Exploring the Art of Guqin

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Abstract: This paper is based on the history of Guqin art and employs a chronological approach to examine various aspects such as players, music, and tablature throughout different periods. By outlining the historical development of Guqin art, it prompts contemplation on the contemporary inheritance and development of Guqin art. This paper presents four proposed ideas for the inheritance and development of Guqin art, which include establishing a professional Guqin teaching system, emphasizing the study of Guqin tablature notation techniques, strengthening the popularization of Guqin art among the general public, and addressing the new challenges faced by Guqin art in the present. The author believes that aligning Guqin art with the modern era is an inevitable trend in its artistic development.

1. Introduction

The Guqin, one of China's most ancient plucked musical instruments, has always been revered as an elegant art form. Traditionally, it was often mentioned in the same breath as "qin, qi, shu, hua" (the qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting), considered essential components of a cultured person's education. Shaped like an elongated human figure, it has seven strings (hence its alternate name, the seven-stringed qin) and features 13 round dot-shaped markers on its soundboard. This paper, set against the backdrop of the historical periods in ancient Chinese music, focuses on the Guqin and its music, encompassing qin pieces, players, and tablature, to explore the historical development of Guqin and its music, thereby stimulating contemplation on the contemporary development of Guqin art.

2. The Guqin and Qin Music in Ancient Times

The origins of the Guqin are subject to various theories, but the prevailing view suggests that it existed even before the Zhou Dynasty. Ancient records on Guqin construction mention, "Shun made a five-stringed qin, played 'Nan Feng,' and brought order to the world," [1] which indicates that the earliest Guqins had five strings. "Later, both civil and military added one string, giving rise to the 'Wen' with six strings and 'Wu' with seven strings." [1] Thus, the Guqin evolved from a five-stringed instrument to a seven-stringed one.

In ancient China, qin music existed in two forms: qin songs and qin pieces. Qin songs involved singing accompanied by qin or se instruments, and they were mentioned in pre-Qin texts, such as the "Analects of Confucius," which references "the sound of stringed instruments and singing." [2] During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, solo Guqin performances became more common, and qin pieces took precedence. "High Mountains and Flowing Water" is a well-known composition from that era.

In ancient times, the composition of Guqin players was relatively uniform. During the prosperous Zhou Dynasty, music and rituals were thriving, leading to the emergence of many skilled qin musicians. Zhongyi, who lived during the Spring and Autumn period, is the earliest recorded professional qin player. Cao and Kuang were also outstanding court qin musicians of that time. However, as the Zhou Dynasty waned and the culture declined, musicians moved away from the court, and folk musicians started to appear, with Boya being a representative figure of that period.

3. Guqin and Qin Music in the Middle Ages

By the Wei and Jin periods, Guqin construction had already included qin markers (徽), and the shape of the Guqin was fundamentally the same as contemporary Guqin with seven strings and thirteen markers.

Qin music saw a flourishing of creative techniques during the Middle Ages. In the Eastern and Western Han periods, a wide range of themes emerged in qin compositions, each with its unique characteristics. "Cai's Five Melodies" employed picturesque scenes to express emotions, "Farewell to the Crane" reflected the thoughts of the common people, and "Zi An's Melody" exhibited a touch of romanticism. During the Wei and Jin periods, literati qin players poured their emotions into qin pieces, with Ji Kang excelling in "Guangling San," while Left Thinking's "Inviting Reclusion" and Ruan Ji's "Drunkenness" all expressed unfulfilled sentiments. The qin music of the Southern and Northern Dynasties had close ties to Qing Shang music, with the only known
written tablature passed down by Qiu Ming, titled "Jieshi Dao: You Lan."

The Sui and Tang periods witnessed the use of poetry as a genre for qin compositions. For example, Chen Kangshi created the qin piece "Li Sao" based on Qu Yuan's "Li Sao," and Wang Wei's "farewell to Yuan Er on a Mission to Anxi" was transformed into the qin song "Yangguan Sandie."

