 60, 65, 67; and Evening Song from a Fishing Boat, 55, 57, 112, 134, 136; and solo zheng, 50, 51, 52, 55; works by, 65–66; and zheng diaspora, 58, 169
Lowenthal, David, 5
Lu Xiutang, 85
Lu Xun Academy of Art (Yan’an and Shenyang), 52, 58, 61, 80, 96
Lu Zaizhu, 168
Luo Jiuxiang, 62, 65, 67, 72–74, 79, 193
lutes: liuqin, 170; shamisen, 17, 18, 19, 29; xiqin, 69; yehu, 74, 75, 100n11, 159; yueqin, 14, 138, 195n46. See also pipa; qin; sanxian; zheng
Lyrichord (music publisher; New York), 106–107
Ma, Annie, 195
Macau, 78, 103, 183
Malaysia, 133, 135, 136, 155, 159, 162, 166
Manchuria, 45
Manthorpe, Jonathan, 116, 117
Mao Yuanqu, 148, 161
Mao Zedong, 46, 63, 95, 105n23, 119; and Cultural Revolution, 88; death of, 35, 96, 97, 139; and Nixon, 120; Yan’an talks on arts by, 58, 59, 87
Maqam, Scattered Prelude, and Dance (Mukamu sanxu yu wuqu; musical work), 148–149
May Fourth Movement (1919), 46, 131, 132
Melvin, Sheila, 194
Mémoire sur la musique des chinois (Amiot), 42
Men Must Improve Themselves (Nan’er dangziqiang; musical work), 165
Meng Tian, 36
Method for Twenty-one String Zheng (Ershiyi xian zheng tanzoufa; Cheng Deh-yuan), 134, 166
Method of Playing the Zheng (Guzheng tanzoufa; Cao Zheng), 62–75, 113; on class status, 173–174, 184; and Cultural Revolution, 89, 91, 187–188; and Guo Ying, 75, 77–78; on liupai, 176; and new curriculum, 79, 87; titles of works in, 65, 129; on types of zheng, 63–64, 102, 114, 121, 137, 186–187
Middle State Old Tunes (Zhongzhou gudiao), 65, 66, 69, 70, 72–74, 161–162
Miki Minoru, 19, 146, 148
Miller, Terry, 24
Ming dynasty, 7, 16, 24, 42, 56, 126, 138; and Taiwan, 115, 116
Minnan language, 116
model plays (yangbanxi), 93
Model Zheng Notation (Ni zhengpu; Liang Tsai-ping), 32, 53–55, 177; and Music of Cheng, 122, 124, 137, 175; notation in, 120, 122, 137; titles of works in, 54, 57, 66, 129
modernization: and CCP, 63, 95; and Chinese vs. Western music, 46–47; of kayagūm, 21, 22; and koto, 19, 30; on Taiwan, 118, 132; of traditional music, 131–132; of zheng, 183–184, 188
Mongolia, xii, 17, 22–24, 155, 187
Moon over the Mountain Pass (Guan shan yue; musical work), 64, 65, 66, 107, 113, 129, 138, 163
Mountain Goddess (Shan mei; Xu Xiaolin; musical work), 148
music collecting (caifeng): of folk music, 84, 89, 91, 132, 144, 160–161, 192; and new solo repertories, 176, 177, 182, 184; and recording, 193; selectivity of, 180–181, 186; transcription problems with, 192–194
Music of Cheng: The Chinese Sixteen-stringed Zither (Guzheng duzouqu; Liang Tsai-ping), 121–124, 125, 129, 133, 138, 139, 177; and Model Zheng Notation, 122, 124, 137, 175
Music of the Sixteen-String Cheng (Liang Tsai-ping), 32, 33
music reform, 180, 183–184; in Beijing, 49–50, 51, 54, 105, 109, 131–132; and Liang Tsai-ping, 120, 131, 132; in Shanghai, 109, 132; and solo zheng music, 133
musical instrument reform units, 88
Musical Notations of the Orient (Kaufmann), 9
musicians: and erhu, 47, 48, 73, 110, 144, 186, 190, 191; and piano, 84, 112, 189, 191; and pipa, 175, 186
musicians, blind (menxian), 19, 30, 44, 48, 56, 175, 186, 193; itinerant, 73, 184; and naamyam, 99–104, 158

