

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Music Department
香港中文大學音樂系



Thursday, 18 January, 2007, 2:00 pm
Room 101, Hui Yeung Shing Building

Colloquium

“Music, Measurements, Pitch Survival, and Bell Shapes in Korea”

**A talk by Professor Robert Provine
University of Maryland, College Park**

Robert C. Provine is Professor and director of Graduate Studies at the University of Maryland School of Music. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in Music, M.A. in Regional Studies (East Asia), and the Ph.D. in Music, all from Harvard University. As a graduate student, he won the Charles Seeger Prize of the Society for Ethnomusicology, and he received a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant and the John Knowles Paine Travelling Fellowship. He researches the music of East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan), with a particular focus on Korean traditional music and a disciplinary emphasis on historical ethnomusicology.

All are welcome

Abstract

The young Chosŏn dynasty court, in keeping with long-standing Chinese Confucian tradition, needed to establish in the early fifteenth century a new set of standardized measurements (length, weight, and volume) for use in the kingdom. The measurements were all proportionately related, so that if one were fixed, all the others were also thereby determined. Following Chinese precedent, the Koreans did considerable research into the establishing of a fundamental musical pitch from which the other twelve pitches in the musical system could be determined, and the length of the pitch pipe which produced this fundamental pitch in turn constituted a basic unit of length from which the other standard measurements could be calculated.

This presentation explores the historical context and the unusual Korean process for setting their fundamental pitch and consequent measurement system. While the historically attested Chinese procedure for setting the length of the fundamental pitch pipe involved lining up a number of grains of millet, the Koreans decided, after careful research and several test runs, to equate their pitch instead to that on surviving fixed-pitch bells received from early twelfth-century China. Remarkably, that fundamental pitch is still in use in Korean court music today. As it turns out, the fundamental pitch borrowed from China, which happens to be C, was itself not from a pitchpipe based on grains of millet, but one derived from the sum of the lengths of three fingers of the emperor's left hand.

Furthermore, the set of bells from China which the Koreans used as a pitch basis was also used as a physical exemplar on which further sets of Korean bells, including those still in use today, could be based. But those Chinese bells were themselves demonstrably based on ancient excavated bells, so that the bells now played in Korea still retain a shape based on bells of the third century B.C. or even earlier.