

Words, Music, and Meaning: The Debate on *Qin* Song in Late Imperial China

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Introduction

Qin Song and the Debate

Qin song (*qinge* 琴歌) refers to a musical form of the *qin* 琴 (aka. *guqin* 古琴, the Chinese seven-string zither) that combines *qin* playing and song singing. Throughout its history of over 2500 years, the performance of *qin* song developed into many different styles.¹ In this paper, the term “*qin* song” is defined from two aspects. As performance, it means playing the *qin* and singing at the same time; as textual work, it refers to the combination of *qin* notation and songtext.²

In traditional China, especially in the late imperial period, the *qin* was culturally distinguished from other musical instruments, as it was considered to be “the instrument of the ancient sage-kings” (*Shengwang zhi qi* 聖王之器) for moral cultivation.³ Therefore, as a form of *qin* music, *qin* song was generally performed by and for the cultural elites in imperial China. Besides being the performers and listeners, these cultural elites were also the composers, readers, and editors of the songs, as the lyrics and the music were often written down.

¹ On the history and performative styles of *qin* song, see Wang Xiaodun, “Qinqu geci ‘Hujia Shiba pai’ xin kao,” 23-25, and Liu Minglan, “Zhongguo gudai qingde yishu tezheng.”

² In the section on terminology I explain my use of “songtext,” as well as its relation to “lyrics” and “text.”

³ Robert van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, 3.

Scholars have noticed that Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was an important transitional period in the history of *qin* song, particularly in the sixteenth century.⁴ On the one hand, enthusiasts of *qin* song created many new songs during this period by setting classical poems and proses into music or adding songtexts to instrumental pieces to make them singable.⁵ Some of them even insisted that every piece of *qin* music should be accompanied by song singing. On the other hand, it was also during this period that, for the first time in history, the idea of combining *qin* playing with song singing was substantially challenged.⁶ Many people argued that lyrics were detrimental to *qin* music, and they deliberately removed the songtexts that were previously transmitted along with the musical scores. In sum, the sixteenth century marked the beginning of a heated debate about whether *qin* music should have lyrics. Many *qin* practitioners participated in this debate through their written arguments, compositional or editorial works, and performances. The debate continued in the following centuries, resulting in a gradual decline of *qin* song particularly from the late seventeenth century to the end of the imperial period.

Current Explanations for the Debate and the Decline of *Qin* Song

The late imperial debate on *qin* song has attracted modern scholars' attention. The current explanations for the debate and the decline of *qin* song generally come from the aesthetic perspective.

Some scholars attribute the debate to the competition between different schools of *qin*

⁴ Xu Jian, *Qinshi xinbian*, 214. Zhan Qiaoling, "Qinge de lishi yu xianzhuang," 100. Zhang Hongwei, "Wan Ming Jiangnan qintan de fansheng," 47-48. Zhu Shasha, "Mingdai qinge yanjiu," 69.

⁵ Zhan, "Qinge de lishi yu xianzhuang," 100.

⁶ Zha Fuxi, "Qinge de chuantong he yanchang," 213.

music, as the followers of each school attempted to claim their authority on *qin* aesthetics over others. Among these schools, as scholars have argued, the Yushan 虞山 school founded in the late Ming was known for their leaders' criticism of *qin* song, and the increasing influence of the Yushan school hence directly led to the decline of *qin* song in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).⁷

This explanation is oversimplifying in the view of some other scholars. Firstly, the characteristics of each school often changed over time, and the differences between schools were not clear-cut. For example, the Zhe 浙 school was described to be opposed to *qin* song by a sixteenth-century writer, but it was then categorized as a vocalist school in a seventeenth-century text.⁸ Secondly, among the participants in the debate, many of them did not identify themselves as followers of any school. Rather, some contended that the principles of good music should be universal and independent from the differences between schools and regions.⁹ Modern scholar

⁷ Zhan, "Qinge de lishi yu xianzhuang," 100. Zhang, "Wan Ming Jiangnan qintan de fansheng," 47-48. Zha Fuxi, "Qinge bian," 161.

