

The Artistic Characteristics of Chinese Guqin Songs

Zhihan Liu¹

¹ People's Music Publishing House, Beijing, 100010, China

Correspondence: Zhihan Liu, People's Music Publishing House, Beijing, 100010, China.

doi: 10.56397/AS.2022.10.06

Abstract

The Guqin is the oldest plucked instrument in China. As the first of the “Four Arts” of the ancient Chinese literati, the Guqin carries a great cultural significance. As the art of the Guqin has developed, two forms of art have emerged: the Guqin Music and the Guqin Songs. It is a distinct art form that arose approximately simultaneously with the Guqin and is an aesthetic representation of poetry and music. In order to uncover the Guqin Songs' special appeal, this article will analyse their creative qualities in terms of tonality, melody, tempo, rhythm, song structure, and lyrical substance; explain the importance of historical context in the discovery, preservation, and promotion of Guqin Songs.

Keywords: Chinese Guqin, Guqin Songs, artistic features

1. Tonality

The characteristics of Guqin Songs in terms of tonality are seen in terms of both setting and modulation. There are many different techniques to set the mood, and they can be roughly split into two categories: basic and non-basic. The basic tune is known as Qingjiao, which is equivalent to the western tune of F major. It is the most common tune of the Guqin. The pitch is determined by the tune of Qingjiao, from the first to the seventh string, divided into Zhi, Yu, Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi and Yu. Its fixed names are C, D, F, G, A, c, d, and its first tune is called Sol, La, Do, Re, Mi, Sol, La. The pieces of Guqin Songs in the Qingjiao Tune include *Huangying yin*, *Lyshuang Cao*, etc.

There is a rich variety of non-basic tune for the Guqin, such as: Manjiao, Ruibin, Qiliang and Wuyi, but they are applied less frequently. Manjiao Tune, i.e., Western C major. Its fixed names are C, D, F, G, A, c, d, and its first tune is called Do, Re, Fa, Sol, La, Do, Re. The pitch of the strings is adjusted by loosening the third string from the basic tune. The pieces of Guqin Songs in the Manjiao Tune include *Changxiang Si*, *Wenjun Cao*, etc. Ruibin Tune, i.e., Western B-flat major. Its fixed names are C, D, F, G, B-flat, c, d, and its first tune is called Re, Mi, Sol, La, Do, Re, Mi. By tightening the fifth string on the basic tune, the strings' pitch can be changed. The pieces of Guqin Songs in the Manjiao Tune include *Manjiang Hong*, *Yuge Diao*, etc. Qiliang Tune, i.e., one of the non-basic tunes in Western B-flat major. Its fixed names are C, D, F, G, B-flat, c, d, and its first tune is called Re, Fa, Sol, La, Do, Re, Mi. The basic tune's second and fifth strings are tightened to change the pitch of the strings, which results in the second string being tuned a semitone higher in the key of B flat. The pieces of Guqin Songs in the Qiliang Tune include *Yi Qine*, *Feiniao Yin*, etc. Wuyi Tune, i.e., one of the non-basic tunes in Western B-flat major. Its fixed names are B-flat, D, F, G, B-flat, c, d, and its first tune is called Do, Mi, Sol, La, Do, Re, Mi. By tightening the fifth string and loosening the first string on the fundamental tune, the pitch of the strings is changed, resulting in the first string being tuned one whole tone lower in the key of B flat. The pieces of Guqin Songs in the Qiliang Tune include *Hujia Shibapai*, *Jianzi Mulanhua*, etc. There are also a few Guqin Songs in other non-basic tunes, which are less numerous and more scattered. They will not be described here.

In terms of mode, the Guqin Songs follow the ancient Chinese musical tradition of the five-tone mode. It is composed of a perfect fifth interval relationship between the Gong (Do), Shang (Re), Jue (Mi), Zhi (Sol), and

