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## On The Origin of Chinese Drums from the Perspective of Myths and Legends

Ji Lingzhu <sup>1\*</sup>, Wu Bo <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1, 2</sup> Department of Foreign Languages, Taiyuan Normal University City of Jinzhong, Shanxi Province, PR China

\* Corresponding Author: **Ji Lingzhu**

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### Abstract

The time-honored Chinese drum culture cannot be separated from the instrument drums, which appeared in Chinese history very early. However, many researchers of drum culture neglected the invention of the instrument. Some even claimed that drum was one of the ancient instruments imported from other nations. Enlightened by the sounds of thunders, the intelligent primitive Chinese people made drums to imitate the sounds. Records of myths and legends from many ancient Chinese classics prove that drums were invented and made by Chinese people much earlier than many other ancient Chinese musical instruments. They thought drums could give them power to drive away wild animals and protect them from natural disasters and enemies. Later, drums were used by them to worship their gods, entertain the rich the powerful and give orders and encourage the soldiers in the wars.

**Keywords:** Drum, thunder, Thunder God, Yellow Emperor

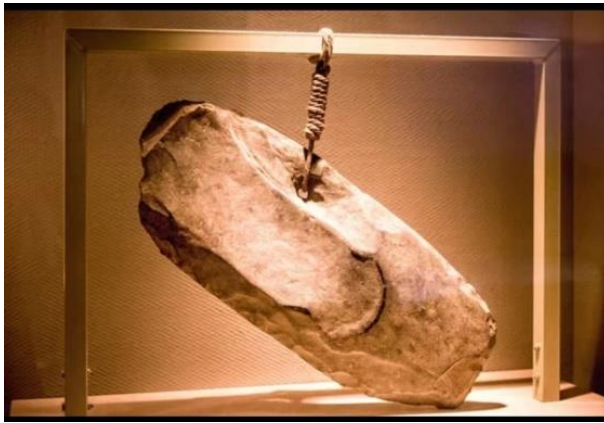
### 1. Introduction

Drum may be the one of the oldest musical instrument for human beings.<sup>1</sup> Drum culture comes after the drum. As the earliest percussion musical instrument, every nation around the world has their own legends of the drum. Taking Burundians in African culture as an example, they place great emphasis on the drum. It is supposed that they invented the drum enlightened by mother's body. In their opinion, each part of the drum is related to a specific part of mother's body. The drumhead is mother's bosom for a baby to sleep, the pegs securing the drumhead are mother's nipples, the straps strengthening the drumhead are mother's sashes, the drum body is mother's abdomen and the drum foot is mother's belly button. Drums of this kind might evolve from the female puppets represented reproduction in matrilineal society inferred from the fact that there are two saint drums in Burundi symbolizing the legitimacy of royal authority and the eternal nature of the state. Now that the drum seems to have some mysterious connection with racial reproduction, it is respected and cherished by Burundians.

Until now, Chinese drums are still widely used in elegant music as well as folk music, and drummers can be found everywhere in professional troupes, amateurs, fans and even among the villagers. However, many researchers of drum culture neglected the origin of the instrument. Some even claimed that drum was one of the ancient instruments imported from other nations. Then what was the origin of Chinese drums ?.

### 2. Revelation of the Thunder God

People get inspirations of instruments from natural phenomena and their production activities. For instant, ancient humans founded some stones striking could produce clear and melodious sounds when they hammered stone tools and they would play those stones during their spare time. Those stones were the initial **shiqing(stone Chime, ancient Chinese percussion instrument)**. Similarly, **xun(an ancient Chinese winding instrument)** was invented from the inspiration of the whistles attracting birds; **flutes** from the bony flutes as the signal during hunts; bowed string instruments form the bows using in hunts and wars, while the Chinese drums were invented from the revelation of thunder.<sup>3</sup>



Stone Chime



Xun (a modern imitation)

