
IN MEMORY OF A GREAT GUQIN PLAYER

Master Zhang Ziqian (1899-1991)

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He was one of the 'three heroes of Pudong', a successful businessman, and head of a large family. But above all, he was one of China's greatest performers on the guqin, the seven-stringed zither. His playing and his warm personality are unforgettable to all those who knew him intimately or who were lucky enough to hear him play in person. Early this year, master Zhang Ziqian died, at the age of 91. His niece and former pupil, Dai Xiaolian, who is presently one of the best guqin players of the younger generation in mainland China, noted down some of her vivid recollections of Zhang Ziqian.

The famous guqin master of the Guangling School 广陵琴派, Mr. Zhang Ziqian 张子谦, has died. On 5 January of this year, he quietly passed away during an afternoon nap. He lived on for as many as ninety-one springs and autumns and, in the course of his long life, was a witness to three important periods in Chinese history - the end of the Qing dynasty, the Nationalist period and the era of the People's Republic of China. Through his hard work and great zeal, he stamped his presence on the history of guqin music in the 20th century.

I learned to know Zhang Ziqian during the Cultural Revolution, when I was still a child and was only beginning to develop an initial understanding of things. Ever after, I was very near to him and, in the course of time, received my artistic education from him. This enabled me to observe at close hand his artistic activities and conduct towards other people. His whole appearance and his personal convictions made an indelible impression on me, and I treasure all my memories of him.

Zhang Ziqian was born in 1899 in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, as one of many children of a large family of landowners whose wealth was on the decline. In those days, it was quite common for the members of various branches and generations of one family to live together in one house. When he was only seven or eight years old, both his parents died from illness. From that time onwards, he was raised by his grandmother and an uncle, as were his two elder sisters. Zhang Ziqian ranked as the ninth male descendant of the family; my grandfather - his cousin - was the seventh.



Zhang Ziqian and his niece Dai Xiaolian in Shanghai. A picture taken in 1987.

When he was seven years old, Zhang Ziqian began to receive private education from a teacher who had been appointed by the family. This happened to be the famous guqin master from the Guangling school of Yangzhou, Sun Shaotao 孙绍陶. At thirteen, Zhang Ziqian officially began to study guqin with master Sun.

THE GUANGLING SCHOOL

Before telling you the story of my great-uncle in further detail, let me first, very briefly, sketch the general, social background of the guqin tradition in China. I should also say a few words here about the origins of the Guangling School. After all, Zhang Ziqian, in his time, became one of the most important representatives of this school.

Those who are familiar with guqin music will know that, throughout the ages, different kinds of guqin schools - actually, styles of playing - emerged in China. It is very difficult to trace the Guangling School to its earliest origins. A poem by the Tang dynasty poet Li Xin 李欣, entitled 'Please play your qin, dear Guangling guest' « 请奏鸣琴广陵客 », suggests that Guangling players already existed during the Tang Dynasty (618 - 906 AD) but, according to historical records, it was a player called Xu Changyu 徐常遇 who founded the Guangling School at the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1694 - 1911) and passed it on to subsequent generations. The playing in the Guangling tradition is characterized in particular by a strong emphasis on timbral and rhythmic variation, which sets it apart from other schools. On first hearing, it is difficult to grasp the rhythm of a piece played in the Guangling style, because it is so extremely flexible. There are other features, but I will not discuss them here in detail.

The first printed tablature of a piece played in the Guangling tradition dates from 1702 and is called *Chenjiantang qinpu* 澄鉴堂琴谱. From this time onwards, qin players emerged in large numbers and the art of the Guangling school was passed on from one generation to the next. Various important qin tablatures appeared in print, such as the *Ziyuantang qinpu* 自远堂琴谱, the *Wuzhizhai qinpu* 五知斋琴谱, the *Jiao'an qinpu* 蕉庵琴谱 and the *Kumuchan qinpu* 枯木禅琴谱.



Zhang Ziqian in 1982: still a very energetic and active performer.

LISTENING IN THE TEMPLE

Mr. Sun Shaotao, who eventually became my great-uncle's teacher, was a Guangling master of the ninth generation. His art and style were highly acclaimed by his contemporaries. In 1915, the Guangling players of Yangzhou founded a 'Guangling Qin Society' 广陵琴社 with Sun Shaotao as director. It had more than fifty members, which was an exceptionally high number for a qin society in those days.