⁸ In the preface to his *Wenhuitang qinpu*, the compiler states that one should only follow the music of the Zhe school, and that *qin* music should be rid of lyrics. See Hu Wenhuan (fl. 1596) comp., *Wenhuitang qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 6, 117. However, in the preface to *Dahuange qinpu*, the writer remarks that the Zhe school prefers to use lyrics while the Wu and the Chu schools promote music with no lyrics. See Xu Hong (c. 1582-1662) comp., *Dahuange qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 10, 291.

⁹ For example. Yang Biaozheng (c. 1520-c. 1590) commented in his *qinpu*: "Sometimes vulgar people argue differently about the distinction between the Jiang school and the Zhe school...[They] do not know that the refinement of the *qin* learning of the sages, comprehended in mind and reflected in hands, is always the same even in different regions." 間有鄙俗異論

Xu Jian 許健 has also noted that those *qin* song enthusiasts never formed any influential school.¹⁰ Thirdly, as Xu points out, although the Yushan leaders wrote against some types of songs, they were not against the entire performative tradition of singing while playing the *qin*.¹¹ In other words, the influence of the Yushan school does not necessarily result in the decline of *qin* song.

Instead of considering school competition as the main contributor, some scholars think that the debate and the decline of *qin* song were inevitable results of the development of *qin* music: as the music became more and more sophisticated, the melody and finger techniques should go beyond the limit of human voice.¹² Some of these scholars further comment that most *qin* songs of the Ming dynasty are of low aesthetic qualities, as the lyrics of the songs “have no poetic beauty” and the music “boring and unimaginative.”¹³ From this perspective, the decrease in the number of *qin* songs in the Qing dynasty seemed to be a reasonable choice made by those with “better” musical taste.

The Remaining Problems

The above explanations have left some problems unsolved. In response to other scholars’ criticism of some *qin* songs’ aesthetic qualities, Zha Fuxi justifiably remarks that to say a song is

江、浙之分……殊不知聖賢琴學之精，得心應手，異地皆然也。Yang Biao Zheng comp., *Chongxiu zhenchuan qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 4, 255.

¹⁰ Xu, *Qinshi xinbian*, 217.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214

¹² Zhang, “Wan Ming Jiangnan qintan de fansheng,” 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“boring” can be too subjective an argument.¹⁴ Indeed, even if we understand the rise and fall of *qin* song as a change in aesthetic trend, we need to account for this aesthetic change by situating it under the broader cultural background.

Moreover, considering the moral implication of the *qin* in traditional China, the debate about *qin* song may have been driven by concerns beyond the aesthetic level. As mentioned earlier, historically the *qin* was closely associated with the ancient sage and moral cultivation. Traditional *qin* practitioners, through playing and listening to the *qin*, were expected to comprehend the sage’s teaching in the music and hence achieve spiritual enlightenment. This belief, even if not held by every *qin* practitioner, has indeed been shaping the *qin* tradition throughout the history.¹⁵ Given that the significance of *qin* activities were not merely artistic but also philosophical, and given that the *qin* practitioners were not just musicians but also literati and cultural elites, then we need to delve deeper into the debate about whether *qin* music should have lyrics, and ask what was really at stake behind this debate.

The purpose of this paper is to deepen our understanding of the debate in question beyond the aesthetic level, to explain the decline of *qin* song from its heyday, and to relate this musical phenomenon to the broader intellectual concerns of this period.

Source and Terminology

My primary source is mainly based on various handbooks of *qin* music (*qinpu* 琴譜) that were compiled and transmitted from the late fifteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Most of these handbooks include not only musical scores, but also commentary notes

¹⁴ Zha, “Qinge bian,” 162.

¹⁵ Van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, 35-50. Bell Yung, “An Audience of One,” 509.

¹⁶ Facsimiles of these *qinpu* are available in *Qinqu jicheng*, compiled by Zhongguo yishu yanjiu

on specific works, instructions on *qin* playing, biographical records of the compilers and their associates, and many other materials about musical theories, aesthetic principles, the history and cultural significance of the *qin*, and so on.

These sources can be categorized into two types. The first type is, of course, the musical works. These include the songtexts and musical notations of the songs, as well as some instrumental pieces. The other type of my source includes all other writings in the handbooks, written or edited by the compilers. These writings tell us what different *qin* players thought about lyrics versus music, what they did with the compositions and performance, and their own comments on their musical works.

