

Chinese Music across Generations – Case Studies of Conservatory Musicians in 20th-Century China

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Abstract: *This paper looks at ways in which some instrumental realms of traditional Chinese music have survived in or alongside modern music conservatory contexts, and how subsequent generations of musicians in China have dealt with the challenges of new teaching methods or performing styles. Four case studies will be presented here in some detail, with additional references to some other musicians recently interviewed. Frank Kouwenhoven introduces Li Guangzu,¹ widely regarded as one of the founders of modern style pipa (lute) playing in China. Li never studied or taught at a music conservatory, but was very influential. Next, together with Lin Chen, Kouwenhoven traces the musical and spiritual development of Chinese guqin (seven-string zither) master Lin Youren (Lin Chen's father). He was among the first generation of qin students to be trained at a music conservatory and witnessed the clash of tradition with modernity first-hand. He struggled with it for much of his life. Thirdly, the fate of Cantonese instrumental ensemble music will briefly be traced via the stories of senior fiddle player Yu Qiwei (Hong Kong) and his son Yu Lefu (Guangzhou [Canton]). The latter built up an impressive career as a modern style erhu (two-stringed fiddle) virtuoso at the Xinghai Conservatory in Guangzhou, but he also began to teach the favorite traditional music of his father, trying to be “more traditional” than his dad. Such a smooth continuation of tradition is rare in Chinese conservatory contexts, but one further example of this is provided by Helen Rees; she looks at two Shanghai-based performers of the endblown bamboo flute xiao, an instrument too quiet and introspective to be favored by many conservatory students. Yet one of the greatest Chinese musicians of the mid-20th century – Sun Yude – earned special fame as a xiao player, while today his younger counterpart Dai Shuhong, a retired teacher of Chinese flutes at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, is nationally renowned for his exquisite use of the xiao to accompany guqin pieces. The paper concludes with a short discussion of the situation in Mainland China today: how much of the heritage of all these musicians lives on among present-day performers?*

Keywords: *Chinese traditional music; Chinese music conservatories; Chinese musical instruments; pipa; guqin; gaohu; xiao.*

¹ Chinese name order is surname first, given name second. Thus Li Guangzu's surname is Li, Lin Chen's and Lin Youren's surname is Lin, etc.

Major changes took place in traditional Chinese music in the course of the 20th century.² In the wake of various wars with foreign colonial powers and collective bursts of popular rebellion and revolution, China witnessed a remarkable transition from a traditional self-sufficient empire into a modern nation during this period. The country's checkered colonial history and its social development since 1911 have had their role to play in creating an urban musical soundscape and a music-educational system that is at once highly developed and in many ways problematic. On the one hand, the country's top urban music conservatories are brimming with talent, training standards are impressively high, and current economic progress ensures that sufficient funds will be available to further strengthen innovative music culture. On the other hand, the educational framework is often inward-looking and almost exclusively geared towards the cultivation of technical virtuoso abilities. Music conservatories and music departments in Chinese universities take their cues primarily from Western (notably) classical music and music teaching methods. As a consequence, traditional music in China has undergone a major metamorphosis. Youngsters in present-day China grow up primarily with Chinese and Western pop. Glamour shows and gala concerts on urban stages, featuring Western instruments and modernized versions of Chinese instruments, dominate the media. Traditional music lives on in local settings, but only a limited quantity of it has been incorporated in urban music education. Traditional repertoires are often taught on modernized (“improved”) instruments, and on the basis of Western musical training methods, if they are taught at all.

This paper focuses on the impact of the institutionalization of (higher) music education in the People's Republic and its consequences for some realms of instrumental traditional music and musicians. How did those artists cope when they first began to teach their art in a drastically modernized system of education? And how did their students respond? What kind of changes did the music undergo? Before examining the experiences of a number of individual musicians in some detail, we will provide a brief general overview of changes in Mainland China's traditional music when the institutionalization of music education along modern lines began, in the first half of the 20th century, and leading up to the present.

Only a handful of traditional music genres in China have been granted a place in higher institutions of musical learning. On the surface, music conservatories, art academies and music departments at universities are unlikely – even hostile – places for teaching traditional music, since they are largely modeled on Western conservatories, on Western notions of art music, on Western-style music training, playing techniques

² We use the adjective “traditional” to refer to those Chinese music genres and instruments that derive entirely or primarily from the soundscape and instrumentarium prevalent throughout China before the advent of heavy Western influence in the early 20th century. When we use the adjective “folk,” we are thinking of the equivalent Chinese expression *minjian* (“[from] among the [ordinary] people”). The two adjectives are not coterminous: the *guqin*, for example, long the preserve of the educated elite, is most certainly traditional, but nobody would describe it as being a folk practice. Localized songs performed by village farmers, on the other hand, are thought of as both traditional and folk in nature.

and aesthetics. Nevertheless, they are the focal point of a great deal of enthusiastic and energetic professional music-making, and they aspire to be breeding places for innovation in the realm of Chinese musical tradition. It turns them into a fascinating topic for research. They offer their students a certain amount of historical knowledge about Chinese traditional genres and instruments, but historically informed performance practice among conservatory students trained on traditional instruments still hardly exists, and students show limited awareness (if any) of past traditions or of continued regional folk practices of the instruments they play. So far, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policies in China have had little or no impact on conservatory training programs. This is regrettable, for it is in these institutions that China's top professional musicians are trained, who will determine for future generations and for a vast majority of people – more than any local traditional musicians – what “Chinese music” is going to mean in the future. Admittedly, there are some signs of change and improvement, which will be examined at end of this paper. But first, let's take a closer look at the abrupt transition to modernity that took place in Chinese music-making in the 20th century.

Traditional Music at China's Institutions of Higher Learning

From the beginning, conservatories and (music-minded) universities in China have dealt primarily with Western music. They did harbor departments or sections focusing on Chinese traditional music, but the teaching of native instruments came to rely increasingly on Western methods. In the early decades of the 20th century, pioneers in the field of Chinese music education such as Xiao Youmei and Cai Yuanpei attached great value to the propagation of Western music and teaching methods. Even ardent proponents of the study of Chinese traditional music, such as the ethnomusicologist Wang Guangqi – he studied comparative musicology in Berlin – criticized the weakness of Chinese traditional music and advocated its refinement by learning from the West. Xiao and Cai took this as a point of departure when they founded the first professional academic music departments at universities in Beijing in 1921 and 1926 and, on a bigger scale, at the National Music College in Shanghai in 1927, which eventually (in 1956) became the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. A number of other music schools aiming at professional academic training were soon founded which acquired the status of music conservatories (mostly in the 1950s).

The emphasis in all these institutions was invariably on Western music.³ The China Conservatory in Beijing, founded in 1964, was the one exception, in that it specialized primarily in native instruments, but here, too, students of *pipa* (four-string plucked lute), *zheng* (bridged zither) or *erhu* (two-string fiddle) soon spent much of their time racing through scales and etudes in major and minor keys, exploring staccato, ritardando, functional harmony, and other foreign inventions. Playing techniques, repertoire and even the designs of Chinese instruments were modified to match assumed Western ideals; composer He Lüting criticized native instruments for their “unstable pitch” and for not having a bass register, and he and many others supported innovations such as equal-tempered tuning, enlarged resonance chambers and steel strings to

³ For more on the role of Xiao Youmei and Cai Yuanpei, on the early presence of Western music in China, and on the development of the Chinese conservatories of music, see Schimmelpenninck and Kouwenhoven 1993:59-65, Melvin and Cai 2004, etc.

enhance loudness. It resulted in numerous attempts to improve existing instruments by extending their pitch range and resonance, and led to the invention of numerous new instruments as well, some of them quite astonishing in shape and size. Attempts to create satisfactory “cello and bass” equivalents for Chinese fiddles (by massively enlarging their resonance chambers) failed, because they did not sound as good as their Western counterparts, but many other innovative versions of Chinese instruments, for example huge mouth organs (*sheng*), many times bigger than the traditional models (see photos 1a/1b), sometimes even equipped with an external keyboard, turned out to be absolute winners. Chinese shawms (*suona*), transverse bamboo flutes (*dizi*) and mouth organs were equipped with valves or keys to enable the playing of chromatic scales in well-tempered tuning; bridged zithers were provided with extra strings or sometimes even with foot pedals to expand their sound or pitch range, and numerous other experiments were undertaken – with varying degrees of success – to enhance the technical and expressive possibilities of Chinese instruments.⁴

What began as spontaneous reforms and innovations eventually took on the aspect of official directives. In 1958, most Mainland Chinese players of silk string instruments switched to steel strings.⁵ Even before that, many had begun to incorporate Western classical ideas of phrasing, rhythm and structure. This is still infinitely subtle compared to the way in which instruments like the *erhu*, the *sheng* (mouth organ) or the *pipa* were turned into Chinese bravura equivalents of Western violin, guitar or piano. A present-day virtuoso like Yan Jiemin (Beijing), playing Sarasate's *Carmen Fantasia* on *erhu*, shows the full impact of Westernization on Chinese music: a few decades ago, the *erhu* was in many cases a beggar's instrument, played by street musicians in rudimentary fashion. In the hands of a contemporary conservatory-style *erhu* player it becomes a loud and masculine instrument with amazing technical possibilities.⁶ Yan Jiemin's performance is just one example of what has become known as the Chinese “conservatory style” (*xueyuanpai*). In this case, we are not listening just to a showcase of dazzling technical display, but also to a heartfelt, eminently musical performance. (See video ex.2, *Sarasate Carmen Fantasia* - https://youtu.be/F_BCsrIBd0I.)

In sum, the innovation of traditional instruments and instrumental music-making in China was more than a cultural “facelift.” It initiated a whole new era in Chinese music, with many new genres and numerous newly composed pieces, many infused with Western harmony and rhythms. The changes in instruments, performing styles, harmonies and rhythms, as well as the massive influx of Western classical music in China, radically altered people's existing aesthetic ideas about Chinese music.

⁴ The “reform” of Chinese instruments is discussed at length in various theses, e.g., Lin Jing (2012) and Li Zhao (2012). It is also the topic of numerous articles in journals like *Yueqi* (Musical instruments) and *Renmin yinyue* (People's music). Substantial papers include Feng Yuankai (2012, 2013), Meng et al. (2004), Li Zhi (2015) and Zhou Dafeng (2001).

⁵ Information based on interviews with elderly musicians by Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck in the period from 1988 to 1998. According to Cheng Gongliang, most *qin* players continued to use silk strings until the 1970s (Cheng 2009).

⁶ For an English-language introduction to the *erhu* and its changing role in 20th-century China, see Stock 1991.

The government of the People's Republic explicitly encouraged a “modernization” of Chinese traditions: a new class of professionally trained urban musicians was expected to raise native traditions to new standards of excellence and to develop new types of “patriotic” elite music. The artists should rise to stardom more or less in the manner of Western “piano lions,” and their new status was to be reconfirmed and backed up by large ballet and opera troupes and “Chinese orchestras” (*minzu yuetuan*, modeled after Western symphony orchestras with mostly native instruments). All these elements should help foster a new and stronger China and invigorate native culture.⁷ (See video ex. 1, *Chinese orchestra* - <https://youtu.be/xmDr397z04M>.)

