World Focus for 2019: China

The ensemble music of China

This topic examines the musical features and performance practice of **two** types of Chinese music ensemble. The region from which the extract is taken will be specified. Candidates would not be tested on the historical or geographical background but they would be expected to:

- Identify and briefly describe some of the main instruments (including the main performance technique, e.g. bowed, plucked)
- Understand which instruments are associated with each ensemble
- Describe the musical processes and features (e.g. scale/mode; texture; rhythm, metre and tempo)
- Describe the performance contexts and modes of transmission

1 Historical background

China is a huge country with an ancient tradition of around three millennia. It became unified in 221 BCE after the King of the State of Qin conquered all the other Warring States and established himself as Qin Shihuang, First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty. The Qin dynasty, however, was short-lived and was succeeded by the powerful Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE. As the Han dynasty is considered the first golden age of China's imperial rule, the majority of the population is known as Han Chinese to this day. China subsequently went through a number of different dynastic rules until a modern republic was founded in 1912 by the Nationalist Party, ending the 2000-year imperial rule in China. Following a time of turmoil which saw the Sino-Japan war and civil war between the Nationalists and the Communist forces, the Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, defeated the Nationalists, establishing the People's Republic of China from 1949. The Nationalist army and its leader Chiang Kai-Shek fled to the island of Taiwan and set up a rival government.

Today, 91.5 per cent of China's population is Han Chinese, while ethnic minorities, comprising 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups, make up about 8.5 per cent of the population. The official language of China is known as Mandarin or *Putonghua*, which is taught at schools. Different regional dialects or languages also exist; some regions may share common terms and a degree of intelligibility, but some are so different as to be mutually unintelligible. The written form of the language, known as *hanyu* or *zhongwen*, has been standardised since the time of Emperor Qin Shihuang. The written text comprises characters that generally represent one syllable of spoken Chinese. In modern times, the traditional system for Chinese characters has been simplified in China and some Chinese-speaking countries outside mainland China. However, places like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau have retained the traditional system.

Just as there are many different regional dialects and languages, Chinese music consists of many regional traditions that are different in form, style, instruments, notation systems, performance practice and repertory. Traditionally, music is often closely linked to religious or ritual contexts and plays an important role in social ceremonies such as weddings, celebrations and funerals. Music ensembles of different regions can generally be differentiated by the instrumental combination and distinctive instruments. We will focus on two types of string and wind (known typically in Chinese as *sizhu*, literally 'silk-and-bamboo', as it comprises instruments made from bamboo and instruments with silk strings; see *bayin*) instrumental ensembles.

2 Types of silk-and-bamboo ensemble

A. Jiangnan sizhu ensemble (Jiangnan silk-and-bamboo ensemble)

Geographical and social background

Jiangnan (lit. south of the river) is a geographic area in China referring to the regions south of the *Yangtze* (modern romanisation *Yangzi*) River. Also known as *Chang Jiang* (lit. Long River), it is the longest river that flows from the peak of the Tanggula mountains in Qinghai province in Tibet to the East China Sea, the mouth of which is in Shanghai. It has served as one of the most important waterways in China and has played a huge role in the history, culture and economy of China. As one of the five treaty ports opened to foreign trade in the nineteenth century, it grew in importance as a major economic centre and financial hub. Being opened to foreign trade and international settlement, it became a hub of modern and Western culture in the twentieth century.

Traditionally, music ensembles have existed all over China; many of these are part of Chinese village societies or associations which provide their services as paid professionals performing for religious and life-cycle ceremonies. At the same time, music-making for self-cultivation or pleasure has also existed. In the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, amateur music-making activities began to spread in urban areas; amateur musicians from well-to-do families and educated backgrounds would gather and play music for self-cultivation and to entertain themselves. In the early twentieth century, many *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble groups and music clubs began to develop in the city of Shanghai. Music enthusiasts would gather and play at teahouses, in clubs or neighborhood associations. They would meet to play music for their own entertainment, to improve their performance skills and to socialise. It was in this climate that the *Jiangnan sizhu* became established as a genre of wind and string ensemble.

In music conservatoires today, students are expected to learn pieces of the *Jiangnan sizhu* repertoire and to know something of the style. However, conservatoire-trained groups tend to play from notated scores while folk groups tend not to use notation when they play.

Instrumentation

The term *sizhu* originally came from the ancient Chinese *bayin* (lit. eight sounds) classification system in which musical instruments were classified according to the material used in the construction of the instruments, the eight being stone, earth, bamboo, metal, skin, silk, wood and gourd.

