
Title of Object

Zither (Qin)

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: China (Warring States)

Date of Object: 5th century BCE

Country: China

Accession Number: 2002.8

File Created: 5/22/2016

Material/Medium: Lacquer over wood core

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Tour Topics

Group 4 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, celebration, entertainment/music, funerary/afterlife, mythology, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, silk strings, Confucianism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

This musical instrument was made in China nearly 2500 years ago. Found in a tomb, it would have accompanied its owner into the afterlife and could provide joy and solace to him. Take a quiet moment to explore the top, front and sides while listening to a short audio clip of a modern ch'in being played. Look for things that surprise you (geometric designs, for animals, or humanoid figures) on the Ch'in.

China was well known for the silk it produced and stringed instruments were known as "silk" instruments. This zither-type Ch'in was originally strung with 5 bundles of silk that could be strummed or played by plucking with a long hard fingernail. What type of person do you think would be most likely to play or listen to this type of music?

If you had a recording of this music, (assuming you enjoyed the audio clip) when would you listen to it?

What class or type of person might want it in their tomb?

This ch'in (also called "qin") or zither is constructed of lacquer over a wood core that has been carved and it probably had multiple layers of lacquer. After the top lacquer layer was cured, red paint and gold leaf were applied. Can you spot any animals that are carved or painted on the Ch'in? The Chinese believed that each compass point was guarded by a specific animal. The phoenix ruled the south, the tortoise ruled the north, the dragon ruled the east and the tiger the west. What attributes do we associate with them? Why do you think the artist included the animals seen here?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1) ORIGINAL LABEL from 2002:

Remarkable for its fine state of preservation and brilliant colors, this extremely rare, five-stringed musical instrument is constructed from a single piece of wood with a rectangular hole cut in the underside serving as a sound box. A tiger's face with large eyes and flattened ears is carved at one end. The piece is covered overall with black lacquer painted with a fine red cross-hatched design on top and sides. On this ground, the sides are decorated with a frieze of five sinuous, black dragons with elongated arched bodies, long tails, thin legs and gold wings. The fingerboard is painted with a register of four groups of confronting double-headed dragons with snake-like silvered bodies between a mythical human-faced (shaman?) dragon form at either end.

This finely decorated ch'in conforms in both form and decoration to Chu kingdom lacquer of the Warring States (475-221 BCE) era. The discovery of the tomb of Marquis Yi of Cheng in Hupei province datable to about 433 BCE yielded a selection of lacquer zithers including one similar to this one in form and number of strings. The importance of court music is manifest in the scale and artistry involved in the manufacture of lacquer instruments of this era. Radio carbon dating (carbon 14) confirms the age of this piece.

2) The Classical zither (standardized in the Han Dynasty) consists of a long, narrow upper wooden board made from tong tree (or other trees of the pine family) and a lower board made from catalpa tree (or other hardwood). These two pieces of boards are struck together and lacquered on the surface. There are 13 small dots (called hui) of ivory, jade, or mother-of-pearl that indicate pitch positions, primarily on the upper melodic string inlaid on the outside of the upper boards, which mark the positions of the musical notes and their harmonics. In the Han period, seven silk strings of graduated thickness and tuned pentatonically using pegs on the underside of the sound box are stretched on the upper board, starting from the thickest one on the outside to the thinnest on the inside (closest to the player's body). This Ch'in, from before the Han period, originally had only five strings.

3) East Asian lacquer is a resin made from the highly toxic sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* tree, which is native to the area and a close relative of poison ivy. In essence, lacquer is a natural plastic; it is remarkably resistant to water, acid, and, to a certain extent, heat. Raw lacquer is collected annually by extracting the viscous sap through notches cut into the trees. It is gently heated to remove excess moisture and impurities. Purified lacquer can then be applied to the surface of nearly any object or be built up into a pile. Once coated with a thin layer of lacquer, the object is placed in a warm, humid, draft-free cabinet to dry. As high-quality lacquer may require thirty or more coats, its production is time-consuming and extremely costly.

4) While items covered with lacquer have been found in China dating to the Neolithic period, lacquerware with elaborate decoration requiring labor-intensive manufacturing processes made its first appearance during the Warring States period. Lacquer as an art form developed in China along two

distinct paths—pictorial (or surface) decoration and carving of the lacquer. Rarely are the two techniques used in combination. In early times, surface decoration took the form of painting or inlay. The earliest lacquered objects were colored black or red with the addition of charcoal or cinnabar to the refined sap. Because lacquer is such a volatile substance, only a few additional coloring agents will combine with it.

5) Compared with other Chinese instruments, the ch'in is unique for at least three aspects: a. The effective vibrating length of the ch'in strings is longer than of any other Chinese instruments, resulting in a large vibrating amplitude and a tone rich in the lower register that fits the sounds of nature. b. The fingerboard of the ch'in is the upper board that does not consist of any frets. Its sound holes are opened on the lower board, which means that the sound is transmitted downwards. c. Over 100 harmonics can be played on the ch'in, making the instrument having the largest number of overtones. Among the existing 3000 pieces of Qin music, only about 70 of them could be played by today's musicians. The ancient scores of the rest of these pieces need to be explored and transcribed. The oldest ch'in score, *Orchid in Seclusion* in *Jie Shi Diao*, was 1400 year old. The score was said to have been composed by Confucius. The fingering and the recording of score has been changed and developed with the evolution of history, and therefore the transcription of ch'in music is a very hard work.