Yu(La) tones. There is a wide variety of modes for Guqin Songs, with the Yu mode being the most widely used, represented by Songs such as *Huangying Yin*, *Yi Wangsun*, *Qiufeng Ci*, etc. According to the ancient Chinese systematics of the Five Elements, the Yu mode belongs to water, its music is soft and gentle. The sound of the Guqin is most compatible with the Yu mode, which is played with the cool sound of a stream. The music of Yu mode not only bring down the Qi of the whole body, but also nourish the heart, calm the mind and replenish the kidneys, so that the whole body can be relaxed. The second is the Gong mode, which is represented by songs such as *Zuiweng Yin*, *Lang Taosha*, etc. It belongs to earth in Five Elements, which music is smooth, flowing and elegant, as vast as the earth, inclusive and harmonious. The music of Gong mode is not only unblocks the smoothness of Qi throughout the body, but also serves to nourish the stomach. The third is the Zhi mode, which is represented by songs such as *Daoyi Qu*, *Qingjiang Yin*, etc. It is a part of the fire element in the Five Elements, which can increase chi (Qi) throughout the body, support the spleen and stomach, nourish the heart, and increase vigor. In addition, there are also a small number of Guqin Songs that belong to the Shang or Jue modes.

2. Melody

The melodic characteristics of the Guqin Songs are mainly expressed in three aspects. Firstly, the melodies are rich in folk music characteristics. The Guqin Songs' lyrics primarily come from traditional songs and old Chinese poetry. *The Book of Songs* collected about fifteen local folk songs during the pre-Qin era. Qian Sima recorded his thoughts in *The Historical Records* during the Western Han Dynasty.

"The three hundred and five poems were all sung by Confucius while playing strings in order to harmonise with the sounds of Shao, Wu, Ya and Song." (Qian Sima, 2021) It is clear from this that the use of string music to accompany the singing of poetry was already widespread in those days. The Guqin Songs, on the other hand, was in its infancy as an independent art form. *The Older Book of Tang Dynasty* mentions, "Only the people who played the Guqin still transmitted the old songs of Chu and Han, involving the Qin or Se tune, Cai's five folds, and the four sounds of the Chu tune, called the nine folds, which were not used in Suburban Temples of the imperial court, and therefore not contained." (Xu Liu & etc, 2014) It is thus clear that some of the traditional folk songs of ancient China have been passed on through Guqin Songs.

The Guqin Song *Zhuzhi Ci* was inspired by the folk song *Zhuzhi*, which was prevalent in the Bayu region during the Tang Dynasty. In the Song Dynasty, Mengde Liu's collection of writings, volume 9, the chapter of *Zhuzhici Yin* states: "Songs from all over the world, different tones but all music. In the first month of the year, when I came to Jianping, the children sang the *Zhuzhi*, played the piccolo and beat the drum." (Yuxi Liu, 2013) The singers wave their sleeves and dance happily. The tone of the song is moderate with a sense of calmness, ends with a fierce and vigorous sound like that of the Wu region. A group of kids playing piccolos, banging drums, dancing, and singing the *Zhuzhi* in the Wuxian region of Sichuan during the first month of the year was captured beautifully by Yuxi Liu. He heard the song *Zhuzhi*, which sounded like the popular Wu sound of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. He was also an expert in music who can hear that the tune was in the Yu tune of *Huangzhong*. The *Huangzhong* is one of the twelve rhythms of ancient Chinese music, which is described in the *Ling Shu* as having a loud and resonant sound. It is certain that the creation of the Guqin Song *Zhuzhi Ci* drew on the characteristics of the popular folk songs of the time.

Ziye Wuge is a song originally popular in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions during the Wei and Jin dynasties. In the Song Dynasty, Maoqian Guo's *Collection of Yuefu poems* contains more than 120 *Ziye Ge*, which were later passed down through the Tang Dynasty and influenced the poetry of many literati. It is also recorded in the *Book of Music of the Older Tang Dynasty*: "*Ziye* is also a Jin song. A woman in Jin used to make this song at night, and the sound was too sorrowful." The song has a lovely melody, and Yuxi Liu used the Wu sound, which was then quite popular in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, as the basis for his Guqin Song, *Ziye Wuge*. The Guqin Song *Ziye Wuge*, included in the *Donggao Qinqu* of the Ming dynasty, has a distinct melodic character (Xianling Yi & Cen Zhang, 2020). The song is in the Yu tune which was created under the influence of the Wu sound, using the small vocal rhyme "Do Re Mi" and the narrow Zhi rhyme "Sol La Do" from the Jiangnan folk song *Wuxi Jing*.

