Brief Note on the Cheng, the Chinese Small Cither

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I. Description of the instrument, and the way it is played

The cheng is an oblong cither, consisting of a wooden sound box, over which a number of strings are strung. The sound box is made of thin boards of wu-t'ung wood (梧桐, Firmiana platanifolia); its bottom is flat, its upper board slightly curved. The bottom board shows an oblong aperture for transmitting the sound, and used also for suspending the instrument on a hook in the wall when it is not being played.

The shape of the box, the number of strings, and the ornamentation differ locally, but the underlying principle of the instrument is always the same. At either end of the upper board of the sound box there is a high bridge of hard wood. On the right the strings, after having passed over this bridge, enter holes in the upper board, and are prevented from slipping out by little staves of bamboo tied on to them. On the left each string, after having passed over the left bridge, is pulled through a hole, and then wound round a hard wood tuning peg, chou. When tuning the instrument, the pitch of each string is first fixed approximately by turning the peg. Then the pitch is adjusted by moving to the left or right a wooden fret of about 6 cm. high, that is placed under each string. As the frets are kept in place only by the pressure of the string, they are easily lost. Accordingly they are usually strung together by a cord of coloured silk.

The cheng occurs in two types, the Northern and the Southern. The Northern type, which survives in Honan Province, has sixteen or thirteen strings. The Southern type, found mainly in Kwangtung and Fukien Province, always has sixteen strings.
The Plate (see Page 25) shows a sketch of a Northern cheng with sixteen strings. It will be noticed that the frets cross the surface of the sound box diagonally, like a flight of wild geese; hence their technical name is yen-chu 鷺柱 “geese frets”.

Originally the strings were made of silk; since the beginning of the Ch'ing period (1644), however, brass strings are also used. The strings are numbered 1-16, no. 1 being the one farthest from the player. They may be divided into two sets, the lower set (nos. 1-8) consisting of thick strings, the higher set (nos. 9-16) of thinner ones. In the case of silk strings, one uses for the lower set the thick string (mu-hsien 母弦) of the Chinese two-stringed violin, for the higher the thin string (tzu-hsien 子弦) of the same instrument.

The sixteen strings are tuned as follows:

The player places the instrument before him in such a way that the end with the tuning pegs is on his left. The cheng is mostly played on a small table, but while being played in an orchestra it is also often put on two light wooden trestles. Old literary sources point to the fact that on occasion the cheng was also played on the lap.

"Playing the cheng" is called in Chinese tsou 弹 or tan 弹. Although in later times both these terms are used in the general sense of "playing the cheng", literary evidence suggests that originally tsou referred to a technique of playing entirely in octaves,
while tan indicated a technique of pulling only one string at a time.

Nowadays the cheng is played chiefly by the right hand. As a rule no plectrum is used, but some players employ artificial nails of bamboo, attached to the thumb and middle finger of the right hand by leather rings. Chinese literature often mentions artificial nails made of deer bone, and silver nail sheaths used by lady players.

Cheng music is played chiefly in octaves. These are produced by plucking any pair of strings separated by four intervening strings, utilizing thumb and middle finger. The lowest octave, for instance, is produced by simultaneously pulling with the middle finger string no. 1, and with the thumb no. 6. Single notes are produced by pulling inward or outward a single string with thumb, index, or middle finger. Finally a number of notes in rapid succession may be produced by running the thumb lightly over two or three strings.

The right hand touches the strings about five cm. to the left of the right bridge.

The left hand is used for producing grace-notes, and for raising the pitch of a string; it touches the strings to the left of the movable frets, about half-way to the left bridge.

A light vibrato is produced by applying rapid intermittent pressure with the middle finger of the left hand, while plucking the string with the right. A slower vibrato is produced by executing the same movement more slowly, and pressing down the string slightly deeper, after the right hand has pulled it. The pitch of a string is raised by pressing a string down for two or three centimeters, before the right hand has pulled it.

Finally, harmonics are produced either by touching a string lightly to the right of the fret with the left hand, exactly half-way between the fret and the bridge on the right, or by pressing the string lightly on the fret.