During the Middle Ages, the composition of qin players became more diverse. In the Eastern and Western Han periods, the music bureau expanded, and folk artists were selected to serve in the court as drum qin players. During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, literati musicians flourished, with figures like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji being esteemed qin players in the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. Notable literati qin players from the Southern and Northern Dynasties included Dai Yong, Zong Bing, and Liu Yun. In the Sui Dynasty, qin players excelled in composition, with Li Yi and He Ruobi among the folk qin players. In the Tang Dynasty, qin players focused on qin theory and tablature compilation, with Zhao Yeli and Dong Tinglan being notable representatives.

A wealth of literature related to the Guqin emerged during the Middle Ages. Cai Yong's "Qin Cao" in the Eastern Han is a rich source introducing early Guqin compositions. Ji Kang's creation of "Qin Fu" during the Wei and Jin periods stands out as a masterpiece that beautifully encapsulates his aesthetic appreciation of the Guqin.

The history of Guqin tablature can be traced back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The earliest surviving qin tablature was in textual form, which used written characters to document the string and position notations for Guqin performance. This tablature method continued into the early Tang Dynasty. During the prosperous Tang period, abbreviated tablature gradually replaced textual tablature, and it is widely believed that Cao Rou pioneered this development. The Sui and Tang periods' "Da Hu Jia and Xiao Hu Jia" still retain traces of the transition from textual to abbreviated tablature.

4. Guqin and Qin Music in the Modern Era

In the modern era, during the Song Dynasty, a style of qin music known as "diaozi" emerged, with "Zuiweng Yin" being one of its representatives. Additionally, Guo Chuwang's "Xiaoxiang Shuiyun" is another notable piece from the Song Dynasty. Qin music in the Ming Dynasty saw broader dissemination, with medium-sized qin pieces like "Pingsha Luoyan" and "Yuqiao Wenda" and small-sized qin pieces like "Liangxiao Yin."

In the Qing Dynasty, representative qin compositions include "Shuixian Cao" and "Oulu Wangji," among others. During the modern era, various schools of Guqin playing emerged. According to the "Guqin" literature, [3] the history of Guqin music schools in China can be traced back to the Southern Song Dynasty, with the following notable schools:

Zhe School: This was the earliest and dominant school during the Song and Ming Dynasties. Guo Chuwang, Liu Zhifang, and Xu Hezhong were prominent figures in this school. The Zhe School had a light and graceful tonal quality, known for its smooth and harmonious style. [4]

Yu Mountain School: Formed during the Jiajing and Wanli eras of the Ming Dynasty, with Xu Shangying as its representative. The establishment of the Qin Society in Qin Chuan, where Yan Cheng was a notable figure, was closely related to the formation of this school. The Yu Mountain School advocated a "clear, elegant, light, and distant" qin style.

Lingnan School: This school hails from Guangdong, with Chen Xianzhang and Li Baoguang as its representatives. It combined elements of both solid and empty sounds and had a peaceful and leisurely style. [4]

Zhucheng School: Emerged in late Ming and early Qing in Shandong's Zhucheng, with Wang Puchang and his son as its representatives. This school had a relatively conservative aesthetic, inheriting the artistic style of the Yu Mountain School.

Meian School: A branch of the Zhucheng School, with Wang Yanqing and Xu Lisan as its representatives. This school exhibited a strong local folk style from Shandong.

Guangling School: Appeared during the late Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, with Xu Changyu as its representative. It was formed by qin virtuosos in the city of Yangzhou in southern Jiangnan. The Guangling School had a more liberal rhythm, diverse tonal quality, and a free-spirited style.

Shu School: Formed in the late Qing Dynasty in Sichuan, with Zhang Kongshan as its representative. Zhang Kongshan made significant contributions to the reputation of the Shu School. This school had a brisk and exuberant tonal quality, with a grand and imposing style.

Pucheng School: Emerged in late Qing in Fujian's Pucheng, with Zhu Tongjun as its representative. The Pucheng School had a calm and leisurely style.

Jiuyi School: Appeared in the late Qing and early Republic of China period in Beijing, with Yang Zongji and Guan Pinghu as its representatives. This school pursued an ancient and unadorned tonal quality and artistic style.

