

Concept of Nature in the Musical Aesthetics of the Chinese Guqin

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Abstract: This study explores the concept of nature in the musical aesthetics of the Chinese guqin (zither) from a material perspective (i.e., through the materials, musical tablatures, melodic phrases, and suitable environments used in playing the guqin), and from a spiritual perspective through an analysis of Kang Hsi's "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither," or "Poetic Essay on the Lute") and Hong Hsu's "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" ("Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music," or "Hsi-Shan's Epithets on Qin Music"). Guqin aesthetics developed under the influence of the Taoist theory regarding cultivation reflecting the highest level of unity among humans, nature, and the universe. The concept of nature is at the core of guqin music, and harmonious unity with nature is the main pursuit of guqin players.

Keywords: Guqin, musical aesthetics, nature, "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither" or "Poetic Essay on the Lute"), Kang Hsi, "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" ("Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music" or "Hsi-Shan's Epithets on Qin Music"), Hong Hsu

1. Introduction

Identifying a means of achieving coexistence between humans and nature has been a common focus of Eastern and Western thinkers throughout history. In Chinese philosophy, this focus falls within understanding how to reconcile humans and nature, that is, understanding how humans and nature are related. Hundreds of schools of thought on this topic have developed since the pre-Ch'in period (before 221 BCE). Although scholars have reported varying opinions, the unity of humans and nature has consistently been a core aspect of Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, the relationship between humans and nature is not oppositional. Rather, it is integrated and harmonious. Ancient Chinese people did not consider nature to be an object outside of human life that should be praised or revered; they contemplated a means of peacefully coexisting with nature.

Chinese music developed through traditional Chinese culture, which has a focus on establishing a harmonious connection between humans and nature. This aspect of traditional Chinese culture is reflected in the aesthetics of Chinese music and is particularly notable in Chinese guqin music. The guqin is a key artifact of Chinese material culture. Concepts related to learning from nature appear in multiple aspects of guqin music.

2. Relationship between guqin music and nature from the perspective of material culture

The guqin is a crucial artifact of Chinese music. Therefore, it is valuable both for the music it creates and its cultural significance. Traditional Chinese literature and historical documents frequently discuss the associations among the guqin, heaven and earth, and the universe and nature. This is reflected in the guqin-related historical documents, musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts, melodic phrases, and the environments in which the guqin is traditionally played.

2.1. The material used to make the guqin

To ancient Chinese people, the guqin was a musical instrument with noble significance. The materials used to make a guqin can affect the tone of the instrument; trees, which are the source of the wood used to make the guqin, grow upward into the air, which ancient Chinese people believed was the essence of the universe. In “Rhapsody on the Zither,”¹ Kang Hsi of the Wei and Jin dynasties wrote

The place where the paulownia grows,
 Rests on a high ridge of a lofty mountain.
 Pushing its roots through the layered earth, tall it rises;
 Reaching to the Northern Dipper, it soars on high.
 Enveloped in the pure harmony of Heaven and Earth,
 It inhales the auspicious radiance of sun and moon.
 Lush and thick, it stands in unique luxuriance

(Knechtges 281)

Hsi indicates that a guqin should be made of paulownia wood obtained from a sacred place that has been nurtured by the heaven, the earth, the sun, and the moon.

2.2. Guqin musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts

The earliest known ancestral guqin music tablature is a textual notation of the “You Lan” (Orchid) that was completed by Ming Chu, who lived in the Liang State during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Figure 1). In the Tang Dynasty, Rou Cao (730-?), a well-known guqin player at the time, reduced the number of strokes in Chinese characters and invented abbreviated character notations. The descriptions of the abbreviated character notations include the *hui*,² number of strings, and fingerings, which formed the guqin music tablature with notations comprising combined words. Textual notations in guqin music tablature were replaced by abbreviated character notations. (Figure 2).