I use “songtext” and “lyrics” as different terms. “Songtext” refers to the text written alongside the music in the *qin* notation. It might be sung aloud in a performance or read silently. “Lyrics,” on the other hand, emphasizes on the vocal aspect, although the words that were once sung aloud were known to us only in textual format. The two terms emphasize on different aspects, but may also be used interchangeably in some situations, as the textual words and the vocal words often overlap. Nonetheless, in this project I find it helpful to make a distinction between “songtext” and “lyrics” for two reasons. First, some *qin* practitioners were against singing but recommended silently reading the songtext when learning the music. Second, we often do not know for sure whether some written texts were actually sung aloud, or whether some lyrics were preserved in written form.

By comparing the musical works and writings in various *qinpu*, I find that *qin* practitioners’ different attitudes toward *qin* song resulted from their different understandings about relationship between music and words, which can be divided into three categories. In what

yuan and Beijing guqin yanjiu hui (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2010).

follows, I analyze these *qin* practitioners' different opinions under each category.

1. Words Should be Combined with Music

The mid and late Ming periods saw a boom of *qin* song, with an increasing number and variety of songs being created and circulated. Among the songs composed during this time (the *qinpu* compilers would specify their own compositions, which helps us speculate the rough dates of some pieces), the songtexts of many are directly taken from poems and proses of earlier time periods. Although these earlier literary works were already widely circulated among cultural elites, some *qin* practitioners insisted that the best way to appreciate these literary works was to combine them with music.

One example is Yang Biaozheng 楊表正 (c.1520-c.1590), one of the most influential *qinpu* compiler in the late Ming. His *qinpu* was carved and printed in 1573, and an expanded edition was published twelve years later, titled “Chongxiu zhengwen duiyin jieyao zhenchuan qinpu daquan” 重修正文對音捷要真傳琴譜大全 (Authentic Complete *Qinpu* with Corrected Lyrics, Collated Sound, and Quick Instruction: Revised). As the title already suggests, all the works included in this *qinpu* are songs. That is to say, each piece of work is a combination of music and songtext.

Yang Biaozheng engaged in the composition of sixteen songs, as he tells us in the *qinpu*.¹⁷ Most of these songs were created by setting well-known poems or proses into music. In

¹⁷ *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 4, 262. It is worth noticing that the idea of “compose” (*zuo* 作) for premodern *qin* players was different from our modern understanding. In Yang Biaozheng's case, only for a few songs was he the author of both the music and the songtext. For other songs, only part of the music and/or songtext contains his original work.

his comments on these songs, Yang explains why he adapts literary works into *qin* songs. On a song titled “Chen qing biao” 陳情表 (Memorial Stating My Situation), he writes, “I hope that those who examine the music would thereby savor the lyrics, and thereby stimulate their filial love.”¹⁸ The lyrics, as well as the title of the song, are directly taken from the famous memorial written by Li Mi 李密 (582-619), in which the writer explains to the emperor that he hopes to decline to serve the government in order to take care of his grandmother. The memorial is a moving display of the writer’s filial love, for which reason it had been widely circulated as an example of good writing for a millennium by Yang Biao Zheng’s time. However, in Yang’s view, the moving power of this memorial may not be fully brought out through textual reading alone. By setting the text to music, Yang believed that the listeners (with the performer included) of the song would achieve a deeper appreciation of the text, and ultimately, become more filial through a sympathetic understanding of Li Mi.

The belief that words may become more expressive when combined with music is founded on the traditional Confucian understanding of poetry and song. The “Great Preface” to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經, one of the earliest Confucian classics) writes, “Emotions are stirred within and take form in words. When words are not enough [to express emotions], one sighs about it; when sighing is not enough, one sing them in songs.”¹⁹ Classical Confucian theories believe that music resonates with both the internal emotions and the external world, and it is hence powerful in both expressing and influencing the mind.²⁰ For this reason, many *qin*

¹⁸ 庶審音者以玩詞，玩詞以起孝也。 *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 4, 336.

¹⁹ 情動於中而形於言。言之不足故嗟嘆之，嗟嘆之不足故永歌之。 Li Xueqin et al, eds., *Shisan jing zhushu Maoshi zhengyi*, 6.

