

The Historical Evolution of Chinese Guqin Songs

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Abstract

Guqin is the oldest plucked instrument in China and has a long history. Guqin music and Guqin Songs are two distinct art forms that have emerged during the history of the evolution of Guqin. The Guqin Songs not only reflect the development and changes of the Guqin over thousands of years from one side, but are also a remnant of traditional Chinese vocal art. This essay's goal is to offer historical context for the creation and growth of Chinese Guqin Songs, as well as to highlight the Guqin Songs' distinctive place in the development of traditional Chinese music and their worth as a stand-alone art form.

Keywords: Chinese Guqin, Guqin Songs, historical evolution

1. Introduction

The Guqin is a traditional Chinese plucked instrument with a 4,000-year history. According to Historical Records, the Guqin has existed since the time of Yao and Shun. Guqin music and Guqin Songs are two distinct art forms that have emerged during the history of the evolution of Guqin. While Guqin music is more about playing, Guqin Songs are more about singing while playing. A Guqin Song is created by combining the melody and lyrics. Music performance is all about presenting the melodic rhythms concealed in the language of the lyrics through virtuosity—showing the emotional expression of the lyrics through vocal technique.

The Guqin songs accompany the development of the Guqin, and have a long history of being widely transmitted. The inscriptions of the musical score of *Feng Qiu Huang*, which was compiled by Biaozheng Yang in the Ming dynasty and included in the *Chongxiuzhenzhuang Qinpu*, contain a clear record of the Guqin Songs. "This Guqin song was composed by Xiangru Sima. At that time, Wenjun Zhuo, who was good at listening to music, had just been widowed. When Xiangru Sima learned of this, he composed a melody and wrote the Guqin Song, *Feng Qiu Huang*, to pursue her." (Biaozheng Yang, 2006)

The Guqin song has experienced ups and downs for a thousand years throughout history. In this essay, we will examine the genealogy of the Guqin Song's development and provide a historical summary of how it has changed throughout Chinese history, explaining its worth as a stand-alone creative form.

2. The Origins and Symbiotic Stage

The Guqin Song has a long history. As early as the pre-Qin period, there are records of people playing the Guqin and singing. The oldest Chinese Guqin Song is called *Nan Feng Ge*, which is said to have been composed by Shun and is recorded in the *Historical Records and the Book of Rites*. This song expresses the "south wind" that nurtures all things and blesses all people (Suli Luo, 2020). Ancient texts such as the *Shangshu* and the *Analects* of Confucius record scenes of singing while playing the Guqin. The development of the art of the Guqin Song draws on elements of folk music from all periods.

To explore the origins of Guqin Song, we have to start with the origins of traditional Chinese music. In the pre-Qin period, traditional Chinese "music" was an integrated art form combining song, music, and dance. It was often used in major ceremonies and rituals, for rituals and blessings. This form of expression is considered to be

the origin of traditional Chinese art and is known as “Yuewu”. In performance, the Guqin and Se usually accompany the singing, and this form of performance with multiple instrumental accompaniments is known as “Xianghe”.

Regarding “Xianghe”, the Ming dynasty book *History of the Qin* contains several descriptions. “In ancient times, as for ‘Xianghe’, there were those who played the Guqin to match the songs and those who composed songs to match the Guqin. When a song was sung, it was accompanied by Guqin music, and vice versa when the Guqin was played. The essence is found in the middle and the sound is found in the fingers, both inside and outside. (Changwen Zhu, 2010) “During the pre-Qin period, the art form of playing music with singing was prevalent. There were many poems, such as the “Book of Songs”, that could be played and sung. In that period, the Guqin, one of the many accompanying instruments in “Xianghe”, grows in symbiosis with them. The Guqin Song has not yet been separated from the string song as a separate art form. Therefore, the pre-Qin period was the origin and symbiotic stage of the Guqin Song.

3. The Stereotypes and Independence Stage

The Guqin Songs gradually transitioned from the Han through the Wei, Jin, and North-South dynasties before settling into an independent era. During this period, the class China ancient scholar-officials was gradually formed. As a part of their lives, Guqin became a means for the literati to express their feelings and cultivate their sentiments. At this time, the Guqin Song was gradually separated from the many instruments of the “Xianghe” and became a relatively independent art form. More top-notch songs have evolved as a result of the widespread participation of the literary community in the creation and promotion of Guqin Songs. Unfortunately, with the change in history and dynasties, most of the Guqin Songs have not survived. Some of them have survived only through limited documentation of their lyrics or titles.

