



Joanna Lee: In Chinese society, people believed that they could actually play music and reach the heavens. They could also play music and move the earth.

I am Joanna Lee. I am a musicologist who has done fieldwork in China.

The Chinese musical tradition clearly must have started thousands of years ago. The chime bells that were unearthed in 1978, now known as the Ancient Chime Bells of Hubai, clearly dated from about 300-400 B.C. Confucius, one of the greatest Chinese philosophers, lived during the period around 600 B.C. and there were temples built in honor of him and rituals that included song and dance. Not only was the music used in court rituals for the emperor but clearly there were also traditions within villages, within small towns, in which people gathered -- whether it was a celebration as in for marriages, for funerals, even to thank the suns and moons -- dated from thousands of years ago.

Music definitely is a very powerful tool. In the ancient medical scripts as well as in Confucius' sayings, they believe that music has tremendous health-giving possibilities. Music is believed to actually instill higher moral virtue and regulate people's behavior so that it really follows the social norm. How that happens, I think it's fairly abstract, but you can just imagine that with very harmonious music, people also feel good or at peace or in sync with their nature.

There were also philosophers who believed music could also have very detrimental effects on human behavior. You can imagine that if there was a lot of party music going on for 24 hours, going on for seven days, certainly that could not possibly be health-giving. There were philosophers who also acknowledged that music could have very seductive and possibly destructive type of qualities to human behavior. But who knows? I guess it's really a matter of striking that balance. That's what people say -- in Chinese music, in Chinese philosophy, you always have to have that balance.

What you're hearing is the [indiscernible], which is known as one of the most ancient and scholarly and intellectual Chinese instruments. The [indiscernible1] is a sither that has just the strings on top of the piece of wood. The instrumentalist really has to manipulate both hands in a very agile way in order to create sounds.

The [indiscernible], being a very contemplative type of instrument, is known as a scholar's instrument because that's really the instrument a scholar would play when he is contemplating, thinking. It was believed that Confucius actually owned and played a [indiscernible].

Legend had it that there was a great [indiscernible] player by the name of [indiscernible]. [indiscernible] was playing the [indiscernible] one day in the woods. A wood cutter walked by, his name is [indiscernible]. [indiscernible] apparently could hear from [indiscernible]'s music the mountains, the wind, the rain. They became great friends. There is a great Chinese saying, when somebody is your greatest friend, you call them as your [indiscernible], as in somebody who knows your music. The legend had it that when [indiscernible] died, [indiscernible] was so heartbroken that he destroyed his [indiscernible] and never played again.

This is the bamboo flute, a Chinese instrument that is truly taken from nature. It is just one string of bamboo with a few holes drilled on it. The bamboo flute is an instrument that is used a lot for celebrations because it really is an instrument that depicts joy and happiness.

You're listening to a pipa, a Chinese lute. The pipa is pear-shaped and if you imagine the lute and the guitar, the pipa has four strings and yet with the agile playing it can manipulate the pitches – i.e., you can pluck the string once and yet you can create at least two or maybe even three pitches after one pluck.

People imagine that when we pluck one string, only one pitch comes out. But one could use four to five fingers to repeat that same plucking motion and with that you create amazing sustaining sounds.

Unlike the [indiscernible], which had fairly long-standing Chinese roots, the pipa was believed to have been an instrument that traveled through the Silk Road, the Caravan Road, of the Tang Dynasty of the 7th and 8th century. So this was an instrument that was used by people way, way west of China, as in the Middle East and so on, that eventually became adapted as a Chinese instrument.

Traditionally, a Chinese instrument ensemble would make up of five, six, up to maybe eight or nine musicians. But in the 1950s, with modern China, the cultural directors said, we can catch up with the West. There's the idea of the Western orchestra. Why can't we organize Chinese instruments and make up a Chinese orchestra of anywhere up to 70, 80, 90 or 100 musicians?

The Chinese orchestra repertoire is twofold. There is very, very new music that is written for it, or there are also music that is based on traditional folk tunes. The sounds they create are very exciting and very different from a Western orchestra or the traditional, small-size Chinese ensemble. The range of colors and the volume and the sounds are really quite amazing.