As a powerful natural phenomenon, thunder brings storms and was powerful enough to kill people and animals. Primitive people themselves felt sheer terror about the thunder, besides they saw others and animals disperse in panic. This experiences led them to develop superstitious and reverential beliefs about thunder and lightning, perceiving a mysterious sympathetic connection between the sound of thunder and humans or animals. As a result, they believed that thunder could cause harm to humans and animals even from a considerable distance away and wondered how to produce thunder to use for hunting and wars to frighten their prey and enemies.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, in the age of primitive society with sorcery prevailing, a sorcery simulating thunder sound was “created”. At first the sorcery might be someone imitating thunder sound and then came the drum. Thus, drum originally was not invented as a musical instrument. The legend of Yellow Emperor creating drum to defeat ChiYou (one of the tribe leaders in ancient China) as follows squarely proves that the first drum was used for war and explains why drums are the common implements of wizards.

Primitive Chinese lacked the knowledge of natural phenomenon that thunder was created due to the collision of positive charge and negative charge so that they thought thunder might be an mythical creatures slapping its belly and producing massive sound. “The thunderstorm is the Thunder God who has a human head and dragon body, slapping his belly,” “then thunder rises”. An alternative expression is that a god beats some objects to create the loud sound, “thunder, the drum of heaven”, beating by the Thunder God. It’s described in pictures that the Thunder God was “a strong man” with a chain of drums on his left and drumstick on his right as if he would play them at once.” Ancient humans “saw thunder as the sound of him beating the drums, deafening to kill people.” Obviously, these legends appeared subsequent to the drum has been invented and indicated that thunder was created by the “drum of heaven”. Actually, thunder is not the drum of heaven, but the drum is the thunder of earth.

The ancient Chinese classical Book *Zhouli Officer of Summer* says that the minister of war taught people what drum, duo, zhuo and nao (the three are all bronze bells in different sizes, shapes and produce various sounds) represent separately. *Annotation of Zhouli* says drum is like thunder. In *Lv’s Spring and Autumn Annals* records that beating instruments made of woods or leather produces sound like thunder. The editor of

*Chinese folk Gods* thought drums were one with the Thunder God at the beginning, afterwards drums became only an instrument used by the Thunder God. That makes some sense. Myths and religions are imaginary reflections of natural phenomena in humans’ mind. Only if humans had invented the drum, the Thunder God could beat it.

### 3. The myths of Tuo and Kui: imagined thunder creatures on earth

After ancient Chinese had stretched their imagination about thunder, they began simulate it, creating thunder-related creatures on the basis of their imagination. In ancient times, there were two behemoths, one called kui (alike to bull), the other called tuo (aligator-like animal). According to *Annotation of Refined Rhetoric*, tuo is like a huge gray lizard, about three to six meters long with scales on its back and tail; with infinite strength, it puffs fog and threatens rain, always attacking people on the shore, even its mighty roar frightening them. “For its lethargic nature, the eyes are always closed. It will bite through its tail after getting mature and develop strong survival ability. After death, it become ghost. Its leather is golden material of drums.” From its specific features, some people thought tuo was crocodile actually. Seeing that these behemoths “sound like thunder” as if they were “the Thunder God beating its belly”, people used their leather for drums and their bones for drumsticks. Such drums beats resonant sound like thunder. In *Lv’s Spring and Autumn Annals* records a myth on the source of music (also the source of drums), saying Emperor Zhuanxu ordered Shan to lead a music performance; “lying on the ground, Shan beats his belly with its tail, making energetic sound.” Shan is related to tuo in Chinese, so that people regard him as tuo. Thus it can be seen that ancient people used to make drums with tuos’ leather so that drums made of other leather were called tuo drum as cited in “playing the dragon flute and tuo drum, we sing and dance”. Both the crocodile skin drum excavated in Henan Yin Ruins of 1935 and the snake skin drum excavated in Shanxi Taosi Ruins of 1980 are the same kind of tuo drum. Besides tuo drum, there was another drum called kui drum, like long-term used cowhide drum in China and other drums made of common leathers. It was mentioned in some poems like “waving flags briskly and beating the kui drum robustly”.



