THE MUSICAL AVATARS OF A BUDDHIST SPELL

Pu'an zhou

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Much of China's musical past is still shrouded in mystery. Scholars of Chinese music often face the challenge to trace the development of a musical piece from its earliest known versions to present-day performance practice. Local or historical variants, both geographically and historically, are the study of a lifetime. François Picard roamed the Chinese countryside and visited Buddhist temples everywhere in search of a piece identified as an ancient Buddhist chant. In this article - actually a lecture presented at the International Symposium on Buddhist Music in Hong Kong, March 1989 - he succesfully demonstrates how, centuries ago, a Sanskrit text formed the basis of what eventually became 'Pu'an zhou', one of the best known tunes of all Chinese instrumental and secular music.

Some years ago, I was looking for a subject that I could study for my doctoral dissertation. I wanted to find a piece, still played today, which would illustrate different genres of Chinese music and whose historical development I would be able to trace. While doing my fieldwork, I heard a 'Pu'an's spell' (*Pu'an zhou* 普庵咒) played on the zither *guqin* and a 'Pu'an's spell' played by a Jiangnan *sizhu* ensemble. At first, these two pieces seemed unrelated; the challenge was to show that they both stemmed from the same source which appeared to be a Buddhist Scripture, although today they are considered to be purely instrumental music.

I began to visit temples all over China to ask for this text to be sung, but without success. Yet old or recent scores revealed some fifty versions of it which embrace almost all Chinese instrumental genres: *qin* and *pipa* solo repertoires, *sizhu*, *chuida*, *xiansuo* ensembles, Qing dynasty Court music, even Kunqu *qupai* and of course Buddhist music: it can be found in temple music or secular, popular, ensemble music such as Qujiaying 屈家营 village music. 'Pu'an's spell' had spread from Wutai shan down to Fujian, through Hebei and Shanghai. But these 'Pu'an's spell' were indeed very different and only careful musical analysis allowed me to say that they were related to the same Buddhist chant.

I will not examine all these versions, but merely point out how a Sanskrit text became one of the best known of all Chinese tunes. I shall attempt to demonstrate that although the oldest printed versions were meant for the literate *qin* repertoire, a better transmission has been made through a popular genre, that is to say Nanguan music.

THE SOURCES

I will examine three different sources. One is the Buddhist Scripture that first appears in the first printed ritual book, the 'Main Daily Offices' (*Zhujing ri song* 诸经日诵) compiled by Zhu Hong 株宏 in 1600. Our piece, which is called 'Pu'an's spell' by today's monks, bears the title 'Master Pu'an's Spirit Spell' (*Pu'an zhushi shenzhou* 普庵祖师神咒). It is divided into seven parts. The first part is an invocation to the deities, the last one is a call for the Bodhisattva Pu'an to come and deliver the people from calamities. The middle parts are obviously in Sanskrit.

The oldest musical score is called 'The Stanzas on Siddham' (*Shitan zhang* 释谈章). It was published in 'The Three Religions Sung with a Single Voice' (*Sanjiao tongsheng* 三教同声), compiled by Zhang Dexin 张德新 , and dated 1592.
This little scorebook for the *qin* contains only four pieces, and all their texts are related to religion: two are Confucianist, one is Taoist, and our piece is Buddhist.
This score does not include different subtitles as is the case, for instance, in a 1611 score, the '*Qin* score from Yang Chun Hall' (*Yang Chun tang qinpu* 阳春堂琴谱) compiled by Zhang Daming 张大命. Here, our piece is called 'The Stanzas on Siddham' and the preface adds that it is the 'Pu'an's spell' . The piece is divided into five sections: 'Will the August Buddhas Bless us with Their Appearance' (*Zhu fo xin lin* 诸佛忻临), 'First Cycle' (*hui* 回), 'Second Cycle', 'Third Cycle', 'Will the Ghosts Disappear' (*Qunmo qiandun* 群魔潜遁). As we can see, these titles refer exactly to either the meaning or the structure of the piece.

