

Lure and lore of the Chinese lute

Intrusions of a
foreigner into a
Chinese scholar's
private preserve

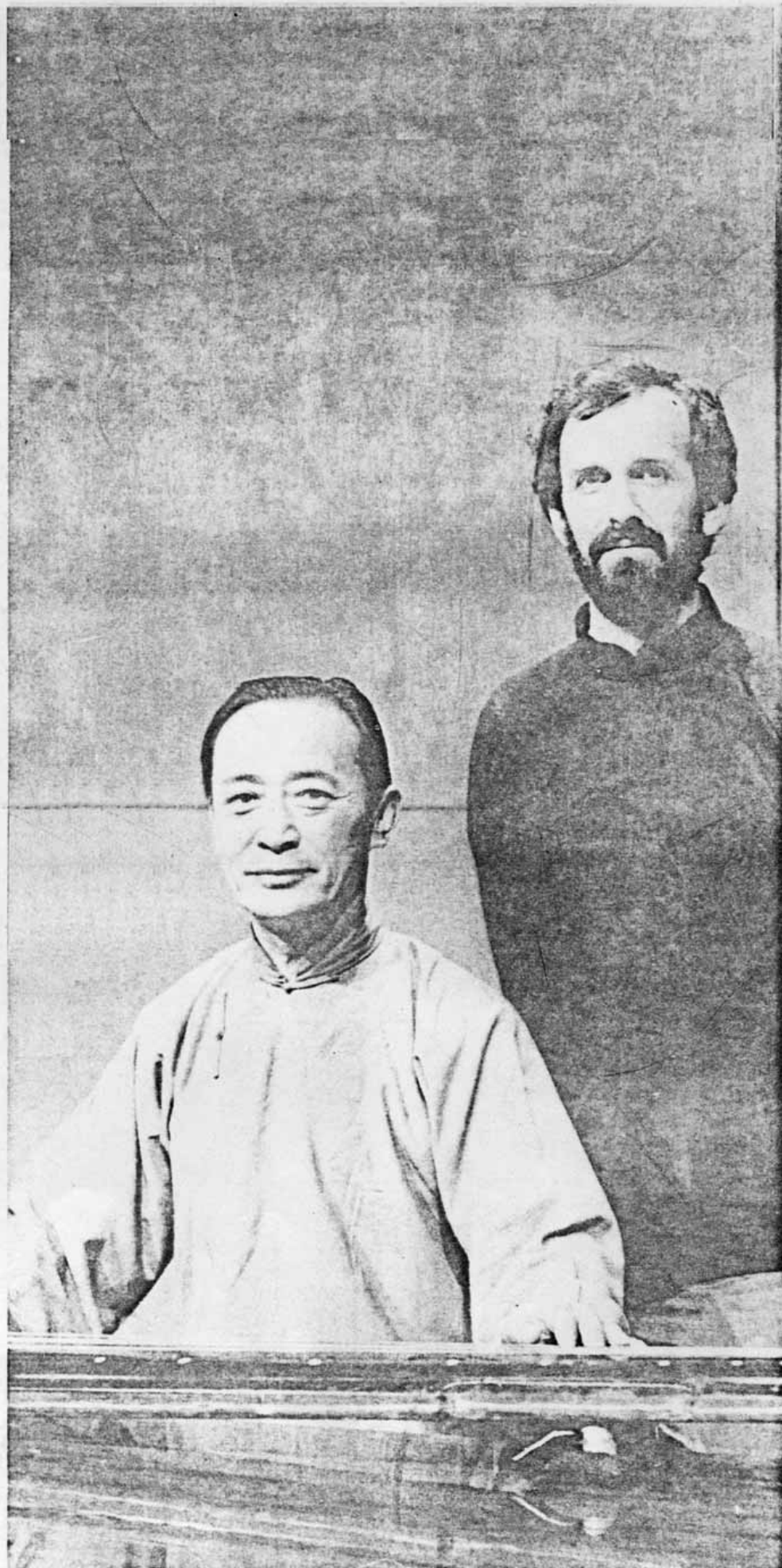
by John Thompson

When Lau Shing Hon needed someone to provide *qin* music for his film *The House of the Lute*, it was almost inevitable that he would have to ask a foreigner to do it. The question was whether the foreigner could undertake such a risky adventure. To explain this requires some background on the person and the instrument.

