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Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road



Edited by Neville Agnew

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Harps on the Ancient Silk Road

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Abstract: *One can derive a great deal of information on Chinese music from images painted during the first millennium along the Silk Road, including Dunhuang, especially if combined with Chinese texts. Long before the arrival of Buddhism in China, music held an important place in Confucian and Daoist ritual. With the arrival of Buddhism, its followers demanded no less, but they required instruments quite different from the ritual instruments used during the first millennium B.C.E.—bronze bells, stone chimes, and large drums. The instruments brought by Buddhists were light (lutes, harps, flutes, reed instruments, and small drums). Most survived in China, but harps (konghou) disappeared shortly after 1000 C.E. as Buddhism declined. One of the last depictions of harps is found in cave 465 at the Mogao Grottoes (thirteenth century).*

This paper attempts to compile what is known about these ancient instruments, information vital to conservators, art historians, instrument makers, and musicians who wish to revive earlier practice. Harps died out in China, but replicas are now played in several places, for example, the Dunhuang Academy, the Shanghai Conservatory, Jeonju (Korea), and Tokyo.

Although harps were not indigenous to China, they came to play an important role there during the first millennium C.E. after migrating along the Silk Road from India, Iran, and points farther west. Many types of Western instruments came the same way. All were lightweight and could easily be transported on camels, horses, and other beasts of burden. Images of these instruments were painted on walls in caves and grottoes on the Silk Road, notably at Dunhuang, and the images reveal shapes and playing positions of instru-

ments, their formation into orchestras, and their cultic and societal function. The information is occasionally supplemented by Chinese texts.

At the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E., Chinese ritual relied mostly on heavy bronze bells and weighty stone chimes. Both were indigenous and lacked parallels in the West. There were few if any string instruments (zithers may have been used, but there is no information). At the same time, Chinese music employed an extensive variety of drums, many of them large. Their massive size confined them to fixed stationary positions during performance.

In ancient western Asia, for example, in Mesopotamia and Iran (Lawergren 1995, 2001), the situation was different. From the earliest documented time, string instruments dominated, with harps, lyres, and lutes already being played in the third millennium B.C.E. Not only were string instruments more numerous there than in China, but they also had a greater diversity of shapes. Moreover, players were sometimes depicted standing and were anything but stationary.

None of these types of light instruments existed in China; conversely, no zithers were known in the West. Western countries were unaware of other Chinese favorites, such as heavy bells and stone chimes. Most Western drums were small, unlike Chinese ones.

This situation changed when the Silk Road opened a window toward the West and its ample supply of string instruments. Buddhist travelers on the Silk Road not only introduced their faith to China but also brought light instruments for their rituals.

The sacred texts of Buddhism compelled China to import Western instruments. Mahayana sutras were written as if Western instruments were the norm. Texts recounting

the life of Siddhartha, the young prince who grew up to become the Buddha, describe how in his father's palace the prince enjoyed the company of the female musicians employed there, and he liked listening to their harps, lutes, flutes, and drums (Lawergren 1994a: 226, 227–28). A still grander orchestra described in the Lotus Sutra includes drums, horns, conch shells, pipes, flutes, zithers, harps, lutes, cymbals, and gongs (trans. A. Berkowitz, pers. com.; Watson and Kumarajiva 1993: 40). Individuals who assembled such orchestras—the sutra promised—would attain Buddhahood.

Music was also featured in the sutras that describe future delights of paradise awaiting devout Buddhists. There would be “music, concerts, and musical instruments,” and worshippers would have access to an assortment of “materials, beginning with flowers and ending with musical instruments” (Cowell et al. 1969: 53). Since the music of Western instruments was a pleasure approved for the afterlife, why not enjoy it already here on earth?

Many light instruments were introduced into China, but this paper focuses on harps. Before Buddhism entered China, harps were unknown there; after the first millennium C.E.—when Buddhism sharply declined—harps disappeared for good. One of the last depictions of a harp is in Mogao cave 465 of the thirteenth century. Later images exist, for example, in Qiu Ying's large hand-scroll *Spring Morning*

in the *Han Palace* (Fong, Watt, and Guo li gu gong bo wu yuan 1996: pl. 203 [central section]). It was painted in 1540 but seems to depict much earlier conditions.

