



A Field Trip to West Hunan Province, P. R. China: Da Liuzi and Wei Gu Percussion Music

by royal hartigan and Weihua Zhang

Introduction

[royal hartigan is a jazz drummer who has also learned music of many world cultures, such as West African drumming and dance, Indonesian *gamelan*, Indian *solkattu* rhythms, West Asian and Turkish frame drum styles, Philippine *kulintang*, Brazilian *samba*, Dominican *merengue*, tap dance, and Chinese opera percussion. Weihua Zhang is a pianist, player of *guzheng*, and ethnomusicologist whose research and publications have focused on the music of Asia and the African American music of North America.]

In recent years, we have visited China several times, where royal has taken advantage of the opportunity to learn some indigenous percussion traditions. Professor Li Zheng-gui, the percussion teacher at Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music, once suggested that Da Liuzi¹, a percussion style of Hunan Province, was a unique and interesting percussion style for study. When we viewed a DVD recording of a performance of *The Map*, an acclaimed work by Chinese American composer Tan Dun, we found that Da Liuzi is used extensively in one of the work's seven segments. The Da Liuzi music on this DVD is performed in its original context, creating an impressive visual image.

In May of 2006, following the China tour of royal's jazz group *blood drum spirit*, we made a ten -day visit to West Hunan, the origin of Da Liuzi music, to investigate and record this unique percussion tradition.

Luckily we have a local friend, Luo Yong, former violinist with the Jishou Symphony Orchestra (Jishou is the capital of the West Hunan Autonomous

¹ According to Luo Yong, *da* means 'beat' and *liuzi* means 'some items.'

Region)². Because the city Zhangjiajie has become a tourist attraction in West Hunan, he had the opportunity to become an entrepreneur in the hotel industry in Zhangjiajie. Consequently, Luo arranged the itinerary for our trip.

On Thursday, May 18, we flew from Shanghai to Zhangjiajie. When we arrived at dusk, we could see imposing shapes of the towering mountains behind the airport. Because of the geological qualities of this area, all the mountains have a unique shape that is not found in other regions. The largest minority group in Zhangjiajie and the whole West Hunan region is the Tujia people; the second largest is the Miao people.

Da Liuzi Percussion Ensembles

On our second day in Zhangjiajie we visited a Da Liuzi group - the same one that performed on the *The Map* DVD. The group with composer Tan Dun became well known and performed in London and Amsterdam . This experience made the ensemble aware of their own market value and of issues regarding intellectual property. Jin De-sheng is the leader of this Da Liuzi group, which is called Jinshi Nuotan Yishu Tuan (Jin Family Nuo Opera Arts Group).

The Da Liuzi ensemble consists of four metallophone instruments: *tou bo* (first small cymbals), *er bo* (second small cymbals), *xiao luo* (small flat gong), and *da luo* (large flat gong). Usually, the large gong plays on the first beat of each metrical grouping. The small gong is more active and has much rhythmic variation. It is held with the left-hand fingers inside the gong rim, which allows the hand to quickly mute its sounds, and the right hand strikes the center of the gong with a flat stick of soft wood. The most interesting ensemble interaction occurs between the first and second cymbals, which together produce a hocket effect. The first cymbal plays on the beat while the second cymbal plays off the beat, and their intense rhythmic dialogue can be accelerated to reaching a

² Large population and other concerns of ethnic groups resulted in the creation of an autonomous region. West Hunan A. R. was established in the 1950s.

climax. The second cymbals have the most difficult part. The cymbals are held in the hands, which are tightly wrapped with a piece of cloth connected to the cymbal's center through a small hole. This secure holding position allows for extremely rapid strokes and maximum control of sound production. Various playing techniques offer a wide palette of sounds expressing moods, describing nature, or painting dramatic scenery. These sounds include normal open and closed sounds, as well as sounds produced by striking the edge or rubbing the cymbals in a circular movement to create a brush-like effect.

The four members of the ensemble are Jin De-sheng (second cymbals), Wu Min-qi (first cymbals), Jin Kai-jie (small gong), and Jin You-qin (large gong). Jin De-sheng's father, Jin De-an, sometimes joins and plays the drum. He is the most knowledgeable and experienced player, and is considered the soul of the group. Because he is quite elderly (perhaps in his late seventies), and does not like to focus on business, he turned over leadership of the ensemble to his son. The small and large gong players are his nephew and grandnephew.

