Historical and Contemporary Development of the

Chinese Zheng

by

Han Mei

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Department of Music (School of)

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The zheng is a plucked, half-tube Chinese zither with a history of over two and a half millennia. During this time, the zheng, as one of the principal Chinese instruments, was used in both ensemble and solo performances, playing an important role in Chinese music history.

Throughout its history, the zheng underwent several major changes in terms of construction, performance practice, and musical style. Social changes, political policies, and Western musical influences also significantly affected the development of the instrument in the twentieth century; thus the zheng and its music have been brought to a new stage through forces of modernization and standardization. This thesis focuses mainly upon contemporary changes. Chapter One reviews zheng history before the 20th century, including its etymology, origin, construction, and music. The discussion is based upon historical documents, archaeological finds, and contemporary studies from both Chinese and non-Chinese sources. Through an examination of social, political, and cultural issues, Chapter Two examines the contribution of musicians who have facilitated the transition from traditional styles to modern interpretations of zheng music. Finally, Chapter Two also examines aspects of modernized instruments, such as the construction of the changeable-key zheng and the butterfly-shaped zheng, together with some new performance techniques and new compositions.
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CHAPTER ONE
HISTORY OF THE TRADITIONAL ZHENG

Scholarly Orientations and Sources

Chinese scholars traditionally considered the zheng as a folk or popular instrument, less significant than the cultivated scholar's zither, the seven-string qin. Compared with the extensive documentation and scholarly studies on the qin, traditional zheng studies were confined to descriptive statements. Many historical records merely have short introductions to the instrument, neglecting performance techniques, musical styles, and social functions. These early accounts have been cited in most of the Chinese music treatises and compilations throughout the centuries without critical evaluation.

The earliest known written zheng reference is in the Shiji (“Record of History,” 237 BC). The next references are brief accounts found in the Shuowen Jiezi and Shiming, ancient dictionaries from the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). These early accounts were restated in dynastic histories and musical treatises such as the Tongdian (“Encyclopedic History of Institutions,” 801) and the Yueshu (“Treatise on Music” c.1100). Later, most of these early records were included in Gujin Tushu Jicheng (“Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present,” 1725) and Zhongguo Gudai Yinyue Shiliao Jiyao (“Summary and Collection of Historical Materials on Ancient Chinese Music,” 1962). The earliest known zheng notation preserved in China, however, was not assembled until 1814, in Xiansuo Beikao (“String Music in Reference”), a notation book for string music transcribed in Chinese gongche notation.
The first contemporary study of the zheng by a Chinese scholar was in 1938, by Liang Tsai-Ping, a celebrated zheng master. He wrote *Ni Cheng Pu*, an instruction book for the zheng, containing a historical summary based upon available written accounts. Few other studies of the zheng had appeared until after the late 1970s, when a large number of articles were published in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, including important books and papers on the issues of origin, development in construction, documentation (Cao 1983, Jiao 1992-1997) and notation (Chen 1978, Cao 1980). In the last twenty years, new archaeological finds stimulated active and serious discussions on morphological and origin issues of the zheng in Chinese scholarship (Huang 1987, Jiang 1985, Xiang 1990, 1993). The only Chinese journal specifically for zheng study was the *Qinzheng*, issued irregularly from 1986 to 1988 by the Xi'an Music Conservatory (Shaanxi province).


The research in this paper is based upon extensive study of both historical accounts and research by contemporary scholars, in addition to my own experience as a zheng
performer for over twenty years. Therefore, I will discuss historical and contemporary
development of the zheng, while offering my own interpretation of some of these issues.

**Etymology, Origin and Construction**

The Chinese character for zheng (fig. 1.1) has two portions: the upper, zhu
(“bamboo,” fig. 1.1a) and the lower, zheng, which has the same sound and shape as the word
“struggle” (fig.1.1b). The lower character, zheng (“struggle”), has fostered the following
colourful explanation of the name and origin of the instrument. Two people struggled over a
twenty-five-string se, an ancient Chinese zither used primarily for ritual. In the struggle they
broke the instrument in half, thus creating both a twelve-string and thirteen-string zheng.

Fig.1.1 Written character for zheng

![1a 1b](image)

This popular story has been discounted, and a more believable explanation is found in
a second century dictionary, Shuowen Jiezi. It states: “The zheng has plucked strings [and] a
bamboo body. [Its music onomatopoeically] sounds ‘zheng’ (Xu c.121).” A third century
dictionary, Shiming, also states: “The strings [of the zheng] are stretched so tight that [it
sounds] ‘zheng, zheng’ (Liu c.200:106).” According to these accounts, the name of the
instrument is a phonetic complex. The upper part, the bamboo radical, most probably refers
to the use of bamboo in the construction of the body during its early development; and the
lower part is clearly a representation of its sound when played.

Other legends explaining historical origins of the instrument abound. In one myth,
Huangdi (“Emperor Huang”), the legendary first emperor of the Han Chinese people,
invented the instrument. Another legend suggests that Kui (c. 2200 BC), the first Chinese musical official, was commissioned to invent it.\(^1\) The most popular story claims that the *zheng* was invented by Meng Tian (d. 210 BC), a general of the Qin kingdom (present-day Shaanxi province). Since it is common in ancient Chinese custom and literature to give credit to famous persons or legendary beings for the invention of musical instruments, caution is needed in weighing the verity of such legends.

It is generally accepted by Chinese scholars that the early *zheng* originated in the Qin kingdom of central western China (Cao 1983:2, Jiao 1992, vol.2:7).\(^2\) This assumption is mainly based upon the *Shiji*: “People of the Qin kingdom beat clay drums [and] earthen jars, play *zheng* [and] slap their thighs to accompany songs. This is the true music of Qin” (Sima, vol.87:2543). Based upon this statement, the *zheng* was called “Qin *zheng*” in some historical books. *Fengsu Tongyi* (c.175), a book discussing old Chinese customs, states that the *zheng* (prior to the first century AD) “had five strings and the body of a *zhu*” (another ancient zither made of bamboo) (Ying as cited in Chen 1725, vol.739:42).” Based upon this document, some Chinese scholars believe that the five-string *zheng* is the earliest (fig.1.2).

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\(^1\) Kui’s alleged musical activities are recorded in the *Shangshu* (“The Classic of Historical Documents”), completed before the Spring and Autumn period (770-221 BC).

\(^2\) The Japanese scholar Hayashi Kenzo suggested that the *zheng* was probably introduced from the “West” (i.e. the Middle East) to China during the Warring States period (475-221 BC) (Hayashi 1962:167). This hypothesis has been dismissed by Chinese scholars due to lack of solid evidence.
However, new archaeological evidence has contested the belief that the five-string zheng of northwest China is the oldest. In the late 1970s, several twelve and thirteen-string wooden zithers were unearthed in Guangxi and Jiangxi provinces in southern China. The zithers found in Jiangxi date to the fifth century BC, much earlier than the five-string zheng.\(^3\) Based upon the construction of these zithers and the way their strings are mounted, they are almost certainly identifiable as zheng types (Huang 1987:39) (fig.1.3). This indicates that the zheng might have originated in the minority-dominated South rather in the North (Xiang 1993:58).\(^4\) It is my opinion that the five-string bamboo zheng existed on the Central Plain of northern China before the first century AD and that the twelve and thirteen-string zithers, unearthed in southern China, might have had different origins. It is very possible that, along with the cultural interaction between the Han Chinese and the minorities, the larger zheng was assimilated by Han Chinese people, which in turn replaced the five-string zheng.

Fig. 1.3 Thirteen-string zither excavated from Guixi county, Jiangxi province, China; photo from Liu (1992:200)

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\(^3\) Two thirteen-string zithers, excavated in Guixi County, Jiangxi province in 1979, were carbon dated to 598 BC (±75) years. One zither is 166 cm in length and 17.5cm in width. No bridges were found in the tomb. On the left side of the instrument, there were thirteen holes lined in two rows, in which pegs could be put. On the right side, there were thirteen holes in one line. Presumably the strings were secured at this end, passing through these holes and wound around tuning pegs at the other side, the same as the zheng.

\(^4\) Non-Han minorities historically inhabited the places where the zithers were found. Since the minorities were non-literate and their history was largely neglected by Han scholars, very little written information about these instruments can be found in Chinese sources.
Some zheng scholars have suggested that wood was not used on the Central Plain of northern China for the construction of the instrument until the third century AD (Cheng 1991:3). What is known, according to the third century poetic essay Zhengfu Xu, is that a substantially different form of the zheng, to what was previously known, was present in the third century AD on the Central Plain.

Its upper part is convex like the vault of heaven; its bottom flat like the earth; its inside is hollow so as to accommodate the six points of the compass, and its twelve strings with their bridges symbolize the twelve months of the year.

