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# A Profile of East Asian Musics and Cultures

*J. Lawrence WITZLEBEN*

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## **Centralization and Regionalism: Urban and Rural Traditions**

### **Classical, Folk, and Popular Music**

#### **Sound and Ideas**

#### **Oral and Written Traditions**

#### **Musical Instruments**

#### **Music and Theater**

#### **Transnationalism**

#### **Acculturation and Western Influences**

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## **CENTRALIZATION AND REGIONALISM: URBAN AND RURAL TRADITIONS**

Although some scholars have described East Asian societies and their musics in terms of a polarity between “great” traditions (centralized, urban, official, orthodox) and “little” traditions (regionally varied, rural, unofficial, heterodox), there is actually a continuum rather than a sharp division between the national and the regional, and interchange between centers and the periphery has shaped much of the history of East Asian music. Musical regions have developed in conjunction with linguistic dialects.

## **CLASSICAL, FOLK, AND POPULAR MUSIC**

While most English-speakers have a sense of distinction among the terms *classical*, *folk*, and *popular music*, their exact definitions and lines of demarcation are somewhat ambiguous, and in East Asia the situation is even more complex. In East Asia, although some classical music (as in the West) is old, precisely written down, and performed by professional specialists, the tradition of the scholar-amateur who performs for self-cultivation is also widespread, and new dynasties often developed their own new or reconstructed “classical” music to supersede that of the outgoing regime. In modern times, the term “popular music” is associated with the mass media, but for centuries before the advent of radio, television, films, and recordings, a variety of singers, storytellers, and actors provided popular entertainment for the masses. Music in the courts and among the literati has constantly borrowed from folk and popular traditions; in a similar manner, many modern concertized traditions are based on music (and dance) originally performed as entertainment in villages or teahouses, or in ritual contexts such as weddings, funerals, and religious or shamanistic ceremonies.

## **SOUND AND IDEAS**

In many types of East Asian instrumental and vocal music, a great deal of attention is lavished on the production of individual sounds: a single “note” may have subtle and complex changes in pitch, timbre, and volume. Musicians and scholars have developed a large vocabulary for these nuances, which are only hinted at in English terms like *ornament* or *vibrato*. However, many musical phenomena and techniques are so obvious to musicians that they have no special name: for example, the standard downward plucking stroke for the Japanese *syamisen* ‘samisen’ or the diver-

	CHINA	KOREA	JAPAN
	ANTIQUITY		
B.C.E. 1200	Xia 21st to 16th century		
	Shang c. 1600–1045		
1100	Zhou 1045–256		
1000			
900			
800			
700	Spring and Autumn 770–476		ANTIQUITY Zyōmon to c. 200
600			
500			
400	Warring States 475–221		
300	DYNASTIES OF IMPERIAL CHINA		
200	Qin 221–206		
	Han 202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.		Yayoi c. 200 B.C.E.–250 C.E.
100			
C.E. 0			
100			
200	Three Kingdoms 220–280		
	Jin 265–420		
300		THREE KINGDOMS	Kohun Culture c. 300–400
400	Northern and Southern Dynasties 420–589	Koguryō ?–668	
		Paekche ?–660	
500		Silla ?–668	IMPERIAL PERIOD
	Sui 581–618		Asuka c. 550–710
600	Tang 618–907	DYNASTIES OF ROYAL KOREA	
		Unified Silla 668–935	Nara 710–794
700			Heian 794–1192
800			
900	Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms 902–979	Koryō 918–1392	
	Liao (Qidan [Khitan]) 916–1125		
1000	Song 960–1279		
	Northern Song 960–1127		
1100	Southern Song 1127–1279		MEDIEVAL PERIOD
	Jin (Nüzhen [Jurchen]) 1115–1234		Kamakura 1192–1333
1200	Yuan (Mongol) 1279–1368		
1300			
	Ming 1368–1644		Muromati 1334–1573
1400		Chosŏn 1392–1910	
1500			PREMODERN PERIOD
			Azuti–Momoyama 1573–1610
1600			Edo 1600–1867
1700	Qing (Manchu) 1644–1911		
1800			MODERN JAPAN
	MODERN CHINA	MODERN KOREA	Meizi 1868–1912
1900	Republic of China 1911–	Japanese colonial period 1910–1945	Taisyō 1912–1926
	People's Republic of China 1949–	Republic of Korea (South) 1948–	Syōwa 1926–1989
2000		Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North) 1948–	Heisei 1989–

