

1 Prologue

One of the most exquisite musical instruments is the five-string lute known as the Raden Shitan no Gogen Biwa 螺鈿紫檀五絃琵琶 (“mother-of-pearl inlay red sandalwood five-string lute”; hereafter the Gogen Biwa), today in the Shōsōin collection in Nara, Japan (Figure 1). The instrument, the only extant example of its type from premodern Eurasia, was apparently received by Emperor Shōmu before his death in 756, upon which it was placed in the collection at Shōsōin, a specially constructed storehouse in the Tōdai-ji temple complex in the then-capital Nara. The 9,000 or so items in the collection, including several other musical instruments, are not accessible except by the personal permission of the emperor, though certain items are put on display every year to great historical interest.

Given its status as regalia within the world’s longest continuous imperial line, one might expect that these sacred objects were of ancient Japanese provenance. Indeed, during the apogee of Imperial Japan, the Japanese provenance of many of the finest items in the Shōsōin was the standard view (Watson 1979: 167). Yet, the image inlaid on the front of the Gogen Biwa betrays a larger story, one that places this musical object at the crossroads of Eurasian cultural encounters. The musician playing a four-string lute astride a Bactrian camel is a motif fairly typical of the art from the Tang Empire, in particular the so-called “three-color” (*sancai* 三彩) lead-glazed burial ceramics.¹

Japan’s closest international relationship in the eighth century was with the Tang Empire, and there is reason to suspect that the Gogen Biwa was manufactured there and probably connected with the court music of Chang’an (modern Xi’an), the Tang capital. As Naitō Sakae recently argued, the instrument may have been commissioned there and brought to Japan sometime before 735 by Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備 (695–775), a ranking member of the Japanese embassy sent to the Tang court in 716. It would likely have been presented to Emperor Shōmu during the festivities that marked the return of the embassy and featured performances of Tang and Silla (Korean) music (cited in Hu 2017: 186).

This was not the sole Japanese musical encounter with the Tang. Several other of the numerous Japanese missions to the Tang court during the seventh and eighth centuries were known to have focused on cultural aspects, including music and dance (Picken & Nickson 1997: 2). Instruments and performance practices were passed to Japan from these missions, where they were known as “Tang music” (*Tōgaku* 唐樂) repertoire. *Tōgaku* combined with indigenous and other exogenous musical traditions (for instance, that of the aforementioned

¹ For example, <https://sogdians.si.edu/camel-with-musicians/>.

(a)



(b)

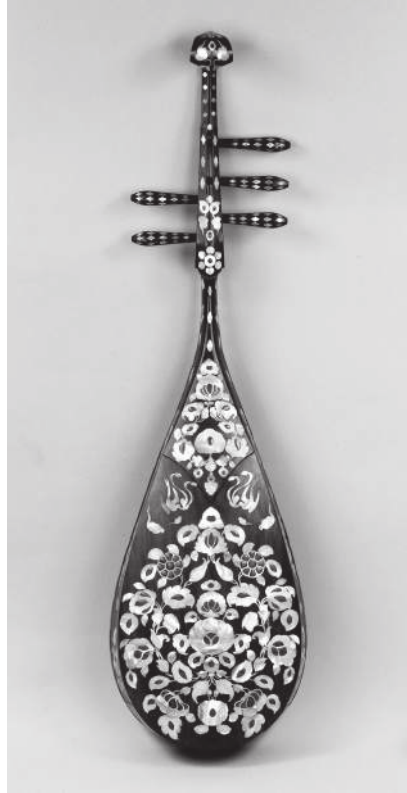


Figure 1 Five-stringed lute (*wuxian pipa/biwa*) with mother-of-pearl inlay. Meiji era, nineteenth century. Copied from the original Gogen Biwa of the Nara period, eighth century, in the Shōsōin Repository, Nara. Tokyo National Museum H-1090. Source: ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan (https://colbase.nich.go.jp/col/lection_items/tnm/H-1090?locale=en).

Silla) to form the musical style known as *gagaku*, a Japanese rendering of the Chinese term *yayue* 雅樂, meaning “elegant music.” *Gagaku* survives as a living tradition in Japan, still performed by a hereditary group of musicians in ensembles that include instruments recognizably descended from court ensembles in Chang’an. There is even a connection in notation: a very early score for four-string lute preserved in the Shōsōin collection matches quite closely the tablature system used in three manuscripts preserved in a cave in Dunhuang, a site over 1,500 km west of Chang’an that served as an important node in the musical and artistic Eurasian network.