After this publication, between 1609 and 1870, we find almost forty *qin* versions of the score which are undoubtedly related. We find also two more *qin* versions, one from the famous 'Mei'an qinpu' 梅庵琴谱 from 1931 called 'The Stanzas on Siddham', and the other, not published until the 1958 *dapu* 打谱 by Pu Xuezhai 溥雪斋 but which was circulated at the end of the last century in manuscript form under the title 'Pu'an's spell'. These last two pieces are in fact far removed from the original scores, and have been subject to transformations that can all be explained by strictly musical processes.

The third main source, I owe to Professor Schipper who gave me the complete version that I had been longing for. This is a contemporary version called 'Pu'an's Spell' (*Pu'an zhou*) and it bears the subtitle 'Buddhist Spirit Spell' (*Shijiao shenzhou* 释教神咒). One can find it in different printed Nanguan score books, from which I choose the 'Collection of Pieces from Southern Fujian Music' (*Minnan yinyue zhipu quanji* 闽南音乐指谱全集) compiled by Liu Honggou 刘鸿沟 , Jinlan Langjunshe Conservatory, Manilla, 1953, pp. 236-248. It is the thirty-seventh 'suite' (*tao* 套), which means that it is considered as one of the oldest. The suites are composed of differents ballads (*qu* 曲) played without interruption. For our purpose one finds only two tunes, one the 'Pu'an's spell' itself, the other a 'Hymn to Guanyin, Goddess of the Southern Seas' (*Nanhai Guanyin zan* 南海观音赞). The suites are generally played as an exercise (*zhi* 指), that is to say, as purely instrumental music. The notation, as usual in Nanguan, transcribes only the *pipa* part, along with the words. I will not discuss here the origin of Nanguan, but only recall that there is no reason to doubt that part of its repertoire was transmitted orally or through manuscript tradition from the Ming dynasty down to the present.
The preface, beside giving valuable information on the rites prescribed for the playing of the piece, reveals an outstanding feature, if compared with the *qin* scores: it states that before one starts playing one should write on a red sheet of paper the following text: 'Great Chan Master Pu'an's Spirit Spell on the Siddham Stanzas' (*Pu'an tade chanshi shitan zhang shenzhou* 普庵大德禅师释谈章神咒) which is almost exactly the same name as that found in the seventeenth century's reprint of the Buddhist Ritual book 'Main Daily Offices' called 'Chan Daily Offices' (*Chanmen risong* 禅门日诵).
After an introductory prayer devoid of musical accompaniment, there are nineteen

separate sections, followed by the 'Hymn to Guanyin'; the suite closes with a spoken section. The intermediate sections are divided into three cycles (*hui* 回) of six sections (*duan* 段) each. We find the same kind of names in two other musical scores: the 'Appendices for Strings' (*Xiansuo beikao* 弦索备考) compiled by Rong Zhai 荣斋, first published in 1814, and the 'Combined scores for *qin* and *se*' (*Qinse hepu* 琴瑟合谱), compiled by Qing Rui 庆瑞, first published in 1870.
As far as I know, today, only the 'Hymn to Guanyin' is still sung or even played in Fujian or Taiwan. The magical power of this text and the terrifying warnings in the preface against its inappropriate use, demonstrate that the 'Pu'an's spell' is still not an ordinary piece.