On the morning of May 19, the group let us watch several tapes of their own performances and those of a children's group, made up of the next generation of the Jin family. Their ages ranged from five to the mid-teens. The ensemble members place great importance on their heritage and the transmission of their musical tradition.

In the tapes we viewed there were examples of other styles of performance besides Da Liuzi, such as Wei Gu (surrounding drum), in which drum, woodblock, and the double reed wind instrument *sona* were added to the Da Liuzi instrumentation. Other styles included Hua Deng (flower lantern), a regional song and dance form with a simple plot, and Nuo Xi, an ancient opera genre in which performers wear masks and the dramatic content is mostly related to folk religious beliefs, deities, and shamanism.

In the afternoon, we went back to Jin's house with Luo Yong, who is also a Da

Liuzi player. Luo gave us an introduction to the origin of the Da Liuzi tradition. During the early Qing dynasty (late 1600s to circa 1700), the government implemented a new policy called *gaitu guiliu* (assimilation of ethnic groups into the mainstream). The central government installed political offices in counties and towns in the minority regions and assigned officials to fill them. This meant that minority leaders were deprived of their political power. Of course this policy met strong opposition from the minority leaders and provoked uprisings. The government sent armies to suppress the rebels, and the defeated minority leaders and their followers fled to the mountains. Because the instruments of Da Liuzi are small in body, not fragile, and portable, this music style was the only one carried into exile and hence survived for a long time.

Da Liuzi instruments can be played in processions and heard on mountain tops as a form of communication. Nowadays, the music is played at all kinds of festive occasions and mostly for entertainment. The Da Liuzi grouping also became, as noted, the accompanying ensemble for Wei Gu, Hua Deng, Yang Opera, and Nuo Xi. Because Zhangjiajie is located by the Li river (one of the four major rivers in Hunan province), it became an important port for the transportation of merchandise; Da Liuzi followed trade routes and thus gained exposure and popularity. According to Luo, Da Liuzi is the oldest music style in West Hunan, and a representative music style of the Tujia people.

Jin's group played several pieces for us, including *Shen-non diao* (shen-non is a legendary person, and *diao* means 'air' or 'tune'), *Bage xizao* (Birds Taking a Bath), *Feng laoda* (Strong Wind), *Laohu moya* (A Tiger Grinding Its Teeth), *Jian xiang qing* (Healthy Native Land), and *Xiqin* (Festive Celebration). The first four are traditional pieces. They sometimes imitate the sounds of nature. For instance, in *Bage xizao* one can hear the spilling of water, the loud chirp of the birds, and the birds fighting with each other. Some other titles such as *Jinji chu shan* (The Rooster Came Down the Mountain), and *Ma guoqiao* (The Horse Passing the Bridge) also belong to this category. The two latter pieces have been composed by the group to play for joyous occasions such as wedding parties.

After performing, the group taught royal hartigan to play the small and large gongs in the ensemble.

They also showed us their notation system. Traditionally, people learned aurally/orally by listening and rote. But now, to make it easier for the younger generation to learn and to compose new pieces, they have devised an oral and written notation. Each instrument is assigned a mnemonic sound:

small gong - *dai*

first cymbals - *qi*

second cymbals - *pu*

large gong - *kuang* (open sound) and *dang* (closed sound)

drum - *dai* (stroke on the side) and *dong* (stroke at the center)

ban woodblocks - *ko*

rest - *yi*

A sample excerpt, from *Xiqin*, 'Festive Celebration':

2/4 | dai dai | dai dai dai | yi dai dai | dai dai dai pu pu |
| dang kuang | dang dang kuang pu pu | dang pu qi pu dang dang |
| yi dang qi pu qi pu |

On May 21, Luo drove us to the area south of Zhangjiajie to experience and learn other styles of Da Liuzi. Our first stop was the town of Anshun, where we went to an old theater. The local host, Zhou Shao-hua, is the head of the cultural bureau of Anshun. We arrived there during a rehearsal of the local song and dance troupe. One male dancer was playing a very big drum of the Miao people. The drum has a diameter of more than 1.5 meters. The dance we saw depicted the whole process of planting, weeding, and harvesting rice, a main crop in the rural area of Anshun, which has many irrigated fields.

