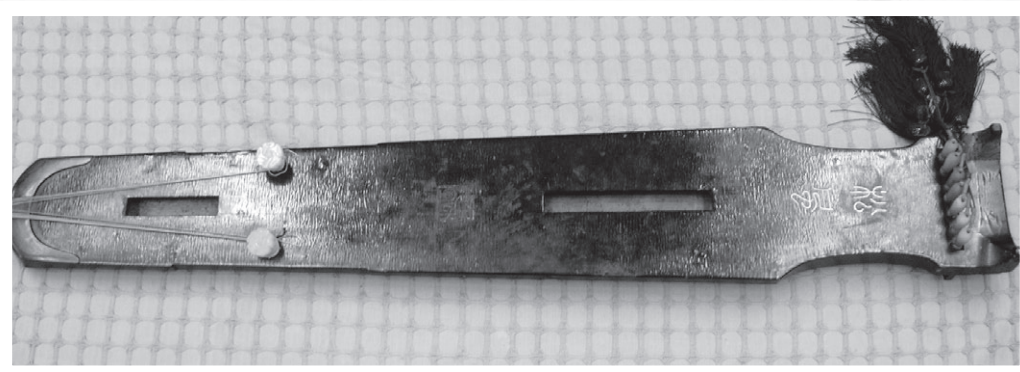
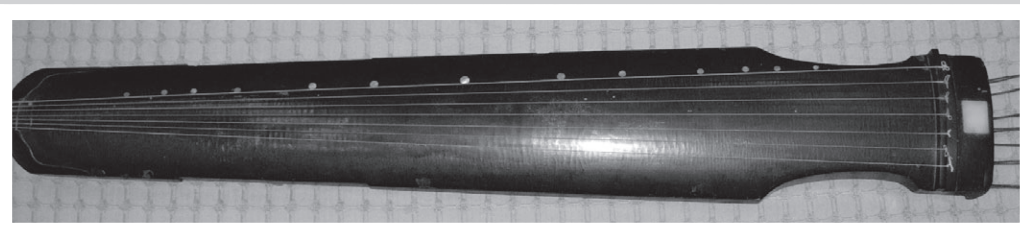


# Van Gulik and the Chinese Lute

The Dutch sinologist, Robert Hans van Gulik (1910-1967), was once voted as being among the 100 foreigners who had significantly influenced Chinese culture in the 20th century. Orientalist, diplomat, musician, writer, Van Gulik is probably best known for his stories, the Judge Dee mysteries. Yet this polymath also had colourful 'amateur careers' in Chinese arts such as painting and calligraphy and he was the first sinologist to study the Chinese lute. Mei-Yen Lee examines Van Gulik's contributions in this regard.

Mei-Yen Lee



Above:  
Van Gulik's lute, 'Pine Wind' (literally named), was made at the end of the Ming dynasty, nearly 400 years ago. Provided by Prof. Willem van Gulik.

NO OTHER MUSICAL INSTRUMENT is so often depicted in Chinese paintings, or so often mentioned in Chinese poetry as the 'Chinese lute'. 'Chinese lute' is the rather poetic name coined by Van Gulik for this ancient seven-stringed zither, known in Chinese as the *ch'in* or *guqin* ('gu' = old; 'qin' = stringed instrument). While he clearly stated in his book that he was aware that the *guqin* is not, in fact, a lute, he adopted the organologically incorrect term as he thought Westerners would more easily associate 'lute' with poetry and intellectual life. The Chinese lute has undergone few changes in more than three thousand years and it was prized as the primary musical instrument played by Chinese scholars, who used it to express their feelings through a rich variety of techniques which have been preserved in *guqin* handbooks.

#### An amateur career

Van Gulik's best known writings on the lute are *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: an essay on the ideology of the Ch'in* (1940) and *Hsi K'ang and his Poetical Essay on the Lute* (1941), both published by Sophia University in Tokyo. These two books confirmed Van Gulik's status as the first sinologist in the western academy to attain expertise on *guqin* music. Although, in recent times a handful of Westerners have published extensively on the *guqin* and its repertoire, these scholars were more or less illuminated by Van Gulik's writings.

