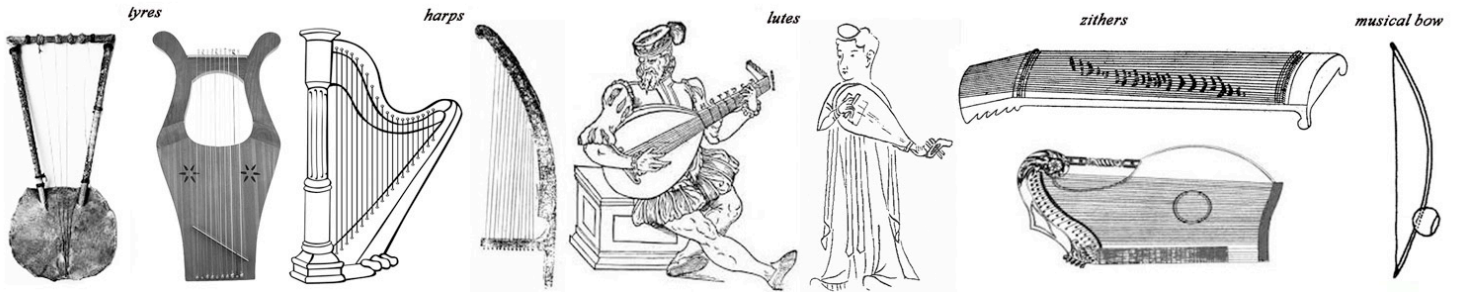


Translating "古琴 *guqin*" into English (further at [www.silkqin.com/11misc/lute.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/11misc/lute.htm))

There is no standard translation: to a musicologist it is a "zither", specifically a "plucked 7-string long zither". Zithers are one of the five types of chordophones (stringed instruments). Examples of the five are as follows:



Written music (further at [www.silkqin.com/08anal/dapu.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/08anal/dapu.htm))

The *guqin* is virtually unchanged for at least 1800 years, and the literati have always liked to write things down; as a result the *guqin* has the oldest tradition of music written in such detail it can be played based just on its tablature, which gives tunings, string names, finger positions, stroke techniques, etc. The sample "note" at right says "大指九徽勾四絃 with left thumb in 9<sup>th</sup> position hook 4<sup>th</sup> string inward with the right middle finger". Rhythms are not directly indicated; usually learned from teachers, they can also be reconstructed by finding the musical structures.



Opening Melody: 漢宮秋 *Han Gong Qiu* (further at [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/16xltq/xl121hgq.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/16xltq/xl121hgq.htm))

A number of Han dynasty poems concern women forced by circumstance to live amongst Central Asian nomads. The *guqin* melody "Autumn in the Han Palace, played here as published in the handbook 西麓堂琴統 *Xilutang Qintong* (1525 CE) relates one such story: Ban Jieyu, having lost her position as the favorite concubine of Han Emperor Chengdi (r. 51 – 7 BCE), is said to have written a poem comparing herself to a fan discarded in autumn. The poem, called 怨歌行 *Yuan Ge Xing* in *Yuefu Shiji* Folio 13, is here paired to the music of Section 5 (of 8).

新裂齊紈素，鮮潔如霜雪。

*Xīn liè Qí wán sù, xiān jié rú shuāng xuě.*

Newly cut plain white silk from Qi, fresh and pure as frost and snow.

裁為合歡扇，團團似明月。

*Cái wèi hé huān shàn, tuán tuán sì míng yuè.*

Made into a fan for joyous trysts, round as the bright moon.

出入君懷袖，動搖微風發。

*Chū rù jūn huái xiù, dòng yáo wéi fēng fā.*

In and out of my lord's cherished sleeve, waved back and forth to make a light breeze.

常恐秋節至，涼颿奪炎熱。

*Cháng kǒng qiū jié zhì, liáng biāo duó yán rè.*

Often I fear the arrival of the autumn season, cool winds overcoming summer heat.

棄捐篋笥中，恩情中道絕。

*Qì juān qiè sī zhōng, ēn qíng zhōng dào jué.*

Discarded into a box, affection cut off before fulfillment.

Shortly after the song ends one can hear a musical sound suggestive of a fan being shut with finality.

