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Source: Campbell, P. S. (1991, Winter). Chinese music, musicians, and musical training: Perspectives from the Post-Tianamen period. *The Quarterly*, 2(4), pp. 22-29. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(2), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme>

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Chinese Music, Musicians, And Musical Training: Perspectives From The Post-Tianamen Period

By Patricia Shehan Campbell

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In a bright and airy seminar room in San Francisco last June, noted sinologist Orville Schell's remarks foreshadowed my own observations* of China's music, arts, education, and culture in the post-Tianamen period. He disclosed his beliefs that China's political scene will continue to unravel as China seeks its role and function in a modern world, and that its cultural traditions will continue to undo themselves—with many ancient customs already entirely lost to this century's massive political upheavals. Pressed on matters of arts and arts education in China, Schell reiterated the politics of the recent past, predicting that music, the visual arts, dance, theater, and the cinema will remain within the realm of the state, which censors as it subsidizes all art as manifestations of the Chinese people en masse. Even in the midst of unprecedented political reform, the ancient Confucian ideal of art as an expression of societal mores and community thought is upheld and carefully maintained by the Ministry of Culture.

A musician-educator's perceptions of contemporary China spin from the ideas of learned experts, and are likely to be colored by detours from the "must-sees" of a tourist's itinerary. True to form, this musician sacrificed some of the historical sites, shopping

excursions, and several other "art-y" pre-arrangements of the Department of Education/Fulbright-Hays seminar on "China's Arts in Transition" to seek issues pertinent to Chinese music, musicians, and musical training. During the summer of 1990, with fewer Westerners present than in any year in more than a decade since the East-West thaw, I began a search for change and tradition in Chinese music.

Like the form of the classic concerto so highly revered by performers and teachers at China's principal conservatories, my impressions are organized into three movements. The first movement, *allegretto*, examines the traditional Chinese *zheng* as an historical artifact, as told to me by a master performer-teacher and one of his students. Andante, the second movement, contains my observations of the research of a distinguished physician and clinical scientist concerned with abuse of singers' voices and its treatment. The ideas of a traditional scholar-musician are presented in the third movement, Minuet. In a final Coda, I draw on the observations of Schell in his "discos and Democracy" and also Richard Curt Kraus's views as a political scientist in "Pianos and Politics in China," while also synthesizing my own impressions in a discussion of the state of Chinese music, musicians, and musical instruments today and in the foreseeable future.

Allegretto: Two Views of Zheng

The ancient plucked zither known as *gu zheng* represents a genuine folk musical art that has been immensely popular since the

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Western Han dynasty. *Zheng* is derived from the sound of the zither's tightly wound strings that create the sound of "zheng-zheng" when played, while *gu* is the term used for things old or from ancient traditions. Because of my training on the Japanese *koto*, an eighteenth century model of the ancient *zheng*, I was especially intrigued to learn of its Chinese ancestral roots.

In Beijing last June, one auspicious meeting led to another, serving up information on the *gu zheng* and two of its performers. In a gallery given over to the artistic expressions of minority peoples, a young woman called Han Mei began telling her story to me. She was a musician by training, an expert on the *gu zheng*. She spoke English well, was gracious in manner, and in the next several days she opened her heart to her new musician-friend.

Han Mei appeared to be the ultimate performer of Chinese traditional music. As I observed a professionally produced videotape in the relative comfort of her three-room apartment, the choreography of her hands was mesmerizing. I recalled the scholarly writings of Bell Yung, who had analyzed the symbolism of performance gestures on an even more ancient but related Chinese zither, the *qin*. As I observed, an aphorism used by William P. Malm to describe Japanese performers also occurred to me as relevant to this Chinese *zheng* performer: "It's not only what you play, but HOW you play." Han Mei had shown herself to be an exquisite performer of a revered Chinese traditional instrument, with gestures that were hypnotically dance-like, and her interpretation of historical pieces exuded intelligence and feeling.

At the China Conservatory, Han Mei introduced me to her former teacher, Professor Cao Zheng. He was retired as professor emeritus, and lived in a compound for retired musician-teachers next to the Conserva-

tory. In the rubble of what had been an elegant courtyard during the Ming and Ching dynasties, Cao Zheng began the telling of the story of his beloved musical instrument to me through his prized pupil, Han Mei.