(Fu c. 265 AD)  

The following picture is a rubbing from a stone mural located in Yinan county, Shandong province from the late Han or early Jin dynasty, depicting a baixi performance (fig. 1.4). The musical ensemble includes a zither at the top of the third row, whose shape meets Fu Xuan's description of the zheng. Yet, some scholars believe that it was a se, a zither usually included in official ritual ensembles.

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5 Author's translation.

6 Baixi was a form of folk performance that included singing, dancing, acrobatics, martial arts, drama and music (Yang 1981:124).

7 In Liu's book (1988), only a segment of the original picture was shown which excluded most non-musical activities, such as a juggler, acrobat, lion dancer and tea server. This led many scholars to assume that this was a depiction of a ritualistic performance. The zither depicted has been thought to be a se, since several other instruments in the picture are considered to be played together with se in ritual events (e.g. jiangu, the big drum, yu, the mouth organ and qing, the stonechime). However, several se excavated from Han tombs show clearly that the soundbox of se was flat (see Liu 1988: 32, 53), and the zither depicted in this rubbing is clearly convex.
The convex shape of the instrument described by Fu Xuan can be seen in Chaozhou zheng construction (fig. 1.5).\(^8\)

The top soundboard of the wooden zheng is convex and usually made from softwood. The wood used for the sides and the flat bottom is often a hardwood, like red sandalwood, rosewood, or sometimes boxwood. The bridges are usually made of wood, occasionally of

\(^8\) The convex shape of the soundboard can also be found in the Vietnamese Dan tranh, which is related to the Chinese zheng.
ivory or bone. The size of the instrument varies in different regions and depends on the number of strings. Strings are secured at one end of the instrument, stretched over individual bridges and wound around tuning pegs at the other end. Silk strings were traditionally used, with steel or copper strings becoming more prevalent around the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

On the Central Plain of northern China, both twelve-string and thirteen-string Zheng were popular during the Sui (581-618) and Tang dynasties (618-907). Fourteen-string zheng might have emerged in the Song dynasty (937-1279) and fifteen-string zheng probably appeared in the late Ming (1368-1644) (fig. 1.6) or early Qing dynasty (1644-1911), while sixteen-string zheng emerged no later than the nineteenth century. With the exception of the twelve-string zheng, all these instruments have remained in existence in different regions of China. The thirteen-string zheng has been popular in Henan and Shandong, while fourteen-string zheng has been used in Yulin region (Northern Shaanxi province), and the fifteen-string zheng has been common in Zhejiang (southeast coast). According to Dr. Thrasher, musicians from Chaozhou (Guangdong province) believe that the sixteen-string zheng has had a long history in the area.

Fig. 1.6 Fourteen-string zheng from the Qing dynasty; photo after Liu (1992:201)
Early Performance History

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the first written reference to the zheng in the Shiji describes the zheng being used to accompany songs in the Qin kingdom, central-western China, around the third century BC. During the Han dynasty (206 BC-221 AD), the zheng was widely used in string and wind ensembles to accompany xianghe ge ("harmonious song"), a combination of folk singing, dancing and music popular in central and central-western China (part of Henan, Shandong and Shaanxi provinces) (Guo c.1264-1269). The zheng was also played in ensembles with the qin, zhu and sheng to perform the instrumental repertoire of xianghe ge known as danqu (Yang 1981:115).

In the Sui and Tang dynasties, the zheng occupied a very important part of the professional court ensembles that played yanyue, the music for banquets and other non-ritual court activities (fig. 1.7). Ensembles with the twelve-string zheng played mainly qingshang yue ("pure music"), the old Han Chinese music handed down from the Han Dynasty (Yang 1981:219). According to Chen Yang (c.1100), non-Han musical genres of yanyue employed the thirteen-stringed zheng. The zheng’s extensive use as a court instrument in the Sui and Tang dynasties resulted in its introduction to the neighbouring countries of Korea and Japan. In Korea, it became the twelve-string kayagum, and in Japan the thirteen-string koto, both of which have since become notable instruments of these countries (Hayashi 1962:160).

As a solo instrument, the zheng served as a source of self-cultivation and entertainment during the Imperial times. It was played mostly by the literati, female
members of royal families, and courtesans (Gulik 1951:10). Playing zheng became a popular subject of Chinese classical poetry and literature.⁹

Fig. 1.7 Section of a yanyue ensemble from the Tang dynasty; photo after Liu (1983:83)

The growth of urban industries and commercial trade during the following Song dynasty (960-1127), saw the developing urban popular culture replace some aspects of old

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⁹ Zheng music was often associated with sentimental subjects such as the beauty of nature, graceful maidens, romantic feelings, and wistful memories. Liang Tsai-Ping collected forty-four classical poems (1978:110-118) from the Han to the Yuan dynasties, which associated zheng music with sentimental feelings.
court culture (Yang 1981: 275, 412). Accordingly, the zheng, together with ruan (lute) and zhu (zither), were excluded from playing banquet music, jiaofang dayue (Yang 1981:375). However, a number of musicians remained in the Jiaofang, the Bureau of Court Music, as solo zheng performers (Jiao 1994, vol. 2:12).

During the Song dynasty, the zheng was also very active as a solo instrument used by common people for both instrumental music and narrative singing (Zhou, as cited in Meng c. 1150: vol. 10). Ducheng Jisheng (“Memories of the Capital”), which described various forms of entertainment in the Song capital, stated that: “Smaller ensembles have only one or two players, such as xiqin (the two-string fiddle, the early form of erhu) and xiao (the end-blown flute)...and solo plucked fourteen strings” (anonymous, cited as in Yang 1981:374). It is likely that this “plucked fourteen strings” instrument was the zheng. If this is true, it also indicates that the fourteen-string zheng appeared in folk music as early as the Song dynasty.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the thirteen-string zheng continued to be played in court banquet ensembles. It should be noticed that the Mongolians, rulers of the Yuan dynasty, introduced a form of ensemble to central China which included zheng, qin pipa or ruan (a four-string lute), huqin (two-string fiddle) and huobusi (a four-string lute without frets) (Yang 1981:731). This instrumentation is very similar to the xiansuo (string) ensemble that was popular in the two following dynasties, and suggests that xiansuo may have been derived from this Mongolian ensemble and adopted by Han Chinese.

10 The zheng rejoined the banquet music ensemble in the second half of the dynasty (Southern Song), but the size of the ensemble was smaller.

11 Wenxian Tongkao (“A Comprehensive Investigation of Documents and Traditions”) states: “The music of a single zheng was heard when the emperor entered the grand chamber holding a glass of wine in his hand.” (Ma ed. vol. 146, as cited in Jiao 1994:vol. 2:16).
In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, court music gradually declined while small instrumental ensembles, such as *xiansuo*, were increasingly popular among common people. *Xiansuo* was prevalent in Henan province, while the similar form *peng baban* ("knocking eight-beat") was popular until the middle of the twentieth century (fig.1.8).\(^{12}\)

Fig.1.8 Ludong Yayue Tuan (Refined Music Ensemble of East Shandong), a *Peng baban* ensemble in the early twentieth century; photo after Li (1994:front plates).\(^{13}\)

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\(^{12}\) The *xiansuo* ensemble employs the *zheng*, *pipa* (four-stringed lute), *xianzi* or *sanxian* (three-stringed lute), and *huqin* (two-stringed bowed fiddle). The *peng baban* ensemble includes the *zheng*, *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer), *erhu* and *leiqin* (two-string bowed fiddle).

\(^{13}\) This photo was taken in Shandong on April 8th, 1944. At the centre: Wang Dianyu (1899-1964), director of the ensemble; the second from the left is Zhao Yuzhai and the second from the right is Gao Zicheng. The instruments in the photo are (from left to right): *erhu*, *yangqin*, *leiqin*, *zheng*, *leiqin*, *zheng*, *erhu*. 

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In the South, the zheng has been prominently included in the sixian ("silk-string") ensembles of Hakka music and the xianshi ("string-poem") ensembles of Chaozhou music, both in Guangdong province.\(^\text{14}\) The zheng was also widely used in ensembles accompanying narrative singing traditions such as qinshu in Shandong, guziqu in Henan, xiaochang in Shaanxi, and tanhuang in Zhejiang provinces. In nanyin ("southern tone"), a narrative singing tradition popular in Guangdong province, the singer accompanied himself on the zheng. According to the Cantonese scholar Huang Jinpei, nanyin was also called manggong ("blind male") zheng, since the singers were usually blind men.