The guqin, as a musical instrument, was originally practised only by members of the Chinese aristocracy and intellectual elite, but at the beginning of the 20th century, it had already found its way to commoners and middle class people. Many Buddhist monks and Daoist priests had also developed a liking for the guqin. I remember that Zhang Ziqian told me that he often went to a temple in the city of Yangzhou to listen to an old monk performing on the qin.

Under these circumstances, Zhang Ziqian's character and artistic temperament were formed. At an early age, he mastered as many as ten guqin pieces which were passed on to him by his teacher Sun, and soon he displayed a considerable talent for the instrument. In some of his technical abilities, he even surpassed the skills of his master, which, one day, made Sun Shaotao exclaim: 'Ah, I cannot compete with you.' Zhang also learned to play the xiao (vertical bamboo flute) and he often performed at the qin society of Yangzhou.

A PRE-ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Zhang Ziqian was the only son of the family. To secure continuation of the family line, his grandmother and uncle decided that he should marry and have children at an early age. When he was only nineteen years old, they selected a bride for him, a girl from a family named Xu 许. He and the girl did not know each other at that time. I remember Zhang Ziqian telling me the story of the first meeting with his bride-to-be: 'When she walked in through the door, covered by a red veil, I had no idea what she actually looked like. I only saw a pair of golden lotus feet three inches long.' The girl was selected partly because of her age - she was two years older than he, ripe enough to

give birth to a son soon. In 1919, only a year after the marriage, the wish of the family was fulfilled and a son was born. In all, Zhang Ziqian had two sons and three daughters, who, eventually, had offspring themselves. In later years, the house was filled with children, and Zhang Ziqian used to do careful calculations in order to boast about the large number of his progeny. 'My family already spans four generations and consists of more than fifty people', he would say, and then add jokingly: 'I'm not exactly a model for the birth control programme.'

In order to find work and to be able to support his family, Zhang Ziqian was introduced, by a cousin, to people at the Zhongfu Bank in Tianjin. For six or seven years, he worked at this bank as an office clerk. At the end of that period, his father-in-law, who was a shareholder in the Gongmao salt factory in Pudong in Shanghai, invited him to come over and work in that factory. Zhang Ziqian accepted and traveled to Shanghai, where he started working as an accountant and later became head of a department. He stayed at the salt factory for sixteen years, and later treasured the memories of these years more than anything else. 'It was the happiest and most meaningful period of my life', he would often say.

THE THREE HEROES OF PUDONG

While at work in the salt factory, he established friendly relations with the staff of the Zhongfu Bank in Shanghai, which was a sister corporation of the bank in Tianjin. He often visited his friends at the bank. One day he was told that, at the office of the Europe-Asia Airlines Company, only one floor up, there was a man who played the guqin extremely well. Naturally, Zhang Ziqian excitedly went upstairs to visit him, and the two men immediately established a good relationship. Already at their first meeting, they felt like old friends. Eventually, they exchanged all they knew and thought about the art of the guqin, and, in circles of guqin players, were very soon the subject of many conversations. Zhang's new friend was the renowned guqin scholar and performer Zha Fuxi 查阜西. Subsequently, at Zha's place, Zhang Ziqian met yet another guqin player, Peng Zhiqing 彭祉卿 from Luling in Jiangxi Province. Peng was eight years older than Zhang and had inherited his knowledge of the qin and his performing skills from his family when he was very young. Later, he studied the instrument with the founder of the Jiuyi School 九嶷琴派, Yang Zongji 杨宗稷.