These and many other objects in the Shōsōin reflect Japan's position as the eastern terminus of what is usually called the Silk Road. "Silk Road" (*Seidenstrasse*), a term commonly attributed to Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833–1905), was used by German orientalists in the nineteenth century to describe what they imagined primarily as a link between Rome and China (Mertens 2019). Its namesake commodity was already popular in Rome at the time of Julius Caesar, and the word "silk" itself might very well be one of few words borrowed from Chinese into an Indo-European language (Wang 1993). However, we now know the Silk Road was never a single road but a network of land trade routes with numerous intersecting branches; very few people traveled along its entire length, with trade instead taking place on short-distance segments, and there were many branches whose main commonality was avoiding impassable mountains and deserts. While silk and other East Asian goods were also frequently exported by sea, overland back-and-forth trade facilitated the accretion of items from the numerous other cultures the Silk Roads passed through. While merchants were motivated by profits, religious adherents to Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam also consciously used the same networks for the spreading of their faiths. As the cultural, economic, and technological arteries that linked empires, kingdoms, and trade communities over many centuries – including those of the Chinese, Sogdians, Sassanians, Byzantines, Mongols, Turks, and Genovese among many, many others – the Eurasian networks facilitated interactions among people from diverse cultures and promoted an unprecedented sharing of commodities, ideas, arts, sciences, belief systems, and innovations.

This interaction of people from diverse cultures also enabled musical contacts in ways that were as varied as they were complex. Together with silk, borax, yak tails, peacock feathers, jasmine, saffron, and lapis lazuli, musical instruments had been moving across the caravan trails of Eurasia since very early times. We know, for example, that ensembles characteristic of various locales outside Chinese cultural spheres – Central Asia, the Tarim Basin, Korea, etc. – introduced different "exotic" musical flavors to imperial festivities at the Chinese court from as early as the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) to as late as the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Musicians and their instruments were willingly or forcibly moved around and sometimes settled in far-off lands, often at the invitation or command of an eager new patron or in the aftermath of war and conquest. After the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258, for example, the last 'Abbasid caliph's famous music theorist and master musician-singer Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī (1216–94) so impressed Hülegü Khan (r. 1256–65) with his art, skill, and erudition that he found gainful employment at the Mongol court. And in the fourteenth century, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta reported that during

his sojourn in al-Kansa (Hangzhou), he attended a banquet hosted by the Yuan city administrator at which “[t]he amir’s son sailed in another [ship] with musicians and singers who sang in Chinese, Arabic and Persian,” over the course of a program including a song with a wonderful tune on a text by the Persian poet Saadi Shirazi (1210–91/92) (Ibn Battuta 1994: 903). Many other such documented instances of cultural intersections reveal the folly of exclusively studying premodern Eurasian musical cultures from the perspective of contacts between static and bounded regional cultures.

Cosmopolitan musical practices and instruments were by no means unique to the powerful capitals of Tang Chang’an, Yuan Hangzhou, ‘Abbasid Baghdad, or Timurid Herat. In the aftermath of frequent cultural encounters in the Eurasian expanses, it sometimes happened that musical objects originally characteristic to a specific area were adopted by various other groups, each of which may have altered not only the associated social and performative practices but also the meanings and music traditions proper with which these instruments were associated elsewhere. In other cases, musical instruments and practices remained strongly, though seldom exclusively, associated with the organological world of a particular ethnolinguistic group, and their historical patterns of circulation mapped onto the movements, expansions, and contractions of that group across large swaths of Eurasian lands.

Musical instruments, their surrounding practices, and their Eurasian stories are at the heart of this Element. The mechanisms that favored their individual Eurasian journeys, and their adoption, adaptation, or rejection by various cultures, are as diverse as they are intricate. They were, in part at least, contingent upon the intensity of the initial cultural encounter and the power relations between the two participating cultural realms, as well as the systems of patronage and intracultural social dynamics and aesthetics involved. It is important to note that musical instruments, as material objects, circulated along Eurasian trade routes and beyond more easily than wholesale music repertoires or dances since, as a rule, instruments are easily reproducible and thus culturally more adaptable. Portability and intrinsic physical features such as frets and tone holes, for example, reflect and transmit fundamental music conceptions of intonation, pitch, and scale, yet these are often the artefactual characteristics most readily modified, adapted, or removed to suit local practices. As ethnomusicologists have long acknowledged, however, beyond their physicality musical instruments “are embedded within the systems of thought that organize and give coherence to a particular world view” (Becker 1988: 385). To the informed and receptive listener, as Megan Rancier reminds us, “the musical instrument functions simultaneously as a reminder of where the instrument came from, the people who have played it, contexts in which it has been played,

and emotional associations with the instrument and its contexts” (Rancier 2014: 381). However, among members of its new adoptive community, any musical instrument may ultimately retain or lose parts or even all of the superstructural complex of meanings, values, and associations it once evoked. This intersection of materiality, morphology, and cultural meaning creates the fascinating stories of each musical instrument in the Eurasian world.

