

Examination and Study on the Origin of Zheng

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Abstract—The origin of Zheng is still a mystery to be solved. Based on previous studies and the examination of Chinese historical data, the authors look at the complicated question about the origin of Zheng with an objective attitude, and attempt to identify the relationship between “Zheng and Zhu” and “Zheng and Se”.

Index Terms—Zheng, Zhu, Se

I. INTRODUCTION

Zheng has a history of more than 2,500 years, which can be dated back to the late Spring and Autumn Period. It has been popular in many fields along the history; it was once an essential instrument in court rituals, and has been also widely used in folk music, and even in religious music in some parts of China (for example, Yunnan’s Dongjing Music). However, there are many controversies over the origin of Zheng. The authors have reviewed the research papers on Zheng published in major Chinese music theory journals over the past decade, in which the in-depth studies include: Lin Qiansan’s “*The process from 5-stringed Zheng to 13-stringed Zheng*” [1], Xiang Yang’s “*From Zhu to Zheng*” [2], Niu Longfei’s “*Identity of Zheng*” [3], Jiao Wenbin’s “*Proposal of Qin Zheng originating from Qin State and its historical basis*” [4], Wei Jun’s “*New evidence for the origin of Qin Zheng*” [5] and “*Re-examination of the*

origin of Qin Zheng” [6].

The research works of the above five scholars involve extensive and in-depth contents, which contributes a lot to the examination of the origin of Zheng in the Central Plains. However, the most controversial part is still over the origin of Zheng. Based on the examination of Chinese historical data, the authors will look at the complicated problem as to the origin of Zheng with an objective attitude, and attempt to identify the relationship between Zheng, Zhu, and Se.

II. ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF ZHENG

Some views on the origin of Zheng. Due to lack of convincing evidence, the origin of Zheng remains controversial for a long time. However, regarding the notion of “*Zheng originating from Se*” [7] and “*Zheng originating from Zhu*” [8], based on the citation analysis of the historical data, the authors attempts to compare the shape and structure characteristics of the three musical instruments from the perspective of philology, so as to identify their relationship: the origin of Zheng has nothing to do with Se or Zhu, they are three homologous but heteromorphic musical instruments.

A. Relationship between Zheng and Zhu – “binate heterosexuals” at the prototype phase (see “Fig.1a” and “1b”)

A



Zheng, a Chinese zither with 21 or 25 strings

B



Zhu, a Chinese zither like five-string lute

Figure 1. The shape of Zheng and Zhu.

First, there are some similarities between Zheng and Zhu. The description of similar characteristics between

them can be often found in some Chinese historical records:

A. "As soon as Jing Ke arrives at Yan State, he makes friends with Gao Jianli, a dog butcher who is good at playing Zhu..."[9]

B. "The man strikes Fou with Weng, pats his legs to beat time, sing a pleasant song, what a really music of Qin."[10]

C. "Zhu, made of bamboo, is a 5-stringed instrument...Zheng...the shape of Zhu is like Zheng, thin-necked, the shape of Zhu was anciently similar to Zheng, but is different from Se."[7]

D. "Who makes Zhu is unknown, the historical data only mentions that Gao Jianli is good at playing Zhu. As described in Shi Ming, "Zhu, made of bamboo, thin-necked as Zheng."[11]

E. "Zhu is a musical instrument, roughly like Zheng, with thin neck and round shoulder."[10]

F. "Zhu, made of bamboo, to play it, hold and strike."[10]
"Zheng, made of bamboo...Zhu and Zheng are made of wood."[9]

From these records, there are at least three similar characteristics between Zhu and Zheng:

(1) The origin time is unknown, but the earliest records in *Records from the Historian (Shi Ji)* are more or less the same[9], about 227-230 BC. But which is earlier should be further examined. (A, B, D).

(2) The shape is similar, as round half-tube, with the same number of strings, namely five strings. (C, D, E).

(3) Made of the same material: wood. (F) In early period, Zheng and Zhu were made of wood, but their radicals are the same “木”, it appears that what Mr. Lin Qiansan claimed is true[1], namely Zheng and Zhu are homologous bamboo instruments.