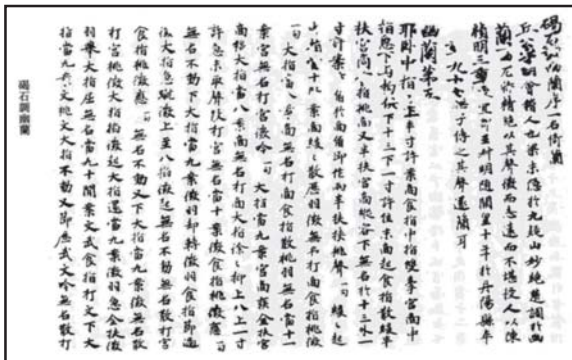


Fig. 1: Textual notation of the “You Lan” (Orchid) [Chu 3]



Fig. 2: Abbreviated character notation

Guqin fingering notations have symbols that differ from those of Western five-line staff notation. Guqin notations do not indicate pitch and rhythm, which provides players with considerable flexibility. In addition, the fingering and gesture charts use both images and text to indicate how each finger should move. The player can conceptualize the timbre effects that the fingering action is intended to produce.

Examples of ancient Chinese fingering and gesture charts are presented in Figure 3-1 and 3-2. The charts present a textual interpretation of finger movements combined with images of fingers clearly demonstrating the gestures required to play the guqin. Guqin notation charts metaphorically represent the characteristics of the target timbre by using images drawn from many sources, including landscapes, animals, plants, and mythology. Because of this, the fingering and gesture charts of

guqin notation convey the cultural importance and aesthetics of guqin music in addition to target fingerings and sound characteristics; the aural aesthetics of guqin music are integrated with nature, the universe, and life.

When a player examines the fingering and gesture charts, he can understand ancient Chinese people's aesthetic interpretation of guqin music and teach this to others. This can help modern people appreciate the liveliness and emotions conveyed through guqin music. These charts both convey ancient Chinese aesthetic perceptions of guqin music and present sounds through imagery and visual associations, which preserves the purpose of guqin music as a means of communication between humans and nature.

The first known guqin music handbook with complete fingering and gesture charts was published in *Xin Kan Tai Yin Da Quan Ji*, which was a complete volume in which the author compiled ancient guqin music tablature and theory, during the Zhengde years (1506–1521) of the Ming Dynasty (Yuan 63–64). The fingering and gesture charts of *Xin Kan Tai Yin Da Quan Ji* (Figure 3-1 and 3-2) have the following characteristics:

- a. All charts use the same form of instruction, including *jian zi pu* (i.e., abbreviated character tablature) and indications of a target gesture, playing technique, and metaphorical representation of a sound.
- b. The charts contain illustrations representing the heavens and earth. These include illustrations of natural landscapes, animals, plants, and images associated with traditional legends.
- c. In ancient China, the imagery of sound was expressed with *xing*, which is a term connected with considerable imagination and association, to inspire guqin players to conceptualize the sound as having color and quality.



Fig. 3-1



Fig. 3-2

2.3. Collections of guqin music

According to Fu-Hsi Zha's *Cun Jian Gu Qin Qu Pu Ji Lan* (*Overview of Preserved Guqin Tablatures*), which is a collection of writings on guqin music,³ pieces featuring the theme of nature are ubiquitous in this extensive collection of guqin music. The images include springs flowing over stones, white snow, running water, mountains, plum blossoms, springs in green gullies, wild geese on sandbanks, and clouds over the Xiao and Xiang rivers. Other guqin pieces, such as spring morning chants and

autumn wind lyrical pieces have seasonal themes. Guqin pieces with nature-related themes reflect ancient Chinese people's emotional and practical reliance on nature and the harmony between humans and nature.

2.4. Environments in which the guqin was traditionally played

In ancient China, environments were expected to meet several requirements to be considered suitable for playing the guqin. Several documents written during the Ming and Qing dynasties discuss the requirements for a venue to be considered suitable for playing the guqin. One such document is *Tan Qin Za Shuo* (*Miscellaneous Comments on Playing Guqin*), which was written by Biao-Zeng Yang during the Ming Dynasty in approximately 1520–1590. He defines a suitable environment for playing the guqin as a clean hall or a high-rise pavilion when the instrument is played indoors and a wooded mountain, mountain peak, water bank, or a Taoist abbey when the instrument is played outdoors. He indicates that the guqin player should be quietly seated in harmony with *yin* and *yang* and accompanied by the moon and a breeze. He also indicates that although having an appreciative listener can be gratifying, the moon, breeze, pines, rocks, apes, and old cranes can serve as an audience (270).

