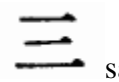
Volume 4, Chapter 4:
Dictionary of Right-Hand Symbols

Translator's note: For each simplified tablature symbol (meaning the simplified character or characters used in qin tablature), we first supply the qin simplified character form as scanned from the original text. As necessary, the qin tablature symbol is followed by the traditional unsimplified Chinese character (or characters), and combined pinyin (only) romanization, with tone number in parenthesis. The pinyin pronunciation was not taken from the original text. Finally, the translation from the text is given, which in some cases may have commentary. The original commentary is always given in italics.

 yi(1). String 1.[1]

er(4). String 2.

 san(1). String 3.

si(4). String 4.

wu(3). String 5.

liu(4). String 6.

qi(1). String 7.

In the tablature, all the previous numeric symbols are written in the normal fashion, without simplification. In older handbooks, they were not entered, but now we put them in the music.

散, san(3) (lit. “empty”, hence open). *[This applies to whenever you do not press (a string) and obtain sound.]* The left hand does not press a string. Only the right hand according to its fingering method plays a string. These are called “san” sounds.[2]

[1] The first string is farthest from the player. String seven is closest to the player.

托, tuo(1) (lit. "pull"). *[On any string obtain one sound.]* The thumb plays out towards the hui, we call this tuo. *[The hui are outside (from the player), hence "plays out".]* Probably because the reach from the first to the sixth or second to seventh strings is far, and gou[3] 句 and tiao 挑 can't reach, then the use of the thumb is necessary. Nowadays, some people (use the thumb) and face it upwards, perpetuating a mistake. They cause the thumb to face upwards to perform tuo, striking the top of the ch'in. The sound is harsh and muddy. How can something fine be obtained? Can we not agree to stop this bad practice?

擘 pi(1). *[On any string, obtain one sound.]* The thumb plays in towards the body. We call this bo (擘, bo(4))[4] This symbol is not often used. Yan Tian-chi (嚴天池) and Xu Qing-shan (徐青山)[5] took playing out towards the hui to mean this character, and tuo 拖 to mean playing in towards the body. Thus the names were not the same. At least the finger used was the same.

抹, mo(3). *[On any string, obtain one sound.]* The index finger plays in towards the body. We call this mo. This motion should be sharply done. It should not be done by brushing and also not done heavily. If too heavy, then the result could be muddy.

挑, tiao(1). *[On any string, obtain one sound.]* The index finger plays out towards the hui. We call this "tiao". The finger should hang and fall and this should lead to a strong and clear tone - pure, and smartly done, without obstruction. If a companion string is struck, the result will not be clear.

抹挑 mo(3) tiao(1) *[On the same string, two sounds are continuous.]* At the appropriate string/hui position, whether pressing or playing an open string, there should be two sounds. First do mo, then perform tiao. This symbol is written as one symbol.

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[2] In Western musical terminology "san" could be said to mean open, as in "open strings". "An" 按 or "pressed" is the opposite.
[3] See below. These are the most common right-hand strokes.
[4] Bo is an alternative character to pi. One meaning is "thumb".
[5] Both are famous Ming dynasty qin players. See Xu Jian (許健), *Qin Shi* (琴史), (Renmin Yinyue Qubanshe. 1982.), pp. 125-126.

句, gou(1). *[On any string, obtain one sound.]* The middle finger plays in towards the body. We call this gou. You should use half fingernail and half flesh. People only know that when using the left-hand thumb, they should use half nail and half finger. They do not know that when using the right hand and playing a string, with gou, or mo, this is also the case. If only the fingernail is used, then the sound is superficial. Technique here involves taking the fleshy part of the finger and with the finger's fleshy part striking the string. "Strike heavy and enter lightly". First use the flesh and then the nail. You must strike directly, and not brush at an angle. Also don't let the fingernail strike the surface of the qin. We will not go over this again.

剔, ti(1). *[Make one sound on any string.]* The middle finger plays out towards the hui. This is called ti. Do not be too inflexible. If too inflexible, then the result may be hurried. In playing, you do not want to go too deep. If too deep, blockage may occur.[6] You want to move in a dexterous manner. When the fingernail is used to play out in the correct piercing way, the sound has a fullness. If you perform ti so that you wrongly strike the next string, and cause unwanted sounds, you may not have the proper harmony. This is a fingering defect. The playing motion here should be similar to tiao 挑.

句剔, gou(3)-ti(1). *[On the same string, obtain two successive sounds.]* At the string/hui position, perhaps pressing a string, perhaps playing an open string, there should be two sounds. First play the gou, then the ti. Thus they are joined in the writing.