Harps in Ancient China

The harp (*konghou*) was the quintessential Buddhist instrument of China. These instruments had several distinct forms, most of them depicted in the wall paintings of grottoes and caves near Dunhuang. I recognize four categories of harps: arched, angular, vajra, and steppe. The first two are the oldest. The arched harp arose in the Iraq-Iran region around 2900 B.C.E. and was replaced around 1900 B.C.E. by the angular type, which soon became ubiquitous in western Asia, Egypt, and the eastern Mediterranean region. But the arched type had apparently already gained popularity in India, during the Indus civilization. Figure 1 depicts an arched harp and an angular harp based on Egyptian depictions (Lawergren 2001: figs. 2m, 3g), but their structure is similar to that of harps illustrated millennia later in China. In other words, harp designs remained stable for extraordinarily long durations. Arched harps (fig. 1a) have a long, curved rod projecting out of the short side of the sound box. Strings are attached to tuning collars, which, when rotated around the rod, tune the strings. The other string ends are tied to a narrow rib in contact with the membrane that covers the

FIGURE 1 Harps from ancient Egypt: (a) arched harp (1340 B.C.E.); (b) angular harp (early eighth century B.C.E.).

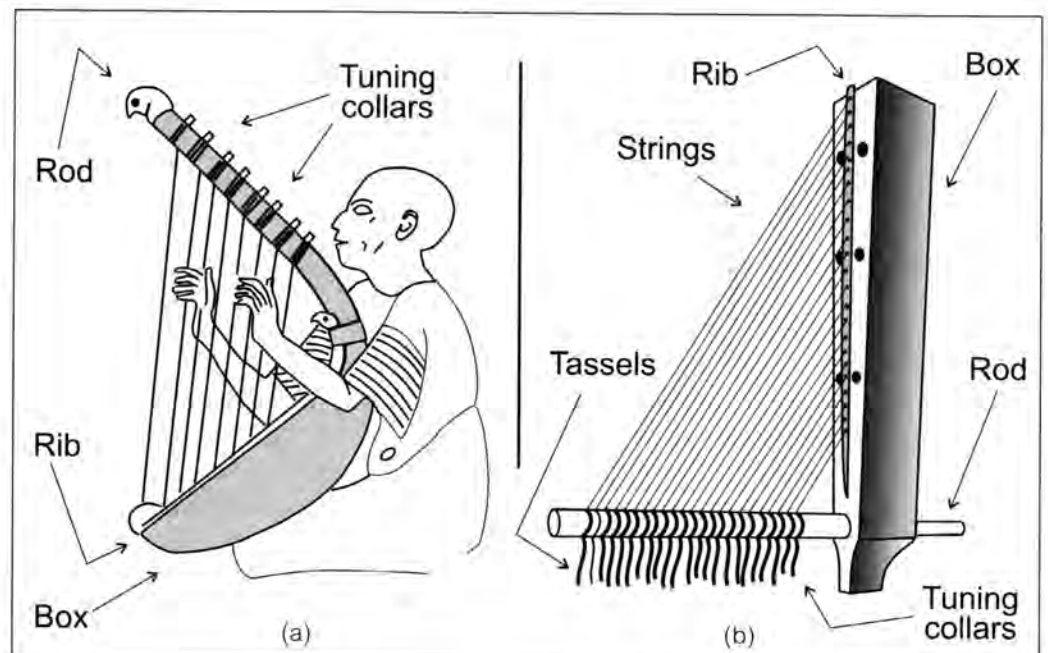




FIGURE 2 Depiction of an arched harp from the Mogao Grottoes (cave 327).

box. Angular harps (fig. 1b) have the same individual components, but they are arranged differently. For example, the rod joins the box perpendicular to its axis through a wide hole, and the box is placed above the rod rather than below it.

During the period immediately prior to the opening of the Silk Road, arched harps existed only in India, and the angular harp in Iran and regions farther west. Most Silk Road sites depict only angular harps; the largest exception is at the Kizil grottoes (near Kucha, Xinjiang Autonomous Region, China), where 75 percent of the harp images are arched (Lawergren 1995: table 1, no. III 1). At the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang, 10 percent of the harp images are of the arched variety, the highest number after Kizil. Farther east into China there were no arched harps. Since the two instrument types came from distinct geographic regions, the percentages reveal distinct musical influences. The large percentage of arched harps at Kizil indicates substantial Indian influences. A dominance of angular harps points to influences from Iran or regions farther west.