A massive transformation of Chinese culture was set in motion. It resulted not only in a whole range of new performance traditions, but also in a rather distorted perspective on China's traditional music, one that excluded numerous rural folk genres as too “rough,” too religious, or too embedded in village rituals or other “backward” practices (in the eyes of the government) to fit the bill.⁸ The newly invented or adapted instruments and freshly created genres opened up a world full of exciting novel sounds. But these new sounds tended to push aside a great deal of traditional music which now came to be dismissed as artistically “poor” or obsolete. Street music and rural village music generally did not make it into the conservatories. Such genres lacked – or were thought to lack – sophistication: unlike Western classical music, they were played without the help of written scores, on plain instruments, in rhythmically loose and improvisatory ways, or so it seemed, and by villagers lacking modern education. But it was not only rural village music which failed to meet the new urban standards of musical excellence. Some technically sophisticated repertoires of regional Chinese solo instrumental music, too, such as those for *zheng* and *pipa*, suffered neglect or misappreciation. Characteristic regional styles of playing of these instruments had a hard time surviving in conservatory and university departments, even though the first musicians who began to teach these instruments to academic students had been trained in those regional idioms and usually cherished the lessons of their own teachers.

At the time when China embarked on the path of Westernized music education, a limited amount of Chinese traditional music was available on gramophone records (mainly opera and traditional narrative songs) and was distributed primarily among the urban elite. These recordings were popular enough in China,⁹ but it was Western (particularly classical) music which came to dominate the musical interests of Chinese musicians in the newly founded urban centers of music training.

New demands for technical agility and virtuoso display, inspired by Western recordings and by the direct presence of Western musicians in China, marginalized regional repertoires and playing styles in favor of Westernized versions of Chinese music. An ongoing debate ensued about the direction that a “national” style of Chinese

⁷ Chairman Mao (Mao Zedong) himself advocated adopting the “strong points” of Western music into Chinese music (Mao 1979 [1956]). On the development of the modern Chinese orchestra, see Han 1979 and Tsui 1998.

⁸ For a brief survey of historical and traditional music genres in China, see Jones 1996.

⁹ For the beginnings of the record industry in China, and early distribution and popularity of genres, see Steen 2006, notably p.78ff.

music should take. Many felt that Western music, with its “objective” emphasis on harmony, counterpoint and equal temperament, offered a more “scientific” standard for the future direction of Chinese music than the time-honored practices of native folk musicians.¹⁰ Sadly, the voices of the folk musicians themselves were little heard in these debates.

Li Guangzu (born 1943 in Kunming, *see photo 2 and video ex.3 - <https://youtu.be/c-Qcd2c4kag>*), a *pipa* player now based in Beijing, says, in retrospect, that he is happy not to have been educated in a music conservatory: “Otherwise I would have sounded like everyone else now.”¹¹ The story of his career echoes that of many other musicians who came from traditional backgrounds and who at some point aspired to play a role in the future development of Chinese music, but did not manage to get a foothold in the music conservatories. Li failed the entrance examinations for the Central Conservatory, initially to his own regret. It was only after some time that he began to realize that it actually helped him to sustain his traditional style and to steer away from too much academic superficiality and empty virtuoso display. Nevertheless, Li would grow into a veritable icon of *pipa* culture in China.

The Story of Li Guangzu

Li Guangzu was taught to play the *pipa*¹² by his own father, the acclaimed master Li Tingsong, but he did not pick up the trade easily, at least not in the beginning. His father, Li Tingsong, had learned in turn to play the instrument from the great Wang Yuting, who was known for his very strong and muscular style of performance. When Wang Yuting died in 1951, he left a son, then still a child. Li Guangzu's father adopted the boy, and out of respect for the art of his teacher, educated him in the “Wang style.” This worked as a powerful challenge to his own son, Li Guangzu. In Li Guangzu's own words: “At first I hardly felt like playing, but when Wang Tianwei became my father's pupil, I detected that I aspired to be better than him. Ultimately, I need to thank Wang Tianwei for my entire career! He stimulated me so much! Eventually we became good friends. And oddly, his own *pipa* playing eventually did not get off the ground.”

At the age of eleven Li Guangzu won a prize for a virtuoso performance of the famous traditional battle piece “Bawang xiejia” (The tyrant removes his armor). In spite of this, he was rejected when applying for a place in the *pipa* class at the Central Conservatory in Beijing: “My hands were too weak.” Instead, he opted to continue to study with his father, who socialized with all the famous traditional musicians in Beijing and who took his son with him wherever he went. It gave Li Guangzu the opportunity to become familiar with the classical styles of many different great masters – an invaluable practical training of a kind which the Conservatory could never have provided.

At the age of thirteen, Li Guangzu joined a military orchestra. “This was not always fun, but well, we needed to earn a living, we had seven children at home.” Later, he joined

¹⁰ Schimmelpenninck and Kouwenhoven 1993:63. See also Fang Kun's lengthy justification of the Western-influenced modernization of Chinese traditional music (Fang 1981).

¹¹ The quotations from Li Guangzu come from interviews carried out by Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck in Beijing in the summer of 2007.

¹² For a general introduction to the *pipa* and its music, see Myers 1992 and Wong 2003.

a mixed Chinese-Western orchestra, in which he eventually also became active as a solo instrumentalist. Li toured extensively with the band, and his career ultimately took him everywhere: to Korea, Japan, Singapore, Paris, Taipei, Latin America, and the United States. He became a famous musician in China and was ultimately heralded as one of the major founders of a modern style of *pipa* playing in China. But Li Guangzu was never quite happy with this reputation, and he actually questioned it. If it were up to him, he would immediately equip his instrument again with traditional silk strings, the way it was played until the 1950s, but “today you cannot find those strings any more.” So he continues to play on steel strings, but sticks with the time-honored traditions of the southern Pudong style (of which the Wang style constitutes a side-branch), and remains critical of the bland, often outwardly showy style of instrumental playing which he feels is promoted at the music conservatories.

Like so many of his colleagues, Li carries the scars of China's many social and political upheavals in the 20th century. He was imprisoned twice and after 1989 moved to America to grant his children “a quieter future.” But he remained strongly attached to his native soil and ultimately decided to return to China. In 2001, half a century after the death of Wang Yuting, he led extensive festivities dedicated to the memory of this great predecessor. Li Guangzu is now widely seen as Wang's most important musical descendant.

About the development of Chinese *pipa* music over the past seven decades he is quite adamant:

People say that the *pipa* has undergone great “development” since the 1950s. I prefer to say “changed.” I don't like the word “developed.” So how did it change, then? First of all, the instrument's silk strings were replaced by steel strings. Secondly, players now pluck the strings with artificial nails made of celluloid. Thirdly, the tonal system was changed. We used to play in a Chinese tuning. Now we play in a Western, well-tempered tuning. Yes, I have played on silk strings in my youth. When I joined the Song and Dance Troupe I still used them, but after 1958 it was no longer possible. You see, silk strings easily got broken, they were made of cheap, second-rate material. My father even wrote a letter about this to the government. For good strings you need quality “A” silk. But at that time, the “A” class silk, the best quality one, was no longer available. It was strictly reserved for use as a pulling device in hand grenades. This was at the time of the war with Korea. So there was simply no good silk left for *pipas*! The letter which my father wrote led to no results, I regret to say . . . It's a pity, because silk strings have a very special sound color. If you do not know the sound, you can't imitate it on steel strings either. I now often tell my students: what a pity that you've never experienced the sound of silk! [For video excerpts from this interview, including the quotes below, see video ex.3 - <https://youtu.be/c-Ocd2c4kag>.]

What does Li Guangzu think of the changes that have taken place in *pipa* playing techniques and musical aesthetics during his lifetime? And what, in his view, are the qualities which characterize a really good *pipa* player? He ponders this question for a while and then replies:

Our traditions have intrinsic values which are hard to capture in words. But nowadays, it's all gone. Nowadays, everything always sounds the same. Everything has to sound "beautiful." But what does "beautiful" really mean? I don't think Chinese aesthetics is like that. In traditional circles, we would say: "rather ugly than affectedly 'beautiful,' rather clumsy than smart!" That, in my view, is what Chinese aesthetics is about. Ah, the way they now make a Western violin vibrate so thickly . . . So is that really supposed to be beautiful? Especially the way they tend to play with those weak gestures, which are so very deliberately taught and controlled . . . That's nothing, that's not music!

Some conservatory teachers of traditional instruments – including *qin* and *zheng* teachers – promote the need for physical expression of the music via elaborate theatrical gestures. (For a visual sample of this style of performance, featuring *zheng* player Qi Yao, see *video ex.4* - <https://youtu.be/1ghmPFf9IIM>.) Some even insist on their students adopting such gestures and will give them lower marks if they don't comply. The practice is controversial and is sometimes also criticized within conservatory circles, but it continues to play a role in many stage performances. Some of the foreign students at Chinese conservatories have dubbed this manner of playing "plastic fantastic."

So if overt theatrical display, according to Li Guangzu, does not constitute real music-making, then what does? "Perhaps no one can really answer that question," he says. "But my father had a clear viewpoint. He argued that you would get real music whenever the sum of one plus one would yield more than two. I feel he really touched the core, pointing at that surplus value. He also felt that freedom of rhythm was of major importance. There's a unique sparkle in a really rhythmically free style, but only truly good players manage to capture it."

One day when Li Guangzu was teaching in Taiwan, someone asked him whether he thought that "communism could save China." "Neither communism nor democracy can save us," Li replied. "Only a solid awareness of our traditional culture can save us. Music is an important part of that." Li Guangzu does not oppose a blending of Chinese and Western styles in music. It was his final statement during the interview we had with him in the summer of 2007 in his home in Beijing: "I'm not against that. But it should be done in a proper way. Not by haphazardly collating things. People here in China often talk about a merging of East and West, but it only makes me laugh. If you don't know Western music really well yet, and don't understand a fig about your own native culture . . . Then what do you expect to achieve? China is still lacking really great names in music. That's my opinion!"

The story of Lin Youren

Li Guangzu emerged from a traditional family of musicians, and never felt much at home in the new world of academic music-making. So would it be easier for others who grew up in a more Western-culture-minded environment? Would it work better for musicians who, from the very start, took an active interest in Western classical music?