Tuo drum (museum picture)



Tuo (the animal)

The relation between thunder and drums can also be explained by the timing of making drums. According to *Zhouli Officer of Winter*, “every drum must be made only on the Insects Awaken Day”. That was because on that day thunder would awaken all the insects thereby people made drums to “contain the power of thunder into the drum” which means that the emperor was enlightened by the power and law of the heaven.

**4. Drums as ancient musical instrument**

Drums used as musical instruments also had been closely tied with thunder not solely due to Shan. In ancient China, the theories about the origin of music also included the concept that the drum was derived from thunder. According to *Rites of the Zhou*, “Heaven is higher than earth and all creatures live between them with a rigid hierarchy. Hence ritual system starts to establish the order. Things around the world develop without halts and convert to each other. Hence music commences to voice the unification”. “Air of heaven descend and air of earth ascend, yin and yang(the positive and the negative) making friction, and as a result, heaven and earth agitated each other. Then thunder rises, wind gusts, rain pours, even the four seasons, the sun and the moon thereby appear”. While music is the unification of heaven and earth, then how to express thunder with music? Preserved in *Annotation of Records of the Grand Historian*, “although

everything lives by the air, they are asleep at first and thunder will awaken them like drums lead music”. Thus, we can infer that drums leading music represents thunder awakening everything. *Huai Nan Tzu* has more direct description that “thunder can be expressed by drums”. In the nature, thunder cracks and then all things on earth crow, while in music, drums beat and then all instruments on stage sing. In this case the relation between drums and thunder are straight forward. It concretely reveals the Chinese musical philosophy that “music demonstrates the rules of nature”.

China has Eight Trigrams and Eight Instruments within which the relation between thunder and drum is also explained. Eight Trigrams, recorded in *I Ching*, refers to the eight earliest symbols that is used by ancient humans to express things and divination. “Originally, the heaven and the earth are mixed together and then yin and yang are produced due to their movement. Later, four seasons are formed and natural phenomena are derived”. Eight Trigrams describe those natural phenomena; Qian represents heaven, northwest, late autumn and early winter; Dui represents lakes, west and autumn; Li represents fire, south and summer; Zhen represents thunder, east and spring; Xun represents wind, southeast, late spring and early summer; Kan represents water, north and winter; Gen represents mountains, northeast and late winter and early spring; Kun represents earth, southwest and late summer and early autumn.

Table 1

Eight Trigrams	☰ Qian	☱ Dui	☲ Li	☳ Zhen	☴ Xun	☵ Kan	☶ Gen	☷ Kun
Natural Phenomena	heaven	lake	fire	thunder	wind	water	mountain	earth
directions	northwest	west	south	east	southeast	north	northwest	southwest
seasons	late autumn and early winter	autumn	summer	spring	late spring and early winter	winter	late winter and early spring	late summer and early autumn
Eight instruments in ancient musical book	zhuyu	bell	stringed instruments	drum	unknown	xun	wind instruments	unknown
Eight Instruments in Baihutong	qing	bell	guqin	drum	xiao	sheng	zhu	Xun

Eight Instruments refers to bell, qing (stone chime), guqin and se(a fifty-stringed plucked instrument), xiao(a vertical flute), yu and sheng(both are wind instruments like trumpet), xun(a clay or ceramic vessel flute that has a unique globular shape with a blowing hole on top), drum and zhuyu(percussion instruments consisted of a square wooden box with a tiger woodcarving on top). They are made of eight different materials including metals, stones, silk, bamboos, cucurbits, clays, leathers and woods. It's said that Eight Instruments are produced from the idea of Eight Trigrams. The following table lists the relation between Eight Trigrams and Eight Instruments in order to a straight understanding. Although the relation between Eight Trigrams and Eight Instruments differs in books of different versions, the relation between drums and thunder as well as zhen is the same which means drums is the sound of spring, representing yang. It's owe to all ancient humans' creativity that drums were invented from the thunder. However, like many instruments in Chinese ancient myth, drums were labeled that they were invented by the "saints" or "deceased kings". Therewith drums were endowed with sacred and mysterious sense, gaining valuable status in ancient Chinese ritual system.