Information pertaining to music-related objects or practices and their trans-cultural journeys comes from diverse sources, and its interpretation requires approaches informed by methodologies from a wide array of scholarly fields: archaeology, historical linguistics, textual and visual studies, anthropology, and ethnomusicology, among others. For example, from visual representations in manuscripts, murals, and carvings, one can carefully determine aspects of the morphology of musical instruments, details regarding ensembles, particulars of dance movements and choreographies, as well as performance contexts and even cultural meanings. Texts of a wide variety of types, including religious and literary writings, travel literature, and diplomatic documents, offer a different type of information, in which the names of instruments or musical practices may be given; the aural world that they engender may be described and, at times, judged; and comparative aesthetic hierarchies may be established. Insofar as musical objects are concerned, actual instruments from the premodern era – such as the Gogen Biwa in the Shōsōin – have survived only in rare and remarkable cases. Most have been found by archaeologists – often in fragmentary state – in burials, thereby attesting to their status in their respective cultures, and thus to the fact that they had been sufficiently valued to be interred in the company of corpses, weapons, and treasure hoards.

The extant evidence – be that iconographic, textual and linguistic, or archaeological – is unevenly distributed across the vastness of Eurasia and disproportionately favors one or another culture in different ways. This can be due to the vicissitudes of history and geography (e.g. wars, destruction in the aftermath of conquest, desertification, melting of the permafrost, levels of ground humidity, etc.), to the kind of materials used for the construction of the instrument or of the media of their visualization or description (e.g. types of wood, paper, ceramic, metal, birch bark, etc.), or to systems of patronage or sociocultural habits that varyingly privileged the visual, textual, oral, or aural. These stories, then, are never complete and final, and new evidence of an unexpected nature may lurk around the corner that provides new complexity and enriches our understanding. But they are not unrecoverable.

In an attempt to make sense of the bewildering diversity of issues that characterize the study of music in premodern Eurasia, this Element offers five stories that sketch historical and geographical trajectories of music-related

objects, practices, or sound-making devices, as articulated in the aftermath of music-cultural encounters and associated entanglements. On the one hand, our stories start from the premise that the spread of musical instruments and practices in early Eurasia took place both through “long-distance” transmission and as a result of networking “contact expansion” (Zürcher 1990: 158–82). On the other hand, they build to a large extent upon the work of scholars such as La Vaissière (2005) and Whitfield (2019), who sought to shift the conversation away from the east–west axis of transmission and interaction, and to highlight the presence of interregional hubs where north–south encounters played at least as important a role.

The stories featured here range from the geographically diverse performing groups and the most famous “foreign” dances during the Tang era, to the elusive musical world of Kucha in the Tarim Basin – a veritable nexus in the network of trans-Eurasian musical commerce. They also recount the fragmentary history of a single instrument linked to the movement of the Turkic peoples across Eurasia, and the circulation of a technological trope – the sound-making automata including the organ – on both east–west and north–south axes. Ultimately, they are but five compelling tales among the many others that await their telling.

2 The Cosmopolitan Chang’an

2.1 Introduction

In the eighth century, Chang’an was among the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. It housed tens of thousands of foreign residents hailing from virtually every country in Asia. No doubt the convergence of the musical practices of all these communities yielded a lively and diverse urban soundscape, but more remarkable than the exotic sounds these foreign residents provided was the already cosmopolitan musical mix celebrated at the center of power, the imperial court.

The scale of the human forces involved in the court music and dance ensembles of the Tang was astonishing. At its peak under Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56), the total is said to have run to some 30,000 musicians and dancers in various capacities (Schafer 1963: 52). The forces even extended to the non-human: Xuanzong was partial to trained horses, and kept hundreds that were trained to dance (Thilo 2006: 501). In part these numbers were due to the large number of divisions within the musical bureaucracy, each of which maintained separate membership. There were four court institutions, the Grand Music Bureau (*Dayue shu* 大樂署), the Drum and Wind Music Bureau (*Guchui shu* 鼓吹署), the Entertainment Bureau (*Jiaofang* 教坊), and the Pear Garden

(*Liyuan* 梨園). Within each of these were multiple subgroups with different functions, each of which could perform independently.