DeWoskin noted a connection between guqin music and nature, stating, “The guqin’s aesthetic language is the language of nature” (24).⁴ Pearce noted that the frequent inclusion of the guqin in Chinese landscape paintings represents the relationship between humans and nature and that the order of music is similar to the order of nature (42).

3. Relationship between guqin music and nature: Spiritual cultivation

The connection between guqin music and nature is deeply spiritual; guqin music offers emotional sustenance.

(1) Taking in the beauty of nature

Ancient documents discussing Chinese aesthetics contain numerous writings discussing the aesthetic ideals of the guqin. Two of these writings are particularly notable: the “Qin Fu” written by Kang Hsi during the Wei and Jin dynasties and the “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” written by Hong Hsu during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Both of these writings discuss the relationship between playing the guqin and nature.

Hsi’s “Qin Fu” indicates that natural landscapes were frequently used to describe aesthetic concepts in music, as demonstrated in the following phrases:

And now can the proper music be played,
 And sublime melodies be performed...
 Their manner is like lofty mountains,
 And also resembles rolling waves:
 Now full and flowing,
 Then tall and stately (Knechtges 289)...
 Sometimes through a difficult passage the notes follow the beat,
 Then, awaiting an opening, they go to a more perilous height:
 Screeching like a stray jungle fowl crying by a limpid pond,
 Winging like a wandering swan soaring over steep cliffs.
 The tones, diversely hued, brightly colored,
 Hang thickly like drooping fringe.
 The echoing sounds carried by a gentle breeze,
 Dainty and delicate, linger in the air (Knechtges 295).
 Fluttering about, distant and far,
 Faint tones swiftly depart.
 Heard from afar,

They are like the harmonious singing of simurgh and phoenix playing amidst the clouds.

Examined more closely,

They are like a cluster of spreading blossoms glistening in a spring breeze (Knechtges 295).

Hsi's "Qin Fu" describes the sound of the guqin as being capable of prompting people to imagine landscapes, such as mountains and bodies of water, or crows, flying geese, the song of a phoenix, and hundreds of flowers in full bloom. Hsi transcribes his perception of the beauty of guqin music into a description of a natural scene. He demonstrates how a reciprocal relationship emerges between guqin music and humans, with the musical images the guqin produces in the mind being associated with nature. To reinforce this, Hsi cites Zhuang Zi's concept of the "Perfected Man" to describe the ideal setting for the cultivation of the virtue of guqin.

The final stanza says:

Quiet and gentle is the zither's virtue—

It cannot be fathomed.

Its purity of essence, detachment of purpose

Are truly hard to attain.

Instruments of good quality and fine players

Can be found in this age.

Its rich and harmonious sound

Surpasses all other arts

But those who understand its music are few,

And who can truly treasure it?

For fully comprehending the elegant zither,

There is only the Perfected Man (Knechtges 303).

According to Addiss, Kang Hsi argues "the qin has the greatest virtue, and goes on to write a powerfully poetic description of nature" (27). Addiss supports this claim by citing how "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither") discusses "the virtue of guqin" from nature-based perspectives and includes pieces of guqin music, such as "Towering Mountains" and "Flowing Water" that were inspired by nature. Addiss also reports that the guqin should be played outside, under the moon, and that the fingering gestures in guqin tablatures are related to nature (Addiss 30–32). Guqin players who wish their music to represent that of "the elegant zither" should be clear headed and live a clean life. Players should protect their minds from the bustle of the material world. Hsi referenced Zhuang's "Perfected Man," stating, "For fully comprehending the elegant zither, there is only the Perfected Man" (Knechtges 303). This demonstrates that Hsi considers the virtue of guqin to be closely associated with physical and mental cultivation and playing the guqin to be capable of revealing a path to self-cultivation. When this occurs, the guqin player's spirit merges with that of nature. As indicated by Kouwenhoven, "Qin players strive to transcend the limitations of human experience by seeking spiritual communication with nature," and "The qin serves as a bridge to the non-human world, a presumed realm of immortality, eternal peace and transcendental fulfilment" (42).