### 5. Yellow Emperor's drum

*Classic of Mountains and Rivers* records, "Off the donghai sea seven thousand miles stands the Mount liubo. There lives a mythical bull called kui, white, hornless and with only one foot. Every time when it in jumped into or came out of the sea, it was inevitable that heavy wind and the rain would follow. Its eyes were bright like the sun and its voice was scary like thunder. Yellow Emperor caught it and made a drum with its leather. He beat the drum with the drumstick made of the bone from thunder creature. The formidable tum can be heard even at distance of five hundred miles by which Yellow Emperor conquered the earth". The fact of him conquering the earth was that he defeated ChiYou who was the descendant of Yan Emperor. After Yan Emperor was beat by Yellow Emperor, ChiYou made up his mind to revenge. ChiYou is a man with copper head and irony forehead who could bite iron and even fly. Thus it was a tough fight for Yellow Emperor. With the help of the Empyrean Fairy, Yellow Emperor made eighty kui drums that a single beat spread five hundred miles and several beats diffused thirty-eight hundred miles away. However, ChiYou was infinitely capable and was defeated until those drums was beat for nine times. He then was stuck and killed by Yellow Emperor at the Mount Qingiu. Invigorated for the victory, Yellow Emperor composed a divine music. With that rhythm, people played the drums while sang and danced reproducing the scene of defeating ChiYou to eulogize that Yellow Emperor made kui drum and conquer the earth.

The legend may not be entirely trustworthy, but sure it does shed light on certain issues. First, ancient humans connected the drum with Yellow Emperor for reason that in legends Yellow Emperor was assumed as the Thunder God initially. "Yellow Emperor is famous for his thunder power". "Xuan Yuan (another name for Yellow Emperor) is the God of thunder and rain." These records take a step further that drums has close relation with thunder. Besides, the legend is in line with our hypothesis that ancient humans made drums imitating thunder to frighten enemies. Second, in this legend, the statement that a beating of kui drum spread five hundred miles and stuck ChiYou mirrors the belief of sorceries, which is a ironclad evidence of our speculation that drums have

something to do with sorcery. Third, the legend also approves that drums was invented at the age of Yellow Emperor and Yan Emperor. Certainly, the frame of drums at that time was made of clay. Wooden and frame appeared later let alone copper drum. *Family Trees of Fame* says "A subject of Yellow Emperor WuXian made copper drums", which is not reliable. In spite that *Records of the Grand Historian* says "Yellow Emperor mined copper at Shou mountain and put the tripod made from the copper at the foot of Jin mountain", it was fabricated form legends. In reality, copper mining and copper drums are believed to have occurred in the Bronze Age. As for the identity and time period of Wu Xian, there are various tales and uncertainties in history. Some say he was a minister of the Yellow Emperor, while others claimed that he lived during the time of Shen Nong or Emperor Yao, and there are even suggestions of him being from the Yin dynasty. If Wu Xian was indeed a minister of the Yellow Emperor, it is unlikely that he would have been involved in the creation of bronze drums. On the other hand, if he did create the bronze drums, then he would have been from the Yin dynasty. These two possibilities are mutually exclusive. Emperor Ku(maybe the great-grandson of Yellow Emperor), who live slightly later than period of Yellow Emperor and Yan Emperor, once ordered Chui to made music instruments such as tao(rattles) and drums. These types of drums were on the basis of those in period of Yellow Emperor and already has distinctions between them. Tao was a kind of drum with handle below so drums at that time were not framed by clay anymore but by woods. In the labor process, ancient humans discovered that hollow woods can make a loud sound if beaten, thus they had leathers covered above hollow woods, creating the earliest wooden drums. It was a great leap in the history of Chinese drums as woods offered many conveniences in terms of production and usage. Possibly most types of Chinese drums are wooden-framed and leather-headed for thousands of years was determined during that time.