Musique de Taiwan (Hsu Tsang-Houei and Cheng Shui-Cheng), 167, 193
Musou Band (Wushuang Yuetuan), 169

naamyam (Cantonese narrative song), 99–104, 133, 175, 180, 182, 183, 185–186; and new solo repertory, 101, 178; and notation, 185, 193; in PRC reform era, 158–160. See also Dou Wun

nanyin (southern tone), 100n10, 158, 159, 162
National Cheng Kung University (Tainan, Taiwan), 134, 135
national music (guoyue), 55, 75; and Chinese vs. Western music, 47–48; in Hong Kong, 109, 181; and naamyam, 185; and reform, 120, 132
National Music Reform Society (Beijing), 49–50, 51, 54, 105, 131
National Taiwan University of Arts, 171

nationalism, 3, 29, 157, 173, 185, 192; and đàn tranh, 26, 30; and yatga, 30. See also nationalism
Nationalist Party (Guomindang), 45, 138, 186; vs. CCP, 35, 51–52, 58, 59; in Chongqing, 51, 120, 125; defeat of, 117; and Hong Kong, 98, 114; and martial law, 166; in Taiwan, 35, 59, 115–120, 132; and traditional culture, 46, 132, 133, 137. See also Chiang Kai-shek; Taiwan

nationalization (minzuhua), 79, 83–85, 87–88, 95–96, 131, 132, 185, 188–189; vs. regionalism, 59, 83, 131
New Chaozhou Silk Bamboo Society (Xinchao Sizhu Hui; Shanghai), 49, 75
New Culture Movement, 131, 181
New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 169

New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments, 169
New Year, Lunar, 88, 91
New Zheng (xin zheng), 66, 79, 90, 102, 136, 147–55, 162, 163, 171
nhac Huế (Huế music), 25, 26, 27
Nianyi guzheng minggu sanshisan shou (Thirty-three famous pieces for the twenty-one string guzheng), 167
Nigeria, 171
Night Rain on Plantain Leaves (Jiao chuang ye yu; musical work), 123
1949–79 Zhengqu Xuan, 143, 167
Nixon, Richard, 95, 120, 139
North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea), 21–22, 30, 146
Nosaka Keiko, 19, 146
notation, musical, 4; and Cao Zheng, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66, 74, 75, 77; and Chen Leishi, 107–108; and Cheng Deh-yuan, 113, 114; and Chinese vs. Western music, 46, 47; and đàn tranh, 26, 30; ersipu, 75–76, 107–108, 175; five-line (Western-style), 31, 121, 137, 151, 158, 193; gongchepu, 9, 42–43, 53, 55, 57, 61, 66, 70, 73, 75, 76, 91, 107, 120, 122, 137, 179, 193; Han Highlands Old (Han’gao jiupu), 73; in Hong Kong, 99, 113, 162–164; vs. improvisation, xi, 2, 57–58, 178; and koto, 18; Liang Tsai-ping on, 53–55, 57, 120, 121, 122, 137; and Middle State Old Tunes, 70; for naamyam, 185, 193; for new zheng, 86, 95, 144, 151, 173, 185, 188; numeric cipher, 1, 2, 32, 43n23, 53, 61, 62, 64, 76, 107, 108, 113, 121, 122, 124, 137, 140, 151, 157, 160, 162, 179, 193; vs. oral/aural tradition, 2–3, 4, 5, 55, 84, 176; for pipa, 53; problems of, 178–183, 193; for qin, 10, 11, 13, 14–15, 17, 29–30, 53, 193; rhythm in, 11, 13, 14, 15, 29, 43, 75, 179, 182; for se, 8–9; and teaching methods, 13, 14–15, 86, 87, 142, 145, 157; and Thirteen Suites for Strings, 42–45, 56–57, 94; and van Gulik, 130, 138; and vocal music, 108, 182; and Wang Xunzhi, 84, 94, 176; Western
influence on, 55, 113, 180; and Xiang Sihua, 160; and yatga, 23. See also Model Zheng Notation

Offering Flowers (Xian hua; musical work), 128, 130, 138
“Old Folks at Home” (song; Stephen Foster), 152, 158
On Chinese Music (Liang Tsai-ping), 121
Once Upon a Time in China (film), 165
Open Little Hand (Xiao kai shou; musical work), 171

opera: Beijing, 93, 95, 161, 177; Cantonese, 103, 109, 158; changqiang in, 69, 71, 74; kunqu, 85; xiao paiqu in, 70–72

oral/aural tradition (kouchuan xin shou), 57, 62, 77, 142; and đàn tranh, 29; and kayagüm, 20, 30; and music collection, 177; of naamyam, 101–102; and new curriculum, 86, 145; vs. notated music, 2–3, 4, 5, 55, 84, 176; and problems of transcribing, 179, 180, 193

Orchid Ensemble, 170
Orchestral music, 127–128, 129, 131, 138
Oriental Angels (Dongfang Tianshi Nüzi Zuhe), 154
O’Rip (Lu Zaizhu; musical work), 168
Osprey Pass (Guan ju; musical work), 52, 54n63, 57, 66n26
Ou Yangxiu, 41, 63
Oxford Music Online/New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 11–12

