

Music, Traditional

Chuántǒng yīnyuè 传统音乐

Chinese traditional music, developed to accompany ritual and with pentatonic melodies that reach back to the thirteenth century, is characterized by instrumental variation on set tunes and percussive patterns. Instruments are often specific to a musical genre and context of performance: silk-stringed instruments and bamboo lutes for tea house performances and zithers for personal meditation, for example.

Music is part of Chinese community life. Much of Chinese traditional music, from folk songs to opera and from region to region, is based on ancient *qupai*, stock melodies performed on traditional instruments. Although some genres, such as the music performed in imperial courts, were lost during the social upheavals of the twentieth century, much of traditional music remains alive today, either performed traditionally or combined with Western instrumentation.

Origins

China's diverse musical traditions and regional styles should be seen as part of a wider overview of music in Asia. Many instruments and musical genres, like the drum and *shawm* (a woodwind instrument) bands (*guchui*), the *pipa*

(a four-string plucked lute), and the *yangqin* (a hammered dulcimer played with bamboo beaters) were brought to China from the the Near East and Central Asia.

Much Chinese music is linked to ritual contexts, from the Confucian rituals of the imperial court to those of village weddings, funerals, and festivals. The ritual music of the imperial court was imbued with complex Confucian theories that linked musical sound to the stability of the empire and the turning of the seasons. This music was lost at the beginning of the twentieth century with the abdication of the last emperor, but court entertainment music has been partially preserved in the beautiful instrumental traditions of Buddhist temples and village ritual ensembles.

Many of the melodies used in traditional Chinese music are drawn from a stock of melodies (*qupai*), distinct melodic units with titles that may be set to a variety of texts, found in varying forms in instrumental music and narrative song and opera genres across China. The titles or labels of these melodies are drawn from the Song dynasty (960–1279) poetry of the ninth and tenth centuries; the melodies themselves can be traced back to the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368).

Characteristics

The aesthetics of Chinese music, with its emphasis on harmony, restraint, and conformity to tradition is linked to the need for correct, nondeviating observance of ritual. Variation and reinterpretation of existing melodies are

prized over creation of the new. Generally, Chinese melodies are built on the pentatonic (five tones) scale, with two more pitches used as embellishment and for modulation. Stock melodies, called *qupai*, are identified by titles or labels. Variations of the skeletal *qupai* are distinguished by the speed, meter, and the degree of ornamentation. Each musical instrument ornaments (*jiahua*, loosely “adds flowers to”) the skeletal notes in its own way, creating a delicate variety of sounds. Meter is marked by *banyan* (beats and “eyes,” or secondary beats), based on the beats of the *ban* (wood clapper). In theory, *ban* is marked by a stroke of the clapper and *yan* by the stroke of the drum or woodblock. The resulting metrical pattern is analogous to a time signature. The most common traditional musical notation (*gongchepu*) uses symbols based on the heptatonic (seven-tone) scale. Notation serves as a basic guide, recording only the skeletal notes (*guganyin*) of a melody.

Genres, Performers, and their Instruments

Shawm bands are groups of musicians, usually male and traditionally low class, who perform daily life celebration music in and around their villages, most regularly at weddings, funerals, and market fairs. Each region has its own repertoire and style.

More widespread are the amateur silk and bamboo (*sizhu*) instrumental ensembles often found in urban tea-houses. They are named for the silk strings of the *erhu* (a two-stringed fiddle) and *sanxian* (a three-stringed lute) and the bamboo of the *dizi* (a transverse flute). *Sizhu* ensembles, whose repertoire is based on *gupai* or titled melodies, are most commonly found in central-eastern and southern China. Percussion ensembles of gongs, cymbals, and drum are also widespread.

The costumes and painted faces of the warrior (*hualian*), clown (*chou*), and woman warrior (*wudan*) and the stylized movements of actors are representative of traditional conventions of Chinese high opera such as the Beijing Opera. Traditional musical components include use of titled melodies, altered to fit the words of arias, and set percussion patterns that represent different characters and different dramatic situations. A drummer serves as

conductor, directing the actors’ movements and leading a percussion ensemble that accompanies the dramatic action. Regional opera, performed at rural temple fairs or public theaters in town, draws on the same stock of melodies and stories taken from popular novels, but the music may be simpler, utilizing solo narrative songs, accompanied by percussion or *sanxian* lute.

A separate vocal genre is that of rural folk songs, often called mountain songs (*shan’ge*). Folk song is strongly tied to locality, so there is great regional variation. The most beautiful are thought to be the songs of northwest China, especially the bitter songs (*suanqu’r*) of the boat pullers on the Huang (Yellow) River and the camel drivers on the Silk Roads.

Few traditional genres are performed by women, but in folk-song festivals held in the northwest and linked to the temple fairs, men and women gather in groups to sing improvised, often crude sexual lyrics. Such occasions lie outside the normally strict Confucian morality of village life. Another genre with women performers is the southern narrative song genre of *nanguan*, in which vocals are accompanied by the wooden clapper, *pipa* and *sanxian* lutes, *xiao* (flute), and *erxian* (two-stringed fiddle).

Distinct from the ensembles and community context of *shawm* bands, silk and bamboo groups, opera, and folk songs is the unique and ancient musical tradition of the *guqin* (a seven-stringed zither). This instrument, played for personal refinement and meditation of gentlemen-scholars, has come to be emblematic of Chinese music. Its tunes are thought to be programmatic, describing a scene or story, and much traditional literature is devoted to tales of disciples who perfectly understood the mood and images their master’s playing evoked. The *guqin* has its own special complex notation, and its performance traditionally involves an element of historical research: interpretation and reworking of centuries-old scores and their commentaries, themselves based on still earlier notations.

Modernization and Westernization

All of these traditional genres still thrive in contemporary China, but the twentieth century brought modernization

and Westernization to Chinese music. Western instruments, theories, and attitudes were introduced, and a musical schooling system and new professional troupes and orchestras were established.

The Communist revolution in 1949 brought with it attacks on traditional culture along with extensive reworking of folk music to produce revolutionary folk songs. Model operas (*yangbanxi*), which the Communist cultural authorities used to instruct people by using revolutionary models as characters, feature elements of traditional music and proletarian protagonists. After the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the loosening of social controls in the 1980s brought about a great revival of traditional music alongside its old ritual contexts. It also permitted the swift rise of a booming industry of pop and rock music that has been promoted on television and through ubiquitous karaoke bars. The rock music of Cui Jian combines traditional Chinese and Western instruments and adds Western rock cadences to traditional Chinese melodies. Several modern Chinese composers have also achieved international recognition with works that draw in part on Chinese traditions. Tan Dun, who wrote the score for the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, composed the symphony *Li Sao*, based on a fourth-century BCE Hunan lament, to be played by a Western symphony orchestra. An integral part of China's history and identity both in style and instrumentation, traditional music in China continues to evolve its way into modernity.

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Further Reading

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Pass oneself off as one of the Yu
pipe players in an ensemble.

滥竽充数

làn yú chōng shù