



## Keyboards of the world

# The Middle-C Kingdom

*How China made the piano its own*

GULANGYU AND GUANGZHOU

ONE LOVE story began in the 1930s, on a road of magnificent Western-style villas on the tiny Chinese island of Gulangyu. Cai Pijie, a lad in his 20s, walked daily past the open window of a young lady he had admired from afar. She regularly practised the piano, an instrument then unheard of in much of China, and the notes floated out in the warm southern air. Entranced, Cai wrote her a letter. "Please play Ignace Leybach's 'Fifth Nocturne' if you love me." Weeks passed before one day her piano answered, and their courtship began. They married. As Cai grew old in the 1980s, his son, Cai Wanghuai, played the nocturne to comfort him. It was the last piece of music he heard before he died.

The younger Cai had by then become deputy mayor of Xiamen, the city of which the island is a part, and helped found Gulangyu's music school, which opened in 1990. Political grandees have visited, including Xi Jinping, the current Communist Party leader. Jiang Zemin, a classical-music fan who was one of his predecessors, asked students to strike up "O Sole Mio" when he visited, singing it in the original Neapolitan.

This summer more than a third of the school's graduates entered top overseas conservatories in America, Germany and Russia. The rest joined the growing number of Chinese ones. They are all part of another relationship that has flourished in the decades since Cai heard the strains of Leybach's nocturne: a love affair with the piano that has spread all across the nation.

Of the 50m children learning the instrument world-wide, as many as 40m may be Chinese. Shanghai alone has over 2,700 music schools, by one estimate. The government lavishes money on orchestras, which now number over 80, and new concert halls. Grizzled bureaucrats, fastidious parents and cool young things fill them to hear the latest *wunderkind*—among whose number, in recent decades, have been Lang Lang, Li Yundi and Yuja Wang (pictured)—play some beautifully judged Bach or fiendishly hard Rachmaninov.

## Musical missionaries

The piano on which Mr Cai's mother played her serenade in the 1930s was a rare foreign import; now four in five are made in China. No country buys more. And much of this can be traced back to Gulangyu.

After Britain defeated China in the first opium war in 1842, foreign powers forced the emperor to permit their residents to live in several "treaty ports". One of those was Xiamen (then known as Amoy). Up until 1943 Gulangyu, which lies just a five-minute ferry ride offshore, was an international settlement run by 13 nations and guarded by a Sikh regiment from British-ruled India. It held in its hilly two square kilometres an ►►



► American consulate, a British school, a Japanese hospital and a Danish telegraph office, among other institutions. The missionaries' music filled the island's churches, whose number grew to six, and converts picked up the strange new melodies.

Mary Doty Smith, the daughter of one of the early American missionaries there, wrote of tea merchants who stopped by their home in the 1850s to hear her mother play what was, for a time, the island's only piano. They brought new scores: "Blue Bells of Scotland" and "Auld Lang Syne". "The Chinese women seemed spell-bound at the instrument, as well as the voice, producing such sweet sounds," Smith wrote. Though the wives of missionaries taught locals to play, it was expatriates who, missing the music of home, popularised the piano as an everyday amusement. There was soon hardly a family on the island that did not host or go to hear an evening recital.

It is hard to imagine a lovelier setting for this musical Shangri-La, filled with coconut palms, pink bougainvillea and subtropical plants carried home by overseas Chinese merchants enriched from trade in the East Indies. A Westerner writing in the 1920s said the island would surely vie for the distinction of being the "wealthiest square mile in the world". For decades it has also claimed another distinction: the largest number of pianos per person in China. By the 1950s it had 500 pianos for some 20,000 people.

The result was a stream of outstanding musicians. At the turn of the 20th century Zhou Shu'an, an islander whose father was a priest, rose to fame singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" to welcome an American navy ship. From 1928 she helped run what became the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the first Western-style conservatory. Chen Zuohuang, born in 1947, became the conductor of China's Central Philharmonic Orchestra, and led its first American tour in 1987. Fei-Ping Hsu, a pianist and the son of a Christian pastor, was playing with China's national orchestra at the age of 18.

But the island's most celebrated musician is Yin Chengzong. Though Mr Yin has lived in New York for decades, he regularly returns to China to perform and to stay in the family's 1920s villa on Gulangyu. On a hot autumn day, the 78-year-old pianist points out the longan, papaya and starfruit trees in the villa's garden.

In the 1940s Mr Yin was a boy soprano at one of Gulangyu's churches. He began playing the piano aged seven, taught by the pastor's wife. He spent half his pocket money on classes and the other half on sheet music. He was 12 when he left the island to attend the preparatory school for the Shanghai Conservatory.

He describes how 100 people once squeezed into the Yins' elegant living room for a family recital. In a corner is modern China's first Steinway, obtained by the government of Mao Zedong for Sviatoslav Richter when the Soviet pianist came to perform in 1957. Seven more pianos are strewn about the house. A photograph of Mr

## Red Guards set axes to those "black boxes in which the notes rattled about like the bones of the bourgeoisie"

Yin taking tea with Mao in 1963 hangs above the mantelpiece. In an exhibition hall nearby is a photo of him with Richard Nixon in 1976, during Nixon's second visit to China.

As the Richter Steinway shows, Western music still flowed in the early years of Mao's rule. The most promising pianists were sent to participate in competitions in other communist countries. In 1955 Fou Ts'ong, a translator's son from Shanghai, won third place in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. In 1962 Mr Yin came joint-second in the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, where he stayed on for further training.

Soon after his return, the ravages of the Cultural Revolution began and anything Western or cultured was attacked. In 1966 Mao's



Red Guards tormented China's musicians, tore up Western scores and took their axes to any pianos they found—those "black boxes in which the notes rattled about like the bones of the bourgeoisie", in the (perhaps apocryphal) words of Jiang Qing, better known as Madame Mao.

