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Wang Guangqi 王光祈: the man who introduced the Berlin School of Comparative  
Musicology to China

Dr Hong-yu Gong

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Wang Guangqi 王光祈 (1892-1936) was a man of many achievements. A student of international law, he had already achieved national prominence as an influential social activist, a charismatic youth leader, an acute journalist, and an accomplished poet of the classical style before leaving China for Germany. During his years in Germany, Wang, whose patriotism and industry saw him cram several demanding careers into his busy and often impoverished life, ranged in activity from being a correspondent for leading Beijing and Shanghai newspapers to translating historical and diplomatic documents. But above all else, he was known as a musicologist who was responsible for introducing, among other things, the theories and methods of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology to China.

Interestingly, Wang, who had no training in music, did not turn to musicological study until 1922, two years after his arrival in Frankfurt.

Some time in July 1922 Wang abandoned his original plan of studying politics and economics and, at the age of 30, began to take lessons from private music teachers in violin and music theory. At about the same time he also started to study organology under the mentorship of Curt Sachs, then director of Berlin's Staatliche Instrumentensammlung, and to study the anatomy of the ear and throat at the Otology Department of Berlin State Hospital in order to learn about the structure and physiological function of these parts of the human body relevant to the study of hearing and voice production. It was also during this time that Wang studied with Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, who taught courses in tone psychology and music psychology at Berlin University. It should be pointed out that

Wang Guangqi did not study music for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment or as part of his intellectual pursuits. Rather, convinced that music was the best means for social transformation, Wang attempted to construct a form of “national music” (國樂) for China by reviving the Confucian concept of 禮樂 (rites and music) that would now be founded on the basis of Western principles.

While pursuing private studies in Western music and musicology, Wang must also have read widely about music in Western literature because it was at this time that he began to publish articles and books in China on all aspects of Western music. From 1923 to 1931, he wrote some sixteen books and an equal number of articles on all aspects of Western and Chinese music.

If there is any pattern to be observed in the appearance of these books and articles, one could establish these rough categories: works describing musical life in Germany appeared between 1923 and 1928, books about the history and general achievements of Western music, although spanning the whole period of his time in both Berlin and Bonn, were mainly written from 1924 to 1931, works promoting music education appeared between 1925 and 1928, works pertaining to comparative musicology were mostly written from 1924 to 1929 before his enrolment in the University of Berlin, and, with the exception of his doctoral thesis, the scholarly works on Chinese music were completed prior to his move to Bonn in 1932. All but two of his books were published by the Shanghai-based Zhonghua Book Company.

#### *Wang Guangqi as a Transmitter of Comparative Musicology*

Wang was first exposed to the concepts, methods and findings of the so-called Berlin School of Comparative Musicology shortly after he moved to Berlin in 1922, even though he did not formally enrol at the University of Berlin until April 1927. Berlin in the 1920s was a world-renowned research centre for comparative musicology “with the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv as the center of a worldwide network of scholarly discourse, of gatherers of information and recordings, a fountainhead of ideas.” The strong tradition of comparative musicology at the University of Berlin can be traced back to the psychologist and philosopher Carl Stumpf who started the Institute of Psychology and

the Phonogramm-Archiv in 1900. This tradition was inherited and strengthened by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, Otto Abraham, Curt Sachs, Robert Lach, and Marius Schneider.

Living in the “Golden Age of comparative musicology” and taking courses with Hornbostel (tone psychology and music psychology) and Sachs (organology), Wang was quick to introduce to Chinese readers the concepts, methods and findings of the school by writing a number of books in this field. These include Wang’s first major study of the development of Western music, 《歐洲音樂進化論》 [*On the Evolution of European Music*] (completed in 1923 and published in 1924), his subsequent explorations into the tone systems of Eastern nations, 《東西樂制之研究》 [*On the Tone Systems of East and West*] (completed in the winter of 1924 and published in January 1926), 《東方民族之音樂》 [*Musics of the Peoples of Eastern Nations*] (completed in November 1925 and published in February 1933), and his article “中西樂制之異同” [The similarities and differences between Chinese and Western music] highlighting the “similarities and differences between Chinese and Western Music”.