Arched Harps

Before the Silk Road became active, arched harps were found only in India. From there they migrated north into Gandhara (near present-day Kabul, Afghanistan), Bactria (near Balkh, northern Afghanistan), and Sogdia (near Samarkand, Uzbekistan). An example from Panjikent (western Tajikistan) is a small, portable harp with seven strings and a bird's head at the upper end of the curved rod (Lawergren 1995: fig. 3c). What is unusual about this

depiction is that the player holds a rectangular plectrum in her left hand and damps the strings with her right hand, a reversal of normal hand positions. Players depicted in wall art in Kizil and Bezeklik (about 30 kilometers east of Turpan, Xinjiang) pluck with their right hands. Their harps have slender rods that swoop out of the box in long arched curves.

The arched harps depicted in two caves at Mogao, cave 327 (fig. 2) and cave 465 (shown in Blunden and Elvin 1983: 111), were drawn nearly a millennium later than those at Kizil. These represent the most easterly diffusion of arched harps (Lawergren 1995: 270, table 1, No. I).¹ The Dunhuang harps and the one in cave 438 at Bezeklik (Yao Shihong 1983: 243) are decorated with bird heads, but these are not unique. Animal heads on arched harp rods are also present at Panjikent (Lawergren 1995: fig. 3c) and two millennia earlier in Egypt (fig. 1a).

The unusually late painting (thirteenth century) of the arched harp in Mogao cave 465 (Blunden and Elvin 1983: 111) contains Tibetan traits. Although the harp is not clear, the S-shape of the rod is plainly visible. A similarly shaped rod was used on another Tibetan harp, that at Alchi (see below).

Angular Harps

The history of angular harps is more complex than that of arched harps. Until about 550 C.E. angular harps maintained the sturdy construction acquired around 1900 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia (fig. 1b). But after 550 C.E. they became instruments of great delicacy and mechanical elegance. The box

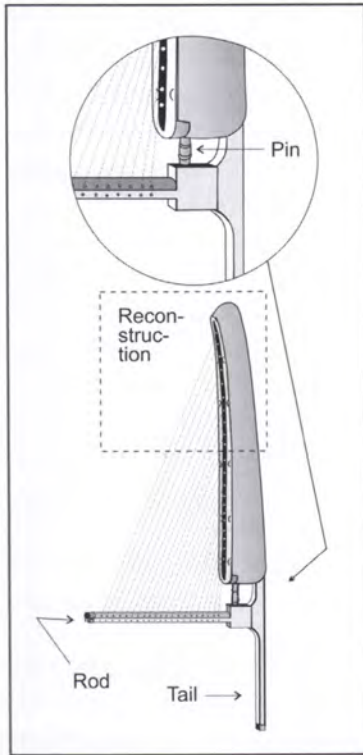


FIGURE 3 An extant cantilever harp in the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan.



FIGURE 4 In this image from Khocho, 50 kilometers southeast of Turpan, the player's arm obscures the pin of his harp, making it difficult to determine if it is an angular harp or the cantilever variant.



FIGURE 5 Depiction of a cantilever harp from the Mogao Grottoes (cave 156).

no longer reached down to the level of the rod, and the two parts could no longer support each other. Instead, the rod was attached to a slender tail that descended from the box. To achieve balance, a pin was inserted between the box and the rod. In other words, the rod had become a cantilever projecting beyond a fulcrum (the pin) and supported by a balancing force from the tail. Figure 3 shows an extant harp in the Shosoin Treasure House in Nara, Japan, which clarifies this construction (Lawergren 1995: fig. 4f). It is dated ca. 800, but earlier examples are depicted in Iran and on the Silk Road. I shall call this variant of the angular harp pattern a "cantilever harp." Elegance was gained by the new design, but strength was sacrificed. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to identify such harps in paintings because the player's right arm may obscure the pin (e.g., fig. 4).

At Dunhuang one finds harps with and without a fulcrum pin, as well as some harps that are difficult to classify. At first glance the harp in figure 5 seems an obscure type, but

the spacing of box, rod, and tail suggests they were joined in a cantilever design.