Peng Zhiqing's guqin playing was superb, and his scholarly knowledge of the instrument profound. The same was true of Zha Fuxi, and both men exerted a deep influence on Zhang Ziqian. Eventually, Zhang invited his two friends to come and live at his new home in Pudong. In the evenings, at dusk, all three of them would sit in Zhang Ziqian's quiet little room to play and discuss guqin music, learning a lot from each other. In circles of qin players, the three were soon provided with a suitable epithet: 'the three heroes of Pudong' 浦东三杰. In praise of their performing skills, they were often also called by the name of their most favourite, most characteristic qin piece. Thus, Zha Fuxi earned the name of 'Zha Xiao Xiang', because he was very good at playing *Xiao Xiang shui yun* 潇湘水云, 'Clouds and Waters of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers'. Likewise, Peng Zhiqing was nicknamed 'Peng Yuge', because he was very good at playing *Yuge* 渔歌, 'Fisherman's Song', and Zhang Ziqian was called 'Zhang Longxiang', after the piece *Long xiang cao* 龙翔操, 'Flying Dragon Song'.

AN ASSEMBLY

In the mid-1930s, Shanghai was a very important centre of trade and industry, indeed one of the very few truly cosmopolitan cities of the Far East, with good transport and communication systems. People from all provinces settled in the city to earn a living. It was also a centre where guqin players from all over China assembled to exchange information and to perform for each other. Some of them were quite famous, such as



Another great guqin master, Wu Jinglüe.

Xu Lisun 徐立荪, from Nantong, of the Mei'an School 梅庵琴派, and Wu Jinglüe 吴景略, from Changshu, of the Yushan School 虞山琴派, furthermore Li Zizhao 李子昭, Zhou Guanjiu 周冠九, Guo Tongpu 郭同埔, Wu Lansun 吴兰荪, etc. In 1936, seven guqin performers decided to establish the 'Jin Yu Qin Society' 今虞琴社. The total number of its members, in the beginning, was 28. From the very day of its founding, this society contributed enormously to the promotion and further development of the art of the guqin in China. Most importantly, the members of the society abandoned their tradition of playing their instruments solely behind closed doors - they brought the guqin out in the open, gave public performances on the stage and in radio broadcasts and also publicized the music via articles in newspapers and magazines. Playing in public, they popularized a repertoire of nearly one hundred qin pieces which they had learned orally from their teachers, and they brought back to life another forty which, for a long time, had existed only in written form.

Moreover, Zha Fuxi and Zhang Ziqian made great efforts to dig up ancient scores of qin songs - classical poems sung to guqin pieces - and had them performed again. These songs are, in

Zhang Ziqian (front row, second from left) with other members of the Jin Yu Qin Society.





Zhang Ziqian (left) with Zha Fuxi and Shen Caonong, in the late 1950s.

fact, older than the purely instrumental pieces. Zhang Ziqian transcribed such songs as *Li yun chun si* 梨云春思, *Su Wu si jun* 苏武思军 and *Hu jia shiba pai* 胡笳十八拍, which can still be heard on the stage today.

The 'Jin Yu Qin Society' provided a great stimulus to qin players from all over the country, and made the art of the guqin flourish as never before. During its brief, one year existence, the society had an enormous impact on the guqin tradition in China.

THE LAST PICTURE

In 1937, the Sino-Japanese war broke out. In the same year, the society published the *Jin yu qin kan* 今虞琴刊, a book full of information about qin music and its performers. It was originally intended as a periodical, but the war interrupted all the activities of the society and prevented the editors from publishing subsequent volumes. Nevertheless, this one issue, published in Shanghai, was a monumental work, a reference book of historic significance. It included a complete account of all activities of the society, various scholarly contributions on the qin, introductory articles about ancient and contemporary qin masters, information on the whereabouts and present conditions of guqins, and a survey of the society's donors and members.

The book ran to 300,000 words - more than 500 pages. Its publication was made possible by the great efforts of Zhang Ziqian, who ran around for ten months collecting materials and stimulating people to finish their contributions. Characteristically, he never claimed any merits with respect to this whole project.

One day, when I was twelve or thirteen years old, I was leafing through this book and my eye fell on a page with small portrait photos of guqin masters. Only after some careful scrutiny did I discover the face of Zhang Ziqian, on the very last picture of the very last row. When I asked him why he was in the last picture of the whole page, he laughed. The lay-out was his own, and he had deliberately put himself at the bottom. This may serve as an example of the kind of modesty which characterized him throughout his life.

In 1944, the salt factory in Pudong was badly damaged during a bombardment, and Zhang Ziqian was transferred to a silk factory in the city of Shanghai, of which he became a director. In that period, he earned enough wages to support his entire family.

