Volume 2, Chapter 1: A General Discussion on Construction of Ch'in

The ch'in is an ancient musical instrument. It was first made by Fu Hsi (伏羲)[1] and has been handed down through the generations. Some of these instruments that have been passed down still exist. Their forms may be different, and even though one can look at these forms, still the deeper mysteries of construction have not been transmitted.

In former times the most famous ch'in maker was Lei Wei (雷威). He lived during the Ta-li (大歷) (766-780) period of the T'ang dynasty in Shu[2]. His clan included: (Lei) Hsiao (霄), Chueh (玨), Wen (文), and Hsun (迅) [3]. *[Someone has said that Wen (文) here is a mistake for Wei (威).]* During the same period there was Chang Yueh (張越). *[C: - Yueh(越) may be Yueh(鉞)],* Shen Liao (沈鐐) and Kuo Liang (郭亮)[4]. During the Ming dynasty there were Chu Kung-wang (祝公望), and Chu Hai-ho (祝海鶴), and the Prince of Lu (潞王)[5], all of whom were skilled in constructing the ch'in. But in no case have their methods been transmitted.

Occasionally one can get a surviving instrument and treasure it. Nevertheless in many cases these ch'in are falsely ascribed to the Ming dynasty Prince of I (益王)[6], whose literary name was Chu-hsien (臞仙), and who skillfully carved out a hundred ch'in and passed them on. Moreover he also edited the Shen-ch'i-mi-pu (神奇秘譜) ch'in handbook [7]. Nowadays these ch'in are seldom seen. Also if one examines all of the ch'in handbooks it is rare that one will find anything about construction. Some of them occasionally will mention a few things or talk about it in general terms and that is all. But in no case in the end do they go into any great detail in explaining its secrets. Nowadays when ch'in are made, two slabs of wood are taken and cut out in the form of a ch'in, which is like copying around a gourd with everything then complete. In the end one does not know the reason for the origin of the methods nor the logic behind why things are done in a certain way.

I have been greatly interested in ch'in construction for over thirty years now. I have seen during my time several hundred ch'in of previous eras and taken apart and repaired many of them. I have analyzed all questions of materials and construction methods, both inside

[1] Legendary culture-hero of prehistoric times.
[2] Present day Szechwan.
[3] See Martin Gimm, "Historische Bemerkunge zur Chinesischen Instrumentenbaukunst der T'ang, I and II", Oriens Extremus, XVII (1970), 9-38, and XVIII (1971), 123-33 for a discussion of the Lei clan ch'in-makers.
[4] Cf. Gimm's article p. 12 for Chang Yueh, who was from Kiangsu (Wu).
[5] A Ming prince who lived in Hangchow. He was a builder of ch'in, some of which still exist. Van Gulik, p.215 states: "Specimens of instruments built at Hangchow by him or under his direct supervision are often met with in Chinese collections; most bear dates of the Ch'ung-chen (1628-44) period."
[6] Another Ming prince (1564?) and ch'in builder of the Ming. See Van Gulik, p. 215. However, the literary name, Chu-hsien , actually belongs to the prince of Ning (寧王), and that is who he meant.
[7] Again, the prince of Ning compiled this book. See Van Gulik, p. 214.

and outside ch'in. I have also done extensive research into what is suitable and unsuitable, since once one gains familiarity, one then starts to understand the tricks of the trade. I can say I have gained quite a lot of experience. If one builds and repairs according to the prescribed methods, then naturally one will understand its secrets. Now I want to explain these mysteries in successive order starting from selecting materials, to construction, to repairs. Also a section on tools and how to use them will be included.

I intend to bring everything out and treat everything in detail. This creation will be like a monk's robe and alms bowl being handed down (to his disciples)[8]. It is my hope that students of ch'in making will continue this craft.

[8] A monk's robe and begging bowl (particularly from a patriarch) were held in reverence, as they were symbols of spiritual authority. Chu's wish is that his book might be given the same treatment so that its knowledge would be perpetuated.