Second, there are different characteristics between Zheng and Zhu.

There are generally two differences between Zheng and Zhu:

(1) Different ways of playing. From the historical data B and D, we can clearly see: Zheng is played by fingers, while Zhu is by bamboo strikes [7].

(2) Different popular areas. In *Records from the Historian · Biography of Jing Ke*, "As soon as Jing Ke arrives at Yan State, he makes friends with Gao Jianli, a dog butcher who is good at playing Zhu...when Gao Jianli plays Zhu, Jing Ke sings..."[9] Gao Jianli was a native of Yan State, which implies that Zhu was very popular in Yan State at that time. And according to *Intrigues of the Warring States-Intrigues of Qi*, "Linzi is very rich and well-off, its local residents play Zhu and Qin, instead of Yu, Se."[11] This was recorded in 302 BC, which is the prime time of Qi State in terms of national power, within the same period of Qin State. It indicates that Zhu was popular in many areas earlier, such as Yan, Qi, Zhao State, while Zheng was only played in Western Qin (*The Book of Music · Yue Tu Lun*, "Zheng is a musical instrument originated from Qin"[12]).

According to the similarities and differences between Zheng and Zhu at the early phase: Although Zheng and Zhu were 5-stringed at the early phase, both have the same characteristics in material, shape and number of strings, which may be even considered to be different products evolved from the same instrument not examined yet.

B. Relationship between Zheng and Se – "Binate homosexuals" at the development phase (see "Fig.2").



Se, a twenty-five-stringed plucked instrument

Figure 2. The shape of Se.

Whether Zheng originates from Se has been always debated. As some ancient records contain the legend of "Zheng is made from breaking Se into two pieces"[13], for example, Zhao Lin in the Tang Dynasty said in his *Yin Yu Lu*, "Zheng, a musical instrument originated from Qin State, belongs to Qin. Se was anciently 50-stringed, Huang Emperor ordered Su Lu to play Se, the emperor was made sad, so he broke it, Se was 25-stringed afterwards. Two brothers in the Qin State played Se, fought, it was broken into two pieces again, Zheng was named so afterwards."[13] As a result, a false impression arises: Zheng is a musical instrument made from accidental breaking of Se into two pieces. But we believe that they appear to be just more "associated".

First, from the perspective of musical instrument making, a musical instrument is generally composed of several components. It seems to be hard to find an example

that another instrument can be made by taking one component from a piece of instrument, let alone Se, known as a musical instrument that has been carried by the literati class since the ancient times, how could it be easily "broken into two pieces" to become Zheng?

Second, from the perspective of philology, because Se is a kind of Qin, so “琴” is dependent from “Se”. As recorded in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, "Qin is solely from 琴" [13], "Se...is a stringed instrument made by Pao Xi. ...So, Se originates from Qin." [7] (24) In this sense, if Qin originates from Se, then the word "Zheng" should take from the radical “琴”, but why it takes from the radical “竹”?

Third, from the perspective of musical instrument shape, although the "Se-shaped Zheng" appeared as early as in the Eastern Han, it evolved from the early shape of "the frame of five-stringed Zhu". As Ying Shao said in his *Folk*

Legends, "strictly follow the frame of 5-stringed Zhu as contained in *The Book of Rites· Record of Music*. Now in *Bing, Liang State*, the shape of Zheng is like Se, but who made this change is still unknown"[7] Then it explicitly shows: the "Se-shaped Zheng", which was popular in Shanxi and Gansu of the Eastern Han, is precisely evolved from the early shape of "the frame of five-stringed Zhu". In other words, indeed Zheng does not originate from Se.

