CHAPTER SIX

BIANZOU: PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND AESTHETICS

The higher the quality of the music, the fewer its supporters will be
(Old Chinese saying)

Ruyue [Confucian literati music] is slow, elegant, and encourages good behavior
(Chaozhou saying)

In this book I have examined the prevailing traditional Chinese ideologies and a core of related (and sometimes unrelated) structural elements in southern music, with the ultimate goal of holistically theorizing these traditions. The downward promotion of Confucian doctrine, emergence of philosophical cross-currents, and some observable manifestations of these ideologies in the structures of southern music have already been discussed.

This chapter is about performance practice, musical behavior and belief. I begin with an analysis of the interactive principles of performance ‘variation’, and continue with observations on how this practice may be seen as a function of social interaction. An understanding of local concepts such as ruyue and xiehe will facilitate this analysis. Following this, I conclude with a broad-based discussion of the values and aesthetic ideals underlying traditional music and of the ways these are seen by local musicians as cultural demonstrations of Confucian ideology and other trends.

‘Variation’ in Performance Practice

The southern instrumental repertoires are large, numbering many dozens of pieces in each tradition, but those in regular performance fall within the range of about fifteen to twenty. Each tradition has a smaller group of very well-known pieces which have especially strong cultural resonance and are performed over and over again.¹ How do skilled

¹ For the Chaozhou, this group includes Hanya Xishui (above all), Da Baban, Pingsha
musicians sustain interest when there is so much repetition in perfor-
mance? Aside from the fact that some will change instruments between
pieces, the principal reason is that musicians attempt to vary the details
of their performance each time they play. Thus, performance is more
than mere repetition of the old tunes—it is creation as well.

Performance creation is generally known as bianzou, ‘variation’, the
same term used in identification of structural forms (q.v. Chapter
Five). As noted in Chapter Five, several Chinese authors have written
on ‘variation’ though usually with emphases upon organizational prin-
ciples. The following discussion will focus upon bianzou as performance
practice.

At least two conditions are necessary for the success of Chinese
performance variation. First, the melodies must be well known to the
musicians. As seen in Chapters Four and Five, the southern chamber
repertoires are based upon a group of old gupai tunes which have been
expanded or varied in any of several ways. Performers are so familiar
with these tunes that they do not use notation. In the traditional per-
formance setting, the use of notation would inhibit the imaginations
of performers and destroy an essential ingredient of the music.

As a second condition, the musical system itself must be flexible
enough to accommodate variation. The texture of Chinese music is
heterophonic (zhisheng ti). When viewed in comparison with Western
homophony and its harmonic complexities, heterophony is sometimes
assumed to be a rather simple system. As a result, it has not been
treated critically in either Chinese or Western scholarship. In practice,
however, Chinese heterophony is a system of great sophistication, in
which all musicians perform the same basic melody with simultaneous
variations suitable to instrumental idioms and—this is key—in accor-
dance with established principles of the texture. These principles will
be introduced below.

Luoyan, Liqing Nian, and several others. The most culturally significant Hakka pieces
include Chushui Lian, Yulan Huan, Xunfeng Qu, Xixiang Ci and Yashan Ai. Among the most
highly valued in the Cantonese repertoire are Pinghu Qiyue, Hantian Lei, Yuda Bajiao,
Shuangxing Hen, Chanyuan Zhongsheng, Yule Shenping, and Zouma.

2 Bianzou is pronounced as ‘bian-dzou’; wg: pian-tsou. In translation, the term
‘improvisation’ is less appropriate because of its imprecise Western-language meaning
(often taken to mean free, unstructured invention). Similarly, the term ‘embellishment’
is inappropriate because it suggests a stylistic addition, something to be added if time
permits.