## Tragedy in red

Li Cuizhen, a missionary-trained pianist who knew all 32 of Beethoven's sonatas by heart, was declared a counter-revolutionary. Red Guards hounded her and she killed herself in 1966. Fou's parents hanged themselves soon after (he had already defected to London).

Lu Hong'en, the conductor of the Shanghai Symphony, was thrown into a cell. He continued to hum Beethoven there. After he tore up a copy of Mao's "Little Red Book", he was sentenced to death. Lu told a fellow prisoner: "If you get out of here alive, would you do two things? Find my son, and visit Austria, the home of music. Go to Beethoven's tomb and lay a bouquet of flowers. Tell him that his Chinese disciple was humming the 'Missa Solemnis' as he went to his execution." Lu was shot within days. His cellmate reached the Viennese grave three decades later.

On Gulangyu the Yins were thrown out of their villa, as were many others. But the cosmopolitan enclave—perhaps because of its remoteness, perhaps because it was shielded by local officials with an attachment to music—was spared the worst of the brutality. Still, the island fell silent. Some found ways to play clandestinely, and others rehearsed the motions soundlessly with their hands, says Zhan Zhaoxia, a local historian.

In the 1960s Mr Yin had, despite all this, begun to compose. "The piano needed to be made Chinese," he says, "and for all Chinese." He had known only church music and the likes of Mozart and Chopin. Now he burnished his Maoist credentials by playing revolutionary ballads to workers in factories. In May 1967 he and three friends carried a piano, along with a banner reading "Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team", into Tiananmen Square. There he played in the open air for three straight days. "We had no idea what would hap- ►►





pen," he says. By the third day over 3,000 had gathered to listen.

The young pianist caught the ear of Madame Mao, who saw the possibility of using his talents for propaganda purposes. He became part of a group of favoured musicians working on her state-approved model operas. In 1969 he arranged an earlier revolutionary cantata into the "Yellow River Piano Concerto". It remains China's most famous orchestral composition.

Mr Yin performed his concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra when it visited in 1973, the first from America to tour communist China. Less than four years later, soon after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony" rang out from radios and televisions across China. It was taken as evidence by many, write Jindong Cai and Sheila Melvin in their book, "Beethoven in China" (2015), that the Cultural Revolution was finally over.

Slowly, what had been suppressed—bright clothes and capitalism, Confucius, Christianity and more—re-emerged. So did the piano. Far from being killed off, love for it had grown. When in 1978 the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing reopened, 18,000 people applied for 100 places in its composition department. "Where did all those musicians come from?" asks Jindong Cai, the author (who is unrelated to Cai père and fils of Gulangyu). "Many had been practising Bach and Beethoven in secret."

Jindong Cai was moved to become a conductor when he first heard Beethoven performed in Beijing in 1979. He went on to lead China's best orchestras, and now teaches at Bard College Conservatory of Music in America. He recalls heady days when securing a piano required a long wait. In 1980 Mr Cai got his hands on one through a contact. "I remember that time with great excitement," he says. "There was such a thirst for classical music." Soon even members of the Politburo were professing their love for it.

Though capitalism, political reform and religion have, at times, stumbled since then, Chinese pianists have only soared, emerging into a nation, and a world, that is happy to fete them.

Mr Yin, though, could see his future in China would be difficult

after the fall of Madame Mao. Eventually, in 1983, he left for America—though his music was hardly loved there. In the *New York Times* Harold Schonberg sniffed that Mr Yin's concerto was "one of those awful ideologically approved pieces of socialist-realism propaganda, but it was so bad it actually had kitsch value".

But so what? The piece had helped secure a place for the piano in China. It had rescued companions, too. Mr Hsu, the fellow pianist from Gulangyu, was among the first musicians who, having been banished to work on a farm, was rehabilitated after agreeing to perform the "Yellow River Concerto" to army units.

It is today part of every serious repertoire in China. Young idols have recorded renditions. In 2007 Lang Lang—once a student of Mr Yin—hammered out its final movement for the one-year countdown ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. It was recently performed at Carnegie Hall by Zhang Haochen, a rising star.

### Means of production

Chinese factories have become attuned to the needs of this booming market. In 1956 the state had directed a group of piano-fixers to start building the instruments in Guangzhou, but for years Pearl River Piano could not muster even one a month. In the 1980s foreign advisers were flown in. Today the state-run company makes more than any other producer worldwide. It builds for Steinway, maker of the world's finest pianos. Inside the factory, hissing machines make a music of their own, stamping and spitting out their wooden parts. Last year 150,000 pianos rolled off its assembly lines, almost a third of global production. Two in five stayed in China. The company also revived Ritmüller, a defunct German piano brand, and bought Schimmel, another languishing producer.

Where once Western classical music flowed into China, pianists and their renditions are pouring out. China is poised to deliver world-class compositions, says Mr Cai. In 2018 the us-China Music Institute that he began premiered six new Chinese symphonic pieces in Carnegie Hall. The Juilliard School in New York opened its first overseas campus this autumn in Tianjin, a northern Chinese city.

Some misgivings remain, abroad and at home, about whether Chinese technical brio is yet matched by imaginative brilliance. Cao Huanyu reflects on this, too. Like many learners he came from a small town with no top piano teachers. Yet he stood out and made it to Gulangyu's music school. In his final year there, he is applying for Juilliard and the Colburn School.

Mr Cao spends hours practising, but he also wanders the gardens. He worries that China's musical world is too rigid. Students have beautiful technique, he says. "But in practising those long hours, something is lost. The smell of the air, the colours of the trees...I try to put them into my music." \*



To listen to a playlist of pieces mentioned here, and more, go online to [economist.com/pianos](https://economist.com/pianos)