

WANG GUANGQI

(1892-1936)

His Life and Works

王光祈評傳

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a biographical and critical study of Wang Guangqi and his written works. In the period of the May Fourth Movement Wang Guangqi emerged as an important social activist and youth organizer. He was the principal initiator of two influential youth organizations, the Young China Association and the anarchist or utopian socialist-oriented Work-Study Mutual Assistance Group. As a typical May Fourth intellectual, Wang was primarily concerned with the general enlightenment of the Chinese populace and dedicated all his life to the reformation of Chinese society. However, what distinguished Wang from his May Fourth peers was his amazing consistency in advocating that social reform take precedence over politics and his idealism in using music as a means of national renaissance. In spite of his profound training in Western culture, Wang also demonstrated deep indebtedness to traditional Chinese learning. This study traces his intellectual development and examines his role as a social activist as well as his scholarly contribution to the history of modern Chinese music.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the life and works of Wang Guangqi (1892-1936).

Despite his important role in founding such influential organizations as the Young China Association and the Work-Study Mutual Assistance Group, Wang Guangqi has come to be thought of predominantly as a musicologist and due to his particular contribution to the scholarship of the history of Chinese music, a music historian. He has also been credited with having introduced Western techniques of musicology into China and Chinese music to the West.

Up to the early 1980s, Wang Guangqi's life and works were either overlooked or misinterpreted in mainland China mainly because of his close association with the leaders of the Chinese Youth Party and his life-long insistence that social reform should take precedence over politics. Although some of his writings have been reprinted and prescribed as reference books for students of music and history, his scholarly achievement has been largely undervalued. Moreover, since the inauguration of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, Wang has been labelled in various ways by the Marxist-Leninist musicologists and historians. For instance, he was classified as a "bourgeois reformist" both to credit him for his initiative in setting up the progressive Young China Association and to discredit him for his lack of enthusiasm for Li Dazhao's call for violent political revolution. Because of his advocacy for a revival of Confucian *li* propriety and *yue* music and his idealism in using music as a means of national rejuvenation, Wang was also portrayed as a "feudal restorationist" who could not keep abreast of the times and therefore should be criticized without mercy. In October 1984, a conference in honour of his scholarly accomplishment was held in Chengdu. Despite the efforts of the conferees to view him more objectively according to historical facts, Wang's social and political views, however, were still seen through a distorting prism of Marxist-Leninist ideology. This time the

criticism of his social stance was less harsh. He was characterized as an utopian socialist who, driven by his burning patriotism and his hatred of social inequality and foreign aggression, had made some commendable experiments in the May Fourth era. The conferees also took pity on his inability to see the "correct way", namely the adoption of the Marxist doctrine, for China's reform, and more or less excused his opposition to political participation by attributing this "weakness" to his petty-bourgeois origin and his lack of contact with the Chinese proletariat. The more encouraging sign from this conference is the fact that Wang Guangqi's scholarly achievement had begun to be taken seriously, particularly his musical writings, obviously due to the relatively apolitical nature of music.

In Taiwan, Wang Guangqi has been dealt with primarily as a social activist. For instance, Guo Zhengzhao and Lin Ruiming published a book entitled *Wang Guangqi de yisheng yu Shaonian Zhongguo xuehui* [Wang Guangqi's Life and the Young China Association] (Taiwan: Huanyu chubanshe, 1974). This book concentrates on Wang's role as a youth organizer and his subsequent devotion to the ideal of creating a young China. Qi Xianci, the historian specializing in the history of the Young China Association, also published a number of articles and dictionary entries concerning Wang's social activities in the course of organizing the Young China Association. While showing more meticulousness in verifying the historical facts, the Taiwanese scholars' study of Wang have also been flawed by the same political bias that affecting the mainlanders, albeit viewed from a different political perspective. Works published in Taiwan which deal with Wang's musical achievements are few and most of them are written in a journalistic manner.