**Repertoire and Schools of the Zheng**

Although court zheng music was frequently mentioned in classical documents and poetry, there is little documentation regarding traditional urban and rural zheng styles that can be found today, as most schools of zheng were found in smaller towns and rural regions. Scholars have not found a direct relationship between the early court solo zheng repertoire and the existing solo zheng music.\(^\text{15}\) Instead, the solo zheng repertoire, which is presently considered “traditional” in China, seems to have a close relationship with the regional ensemble music mentioned above, since both of them share many common features, such as their musical structure baban ("eight beat").

*Baban* is a 68-beat structure with a basic melody and a fixed phrase pattern that is derived from the qupai ("named tune"), an older dramatic melodic form. The majority of

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\(^{14}\) The sixian ensemble employs the zheng, pipa and yehu (two-stringed bowed fiddle). The zheng, ipa, and erxian (two-stringed bowed fiddle) are the main instruments in the xianshi ensemble.

\(^{15}\) It is generally agreed by scholars that early zheng music (i.e. from the Tang dynasty) might have a close relationship with traditional Japanese koto music (see Thrasher 1995).
traditional zheng repertoire is in baban form. Northern zheng schools perform baban in a comparatively steady tempo, while in southern schools of zheng, baban is usually performed with tempo variations of increasing speeds (Thrasher 1988:1). In a slower tempo (e.g. a quarter note = 36 to 72), usually one measure of 4/4 is considered one ban ("beat"), therefore, as baban has 68 beats, a piece contains 68 measures. In a faster tempo (e.g. a quarter note = 84 to 108), two beats are counted in a measure of 2/4, thereupon a piece has 34 measures. Other than baban, the rest of traditional repertoire is formed by other qupai-derived melodies.

Each zheng school has its own distinctive pieces and different styles. Traditional zheng music from these schools has been notated, and different notation systems have been used over the years (see next section). However, these scores only show the main notes of the melodies without providing details of embellishment and dynamics. This has resulted in the same piece being interpreted differently by each performer. Traditionally, zheng instructors sing the melodies for their students before playing so that the students can grasp the style.  

Among traditional zheng schools, the Henan and Shandong schools represent the northern styles, both using the thirteen-string zheng. Chaozhou and Hakka schools represent the south, using the sixteen-string zheng. 

Henan was once a major cultural centre of the Han Chinese people. Zheng music was prevalent in the area as early as the Han dynasty. The present day Henan zheng school is

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16 I experienced this teaching style when I studied with zheng masters Gao Zicheng, Zhao Yuzhai and Cao Zheng.

17 A famous poem of the late Han dynasty praises the zheng music that was popular in this region. Some believe it was written by Cao Zhi (192 – 232 AD).
located in the old Han cultural centre Kaifeng and its surrounding rural areas. Its repertoire
of approximately fifty pieces, is divided into two types: bantou qu, a type of prelude, and
paizi qu, or named tunes. Bantou qu follows the baban form, which contains 68 beats. It is
the instrumental prelude of the dadiao quzi ("major tune"), a local narrative song tradition.
The paizi qu contains a large number of qupai melodies drawn from the same narrative
tradition. Among the most famous of these tunes are Tianxia Datong ("Universal
Harmony"), also called Henan Baban, Hefan ("Reconciliation with the Barbarians"), and
Bainiao Chaofeng ("Hundred Birds Honouring the Phoenix"). The earliest known printed
Henan zheng music was in the book Zhongzhou Gudiao, completed in 1920 by Wang
Huangshi (Ding, as cited in Yan 1993:273). Henan zheng music is distinctive in its leaping
melodic contour, which comes from the imitation of the singing style of dadiao quzi.

The Shandong zheng school is found mainly in Heze and Liucheng counties in
southwest Shandong province. According to the local zheng masters, the performance
techniques and repertoire of the school were handed down by a Taoist court musician during
the early Qing dynasty. Its repertoire includes baban pieces and other minor tunes of qinshu,
the local narrative song tradition. Since most baban pieces are short (34 measures), usually
four pieces are played together as a set. Gaoshan Liushui ("High Mountain and Flowing
Water"), 18 Siduan Jin ("Four Variations") and Hangong Qiuyue ("Autumn Moon over the
Han Palace") are among the best known of this repertoire of more than thirty pieces. The
music is noted for its "earthy" style and "flowers" (embellishment of descending and
ascending glissandi around the main melodic notes).

18 Gaoshan Liushui includes Qinyun ("Sound of Music"), Fengbai Cuizhu ("Wind Swaying Bamboo"),
Yeijing Luanling ("Bells Ringing in the Silent Night") and Shuyun ("Sound of Reading") four short tunes.
The Chaozhou and Hakka schools are found in eastern Guangdong province in southern China. Chaozhou zheng music is characterized by its highly embellished melodies, baban form in increasing tempo variations, and its distinctive modes.\textsuperscript{19} The core repertoire is known as shi datao ("ten great suites"), including Pingsha Luoyan ("Geese Alighting on the Sandy Shore"), Hanya Xishui ("Winter Crows Playing Over a Stream") and other qupai tunes such as Liuqing Niang ("Madam Liuqing").

Hakka zheng music is also called handiao ("tunes of the Han Chinese"), or zhongzhou gudiao ("ancient tunes of central China"). The music is divided into two types: dadiao ("great tunes"), all in the baban form, and chuandiao ("minor tunes"). The best known melodies are Jiaochuang Yeyu ("The Night Rain Sprinkling on the Window"), Chushui Lian ("Lotus Blossoms Emerging from Water") and Xunfeng Qu ("Mild Breeze Melody"). The Hakka school shares a number of music features with the Chaozhou school, such as a baban structure played in increasing tempo variations and sophisticated modes.\textsuperscript{20} However, according to local musicians, Hakka melodies are less highly embellished than those of the neighbouring Chaozhou school.

Another more recent school is Zhe or Wulin of Zhejiang province in southeastern China, which traditionally uses the fifteen-string zheng. Part of its repertoire came from that of the silk-bamboo music, an ensemble music tradition popular in Shanghai, Hangzhou (provincial capital of Zhejiang), and other nearby coastal areas. The Zhe or Wulin school

\textsuperscript{19} One piece usually has three sections: touban (first section) in slow tempo, kaopai (second section) in moderate tempo, and sanban (third section) in fast tempo. The modes are qing sanliu ("light three-six", sol la do re mi), zhong sanliu ("heavy three-six", sol \textasciitilde \textasciitilde ti do re \textasciitilde fa), qingsan zhongliu ("light three and heavy six", sol la do re \textasciitilde fa), huowu ("lively five", sol ti do\textasciitilde\textasciitilde re\textasciitilde fa) and fanxian ("to reverse strings", do re fa sol la").

\textsuperscript{20} Hakka zheng modes are yingxian ("hard string", sol la do re mi) and ruansian ("soft string", sol \textasciitilde ti do re fa\textasciitilde).
also has adopted the repertoire of *xiansuo shisantao* (“Thirteen Pieces for Strings”), as collected in the *Xiansuo Beikao* (“String Music in Reference”) (see page 1). Well known pieces from this school include *Dengyue Jiaohui* (“Moonbeams and Bright Light”), *Yue’er Gao* (“The High Moon”) and *Jiangjun Ling* (“General’s Command”), with over twenty other standard pieces. Unlike the repertoire of other *zheng* schools, these pieces require the technique of plucking simultaneously with both hands.

Other smaller regional styles include the Qin school in Shaanxi province and the Min school of Fujian province. Although the *zheng* has had a long history in Shaanxi, the Qin *zheng* school does not have a solo repertoire; instead, the traditional *zheng* is only played with ensembles to accompany *xiaoqu* (“minor tunes”), the local narrative song tradition of Yulin county, northern Shaanxi.\(^{21}\) The Min school of *zheng* is located in Yunxiao, Zhao’an and other counties of southwestern Fujian province. Compared to the major *zheng* schools, its unique repertoire is small and it has borrowed a large part of the Chaozhou and Hakka repertoire. Therefore, it is very possible that traditional *zheng* music (i.e. *baban* repertoire) was introduced to this area either by Han Chinese from the Central Plain or learned from neighbouring Chaozhou and Hakka people.

**Performance Technique, Tuning, and Notation**

Before the Song dynasty, *zheng* performers knelt on the floor, placing the head of their instrument on their lap, with the instrument pointing to the left when playing. This

\(^{21}\) This narrative song may have been popular in the area since late Ming or early Qing dynasty. Other instruments of the ensemble are *yangqin*, *pipa* and *sanxian*. 
The techniques of playing the zheng can be divided into two types: plucking (usually with the right hand) and ornamenting (usually with the left hand). Basic right hand techniques include plucking the strings with fingernails (either real or simulated), with the thumb and middle finger plucking either outward or inward, and the index finger usually plucking inward. However, the choice of using these techniques varies with each school. For instance, Henan and Shandong schools regularly use a technique where the thumb, independent from the rest of the hand, quickly plucks one string in both directions to create staccato sixteenth or thirty-second notes (fig. 1.9, 1.10). The Zhe school is distinguished by the yao ("rolling"), a technique where the whole wrist is moved as the thumb rapidly picks a string in both directions to create an unbroken melodic line. This technique is similar to the lun ("roll") of the pipa or the tremolo of the guitar.