The Da Liuzi group there had five people, adding a sona player to the four percussionists. The performers were Li Dong-sheng on sona, Zhang Zhong-miao on first cymbals, Peng Ji-wang on second cymbals, Huang Qi on large gong, and Zhou Shao-hua on *maluo* (small gong, also called *xiao luo*). They performed five pieces for us: *Anqin xin niang shang jiao* (The Bride in Anqin Steps into the Sedan Chair), *Ma guo qiao* (A Horse Crossing a Bridge), *Yi, er, san* (One, Two, Three), and *Shuang feng chao yang* (Two Phoenixes Worshipping the Sun). The royal again learned a short section of *Ma guo qiao* on the small gong and played with the ensemble.

Wei Gu: A Related Style

After another hour's drive we arrived at another town called Wangcun (Wang's village). This town is famous for the music style Wei Gu. The instrumentation of Wei Gu involves the addition of the sona and *tang gu* (large drum) with *ban* (wood blocks) to the Da Liuzi instruments. Wei Gu is played mostly at weddings and funerals, and it is performed by the musicians who are seated. The six performers were Qin Zhi-rong on sona, Yao Zulong on drum and woodblock, Wang Xiao-kun on first cymbals, Shi Shi-yu on second cymbals, Deng Min-zhi on small gong, and Lu Kai-wei on large gong. The pieces they played were *Zhu yun fei* (Flowing Clouds), with *Ban tian fei* (Lit. Half Sky Flying), *Feng ru song* (Wind in the Pines), with *Yi jiang feng* (Wind on the River), *Gan zhou ge* (Song of Ganzhou), and *Er liu* (Two Streams). The addition of the melodic sona adds another dimension to the repertoire. These pieces are adapted from the *qupai* (melody type) of the local Han operas. The sona of the Tujia people has three holes in the front that form a triad, but the pitch changes if the hole is partially covered. There is another hole in the back of the instrument, and covering it also can change the pitch.

Wangcun is a port located by the Li river and is about a thousand years old. Before the advent of railways and highways in the region, water offered the only means of transportation for transporting merchandise. Because of its port

location, Wangcun enjoyed a prosperous economy in the past. The Wei Gu group met with us in a dilapidated old mansion. Although it is very much run down now, one can still see a trace of the grandeur of its past. royal also learned part of the piece *Xi ma* (Washing a Horse) there. This music was intended to accompany the movements of the horse boy as he washed the horse of the general.

Luo Yong had originally arranged for us to stay overnight in a rural village, but after we learned that there were a lot of mosquitoes breeding during the rainy season and none of us had taken medication for malaria prevention, we had to decline that excellent opportunity to see firsthand the life of local peoples. Instead, we drove to Jishou for hotel lodging.

On the morning of Monday, May 22, we went to the studios of the Jishou Song and Dance Company. Luo had worked at the company for many years in the past, and he still maintains a close relationship with its members. Consequently we enjoyed warm hospitality and many conveniences. First we met the company's officers, and later its Da Liuzi group, which includes Long Yi on large gong, Shi You-en and Le Li-ke on small gong, Li Ze-jian on first cymbals, and Luo Yong and Long Yi on second cymbals. They played *Bage xizao* (Birds Taking a Bath), a piece we had previously heard in Zhangjiajie. The Jishou ensemble played in a more active style, with the two cymbals creating a lively call-and-response format.

Following our recording of the percussion ensemble, one of the troupe's singers, Long Chang-chen, sang a folk song for us. The title of the song is *Biagu qiang* (A love song). The lyrics concern a 'brother'³, who missed his sister (his lover) so much that he could not eat or drink. The second song is called *Ping qiang* (Lit. Flat Song). Its theme is also about love, painting a scene of nature with plenty of fruits on the trees, and a 'brother' and 'sister' sitting together: 'We get together because we love each other. / Our love is true.' Another singer, Shi You-en, sang

³ It is common practice in many regional Chinese folk songs to refer to lovers as brother and sister.

two more love songs. The first is called 'Today We Are Sitting Together.' The second is without title; its lyrics are 'I got up when I heard the roosters. / I was on the road when the dogs bark. / Hurry to go to school. / Hurry to go to school.' Luo told us that both performers are excellent interpreters of folk song. Even though they do not have big voices, they are good improvisers. The songs were all improvised on the spot. We noticed that the singers use their right hands to cover their right ears while vocalizing, a practice that helps the singer improvise lyrics and feel the resonance of his or her voice.