²⁰ This theory, though developed mainly by Confucians, is not exclusively Confucian especially

practitioners in the late imperial period were concerned by the fact that the *Book of Odes* was no longer singable—since the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220CE), the three-hundred works in this ancient canon had been generally studied as textual poems rather than songs because the music was lost. In their views, the texts in the *Book of Odes* must be combined with music and singing to fully convey the ancient sages’ teaching, and that was how the songs were supposed to function by the end of the Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE). Therefore, many *qin* practitioners attempted to revive the singing tradition of the *Book of Odes* by re-creating the music.²¹ Their attempts were in agreement with earlier Confucian masters like Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104-1162), who argued that it was not the best way to learn works in the *Book of Odes* if people “cannot sing them but only recite the text and discuss the meaning.”²²

Some people also used *qin* music to facilitate the learning of other religious texts. In a

in its early stage. For ancient Chinese thoughts about music, see Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *A Song of One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1982).

²¹ Some of the *qin* musicians drew inspiration from the musical notation of twelve songs preserved in *Yili jingzhuan tongjie* 儀禮經傳通解 (“An Thorough Interpretation on Rites and Ceremonies and Other Classics and Commentaries”), a book that was written and compiled by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) and his disciples. Many others, however, composed the music mainly from their own understanding and imagination. Some even made substantial changes to the songtexts, which seem to propose a different way of reading/singing the *Book of Odes*.

²² 古之詩，今之詞曲也。若不能歌之，但誦其文、說其義，可乎？ In Xiong Penglai (1246-1323), *Se pu*, *juan 1* (*Siku quanshu* edition).

qinpu titled *San jiao tong sheng* 三教同聲 (“Three Religions One Sound”), preface dated to 1592, we find a Daoist song using excerpts from the *Dao de jing* 道德經 (“Classic of the Way and Morality”) and a Buddhist song with Sanskrit incantations. Along with them are two other Confucian songs, the songtexts of which are from *Da xue* 大學 (“The Great Learning”). The title of the *qinpu* seems to suggest that the three religions all lead to the same ultimate truth which manifests itself in “one sound” (i.e. the sound of the *qin*); accordingly, *qin* music was used to connect these different canonical texts together for a comprehensive understanding of the three religions.

2. Music Should be Combined with Words

The section above has shown the opinion that the meaning of words can be better expressed with the help of music. This opinion, however, does not require every text to be paired with music, nor does it indicate whether instrumental music should, in turn, be paired with songtexts. In other words, it does not necessarily object to the purely instrumental form of *qin* music.

In some people’s view, however, *qin* playing should always go hand-in-hand with song singing. They believed that “the ancients” played the *qin* whenever they sang and sang whenever they played the *qin*.²³ In a *qinpu* published in the sixteenth century, we find a paragraph criticizing the “recent” non-vocal pieces for “making beautiful melody with excessive sounds.”²⁴

²³ 古人歌則必絃之，絃則必歌之。Jiang Keqian (fl. 1590) comp., *Qinshu Daquan*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 5, 212.

²⁴ Ibid. This piece of writing may have had an earlier origin, as the content of *Qinshu daquan* is almost identical to the *Yongle qinshu jicheng* which may be dated to the early 15th century.

Indeed, because instrumental pieces are not bound by words or human voice, they have the freedom to incorporate a greater variety of melodic and rhythmic combinations. However, why were some *qin* practitioners against the acoustic pleasure created by the complexity of musical sounds? How, in their views, did this “recent” trend in *qin* music deviate from the music of the ancient sages?

In a postface to a *qinpu* dated to 1513, the writer He Zhuang 何莊 (fl. 1510s) harshly comments that most *qin* players of later periods have been “selling their artistic skills like frogs showing off their croaks.”²⁵ The problem with their skillful performances, in He Zhuang’s eyes, is that they have made no contribution to “the education of the world.”²⁶ The writer argues that people have lost the “ancient intention” (*gu yi* 古意) of *qin* music once they stopped to perform *qin* songs like the “South Wind” (*Nanfeng* 南風).²⁷ The “South Wind” was said to be a song composed by King Shun 舜, one of the ancient sage-kings. According to the legend, King Shun used to sing this song while playing the *qin*, and thereby brought peace and order to the state.²⁸

However, scholars have been debating about the authenticity of *Yongle qinshu jicheng* and its relationship with *Qinshu daquan*. See Yang Yuanzheng, “Yongle qinshu jicheng xieben zhenwei de kaocha.”