Fig. 1.9 Excerpt from 江乡派 from Shandong province, copy after Yan (1993:21)
Southern schools have more subtle nuances in their right hand techniques, which are achieved through varying the intensity of plucking, using only the nail, or the combination of nail and the flesh of the fingertip, or by changing the position where the strings are plucked.

Left hand technique involves the application of pressure to the strings on the left side of the bridges, to obtain alternate pitches (e.g. fa and ti are sounded by pressing the string of mi and la), to raise pitches, and to obtain various ornaments such as vibrato and portamento. Chaozhou and Hakka schools have very subtle and complex left-hand techniques. For example, the Chaozhou huowu mode, often uses intervals that are less than a semi-tone, achieved through a slight but controlled pressure of the left hand on a string (e.g. ↓7↑6↓7). This technique requires a great deal of skill to be done properly.

Despite differences in the playing techniques of different regions, the zheng is nearly always tuned to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale, using 宮(gong), 商(shang), 角(jue), 徵(zhi), and 羽(yu), five Chinese characters that represent the five notes in the scale of sol la do re mi. The traditional sixteen-string zheng allows for three pentatonic octaves. Traditionally the zheng is tuned to zhidiào, sol (徵), la (羽), do (宫), re (商), mi (角); or to gongdiao, do (宫), re (商), mi (角), sol (徵), la (羽), starting from the lowest string (see Appendix).
According to Hayashi, the twelve-string zheng used in the Tang court music was tuned in both forms, depending on the composition. The thirteen-string zheng of Shandong and Henan provinces was tuned the same as the twelve-string zheng, with one more note added above the highest note. This differs from the thirteen-string zheng of the Tang dynasty, where the additional string (added below the lowest string of twelve-string zheng) was tuned, depending on the key, either a fourth or fifth higher than the second string (Hayashi 1962:177). Some scholars have suggested that the reason why the lowest string was tuned to the dominant degree in the scale was to emphasize the tonal note, the second string (Tang 1993:43). This tuning system, where the lowest pitch of the instrument is on the second lowest string, is still found in the koto tradition of Japan. The fourteen-string zheng, used in Yulin, Shaanxi province, has a similar tuning principle to that of the Tang thirteen-string zheng and the koto (Li 1992: 859). This may be important evidence suggesting that the Yulin zheng is directly related to the court zheng tradition, and has a longer history than presently considered.

Two notation systems were traditionally used for zheng music, gongche and ersi ("two-four"). Gongche notation, believed to have been originally invented for wind instruments, was extensively used in the Shandong, Henan and Hakka zheng schools, and in selected scores from the Chaozhou school. Gongche notation employs several Chinese characters in a similar manner to solfege, and occasionally includes abbreviated ideograph symbols indicating fingering techniques (Fig 1.11, 12).

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22 Traditionally Yulin zheng contains an additional string (the fifteenth string) below the lowest string. The local musicians say that the string is not tuned, but is only used to imitate percussive sounds where necessary.
Fig. 1.11 Gongche Notation

合 四 乙 上 尺 工 凡 六 五
5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6
sol la ti do re mi fa sol la

Fig. 1.12 Excerpt from Hefan ("Reconciliation with the Barbarians"), written in gongche notation, photo after Li (1994)

Ersi notation was traditionally used for Chaozhou zheng as well as other Chaozhou music genres. It has been suggested that the ersi notation system was most likely handed down from the Tang dynasty (Chen 1978:54), but, to my knowledge there is no conclusive evidence to prove this theory. Ersi notation uses seven numeric symbols, from two through eight, to indicate different notes (fig. 1.13). However, depending on the mode, two symbols may represent different pitches. The character for “three” can represent either la or ti, and “six” can represent either mi or fa, depending on whether these strings are pushed or not.
Therefore, the mode of qingsanliu contains a “light (i.e. without push) three (la) and six (mi)”, and zhongsanliu has a “heavy (i.e. push) three (jiti) and six (tfa)”.

Fig. 1.13 Ersi notation

The following example, from Hanya Xishui “Winter Crows Playing Over a Stream”, combines both ersi notation and a downbeat sign “°” (fig. 1.14).

Fig. 1.14 Excerpt from Hanya Xishui, in ersi notation, photo after Chen (1978:131)

Some scholars believe that the notation included in the Japanese manuscript Jinchi Yoroku (“Essentials of Being Benevolent and Wise”, 12th cent.) was zheng notation from the Tang dynasty (Cheng 1991:16). Ye Dong, the late scholar of Shanghai Music Conservatory, transcribed four pieces into staff notation. However, since no similar score has been found in China, its origin cannot yet be fully identified as Chinese.
Early in the twentieth century, cipher notation became the standard for *zheng* music, and staff notation has gradually become popular over the last thirty years, especially with conservatory trained musicians.
CHAPTER TWO
MODERNIZATION OF THE ZHENG

Introduction: Social Influences Affecting Modernization

It is commonly held by Chinese historians that contemporary Chinese history begins in 1840, marked by the eruption of the Opium War between China and Great Britain (Zhongguo 1979:1). Throughout the twentieth century, China faced exceedingly complex social, political, economic, and cultural changes. These changes include the extermination of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the last imperial dynasty, the transitional Republican period (1911-1949), a time of pervasive wars between China and Japan as well as between the Republican and Communist Parties, and the rise of the Communist era beginning in 1949.

Aggressive and invasive Western interest in the Chinese economy gave rise to continuous wars from the 1840s to the 1870s. Confronting the powerful warships and guns of the Western forces with simple lances and knives, China was quickly defeated and forced to open up to the West. Treaties signed between the defeated Qing court and the Western Powers permitted a number of western countries to own concessions and develop industries in the main cities of China. Although the Qing court remained the official Chinese government, foreign powers took control of China’s major trade and industry, turning Imperial China into a semi-colonial country.

Chinese nationalists and scholars were enraged and humiliated by the Western power after the Opium War. Yet, they began to study xixue, “Western knowledge,” and to examine the cause of the nation’s weakness. They realized that, compared with the West, China was far behind in industrial development and social structures. It was believed that
the basis of China’s problem was the “undeveloped,” or “backward” traditional culture, which prevented China from being a strong nation. As Li Dingyi, the Chinese historian, pointed out:

They (Chinese nationalists and intellectuals) reached the conclusion that it was the traditional Chinese culture that was the chief obstacle in the way of China’s achievement of strength and prosperity. They therefore put forward the idea that traditional Chinese culture should be overthrown.

(Li 1970:327, as cited in Han 1979:13)

Under the idea of ziqiang, or “self-strengthening,” modern-thinking Chinese nationalists and scholars wrote a series of petitions and articles for reform. These urged the Chinese government to adopt Western industrial science and technology, to reform the political system according to Western constitutional models, and to abandon the traditional educational system. As a result, many arsenals, factories, and shipyards were built in China and western science and languages were taught in some schools in the major cities. Eventually, keju, the civil service examination system, was abolished. Students were sent abroad through individual or community initiatives or by government sponsorship in the hope that national regeneration could be achieved through the application of Western practical methods (Zhongguo 1979:52).

By the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of discarding traditional ideologies and replacing them with Western models was widespread. This led to the “May Fourth” Campaign of 1919, which represented the peak of anti-traditional and pro-Western

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23 Kang Youwei (1858-1927) initiated Gongche Shangshu ("Candidates Petition") in 1895, urging reforms in government administration. In 1898, another controversial book Kongzi Gaizhi Kao ("Confucius as a Reformer") was published, which attempted to legitimize reform within the framework of Confucian ideology. Yan Fu (1852-1921) used Darwin’s evolutionary theory to argue that if China were not going to change, it would be eliminated by the world.
sentiments. On May fourth 1919, students of Beijing University led a demonstration against Beijing’s role in Paris and the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, which allowed Japan to retain control of the erstwhile German-leased territory in Shandong Province. The protest soon spread from Beijing to other cities and developed into a national campaign denouncing classical Chinese culture. Confucianism and Confucian classics became the major target for ridicule as students and scholars strongly advocated embracing “science” and “democracy” from the West.

These political and cultural campaigns have had a strong and profound influence nationwide that resonates even today. Chinese people had lost their faith in the integrity of traditional culture and even felt ashamed of it. The “May Fourth” campaign, which is considered by most Chinese scholars and political leaders to be a “contemporary renaissance” (Liu 1988:7), was the primary factor in accelerating the pace of westernization and modernization.