The core instruments used in the standard *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble include the *dizi* (transverse bamboo flute), *xiao* (end-blown bamboo flute), *sheng* (mouth organ), *erhu* (two-stringed bowed lute), *pipa* (four-stringed plucked lute), *yangqin* (dulcimer or struck zither), *sanxian* (three-stringed plucked lute), *bangzi* (woodblock) and *ban* (clapper).

At any gathering, the number of players is not fixed. As few as two or as many as ten or more players may participate. But generally, only one of each instrument is played. If more players of a particular instrument turn up, the players will take it in turn to play. Those waiting to play will sit around, chatting and drinking tea.

Candidates should be able to identify and briefly describe the following instruments:

Dizi

The *dizi* is a transverse or side-blown flute made from a piece of bamboo with six finger holes and a blowhole. Halfway between the finger holes and the blowhole is an extra hole which is covered by a thin membrane of bamboo skin. This membrane produces a slightly nasal buzzing tone colour and amplifies the volume. In *Jiangnan sizhu*, the moderate-length flute known as the *qudi* is used. It is tuned in the key of D and has an average range of about two and a half octaves. It is normally the leading instrument of the ensemble.

Sheng

The *sheng* mouth organ is one of the oldest Chinese wind instruments. It is made up of fourteen to seventeen bamboo pipes of different lengths set in a small wind chamber traditionally made of gourd; in modern times this may be made of metal. Each pipe has a free reed made of metal or brass attached to the end of it before it is inserted inside the wind chamber. It is held at an angle to the player's right. Sound is produced by exhaling and inhaling air through a wooden or metal blowpipe connected to the base and by closing the finger holes in the gap in selected pipes. It is capable of producing two or more tones simultaneously, producing the harmony of a fourth, fifth or octaves.

Erhu

The *erhu* is a two-stringed, bowed fiddle. Originating from the bowed spiked-lute of Persia, this instrument travelled to China via Central Asia on the ancient Silk Road. Today it is very much an important Chinese instrument. It has a round and long fretless pole mounted perpendicular to a small hexagonal-shape soundbox covered by snakeskin. Two silk strings (in modern day, steel or nylon strings) are fastened to the lower end of the pole and are passed over the face of the soundbox by means of a small bamboo bridge and then wound onto tuning pegs at the top. The bow, made of horse hair, rests between the two strings. Sound is produced by pushing or pulling the bow against the inner or outer string. The strings are commonly tuned a fifth apart to D–A, C–G or A–lower D.

Pipa

Like the *erhu*, the *pipa* is an instrument imported into China via the Silk Road in around the 6th century CE. Its ancestor is the Persian *ud* (or *oud*). The *pipa* has a pear-shaped wooden body. Today, the *pipa* has 29 or 31 frets, six on the neck and the rest on the body of the instrument. Four strings run from a fastener on the belly of the instrument to conical tuning pegs in the sides of the bent pegbox. The strings are commonly tuned to A–D–E–A. Previously, silk strings were used but today, nylon-wrapped steel strings are used to make it sound more powerful; as a result, finger picks are attached to the right hand fingers, which pluck the strings to produce sound. The left hand presses on the frets to produce the desired pitch. When it first arrived, the instrument was played horizontally, but gradually it is held more upright. In the *Jiangnan sizhu* style of playing, it elaborates the melody by using performance techniques such as the finger rolls, tremolos, harmonics and glissandi.

Yangqin

The *yangqin* ('foreign' *qin*) is a trapezoidal-shaped hammered dulcimer. Its origin can be traced back to the *santur* of Persia. In China, it has been adapted and has expanded in size. The instrument used commonly in *Jiangnan sizhu* has two rows of bridges at the top, each supporting eight to twelve courses of metal strings (two strings per course) passing over each bridge. In the lower octave, each course has a single string. The strings are struck with two slender bamboo beaters covered with felt.

The following instruments are commonly used in a *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble, but candidates will not be expected to identify or describe them:

Zhonghu

The *zhonghu* is similar to the *erhu* but is slightly larger in size. It is tuned an octave lower than the *erhu* and is used more often as a subsidiary instrument to add a thicker sound texture to the high-pitched *erhu*.

Xiao

The *xiao* is a vertical-notched bamboo flute. It has four or five finger holes in the front and one in the back. It is thin and long and pitched a fourth or fifth lower than the *dizi*. It has a softer tone and more delicate timbre than the *dizi* transverse flute. Its range is about two octaves. In *Jiangnan sizhu* it usually plays a less ornamented version of the main melody.