The kind of performance most associated with the Tang is the spectacles known as *yanyue* 燕樂, literally “banquet music.” The name derived from its typical performance occasion as entertainment during a banquet. The term *yanyue* is not to be confused with the more formal *yayue* (“elegant music”). The latter term designated the more refined and prestigious forms of ceremonial music that were extolled in the Chinese classics in the first millennium BCE. *Yanyue* was also an ancient term and practice, but it had always been overshadowed by *yayue* in the discourse. However, by the Tang, though *yayue* continued to serve the important legitimizing function as part of the state sacrifices, it drew much less attention than the courtly entertainment music. Some of the foreigners may have even misunderstood the distinction between the two; for instance, the Japanese applied the term *yayue* (using kanji which they pronounced *gagaku*) for musical practices that clearly derived from *yanyue*. Indeed, foreign emissaries were far more likely to be shown the splendor of the entertainment music, which would flaunt the court’s enviable resources, than the power of the ritual music, which could potentially be harnessed against them (Picken 1985b: 8 and 1987: 46).

However, it is important to note that these distinctions were never as clear as the typology suggests. *Yayue* had traditionally been opposed to *suyue* 俗樂 (“popular music”), which represented popular songs useful for entertainment but not for ritual, and *huyue* 胡樂 (“barbarian music”), which was for outsiders. But by the mid-Tang, this three-way distinction no longer clearly applied. Popular music increasingly drew upon foreign elements, and developed into what was called “new popular music” (*xin suyue* 新俗樂), which served as banquet music. But this new banquet music also served important ritual functions that came to mimic the state sacrifices in various ways, and was even designated as “new elegant music” (*xin yayue* 新雅樂) (Gimm 1966: 135).

However, despite the conspicuous presence of foreign elements, there were ways in which the cosmopolitanism of Tang musical performances was not a wholesale adoption of foreign cultural ideas, but rather a superficial veneer that reinforced a number of longstanding aspects of Chinese music ideology. First, the domain of music should not be understood as limited to the sound of vocal and instrumental music, but was much larger, including at least costume and dance, and at times what we might categorize as even less musical forms like acrobatics. The *Record of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記, c. 300 BCE) treats music as part of a continuum of increasing expressiveness of interior states: “Poetry expresses intention, song extends the sounds, and dance moves the countenance; these three are based in the heart” (詩言其志也, 歌詠其聲也, 舞動其容也, 三者本於心)

(c. 19.33²). Elsewhere it clarifies that the addition of feathers and axes (implying dance props and costumes) yields the most fully realized and cultured form of music, that which separates “music” (*yue* 樂) from mere “tones” (*yin* 音) (Cook 1995: 19–22, 25–27). These visual elements were also essential to the Sui and Tang cosmopolitan forms, which were used as grandiose entertainment.

Second, music was bureaucratized, with musical agents distributed into various departments with different functions. This is a musical version of the vision of government in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhou Li* 周禮, c. third century BCE), which purports to describe the governing institutions of the Western Zhou period (c. 1045–771 BCE), a period revered as a golden age by Confucius and his followers. Among the institutions whose members and duties are enumerated in the *Rites of Zhou* are several kinds of music directors, musicians, and craftspeople. As noted, official music functions in the Tang were divided into four separate divisions, but within each of these were suborganizations with a fully bureaucratic structure, all in a scheme of vastly larger proportions than its classical predecessors.

Third, music was typically organized using geographic designations in ways that emulate the pattern set by the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經, eleventh to seventh centuries BCE). The largest section of the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Airs of the States* (*Guofeng* 國風), is arranged into fifteen sections named after various states within the ancient Chinese ecumene, each of which includes a dozen or so songs that allegedly originated there. The musical content of the songs has been lost, so later scholars often treat them as poems, but we know from accounts elsewhere in the classics that they were sung. Indeed, the *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳, c. 400 BCE) gives an account of a concert of the *Airs of the States* given to an emissary during an official visit in 543 BCE (DeWoskin 1982: 21–25). This geographical classification of musical materials and its use in diplomacy has echoes in Tang approaches to music.

Finally, in ancient times, sung poetry was recognized as a particularly potent way of expressing oneself, as noted in the passage from the *Record of Music* that included the crystalized phrase *shi yan zhi* (詩言志), meaning “poetry expresses intention.” This phrase is even older; its *locus classicus* is in a passage discussing the duties of the Director of Music in the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu* 書經). From this ideology, it follows that the authentic folk songs of an area could encode something about the state of the society there, thus music collections could be considered a political tool for conceptualizing and understanding the realm. The fate of societies could also be predicted from the nature of their music. When the music of Zheng 鄭 was played to the emissary in the concert

² Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/liji/yue-ji#n10140>.

mentioned in the last paragraph, he predicted based on its extravagant music that it would be the first state to vanish; a century later it did succumb. The music of Zheng and another troubled state Wei 衛 became a metaphor for dangerous music that showed symptoms of social malaise. Though Zheng and Wei proper were located in the Chinese heartland, connecting them with the foreign and thereby suspect was a longstanding trope. Moralists who remembered these lessons looked at faddish music in court with a suspicious eye, worried for what troubles it might foretell.

