Chinese musical instruments have been evolving since the first millennia BCE, when instruments of “eight sounds” were developed and categorized according to their material composition. International contact led to adoption and adaptation of instruments developed elsewhere. In the modern era Chinese music incorporates both Western and traditional Chinese instrumentation.

China’s musical instruments have evolved in ways that express China’s aesthetic connections with the beauty and power of nature. While traditional instruments have sometimes been associated with specific regions and ethnicities within China, they have also been an important component of an emerging national musical identity, usually grounded in elements shared by groups within China’s Han majority.

Earliest Instruments

Both literary and archeological records reveal the importance of musical instruments from the very beginning of Chinese civilization. Literary records credited the legendary first emperors with the invention of various instruments, and some of the earliest, including the bianqing 编磬 (suspended stones) and bianzhong 编钟 (suspended bells), were used in court rituals. Both are still used in Confucian ceremonies. These instruments are sets of tuned idiophones (instruments whose sound is produced by vibrations of the material of the instrument); they are made of stone and bronze, respectively, and are mounted on wooded frames. The character for music, 乐 yueh, is derived from an ancient representation of these instruments. A much softer ancient instrument,
the guqin 古琴, a bridgeless zither, was favored by Confucius, who admired its subtle qualities. Over centuries, an extensive written body of solos was developed for this instrument, which well-educated scholars considered to be an essential vehicle for personal aesthetic refinement. Another zither, the harp-like zheng 箜篌, which has strings suspended on moveable bridges, evolved somewhat later, and formed the prototype for the Japanese koto and other East Asian instruments.

**Instruments of “Eight Sounds”**

During the time of the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE), instruments were classified according to their material composition and associated sound qualities. These categories, known as bayin 八音 (eight sounds), included the following: silk, bamboo, stone, wood, metal, clay, gourd, and skin. Through correlative cosmology, these categories were connected with the primary directions and seasons of the year. Court rituals were supposed to harmonize the earthly realm with the cosmos, and officials took responsibility to see that instruments were tuned properly for this purpose. The sheng 笙, an ancient mouth organ, was used to represent the gourd category because of its gourd resonating chamber, although its sound pipes were made of bamboo. The sheng, a distant instrumental relative of the Western pipe organ, is still in use today, although modern instruments have sound chambers made of other materials. While prehistoric flutes made of bone have been found by archeologists, bamboo flutes flourished throughout most of recorded history, and are used extensively in regional ensemble music. The most popular bamboo flutes today are the dizi 笛子, a transverse flute, and the xiao 箫, a vertical flute.

The softer and more stationary instruments were used for indoor music, while louder and more mobile percussion and wind instruments were used outdoors, originally for processions. These indoor and outdoor ensemble traditions evolved in diverse regional styles. The softer ensemble traditions are often referred to generically as sizhu (silk and bamboo), borrowing two of the ancient “eight sound” categories to emphasize the importance of stringed instruments and flutes, even though the ensembles may include other kinds of instruments. The outdoor ensembles include many kinds of drums and often include the piercing sound of the suona 嘹吶, a double reed instrument related to the Indian shenai and Western

*The pipa 琵琶, a Chinese lute-like instrument. PHOTO BY ANNA MYERS.*
The shorter, fatter flute is a *dizi* 箫子. The longer, thinner flute with a notch on one end (also of darker wood) is a *xiao* 箫. The wooden fish (also called a “temple block” by Western musicians) is a *muyu* 木鱼. PHOTO BY ANNA MYERS.

obo. A generic term for these louder ensembles is *gu-chui* (“drums and winds,” although some ensembles may include other kinds of instruments). Along with a great variety of drums, which formed the “skin” category of the “eight sounds,” numerous bells, cymbals, and gongs were developed.

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**International Influences**

As China’s borders expanded, contact with Central Asian and other cultures along the Silk Roads led to musical exchanges, and plucked lutes entered China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Central Asian and Indian...
plucked lutes influenced the development of the Chinese *pipa* 琵琶 and *ruan* 魚.

Centuries later, during another phase of increased international contact during the Mongol period (Yuan dynasty [1279–1368]), the bowed lutes were introduced, and the two-string fiddle, the *erhu* 二胡, and related instruments became important in regional ensemble and dramatic music. The last imported instrument to be widely adopted during the dynastic period was the *yangqin* 扬琴, a hammered dulcimer derived from Central Asian instruments such as the *santur*. The *yangqin* entered China during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and
despite being called “the foreign instrument,” its distinctive articulation became part of many ensemble genres. Indigenous instruments continued to evolve as well, and special gongs were developed to accent the libretti of regional opera genres with rising and falling pitches.

Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries

In the twentieth century, the bowed instruments of the huqin family were expanded to facilitate large ensembles, roughly paralleling the string section of the Western orchestra. Originally based on arrangements of traditional “silk and bamboo” repertoire primarily from southern regions, the inclusion of regional chamber music in a more nationalized style was centered in urban communities and paralleled the practice of Western music. The traditional genres continued to flourish in diasporic communities as well as within China. Traditional Chinese instruments were also combined with Western instruments in concerti and symphonic works. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Chinese instruments were used in the eight revolutionary operas, although use of the guqin with its elite associations, and other instruments associated with religious ritual, was discouraged. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, modern composers such as Tan Dun continued to experiment with combinations of Chinese traditional and Western instruments. The cellist Yo-Yo Ma, inspired by earlier periods of contact between civilizations, established the Silk Road Project, led concerts worldwide and commissioned many new works in blended musical styles and instrumentation. Chinese traditional instruments, reflecting several millennia of culture, form a significant part of the global orchestra.

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Further Reading