

# Johnny Thompson learns to take his music on the ch'in

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Never mind that the ch'in originally was designed to improve moral character. Its very survival now seems to depend on exposure, and if a movie maker wants his music played only on the ancient Chinese instrument, Johnny Thompson is willing to oblige.

That means, when he gets back to Hong Kong this month following a four-week Tampa visit with his parents, Thompson will begin arranging music for the traditional instrument to the beat of a contemporary movie — one featuring a rich invalid whose young wife is having an affair with the jealous gardener. The movie plot becomes ghostly in the end, as Thompson describes it. Maybe the ch'in will slip more comfortably into the aesthetics of that portion.

The instrument suggests a rather surreal nature, embodying as it does the simple essence of a culture that is thousands of years old. The ch'in, according to historians, dates back to the Han Dynasty of China (25-220 A.D.). According to Thompson, who has studied the instrument for the past four years, it was originally the musical instrument of the scholars — reserved for the elite of society and practiced for the edification of the individual, not performed for an audience.

"If you look at Chinese literature and painting, it's the most often mentioned or drawn instrument by far," said Thompson, an Asian Chinese studies scholar specializing in ethnomusicology. "Three-fourths or so of the literary references or poetry will be to this instrument. Landscapes almost always have an instrument, and it will be this one. The exception was the courtesan."

The ancient Confucian scholars took a very strict attitude toward life, Thompson explained, and were "very much concerned with living a moral life in society, and the reason you play the instrument is to improve that. This is the instrument of the sages."

The Taoist attitude, which was one of escaping from society, was responsible for the subsequent attitude reflected in such traditional songs as "Wandering Around in the Eight Directions" which have remained in the ch'in literature.

Women, Buddhists and merchants were among those traditionally banned from playing the ch'in. "But the more you know the Confucians are carrying on about this," said the contemporary scholar, reflecting on the instrument's history, "the more you know women and Buddhists are playing it."

The traditional scholar, Thompson further explained, had to do certain things such as studying and practicing calligraphy and painting, memorizing the classics and playing the ch'in. "You'd learn one or two pieces and have it hanging on the wall," he said. "If you couldn't play it at all, you'd have it hanging on the wall without strings on it."

Literally, the instrument would hang on the wall to preserve the straightness of the wood. But as one Fourth Century scholar esoterically explained of the ch'in without strings on his wall, "If you understand the inner sig-

nificance of the instrument, what need is there to toil at it."

Thompson has been toiling at it, personally, as well as infusing himself with the aesthetics of the ch'in. He left his studies at the University of Michigan to move to Taiwan and improve his Chinese. He began studying the ch'in with Sun Yu-chin, a professor there, and later moved to Hong Kong to teach English at the British Council and to study with musician Tong Kin-woon. The three ch'in practitioners gave a joint recital there just before Thompson left the city for his vacation, and an

**Johnny Thompson plays the oldest form of string music known in Chinese culture, the ch'in. Thompson is a Chinese scholar currently living in Hong Kong. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Francis Thompson, are Tampa residents.**

audience of more than 400 people appeared for the event.

The three represent a fourth of the dozen or so serious students of the ancient instrument, which like other traditional cultural forms has been relegated to near oblivion in China's recent cultural purge and present Westernization. "As far as art in general, most of the traditional arts are endangered," said Thompson, "especially in the traditional attitudes towards them."

He draws some optimism, however, from the return in Japanese culture to more traditional appreciation which resulted in large part from the consuming interest Western scholars brought to the ancient forms. The same pattern may develop, he feels, as the Chinese recognize the interest of such scholars as himself.

The very availability of the instrument, however, is hampered by the lack of artisans who can craft the wooden zither, which is

played by plucking with the fingernails (grown long) of the right hand and by sliding stops with the left. The seven silk strings are another rarity, since the family in China which had been masters of that craft gave up the art in the wake of the cultural revolution and the resultant edict to utilize metal strings for musical instruments there. Thompson's teacher in Taiwan did manage to procure a special order of 200 sets of the strings, however, and Thompson has his own little hoard of five sets from that order. The strings last some seven years; they are considered at their performance peak while they are from two to five years old.

Thompson owns one recently constructed ch'in and has two more on order from contemporary artisans. He would like to obtain one of the ancient ch'ins still in existence, but availability is severely restricted.

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(One collector in Taiwan, a ch'in composer at the age of 90, boasts a private collection which contains instruments more than 1,000 years of old.)

Meanwhile, Thompson's particular contribution to the preservation of the ch'in and its cultural relevance is presently taking the serious, scholarly path of transcribing the oldest collection of ch'in literature known to exist. It is a book published in 1425, collected by a prince of the Ming Dynasty. Thompson is interpreting the tablature for the 60 pieces, working from the Chinese notations for finger positions and harmonics and developing the unwritten note values according to traditional rhythms. He has completed 10 transcriptions in the past year and a half.