Not necessarily so. A telling case is that of Lin Youren (see photo 3), a musician who grew up with a passion for Western classical music, and only later turned to a study

of the (*gu*)*qin*, the classical Chinese seven-stringed zither.¹³ He pursued his study of the instrument at the Shanghai Conservatory and ultimately became a teacher of *qin* at this same institution. But he gradually noticed that this institution did not at all fit his traditional ideas about playing and learning the *qin*. He attempted to reform the conservatory's teaching methods from within, but clashed with the school's management and was fired in the 1990s. In the eyes of his superiors, Lin Youren was a brazen romantic, unable to adapt to changing ways of life in China. But perhaps he was merely an artist of fine principles, too passionate about music to accept a forced alienation from what he held dear and sacred in his art. He struggled all his life with the clash between tradition and modernity. For him, the *qin* would never be a mere musical instrument or the mere tool of a professional trade. More likely, the *qin* amounted to a way of life, a complete vocation, which absorbed the entire horizon of his mind.

Lin Youren, one of China's finest traditional musicians, though too little known outside circles of *qin* aficionados, died on 12 October 2013 in Shanghai. He was 75. In his youth, he studied the *guqin* with such great masters as Xia Yifeng, Liu Shaochun, Wei Zhongle, Gu Meigeng, Shen Caonong and others, and he became a master in their wake. Those who met him in person and had the pleasure of hearing him play will always remember the poise and tranquility of his performances, notably in his favorite piece, “Pu'an zhou” (Buddhist incantation). They will also remember the twinkle in his eye, his special brand of humor, his great love of alcohol, his gentleness, his perpetual wordplay, and somewhat nervous manner of talking.

We interviewed Lin Youren many times, and attended many of his concerts. He generally disliked performing on concert stages and criticized the tendency at the conservatory to mainly let students work towards stage performances—the conveyor-belt mentality. Following a retreat in a Buddhist monastery in Tiantaishan in 1993, he explained his viewpoints: “In formal professional teaching people tend to ignore the amateur side of the *qin*. I do not believe that the instrument belongs on a concert stage. Artistry should not be about fame, power, glamor . . . Art is food for the mind.” His preferred way of playing was alone with a few friends and a bottle of Shaoxing wine. After his forced departure from the Conservatory, he tried to arrange informal *qin* meetings in a coffee bar near the school, but only a handful of listeners turned up, and after a while he stopped. “But the atmosphere was better than that of staged concerts,” he commented about these meetings. In spite of his reservations about concert recitals, Lin Youren accepted invitations to perform abroad, in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, France, the USA, Amsterdam, and London. At times he was lucky:

In Paris I did a concert where we stopped after two pieces, giving the audience an opportunity to respond. We had brief discussions between some of the pieces. And I had brought some calligraphy. This was a good ambiance for the *qin*. You see, the instrument is like a plant, it cannot grow in every kind of soil.

¹³ *Gu* means “old,” *qin* means “instrument.” The seven-string zither is often referred to simply by its shorter name, *qin*. Here we use *guqin* and *qin* interchangeably, as is done in China. For a general introduction to the *qin* and its music, see van Gulik 1940 (1969), Yung 1997, Lindqvist 2006, and Kouwenhoven 2015.

Lin Youren, whose ancestors came from Taiwan, was born in Shanghai on 11 August 1938. He was brought up in Nanjing under the trauma of the Japanese occupation and civil war. His dentist parents were amateur musicians, and his early musical tastes were for Western music, which he heard on records. “My parents really loved music,” Lin Youren told us in the summer of 2007. (*For excerpts of this interview see video ex.5 - <https://youtu.be/iYBsUHOse-w>.*) “My father played the violin, my mother the piano and also a mouth organ. But they did not want me to take up music because they feared I would not be able to earn a living with it. They were doctors and wanted me to pick up the same profession. But I didn't listen to them. Haha!”

Lin Youren began to learn the Western violin and for a while conducted a school choir. In 1957 he got in touch with the Music Society of Nanjing, where he came to know classical *qin* masters like Xia Yifeng and Liu Shaochun. He began to play the *guqin*, taking lessons with both masters.

He especially cherished his lessons with Liu Shaochun, a representative of the regional Guangling style of *qin* playing. Liu was his second *qin* teacher and essentially the man who initiated him in the art of the *qin*. Liu was also a model of kindness and modesty. As Lin Youren described him,

his family used to be very rich. They were salt merchants from Yangzhou. Liu Shaochun got the reputation of being the kind of person who ruins the family fortune. He was kind-hearted and gave money away to whoever needed it. In the end he had almost no means left for himself. But at least the art of his playing survived on recordings! No, I did not live in his house. It was customary for *qin* teachers in those days to adopt *qin* pupils and let them live in their homes, but Liu's place in Nanjing was much too small for that. I did visit him every day after school for a lesson. His teaching method? He taught phrase by phrase. He was familiar with the problems of beginning students. They always wanted to play fast. So he said: “If you want to play something fast, you won't be fast! If you learn too many pieces, you won't learn them well.”

Liu taught his pupils slowly but steadily to grow into the art of *qin* playing. Lin Youren had found his passion, and now thought about turning it into a career. In 1958 he entered the Shanghai Conservatory to continue his *qin* studies. Unfortunately, the “Great Leap Forward” soon intervened. Lin and his fellow pupils and teachers were dispatched to rural Anhui and Henan to make amends for their decadent intellectual attitudes and to learn from the peasants. Lin was only able to resume his *qin* studies in Shanghai in 1961, with masters like Liu Jingshao, Gu Meigeng, Shen Caonong, and the great Wei Zhongle.

Five years earlier, in 1956, the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music had begun to offer professional courses in *guqin* for the first time. The first generation of *qin* students to enroll was the last to be taught by the traditional *qin* masters, such as Wu Jinglüe, Zha Fuxi and the masters listed above, and they were also the first generation who had to face Western pedagogic methods.

From their *qin* teachers these students received a traditional type of education known primarily as “oral and mental transmission and instruction” (*kouchuan xinshou*). The conflicts and confusion which resulted from the clash between the old and the new had

a major impact on these students' lives; it marked the beginning of extensive debates and reflection on traditional music, debates which would continue well into the 21st century.

Lin Youren was among this first generation of students. His teachers used conventional teaching methods such as *dui-tan* (teacher and student sitting across from one another, with the student copying what the teacher did). These methods were true to Chinese tradition, but they had their own drawbacks, such as insufficient attention to *qin* playing techniques and historical background. Generally speaking, players of the older generation showed little interest in individuality and different playing styles. They were craftsmen, mainly keen to pass on the melodies they had learned and to share their passion for the extraordinary sounds of the instrument. Of course, they were also literati, interested in the poetry and philosophy associated with the *qin*. But their teaching methods were often quite plain.

After his graduation in 1963, Lin Youren became a scholar and *qin* teacher in turn at the Shanghai Conservatory, and had to come to terms with the *qin* tradition as it had been presented to him. He was given a research position at the Conservatory under Xia Ye and began to do research into the early history of *qin*. He came under the spell of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy and turned into a conscious adherent of the Guangling performance style, which emphasizes an inner and spiritual drive in the music.

“If you play straight from your heart, you build up a relation with a piece,” he explains. “But it only gets really good if that relationship disappears again, once you become entirely unified with the music.” That implied becoming unified with one's instrument as well. Like numerous *qin* players before him, Lin Youren deeply cherished the *qins* he played, and he liked to talk about them as if they were human beings. During the 2007 interview, he proudly showed us the finest instruments in his collection:

This is a *qin* from the Song dynasty, called *Mingquan* (Sounding source). No, I didn't find this instrument. It found me. That's what is called destiny. You've got destiny for *qin*, too! Someone made it a gift to me. I could never have afforded to buy this *qin*. Too costly! Look at the seal on the backside. It says “My friends understand me.” A very good *qin*, and a beautiful one. *Qins* are all different, just like people. What this particular instrument sounds like? (*After a short pause:*) Like a heavyweight boxer. There is a lot of force in its sound. It has a deep and robust resonance. A very deep breath . . . That's also what it looks like. Sturdy! No sharp corners. Everything is round and smooth. A finely crafted instrument!

The peace gained from Lin Youren's new insights into *qin* philosophy and the Guangling style in the early 1960s was not allowed to last. In 1966, three years after he had taken up his academic post in Shanghai, the Cultural Revolution broke out. As an intellectual with traditional – therefore politically questionable – interests Lin was sent to the countryside to work in the fields. He spent four years at a collective farm in Heilongjiang, up in the country's cold north, and returned to Shanghai only in 1974.

As a teacher and researcher of *qin* he then resumed his explorations of early *qin* history and Buddhism and Taoism and began to blend elements of Western musical teaching with the traditional method of “oral and mental transmission and instruction.” He would primarily play short musical phrases to demonstrate them to his pupils and then ask them to imitate his playing. Not much time was lost on verbalizing about technique.

Lin Youren: “I talk very little when I teach. I mainly try to make sure that my

students are constantly in touch with the music. When I was a student myself at the Conservatory, they gave us lesson material about ‘How to enjoy music. How to listen to Beethoven . . .’ Well, just imagine that a cook would start explaining to you how to enjoy his food!”

Some cooks, if challenged, would have little trouble, though, getting lyrical about their dishes. So what would Lin Youren say if someone asked his advice about how one should listen to *qin* music?

Well . . . Use your ears . . . Use your heart. In recitals I often don't tell the audience what I'm going to play. Suppose it's “Pingsha luoyan” (Wild geese descending on a sandbank). If I tell people that, they will immediately start searching for the goose: “Where is that goose now? Has it already descended on the beach?” You might as well invent a title of your own or accept the music without any title. Or you might just call it “B flat major”.

In the course of time, Lin Youren began to reflect more critically on the essence of the art of the *qin*: would it at all be possible to sustain this unique tradition successfully within the limitations and specific demands of an academic educational system? The question marked the beginning of his third and final stage as a performer and teacher. More than ever before, he now recognized spiritual cultivation as the heart of *qin* playing: plucking the strings ultimately meant nurturing one's heart and soul, with the goal of reaching a state of “complete harmony of *qin* and man.” From this point onwards he emphasized this idea in his teaching and de-emphasized playing techniques and other aspects. He also stressed his belief that the survival of *guqin* depended on “folk” and informal musical practice: the academic teaching of *qin* would merely stress technical agility. This, he felt, amounted to the very destruction of the tradition of *qin* music:

At the conservatory, they like to talk about the “mastering of techniques.” So then it's about finding a balance between light and heavy, fast and slow, and so on. Much of that is even notated very precisely. But in the old days people said, “Music is the sound of your heart.” So it comes from your heart, it doesn't derive from a score. It also doesn't come from a teacher who says: “louder . . . softer . . . faster . . . slower . . .,” as if you are some kind of sound control panel. That may look professional, and it's possible to do things that way, but ultimately, it's like lying. It's artificial.

At the end of the 1970s, Lin was a different man. For him, the *qin* had become a realm of spiritual exploration, a total passion, and an oasis in the midst of a turbulent world. The instrument had survived the onslaught of Maoist ideology, but under the country's new leader, Deng Xiaoping, it was still going to meet its biggest challenge yet: that of the rapid commercialization of Chinese society and an as yet unprecedented influx of foreign culture in the country.