Another opera singer named Le Li-ke sang for us a folk song from the San-zi region for us. It is a song of a dialogue between two lovers. The conversation goes like this:

Man: 'I am going to the army and won't be back for three or five years. So my sister (lover) should find another man and marry.'

Woman: 'If you are away for one year, I will wait for one year. If you are away for two years, I will wait for two years. If the key⁴ is not here the lock will not be open.'

Mr. Le has a gorgeous voice, and this is a well-known folk song in the region. His singing resembled a stage performance and was very different from that of the other two singers discussed above. There are various opportunities in the Jishou and Zhangjiajie areas for this kind of folk singing; some restaurants have waitresses singing greeting songs at the door to welcome customers and also farewell songs when customers leave.

Luo then took us to a neighboring town known as Dewu, populated by the Miao people. On our way we had many views of the scenery for which the Zhangjiajie area is so famous. The mountains have shapes so remarkable that people have given them imaginative names such as 'a monkey stealing peaches' and 'a

⁴ I did not ask for the meaning of key and lock. I assume it insinuates the chastity belt.

maiden in front of a dressing table.' The area has underground caves with stalactites and stalagmites, and layers of underground rivers. Due to our tight schedule we were not able to visit individual scenic places. However, on our trip to Dewu we observed terraced rice fields and water mills surrounded by towering mountains. Visible everywhere are different shades of green. When we arrived at the Miaozhai (the collective residences of the Miao people) it seemed like another world.

Some Music of the Miao People

The Miao people are a large minority group living in many southwest Chinese provinces. Miaozhai is a frequent stop on the tourist circuit. We came there mainly to see the famous Miao drums. There is a large semicircular outdoor performance space seating several hundred people, and performances for tourists are scheduled several times a day. Eight big drums, each about 1.5 meters in diameter, are situated in the space. Young women in colorful native costumes, headdresses, and jewelry dance around the drums, which are played by young men. Several program pieces involve audience participation, including a tug-of-war and communal dance. After the performance we roamed around the site. We saw a huge drum (*da gu*) behind the stage area sitting in a shrine, and the drum seems like a totem to the Miao people. Luo and royal were allowed to play this drum and it produced a deep booming sound with a long resonance, felt as much as heard. In addition to music and dance, there is a display of weaving by an older woman, tea houses, and gift shops of the sort found at all tourist attractions.

On May 23, our second day in Jishou, we spent the morning setting up a jazz drum set bought from Guangzhou, for the Jishou Song and Dance Company. royal tuned the drum set and gave an informal presentation and performance on its history and associated styles. Then royal also played the drum set along with the company's Da Liuzi ensemble, and we recorded the performance. There was a grand piano in the studio, and royal also played some jazz piano. The Chinese

musicians, who had never heard jazz piano played live, were very impressed.

In the afternoon we returned to Zhangjiajie and immediately proceeded to Wulinyuan, a suburb of Zhangjiajie, to see a commercialized performance. Because the members of the Jishou Song and Dance Company participated in the performance we received free tickets. Otherwise the tickets would have been very expensive, between 300 and 400 Chinese yuan (\$40 to \$50 US). Yet the big theater was full. Before the show there was a lottery drawing. The prizes were two large Chinese paintings donated by local artists. The stage was lit with laser lighting, and the emcee (a term derived from 'M. C.' master of ceremonies) was dressed in a shiny red costume similar to those of his Western counterparts. The program included *Baishou-wu* (a swinging-hands dance) and a skit called *Xinniāng Kujiao* (A Weeping Bride Says Farewell to Her Parents). According to Luo, these are typical local programs. But for us and others, the loud taped pop music in the background and the exaggerated, choreographed dances resembled a Western-style extravaganza using commodified folk arts for tourists' entertainment. We did not stay to the end.

A Local Opera Troupe

On Wednesday, May 24, we went to visit a local opera group, Yang Xi (Sun Opera). This is the favorite entertainment of the people in Zhangjiajie. A famous writer, Shen Cong-wen, once said that if you have not seen the Yang opera you cannot claim to have visited West Hunan. It has a history of 200 years and 15 generations of performers. The Sun Opera name has various explanations. One is that it was always performed in March or April, the sunny spring, while another is that it was performed in the past as part of worshiping the sun.

