

A Legend about the Origins of Chinese Music

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations. Over 3,500 years ago, farmers grew rice, corn, and soybeans, and artisans made pottery and copper objects. And the Chinese people made music with voices and instruments many centuries before Europeans began to develop their own musical systems. Music in Ancient China was made for entertainment, ceremonies, dancing, singing, special events and announcements. The music of China can convey powerful stories and images through sound. With poetic and unique titles, the music leads listeners to imagining images and scenes that are like sound paintings.



Huang-ti leader of the Han tribe near the Yellow River around 2497 BCE

There is a legend about how the twelve different pitches in Chinese music were discovered. One day (around 2497 B.C.E.), Emperor Huang-ti, a legendary Chinese ruler, cultural hero, and music-lover commanded the court scholar, Ling-Lun, to bring some order to music. A very resourceful and educated man, Ling-Lun went out to cut bamboo pipes.

Bamboo grows very straight and even in the valleys of the K'un-lun Mountains. There were many fine stalks from which to choose. Ling-Lun found one he liked, cut the stalk of bamboo, then blew into it to test the sound.



The Chinese Fèng Huáng or Phoenix was believed to control the five tones of traditional Chinese music and to represent the Confucian virtues of loyalty, honesty, decorum and justice.

At the moment when the sound flew out of the bamboo stalk, something amazing happened! A bird (legend has it that it was a phoenix) echoed the pitch made by Ling-Lun's bamboo pipe, and then sang five more pitches.

Almost immediately, a second bird answered with six additional pitches. After hearing these twelve sounds made

by the birds, Ling-Lun immediately cut eleven more bamboo pipes into sizes that produced the very same pitches he heard and the 12 tones of a musical system.

Emperor Huang-ti was very impressed with the order Ling Lun was able to bring to musical sound. The Emperor wanted his new pipes in tune with the heavens, so he instructed his astrologer and acoustical specialist to work together. In this way, both the pipes and his reign as emperor would be in harmony with nature.

This legend is a mythological story. But Ling-Lun (2697 BCE) did exist and is considered the founder of Chinese music because he imitated the songs of the birds to create a musical system or scale. The sounds were recreated through careful mathematical calculations applied to lengths of bamboo pipes, for both mathematics and acoustics were ancient Chinese skills.

In Focus with Nature

A focal point in Chinese music is the connections between nature and humans. Patterns and order in music followed the patterns and order in nature. The ancient Chinese identified:

- five directions in nature: north, south, east, west, and center
- five elements: wood, water, fire, metal, and earth
- five senses: sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.

This focus on significant groups of five led to organizing the twelve tones into the traditional modes or scales, each made from five pitches. Though twelve tones are possible in Chinese music, compositions are usually, but not always, created on one of these five pitch modes. A five-tone scale is called a pentatonic scale from the Greek word for five, *penta*.

Here are the five tones from one version of a pentatonic scale in western notation. The 4th and 7th tones in parenthesis are not used.



There are many kinds of five tone or pentatonic scales in Chinese music.

Melody is a key musical element in Chinese music. Music is often based on stories or descriptions of nature and/or natural sounds; almost like painting through sound.

Rhythmically, most of the music is in duple meter (2/4 or 4/4 in Western notation). Triple meter is rare. Syncopation occurs often in rhythm patterns.

Traditional music is often monophonic, played as a single line without chords or counterpoint, but some polyphony does exist (including in Thinking of My Home.) Heterophony, where musicians play the same core melody together, but each adds his or her own particular ornaments and variations, occurs frequently.

Instruments

Organizing pitches into 12 tones was not the only musical invention from China. An ancient system for classifying instruments also was created for the instruments of the Imperial Orchestra. It is known as the 'eight sounds' or *ba yin*. The system was useful because there is a wide variety of instruments played in China. Each of the eight categories was based on the materials used to construct the instruments. The categories were silk, bamboo, animal hide, clay, gourds, metal, stone, and wood. They are the same groups or families in use in China today.

Silk represents the stringed instruments because silk was used in ancient times to make vibrating strings. Woodwind instruments are made from bamboo, plentiful and important in China. All of the gongs, chimes, and bells were made from metal, though stone and clay was also used to make chiming

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instruments. And animal skin or hide formed the vibrating heads of drums and rattles. Some sturdier instruments from ancient times have been found by archeologists. In 1986, a set of eight thousand year old flutes made from wing bones of cranes were unearthed by archeologist in Henan Province. Known as *gudi*, each had a set of five to eight finger holes bored in its length. Other ancient instruments found in digs include round clay flutes (*xun*), tuned stone chimes (*ging*), bells made of bronze (*zhong*), and drums (*gu*).

Resources

Lau, F. (2008). *Music in China. Experiencing Music. Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Chinese-music#ref602780>
Encyclopedia Britannica online.

<http://www.enotes.com/topics/ling-lun>
eNotes: Study Guides on many topics.

<http://cryptidz.wikia.com/wiki/H%C5%8D-%C5%8D>

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/much/hd_much.htm
The Metropolitan Art Museum, NYC, "Music & Art of China"



A modern day picture of a woman playing the pipa, a silk (string) instrument