Van Gulik's interest in the Chinese lute began in his student days and continued throughout his life. In 1933, Van Gulik wrote an article for the periodical *China*, 'Wu Liu Hsien Sheng' (The Wise Man of the Five Willows), the name given to T'ao Ch'ien (T'ao Yüan-ming), a famous poet and lute player, with a distaste for official duties and a predilection for flowers and wine. Van Gulik's article concludes with the words:

*"what remains in one's memory is no more than the strangely melodious and pleasant sound of Chinese poems; there was the tune of a lute; there was a garden full of roses and chrysanthemums. There was some wine and some feeling of melancholy. No more than that".*

Between 1935 and 1942, Van Gulik was posted to Japan. It was from there that he made a trip to Peking in the autumn of 1936, keen to collect antiques and ancient books. During this trip, he also purchased an ancient Chinese lute which he learned to play with the famous Master Ye Shi-meng, a member of the Fujian Minnan school of performance, to whom he later dedicated his book *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*. He also began doing serious research on the Chinese *ch'in* and its music, purchasing books and manuscripts on the subject and visiting Chinese lute players. On his return to Tokyo after his first visit to Peking in 1936, Van Gulik ordered a lute table and continued his mastery of the *ch'in* with a Japanese teacher.



Above:  
Dr. Robert Hans van Gulik (1910-1967)

He wrote a number of academic papers on the subject. He spent many months poring over important historical Sino-Japanese literature in a famous Tokyo library, the *Naikaku, bunka*. In 1939 he wrote in his notes: 'I played the lute every day in Tokyo.'

When Van Gulik was posted to Chungking (1943-1946), he joined the famous Chinese lute society *T'ien-Feng Ch'in She*, (the Heaving Wind Lute Association). It brought him in contact with prominent scholars such as the aged Yü Yu-chen and with colourful figures like General Fen Yu-hsiang. Van Gulik was the only foreigner and also the youngest member of the *T'ien-Feng Ch'in She* and the membership opened the door for him to study the *ch'in* further under the tutelage of masters such as Guan Ping-hu, Guan Zhong-hang and Yang Shi-bai.

#### A missing definition

In *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in Ch'in Ideology*, Van Gulik conscientiously and carefully collected, translated and interpreted many texts regarding the Chinese lute, also including illustrations and four appendices.

Van Gulik reveals his motives for writing the book in the Preface:

*"Although the tones of the lute may be featured, when listening to them, who shall be able to fathom their significance?"*

*"This essay is an attempt to describe the cultural significance of a Chinese musical instrument, the seven-stringed lute." (p.VII)*

After studying these texts, Van Gulik found that the historical and cultural significance of the lute ('*Ch'in-tao*') outweighed the significance of the Chinese lute music itself. For a Westerner to have this prescience is truly surprising. Moreover, '*Ch'in-tao*' did not have a set definition in Chinese culture, something anomalous from a Western standpoint, and so Van Gulik set out to create some definitions:

*"Literally: the Way of the Lute, meaning: the inner significance of the lute and how to apply this in order to find in the lute a means for reaching enlightenment." (p.35)*

*"This term Ch'in-tao might be translated as 'the doctrine of the lute'; but as we do not possess a special text where the principles of this doctrine are set forth, I think a vague term like 'ideology of the lute', is the more suitable translation." (pp.35-36)*

In his translation of Chinese *Ch'in-tao*, Van Gulik attempted to create not only a literal translation, but also a cultural interpretation by addressing the social implications of the texts that he had analysed. While it is possible to describe the *Ch'in-tao* in a way that is accessible to Westerners, Van Gulik's definition is inadequate. This is because, due to the nature of Chinese philosophy, the definitions of spiritual concepts are derived from lifestyle rather than from academic knowledge.



Van Gulik said:

*"In the long course of its development, Ch'in ideology benefited by its lack of delimitation; because of the absence of a fundamental text, Ch'in- tao was able to absorb a great wealth of various conceptions."* (p.36)

#### Ch'in ideology

In order to help him explain the concepts of *Ch'in- tao*, Van Gulik analysed the establishment and evolution of *Ch'in* ideology in relation to Chinese Confucian (social), Taoist (religious) and Buddhist (psychological) influences. Van Gulik notes, for example, that according to the doctrine of Confucianism, playing the lute is a way to keep men in good spirits:

*"Thus the lute, through its capacity for restraining human passions, was a suitable instrument for everyone desiring to become the ideal statesman and ruler of the Confucianist school of thought, the Superior Man or Chün-tzû."* (p.43)

He also asserted that Taoism and Confucianism were both connected with the ideology of *Ch'in- tao*, but that their explanations and appreciation of this concept differ considerably:

*"...it will be clear that next to the influence of Confucianist literary tradition, Taoist conceptions also contributed to the formation of Ch'in ideology, and promoted its further development."* (p.48)

Van Gulik's opinions were the key to the Chinese *Ch'in- tao*, but there was some confusion in other statements he made about pre-*Ch'in* Taoist thought and the later form practiced from the Han dynasty onwards.

