

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OLD, BUT VERY ALIVE: THE GUQIN;  
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAI XIAOLIAN

Marjolijn van Roon

*Abstract*

The very word *guqin* is full of the associations of an age-old, colourful history. The author Robert van Gulik compared this Chinese musical instrument to the lute, which has an equally long, diverse and dignified tradition in Western classical music. The playing technique of the Chinese 'lute' (in fact, more a kind of zither) is highly developed and very refined. The *guqin* has a continuous tradition almost without interruption until today. Naturally there were times when the instrument was more popular than at others, such as during the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), while it was prohibited during the Cultural Revolution for example; nevertheless the playing technique has progressed steadily to the high level it has reached today. In the following interview Dai Xiaolian, a master of *guqin* playing, tells about her experiences with the teaching and performance of *guqin* music.<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction<sup>2</sup>*

In the summer of 1991 I had the opportunity to interview Dai Xiaolian, a master of *guqin* playing, who was visiting Europe at that moment to give several concerts and lectures.<sup>3</sup> Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, a specialist in Chinese folk music, was her hostess in the Netherlands and offered to be interpreter during our interview. Dai has been invited to come again as musician and lecturer to the ESEM/CHIME conference in Rotterdam in September 1995; so it seemed appropriate to publish this interview now. As well as conducting this interview with Dai, I heard some of her concerts and lectures. She seemed to me a very lively and enthusiastic musician and very eager to tell about her profession as a *guqin* player. I was interested to hear about her expe-

<sup>1</sup> Dai Xiaolian was born in 1963; since her studies at the Conservatory of Shanghai, she has given many concerts and made several recordings. Her *guqin* playing was recorded in Paris during her stay in Europe, and this new CD is now available under the French label 'Audivis' (B 6765).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to David Rowland and especially Loekie van Proosdij who read through earlier versions of this article.

<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands these lectures formed part of the lecture series 'Music in China', organised by the University of Leiden in co-operation with the University of Amsterdam and supported by CHIME (European Foundation for Chinese Music Research).

periences as a professional musician and Conservatory teacher myself. I was looking forward to an exchange of thoughts and ideas concerning our profession. First of all, however, I asked her about the *qin* and the way she learned to play this ancient Chinese instrument.<sup>4</sup>

*Guqin and tradition*

Dai Xiaolian's uncle, Zhang Ziqian, was one of the most important *guqin* master players of this century. When Dai was nine years old, her uncle came to live next door and became her devoted teacher and musical 'father' from that moment

onwards. He gave her a **one-** to two-hour **lesson** every day and so **initiated her** into the art of *guqin* playing (see Dai Xiaolian 1991).

According to Dai Xiaolian, **everyone** today, regardless **of status** or class, **has the** chance to learn to play **the qin**, although **the** instrument is **rare**. Not **many** people come into contact with **it**, so that the circle of *guqin* players is a relatively small one in comparison with other **instruments**.

**In** former times, however, **the guqin** was reserved for the **Chinese** aristocracy and **the** intellectual elite, although it was also used at one **time** by Buddhist and Taoist monks. It was only at the beginning of this century **that** it found its **way** to **the** middle **classes** of Chinese society.

It is worth mentioning that both men and women have always been allowed to play and teach **the qin**. Although fewer in number, **there** were some very important female **masters** in the past. Among these, Dai Xiaolian mentions Cai **Wenji**, who lived at the time of the Han dynasty, and Lin Qingzao, from the Tang dynasty (618 to 907 AD).

The instrument itself has a male and female part: *yang* is the upper part and *yin* the underside of **the qin**. The *yang* part is made out of **the yang** side of a tree, the side on which **the sun** shines, while **the** shady side is *yin* and goes into **the** making of **the** female part of **the** instrument.

**The guqin** tradition still bears the traces of many different influences from the past. When one reads old manuscripts about it, **one** is reminded of the prescriptions of the aristocracy or the ideals of Taoism and Buddhism.

<sup>4</sup>

*Qin* is an abbreviated form of *guqin*.