Western Impact on Chinese Music in the Early Twentieth Century

China’s fascination with the West has had a great influence on its music as well. In 1927, the first Chinese music conservatory was founded with a curriculum following a Western model. Although some Chinese instruments were taught, Western instrumental music and compositional theory were the major courses. Moreover, a mandatory music

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24 Western music’s introduction to China has a long history. Catholic and Christian missionaries brought Western church music as early as the thirteenth century. However, it was not until late nineteenth centuries when Western music became increasingly popular in the urban areas. In 1895, the first Western military band was established in Beijing and in 1908, the first Western string ensemble was founded in Shanghai (Liu 1988:15,23)

25 According to Chao Mei-pa’s article “The Trend of Modern Chinese Music” in 1937, out of one hundred and ten students in the National Conservatory, only two students studied Chinese music (pipa) as a major.
course was assigned for urban public schools across the nation, in which only Western music was taught. During this time, Chinese composers, apart from learning Western repertoire, also composed *xin yinyue* ("new music"). This musical style employed Western harmony, counterpoint, and the common practice, formal procedures of the time period, none of which had a direct connection with traditional Chinese music (Liu 1988:8). Also during this period, the first concert hall was built in 1933, in Nanjing, the capital of the Republic of China (Liu 1988:17).

These developments helped to nourish the widespread familiarity with and adulation of Western music, but they also posed a great challenge to traditional music. Traditional Chinese music, especially instrumental music, was not active in urban areas at the beginning of the century. With the exception of *sizhu* ("silk-bamboo") music in Shanghai and Cantonese music in Guangzhou, most instrumental music genres were preserved in smaller towns and rural areas, or in Buddhist and Taoist monasteries, and did not attract the attention of the outside world. In contrast with the rapid acceptance and spread of Western music, traditional music encountered great criticism in urban areas by some Western trained scholars and educators. Chen Hong (1907-?) made the following statement:

> Our music died a long time ago. The so-called musicians now are lower class amateur bands, prostitutes, the blind, and the homeless. Their music is either extravagant or degenerate. If music represents culture, our nation of *li* (rite) and *yue* (music) has become bestial. This kind of traditional music should definitely be exterminated.

(Chen 1933.11, as cited in Liu and Wu 1994:6)

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26 Ancient Chinese rulers, following Confucian philosophy, believed that human virtues, family relations, and rulership were associated with music. Thus, if music is seductive and depraved, the people will become mean-mannered.
Qing Zhu (1893-1959), another famous musical scholar said,

In my opinion, there is only one type of music that can be considered as art, that is Western music... In the opinion of some patriotic citizens, Western music coming to China is a form of “art invasion.” If this is true, then let it happen. It is obvious that Chinese music cannot compete with Western music...we have to choose between Chinese and Western music. We cannot have both.

(Qing 1934.3. Ibid., 7)

Judging Chinese instruments, compositional methods, and musical styles by Western classical standards of intonation, range, tone colour, and harmony, these Chinese scholars considered traditional music to be too simple and undeveloped. Furthermore, they reached the conclusion, based upon Darwin’s theory of evolution, that Chinese music was at a lower stage of development; therefore, it should be eliminated.

Most people, however, disagreed with this radical idea of abandoning traditional music. Instead, they wanted to “improve” Chinese music by applying Western musical concepts and techniques. Xiao Youmei (1884-1940), the famous music scholar and educator, believed that “Chinese music will have the possibility of continuing its development only if Chinese musical instruments are improved on the basis of Western technology” (Xiao 1916, as cited in Liu and Wu 1994:208). Since the 1920s, China has been on a revolutionary and rapid path to modernize and westernize traditional music and musical instruments. New compositions, called guoyue or “national music”, were written for Chinese instruments. For example, Liu Tianhua (1895-1932), the distinguished pipa and erhu player, composed ten pieces for erhu, the two-string bowed fiddle, by adapting

27 The term guoyue was used to differentiate Chinese music from Western music in the 1920s (Liu and Wu 1994:3). Now the term is mainly used in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In China, music played by traditional Chinese instruments is called minyue, which also means “national music.”
violin techniques. *Guoyue* pieces were also composed for large orchestral ensembles formed in the 1930s, featuring traditional Chinese instruments (Han 1979:14).

Although the popularity of *guoyue* was important for the survival of traditional music at that time, it should be noted that these innovations gradually caused the abandonment of some unique characteristics of traditional music. For instance, *guoyue*, as composed music, is played according to a score. This is in contrast to traditional music practice, in which a basic melody is played and variously developed by individual musicians. Adherence to a score restricts the possibility for a greater diversity of styles created by different musical interpretations. Furthermore, traditional regional identities were gradually subsumed by a national style.

**Zheng for the People: Popularization of the Zheng in the Twentieth Century**

Although the *zheng* had been a court instrument and enjoyed by the literati, it seems that its music was not popular in large urban areas, such as Beijing and Shanghai, at the turn of the twentieth century. Two *zheng* masters, Lin Yongzhi (?-1925) and Wei Ziyou (1875-1936) first introduced *zheng* music to Beijing between 1910 and the early 1920s. Lin Yongzhi, from Jieyang County, Guangdong province, brought the Chaozhou style to Beijing. His teaching and performances were documented in the Yinyue Zazhi, the music journal published by the Music Institute of Beijing University in 1920 (Cao 1993:275). Wei Ziyou, a former scholar-official of the Qing dynasty from Suiping County, Henan province, played and taught Henan *zheng* music at Beijing Daode Xueshe (school of ethics) around 1925 and often held private concerts at his home. He also assembled *Zhongzhou Gudiao*, a collection
of notations from the Henan zheng repertoire, written in gongche notation (unpublished) (Ding 1993:273).

Wei's disciples, Shi Meiyin (b.?-d.?, Guangdong), Lou Shuhua (1907-1952, Hebei), and Liang Tsai-Ping (b.1910, Hebei) all became celebrated zheng masters. They not only inherited traditional zheng repertoires, but also began arranging new pieces for the zheng. In 1936, Lou rearranged the classical tune Guiqulai Ci ("Song of Coming and Going") and entitled it Yuzhou Changwan ("Fishermen Singing in the Twilight"), which has subsequently become a model piece for contemporary practice and performance. Liang Tsai-Ping assembled Ni Cheng Pu, the first instructional book on the zheng, which was published in 1938 and he performed and lectured internationally after moving to Taiwan in 1949. These zheng masters played a crucial role in popularizing traditional zheng music in the large cities. Due to their enthusiasm, the zheng and its traditional repertoire not only survived, but also developed to a new level as one of the most popular traditional Chinese instruments.

Dr. Liang Ming-Yue identifies two schools in modern zheng music: fugu pai, the "Renaissance school," led by Wei Ziyou and Shi Yinmei, and weixin pai, the "Renovation school," led by his father, Liang Tsai-ping. According to Liang Ming-Yue, the "Renaissance school" concentrated on reviving old zheng pieces, many of which were original melodies of the qupai tradition, while the "Renovation school" not only rearranged the old zheng melodies, but also composed new pieces in a more modern style (Liang 1984: 893-894).

The concept of "Renaissance" and "Renovation" Schools, however, has not been widely accepted by other zheng scholars. Instead, "southern" and "northern" styles are used to specify the different zheng music styles (Cao 1983: 9). This seems reasonable since the

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28 The book includes a brief historical summary, tuning and fingering instruction, and fifteen traditional pieces, written in gongche notation.
repertoire and styles that the above masters presented still belonged to the existing zheng schools or styles (e.g. Chaozhou and Henan) and therefore did not form distinct new schools.

Another factor that influenced the popularization of the zheng was the rise of Communism in China. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party came to power and established the People’s Republic of China. To achieve the political goal of constructing a powerful and culturally developed new China, the government encouraged artists to contribute their talents to the socialist country. In the early 1950s, the government's cultural policies supported and stimulated music, along with other the Arts. Western and Chinese orchestras flourished nationwide and musical conservatories were founded in several major cities. Under this political climate a number of highly regarded zheng virtuosi were recruited from around the country to teach in music conservatories and to compose new zheng pieces. This was the first time in Chinese history that zheng performance was established as a conservatory course, and it signified that the zheng had emerged from its historical position as a minjian or “popular” instrument to become a serious instrument for the concert stage.