Despite Wang's activities in the May Fourth era and his later contribution to the study of Chinese music, little work has appeared in Western languages concerning his life and work except some rather brief mentions found in Chow Tse-tsung's *The May Fourth Movement*, Chan Lau Kit-ching's *The Chinese Youth Party, 1923-1945*, Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*, Wen-Hsin Yeh's *The Alienated Academy: Culture and*

Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937, and some other general works dealing with the intellectual history of modern China.¹

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an introductory note to Wang Guangqi's life and work both as a social activist and as a musicologist. Because of Wang's unique advocacy of music as a means of national salvation, it is hoped that a biographical and critical study of Wang's experiences will shed some light on our understanding of the May Fourth intellectuals from a different perspective.

This thesis attempts to discuss the biographical details of Wang in a loosely chronological order. Chapter One provides Wang's family background, his early upbringing, his relationship with Zeng Qi, Zhou Taixuan, Guo Moruo and particularly his association with the brothers Zhao Erxun and Zhao Erfeng. Chapter Two traces Wang's activities and his intellectual development as a student and clerical worker in Beijing in the period before and after the May Fourth Incident. Chapter Three examines in detail Wang's crucial role in initiating the Young China Association and his social and political views. For the sake of organization I have not followed a chronological order in this chapter including also most of Wang's views expressed after his departure for Europe in 1920. Also in this chapter Wang's ideas for social reform are put in historical perspective. By following Wang's journey to Germany, Chapter Four gives a description of his life and thought during his last sixteen years in Europe. This is followed by a descriptive account of Wang's musical writings and some analysis of his musical thought in Chapter Five.

The most important resources for this study have been Wang Guangqi's own writings published in the journal of the Young China Association, books published by the China Publishing Co. and his friends' reminiscences written after his death. Secondary sources are used only when I know of the existence of documents but have had no immediate access to them. Although Wang's role as the principal initiator of the Work-Study Mutual Assistance Group was no less significant than his role as the founder of the Young China Association,

¹ Publishing details of these books will be given in the Bibliography.

I have not included a detailed discussion on this point due to lack of source material. Because I do not have the access to *The Extant Writings of Wang Guangqi in Germany* (Wang Guangqi lu De cungao) published in May 1936, the description of his life in Germany in this study has been dependent on the information gleaned from the articles, letters, correspondence, and reports Wang published in the journal of the Young China Association and of his friends who were closely associated with him during this time. I am also aware that Wang contributed a large number of reports to the *Shenbao* and other journals. If these materials had been available to me, the content of this thesis would have been enriched immeasurably.

Throughout the thesis the *Pinyin* system of romanization is employed, although some names such as Sun Yat-sen which are familiar to Western readers in other forms are retained.

All the translations from the Chinese included in this study are mine unless otherwise specified.

CHAPTER 1: YOUTH IN SICHUAN

CHILDHOOD IN WENJIANG

Located in southwest China, Sichuan province, "a land rich and fair, with abundance of rivers and streams, fertile lands, forest and bamboo groves,"¹ is one of the oldest breeding grounds of Chinese civilization. As early as in the Spring and Autumn Era (770-475 B.C.) Chengdu, the provincial capital, had already begun to assume the appearance and proportions of a prominent city. In the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280 A.D.) it became the social and political centre of the state of Shu, one of the three contestants in the struggle to control the entire Chinese empire. It was in Xiaohe, a small village one and a half kilometres west of Wenjiang county, less than thirty kilometres west of Chengdu, that Wang Guangqi, (previously spelt variously as Wang Kwan-chi, Wang Guang Ki), *zi* Runyu was born sometime in the latter part of 1892.²

¹ *Da Qing yitong zhi* (Geography of the Qing dynasty), 1812 ed., 236:8. This translation is found in S. A. M. Adshead, *Province and Politics in late Imperial China* (London and Malmo: 1984), p. 2.