As regards the finger technique, playing the cheng is not very difficult. While it takes, for instance, years to learn to play the seven-stringed lute, ku-ch'in 古琴, one may become quite a good cheng performer in half a year or so. The main difficulty is to find one's
way quickly and accurately among the sixteen strings. Since these strings are rather close together, one needs slender and nimble fingers to arrive at a sure touch. One need not wonder, therefore, that since olden times the cheng has been a favourite instrument of lady musicians.

Notwithstanding the comparative simplicity of its structure and technique, the cheng produces a most charming music, and is capable of a wide range of musical expression.

II. History of the cheng, and its place in Chinese culture

Chinese literary sources are agreed that the cheng originated during the Ch’in period ( 秦, 221-206 B.C.); hence this instrument is often referred to as “the cither of Ch’in”, ch’in-cheng 秦筝.

The most authoritative sources credit the famous Ch’in general Meng Tien 梁恬 with the invention of the cheng. One should not, however, attach too much importance to this statement. Ancient Chinese writers are accustomed to trace the invention of various musical instruments of antiquity to famous persons or mythical beings. Meng Tien is, amongst other things, credited with having invented the writing brush, although archeological evidence has shown that this implement was in use already before his time.

Other books mention as the inventor of the cheng “a girl from Ch’in”, ch’in-nü 秦女, without giving further particulars.

Others again explain the origin of the cheng on the basis of phonetic speculations. Some aver that during the Ch’in period a certain person gave a se (瑟, the antique large cither with 25 strings) to his two daughters. They quarreled about who was to have it, and during this domestic difference the se was broken into two halves; each daughter took one half, and made it into a “small cither” with twelve strings. This story is built on the fact that the phonetic element in the character cheng, viz. cheng 炕, has the significance of “to quarrel”. Further the Shih-ming 释名, a dictionary of the Han period, avers that cheng is onomatopoeic, reproducing the sound
of the instrument. "The cheng", it says, "is an instrument the strings of which are strung very tight, so that it sounds cheng-cheng".

It goes without saying that these traditional views are valueless, beyond the fact that they all agree that the cheng originated during the Ch'in period. Here I shall briefly survey some more reliable data.

Li Ssu (李斯, died 208 B.C.), the Ch'in minister notorious for his decree relating to the burning of the Classical Books, is quoted by the Shih-chi (史记, a standard history dating from the Han period) as having said: "Now beating the earthen jar, rapping the clay drum, twanging the cheng, slapping one's thighs while singing songs, boisterous performances pleasing to both the ear and the eye, these constitute the true music of Ch'in". So this source definitively confirms that the cheng was a typical Ch'in instrument.

About the appearance of this primordial cheng little is known. The character for cheng is composed of two parts, the radical for 'bamboo', chu 竹, and the phonetic element cheng 争. This only suggests a musical instrument made of bamboo, and called cheng.

The first somewhat detailed description of the instrument is found in the preface which the scholar Fu Hsüan (傅玄, 217-278) added to his Cheng-fu "Poetical Essay on the Cheng". "If now we observe this instrument", he says, "we notice that its upper part is concave like the vault of Heaven, its bottom flat like the Earth; that its inside is hollow so as to accommodate the six points of the compass, and that its twelve strings with their frets symbolize the twelve months of the year". From this description one would conclude that the 3rd century cheng was not greatly different from the instrument as we know it now. Further we read in the Feng-su-tung-i (風俗通義, a reliable source of the 2nd century A.D.): "The cheng produces the music of the state of Ch'in. Some say that this instrument was created by Meng Tien, with five strings and a body like that of the chu (築, an old stringed instrument with a bamboo sound box, held to the shoulder with the left hand, and struck with
a bamboo stick. Transl.) The *cheng* which is now played in Ping (a district in S. Shansi) and Liang (in N. Kansu) resembles the *se*; it is not known who changed it in such a way”.

The 19th century scholar Chu Hsun-sheng 朱駿聲 says in his commentary on the 2nd century dictionary *Shuo-wen* (Shuo-wen-tung-hsun-ting-sheng 說文訓定聲): “The antique *cheng* had five strings, strung over a bamboo body, not unlike that of the *chu* (see above). Meng Tien of the Ch’in period increased the number of the strings to twelve, and changed the structure of the instrument after the *se*, using as material wood instead of bamboo. After the T’ang period (618–907) the number of strings was increased to thirteen”. That the primordial *cheng* had only five strings would seem logical: those would represent the five notes of the antique Chinese scale.

