Music, Religion And Human Nature:
A Discussion Of An Ancient Sound, Guqin Music

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Abstract

The study of Guqin has become an important topic in Asian music for the past 10 years. In this article, the connection of music, religion and human nature is examined through this ancient instrument. There are three underlying reasons why the author chooses Guqin as a medium for investigation. First, from a musical perspective, Guqin is the earliest notation written instrument in human history. Second, from a religious perspective, Guqin is the only official religious instrument recognised by Confucius in ancient China. Third, Guqin music, Flowing Water, had been selected (as one of the 27 pieces of world famous music) and carried by the American spacecrafts on August 20 in 1977 to space--- as greetings and connection to humankind in other planets. Therefore, this study serves to discuss the power of music --- as an ambassador of human nature.

Introduction

Music can reflect the value and temperament of a culture. In other words, music is an expression of life. Frequently, the “cultural matrix in which an individual lives determines the mode of expression.” In this article, the essence of Taoism is examined through this ancient instrument, Guqin.

The development of Guqin music has been framed and moulded by her dual role as the only official recognised religious instrument in China, and as an instrument which represent the scholastic class for the past 3000 years. Along with chess, calligraphy, and painting, Guqin is regarded as the most prominent medium for scholars to cultivate his character. Further, Guqin is the only Chinese instrument that possessed its own kind of ideology. And its ideology is rooted and established in China’s three notable religious and ethical systems: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

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1 Staf pengajar Fakultas Seni Pertunjukan Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana Salatiga
3 Ibid, p.16.
5 Ibid.
The duet of nature and human

One of the functions of Guqin music is to unite human with nature. This concept is manifested in the construction of the instrument. The length of Guqin is four feet by five inches which represent the four seasons and the five elements. Thus, the seven strings represent the Seven Stars.

The praise of nature, also one of the teachings of Taoism, has been an everlasting theme in Chinese art, literature and music. The ancient Chinese scholars, musicians and artists were fond of conveying their inner feelings to nature, especially on the occasion of homesick or abdicate from official. These thoughts and feelings were transformed into music compositions, paintings and poems. For instance:

*Nature thus became the vehicle, or raw materials, by which the literati painters interpreted their innermost thoughts and feelings. The emphasis shifted from an interest in portraying nature and man’s relationship to nature to a more personal expression of the nature of man.*

Further,

*This interest grew during the troubled and divided Northern and Southern dynasties when men sought consolation and solace from the disturbed world of human affairs in the landscape, spurred on by Taoist attitudes and notions through which poets and painters were inspired by their emotional responses to nature.*

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Musically, there were over three-quarters of the existing Guqin pieces bear the titles of nature scene. For example, *Flowing Waters* (Liu-shui) is regarded as one of the most famous Guqin melodies. This piece is later divided into two separate tunes, *High Mountains* (Kao-shan) and *Flowing Waters* (Liu-shui). Other notable examples include *Wild geese rest in the Sandy Wilderness*, *A Spring dawn at the Jade tower*, *Springing fountains*, *Song of Spring*, *Ode of the Autumn Wind*, *The beautiful night tune*, *Crows Caw at Night*, *White snow*, *The Moon of Guanshan*, *Three Variations of Plum Blossom* and *The Orchid*.

Water, mountains, fisherman and woodcutter are Taoist writers’ favour descriptive models. They are also popular subjects in Guqin repertoires. Each of them has its own symbolic meaning.

First, Taoism often uses ‘water’ to illustrate the power of ‘inactivity’. Lao Tzu used the ‘formless’ and ‘flexible’ nature of water to demonstrate the appropriate attitude that a person should maintain in this world: to renounce bias, formality and embrace the natural.

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6 Hsu Wei. *Contemplating in the deep forest*. Anhui Provincial Museum.
9 Ibid.
flow of lives. Remarkable water pieces in Guqin music include *Flowing Waters* (Liu Shi). Unlike Debussy’s *The Sea* (La Mer) nor Ravel’s *The Play of Water* (Jeux D’eau), the author would say that the core of *Flowing Waters* (Liu Shi) emphasized the praise of nature whereas the water pieces of Debussy and Ravel focused on sense perception (impression of a scene). Take Whistler’s: *Green and Gold: The Great Sea* as an example. Whistler depicted the transitory moment of the sea into his canvas. The impressionist composers and painters put their impressions of the nature world (usually based on their sensory impressions) into their compositions and paintings.