Pale River Sunset (Danjiangmuse; Cheng De-yuan; musical work), 113
Palestrina (polyphonic church music), 5
p’ansori (traditional musical drama), 20–21, 30
Parting at Yangguan (Yangguan san die; musical work), 106
Peacocks Flying Southeast (Cheng De-yuan; musical work), 134–135, 138, 166
Pegg, Carole, 23
Peking Scenes (Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 130

peng baban structure, 69
People’s Liberation Army (PLA), 88, 98, 115
People’s Music Publishing Company (Renmin yinyue chubanshe), 143
performances, zheng: in early history, 36; large-scale, 155–156; modern, 49, 165, 170, 189; visual aspect of, 153–154; and zheng diaspora, 170
Phuong Bao, 28, 30
Piano (gangqin), xii, 6n13, 31, 47, 80, 112, 140; conversion to zheng from, 83–84, 160, 188, 189, 190, 191; and koto, 19; works for, 149n36, 150, 194; vs. zheng, x, 89, 156, 157
Piazzolla, Astor, 21
Pink Lotus (Fen hong lian; musical work), 54, 77, 128, 158
pipa (four-stringed plucked lute): adaptations for zheng from, 57, 113, 128, 130, 134, 138, 181; and Choi Kit-yee, 111; and Choi Ngar-si, 110, 112; in ensembles, 43, 69, 154, 170, 181; in Hakka music, 74; notation for, 53, 76; and peng baban, 69; players of, 14, 42, 50, 51, 70, 71, 120, 175, 186; van Gulik on, 127, 128, 130; works for, 50, 138; vs. zheng, 45, 126, 127, 135–136; and zheng techniques, 80, 82, 147
Plum Blossom (Meihua san nong; musical work), 105
Polo, Marco, 42
popular music, 21, 28, 126; censorship of, 48, 60; transcription for zheng of, 152, 164
Popular Music Gold for the Chinese Zheng (Zhongguo guzheng liuxing jin qu), 152
“Preface to the Teng Wang Pavilion” (poem; Wang Bo), 54
psaltery, 6
pyongch’ang (solo vocal music), 20, 30
Qiang Zengkang, 145
qin (guqin, Chinese lute), 1–2, 6, 10–17; adaptations for zheng from, xiii, 52, 53, 57, 106, 112, 122, 129, 138, 146, 160, 161, 177, 178, 181; antique, 194; and Cao Zheng, 61, 113, 184; and Chen Leishi, 105, 106, 107, 112, 159, 160, 184; and Chinese vs. Western music, 46; and class status, 2, 10, 11, 12, 17, 29, 46, 183, 194; and Confucianism, 8, 11, 16, 56, 127, 134, 184; and Confucius, 10–11, 13; and Cultural Revolution, 89; and đàn tranh, 24; description of, 10; and folk music, 15, 67, 68; in Japanese music, 16–17; and Liang Ming-yue, 133–134; and Liang Tsai-ping, 120, 121–122, 168, 184–185; and liupai, 177; notation for, 10, 11, 13, 14–15, 17, 29–30, 53, 193; and origins of zheng, 37, 39; owners of, 175; players of, 50, 51, 110, 184; and poetry, 11, 15, 106; repertories for, xiii, 10, 17; and se, 8–9, 42, 170; in Taiwan, 115, 119; teaching methods for, 12–13; and tempo, 13–14; van Gulik on, 16, 127–128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 138; and zheng, xiii, 6, 17, 92, 126, 137, 138, 174, 194
Qin dynasty, 38, 40, 56, 63, 79, 126; “true music of,” 36–37, 39, 174
Qin Shihuang, 36, 37, 39, 52, 56, 66, 70
Qin Zheng (journal), 143, 154, 159, 191
Qing dynasty: fall of, 23, 35, 45; founding of, 7, 24, 42; and Hong Kong, 97, 98; music of, 44, 46, 51, 56, 68, 107, 138, 183; and Taiwan, 115, 116
Qing Ming (Pure Brightness) holiday, 149
Qinsang Melody (Zhou Yanjia; musical work), 145
qinshu (accompied vocal music), 65, 66, 67–69, 74, 80, 178
Qu Yun, 82, 145, 146, 190
qupai (paipu; small named pieces), 67, 68, 71
Radio Hong Kong, 185
Ranger, Terence, 5
Raulot-Leyrat, Lucie, 34
Records of the Grand Historian (Sima Qian), 10, 36, 56
Red Chamber (musical group), 170
Red Guards, 88, 96, 178
regional schools (liupai), xiv, 32, 33, 60n8, 92, 130, 158, 159–165, 175–178, 179; and Cao Zheng, 52n57, 63, 67, 176; and Chaozhou music, 106, 161, 169, 176; and Hakka (kejia) music, 176, 177; in Henan, 32, 106, 176; in Hong Kong, 163–164, 184; Liang Tsai-ping on, 139, 177; and new solo repertories, 176–177, 184; and New Zheng, 153, 154; northern and southern, 52, 57, 68, 106, 126, 138, 145, 169; in PRC reform era, 169–170; and qin zheng revival, 144, 145; of Shandong qinshu, 68; and Thirteen Suites for Strings, 44
regionalism, 59, 83, 131
Relieving My Heart (Shu huai qu; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 123
Ren Qingzhi, 179
Renaissance school, 130, 169
Renovation school, 130, 169
repertories: and Cultural Revolution, 87, 89, 92, 165, 178; for đàn tranh, 28, 29; Henan music in, 31, 33, 51, 55, 126, 137, 139, 192; vs. improvisation, 57; for kayagūm, 20; and liupai, 176–177, 184; of naamyam, 100, 101, 178; new solo zheng, xiii, xiv, 34, 86, 87, 96, 133, 173, 175–178, 182, 184, 185, 188; and New Zheng music, 147–148; notated vs. unnotated, 2–3, 29, 193; in PRC, xii, 86–87, 173–174, 175, 176, 181, 188; for qin, xiii, 10, 17, 134; traditional, x–xi, 4
Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO), 11, 28