It is well known that the Ch’in period witnessed a remarkable revival of popular music. Consequently there was a great demand for musical instruments suitable for performing this music, chiefly as accompaniment for the human voice. Most of the instruments of the pre-Ch’in Chinese classical orchestra were unsuited for this purpose. This orchestra contained only two stringed instruments. The one, the *se*, was too unwieldy to handle, and on the other hand, the sound of the *ch’in* was too slight. Therefore new stringed instruments were created, of simple structure and less cumbersome than the *se*. Thus the cheng was built after the model of the *se*, and called *cheng*, probably a name borrowed from a crude either-like instrument of bamboo, popular among the people of Ch’in. This seems the simplest explanation of the origin of this instrument.

Space does not allow here to relate in detail the subsequent history of the *cheng*. Suffice it to say that it was never incorporated in the classical orchestra, but was used exclusively for music of a lighter genre.

It is worth mentioning that at an early date it was introduced into Japan, where it became the *koto*, to-day still one of the most popular Japanese musical instruments.

Cheng music flourished especially during the T’ang (唐 618–907) and
Ming (明 1368-1644) periods. It was played in Court circles and among the nobility. As a popular instrument it flourished in Central China (Honan Province), and in the South (especially in the Provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung). It would seem that it was mainly used for accompanying the human voice, although in Chinese literature one also finds references to the *cheng* being played as a solo instrument. The music performed might be broadly characterized as semi-classical, that is to say melodies of a lighter genre, which do not however lack literary elegance. In short, high class light music.

In the 18th century interest in cheng music gradually waned. During the rule of the Ch'ing conquerors, the life of the Chinese upper class lost more and more of its old charm. Although scholarship flourished, the "gentle arts" and refined literary pastimes all went through a period of signal decline. A further reason probably was the ever-growing ascendance of more popular stringed instruments, like the p'i-p'a and the two-stringed violin. Thereafter the number of those who could play this instrument gradually decreased. The *Tz'u-yüan* 辻源, one of the modern standard Chinese dictionaries, goes even so far as to state, sub voce *cheng*, that the art of playing this instrument now is lost completely. This statement, however, is an exaggeration. Although for more than a century the *cheng* has not longer been played in broader circles of Chinese lovers of music, there still survive a sufficient number of players to guarantee that the old tradition is not lost.

From a cultural point of view, the *cheng* occupies in Chinese musical life a position akin to that of the *p'i-p'a*, the well-known pear-shaped mandolin; *cheng-p'a* 程琶 "*cheng* and *p'i-p'a*" has become a fixed compound, used in both Chinese prose and poetry.

Although Chinese literary sources of the succeeding dynasties mention a number of scholars who attained fame because of their *cheng* playing, the small cither was first and foremost a ladies' instrument. It was played chiefly by Court ladies, by the female members of
noble households, and by high-class courtesans. While throughout the centuries the ch'in 弹, the seven-stringed lute, has been associated with solemn literary meetings in the scholar's library, and with the ceremonial orchestra in the Temple of Confucius, the cheng, on the other hand, suggested intimate gatherings in the harem, and gay informal parties enlivened by the presence of female entertainers.

Chinese essays and poems often mention cheng music in connection with beautiful maidens and love intrigues, while a young girl playing the cheng was a favourite subject depicted by ancient painters. As an illustration of these associations of the cheng with love and beauty, I quote the following two poems.

The cither (by the scholar-artist Shen Yueh 沈約, 441-513).

"The cither of Ch'in gives forth unsurpassed melodies,
"The frets of jade make the strings produce high-pitched tunes.
"The strings are strung so tight as to be nearly breaking,
"The melody follows her agile fingers roaming over the strings.
"But how can one by merely hearing the lingering echo afar-off,
"Divine the perfect beauty of the player?"

沈約詠箏詩
箏聲吐絃調。玉柱揚清曲。
絃依高張斷。聲隨妙指續。
徒聞音繞梁。寧知顏如玉。

To a cither player (Sung poem)

"All my life I have been indifferent to most things,
"But now I fain would be transformed into a cither.
"For thus I would be near to the slender fingers of the lovely maiden,
"And, resting on her smooth silk lap, sing sweet melodies."