打, da(3). *[Obtain one sound on any string.]* The ring finger plays in towards the body. This is called da. It is used with the first and second string. It may also be used when playing open strings. Also it may be used because you have to go too far to play a string, so it can be very convenient. The playing method is not any different from gou 剔. Thus da is the name for using the ring finger and playing in (towards the player). There is a mistaken idea that this means to strike the string with great force. One can but laugh.[7]

摘, zhai(1). *[Obtain one sound on any string.]* The ring finger plays out towards the hui. This is called "zhai". Zhai must be played with dexterity. After continued practice it is best if the fingertip achieves some compromise between flexibility and firmness. Zhai is mostly used with the "roll" (gun 滾) and the "wheel" (lun 輪). More details will be found later (with those symbols).

[6] You might hit the top board of the qin.
[7] "Da" literally means "to hit" or "to strike", hence the confusion.

Whenever the right hand four fingers play strings[8], you use the eight methods: tuo 托, pi 劈, mo 抹, tiao 挑, gou 句, ti 剔, da 打, and zhai 摘. These should be used above the first hui. When executing these (methods), in all cases obtain a strong and clear sound. If played around or below the third or fourth hui, the fingers will enter in a crooked superficial way, producing a weak sound. Regarding harmonics, one should approach the bridge to obtain strength and clarity. If the left hand is pressing the strings above the fourth or fifth hui, then the right hand should play near the first hui. Wherever, don't play too heavily. All should have a clear shining sound, without being too agitated. Scholars! Note this well, as we will not return to it later.

歷, li(4). *[Several strings obtain a continuous sound.]* The index finger performs tiao 挑 continuously on two or more strings. Make the sounds with lightness, quickness, continuity, and clarity. This is also called du 度.

如一, ru(3)-yi(1) (literally, "like one"). *[On two strings, at the same time make one sound.]* One string is pressed and one is open. Using ti 剔, play out on two strings, simultaneously producing one sound. Phrases (in a song) with a need for strong harmony may use it.

疊涓 die(3)-juan(1). *[On the same string, two sounds are made in succession.]* At some string position, where the strings may be pressed or open, there should be two sounds. Mo 抹 and gou 句 are rapidly played. First play mo, and then play gou. The sounds obtained should be continuous, quick, and clear.

抹句, mo(3)-gou(1). When found in the notation, this is short for the previous symbol.

摟圓, lou(1)-yuan(2). *[With two strings, make one sound.]* At two strings, using gou 句, and mo 抹, each play one string. The fingers play together, and cause two strings to simultaneously make one sound. Do not slant to the side. Only harmonics use this (symbol). This is also called ban-fu 半扶, which is written in the qin notation.

[8] The thumb is considered a finger. The four fingers are the thumb, index, middle, and ring finger.

全扶 quan(2)-fu(2). *[On three strings, altogether make one sound.]* Using index, middle, and ring fingers, each to a string, da 打, gou 句, and mo 抹 play together, each obtaining one sound. This is also used with harmonics.

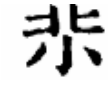
半扶, ban(4)-fu(2). *[On two strings, altogether make one sound.]* This is also lou-yuan 摟圓.

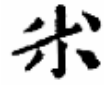
鼓, gu(3). *[Together on one or two strings, make two sounds.]* With one string pressed, one string open, play ti 剔 and tiao 挑 in succession. With two strings there will be two sounds. First play ti, then tiao. This is also called shuang-tan 雙彈.

雙彈, shuang(1)-tan(3) (literally, "double-play"). This is the same as gu 鼓. It is also similar to ban-lun 半輪.[9]

輪 lun(2) (literally, "wheel"). *[In succession, on one or two strings, make three sounds.]* On the same string, in succession, play zhai 摘, ti 剔, tiao 挑, obtaining three sounds. Lun has slow and fast forms. It depends on the rhythm of the song. As for the bending of the knuckles of the three fingers, they should be lined up and close together. The result should be strong, clear, and precise.

半輪 ban(4)-lun(2) (literally, "half-wheel"). *[On one or two strings, successively make two sounds.]* Using the ring and middle fingers, play zhai 摘, and ti 剔. The fingering is (roughly) like gu 鼓. There is some similarity.

 背銷 bei(1)-xiao(1). *[On the same string, make three sounds.]* On the same string, use ti 剔, mo 抹, tiao 挑, to successively play three sounds. Ti and mo should be played quickly, and tiao somewhat slowly, following the rhythm. This is also called shao(3)-xiao(1) 少銷.

 少銷 shao(3)-xiao(1). See previous.