Returning (Gui qu lai; musical work), 54, 128

Reunion at the Silver River (Yin he; Liang Tsai-ping; musical work), 122, 123

Rhapsody in Red: How Classical Music Became Chinese (Melvin), 194

Rhapsody of Red River (Hongshui kuangxiang; Li Meng; musical work), 155

Ricci, Matteo, 42

Rong Zhai, 42–45, 53, 56, 82, 94, 174

roots-seeking craze (xungenre), 143

Saeul Kayagūm Trio, 21

Sagye Kayagūm Quartet, 21

sanjo (type of kayagum music), 20, 30

sanxian (three-stringed lute), 14, 43, 45, 70, 71, 73, 74, 181

scales: chromatic, 7, 22, 90; heptatonic, 74, 90; pentatonic, 7, 18, 20, 74, 89, 90, 146, 148, 185. See also tunings

Schimmelpenninck, Antoinet, 182, 186

Se Pu (Xiong Penglai), 9

Sea Laughs, The (Canghai yishengxiao; musical work), 165

Shaanbei music, 143

Shaanxi, 39, 162, 178; and New Zheng, 148, 149, 151, 155; qin zheng revival in, 92, 143–146, 190

shakuhachi (flute), 18, 19

shamanism, 168

shamisen (three-stringed lute), 17, 18, 19, 29

Shandong music: and Celebrating the Harvest, 81; vs. Chaozhou music, 75; and New Zheng, 155; players of, 79, 113; qinshu from, 67–69; school of (liupai), 162, 169; works from, 65, 69n36, 73, 74, 122, 176; zheng in, 63, 174

Shanghai: music reform in, 109, 132; music societies in, 49, 73, 75, 130–131, 151, 152, 181; musicians from, 79; qin in, 12, 14

Shanghai Chaozhou National Music Ensemble (Shanghai Chaozhou Guoyuetuan), 75

Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 47, 48, 84, 85, 170, 182; women zheng players at, 83–84, 160, 188, 189, 190, 191

Shanghai Folk Instrument Factory, 171

Shanghai Musical Instrument Factory, 85, 156

Shanghai Tranquil Sound Society (Yixiang She), 49

Shanghai Zheng Society, 151, 152

Shangshu (Book of history), 8

Shantou, 75, 79, 104n21, 106

Sharp, Cecil, 177

Shen Honglai, 12

Shen Yüeh, 40

sheng (mouth organ), 12, 42, 127, 138

Shenyang Conservatory of Music, 1, 140, 144–145, 156

Shenyang Musical Instrument Factory, 82, 85, 90

Shi Fei, 47

Shi Qingzhang, 130

Shi Yinmei, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 130, 169

Shi Zhaoyuan, 143, 179

Shiliu xian guzheng duzouqu (Sixteen-string zheng solos; Liang Tsai-ping), 168

Shin Miyashita, 162

Shintoism, 116

silk and bamboo (sizhu) genre, 113, 134, 160, 162; Hangzhou, 82; Jiangnan, 15, 131n52; in Shanghai, 49, 75, 131, 181

Sima Qian, 36

Singapore, 135, 136, 155, 159, 166; and Chaozhou music, 78, 107, 108

Sino-Japanese War, First, 116

Six Swaths of Brocade (Liu duan jin; Dong Rong Lin; musical work), 113

Six-Fingered String Demon (novel; Chuang Yi-Kuang), 191
Sixth Asian Music Forum (1983; North Korea), 146