Diagram 2  Whistler: *Green and Gold: The Great Sea*

Second, the holiness of the mountains is reflected in the Chinese saying that, monks usually occupy the renowned mountains in the Empire. The ‘serenity’, ‘quietness’, ‘inactivity’ and ‘profundity’ of the mountains suit the aesthetic of Taoism. And Taoism’s teaching, such as self-effacement, namelessness, return to simplicity and ‘return to nature’ are reflected in Guqin repertoires such as *Singing in the Mountain Life*, *High Mountains and Flowing Waters* and *Missing a friend when staying in Mountain*. These

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10 Ibid.


17 Ibid.
titles penetrate the spirit of ‘hermits’, who choose living away from the mundane world and surround themselves by mountains and rivers.

These psychological reflections coincided with Merriam’s idea that music functioned as expressing emotions and, furthermore, an aesthetic experience. Merriam also concluded that music is a psychological summary of a culture, in which its value and heart were exposed and depicted. 14

Third, the essence of Taoism is revealed in Guqin pieces such as Dialogue between Fisherman and Woodcutter and The evening song of a Drunken Fisherman. Taoism often perceives ‘fisherman’ and ‘woodcutter’ as people who obtain wisdom and close in harmony with nature. Referring to the Guqin performer, Gong Yi’s C.D. program notes of Dialogue between Fisherman and Woodcutter,15 it stated:

Prosperity and destruction alternate in the blink of an eye yet nature is constant and steadfast. The fisherman and the woodcutter who escape to their pastoral retreat understand the real content of life.

The relationship between the fisherman and nature is described in Evening Song of the Drunken Fisherman. The tune portrayed a drunken fisherman riding on the boat and became “drunk” in the beautiful scenery that surrounded him.

On the other hand, Taoism’s perception about fisherman and woodcutter appears in contrast with some of the western writers and musicians. Take Taoist writer, Chuang-tzu and Nobel Prize Winner, Hemingway as examples. Chuang-tzu used old fisherman to illustrate someone who obtain wisdom, someone who live freely from earthly burdens and in harmony with nature. However, in Hemingway’s The old man and Sea, the wisdom of the old fisherman is reflected through the conquered of natural world. ‘Strength’ and ‘force’ are against Taoist’s teaching of ‘inactivity’ and ‘submission’.

Viewing the history of Guqin music development, there’s only one repertoire bears the content of ‘fight’. The one and the only example is Guangling San. Guangling San is based on a historical story, Nie Zheng’s revenge. The piece described Nie Zheng’s sorrow, anger and his revenge for his father. The content of the piece, such as the glory of heroism and use of force were against Taoist teaching. Therefore, Guangling San’s eligibility as a

19 Gong Yi, Dialogue Between the Fisherman and Woodcutter, w/Lue Shoucheng (xiao) - Wind/Solar SMGE-1988 Taiwan, 1995.
Guqin piece has created controversy for a while as it contradicted with the peaceful and elegant nature of Guqin music.

In addition, the word, drunk, bears an ironic meaning in Taoism. Remarkable Taoist writers, such as Chuang Tzu (4-300 B.C.), His K‘ang (223-262) and Su Tung-P‘o (Sung Dynasty) took the same view that a cup of wine served to forget or free one from earthly boundaries and worries. Holding a ‘jar’ of wine, they stand aloof from present consciousness, see through the fleeting laughter and fame in life.