Cao Zheng (1920-1998) born in Xinmin County, Liaoning province, was the first zheng performer involved in teaching at the music conservatories. Cao started learning the zheng with Lou Shuhua in Beijing in 1936 and went to study with Liang Tsai-ping after being introduced to him in Nanjing in 1946. In the following year, Cao presented his first solo concert in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, and in 1948, he was hired as a term instructor to teach the zheng at Nanjing Guoli Yinzhuan (National Music Conservatory) (Zhou and Zhu 1994:2-3). In 1950, Cao was engaged to teach at Dongbei Yinzhuan (“Music Conservatory

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29 According to official statistics, China had fifty-eight Western orchestras and fifty-five Chinese orchestras in 1951 (Zhongguo 1959:17).
of Northeastern China”), the predecessor of Shenyang Music Conservatory, where he remained until he was transferred to the Chinese Music Conservatory in Beijing in 1964 (ibid.3).

Through Cao Zheng’s recommendation, a number of zheng masters from various zheng schools were engaged to teach at conservatories. Cao Dongfu (1898-1970), from Dengxian County, Henan, was a master of Henan style. Born into a poor but musical family, and having learned dadiao quzi (local narrative singing) and instruments such as the zheng, yangqin, and zhuihu (a two-string fiddle) from his father, he became a street musician when he was eleven years old (Cao and Li 1988:1). In the early 1950s, he became a professional musician, performing in Henan, Hubei, and Beijing. In 1954 he began teaching zheng and went on to teach at Kaifeng Normal School, Zhengzhou Art School, the Chinese Central and Sichuan Music Conservatories.

Another musician recommended by Cao Zheng was Zhao Yuzhai (b.1923). Zhao Yuzhai was born in Yuncheng County, Shandong province, the home of qinshu (a narrative singing tradition), and Shandong zheng music. Here, at an early age, he learned the zheng and several other instruments from his father. In 1943, he studied with Wang Dianyu (1899-1964), a well-known blind multi-instrumentalist, and in 1950 joined an ensemble in Chongqing, Sichuan province, as a professional musician. Three years later, he was recommended by Cao Zheng to teach in the Shenyang Music Conservatory (Yan and Xu 1997:1-3).

As a third example, Wang Shenzhi (1899-1972) became a significant zheng scholar under Cao Zheng’s recommendation. Wang began to learn music in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, in 1921. By 1925 he was already a talented musician and moved to Shanghai to
begin an active music career specializing in zheng, sizhu, and other musical genres (Guo 1993:40).

Another artist who developed his career in Shanghai was Guo Ying (b.1914). Born into a musical family in Chaoyang county, Guangdong province, Guo went to Shanghai at age thirteen and later joined Xinchaosizhu Hui ("The Society of New Chaozhou Silk and Bamboo Music"), playing Chaozhou music. In 1941, he held his first solo zheng concert in Shanghai. Guo joined the Shanghai National Orchestra in 1953 as a zheng soloist, and was invited to teach at Nanjing Yishu Xueyuan ("Nanjing Art Institute") in 1960. In the same year, he started teaching zheng at Shanghai Music Conservatory until his retirement (Guo and Guo 1996:2).

Other notable zheng artists include Gao Zicheng (b.1918) from Shandong, who joined the Ensemble of the Liberation Army in 1955. In 1957, he was transferred to Shaanxi Music Conservatory and taught there until retiring. Luo Jiuxiang (1902-1978) from Dapu County, Guangdong province, was a master player of Hakka style. He joined the local Hanju Opera troupe in Dapu in 1954. From 1959 to 1978, he taught zheng consecutively at Tianjin and Guangzhou Music Conservatories.

Despite the fact that all these zheng masters came from different regions, their life experiences were quite similar, especially after 1949. At the beginning of the communist rule, they were provided opportunities to become professional performers and instructors, which put their talent to good use. Over the last forty years, they carried on the traditional heritage of zheng music by training a whole new generation of professional zheng players. Furthermore, they pushed the boundaries of traditional music, and created new pieces, some of which I will discuss later in this chapter. Unfortunately, their careers and personal lives
suffered from the continuous political upheaval of the late 1950s to 1970s. During the Cultural Revolution, they were politically persecuted. They were prohibited from playing traditional music and most of their notation books were burned, which was a great loss to the nation.


The reformation of zheng and its music began in the early 1950s. Communist China inherited the cultural iconoclasm of the “May Fourth” campaign, which held a negative opinion towards traditional culture in general. Mao Zedong clearly stated his cultural policy in the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942:

We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people.

(Mao 1967: 76)

Later in 1957, he reiterated his notion that “traditional [culture] should serve the present. Western [culture] should serve Chinese.” Yet what precisely was the “essence” and “excellence” of Chinese traditional music was not clearly specified by Mao Zedong or the Party. Highly developed musical genres, such as qin music, were criticized for having served the elite and intellectuals. Village folk music, which was traditionally associated with folk festivals and religious ceremonies, was accused of being associated with “superstitious activities,” unless its function was reformed to carry communist values. A good example is yangge, a collection of songs, dances, and folk plays traditionally performed in northern China for fifteen days from the New Year to the Lantern Festival. It was adopted by the Communist Party as a propaganda medium and as the basis of a mass cultural movement. It is known as a successful example of the stratagem of “putting new wine in old bottles.”

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30 Cao Dongfu passed away after being persecuted in 1970.

31 A good example is yangge, a collection of songs, dances, and folk plays traditionally performed in northern China for fifteen days from the New Year to the Lantern Festival. It was adopted by the Communist Party as a propaganda medium and as the basis of a mass cultural movement. It is known as a successful example of the stratagem of “putting new wine in old bottles.”
musician, it was clear that the subtle and refined characteristics of traditional music contradicted the “strong, high, and fast” spirit of the socialist society. The idea of “[literature and arts] serving the millions and tens of millions of working people” (Mao 1942: 75) unfortunately has been an oppressive force in Chinese music since 1949. Musicians and composers were instructed to make music which echoed Marxist thinking, in an effort to convey the plight of the common people’s lives and the spirit of the nation, while preserving traditions from the effects of radical social changes. Though these constraints on musical expression produced a mix of traditional music style and socialist ideology, perhaps this was the only way for tradition to survive such social change.

In 1955, Zhao Yuzhai composed the solo zheng piece Qing Fengnian (“Celebrating the Harvest”), which depicts an exciting scene of village life. The next year, Cao Dongfu composed another zheng work, Nao Yuanxiao (“Rapturous Lantern Festival”). Although the two pieces are based upon traditional styles of Shandong and Henan zheng music, more dynamic melodies and fast tempi were applied to the music. In Qing Fengnian, the composer used both hands to play chords simultaneously, thereby redirecting the zheng composition from its subtle and soft essence toward a new direction of louder, stronger, and faster techniques and expressions. The traditional sixteen steel-string zheng, which contains three octaves, no longer met the demands of the new compositions. In order to accommodate these new musical trends, the traditional instruments had to be reformed.

The reform of Chinese traditional musical instruments had already been suggested earlier. The issue had been discussed at the meeting of the Second Conference of the National Musicians’ Association in 1953 (Li 1954:492) and the First Forum on Instruments’
Reform in 1954. Li Yuanqing, the former director of the Chinese Music Research Institute, pointed out that reform had become a crucial issue in the musical field. Although he acknowledged the rich heritage of traditional musical instruments, he also made the following statement:

The stagnation of the Chinese Imperial society prevented the development of Chinese musical instruments. The Chinese instruments, therefore, are still in their 'infancy'. Chinese instruments cannot be compared with those of the West, because Western instruments experienced the capitalist revolution. Also the development of Western instruments was influenced by [the development of] contemporary science and technology. Hence, they are advanced in terms of construction. Today, along with the great change of the life of Chinese people, we feel that our instruments do not meet the requirements of the new life, new ideas, and new feelings. If we consider the future of the instruments within the glorious prospects of socialism, we will realize the importance of the reform.

(Li 1954:493)

Yang Yinliu, Li’s successor at the Music Research Institute, also said: “Even though our national musical instruments are varied and colourful, from the contemporary point of view, they are inadequate and archaic. Their tonal quality is limited, their range is narrow, and modulation is difficult (Yang 1957:73 as cited in Hamm 1991:10).” Similar opinions were predominant, resulting in great changes to, and the reinvention of, many traditional instruments.34

The traditional zheng was considered to have three main restrictions: the range of the instrument was too limited for new compositions; it did not have enough strings to

32 Source: an unpublished collection of documents from this meeting.

33 Author’s translation.

accommodate playing both the melody with the right hand and the accompaniment with the left hand; and the instrument was too quiet to achieve the boldness of the new spirit and to be used as a concert instrument; therefore, changes were unavoidable.

