

# Wang Fei

## Introduction to the Guqin, China's classical zither

06/07/2003, Berkeley Buddhist Monastery

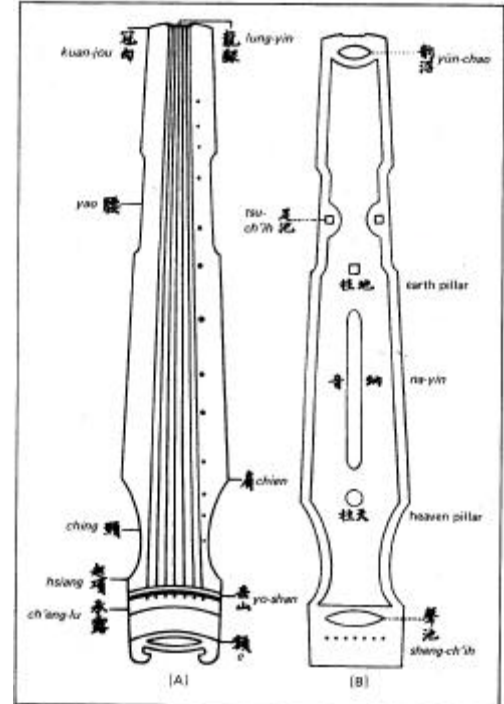
### About Guqin

The guqin, a seven-stringed zither, is China's oldest stringed instrument, with a history of some 3000 years. Chinese music has a long history, and its essence is best expressed on the guqin. In Imperial China, a well educated scholar was expected to be skilled in four arts:

*Qin (the guqin)*  
*Qi (the game of Go)*  
*Shu (calligraphy)*  
*Hua (painting)*

Historically, the guqin has been viewed as a symbol of Chinese high culture and the instrument most expressive of the essence of Chinese music. There are over 150 guqin handbooks extant, which contain more than 3,000 pieces of music as well as essays on the theoretical aspects of the guqin and its music.

When the U.S. spaceship "Voyager" was launched in 1977, a gold CD was placed on board to introduce the music of our planet to the rest of the universe. The guqin piece "Flowing Water" was included as one representative of the world's music.



In Chinese, "gu" means old and "qin" means "musical instrument". Historically, guqin was rendered as "qin" in most ancient texts. Because its long history, it has during the last 100 years been widely called guqin.

There is much symbolism surrounding the instrument. For example, it measures 3' 6.5" (Chinese feet and inches), symbolizing the 365 days of the year; the upper surface is rounded, representing the sky, the bottom flat, representing the earth. The five strings of the earliest qin symbolize the five elements: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. When Bo Yikao, son of King Wen, first ruler of the Zhou Dynasty around the 11th century BC, died the Emperor added a sixth string to mourn his son; the sound of the sixth string is sorrowful. The seventh string was added by the second Zhou ruler, King Wu to inspire his soldiers when his country went to war; the sound of this string is very strong. Finally, the 13 mother-of-pearl inlays along the outer edge represent the 13 months of the lunar year.

Undoubtedly, the guqin is a part of our world's heritage, but today fewer than two thousand people can play it, and it is rarely seen in China. Music that was written over a period of many centuries is unknown to most people.



#### Guqin tablature

The guqin has its own notation, which itself has a history of at least 1500 years.

For more Guqin info and music samples, please check <http://www.guqin.org>

For more about Wang Fei, please visit <http://www.feiwang.com>

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### Program Notes

#### Yi Gu Ren

*(Thinking of an Old Friend)*

This piece, also known as *Kongshan Yi Guren (In the Mountains, Thinking of an Old Friend)* first appeared in the *Dihui Guan Qin Handbook of the Qing Dynasty*. This handbook was popular in Sichuan. This piece is considered a masterpiece of the Wu school. It became popular throughout China after its publication by Peng Zhiqing in the *Jinyu Qinkan* in 1937. Peng learned it from his father. It is based on the story of Dai Kui's journey to visit his friend Wang Xianzhi during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420 AD). Although his friend was not at home, Dai Kui was satisfied that he had made the effort. The subtle melody reflects the restrained emotions of a Confucian scholar.

#### Ping Sha Luo Yan

*(Wild geese descending on the sandy beach)*

This piece is more than 300 years old. As the title suggests, the music depicts wild geese descending and ascending on a bright sunny day. The melody also symbolizes the abstract concept of tranquility, which has been pursued by Chinese scholars through the ages.

#### You Lan

*(The Solitary Orchid)*

This is the oldest qin piece in existence today. A manuscript was found in a temple in Kyoto, Japan by a monk in the early 1880s. This manuscript dates from the Tang Dynasty, but is probably a copy of a work lost much earlier: Qiu Ming's Music for the Qin of AD 586.

You Lan may have been composed by Confucius himself, while travelling among the feudal princes and trying unsuccessfully to convert them to his ideology. The music describes Confucius' feelings when, while travelling home from the kingdom of Wei to the Kingdom of Lu, he saw an orchid blooming among grasses and weeds in a desolate valley. He saw in this an analogy with his own situation: an orchid, the flower of kings, growing among ordinary wild flowers; he, the great scholar, having no audience among the princes, had to speak to the common people. It is infused with his sadness and unspoken anger.

#### Liu Shui

*(Flowing Water)*

This piece is more than 700 years old, and is perhaps the most famous Chinese classical composition.

The story behind it concerns the Guqin player Bo Ya and his friend the woodcutter Zhong Ziqi. The Guqin music played by Bo Ya was as grand as the high mountains and as lively as flowing water, but only Zhong Ziqi could perceive this in his music. Whatever Bo Ya played, Zhong Ziqi never failed to understand. As a result of this mutual appreciation they became very close friends. When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya destroyed his qin and vowed never to play again, because he thought nobody else could understand his music. This is the origin of the Chinese expression *zhi yin* - "knowing the sound". It means a very close friendship.

#### Pu An Zhou

*(Incantation of Pu Buddhist Temple)*

Originally written over four hundred years ago, this present rendition is based on the "Qinxue Remen" (A beginner's book for Guqin study) edition. The solemnity and benevolence of Buddhism are reflected in the piece.

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