Yu Renhao, a Beijing-based musicologist who was one of the first to make an in-depth study of Wang’s connection with the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology, has demonstrated that its influence on Wang is mainly manifested in three areas: his belief in the evolutionary process of music; his application of the theory of cultural circles in music (*Kulturkreislehre*); and his choice of research topics and areas of focus. Indeed, the most salient features of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology are its idea of musical evolutionism and its focus on the origins of music. The study of musical instruments was another important field for this school. Both Hornbostel and Sachs were strong advocates of the theories of musical evolutionism and diffusionism, sometimes also called “culture-circle” (*Kulturkreislehre*) theory. These theories found their way into almost all of Wang’s writings on music. In his *On the Evolution of European Music*, for instance, Wang made it clear that he aimed to give a concise account of the evolutionary process of European music from the time of the Greek lyric poet Pindar to that of Beethoven. Clearly applying the theories and methodologies of his mentors, Wang describes the evolutionary process of European music from simple medieval monophony to more complex polyphony, and ultimately to homophony.

Continuing in the same evolutionary vein, Wang in his *On the Tone Systems of Orient and Occident* provides the readers with a detailed analysis and mathematical calculations of the tone systems of China, Europe, Persia, Arabia and India. It is in this book that Wang made an assertion that although everything in the China of his day was in a state of backwardness, the study of tone system, or rather the study of theories of temperament (*lü* 律) and mode (*diao* 調), were highly developed in traditional China. Instead of demeaning themselves, Wang stated, Chinese people should be proud of this accomplishment and strive to bring it to perfection.

The influence of the theories of musical evolutionism of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology on Wang can also be seen in his other writings on music. The “Outline” and the fourth section of Chapter Two of Wang’s 《西洋音樂史綱要》 [*Summary of Western Music*] (1925) and the ubiquitous use of the term “進化” [evolution] in his 《西洋音樂與戲劇》 [*Western Music and Drama*] (1933), “中國音樂短史” [“A Brief History of Chinese Music”] (1928), and 《中國音樂史》 [*History of Chinese Music*] (1934) are just some of the most obvious examples. His chapter on the origins of *lü* in the latter book, in particular, is based on the diffusionist view Sachs adopted in his *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente* [The Spirit and Evolution of the musical instrument] (1929).

Wang also applied the “culture-circle” theory to the study of Chinese scale and modal systems. In his *On the Tone Systems of East and West*, for example, he divided the world into three musical circles - China, Greece, and Persia/Arabia, and, following his mentor Hornbostel’s theory, he argued that although the musical cultures of China and the West shared the same origin, namely both were shaped by the influence of ancient Babylon, they went on different paths of development. He believed, as argued in his article “中國樂制之發微” [“Exploration in the Chinese Tone System”], that the ancient Chinese measurement was based on the Babylonian unit of measurement.

Methodologically, Wang was strongly influenced by the so-called “Hornbostel paradigm”, which has a strong focus on “scalar structures and pitch relations and giving attention to singing style and tone colour”. This influence is manifested most clearly in his 《東方民族之音樂》 [*Musics of the Peoples of Eastern Nations*] which is in fact an

amended version of Wang's previous work *On the Tone Systems of Orient and Occident*. In this book, Wang gives an account of the musics of Asian nations, comparing their similarities and differences on the basis of scalar structures and pitch relations. It is in this book that Wang first introduced the concept of “比較音樂學” (Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft; comparative musicology) and highlighted its scope of research. It is also in this book that Wang acquainted Chinese readers with the scholarly achievements of A. J. Ellis (1814-1890) by mentioning his monumental work *On the Musical Scales of Various Nations*.

The influence of Hornbostel and Sachs on Wang is perhaps nowhere more clearly manifested than in his adoption of the Hornbostel-Sachs system of classifying musical instruments and his application of the “culture-circle” theory to the study of scale and modal systems. In his *History of Chinese Music*, Wang discussed the difficulty of using the traditional “八音” (eight sound materials) system to classify Chinese musical instruments and adopted the Hornbostel-Sachs system of classification. In the same book Wang also used the diffusionist theory to explain the origins and development of Chinese music.