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singing of folk

**Plate 1:** Dai Xiaolian with *guqin*

In 1936 a society was founded, the Yu Qin Society in which representatives of these different Miles Sobota wengi

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late the preservation and transmission of the *qin* tradition. The Society had a brief but very important life of one year. In 1980 it was refounded, and Dai's teacher, Zhang Ziqian became its director. Its influence on *guqin* performance practice in general has increased significantly (see also Dai Xiaolian 1991).

Dai Xiaolian makes her own contribution to **the** tradition by studying the development of the Guangling school. She told: 'I am trying to **make** a pedigree of teachers and pupils of this school and to go back to its very first beginnings. It is quite curious and interesting, because it includes besides aristocrats and intellectuals, also Buddhist and Taoist monks. The pedigree ends with **the** generation of Zhang Ziqian. **There** are so **many** students at the present moment that it is impossible to keep everything in perspective.'

#### *Learning to play the guqin*

Dai had a traditional pupil-master relationship with Zhang Ziqian in which she was guided day by day. She remembers very well how the learning process started: 'My uncle **taught** in the **tradional** fashion; this **meant** that the two *qins* were on one table, with the teacher and pupil seated opposite each other. In the beginning, being only a child of nine years old, I found the lessons very difficult; I didn't understand anything and felt clumsy, but Zhang Ziqian encouraged me and rewarded me with peanuts if I had done well.

Initially I learned to play without **the** help of notation, and my master taught me fingering techniques string by string. I learned different kinds of plucking with the right hand, as well as the matching names. My left hand had to press **the** strings at the right moment and in the right place. To get both the position and the movements of **my** hands correct, I had to practise in front of a mirror to check the way I touched **the** strings.

I learned my first *guqin* piece by listening to and watching my teacher, who played it several times before I was asked to imitate it. When I knew three *guqin* pieces by heart (after some months of lessons every day), **he** showed me the notation for this music. At that moment some pieces of the '*guqin* puzzle' suddenly fell into place. I soon recognized what I had been playing, and the instructions which I had not fully understood before then became clear by reading. Because I had already mastered the pieces, it was not difficult to follow the notation, and soon I was able to recognize the meaning of its symbols.'

This must be a very effective **way** of introducing musical notation to a beginner. It seems to me very healthy first to learn the physical process of a musical action and only afterwards to be confronted with the abstract picture of it on paper. **In** this way the notation functions as a mirror of the musical action, and not the other way round, as appears to be so often the case in Western classical music teaching. What also

struck me, as a music teacher, was **that** Dai Xiaolian from the beginning learned the pieces **as** a whole and not tone by tone. **Within these** musical entities technical detail and precision are incorporated; so exercises or études are **not** necessary, and **the** unmusical 'piling up' or 'linking up' of tones during **the** first attempts at playing by **the** pupil is avoided. This could become an important subject of discussion for teachers of Western classical music.

Dai Xiaolian, alas, also adds a marginal note on this aspect: 'Unfortunately nowadays pupils come at the very most only once a week for a lesson, and so the musical notation comes earlier in **the** learning process **as** an aid to memory. At first sight, this seems to speed the process of learning to play the *qin*, but it inhibits the development of musical intuition and so affects **the** real musical understanding of a piece, and has a bad effect upon musical flexibility in general.

A good method though in which the pupil not only memorizes **the** fingering in a thorough way but also more especially grasps the inner meaning of a piece is **the** method of *chang xuan* or "singing the strings". **Zhang** Ziqian used to insist very firmly on this method: he would simultaneously sing and play a certain phrase and I had to imitate this; "singing the strings" means, then, that on every tone he sang in words what I had to do, and what fingering I had to use to produce this sound. This specific method, by the way, is only used by players of **the** *Guangling* school.'

#### *Tablature*

The notation of *guqin* music consists of complex figures that indicate the string, fingering, colour, dynamics, and so on, in **the** one symbol. It is a tablature system and is named *chien-tzu*. Already at **the** time of **the** Ming dynasty more than two hundred different combinations of fingering and touch movements were known, and one finds as **many** abbreviated symbols in the *guqin* scores. Furthermore, twenty-six varieties of vibrato and twenty-four tone quality principles have been classified.