Professor Zheng was born in Xin Min County (Liaoning Province) in the first decade of this century. In his youth, he studied with Master Lou Shuhau, and, like his master, Zheng continued the revival of the traditional art of the *zheng* throughout his professional life. Cao Zheng gained prominence as a performer and a master teacher. He also became known as a noted musicologist of Chi-

nese music whose compilation and arrangement of hundreds of folk songs for the *zheng* are widely performed. Cao Zheng is revered for his virtuosity as a performer, his insight as a researcher, and his indefatigable efforts as propagator of traditional Chinese music.

Cao Zheng's interest in the continued transmission of the art of *zheng*-playing was reflected in his discussion of master teachers who had preceded him. In his youth, there were two principal performers: Lin Yongzhi from Guangdong Province, who maintained and developed the Southern style; and Wei Ziyou from Henan Province, who mastered the

Northern Style. As Cao Zheng recalled, these men contributed to the preservation of both traditional performance practice and pedagogical techniques. In the 1920s and 1930s, at a time of great Western cultural infusion in China, these teachers fostered the dying art of *zheng*-playing and raised it to a new level of greatness. Cao Zheng noted that Lin's most representative work, "*Yu zhou chang wan*" (*Fisherman's Evening Song*), has enjoyed over 50 years of popularity as a relatively easy piece to learn but a notably difficult piece to perform masterfully. Cao Zheng

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went on to explain that Ziyou was said to have introduced *zheng* and *qin* music to Americans during his study at Yale University in the 1930s.

According to Professor Zheng, there has been an increased interest in the performance of the *zheng* since the 1950s. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many institutes began offering private and group lessons on *zheng*. Courses in the history of the *zheng* and other traditional instruments became common, and young composers were encouraged to create new works for these instruments. Troupes of *zheng* performers were organized to play in ensemble with each other, and some travelled to perform in other countries, thus propagating the traditional and newly composed music for *zheng*.

New performing techniques have been nurtured, including the introduction of two-handed plucking (it had been traditionally relegated to the right hand alone). Technological developments arrived in the 1960s: Cao Zheng discussed a system of mechanical tuning switches and the now-common use of a foot pedal for tuning.

The sounds of a traditional mouth organ drifted from the windows of a practice studio in the ancient building across the courtyard, and Cao Zheng took it as a signal to end his informal lecture. We three shook hands, closing what may have been a mutually fulfilling experience: one American musician eager to absorb a master's comments on Chinese traditional music, and a legendary musician and his student who only too seldom express their rich history to foreigners. Han Mei had become a friend to me, and Cao Zheng, a memorable encounter with the living legend of a great musical tradition.

Andante: A Refuge for Singers

As the premier center for the training of performing musicians in China, the Shanghai Conservatory is an impressive set of French Colonial-style buildings bordered by gardens and flowering trees in the "*quartier vieux*" of

the city. It is impressive as well to experience the collision of virtuosic sounds that filter into the courtyard below the studios and practice rooms: piano, violin, flute, and the many timbres and textures of young operatic voices in training. Faculty of the Shanghai Conservatory proudly fulfill their responsibilities as model musicians and master teachers in six departments that include composition and conducting, piano, voice, Western musical instruments, Chinese musical instruments, and music theory. As the oldest Chinese academy of higher education in music, the Shanghai Conservatory continues its tradition of rigorous European and Russian-style training, carefully preserving its international reputation for advancing a pyrotechnical flair in its young virtuosos that overwhelms and invigorates concert audiences in China and abroad.

Within easy earshot of soprano and baritone voices are the offices of the Art Phoniatics Laboratory, one of several divisions of the Music Research Institute of the Shanghai Conservatory. Chen Peifang, a medical doctor whose research and clinical experience emphasize the vocal health of singers, seemed at first an unlikely member of the Conservatory staff. In a laboratory-white jacket that extended almost to her knees, she was introduced by a member of the voice faculty—one who knew her from many previous visits prompted by intensive rehearsals that were, by his own admission, "too rigorous." Dr. Peifang had become an important part of the faculty member's professional life, and her ability to reduce his vocal fatigue had increased the frequency of his visits to her laboratory. In a very few minutes, it had become evident to me that Chen Peifang and her staff were serving as an important counterbalance and "safety check" for the highly motivated young singers who, driven by the nature of China's extremely high standards of concert perfor-

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mance, practiced longer and harder than their voices would usually allow.

