# Observations and Reflections on Traditional Music in Modern China

Dr. Jeff Roberts

The history of China and its music stretch back over four thousand years. During this time, traditional Chinese music meant a lot of different things, depending on the epoch. Such variety over time reveals that music culture is not static, but dynamic and in a four thousand year old tradition, much change over time has taken place. At the same time, such change occurred in the context of a remarkably stable and fixed system of cultural beliefs.

When looking at music traditions in Mainland China, as they exist today, we must consider the continuity of China's history while at the same time accounting for evolution and change, whether historically or in the present day. We look to identify what Chinese music traditions are by looking at what they were in the time of Dynastic China; where cultural continuity shaped millennia-long lineages of music tradition. At the same time, when we look at Chinese traditional music today (which has been changed by dramatic socio-cultural, political and economic change in the last one hundred and fifty years) we need to consider not just what these circumstances have done to alter music traditions, but also what, in the modern context, Mainland Chinese musicians do with these traditions to either reclaim-maintain-preserve them or develop them in new directions. This article hopes to outline the dynamics of traditional music in modern day China by presenting profiles of several music traditions in China as they existed historically and as they exist in the present day.

A good starting point in this endeavor would be to consider what traditional culture in China was before contact with the West and how this historic cultural foundation was altered over the course of the 20th century in relation to music. China's cultural foundations, including China's music traditions, rest on Confucianist and Daoist thought. Chinese music, as a component of traditional culture, sought to express Confucianist and Daoist ideas and the variety of music expressions in traditional music were shaped by different social contexts and functions. The range of music expression can be exemplified by highlighting two traditions: the urban literati 古琴 *guqin* (ancient string instrument) tradition and the rural ritual music of North China called '吹打 *chuida*' (wind and percussion instruments). The literati were a class of highly educated Confucian scholars who held government posts and often came from landed gentry families. Confucianism, simply put, is concerned with the relationship between men in society whereas Daoism was concerned with the relationship between the individual and the natural world. The traditional arts (including painting, poetry, calligraphy, chess and seven stringed plucked zither *guqin*) of the literati scholar served to cultivate these relationships. Through playing *guqin* pieces related to Daoist ideas, the scholar sought to cultivate his relationship to the nature and the universe. In the Confucian context, the scholar also used *guqin* to help cultivate himself into a virtuous Confucian gentleman that would act morally in government and society. Other arts served a similar end and from this common goal the *guqin* tradition has close ties to poetry, painting and calligraphy. These were not professional pursuits, but were used for daily life cultivation.

In contrast with urban literati culture, rural folk music traditions expressed Daoist beliefs related to important events in everyday life such as birth, marriage or death which required ritual ceremony. *Chuida* music (blowing and hitting music), a North China regional music, was performed in the context of Daoist ritual. Just as *guqin* was not considered a professional pursuit, *chuida* music was also not a profession. Passed down through families from one generation to the next, *chuida* traditions were an important part of local village life and musicians performed as a sense of duty to the local community. Historically, these rituals were disseminated from Daoist temples in larger cities such as Beijing or Tianjin into the

smaller rural communities, upon which, over the years, developed a variety of regional styles. Both the *chuida* and *guqin* traditions, as they exist today, are continuation of traditions as they existed and developed over the two most recent Dynastic periods of Chinese history (i.e. Ming 1368-1644, and Qing 1644-1911).