[9] Note how there are two paired symbols left and right. There is also a form that has three such pairs (san-tan), and has three double notes in succession. It is played with zhai, ti, and tiao in that order.

短銷 duan(3)-xiao(1). *[On the same string, make five sounds.]* On the same string, First slowly play two sounds using mo 抹, and gou 句. Then add in bei-xiao 背銷, which will altogether total five sounds.

長銷 chang(2)-xiao(1). *[On the same string, make seven sounds.]* On the same string first evenly play four sounds using mo 抹 tiao 挑 mo 抹 gou 句. Then add bei-xiao 背銷 to altogether make seven sounds. It is also possible that nine sounds are used. In that case, add mo 抹 and tiao 挑 at the beginning. Play this with care.

打圓 da(3)-yuan(2) (literally, "striking a circle"). *[On two strings, altogether make seven sounds.]* One tiao 挑, one gou 句 - each has a string and alternates. First make two sounds (tiao, then gou). Then less slowly and more rapidly, repeat two times, making four sounds. Then add one more tiao 挑.[10] Altogether there are seven sounds. Alternatively, one could also use tuo 托 and gou 句 in a similar way. Possibly the beauty of this technique lies in getting the fast rhythm right for the central four sounds. The sound should be bright. The playing should be even and smooth. The whole thing should be lively, without a hint of slowness. If tiao is heavy and gou light, and the strength of playing is uneven, then the desired freshness cannot be obtained. Carefully discern this!

滾 gun(3) (literally, "to turn round/to roll"). *[On a number of strings, several sounds are continuously linked together without a break.]* The ring finger using zhai 摘 starts with the seventh string, and continuously plays zhai through and including the second string. Or one starts from some string and plays (away) to some other string without restriction between the seventh and second strings. The technique involves bending the knuckle but at the same time holding the last digit firmly. Practice until it can be played with strength. Push through firmly and then release the finger. The sound should be "rolling". Gun is also called lin 臨.[11]

臨 lin(2). This symbol is another name for gun 滾. It is often used with harmonics.

[10] There are three pairs of tiao, gou, followed by a final tiao.
[11] Note that gun is often followed by fu 沸 to make a continuous rolling sound.

沸 fu(2). (literally, "bubbling/boiling"). *[On several strings, make several continuous sounds.]* The index finger using the mo 抹 technique continuously plays from the first string through the seventh string. Or from some string to some other string and then stops. Do not get hung up anywhere. Do not play it in an explosive heavy way. Rather play it smoothly and continuously without interruption. Then it will have some flavor.

滾沸 gun(3)-fu(4). *[The two techniques are continuously played together over the strings.]* One gun and one fu are used in succession. It is essential to play the two techniques without interruption. It is best to play continuously without stopping. All of it should be clear like the hidden and mysterious sound of thunder. Play cleanly without clamor. On the strings the technique involves obtaining a circular form when playing. Starting with gun, turn to the left, circling from the inside out. For fu, turn to the right, and circle out coming back to the inside. Both techniques together are like the form of a circle. Practice until the two techniques are naturally linked together. Today, many play one zhai and one mo as if it should be an octagon. And often divide the technique into two. In the end, they cannot make it continuous, simply because they do not know of the circular technique.

索鈴 suo(3)-ling(2) (literally, "a string of bells"). *[On a number of strings, a number of sounds are played in a continuous manner.]* It is similar in form to gun 滾. Using tiao 挑, one presses the seventh string, and then plays it. One then presses the sixth string, and using tiao again, plays it. This technique is repeated over some number of strings, successively away from the player. The entire tiao motion is like a set of bells on a string. The sound rolls off without interruption. Beauty depends on continuity. This technique is often used with harmonics. The manner for obtaining sound is similar to that of gun. However one technique uses zhai, and the other uses tiao. Consequently the names are different.

潑剌 po(1)-ci(4)[12] (literally, "splashing sound"). *[This is two techniques played on the same two strings. Each makes one sound.]* By itself one finds 潑 written in the tablature as . In the tablature, 剌 is written as . When used together they are written as . In some cases one of the two strings is pressed and the other is open. In some cases, they are both pressed or both open. With the po technique one uses the ring, middle, and index fingers all joined together. The last two digits of the fingers must

[12] La(2) is another possible pronunciation as opposed to ci.