The Westernization of teaching methods in the conservatories continued. Standard grade examinations, following Western models, were eventually adopted. Lin Youren didn't budge. He refused to be convinced by the Conservatory leadership that he now spent too little time teaching his students rapid scales and fingering techniques. Instead, he was frequently doing *qigong* (Chinese breathing) exercises with them. In his lessons he used

traditional *qin* tablature, never Western staff notation (which at that time had become more common in *qin* teaching, alongside traditional notation). Lin Youren was a non-conformist, and his ideas no longer seemed to suit the Conservatory ethos.

Some thought of him as a charmer, an eccentric, perhaps even a rascal, but he opted for the sole solution available to him: he stuck to his own methods. Instead of exams, he organized meetings, where all his pupils played and where incense was burned. Like his own master Liu Shaochun, he would take ample time to teach his students new pieces, always preferring quality over quantity:

I teach my students *qin* in the traditional way. This may appear to be a slow method because you learn the music phrase by phrase, so it takes a long time. A single piece may consist of seven, eight different parts . . . But you learn it very meticulously then. You won't forget it after having invested so much time in it. Some people, superficially, just want to learn many pieces. That's like eating food without tasting it. You swallow everything without savoring it. In the north they call this "a blind bear." Such a bear plucks one cob of corn after the other and holds it under his arm but, with every new cob he collects, he drops the previous one . . . And in the end, he is left with just a single cob, haha!

In the old days you were expected to penetrate the core of things. Plucking the *qin*, playing chess, writing calligraphy, poetry . . . As a cultivated person, you would know about the cosmos, about geology . . . All this turned you into a complete person. But today it's only about "performing," about creating an effect . . . There's a lot of artificiality and falsehood in that.

The continuing interest of pupils, after Lin Youren stopped teaching at the conservatory, proved that his traditional approach to the *qin* was appreciated by many. He struck a chord with students who, like him, viewed the *qin* as a way of life, rather than as a career instrument. He would say to new pupils: "I'm going to introduce a faithful companion to you – it'll never let you down."

Introvert, captured by the mysticism of the *qin* and its music, Lin Youren ever became more one with his instrument in performances. He tended to play his music at a slower pace than his traditional teachers had done, not so much as a bow to romanticism, but under influence of the Buddhist and Taoist texts he read. But no matter how lofty his spiritual and artistic aspirations, his conversation always remained down to earth, cynical, cryptic, full of jokes and word-play. He radiated a warm and deep humanity, and so did his musical performances.

After his retreat from the conservatory, Lin Youren published many articles on the *qin* and on Chinese music history, recorded several *qin* CDs – both in China and abroad – and continued to play the instrument in private until his final period of illness.¹⁴ He spent many summers in monasteries in the mountains of Wudangshan and Tiantaishan, in the vicinity of a waterfall, where he would frequently play the *qin* outdoors. His daughter, Lin Chen, who looked after her father in his last years, has honored his heritage by becoming a *qin* musician herself and a scholar of *qin* history at the Music Research Institute in

¹⁴ The most accessible of these CDs for a Western audience is *Music for the Qin Zither: Lin Youren* (2000), which has excellent English-language liner notes by Stephen Jones and Lin Youren.

Beijing.

Yu Qiwei and His Son Yu Lefu, Promoters of Cantonese Music

Qin players of Lin Youren's generation all faced the same challenge: they needed to redefine *qin* music to make it fit comfortably within a Westernized academic system of education. Some of Lin's colleagues succeeded better than he did in accommodating the *qin* to this new environment. They continued to teach traditional pieces from the traditional *qin* handbooks, familiarizing their students with the special tablature notation for the instrument, but would also use Western staff notation and require their students to play new compositions.

Perhaps the task was less daunting for Chinese musicians who had already incorporated a lot of Western influence over a longer period of time. Players of Cantonese instrumental ensemble music, for example. Cantonese ensemble music was born roughly one century ago from a blending of local regional styles and Western popular music in China's south. It resulted in a unique repertoire, no longer as popular as it used to be before the Second World War, but still pleasing audiences in the Cantonese-speaking world, notably in the former British colony of Hong Kong.¹⁵

So who is teaching Cantonese music to whom, and what is its current status at Chinese music conservatories? For an answer to this question, we move to China's south and make our acquaintance with a father and son who compete as artists and teachers, but who essentially support one and the same cause: both promote Cantonese music.

Yu Qiwei (photo 4), a native of Guangdong Province, is a famous senior fiddle player in Hong Kong, who is well-versed in a wide variety of regional two-stringed fiddles, such as the nasal and high-pitched *gaohu*, the smaller and sharper-sounding *erxian*, the low and mellow-toned *yehu* (coconut fiddle), and the bigger, sturdy, deep-sounding *zhutiqin*. He also plays the bamboo flute. These and other instruments feature in old-style Cantonese music, a genre which Yu Qiwei teaches to his students in Hong Kong.

His son Yu Lefu is doing the same in Guangzhou (Canton), some 175 kilometers to the northwest of Hong Kong. The ensembles in which father and son play, each in their own location, sound so similar as to be indistinguishable in style. Nevertheless, there are enormous differences between the cultural realms in which father and son operate.¹⁶

Yu Lefu has primarily become a star performer on *erhu* and mostly teaches this modern virtuoso concert instrument to flocks of conservatory students in Guangzhou. Only a handful of his pupils opt to study regional Cantonese fiddles such as *gaohu*, by way of “specialization,” and most of them tend to neglect these instruments again after they graduate or drop them altogether in favor of the *erhu*. They generally do not form small ensembles of their own to play traditional-style Cantonese music; there is simply not much interest in it.

By contrast, most of Lefu's father's pupils in Hong Kong prefer to learn the regional fiddles and are generally quite motivated to join old-style ensembles. So why is it that

¹⁵ For a general introduction to Cantonese ensemble music, see Huang Jinpei 2002.

¹⁶ I (Kouwenhoven) interviewed Yu Qiwei in Hong Kong on 22 March 2007, and his son Yu Lefu during a tour of The Netherlands in Amsterdam on 18 January 2008. Additional material in the report on father and son was gleaned from an interview with Yu Lefu by Zhou Yu and Chen Jiyao in the *Nanfang ribao* (Southern daily) of 18 October 2014.

Cantonese music has a much firmer hold on people in Hong Kong, compared to Guangzhou? Both places historically hosted a vibrant scene of old-style Cantonese ensemble performance. But the amateur music clubs in Guangzhou dwindled quickly after the 1950s, and eventually they disappeared almost entirely. In recent years, a few clubs have been revived, but their style of playing has changed: Guangzhou musicians now mostly perform the traditional pieces in equal temperament (i.e. Western tuning), if they play these pieces at all. By contrast, Hong Kong has kept intact its tradition of amateur clubs, and the players there mostly stick to the traditional Chinese tunings.

So on the surface, Guangzhou presents a more “modern” face of Cantonese music. The communist government has propagated an academic institutionalization of the genre, has paid for the founding of professional large-scale Cantonese orchestras, and has promoted the creation of a repertoire of modern compositions for Cantonese and Western instruments. Regular competitions and large-scale gala shows of this new style of Cantonese music are organized. The transition to the new realm has been fairly successful in the sense that the small amateur ensembles in traditional club-settings have almost disappeared, and Cantonese music has been elevated to the status of a “professional art”: it has been given a touch of glamour and occupies a secure presence on big concert stages. All the same, how successful is this new style of Cantonese music in reality? The orchestral concerts and gala events certainly draw sizeable audiences, and some concerts are broadcast on regional TV. Yet there is an element of artificiality in the way the music is framed and presented. It is less a spontaneous outcome of local musicians' interests than a politically engineered move towards “modernity.” Much money is spent on expensive backdrops, stage scenery and lighting, presenters typically announce and sing the praises of every individual performer, and concerts are typically cast in the form of competitions with juries and prizes. And presenters in Guangzhou will never fail to stress that, in 2006, Cantonese music became incorporated in the canon of the central government's “intangible cultural heritage” programs, a distinction associated with international prestige. At the same time, the biennial Guangdong Province music contest which took place in 2006 was not taken up again in the next eight years, due to lack of interest or motivation. The event was revived only in September 2014, very likely as a result of a government directive.

In Hong Kong, which remained under British rule until 1997, the old style of Cantonese music has largely been left to its own devices, and it seems to have fared rather better than on the Mainland: in Hong Kong, Cantonese music has maintained its position as a vibrant teahouse and club genre for amateurs. In ICH terms, it has been “preserved” rather than “developed.” It did take on a life of its own in academic music teaching, too, but at the Hong Kong Academy of the Arts no formal policy was ever implemented to turn Cantonese music into a modern virtuoso stage genre. If musicians would love to have it that way, fine – it would be entirely their own decision.

But to return to the story of Yu Qiwei and his son: this is not so much the story of two generations representing diametrically opposed musical worlds – matters are rather less simple than that. Sure enough, father and son did clash over music and did experience a generation gap; they even fell apart for a while. But what they disagreed about was not about different ways of playing Cantonese music. Moreover, the way they eventually achieved reconciliation is fascinating in its own right. The story of this father and son defies standard expectations about a generational gap, and deserves to be told in some detail.

The Father – the Traditional World of Cantonese Ensemble Music

To find out more, we move, for a start, to Kowloon, the old part of Hong Kong, where we risk finding ourselves completely locked in by skyscrapers, tons of glass and concrete, and the din of heavy traffic. There is some relief from the traffic noise in the form of music: rowdy traditional street opera can be heard on Temple Street, and folk songs resound in the park nearby. A narrow path between sky-high buildings takes us to the Hong Kong Academy of the Performing Arts, where Yu Qiwei, since 2003, has been teaching the city's youngsters to play *gaohus*, coconut fiddles and bamboo flutes, in the revered manner of old masters. Yu resides in a narrow office space on the tenth floor of a skyscraper. He shares this kind of environment with hundreds of other traditional music teachers in the city.

The pieces which Yu Qiwei plays may no longer be as fashionable as they were before the Second World War, when numerous cabaret halls, cafés and cinemas in Hong Kong hosted their own Cantonese ensembles. But Yu still attracts new disciples and, in his quiet, unassuming manner, sustains the life of a genre from colonial times that never fails to please. High-pitched Chinese fiddles, plucked lutes and bamboo flutes blend smoothly with dulcimer strings, and sometimes with violin, trumpet or saxophone, instruments now all viewed in Hong Kong as “traditional Chinese.” The music is a blend of tunes from Shanghai or Guangzhou (Canton) with the idiom and (sometimes instruments) of Western jazz and dance-hall music. Hundreds of new compositions appeared, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. (*For a sample of traditional style Cantonese music, listen to sound ex.1 - <https://youtu.be/xmDr397z04M>.*)

After the war against Japan (1937-1945), Cantonese music, as an “established” genre, lost some of its initial charm, but it continued to be popular, both in Hong Kong and in what used to be on the other side of the border, Guangdong Province in Mainland China. But Yu Qiwei was not born in Hong Kong. He was born in 1953 in communist China, in the rural town of Kaiping in Guangdong Province, where he spent his boyhood. His father was a technology worker and his mother worked on a farm. Neither of his parents was in the music business. Yu Qiwei remembers fishing for shrimp in the local river as a child or lying on his back for endless hours, watching the clouds. He remembers that the winters were harsh and that women would work barefoot outdoors even in the coldest weather, suffering cracked skin and bloody feet. “Every time I saw it, I was shocked,” he says. “If you have not experienced that kind of harsh country life, if you have not experienced the hardships of ordinary villagers, it may be hard for you to play Cantonese music well.”

