

Remembering Prof. Sun Yü-Ch'in ( 回憶孫毓芹教授)

August, 1990; 1 November, 2025

Sun Yü-Ch'in in 1990 (compare 1978)

The following was originally written for the program published with the 1990 memorial concerts for Sun Laoshih. By that time my personal focus was almost exclusively on reconstructing old *qin* melodies from their earliest source. This remains true in 2025 and so, although I still play most of the melodies I learned from him, almost all of the versions I now play are quite different: they are the earliest published editions I could find of those melodies.

If Sun Yü-Ch'in could ask me today why I play those versions rather than the ones he taught me I could only say what I say to everyone who asks. I liked the music that I learned from him so much that I felt an urgent need to find out whatever I could about their sources: the people who created the music, the stories behind the melodies, and of course the music itself. All of that continues to inspire me in the way it did when I studied with Master Sun, and it all began with him.

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I have fond memories of my twice weekly lessons with Sun Yü-Ch'in Laoshih. However, when I first met him I was very nervous. I had become interested in the *guqin* because of reading Lore of the Chinese Lute by the Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik; but I remembered reading there that one traditional point-of-view was that the *qin* shouldn't be taught to foreigners. After all, we could never really understand Chinese, the language of the sages; how could we understand the music of the sages?

I was introduced to Sun Kung by Professor 莊本立 Chuang Pen-Li. I had come to Taiwan in 1974 from the University of Michigan, in the United States, where I was studying Chinese language and Japanese music. There was no professor of Chinese music, and this was why I had to go to Taiwan.

William P. Malm, the professor of Japanese music at the University of Michigan, knew something about Chinese music. In fact, he had written an article on it in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, so he knew the experts in the field. It was his opinion that, at that time, in Taiwan it was too easy to get the wrong teacher, one who would not give you rigorous teaching in an authentic tradition. He had nothing against modernization. He just felt that, if you were going to modernize something, first you had to master its tradition. He thought Chuang Pen-Li could guide me in the right direction.

Later, Sun Laoshih told me that when he received the call from Professor Chuang, he wasn't sure what to do. He was of course aware of the prohibition about teaching the *ch'in* to foreigners. On the other hand, it seemed to him as though most other Chinese were only interested in Western music. He felt he had hardly any serious students. Most of them were girls studying at an art college. After they graduated they would get married and stop playing. Maybe, he told me, if the Chinese who worshipped Western music saw a Westerner studying Chinese music, they would listen again to Chinese music with new respect.

Was this true? I think there was some truth in it, but probably Sun Kung was mostly joking. If it really were true, this would put a large obligation onto me. But I never felt that Sun Laoshih tried to put pressure on me to do anything. He seemed surprised I wanted to study with him twice a week -- he said it was only necessary to come once, like the other students. He also seemed surprised I wanted to study the tablature carefully -- he said it was only necessary to copy him. He never seemed to get impatient when he showed me many times how to play something, but I still did it

wrong. I am sure he must have felt frustrated because my Chinese wasn't better. When he tried to explain to me some philosophical point about playing *guqin*, he could see I often didn't understand; and he would patiently explain it again.

I tried to learn all the pieces Sun Laoshih could play. Not many students did this, so when we began a new piece he sometimes hadn't played it in a long time, and would forget something. But even while he was re-learning an old piece I could feel in his music the sounds of a gentleman, a person who had great respect for his traditions.

Maybe this was the most valuable lesson. Have respect for the heritage passed down by those who went before. Sun Kung once said he would never play *Guangling San* because it was too violent. As a Westerner I might say in this way he was being true to himself. I think he felt that this was the way he was being true to his heritage.

Sun Yü-Ch'in taught me so many things, but because my Chinese is still rather bad, I never felt I could adequately express to him my gratitude for his teaching. But I feel that even in English I cannot express very well such feelings. Maybe this is why I like to play music. I hope that when I play I can in some small way "take the *qin* to represent the words".