According to Dai, the learning of all of **these** nuances and complexions is a slow process. 'At first one only learns the basic fingerings, a few essential vibratos and some simple slides. Only the bare finger movements are practised. This technique consists roughly in using the correct string and the correct finger, knowing how to **pull** the right hand-fingers

forward or backward as well whether to use nail or the fleshy part of the finger when touching the string. The left hand learns to make the choice between *fan-yin* (harmonics), *san-yin* (open strings) or *an-yin* (pressed strings) and is responsible for vibratos and slides.

Then, much later and step by step, one learns the nuances of dynamics, the shades of tone colour, and more complex combinations of all these elements (subtle- ties like special vibratos, long or short, or sound colours, which are called, for example, "solid" as opposed to "empty" and so on).'

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### *Yuan, zheng and physical balance*

When Dai Xiaolian plays the *guqin*, it is placed on a table, though this was not the case in former times. Old pictures show that players used to sit on the ground with the instrument on their lap. Only since the Sung dynasty (960 to 1280 AD) have tables been used. Dai said: 'Because of the fact that the quality of the sound, the tone colour, has high priority in *qin* music, there has been very much experimenting with the material of the table; it has been made of stone, of wood, and I have even tried out glass, but that was not very successful.' (See also Wang Pin-lu 1983:12-14.)

In the nineteen twenties and thirties Zhang Ziqian and his friends studied the effects of different kinds of tables on the loudness of the *guqin*. They wished to improve the resonance quality. They took the drawers out of the tables to make them hollow, or drilled holes for the same effect. The hollow table indeed increases the resonance, so there are players who like to use such a table, but there is no real need or obligation to have it; it is a question of personal taste.

I think it is important what kind of wood is used for the table. During my stay in Holland this time I had the opportunity to try out several kinds of wood; a certain kind of pinewood appears to be the best. In China I don't have so much choice and normally I have to accept the table I get, regardless of the material. I am glad that I know now what to look for.'

With time, the *qin* moved from the player's lap to the table, and the player from the ground to the chair. As people became conscious of the effect of the position of the instrument, theories likewise developed concerning the physical position and the movements of the player. In Dai's words: 'During my lessons, Zhang Ziqian only concentrated on the upper part of the body; I had to sit up straight and my hands had to be relaxed (which is called *song*). He was very particular about the fingers; I had to play *yuan*, meaning that I had to hold my right-hand fingers in a slightly slanting position to create a rounded movement of the hand. Tradition prescribes, apart from an efficient use of the hand, aesthetically correct gestures of the fingers (*zheng*). The little finger, for example, which is not used for playing movements, is held up in the air, elegantly imitating the beak of a bird.

Otherwise, he never said anything about the way I sat in front of the *guqin*. For him the most important thing was an appropriate "musical mentality" of the player, and body position would automatically be the physical translation of this attitude. I think it necessary, though, to explain explicitly to a pupil how to achieve the right position. An ideal balance of the body when one is seated in front of the instrument is achieved by pushing one foot slightly forward and pulling the other one backward (under the chair). Thus seated, the concentration is in the centre of the body and one is not distracted by any incorrect balance of the legs while playing.'

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Here, Dai Xiaolian became very excited and showed me all kinds of possible positions, seated or standing. She has very definite opinions about this. She agrees with her teacher that the player's mental attitude influences his or her physical position, but is convinced that, conversely, body position equally determines the psychological condition.

It is as though, having these convictions, she expressed a similar principle as in the case of one of the above-mentioned rules, namely that one should 'rinse one's mouth and wash one's hands before playing'. This rule sounds too exaggerated for Dai Xiaolian, but where a rule seems to be purely ritual today, it may have had a practical function in earlier times. It also prescribes some sort of physical condition that has to be fulfilled before playing.

