

Chinese musical instruments

Historically, musical instruments in China were categorised into eight groups according to the material from which they were made. These groups are known as the 'eight sounds' (*bayin* 八音) and are: metal (*jin* 金); stone (*shi* 石); silk (*si* 丝); bamboo (*zhu* 竹), gourd (*pao* 匏), clay (*tao* 陶), leather (*ge* 革) and wood (*mu* 木). The list below includes a selection of instruments; some of which were not invented when the 'eight sounds' system was devised but can be fitted into the categories.

Metal

Bronze bells were first produced in the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BC) and by the Zhou dynasty (c. 1050-221 BC) large sets of bells suspended on frames were used to perform ritual music. An example is the set of 65 ceremonial bells excavated from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zeng Hou Yi 曾侯乙) in Hubei Province in 1977. Each of the bells produces two notes and a complete scale of 12 notes to the octave is available. Sets of 12 bells, known as the *bianzhong* 编钟, remained an important part of the Confucian ritual ensemble up until the end of imperial China in 1911.

Stone

Another Confucian orchestra instrument is the *qing* 磬. The *bianqing* 编磬 is a set of stone chimes suspended on a frame. Each chime is tuned to the same 12 notes of the scale as bronze bells. The 'special chime' (*te qing* 特磬) is a single stone chime larger in size than those in the *bianqing*.

Silk

The *qin* 琴, also known as the *guqin* 古琴, is a seven-string unfretted, bridgeless 'zither'. It is the traditional instrument of the Chinese scholar. The *qin* is related to the *se* 瑟 and the *zheng* 箏 and similar instruments are found across East Asia. The *qin* is usually played as a solo instrument and sometimes in duet with the *dongxiao* 洞箫, a type of flute. During the Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) a whole culture of the *qin* developed and a series of criteria was created to judge the instrument.

The *pipa* 琵琶 is a lute that arrived in China along the trade routes known today as the 'Silk Roads'. The name *pipa* imitates the sound of the instrument as well as the up-and-down motion of the plectrum used to pluck the instrument. The *pipa* is used in ensemble, as a solo instrument and as an

A BRITISH MUSEUM TOUR

CHINA
JOURNEY TO THE EAST

Supported by BP



A CHINA NOW legacy project



THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM
Partnership UK

Also funded through the DCMS/DCFS
National/Regional Museum Partnerships
Education Programme 2008-09.

accompaniment to singing. Early examples, from the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907) survive in the Shōsōin, the treasure of the Tōdai-ji, Nara, in Japan. Early examples were played with a plectrum; the playing method still used in Japan where it is known as the *biwa*. Over the centuries, a finger-picking technique developed and this is the usual method used to play the instrument today.

Bamboo

There are two main types of flute used in China, the *dizi* 笛子, a transverse flute and the *dongxiao* 洞箫. The *dizi* has six finger holes with another hole close to the mouthpiece over which a piece of thin paper is placed giving a buzzing quality to the sound. The *dongxiao* is a type of 'notch-flute', played in a similar manner as the Japanese *shakuhachi* and the South American *quena*. It is often played as a solo instrument and in the classic duo combination with the *qin*.

Gourd

The *sheng* 笙 is a type of 'mouth organ'. It is shaped like a gourd, from which it was originally made although the body of the modern instrument is made from wood or metal. The *sheng* may date from the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BC) and one made from a gourd with wooden pipes was unearthed from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zeng Hou Yi 曾侯乙), dated to c. 433 BC.

Pottery

Two types of musical instrument belong to the pottery category the *xun* 埙, an instrument similar to the ocarina, and the *fou* 缶, a percussion instrument. Excavations have revealed that the shells of some drums were made from pottery during the late Neolithic period, c. 4th-3rd millennium BC.

Leather

The leather category applies to all Chinese drums which come in all shapes and sizes. They are used in storytelling and opera performances, ensemble and dance music, and in religious contexts.

Wood

Traditionally the wood category applied to two Confucian orchestra instruments; the *yu* 敔, shaped like a tiger with moving ratchets down its back, scraped with a stick to produce a rattling sound and the *zhu* 祝 which is shaped like a square bucket and has its interior struck with a wooden stick.

A BRITISH MUSEUM TOUR

CHINA
JOURNEY TO THE EAST

Supported by BP  A CHINA NOW legacy project 

THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM
Partnership UK

Also funded through the DCMS/DCFS
National/Regional Museum Partnerships
Education Programme 2008-09.