*sizhu. See silk and bamboo (*sizhu*) genre

So Chun-bo: at 2006 festival, 165; and Chen Leishi, 110, 111; and Hong Kong music, 99, 114, 159, 163–164, 174, 175, 186, 188; and women players, 112, 188, 190; works by, 32, 110–111, 162, 164

solo zheng music: adaptations for and from, 70, 82, 87, 143–144, 148, 163, 176, 177, 181; and Cao Zheng, 64, 66, 131, 133, 173–178, 188; and Chaozhou music, 77; vs. ensembles, xiv, 4, 69, 178, 183, 185, 188; and folk music, 176, 178; and Hakka music, 73–74; history of, 49–53, 56, 174, 188, 192; and improvisation, 178, 188; and Liang Tsai-ping, 49, 50, 51, 52–53, 58; and Lou Shuhua, 50, 51, 52, 55; and music collecting, 176, 177, 182, 184; new repertories for, xiii, xiv, 34, 86, 87, 96, 133, 173, 175–178, 182, 184, 185, 188; and New Zheng, 148, 185; and *peng baban*, 69; and qin zheng revival, 144, 146; and *qinshu*, 68; and regional schools, 176–177, 184; in Taiwan, 168; in *Thirteen Suites for Strings*, 43; van Gulik on, 127–128, 138, 139; vocal, 178, 183, 186; and zheng diaspora, 170

Song dynasty, 40–42, 56, 174

*Song of the Court Lady* (*Bei zheng guan*; musical work), 129

*Songs for “Great Leaders”: Ideology and Creativity in North Korean Music and Dance* (Howard), 22

Sound of Asia (store), 170

*Source and Origin of the Lost Ch’ao Chou’s Two-Four Notation* (*Erh-ssu pu*) (Chen Leishi), 107

*South Sea Fishing Song* (Wang Zhixun; musical work), 161

*Spring Arrives* (*Dao chun lai*; musical work), 54, 128, 143

*Spring Night on a Moonlit River: Music of the Chinese Zither* (Chen Leishi; recording), 39n10, 105n23

*Spring River, Flowers, Moon, and Evening* (musical work), 181

*Stepping Upstairs* (*Shang lou*; musical work), 54, 123, 128, 129, 130, 137

Stock, Jonathan, 48, 186

string poem music (*xianshiyue*), 75–78, 107, 160, 178, 181, 183

*Strumming of an Elderly Gentleman in a State of Refined Intoxication* (*Zui weng cao*; musical work), 105, 107

Stuart, John Leighton, 105n23

Suen Sang, 102, 104

Summit Records (Taipei), 106–107

Sun Wenyan, 77, 78, 190

Sun Yat-sen, 35, 45, 51, 118

Sun Zhugan, 130

Sun Zhuo, 33, 47, 49, 82, 92, 149; on *dadiao quzi*, 71n45, 72, 189; on problems of transcription, 179; on vocal music, 144, 145; on women players, 72, 189, 190

Suzhou Musical Instrument Factory, 90

switched string (*fanxian*) technique, 74, 77, 80, 90

*Swordsman* (film), 165

tài tur music (Vietnamese), 26, 27

Tainan (Taiwan), 115, 116

Taiping Tianguo Rebellion (1850–1864), 45

Taiwan, 96, 115–139, 192, 193; aboriginal peoples of, 167, 168, 186; and Chaozhou music, 78; Confucianism in, 9, 115, 118, 119, 168; Cultural Renaissance Movement on, 118–119, 132; and Cultural Revolution, 118, 119, 132; Dutch in, 97, 116; Guomindang in, 35, 59, 115–120, 132; and Hong Kong, xi–xii, 3, 99, 113, 114, 133, 136, 173; immigrants to, 7, 32, 115; isolation of, 3, 163; Japanese occupation of, 35, 45, 52, 97, 116–117; Liang Tsai-ping in, 59, 106, 119, 120–124, 133, 136, 167, 168, 175, 188–189; martial law in, 35, 112, 114, 115, 117, 133–136, 141, 166, 175; modernization on, 118, 132; popularity of zheng in, 142, 155, 156, 172, 184, 188–189; and PRC, 35, 115–120, 121, 135, 141, 166, 175; and PRC
music, 133–136, 166–169, 175, 182; in PRC reform era, 35, 141, 166–169; traditional culture in, 118–119, 133, 137; types of zheng in, 119, 134, 187; and UN, 117–118, 119, 139; and US, 117–118, 120; women as zheng players in, 162, 188, 189, 190

Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (model play), 147

Tan zheng se (Discussing the zheng and the se; Liu Yizhi), 132

Tang dynasty, 40–42, 56, 126, 174
teaching and transmittal: for children, 156, 157, 165, 170, 191; children’s study of, 140–141, 142; curriculum for, 86–87, 124; in Hong Kong, 142, 163; new curriculum for, 144, 145, 151, 156, 157, 158; and notation, 13, 14–15, 86, 87, 142, 145, 157; in PRC, 79, 82, 84, 85, 95, 96, 133, 156–158, 173–174, 185; of qin, 12–13; and qin zheng revival, 144, 145; in Taiwan, 119, 121, 132, 136, 175

Teaching Materials Conference, National Musical Institutes (Xi’an; 1961), 82, 86–87, 144, 161, 176, 177, 179, 184, 190
techniques, zheng: of Dou Wun, 102; fast fingering (kuaisu zhixu), 147, 152, 190; in Hong Kong, 113; and liupai, 177; New Zheng, 148, 154; in northern vs. southern styles, 126, 145; and notation, 64, 73, 84, 86, 94, 158, 176; and pipa, 80, 82, 147; in PRC, 80–83, 86, 87, 88, 94, 95, 124, 137, 152–153, 175; and qin, 130; switched string (fanxian), 74, 77, 80, 90; in Taiwan, 134, 137, 168, 175; and tunings, 90, 146–147; Western influence on, 144

Temple Fair on Xiang Mountain (Qu Yun; musical work), 146
tempo, 13–14, 15, 74, 77, 145, 148
Thailand, 78

Thirteen Suites for Strings (Xiansuo shisan tao; Rong Zhai), 53, 82, 84, 85n100, 155, 174, 178; and notation, 42–45, 56–57, 94

Thousand Voices Lauding Buddha (Qian sheng fo; musical work), 54, 123, 128, 129, 137, 138

Thrasher, Alan, 181
titles of musical works: in Cheng Music of China, 129–130; in Method of Playing the Zheng, 65, 129; in Model Zheng Notation, 54, 57, 66, 129; and politics, 167, 182; reuse of, 137, 139; in Thirteen Suites for Strings, 44; tongming butong qu, 193–194; in traditional music, 69n36, 193

To Top Floor (Deng lou; musical work), 54, 128

Tong Kin-woon, 159
tradition, constructed, xiv, 3, 4, 5

traditional culture: and CCP, 47, 184; and Cultural Revolution, 88; and Guomindang, 46, 132, 133, 137; in Hong Kong, 108; in PRC reform era, 142, 143; in Taiwan, 118–119, 133, 137; in Vietnam, 27

traditional music: adaptation of, xiii, 33, 143–144, 177, 186; collection of, 177, 188; in Cultural Revolution, 35, 87, 91, 92, 96, 183; and dân tranh, 28, 30; in Hong Kong, 99, 109; modernization of, 131–132, 181; and naamyam, 185; and nationalization, 29, 48, 83; and New Zheng, 144, 151, 152–155, 157, 176; problems of transcribing, 178–183; and qin, 12, 17; reform of, 94, 109, 130; repertories for, x–xi, 4; societies for, 49; and solo music, 55, 176; titles of musical works in, 69n36, 193; and van Gulik, 133; in Vietnam, 27; Western, 5, 46–49. See also folk music

Tran Quang Hai, 28

Tranquil Sound Society (Shanghai), 73

Tsar Teh-yun, 12–13, 15, 16, 30
tunings: diatonic, 89; heptatonic, 74, 90; multiple (duosheng), 155; and naamyam, 102; pentatonic, 7, 18, 20, 74, 89, 90, 146, 148, 185; in PRC reform era, 152–153; scordatura, 148, 151
Twelve Girls Band (*Nüzi shier yuefang*), 154, 169

Uighur people, 148

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, 11, 28

*United by Music* (scroll painting), 41–42

United Nations (UN): and PRC, 119, 139; and Taiwan, 117–118, 119, 139

United States (US), 152, 156; and PRC, 118, 120, 139; and Taiwan, 117–118, 120

Universal Celebration (*Putian tongqing*; musical work), 122, 123, 129

van Gulik, Robert Hans, 9, 16–17, 40, 169; on entoning poetry, 127, 128, 138, 139, 178; on Liang Tsai-ping, 120, 125, 130, 132–133, 138; and *liupai*, 177; on notation, 130, 138; on qin, 16, 127–128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 138. See also “Brief Note on the Chinese Small Cither”

Versailles, Treaty of (1918), 45

Vietnam, xii, 98, 178, 180; đàn tranh in, 17, 18, 24–29; Han immigrants in, 7, 24–25

Vietnam War (1954–1975), 118

Vietnamese Communist Party, 27

Vinayak, Nalini, 170

violin, xiii, 165. See also fiddles

Virtue Music Society (*Daode Xueshe*; Beijing), 49, 51, 52, 54, 60, 105, 131

*Visitors of the Desolate City* (*Huangcheng laike*; So Chun-bo; musical work), 110–111