Of course, the fact that Zheng changed from the "frame of five-stringed Zhu" to the shape of Se also shows that it took in some characteristics of Se in the course of development, so it was improved. Zhu Junsheng in the Qing Dynasty said in *Shuo Wen Tong Xun Ding Sheng*, "Zheng was anciently 5-stringed, made of bamboo, the shape is like Zhu, by the Qin Dynasty, Meng Tian changed it to 12-stringed, the shape is like Se, made of wood instead of bamboo, after the Tang Dynasty, changed to 13-stringed"[14] It shows that the material of Zheng changed from the previous bamboo to wood. And its volume was also enlarged. More importantly, subject to the influence of Se, its number of strings increased from the previous 5 to 12, 13. Until the early period of the Han Dynasty, the Se-shaped Zheng as above-mentioned in *Folk Legends* was formed[7]. It is precisely because this type of Zheng is very similar to Se in terms of structure, especially both are columned one-string-one-tone musical instrument, so it is easy to consider that Zheng originates from Se. Aside from these similarities, they have different number of strings, playing techniques and ways of tuning. Thus, we believe that both are only homologous and associated.

In summary, Zheng was once homologous and associated with Zhu and Se at the prototype phase and the forming phase. However, there is nothing but homologous (though not examined) and heteromorphic, rather than reciprocally homologous.

III. ABOUT THE USE OF ZHENG IN CHINESE COURTS.

As a local folk instrument, since the Later Wei, whether it is in court or folk, Zheng was very popular. This paper mainly examines the use of Zheng in Chinese courts.

A. Zheng in Xianghe Lyrics – During the period of Western Han and Three Kingdoms

The use of Zheng in courts can be dated back to the Han Dynasty[7]. For example, "Xianghe Lyrics" collected by Yuefu (a government office established to collect songs and ballads) showed the use of Zheng[3].

Xianghe Lyrics were mainly played at the banquet attended by officials or merchants or other entertainment occasions, or court morning meeting and banquet, sacrifice ceremony in celebration for New Year, even at the folk events. In *History of Song·Chronicles of Music*, "stringed and woodwind instruments are in more harmony, the men holding tally are singing" [14], Xianghe Lyrics features the singer striking drum to get in harmony with the accompanying stringed and woodwind instruments.

The accompaniment band of Xianghe Lyrics is generally composed of seven instruments: "Sheng, Di(bamboo flute), Jiegu, Qin, Se, Pipa"[15]. In which, Zheng was used in three pitches of Xinghe Lyrics: Ping,

Qing, Se. In *Records of Banquet Music Techniques*, "The pitch Ping has seven songs,... it has seven instruments, namely Sheng, Di(bamboo flute), Zhu, Se, Qin, Zheng, Pipa" [15].

For more than 200 years from the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the Sui Dynasty, as Qingshang Music got popular, a part of Xianghe Lyrics of the Han, Wei, and Western Jin Dynasty was absorbed by Qingshang Music, Zheng was still used in Qingshang Music of the Eastern Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties and Qing Music in Nine, Ten Orchestras of Sui and Tang Dynasties.

B. Zheng in Qingshang Music – During the period of the Eastern Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties

Qingshang Music was used in similar occasions as Xianghe Lyrics during the period of the Eastern Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties. "Wusheng" and "Xiqu" are critical components of Qingshang Music. As recorded in *Ancient and Modern Books of Music*, "Wusheng is a refined music, ancient musical instruments include Guan, Konghou, Pipa; modern musical instruments include Sheng, Zheng"[9] Wusheng generally used Guan, Pipa, Konghou in early period, and later introduced Se and Zheng. Because Qingshang Music and Xianghe Old Songs are traditional music for Han People, so they were stressed by courts in different orchestras. And Zheng was also used, indicating its high status in band of Qingshang Music.