Yu Qiwei began to play Chinese fiddles at the age of ten and from 1972 studied *erhu* with Huang Jin at the Guangdong People's Art Institute. Later he received training on *gaohu* from masters Liu Tianyi and Zhu Hai. As a twenty-year-old he was already remarkably famous as a *gaohu* player and soon found himself winning awards and giving concerts in China as well as abroad. Yu began to teach Chinese fiddles at the music conservatories of Wuhan and Guangzhou and, during weekends, would turn his private home in Guangzhou into a music school as well, a veritable beehive of students coming and going. He married Peng Yanzhen, an expert performer of *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer) and *zheng* (bridged zither). She totally shared his passion for

Cantonese music and would play together with him, both in public and in private.¹⁷

Given that the young family's life was entirely dominated by Cantonese music, it would not come as a surprise for the son, Lefu, born in 1980, to be firmly steeped in it as well and to follow in his father's footsteps. Eventually, this was what happened, but in the beginning young Yu Lefu showed very little understanding of the music of his parents. He did dabble a bit with *gaohu*, trying out the instrument for himself, but he found that what really touched and moved him was Chinese rock, much detested by his father. Sure enough, Yu Lefu was drifting towards music, but the key to real music-making, the way he experienced it, could only be a rock guitar. As a teenager, he agreed to enroll at the Xinghai Conservatory in Guangzhou to study *gaohu*, but his musical heart resided elsewhere. He felt increasingly committed to rock music and soon founded a band of his own. In this very period, his father moved to Hong Kong, where he would devote his time entirely to the teaching of traditional music, in an environment more sympathetic to it than Guangzhou, with its glamorous concert scene. It appeared as if father and son were drifting apart and, for a while, the breach looked serious.

The Son – Experiments with Rock Music, and a Change of Heart

In Yu Lefu's memory, his father was always busy teaching and had little time for a family life outside the realm of music. The idea of spending leisure time together on tourist outings was mostly considered an undue luxury. "When I was a child, my father was almost never at home," he remembers. "He was always at work." At the age of fifteen, Yu Lefu discovered the rock guitar and first heard the Chinese band Beyond, which impressed him enormously. He became "totally obsessed" with rock. From that moment on, he took his daily practice on *gaohu* even less seriously than he had done before. "I was born naughty, and at that time I didn't think the *gaohu* amounted to anything much." His father was deeply disturbed by the interest his son took in rock music. It was a realm which Yu Qiwei – like so many people in China – associated primarily with rebelliousness, unhealthy minds, decadence, and unpleasant noise. He began to shower his son with ironic and biting comments about rock music and would continue to nag about it for years. He actively tried to persuade his son to give up all commitment to it.

It was Yu Lefu's mother who, amiably and cautiously, began to mediate between father and son in the hope of regaining domestic peace. She had a very gentle character, perhaps in line with the role of her main instrument in ensemble playing: her husband's *gaohu* would normally lead the music, and there would be a humbler, more supportive and primarily rhythmical role for the *yangqin*, in accordance with how this instrument is normally employed in classical *wujiatou* (five-person) Cantonese ensemble playing.

Peng Yanzhen turned out to be more open to Chinese youngsters' interests in pop music than her husband. The two key instruments which she practices, *yangqin* and *zheng*, both feature in Chinese rock and may have more musical elements in common

¹⁷ Peng Yanzhen studied at the Xinghai Conservatory; she took *yangqin* lessons with Kong Qingyan and Tang Kaixian, and *zheng* lessons with Rao Ningxin and after her graduation initially worked at the Guangzhou Cantonese Opera troupe before meeting Yu Qiwei. She felt great admiration for Yu; his knowledge of Cantonese music sometimes intimidated her, but eventually the two shared their explorations in the realm of this genre, and both felt they greatly profited from the cooperation.

with rock than the traditional *gaohu*. In any event Peng Yanzhen showed more understanding for Yu Lefu's passion for rock than her husband did and on numerous occasions attempted to defend him.

Yu Lefu did continue his *gaohu* studies and in 1998 even entered the Xinghai Conservatory of Music to study the instrument with Chen Guochan. But one year later, at the age of 19, he joined Chuibotang (Sugar Blow Wave), a Chinese rock band, in which, as a guitarist, he quickly asserted a leading position as composer and band leader. "My father said that we were just following a fad and were wasting our time. He judged our songs 'cynical' and found the music superficial; he said it was a road that would surely lead nowhere at all." Lefu decided to prove his father wrong. He wanted to show him that rock music could make him a professional income, and that it constituted a musical realm as powerfully expressive and as artistically meaningful as any other. He was now keener than ever before to embark on a musical path different from his father's.

Yu Lefu graduated from the conservatory with a BA degree in *gaohu* in 2002 and began to teach the instrument at the same school. But he continued to invest all his spare time in the pursuit of rock music, touring with his band and writing new compositions. Yu Lefu: "What you express as a rock musician is a certain dissatisfaction with reality. Instead, you pursue a dream of your own. But this is not the same as being extreme or decadent!"

His band Chuibotang went on stage for the first time in 2007, at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center. In the years that followed, Lefu's band issued several CD albums and gradually secured a name for itself, not just in Hong Kong, but in wider parts of southern China. Young people liked to come and listen to Chuibotang and bought the albums. And for Yu Lefu, at this time, playing the guitar was "cool" and "stylish," and gave him a satisfaction which he thought playing the *gaohu* would not be able to offer.

But one day, in a surprising *volte-face*, Lefu came to take a different perspective on things. Reflecting again, as he had done before, on the traditional music with which he had grown up, he suddenly realized that his casual impressions of it – its assumed "simplicity" and its "backwardness" – simply did not hold true. "I suddenly felt an interest in folk music emerge in me as I had never experienced before. It was like waking up. I began to think about what Cantonese music really amounted to, and it was as if I realized for the first time what it was actually like." Yu Lefu arrived at the conclusion that musicians truly committed to Cantonese music would strive for – in his own words – a "pure artistic spirit" no less than their counterparts in rock music. Both realms, he felt, required a conscientious approach and offered a big challenge. "No matter whether you compose or perform a traditional Cantonese piece or a Chinese rock song, the challenge to do it well and to achieve a high-level result is the same. Even if the means by which you achieve it are different."

Yu Lefu did not give up his ambitions in rock. But now he decided to continue higher-level studies at the Conservatory, despite having postponed this for a number of years. In 2011 he was granted a full scholarship which enabled him to finish an MA in Musicology and Musical Literature at the Xinghai Conservatory. The teacher he would study with turned out to be his father. After going around in circles for years, father and son now resumed cordial relations and became teacher and student. For Yu Lefu, to be a student of his father had become "the greatest wish" of his heart. And the teaching,

insofar as he could judge, remained impartial and professional, and father and son even retained a certain sense of distance.

We don't perform on stage together a lot. And I don't have the experiences my father had when he was young, some of which were unique. It means that my relationship with music, by definition, must be different from his. I grew up in big cities, under very different circumstances, but it means that some of my own experiences are unique in a different way; they belong to my own path of music, which my father may not entirely understand.

In recent years, Yu Qiwei has become milder about his son's rock aspirations. But today, at the Xinghai Conservatory, Yu Lefu is teaching with great conviction and enthusiasm the style of traditional music which he has learned from his father. He regrets the fact that only a handful of his students opt for *gaohu* as specialization. Most prefer more robust “modern” instruments such as violin, piano and *erhu*, but as a rock fan, Yu Lefu can understand why many youngsters prefer instruments or sounds associated more with “modernity” over the instruments and modest sound dimensions of traditional Cantonese teahouse music. But this fact has not prevented Yu Lefu and four of his fellow teachers at the Conservatory from starting such a traditional ensemble of their own and returning to the roots of a great folk musical tradition.

Lefu and his friends now seem to embody the cultural contradictions and clashes of modern Mainland China in their very life-style: they regularly perform old-style Cantonese music for aficionados in Guangzhou. At the same time, on artist photos (see photos 5 and 6), they like to pose as cool young men, with Rolexes, sunglasses and leather jackets. At the time we first interviewed them, all but one of them were younger than thirty and unmarried; they loved (and still love) fast cars, beautiful women and football, and are armed with mobile phones and iPods full of rock music. Three of them, including Yu Lefu, actively participate in a rock band. At night the overcrowded dancing floor of the local youth center rumbles with their bass guitar riffs.

Nevertheless, the music which all of them profess to love best is the old-style Cantonese music. (*For a demonstration by Yu and his colleagues of various Cantonese fiddles, see video ex.6 - <https://youtu.be/OxTXoHRmc8A>. For an impression of their playing, see video ex.7 - <https://youtu.be/OxTXoHRmc8A>, an excerpt from a rehearsal of Yu Lefu's ensemble.*) The group does two things that most conservatory musicians in China don't do: they play all their repertoire by heart, even the most complex pieces, and they respect the Chinese traditional tunings. Most other Cantonese music groups in Guangzhou need scores and a conductor and would shun variation and improvisation. Yet this freedom, says Yu Lefu, is paramount in the traditional style, so it is essential for him and his musician friends to keep it up. He says it is what attracts him most of all in this music.

As for the relationship between father and son, it couldn't be better. Yu Lefu says: “I greatly admire my father, but I would like to surpass him. This is the biggest challenge for me now: to play even more traditionally than he does. I want to beat him at his own game.” When asked what he sees as his father's most powerful qualities and the factors which inspired him most, he mentions a “gentle temperament” and deep concentration when playing music. And what does Yu Lefu see as his main artistic task

for the future? “To find a new path of development in Cantonese music, namely, how to be yourself while using a unique regional musical language.”

Shanghai Masters of the Endblown Chinese Flute *Xiao*

The experiences of Yu Qiwei and Yu Lefu illustrate the different opportunities, expectations and career paths of two generations of a single family of professional musicians from the 1970s to the present. This final case study does something similar for two unrelated musicians, Shanghai's two best-known *xiao* masters, but greatly extends the timeline, reaching back to the 1920s. The older musician, Sun Yude (1904-1981), grew up before the institution of conservatory study of traditional Chinese music, but became associated with the new professional musical establishment in the 1950s. The younger man, Dai Shuhong (b.1937), acquired his skills at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he taught for most of his working life. However, he later applied those skills to an esoteric musical tradition only marginally present in the conservatories—that of *qin-xiao* ensemble playing, in which the *xiao* player forms a duo with a *qin* player. Below we first introduce the *xiao*, then its two most prominent Shanghai-based proponents; thereafter we compare and contrast the ways in which the two musicians acquired their technical skills and developed their distinctive personal styles.

