

# The Wind Rises in the West 风起西洋

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In the autumn of 2015, my wife and I received an invitation from Prof Zhang Weiliang to attend the Third China Bamboo Flute Music Festival at Yuping, Guizhou. My wife Hyelim Kim (金惠林), being one of the foremost performer in her generation of the Korean flute daegeum (大笳), has been invited to present an academic paper on the daegeum and also to perform at the gala finale concert of the festival. As we are based in London, we were therefore effectively representing both the U.K. and South Korea.

During the festival, as my only role was acting as interpreter for my wife, I had the luxury of being able to carefully observe and interact with everything that was going on around us. It was our first time in Yuping (though certainly won't be our last). The initial shock of arriving at this new destination for us and of being surrounded by all the brightest 'stars' and personalities from the bamboo flute world was indeed overwhelming. But as our eyes adjusted to the aura of the whole event and I started to see a clearer perspective and context of the place and culture that we found ourselves in, it particularly struck me how major a role the bamboo flute plays in the cultural and geographical psyche of Yuping.

The significance of the bamboo flute to Yuping is a well-documented phenomenon and I do not need to repeat it here. But over the years since our memorable experience at the 2015 festival I have found myself pondering many times what the borders of this spread of the bamboo flute is. In other words, if we take Yuping as the spiritual heartland of the bamboo flute, how wide exactly has been the reach of this instrument internationally? As a xiao flute player myself, in recent years I have come across increasingly more musicians in the West, particularly the U.S., playing and recording with the xiao. In our age of the Internet and social media, the ease of accessing aspects of cultures geographically and ideologically very remote or distant from ours has no doubt facilitated this. But to find musicians who live and operate in very different environments, sometimes with no or minimal access to Chinese culture, to actually take up the instrument, make challenging efforts to master it, and even use it as a tool and channel to convey their musical expressions, is a phenomenon that I feel cannot go unexplored.

This invitation to contribute my ramblings on Yuping and the bamboo flute has therefore given me an ideal opportunity to explore this topic, namely: what has attracted (and would attract) the West to the xiao flute. I started my survey of a few prominent players (and a maker) of the xiao, and my interviews and conversations with them revealed some fascinating and thought-provoking facets that ignited in me a renewed love and attachment to the xiao, and includes some observations that for those of us who actively disseminate the instrument would also benefit from.

## Early birds in the bamboo grove (西风稍急喧窗竹)

I did not see the benefit in setting any strict rule or a narrow remit for this article, but it was nonetheless important to restrict my subjects to only ethnically non-Chinese xiao players. And there is no one better to start with than **Gary Stroutsos** (b 1954), whose contribution to the popularity of the xiao in the West is immense, as the reader shall soon find out.



Gary is a musician from Vermont, U.S.A., of mixed Italian, Greek and Lebanese descent. He is best known for his recordings on the Native American Hopi flute, which he describes as introspective, meditative music, but also regularly performs and records jazz and improvised music. He was first gifted a xiao by the owner of a music shop in San Francisco Chinatown. He was so captivated by the instrument and its sound that he started practicing daily for many hours, experimenting and inventing modes and creating tunes with it. Gary found that he can relate to

the mysterious and ethereal sound of the xiao, a sound that makes him happy. Also because bamboo is a natural material, he feels that it links us to a past with deep roots; as Gary says, the sound of the xiao “has the rhythms of the natural world“.

When he started using the xiao in the jazz band that he was playing with, the other members were so struck by his obsession that they gave him the nickname ‘Chairman Xiao’. But all that hard work paid off because from 1997 onwards he started recording with the xiao and regularly using it in live performances with his jazz band, including with the respected pianist David Lanz. Their versions of various Beatles covers, other jazz classics and serene New Age music featuring Gary’s mellifluous xiao are probably some of the earliest recordings using the xiao by non-Chinese flautists and has fascinated and inspired countless musicians since. Like Gary himself, his xiao playing is haunting and healing, creates ‘big round shapes’ but does not try to grab your attention, and yet it is this very self-effacing aspect of his performance that ends up enticing us.

