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# On Chinese Qin and Chan Buddhism Literature

## A Lecture by Dr. Huqun Li

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On March 14, 2019, Dr. Huqun Li, Associate Professor at the School of Humanities at China University of Political Science and Law, delivered his lecture and performance “On Chinese Qin and Chan Buddhism Literature: to learn from the performance of Guqin” at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Li presented his lecture in Mandarin and Weiyu Lin, an M.A. student at the University of British Columbia, provided supplemental translation in English. In addition to sharing his research on the cultural history of the *qin* (or *guqin*: ancient *qin*), Dr. Li also performed a selection of four *qin* compositions. These musical pieces highlighted the *qin*’s multiple roles in Chinese culture: from its Confucian heritage, to its importance in later literati cultures, and its artistic and meditative nature which suited Daoist and Buddhist practice. Dr. Li began the lecture by introducing the physical properties of the *qin* as an instrument. He went on to explain the formation of its musical traditions within Chinese culture, and its relationship with Chan Buddhism in particular.



Figure 1. Dr. Huqun Li welcomes the attendees to his lecture. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission



Figure 2. Weiyu Lin, UBC M.A. student, translates for Dr. Huqun Li. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

This ancient stringed instrument is deeply symbolic, Dr. Li emphasized, through its music, cultural connections, and through its physi-

cal characteristics. Dr. Li used his own *qin* to demonstrate how the *qin*'s shape and markings symbolized the human body and paralleled the earth and sky with its rounded top and flat bottom, among many other symbolic qualities of the *qin*. Dr. Li also showed the *qin*'s unique music notation system. Because this notation system only tells the player which note to play, the rhythm is left to the player's personal interpretation and allows for flexibility within each musical piece. With this introduction to the basics of the instrument itself, Dr. Li turned to the *qin*'s role within religious and literati traditions.



Figure 3. Dr. Huqun Li explains the symbolic qualities of the *qin* in relation to its physical characteristics. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

Dr. Li elaborated on the *qin*'s connection to China's literati culture and Confucian values. The tradition maintains that Confucius himself played the *qin* and sang poetry to accompany it. He taught his students to play the *qin* in order to cultivate themselves and master Confucian performance. To reflect the *qin*'s Confucian roots, Dr. Li performed a piece with a five thousand year history titled, "The Chant of Returning

Home.” This piece included lyrics that closely followed the slow, flowing melody of the *qin*. Chinese literati culture upheld the Confucian *qin*-playing tradition. It played such an essential role in literati activities that it was considered one of four main literati activities. However, literati *qin* playing emphasized the performance over the instrument itself, using it in the broader education system to cultivate individual virtue, and creating an ideal “virtuous sound.” Until the twentieth century, many literati were able to play this instrument. Despite its decline, various groups are attempting to revive *qin* playing and celebrate its close relationship to China’s literati history. Dr. Li’s next piece, “Running Water,” demonstrated how literati *qin* playing transmitted not only images of nature, but also the quality of the mountains and rivers the piece represents. This *qin*-only technique made a wider use of the *qin*’s melodic range, hovering between notes and using a looser rhythm.



Figure 4. Dr. Huqun Li explains the meaning of Chinese characters for “music” and other associated terminologies. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

Though most of its cultural ties are to the literati and elites, *qin* playing also became associated with religious cultivation. The quiet and secluded environment that many *qin* players preferred, lent itself well to Daoist ascetics' practice. As Dr. Li explained: "*qin* music also carries the simple and tranquil spirit of Daoist culture." Dr. Li's next *qin* performance titled, "Loving and Living a Good Life of Mountain Seclusion," featured a sparser melody with quiet slides up the body of the *qin*.

Despite the Buddhist *vinaya*'s prohibition against playing music, many Buddhist masters also played the *qin*. This was not only due to Buddhism's close relationship with literati culture, but also because many monastic *qin* players considered mastery of the *qin* as a form of meditation and an expression of truth, as well as a way to glorify the Chinese Buddhist *sangha*. According to Dr. Li, some Chan monastic lineages began to play the *qin* in the Northern and Southern dynasties and continued this tradition through teaching their own students, which later flourished in the Tang and Song dynasties. Dr. Li noted that this tradition is still alive today, as he recounted from his meeting with *qin*-playing monks. A "*qin* Chan," where *qin* playing becomes part of Chan practice and meditation, encourages mindfulness and self-cultivation. Monks who master the *qin*, Dr. Li surmised, are almost always masters of Chan as well. Dr. Li's final *qin* piece titled, "Master Pu-an's Incantation," reflected Chan Buddhism's close relationship with the instrument. This piece was a small selection from a larger Buddhist *qin* collection, the *Qin Score of Withered Wood Chan*, which not only assembled traditional *qin* pieces and new compositions but described *qin*-playing theory in relation to Chan meditation. Dr. Li's chosen section was a challenging piece, characterised by long-held ringing chords.



Figure 5. Dr. Huqun Li performs the “Master Pu-an’s Incantation” composition. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

Dr. Li is not only interested in the religious and cultural history of the *qin*, he is also actively involved in reviving the playing of this ancient instrument. In 2001 he founded a *qin* club at Peking University to practice literati traditions and aesthetics. Many universities are now doing the same by creating clubs and departments to encourage *qin* playing and literati cultural revival. Dr. Li believes that university students in particular can benefit from playing the *qin*, for it nurtures their minds and helps them find meaning among philosophy’s mechanistic systems. As Dr. Li pointed out throughout his lecture and performances, playing the *qin* involves more than making music—it allows for expression through wordlessness and quiets the mind.

A recording of the lecture can be viewed here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3mzP5thFVI&feature=youtu.be>