Construction of the 21-string and Key-changeable Zheng

The first twenty-one-string zheng was produced in 1957 after Zhao Yuzhai suggested the Musical Instrument Factory (henceforth MIF), affiliated with the Shen Yang Musical Conservatory, enlarge the body of the instrument and increase the number of strings (Yan and Xu 1997:3). The 21-string zheng contains four octaves, ranging from D to d3. In 1962, Xu Zhengao of the Shanghai National MIF made the first 21-string “S” shape zheng (fig. 2.1). Different from the traditional zheng, the left shankou, or nut, is shaped in a curve to the performer’s left (shown at the right in the picture below). Accordingly, thinner strings (i.e. higher pitches) are shorter and thicker strings (i.e. lower pitches) are longer. This system helped to balance the tension of the strings. In addition, the composition of the strings was changed from pure steel, to a steel core wrapped with nylon, similar to that of a harp. This type of zheng has since become the standard.

Fig. 2.1 21-string zheng
In the early 1960s, due to the development of large Chinese orchestras and new compositions, the zheng had to develop further to allow it to change keys rapidly. In 1964, Zhang Kun of the Shenyang MIF experimented with the first key-changeable zheng. The goal of this innovation was to “enrich the expressive capability of the zheng so that the instrument is not only able to play complicated solo pieces, but also able to play in ensembles” (Zhang 1964:1-2). The construction of the first key-changeable zheng was finished in 1965, named “Model 65” (fig. 2.2).

This new zheng has 22 strings, tuned pentatonically. The principle of changing keys on this instrument is to change the length of strings from bridges to the right shankou, or nut. The idea is similar to the traditional way of changing keys, which is to move bridges, thereby changing the string length. Unlike the traditional zheng, however, the bridges on Model 65 are permanently fixed to the soundboard. Instead, a key-changing mechanism is installed on the right side of the instrument. The mechanism comprises forty-four tuning posts, five connecting rods, eleven tuning switches and twenty-two fine-tuning metal screws. The tuning posts are installed in two rolls inside the soundbox, to the left of the right shankou. These posts extend through the soundboard to the same height as the right shankou. At the top of each post there is a small cap with two pegs that the string sits between. When the tuning post is turned, these two pegs are rotated to act as temporary nuts, by contacting and thereby shortening the string. As there are two tuning posts per string, each of them can raise the string a semitone. Turning both tuning posts will raise the string a whole tone. All the tuning posts of the strings of the same pitch in different octaves are linked to a connecting rod that is attached to a tuning switch. When a tuning switch is moved to the side, the

connecting rods will rotate the tuning posts of all the octaves of that pitch simultaneously, either raising or lowering the pitches as desired. When combined with the open strings in a neutral position, all twelve keys can be produced. Fine-tuning screws to the right of the shankou allow for small adjustments of pitches.

Fig. 2.2 Model 65 key-changeable zheng, artistic recreation after Zhang (1964:no page).³⁶

A newer model of key-changeable zheng, called “Model 72”, was developed in the same factory in 1972. It has nineteen strings, and like the first model, a key-changing device is installed on the right side of the instrument. However, this mechanism has eight rows of nineteen tuning screws attached to semi-circular axles. When an axle is turned, the screws press against the strings raising them in pitch thus changing the intervals between the strings. Different combinations of axles would produce all the keys required (Shenyang 1973:2-4).

Improving on the previous models of the key-changeable zheng, Zhang Kun created a new

³⁶ The numbers in the picture are: 1. tuning switches, 2. the caps of the tuning posts containing two pegs, 3. the lid, 4. tuning pegs, 5. bridges, 6. strings, 7. fine-tuning screws.
pedal operated model with a mechanism that moved the bridges, thereby changing the pitch of the strings when a pedal was depressed (fig. 2.3).

A report on this project stated that besides having improved the tuning mechanism, making it more precise, the instrument makers also flattened the soundboard. This made the instrument faster to play, which was an important modification of the zheng, and a departure from the tradition of making the soundboard convex like the “vault of heaven”.

Fig. 2.3 Pentatonic 21-string pedal zheng, photo after Liu (1992:206)

In the 1970s, more instrument manufacturers in China reproduced key-changeable zhengs based upon the older designs, such as the 21-string key-changeable zheng by Yingkou MIF, Liaoning province, and the 25-string version by Shaanxi MIF.

Creation of Other Types of Zheng

In 1972, Zhang Ziyue of Suzhou MIF, Jiangsu province, designed a diatonic 36-string (fig. 2.4) and a 44-string zheng. The range of the 44-string zheng is more than six octaves
from F1 to g4 (Suzhou 1972:4). The key-change device is similar to that of the harp, which has seven pedals at the foot of the instrument, one controlling all the C-strings, one all the D-strings, and so on. Each pedal can be depressed two notches, shortening the corresponding strings to sound one or two semitones higher as desired. The basic tuning is in B major. When all the pedals are depressed one notch, the tuning is C major.

In 1978, He Baoquan of Shanghai MIF designed a 49-string chromatic key-changeable zheng, ranging from D-d3. The instrument was named the “butterfly zheng,” as the shape resembles a butterfly (He 1981:14) (fig.2.5). It is constructed so there is a nut at the centre of the instrument with a soundboard on either side. Strings are stretched in both directions from the nut, over a series of bridges on each soundboard. Each side of the
instrument is tuned to a pentatonic scale (i.e. right side is in G major, left side is in D major), and each side of the soundboard has four additional strings for semitones.

Fig. 2.5 Butterfly Zheng, photo after Liu (1992:205)

According to Xiang Sihua, who tested the butterfly zheng, only one key (D) could be played comfortably on this instrument. In other keys, to play pentatonically, the players had to skip over some strings, which made the instrument very awkward to play with traditional hand positions.\(^{37}\)

Although the idea of making a key-changeable zheng was very popular from the 1970s to the 1980s, these experiments were not very successful. Most of the players, who have tried these new instruments, including myself, do not favour the new instruments, especially the key-changeable instruments. The tuning mechanisms are seldom accurate and often quickly put the instruments out of tune. As well, these mechanisms make the

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instruments too heavy to be carried by a single person, and are therefore useless for the travelling musician.

**New Compositions and Techniques**

The 1950s saw the beginning of a number of new compositions being written specifically for the *zheng*. These compositions, mainly composed by *zheng* performers, incorporated new techniques and structures.

In the *zheng* composition *Qing Feng Nian*, the composer/performer Zhao Yuzhai (mentioned above), added left hand techniques that differed from the traditional Shandong techniques. An example can be seen at the beginning of the piece, in which the melody is played by both hands alternately (fig. 2.6). Thus, a dramatic accelerando and crescendo can be achieved.

Fig. 2.6 Excerpt from *Qing Feng Nian*, copy after Beijing (1996:193)
This piece also introduces the use of the left hand to play a glissando or “flowers”, which, traditionally played by the right hand, is a distinctive characteristic of Shandong zheng music (see page 15). The left handed “flower” as an accompaniment to the melody played by the right hand gives the music a fuller and livelier sound (fig 2.7).

Fig.2.7 Excerpt from Qing Feng Nian (ibid.)

Qing Feng Nian was very successful and drew a great deal of attention. Zhao Yuzhai’s composition was highly praised in an article entitled “The Guzheng Yanzou de Gexin Zhe” (The Innovative Zheng Performer), written by Li Ling, a famous musical analyst, and published in the official voice of the government, The People’s Daily (Aug. 10th, 1956). This article had a profound impact on other zheng players, resulting in the appearance of approximately forty new compositions for the zheng (Xiang Sihua 1990:143).

Wang Shenzhi and Lu Xiutang of Shanghai composed Linchong Yeben (c. 1962) for the newly designed 21-string “S” shaped zheng. In order to make an unbroken melodic phrase to portray the hero’s sorrow and other dark emotions, the composers introduced the

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38 The piece is based upon a famous classical story of Lin Chong of the Song dynasty. Lin, a loyal and innocent military general, was framed and forced to join the bandits in the Liangshan Mountain in Shandong province.
technique known as \textit{yao} in the piece (fig.2.8). Although \textit{yao} is a traditional technique from Zhejiang \textit{zheng} school (see page 18), it was not recognized by most composers and \textit{zheng} players until this piece was created. Consequently, \textit{yao} has become a standard \textit{zheng} technique, used extensively in contemporary \textit{zheng} compositions.

Fig. 2.8 Excerpt from \textit{Lin Chong Yeben}, copy after Wu and Xiang (1996:43)

Most \textit{zheng} pieces composed during the 1950s, except for \textit{Qing Feng Nian} and a few others, were quickly forgotten and were replaced by still livelier pieces, with more current political messages, written by the new generation of \textit{zheng} performers and composers. In the late 1950s, the impact of changing political thought resulted in the “nationalization” of music
and the banishment of Western instruments in the music conservatories. Consequently, students who had learned Western instruments had to switch to Chinese instruments. Xiang Sihua (1939-), the celebrated zheng virtuoso, originally studied piano at the Affiliated High School of Shanghai Conservatory and had to transfer her studies to the zheng in 1958. The same was true of Zhang Yan (1945-1996) and Wang Changyun (1945- , daughter of Wang Shenzhi), two other zheng virtuosi. It is not surprising to find that these and other zheng performers soon introduced piano techniques to the zheng.

