

Postscript to the Dapu of *Letian Cao*

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Abstract: *Dapu*, as an act of interpretative reconstruction of historical music scores, is both a creative endeavor and a practice of rendering sound from notation. Throughout the *dapu* process, one must synthesize multifaceted elements—such as the historical context of the composition, the musical background, the characteristics of the score versions, and the thematic essence of the piece—to meticulously reconstruct the composer’s original intentions and thereby manifest the work’s musical form. *Letian Cao* (Ode to Joyful Heaven) is preserved in *A Primer to Qin Studies* (1894), a Qing-dynasty guqin treatise published in the 20th year of the Guangxu reign. This essay comprises two sections: the first examines the historical and cultural context of *Letian Cao*; the second documents the practical procedures of its *dapu* and highlights the distinctive techniques derived from the Guangling School employed during the reconstruction.

Keywords: Dapu, Guqin, *Letian Cao*, *A Primer to Qin Studies*.

1. Exploration of Musical Intent

The term *Letian* (乐天, “joyful acceptance of heaven’s will”) first appears in *The Book of Rites: Duke Ai’s Inquiries* (礼记·哀公问), where it states: “One who cannot settle the land cannot ‘Letian’; one who cannot ‘Letian’ cannot perfect the self.” Here, it is interpreted as “rejoicing in the alignment with cosmic order.” Tao Yuanming (365–427) of the Jin Dynasty further articulates this philosophy in his *Self-Elegy* (自祭文): “Though labor leaves no respite, the mind abides in tranquility. By ‘Letian’ and yielding to fate, one attains a century of peace.” This reframes *Letian* as a state of equanimity toward one’s circumstances. Throughout Chinese intellectual history, Bai Juyi (772–846) epitomized this ethos. A polymath versed in the *Book of Changes* (周易), Bai adopted the courtesy name *Letian* (乐天), derived from the *Xici I* (系辞上): “To act without transgression, to ‘Letian’ and know fate—thus, one remains free of sorrow.” This passage crystallizes Bai’s philosophy of *Letian*—a harmonious acceptance of cosmic and existential imperatives.

Bai’s life mirrored this doctrine: celebrated for his literary genius in youth, he became an outspoken statesman in midlife, endured repeated political demotions, and ultimately embraced a contemplative resignation in old age. His poetry consistently reflects this worldview. In *Composed Upon My Pillow* (枕上作), he writes: “If asked whether *Letian* frets over illness—*Letian*, knowing fate, harbors no care.” The first *Letian* functions as a self-referential pun, while the second articulates his philosophy of equanimity—a masterful rhetorical duality. Lines such as “Anchor the mind beyond worldly affairs; neither joy nor sorrow remains” and “Detached, body and world henceforth part ways” further distill his ethos. Bai’s legacy lies in his synthesis of political discretion (藏锋敛颖) and existential resilience, forging an archetype of the scholar-official who transcends worldly strife. His influence resonated across generations, as evidenced by Emperor Xuanzong’s elegy: “Untethered as floating clouds, his name ‘Dwells-in-Ease’; unforced as nature’s course, his sobriquet ‘Joyful Heaven.’”

The colophon to *Letian Cao* (乐天操) notes: “This piece, with its austere tonality and unyielding rhythmic integrity, demands performative restraint—played with poised

detachment, fingered with grounded serenity. Its execution purges worldly attachments, embodying the music of contentment in humble virtue.” Such descriptions resonate profoundly with Bai Juyi’s philosophy of *Letian*.

2. Dapu Notes

2.1 Modal Tuning

According to *A Compendium of Surviving Qin Compositions* and *The Collected Qin Repertoire*, *Letian Cao* (乐天操) is exclusively preserved in *A Primer to Qin Studies* (琴学初津, hereafter *Qin Primer*). The score opens with the annotation “Huangtai mode, Gong tonal center” (黄太调宫音). As clarified in the *Qin Primer*: “The Huangtai mode, also termed the Taicu system, designates the fourth string as the Gong (宫) pitch, avoiding the open tones of the first, third, and sixth strings while aligning with the Rui (蕤) and Ying (应) pitch standards.” This tuning conforms to the zhengdiao (正调) system, where the fourth string serves as the foundational Gong pitch, with systematic exclusions of specific open strings.

2.2 Interpretation of Jianzi Fingering Techniques

While absent in the *Qin Primer*, Guan Pinghu’s *Research on Ancient Fingering Techniques* (管平湖古指法考) defines “Da-Tiao” (打挑) as “plucking two adjacent strings with distinct fingers: striking the upper string and plucking the lower.” By analogy, “Gou-Tiao” likely involves simultaneous execution of gou (勾, inward pluck) on the upper string and tiao (挑, outward pluck) on the lower.

Though undefined in the *Qin Primer*, the term “Huo Yin” (活吟) is glossed as “a vibrato technique resembling luozhiyin (落指吟) but with subtle timbral distinctions.” Thus, “Huo Zhuang” likely emulates the dynamic inflection of zhuang (撞, upward slide) executed with fluid articulation.

“Xu Daiqi” (虚带起): Defined in Guan Pinghu’s treatise as “lifting the left-hand finger from a pressed string without right-hand plucking, producing a faint harmonic resonance.”

“Xi Yin” (细吟): The Qin Primer describes this as “a microtonal vibrato executed with refined subtlety.”

“You Yin” (游吟): The Qin Primer specifies: “A ‘wandering vibrato’ involving gradual ascent (chuo shang), slight retreat, repeated ascent, and another retreat—yielding two distinct inflections. The motion should emulate a leisurely oscillation, akin to a slowed shuangzhuang (双撞, double slide), avoiding abrupt tonal breaks.”

