CHAPTER FOUR

YUELÜ: MUSIC THEORY AND PRACTICE

the music of ancient China was regarded as the image of order of the universe
(Nakaseko 1957)

In this chapter, the basic melodic and modal elements of ‘silk-bamboo’ music are examined, beginning with a brief introduction to Chinese melody, and followed by discussion of the relevant historic theories of pitch organization and a more detailed examination of the southern pitch systems and mode.¹ With these particular melodic and modal elements, it is not always easy (or even possible) to correlate style with the older ideologies because some of the more creative elements (e.g., use of the ‘crying mode’) have obviously emerged from local practice—from below rather than from above.

It might be thought that these stylistic differences represent contradictions in Chinese philosophy and in the underlying functionalist thread weaving through this study—and, in a sense, they do. It is apparent from analysis that the Confucian influence has been strong in some musical areas, weak (or even absent) in others. But it is essential to realize that contrary cultural trends of this sort are generally resolved in people’s minds—especially in China where the ideal of harmonizing opposites (yin and yang, wen and wu) has a long history. Analytic matters aside, local musicians believe that the sizhu musical system as a whole reflects the values of the Confucian scholar (rujia)—a reminder of the importance of perception. More will be said below on these relationships.

Chinese Melody

Traditional Chinese musical accomplishment must be measured almost entirely in terms of melodic sophistication. Where other world cultures

¹ The term yuelü, which historically refers to the ancient pitch system used in court rituals, is employed in the title of this chapter as a general reference to Chinese music theory.
have developed complex harmonic and rhythmic systems, Chinese musicians have felt that development of the melodic line was of paramount importance, and that melodic enrichment was best achieved by varying the melodic parameters themselves. Some of these characteristics can be seen in the short melody *Xixiang Ci* (“Poem of the west chamber”) (Fig. 4.1), which in many ways is typical of southern melodies. This piece from the Hakka repertoire most likely emerged from a literary model, perhaps a poem of the same name or possibly from the Yuan dynasty drama “The Tale of the West Chamber” (*Xixiang Ji*). Huang Jinpei (1996) suggests that the term *xixiang* (“west chamber”) alludes to a reading room or library, thereby associating the music with one of the most cherished of Confucian ideals—education. It will be remembered from the above chapters that the Hakka have been among the staunchest defenders of the Confucian institution. As with most repertoire passed on by way of oral transmission, *Xixiang Ci* is of unknown authorship. It is said to be ‘traditional’.

*Melodic Line* An essential aspect of good Chinese melody, really the ideal, is the presence of a winding melodic line, in which ascending motivic movement is mixed with descending movement, and dramatic contrasts in style are avoided. In his book, *Minzu Qiyue Gailun* (1981: 223ff.), the scholar Gao Houyong insightfully outlines several valued characteristics of traditional melody, notably the presence of small intervals (rather than of large intervallic leaps), twisting motivic movement (rather than straight scalewise movement), and a sense of emotive balance from phrase to phrase (rather than sudden stylistic contrasts). As examples of small intervals and twisting movement, Gao cites the opening motifs of *Baban* (Fig. 4.2a), together with several other melodies. Significantly, in his description of ideal melodic movement, he uses the term *quzhe*, which in today’s vocabulary means ‘twisting and turning’. Gao could have further explained the deeper cultural significance in the character *qu* itself, which now is translated as ‘melody’ or ‘song’, but historically could be read as ‘twisted’, ‘crooked’ or ‘bent’. Associations

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2 *Xixiang Ci* (pronounced as ‘syi-syang tseh’), and most examples transcribed and analyzed in this book, can be heard on the CD “Sizhu: Chamber Music of South China”, PAN Records, 1994. The transcription in Fig. 4.1, a solo recording by the Hakka *zheng* master Rao Ningxin, is based upon my field tapes of 1986. The version on the CD is performed heterophonically by the Guangzhou-based four-piece Hakka ensemble pictured in Chapter One.

3 The Han dynasty dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* shows the character *qu* as a square-sided