#### Taoism and the Ch'in- tao

Van Gulik wrote:

*"These early Taoist conceptions are the foundation on which the most imposing monuments of Chinese thought are built. It seems, however, that these teachings were taken in their literal sense already at a fairly early date. Especially in the first century A.D., when Taoism was reorganized after the example of Buddhism, the accent fell more and more on the materialistic aspects of meditation. Meditation was no longer exclusively considered as a means for salvation, but chiefly as a means for obtaining occult powers, to perform all kinds of magical feats. So the passage of Lieh-tzû quoted above was interpreted as a description of a method of accomplishing levitation, while Chuang-tzû's definition of yang-shêng was taken to refer to the art of prolonging life. The lofty teachings of Taoism degenerated into alchemy, aiming at transmuting metals and finding the elixir of immortality. Returning now to the lute, we see that the fundamentals of ch'in ideology described above fitted in exactly with Taoism, both with its philosophical and with its alchemistic aspect."* (p.46)

The flaw in Van Gulik's viewpoint is his idea that the Chinese drive for longevity –through controlling their desires, using breathing techniques and imbibing special herbs –was equivalent to Western alchemy. In fact, the two schools of thought are very different, with merely superficial similarities. Since the Han dynasty, the Chinese have associated excellent musicianship with longevity. This was related to their concept of vital energy, or 'Ch'i.' Van Gulik mistakenly linked Taoism with distinctly different Taoist entities. There were other important viewpoints in his works:

*"Playing the lute purifies one's nature by banishing low passions; therefore, it is a sort of meditation, a means for communicating directly with tao. Its rarefied notes reproduce the 'sounds of emptiness', and so the music of the lute tunes the soul of the player in harmony with tao. Further, as we shall see below, the measurements and the construction of the lute all stand for cosmic elements, so its contemplation is conducive to a realization of eternal truths and cosmic harmony."* (p.46)

Right:  
Van Gulik's 'seal cutting' on the bottom board of his lute 'Pine Wind'.  
Provided by Prof. Willem van Gulik.



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How could playing the lute purify one's nature by banishing low passions, and allowing one to communicate directly with tao? Van Gulik proposed his opinions as follows:

*"Seen from the more materialistic angle, playing the ch'in was a means for purifying the body, thus bestowing upon the performer freedom from sickness, and longevity. To obtain these blessings, neo-Taoistic writers recommend, in addition to fasting, etc., exercises for learning to regulate breathing, lien-ch'i. Now, playing the lute is said to harmonize the circulation of the blood, thereby regulating the breathing. In this way the vital Yang essence in the body is cultivated, and evil influences are driven away. As the philosopher Kuan-tzû observes: 'to regulate the blood and the breath, in order to obtain longevity'."* (p.47)

Van Gulik's analysis was a general description and would have offered a more profound explanation had he gone further in his discussion of Chinese philosophy. In fact, we return again to the idea that man's vital energy, or 'Ch'i', is the most important element in Chinese lute music.

Before playing the lute, the lute player has to sit still with a peaceful mind, meditating to avoid the intrusion of distracting thoughts. Once the lute player concentrates his thoughts and frees himself from the indulgence of earthly materials, his soul can be drawn into deep peace and his body's vital energy,

or 'Ch'i' can function well. After a skilled performance, the lute player will reach a high level of perfection. The melody of the lute music continues to reverberate; that is the significance of the *Ch'in- tao*.

#### Conclusion

Van Gulik said: "Lute amateurs indignantly protest against the designation of lute music as an art, for it is far more than that, it is a Way, a path of wisdom, tao." This concise statement sums up Chinese *Chin- tao's* significance.

In fact, Van Gulik must have been very close to unlocking the secrets of Chinese culture. Although he made many interesting points about Chinese lute knowledge, it's a pity that he didn't develop further his discussions regarding the major schools of Chinese philosophy. That said, while his interpretations were imperfect, they still constitute an invaluable study today.

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