崔懐寶贈薛瓊璽箏詩
平生無所顧。願作樂中華。
得近玉人纖手子。袴羅裙上放嬌聲。

Further, in Chinese literature the cheng has almost become a fixed symbol for sad memories of a lost love. I quote:

To a cither player (by the Liang Emperor Hsiao-wen)
"Having laid the cither before me, in this room full of memories,
"My thoughts are suddenly full of her who strung it.
"The frets are still in the places where she put them,
"And here are still the silver nail-sheaths she was wont to use-
"Ruefully I think of the tears we shed when we parted,
"To-day still this old love saddens the heart."

梁孝文帝和彈箏人詩
横壪在故 ($) 忽憶上弦時。
舊柱未移處。銀帶手持持。
悔道啼將別。交成今日悲。

To a either player (by the Liang Prince Hsiao T'ung, 501-531)
"There only remains of her this pitiful cither,
"Which now has been handed over to her successor.
"The accumulated dust impedes the moving of the frets,
"The dried-out strings will snap when they are tuned.
"Yet when on this cither songs of mutual love are played,
"Who will then still remember her who passed away?"

昭明太子誦彈箏人詩
故壪猶可惜。應度新人邊。
塵多塞移柱。風燥軒調絃。
還作三洲曲。誰念九重泉。

Finally, the cheng and its music came to stand for the transitori-
ness of all earthly things, the passing away of youth and beauty.
This may be illustrated by the following two poems:

Expressing my feelings on hearing the cither at night
(by the famous T'ang poet Po Chü-i, 772-846)
"Formerly hearing on a spring evening the cither played at Chiu-
chiang,
"I did not enjoy its sad tones, for I was then still in my prime.
"But since old age has covered my head with snow,
"Play for me, I beseech you, till the break of dawn."

白居易題夜箏有感
江州二月聽箏夜。白髮新生不顧聞。

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Impromptu, written while hearing the cither played
(by the scholar-artist Ou-yang Hsiu, 1007-1072)
"For twenty years I had not heard the sad notes of the cither,
"Then suddenly her slender fingers made the strings resound.
"Now the tones came lightly like birds twittering among the flowers,
"Then there was a low murmuring sound, like streams covered with ice.
"It is usually said that this music is now forgotten,
"So I ask her who taught her the cither when she was still a child.
"The melody finished, the guests laugh at me over their wine cups
"For I, white-haired old man, have started silently to weep."

欧陽修李留孫後家聞箏詩
不聽哀箏二十年。忽聞纖指弄聲絃
綿錦巧轉花間舌。嗚咽交流冰下泉
常謂此聲今已絕，問渠從小自誰傳。
樽前笑我聞頭罷，白髮蕭然涕泣濛。

It is not without interest to note, in connection with the poems quoted above, the fundamental difference between the significance of cheng and ch'in. Playing the ch'in has always been considered as a spiritual discipline, a mystic ritual; its music has since the earliest days been associated with the contemplative life of holy sages, remote from all earthly desires. Playing the cheng, on the contrary, is meant to provide entertainment. Its music is very much earth-bound, it sings the sorrows and pleasures of every-day life.

III. Cheng music.

The music of the cheng may be roughly divided into four classes, according to the particular function of this instrument. These are:
a. melodies for the cheng played as solo instrument
b. melodies for the cheng accompanying the human voice
c. melodies for the cheng as forming part of the yen-yüeh orchestra
d. melodies to be played by cheng and ch'in, cheng and vertical flute, cheng and two-stringed violin.

Below I give a classified list of the most important cheng melodies that have been preserved.

A 1. From early times a number of melodies have been composed specially for the cheng. These were played by lady performers on festive occasions in the Palace, at dinner parties of high officials, etc.

1) Han-ya-hsi-shui “Lonely crows sporting by a winter stream”.
   This is one of the oldest cheng melodies known, dating from the 10th century. It is meant to express the melancholy atmosphere of a bleak winter morning.

2) Chin-shang hua “The flower of melodies”.
   A Peking melody, dating from the 16th century.

3) Pai-niao-chao-feng “All birds honouring the Phoenix”.
   A Honan melody of the 17th century.

4) I-sung-lan “To the Sung Mountain”.
   A Honan melody of the 15th century. The Sung-shan is a famous mountain in Honan Province.

5) Kuei-ch'ü-lai “The home-coming”.
   A Honan melody of undetermined date.