Angular harps became common throughout China. Buddhist orchestras had them, and so did entertainers, virtuosos, and poets. During the Sui and Tang dynasties (581–907 C.E.), female central Asian musicians were in especially strong demand in China, and they frequently modeled for terracotta and porcelain figurines (e.g., Lawergren 1995–96: fig. 10). Among poets favoring the harp, we note Li He (791–817), active in the Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an. One poem describes a harp concert given by the court musician Li Ping (Frodsham, David, and Li Ho 1970: 10–11). The air is cool; it is an autumn day with low clouds and dew on the ground. The poet sees the clouds move nearer to the musician and imagines they wish to hear the harp better. But rain begins to pour, and the harp moans. When a rainbow appears, it is as if the sound had shattered jade and vaporized minerals, which spread across the sky. Earth and heaven quiver, fish jump, dragons

dance, phoenix-birds shriek, and the light melts before the city gates of Chang'an. Nature and harp had become one.

Other Harps

A third type of instrument, the vajra harp, appeared in China at the time when arched and angular harps were about to disappear, shortly after 1000 C.E. Most of the evidence for this harp comes from Japan, but similar harps are shown on images not far from Dunhuang. Recently a fourth type of instrument, the steppe harp, has been brought to light by archaeologists working in Xinjiang—again, not far from Dunhuang. This harp, however, appeared before the opening of the Silk Road and does not seem to have penetrated east of Xinjiang. Like other harps, both types came from the West.

Vajra Harps

A typical early vajra harp is shown in figure 6. It was drawn about 1125 on a raigo painting (a type of Japanese painting that depicts the descent of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, accompanied by scores of musicians) that now hangs in the Reihokan Museum, Koyasan, Japan (Lawergren 2008). The instrument has a flat, cylindrical, and horizontal body that supports an undulating vertical rod holding six nearly vertical strings. The assembly is crowned by a three- (or four-) pronged vajra (an object representing a thunderbolt). The vajra, an implement used in esoteric Buddhist sects in China and Japan (Louis-Frédéric 1995: 63–67), lends a sacred aura to this harp. On later raigos (twelfth–seventeenth century) the body and rod of the vajra harp are greatly simplified and do not appear to be functional. The cylindrical body has been replaced by a horizontal stick, and the strings have disappeared, but the vajra remains. Evidently, the religious symbolism of the vajra was more important than the musical efficacy of the instrument. Thus this was a symbolic harp rather than a musical one. There are no vajra harps in the Shosoin Treasure House, a place otherwise well supplied with musical instruments of the late first millennium. The absence is hardly surprising.

In Japanese Buddhism, raigo paintings express a belief in the Pure Land, a far-off region that offers marvelous delights to the righteous Buddhist after death. It is a paradise, and Buddhist paintings show it with sumptuous buildings, spacious gardens, refreshing pools, large orchestras, pliant dancers, and blessed inhabitants. Buddha Amida, who presides over it, is attended by two bodhisattvas, Seishi and Kannon. Raigo paintings show the three descending to receive the spirit of a deceased man and bring it back to the

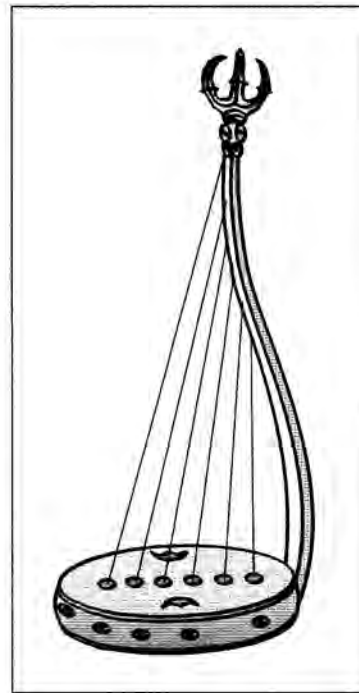


FIGURE 6 Depiction of a vajra harp on a raigo painting. (Reihokan Museum, Koyasan, Japan)

Pure Land. The occasion is of great musical interest as musicians accompany Amida, and their instruments—including a vajra harp—are usually carefully drawn. This type of painting was unique to Japan—as was the harp. However, evidence of the existence of a variant of the vajra harp is found in China (discussed below).