An interesting point to be raised in the interview with Dai Xiaolian about performance practice was that of **the influence of singing or of the voice in general**. She had already explained her uncle Zhang's *chang xuan* method, but there was more to be said on this subject, namely: 'Apart from the singing as an aid to memory for the finger technique, singing the melody can give you the appropriate musical feeling, it makes you play with the heart.'

Poetry and songs are sometimes connected with *qin* music, but when a text is set to music it is more the meaning behind the words, the atmosphere, **that is expressed in the *guqin* sounds**. There is mostly no literal imitation or following of the voice, and in *guqin* theories no connection is established with the direct physical vocal aspects, either. Only musicians of the new school, *Mei An*, do imitations **of the singing of the folk-songs they accompany**. Moreover, one has to draw a distinction here between the *qin* as accompaniment or as a solo instrument.

For centuries the *Guangling* school has specialized in the playing of solo music. **In the course of time there has been a lot of refinement, and one might say that in a certain sense the *guqin*, within this highly sophisticated musical tradition, surpasses the voice**.

Perhaps of all Chinese instruments, the *guqin* is able to express the greatest variety of moods and emotions with its abundant tonal colours and variety of touch techniques.

I think that Chinese musicians in general are not interested in expressing these moods and emotions on their instruments merely by imitating the human voice; they like to suggest a certain mood and only imitate the sounds of nature in order to "paint" the atmosphere. In one of the *guqin* pieces, for example, one recognizes the murmuring water of a little river by the regular lapping sounds and the player can strengthen then such ideas. There is another piece called "the drunken man", where

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the title can be suggested by playing **the music with an irregularly swaying rhythm**. Zhang Ziqian never hesitated about changing a score to depict a mood as colourfull as possible.'

At this point it is **very easy to make a comparison with Western classical music**. Tempting this may be, **one is skating on thin ice here**, however. Precisely where it is concerned musical expression, social and cultural norms and codes play a very important role. Many misunderstandings are possible, to cite a well-known example, when a Westerner attends **the performance of a Chinese opera for the first time in his life**: a lot of **the movements in the acting and the musical performance seem familiar** to him, but yet he will misunderstand the **messages** if he does not **know the meaning of every aspect of the gestures and the musical motives**."

### Symbolism

**There are numerous associations and symbolic meanings linked with the image of the *guqin***. Dai Xiaolian explained: **The various parts of the instrument still bear the symbolical names they were given during the Han dynasty**. The instrument is compared to the body of a living creature, with a head, **eyebrows**, shoulders and a tail. The dragon and Phoenix are associated with several components' (see also for a short overview of **these meanings** Wang Pin-lu 1983:8-12).

'There are a lot of metaphorical meanings **in the names of playing technique**. An apt example of this is the distinction drawn **between "empty" (*xu*) and "solid" (*shi*) sounds to draw a comparison with the thin and thick lines in a drawing**; in music it denotes **the exact intonation of a tone (solid) as opposed to a glissando (empty)**.

As a pupil one is generally not intentionally confronted with **these symbolic meanings and the theories around them**. Only during my study at the conservatory did I learn about **the symbolical value of the instrument and its music**, although even then not in a systematic way. I used to ask my teacher about **the things I read**, and by thus asking found out about the **background of the *guqin***. One learns most by reading ancient manuscripts or studying old scores. Professional *qin* players **try to help each other in this research: one communicates the knowledge one has gained at conferences and meetings**.'

Dai Xiaolian is mainly self taught in **this respect**. Particularly since obtaining **her conservatory diploma she has deeply**

concerned herself with *qin* history and theory. She regularly studies old manuscripts and asks *guqin* masters what they know about *qin* tradition. It is very intensive work, because, apart from the fact that she often

6 Waving the hand up and down to a Westerner means 'goodbye', while in Peking Opera it signifies 'come here'.

Fighting in the dark is represented in bright spotlight, with the actors miming as if they were in the dark. Walking in a circle denotes a long journey, and so on. (See, for example Wu Zuguang 1984.)