2.3 Rhythmic Prosody

Dapu (打谱, interpretative reconstruction of historical scores) is not an arbitrary process. As Gu Meigeng (1899–1990) elucidates in *Essentials of Qin Studies* (琴学备要):

“Primary techniques—**mo** (抹, inward pluck), **tiao** (挑, outward pluck), **gou** (勾, hook pluck), and **ti** (剔, upward flick)—constitute foundational tones, each assigned to one **ban** (板, beat).

Connected techniques—**lun** (轮, rapid alternation), **juan** (涓, tremolo), **da** (打, strike), **suo** (锁, locked pluck), **gun** (滚, rolling), and **fu** (拂, sweeping)—group multiple notes into a single beat.

Transitional techniques—**yan** (罨, pressed harmonic), **qiaqi** (掐起, lift-and-pinch), **zhuaqi** (爪起, clawed lift), and **daiqi** (带起, harmonic lift)—occupy half a beat.

Ornamental techniques—**yin** (吟, vibrato), **nao** (猱, wide vibrato), **zhuang** (撞, upward slide), **huan** (换, positional shift), **shangxia** (上下, ascending/descending slides), **jinfu** (进复, forward-return), and **tuifu** (退复, backward-return)—extend across one or half a beat.

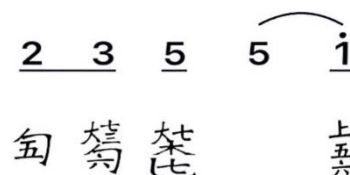
Rests—**shaoxi** (少息, brief pause) and **daxi** (大息, extended pause)—occupy one to two beats or half a beat.”

This framework confirms that **dapu** is a process of **sonic archaeology**, requiring logical rhythmic reconstruction based on textual cues embedded in historical notation. For instance: The character **li** (歷, rapid sequential plucking) demands **tightly articulated legato phrasing**, forbidding rhythmic separation or deceleration. **Shaoxi** (少息) dictates a **measured rest**, suspending temporal flow. **Ru man** (入慢, “entering slowness”) signals a **ritardando**, guiding performers toward cadential resolution through gradual tempo and affective subsidence.

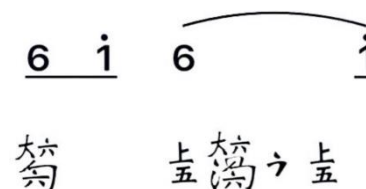
These notational markers—**prosodic**, **gestural**, and **affective**—demand meticulous hermeneutic engagement to reconstruct the composer’s intentionality. By decoding such cues, the **dapu** practitioner bridges temporal and cultural divides, transforming static glyphs into living sonic intentionality.

For instance: In the second section of the composition, the phrase “thumb at the 7th hui, mo-tiao on the 7th string, ascending to positions 5–6 via ‘geng’* (更)” employs the

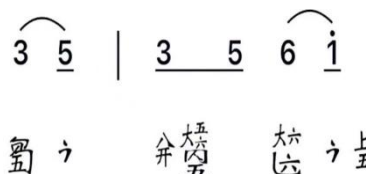
left-hand technique **geng**. Though written as 更 in the **jianzipu** (减字谱, tablature), this character is an abbreviation for 硬 (ying, “firm”). The Qin Primer defines 更 as: “‘Ying’ (硬)—upon attaining the pitch, ascend directly and resolutely with unyielding articulation.” This indicates that the upward slide (**shanghuayin**) here demands a linear trajectory and crisp tonal release. Consequently, the rhythm is structured as a pronounced syncopation to accentuate the abrupt, decisive execution of the technique.



According to the meaning of this song, the composer describes a state of contentment and ease, so the author did not use regular beats throughout the rhythm arrangement, but interspersed some compound beats to highlight the leisurely and leisurely musical effect of this song. Teacher Li Fengyun once said, “The mixed beats of different units can create a special sense of rhythm, and as the emotions of the music develop and change, the importance and urgency seem to be unexpected. Only in this way can the performance be free and unrestrained.” Compound beats are often composed of two beat and three beat combinations, with continuous sound effects and ups and downs, which have the characteristics of Guangling style performance. When composing this song, the author also devoted himself to incorporating the characteristics of the Guangling School. The following will use the example of compound beats to illustrate:



(1) The phrase ‘Big Finger Six Emblems Hook Six Up Five’ is repeated here, in order to make the sound effect sound more vivid, the first sentence is arranged as two octaves beats, and the last sentence is arranged as a triple beat, forming a strong and weak contrast sound effect, making the rhythm of the musical sentence more tense.



(2) In Section of “Gou-Ti on the 5th String with Yin Articulation”, identical pitch classes are assigned contrasting composite meters—transitioning from a hybrid pattern in the preceding measure to a regular pattern in the second, followed by a reintroduction of irregular grouping. This metrical metamorphosis generates dynamic undulations, destabilizing the listener’s anticipatory framework and fostering an illusion of seamless auditory flow. By subverting metric predictability, it can accumulate unresolved tension, culminating in a climactic surge of expressive intensity.

3. Conclusion

Letian Cao, though compact, exemplifies structural elegance, with expansive harmonic spans (e.g., harmonics leaping from the 12th to 5th hui). Its score reveals meticulous fingering logistics and precise hui-fen (徽分) positioning, interspersed with technically demanding passages requiring rapid cross-string articulation. By infusing Guangling School-inspired rhythmic fluidity, this dapu seeks to sonify Bai Juyi's Letian philosophy—a harmony of existential equanimity and artistic spontaneity. The arduous process—from contextual research to performative reconstruction—echoes the adage “three months for a small piece, three years for a grand suite,” yet yields profound insights into the interplay of historical fidelity and interpretative innovation.

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