THE TEXT

Let us now compare the different texts. All the three basic sources, Buddhist, *qin* music and Nanguan, begin and end with the same two parts. They are all written in Chinese. The first part is invocatory, the last is a call for exorcism. It is only in the *qin* scores that we find these two parts must be sung.
Each of the five central parts of the Buddhist Scripture has the same structure. The text has absolutely no meaning in Chinese. Even more astonishing is that it is also devoid of meaning in Sanskrit. The word *xitan* 悉昙, or *shitan*, in various titles leads us easily to the Sanskrit syllabary *siddhamāṭrkā* or siddham. By 'syllabary' I mean the combination of vowels and consonnants. From the Vedic tradition down to the twentieth century via India, Cambodia and Tibet, I was able to trace the tradition of using the Sanskrit syllabary both as a technique for learning the language, and its pronunciation, and as a magical spell, be it a *dhāṛanī*, a *mantra*, or as a diagram *yantra*. The siddham is one of the first texts to have been transcribed into Chinese characters, and there are versions from it as early as the Dunhuang manuscripts[1]. It is closely related to our subject, Buddhist music, since it has its source in the Indian concept of the Sacred sound which gave birth to both Pāṇini's[2] description of language and to the *fanbai* 梵呗. A proof of this can be found in the Japanese tradition, since *shittan* was the former word for *shomyo*[3] 声明 before it became a type of calligraphy, which shows that Japanese thought was even more averse than the Chinese one to the concept of the Sacred sound.
The five central stanzas are a combination of the twenty-five consonnants with various vowels which, respectively, correspond to gutturals, palatals, cerebrals, dentals and labials. Because the Sanskrit syllabary does not allow all combinations of vowels and consonnants, the remaining letters have been placed in a small stanza that has neither the same structure nor the same function as the major stanzas.
If we compare this Buddhist Scripture with the written musical versions, a process unique in all Chinese literature, the use of acrostic, becomes apparent. The text is alternatively read horizontally and vertically. This possibility is in fact inherent in its very construction[4] and reminds me of the memorizing exercices used in the Vedic tradition. It can also be linked to the esoteric tradition: only an initiate could know how this text was supposed to be pronounced; but the need to write down the various melodies lead to the revelation of this secret; this also explains why, in the Fujian tradition, it is treated with great respect.
Further more, the five three lines stanzas are not sung in the right order, but as three separate stanzas, the first of which includes the first lines, the second the middle lines

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[1] Pelliot P. 2204, dated 942, P. 2212, P. 3085, P. 3099, Stein S. 4583 v° and Peking *Niao* 64.
[2] Pāṇini, in the fourth Century B.C., published the first complete linguistic description of Sanskrit.
[3] See Annen 安然, *Shittan zo* 悉昙藏, 880.
[4] See Mary Boyce, 'Some Parthian abecederian hymns', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XIV, Part 3, 1953, pp. 435-450.

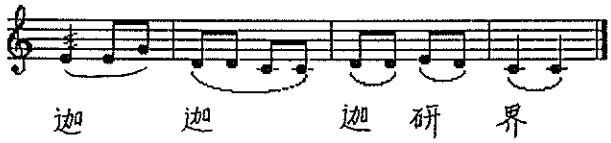
and the last the third lines of each of the five stanzas. This very special rendition leads to a *rondo* form, which, as Wang Guowei[5] tried to show, is related to the Indian *chanda* (Chinese *chanda* 缠达, *chuanta* 传踏, or *zhuanta* 转踏). I wish to add that, in my opinion, the term *zimu* 子母('son and mother'), that one finds in Yuan operas related to that very form, could be another version of *zimu* 字母('mother of characters') which is the Chinese rendition of the Sanskrit word *mātṛkā*.

THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE

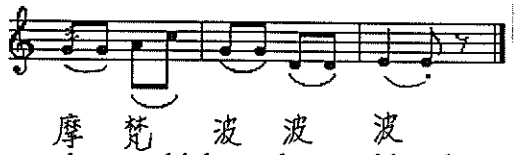
The musical structure of the central parts follows the structure of the transformed text. But the rigid structure of the names used in the Nanguan lead the transcriber to the omission of the fourth section of the first cycle, which, were it to be re-established, would start with *duo duo di di duo duo di* , which would give us the musical structure:

A B C C C C C B C' C' C' C' C' B C" C" C" C" C" B.