THE FIRST QIN PROFESSIONAL

After 1949, the silk factory was partly taken over by the state. Zhang Ziqian was recognized for his achievements in the field of guqin music, which led to his subsequent appointment as a member of the *Shanghai minzu yuetuan* 上海民族乐团 (Shanghai National Music Ensemble) in 1956. This was an association of professional musicians who performed either solo or in ensembles, in various settings. In this way, Zhang Ziqian was able to make a living as a qin player. He would often boast: 'I was the first guqin professional of China.' Together with



'The first guqin professional of China' - member of the Shanghai minzu yuetuan.

Together with other members of the group, he toured through the country on many occasions. His guqin performances were recorded and broadcast on radio and television and he gradually established his position - first in circles of traditional music performers, later all over the country - as one of the foremost guqin masters of his time. Needless to say, his example had a great impact on other qin players.

In the 1960s, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music appointed Zhang Ziqian as a teacher of guqin and a special research Fellow, and in 1961, together with Zha Fuxi and Shen Caonong 沈草农, he wrote 'A Preliminary Introduction to the Guqin', which was published by the Music Publishing House. Today, this is still the only book in mainland China which offers a broad introduction to the instrument, intended for a general readership. Throughout the years, Zhang Ziqian also published many important articles, such as 'The Evolution and Characteristics of the Guangling Qin School' « 广陵琴派的沿革和特点 » (In *Jinyu qin kan*, Shanghai, 1937), and essays on his understanding of the qin piece *Meihua san nong* 梅花三弄, and on the history and future of Guangling qin scholarship. Eventually, he interpreted and performed more than twenty guqin pieces which, for a considerable time, had only existed in written notation. His musical renderings were generally acclaimed as great scholarly achievements. They showed his individual talent in bringing ancient guqin scores back to life and they revealed a profound affinity for the instrument.

SILENTLY PLAYING THE QIN IN HIS MIND

From August 1938 up to the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Ziqian kept a meticulous record of almost thirty years of his active involvement in the traditions and performance of the qin. In his diary, entitled *Cao man suo ji* 操缦琐记, he wrote down everything he learned about the qin and what he gained from playing this instrument. All together, the diary consists of nine or ten volumes. Unfortunately, when his house was ransacked during the Cultural Revolution, one volume was lost. The remaining volumes are now kept by his children.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Zhang Ziqian, like many other guqin players, was branded a class enemy - literally a 'cow's ghost' or 'snake spirit'. He was captured by Red Guards and denounced at public meetings. His wages were cut down to a bare minimum. He had to live through many of these difficulties alone; his wife had died from illness in 1957, and his children were criticized and suffered assaults in other parts of the country.

Soon, Zhang Ziqian was no longer able to pay his rent and had to move from his flat to a communal, single-storey house. For a man of nearly seventy years old, it was a trying experience. During the day he often had to attend 'criticism meetings'. Moreover, groups of children would regularly come up to his window to swear at him and throw dirt in his room. In the evenings, he sat under his lamp and silently played the qin in his mind, softly humming the tunes.

It was in this period that I came to know uncle Zhang, because my mother often took me with her when she went to visit him and brought him some food.

MUSIC FOR PEANUTS

I was six or seven years old at that time. I still remember one particular evening in his home, when his youngest daughter had come to see him, bringing her own two little girls. I and my cousin of the same age were teasing the other girl, who was just trying to learn to walk. When Zhang Ziqian looked at us, he laughed. It was the first time since all the trouble had started that he was able to laugh. I immediately felt a great respect for this kind, old man.

In 1972, he moved to the house next to that of my parents. In that time he was already allowed to play the qin again - the instrument had not been lost, fortunately. In the autumn of that year, I officially started to study the guqin with him.

Zhang Ziqian taught in the traditional fashion, i.e. with two qins opposite each other, teacher and pupil facing each other, and then we proceeded in a simple way - he would sing and play a line and then ask me to repeat it, and so on.