During this period, Guqin Songs were composed mainly of Xianghe Songs, Xianghe Daqu, Qingshang music, and other folk music. Xianghe songs are an art form that circulated in northern folklore during the Han Dynasty. During the Han Dynasty, the Xianghe Song was a kind of art that was popular in northern folklore. It became the Xianghe Daqu in the Han and Wei dynasties. They were adapted and developed from various primitive folk songs and have had a profound influence on the development of traditional Chinese music. This description of the Xianghe Song is found in a musical report in the Book of Jin: “It was the customary song of the Han Dynasty. The plucked and wind instruments are in harmony and the singer sings while playing the rhythm.” (Xuanling Fang, 2015) In this period, Guqin songs were closely related to Xianhe Songs. The lyrics and melodies of the Xianghe Songs were used by the guqin players to create their songs either directly or indirectly. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Guqin Songs recorded in Yong Cai’s *Qin Cao*, such as *Sigh of the Concubine of Chu* and *Liang Fu Yin*, were based on the Xianghe Songs which were prevalent at that time. Many ancient Chinese folk music is preserved in the form of Guqin songs, which have been passed down in the form of Guqin music. Guqin Songs have significant historical relevance and value in the development of traditional Chinese music.

Southern and northern music were combined to create Qingshang Music throughout the Wei, Jin, and Northern Dynasties. Political rights had to move to the south during this time because of the conflict in the north, and the northern musical culture also spread south during this time, merging with the folk music of the south to form Qingshang Music. As a result, both the northern and southern musical traits are still present in Qingshang Music (Rong Guo, 2008). The composition of Guqin songs in this period also took on a diverse character. *Ao Nong Ge* is a Qingshang song that was well-known in Jiangsu throughout the Northern and Southern Dynasties. It was documented in the Ancient and Modern Music Records. During the same time, the same Guqin Song was also popular.

The Guqin Songs have gradually progressed from their beginnings to a clear and independent stage from the Han period to the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties. During this period, it accompanied the development and stabilization of the class China’s ancient scholar-officials, breaking away from the confines of the court. The most significant writers, singers, and performers of Guqin songs were literati and professors. Guqin Songs gained a lot of popularity among all social classes as a result of their aggressive promotion. In terms of tone, style, and aesthetic form, the Guqin Songs of this period time have a close relationship with folk music.

4. The Development Stage

The creation of the Guqin song began during the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. The “scholar” class gained power during the Sui dynasty, and the literati infused the Guqin’s music with their aesthetic, creative, and even personal interests. They included poetry and literature in the Guqin music, giving it a rich cultural legacy and a lot of room to grow. During this period, the art of Guqin Song flourished. It also eventually underwent theoretical research, including discussions on composition and performance.

With the rise of notable musicians like Yeli Zhao and Tinglan Dong, the music of the Guqin advanced quickly throughout the Tang Dynasty. The Li Sao, Yang Chun, and Bai Xue were some of the most popular Guqin music

at the time. The expressive capacity of Guqin music has increased overall as a result of the development of performance styles. The Guqin Songs also became a symbol of elegant music in the minds of the literati, distinguishing itself from other folk music and assuming an independent artistic status. During this period, Guqin Songs were mostly inspired by poetry and literature. The lyrics of the ancient Guqin Song *Yangguan Sandie* are based on the poem *Sending Yuaner to Anxi* by the poet Wei Wang, and the *Fisherman's Song* is based on the poem *the Fisherman* by the poet Zongyuan Liu. Famous poets' poems, like those by Bai Li and Ji Zhang, have also been transformed into Guqin Songs for public consumption.

Different Guqin art genres developed during the Song dynasty, influenced by the locale and passed down from masters to apprentices. Guqin art has experienced a boom. During this time, the Guqin was increasingly integrated into the literati's daily lives. Guqin Songs were helped along in some respects by the literary genre of song lyrics, which is currently flourishing. In this period, the literati composed Guqin Songs in two ways. The first method was to "fill in the words according to the music," which included singing songs to replace the phrases in old Guqin music. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the literary scholar Shi Su wrote the lyrics to the Guqin music *Zuiweng Yin* composed by the Guqin artist Zun Shen, which he called *Zuiweng Cao*. The music for the Guqin was inspired by Ouyang Xiu's famous prose named "the Records of the *Zuiweng Pavilion*". More than thirty years later, Zun Shen and Xiu Ouyang both passed away. As a friend of Zun Shen's, Xian Cui loved to play *Zuiweng Yin* but regretted that there was only a song but no lyrics, so he wrote down the music and visited Shi Su with his Guqin, hoping that he would fill in the lyrics for the music. When Xian Cui played the Guqin, Shi Su composed a song called *Zuiweng Cao*. This Guqin Song has become a classic that has been widely disseminated over the years and has high artistic worth both musically and literally. The second way was "writing melodies based on lyrics", which are based on the rhythm of poems and texts. *Songs of the Baishi Daoren* by Jiang Kui is a compilation of Guqin Songs composed in this manner during the Southern Song Dynasty.

In conclusion, the Guqin Songs underwent an evolution during the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. One way is that diverse Guqin genres emerged as a result of regional influence and the passing of knowledge from masters to apprentices. These Guqin performers then developed their performance styles and ideas, which created an ideal setting for the growth of Guqin Songs. The Guqin Songs, on the other hand, were a combination of music and literature that accompanied the growth of poetry and other literary forms. It has opened up a much wider space.

