

Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi

Yú Bóya hé Zhōng Zīqī 俞伯牙和钟子期

The Chinese call a close, sympathetic friend *zhiyin* (knowing the sound) or “one who truly appreciates the tune played by another.” This is an allusion to a legend about two friends named Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi.

Yu Boya refers to the actual famed musician Bo Ya who lived in the State of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE). He demonstrated a great musical talent at an early age and later became

a student of a great master *zheng* player named Cheng Lian. *Zheng* is a traditional Chinese stringed instrument of the zither family. Even though he excelled at all the techniques Master Cheng could teach him, Yu Boya was still unsatisfied, because he felt unable to express his feelings when he played. Seeing this, Cheng Lian offered to take him to his own master, who lived on an island in the East China Sea. Once there, Cheng Lian asked Yu Boya to wait for his master; he promised to pick up Yu Boya when he was done. Days passed, however, without a sign of either Cheng Lian or Cheng’s master. Now Yu Boya’s only companions were the birds singing in the forest. Their

This man plays a *zheng*, the instrument Yu Boya played to his friend Zhong Ziqi during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.





After the death of his friend Zhong Ziqi, Yu Boya never plucked the strings of his *zheng* again.

songs, with the backdrop of the pounding waves, sounded as melancholy as he felt. This struck a chord in his heart; with a sigh, Yu Boya began to pluck his *zheng*, and it produced the soul-stirring music he had been seeking all along. In fact, this was just what Master Cheng Lian had planned. Later, people observed that Yu Boya played so well that “even horses eating at their troughs would raise their heads and listen” (Zhu, 1998). Nevertheless, he still was not satisfied because he felt that no one really understood the beautiful music he could play.

One day, Yu Boya was traveling on a riverboat when it began to rain. He had to seek shelter at the foot of a mountain. Watching the downpour as it beat on the heaving waters of the river, Yu Boya felt the urge to play a tune in response. He was indulging himself with the emotions that his beautiful music had created when a string on his *zheng* snapped. Yu Boya raised his head and caught sight of a woodchopper sitting on the bank. The man, Zhong Ziqi by name, had been listening to Yu’s music so attentively

that he was even oblivious of the rain. Deeply touched, Yu Boya invited Zhong Ziqi to his boat so he could share his music with him. As soon as Yu Boya finished a tune he had named in his own mind “High Mountains,” Zhong Ziqi told him, unaware of Yu Boya’s unstated title for the song, that the melody painted a picture of unbroken mountain ranges in his mind. Then, after Yu Boya performed another tune he intended to call “Flowing Waters,” Zhong Ziqi commented that it seemed as if he had heard the torrent of the Yangzi (Chang) River while listening to the song. Seeing his *zhiyin* in front of him, Yu Boya’s joy was boundless. Instantly they became avowed friends. Before parting, they agreed to meet again in the near future.

A few years later, Yu Boya decided to pay Zhong Ziqi a visit. Unfortunately, when he arrived at his home, he learned that Zhong Ziqi had already passed away. Yu Boya was filled with sorrow, lamenting that no one in this world would ever appreciate his music like Zhong Ziqi. Rushing to his friend’s tomb, Yu Boya knelt down and started playing his *zheng*. Then, rising slowly, he crashed it to the ground. After that day, not a single tune ever came out of Yu Boya’s skillful hands again.

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Further Reading

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