**Interlude Melody: 漢節操 *Han Jie Cao* (further at [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/16xltq/xl137hjc.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/16xltq/xl137hjc.htm))**

As with the *qin* melody 李陵思漢 *Li Ling Si Han*, also published in *Xilutang Qintong* (1525), the melody *Han Jie Cao* highlights the opposite fates of general Li Ling and ambassador 蘇武 *Su Wu* in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Li Ling heroically led a Han army against Central Asian nomads but surrendered when he ran out of ammunition and as a result was forced to stay amongst the nomads and serve them; the Han emperor executed his family. *Su Wu* was also detained in Central Asia but became a hero by refusing to serve the nomads except as a lowly shepherd. In the end *Su Wu* returns to Han (China) but Li Ling does not believe he can do so. The theme of both melodies thus connects to that of lyrics called the Parting Song (別歌 *Bie Ge*), through which Li Ling tells *Su Wu* why he cannot go home. Neither melody uses *Bie Ge* as lyrics, but Section 9 of *Han Jie Cao* is entitled "To die separated from Li Ling", while two sections of *Li Ling Si Han* mention Li Ling meeting *Su Wu*, then their having to part.

**Melody with the readings: 龍朔操 *Longshuo Cao* (further at [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/07sqmp/sq46lsc.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/07sqmp/sq46lsc.htm))**

This "Melody of Longshuo" (the north) is played here as published in the *guqin* handbook 神奇秘譜 *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (1425 CE). It concerns 王昭君 *Wang Zhaojun*, a concubine of Han emperor Yuandi (r. 48 - 32 BCE). Because she did not bribe a court painter he made an ugly picture of her to give to the emperor, as a result of which she was sent to Central Asia as wife of a nomad prince. The related melody *Zhaojun's Lament* (1511) has 14 sections; the first seven set to music the seven poems on this topic from the *qin* melody lyrics section of *Yuefu Shiji* (the first poem is attributed to *Zhaojun* herself); the final seven sections repeat the lyrics, with the melody an octave higher. The structure of the 1425 version is similar: sections 5 to 8 largely repeat the music of sections 1 to 4. The theme of these poems might be compared to that of the Han dynasty poem 烏孫公主悲愁歌 *The Lament of Xichun*. *Xichun* was Princess *Wusun*, also a woman who was married off to a nomad prince and thus forced to live in Central Asia.

**Some other *guqin* melodies connected to the themes of Han poetry**

Surviving *guqin* melodies were largely the product of the same class of people who produced the surviving Chinese classical poetry. Thus the themes often overlap. Two examples of this mentioned above are the Parting Song and, indirectly, the Lament of *Xichun*. Two further poems discussed today also have *guqin* connections.

**Autumn Wind Lyric (秋風辭 *Qiu Feng Ci*; see [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/10tgyy/tg35gqf.htm#hwdlyr](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/10tgyy/tg35gqf.htm#hwdlyr))**

The lyrics, attributed to Han emperor Wu, were set to a melody of the same name in the *guqin* handbook *Hewen Zhuyin Qinpu* (1676). The handbook was published and preserved in Japan but most of its melodies were brought there from China by 蔣興疇 *Jiang Xingchou*.

**Green green river side grass (青青河畔草 *Qing qing he pan cao*; [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/36sxgq/sx15lx.htm#1961](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/36sxgq/sx15lx.htm#1961))**

An introduction to the modern version of the *guqin* melody Peaceful Evening Prelude (良宵引 *Liang Xiao Yin*) connects it to a line from 古詩十九首之二 the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 19 Old Poems, dating from the Han dynasty: "晝短苦夜長，何不秉燭遊！" (Waley: "When days are short and the dull nights long, Why not take a lamp and wander forth?"). The *guqin* melody was first published in 1614.

**John Thompson**

John Thompson, the best-known performer of early music for the *guqin* silk string zither, began his studies in Taiwan in 1974, learning the traditional repertoire from National Treasure Sun Yuqin. Since 1976, though, he has focused on reconstructing old melodies directly from tablature, by now having recorded over 200 melodies learned directly from 15th, 16th and 17th century handbooks. From 1980 to 2000, while serving as artistic consultant to the Hong Kong Festival of Asian Arts, he continued his own research and performance, publishing seven CDs of his musical reconstructions and four books of transcriptions. Since moving to the New York area in 2001 he has continued his research, also performing and lecturing in the United States and Europe as well as in Asia. Most recently he taught a one month *guqin* course at the Confucius Institute of Pace University. His website, [www.silkqin.com](http://www.silkqin.com), which receives over 8,000 hits a day, is the most comprehensive source of information on this music and its cultural and historical context. It has recordings of all the melodies mentioned above.