These four assumptions about the nature of music, that music performance extended beyond sound to spectacle, that it could be bureaucratized, that it could be geographically defined, and that it was politically significant, constituted the frame through which educated Chinese understood music. As they came to encounter music from non-Chinese peoples, it was understood in these terms. During the golden age of Chinese musical cosmopolitanism in Chang'an, foreign musics were everywhere but understood in local terms.

2.2 Bureaucratizing Cosmopolitanism

Following the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, the Chinese cultural realm entered a prolonged period of disunity that lasted nearly four centuries. When the founder of the Sui dynasty, Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 581–605), was able to once again consolidate the states, he knew that military conquest alone would not achieve a lasting polity, and thus sought to draw on the legitimizing function of music. During his reign, a series of musical debates took place that involved thirty-seven musicians and theorists from around the realm, including representatives from each of four conquered states: Northern Qi 北齊 (550–77) and Northern Zhou 北周 (557–81) in the north and Liang 梁 (502–87) and Chen 陳 (557–89) in the south (Wang & Sun 2004: 59). The northern territories had been under frequent non-Chinese rule, as Tuoba 拓拔, Tibetan, Xiongnu 匈奴, and Xianbei 鮮卑 tribes fought over the numerous ephemeral states. In the south the regimes had been more stable, but there were many musicians who had fled warring regions or sought opportunities in the southern courts. The participants of the conference thus represented generations of hereditary and master–disciple traditions that had migrated following the vagaries of patronage during rather chaotic centuries (Wang & Sun 2004: 60).

In this way, the Sui emperor attempted to unify musics that represented several distinct traditions. Many of these, particularly in the south, drew upon traditions that continued practices from the Han dynasty and earlier. But others, particularly in the north, brought in practices originating from other communities, often with ties to Central Asia. Moreover, music was often expanded with

conquest or hegemonic statecraft; it was “obtained” (*de* 得) as tribute or booty, a terminology that denotes not just the possession of intangible music (which was regarded as real property), but the very tangible instruments, costumes, and performers themselves (Schafer 1963: 51), who entered a status of servitude from which few could leave (Kishibe 1960: 20).

In order to consolidate the disparate musics, the Sui emperor established a musical bureaucracy that divided the banquet music performers into separate units. Each performing division had its own separate personnel (instrumentalists, singers, and dancers), instruments, and costumes. Each group had seven to twenty-five musicians and two to five dancers, except for the larger Banquet Music group, which numbered thirty-one musicians and twenty dancers (Thilo 2006: 492). Initially Emperor Wen established this arrangement as the Seven Performing Divisions (*Qibu yue* 七部樂). The subsequent emperor Yang 煬帝 (r. 604–18) made some modifications and added a few additional divisions, yielding nine; after the Tang conquest of the Sui in 618, this structure continued with minor modifications for a decade before a final overhaul brought the total number to ten. The names of the divisions used in each of these formulations are summarized in Table 1.

Note that each formulation of the system employed geographic names for all but two divisions. Since the number of divisions grew longer as the system was revised, a higher fraction of the performing divisions came to supposedly represent these exotic forms. Despite the foreignizing nomenclature, however, most of these kinds of music were not new to China, having been first attested in Chinese sources in the fourth or fifth century (Yang 1985: 26). Thus, by the time of the Sui, they had had centuries to become familiar and adapt to domestic musical paradigms. In addition to those in a formal group, there were also performers representing Baekje 百濟 and Silla 新羅 (the other two kingdoms in Korea at this time), Göktürks 突厥 (*Tujue*), and Japan (倭國 *Waguo*) (Courant 1913: 192, citing the *Book of Sui* [ctext 15.122³]).

According to the *Book of Sui* (*Suishu* 隋書, compiled in 636) and compendium *Tongdian* 通典 (“Comprehensive Institutions,” written 766–801), the Seven, Nine, or Ten Performing Divisions would perform together sequentially at large banquets. The resulting suite would go through each of the performing divisions in order. Most of these performances would consist of songs and dances (Sun 2012: 63–64). The serialized performance of the geography echoes the musical tour of the *Classic of Poetry* that seems to have been used diplomatically in the Warring States period.

³ Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=124338>.