In 1965, Wang Changyuan composed Zhan Taifeng ("Struggling with the Typhoon") when she was still a student of the Shanghai Music Conservatory. The composer was inspired by watching a group of dock workers struggling bravely against the destructive power of a typhoon. Similar to most Chinese musical compositions written between the 1950s and 1970s, this piece is very pictorial, with the first section depicting the scene of a busy dock through vigorous rhythmic and melodic statements (fig.2.9). In the second section, the composer applies double-handed descending and ascending glissandi on both sides of the bridges, imitating the howl of the wind and the fury of the waves hitting the dock. The third section uses two hands to pluck the strings rapidly in imitation of the workers fighting against the strong wind. The fourth section portrays the sunshine after the storm, and the last section recapitulates the lively working scene (Yuan 1987:147). Apart from applying approaches of the Zhejiang school, such as yao and sidian (i.e. plucking rapidly with thumb, index and middle fingers of the right hand), the composer also combines...
yao with saoxian ("stroke strings"), a quick plucking of several strings simultaneously, a pipa technique, creating a new technique called saoyao (fig 2.10).

Fig. 2.9 Excerpt from Zhan Taifeng

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{stroke} \\
\text{mf}
\end{array} \]

After the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, all traditional and Western music was prohibited. Except for the eight "model" Beijing operas approved by Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, the country's music withered completely. The government badly needed new compositions that could set a good example to guide and animate the development of revolutionary music to serve the political demand of the Cultural Revolution. Zhan Taifeng happened to be a perfect example for this purpose. Once more, the People's Daily published
an article praising the piece. It states: “Traditional zheng music does not reflect life of the workers. Even among the pieces composed in the 50s, very few have as clear a theme for praising workers as Zhan Taifeng. Therefore, this piece is worth serious attention (as cited in Xiang 1990:146).” Instantly Zhan Taifeng became the most popular tune in the country. This promoted the composition of more zheng pieces and stimulated new compositions for other traditional instruments.41

The popularity of Zhan Taifeng once again demonstrated the extensive political impact on the development of contemporary music in China. After Zhan Taifeng was praised by the government, more compositions were written for the zheng in the 1970s. Among them, the prominent ones include: Dongting Xinge (“The New Tune of Dongting Lake”), by Wang Changyuan and Pu Qizhang, 1973; Xinfu qushui Dao An’cun (“Water of the Happy Canal Passing by My Village”), by Shen Liliang, Xiang Sihua and Fan Shang’e, 1974; Caoyuan Yingxiong Xiao Jiemei (“The Heroic Sisters From the Grassland”), by Liu Qichao and Zhang Yan, 1974; and Liuyang He (“Liuyang River”), by Zhang Yan, 1975. These pieces adopted more techniques from Western instruments, such as piano and harp, and therefore were seen as being more challenging for the performers.

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CONCLUSION

The twentieth century has witnessed many changes in the zheng: from its construction to performance techniques, and from its music to social status. These changes arose from the radical changes in social, economic, and political structures in China. The reform seems deeply rooted in a sense of national humiliation instilled in the country since the Opium War, as stated in a famous Chinese saying: “We must have what the foreigners have, we also must have what they do not have.” Another factor is the contempt for traditional culture borne from the “May Fourth” campaign, which resulted in tugu naxin, meaning to throw out the old and to embrace the new, which has inspired a constant stream of cultural reforms.

The fault in tugu naxin is that the Chinese musical establishment is in danger of repeating the mistakes of the past, without the wisdom of those who have gone before to guide them. If the inventors of the key-changeable zheng had researched the methods used to change modes from traditional Chaozhou music, like the piece Fenhong Lian (“Pink Lotus”), they might have saved themselves years of useless toil, that might have been better put to use developing more functional innovations on the instrument. Tugu naxin limits the options. A greater wisdom would allow Chinese musicians to employ nylon strings, while preserving steel strings that both define and are integral to the expression of the traditional styles, such as Chaozhou and Henan. This greater wisdom would also allow the revival of the manufacture and use of silk strings. In the haste to invent new techniques to make the zheng play louder, faster and with a profusion of notes, composers should not lose sight of yiyun busheng (“using lingering charm to make up sound”), a powerful musical technique that is part of the distinctive nature of the instrument.
Many performers, composers and instrument makers have devoted their lives to the popularization and reform of the zheng. While many of these reforms have been discarded, others have helped transform it from a regional instrument, to a powerful instrument of expression that is now heard on the international stage. Yet the erratic political and social transformations that seem to plague China will probably continue to have a profound effect on the instrument. Hopefully, there will come a time when a more expansive view of the instrument will allow all the stages of the zheng, from past to future, to be regarded as essential vehicles of expression, and that the terms “traditional” and “contemporary” will not be considered in opposition to each other, but rather be seen to form the two interlocking parts of yin and yang, inherently linked and in constant balance.
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GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

baban
Bainiao Chaofeng
baixi
Beijing Daode Xueshe
Chao Dongfu
Caoyuan Xiaojiemai
CaoyuanYingxiong Xiaojiemai
Cao Zheng
chaozhou
Chen Hong
Cheng Te-yuan
chongqing
Chushui lian
chuan diao
dadiao
dadiao quzi
dizi
Dongbei Yinzhuan
Dongting Xinge
erhu
ersi pu
Fan Shang'e
fanxian
Fenhong Lian
Fengsu Tongyi
fugu pai
Fu Xuan
Gaoshan Liushui
Gao Zicheng
gongche pu
Guijin Tushu Jicheng
guzi qu
Guo Ying
guoyue
Guiquai Ci
Guixi
Guangdong

八板
百鳥朝風
百戲
北京道德學社
曹東扶
草原小姐妹
草原英雄小姐妹
曹正
潮州
陳虹
鄭德淵
重慶
出水蓮
串調
大調
大調曲子
笛子
東北音專
洞庭新歌
二胡
二四譜
范上娥
反線
粉紅蓮
風俗通譯
復古派
傅玄
高山流水
高自成
工尺譜
古今圖書集成
鼓子曲
郭鷹
國樂
歸來去辭
貴溪
廣東
Hakka
Hangong Qiuyue
Han Kuo-huang
Hanya Xishui
Hangzhou
He Baoquan
Hefan
Henan
huqin
huobusi
huowu
Huangdi
Jiaochuang Yeyu
jiangu
Jiang Qing
Jiangxi
ke ju
Kui
leiqin
li
Li Ling
Li Yuanqing
Lou Shuhua
Linchong Yeben
Lin Yongzhi
Liu Dehai
Liu Qichao
Liuqing Niang
Liuyang He
Liang Ming-yueh
Liang Tsai-ping
Lu Xiutang
Luo Jiuxiang
Mao Zedong
manggong zheng
Meng Tian
min
minjian
minzu hua
Nao Yuanxiao

客家
溡宮秋月
韓國璜
寒鴉戲水
杭州
何寶全
和番
河南
胡琴
火不思
活五
黃帝
蕉窗夜雨
建鼓
江青
江西
科舉
夔
擂琴
禮
李陵
李元慶
箋樹華
林沖夜奔
林永之
劉德海
劉啓超
柳青娘
瀏陽河
梁銘越
梁在平
陸修棠
羅九香
毛澤東
盲公箏
蒙恬
閭
民間
民族化
閩元宵
Nanjing Guoli Yinzhuan
南音
Ni Cheng Pu
南音
paizi qu
南音
peng baban
牌子曲
pipa
琵琶
Pingsha Luoyan
平沙落雁
Pu Qizhang
浦其章
qin
琴
qinshu
琴書
qinzheng
琴筝
qing
磐
Qing Fengnian
慶豐年
qing sanliu
輕三六
qingshang yue
清商樂
Qing Zhu
青主
qu pai
曲牌
ruan
阮
saoxian
掃弦
saoyao
掃搖
sanxian
三弦
se
瑟
Sichuan
四川
sidian
四點
Sima Qian
司馬遷
sixian
絲弦
sizhu
絲竹
suona
唢吶
Shancun Laile Shouhuo Yuan
山村來了售貨員
Shandong
山東
Shen Liliang
沈立良
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Zhao Yuzhai  
Zhang Kun  
Zhang Xiaofeng  
Zhang Yan  
Zhang Ziyue  
zheng  
Zhengfu Xu  
Zhongguo Gudai Yinyue Shiliao Jiyao  
zhong sanliu  
zhongzhou gudiao  
zhu  
zhu  
ziqiang
APPENDIX

Tuning and Cipher Notation for the 21-String Zheng in the Key of D