Over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, foreign influence altered the cultural contexts within which these two traditions were historically situated. From the time of the Opium Wars (1840-1842, 1856-1860) up through the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China underwent dramatic political, economic, social and cultural change, all of which impacted the arts. In the Chinese world of traditional music, the adoption of Western-style music education[1] and its related value systems greatly influenced music traditions in China. One of the more impactful outcomes in the adoption of Western training was the professionalization of music performance. In the context of traditional culture, the highest levels of music artistic achievement occurred through refined practice of instruments according to their life-cultivating goals such as with Daoism and the *guqin*. Refined *guqin* performance meant subtle nuances in performance expression through the cultivation of a personal style that did not necessarily place technical mastery as a goal. The adoption of Western training emphasized technical mastery and virtuoso performances in Western-style concert hall settings. Instrument traditions such as *pipa, guzheng* and *erhu* evolved in this manner during the twentieth century, with *guqin* less so (until recently) because of its highly private traditional function and performance context as well as its very soft volume level. Western-style training also impacted rural folk traditions like *chuida*. During the formative years of Communist China, master instrument folk musicians were brought from the countryside to Western style conservatories in major cities and encouraged to develop students in a similar type of virtuoso performance. One consequence of both technical emphasis and centralized teaching was the slow erosion of regional styles. In conservatory settings, styles from different regions mixed, blended and faded as technical emphasis outweighed the adoption of one specific style of playing. Today, when talking about regional styles, it is common to include a category termed 'conservatory style'. Such virtuoso training has also impacted *chuida* performance in rural village life. In contrast to the amateur-based performance of ritual music by local musicians who performed as a service to the village community, there are also now virtuoso *chuida* groups who travel perform paid concerts purely for entertainment.

As is well known, the Cultural Revolution had an enormous impact on music traditions in China. Mao Zedong's Forum on Literature and Music (1942) created a foundation upon which,

"...literature and fine art handed down in the past ages were either [considered] feudalistic, imperialistic or revisionist. In order to build an uncontaminated proletarian social society, Mao strongly believed that all these remnants of past ages should be completely obliterated, therefore in 1966, he outlawed all books, all music, all paintings, all movies and all plays created since the birth of civilization."(Mao, 1991: 104)[2]

In the context of rural *chuida* music, religious aspects of Daoist or Buddhist ritual music were considered feudal superstition and thus banned outright during the Cultural Revolution. After 1976, the program to erase feudal superstition from modern China continued in efforts by the government to discourage ritual ceremonies and secularize performance. The results of these efforts have been mixed. On the one hand, a once vibrant network of Daoist and Buddhist temples and priests disseminating ritual ceremony to local priests and villages has disappeared and been replaced by local farmer lay priests, who were once musicians under the

[1] For example, Shanghai Conservatory, the first Western music conservatory in China, was founded in 1926.

[2] Mao Yurun. 1991. Music Under Mao: Its Background and Aftermath. *Asian Music*, Vol. 22(2); 97-125.

service of a priest and have since taken up responsibilities for all aspects of the ritual, not just the music. On the other hand, while the government succeeded to some extent in discouraging and/or secularizing ritual music, there are still vast rural areas in the North that continue to practice these traditions as they have been practiced for generations. Chinese folk instrumental music scholar Stephen Jones notes that several years after the Cultural Revolution, "the liberalizations of the early 1980's may have lead to a significant revival of musical groups in many areas. In 1991, we were told that there were about sixty practicing shawm bands in the county of Yang'gao alone in northern Shanxi, and about six *sheng-guan* ritual ensembles." (Jones, 1998: 15) [3] While this seems like a sign of revival, this is also tempered by the fact that there is a decline in the number of younger generation village musicians who take up traditional practices. Along with pop music and its reshaping of young Chinese listening habits in the countryside, there is also greater numbers of youth moving away from rural villages to find better work in the cities.

Professionalization has had an effect on regional music practices in Southern China as well. Lawrence Witzleben's extensive research (Witzleben, 1987, 1995) [4] on Southern *sizhu yinyue*, or Silk and Bamboo music, has shown how this tradition struggles to continue in the modern Chinese context. Focusing on *Jiangnan sizhu* in and around the area of Shanghai, he tells of how professional, virtuosi training on *sizhu* instruments (*erhu, pipa, guzheng, yangqin* and *dizi*) have reduced the number of younger generation instrumentalists that participate in the performance of *Jiangnan Sizhu* in local teahouses or social clubs. Because their training is geared toward repertoire for the concert stage, they feel they have little time to play *sizhu* music and also complain that the music is too repetitive and boring. *Jiangnan sizhu* is a type of music performed by amateur musicians who sit around a table in a teahouse and perform in an ensemble for their own enjoyment, often switching instruments between songs. The aesthetics of appreciation are rooted in each performer's unique way of '*jixing jiahua*' (lit. to "spontaneously add flowers") meaning to improvise embellishments between the fixed main notes of the melody. If younger generations who only practice solo concert repertoire never spend time playing with local *sizhu* clubs, they will never have the chance to develop a personal *sizhu* playing style or an appreciation of the music aesthetics. Witzleben notes however, that there are some attempts by younger Chinese composers to compose new repertoire for these ensembles, which creates the possibility of imbuing a new vibrancy into the tradition. While new works are initially rejected by older *sizhu* performers because of their newness, some eventually become incorporated into a *sizhu* club's repertoire as performers become more familiar with the music.