Vivaldi, Antonio, 21

vocal music: adaptations for zheng from, 144, 181, 182; *banyan* (brothel songs), 100, 183; beggar’s songs (*long zhou*), 100; brothel songs (*banyan*), 100; collection of, 192; and đàn tranh, 25, 26, 28; in ensembles, 37, 56, 183; and kayagūm, 29, 30; narrative (*shuochang*), 159; and new solo repertory, 178, 183, 186; notation for, 108, 182; operatic (*changqiang*), 69, 71, 74; play and sing (*tanchang*) groups, 189; and politics, 182–183; *qinshu*, 67, 68; and solo zheng music, xiv, 178, 183, 186; in *Thirteen Suites for Strings*, 44; van Gulik on, 127; women’s folk narrative (*yue ou*), 100; and yatga, 23, 24, 29, 30; zheng accompaniment to, 99–104, 113, 183. See also *qinshu*

Wang, Amy, 195

Wang Bo, 54

Wang Changyuan, 83, 85, 93–95, 96, 158, 170, 189

Wang Guangqi, 47–48

Wang Hongwen, 93

Wang Jianmin, 149, 151

Wang Wei, 106

Wang Xingwu, 144

Wang Xunzhi, 84, 85; and Cultural Revolution, 91, 155, 187; and notation, 84, 94, 176; as teacher, 84, 85; and women players, 160, 161, 189

Wang Yingrui, 32, 52, 61, 79, 156, 189

Wang Zheng, 190

Wang Zhixun, 161

Wang Zhongshan, 147, 148, 152, 165, 190, 191

Washburn, Abigail, 170–171

*Waters and Mists of the Rivers Xiao and Shang* (musical work), 13

*Water in River and Lake* (*Jiang hu shui*; musical work), 54, 129

Waterman, Christopher, 4

*Waves Washing the Beach* (*Lang tao sha*; musical work), 105, 161

Wayfarer’s Autumn Lament (*Ketu qiuhen*; *naamyam* work), 100–101

“Weaving Medley” (folk song), 171

Wei Yuanyu, 63

Wei Ziyou, 50–52, 55, 57, 60, 66, 69, 70, 130

Wellesz, Egon, 105

*Well-Tempered Clavier* (Bach; musical work), 180

Wenyi Chashe (Literature and Art Tea House; Siqiao), 92, 155

*West Wing Words* (*Xi xiang ci*; musical work), 161
Western influence: and Chinese vs. Western music, 46–47; and New Zheng, 90, 151, 154; on notation, xiv, 55, 113, 180; opposition to, 59, 108; and Taiwan, 118, 132; and Xiang Sihua, 160, 162; on zheng, 144, 194; and zheng diaspora, 170. See also Britain; United States

Western music: adaptations for zheng from, 160, 162; vs. Chinese music, xii, 46–49; and đàn tranh, 26, 28; in Hong Kong, 108, 109; improvisation in, 33, 170; and kayagüm, 21, 22, 30; and koto, 19; and nationalization, 83; notation for, xiv, 31, 43, 121, 137, 151, 158, 193; in PRC, 95; and Taiwanese innovation, 168; traditional, 5, 6, 46–49; in Vietnam, 27; and zheng, 7, 33, 50, 195; and zheng diaspora, 168

Williams, Ralph Vaughan, 177
Williams, Sean, 24

wind instruments: guyue, 146; sheng, 12, 42, 127, 138. See also flutes

Witzleben, Lawrence, 131, 181
women: as composers, 94; conversion to zheng of, 83–84, 160, 188, 189, 190, 191; as courtesans, 16, 100, 174, 184; and dadiao quzi, 72; and đàn tranh, 26, 28; in ensembles, 41; and kayagüm, 21; and koto, 19, 30; and nationalization, 83–84; in Taiwan, 162, 188, 189, 190; in zheng diaspora, 170–171; as zheng players, xiii–xiv, 34, 40–42, 56, 61, 86–87, 111–112, 126, 127, 131, 138, 162, 174, 188, 189–191; as zheng students, 83, 85, 190, 191

Wondrous and Secret Notation (Shenqi mipu), 106

Wong, James, 165
Wong, Shirley, 195

Work, John Wesley, Jr., 177
Workers’ Club of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, 110, 112

World of Harmony (Tianxia datong; musical work), 52, 54n63, 57, 65, 66n26, 67, 68, 128

World War II, 117

Wu Fei, 170

Wulin music, 82


Xi’an Conservatory of Music, 143, 144–145, 152

Xi’an music, 146, 150. See also Teaching Materials Conference, National Musical Institutes