FIGURE 1 Chronology of East Asian history.



gence among melodic lines in Chinese ensemble music that Western scholars call “heterophony.”

Natural sounds such as audible breath in playing a bamboo flute or fingers sliding along strings are often integral to East Asian music. A close connection with nature is also exemplified by the idea of program music: an instrumental piece may refer to a historical event or legend, a poem or novel, a scenic locale, a season, a bird, or a flower. Particularly in musical theater, sounds may clearly represent things that are not seen onstage, some as obvious as a rooster’s crow or horses’ hooves, others understood only by those familiar with the conventions of a particular genre.

The organization of music varies enormously, but in many parts of East Asia, long multisection musical forms have developed. These may be instrumental (Korean *sanjo* or *Yongsan hoesang*, Chinese *xianshiyue* and *Jiangnan sizhu*), vocal (Chinese *nanquan*), a combination of instrumental and vocal sections (Japanese *nagauta* and *sankyoku*), or a mixture of singing and heightened speech (Chinese opera; Korean *p’ansori*). In Xinjiang, the “twelve *muqam*” (*mukam*, *mukamu*) of the Uighur (Uyghur) people are long, suite-like forms that also incorporate dance segments.

## ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITIONS

Although some of the oldest surviving examples of musical notation in the world can be found in China, Japan, and Korea, the nature and purpose of written music in these civilizations have often been rather different from those of their Western counterparts. In many cases, melodies are given in skeletal form, with details of ornamentation and technique to be learned aurally, realized in performance, or both. In other cases (most famously in the music for the *qin* zither of China), finger techniques are written with great precision, while rhythms are a function of the player’s memory or imagination. Even in the most refined or carefully notated traditions, aural learning has had a central role, and a wide variety of mnemonic systems have evolved. Although these systems are sometimes written down, they function primarily as a tool for oral teaching, learning, and remembering, with syllables representing everything from court melodies to strokes and combinations for percussion instruments. Improvisation often has a role at a relatively “micro” level, with basic melodies and structures fixed while considerable freedom is allowed in the individual player’s ornamentation and nuances. In the *sanjo* music of Korea, clear, consistent, recognized melodic and rhythmic structures pass from teachers to students, but each player is expected to exercise great individuality in ornamentation and nuance.

## MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Perhaps the strongest case for treating China, Japan, and Korea as a musical region can be made in the related musical instrument types found in the three countries. Long zithers with movable bridges, bowed lutes, transverse and end-blown bamboo flutes, and cylindrical double-reeds are shared by all three countries. Other instrument types are prominent in both China and Japan (three-stringed and four-stringed plucked lutes) or China and Korea (conical double-reed, two-stringed bowed lutes), while still others (such as the bowed zither in Korea and Okinawa) are preserved in one country but are no longer played elsewhere.

Percussion instruments in East Asia tend to be rather specific to individual cultures and to genres within a culture. Virtuoso playing is featured in the music of Korean farmers’ bands and in *samul nori*, Japanese *taiko* drumming, and Chinese *shifan* music; but more often than not, percussion in East Asia functions as articulation or punctuation of phrases, establishing a metrical framework, marking the location of primary and secondary beats, or in other ways having a role secondary to that of the melodic instruments. However, even when overshadowed by voices or melodic instruments, percussion may have an essential role for both performers and audiences: Korean *sanjo*

and many types of Chinese opera would be almost unperformable without percussion instruments. Drums, gongs, cymbals, and other percussion instruments come in a seemingly endless variety of sizes and shapes, and many instruments are used only for a specific type of music, such as the wooden tiger and percussion box, originally played in Chinese court music and still featured in Korean court music.