In the modern era, there was a proliferation of Guqin literature. During the Song and Yuan periods, qin players, building upon their predecessors and practical experiences, composed numerous qin works. Notable works include Zhu Changwen's "Qin Shi," which documents the activities and critiques of qin players from pre-Qin to the Song Dynasty. In the Yuan Dynasty, works like "Qin Lu Fa Wei" and "Lun Qin" were created. During the Ming Dynasty, an emphasis on the aesthetics of performance led to Xu Shangying's "Xishan Qin Kuang," which supplemented and revised the "qin, hui, dan, yuan" qin style proposed by the Yan family. Zhu Quan's "Shenqi Mipu" is currently the earliest known printed collection of qin pieces. In the Qing Dynasty, Qin Wei Han, a disciple of the Guangling School, authored "Jiaoan Qin Pu," which is renowned for its detailed and comprehensive presentation of Guangling School qin pieces.
5. Contemporary Guqin and Qin Music

In the 19th century, two prominent Guqin schools, the Chuan School and the Zhucheng School, were particularly active. The Chuan School was known for its representative pieces such as "Flowing Water" and "Drunk Fisherman Singing at Dusk," which featured a distinctive style characterized by lively and turbulent sounds akin to surging waves and thunder.[5] The Zhucheng School, influenced by Shandong folk music, created compositions like "Changmen Yuan" and "Moon Over the Mountain Pass." In the 20th century, new Guqin compositions like "Meiyuan Yin" and "Spring Wind" explored novel approaches to composition.

As documented in "Guqin," [3] the 20th century saw the emergence of numerous regional Guqin societies and associations in China. These included the "Yueyun Qin Society" in Beijing, the "Yinyin Qin Society" in Changsha, the "Yuanxin Qin Society" in Taiyuan, the "Guangling Qin Society" in Yangzhou, the "Qingxi Qin Society" in Nanjing, and the "Meian Qin Society" in Nantong. Notably, Cha Fuxi and Zhang Zijian were instrumental in establishing the enduring Jinuyu Qin Society.


6. Reflections on the Development of Modern Guqin and Qin Music

The Guqin, often described as "elegant music of ancient times," has been transmitted among the literati, emphasizing the pursuit of tranquility in sound and serenity of the heart. However, its spiritual core does not always resonate with contemporary societal development, making its survival environment less than optimistic. The rescue of Guqin culture is pressing. In light of this, the author reflects on the current development of Guqin and Qin music through the following four points. Firstly, professional music academies should serve as the primary "battleground" for the inheritance of Guqin art, making it essential to establish a teaching system compatible with professional music institutions. Secondly, Qin music has its unique notational system, emphasizing the ability to read ancient scores and learn to play notated works, which should hold a significant place in Guqin education. [6] Thirdly, tapping into the values of Qin societies and Qin halls, strengthening their roles in popularizing folk Guqin culture is indispensable. Lastly, in the context of international cultural fusion, exploring the development of Guqin on the international stage is imperative.

(1) Constructing a Specialized Guqin Teaching System

Guqin education should be rooted in the soil of the nation's music. As Professor Zhang Huaying stated, "Building a standardized, comprehensive, scientific, and rigorous specialized Guqin teaching system based on the requirements of music itself is a critical step in the development of Guqin music." [6] Establishing a specialized Guqin teaching system can be approached from three key aspects. First, in the teaching at professional institutions, the "oral transmission" method of Guqin should be retained. Moreover, the teaching qualifications of the mentors are crucial to avoid deviations during the transition of apprenticeship, which may gradually lose its essence. Second, in the realm of music theory, a stronger emphasis on the study of Chinese traditional music and ethnic modes is required. Third, in line with the prominent position of literati Qin players in the development of Guqin art, attention should be given to enhancing the literary qualities of Qin players, including the inclusion of relevant courses in history and literature, nurturing well-rounded, orthodox Qin players.

(2) Emphasizing the Research of Guqin Notation Techniques

Due to the limitations of Guqin notation, the technique of notational rhythm becomes an essential means of preserving ancient melodies. The "Chinese Musical Dictionary" defined "notation" as "the process of playing a piece according to the score." [7] Since the notation only provides fingering positions and techniques without directly indicating pitches and rhythms, there is considerable room for interpretation. Thus, notators must be familiar with the general rules and performance techniques of Guqin music, intuit the emotional context, and recreate the original appearance of the piece.

