

Guqin and its music

修身理性，以返天真

Shi Yang, Cambridge Guqin Society

Chinese New Year of the Rabbit Celebration at The Open University, 17th January 2023



**UNESCO Inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity
(originally proclaimed in 2003)**

The Chinese zither, called *Guqin*, has existed for over 3,000 years and represents China's foremost solo musical instrument tradition. Described in early literary sources and corroborated by archaeological finds, this ancient instrument is inseparable from Chinese intellectual history. *Guqin* playing developed as an elite art form, practised by noblemen and scholars in intimate settings, and was therefore never intended for public performance. Furthermore, *Guqin* was one of the four arts – along with calligraphy, painting and an ancient form of chess – that Chinese scholars were expected to master.

Guqin has seven strings and thirteen marked pitch positions. By attaching the strings in ten different ways, players can obtain a range of four octaves.

Nowadays, there are fewer than one thousand well-trained *Guqin* players and perhaps no more than fifty surviving masters. The original repertory of several thousand compositions has drastically dwindled to a mere hundred works that are regularly performed today.

Shi Yang will perform the following three pieces during the Chinese New Year celebrations at the Open University on 17th January 2023.

"Yang Guan San Die" 《阳关三叠》

A piece of music played with lyre according to a poem written by Wang Wei, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Wang Wei wrote the poem when he saw off a friend to serve in army at Weicheng, a small town in Yangguan neighbouring the border.

The poem goes like this: "In the central town Weicheng, it rains lightly in the morning. All the houses and willows look fresh after the rain. I suggest you have another cup of wine, as soon as you go West through the Yangguan Pass, there will be no old friends."

San Die, means repeating three times. In the poem, the sentence "Going west through Yangguan there will be no old friends". "西出阳关无故人" is repeated three times, so it is called "Yang Guan San Die".

Instrument players made it a see-off song based on the poem. Even today, some people usually sing this song when they see off friends.

“Mei Hua San Nong” 《梅花三弄》

One of the earliest and most famous pieces of Chinese ancient music. Its origin went back to as early as the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), in which period lived a famous general and musician named Huan Yi. One day, General Huan met a young man named Wang Huizhi, who humbly invited Huan to play one piece of *Dizi* (bamboo flute) music. Huan accepted with no hesitation. What he played was *Meihua Sannong*, the most popular melody in that period. *Meihua* means plum blossom. *Sannong* means repeating the main melody three times. *Meihua Sannong* is composed mainly of a number of different melodies, each of which consists of a string of connected musical phrases. Contrasting tempos and the restraining influence of synchronism serve to produce effects of scattering and tightening, which represent plum blossom's pure and noble peacefulness and fearlessness to the severe cold. This melody expresses the loneliness and extraordinary self-admiration of ancient Chinese scholars. With time passing by, *Meihua Sannong* is fairly common with other kinds of musical instruments and this elegant melody now is one of the repertoires of *Guqin* music.

“Guan Shan Yue” 《关山月》

Guan Shan Yue (Moon Over the Mountain Pass) is a traditional *Guqin* composition based on a poem by the famous Chinese poet, Li Bai in Tang Dynasty. It represents soldiers on the battlefield longing for the comforts of their home and family. The origin of Guan Shan Yue dated back to Han Dynasty. It has become famous after the Poem of Li Po. The one by Li Bai is the most famous.

Li Bai's poem *Guanshan Yue* is as follows (translation is from Fred Lieberman, *A Chinese Zither Tutor*, p. 88 [Romanization changed]):

明月出天山，	bright moon over Tianshan
苍茫云海间。	vast expanse ocean of clouds
长风几万里，	great wind from far off lands
吹度玉门关。	blows through Yumen Pass
汉下白登道，	Han march down Bai Deng
胡窥青海湾。	Hu reconnoitre Qinghai Bay
由来征战地，	returning from places of battle
不见有人还。	no one yet has been seen
戍客望边色，	frontier guardians watch borders sadly
思归多苦颜。	homeward thoughts many bitter faces
高楼当此夜，	in boudoirs on this night
叹息未应闲。	only sighing and no rest

Enjoy the Guqin music!

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