C. Hezheng in Nine, Ten Orchestras – During the period of Sui and Tang Dynasties.

Until the period of Tang Dynasty, at the national reunification and the prime time of national power, different ethnic groups created prosperous culture of music, and Yan Music was one of the main indicators. As Zheng gradually became a main musical instrument used in the court music events of the Tang Dynasty, four out of Nine, Ten Orchestras used Zheng. For example, Qingshang Orchestra, its musical instruments were recorded in *Books of Sui·Chronicles of Music*, "For Qingyue Music...its musical instruments include Zhong, Qing, Qin Se, Ji Se, Pipa, Konghou, Zhu, Zheng, Jiegu, Sheng, Di(bamboo flute)..."[8]

Guo Orchestra, as recorded in *Books of Sui*, "For Xiliang Music...its musical instruments include Zhong, Qing, Tan Zheng, Wo Konghou, Pipa..."[8]

Gaoli Orchestra, its musical instruments were recorded in "...Tan Zheng, Wo Konghou, Shu Konghou, Pipa, Wuxian..." [8]

Yanyue Orchestra is the first part of Nine, Ten Orchestras of the Tang Dynasty, according to *Old Book of Tang · Chronicles of Music*, "...(*Gong Le*)...Musical instruments include a set of Yuqing, a set of Dafangxiang, a set of Chou Zheng, a set of Wo Konghou, a set of Xiao Konghou, a set of Dasheng, Xiaosheng....."[8], Zheng was also used as a main instrument. From the sorting order in musical instrument records, aside from Qin Se as the primary instrument of stringed instruments in Qingyue, Zheng was used as the primary instrument of stringed instruments in Shangli, Xiliang Orchestra, even the first-order Yanyue Orchestra. This indicates that the ruling class attached great importance to Zheng with the folk origin,

which became one of the essential main stringed instruments.

The periods of Song Dynasty, Liao, Jin State, and Yuan Dynasty were the secession during which all ethnic groups of China fought with each other. It is during these periods that Zheng was booming.

In the early period of the Song Dynasty, a lot of musicians with the knowledge of Tang music were recruited, along with Zheng, Pipa and other musical instruments, which helped the Song Dynasty inherit Tang music. In *History of Song-Chronicles of Music*, "The Emperor proposes a toast, play Zheng solo in the hall"[14]. This was the first programme of the three grand banquets, indicating the extremely high status of Zheng in the Song Dynasty.

In the period of the Liao State, court music mainly includes Guoyue, Yayue, Dayue, Nao Ge and Hengchuiyue. In which, Zheng was used in Dayue and Sanyue. In *History of Liao*, "Liao has Guoyue, Yayue, Dayue, Nao Ge, Hengchuiyue ... for Liao's Dayue, ... musical instruments include Yuqing, Yunxiang, Chou Zheng, Zhu...", "Sanyue...for six lines, play Zheng solo, play football...for seven lines, play Zheng solo...Sanyue musical instruments include: Shengli, Xiao, Pipa, Wuxian, Konghou, Zheng, Yunxiang..."[8], indicating that Zheng was also stressed in the Liao State.

After ruling of the Central Plains by the Yuan Dynasty, some traditional Han music was used as ritual music, Zheng was included in the court instruments. Zheng was involved in the ensemble of Dayue, Tianyue, Yunheyue which were arranged by Jiaofang (imperial music office). In *History of Yuan*, "At the ceremony conferring title to Empress Dowager...A collection of Yuehe Music: An order is issued to arrange musical instruments to the left and right side...In the front row, Pipa is placed in No.20, Zheng is in No.16, and Konghou is in No.16"[8], These plucked stringed instruments were only limited to Zheng, Pipa, and Konghou, so the role and status of Zheng cannot be underestimated.

The social stability in the early period of the Ming Dynasty, and the peaceful life further made Zheng at its prime time. After the Ming Dynasty, Zheng was gradually less popular in the folk. However, in the early period of the Qing Dynasty, Zheng was actively used again in the upper class due to rich material life of court officials. For example, three Duiwu dances played at the celebrating banquet of court morning meetings in the Qing Dynasty used Zheng, according to *Draft History of Qing*, "There are three Duiwu dances, one day for Qinglong Dance...one day for Shide Dance...one day for Desheng Dance. The three dances in the same system are played for celebrating festivals. Musical instruments include a set of Zheng, a set of Xi Qin, three sets of Pipa, three sets of Sanxian..."[11].

In summary, although Zheng was once put aside due to the historical movement of "pursue elegance, eliminate vulgarity", it was always used by court bands in different dynasties of China, with an important position in plucked stringed instruments.

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