Six years ago I was a graduate student in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, trying to combine undergraduate studies in Western musicology with a previous graduate career in Chinese Studies. There were three professors of ethnomusicology, in Japanese, Indian and Indonesian music respectively. Apparently the only English-speaking authority on Chinese music was at Cambridge University in England.

But I decided to go to Taiwan. Even then, though, I was not sure I wanted to pursue Chinese music academically. My tastes were rather selective: small ensemble or solo music. Most of the performances one could hear were of music adapted for large orchestra.

Listen to a recording of Chinese music (or a live performance) and what do the program notes invariably say? "Traditional melody" (no mention that the Chinese orchestra which is probably playing



Sun Yu-ch'in and John Thompson

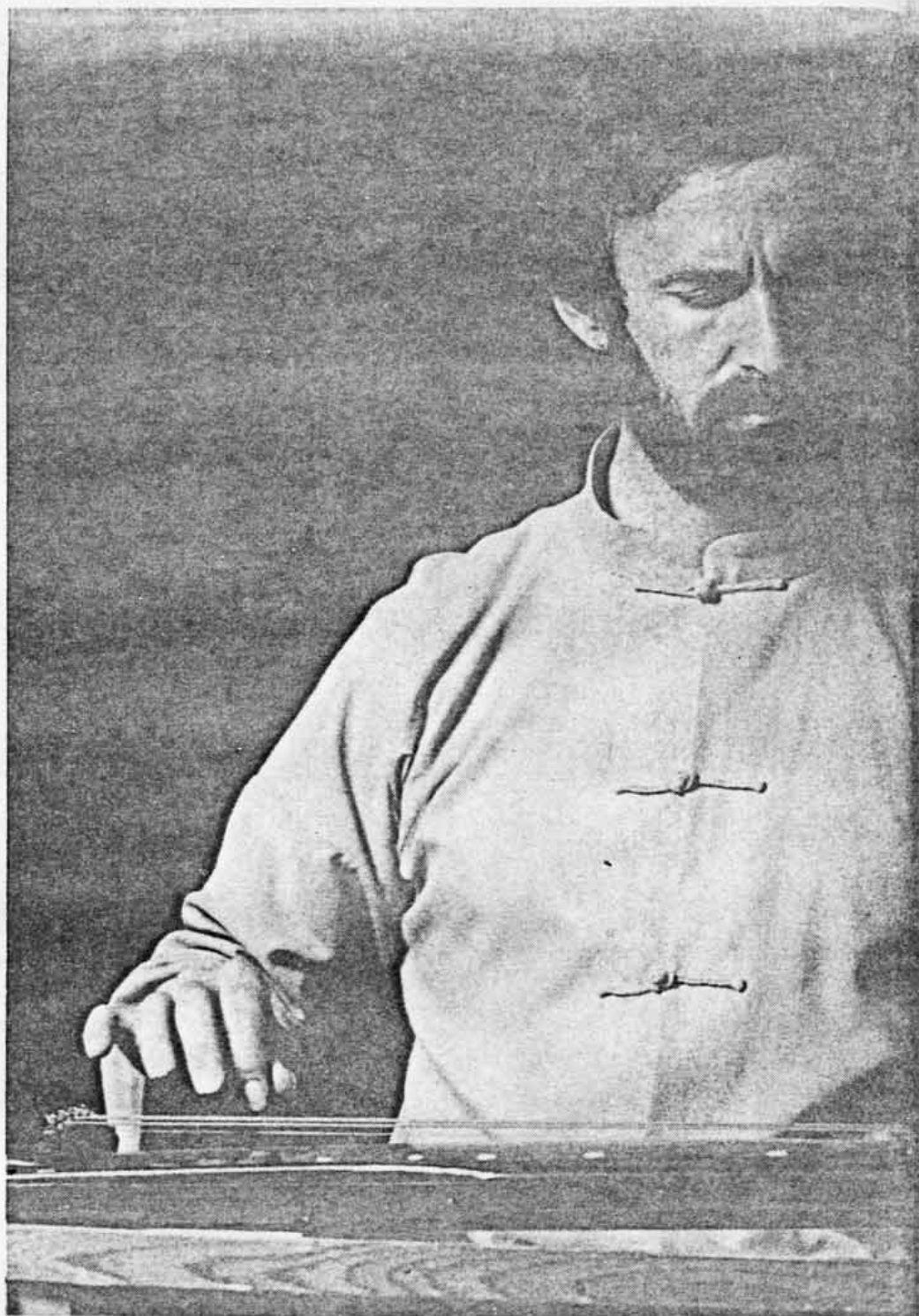
it was invented around the turn of the century in imitation of Western orchestras); "composed by Confucius", or the Yellow Emperor, or some other unlikely person, with no evidence of who makes this claim. Where does this music really come from?

