

Book Review

Yeung, Juni L. *Standards of the Guqin: An English Language Introduction to the Chinese Seven-Stringed Zither. Fourth edition.* Toronto: Toronto Guqin Society, 2018. Iv, 197pp. Photos, illustrations, tables, music scores, bibliography. ISBN 978-0-9866225-0-2.

This book is the only commercially available introductory text in English on how to play the *guqin*. Therefore, it should be well sought after among English speakers in learning the *guqin* but unable to read Chinese. The book gives a good account of *jianzipu* 減字譜, “the simplified character notation system,” a tablature system for *guqin* that notates fingering instead of musical notes. There is a carefully selected repertoire, using a duo-line score showing both Western staff notation and *jianzipu*, covering pieces from both the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), as well as pieces utilizing standard tuning and nonstandard tuning. There is a brief section on the traditional aesthetics for *guqin* music and its development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. After the students have mastered the more basic repertoire, they are asked to try *dapu* 打譜, or reconstructing music from old scores, a special feature not found in most introductory texts in Chinese. To facilitate this, the author gives a brief description of the *dapu* process, and reports on her experience in reconstructing a Qing Dynasty piece. Students are then asked to reconstruct three short pieces from Ming Dynasty handbooks. This may be challenging for students because the tablature system in the Ming Dynasty was a bit different from the Qing Dynasty system that would be more familiar to them. Furthermore, unlike the pentatonic late Qing Dynasty pieces, some early Ming Dynasty pieces utilize nonpentatonic notes. Rather than just the 4th and 7th degrees of a heptatonic scale, characteristically the flattened 3rd degree is used as well. Nonetheless, under the guidance of a good teacher, this nonconventional approach can broaden students’ perspective.

In the fourth edition of the book, the author further expands the scope of the teaching materials by adding a chapter on intonation theories and another on modal theories. However, this is not an easy task. The approach and terminologies in Chinese modal theories are different from those in Western music. Furthermore, as the author says in her foreword to the fourth edition, her work “ended up into the forays of the most hotly-contested [writings] at the forefront of Chinese musicological scholarship.” Reading

writings at the forefront of current scholarship, if not done critically, can lead to misinterpretation of the more basic concepts.

I will illustrate the difficulties with a few examples. On page 55, under the section labeled “Gong 宮: Fundamental Tone,” there is a table that describes how each note of a gamut of seven pitches can be used as the *gong* 宮 (*do*) note. The table is reproduced as follows to facilitate discussion:

Zhonglü Yun [仲呂均]	Diatonic scale	F	C	G	D	A	E	B
F as gong	F, G, A, B, C, D, E	1	5	2	6	3	7	#4
C as gong	C, D, E, F, G, A, B	4	1	5	2	6	3	7
G as gong	G, A, B, C, D, E, F	b7	4	1	5	2	6	3
D as gong	D, E, F, G, A, B, C	b3	b7	4	1	5	2	6
A as gong	A, B, C, D, E, F, G	b6	b3	b7	4	1	5	2
E as gong	E, F, G, A, B, C, D	b2	b6	b3	b7	4	1	5
B as gong	B, C, D, E, F, G, A	b5	b2	b6	b3	b7	4	1

The table does not conform to standard teaching in Chinese music theory. I speculate that the author might have utilized a concept “at the forefront of Chinese musicology scholarship,” *tongyun sangong* 同均三宮, proposed by Huang Xiangpeng 黃翔鵬. In Chinese music theory, a heptatonic scale can be interpreted as having a 4th degree and a 7th degree added to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale *do, re, mi, sol la*. Huang suggested that, for the same gamut of seven pitches (C, D, E, F, G, A, B), three, namely F, C, and G, can be used as *gong* (*do*), generating three heptatonic scales with different positions of the 4th and 7th degrees. The first three rows of the author’s table correspond to the three scales in Huang’s concept, namely, the *zhengsheng* scale 正聲音階, *xiazhi* scale 下徵音階, and *qingshang* scale 清商音階. I speculate that the author further extrapolates from this concept by having D, A, E, and B as *do* and generating four more scales. However, such extrapolation beyond Huang’s concept probably cannot stand critical scrutiny.

If the previously mentioned speculation seems too far-fetched, and if we just look at the second column labeled “diatonic scale,” there can be a simpler speculation. The problem may be due to mixing up the terms *diaotou* 調頭 (modal final) and *gong* 宮 (*do* note), as both can be translated as “tonal centre.” The left side of the table can be understood easily if the term *diaotou* is used instead of *gong* in the first column. But then, the *sol-fa* names in the right side of the table have to be revised.

Next, I turn to difficulties in intonation theories. In the author’s discussion of *sanfen sunyi* 三分損益 tuning (Pythagorean tuning), the author says that “comparing two pitch pipes of the same diameter with one $2/3^{\text{rds}}$ the length of the other” will give a frequency ratio of 3:2, similar to strings of the same thickness and tension with a $2/3^{\text{rd}}$ relationship in

length (p. 45). This is not entirely correct. Unlike strings, because there is end correction in pitch pipes, the pitch of the shorter pipe should be slightly lower than the just perfect fifth of the longer pipe. On page 46, the author provides a ratio of $(3:2)^9$ to represent the result of generating the tones twelve times by sanfen sunyi, and then compares this with the ratio 2:1 of an octave. The difference is the well-known Pythagorean comma. However, after generating the tones twelve times, the correct frequency ratio should be $(3:2)^{12}$ (to be divided by 2^6 to bring the pitch toward the higher octave of the fundamental, to compare with the ratio of 2:1). On page 52, in her explanation on tuning the guqin by harmonics, the author says that “after cycling through most of the strings, the latest tone you have tuned will be higher than the previous ones when you cross-check. That’s the Pythagorean comma at work.” When utilizing harmonics at the 9th/5th stud and the 7th/10th/4th stud to tune the pentatonic strings of the guqin, only the first four steps in sanfen sunyi are implicated. The Pythagorean comma is not involved. It is only when one utilizes harmonics at the 3rd/6th/8th/11th stud (which have a just major third relationship with the fundamental) that a discrepancy would arise in comparison with tones tuned by sanfen sunyi. However, this discrepancy is the syntonic comma (22 cents) and not the Pythagorean comma (24 cents). The two are conceptually different.

The author even goes on to cover the infamous 14-tone system promulgated by the Qing Emperor Kangxi in 1714 (called the “14-tone scale” in her book), and comments that “the orthodoxy of the qin had been greatly deformed and damaged ... with this new tone system” (p. 72). Major deviations from the sanfen sunyi system in some guqin pieces occurred in late Ming and early Qing Dynasty, a period well before the time of Kangxi, and might have been affected by vernacular intonation practices around that period.

In an introductory book on the guqin, it is probably adequate just to discuss basic aspects of intonation and modal theories directly relevant to introductory practices, rather than dwelling into difficult areas. I look forward to improvements in these areas in the fifth edition of *Standards of the Guqin*.

References

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