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needs to interpret texts in old classical Chinese, she has to deal with the numerous incongruities in *guqin* scores, as there have been changes and additions to the original notation, according to the taste of the different periods.

In the Netherlands, in 1991, she had an opportunity (at the University of Leiden) of studying some old scores which had been once transcribed by the well-known *guqin* connoisseur Robert van Gulik. These scores, together with Van Gulik's transcriptions, are very important to her, because they fill in a gap in the historical background of the art of *qin*-playing. Dai is of the opinion that Van Gulik's book about the *guqin*, *The lore of the Chinese Lute* (1940/69), is very informative and still up to date.

On the other hand, however, Dai is aware of the relativity of theoretical research, saying: 'In spite of all the symbols and all the picturesque texts and titles in *guqin* music, a lot of the musical meaning is left implicit. One needs a great deal of musical intuition not only to grasp the meaning of a piece, but also to be able to make a personal interpretation. My master Zhang Ziqian often used to say: "First you must have the idea of the music in your heart; then, after that, you will have the ability to express it in a musical performance."'

I asked her if she would have been able to learn the *qin* without any notation, but Dai replied: 'In that case I would have become an exact, complete copy of my teacher. Now, having the opportunity to read the scores I am able to deduce what my teacher Zhang Ziqian has changed in the music, how he interpreted it. After seeing and hearing how interpretation is possible, I was in a position to develop my own

ideas.'

### *Interpretation and ornamentation*

The personal interpretation of a *guqin* piece may be rather free, but there are limits to the changes to the score. In Dai's words: 'Every interpretation of one and the same *guqin* piece may be different, but how free the player is, depends on the school or style of playing. Especially in the style of the *Guangling* school, the expression of the mood of a piece has priority, and this may mean that one does not follow the score exactly while playing. Mind you, this is one reason why it is some-times difficult for laymen to follow the rhythm of a *Guangling* interpretation of a piece of *guqin* music.'

The art of embellishing and colouring notes has become very elaborate in the past centuries, especially of course in solo playing. Apart from the free rhythm, even tone pitch can be relative (in that it may change a tone or a semitone), and one may add dynamics or vibrato (although one does not normally change the vibrato as indicated in the notation).

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Changes to the notation have always been made when a given master liked to add or to leave out something to "improve" the music. So the original scores have often been shaped and reshaped. On the other hand there are some *guqin* pieces tradition-ally handed down from master to pupil that are as complete and unchanged as possible. I don't know till how far one may trace back this process from generation to generation. I have learned three such pieces.

Furthermore, I won't deviate from Zhang Ziqian's versions of the repertoire out of respect for him as my master. However, I do try to impose my personal vision on every new *guqin* piece I add to my own repertoire.'

The literal changing of a symbol as it occurs in the score, does not always appear to be appreciated. Dai said: 'In fact, there are two views on the interpretation of *qin* scores. First of all there are the historians or theoreticians who hold the opinion that *guqin* pieces should be performed in an authentic way, exactly as they were written down. They are only interested in finding out how this was. On the other hand *guqin* players themselves like to add to the score, to put in the colouring dictated by their own taste. The old scores, as I have just said before, bear witness to this procedure, since musicians of every generation have imposed their ideas, and indeed have sometimes changed the notated symbol according to their taste. I believe that, exactly because of this process of creative interpretation and reinterpretation, the technique of *qin* playing has developed to the high performance standard of today.'

### *Tempo*

When I asked Dai Xiaolian if there was any difference between her interpretations and those of her former master, Zhang Ziqian, she touched on a new subject, saying: 'There is clearly a difference in dynamics (I make more contrasts than Zhang Ziqian), but more particularly in tempo. Perhaps this is the influence of modern times. I generally play *guqin* pieces much faster than he did. We once tested this by means of a stop watch. We both played the same piece and then checked the length of our respective performances (of *guqin* pieces of about ten minutes in length). I always turned out to have played at least two minutes faster. He told me that he, too, was playing faster than his master. I think that this tempo change is a fascinating phenomenon.' And, in this fascination, Dai confronted me with the unexpected counter-question: 'Do you have the same striking tempo deviations from generation to generation in the performance of Western classical music?' I replied that there is indeed a concern with the problem of tempo changes. The performance time of various recordings of a particular piece is carefully noted, and discussions arise when

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it appears that, for example, the 1954 recording of a Mahler symphony under such and such was slower or faster than an 1990 interpretation of the same symphony.?