²⁵ 競蛙鳴以售巧於天下。See Xie Lin (fl. 1510s) comp., *Taigu yiyin*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 1, 306.

²⁶ 於世教何補哉? Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For example, see Sima Qian (145 BCE?-87 BCE?), *Shiji* (The Grand Scribe’s Record), *juan* 24, 1235.

From He Zhuang's perspective, *qin* music should be used to educate the world rather than simply bring aesthetic enjoyment; to fulfill its educational purpose, the *qin* player must transmit the moral teaching to the audience by singing it out in comprehensible words. Therefore, He Zhuang gave much credit to this *qinpu* that he postfaced, which is compiled by Xie Lin 謝琳 (fl. 1510s), for all the pieces in the *qinpu* are vocal. He writes that only musical works like these—with both musical tones and lyrics (*you sheng you wen* 有聲有文)—can be called “elegant music” (*yayue* 雅樂) because they “are concerned with the education of the world and facilitate the learning of the sage.”²⁹ For people like He Zhuang and Xie Lin, although music helps to convey the moral teaching in the songtext and to move the minds, it is the songtext that gives meaning to the music; without texts and words, instrumental music brings no good but sensory pleasure.

Compared to the sixteenth-century discussions above, a more complex view seemed to have been developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This view still regards words to be necessary for conveying the meaning of the music, but it does not oppose to instrumental pieces. Writing in 1744, a *qin* player commented that playing the *qin* without songtext is like abandoning the cart and go on foot.³⁰ Nonetheless, the same writing also justifies *qin* pieces with no songtext. In his view, no one should be ridiculed for either taking the cart or going on foot, as people will reach the destination either way.³¹

Some *qin* practitioners who accepted both vocal and instrumental works further discussed the complexity of the issue by weighing the pros and cons of songtext in conveying meanings. In

²⁹ 關世教，益聖學。See Xie Lin (fl. 1510s) comp., *Taigu yiyin*, 306.

³⁰ 蓋鼓琴而無章句，猶之舍車而徒也。See Cao Shangjiong (fl. 1744), Su Jing (fl. 1744), and Dai Yuan (fl. 1744) comp., *Chuncaotang qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 18, 218.

³¹ *Ibid.*

a *qinpu* dated to the early Kanxi period (1662-1722), the compiler's preface starts by justifying instrumental pieces, as it writes that *qin* tunes of the ancient time were composed as purely instrumental and had no songtext to begin with. However, the preface continues to explain that these instrumental pieces often have to be combined with songtext to help later people understand and transmit them. Without songtext, as the writer argues, a beginner would find it hard to capture the meaning of the tune and hence cannot truly appreciate it.³² At the same time, the writer also warns against fully relying on the songtext. In his eyes, the text is merely a tool that facilitates understanding; once the player has comprehended the meaning of the music, he should “forget about the songtext” so that his music may turn out profound and far-reaching.³³

The case above exemplifies the following understanding of the relationship between music and words: while it is often necessary for music to be combined with words, it should never be bound by words. *Qin* practitioners who held this view considered music and words to be two unique means of expression that each has its own values and limitations: words are more straightforward than music, but music can reach feelings and ideas that words cannot fully describe.

3. Music Should be Freed from Words

Considering the limitation of words, some *qin* practitioners' advice is to make use of the songtext but then forget about it when playing the music, as shown in the previous example. Others, however, began to question whether it would be even better to completely remove

³² 恐入門者索之有似捉影，味之竟同嚼臘。See Zheng Fang (fl. 1663-1665) comp., *Chenhuitang qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 11, 73.

³³ 忘詞則意趣高遠。Ibid.

songtexts. For them, if the main advantage of songtext is that it makes the music more comprehensible to “beginners,” whereas the limitation of songtext may become an obstacle to a more profound level of communication, then the downside of using songtext seems to outweigh its advantage.