Among the Han Chinese,¹⁸ two forms of flute are prevalent today: the transverse bamboo *dizi* and the endblown bamboo *xiao*. Of these two, the *dizi* is by far the more widely played in both amateur and professional circles. Its bright, piercing tone is created in part by the application of a thin vegetable membrane to an extra hole placed between its embouchure hole and its six finger holes, and it has long been an indispensable member of ritual and secular folk music ensembles throughout China.¹⁹ Following the push from the 1950s on to modernize, standardize and institutionalize traditional Chinese instruments, the *dizi*, with its loud sound and easy virtuosity, quickly earned a prominent place in the newly professionalized musical world. Outstanding folk proponents became salaried civil servant musicians and conservatory teachers, encouraged to create a new solo repertoire that continues to expand; the music conservatories are full of talented young *dizi* players aiming at careers on the modern professional concert stage, and instruction manuals for the instrument abound.²⁰

The endblown flute *xiao*, by contrast, has largely missed the professional limelight. It is a much quieter instrument: it lacks the *dizi*'s membrane, the embouchure hole is small, and the bore is very narrow in relation to its length. In addition, the widely spaced finger holes make it more awkward to play, and the tiny embouchure hole is unforgiving of the

¹⁸ The Chinese government grants official recognition to fifty-six ethnic groups in China, with 91.51% of the population (i.e., over 1.2 billion people) classified in 2010 as members of the Han Chinese, the bearers of mainstream Chinese languages and cultures (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011).

¹⁹ See, for example, Jones 1995 and Witzleben 1995.

²⁰ On the construction and history of the *dizi* and *xiao*, and the best-known professional players, see Lau 1991, Lau 2002, Thrasher and Wong 2011, and Zhang 2011. It is important to note that amateur performance on the *dizi* as part of traditional ritual and secular ensembles continues today. Folk proponents are typically highly expert in their own local style and repertoire rather than the formally composed post-1949 solo pieces that draw material from all over China and even abroad (see, for example, Witzleben 1995).

slightest mistake.²¹ Capable of delicate timbral nuance within its restrained dynamic range, it is not the type of instrument to take the professional stage by storm, being aesthetically more suited to the less flamboyant world of traditional amateur chamber ensembles. Unlike the *dizi*, the *xiao* has not developed a major modern solo repertory, and for the most part is present only as an afterthought in the conservatory training of *dizi* players. Whereas there have been dozens of famous *dizi* soloists since the 1950s, one is hard pressed to think of more than a tiny handful of professional musicians primarily lauded for their prowess on the *xiao*.²²

Shanghai, however, has spawned two renowned *xiao* masters of different generations: Sun Yude, who died aged 77 in 1981, and Dai Shuhong, born in 1937 and still very active as a performer and teacher. Both started life as amateur performers but later became salaried professional musicians; each came to the instrument via different formative experiences from different eras, and each developed his own instantly recognizable, highly admired style. An examination of their lives, careers, and playing styles tells us much about the development of Chinese musical performance and learning across generations, and about the ongoing interaction of professional and amateur musical worlds in China's most cosmopolitan city.

Sun Yude

Born in Shanghai in 1904, Sun Yude started out as an amateur musician playing local repertoire. He began working for the Shanghai Electric Company in 1920, rising through the ranks while practicing music on the side.²³ Initially he picked up several Chinese instruments rather informally, but in 1920 he joined the National Music Research Society (*Guoyue yanjiushe*), where he studied the *xiao* and the four-string plucked lute *pipa* systematically from two of the group's teachers, Jin Zhongxin and Xu Xian. It was at this time that he learned thoroughly the “Eight Great Pieces” that form the core of the local *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble repertory, with which he would be closely associated for the rest of his life (Tian and Sun 1994:564-565).²⁴ Both *xiao* and *pipa* are major instruments in this

²¹ The description here is of the most commonly found *xiao*, such as those shown in photo 7. The instrument is also often referred to as *dongxiao*. The version of the instrument used in the ensemble genre *nanguan/nanyin*, which is widespread in southern Fujian province, Taiwan, and Minnan-speaking parts of Southeast Asia, is shorter and thicker, with a wider bore. It is also louder as a result (Wang 2002:206).

²² A few professional *dizi* players have made the *xiao* an important secondary focus of their work—for example, Zhang Weiliang (b.1957), a professor at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, some of whose *xiao* recordings are notably experimental (Zhang 2011:356-359).

²³ Because Sun died in 1981, long before the author of this section (Helen Rees) first visited Shanghai, details of his life come primarily from the article-length biographical sketch by Tian Peize and Sun's daughter Sun Wenyan (Tian and Sun 1994).

²⁴ *Jiangnan* means “south of the [Yangtze] river”; *sizhu* means “silk and bamboo” (referring to the string instruments and flutes used). Thus this genre is called “silk and bamboo [music] from south of the Yangtze river.” The major English-language study of the genre is Witzleben 1995. A sense of the look and sound of the music as played by amateurs in a traditional Shanghai teahouse setting may be found in this video clip, accessible in February 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbf7DUgdX7k>.

widespread local ensemble genre. To become an expert in the amateur tradition of *Jiangnan sizhu* is a major undertaking: in the traditional amateur groups, one is expected to memorize the long, winding melodies of the major pieces, to be able to add ornaments extemporaneously to the heterophonic texture, and to be able to do so on several different instruments (Witzleben 1995) (photo 7). In 1924 Sun added lessons from the famous Shanghai *pipa* master Wang Yuting, who taught him the solo *pipa* repertoire; Sun practiced assiduously and learned rapidly (Tian and Sun 1994:565-566).

By the 1930s, Sun was renowned in the Shanghai musical world for his first-rate *xiao* and *pipa* skills, and was a member of an increasingly influential quartet formed by fine local exponents of the *xiao*, *pipa*, *erhu*, and *yangqin* who played a refined repertoire derived largely from regional melodies and *pipa* pieces (ibid.:566; Witzleben 1995:63-66). Despite the fact he was still working for the Shanghai Electric Company, in 1938 Sun toured the United States as part of a “China Cultural Troupe” (*Zhongguo wenhua jutuan*), to introduce Chinese arts to an American audience during the war against Japan. After his return in 1939 he plunged back into the Shanghai music world, teaching traditional repertoire to an organized amateur group that eventually became the well-known Shanghai National Music Research Association (*Shanghai guoyue yanjiuhui*). Sun was selected as the association's leader in 1941, and in 1947 took some of the members on a second tour of the United States (Tian and Sun 1994:566-567).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Sun's musical and administrative skills were quickly recognized: in 1951 he was named a deputy director of the government-established Shanghai City National Music Friendship Association (*Shanghai shi guoyue lianyi hui*), which organized amateur folk groups' activities, and in 1957 he became deputy leader of the newly established Shanghai Chinese Orchestra (*Shanghai minzu yuetuan*). This was a salaried professional group at the vanguard of the modernization and institutionalization of Chinese music. It was thus only in the 1950s that Sun was able to devote his full energy to music, finally making the transition from fine amateur to salaried professional. In this capacity he travelled abroad several more times, to India, Burma, Indonesia, and several countries in Eastern Europe (ibid.:567-568); he also undertook some teaching at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (ibid.:569). Similar transitions were made at this time by many others whose pre-1949 engagement with music had been on a purely folk, regional level, but who now found themselves salaried civil servants working within a new national framework (Lau 1991:51-64).

Remembrances of Sun Yude portray him as a naturally reflective and inquisitive musician with a meticulous approach to everything he did. His biographers mention the copious notes he took on his *pipa* lessons with Wang Yuting, his visit in 1932 to the nearby city of Suzhou to investigate Buddhist and Taoist music there, his writing out of vast numbers of folk music scores, and his learning of *qin* finger techniques from renowned masters such as Zhang Ziqian and Wu Jinglüe (Tian and Sun 1994:568). This last undertaking not only enriched his *pipa* technique (ibid.), but must also have informed his *xiao* playing when he engaged in *qin-xiao* duet performance.

The seven-string zither *qin* has long been regarded as one of the most elegant and refined Chinese instruments. Possessed of an elaborate tablature notation dating back nine centuries and a repertoire of over three thousand pieces, the *qin* is today one of best-known

symbols of Chinese literatus culture.²⁵ For the most part, its repertoire is played solo, but there is also a tradition of playing *qin-xiao* duets. Like the *xiao*, the *qin* is a very quiet instrument with an innately restrained aesthetic, so the two go together well. In such a duet, the *xiao* player creates a complementary melodic line out of the *qin* piece, remaining the junior partner who must follow the *qin*'s elastic rhythm exactly and seek to enhance what the *qin* player is doing. To become really good at this esoteric pursuit requires time and commitment: one must memorize the lengthy *qin* pieces, create a line that is usually not written down as part of a score, insert ornamentation that mimics the myriad minute ornaments produced by the *qin* player, and watch the *qin* player's fingers like a hawk to ensure that *qin* and *xiao* remain as one. While Sun Yude is perhaps first thought of for his phenomenal grasp of the *Jiangnan sizhu* tradition, he was also widely praised for the sensitive way he worked with *qin* players.

To quote his biographers:

Sun Yude's level of artistic attainment on the *xiao* was . . . very high, and he was known as the “king of the *xiao*.” Especially when . . . playing [major *qin* pieces] together with Wu Jinglüe or Zhang Ziqian, the performance was well coordinated and soul-stirring, as the elegant sound of the *xiao* blended seamlessly into the shining language of the *qin* (Tian and Sun 1994:568-569).

They go on to note the quiet elegance of his sound that resulted from the excellence of his fingering, breath control and embouchure (ibid.:569). Certainly we can see from Sun's 1962 treatise on playing the *xiao* how systematically he had developed his ideas on all aspects of *xiao* technique, including posture, dynamics and control of intonation, and how carefully he set them out for his readers. The appended practice exercises and pieces have breaths, dynamics and ornaments all carefully marked (Sun 1962).

Sun Yude made a number of recordings; among the most accessible today are eight *pipa* and *xiao* pieces brought together on the compilation CD *Sun Yude yanzou ji* (Collected performances of Sun Yude), issued in 2002. Two of these, noted as dating from the 1980s (presumably 1980 or 1981, since he died in November 1981), are solo pieces developed from folk tunes (tracks 5 and 6); both display a beautiful, even tone quality and excellent intonation, together with elegant phrasing facilitated by first-rate breath control and subtle use of many ornaments.²⁶ The final two pieces, both from the 1960s, are *qin-xiao* duets (tracks 7 and 8). The unison between *qin* and *xiao* is essentially perfect, and Sun carefully accentuates the subtle ornaments of the *qin* player's left hand while maintaining an overall sense of serenity. The tone quality, intonation and phrasing are as good as in the two *xiao* solos, and the result is a technically and aesthetically cohesive whole that few others can achieve.

