ON THE PREVALENCE OF THE WUXIAN, FIVE-STRINGED LUTE

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The wuxian (Japanese, gogen or gogenbiwa: a five-stringed lute) is widely understood as a musical instrument associated with the Shōsō-in. The origin of this lute is in India, and it is characterized by its pear shape, straight neck, five strings, four frets and one partial fret for a single string. This study is intended to further understanding of this instrument by considering its prevalence. The following points were addressed in this study.

The wuxian has been thought to have been widely popular from the 6th century in Qiuci (Kucha). Nevertheless, it seems in fact to have popularly been played there prior to the 6th century. It is said that the wuxian was introduced into China in the 6th century. However, on the basis of the example seen in one of the caves of Yunan and the descriptions in the official Chinese histories, it actually seems to have been introduced into China in the 5th century at the latest. Then, it became widely popular after the first half of the 6th century.

It is said that Zheng Yi (540–591) of the Sui dynasty (581–618) employed the wuxian in an attempt to establish a new theory of music. Yet, he actually appears to have used the quxiang, also known as the Qiuci-pipa (the lute of Kucha) or the hu-pipa (the lute of the barbarians), and consulted Indian musical theory in an attempt to reform the confused state of Chinese music at the time.

During the Sui and Tang (618–907) dynasties the wuxian was not used in the official repertoire of court music for rites. On the other hand, it was often played at court banquets. It is likely that it was also used in faqu, the variety of music given the greatest cachet by Emperor Xuanzong (r.712–56).

It appears that the wuxian died out in China after the 12th century. In contrast, it seems to have been played widely through the first half of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) after its introduction to Korea in the second half of the 5th century. It is known to have been played from the 8th century through the 9th in Japan.

The following points were also made.

During the first half of the 6th century, the quxiang became widely popular in the northern dynasty in relation to the rise of Buddhism. By way of contrast, it appears that nothing of the sort occurred in southern China. Thus in terms of music, disparate Buddhist cultures were established in north and south.

According to the Jiaofangji (Records of the Court Entertainment Office), the sanxian, three stringed instrument or the prototype of the shamisen, was played in the Court Entertainment Office of the Tang. However, the record of the use of the sanxian was a misprint that seems to have originally been written as wuxian.

In regard to its popularity in Korea and Japan, the problem of how the expression wuxianqin (five-stringed harp or lute) seen in the official Chinese histories should be read may become an important factor in future considerations of the wuxian.