

LESSON FIVE

Chinese Musical Instruments

Presented by



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CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY

There is a wide variety of Chinese Musical Instruments which matches China's long and varied history. The earliest Chinese musical instruments were made over 9,000 years ago. They were flute-like instruments made of clay or bamboo. Bronze bells, wooden drums, and bamboo flutes were used during the Xia (2070-1600 BCE) and Shang (1600-1046 BCE) dynasties. To classify these instruments China developed the world's oldest classification systems during the Zhou Dynasty (1046 – 256 BCE). Called the eight sounds (八音 *bāyīn*), the classification system is based on the material used to make the instrument: stone (chimes), metal (bronze bells), silk (stringed instruments), bamboo (flutes), wood (percussion), clay (ocarina), gourd (flute), and skin (drums).

Traditional Chinese musical instruments that are still commonly used include:



Erhu (二胡 èrhú)

This two-stringed instrument is played with a bow and sounds similar to a violin. The sound box was traditionally covered in python skin that vibrated along with the strings to generate the sound. Today most erhu's use man-made material. The erhu is still one of the most commonly played traditional Chinese instruments and is even featured in pop music from China.



Pipa (琵琶 pípá)

This fretted four-stringed instrument is similar to a lute and plucked with the player's fingers. The pipa probably originated in central Asia and migrated to China along the Silk Road trade routes more than 2000 years ago.



Dizi (笛子 dízi)

Similar to a flute, the dizi was traditionally made from a single piece of bamboo and usually has six or more finger holes. This is one of the oldest Chinese instruments. Similar bamboo flutes found in China date back more than 9000 years.



Guzheng (古筝 gǔzhēng)

This long, horizontal wooden instrument has 18 or more silk strings that are plucked by the player's fingers. Often called the Chinese zither, the guzheng has been played in China for over 2500 years.

Student Activities:

1. Find samples of what each of the four instruments sounds like online.
2. Look up on the internet what other kinds of Chinese instruments there are.
3. Find out what similarities Chinese instruments have with instruments from other cultures and discuss how trade influenced the spread of musical instruments.

Confucius Institute Day - OU South Oval, Wednesday, Sept. 28 - ouci.ou.edu/2016ciday

Beijing Normal University Youth Art Troupe Performance - OU Sharp Concert Hall, Friday, Sept. 30 - ouci.ou.edu/2016bnu



For the sources used in this lesson and for more information about Chinese instruments,

please visit the OU Confucius Institute website at ouci.ou.edu/chineseinstruments