²⁵ Clear English-language explanations of the *qin*'s notation, finger techniques and aesthetic are provided by Bell Yung (1997).

²⁶ As of February 2016, a few recordings by Sun are available online. For his rendition of the solo piece “Zhuangtai qiushi” (Autumnal thoughts at the dressing table), see <http://www.tudou.com/listplay/v7FIHD1yJH8/hDoFDTLoxXg.html>.

Dai Shuhong

Born in 1937 into a poor family in Taizhou, a city in Jiangsu Province to the northwest of Shanghai, Dai Shuhong, like Sun Yude, took an early interest in music, learning several instruments informally and playing local folk music and later film song tunes for fun. Unlike Sun, however, Dai received systematic music conservatory training from a young age, spending his career as part of the new professional socialist music establishment.²⁷

In 1956, when Dai was working in a Shanghai factory, he passed the entrance exam to study *dizi* (transverse bamboo flute) at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, becoming a member of the first class of traditional Chinese instrument students at the conservatory. After graduating, he was assigned to teach the modern style of *dizi* for the Conservatory, doing so for many years at the attached primary and middle schools and influencing several generations of young talent. A versatile performer, his experience included playing with modernized Chinese orchestras, recording a variety of genres, and providing *dizi* accompaniment in the late 1950s and early 1960s for Tibetan megastar propaganda singer Tseten Drolma (Caidan Zhuoma). Today, however, he is best known and widely revered for his achievements in a rather different musical realm: the rarefied world of *qin-xiao* performance.

Shanghai was a major center of the *qin* tradition in the 20th century; it was home to the respected amateur Jinyu Qin Society (*Jinyu qinshe*), founded in 1936, whose membership included many of the most famous *qin* players in the country.²⁸ Dai encountered fine *qin* performances in Shanghai in the late 1950s and 1960s; this was also the time when he heard and admired Sun Yude playing *xiao* on stage with the renowned *qin* master Zhang Ziqian (1899-1991). Following the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and a subsequent two-year spell teaching in Tibet, in the early 1980s Dai began working intensively with Zhang Ziqian on *qin-xiao* ensemble performance and on picking up the basics of *qin* technique with Zhang's help. Plunging enthusiastically into the small *qin* circle that had been revived in Shanghai after the Cultural Revolution, Dai soon became a sought-after *xiao* player for *qin-xiao* duets and himself an increasingly accomplished amateur *qin* player. As a *xiao* player he has performed both on the professional concert stage and in more traditional informal settings with many of China's top *qin* artists, including Zhang Ziqian, Lin Youren, Gong Yi, and his own daughter Dai Wei (*photo 8*) and has recorded LPs, cassettes and CDs with some of them (including the four listed here). At the age of nearly eighty, he remains in great demand as a teacher of both *xiao* and *qin*, revered for his deep knowledge of both.

One of Dai's iconic commercially issued recordings was the 1986 cassette tape *Longxiang cao* (Soaring dragon). This tape features classic repertory performed by Zhang Ziqian, with Dai playing *xiao* with him to create several duo pieces. One of the much admired duo renditions on this tape is of the piece "Pingsha luoyan" (Wild geese landing

²⁷ Information on Dai Shuhong's life comes from videotaped interviews of August 2008, which form the basis for the biography on which Dai and Helen Rees are collaborating. It should be noted in this context that Rees has learned *dizi* and *xiao* with Dai since 1987, when she began two years' study as a British Council Scholar at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

²⁸ For a vivid English-language description of *qin* activities in mid-20th-century Shanghai, see Yung 2008:55-71.

on the sandbank). Dai mimics the soft opening harmonics of the *qin* with extraordinary delicacy before going on to employ a full palette of subtly differing tone colors and elegant, unobtrusive ornaments to complement what the *qin* player is doing on the strings with his right hand (which does most of the plucking) and his left hand (which stops the strings and engages in a myriad of slides, vibrati and other ornaments). The ensemble between the two players is so perfect that it is as if they are functioning as one -- a result that can only be achieved when the members of a *qin-xiao* duo have played together intensively for years - - and the breath control and intonation on the part of the *xiao* are exemplary.²⁹ To quote the admiring words of Beijing-based *dizi* virtuoso Zhang Weiliang, through Dai's years of intensive work with Zhang Ziqian, he “explored deeply and fully experienced the mystery of the *qin*, taking the ineffably wonderful and extremely faint ‘signals’ of the *qin* and accentuating them through perfectly judged *xiao* performance, achieving the ideal result of each complementing and enriching the other” (Zhang 2011:324).

Dai, like Sun Yude before him, is meticulous in documenting his work, and equally thoughtful about what he does and the decisions he makes. In describing his own *qin-xiao* aesthetic, he emphasizes the importance of tone color (*yinse*), and the need to match the *qin*'s open strings, stopped notes, harmonics, and innumerable small ornaments. He can play on the *qin* all the *qin* pieces he performs on the *xiao* as *qin-xiao* duets, so that he knows every minute nuance of the *qin* part inside-out. But he also attributes his ability to create shifting tone colors to the opportunities his conservatory training and employment gave him to listen over the decades to fine players of both Chinese flutes and the Western silver flute.³⁰

Shanghai *Xiao* Masters Across Two Generations

The different routes by which Sun Yude and Dai Shuhong arrived at their *xiao* technique and characteristic styles of performance offer a sidelight on the broader trajectory of China's modern musical history. Sun Yude's formative years were rooted in the amateur folk and traditional music world of the early 20th-century Shanghai region: like most amateur musicians of his youth, he was a multi-instrumentalist with an extensive local repertoire, expected to be able to pick up most of the major string, wind or percussion instruments and play whatever the group needed. His later renown as both a fine *pipa* performer and an outstanding *xiao* player would be hard to imagine in today's professional musical world, where students usually specialize in just one type of instrument, rather as with the typical European conservatory. The depth of Sun's roots in the *Jiangnan sizhu* tradition can be heard in the elegant ornaments he produces on the *xiao*, his luminescent tone, his excellent intonation, and the sensitivity with which he works with others.

Dai Shuhong, by contrast, was trained primarily as a professional *dizi* performer in a music conservatory system that had deliberately borrowed much from elite European institutions and exposed him at a young age to the playing styles and aesthetics of European classical instruments. While, like Sun, he knows the *Jiangnan sizhu* repertoire and excels in playing solo *xiao* pieces created from the folk tradition, his primary love since the early

²⁹ A performance of the same piece by another renowned Shanghai *qin* musician, Gong Yi, with Dai Shuhong playing *xiao*, is accessible in February 2016 at http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/FQUfwYMXZ_s/.

³⁰ Interview videotape, 3 May 2014.

1980s has been the world of the *qin*. The melding of his deep insider feeling for the *qin* with his experience as a professional conservatory-based flautist trained to think actively about every aspect of technique has created a unique style of *qin-xiao* performance. Attuned to the slightest nuances of the *qin*'s quiet sounds and possessed of enviable embouchure and breath control, Dai changes his tone color constantly to match what the *qin* is doing. While some *qin* players also play *xiao* and some professional *dizi* virtuosi occasionally pick up a *xiao* to accompany a *qin* piece, it is the uniquely deep acquaintance with both sides of the *qin-xiao* equation that have created Dai's distinctive artistry and cemented his reputation in this esoteric tradition.

What of the future? Dai has a number of committed amateur *qin* and *xiao* students, ranging from children to middle-aged aficionados, and he passes on his knowledge and passion for the *qin* and *qin-xiao* tradition to them with meticulous care and deep engagement.³¹ It seems true that *dizi* students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music are, perhaps understandably, reluctant to sink years of effort into memorizing the long, winding pieces of the *qin-xiao* repertory or *Jiangnan sizhu*, both of which are aesthetically worlds removed from their course of study and are unlikely to benefit them in terms of income or professional standing. At a *dizi* recital held at a major hall in Shanghai in 2015, the excellent young virtuoso did include one *qin-xiao* piece but played it from a score rather than from memory. As a result, the ensemble was not perfect; in addition, the style was clearly not second nature the way it was in the brilliantly executed bravura *dizi* solos, some of which were arrangements of European classical pieces and all of which were played from memory.

Perhaps it is just the case that *xiao* players of the stature of Sun Yude and Dai Shuhong, each with his first-rate technical prowess and his secure basis in traditions learned entirely or largely outside the walls of a conservatory, will always be rare birds. But the presence of quite a number of serious amateurs—even if most may not have the time to develop the same level of exquisite skill as Sun and Dai—suggests that interest in *qin-xiao* performance will continue, just as interest in the amateur performance of *Jiangnan sizhu* does. No doubt the recordings made by Sun and Dai will be held up for years to come as exemplars of the repertoires in which they have specialized, and the complex interface between professional and amateur musicians, traditions and aesthetic outlooks will endure well into the future.

Conclusion

When Cantonese fiddle player Yu Lefu was asked whether he had any conflict with his father, he replied that he was good friends with his dad but felt that there would always be the challenge to try and do things better, with still more commitment. Perhaps true commitment is the basic hallmark of great musicians. Perhaps it is what distinguishes not only Yu Lefu and his father, but also people like Li Guangzu, Lin Youren, Sun Yude and Dai Shuhong: they show, all in their own ways, that the continuing story of traditional music in China is *not* a simple one, that it is not just about erecting a facade of “modernity,” or about being technically superb. What is needed, apart from a more sincere engagement with musical tradition, is sufficient room for adventure and for

³¹ Information in this paragraph and the next comes from Rees's observations in Shanghai since the early 21st century.

genuine personalities to unfold their talents and to follow their aspirations.

But in Mainland China today, what are the prospects for a survival of traditional music along such lines? What are the prospects for committed musicians who wish to pursue personal trajectories in music-making, independent of prevailing cultural fashions, government policies or politically motivated debates on “national music”? And how much of it can survive in the context of academic institutions?

Unfortunately, the country's rigid cultural and social climate still appears to put the brakes on creative artists' individualism. And many traditional music genres resist being lifted to the level of “stage art”; if they survive at all, they can probably only do so meaningfully within regional contexts. This is especially the case for China's myriad genres of music whose main cultural context has long been the world of rural and small-town ritual. If taught at music conservatories, they would need to operate independently from educational structures which are tailor-made for the promotion of high-brow musical stardom and virtuoso display. Whether such a niche for traditional music -- especially highly regionalized folk genres -- can still be created at today's conservatories in China remains to be seen.

At present, at the China Conservatory in Beijing it is to some extent still possible for students to get training in regional instrumental styles; in most other conservatories the option has disappeared altogether, or, if it still exists, the learning of traditional pieces is valued with the lowest number of points in official examinations, so that most students prefer to play modern virtuoso compositions: it earns them more points and probably leads to quicker appreciation in public concerts.³² One partial exception to this is the teaching of *guqin*, which, as we noted before, retains ties with the repertoires and regional styles of the past.