*Guqin* teaching and performance activity in Mainland China seems be increasing over the last several years, compared with the twenty or so years following the Cultural Revolution. Personal experience with elder *guqin* masters and younger generation professional *guqin* players in Beijing has revealed a healthy number of students studying *guqin* as a profession, as well as a good number of serious amateurs. In addition, visits to inland Chinese cities such as Zhengzhou and Xi'an revealed a number of younger *guqin* players who studied with Beijing or Shanghai *guqin* masters and have established local *guqin* studios in which both *guqin* instruction and *guqin* making are pursued. A recent *guqin* concert at Peking University in 2010 of some of Mainland China's elder *guqin* masters (e.g. 李祥霆 Li Xiangting, 龔一 Gong Yi, XX Wu Zhao, 林友仁 Lin Youren) reveals the extent of this revived interest. In a sold out large concert hall audience, the majority were younger Chinese in their 20's to early 40's. In other

---

[3] Jones, Stephen. 1998. *Folk Music of China: Living Instrumental Traditions*. Clarendon Press.

[4] Witzleben, Lawrence, 1987. Jiangnan Shizhu Music Clubs in Shanghai: Context, Concept and Identity. *Ethnomusicology*, 31(2): 240-260.

Witzleben, Lawrence. 1995. *"Silk and Bamboo" Music in Shanghai: the jiangnan sizhu ensemble tradition*.
Kent State University Press.

personal interactions with young, college educated Chinese professionals, I have encountered several who have invested free time in studying *guqin* and exploring its aesthetic and spiritual aspects. It is interesting to see how the *guqin* tradition fits into their cultural landscape, as they also pursue a variety of other interests such as world cinema, Western folk music or salsa dancing. These accounts provide a picture of amateur *guqin* playing in a thoroughly modern Mainland context, of which the *guqin* tradition occupies one of many Chinese or international cultural pursuits.

In Beijing, the current atmosphere for professional *guqin* performance is filled with a variety of approaches to *guqin* performance: some traditional, some new. Great *guqin* masters of the early twentieth century such as 查阜西 Zha Fuxi (1895–1976), 管平湖 Guang Pinghu (1897–1967), and XXX Wu Lingjue taught several of the current masters. *Guqin* master Li Xiangting is an interesting case of new directions in *guqin* formed from principles of the tradition. Mr. Li has formed his own approach to improvisation (a practice unheard of in the recent era of *guqin* although seemingly a part of ancient *guqin* practice) using traditional *guqin* melody and principles of traditional music form, coupled with poetic impressions from Tang, Yuan and Song Dynasty poetry. As well, 吴娜 Wu Na, a former student of Mr. Li, has spent a good part of her career in China and abroad focusing on intercultural collaboration with a variety of Chinese, American and European Experimental, Rock and Modern Classical musicians. Such new directions in *guqin* performance are debated and argued among circles of *guqin* performers (as well as multiple 'new' traditional approaches to interpreting the traditional *guqin* repertoire). But herein lies the reality of Modern China: the opening up of the Mainland over the past thirty or so years has provided opportunities for Mainland Chinese artists to expand, stretch and explore. It is a context where tradition, uprooted in part or in whole from its dynastic roots may be revived or preserved, but may also tend to explore new territory because past boundaries and expectations have been eroded.