A typical example is the Guqin piece, The Drunkard. Thompson’s Guqin Silk String Zither website stated The Drunkard was written by Ruan Ji. Because of unable to fulfill “Tao” in the devastated society, he put his anxieties out of his mind and found ‘realness’ in drinking wine instead. However, the core of the piece is not really about being infatuated with wine. Based of the information from Thompson, The Drunkard is divided into seven sections (excluding the coda part) as follows:

1. Enjoying wine and forgetting troubles
2. Drunkenly dancing like a flying immortal
3. Singing loudly to earth and heaven
4. Loving wine and forgetting the body
5. Dashing off calligraphy on art paper
6. Boasting over to exalt wine
7. Hold up wine and feign madness

Coda: Sound of the immortal exalting his wine
End

Taoism’s concept of ‘drunk’ differs from Verdi’s Toast, from the opera La Traviata. Both pieces mentioned about drinking wine. However, the philosophy behind The Drunkard differed from the kind of “Hedonism” portrayed in Toast. The essence of hedonism is revealed in the following lyrics from Toast:

To life and to love and to light hearted laughter we joyously lift our glasses,
We celebrate moments too fleeting to capture before the magic expires.
The ecstasy of love will live for all too brief an hour.

a frail and fragile flower that blooms and fades away.

Tomorrow, tomorrow we cannot recapture the pleasure we live for today.

“Hedonism” usually applied to attain pleasure and avoid pain. The intention and action of hedonism are normally based on personal assumption. On the contrary, even at the moment of seeking pleasure and entertainment, Taoism still search for Tao (wisdom and spiritual fulfillment), which is beyond the level of merely pleasure. Besides, cultural differences also reflected in the manner of drinking wine in both cases: drinking in solitude/with intimate friends against drinking in banquet; and holding a ‘cup’ or ‘jar’ (mostly Asians) of wine instead of lifting the ‘glasses’ (Europeans).

“Virtue is more than the arts”: “Music is to teach harmony”

Guqin is “near to Taoism, it teaches one how to subdue the scheming mind.” Also, the aesthetics of Taoism, which emphasized ‘serenity’, ‘quietness’, ‘emptiness’ and ‘formless’, outweighed the ritualism of Confucianism in the history of Chinese arts. Profundity, quietness, serenity, emptiness are the desired sound of the Qin, which correspond with the aesthetic of Taoism. The ideal Guqin ‘altar’ is stated as: “preferably on a beautiful spot of nature: it must be far from all worldly noise, pure, and surrounded by exquisite scenery.” These aesthetic qualities assemble the sound of nature.

Regarding the timbre of Guqin, His K’ang regarded the sounds as chequered feathers, penetrate with different colours and variations and they are like echoes of gentle, lightly breeze. And the ‘harmonics’ of the Guqin are like the echo of a distant bell, soft and delicate. The sound of the Guqin is sonner when compared to other Chinese instruments, such as Chin and Pipa or other western instruments, such as the flute, violin and trumpet. Unlike other Asian or Western instruments, Guqin has never developed to become a performing instrument (until the last 30 years).

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid, p.49.
Part of the reason is due to its softness in nature, for the string is made of silk and easily broken by extensive force. However, nowadays, metal string (instead of silk one) is commonly used by Guqin players.

Another reason is the craftsmanship of the Guqin lies not only in musical entities but in polishing one's character. Confucius claimed that the purpose of "music is to teach harmony" and he asserted the greatness of music lies not in the perfection of tone, but as a means of self-cultivation. Therefore, he regarded virtue is more important than the arts. For example, Ch'eng Yen-chi, a Guqin player in Ch'ing dynasty, asserted playing Guqin as a way to achieve wisdom and not mainly for the sake of the arts. He strongly recommended that all who intended to teach to pass the knowledge of the Guqin should wait until they meet a pupil who has good character and cultural taste. Besides, Po Ya was regarded as one of the best Guqin players in ancient China. Chung Ch't was a great listener who never failed to understand Po Ya's music. When Chung Ch't passed away, Po Ya broke his Guqin and tore the strings and didn't play the instrument any more. He considered no one in the world was worthy for him to play.

In conclusion, Kandinsky once stated:

"Art travels along the path of human nature. With the development of the human spirit, art too is eternally enriched, and enriches in its turn with new means of expressing the human spirit."

Being the earliest notation written instrument in human history, Guqin not only witnesses the development of music, but also serves as the epitome of human nature.

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29 Ibid.
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