Despite all his laudable efforts in broadening the exposure of the instrument, Gary feels there is still a lack of awareness of the xiao in the West, one major reason being the difficulty in accessing and obtaining good quality and affordable instruments. Despite that, Gary is in fact instrumental in remedying this problem. At a 2006 Native American flute convention, Gary met the artisan woodwind instruments maker, **Geoffrey Ellis** (b 1967).

Geoffrey, who is from San Diego, specializes in making all kinds of world flutes in wood, with his own contemporary interpretations. His online store currently includes the Irish transverse flute, Indian bansuri, Japanese shakuhachi, South American quena and, holding a particularly special place, the Chinese xiao.



At that convention Geoffrey got hold of his first xiao from Gary and he set about learning it over the next few years. As a flute

maker, he was particularly fascinated by the long history of the xiao and how the design has been refined by countless generations of makers. Initially he was keen to ‘improve’ its design, but soon found that the classic standard of 8-hole long, narrow bore with tone-holes in the lower part has been so perfected that it was futile to modify. In particular, Geoffrey found that there was a good

reason why the typical xiao has the extended length and tone-hole matrix design features as they affect the harmonics and ease of producing the higher octave notes. It would be ignorant to think that cutting the length to where the first tone-hole starts would produce an equally effective instrument. However, as Geoffrey got more immersed in xiao making and interacting with other active xiao players in the West, he came across more examples of the instrument giving him a broader outlook of what he wanted to achieve as a maker. Although it is clear that the basic xiao design is beyond improvement and it would be presumptuous to think that drastic changes could be made to advance the instrument, nonetheless Geoffrey believes that careful refined, subtle changes can be made by makers within the parameters of the standard design to create surprisingly diverse and effective instruments.

One such innovation is borrowing the Baroque flute making practice of ‘chambering’, where the cavity is widened at certain locations of the bore to create a more precise tuning for certain notes, a practice that he appreciates has been utilized by historic Chinese makers. Constant research and collaboration with musicians, coupled with a deep passion for woodwinds and a most modest and amiable personality, has made Geoffrey a well-liked and respected flute maker, and undoubtedly the foremost xiao maker outside East Asia. His role in improving the availability of the instrument in the West and its overall quality cannot be underestimated. Anyone who has played a xiao made by Geoffrey would be struck by how good an instrument it is, combining the most advance and developed organology, refined aesthetics, surprising efficiency in tone and dynamics, while at the same time preserving and respecting (for good reason) the original Chinese standards.

It was in fact the xiao that started Geoffrey’s journey of exploring different flutes from around the globe. Clearly there is a growing interest in the West for various world flutes, and the xiao holds a special place in this. Geoffrey feels that this is mainly due to the fact that despite being a keyless folk flute, the xiao is incredibly versatile, has a broader range than most folk flutes, and (unlike transverse flutes) is ergonomically comfortable to hold and play, giving the player’s body the least strain. The ‘voice’ of the xiao is also easily adaptable to a variety of musical styles and genres, from traditional Chinese to Irish folk tunes and even Bach. But most importantly the xiao stands out as being an amazingly flexible instrument, making it the ultimate ‘desert island’ flute! In Geoffrey’s own words, “if I could only play one flute, it would be the xiao”.

Availability of the instrument is one thing, but without good musicians taking up the xiao, it would still be difficult to broaden its exposure in the West. One such musician is the distinguished recording artist, **Joseph L Young** (b 1972). Hailing from Boise in Idaho, Joe is an all-round musician, having started playing the saxophone since he was 12. Today he is best known for his New Age, Synth-pop and contemporary instrumental music. Aside from playing in a rock band, he is also a sound engineer and music producer, and is soon to release his sixth solo album. In many of his commercial recordings, Joe has used the xiao as the lead solo instrument to amazing effect.