6) T'ien-hsia-ta-t'ung “Universal harmony”.
   A famous Honan melody from the 12th century.

7) Chung-yüan-ya-yin “Elegant harmonies from Honan”.
   Another famous Honan melody, dating from the 15th century.

A 2. Secondly, various melodies originally written for other instruments, were re-arranged for cheng solo.

8) K'un-chiang-lung “Sporting dragons”.

9) Ch'ien-shengfo “Buddhist litany”.

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Both of these are North-Chinese melodies of the 17-18th century, originally belonging to the repertoire of popular music. “Sporting dragons” was a song sung to the accompaniment of the transverse flute, while “Buddhist litany” belonged to the repertoire of the yüeh-ch’ìn 月琴, the moon-shaped mandoline.

10) *Shih-mien-maifu* 十面埋伏 “Song of the Han battle”.
This is one of the most famous चि-िा melodies.

11) *Hsien-hua* 奉華 “Offering flowers”.
This melody originally belonged to the ceremonial music, played in the Temple of Confucius.

B. “Entoning poetry”, yin-shih 咏詩, was a favourite pastime of the literati. Every one of the many Chinese metres and poetical patterns is associated with a certain melody, and the same applies to poetical essays. All these melodies can easily be reproduced on the cheng, and used for accompanying the human voice.

C. During the Ming dynasty, and till well into the Ch’ing period, at dinner parties in the Palace or in the mansions of high officials, a small orchestra usually provided musical entertainment. Such an orchestra, known as *yen-yüeh* 燕樂 “elegant music”, was composed of cheng, the mouth-organ *sheng* 笙, the moon-shaped mandoline *yüeh-ch’in*, the चििा, the two- and three-stringed violin, and small drums and gongs. Its players were dilettanti, Court ladies or members of the household. In cheng music there have been preserved a number of compositions of this *yen-yüeh* repertoire. I mention:

12) *Tao-ch’ün-lai* 到春来 “The advent of spring”.
A Cantonese melody, dating from the 15th century.

13) *Fen-hung-lien* 風紅遠 “A fair lady paints her face”.
A Fukien melody of the 18th century.

14) *Shang-lou* 上樓 “March”.
Honan melody of the 15th century.

15) *Teng-lou* 登樓 “March”.
Peking melody of the 18th century.

16) *Chiang-hu-shui* 江湖水 “Flowing water”.

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17) Pei-cheng-kung 北征宫 “Song of the Court lady”.

18) P'u-t'ien-t'ung-ch'ing 普天同慶 “Triumphal return”.

A Peking melody of the 16th century.

From the 17th century onwards, the yen-yüeh music fell into disuse; as this music was never properly recorded, its tradition has now wellnigh become lost. It is worth noticing, however, that in the 17-18th century the wealthy Chinese merchants residing in the Japanese port of Nagasaki were greatly addicted to this music, and taught it to Japanese sing-song girls. At the time this minshingaku 明清楽, as the Japanese called it, became quite popular throughout W. Japan. Japanese Sinologues started studying it, and noted down the melodies with considerable care. As moreover to-day there are at Nagasaki still a few people who can play various instruments of the yen-yüeh orchestra, these Chinese materials preserved in Japan may supply valuable clues for re-constructing the old Chinese yen-yüeh.

D. This class is composed mainly of old melodies borrowed from the rich repertoire of the antique seven-stringed lute.

19) P'ing-sha-lo-yen 平沙落雁 “Geese alighting on the sandy shore”.

This is one of the best known ch'in melodies, dating from the 15th century; it has been transmitted in many versions. The cheng version differs considerably from these; it seems to be based on a version current in N. China during the 17th century.

20) Kuan-shan-yüeh 間山月 “Sad solitude”.

Originally one of the oldest original cheng melodies, but lost as such. At an early date, however, it was rearranged for the seven-stringed lute, and now is still one of the best known melodies of the lute repertoire. In the 19th century it was re-adapted for the cheng.
IV. Present condition of cheng music, and future possibilities

At present those Chinese musicians who are studying the cheng can be divided into two schools, which might be named fu-ku 復古 and wei-hsin 維新.