There is a general belief that in some cases musicians are performing faster than in the past, not out of conviction, but as Dai thought as a result of our hectic modern times (the heartbeat of Westerners seems to be faster today than it was in the nineteenth century or earlier). Yet, in other cases musicians have been observed to be slower in their interpretation rather than the opposite; some striking examples of this are provided by the first recordings of vocal music at the beginning of the twentieth century in comparison with more recent recordings of the same music (especially, in the case of '*Liedkunst*', in recordings of Richard Tauber versus Dietrich Fischer Dieskau and others). Some time ago there was even a conference on tempo in the Netherlands. It might be useful to invite Chinese and other non-European musicians to take part in the discussion the next time such a conference is held.

It is striking that Dai Xiaolian, after listening to a slow part of a Western classical baroque sonata, complimented this performance by saying: 'What a beautiful tempo.' The fact that someone may like a certain tempo for its own sake, that tempo can be a subject of an aesthetical conviction, definitively opens up new perspectives

to me.

### *Improvisation*

Thus talking about personal taste and freedom of interpretation, I felt tempted to ask if *qin* music was or is ever improvised without a printed score. Dai replied: 'When *qin* music was composed in former times, it was by improvisation - if you can call it that - before noting it down on paper. One reads in the old manuscripts that people used to play in the mountains or near a murmuring stream in order to be inspired by nature and thus hit upon the right melodies. Of course one has to understand this as a metaphor to



describe the creation of **the vast** *qin* repertoire. It is the legend of musical composition. Improvisation in **the** sense of playing without **any** notation or even without the intention of noting the music down does not occur in the tradition of *guqin*-playing.'

In the meantime, while Dai's words were being translated by the interpreter, she literally tried to 'pin down' the English word 'improvisation' by writing it on a scrap of paper. First trying out the pronunciation, **she** then suddenly confronted me again with a counter-question, this time direct in the English language: 'Why, I would like

7 For one of the more recent publications concerning the presumed tempo changes in the performance of Western classical music, see Wehmeyer 1993 (1st edition 1989).

8 A summary of the discussions here has been published in *Tempo in de 18e eeuw; Studiedag 1 september 1983*, edited by **STIMU**, Utrecht 1983.

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to know, are you Westerners **so** interested in improvisation?' Her intonation **sugge-**sted the idea not just of 'interested in', but rather 'fixated on!' Here it is necessary to understand that Dai Xiaolian, **during** her stay in **the Netherlands**, had heard a lot of improvised music (from **jazz** to Jimmy Hendrix) and probably **the** word 'improvisation' had been dropped several times.

Although the music of **Western** countries is so varied in its manifestation today, so that it is impossible to speak of 'Westerners' in general, I nevertheless had **the** feeling that Dai Xiaolian had hit a tender spot here. It has become a fashion to discuss **the value** of improvised music performance in comparison with the literal reproduction of a score, **more than** once with the matter being settled in favour of improvisation.

As a specialist **only** in **the** performing of Western classical music, I restricted **my** remarks to this field. I told Dai Xiaolian **that** I thought **that** there was at least **one** reason why attention has been directed to the live performance of music without notation. At the beginning of the twentieth century musicians started rejecting **the** over-elaborated scores of the romantic period, feeling a need 'to sober up'. One of **the** consequences of this has **been that** composers **have** created graphical notation, or even empty pages to provide improvisation possibilities for **the** performer. Besides **this phenomenon** in classical music, the popularity of **all** kinds of non-**Western** music - in which improvisation often plays an important role - has grown since the first victory days of jazz and other black music.