In addition to "Qin Fu," "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" by Hong Hsu is a core text in the history of Chinese guqin musical aesthetics. It was completed in the 14th year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign during the Ming Dynasty (1641) and was included in the *Da Huan Ge Guqin Tablatures (Qing Shan Guqin Tablatures)*, which was published in the 12th year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign during the Qing Dynasty (1673). The theory presented in "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" divides guqin aesthetics into 24 categories: *He* (harmony), *Jing* (quietude), *Qing* (clarity), *Yuan* (distance), *Gu* (antiquity), *Dan* (unadornedness), *Tian* (tranquility), *Yi* (transcendence), *Ya* (elegance), *Li* (beauty), *Liang* (brightness), *Cai* (luster), *Jie* (cleanliness), *Run* (moisture), *Yuan* (roundness), *Jian* (firmness), *Hong* (grandness), *Xi* (fineness), *Liu* (smoothness), *Jian* (vigor), *Qing* (lightness), *Zhong* (heaviness), *Chi* (slowness), and *Su* (rapidity)⁵. Using these 24 aesthetic categories, Hsu developed a set of performance aesthetics and the concepts of artistic aesthetics. Hsu differed from his predecessors in the field of guqin aesthetics

in that he used 24 characters to describe the beauty of guqin music, with each character encompassing an extensive aesthetic concept. He used individual characters to serve as a symbolic representation of complex concepts, which raised the artistic features of guqin music to a complex theoretical level.

In “Xi Shan Qin Kuang,” Hsu identified 24 characters that could be used to discuss the musical aesthetics of the fingers, strings, sound, and meaning related to guqin music and the amount of focus applied for each. Hsu lists *Hong* (grandness) and *Xi* (fineness), *Liu* (smoothness) and *Jian* (vigor), *Qing* (lightness) and *Zhong* (heaviness), and *Chi* (slowness) and *Su* (rapidity) as four pairs of oppositional qualities. These 24 categories cannot be strictly delineated and are not exclusionary. The categories often blend into each other and are not connected through any notable hierarchy.

Other analyses of Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” have had the following focuses:

- a) An investigation of Hsu’s life and age at the time of his writing “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Xiao);
- b) A comprehensive discussion of the musical aesthetics and artistic concepts of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Wu);
- c) A discussion of the 24 characters presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Lee);
- d) An application of the theory presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” to musical theory, including performance psychology, performance aesthetics, and musical emotional expression (e.g., Liu);
- e) An application of the theory presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” to the playing and aesthetics of other musical instruments, such as the erhu, pipa, dulcimer, guzheng, piano, and violin (e.g., Song and Xiang);
- f) The relationship between “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” and Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (e.g., Lee);
- g) A comparison of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” with “Shi Pin” and “Sixteen Rules for the Tones of Qin” (e.g., Kung);
- h) An English translation of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Wang and Peng);
- i) A review of the literature on “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Xiang; Yuan);
- j) Other focuses, including the relationship between “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” and regional aesthetic culture (e.g., Tian).

Few studies have reported on Hsu’s use of single characters to represent and define the aesthetics of guqin music. According to Hsu, when playing the guqin, which is of particular value because the techniques applied for playing the guqin consistently change and the music itself comprises numerous components. A player should seek to imbue the music they create with these qualities. These 24 qualities demonstrate the connection Hsu perceives guqin music to have with nature. Hsu describes the aesthetic sound of the guqin through the symbolism of natural landscapes, which can enable players to recognize the connection between humans and nature, and the boundlessness of the human spirit.

Nature is symbolically incorporated into Hsu’s language, with *He* (harmony) discussed using the imagery of spring landscapes, *Qing* (clarity) and *Chi* (slowness) discussed using the imagery of autumn landscapes, and *Gu* (antiquity) discussed using the imagery of winter landscapes. Hsu’s language indicates that he has a preference for autumn imagery. For example, he describes *Qing* (clarity) as “limpid as an autumn lake, clear as the cool moonlight, rousing as the roars of mountain torrents, deep and remote as echoes in a valley” (Tse 74) and *Chi* (slowness) through the following statement, “As you further explore the wonders of slowness, you will find yourself as if situated on a quiet mountain listening to the sound of autumn. You will see the moon lighting up the forest and a cool spring flowing between rocks” (Tse 93). Although autumn imagery is employed in the descriptions of both of these categories, the meaning is symbolic and carries the deeper significance of tranquility of the mind.