Like Geoffrey, Joe was also introduced to the xiao by Gary Stroutsos. When he was in his mid-twenties, Joe started experimenting with various world flutes, primarily the penny whistle and Native American flute, and used them in his original compositions. At a concert in 2006 with his regular pianist David Lanz, Gary performed some pieces with the xiao and the sound immediately captivated Joe. Having played and performed with many types of world flutes, Joe was amazed by the versatility of this ancient instrument. Unlike most

other keyless flutes from around the world, which are usually very limited in range and notes, the xiao could play two and a half octaves, has the extra finger holes for an almost full chromatic scale, and a musician can do so much more with it. In the right pair of hands, the xiao can be extremely expressive, and responds well to various playing techniques, such as overblowing, etc.

Aside from actively performing and recording, Joe has also been teaching various flutes for the last 16 years, including the xiao. He found that for many students and audience members who have not heard the sound of the xiao before, its sound easily captures their hearts, to quite a magical effect. It is difficult to explain why it has this effect on the listeners. Joe feels that possibly this has something to do with the fact that in the soundtracks of many films or other incidental music used in the media, the xiao or similar sounding keyless flutes have been used to evoke a certain mood. The sound, therefore, becomes associated with such feelings and every time the listener hears these sounds they are unwittingly transported to that atmosphere.

More importantly, Joe feels that even though we live in a much smaller world now and can access so many things from different countries at the tip of our fingers, there are still too many things that different cultures do not know about each other. Despite that, and even though Joe himself had not had the opportunity to travel much outside the U.S., the xiao journeyed all the way from distant China to find him and opened up a new world of sound for Joe. Music is truly universal, and as every musician would attest to, even without any common language musicians from different cultures can easily make music together. In trying to learn more about the xiao, Joe also learned many more things about the culture and history of the Far East. He has gathered bits of information but is still trying to piece the full picture together; all thanks to this beautiful instrument, which Joe feels the Chinese should be proud to shout about it.

### **A lonely ape sits howling to the moon (孤猿坐啼墳上月)**

Certainly, it seems more could be done by the Chinese themselves to promote and make its traditional music more accessible to the West. This could be beneficial not merely from a cultural outreach perspective, but also (particularly in the case of the xiao) in pursuit of universal well-being. One musician who has found much solace in the xiao is the multi-instrumentalist, **Chris Rippey** (b 1983), who was born in Connecticut and now lives in Colorado.

Chris is a musician, composer, improviser and music instructor. Due to his roots, Chris initially gravitated towards the Irish flute in his search for a musical voice. However, he soon found that conventional structures of music making did not suit him. The enforced way of how music is created, interpreted and then digested is too rigid and hierarchical. For instance, Chris feels that music is much more than just a score and yet with the score is how most music making starts. His music is supposed to represent what he feels and how he expresses himself, he would not want to experience someone else perform, interpret and 'feel' his feelings.

What mattered most to Chris was the need to express oneself through music, to release the voice that resides in our soul. Chris believes this is a primeval nature in all living beings that has no explanation and needs no justification. Like the wolf howling at the moon, birds singing in the trees, or



gibbons crying in the woods; it is an inexplicable yearning that cannot be caged and you simply have to enter into that moment. The music must come out and once it is released, you are cleansed. The xiao is the perfect funnel for this outlet.

Having played and performed the Irish flute for many years, Chris eventually had to give up that instrument reluctantly due to the strain placed on his body by the posture of this transverse flute. This cause him much depression as he continued to search for different instruments that he could connect with. When he accidentally came across the xiao, he was attracted not just by the relaxed body posture required by the xiao but also by how the xiao could work on many diverse kinds of music. Because of the relative comfort in its posture, playing the xiao is like water flowing in the mountains, having a healing effect. The instrument and its sound possess a beauty that gives Chris profound comfort and speaks to his soul.

