DECONSTRUCTING TRADITION IN JAPANESE MUSIC

A Study of Shakuhachi, Historical Authenticity and Transmission of Tradition

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Abstract

The present study is conducted as a study of the shakuhachi, a vertical bamboo flute, its history and transmission of its music. Most of the studies relating to shakuhachi are historical, in which the origins of the shakuhachi, as an instrument and its music, are debated. The first studies were conducted in the early twentieth century, and these studies disproved the legendary origin as it was elaborated in Edo period writings. In the Edo period (1603–1867), the shakuhachi was used by a certain types of monks, komusō, as a religious implement. These monks claimed an origin that goes back to the ninth-century Chinese Chan Buddhist monk Pu Hua (Fuke). In the twentieth century historical studies, Japanese scholars have presented an indigenous origin, going back to before the Edo period, with links to other types of Buddhist monks: the boro and the komosō, and this is now a generally accepted theory of the origins of the shakuhachi.

I introduce the legendary origin of the shakuhachi in Chapter 4, where I also discuss a possible reason why the three types of monks mentioned above came to be regarded as of the same kind quite early in the Edo period. Chapters 5 and 6 contain detailed analyses of the primary sources, directly connected to the boro and the komosō, which most of the studies by Japanese scholars refer to. My analyses result in a counter-argument against the commonly accepted theory of an indigenous origin, and the development that these Japanese studies suggest. The main theme is the concept of ‘tradition,’ which is supposedly based on an authentic origin. My analyses do, however, indicate that the notion of an indigenous tradition of shakuhachi was created, probably for socio-political reasons, in historical studies conducted in the twentieth century.

In the present study, I also discuss another perspective of the notion of ‘tradition’: the transmission of a traditional art. In Japanese studies the notion of kata – fixed forms that implicitly contain some essential elements of the ‘traditional’ art form in question – is discussed as a special feature of Japanese arts. I investigate how transmission is conducted, and argue against the notion that the elements that are transmitted from teacher to student contain the essence of the tradition. In contrast to this essentialist viewpoint, I argue that the concept of fixed forms, as a defining characteristic of Japanese traditional arts, should be modified to a more modest ‘character of the music’ on the level of individual transmitters. I discuss the elements that are transmitted, and investigate what it is that constitutes the ‘traditional’ aspects, if any, of this transmission.

Keywords: Shakuhachi, Japanese music, tradition, transmission, historical authenticity, Fuke, komusō, komosō, boro, Edo period, form, kata, poietic, esthetic,