CHAPTER FIVE

BABAN AND THE SIZHU REPERTOIRE

When the ancients composed [music]...each piece was given 68 beats

(Pipa Pu, 1762)

While common-practice modal forms seem to have been influenced less by Confucian thought than by regional practice, other organizational and performance elements display a more conscious range of correlations with cultural belief. In this chapter—which is focused upon another area of analysis—I examine the concept of melodic models (qupai), together with the historic methods by which these have been transformed into new tunes and the subsequent growth of the southern instrumental repertoires. The ancient, largely Confucian, ideology appears to have been an influential force in at least some of these structural areas. Underlying the southern repertoires are symbolically important numerological issues, notably the proper number of beats in Baban-based pieces, the theoretical number of variations in traditional suite forms, and the essential yin-yang duality within the southern ‘silk-bamboo’ categories themselves. Perhaps of greater significance, however, is the ideal of deriving new material from the old, an ideal manifest in the traditional forms of ‘variation’ (bianzou).

Sizhu Repertoire

In the sizhu traditions of South China, two repertoire categories are commonly identified. The Chaozhou distinguish between the ‘great suites’ (datao), which are pieces in the Baban form (or closely related), and ‘popular tunes’ (liuxing diao), which are generally shorter in length and lighter in content. Hakka musicians similarly divide their repertoire into ‘great melodies’ (dadiao) and ‘miscellaneous melodies’ (chuandiao). In the eclectic Cantonese tradition, where so many external influences have been accepted into practice, these sharp divisions disappear. Yet, older musicians are aware of what they call the ‘old
tunes’ (*gudiao* or *guqu*), as opposed to numerous lighter melodies in the repertoire.¹

For all three cultures, the repertoire in the first category consists almost entirely of 68-beat *Baban* variants—the culturally heavy pieces of the distant past. In some Chaozhou and Hakka published collections, the 68-beat variants are organized together according to repertoire size, such as the Chaozhou ‘ten great suites’ (Zhang 1958) and the Hakka ‘sixteen great melodies’ (Luo 1985).² In other collections, however, the 68-beat variants are mixed with tunes of lesser importance (Luo 1982a). Pieces in the second category are mostly the shorter, light and lively *qupai* tunes associated with traditional opera. This category will be discussed first, followed by a lengthier examination of the *Baban* variants.

*The Qupai Foundation* The instrumental repertoires of South China are built upon a system of old melodies which have served as structural models. These models are collectively known as *qupai*, literally ‘song board’,³ though more normally translated as ‘named song’ or ‘labelled melody’. In popular terminology, *qupai* are often simply called *paizi* (‘labels’).

*Qupai* is a broad concept, commonly employed in identifying a wide variety of instrumental melodies used as opera interludes and as models for instrumental repertoire. Historically, these tunes emerged from several sources, notably traditional opera interludes (in which they are still used), Yuan and Ming dynasty songs (1279–1644), urban melodies and other sources.⁴ In fact, the names of some tunes have been found in Tang and Song sources (618–1279), but the old melodies themselves were not notated during those periods (Zhongguo 1984: 321). Neverthe-

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¹ The Cantonese collector and composer Qiu Hechou (1917) was probably the first to distinguish among the instrumental melody types *gudiao* (‘old tunes’), the more popular *guochang qu* (‘crossing-the-stage tunes’) and *xiaodiao* (‘short tunes’). In Minnan *nanguan*, somewhat similar categories are differentiated in the *pu* and *zhi* repertoires, though 68-beat variants are not found in the *pu* genre, and the *zhi* genre is not based upon popular or opera tunes.

² These repertoire numbers represent a kind of attenuated symbolic relevance, both being multiples of highly auspicious numbers—for the Chaozhou, five suites in ‘light 3–6’ mode and five in ‘heavy 3–6’. In Hakka music, however, the presumed rationale for sixteen—eight plus eight—if ever recognized has been forgotten.

³ According to Gao Houyong (1981: 295ff., 1989: 4), the term *qupai* derives from the old practice of writing the titles of music to be performed on announcement boards, a practice not seen today. *Qupai* is pronounced as ‘chü-pai’; wc: ch’ü-p’ai.

⁴ Chinese folksong types, such as *shan’ge* and *haozi*, are not recognized as being among this group of diverse sources.