## MUSIC AND THEATER

The relationship between music and theater is extremely important in East Asia, but manifestations of musical theatricality are very diverse, both among and within the countries of this region. In Chinese “opera” (*xiqu*) and Japanese *kabuki*, elaborately costumed and made-up actors and actresses present a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In contrast, narrative genres such as Korean *p’ansori* and Chinese *shuochang* are almost minimalist, with sparse instrumentation and a single vocalist representing a multitude of characters. Masked dance and puppet theater are also widespread. In both human and puppet theater, stock characters are common, and an educated audience member will immediately know much about an unfamiliar character through the costume, the makeup, and the style of speaking and singing. Intertextuality is common, with certain pieces or phrases referring to other plays or even to other genres.

## TRANSNATIONALISM

While a geographically focused work may give the appearance of a discrete group of countries with a shared present and past, many of the musics and peoples discussed in this volume have close links with those in neighboring—or, sometimes, distant—lands. The musics of the Han Chinese have obvious links to those of Japan and Korea, but ethnic groups such as the Uighurs and Kazakhs share a culture with their counterparts in the former Soviet republics. The mainland Southeast Asian counterparts of the Miao people of Yunnan are known as Hmong, and Tibetan culture extends into Nepal, Bhutan, and India. Over the past few centuries, East Asians have migrated throughout the world. Many of the same traditions discussed in this volume are practiced or have been adapted by the East Asian diaspora in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, including notable examples such as the Chinese in Singapore and Thailand and the Japanese in Hawaii and South America.

Both within and beyond East Asia, many ethnic groups have been divided among countries or regions with vastly different political and cultural systems, and this fact has interesting implications for musical developments. The differences between North and South Korea and between the Central Asian peoples in China and their counterparts in the newly independent former Soviet republics are only the most obvious examples. In 1997, Hong Kong was politically reunited with the Chinese mainland, but its musical culture continues to develop in ways of its own, and musical developments in Taiwan have been equally distinct. In different ways, the musics of the Korean minority in China’s northeast contrast with the majority cultures in both North and South Korea.

## ACCULTURATION AND WESTERN INFLUENCES

For several millennia, goods and ideas, including musical instruments and concepts about music, have flowed back and forth along the Silk Road linking West, Central, and East Asia, as well as along the borders between China and the Indian subcontinent, the Tibetan plateau, the Korean peninsula, and mainland Southeast Asia, and across the seas from and to India, island Southeast Asia, Japan, and—more recently—the Americas and Europe. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.; figure 1), musics from present-day Burma, India, Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Iran could be heard in the imperial courts of China, and some of these were passed on in turn to Korea and Japan.

Western music and music education have had a profound influence on much of Asia, but in contrast with places such as Indonesia and India, the concept of the symphony orchestra has made a relatively deep impact on China, Japan, and Korea. Large ensembles combining string, wind, and percussion instruments have long been an important part of East Asian musical cultures, and perhaps because of this, not only have local symphony orchestras been enthusiastically promoted and received, but indigenous symphonized ensembles of Asian instruments playing from written parts and coordinated by a conductor with a baton have, especially in China, become central to the development of a modern national music.

In this volume, we will explore these themes in more detail with reference to individual musical traditions in East Asia. It is important to note that—sometimes in contrast to the emphasis on innovation in Western cultures—the peoples of East Asia have tended to have great respect for their heritage from the past. Much attention is often paid to finding ways to keep the music of the past alive in the present. Reverence for the ancient is sometimes associated with Confucianism, but we can also suggest that Confucianism itself is one manifestation of deep-seated values that have helped to shape the musics and societies of East Asia.