Hsu’s descriptions of *Qing* and *Chi* respectively include the imagery of “clear as the cool moonlight” and “the moon lighting up the forest.” The autumn moon shining high and away serves as a symbolic representation of the boundless capacity of the soul. The descriptions of *Qing* and *Chi* differ in that of *Qing* employs the imagery of the clear beauty of echoes in an empty space (“rousing

as the roars of mountain torrents, deep and remote as echoes in a valley”), whereas that of *Chi* emphasizes the beauty of intermittent fast and slow tempos (“[the] breeze blowing through the pine trees” and “a cool spring flowing between rocks”). Both descriptions involve the player’s soul converging with nature to form a unified whole and indicate that an individual can only achieve a sense of peace by playing the guqin and leaving the secular world behind to thereby discover the boundlessness of nature. By doing so, the player can experience *Qing* and *Chi* (slow) and create sufficient peace and space for their soul to become all encompassing.

Neither Hsi nor Hsu attempted to establish a relationship between the mind and music or to explore the means through which the mind connects musical imagery with nature. Instead, they employed natural scenes as symbols to represent inner feelings. They also did not represent the mind as a mirror that simply reflects or imitates musical expression. When Hsi and Hsu employed symbolic natural imagery, the imagery was used to represent the feelings of the guqin player. Such literary descriptions of the guqin can illustrate the indescribable beauty of the sound of the guqin. When guqin players experience the feelings represented by the natural imagery, the experiences have a deep psychological influence. The sound of the guqin often evoke deep introspection, which enables appreciation of the beauty of guqin music.

As Hsu states, “Those who achieve beyond strings can reflect in their music the grandness of mountains and the vastness of water. One may feel snow falling even in the hot summer, and spring’s warm breeze despite the cold winter. The possibilities are infinite and beyond imagination” (Tse 70–71). The incredible beauty of guqin music beyond the music itself is the process through which the guqin player retreats within themselves to achieve harmony with nature.

(2) *Accepting silence as beauty*

In addition to using natural landscapes to represent the aesthetics of guqin sound, Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” integrates the Taoist spiritual ideals of *Wu Wei* (noninterference) and *You Wei* (interference) into the aesthetics of guqin music. For example, Hsu incorporates Taoist cultivation theory into his descriptions of the *Dan* (unadornedness), *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) categories:

Yet, a cultivated person is peaceful and without worldly desires. His heart is not tainted with the dust of the world, and his fingers work leisurely. Discussing the principle of the sparse sound with him is delightful and gratifying. Sparse sound is the extreme of quietude, connected with emptiness and traveling through the void, with the mind communicating with the supreme sages of the past (Tse 72).

The ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void. This may not be easily appreciated if the listener does not have a deep understanding of the music (Tse 74).

Yet, once this is appreciated, it will be unceasing. Therefore I said, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound” (Tse 75).

In ancient times, people thought that the *qin* could nurture one’s character because of its grand and harmonious quality. Therefore, they described the sound of the *qin* as sparse (Tse 93).

These descriptions of *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) reveal that the highest achievement in guqin music is sparse sound, as indicated by the statement, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound,” that is, when you look at the overtone. Hsu reports that feelings are elicited by sparse sound because “the ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void.” This concept was likely inspired by the phrase “loud is its sound, but never a word it said” in *Lao Zi* (Chapter 41).⁶

A key focus of Taoism is identifying a means of freeing oneself from an unnatural mindset and hypocrisy to pursue a free and spiritual life. Guqin music is influenced by Taoism, which serves as the foundation for its aesthetics and performance practices. Hsu integrated Lao Zi’s concept of “loud

is its sound, but never a word it said” into his artistic interpretation of guqin aesthetics and named sparse sound the highest aesthetic achievement in guqin music. Hsu uses *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) to develop the following descriptions of sparse sound:

a) Sparse sound can only be recognized amid extreme silence. In real environments, extreme silence does not exist; only relative silence that contrasts with activity exists. To achieve extreme silence, “one should cool the hot temper and ease the competitive mood,” (Tse 72), calm the mind, and expel restlessness, regardless of the turbulence of the outside world. When a person becomes indifferent to their own mind and releases the soul without hindrance, they achieve extreme silence.

b) The “sparse sound” is according to Hsu, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound” (Tse 75). On the guqin 7, 147, and 91 sounds can be produced through the *San*, *An*, and *Fan* techniques, respectively.⁷ In addition, the left hand can slide back and forth to change the tone and rhythm. However, when Hsu described sparse sound in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang,” he did not directly offer a detailed description of the music itself. Instead, he described sparse sound through the context of a guqin player becoming one with nature. In his description, the sounds transform into silence, which has ever-changing remote sounds; the meaning of this description is sensed rather than explained in words.