Vajra harps were depicted centuries before one appeared on the Koyasan raigo, namely, on the Diamond World mandara, or *kongokai* (Lawergren 2008), which is a pictorial representation of concepts and doctrines fundamental to Shingon and Tendai Esoteric Buddhism (ten Grotenhuis 1999: 33–57, figs. 20, 23, pls. 6, 7). The earliest surviving polychrome copy of this mandara, from the ninth century C.E., is kept in the Toji temple in Kyoto, but later copies are very similar. The vajra harp is placed at the upper left side (ten Grotenhuis 1999: 80–86), in a section that contains many other objects outfitted with vajras. Presumably, the harp was given its vajra because of the environment on the mandara. The original Diamond World mandara had been given to the Japanese monk Kukai when he visited the Chinese capital Chang'an in 804–5 (Lawergren 1995: 247). Many copies of the mandara have survived in Japan but none in China. The vajra harp is the only musical instrument represented on the mandara. It rests unplayed on a lotus pod. So even here it is a symbol rather than an active instrument.

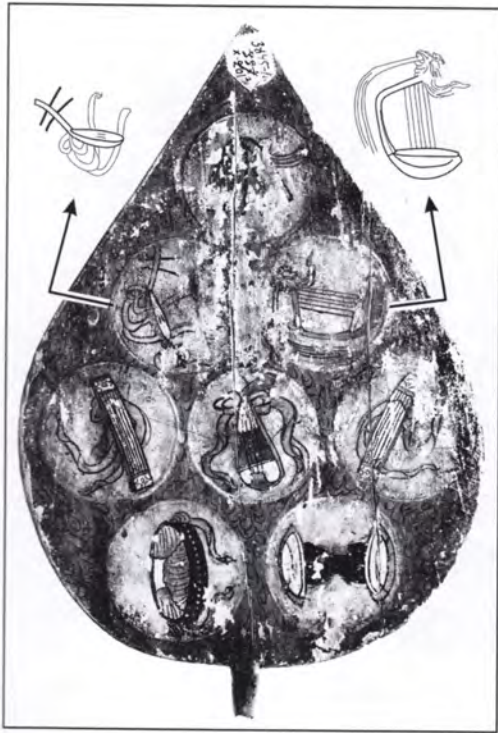


FIGURE 7 Musical instruments depicted on a wooden plate from Kharakhoto, Inner Mongolia. Arrows point to a phoenix harp (right) and an arched harp (left). State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, inv. no. 3845-1a

As mentioned earlier, a related instrument—without the vajra—was depicted in central China and in regions farther west around the beginning of the second millennium C.E. A comprehensive Chinese treatise on music published in 1104 C.E. by Chen Yang (1979; Lawergren 1995: fig. 3F) illustrates this harp, but a phoenix head has replaced the vajra. The alteration replaces Buddhist associations with ancient Chinese ones. Quite likely, Chen Yang's instrument and the vajra harp had a common source in central China or west of it. The surmise is supported by two further examples, both from the West. The first comes from Kharakhoto, western Inner Mongolia, which at the time (1000–1200) belonged to the state of Xixia, where Buddhism was the state religion (Piotrovsky 1993: 55–57). The second is in a Buddhist temple at Alchi, about halfway between Leh and Khalatse in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Russian excavations at the Kharakhoto site produced a thin wooden plaque carved and painted to look like the leaf of a bodhi tree (Zuber 1940: pl. 6). The plaque, dated 1200–1400, has sixteen images of

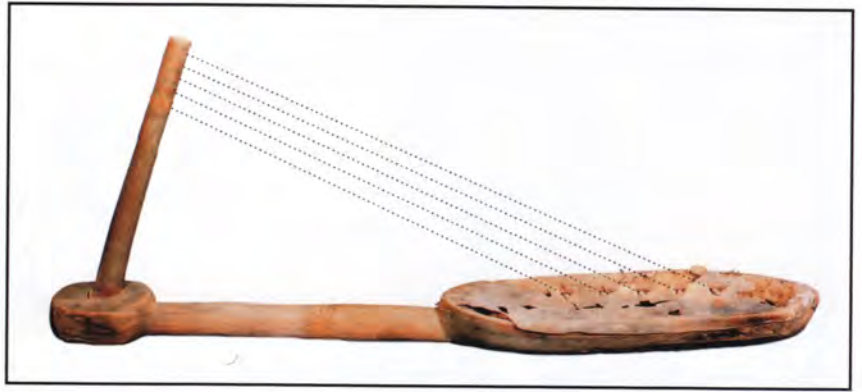


FIGURE 8 An extant steppe harp excavated near Shanshan, Xinjiang, China.

instruments without players,² and the instruments hover in the air decorated with ribbons. Figure 7 shows one side of this plaque on which there are two harps, one an arched harp, the other a phoenix variant of the vajra harp. A painting found at the Alchi site (dated 1000–1200) shows a harp with a sharply bent rod reminiscent of Chen Yang's phoenix-variant vajra harp (Goepfer et al. 1996: 44).