Chen Peifang was receptive to questions and intent in her explanation and demonstration of “loud-speaking” acupoint, an emergency treatment of the vocal cords of singers and actors whose invention has been attributed to her. She first described a set of massage maneuvers for patients with hoarse or “unsmooth” voices. We watched as she pressed and lifted the muscles of a young student along channels and collaterals called *Quchi*, *Hegu*, *Zusanli*, and *Sanyinjiao* points. This student’s hoarseness had progressed to the development of vocal nodes so extreme that when she attempted to speak, only air was expelled. Dr. Peifang ascertained that with daily treatment that included massage and “loud-speaking” acupoint, this student could be restored to the vocal health of good singers and speakers. With the localized pressure of her massage alone, Dr. Peifang had already achieved her expected results: a relaxed throat, increased secretion of saliva, and improvement of the vocal fold tension.

The acupoint treatment itself was a form of acupuncture long practiced by Chinese physicians. Following massage and the discovery of the locale of pain and tension, Chen Peifang positioned the student to sit upright with her head leaning slightly forward at approximately a 25-degree tilt. A four-inch needle was inserted at the base of the neck, in the region of the sixth cervical vertebra which was, according to her scientific papers, at a position of “1 - 1.5 cm bilateral to the spinal column.” The needle slid slowly but easily about two inches into the neck in a movement that resembled a sparrow pecking food. Dr. Peifang turned the needle, then let it rest, and stepped away to talk further with her observers. The young singer showed no evidence of pain, and the only sensations she may have felt were described to be a moderate heaviness and numbness at

the top of the spinal cord. The results, we were assured, would be curative, so that in five or six weeks the young student could be speaking and possibly singing once more.

Standing in the small but sterile laboratory office of this distinguished clinical scientist, I felt overwhelmed: partly squeamish at what I had witnessed, and partly in awe of an ancient Chinese tradition that had survived and was flourishing in modern medical practices. I heard the trilling of a soprano as I moved toward the window of air, and I revelled at how science was serving young artists at China’s renowned Shanghai Conservatory. I was somewhat saddened at the thought of how a too-intensive musical training might lead to such extreme vocal misuse and abuse. The pressures of a young operatic singer to succeed in a competitive concert world, which for some was also a passage from China to the West, could be more physically demanding than should be sensible. Nonetheless, Chen Peifang appeared to be the hope, refuge, and regular check-point for lessening the fatigue, tension, or emerging polyps of aspiring and ambitious singers. As she provided for the repair of overused and misused voices, Dr. Peifang also provided for the healthy balance of work and relaxation—the yin for the yang.

Minuet: Music as Scholarship

If Beijing is the core of China’s sociopolitical activities, and Shanghai the heart and soul of the country’s artistic impulse, then Hong Kong is the voice that freely speaks for the political, intellectual, and cultural changes that have occurred on the mainland over the past half-century. Hong Kong lies beyond the border of the People’s Republic of China, a twenty-first century center of commercial and technological wonders. Teeming masses of expatriate Chinese, refugees from the mainland, reside in flats stacked 40 stories high that overlook the

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magnificent harbor for which Hong Kong is known. In conversations with the Hong Kong Chinese, in their exhibited works at galleries throughout the city, in their music, dance, and theater pieces, and in their news media, there is unfailing evidence that people in Hong Kong, despite their envelopment in a contemporary “cutting edge” environment, maintain a strong association with the traditions of their ancestors in the immense country that hovers just beyond their border.

