

# CHINESE NATIONAL MUSIC

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## Wen Ti

The tune "The East Is Red" sent out by China's first man-made earth satellite launched in April 1970 was played on an ancient bell-chime unearthed in the fifties from a tomb in Honan province.

This musical instrument, used over 2,000 years ago, consists of a row of 13 bronze bells hung on a wooden frame and ranged according to pitch. It is played by striking the bells with a wooden hammer. The bell-chime is now preserved in the Palace Museum in Peking.

China has a tradition in music that goes back to ancient times. Ancient musical instruments and scripts inscribed on oracle tortoise shells and bones unearthed in the ruins of Yin dynasty in Honan province have provided evidence that 12 types of instruments existed over 3,000 years ago. The number increased to over 80 during the period from the 11th to the second century, B.C. In the years from 221 B.C. to 907 A.D., the "cheng" (a zither-like instrument), the "pi pa" (a four-stringed Chinese lute) and the "tao" (a hand drum with two swinging knobs used to beat it) were among the major folk instruments and such pieces as the "hsiao" (a vertical bamboo flute) and the "ti" (a bamboo flute blown transversely) were popular in national minority areas. During the same period a number of instruments were introduced from abroad and some of these improved upon.

Apart from large numbers of pieces of instrumental music, Chinese national music comprises innumerable folk songs and well over 300 varieties of local opera including those of the national minorities.

New China values its rich musical heritage and the government set up special teams to collect and collate ancient music that had fallen into oblivion. One piece that has been revived, is "Kuang Ling San", an ancient melody popular in southern China in the third century. Specially written to be played on the "ku chin" (a 7-stringed Chinese harp), it depicts a warrior who revenged his father during the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.). In the course of time, however, the score fell into the hands of a very few

connoisseurs and was consequently inaccessible to the average player. After Liberation in 1949, the people's government organized a group of veteran players to collect and refine "ku chin" scores. This led to the revival of the score of "Kuang Ling San".

Chinese artists have since Liberation re-discovered and refined over 2,000 musical pieces and dances after extensive travels in dozens of areas including Tibet, Sinkiang, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan, Kweichow, Fukien, Kwangtung and Kwangsi. One of the revived works is the "so na" solo "One Hundred Birds Pay Homage to the Phoenix", a popular piece frequently included in stage performances across the land. The "so na" is a simple Chinese clarinet, with which the player can imitate bird chirps. A competent player can now produce 14 or 15 kinds of bird calls incorporated into a bright, cheerful tune. In the past, "so na" players could render just six or seven kinds of bird calls.

A number of splendid works once favoured among the more than 50 minority nationalities have been rediscovered. The "Twelve Mucams" is twelve sets of popular folk tunes in Sinkiang that go back 600 years. Many of the tunes were lost before Liberation. Now part of the time-honoured work has been tape-recorded and published in book form following years of research by musicians. Studies on this musical legacy are still in progress.

Drawing on the tradition of national music, Chinese musicians have created many new works that have both a strong national flavour and a contemporary spirit. "Battling the Typhoon", a piece played on the "cheng", is considered one of the outstanding works of recent years. The melody conjures up visions of Chinese dockers braving a typhoon to save state property. The surging, powerful music sounding like the howls of a storm makes one feel as if he was at the side of a tempestuous sea. The vigorous rhythm presents a scene where the dockers are combating a fierce typhoon. Finally a cheerful, lilting melody expresses the workers' joy at riding out the typhoon.

The modern version of the ancient "cheng" is able to present contemporary themes with such complicated contents, now that it has a wider range and greater expressiveness. Meanwhile the playing technique has improved by drawing on some special skills in playing the 7-stringed lyre and the "pi pa". In particular, the fingers of the left hand are much more used than before while formerly their use was practically confined to producing harmonic vibrations.

Improvements have been made on all the 200-odd types of musical instruments now in use in China, which nevertheless retain their original characteristics.

Chinese folk music was so neglected before Liberation that the country had not a single professional orchestra using Chinese instruments. Now in Peking, there is a 200-member Central National Music Orchestra. In addition, the city has such an orchestra attached to the Central Broadcasting Administration and the Central Newsreels and Documentary Film Studio each. An organization devoted to research in national music has also been set up there. In Shanghai and Canton, a national music orchestra is in operation. All big cities, provinces and autonomous regions have national music groups. Many schools and academies of music have departments of national music which train large numbers of artists.

Amateur art groups in many Chinese factories, rural communes and schools regularly play national instrumental music, and their songs and dances are often performed to such music.