There is a very interesting book by R. H. van Gulik, author of such works as *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, *Erotic Color Prints of the Ming Period*, and Judge Dee mystery stories. Entitled *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, it describes the *qin* (nowadays called 'gu qin', which means 'old qin') as the instrument *par excellence* of the literati of Ancient China. The instrument it described sounded like the perfect antidote to many of my frustrations concerning music, Chinese music in particular.

For one thing, its history and music are very well documented. *Qin* handbooks have been printed regularly since the 15th century AD, (sporadically before that): thousands of tunes which, although they often make the same sorts of claims as those mentioned above, at least provide some basis for verifying part of the claim. One can write program notes saying, for example:

The version of the piece performed here comes from the *Secret Handbook of Things Marvellous Beyond Comprehension*. Published in 1425 AD by Zhu Quan, a prince of the Ming Dynasty, this handbook is a collection of earlier handwritten tablatures. The style of tablatures in different pieces varies in such a way that one can see clearly that some pieces are much older than others. The tablature for this piece seems to be among the most archaic. However, it is not possible at present to verify the claim made in the preface to this piece that it was composed by the poet Xi Kang in the third century AD.

Lore of the Chinese Lute begins with a description of why the author translates *qin* as 'lute'. Van Gulik admits that a musicologist would prefer to call the instrument a zither. 'Zither' is a generic term for any instrument in which the strings are extended all the way along the length of the resonating part of the instrument, and only that part. The *qin* falls into this category. It is about four feet long and eight inches



wide. It has seven silk strings tied with the aid of silk tassels through seven holes to seven pegs under an immovable bridge at one end of the sound box. The strings extend the length of the sound box before continuing underneath the instrument at the opposite end, to be tied to the two 'phoenix feet' which elevate the instrument a few inches above the table on which it is played. The two sound holes underneath cause the sounds to be reflected off this table.

The problem is that 'zither' is best known in the West as the specific

name of a Central European folk instrument, and the *qin* is anything but a folk instrument. The Western instrument most closely associated with poetry and other sorts of refined enjoyment, according to Van Gulik, is the lute. This is exactly the role of the *qin* in traditional Chinese society, and the only instrument with this exclusive role; and so he decided to translate *qin* as 'lute'. This causes some confusion because musicologists use the word 'lute' to describe any instrument (such as the violin or guitar) in which the strings also extend across a fingerboard attached to one end of the



resonating part of the instrument. Thus the Chinese instrument called *pi pa* is also a lute. Perhaps it is best simply to call a *qin* a *qin*.

The oldest surviving *qin* were made around the fifth or sixth centuries AD, and there is a third century poem by Xi Kang (see above), whose detailed description could apply to instruments made today. During the Han Dynasty (206 B. C. — 220 A. D.) and earlier there are stories about the *qin* being played in court, along the road, and even in chariots. There does not seem to be any way of ascertaining the sound at that time

except to say that it must have been considerably louder than it is today: the thickness of the wood and the material of the strings (silk) make it one of the quietest instruments anywhere.

To me, this was its second major source of appeal. The *qin* is an instrument intended to be played for oneself in the quiet of one's room. Close the door and no one outside can hear. What better antidote could there be to years of brothers and sisters who reacted to my piano and violin efforts (as I did to their own musical efforts) with the accolade, "Can't you practise some other time?"

I once read a theory that today's quietness results from a deliberate attempt to make the instrument more remote. This article argued that 'modern' *qin* style developed during a period leading up to and including the Tang Dynasty (618 — 905 A. D.). At that time there was a lot of 'barbarian' influence in China. The Confucians objected to this, so they took the most traditional Chinese instrument then still played, the *qin*, and rarified it as much as possible. They wanted to make it less accessible to 'common' influences. There were restrictions made over who should play it. These were not really observed, but you can read books which say Buddhists should not play it, or merchants should not play it, or foreigners, or even women. There were no attempts to make the music more accessible. The ideal was the scholar playing for himself or for one or two other *cognoscenti*. If invited to perform in court, or for an unworthy person, he would refuse. There are even stories of men destroying their instruments or drowning themselves to avoid polluting the instrument in such a way. It is not surprising, then, that the *qin* was never popular outside literary circles.