At the Hong Kong Academy of the Arts, Kin-Woon Tong has performed teaching and advising duties for three years as head of the Department of Chinese Music Studies. He is overqualified in some respects: trained in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, where he received his Ph.D. in musicology and ethnomusicology, he teaches a handful of high school and college students the performance art of the seven-stringed *qin*. None of his students share his enthusiasm for the scholarly study of the music of the ancients, yet he is world-renowned for his thorough analysis of *qin* performance practice, and for the interdisciplinary study of philosophy and literature which scholar-musicians must pursue in order to perform *qin* music intelligently, as it was intended by musicians since Confucian times. Kin-Woon Tong is a relic from the ancient past, an anachronism. On June 20, 1990, I stepped out of post-modern Hong Kong and traveled backwards in time with Professor Tong through the music and performance ritual of musicians as ancient as the Tang, Han, and Shang dynasties. The following is an account of that singular experience.

According to pre-arranged plans, we met in the lobby of a Hong Kong hotel, and traveled by three buses to the home of his elderly parents. Kin-Woon Tong is in his late 40s, a bespectacled, thin, and wiry man prone to occasionally abrupt gestures that break the rhythm of his otherwise measured words and calm

demeanor. We arrived to his parents' home, a spacious 1400-square-foot flat on the eighteenth floor of an apartment building. After an abbreviated tea ceremony and an exchange of perfunctory remarks with his parents, we toured the home. Professor Tong disclosed its cost as nearing the price of a Park Avenue apartment, and so it seemed that his parents had met financial success since their arrival from Guangdong in 1947. There was a large sitting room, and a kitchen with a low green sink and matching miniature refrigerator, stove, and cabinets. There were also three bedrooms, three bathrooms (one of which contained a bathtub with three large turtles from Chengdu province), a sewing room and instrument repair shop, an instrument storage room, and a study.

We entered the study, where we sat with tea for four hours, surrounded by books and musical instruments. The room was air-conditioned and sound-proofed with acoustic tiles on the ceilings and walls. There was a black-lacquered desk near the window, and on it rested a *qin* and a large polished rock. This was clearly the focal point of the room, and of Tong's life—this altar where the scholar-musician performed his evening ceremonies.

Pressed by a stream of questions, Kin-Woon Tong began to unravel bits and pieces of his life: his interests in archaeology, phonetics, literature, and philosophy, and their relationship to consummate musicianship. He told of his childhood, and of his early fascination with oracle-bone inscriptions on turtle shells from the Shang dynasty. By the time he was 16, Tong was a student of archaeology and phonetics at Taiwan National University, seeking out the hieroglyphic-like characters on oracle bones to discern information on music and musical instruments from the sixteenth-century B.C. While he pursued interdisciplinary research that combined certain musicological processes, Tong continued to play *pipa*, *erhu*, and *zheng*—three traditional Chinese stringed

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instruments he had played since childhood.

As for his beloved *qin*, Professor Tong did not begin to study the ancient zither until his sophomore year in college. An old man who had emigrated from China to Taiwan, and who was part of a long lineage of one of the five traditional schools of *qin*-playing, was impressed with Tong’s earnest efforts to learn about China’s past. The teacher was especially approving of Tong’s knowledge of history and literature, and of his archaeological pursuits. It was only after a careful review of Tong’s broad yet intensive grasp of Chinese history and culture that the elder musician invited him to become his student. Like his teachers before him, the old man was maintaining the tradition of *qin*-playing as a right and privilege of the thoughtful scholar. Kin-Woon Tong had impressed his teacher as one who would prove to be more than a technician; he was a scholar whose understanding of the past would help to realize the aesthetic of *qin* music in its many splendors.

Tong recalled with great enthusiasm the long hours of practice he began to endure for the sake of developing technical facility on the instrument. He described as well the way in which his research informed him of ancient Chinese people and culture, and noted that as knowledge of the historical past increased, his practice of the *qin* grew more intense. Beginning with his student days, Tong began to require less sleep, he said, alternating between *qin*-playing, reading, and thinking. Even now, Kin-Woon Tong is likely to perform three or four hours in the solitude of his sound-proofed study, usually beginning around midnight.