In a *qinpu* titled *Deyintang* 德音堂, printed and published in 1691, the compiler explains why he decided to remove the songtexts in earlier sources when compiling this *qinpu*. In his opinion, the sounds of the *qin* represent the pure harmony of the nature, thus should not be bound by lyrics; otherwise, the sounds become impure and the natural flow of the melody becomes restrained.³⁴ Only in one exceptional situation would the compiler keep the lyrics, as he writes: “but in some pieces, the music is not complete without songtexts. Therefore, ...for songtexts that cannot be removed, I keep them [in my *qinpu*] for future reference.”³⁵

This writing in *Deyintang* shows how the compiler compares two types of sounds: the sounds of *qin* music, and the sounds of human voice and language. For him, the former is superior to the latter because it represents the natural harmony. From this perspective, combining singing with *qin* playing would only “contaminate” the harmonious music that comes from the nature. The writer also seems to suggest that the few songtexts kept in the *qinpu* are supposed to be read with eyes (*guan* 觀) rather than sung aloud. His reason for keeping the songtexts of some pieces is similar to the viewpoint discussed in the previous section, namely, words may be an indispensable supplement to music. However, the compiler of *Deyintang* made a clearer distinction between the experience of listening and the experience of silent reading. What he did

³⁴ 琴乃天真元韻，音出自然，不喜以文拘之。拘之則音雜，滯其高下抑揚，故取音而棄文。See Wang Tianrong (fl. 1691) comp., *Deyintang qinpu*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 12, 447.

³⁵ 然亦有舍文而不能成音者。故可刪者刪之，不可刪者，存以備觀也。Ibid.

was to examine the pros and cons of music and words in two different modes of communication: the textual and the auditory. On the one hand, he admitted that words may offer valuable references for people to understand the music when they read the *qinpu*; on the other hand, he felt that the sounds of words could do no good to a *qin* piece in an aural experience. In this case, because the *qin* is essentially used for auditory communication, the priority is given to the maximization of musical expressions over words.

The example above shows the idea that the relationship between music and words differs between the textual mode and the auditory mode of communication. The development of this idea in the following centuries continued to shape people's understandings of *qin* song. One of the most striking cases concerns the *qin* pieces related to the *Book of Odes*.

As explained earlier, the textual works in the *Book of Odes* were believed to be songs of the time of the ancient sages. Thus in the late imperial period, many *qin* pieces were composed and edited to revive the lost singing tradition of the *Book of Odes*, among which one of the most popular titles was "Guanju" 關雎 ("ospreys"). "Guanju" is listed as the first song/poem in the Mao tradition of the *Book of Odes*—the most authoritative interpretation since no later than the first century CE.³⁶ Orthodox commentaries throughout the history have underlined the importance of "Guanju" in moral education, and such interpretation was shared among late imperial *qin* practitioners. Citing traditional commentaries, many compilers of *qinpu* explained the educational function of "Guanju" and reaffirmed its connection with the ancient sages. One of them writes:

This song is composed by the Duke of Zhou, celebrating King Wen's marrying the Queen. King Wen was born with saintly virtue, and had the saintly woman Taisi to match him. She was demure and sincere, with the virtue of being reserved, retiring, steadfast and serene, thus helping the teaching to circulate. With families transformed and customs accomplished, all were in the air of harmony and happiness. From this point, the ethics of

³⁶ Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 37.

human relations began to flourish. This song was manifested in singing, accompanied by the studs and strings. Confucius said, “‘Guanju’ is joyous but not excessive, melancholy but not morose.”³⁷

The writing above exemplifies an understanding widely shared among *qin* practitioners, namely, the moral teaching of "Guanju" is supposed to be transmitted through the singing of the ancient song along with the playing of the *qin*. Nonetheless, in late imperial *qinpu*, some versions of "Guanju" do not have lyrics at all, in spite of the belief that this classical work was originally a song.

Some of those who preferred non-vocal versions of "Guanju" offered their explanations. The compiler of *Chuncaotang qinpu* 春草堂琴譜 asked *qin* players to "feel and understand" (*tihui* 體會) what Confucius meant by “joyous but not excessive, melancholy but not morose” in the music of "Guanju." He further remarked, “as for those mediocre performers who play this piece like the sounds of book reciting, they have deviated severely [from the meaning of Confucius’s comment].”³⁸ It is not clear what the writer means by "play this piece like the sounds of book reciting." However, since his version has no lyrics, he seems to suggest that neither should one play this piece while singing/reciting the poem nor use the music to mimic the sounds of reciting the poem. In his view, the moderation of melancholy and joy—as Confucius

³⁷ 此周公作，美文王得后妃也。文王生有聖德，又得聖女妣氏以爲之配，端莊誠一，備幽閒貞靜之德，助流風教，家化俗成，咸被和睦樂順之風。人倫之盛，自此始矣。形於詠歌，被之徽絃。孔子曰：“關雎樂而不淫，哀而不傷。” Kong Xingxie comp., *Qinyuan xinchuan*, in *Qinqu jicheng*, vol. 11, 368.

