



CHINESE CULTURAL  
STUDIES CENTER



John Thompson majored in Western musicology at Harverford College, earned a MA in Asian Studies at Florida State University, and continued with further studies in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). He began in 1974, in Taiwan, to study the modern guqin tradition from Sun Yu-qin, who was honored as a Living National Cultural Treasure by the Republic of China. In 1976 he turned his studies to the early repertoire of guqin music, moving to Hong Kong to consult with Tong Kin-woon. Since 1976, his focus has been reconstructing, analyzing, teaching and performing guqin music published during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). He has recorded more than 200 melodies he has reconstructed. He is currently the president of the New York Qin Society.

In this presentation, John Thompson will be performing and discussing the earliest versions of melodies he learned from his teacher Sun Yuqin, as a commemoration of the 25th anniversary of his passing. The presentation will involve discussion of musical changes that have occurred in the guqin musical repertoire over time.

## “Return to the Sources:

A presentation of the earliest known versions of today’s standard guqin melodies”

**Presenter: John Thompson**

Language: English

Thursday, August 6th, 2015

7:00-8:30pm

304 Lyndhurst Building,  
29 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central

As seating is limited, it is strongly recommended that reservations be made. For reservations and further information, please contact [info@chineseculturalstudiescenter.org](mailto:info@chineseculturalstudiescenter.org) or call +852 9660 2639

## **Presenter biography**

John Thompson majored in Western musicology (early music) at Harvard College, earned a MA in Asian Studies at Florida State University, and continued with further studies in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). He began in 1974, in Taiwan, to study the modern guqin tradition from Sun Yu-qin, who was honored as a Living National Cultural Treasure by the Republic of China. In 1976 he turned his studies to the early repertoire of guqin music, moving to Hong Kong to consult with Tong Kin-woon. Since 1976, his focus has been reconstructing, analyzing, teaching and performing guqin music published during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). In 1992 he was invited to a seminar on reconstructing music from the earliest surviving guqin handbook, *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (Handbook of Spiritual and Marvelous Mysteries, 1425) in Beijing. In 1996 he began making CD recordings of his reconstructions, resulting in his first CD *Music Beyond Sound*; this was followed by his six CD publication of the complete music from *Shen Qi Mi Pu*. In addition to the 77 melodies on his seven CDs, he has also recorded more than 120 of the further melodies he has reconstructed. These recordings are complemented with extensive musicological, historical and philosophical commentary.

Through exclusive use of silk strings and carefully following the written scores, John Thompson has become one of the most respected and well-known practitioners of historically informed performance of early guqin music. John Thompson has performed in the US and Europe as well as throughout Asia, with a reputation for the fidelity, fluency, and feeling of his performances. He continues to perform, teach, research and lecture on the guqin, and is currently the President of the New York Qin Society.

## **“Return to the Sources: A presentation of the earliest known versions of today’s standard guqin melodies”**

What did popular modern standards for the guqin seven-stringed zither sound like four hundred or more years ago? Why do some, such as *Leaves Dance in an Autumn Breeze*, sound almost the same, and others such as *Flowing Streams* sound recognizable but rather different, while other such as *Drunken Fisherman Sings in the Evening* seem to be completely different? The music most respected by Chinese literati was that for the guqin, from ancient times writing down music they considered as descended from Confucius or earlier. Although it is thus one of the world's oldest tradition of written music—incribed with sufficient detail that it can be played today with an arguable degree of accuracy—it has also always been an oral tradition, with melodies constantly evolving or completely changing. The most dramatic changes have come since the Cultural Revolution, when metal strings were developed and soon replaced the silk strings that had been used for over 2000 years.

John Thompson, who this July will be performing in Taiwan at events commemorating the 25th anniversary of the passing of his original guqin teacher Sun Yuqin, will perform here at Chinese Cultural Studies Center the earliest versions of melodies he learned from him in the 1970s. His performances will be with silk strings, and will involve some discussion of musical changes that have occurred in the guqin musical repertoire over time.