

The Chinese Xylophone 木琴

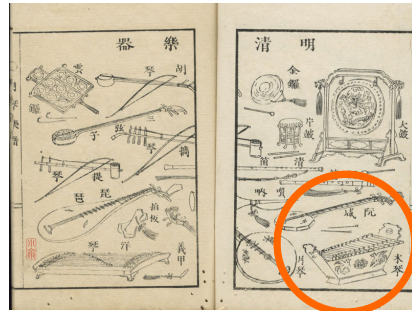
Accidentally [re-]discovered in the CCC Museum Collection on October 18th, 2012, the exact history of the Cantonese xylophone or *muqin* (木琴; “wooden-zither”) on display is subject to further investigation. It is certain, however, that the instrument is not tuned according the Western equal-tempered scale. The instrument is accompanied by a hand-written *gongche* 工尺 notation chart, which specifies the notes of the Chinese musical mode (similar to the idea of solfege, or *do-re-mi* in Western music), presumably for pedagogical purposes.



www.sciencehuman.com

Xylophones are generally not considered today as a typical Chinese instrument. Yet a 2006 discovery of a 15-key stone xylophone in the city of Zhaoqing (肇慶) in Canton province, dating back to the mid-Qing Dynasty (ca 1600 AD), suggests its possible use in earlier Chinese music practices.

In a late 19th-century Japanese depiction of instruments imported from the Ming and Qing-Dynasty China, one also notices the presence of *muqin*, which bares a strong resemblance to the Indonesian (Javanese) *gambang*. *Mokkin* (the Japanese pronunciation of *muqin*) became popularized in Japan during the Edo period, and was depicted by Hokusai in his prints. It is reasonable to postulate that Chinese or Western merchants might have brought xylophone-like instruments from Southeast Asia to both China and Japan around the 17th Century.

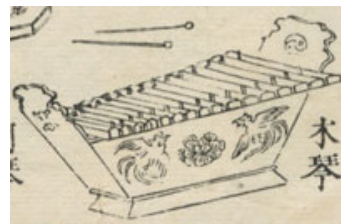


From *Gekkin Gappu* (Japan, 1878)



www.orgs.usd.edu

Javanese *gambang*



muqin/mokkin

Speaking of Southeast Asian xylophones, one popular view holds that they might have been introduced to Africa via the island of Madagascar by early Southeast Asian sea travellers, subsequently giving rise to the dazzling array of African xylophones, and perhaps even the *mbira*, or “finger piano.” As a supporting evidence, Magalasy, the indigenous language of Madagascar, is not an African language, but the Western-most member of the Austronesian language family, which also includes Indonesian/Malay and Tagalog.

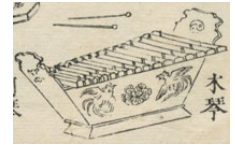


www.orgs.usd.edu

Africa

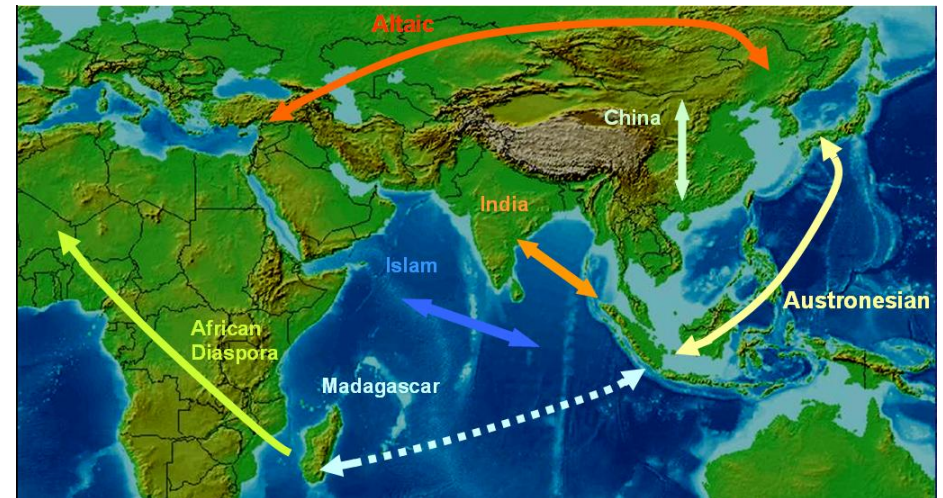


Indonesia



China/Japan

In the early 20th Century, xylophone made its “comeback” into the Cantonese musical scene in its Western form, along with the introduction of Western pop music elements such as harmony, as well as violins, saxophones, drum sets, and even electric guitars and basses – let us not forget that Western pop music is, in itself, a legacy of the African Diaspora. We can thus construct a map of musical/cultural continuum with circular relationships. In fact, from the map below, one can appreciate the various forces that helped to shape Chinese culture throughout the centuries, partly explaining, for example, the inherent North-South dichotomy between Altaic-influenced Mandarin culture in the north, and the southern cultures, such as that of the Cantonese people.



No attempt is being made here to impose a direct relationship between Cantonese and African xylophones. Rather, this perhaps somewhat novel juxtaposition is intended to illustrate an overall, *general* connection among cultures, and *humanity* – whether by divergence or convergence – and as an added *dimension* to the ongoing phenomenon of an *East-West Dialogue*.