Tong’s favorite *qin* is dated 815 A.D. It is a remnant of the Tang dynasty which is featured in several glossy photograph publications of historical musical instruments. He owns other *qin*, many from the nineteenth century, about six from the Ming dynasty, and two from the Sung Dynasty. He explained that as the tradition of *qin*-playing continues to fade, there are more instru-

ments available to collectors like himself, given up to antique shops by descendents of musicians who look to the West and to the twenty-first century rather than to China’s historical past. *Qin* music is not intended for the masses, and it does not hold the interest of those who do not understand the integrative nature of music and thought, nor the relationship of music to other learned disciplines. It is instead the music of the *literati*, of the ancient sages, and supposedly the instrument which Confucius himself favored. Today, there are only 200 *qin* players in Taiwan, 60 in Hong Kong, about 300 in all of Mainland China, and just several hundred more scattered in Chinese communities elsewhere. The *qin* has become an *objet d’art*, but Tong believes that the musical art is lost on those who do not understand the essence of the historical Chinese culture which it represents.

Interested in telling more of his story, Tong explained that in 1971, while in his 20s, he wrote a three-volume book entitled *Ch’in Fu: Collection of Materials on the Seven-Stringed Zither*. We glanced through the pages that contained pictures of 17 finger positions for *qin* performance, and its associations to animals and nature movements. These volumes included *qin* notation gathered from libraries and archives across the world. There were several examples of Western staff notation; Tong explained that they were inaccurate representations of the music but that such notation was a reasonable attempt to spread an appreciation of *qin* to the West by Chinese musicians of the 1920s and 1930s. Tong told of interviews he conducted with over 300 *qin* players in the United Kingdom, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States. His published collection includes their biographies, their repertoire of *qin* pieces, and their views on music as a means of contemplation of the Chinese culture at large. We poured through his published works, as we also looked at traditional *qin* notation and discussed its use as a guide to pitch and finger position, but not rhythm.

The evening turned toward night, and it ap-

“The teacher in me found the earnest interest and rigorous practice of student musicians heartening, and the reverence and esteem held by students for their teachers winsome and reassuring.”

peared time to go when, at 11:00 PM, his student appeared for a lesson. Professor Tong and the student sat on the floor facing each other as the student slowly uncovered a large smooth brown-marbled stone from a cloth bag he had carried into the study. Both teacher and student fell silent and sat for several minutes in deep reverie, their eyes transfixed on the stone. Tong then quietly rose and made his way to the *qin* that rested across his desk. He played with deliberate, strong strokes that were separated by long moments of silence. I heard each plucking sound, the whisk and brush of each string, the slow trills and tremolos, and listened while each pitch so gradually disintegrated and decayed. Clearly, the stone had been an inspiration for Tong. He was deep in thought, and when the music stopped, it was nearly five minutes before we engaged in conversation. I knew well enough to wait for the ceremony to close, and to await his cue to close the suspended silence that had overtaken us.

A visit with Kin-Woon Tong was a rare experience for a Westerner. In talking with his colleagues at the Hong Kong Academy of Arts and members of the music faculty at the University of Hong Kong, it appeared that he is rare among the Chinese as well. Perceived even by himself as eccentric and as somewhat of an anomaly, Professor Tong lives in another time and is travelling in a direction quite the opposite of Hong Kong's thrust into its technological future. He is one of few individuals resisting the giant wave forward, choosing instead to swim against the current toward China's rich past. Musician and scholar, Kin-Woon Tong gave new meaning to the scholarly study of music, reinforcing the case for comprehensive study of its context in order to grasp its full intention.

Coda

China was not what I had envisioned, nor was Chinese music what I had perceived it to be. The blend of tradition and modernity was not a balanced one in the musical world; it appeared that the West had won the hearts of much of the Celestial Empire some time ago.

The missionary and military efforts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had done their share in disseminating the melodies, genres, and instruments of European art music. Merchants from the United Kingdom and White Russian refugees from the revolution were strong influences in the establishment of both popular and art music idioms by the 1920s, particularly in the ports of Shanghai and Hong Kong. China's conservatories have become internationally known for the calibre of pianists and violinists they train, and the Western-style orchestras in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong program nineteenth-century masterworks that are masterfully played with all of the technical facility of a carefully monitored machine.