This trend to branch out in explore while still retaining connection to China's music traditions extends to Chinese musicians who pursue careers in music with foreign origins such as Western classical and Rock music. Surprisingly, Western classical music first came to China in the 17th century during the rule of Qianlong when Jesuit missionaries brought instruments and performed late Renaissance and early Baroque music for the emperor.[5] It was not until the Republican era (1911-1949) when greater numbers of Chinese pursued study of Western music, either in China or abroad. In the artistic vacuum of mid-twentieth century China, Chinese composer's activities were also severely repressed and it was not until the early 1980's when China's composers were free to pursue study and activity again. For composers today in the age range of mid 40's to late 50's, there is a good chance they were trained in traditional Chinese music. These composers, in various approaches, have drawn on the Chinese tradition to compose music, either for Chinese instruments, using Chinese musical elements with Western orchestral instruments (melody, rhythm, form) or both. While younger generation Chinese composers also draw on their own traditions, there is also a greater chance that they have been trained not on Chinese instruments but on Western instruments such as piano or violin.

Branching out to music outside of China's traditions is also seen in the area of Chinese rock music, as it interacts with traditional folk music. Chinese rock music is for the most part a phenomenon of North and Northeast China (not to be confused with Chinese pop music, associated with softer melodic popular music of Taiwan and Hong Kong). Begun in the mid 1980's in Beijing, Chinese Rock music has always had a strong association with rural folk traditions, often because rock musicians came from backgrounds in folk music. 刘义军 Liu Yijun, guitarist for China's first heavy metal rock group 'Tang Dynasty' commented that:

---

[5] Although this represents the first time Chinese were exposed to Western music, this took place wholly within the Dynastic court to a handful of people.

"Rock is based on the blues, and we can never play the blues as well as an American. It's just not in our blood. We can imitate it, but eventually we'll have to go back to the music we grew up with, to traditional Chinese music, to folk music." (Huang, 2003: 7)[6]

Such a comment reflects the efforts of current day rock groups that often find ways to synthesize their rock music with regional folk music traditions. One such example is the Northeast Chinese rock group二手玫瑰 *Ershou Meigui* (Secondhand Rose) from Heilongjiang province, who integrate a regional folk *Ershou Meigui* opera called 二人转 *Er Ren Zhuan* along with other instrumental folk music elements into their music and stage presence. *Er Ren Zhuan* is a two-person male-female light-hearted opera drama enjoyed in Northeast China mostly by rural, uneducated farmers and laborers. In their song 命运/生存'Mingyun/Shengcun' (Fate/Survival), the group combines rock instruments with various instruments from rural folk music (*sanxian, erhu, suona*). At the song's opening the lead male singer (in cross-dress and opera makeup which connects to the Chinese opera tradition of female roles sung by males) sings *falsetto*, imitating the vocal style of Chinese opera. In contrast to the light, comic nature of *Er Ren Zhuan*, the singer opens the song by crying 'Fate!' alluding to the hard life and limited options of Northeast Rural Chinese workers. The song, laced with *sanxian* and *suona* instrument accompaniment, continues to contemplate the details of this hard life and provides subtle criticism of modern Chinese government and society for creating such a bitter fate. While most older generation Chinese do not listen to groups like *Ershou Meigui*, younger generation Chinese do, and those who know the regional folk music and opera of the Northeast would feel a particular attachment in hearing youthful Rock music with social commentary and tinged with elements of the folk music from everyday rural life. Initially known just in Northeastern China, *Ershou Meigui* have gone on to national fame with younger generation Chinese, who feel the group speaks for them, addressing issues in modern Chinese society.