² There are at least four accounts of the date and place of Wang's birth: a. Wang himself gave the date as August 15, 1896; see in *Wang Guangqi yinyue lunwen xuan* [Selected Works on Music by Wang Guangqi] edited by Wang Guangqi yanjiu xueshu taolunhui choubeichu, (Chengdu: 1984), hereafter YYLW, p. 314; this statement is in contradiction with that of other scholars; b. according to Liu Jingzhi, Wang was born on the 15th day of 8th month in the year 1891, Liu Jingzhi, "Xinyinyue dianji shiqi 1920-1936" [The Founding Period of the Chinese New Music] in *Zhongguo xinyinyue shi lunji* [Collected Essays on the History of New Music in China] edited by Liu Jingzhi, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1986-1992), 4 vols., hereafter YYSLJ, Vol. 2, p. 74; c. Dai Yaotian, a native of Wenjiang, believes that October 5, 1892, the 15th day of 8th month in Chinese reckoning is the date of Wang's birth; see "Wang Guangqi guxiang shenghuo zhilue" [A Brief Account of Wang Guangqi's Life in Wenjiang] in Li Wen, Bi Xing, Zhu Zhou ed., *Wang Guangqi yanjiu lunwenji* [Selected Essays on Wang Guangqi] (Chengdu: 1985), hereafter YJLW, p. 322; d. in "Wang Guangqi shengping shilue" [A Brief Biography of Wang Guangqi] Han Liwen and Bi Xing indicate that Wang was born on August 15, 1892; see YYLW, p. 320. While there is no way to verify this fact I am inclined to agree with the last account.

According to Dai Yaotian, the ancestral home of the Wangs was in Hunan, the neighbouring province to the southeast. The Wang family did not settle down in Wenjiang until Wang Hongxin, the great great grandfather of Wang Guangqi, went to Sichuan on a business tour sometime in the early years of the Qing period. Wang Guangqi was the fifth generation in Wenjiang.³

During the reign of Qianlong (1736-1795) one of Wang Guangqi's forbears began a small business manufacturing woks. After a few years hard work the Wang family became comparatively well-off, and, like other well-to-do families in traditional China, they began to pay more attention to the education of their children hoping their offspring could win some honours to glorify the family by becoming scholar-officials one day. This educational endeavour was justified when Wang Qianguang, the great grandfather of Wang Guangqi, passed the imperial examination and became a member of gentry-scholar class by qualifying himself as *zhusheng* or *xiuca*, a Cultivated Talent, in Huayang prefecture.⁴

Wang Qianguang had a daughter and a son. The daughter was married to a *juren* or *xiaolian*, a Provincial Graduate, named Zhao Xiguang, a native of Huayang. The son, namely Wang Guangqi's grandfather, Wang Zaixian, *zi* Zeshan, born to a family now not only well-to-do but also "scented with the fragrance of books", as the old cliché goes, naturally had a very good education in traditional learning. And he was believed to be extremely intelligent and keen to learn. By the second year of Xianfeng's reign (1852) he had already gained the *juren*, or a masters degree. However, no matter how talented he was, luck was not always with him. So when the young and ambitious Wang Zaixian went to Beijing (Peking) to take part in the prestigious metropolitan examination for the third degree *jinshi*, or Metropolitan Graduate, he failed. Unsuccessful also was his second

³ Dai Yaotian, "Wang Guangqi guxiang shenghuo zhilue" in YJLW, pp. 322-323.

⁴ Ibid.

attempt.⁵ The failure did not become "the mother of success" as the old Chinese saying goes. On the contrary, it proved too heavy a blow for him to sustain. Out of frustration and disillusionment, Wang Zaixian gave up the idea of trying again and perhaps not wanting to face the people who had so much faith in his talent in his native county, or maybe the intellectual atmosphere in the capital was too much of an attraction for him to resist, he stayed on indulging in drinking as well as poetry. In the following years he managed to earn himself a reputation as being brilliant in poetry composition but unconventional in his manner. Unfortunately, except for a collection of poems called *Zeshan shichao* [Collected Poems of Zeshan] in two *juan* published sometime before his death in 1871 and a set of poems for the purpose of entertainment published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* [Fiction Monthly] we know practically nothing about his other literary writings.⁶