5. The Decline Stage

From the mid-Ming to the early Qing dynasties, the Guqin was in decline, and so were the Guqin Songs. This age provided perfect conditions for the spread of Guqin Songs due to the popularity and development of printing technology. During this time, the Guqin Songs that had been passed down from the Song dynasty and earlier were gathered and printed, and there are still more than 40 collections of printed scores from the Ming era. The various Guqin genres have, however, developed quite different understandings of and attitudes toward Guqin Songs as a result of the systematization of collections. These have significantly influenced the growth of Guqin Songs.

The main source of Guqin Songs composers at this time was the Jiang genre of Guqin artists, which featured artists like Lin Xie and Shida Huang. The Jiang genre advocates playing and singing Guqin Songs and composing music for poetry and literature. On the one hand, they discovered and collected Guqin Songs that had been handed down to the people before the Ming Dynasty, and carved and printed a variety of scores for publication. There are seventeen Guqin scores from the Ming dynasty that have been handed down to us, including the *Tai Gu Legacy* and the *Zheyinshizi Qinpu*, which have been handed down since the Song dynasty. On the other hand, they were committed to the concept of "one word, one tone" and produced a large number of new Guqin Songs. However, these works were strongly rejected by other Guqin genres players of the same period, and brought Guqin Songs to the forefront of the debate. Cheng Yan, a representative of the Yushan genre, began to reject Guqin Songs because he believed that the composition of one word and one tone was contrary to the traditional way of one word and several tones, and that it affected the expression of the meaning of ancient poems.

This period saw an increase in the number and dissemination of Guqin Songs, but the controversy between the various genre of Guqin Songs became the beginning of their decline. During this period, some Guqin players experimented with prose and parallelism as lyrics for Guqin Songs, but because of their large length and fragmentary structure, it was difficult to gain universal acceptance when set to Guqin music. In addition, some of the newly composed Guqin Songs are not based on the connotation of the lyrics and lack artistry, making the quality of Guqin Songs uneven. The majority of the literati and Guqin intellectuals during this time gave literary priority while ignoring the melody. In the late Song and Ming dynasties, the Zhejiang and the Yushan genre of Guqin artists were eager to exploit the performance of the Guqin as a solo instrument and rejected Guqin Songs,

resulting in the loss of a large number of ancient Guqin Song scores. From the mid to late Ming Dynasty onwards, the development of the Guqin song declined and the number of performers decreased until the founding of New China. Only approximately 200 persons nationwide could play the guqin, according to a census conducted by the Jinyu Guqin Society before the start of the Anti-Japanese War. In 1954 the Chinese Institute of Ethnomusicology counted only about 90 people left. The Guqin Songs also entered a phase of decline.

6. The Silent and Revival Stage

After the founding of New China, the development of the Guqin and Qin Songs gained renewed vigor under the impetus of the great zither scholar Fuxi Zha. From April to July 1956, Fuxi Cha, Di Wang, and others traveled to 23 places in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Sichuan to find 98 Guqin players and collect 327 Guqin music, but unfortunately, only seven songs were collected. This search for statistics made Di Wang realize that the discovery of Guqin Songs is crucial. It would be a shame for the history of world music if Guqin songs were to decline until they were lost, so she was determined to discover and compose the songs. After that, Di Wang began to explore and compose Guqin Songs under the guidance of Pinghu Guan. By 1978, she had discovered more than a hundred Guqin Songs, including The Oriole's Chanting, *Hu Jia Shi Ba Pai*, and *Chang Xiang Si*. She has published a collection of qin song scores, such as "Qin Songs" and "Xian Ge Ya Yun". Her student, Qing Yang, inherited the legacy of Guqin songs. With a focus on popularization, he has made traditional Chinese Guqin Songs pieces widely available. Qing Yang has unearthed and collated the Guqin Songs scores of The Book of Songs from the Si Ku Quan Shu. He has brought sixteen Guqin Songs, including Guan Ju, back to life. As the honorary director of the Beijing Benxintang Art Theatre, Qing Yang has also spread Guqin Songs to Japan and Korea, gaining international recognition for this art form.

Nowadays, the development of Guqin Songs is heading towards a new period of revival. Even greater expectations are placed on the inheritors for the protection and advancement of the Guqin Songs art. Because of the uniqueness of the Guqin Songs' art, those who inherit it must possess several different traits at once. First and foremost, to access the large collection of ancient books, the bearer must have a solid understanding of Chinese literature. Secondly, there is a need for experience in setting scores from masters and apprentices transmission to explore traditional Guqin Songs. Thirdly, to better understand the rhythm of singing Guqin Songs, the bearer needs to have a high level of vocal ability as well as a solid command of ancient Chinese chanting techniques. Fourthly, one needs to be able to play the Guqin to a certain level and be freely able to sing while playing.

Chinese Guqin Songs have developed over thousands of years, from their beginnings to their progression to their resurrection, leaving behind a wealth of precious artistic treasures for humanity. It is not only a jewel of the world's music culture but also a treasure of traditional Chinese music.

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