In the beginning, learning to read those extremely complicated pieces was a forbidding experience for me, since I was a child of only nine years old. I remember saying to my teacher: 'I learn too slowly. I do not want to go on.' But Zhang Ziqian encouraged me to continue. In fact, he gave me little rewards in the form of peanuts if I had done well. After some time, whenever I managed to play a line from a qin score, I would ask him for peanuts myself. Then he would count them one by one, with a serious face, and say: 'You cannot have any more, first you have to play better.' Occasionally, when I had eaten all the peanuts, both of us would burst out laughing. He was a very kind-hearted and sincere old man.

ZHANG ZIQIAN AS TEACHER & PERFORMER

In the course of the years, he passed on to me the knowledge of the Guangling qin school. He always made very heavy demands on me, with respect to my musical education. Actually, his later qin students did not experience him in quite this way.

Above all, he emphasized that my playing had to be *zheng* 正 (correct), *song* 松 (relaxed) and *yuan* 圓 (round). *Zheng* means that the fingering had to be in accordance with the standards of the performance tradition: the pink should not be bent but rather held in a straight, slightly upward position, like the beak of a bird. *Song* means that both hands should be relaxed, not strained. *Yuan* means that the fingers of the right hand, while plucking the strings, should slant slightly sideways, resulting in a circular movement of the hand if several strings are plucked in succession.

Furthermore, he taught me that players of the Guangling School often plucked the strings near the fourth or fifth *hui* 徽 (pitch sign). I noticed that my master adopted this method, but went even further by sometimes plucking the strings up to the position of



'My fingering had to be *zheng* (correct), *song* (relaxed) and *yuan* (round).'

the sixth *hui*. In this way he expanded the potential range of tone colours on the instrument, and I believe he did it in a very effective way. For example, there is a short motif in the piece *Pingsha luo yan* 平沙落雁 ('Wild Geese Descending on the Sandbank') which goes as follows:



When Zhang Ziqian played this, he plucked the first D at the position of the third *hui* and the subsequent D at the position of the sixth *hui*. Thus, the same note on the same string was produced in two different tone colours and with different dynamics. Changing finger positions to achieve such an effect is a very delicate technique, typical of Guangling-style interpretations of guqin pieces. It may also help to show that, while Zhang Ziqian's playing was firmly rooted in tradition, he nevertheless developed his own ideas about how to play and re-create guqin music. He would often say: 'First, you must have the idea of the music in your heart; then, after that, you will be able to bring it out in actual performance.'

THE PROCESS OF 'DAPU'

People who listened to Zhang's playing were easily enchanted and carried away by it. He made them feel relaxed and happy. His great artistic talent was particularly evident in his skilful re-interpretations of ancient qin scores. These scores are actually tablatures, with elaborate instructions for fingering and pitch positions, but only occasional and very limited indications of the rhythm, resulting in a great potential freedom of musical interpretation. The notation system used in these scores is called *jianzipu* 减字谱. Every guqin player will perform a qin tablature according to his own, personal understanding of the piece. This process of bringing to life a written piece of guqin music is called *dapu* 打谱, 'translating' or - literally - 'beating' scores.



Together again: Zhang Ziqian (2nd from right), Wu Jinglüe (right), and two other qin friends, Shen Zhongzhang and Fan Boyan, November 1985, at the author's home in Shanghai.

Whenever Zhang Ziqian 'translated' guqin pieces in this way, he handled the rhythm of the music entirely in accordance with their underlying stories. Thus, his interpretations were rhythmically and emotionally just as varied as the myths and legends that formed the basis of the music. Sometimes, he would even neglect rhythmic indications in a score and adjust the rhythm according to his own feeling in order to bring out still better the story on which the music was based. Let me give one example of this. The piece *Chu Ge* 楚歌 ('Song of Chu') describes the agonies of a senior warrior, general Xiang Yu 項羽, who is deeply ashamed of having lost a battle and decides to commit suicide. He cuts his throat, after having taken leave of his favourite concubine. The music captures the rapid swings of his mood - from triumph and passion to shame and utter despair. In the musical score, the sixth part of *Chu Ge* consists of various phrases separated by rests, but Zhang Ziqian, in his own performances, disregarded some of the rest signs and tended to play the whole section in one breath, thus bringing out the agony of the old general even more convincingly. In Zhang's interpretation, both the music and the story are beautifully expressed.