Sanxian

The *sanxian* is a fretless plucked lute with three strings. It has a small rectangular sound box covered in the front and back with a snakeskin. It has a long neck, with a curved-back pegbox at the end of the neck and three tuning pegs at the side of the neck. The instrument used in the *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble is about 95 cm in length. It has a rich tonal quality and has a compass of about three octaves. It is played by plucking the strings with the fingernails of the right hand or with a plectrum.

Percussion instruments in *Jiangnan sizhu* (candidates should understand the importance and role of the percussion, but will not be expected to identify or describe the instruments)

The percussion part in *Jiangnan sizhu* ensemble is played by a single musician, who holds the *ban* clapper in the left hand while the right hand strikes the *bangzi* woodblock with a stick. The *ban* clapper marks the strong (at times also on medium strong) beat, with the *bangzi* woodblock playing the rest of the beats (see section on Rhythm, Metre and Tempo). Although the percussion part is not technically demanding, the percussionist plays an important role of controlling the tempo of a piece and signalling changes in tempo between sections. In the slow section in 4/4 time, the woodblock subdivides the weak beats into two, four or eight pulses in an improvisatory manner. As the tempo quickens, the rhythmic patterns in the woodblock becomes less dense; as the music progresses into a very fast tempo in the last section, the clapper and woodblock alternate in rapid succession.

Ban

The *ban* is a wooden clapper consisting of two slabs of wood loosely attached together by a cord at one end. One slab is actually formed from two pieces of wood permanently tied tightly together and is thus twice the thickness of the other slab, which is a single piece of wood. The two parts of the clapper have flat surfaces on one side, which are struck together, while the other sides may be slightly contoured.

The single slap of the clapper is held in the palm of the left hand with the thumb separating the two slabs. The heavier double slab hangs down freely. The moving part is struck against the other slab, which remains stationary.

Bangzi

The *bangzi* is a rectangular woodblock partially hollowed out with a horizontal slit. It is placed flat on a table and played with a single thin piece of wood or bamboo.

YouTube example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOFr4Th7CD4

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdvgQiG_hY4

Performance contexts

As explained above, this music is performed by amateur musicians who play for recreation. Groups meet weekly in the tea-houses and/or community centres dotted around the city of Shanghai. Some members regularly attend one music club or centre, but some play in different places. In the more public tea-houses, musicians sit in one corner around one or two tables. Members of the music club usually take it in turns to play; those not playing will sit around, drinking tea, smoking or chatting among themselves. Patrons in the tea-house may listen to the music if they wish, but more often than not, they would simply ignore the group. Today, groups may also be invited to play on the concert stage.

B. Guangdong music

Geographical and social background

The Guangdong province lies on the coast of the South China Sea. As the region is in the far south of the Chinese territories, the region and its people have often been marginalised and dismissed as the 'southern barbarians'. Since opening up the region as an important port of entry for foreign trade in the early part of the twentieth century, Guangdong has flourished rapidly, attracting foreign businesses and Christian missions. The region has thus been highly influenced by Western culture. Today, Guangdong is the most populous province in China, with its capital city Guangzhou and its special economic zone Shenzhen becoming an important economic hub. Both the people of Guangdong and the dialect spoken in the province are referred to as Cantonese, Canton being the romanised name of the city of Guangzhou. Hong Kong and Macau, two islands on the southern coast of Guangdong province, were ceded to the British and Portuguese in the late nineteenth century. Both places were then under British and Portuguese rule until their return to the People's Republic of China in 1997 for Hong Kong and 1999 for Macau. Mass migration of Cantonese from the Guangdong region, Hong Kong and Macau to other parts of Southeast Asia, America and Europe in the nineteenth century has led to the spread of Cantonese culture.

The term *Guangdong yinyue* (lit. Guangdong music) may refer broadly to music that developed in or originated from this region, but it is also a type of silk and bamboo (*sizhu*) ensemble music of the region.

Hong Kong's proximity to Guangzhou has had some impact on Guangdong music as the then British colony has a vibrant recording and movie industry, night clubs and live entertainment venues. Since the 1920s, Cantonese music played in Hong Kong has been more experimental, with the addition and adaptation of Western instruments such as the violin, cello, Hawaiian slide guitar, banjo, xylophone, and so on. Musicians and composers active in Hong Kong were also performing in Guangzhou, Macau and other cities. Recordings and the commercialisation of this music have made it a modern urban genre.