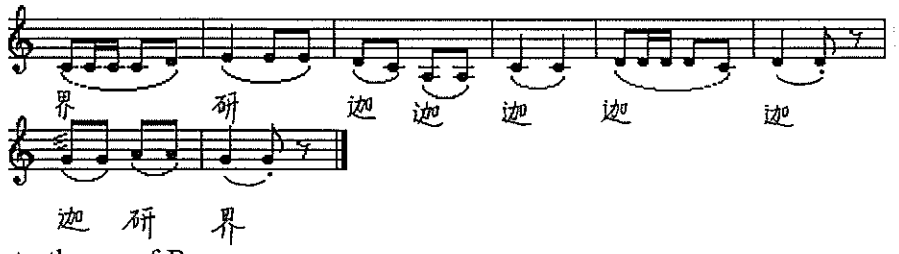
Let us now examine the different musical themes in the Nanguan version. A is made of five repeats of the same phrase:



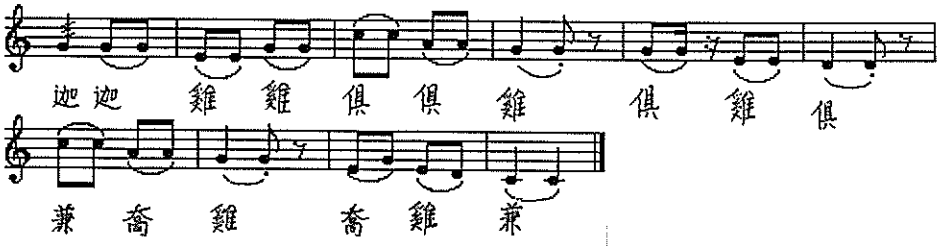
B is made of four repeats of the same phrase:



followed by a phrase which can be considered as a paraphrase of A:



C is a countertheme of B:

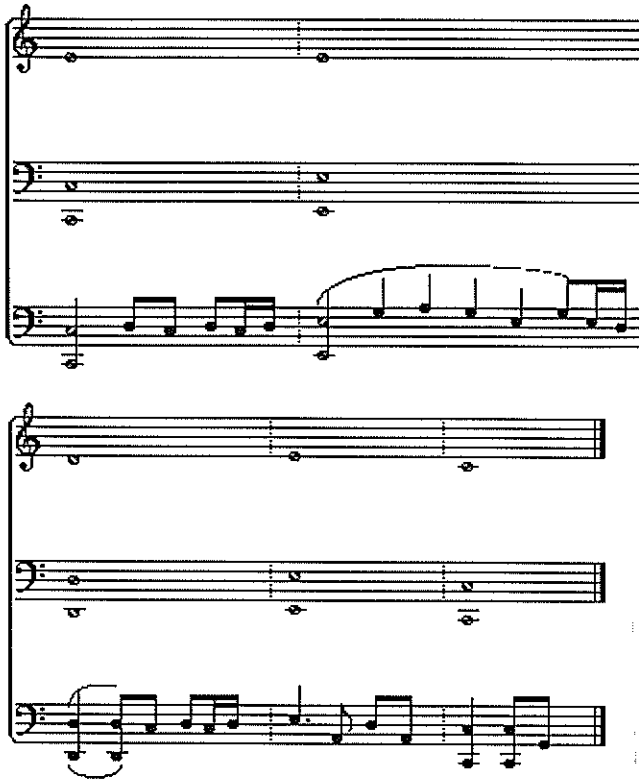


which is followed by the same ending phrase than B. C' and C" are simple amplifications of C. One should add that A is also the motif which is used in the spell part of the 'Hymn to Guanyin'.