In addition to applying the theories of cultural evolutionism and diffusionism in his studies of both Chinese and Western music, Wang was also the first to introduce the theories and works of Carl Stumpf, commonly regarded as the father of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology, to China. In his book 《音學》 [*A Study of Tones*], for example, Wang drew on the theories and findings in Stumpf's *Psychology of Tone* and gave an introductory account of Western studies of the phenomenon of sound as a stimulus at once physical, physiological, and psychological. In an article entitled “聲音心理學” [“Tone Psychology”], he described Stumpf's views concerning the perception of consonance and dissonance and highlighted his psychological approach to the physics of sound.

Although Wang's writings contained ideas from his mentors, he also used other sources he found in German libraries and private collections to help formulate his arguments. For example, he was certainly aware of the research on Tang music and Biwa done by Japanese scholars such as Tababe Hisao 田邊尚雄, and the Chapters on “樂器之

進化” [The evolution of musical instruments] and “器樂之進化” [The evolution of instrumental music] of his 《中國音樂史》 (1934) (The history of Chinese music) were largely drawn from the works of French and German Sinologists (i.e. Maurice Courant’s *Essai historique sur la musique classique des Chinois* (Historical essays on Chinese classical music) and E. Fischer’s “Beitri ge zur Erforschungde r chinesisohen Musik”). In the preface of his PhD thesis “Ueber die chinesische klassische Oper, 1530-1860” [On Classical Chinese Opera, 1530-1860], he acknowledged his indebtedness to such French, British and Chinese sinologists as Bazin, Tcheng Kitong (陳季同), Gotschall, Stanton, Jacobleff, George Soulie de Morant and L. C. Arlington.

Wang led many lives during his sixteen years in Germany, three of which stand out as most significant – first as a pioneer of Western music in China, then as a transmitter of the theories and methods of the Berlin School of Musicology, and finally as an explicator of Chinese music to the German public. In all three his role was significant. After all, he was the first Chinese person to earn a doctorate in musicology from a German university and his writings on Western music were not only among the earliest publications on the subject but also the most comprehensive in China before the 1960s.

Wang’s second role, as as a transmitter of the theories and methods of the Berlin School of Musicology, has been described by a modern scholar as significant but that his influence in this area was negligible. “In the China of the 1920s and ’30s,” the scholar writes, “his work did not receive the attention it deserved, and for the next forty years or more, right up until the early 1980s, there was no research done on his work at all.” This is not entirely true. In fact, Wang’s work in comparative musicology was taken notice of not only by Chinese scholars but by Japanese scholars as well. Shortly after the publication of Wang’s *On the Tone Systems of East and West* in 1926, Yang Molei 楊沒累 (1897-1928), a Beijing-based music scholar, wrote a review discussing Wang’s and Tanabe Hisao’s work on pitch calculation. Ten years later, Shen Youding 沈有鼎 (1908-1989), the philosopher and an expert in mathematical logic, published a lengthy review in the *Journal of Tsinghua University* to praise Wang’s contribution. The book itself was so well-received that it had to be reprinted in 1928 and 1936. In 1958 the book, along with *Music of Eastern Nations*, was again reprinted in Beijing. The Japanese musicologist,

Kishibe Shigeo 岸邊成雄 (1912-2005), published his positive review of Wang's *History of Chinese Music* in *Toyo Ongaku Kenkyu* as early as 1937.

Perhaps no less importantly, in his German articles and PhD thesis, Wang helped explain Chinese music to the cultural elite of Berlin and Bonn. Admittedly, the influence Wang exerted in his role as an explicator of Chinese music to the German public was not as big as his roles as a pioneer of Western music in China and a promoter of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology. Nevertheless, he was the first Chinese person who tried to explain China's musical culture to the German public and the fact that his German writings on Chinese music and his PhD thesis are still being cited testifies to the significance and durability of his work.