Xian Xinghai, 84n97

Xiang Sihua (Hon See-Wah), 85, 160–162, 165, 174, 176, 189–190; conversion to zheng of, 84, 95; and Cultural Revolution, 93; in zheng diaspora, 170

Xianshiyue. See string poem music

xiansuo (string ensemble), 44, 56. See also Thirteen Suites for Strings

xiao (end-blown flute), 14, 31, 42, 49, 50, 113, 181

xiao paiqu (small operatic tunes), 70–72

Xiao Youmei, 47, 48, 49

Xiaofeng Zheng Ensemble, 190

Xiong Penglai, 9

xiqin (bowed lute), 69

xiyue (elegant music), 178, 181

Xu Lingzi, 165

Xu Xiaolin, 148, 153, 158

Xu Yuanbai, 14–15

Xu Zhengao, 85

Xunyang River, Moon and Evening (musical work), 181

Xuzhou Southern Breeze Zheng Society, 189

Yan Huichang, 164

Yan Jia (Zhou Yanjia), 143

Yan Jidao, 63

Yan’an, 52, 61, 149; Mao on arts in, 58, 59, 87

Yang Nani, 2, 140, 156–157

Yang Piao-chêng, 16n51

Yang Qinghui, 168

Yang Shi-de, 161

Yang Shinyi, 195

Yang Xin-yi, 124

Yang Yinliu, 120
INDEX

yangqin (hammered dulcimer), 68, 69, 70, 80, 96, 100, 110; in ensembles, 158, 170, 181; and New Zheng performance, 154
Yangzhou Zheng Conference (Zhongguo guzheng xueshu jiaoliu hui; 1986, 1991), 146–147, 152, 155
yan-yüeh orchestra music, 127–128, 129, 131
Yao Bingyan, 12, 14–15, 30
Yao Ningxin, 158
Yao people, 148
Yao Wenyuan, 93
yatga (yatog, yatugan; Mongolian zither), 18, 22–24, 29, 30, 31, 186, 187
Yatsuhashi Kengyō, 19, 30
yehu (bowed fiddle or lute), 74, 75, 100n11, 159
Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), 149–150
Yenching University (Beijing), 104–105
Yi, Marquis, tomb of, 39
Yi people, 148
Yi Qiying, 161
Yin Chengzong, 84n97
Yin Qiyi, 148
Yin Qiyi, 148
Yinhe bibo (Milky Way in boundless blue selected zheng pieces), 167
Yu Siu-wah, 4, 109, 158, 159, 181
Yuan dynasty, 7, 22, 23, 42, 43, 56
Yuan Jingfang, 8, 44
Yuan Sha, 194
yuehu (two-stringed bowed fiddle), 100
yueqin (moon lute), 14, 127, 138, 195n46
Yulin xiaoqu music, 144
Yung, Bell, 11, 12, 13, 15, 100, 102, 103, 185
Yunnan, 63, 151, 174
Yuxin, 1, 2
Zeng Zhimin, 47
Zhang Chunqiao, 93
Zhang Heming, 62, 65, 67–69, 69n36, 79
Zhang Jingxia, 67
Zhang Jiuling, 63
Zhang Yan, 85, 93, 112, 189
Zhao Guangchen, 148
Zhao Jiazhen, 194
Zhao JunAppeases the Barbarian (Zhao jun he fan; musical work), 64, 65
Zhao Manqin, 147, 152, 190
Zhao Yongming, 182–183, 186
Zhao Yuzhai, 71, 79–82, 85, 96, 133, 156, 181, 187. See also Celebrating the Harvest
Zhejiang, 63, 65, 79, 155, 161, 162, 174
Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), 116
Zheng Exercise Pieces (Guzheng lianxiqu), 61
Zheng Exercises (Guzheng lianxipu; Cao Zheng), 61
Zheng Jinwen, 181
Zheng Zither (Wang Yingrui), 32, 79, 189
Zhongguo Yinyue (journal), 32
Zhongguo zhengyi da quan (A complete guide book of the arts of Chinese guzheng; So Chun-bo), 32
**Index**

*Zhongzhou gudiao*, 192

Zhou Dunyi, 72n49

Zhou Enlai, 88, 94

Zhou Ji, 148

Zhou Wei-ming, 159, 160

Zhou Xiwen, 130

Zhou Yanjia, 79, 86n106, 144–145, 153, 179, 190

Zhou Yun, 19, 32, 77, 82, 153

Zhu Xiaogu, 152

Zhu Yuzhi, 143n10

Zhuang Yi Li, 75n60

zhuihu (two-stringed bowed fiddle), 70

zhuiqin (two-stringed bowed fiddle), 80

zithers: Asian long bridged, 6, 17–29;

Chinese, 5, 6–17; types of, xii; Western types of, 6

zokusō style (koto), 18

Zuni Icosahedron (theater group), 159