



## Ling Lun

### *Mythological Founder of Chinese Music*

Ling Lun is remembered in Chinese tradition as the cultural hero who first brought order to sound. Serving under the legendary Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), he was charged with discovering the true foundation of music—not by invention alone, but by listening carefully to the natural world.

According to ancient accounts, Ling Lun traveled to the western mountains, where he cut lengths of bamboo and fashioned them into pipes. As he listened to the calls of the phoenix—an auspicious bird symbolizing harmony and virtue—he tuned these pipes to match its song. From this careful observation, he established the twelve foundational pitches (known as the *lü*), which became the basis for Chinese musical theory.

These pitches were not viewed as arbitrary notes, but as reflections of cosmic order. Each tone was believed to correspond with elements of nature, the seasons, and even the moral structure of society. In this way, Ling Lun's work connected music with mathematics, philosophy, and governance.

His legacy endured for centuries. Later dynasties used systems based on his pitch pipes to tune instruments, standardize court music, and maintain what they believed to be harmony between heaven and earth. Even though his story is partly mythological, Ling Lun represents a foundational idea in Chinese thought: that music is discovered through attentive listening, aligned with nature, and essential to a well-ordered life.

## Ancient Chinese Music Through the Dynasties

Music in ancient China was never merely entertainment—it was believed to shape the soul, order society, and reflect the harmony of heaven and earth.

The Chinese word for music, “*yuè*” (乐), is closely tied to joy, order, and beauty. Philosophers like Confucius taught that music could cultivate virtue and bring peace to a nation.

Let us walk through the dynasties and listen for the echoes of their songs.

## The Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046-256 BC) - Music as Order and Harmony

During the Zhou Dynasty, music was deeply tied to ritual and government. It was not simply played —it was performed as part of sacred ceremonies honoring heaven, ancestors, and rulers.

### Key Ideas:

- Music reflected cosmic harmony (balance between heaven, earth, and humanity)
- Different musical tones were believed to influence emotions and moral character
- Only certain music was considered “proper” for noble people

### Instruments of the Zhou:

- Bianzhong (bronze bells): Played in large sets, each bell producing two tones (*see next page*)
- Guqin: A quiet, introspective string instrument played by scholars (*see image below*)
- Se: A larger zither, often used in court music

Confucius believed that if a ruler used the right music, the people would naturally become virtuous.



Guqin

## The Qin & Han Dynasties (221 BC-220 AD) - Music Becomes Imperial

Under the Qin and especially the Han Dynasty, music became more centralized. The government established an official bureau: **The Imperial Music Bureau (Yuefu)**. The Yuefu collected folk songs from across the empire, preserved music traditions, and created music for ceremonies and court life.

### Instruments of the Han:

- Dizi: A bright bamboo flute
- Sheng: A fascinating mouth organ made of pipes
- Pipa: A pear-shaped lute (*see image, right*)

A cultural shift took place at this time as music began to include stories of everyday life, not just rituals. Songs told of farmers, soldiers, love and longing, and hardship and hope.



Pipa

## The Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) - The Golden Age of Chinese Music

The Tang Dynasty was a time of openness, trade, and cultural richness. Music flourished like never before.

### What made Tang music special?

- Influences from Central Asia, India, and beyond
- Large orchestras and elaborate performances
- Music paired with dance, poetry, and theater

The capital city, Chang'an, was filled with sound—music from many lands blending together.

### Instruments of the Tang:

- Pipa (became extremely popular and virtuosic)
- Erhu (early forms of bowed string instruments)
- Percussion instruments for dance and drama

### A Living Art:

Poets like Li Bai wrote verses meant to be sung or accompanied by music.

## The Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD) - Music for the People

In the Song Dynasty, music moved beyond the court and into everyday life.

### What changed?

- Rise of urban culture
- Public entertainment districts
- Early forms of Chinese opera

### Music was now:

- Heard in marketplaces
- Performed in teahouses
- Enjoyed by common people

### Musical Developments:

- More expressive and emotional styles
- Storytelling through song and drama
- Continued importance of the guqin among scholars



Bianzhong

## The Yuan, Ming, & Qing Dynasties (1279-1912 AD) - *Opera and Tradition Flourish*

In later dynasties, music became closely tied to theater and opera, especially during the Yuan Dynasty under Mongol rule.

### Key Developments:

- Growth of Chinese opera traditions
- Music used to tell dramatic, emotional stories
- Regional styles began to develop

### Instruments of Later Dynasties:

- Erhu: A two-stringed bowed instrument with a deeply expressive sound
- Yangqin: A hammered dulcimer (*see image below*)
- Gongs and drums: Essential for opera performances

### Famous Form:

- Beijing (Peking) Opera developed during the Qing Dynasty
  - Combines music, singing, acting, and acrobatics

Throughout all dynasties, one idea remained constant: *Music reflects the order of the universe.*

Ancient Chinese thinkers believed:

- Good music creates good character
- Harmony in music leads to harmony in society
- Disorder in music reflects moral decline

This idea connects music not just to art—but to ethics, leadership, and daily life.



Yangqin

# Traditional Chinese Music

Week 1 - Music from the Zhou Dynasty  
*(featuring a guqin)*

Week 2 - Music from the Han Dynasty  
*(featuring a pipa)*

Week 3 - Music from the Tang Dynasty  
*(featuring flutes & percussion)*

Week 4 - Music from the Song Dynasty  
*(featuring bianzhong)*

Week 5 - Music from the Qing Dynasty  
*(featuring strings)*

Week 6 - Traditional & Neo-Traditional  
Chinese Instrumental