My teacher in Taiwan, in fact, said he had originally been unwilling to teach foreigners — I was his first non-Chinese student. Over the years he had become more and more discouraged because no Chinese were taking it up, except for school girls, who were not doing it seriously. They would invariably quit as soon as they got married. Chinese seemed to be interested only in Western music and culture. He hoped that if they saw a foreigner studying the *qin*, it might kindle interest on their part.

So I had a teacher, Mr Sun Yu-ch'in. Mr Sun even loaned me an instrument for six months until I could get one made. He had another student, a Mr Yeh, who was a wood carver. Mr Yeh had wanted to ask Mr Sun to teach him how to make instruments, but had been too shy to ask. Mr Sun knew how to make instruments, but had not had much experience working with wood. He had wanted to tell Mr Yeh that he would be better off making instruments than playing them but he, too, had been reticent. It took more than a year before the ice was broken, and now Mr Yeh makes very good instruments. But these take time. I have had a second *qin* on order for more than three years now.

Communicating with the Ancients

My goals in learning the *qin* being to a great extent antiquarian, I envisaged a logical sequence in which my studies would take me closer and closer to playing the earliest melodies possible. Step one was to copy Mr Sun as precisely as possible. This is the traditional method of learning the instrument. At home I would have the tablature to work with ('tablature' describes finger positions, whereas 'notation' tells the note to be played).

Qin tablature is a kind of shorthand. Each figure explains what to do with the right hand and the left hand. For example, one character means "Place the left ring finger on the ninth position of the seventh string, and with the right index finger pluck outwards on the same string, at the same time doing a slow vibrato with the left hand." There is no attempt (or, perhaps, very little attempt) to indicate note-values (rhythm and so forth). This was easily remembered once the piece had been learned from the teacher. But any given note could be played in many different ways, each with what is considered to be a marked difference in coloring. This coloring is paramount. So before a student was separated from his teacher, he would endeavor to write down all the finger positions of the pieces he had learned. Most of these hand copied manuscripts are lost. As mentioned before, it was not until the 15th century that the playing methods of masters were regularly printed after they had been hand-copied.

Unfortunately, most of these handbooks are very difficult to come

by outside of China. Thus the recent announcement by the *New China News Agency* that a new publication of *qin* music in China would include copies of 139 hand-copied manuscripts from the Tang Dynasty onwards is extremely interesting.

Getting back to step one: for two years I studied Mr Sun's pieces, perhaps 15 in all, and the tablature used to write down the versions he plays. The second step was then to learn from recordings of other players, together with the tablature they used. These recordings included both pieces played as they have come down to us today, and attempts by old masters in China to recover the way pieces were played in an earlier time.

Several of these latter have also been transcribed onto staff (five-line) notation and published in China together with the original tablature. These publications also include pieces transcribed from the original tablature, but not recorded; or if they are, the recordings have not been made available to the public. Step three, then, was to study these old pieces for which there were no available recordings. This, of course, meant that I was now completely studying from books — the original together with the transcription. There were a limited number of pieces thus available, so I soon went on to step four.

The fourth step is to try to work out melodies simply by analyzing the original manuscripts. This step has two parts. First, there are some melodies played today which are recognizably similar to earlier printed forms. I selected some of these and tried to make the early version sound as much like its predecessor as possible. The second part is to learn pieces which have no apparent relation to any melodies still played today. This is largely guesswork, but there are many clues to make these guesses into educated guesses. Music is a language. There are certain *qin* expressions, phrases, ornamentations, and so forth, which can be predicted to fall into certain patterns. I cannot claim that the note values I have ascribed are precise, but hopefully they are in the same language.

Recently a friend sent a tape from China of a piece which had been recreated from the same 15th century handbook mentioned above. Without listening to it, I worked out my own transcription from the same

original, and was quite pleased at the similarity of our results.

In this fourth step I have concentrated my efforts on the handbook just mentioned, as it is the earliest large collection. The Ming Dynasty prince who compiled the over 60 melodies retained the style of the originals from which he made his copies. Some are attributed to men of the Sung Dynasty (618 — 907 A. D.). Less reliable are attributions to men of earlier periods. In any case, I had the natural desire to hear this music played on original instruments. This meant a trip to see Mr Lo Ka-ping.

Mr Lo is a gentleman aged about 90, who lives near Yuen Long. The visit is one of my most memorable experiences. Mr Lo has more than a dozen ancient instruments. Two of these are more than 1,000 years old, though one of them is too warped to be playable. He also has several from the Sung Dynasty, about 800 years old, and many more from the Ming and Qing (1644–1911 A.D.) Dynasties.