The Fu-ku, or "Renaissance School", aims, as its name implies, at a restoration of ancient cheng music. Since the beginning of this century, Shih Yin-mei 史蔭美 and Wei Tzu-yu 魏子猷 at Peking have been collecting ancient cheng tunes, and taught these to a limited number of pupils. Wei Tzu-yu served as a district magistrate in Honan Province under the Ch'ing dynasty, and thus had excellent opportunity for collecting and studying the tunes preserved in that old center of cheng music. Both Shih Yin-mei and Wei Tzu-yu are dead, but two of their pupils, Lou Shu-hua 樂樹華 and Chou Hsi-wen 周希文 continue their tradition in Peking. Lou Shu-hua is especially known for his playing of the melody T'ien-hsia-ta t'ung (cf. above no. 6), while Chou Hsi-wen is experimenting with improving the sound of the cheng by borrowing some elements from the Japanese koto.

At Kunming, in Yunnan Province, there still lives Sun Chu-hsien 孫竹軒. This old gentleman is known as an expert on the two-stringed violin, but he also plays the cheng. One of his favourite melodies is Hsien-hua (cf. above, no. 11).

Outside Chungking there lives Shih Ch'ing-chang 施慶章, now 90 years of age, an expert on both the cheng and the seven-stringed lute. He was formerly a district-magistrate in Szuchuan Province, and learned the cheng from a certain Ku 魏, a traveling scholar from Honan. Although thus Shih Ch'ing-chang's cheng playing is based on the Honan School, his finger technique would seem to be influenced by that of the ch'in; he makes little use of octaves. His favourite tune is the old melody Ch'i-yen-hui 泣頌回 "Confucius mourning over his disciple Yen-hui", originally belonging to the lute repertoire.
The Wei-hsin, or "Renovation School", has a twofold aim, viz. a) reconstructing the ancient cheng music, and b) exploring possibilities for a further development of cheng music.

Mr. Liang Tsai-p'ing 梁在平 is the leader of this school. Himself a talented musician, he has rearranged various old Chinese melodies for the cheng, and created a simple but effective system for noting down cheng music. As far as I know, cheng music was never written down. While at Peking, however, I was once told that in the old Palace Collection manuscripts have been preserved containing some sort of cheng notation, used by Court ladies of the Ch'ing dynasty.

Mr. Liang has also composed some new cheng melodies. Among these I especially mention the charming composition Ku-tu-feng-kuang 故都風光 "Peking Scenes". This is divided into four parts, viz. (1) The streams of the Western Hills (2) Memories of the Old Palace (3) Scenery of the Pei-hai (4) The atmosphere of the Old Capital. Mr. Liang has admirably succeeded in perfecting the finger technique of the cheng, utilizing to the full not only the possibilities of the right hand, but developing also the graces to be effected by the left hand. He is, however, deeply conscious of the fact that no matter how one develops the music of this instrument, care should be taken that it always retains those features characteristic of purely Chinese music. A sound principle, that will be appreciated by all serious lovers of music.

Mr. Liang has published the results of his studies in his book Ni-cheng-pu 擬箏譜 (one volume, Peking 1938). There he gives a brief history of the instrument and its music, a description of the finger technique, and fifteen representative cheng melodies in his own notation.

I have heard that in Fukien and Kwangtung there are a number of cheng players who are using this instrument for playing Chinese popular melodies. A Mr. Wu from Fukien has rearranged a number of p'i-p'a melodies for the cheng.

Further, the Ta-t'ung-yüeh-hui 大同樂會, an association for the
study and advancement of Chinese music, founded in the Twenties at Shanghai by the late Cheng Chin-wen 鄭觀文, also pays much attention to the *cheng*. Hsü Ju-hui 許如煒 tries to use the *cheng* in a kind of modernized *yen-yüeh* orchestra.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the revival of the *cheng* augurs well for the future. The *ch'in*, the seven-stringed lute, will always be the most perfect, and technically most developed, Chinese musical instrument; its music will always be the repository of all that is best in Chinese classical music throughout the ages, the highest expression of Chinese musical genius. Its character is such, however, that it must always remain limited to a comparatively small circle of connoisseurs, while the volume of sound produced is so small that it can never be enjoyed by a larger audience. The *cheng*, on the other hand, may serve a double purpose. First, it may play an important role in preserving and popularizing ancient Chinese music of a lighter genre. And second, the *cheng* may be utilized for developing a modern, purely Chinese music, accessible to broader circles: an indispensable factor in national life.