³⁸ 鼓者當體會其中“樂而不淫，哀而不傷”之意。如俗以讀書聲撫之，失之遠矣。See Cao Shangjiong 曹尚綱 (fl. 1744) et al. comp., *Chuncaotang qinpu*, 254.

observed in "Guanju"—should be sought from the music rather than the recitation of the text.

Writing in the last decade of the imperial period, a *qinpu* compiler named Chen Shiji 陳世驥 (fl. 1902) stated a similar view in his comment on a non-vocal version of "Guanju" composed by himself. Chen explained that his version of "Guanju" is "based on the achieved gist rather than the sounds of the words." "If one goes about it by the sounds of the words," he comments, "one would be far from truly grasping the piece."³⁹

Like the compiler of the *Deyintang*, the two writers above both distinguished between the textual and the oral form of words. They composed/edited their versions of "Guanju" based on the "achieved gist," which was firstly achieved through the textual reading of the *Book of Odes*. Once the music has been composed, in these *qin* practitioners' views, it manifests the sages' teaching in a way that the original poem cannot compare. Therefore, the recitation of the poetic words would become unnecessary. For these *qin* practitioners, even the words are from ancient Classics like "Guanju," they are not the end, but simply one of the means of learning the sages' teaching, and not even the best means. Moreover, the two writers above have underlined the limitation of both the textual and the oral form of words. They believed that readers of "Guanju" would need music to fully "feel and understand" the sagely virtue because one could hardly achieve such a comparable experience through the reading of the poem. Meanwhile, they both suggested that the sounds of words were not only unhelpful but even misleading.

Conclusion: Words and Music as Communicative Tools

³⁹ 蓋此曲是會意之作，非依詠和聲之製，當以詩意求之，無不惟妙惟肖，若以聲字為用，則失之遠矣。 See Zha Fuxi, ed., *Cun jian guqin qupu ji lan*, 356.

So far, I have compared various views on *qin* song in late imperial China. Although I divide these views into the above three categories, I have noted that none of these categories is monolithic. Rather, each *qin* practitioner mentioned in this paper held a different—to various degrees—opinion from others about *qin* music, lyrics, songtexts, *qin* playing, singing, and silent reading. Therefore, the debate over *qin* song during this period was more complex than a conflict between the vocalists and the instrumentalists. Whereas some *qin* practitioners did radically advocate singing whenever one plays the *qin*, or thoroughly remove all songtexts from earlier musical scores, many others did not perceive the issue of *qin* song in black and white. Their different perspectives and musical practices remind us that the concerns behind the debate on *qin* song were multifaceted and that the decline of *qin* song was not linear.

In spite of their different views in *qin* song and *qin* music, these *qin* practitioners nonetheless shared two major concerns in common. These two commonalities are crucial for us to understand the debate on *qin* song beyond the aesthetic level.

The first major concern shared among the *qin* practitioners was how to better communicate the meaning of a piece of work. As we have seen in the examples above, no matter whether one chose to add music to an existing literary work, to add lyrics to a piece of music, or to remove the existing songtext from a *qin* song, the choice was made in hopes that the meaning of the work would be better expressed and comprehended this way. Moreover, the piece of work in question was not limited to *qin* music per se. It could be an essay—such as in Yang Biao Zheng’s case, who used *qin* music to emphasize the filial love in “Chen qing biao,” or be an ancient song that did not have to be sung—such as the non-vocal version of “Guanju” that was believed to communicate the sages’ teaching more effectively than vocalizing the songtext. In those cases, what the *qin* practitioners did was essentially creating new interpretations, performances, and experiences of a piece of work by utilizing music and words.