I heard more Western music than I cared to; I also sang at banquets, teas, and in schools the American folk and popular songs I had long ago forgotten—songs the Chinese know better than I. They had an odd assortment of classical favorites that played as Muzak on buses, in office buildings, and on elevators: Beethoven's *Für Elise* and the *Moonlight Sonata*, Schubert's *Serenade*, Liszt's *Liebesträume* #3, and Mozart's *Turkish Rondo*. They appeared to prefer the passionate and colorful music of the Romantics to the more austere music of Bach and Handel or the twentieth-century works by progressivists like Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Messiaen. One violinist I spoke to claimed the salon virtuoso pieces of Weiniawski, Sarasate, and Fritz Kreisler as those most preferred by his audiences. As for popular song requests, I was challenged to recall the words for what the Chinese regarded as representative of American culture: “Red River Valley,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” a variety of Christmas carols, and selections from “The Sound of Music.”

I longed to hear more *zheng* and *qin*, and to hear solo *erhu* and *pipa*. The Nonesuch and Lyricord recordings of *erhu*, the Chinese two-stringed fiddle, had first drawn me to a study of their music and culture. Its silk strings were capable of chains of high harmonics, glissandi, and trills in a haunting timbre that resembles

the human voice. I never heard "Moonlit Night" or "Singing in Sickness," the standard concert pieces of *erhu* concert repertoire. The view of a community of musicians, philosophically rooted both in ancient traditions and in the contemporary Communist attitude of art by and for the masses, may have been reason for the relative absence of performances by solo instruments. The traditional strings, winds, and percussion instruments were more likely to be heard in the offstage opera ensembles or in the massive orchestras resonating outside the People's Republic of China, in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

If one were to describe the musical taste of the Chinese on the brink of the twenty-first century, Western-styled popular and rock music would head a rank-ordered list of genres. The record stores on Beijing's Wangfujing Street sent rock and rap rhythms into the streets, anchoring the Chinese, Japanese, and English lyrics in place. The words may not be easily translated by the average capital-city dweller, but the pop beat appeared to be a common denominator and a unifier of young people in their teens and twenties in China, as it is in the West. Japanese *karaoké* bars nightly attracted the attention of residents and foreign visitors in corner neighborhood establishments and at such plush places as the Shanghai Hilton International. There, with the beat as the underlying constant, the Chinese read Japanese lyrics as readily as Chinese from television monitors, singing with fervor the romantic ballads to all of its synthesized backbeat arrangements. Western rock and popular music, prohibited from China for decades, has virtually flooded the commercial centers today, and is now even featured on government-sponsored radio and television programs, albeit to a limited extent.

A sampling of music, musicians, and musical training in contemporary China is a kaleidoscope of change and tradition. As Chinese society is multifaceted, so is its music. Both Schell and Kraus suggest that as music is symbolic of societal values, the emphasis which China has placed on Western classical and popular music may be sociopolitically more intentional than incidental. The ideal of community is personified in the assembly of large groups of instrumentalists in both Western and Chinese orchestras, conveying a powerful message through lush harmonies and unison

or doubled-octave textures. The high volume and high-tech power of rock music communicates an energy that may also not be completely lost on political leaders. It is also plausible that the lyrics of popular and folk music, as well as the texts of Beijing opera arias, provide thoughts that are in tandem with both traditional and Communist ideologies. In many cultures and historical periods, music has served well its extramusical functions. Contemporary China has shown itself to be no exception.

The future holds the key to the course of the Central Kingdom called China. Like all peoples, the Chinese will retain that part of music and culture that holds aural and ideological meaning for them; they will discard the rest. Perhaps Western music is a symbol of modernity, but I found tucked away behind the edges of mainstream China the echoes of a rich musical past. The teacher in me found the earnest interest and rigorous practice of student musicians heartening, and the reverence and esteem held by students for their teachers winsome and reassuring. I hold fast the hope that China will continue to develop its dreams for increased technology and stronger economy, but that it will choose not to undo its ties to some of its greatest natural treasures: its traditional music and the master musicians who teach it.

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Note: As this is an impressionistic essay, there will be no attempt to cite and document ideas; they are meant as matters for the reader's own reflective thoughts—as they were for me.

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