As a product that is so strongly symbolic of the Chinese culture, Chris feels that the Chinese should be proud and be a good steward of the xiao. Far too often we take things in life for granted, especially in this day and age when many people are feeling alienated, from family or nature. The art of the xiao is like a balm in these troubled times, which can give so many people happiness and consolation. Chris recounted to me a touching incident in Texas where an old lady whose husband was dying heard Chris play the xiao. She closed her eyes and explained that the dark voice of the xiao spoke deeply to her. It is a sound that has the essential quality capable of transcending any soul directly. As Chris says, "I have been looking for this my whole life, what I would give to have it in my life".

Someone who did find the xiao early in her life is the singer and musician, **Pernelle Gelsi** (b 1997) from Marseille, France. Pernelle grew up surrounded by different musical instruments from all over the world that her jazz musician father collected. When she was around 7, she developed an interest in various world flutes and one day stumbled upon a set of dizi flutes. That started her passion for the instruments of the Far East when she taught herself how to play the dizi, and later the shakuhachi. As Pernelle learned more about these flutes, she eventually discovered the xiao and it has now become one of her favourite instruments, having been inspired by the online videos she found of performances by Zhang Weiliang (张维良), Zeng Gege (曾格格) and Chen Yue (陈悦), among others.



Pernelle is a singer songwriter who describes herself as a moody 'Space Jazz' musician, composing and performing in an individualistic style invented by herself. In many of her own compositions or covers of standards, her strong expressive vocals reveal a distinctive and appealing singing style, often backed by instrumental parts performed by herself. In the video of a freely improvised xiao solo called 'Lotus Blanc' (白莲), and the more recent commercial recording 'Mercure' where a captivating xiao melody intertwines with the vocal line over a voluptuous electronic rhythm, Pernelle shows how she can find a unique new language for the xiao.

As a musician who prioritizes feelings and soul over everything else, there are not many instruments that would appeal to her. When she plays the

xiao, however, Pernelle feels she is interacting with the whole universe. The modulation of the xiao gives it a life and personality, which makes playing it addictive. When one is absorbed in the sound, whether as a performer or an audience member, you are drawn into a meditative state which feeds your imagination.

As evidently shown in her music, Pernelle believes that the way to spark the Western audience's curiosity for the xiao is to integrate it with styles and concepts that they are familiar with. The public will always prefer what they understand and are used to. But on the other hand, it is vital that the xiao is not then used in a superficial way in pursuit of assimilation, hence losing its 'essence' through intellectual degradation. It is this very subtle balance that Pernelle finds challenging and enticing, and it is the aim of creating this type of experimental music that she has set herself out to achieve.

The xiao needs more musicians like Pernelle, who is unfettered by rigid traditional conventions, moulded by her own good taste in music and fierce individualistic creativity, and guided by the essential qualities of the instrument and the effect it has on the listener. Another musician who is bringing the xiao into interesting new territories is the 'Renaissance man' performer **Connor Keene** (b 1988), who is a musician, actor, playwright, novelist and director. Connor grew up in Hacienda Heights, Los Angeles, close to the largest Buddhist temple in the Western Hemisphere, Hsi Lai Temple (加州西來寺) and the Chinese community there. Inspired but also daunted by his father and godfather Phil, who were both amazing musicians (the latter being one of the top oboists working in Hollywood), Connor only started playing music in his 20s, and took up the flute when he was around 24.

Connor was interested in world flutes and continued experimenting on different types even after his godfather Phil introduced him to the xiao around 10 years ago. But he found that after trying out many flutes from around the world, he kept coming back to the xiao as it was simply the best and most versatile keyless flute around. The design development of the xiao in China is key to its success. The increase in playing holes from 5 to 6, then to 8 has equipped the xiao with a broader range of notes and octaves compared to most other folk flutes. The structure of the instrument and the posture required to play it ensures that it is also the most convenient and relaxing flute to pick up, usually requiring no effort in assembly at all. And the fact that it is an end-blown flute provides it with a surprisingly wide scope of expressiveness. The xiao could be used to play so many different styles, limited only by the player's skill; from gregarious Irish jig, earthy klezmer, mysterious shakuhachi, exotic kaval to smoky jazz. You could play any style you like and the xiao would still sound idiomatic.