During his stay in Beijing Wang Zaixian also engaged in some teaching activities on a sporadic basis, offering his service to some descendants of Manchu banner men and of Chinese officials. Among his students were two brothers, Zhao Erxun (1874-1927) and Zhao Erfeng, who were to become not only very important in the history of late imperial China in terms of political struggle as well as scholastic achievements but also to play a significant role in Wang Guangqi's life.⁷

Despite his failure in the metropolitan examination, Wang Zaixian did not entirely give up his interest in state affairs. He enjoyed particularly talking about military strategy. Wang travelled extensively within China and always observed carefully the local conditions, customs as well as topographical features wherever he went. It is recorded in the local

⁵ Ibid. Also see Han Liwen and Bi Xing, "Wang Guangqi shengping shilue" in YYLW, p. 321.

⁶ Ibid. Also see Li Jieren, "Shiren zhisun" [Grandson of the Poet] in *Li Jieren xuanji* [Selected Works of Li Jieren] (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 1986), Vol. 5, hereafter LJRXJ, pp. 40-41.

⁷ For the Zhao brothers' political activities in Sichuan, see Adshead, *Province and Politics in Late Imperial China*, pp. 74-104; Roger Thompson, "Statecraft and Self-Government: Competing Visions of Community and State in Late Imperial China" in *Modern China*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1988), pp. 45-51. Zhao Erxun later became the director of the Bureau of the Qing history and conducted the compilation of voluminous *Qing shi gao* [A Draft History of the Qing Dynasty].

gazetteer that Wang had "a concealed ambition for managing worldly affairs".⁸ It is also said that Wang Zaixian acted as an adviser to Zeng Guofan and Ding Baozhen for sometime by virtue of his many talents.⁹

Equally well versed in the traditional Confucian classics, Wang Guangqi's father, Wang Zhansong, *zi* Maosheng or Mengsheng, had done little to contribute to the family's wealth although he earned the academic degree *xiucai* and held a position in the Qing imperial court for a brief period in his early years. By now the Wang family began to experience a slow but irreversible economic decline. In order to alleviate the family's financial difficulties Wang Zhansong took over the management of the wok factory upon returning from Beijing. However, because of his lack of experience in business administration and his bookish nature, the entrepreneurial endeavour failed miserably. Instead of making profit the factory became a financial nightmare. Not long after he had taken over the factory a huge loss incurred and deficit became inevitable. In the ensuing years the situation continued to deteriorate to a point finally that left him no choice but to lease the factory out. Later he made another attempt to run a small business, however, little success was achieved. In 1892, about two months before Wang Guangqi was born, Wang Zhansong died of illness on a business journey to Longchang¹⁰ leaving Wang Guangqi and his mother with a meagre cash asset of three or four hundred taels of silver and a shabby wok factory which could only attract an regular income of twenty thousand cash a year.¹¹

Wang Guangqi's mother, whose name we do not know, came from a family of similar background. Brought up in a scholarly family, she had a fairly good exposure to Chinese traditional learning, though she did not receive a formal education. Besides her knowledge of the standard histories she is said to have been particularly fond of literature and poetry.¹²

⁸ Dai Yaotian, "Wang Guangqi Wenjiang guxiang shenghuo zhilue" in YJLW, p. 323.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Li Jieren, "Shiren zhisun", in LJRXL, p. 41.

¹² Han Liwen and Bi Xing, "Wang Guangqi shengping shilue" in YYLW, pp. 320-321.

