

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Zither (*qin*) inscribed with the name “Dragon’s Moan”



China

Tang to Northern Song dynasty, 618–1127

Lacquer over wood; pegs and keys of jade; stops inlaid with metal; silk strings. Pegs, keys, and strings are replacements.

48 1/2 x 8 1/4 x 4 7/16 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1915.100

Describe

This long, rectangular instrument is a zither, or *qin* in Chinese. It is extremely rare because not many musical instruments from this period still survive today. The scalloped outline (traditionally named “strung pearls”) and relatively thick sound box suggest it was made during the Song dynasty (960–1279) or earlier. The instrument has seven silk strings of varying thickness. The strings are mounted on a hollow, lacquered wooden box. Thirteen inlaid jade inserts run along the outer edge to indicate pitch positions and help the performer with finger placement. The underside is incised in words that translate to “Dragon’s Moan,” the name given to this instrument. Further inscriptions describe the instrument’s music as being emanated from heaven, its music possessing an almost magical, life-giving power.

Analyze

Qin are one of the most ancient Chinese musical instruments, probably in use as early as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE). When playing, the performer plucks the strings with the right hand and alters the pitch with the left. The design of a *qin*, such as its seven-string form, was standardized during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). *Qin* owners and masters often incised the backboard of a treasured instrument with poetic writings, praising its venerable history and spiritual virtues. Unlike Western instruments that are often played in orchestras at large gatherings, *qin* are played mainly for personal enjoyment or for a small group of friends, often in private gardens.

Interpret

Qin have for centuries been valued as a symbol of high culture by the Chinese elite class. Every scholar-gentleman is expected to be skilled in four art forms: *qin* (music), *qi* (chess), *shu* (calligraphy), and *hua* (painting). *Qin* playing is regarded as a spiritual and intellectual activity. It can help with self-cultivation and learning enhancement. In Chinese landscape paintings, sages and scholars are often seen playing *qin* while enjoying beautiful scenery.



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Inquire

- Why do you think the instrument was named “Dragon’s Moan”? Who do you think named it? What can we infer about the person who named it and described its sound?
- Listen to a recording of a *qin* being played, and take notes about your thoughts and impressions as you listen. Does the sound match what you imagined when you first saw the instrument?
- Compare and contrast *qin* with other stringed instruments in terms of shapes, sounds produced, how the instrument is played, and the materials used to make the instrument.

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1915.100/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