bend. The ring finger is extended more than the middle finger, which is extended more than the index finger, resulting in a slanted form. The fingers line up lightly moving in, sketching out a form like a single brushstroke down to the left. Together they make one sound. We call this po. As for the ci technique, it uses the ring, middle, and index fingers all together. One bends the knuckle (back) with the ring finger slightly exceeding the middle finger, which in turn slightly exceeds the index finger.[13] The fingers play the strings at the same time, forming something akin to a brushstroke up and to the right. One sound is made. This is called ci. Po-ci are two techniques, used together, their form goes and comes; hence the name. It is like a "wandering fish slapping its tail". Appearance and reality converge. One may observe it if it is well played, and hear it too if the musical sound is pure and strong. If played too heavily, the result will be too agitated. If played too lightly, then the result will be too weak. It should be somewhat like a wind through pine trees, with the sounds rising together, and played in a natural way, lacking any obstruction. This then will be excellent. The technique depends on all three fingers touching the strings together. The sound should have a natural twang. The fingers should not be too far from the strings. Otherwise the result might be too powerful of an attack. It is best to play in and out near the strings. There are cases of those who when playing po grasp too far, which cannot avoid being rough and coarse.

泼 po(1). See previous (潑剌).[14]

剌 ci(4). See previous (潑剌)

撮, cuo(4) (literally, "pinch"). *[Simultaneously on two strings make one sound.]* Using gou 句, and tiao 挑, at the same time sound two strings. Or use gou and tuo 托 together.[15] Both (combinations) are called "cuo". Sometimes one string is pressed and one string is open. Sometimes both are open. Sometimes both are pressed. Two strings are played to produce one sound. Do not play it in some irregular manner. It should not be too loud. If too loud, it will be noisy. The two strings should instantly be in accordance.

[13] The ring finger bends (back) more than the middle finger which in turn moves more than the index finger.
[14] Po and ci are not broken out in the original text, but are done so here because in particular po may appear by itself in qin-pu.
[15] Which pair to use depends on how the distance between the paired strings. For example, the middle finger and thumb would be used with string pairs 1/6. The middle finger and ring finger would be used when the paired strings are closer together; for example, with string pairs 5/7.

反撮 fan(3)-cuo(4) (literally, "reverse-pinch"). *[On two strings, at the same time make one sound]*. If you use gou 句 and tiao 挑 to perform cuo 撮, then to reverse it, use mo 抹 and ti 剔. If you use gou and tuo 托, then reverse that by using pi 劈 and ti. The sound should be similar to the use of cuo.

掐撮三聲 tao(1)-cuo(4)-san(1)-sheng(1). *[Two strings together make eight sounds.]* These sounds are played at a conclusion.[16] The left ring finger holds down a string. The left thumb then plays one tao 掐[17] (technique) *[for details, see the left hand symbol section under tao]*, followed by one cuo 撮 with the right hand. This is in turn followed by two tao; followed in turn, by a single right-hand cuo. Generally speaking, we have three kinds of sounds, from the ring finger, the cuo, and the tao. There are three tao, and two cuo. Each tao has an implicit additional "hammer-on"(罨) sound. Together there are eight sounds.[18] *[The first section has three sounds, and the latter section has five sounds]*. The "hammer-on" should be on the note position (on the surface of the qin).

掐潑剌三聲 tao(1)-po(1)-ci(4)-san(1)-sheng(1). *[With the three sounds, tao, po, ci, on two strings, obtain eight sounds.]* This is similar to the previous technique. Using the left-hand play one tao. Then using the right-hand play one po. Follow this using the left hand, play two tao, and then play one ci with the right. This technique also signals a conclusion (of a musical section).

摘潑剌 zhai(1)-po(1)-ci(4). *[First make one sound on each of two strings. Then make two sounds on two strings. Together there are four sounds.]* The ring finger plays zhai on the second string, and first string. Then add po-ci on the two strings.

伏 fu(2) (literally, "to prostate oneself"). *[On two strings make one sound without music.]* This symbol indicates an abrupt concluding sound. The technique is similar to ci 剌 but the sound is different. One makes it on the first two strings, in the vicinity of the fourth to fifth hui. At the point when the fingers are extended to make the

[16] It is played at the conclusion of a section or piece.
[17] This is a left-hand technique. The thumb plays two sounds, first by striking down (in guitar terms, this is a "hammer-on"), and then by pulling-off on the string using the thumb nail. The string is held down by the ring finger at a higher hui position.
[18] In point of fact, the technique usually begins with a cuo, although our author is basically ignoring how the left-hand ring finger got placed in the first place.

ci, one brings the palm down to cover the strings. The musical sound of the strings is repressed, with the first two strings beaten down to the ch'in surface, resulting in a clipped sound. It is best if played clearly and strongly like the tearing of silk.

In general when playing the strings, (the right hand) should be inside the first hui. Only fu is played between the fourth and fifth hui. Do not play it in the vicinity of the first hui, because near the bridge, the strings are high. One fears that the fingers might fall through and become tangled up.