At a very early age, Wang's mother began to instruct him in learning Chinese characters and memorising poems. She also kept telling Wang Guangqi the deeds of his grandfather Wang Zaixian, hoping Wang Guangqi could restore the lost prestige of the family. Before Wang Guangqi reached the age of nine, his education was not formally given by a private tutor, a practice commonly observed by wealthy families, but rather was in the sole charge of his mother owing to their financial difficulties. It was she who guided Wang Guangqi in his pre-school education, introducing him to a selection of Confucian classics and literary masterpieces of traditional Chinese learning.¹³

Despite the idyllic calm of the village life in Xiaohe, Wang Guangqi's childhood was not a care-free one. It was hard indeed to make a living for a widowed woman and a dependent child by relying on the above mentioned amount of money. Like other children of a poor family, Wang began to understand hardship at an early age and did his best to lighten the financial difficulties his mother faced by tending cattle for neighbouring peasants.¹⁴ It was at this time that Wang Guangqi began to cultivate a sense of independence and endurance which were to constitute part of his personality.

Fortunately, Wang Guangqi's mother was not an ordinary woman. She not only had the virtues for which other Chinese women had always been praised for such as the capacity for hard work, endurance for all kinds of hardship and so forth, but was also an enlightened person who saw her son's education as being of paramount importance. Convinced that the future of her only son lay in learning, and aware that she herself was not in a position to provide him with a high standard of education, Wang Guangqi's mother made a bold move. She sold the family house in Xiaohe and a few *mu* of land and moved to Mashi street just outside the western gate of Wenjiang county seat. Around 1901, at the age of nine, Wang Guangqi enrolled at an old style private school (*sishu*) adjacent to a

¹³ Li Jieren, "Shiren zhisun" in LJRXX, p. 41; Han Liwen and Bi Xing, "Wang Guangqi shengping shilue" in YYLW, pp. 320-321.

¹⁴ Dai Yaotian, "Wang Guangqi Wenjiang guxiang shenghuo zhilue" in YJLW, p. 324.

temple called Sanguanmiao in Wenjiang county seat and thus began his formal education. Little is known about the life of Wang Guangqi in this period. The sketchy information that comes to light indicates that Wang was taught by a certain Jiang Chunfan, who was a pro-reform intellectual and liked to tell stories of the 1898 reform activists to students in the school. Before long, for reasons somewhat obscure, Wang Guangqi transferred to a family school (jiashu) where he was taught by another enlightened educator Huang Yushan.¹⁵

SCHOOL YEARS IN CHENGDU

In 1907, two years after the abolition of China's age old civil examination system, Wang went to Chengdu and enrolled at the No. 1 primary school.¹⁶

According to Li Jieren, a classmate and long time close friend of Guangqi, Wang went to Chengdu on the request of Zhao Erxun, who, out of gratitude toward his former teacher Wang Zaixian, had written an extremely sincere letter to Wang Guangqi's mother in the previous year insisting that Wang Guangqi be educated in Chengdu.¹⁷

Although Zhao was nominated to the viceroyalty of Sichuan in 1907, he did not take up the post immediately due to his subsequent appointment to the Hu Guang viceroyalty on 5

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 434-325.

¹⁶ Of Wang Guangqi's enrollment in Chengdu there are two different accounts: a. Dai Yaotian and Li Jieren indicate that Wang went to Chengdu at the age of thirteen, namely 1905; see "Wang Guangqi Wenjiang guxiang shenghuo zhilue" in YJLW, p. 325; Li Jieren, "Shiren zhisun" in LJRXJ, p. 41; b. Han Liwen and Bi Xing believe that Wang did not go to Chengdu until 1907 at the age of fifteen; see Han and Bi, "Wang Guangqi shengping shilue" in YYLW, p. 321. I agree with the latter because: a. Li's assertion is not consistent. He says that Wang went to Chengdu at the age of thirteen, namely 1905, but he goes on to state "next year, it was the thirty-fourth year of Guangxu's reign (1908)." b. Dai says: "when Wang Guangqi was at the age of thirteen, [1905] the year Zhao Erxun ... was appointed the governor-general of Sichuan province." But in fact Zhao was not appointed until June 1907. See also the editorial note in YJLW, p. 325.

¹⁷ Li Jieren, "Shiren zhisun" in LJRXJ, p. 41.

