

Brief Note on the Cheng

Robert van Gulik — *Toyo ongaku kenkyu*, Vol. 9, 1951; herdrukt in *Music of Cheng*, 1971

法官狄

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Voor de presentatie van het gedenkboek Robert van Gulik 1910–2010 zocht ik een muzikaal intermezzo. In eerste instantie dacht ik aan Van Guliks geliefde instrument, de *gu-qin*. Het was echter moeilijk iemand te vinden die dat exotische instrument bespeelde. Toen kwam Fen-mei met een alternatief: een vriendin van haar bespeelde de *gu-zheng*, een Chinese citer met 13 tot 21 snaren.

Nu wist ik dat Van Gulik daarover een artikel gepubliceerd had in een obscuur Japans tijdschrift, dus dat leek me een passend alternatief. En dat bleek het inderdaad te zijn: alle aanwezigen genoten van het exquisite spel van JingJing op haar prachtige instrument.

Onlangs ontdekte ik dat het bewuste artikel in 1971 herdrukt is in een publicatie getiteld *Music of Cheng*, uitgegeven door de *Chinese Classical Music Association*. Hier volgen enkele passages uit dat artikel.

I. Description of the instrument, and the way it is played

The *cheng* 箏 is an oblong cither, consisting of a wooden sound box, over which a number of strings are strung. The sound box is made of thin boards of *wu-t'ung* wood (梧桐, *Firmiana platanifolia*); its bottom is flat, its upper board slightly curved. The bottom board shows an oblong aperture for transmitting the sound, and used also for suspending the instrument on a hook in the wall when it is not being played.

The shape of the box, the number of strings, and the ornamentation differ locally, but the underlying principle of the instrument is always the same. At either end of the upper board of the sound box there is a high bridge of hard wood. On the right the strings, after having passed over this bridge, enter holes in the upper board, and are prevented from slipping out by little staves of bamboo tied on to them. On the left each string, after having passed over the left bridge, is pulled through a hole, and then wound round a hard wood tuning peg, *chou* 軸. When tuning the instrument, the pitch of each string is first fixed approximately by turning the peg. Then the pitch is adjusted by moving to the left or right a wooden fret of about 6 cm. high, that is placed under each string. As the frets are kept in place only by the pressure of the string, they are easily lost. Accordingly they are usually strung together by a cord of coloured silk.

[...]

The player places the instrument before him in such a way that the end with the tuning pegs is

on his left. The *cheng* is mostly played on a small table, but while being played in an orchestra it is also often put on two light wooden trestles. Old literary sources point to the fact that on occasion the *cheng* was also played on the lap.

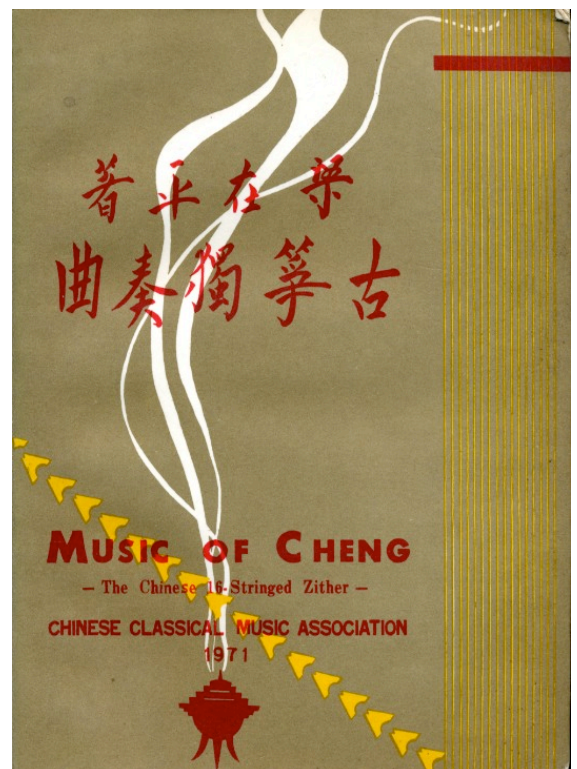
[...]

Nowadays the *cheng* is played chiefly by the right hand. As a rule no plectrum is used, but some players employ artificial nails of bamboo, attached to the thumb and middle finger of the right hand by leather rings. Chinese literature often mentions artificial nails made of deer bone, and silver nail sheaths used by lady players.

[...]

As regards the finger technique, playing the *cheng* is not very difficult. While it takes, for instance, years to learn to play the seven-stringed lute, *ku-chin* 古琴, one may become quite a good *cheng* performer in half a year or so. The main difficulty is to find one's way quickly and accurately among the sixteen strings. Since these strings are rather close together, one needs slender and nimble fingers to arrive at a sure touch. One need not wonder, therefore, that since olden times the *cheng* has been a favourite instrument of lady musicians. Notwithstanding the comparative simplicity of its structure and technique, the *cheng* produces a most charming music, and is capable of a wide range of musical expression.

[...]



II. History of the *cheng*, and its place in Chinese culture

[...]

From a cultural point of view, the *cheng* occupies in Chinese musical life a position akin to that of the *p'i-p'a* 琵琶, the well-known pear-shaped mandolin; *cheng-p'a* 箏 琴 “*Cheng* and *p'i-p'a*” has become a fixed compound, used in both Chinese prose and poetry.

Although Chinese literary sources of the succeeding dynasties mention a number of scholars who attained fame because of their *cheng* playing, the small cither was first and foremost a ladies' instrument. It was played chiefly by Court ladies, by the female members of noble households, and by high-class courtesans. While throughout the centuries the *ch'in* 琴, the seven-stringed lute, has been associated with solemn literary meetings in the scholar's library, and with the ceremonial orchestra in the Temple of Confucius, the *cheng*, on the other hand, suggested intimate gatherings in the harem, and gay informal parties enlivened by the presence of female entertainers.

Chinese essays and poems often mention *cheng* music in connection with beautiful maidens and love intrigues, while a young girl playing the *cheng* was a favourite subject depicted by ancient painters. As an illustration of these associations of the *cheng* with love and beauty, I quote the following two poems.

The cither (by the scholar-artist Shen Yüeh 沈約, 441–513).

The cither of Ch'in gives forth unsurpassed melodies,
The frets of jade make the strings produce high-pitched tunes.
The strings are strung so tight as to be nearly breaking,

The melody follows her agile fingers roaming over the strings.

But how can one by merely hearing the lingering echo far-off,
Divine the perfect beauty of the player?

[...]

To a cither player (Sung poem)

All my life I have been indifferent to most things,
But now I fain would be transformed into a cither.

For thus I would be near to the slender fingers of the lovely maiden,
And, resting on her smooth silk lap, sing sweet melodies.

[...]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that the revival of the *cheng* augurs well for the future. The *ch'in*, the seven-stringed lute, will always be the most perfect, and technically most developed, Chinese musical instrument; its music will always be the repository of all that is best in Chinese classical music throughout the ages, the highest expression of Chinese musical genius. Its character is such, however, that it must always remain limited to a comparatively small circle of connoisseurs, while the volume of sound produced is so small that it can never be enjoyed by a larger audience. The *cheng*, on the other hand, may serve a double purpose. First, it may play an important role in preserving and popularizing ancient Chinese music of a lighter genre. And second, the *cheng* may be utilized for developing a modern, purely Chinese music, accessible to broader circles: an indispensable factor in national life.

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