*Er Ren Zhuan* regional opera has a strong regional identity for Chinese of Northeast China, just as regional opera styles throughout China have for many other cities and rural areas. In total there are about fifty regional opera styles in China. Opera carries a particularly strong regional identity because its texts are sung in the local dialect. When most foreigners think about Chinese opera they imagine Peking Opera. Peking opera, in contrast to other regional styles, is not actually a regional style at all; it is a national opera. It's origins lie in classical opera from Anhui province, *Kun* Opera, which was brought to the court in Beijing during the Ming Dynasty. In Beijing, Anhui troupes incorporated influences from other regional styles and over time formed what we know as Peking Opera today. Peking Opera is also sung in the Mandarin *putonghua*, or standard Chinese, which is spoken all over China. It is from these factors that Peking Opera, while situated in Beijing is known and understood across all of China. During the Cultural Revolution, Peking Opera was one of the only music traditions not completely suppressed. Five Operas were reformed to express Communist ideology and propaganda and included in what was called the "Eight Model Plays". After the Cultural Revolution, these reform operas ceased to be performed, and along with other traditional music, Peking and other regional opera traditions resumed. Today Peking Opera is still performed in Beijing in smaller traditional or larger modern theatres. With opera academies in Beijing specializing in Peking opera or the classic opera *Kun*, there are still fine performances to be found in Beijing (although the vibrant audiences of opera aficionados found in late Qing and early twentieth century opera houses are largely gone). Regional opera can still be heard nation-wide in Sichuan (*Chuan* opera) Hunan (*Xiang* opera) or Guangzhou (Cantonese Opera), for example. Performance quality and type vary depending on context. Tourist-oriented performances are almost always lackluster with non-staged recital-type

[6] Huang, Huo. 2003. "Voices from Chinese Rock, Past and Present Tense: social commentary and construction of identity in Yaogun yinyue, from Tian'anmen to Present" in *Popular Music and Society*.

presentations or presentations in a variety show contexts providing high quality performances. Live, fully staged performances are possible to find as well. Recorded performances on China Television stations dedicated to opera perhaps provide both high quality and quick access to a variety of regional styles, often with some of the great twentieth century singers of the different styles.

Opera appreciation, like other music traditions in China, is much less in younger generations. This prompted the cultural bureau in the local Beijing government in 2008 to institute a program in Beijing's public school system to require middle school students to learn how to sing and perform Beijing opera. While long term effects at cultivating new appreciation for China's traditional music are difficult to gauge at this point, it seems like a step in the right direction to keep future generations of Mainland Chinese connected to and appreciative of their rich cultural heritage.

While this article is not exhaustive in discussing the immense variety of music tradition in China's historical and modern cultural landscape, it has provided an introduction and overview of the various dynamics that the music traditions of China face in the present day. One significant omission to this article has been the situation of music traditions in China's ethnic minority populations. These cultures and music traditions face issues similar in nature to the ones discussed here in the context of Han Chinese music traditions. But there are also issues unique to these traditions which demand an article just dedicated to outlining and discussing the dynamics involved in Mongolian, Yi, Uyghur or Tibetan music traditions in China. In all, the traditional music landscape in China, while altered from original pre-twentieth century context, still thrives and practices music that still follows and upholds traditional values. While there is some cause to worry about the long-term future of some of these traditions, there is also cause to appreciate the musicians, both young and old, who continue the practice and pass on their knowledge to young generations. While the fast pace of modern Chinese life seems out of touch with pace and perspective of tradition, there will always be an underlying connection between modern Chinese and the roots from which they come; it is sometimes just a matter of being reminded and awoken to it once again.

Jeffrey Roberts holds a PhD in Theory and Composition from Brandeis University, an MM in Composition from Boston University and a BM in Improvisation from New England Conservatory of Music. He pursued special studies with composer Hans Zender at the Hochschule für Musik, Frankfurt am Main Germany, through a grant from the Franz Goethe Stiftung and at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music with *guqin* Master Li Xiangting, on a Fulbright. Dr. Roberts is currently Visiting Assistant Professor in Composition and History at Williams College. He is also a professor-consultant at The Beijing Center for Chinese Studies, where he teaches coursework on Chinese and ethnic minority music and develops projects in music ethnography for the TBC's student fieldwork excursions. He is also music artistic director of Yishu-8 Art and Culture Space in Beijing where, in March 2011, he presented the first International Chamber Music Festival-Residency with German E-mex Ensemble, in partnership with the Institute for New Music at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music. See www.jeff-roberts.org .