These near-illusory effects cannot be achieved through musical practice. In Western music, a basic requirement for forms of music is a clear indication of pitch and rhythm. However, no indicators of pitch or rhythm are included in the *wen zi pu* (character tablatures) and *jian zi pu* (abbreviated character tablatures) of guqin music. These features are omitted to provide each player with unlimited space for artistic expression; players can expand their musical expression beyond the limits of the guqin musical tablature to discover sounds that echo the human spirit through fluctuating sounds and phrases. However, this can only be achieved when the human mind is extremely quiet and free from mundane pursuits and earthly disturbances.

This practice is reminiscent of the “fasting of the mind” of “Man in the World, Associated with Other Men” in *Zhuangzi*, which can be achieved through the following: “Maintain a perfect unity in every movement of your will; you will not wait for the hearing of your ears about it, but for the hearing of your mind. You will not wait even for the hearing of your mind, but for the hearing of the spirit.”⁸ By developing the practice of *Wu* (eliminating obsessions and forgetting oneself) through self-cultivation, people learn to respond to bias of the ear (sensory desire) and heart (conscious desire). In doing so, they free their spirits from preoccupation and learn to ignore worldly distractions, which enables their spirits to wander in nature and the individual to achieve harmony with heaven and earth. Hsu applied Zhuang Zi’s fasting of the mind to the practice of guqin and developed the following philosophy: “When the spirit is free and the flow transformed, the mind will reach a transcendental state, something doubly profound.” (Tse 74)

When people seek to understand the beauty of guqin music, the music first enters the ears. When the music subsequently enters the heart, the mind is cultivated beyond a material level and sublimated to spiritual actualization. This spiritual actualization necessitates a pursuit of the freedom of nature beyond the mundane. The human mind is infinite in scope. Playing the guqin can enable an individual to integrate their heart with heaven and earth. Subsequently, through mutual inclusion and purification, heaven and earth can render the mind flexible and boundless.

c) Although the concept of sparse sound was developed to discuss spiritual cultivation, it is inseparable from the practice of guqin. The *San*, *An*, and *Fan* techniques can be applied to produce various tones on the guqin. Left-hand rhythm (*Yin* and *Nou*)⁹ and rhyme (*Zhuo* and *Zhu*)¹⁰ have a decisive influence on the quality of the melodies produced on the instruments. According to Hsu, “The lively delights of musical tones depend partly on vibrato and the wonders of vibrato depend totally on roundness and fullness of the sound” (Tse 85). Effective application of *Yin* and *Nou* is determined by the player’s ability to both train their fingers and relax their body, mind, and spirit. The shoulders,

elbows, and hands must naturally follow the breath and the course of the sounds produced by each string to create “the sound of the *qin*, lasting long and far, even when the spirit ventures into the soundless void” (Tse 82).

Here, the “sound of the *qin*, lasting long and far” is the lingering mood produced through the rhythm (*Yin* and *Nou*) and rhyme (*Zhuo* and *Zhu*) played by the left hand. A person who becomes absorbed in the silence of remote sound achieves a higher level of spiritual actualization. For this reason, Hsu stated, “Wonders of the void are achieved when the spiritual effect lingers on despite the end of the music itself” (Tse 82). That is, when a person becomes absorbed in the music beyond the sound of the strings and cultivates space in their soul, they begin to miss the silence they have developed through the cultivation of the mind. This indicates that the key to embodying sparse sound lies in how a player cultivates their life. Only an enlightened person can appreciate that “the ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void” (Tse 74).

4. Conclusion

The guqin is closely associated with nature. Its wooden texture, melodic phrases, and musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts were designed to imitate the visuals or movements of animals, plants, or scenery. The environments traditionally considered suitable for playing the guqin, such as the mountains or beside a lake or pond, are mostly outdoors, that is, close to nature. These demonstrations of employing nature as a framework reflect the values of the ancient Chinese people, who pursued harmony with nature.