Considering the wide geographic distribution of this variant of the vajra harp—between Japan and the Indus—and its close association with Buddhism, one would not be surprised to find it at Dunhuang. But it has not yet been reported there. Indeed, this instrument has only now been recognized as a separate type of harp with international spread.

Steppe Harps

A fourth category of instrument is the steppe harp, which I have so named because several well-known examples had been found buried at the edge of the vast Eurasian steppe zone. They belong to the wider category of horizontal angular harps that were first depicted in Mesopotamia around 1900 B.C.E. and continued on Assyrian monuments 850–650 B.C.E. Recently steppe harps were found in tombs excavated in the extreme western part of China, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The tombs date to the first millennium B.C.E., that is, before the Silk Road became active. About five harps have been recovered, some in excellent condition, as seen in figure 8 (Lawergren 2003: 89–91, fig. 11). Since their shape is reminiscent of the Assyrian harps, steppe harps appear to be the result of an eastward migration. Although not part of the “classical” Silk Road migration of the first millennium C.E., steppe harps nonetheless show that Xinjiang

lay open to Western musical influences centuries earlier. Of the different harp types discussed here, steppe harps are the only ones that do not seem to have spread east of Xinjiang.

Some of these harps were found in the dry sands at Zaghunluq cemetery in Qiemo county, Xinjiang. This remote site lies on the southern route of what would become the Silk Road around the Takla Makan (Wang Zichu 1999: 60). A similar harp was recently found at Yanghai in Shanshan county on the northern route.

These instruments are similar to three long-known extant harps. One was well preserved in a frozen tomb at Pazyryk in the Altai mountains in Siberian Russia; it is dated to 350 B.C.E. (Lawergren 1990). Another harp was poorly preserved in a tomb at Bashadar (near Pazyryk) with a similar date. The third, belonging to the Samartian culture, was found at Olbia on the Black Sea (Bachmann 1994). It dates to 75–100 C.E. (O. Simonenko, pers. com. 2005). Horizontal angular harps, some with nine strings (Lawergren and Gurney 1987: 51), were also depicted in royal Assyrian art around 900 to 600 B.C.E. (Rashid 1984: figs. 137, 146). It is known that some Eurasian peoples, for example, the Scythians (Lawergren 2003: 90), worked as mercenaries in the Assyrian army, and I surmise such equestrian people brought the harp to Xinjiang. The small size and light weight of these harps facilitated this migration. Steppe harps were not associated with Buddhism, and tombs with steppe harps contained no Buddhist paraphernalia.

Conclusion

Harpes were among the many light instruments brought into China from the West by Silk Road travelers, many of whom passed through Dunhuang. Their instruments are shown on the walls of Dunhuang caves and grottoes, and the depictions provide an excellent source for musical study. But harps are also found in archaeological excavations in the nearby Xinjiang Autonomous Region and in depictions over a wider area, including Japan, Inner Mongolia, and northern India.

The Chinese term for harp, *konghou*, suggests that only a single kind of instrument existed, but so far four types have been recognized: angular, arched, vajra, and steppe harps. Although harps died out in China around 1000 C.E., the tradition is now being revived in several places. At present, replicas of vertical angular harps are owned and promoted by the National Theatre in Tokyo and by MBC Television in Jeonju (Korea).

Notes

- 1 However, an orchestra from Upper Burma was presented to the court at Chang'an in the year 802 (Picken 1984: 245). It included nineteen different types of instruments, including two phoenix-headed harps (*feng shou konghou*). Animal-head decorations were characteristic of arched harps (e.g., fig. 2).
- 2 In China these instruments are called *bu gu zi ming* ("no drum-beating, but sounding on its own").

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