After analyzing various drums' forms and structures(including wooden drums, bamboo drums, leather drums, clay drums, copper drums and steel drums) combining materials of ethnology and anthropology, some learners concluded that body-resonating wooden drums dated back period of man-like ape to ape-like man when they beat the tree trunk. Initial body-resonating drums made of woods or bamboos obtained natural materials directly while leather drums needed knowledge on membrane vibration, body resonance of musical instruments and combining both, hence it holds some validity that wooden drums predated the leather drums as the earliest form of drums. Nevertheless, information of these body-resonating drums is a rare gem in documents of Chinese musical instruments' origins plus scarce attention to them in archaeology except that few remains and relevant legends in ethnic minorities of southern China (the Gaoshan people, the Wa people and the Miao people).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we can only profile the origin of Chinese drums according to ancient legends. Indeed, these legends may be fabricated by later people and untrustworthy as Mr. Zhang Shibing wrote in his book *Discursive essay on the history of Chinese music,*" remains none, documents improbable, we are still at the exploratory stage of Chinese ancient music".<sup>7</sup> Anyway, we finally adopt these legends for two reasons: first, nothing can be found but these legends; second, though these legends are not historical facts but they are grounded to some extent.

## Conclusion

Evidences above states that Chinese drum was invented very early in China. But Japanese scholar Mr. Tanihata Naooki wrote in his book *Chinese music history* that musical instruments of late Zhou Dynasty contained many from other nations such as sheng, xiao, yue(a type of bamboo flute played aslant) and some kinds of drums except for the kinds of bells, pans and guqins as the earliest Chinese musical instruments. <sup>8</sup>By that he meant bell, pan and guqin were the most ancient Chinese musical instruments, earlier than drum and even among drums many kinds were non-Chinese origin but from surrounding nations.

That statement was an illusion. Even though in some legends Fuxi (one of the three most ancient Chinese ancestors) was mentioned to make guqin earlier than the time when Yellow Emperor made drums, it's groundless. First, there were no signs of guqin in oracle bone inscription and bronze script; instead dozens of signs of drums were founded such as “𡗗” and “𡗗”, showing the universality of drums and illustrating their structures, forms and basic skills. It's generally believed that the initial sign of drum “𡗗” is the pictograph of ying drum or jian drum (both are large drums strengthened with a pillar through and four feet), the 𡗗 above being ornamental, the 𡗗 middle drum, the 𡗗 below drum feet.

𡗗, the left part is the drum and the right part represents a person playing it with the drumstick. 𡗗, sign of tums, the right part 𡗗 represents a cascade of beatings visualizing the momentum. Were it not with a long-term development, drums could not be symbolized by characters so clear. Second, from the perspective of regularity of musical instruments, percussion instruments only with rhythm was prior to the melody instruments like guqins. Third, the action of play all kinds of musical instruments was called “gu (鼓, the character symbolizing drums in Chinese)” and some instruments' hit spots were also called “gu”; does both the meanings of “gu” may imply that drums are prior to other instruments? Mr. Guo Moruo (a famous scholar as well as a high rank leader in China) once said, “Chinese-origin musical instruments are nothing more than various of pans, yues, drums and bells, even guqins are exotic kind”. <sup>9</sup> Saying guqins as the exotic is incorrect while it's flawless that pan, as well as yue, drums and bells are definitely indigenous to China. It can be seen that drums are one of the oldest musical instruments in China and Chinese drum culture has an extremely venerable history.

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