Guzheng: China's most popular traditional music instrument

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By Zhang Kun in Shanghai |   
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The earliest records of the guzheng were found in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) but it was only in the following Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) period that it gained prominence. The musical instrument later became the most widely played instrument in China and found its way to other countries such as Japan and Vietnam.  
The ancient guzheng came in different sizes and commonly consisted of 16 or more strings made of silk placed on movable bridges, with a large resonant cavity made from wood. In the 1950s and 1960s, the guzheng and a number of other traditional Chinese instruments underwent a major overhaul to expand their sound range and enhanced their expressiveness. This overhaul then prompted the creation of a large number of new compositions in Chinese music.  
The redesign of the guzheng was spearheaded by Professor Wang Xunzhi from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. An active member of the Shanghai music scene in the 1920s, Wang joined the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1956 when the school was established and with the help of his students documented a large number of traditional guzheng music, transcribing them from the traditional Chinese "gongchi" music score to that of the modern music sheet.  
Wang completed the redesign of the guzheng in 1958. The new version, which is the one most commonly used today, is 160 centimeters long and has 21 strings. The most important change is the new set of strings that are made of steel coated with nylon.  
This allows the instrument to emit a greater sound similar to that of a piano.  
In 1965, his daughter Wang Changyuan composed a musical piece using the new guzheng titled Fighting the Typhoon (Zhan Taifeng). It was considered a ground-breaking piece because it marked the emergence of a series of new playing techniques. The piece vividly represents the sounds and destructive power of the typhoon, and fully capitalized on the new capability of the redesigned instrument.  
Today, the guzheng is widely considered the most popular traditional Chinese music instrument, and can be considered the equivalent of the piano in Western music, said Luo Xiaoci, director of Shanghai Chinese Orchestra.  
"The guzheng is a versatile instrument with very broad range of sound. You can play gentle lyrical ballads that tell of a lotus budding above water as well as dramatic pieces depicting a raging typhoon," she said.  
Luo, who plays the guzheng and has over the years composed several works for it, added that the instrument offers musicians a plethora of sounds that can be created with just subtle changes in the pressure applied to the strings.  
"You sometimes hear popular songs being played using the guzheng, and you will find that they are pleasant to listen to and not at all tacky," she said. "Such is the unique timbre of the instrument."

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