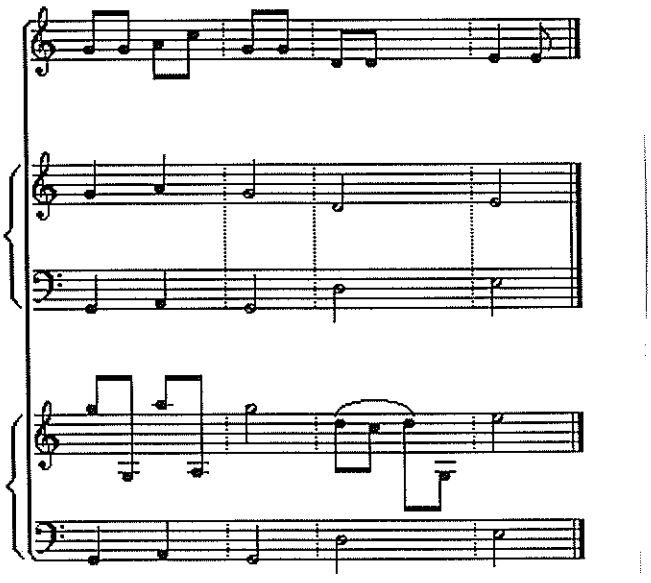
If we now consider the *qin* versions, we find not only the same structure, but almost the same notes. There is an introduction in two parts, a burden, stanzas with two

[5] Wang Guowei 王国维, *Song Yuan xiqu kao* 宋元戏曲考 , 1909.

themes, and a coda. The first part of the introduction, which corresponds to the part which is not sung in the Nanguan, is musically related to Nanguan A. The second part of the introduction is the same as Nanguan A. Here are the synoptic scores of a simplified version of Nanguan A and of *qin* scores in the 1592 and 1958 versions:



The burden corresponds to B while the stanza corresponds to C. Here are the synoptic scores of Nanguan B and *qin* in the 1592 and 1958 versions:



The coda is related to the ending of Nanguan B and C. We can find various undoubtedly related versions of one, or both, of the two themes B and C in almost all of the dozens of 'Pu'an's spell' performed throughout China. They can be found

among all the most important Buddhist scores such as 'Yoga Ceremony to Feed the Hungry Ghosts' (*Dazang Yujia shishi yi* 大藏喻伽施食仪) published around 1770, and the *Zhihua si* 智化寺 scores from 1694 and 1903.
If we compare similar themes in both Nanguan and *qin* versions, it appears that the Nanguan melody is closer to the structure of the text. The study of the characters used for the transcription of the Sanskrit shows that Nanguan is closer to the 'Chan Daily Offices' than to any *qin* text. The melodies for the introduction and the coda which appear in the *qin* scores, and not in Nanguan, are not evident in any other version. This leads me to the conclusion that today's 'Pu'an's spell', as preserved in Nanguan music of Fujian and Taiwan, is closely linked to the Buddhist chanting of the spell. Thus, we should accept that this music has been handed down from generation to generation for at least four centuries.

CONCLUSION

The 'Great Chan Master Pu'an's Spirit Spell on the Siddham' first appears at the turn of the seventeenth century. It is not included in the 'Sayings of Pu'an Yin Su, chan master' (*Pu'an Yin Su chanshi yulu* 普庵印肃禅师语录) which is a collection of the texts of the very famous chan monk Yin Su who lived from 1115 to 1169. Pu'an was granted the honory title of *badantha* (*tade*) in the year 1300, while the first mention of his cult is to be found in Jiangsu in 1314, so that our text is indubitably earlier than the fourteenth century. I must also explain why this text refers to Pu'an. According to his 'Sayings', Pu'an found enlightment through chanting. He performed many miracles and when asked about them, he traced mysterious signs in the air and chanted. So that no other Buddhist figure could have been more appropriate for a text which is an hymn to the efficacy of Sacred sound.
The study of this music enables us to have a better understanding of an important aspect of Chinese culture where music is not influenced by meaning or program, but is rather an attempt to reach a stage beyond all word which is akin to enlightment, *bodhi*.