6) General characteristics of Chinese stringed Instruments: First, the strings of ancient instruments stretched along a wide soundboard. Second, present day zithers ("classical instruments" standardized in the Han Dynasty) acquired their shape during the first half of the first millennium CE and have changed little until this century. And third, Chinese zithers use two methods of fine-tuning: adjusting string lengths by movable bridges such as in the se or of string tensions by tuning pegs, pegs such as in the ch'in. Peg tuning is seen on the classical ch'in. Its seven strings have approximately the same length and tension, but different thickness made up of 48, 54, 64, 72, 81, 96, and 108 silk threads. This graduated set yields a pentatonic scale which is fine tuned by pegs. On the ch'in, each string is tied to a twisted, thick cord that passes through a channel along the axis of the peg, called an "axial peg". While in the channel, the cord exits a side opening, loops around the outside of the peg, and returns to the channel through the same hole. This arrangement binds the peg to the lower end of the cord, while the top end is fixed against the bridge. When the peg is turned, the cord twists more tightly and its effective length shortens. This pulls the string, increases its tension, and raises the pitch.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Pre Han dynasty (Zhou and Warring States) musical ensembles (11th–3rd century B.C.) contained highly complex and varied instruments. Orchestras consisting of exceptionally decorated instruments, notably one discovered in 1978 in the tomb of the Marquis Yi of the former Zeng state (Hubei Province, 5th century B.C.), reveal an astonishing understanding of the interplay between physics, acoustics, metallurgy, and design. Some 125 instruments, including sets of tuned bells and stone slabs suspended from ornate tiered stands, transverse lutes, bamboo panpipes, mouth organs producing several pitches at once (sheng), zithers (ch'in and se), and drums comprise an ensemble that was the most sophisticated and complex of its time.

Classification and Context of Musical Instruments

Zhou scholars provided the first classification system for musical instruments. The bayin (eight-tone) system presented in the *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou, ca. 3rd century B.C.) organized musical instruments into

eight resonating materials—hide, clay, metal, stone, gourd, wood, silk and bamboo. This breakdown complemented cosmological assumptions and concepts such as the eight compass points and the eight trigrams (ba gua). In later periods, as wind (bamboo) and string (silk) instruments became dominant, the term sizhou (“silk-bamboo”) became a synonym for music itself.

The Qin, in accordance with the Confucian Way, was used as a "vehicle for worship, formation of character, and regulation of political life of the state." It was the instrument of the Confucian Superior Man and most of the scholars of the day were required to study and regularly practice the instrument. Throughout recorded history the ch'in was the chosen instrument of the Chinese literati, played for personal enjoyment and self-cultivation.

This ancient instrument has always been treasured as a symbol of high culture by Chinese intellectuals and Confucianists, and it is often seen in landscapes with sages viewing some scenic beauty. The well-educated person was expected to be skilled in four arts: qi (chess, or probably go), shu (calligraphy), hua (brush painting), and the playing of the ch'in.

“The role of music is elaborated in later works in the Confucian tradition. In the writings of Confucius’s most famous pupil, Mencius (ca 371-289 BCE), the disciple Zigong says: “By seeing the rites of a ruler, we may know the character of his government. By hearing his music, we may know the character of his virtue”. And then Yue Ji says: “...the early kings instituted rites and music to regulate human conduct.” The chapter continues: “It is the business of (music and rites) to attune people’s feelings and give elegance to their outward manifestations.” “Music comes from within; rites act from without.” (and later in the Yue Ji) “Coming from within, music produces serenity (of the mind). Let music achieve its full results, and there will be no resentments.”

Some evidence suggests “the ch'in originated as a foreign instrument, Confucius nevertheless accepted it as a wholly Chinese one, if we are to believe the later traditions. Though Marquis Yi might have enjoyed listening to his female musician playing licentious music on his ten-stringed ch'in and the other instruments in his chamber ensemble, Confucius was thought to have used the same sort of instrument to perform the music of self-cultivation a half-century earlier. The evidence from the tomb of Marquis Yi tells us that the early history of the ch'in was not necessarily so simple and pure as later literati musicians would have liked to believe.”

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Remarkable for its state of preservation and vivid colors, this rare five-stringed instrument called ch'in is constructed from a single piece of wood with a rectangular hole cut in the underside serving as a sound box. The important discovery of the tomb of Marquis I of Cheng (433 BCE), which yielded the massive set of sixty-five bronze bells also included two types of lacquer zithers: one version with ten strings resembled the rectangular type held by the tomb figurine shown here. The second, narrower type, is very close in form, fine decoration, and number of strings to this example.

Still being played, the ch'in is arguably the oldest continuous musical tradition in the world. Its unique notational system, which records detailed finger techniques that indicate timbral subtleties, has persisted since at least the T'ang dynasty. Popular since the time of Confucius (6th century BCE), the ch'in has shared an intimate relationship with the lives and thoughts of the literati. The instrument of choice for traditional scholars, it offers a unique view of Chinese culture. The soundtrack playing in the gallery includes a section of "ancient" ch'in music.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Music and Art of China, article at Met Museum:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/much/hd_much.htm

Video of playing the ch'in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2es7oZzwLWM>

Chinese Arts and Music Association: <http://www.uschinamusic.org/instrument/plucked/guqin.php>

Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/art/qin-musical-instrument>

(icon for recording of ch'in music can be found here)

Article on lacquerware from Met Museum: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/elac/hd_elac.htm

Books:

Music in the age of Confucius, edited by Jenny F. So, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur Sackler Gallery
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC © 2000 (Full text available online:

https://archive.org/stream/musicinageofconf00soje/musicinageofconf00soje_djvu.txt)

The Resonance of the Qin in East Asian Art, Stephen Addiss, China Institute of America © 1999