Playing these was an almost indescribable experience. Two of the instruments have a particularly exquisite sound. In fact, each note played on either of these two instruments was so beautiful that I hated to go on to the next note. Each sound seemed to be suspended in time. Intellectually I knew the sound waves had stopped, but psychologically I could not accept that fact. I felt as though I was making some sort of physical contact with the distant past: the very instruments, the very melodies. And yet they had not 'spoken' for centuries.

I felt that I had a better understanding of why so many *qin* melodies are so slow. I also felt that I had some understanding of the stories of a certain ghost appearing when such and such a person was trying to play an old melody.

Communicating with the Moderns

During my three years of teaching English at the British Council in Hong Kong I have discussed the *qin* with at least a thousand different students. Almost all the students are aged between 15 and 30. They form, I believe, a rather typical cross-section of that age-group in Hong Kong.

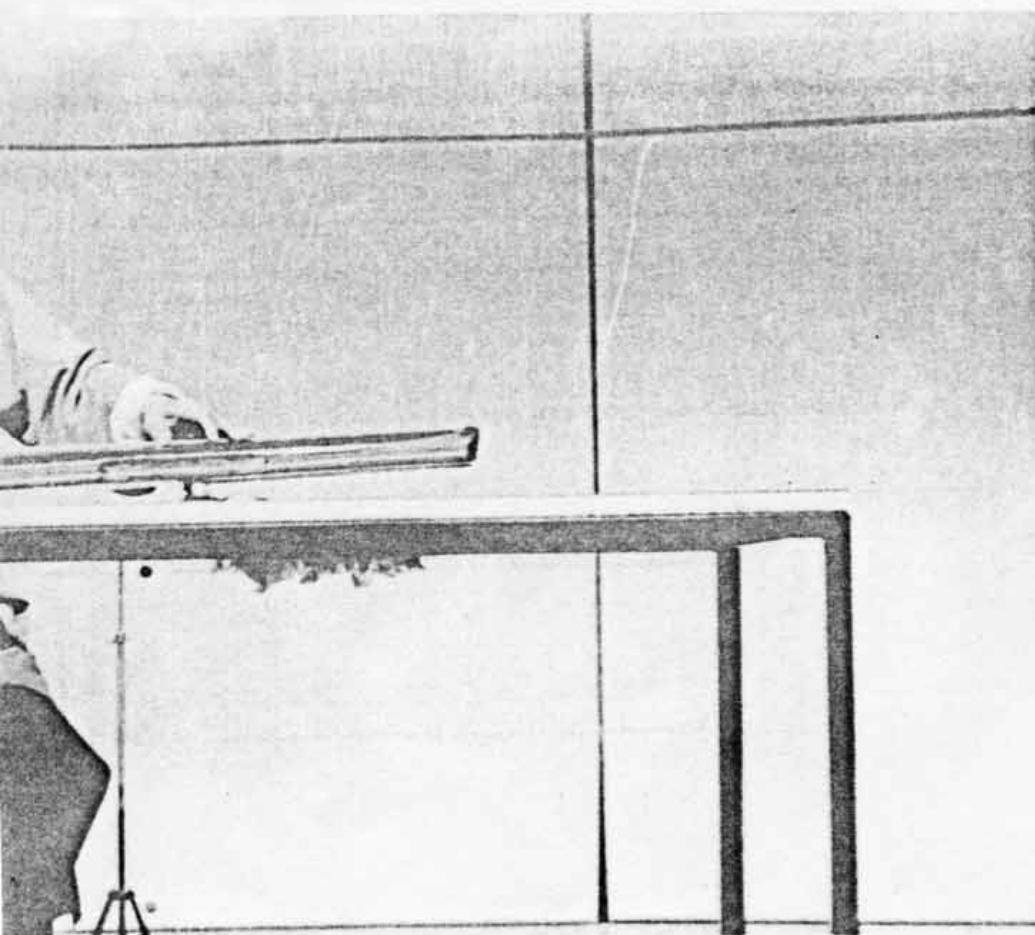
The first reaction I get is almost



invariably that I am making a mistake — I must mean *zheng*, not *qin*. There are several basic reasons for this reaction. First, the Mandarin word *qin* is pronounced in Cantonese like the English word 'come', while the Mandarin word *zheng* is almost the same in Cantonese. *Qin* sounds closer to *zheng* than 'come' does.