Connor started taking the xiao seriously, traveling to Taiwan to take lessons from the xiao maker Winson Liao (廖锦栋) and also collaborating with Geoffrey Ellis to refine the instrument. But

while he has gained so much gratification from the instrument, Connor found that unfortunately there is very little awareness or interest in the xiao within the Chinese community in the West. In all his years of growing up in a Chinese neighborhood, he was surprised never to have met even one Chinese musician playing traditional music. Instead, most Chinese parents are keen to push their children into western music and culture. When Connor is performing the xiao in the U.S., he is surprised to be asked by Chinese audience members what instrument it is.

Connor feels that more could be done to promote wonderful traditional Chinese instruments such as the xiao in the West, like the efforts already made by countries like Japan and Korea to promote their traditional music. The xiao is a priceless achievement of the Chinese nation and heritage, one that could stand as a symbol of the culture and that China should be proud of.

### Full Circle

My journey in surveying western interests in the xiao has been most interesting and valuable, both in understanding what aspect of the instrument has stood the test of exportation to different cultures, and also to better appreciate my own role as a Chinese xiao player living in the West. The strongest aspect of the xiao that has helped its popularity grow organically is without doubt the simple yet highly refined classic standard structural design, which enables it to produce a sound of such purity and appeal. And I could also see that the xiao can further break free from its musical boundaries, introducing its versatile voice into genres of music that it has never ventured into before.

Yet in the midst of all these altruistic aspirations and conscious positive efforts, when we circle back to the Chinese heartland to speak to **Jake Pinnick** (b 1990), we find that at the end of the day it is the pure and simple pleasure of producing sounds from this tube of bamboo that is most universal.



Jake, who was born in Kewanee, Illinois, has become something of a Chinese social media sensation over the last couple of years, better known

as ‘Jake of Wudang Mountain’ (武当山杰克) or ‘the Foreigner in Wudang Mountain’ (武当山外国人), through videos of him playing the xiao in full Taoist robes. How did this young American man end up as a xiao ambassador in China?

Jake did not come from a musical background, but in his younger days had been interested in a broad range of musical styles, from rock’n’roll to classical to heavy metal. He first came to China to take a 5-year martial arts training program, and part of the course included brief introductions to artistic aspects of the culture, including music. He became fascinated by Chinese music, but because the martial arts training was intense there was very little time for him to pursue anything else. By the time Jake graduated from the program, he had a Chinese wife and they were expecting their first child. The couple decided to move back to the U.S. when their daughter was born, and it was during this period when Jake was physically remote from the culture that he had grown to love, that his interest in Chinese music deepened.

When his daughter was 3, Jake moved his family back to China and became a full-time martial arts instructor in Wudang Mountain. It was then that he properly picked up the xiao and started learning from whatever resource he could get hold of and from some fellow Wudang martial arts practitioners. He was never interested in wind instruments, but the xiao changed everything. It is an instrument that is easy to carry around, that you can literally play anywhere and feel very comfortable with, since it is so simple and yet has so many possibilities.

Jake believes that how you carry yourself and how you feel directly affects the sound of the xiao, it is a correlation that cannot be ignored. Only half the instrument is the flute itself, the other half is you. The xiao is able to open up an inner language and establish your connection with your breath. It is universal and very important for humanity to be able to do this. As Jake says, “with the xiao, you find balance one breath at a time”.

And it is with this balance one breath at a time that we return to the verdant bamboo groves of Yuping, to the ethereal sound of the xiao wafting through the rustling leaves, as we pay homage and give our thanks to this most generous, great and yet humble of instruments: within its narrow bore flows the *qi* of an entire nation.

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