Instrumentation

Like the *Jiangnan* silk and bamboo ensemble, the instruments used in *Guangdong yinyue* largely comprise of bowed and plucked lutes and wind instruments. Some instruments found in *Jiangnan* silk and bamboo ensemble are also used in Cantonese music. These include the *sanxian* three-stringed fretless lute, *yangqin* hammered dulcimer, *dongxiao* end-blown flute and the *pipa* four-stringed lute. But several other instruments not heard in *Jiangnan* silk and bamboo ensemble make it uniquely Cantonese. These include *gaohu*, *yehu* and *qinqin* fretted plucked lute. At times, other instruments such as the long boxed zither *guzheng* may be added to the ensemble. Traditionally, Cantonese ensembles do not often use percussion instruments, but today, pieces may be arranged for larger orchestras in which percussion and other instruments may be added.

Candidates should be able to identify and briefly describe the following instruments:

Gaohu

The *gaohu* (lit. high fiddle) belongs to the family of two-stringed bowed lutes. It is about 78 cm in height. Developed from the *erhu* in the 1920s by a Cantonese musician and composer, it has a slightly smaller soundbox than the *erhu's* and the strings are tuned a fourth or fifth higher. It is held with the resonator between the player's knees. It is the lead instrument in the Cantonese ensemble.

YouTube example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZCGHmPuUsw&list=RDyZCGHmPuUsw#t=4

Guzheng

The *zheng*, known today as *guzheng* (gu meaning ancient), is a Chinese zither with more than 2500 years of history. It has 16–21 strings and is 160 cm long. It has a high arching soundboard and large wooden, moveable tuning pegs mounted diagonally on the soundboard itself. The strings are tuned to a pentatonic scale without half steps over a three-octave range. Today, the instrument is played resting on a stand. It is plucked with finger picks made of plastic, ivory or tortoise shells and taped to the first three fingers in the right hand. The left hand presses the strings to the left of its bridge as it is plucked.

YouTube example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg3lfTj3V2k

Example of ensemble: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmTl3s90AII

The following instruments are commonly used in a *Guangdong yinyue* ensemble, but candidates will not be expected to identify or describe them:

Yehu

The *yehu* (coconut-shelled bowed lute) has a resonator made from coconut shell with its front end covered with a piece of coconut wood instead of the snakeskin commonly used in other two-stringed lutes. Like the other types of two-stringed lutes, the bow passes in between the two strings, and a small seashell serves as a bridge. It is a supporting instrument in the ensemble. It has a medium pitch and a distinctly mellow timbre.

YouTube example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2xcnIFbgao

Qinqin

The *qinqin* is a fretted three-stringed lute with a fretted neck. It has a scalloped resonator covered with a wooden soundboard. It is held in a horizontal (or diagonal) position, the soundbox resting on the player's lap. It is plucked with fingernails or a small plectrum.

Performance contexts

In the early twentieth century, *Guangdong* music, like the *Jiangnan sizhu*, was also played in tea-houses by amateur musicians. However, it soon developed into a form of pure entertainment music by semi- or professional music bands. This music came to be played on radio, in dancehalls and on television. The music is also used in films and recorded commercially, particularly in Hong Kong.

Today, amateur music clubs still exist in cities and rural areas, but it is not always easy to locate such groups. In places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States, Cantonese music is often played by modern, larger Chinese orchestras (e.g. The New York Chinese National Ensemble www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEFSX0vumGk)

3 Overall musical features of Chinese music

A Scale/mode
B Texture
C Metre, rhythm and tempo
D Melodic labels

A Scale/mode

The Chinese scale system is heptatonic, having seven degrees in an octave. Although it is a heptatonic system, the basic scale of the majority of the melodies is pentatonic, consisting of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th degrees of the scale. The 4th and 7th degrees are commonly used as leading or passing tones, which are essential for filling in the gaps and helping to elaborate the melody, particularly when the music is in a slow metre.

B Texture

Harmony in the Western sense does not traditionally exist in Chinese instrumental music. Rather, each instrument decorates the basic melodic outline in different ways according to the idiom and technique of each instrument, resulting in simultaneous variation of the same melody. This form of musical texture is known as heterophony. The ability to ornament the basic melody spontaneously is an important feature of Chinese music and is a highly regarded skill in the playing of *Jiangnan sizhu* and *Guangdong* music. Thus, for the musicians, the music is never played in the same way each time.