Training in the realm of Chinese music history, too, has tended to become shallower and more detached from music practices from the past. Central Conservatory students specializing in fields like musicology or music education in the 1980s could count on four hours of Chinese music history every week and had enough time to read such standard works as Yang Yinliu's *Zhongguo yinyue shigang* (Outline of the history of Chinese music), but in recent decades, the number of weekly lectures on this topic was very much reduced. Major standard works of the past are now often used only for reference, no longer as basic teaching materials, simply because there is not enough time to read them; Western music theory and history are claiming ever more space.³³

Generally speaking, the level of music education at academic institutions in China has suffered from a growing emphasis on commerce and from a dramatic increase in the numbers of students, especially since the 1990s. Traditionally, staff incomes at conservatories and universities used to be low, and the number of academic posts paid for

³² Information based on recent interviews (summer 2015 and January 2016) by Frank Kouwenhoven with *zheng* teachers Song Xinxin and Yang Lin, active at the Central Conservatory and the China Conservatory in Beijing.

³³ The information in this paragraph and the next two paragraphs is based on recent interviews (January 2016) by Frank Kouwenhoven with a number of teachers at the Central Conservatory in Beijing (including Tang Qiong, Zhang Boyu, Jia Guoping, Song Xinxin, Lan Weiwei, and An Ping) and at the Shanghai Conservatory (including Zhao Weiping and Xiao Mei), as well as a number of students at both schools.

by the state used to be limited, inducing institutions to supplement these from their own resources and to search for alternative funding. In the 1990s, following the country's economic reforms, institutions began to use their knowledge as a potential source of wealth. The numbers of students dramatically increased. Classes of five students in the past often grew to the size of one hundred students or more. Teaching music became a profitable business. It transformed the nature of the education itself: with commercial motives gaining importance, the quality of the teaching declined, also because – with the much greater numbers of students – there was less time left to pay attention to individual pupils' achievements. The already limited niche for traditional music has thus received a further blow.

Paradoxically, in the same period, government support for the preservation of traditional music has increased dramatically. Impressive programs for protecting or promoting traditional music have been set up, in a wealth of different guises: intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects, internet archives, eco-cultural protection zones, ecomuseums, support grants for outstanding musicians (“cultural treasures”), sponsored concert tours and exhibitions, and a good deal more.³⁴ But ICH – so far – seems to have had very little impact on developments in institutionalized music education.

Admittedly, the renewed attention to tradition presents a dramatic reevaluation of tradition, a reversal of the anti-traditionalism of former decades: many would agree with *pipa* player Li Guangzu's view that “traditional culture can help the country forge ahead” (rather than block its progress). A proud return to China's “Confucian heritage” is promoted in many Chinese media. It has been heralded as a pan-Asian development, echoing a similar revival of Confucian ideals elsewhere in East Asia, for example in South Korea.³⁵

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if this current craze for preservation and promotion of traditional music can have a positive impact on the country's highest-level musical training institutions. Perhaps a partial rehabilitation of older and regional folk styles of Chinese music within the curriculum of these institutions is possible. There are some positive developments and signs of change pointing in this direction. For example, in 2004, the Yunnan Art Institute invited several folk musicians as guest professors for one semester to teach undergraduates traditional music and dance.³⁶ This was a costly experiment that was apparently not repeated, but the rise of the market economy in China does create the funds to set up and support such new initiatives. The Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Music Conservatory of Wuhan initiated a project in which composers, musicians and musicologists cooperate closely in fieldwork on traditional rural music. The project has boldly broken through the conventionally tight barriers which exist between these professional realms in China – another promising sign. In the same period, the Shanghai Conservatory has been hosting a growing number of concerts of “world music” from inside and outside China, widening the cultural horizon of its teachers and students. World music has been part of the curriculum of

³⁴ For ICH protection policies in China, see Rees 2012.

³⁵ See, for example, Pastreich 2016.

³⁶ Rees 2012:34.

Chinese conservatory students for a number of years, but never before has there been such a generous exposure to *live* traditions.

An increasing wealth of historical and field recordings of Chinese traditional music now gets published, and such recordings are made more widely available than ever before, via record shops or on the internet, so that there is more opportunity for students to learn more about traditional genres. And some music teachers now grant their students more freedom to temporarily study with alternative teachers so that they acquire a more varied knowledge about techniques and different playing styles. And, last but not least, a growing number of students now take the step of contacting traditional musicians for lessons or information. In sum, there is really a growing window of opportunity for music students to acquire new and rewarding experiences with traditional music and to expand their existing notions and concepts of music more generally.

Nevertheless, the current call for “more emphasis on native culture,” as positive as it may sound, seems as firmly steeped in political motives as the anti-traditionalism of the red past. It expresses an interest on the part of the government, first and foremost, in strengthening nationalistic sentiments in China. It is one of the reasons why native cultural treasures and traditional values are raised to the level of sacred truths and ideal models for emulation. There is little to argue against a reappraisal of native traditions, but to “stipulate” interest in Chinese roots might well in the end become as counterproductive as doing the opposite – “prescribing” modernity and quick Westernization, as happened in the past. One can only hope that it does not lead to a situation where, due to political pressures, Chinese musicians will need to face almost as many difficulties in defining their own position versus tradition as their 20th-century predecessors did – namely the musicians whose struggles and tribulations formed the focus of most of this paper.

Illustrations



Figure 1a: A traditional mouth organ from northern China. Photo: CHIME Archive.



Figure 1b: A giant version of a Chinese mouth organ, as used in the Chinese National Traditional Orchestra in Beijing. Still bigger versions exist, with external keyboards and pedals. Copyright: CHIME.



Figure 2: *Pipa* player Li Guangzu. Copyright: CHIME.



Figure 3: *Qin* player Lin Youren. Copyright: CHIME.



Figure 4: Yu Qiwei, fiddle player in Hong Kong. Copyright: CHIME.



Figure 5: Yu Lefu and his band of Cantonese musicians in Guangzhou. Photo courtesy Yu Lefu Band.



Figure 6: Yu Lefu and colleagues: “cool” young men. Photo courtesy Yu Lefu Band.



Figure 7: Amateur *Jiangnan sizhu* performance in the Huxinting Teahouse, Shanghai, August 1999. Photo by Helen Rees. Note the two *xiao* players at the bottom of the picture (Dai Shuhong is on the right), with a *dizi* player right of centre.



Figure 8: *Qin-xiao* ensemble: Dai Shuhong (*xiao*) and Dai Wei (*qin*) at home in Shanghai, August 1999. Photo by Helen Rees.

Video excerpts

VID 1: Chinese Orchestra (short excerpt of a performance by the Chinese National Traditional Orchestra in Beijing). From a DVD issued by the orchestra in 2001, used with their permission. 1 min. <https://youtu.be/xmDr397z04M>

VID 2: Yan Jiemin, *erhu* (with piano): Sarasate - armen Fantasia, short excerpt, used with permission from the performer. 1 min. https://youtu.be/F_BCsrIBd0I

VID 3: Excerpts from an interview with *pipa* player Li Guangzu, summer 2007, Beijing. Copyright: CHIME. 7 mins. <https://youtu.be/c-Qcd2c4kag>

VID 4: Excerpt from a performance on *zheng* by Qi Yao, a teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory, June 2004. Copyright: CHIME. 1 min. <https://youtu.be/1ghmPFf9IIM>

VID 5: Excerpts from an interview with *qin* player Lin Youren, summer 2007, Shanghai. Copyright: CHIME. 6 mins. <https://youtu.be/iYBsUHOse-w>

VID 6: Yu Lefu and his “Wujiatou” ensemble, demonstration of various southern fiddles (*erxian, zhutiqin, gaohu, yehu*). Copyright: CHIME. 3 mins. <https://youtu.be/QxTXoHRmc8A>

VID 7: Yu Lefu and his “Wujiatou” ensemble, excerpt from a rehearsal of Cantonese music Copyright: CHIME. 1 min. https://youtu.be/_922uWukQDk

Yu Lefu – Rain on Banana Leaves - <https://youtu.be/r4NwvL040Z8>

Glossary of frequently used Chinese terms

dizi	笛子	transverse flute
erhu	二胡	two-string fiddle
gaohu	高胡	high-pitched two-string fiddle used in Cantonese music
guqin/qin	古琴／琴	seven-string bridgeless zither
Jiangnan sizhu	江南丝竹	chamber ensemble genre from the Shanghai region
pipa	琵琶	four-string plucked lute
sheng	笙	mouth organ
xiao	箫	endblown flute
yangqin	扬琴	hammered dulcimer
zheng	筝	bridged zither

Characters for selected other Chinese names and terms

An Ping	安平
Cai Yuanpei	蔡元培
Caidan Zhuoma	才但卓玛
Chen Guochan	陈国产
Dai Shuhong	戴树红
Dai Wei	戴微
dongxiao	洞箫
dui-tan	对弹
Gong Yi	龚一
Gu Meigeng	顾梅羹
Guoyue yanjiushe	国乐研究社
He Lüting	贺绿汀
Huang Jin	黄进
Jia Guoping	贾国平
Jin Zhongxin	金忠信
Jinyu qinshe	金虞琴社
Kong Qingyan	孔庆炎
Lan Weiwei	兰维薇
Li Guangzu	李光祖
Li Tingsong	李廷松
Lin Chen	林晨
Lin Youren	林友仁
Liu Jingsao	刘景韶
Liu Shaochun	刘少椿
Liu Tianyi	刘天一
Peng Yanzhen	彭燕珍
Pingsha luoyan	平沙落雁

Qi Yao	祁瑶	
qin-xiao	琴箫	
Rao Ningxin	饶宁新	
Shanghai guoyue yanjiuhui		上海国乐研究会
Shanghai minzu yuetuan		上海民族乐团
Shanghai shi guoyue lianyi hui		上海市国乐联谊会
Shen Caonong	沈草农	
Song Xinxin	宋心馨	
Sun Yude	孙裕德	
Tang Kaixuan	汤凯旋	
Tang Qiong	汤琼	
Wang Tianwei	汪天伟	
Wang Yuting	汪昱庭	
Wei Zhongle	仲乐	
Wu Jinglüe	吴景略	
Xia Yifeng	夏一峰	
Xiao Mei	萧梅	
Xiao Youmei	萧友梅	
Xu Xian	许仙	
Yan Jiemin	严洁敏	
Yang Lin	杨琳	
yinse	音色	
Yu Lefu	余乐夫	
Yu Qiwei	余其伟	
Zha Fuxi	查阜西	
Zhang Boyu	张伯瑜	
Zhang Ziqian	张子谦	
Zhao Weiping	赵维平	
Zhongguo wenhua jutuan		中国文化剧团
Zhu Hai	朱海	
Zhuangtai qiusi	妆台秋思	

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