SINGING THE STRINGS

During all those years in which he taught students to play the guqin, Zhang Ziqian constantly advocated the importance of open-mindedness. He urged his pupils to keep their ears open and always try to learn from other musicians. They need not always adhere to one and the same style, as Zhang himself did not do either. In the 1930s, he asked Zha Fuxi, who was four years older than he was, to teach him to play *Xiao xiang shui yun*, and similarly, he asked Peng Ziqing to teach him a piece which Peng had inherited from his family, *Yi guren* 忆故人 ('Remembering Old Friends'). After some time, he was able to play these pieces. One day, a qin master of the Mei'an School, Xu Lisun 徐立荪, who had heard him play, said rather unpolitely: 'Your fingering is not very solid; the tones do not sound balanced.' First, Zhang Ziqian was deeply shocked, but then he decided to write these lines on a scroll, in the form of an

antithetical couplet, and hang them in his room as a continuous reminder to himself to improve his playing.

As part of his teaching, Zhang Ziqian always urged his students to apply the method of *chang xuan* 唱弦, 'singing the strings', while learning a new piece. It meant that the music was memorized by singing to its melody the words which indicated the fingering of the piece. In his opinion, this method had several advantages. First of all, singing would enable a player to grasp the inner meaning of a piece even before it was produced on the instrument. Secondly, singing it in this way was very helpful in committing the fingering of a new piece to memory.

I already mentioned the fact that, during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Ziqian had no guqin to play on. However, thanks to his method of 'singing the strings', he remembered the pieces and was later able to play them again. Actually, this specific method is only used by players of the Guangling School.



Zhang Ziqian in Tianjin, April 1990.

THE FINAL YEARS

In the 1980s, Zhang Ziqian, who was now more than eighty years old, was still a very energetic and lively man full of new plans and ideas in the field of guqin music. He still had many students. He always felt it was an important task to pass on his knowledge and artistic skills to younger people, and he continued to do so in old age, dedicating his remaining years entirely to the cause of the qin.

At his instigation, the Jin Yu Qin Society, which had ceased to exist more than forty years earlier, was refounded and took up its activities again. Zhang Ziqian became its director and took charge of all the activities of the society. Personally, he participated in more than twenty performances, and received many important guests from China and abroad. Students and scholars of guqin music came from France, Italy, America, Japan, Singapore and Switzerland to ask for his advice and pay him their respects, and Zhang Ziqian sincerely tried to help them all. He said to me, cheerfully: 'The guqin is already winning international recognition!' At the age of 86, he made a recording¹, which was a musical summary of what he had achieved during his life. His art had reached the highest degree of technical perfection, and his character was pure and selfless.

¹ A music cassette, *Long xiang cao* issued by Shanghai yinxiang chubanshe, 1985. Later, a pirate copy was published in Hong Kong: 'Guangling Qin Music Volume I' on the label Hugo, HRP 701-4. Parts of this recording were re-issued on a CD, 'Guangling Qin Music Series', Hugo Records, HRP 718-2 (1988), which also contained pieces performed by Dai Xiaolian and another player of the Guangling school, Chen Gongliang.

In May 1988, Zhang Ziqian left Shanghai. He had spent almost his entire life in this city, and left many students and friends behind, as well as the Jin Yu Qin Society in which he had invested so much energy. He went to Tianjin, to spend his last years peacefully in the home of his son. Now, he could happily and quietly complete his 91 springs and autumns, with a free mind and an optimistic view with regard to the musical future. During his lifetime he never sought fame or wealth. He passed away exactly in the same way as he had lived - quietly, and with peace in his heart. In my memory he is a saint-like figure. What is left of him is the sound of the qin, which will never disappear.

Ninth uncle, all your life you were fond of fresh, bright-coloured flowers. In Holland², the country that is called the 'land of flowers', I will pick the brightest flowers to present to you, my dear great-uncle, teacher and friend.

Translated by A. Schimmelpenninck, edited by F. Kouwenhoven.

² The Chinese name for Holland is *Helan*, which literally means 'Lotus-Orchid'. Dai Xiaolian is currently in Holland on the invitation of the CHIME Foundation, to give concerts and lectures and to study the collection of guqin scores of the late Professor Robert van Gulik, some of whose transcriptions are now kept at the Leiden Sinology Institute.