Hsi’s “Qin Fu” and Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” were written on the basis of Taoist ideals regarding cultivation. These authors argue that playing the guqin can enable the individual to achieve harmony with nature. Hsu particularly described guqin players as seeking the highest level of spiritual actualization. His “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” serves as a representation of the culmination of the Chinese guqin musical aesthetics. It offers an in-depth explanation of the influence of nature in Chinese guqin music.

The key to the cultural significance of guqin music can be identified in spirituality and in the role of nature in its aesthetics. “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” discusses the emotional sustenance humans require to achieve spiritual actualization. The information presented in this text reveals that the ancient Chinese people believed in maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature and reflects the ancient Chinese ideal of communicating with nature through guqin music to merge the body, mind, and soul with nature to form a whole.

Although modern listeners of guqin music may consider this ideal to be “drifting away from real life” (Cai 80), if guqin music were stripped of its inspiration from the beauty of nature, it would lose its uniqueness. Guqin music is capable of bringing peace to people’s minds in a mundane world and of establishing a pure, spiritual realm in which humans and nature exist as a whole.

Notes

- ¹ My translation was completed with reference to Tong Xiao's *Wen Xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature* Volume III, "Rhapsody on the Zither" trans. David R. Knechtges. Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1996. This work is hereafter cited as "Knechtges." Adjustments were made to the Knechtges "Rhapsody on the Zither" translation with reference to the original text.
- ² The surface of upper board has 13 *huis* that mark where the player should place their fingers to play different notes.
- ³ "as many as 144 kinds of printed books, manuscripts, and transcripts. The materials that have been mastered, after repetitions have been eliminated, total 3,365 different transcribed tablatures, 658 different transcribed repertoires, 1,771 theme explanations and postscripts (general descriptions of the history, performance content, and performance effects of the guqin music), and 336 lyrics." (5)
- ⁴ DeWoskin cited many pieces of guqin music, including "towering mountains" and "flowing waters," that are related to nature. DeWoskin also reported that guqin music is not simply a form of art because art is artificial and unnatural. Nevertheless, the influence of nature in the descriptions of the fingering gestures and techniques that are used to play the guqin, the environment in which the guqin is played, the mood of the players and the listeners, and the guqin itself is similar to that in other art forms and literature. DeWoskin also noted that most of the names of the playing techniques provided on fingering tablatures are derived from nature. DeWoskin reported that each finger movement for guqin music can evoke a mental association with nature, rendering guqin music inextricably linked to nature. (24)
- ⁵ My translation was completed with reference to Tse's "The Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music by Xu Shangying" (trans. Chun Yen Tse and Shui Fong Lam), in *Shen Lu Xun You—Xie Junren Guqin Lunwen Yu Qu Pu Ji (Reviewing Melodies and Seeking Tranquility—the Collection of Chun Yan Tse's Guqin Paper and Guqin Musical Compositions)*. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing Group, 2016, 65–96. This work is hereafter cited as "Tse." Adjustments were made to the Tse's "The Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music by Xu Shangying", translation with reference to the original text.
- ⁶ My translation was completed with reference to Er Lee, *Tao De Ching*, trans. James Legge, accessed on April 30, <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing/zh?en=on>.
- ⁷ *San*, *Fan*, and *An* are three basic playing techniques in guqin music. For *San*, an open string is played only by the right hand. For *An*, the left hand moves left and right on the same string after an open string is played by the right hand. The movement of the left hand produces tonal color. For *Fan*, the fingers of the left hand delicately and lightly touch a point indicated by *hui* (a marker of a pitch position), and several strings are plucked by the right hand.
- ⁸ My translation was completed with reference to Zhou Zhuang, "Man in the World, Associated with other Men," *Zhuangzi*, trans. James Legge, accessed on April 30, 2022. <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/man-in-the-world-associated-with/zh?en=on>.
- ⁹ *Yin* and *Nao* are fingering techniques. The player uses a left-hand finger to play delicate vibratos as a right-hand finger plucks the string.
- ¹⁰ *Chuo* and *Zhu* are fingering techniques. For *Chuo*, the player uses a finger of the left hand to press a string and glides their finger smoothly toward a right *hui* (a marker of pitch position) as a finger of the right hand plucks the string. For *Zhu*, the player uses a finger of the left hand to press a string and glides their finger smoothly toward a left *hui* as a finger of the right hand plucks the string.

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