September in the same year. Zhao Erxun was re-appointed to Sichuan on March 6, 1908 and arrived three months later.

From 6 March 1907 to June 1908 Sichuan was under the rule of the interim viceroyalty of Zhao Erfeng, the younger brother of Zhao Erxun. While it is not known whether the Wangs ever benefited from Zhao Erfeng's administration in any way during this period, though it is likely, it is certain that Wang Guangqi's education in Chengdu was made financially possible by the generous help of the Mukden tartar-general Zhao Erxun. In order to ease the ever-increasing financial difficulties the Wangs were facing, upon his arrival in Sichuan Zhao Erxun ordered one thousand taels of silver, a fund from the fines imposed on forty-eight pawn shops in Chengdu, to be deposited in the two biggest pawn shops located respectively in the eastern and southern quarters of Chengdu city so that an annual income of interest, amounting to forty-odd taels of silver, could be drawn by Wang Guangqi and his mother. Besides, Zhao Erxun, a scholar of profound learning, also showed some genuine concern for Wang Guangqi's study. It is said that he used to require Wang to present him with an essay at least once a week. And after reading them carefully he would correct them and make some critical comments for Wang Guangqi to reflect on.¹⁸ No doubt this training was directly responsible for the elegant style that Wang Guangqi was to demonstrate in his numerous writings. Furthermore, Zhao even purchased an official title *tongzhi*, sub-prefect, for Wang.¹⁹

Thanks to Zhao's help both financially and intellectually, Wang Guangqi was able to enrol at the exclusive Sichuan Gaodeng Xuetang Fushu Zhongxue [the Secondary School Affiliated to the Sichuan Institute of Higher Learning] soon after he graduated from the elementary school in 1908.

Despite its short history, the Fushu Zhongxue, established in Autumn of the thirty-third year of Guangxu's reign (1907), had a considerable reputation for its academic excellence.

¹⁸ Ibid. PP. 41-42; Dai Yaotian, "Wang Guangqi Wenjiang guxiang shenghuo zhilue" in YJLW, pp. 325-326.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The first *Jiandu* or principal was Xu Zixiu (1862-1936), a scholar as well as an educator. Xu had studied in Japan and served in such capacities as chief instructor of Jianjiang Shuyuan [Jianjiang College], lecturer in Sichuan Fazheng Xuetang [Sichuan Institute for the Study of Law and Politics], Sichuan Gaodeng Xuetang [Sichuan Institute of Higher Learning], Zhongguo Gongxue [China College], and so forth. Aside from his educational commitments, Xu was also renowned for his prolific writings among which *Qunjing dagang* [An Outline of Various Canons] and *Jiyuan shiwen chao* [Poetic Writings of the Clear Garden] were most famous. Under Xu's aegis, two classes of students, class A and class B, were recruited. Wang Guangqi belonged to class C. Although Xu was sometimes criticized for being conservative in his educational approach, Wang was not influenced by him, at least not directly. Because when Wang Guangqi was accepted by the school in 1908, Xu had already been replaced by the reform-minded principal Liu Shizhi.

The school was located on the former site of the Zunjing shuyuan, [College for the Study of Canons], a place famous for its rich historical significance, in the southern part of Chengdu city.

Since the fees required by the school, an annual payment of five *yuan* for tuition, twenty *yuan* for accommodation, food and other expenses, were well beyond the means of ordinary working people, the school in fact was a boarding institute exclusively for the privileged. Twenty-five *yuan* a year may seem to be an insignificant amount of money according to today's standard but it was by no means the case in the year 1908. By paying that sum students were not only issued with two long gowns, two jackets decorated with shining brass buttons and collar insignia, two pairs of leather boots, one straw hat and a sun cap made of blue flannel, but also provided with stationery such as writing brush, exercise books, ink and other student gear. The accommodation was rather comfortable even according to today's living standard in China. All the dormitories were fully furnished and each of them was occupied by four to six students. Sheets, pillow cases and other bedding were provided, properly washed, and changed at intervals. Washing facilities were