In ancient times Dayong (now Zhangjiajie) was a key transportation center for the four provinces Sichuan, Guizhou, Hubei, and Hunan, and elements of the music of each of these areas were incorporated into the Yang opera genre. The music of Yang opera developed out of shamanic styles and the local music of

Hubei. It diverged into upper and lower river styles. Yang opera as performed in Zhangjiajie is in the upper river style. The music is mostly in the C mode. Traditionally there were *jiu qiang* (nine melodies) and *shiba diao* (eighteen tunes). Later on, regional folk songs, the Liangshan music of East Sichuan, and music from the Hua Deng⁵ (flower lantern) style found their way into the Yang opera. Singers use both natural voice and falsetto and one characteristic of the singing style is that musical statements end with repetitions of the last phrase an octave higher. The accompanying instruments are the four metallic instruments of the Da Liuzi ensemble, plus one *bangu* (flat drum), one *tanggu* (a large barrel-shaped drum), one *ban* (woodblock), and two *da tong* (stringed instruments with an extra-large resonator box and two strings).

Luo informed us that the contents of the operas are mostly concerned with family ethics. The roles are stock types: *xiao sheng* (young male), *xiao dan* (young female), and *chou* (clown). The present Yang opera company was founded in 1956. They not only play in the local theater but also travel by bus to perform in neighboring towns. Since the company was loading their bus for travel we could not attend a real performance. However we were able to record and listen to the singing of four performers. Ms. Xu Chun-hua and Mr. Li Jia-cai sang two songs in the Hua Deng style with instrumental accompaniment: *Gua zi hong* (Melon Seeds Are Red), and *Fang feng zheng* (Flying a Kite). Ms. Zhao Fang-rong and Mr. Ou Hui-ping sang for us an excerpt from the Yang Xi repertoire, *Er tang she zi* (Giving Away the Son). The instrumentalists were: Zhang Deng-yun and Li Wen-chang on the two *da tong* stringed instruments; Peng Guo-ji on *bangu*, *tanggu*, and *ban*; Li Bo-lin on first cymbals, Zhang Tuan-wen on second cymbals, Liu Shi-hong on large gong, and Qu Guo-zhong on small gong.

On our last day in Zhangjiajie, Luo brought us to see an old Taoist temple. It was not yet totally repaired and publicly open to tourists. It has a large stage and audience space. We do not know what kind of performances were given there in

⁵ A song and dance style performed by two persons, the content is usually courting and flirting between a couple.

ancient times. On the site there was also an interesting building with twisted columns and beams bent to reflect a Chinese proverb: 'If the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam would also be leaning.'

Luo then brought us to meet with some local musicians. Peng Cheng, a pianist himself, owns a piano store and a large music studio offering classical music lessons in piano, violin, wind instruments and sight-singing. He invited us to give workshops in his studio on our next visit. We then went to the home of another musician, Mr. Qu, for dinner. His son is a student of composition and violin at the Guangzhou Conservatory of Music. He played a tape of his son's compositions for us, and Luo asked royal to play jazz piano. We also met another music teacher from a local normal school. These activities gave us a vague idea of the musical life of the local people.

Over the hundreds of miles of our trip, we shared the company of Jia Qian and Jia Lu (who are not related). The former is Luo's girlfriend, and the daughter of the former president of the Jishou Song and Dance Company and his choreographer wife. The parents, who are now retired, went to Jishou in the 1960s and almost single handedly built the company. They are still remembered and respected by its members. Jia Lu is a young woman, daughter of a former member of the company. She is already a professor of arts at Changsha University (Changsha is the capital of Hunan Province) and is involved with research on the connection between folk art and folk music. After traveling together for ten days we became very close and called ourselves 'The Five.'

In ten days we researched, studied, and recorded four Da Liuzi ensembles, one Wei Gu ensemble, Miao drums, folk songs, Hua Deng singing, and Yang opera. The only major musical style we missed was Nuo Xi, due to its seasonal timing. Thanks to Luo's help we found the right groups, and everywhere we went received warm hospitality. It is clear, as Luo told us, that Da Liuzi is the most important musical genre in the area. It can be performed by itself, as shown in *The Map*, and it lies at the core of the instrumental ensembles of other musical

styles. The reason Da Liuzi is so popular in the area lies in the historical resonance it holds for the local population - it is the only music that survived after the Qing government began to dominate the area. It therefore symbolizes the independent spirit of the Tujia people and their heritage of protest and struggle.