What made the “meaning” of the work so important for these *qin* practitioners? How was the “meaning” related to the sensory beauty of the music? From their writings, we notice that the *qin* practitioners’ concerns about “meanings” were driven by the moral significance of *qin* music and the ultimate purpose of *qin* playing. Their writings make constant references to their imaginations about ancient sages and the sages’ music, whereas the “meanings” under consideration are almost always related to the sages’ teaching, such as the regulation of emotions, the ideal human relations, the moral transformation of the society, and the harmony of the cosmos. After all, as already explained in the beginning of the paper, the *qin* was regarded as the legacy of ancient music which the sages used for moral cultivation. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of *qin* activities was to comprehend and transmit the sages’ teaching, rather than to simply create an aesthetic experience. Sometimes, the pursuit of sensory beauty was even criticized for “making beautiful melody with excessive sounds,” “selling artistic skills,” and having no use for “the education of the world,” like what we have seen in *Qinshu Daquan* and He Zhuang’s postface.

In searching for the best way to communicate the moral meaning of a piece of work, another shared major concern among *qin* practitioners was the limitation of language and the expressiveness of music. The three types of attitudes toward music versus words that I have discussed in this paper came from the same ground that language is not enough to fully communicate meanings. Considering the limitation of language, some *qin* practitioners used music and singing to supplement existing texts, thus created many new songs particularly during the mid and late Ming. They believed that music could communicate thoughts and feelings in a way that could not be done by words alone. However, as *qin* practitioners continued to emphasize the limitation of language and the power of music, some started to question the necessity of songtext, arguing that music alone would be a sufficient vessel for even the most

abstruse ideas. In order that the expressiveness of music be fully realized, many of them proposed to free the music of the *qin* from human voice and the sounds of words. Among people who held this view, some would still keep songtexts for textual reading, acknowledging that language is, after all, more explicit and comprehensible to novices in music. Others, however, would rather remove any songtext from existing musical sources; for them, music is the most accurate manifestation of meanings, whereas the literal meaning of the words—even those from the Classics—may be misleading and could prevent one from an in-depth comprehension of ideas that cannot be captured by language.

As these *qin* practitioners' different views rose from the shared concern about the limitation of language, the flourishing and decline of *qin* song during the sixteenth and nineteenth century were more of a continuation of the same trend than a dichotomy between two opposite ideas.

This trend in the field of the *qin* from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, namely, the increasing emphasis on the limitation of language in communicating moral meanings, complicates our current understanding of the intellectual changes from the Ming to the Qing. Studying the most prominent Confucian scholars of this period, modern historians have noticed a rise of “philological approach” in Confucian learning from the seventeenth century which climaxed in the eighteenth century. This intellectual change is referred to by Benjamin Elman as “from philosophy to philology.”⁴⁰ Elman remarks that the *kaozheng* 考證 (evidential scholarship) scholars in the Qing dynasty, opposed to the Ming Neo-Confucian way of learning,

⁴⁰ Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984).

promoted a linguistic and etymological methodology for learning the ancient Classics. For *kaozheng* scholars like Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682), Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777) and Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849), the sages' teaching in ancient Classics would be fully understood by people of later periods if only they could restore the pronunciation and original meaning of the ancient language. Thus, as Elman has put it, “philology became the route to the past.”⁴¹ Following Elman, Cynthia Brokaw argues that for Dai Zhen—one of the most influential *kaozheng* scholars in the eighteenth century, “philology, properly practiced, was philosophy,” as Dai Zhen believed that the exact meaning of the text in the Classics “automatically reveal the moral truth.”⁴²

While modern scholars have identified the rise of philology as the major intellectual change during the Qing, the *qin* practitioners—most of them were scholars and cultural elites yet less renown to us today—provided us with another side of the picture. As I have shown with the example of the *Book of Odes*, various versions of *qin* pieces based on this Classic implied the composers' and editors' different strategies for Confucian learning. Unlike *kaozheng* scholars who insisted that the study of the texts and words alone would suffice, *qin* practitioners attempted to supplement, and even replace, canonical texts with music. With more and more *qin* practitioners becoming opposed to songtext by the eighteenth century, the communicative efficiency of language was questioned. This phenomenon forms an interesting dialogue with the *kaozheng* scholarship which became increasingly influential during roughly the same time.

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⁴¹ Ibid. 64.

⁴² Cynthia Brokaw, “Tai Chen and Learning in the Confucian Tradition,” 259.

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