Comparing the interpretation of Guqin scores, it can be observed that both Western and Chinese notation methods have their unique advantages. Western notation, with composers at its core, utilizes the staff notation to consistently represent pitch and rhythm. Compositions exhibit the distinct creative styles of composers, such as the Baroque artistic style found in Bach's music or the Classical style present in Mozart's works. In contrast, Guqin notation, devoid of strict pitch and rhythm markings, places greater emphasis on the performer's creative interpretation. Different performers' notation of the same score can exhibit unique personal styles, providing a higher degree of interpretive freedom in the hands of the performer.

Most existing Guqin scores have become "extinct," and their music can only be revived through notations created by performers. Inconsistent notation techniques can greatly impact the performance and inheritance of Guqin music. It is suggested that the development of Guqin art should include rigorous requirements for notation techniques as part of the essential qualifications for Guqin artists. Furthermore, specialized talents should be encouraged to conduct further research on notation techniques.

(3) Strengthening the Popularization of Guqin Art in Folk Culture

The size of the audience is a critical factor in the development of Guqin art. At the level of student groups, schools can follow the example set by Professor Zhang...
Huaying at the Central Conservatory of Music and, based on their specific circumstances, offer elective Guqin-related courses to students across all departments. In addition, comprehensive universities can moderately introduce elective courses in Qin music appreciation, expanding the reach of Guqin to a wider audience.

In the history of Guqin art, numerous Qin societies have emerged. Qin societies serve as carriers of Chinese literati music and have a certain influence. Until today, there are still some well-known music societies in China and Japan. [8] Thus, at the level of social groups, Qin societies should innovate their membership criteria, focusing on interests and initiating cultural activities such as gatherings, reintroducing Guqin to the public eye. [9] Additionally, with the successful inclusion of Guqin on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list, a group teaching approach, known as "Qin Halls," [10] has emerged. Qin Halls serve as a combination of folk organizations and training institutions, catering to the interests of the public in traditional Qin music. They provide opportunities for people to learn and understand Guqin performance. Simultaneously, Qin Halls should prioritize the composition of teaching staff and promote orthodox Qin studies culture. Qin societies and Qin Halls should evolve and develop together, mutually benefiting and boosting the popularity and influence of Guqin.

(4) Addressing the New Challenges Faced by Guqin Art in the Present

We are currently in an era of cultural convergence between the East and the West, witnessing continuous changes in societal and cultural forms. From a macro perspective, Chinese national instrumental music has gained a certain level of influence in the international arena. Overseas music schools are gradually introducing degrees in traditional Chinese music, and there are numerous programs in Chinese instrumental music in various international institutions. Furthermore, multiple overseas institutions have well-established Chinese music ensembles, presenting a fresh perspective on traditional Chinese music.

From a micro perspective, Guqin art, as a "representative work of oral and intangible cultural heritage," stands at the crossroads of global artistic civilization. The enthusiasm for the Guqin is spreading both domestically and abroad, with notable representatives like Sweden's Linda Qiu. Through her understanding and appreciation of the art of Guqin, Linda Qiu has elucidated the differences between Eastern and Western cultural arts.[11] In the face of Western cultural influence, efforts should be made to preserve the traditional characteristics of Guqin art in its international transmission. Initiatives like the "Qin Associations" [12] that link various regions should be promoted to maintain cultural connections between China and the rest of the world, facilitating the exchange and dissemination of orthodox Qin music aesthetics and Qin studies information. Additionally, leveraging modern digital media technology, a digital resource sharing platform for Guqin music should be established. Projects like the "Chinese Guqin Music Culture Database" [13] and the "Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Music Notation" [14] should be promoted to contribute to the protection of Guqin cultural heritage and provide rich Guqin resources for both domestic and international Qin players, fostering the widespread dissemination of ancient melodies and Guqin music aesthetics to reinvigorate its international presence.

7. Conclusion

As a living relic of Chinese traditional art, the Guqin possesses a wealth of theoretical literature and a vast repertoire of outstanding pieces. In the context of the dual influences of Western culture and modernization, the development of Guqin art faces significant challenges. This presents a new proposition handed down by history to contemporary Chinese people.

References