Another reason for the confusion is that the manner of playing is similar. Both instruments are plucked with the right hand as the instrument rests on a table. Both instruments are generically zithers. But the *zheng* is slightly wider and has 13 to 17 strings, depending on the style. It also has a movable bridge under each string. And nowadays the strings are made of metal. Traditionally, it was a folk instrument. In Chinese landscape painting, there is the very common motif of a scholar sitting amongst the mountains and streams, holding a *qin* in his lap, or set on a table in front of him; or the man is walking or riding along with his '*qin* boy' behind, carrying the *qin* in a silk case. If there is a picture of a *zheng* it is usually being played by a woman, and in different surroundings.

A third reason for the confusion is that the character *qin* is applied to



Photographs by Lincoln Porter

many other stringed instruments as well. Thus, the European violin is called a 'small arm *qin*', and the piano is called a 'steel *qin*'. The Chinese version of the Persian *santur*, a zither struck with sticks, is called the '*qin* which came by sea', it having been brought to China by Arab traders; it is also called the 'butterfly *qin*', from its shape. There is a two-stringed fiddle called the '*qin* of the Central Asian barbarians', having entered China from that region. The word *qin* by itself, in classical literature, would always refer to what is today called the 'old *qin*'. This appellation 'old', however, was not considered necessary until the present century. Before that, any literate person would have known what was meant by the simple word *qin*.

The fourth reason is that the *zheng* is today far more widespread than the *qin*. Most Chinese have heard a *zheng*. Few people have heard the *qin*. I have already mentioned the situation in Taiwan, where only two teachers remained at the time I left. In Hong Kong the situation is worse. At present there are no teachers at all. On the other hand, here more than in Taiwan some of the former students continue to play after they have stopped taking formal lessons. But they number only a handful.

This situation is one reason why Lau Shing Hon had to ask me to do the music for his film *House of the Lute*, a more manageable title in English, he had decided, than the Chinese title *Qin burned in the Fires of Desire*. The main character in this story is an old man who fancies himself to be a traditional gentleman. In addition to practising calligraphy, painting and playing the Chinese board game *go* (*wei qi*), he must of course play the *qin*. It was all *de rigeur* in old China.

The film, for better or worse, has its share of sex, violence and other ingredients considered to be rather unsavory by many people. Perhaps a foreigner, who had already broken a taboo simply by playing the instrument, would not have such inhibitions — we are all rather an unsavory lot anyway. So I was chosen; not, I trust, because of my particularly unsavory character, but because I was the only willing *qin*-player in town.

My initial reaction was ambivalent. Would this ruin any chance I might have of being accepted in the *qin* community? Though my interest is mainly in music from more than 500 years ago, I cannot pretend to be a scholar of that period. I have great respect for and fascination with the

traditional ideas surrounding the music. To appreciate the music it certainly helps to have some appreciation of that aspect of it. But I do not think it is necessary to be a 15th century *litteratus* in order to play his music, any more than I think it necessary to be a Christian to perform in a Bach cantata.

In addition, the film tells an essentially moral story. And best of all, it provided me with an opportunity to make some sorties into step five — free composition. I used, as a basis, music I had transcribed from my Ming Dynasty handbook. After that it was all experimentation.

The method used was to divide the film into one to two minute segments. Each segment was placed on a continuous reel and played one by one in the sound studio. It was played over and over as I tried to fit in the music, under Lau's constant direction. If the old man was playing a melody, the music had to fit his hand movements as much as possible. I had taught the actor how to fake the movements and, being an excellent actor, he did that very well. However, he hadn't had time to learn the precise note values, so when I did the recording that all had to be changed.

In some places complete melodies were used. But these also had to be changed, in most cases. This had as much to do with recording problems as anything. It is very difficult to capture the sounds of the *qin* through recording. They are designed to be extremely delicate and quiet, clear only if heard in dead silence. Amplification necessarily changed this. In particular, many sliding sounds became overly loud with amplification. They had to be reduced.

Then, much of the film music was a note or two here and there for a special effect. Or a repeated note or note-series with heavy amplification, or even distortion. We had nothing to go on as a model. Traditional *qin* music had never been used for this subject matter. No one had ever used the *qin* to provide any sort of background music for a film. And I had never done film music before. I am very grateful for this opportunity. It will be most interesting to see how it comes across at the cinema.

I only hope that the ancients, with whom I felt I was in communication that day in Yuen Long, do not roll over in their graves. ▲