C Metre, rhythm and tempo

Metrical structure in Chinese music is referred to as *banyan* ('beat and eyes'), *ban* (also the name of the clapper percussion instrument) being the strong beat of a measure and *yan* the subsidiary beats. In Chinese music, duple or quadruple metre is common; triple metre is rare. A time signature of 4/4 is known in Chinese as *yi ban san yan* (One *ban* and three 'eyes'); 2/4 is referred to as *yi ban yi yan* (One *ban* and one 'eye').

Sometimes, free tempo sections may introduce a piece or end a piece. In general, Chinese instrumental music tends to progress from slow to mid- to fast and really fast tempo. Slow to mid-tempo sections are often in 4/4; fast sections are in 2/4, and towards the end of a piece when the tempo really accelerates to a very fast tempo, the metre is in 1/4.

D Melodic labels and performance practice – teachers will find this section helpful in understanding more about Chinese music, but candidates will not be tested on this

As mentioned above, the basis of Chinese music is the basic melodic outline. Melodies, both vocal and instrumental, are built from the system of *qupai* or 'labelled melodies'. These are pre-existing melodies which are assigned name titles, hence the word 'label'. One of the most common *qupai* structures is that of a melody having a total of 16 beats in 2/4 metre. This melodic unit then forms the basis on which variations are created. One method of transforming the labelled melody is through the process of metrical expansion, slowing down the metre to 4/4 time. When expanded, the notes in the original labelled melody become further apart temporally, thus allowing more notes to be inserted. This thus results in more densely decorated versions of the original labelled melody (see Figure 1). A labelled melody on which other derivative pieces can result is referred to as the 'mother tune'. In the *Jiangnan sizhu* repertoire, there are pieces which begin with densely ornamented melodies in the expanded 4/4 metre. As the piece progresses and the tempo speeds up, the melody becomes less ornamented until it is stripped back to its core labelled melody outline. An example of this is a piece titled *Huanle Ge* (Happy Tune) (see Jonathan Stock, *World Sound Matters: An Anthology of Music from Around the World*, Transcriptions. Schott Educational Publications,

1996, p.14). At the same time, 'stand-alone' pieces that need not contain the stripped back labelled melody may also result.

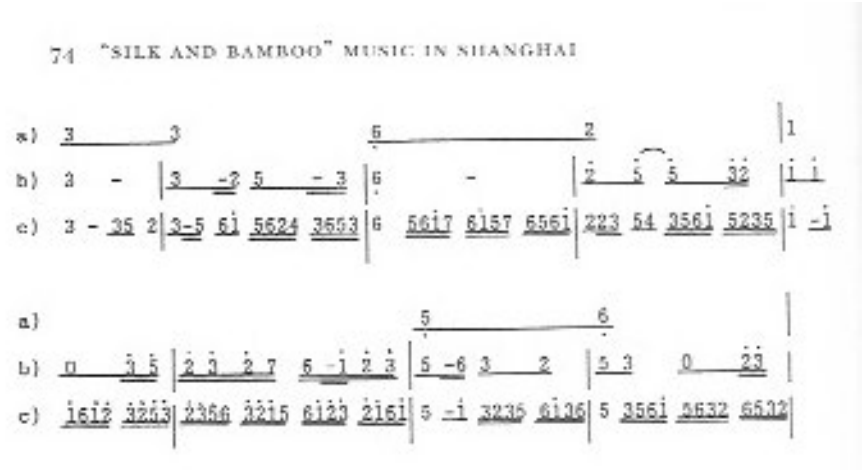

Figure 1. Example of the expansion of the labelled melody: a is the 'mother tune'; b is a version in mid-speed, and c is in slow 4/4 metre. (From J Lawrence Witzleben, *Silk and Bamboo Music in Shanghai: The Jiangnan Sizhu Instrumental Ensemble Tradition*. The Kent State University Press, 1995, p.74)

4 Notation and transmission

Different types of notation system are used in China for different genres and instruments. Some solo instruments use the tablature notation system. Traditionally, a more common notation system for instrumental music is one that uses Chinese characters to denote the seven degrees of the scale. However, this form of notation is now less commonly used. Since the early twentieth century, cipher notation (borrowed from the French Chevé Galin system), whereby numbers 1 to 7 are used to represent the degrees of the heptatonic scale, is the most prevalent form of music notation. With the introduction of the Western music conservatoires since the mid-1950s, the Western staff notation is now also commonly used.

Although different forms of notation systems exist, oral/aural transmission was also an important part of music learning and was usually passed on within the family or a hereditary lineage. However, with the introduction of music conservatoires, music learning has become more institutionalised with formal teaching resulting in the playing from notated scores, standardised and virtuosic performance.