Perhaps, I said to Dai Xiaolian, we need to redefine **the** concept of 'interpretation' in Western classical music through improvisation. Dai suggested: 'Being a good musician means that you have the ability to express your personal feelings and taste in the music you play; perhaps there is no real difference between "interpretation" and "improvisation". You could even, I **think**, call the traditional interpreter of old *guqin* scores a "composer", because **the guqin player has** so many personal inventions to add to **the** score. There is, for **that** matter, **one guqin** player who improvises in **the way** you just meant. At **the same** Dutch festival where I gave a concert, my colleague Li Xiangting performed music with only a poem or a Chinese painting as inspiration. Li Xiangting has been living in Europe for **some** time, and I wonder if **he** was influenced by his surroundings when he decided to try out this modern experiment. **Personally**, I doubt if this kind of improvisation can really mean **anything** to a non-Chinese audience. In **the** first place, in **the** case of a poem, there are not many people **who** understand the Chinese language, and a translation is not enough for people to be able to sense the true meaning of the text. Furthermore, in the case of a painting,

9 *Guqin* Festival, held in *Soeterijn*, Amsterdam, in May 1991.

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one has to know a lot about Chinese culture and tradition, I think, to be able to follow **the** ideas behind it.

Apart from all this, **the** highly refined art of *qin*-playing is itself something which you have to **make** a considerable effort to understand and appreciate completely.' In **this** respect Dai Xiaolian had a successful attempt at educating the European public. Her concerts were accompanied by lectures in which **she** introduced **the** instrument and its theory something she did in a very **thoroughly** manner. Besides, her concert programme was well chosen; **she** varied it by juxtaposing 'simple' pieces with meaningful titles **that** are understandable to a European public with more elaborate *guqin* pieces which enabled her to show off her **skill**.

### *Western influence*

A last unavoidable question which I had to ask Dai Xiaolian, was: 'In **what** sense has *qin* music or Chinese music in general, in your opinion, been influenced by **the** confrontation with Western culture?' **She** answered: 'Western influence seems to be quite **strong**. During the Cultural Revolution, *guqin*-playing **was** forbidden. Nowadays it is allowed and respected again, but the *guqin* - in spite of its revival - is often looked upon as being old-fashioned in comparison with modern Western instruments. The curriculum of the Chinese Conservatory reflects this ambiguous attitude; obligatory subjects here are: the piano, folksong, harmony, composition, and ear training. The subjects of musical analysis and musical history concern Western classical as well as Chinese traditional music. Commerce is playing a role, too, and is stimulating "westernized" music very much.'

In some cases there seems to be a happier 'marriage' between the two cultural traditions, for example in the contemporary notation of *qin* music. Dai Xiaolian sees certain advantages in both traditions, and likes to combine them (see Plate 2). Her words were: 'At the moment **the** complicated traditional tablature, which is called *Wenzipu* is being used alongside *Jazipu*, a more simple system of notation using numbers. I like something in between. I believe, in fact, that it is very sensible to combine the Western style of notes marked on a stave with the original symbols, which may be printed underneath. This way, it is easy to understand **the** horizontal flow of the melody, while one does not lose the richness of the old tablature.' With this comforting statement, our conversation ended.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Antoinet Schimmelpenninck for her co-operation as an excellent and patient interpreter during **this** interview. Besides, I would like to **thank** both her and Frank van Kouwenhoven for **their** initiative in organizing lecture series and concerts in the Netherlands on **the** inexhaustible and colourful subject of Chinese music. They **have** proved a great success.

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by Doi xiaolian

《神奇枯谱》

戴晓莲整理打谱

六哥压六笥毯

ATRY

处

芍盐芋匀

酱笥笥赞功苾

(三)建邦本

入拍

丁。企

下已

Toninin

筍。

焗特筍選芋習醬

woll

芭背造

**Plate 2:** Manuscript by Dai Xiaolian; **the** combination of **Western staff** notation and **Chinese** tablature

old no ahin

solo bar sid

zoni

**THREE THOUSAND YEARS OLD, BUT VERY ALIVE: THE GUQIN**

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