CHAPTER ONE

SIZHU MUSIC IN SOUTH CHINA

Most Cantonese music can be characterized as ‘bustling’ (re’nao) because this is an urban tradition, unlike the rural Hakka music which displays a strong sense of ‘tranquility’ (anjing) (Huang Jinpei, 1986).

The myth of a monolithic Chinese culture has penetrated deeply into popular thinking, both Chinese and Western, and occasionally into scholarly thinking as well. But the student of Chinese history is certainly aware of the many periods of cultural dissonance and internal conflict from the Warring States period (5th–3rd centuries B.C.) onward. In fact, one of the major achievements of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) was unification of the numerous warring kingdoms on and around the Central Plain of North China. As a result, most Chinese today refer to themselves as ‘Han people’ (as an ethnic term), and to mainstream Chinese civilization as that of the Han.

With unification came a sustained diffusion into southern regions of court and literati cultures—notably of written language, measurement systems, the Confucian philosophy, state rituals and literature. In spite of this, however, local dialects, local musics and local cuisines have been well maintained. It is fair to suggest that unification was not always warmly embraced, especially in marginal regions and among minority cultures. Indeed, the Hokkien cultures of southeastern coastal areas (Chaozhou and Minnan) and the very eclectic Cantonese, who have always been opposed to the hegemony of the North, call themselves ‘people of the Tang [dynasty]’ (Tangren), as if in protest.

In this book I examine the theoretical underpinnings of the sizhu (‘silk-bamboo’) instrumental ensemble traditions of the Han and Tang peoples of South China. This region is dominated by four cultures: Chaozhou, Minnan, Hakka and Cantonese. Their areas of settlement

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1 Sizhu is pronounced as ‘seh-ju’; wg: szu-chu.
2 The Beijing scholar Yuan Jingfang (1987: 290ff.) distinguishes among four different regional sizhu types—Chaozhou, Minnan, Cantonese and Jiangnan (central-eastern
are shown in Fig. 1.1. The name ‘silk-bamboo’ derives from the instrument types which dominate the chamber ensemble—those with silk strings (lutes, fiddles, zithers) and flutes constructed of bamboo. Percussion instruments, when employed, are small in size and usually restricted to woodblock types or other time-markers. While all cultures maintain regional names and distinctive stylistic characteristics for their ensemble traditions, most share a core of aesthetic, behavioral and musical concepts, allowing for the kind of cross-cultural study proposed here.

Music Categories: Sizhu as a Domain

Chinese scholars have always taken an active interest in classifying their material and expressive culture. As early as the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C., the concepts of proper and improper music were differentiated in Zhou dynasty literature, notably in reference to the traditions of the virtuous state of Lu and corrupt state of Zheng (q.v. Chapter Two). Specific functional types, such as ritual music, processional music and entertainment music were cited and visually depicted during the Han dynasty (c2nd century A.D.). Several centuries later, the categories of ‘refined music’ (yayue) and ‘banquet music’ (yanyue) appeared in the literature of the Tang court. The early Song scholar Chen Yang (c1100), in attempt to document the strong Indian and Central Asian influences as well as indigenous traditions, differentiated among the concepts of ‘refined music’ (yayue), ‘popular music’ (suyue) and ‘barbarian music’ (huyue). These domains and associated concepts are cited in dynastic sources from the earliest periods onward.3

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3 For a good introduction to musical ideologies of the Zhou period, see DeWoskin 1982: 19ff. For a general review of historic research orientations, see Thrasher 1993: 311ff.