Secondly, the melody serves the rhetorical expression of the song, showing a tendency towards intonation. Poetry serves the same purpose as music, according to Yingda Kong of the Tang dynasty, who stated in the *Maoshi Zhengyi* that "Poetry is the heart of music, music is the sound of poetry." (Yuan Ruan, 2019) To compose music, a melody must be composed according to the poem. In the case of existing music, the poem needs to be based on the melody. At this time, poetry and music were typically combined to create Guqin Songs. It is written in the *Shangshu*: "Poetry speaks to the ambition, song to the words, sound to the chant, and rhythm to the sound." The melody of the song is built on the verbal phonetics of the poem, the lyre accompanies the song and the chant is in harmony with the lyre.

Poetry and music work well together from the perspective of the Guqin Song's production. The Guqin Song's melody, for example, is constructed on the expression of the lyrics and is characterised by a tendency toward intonation. This is similar to how music for poetry is based on the poem. The melody of Guqin Songs is formed

by the blending of Guqin music and poetry, so that it should be dependent on the language of poetry. Chinese consists of tones, complex vowels, and beginning consonants. It is because of the ebb and flow of the Chinese vocal tones that a richer melody is created.

From the point of view of the singing style, Guqin songs are often sung in “chanting” and “singing”. “Chanting” is a unique rhythmical expression formed by extending the sound of poetry readings, which is more musical than reading and makes the emotions fuller and more moving. The act of “singing” involves using vocal techniques to convey the melody and rhythm of the music as well as to more fully convey the sentiments expressed in the words.

Thirdly, the melody echoes the music of the Guqin, showing the unique characteristics, and the singing is in harmony with the acoustics of some fingerings in the performance. In Guqin playing, the left hand often has the fingerings “Yin” and “Nao”. In the Qing dynasty, Guangshuang Li compiled a book called *The Fingerings under the Swinging Strings of the Lantian Guan*, in which he discusses the origins of the fingerings “Yin” and “Nao”: “The vibrato forms a rhythm, imitating a human singing voice, which in turn gives rise to the fingerings of the Yin. The size and duration of the sound vary depending on how the fingers go across the board, slowly moving outwards and quickly moving inwards. The twists and turns, in different positions, give rise to left and right vibrato with one point as the core.” This shows that the “Yin” in the left-hand rhyming technique of the Guqin comes from the imitation of singing. During singing, especially when singing longer tones, there is usually a vibrato at the end of them. The left-hand rhyming techniques of the Guqin, such as “Yin”, “Jinfu” and “Tuifu”, all produce vibrato that resemble the human voice. In terms of melody, these rhyming techniques are translated from the subtractive spectrum to the staff, resulting in a unique grace note which could build the unique flavour of Guqin Songs.

3. Tempo and Rhythm

The beat and rhythm of the Guqin Songs have not been preserved with the score in the historical development of the instrument. As for the beat, it has been said in China since ancient times that there is no beat in Guqin music. In the Yuan dynasty, Ye Li’s *Commentary on the Ancient and Modern Times of Jingzhai* says: “All music has a beat, except for the Guqin.” The Guqin music has no beat, but it is in rhythm. In the Qing dynasty, Fengcao Zhu’s *The Qin Score of the Yugu Zhai* states that the music of the Guqin “originally had a natural beat”. A Guqin player believes that the rhythm mirrors nature; speed and strength should follow the four seasons’ cycles of Yin and Yang; if the rhythm is fixed, it goes against the rhythm of the natural world.

The fact that there are no rules regarding the rhythm of Guqin music is related to the notation of it. The subtractive spectrum is a “phonemic spectrum”, which does not contain information about tempo or rhythm. Historically, the transmission of Guqin Songs relied heavily on face-to-face teaching between master and learner, while the rhythms and tempos were mainly transmitted by teaching orally. As a result of the liberty that was given to subsequent generations of players during the transmission process and the inevitable individualized interpretations, the music was not immutable. All players have their own styles, personalities and beauty views, so the scores they play are different. All qin players had their own styles, personalities, and beauty views, so the discovery, arrangement, and translation of ancient Guqin scores were different. Different performers can interpret their own interpretations of Guqin Songs, which is also an important feature of the Guqin Songs. In the contemporary study of Guqin Songs, Di Wang of the Jiuyi school of Guqin has made an outstanding contribution. In the contemporary study of Guqin Songs, Di Wang of the Jiuyi school of Guqin has made a remarkable contribution, studying under Mr. Pinghu Guan. The art of Guqin has been in decline since the mid to late Ming Dynasty. By 1954, according to a survey conducted by the Institute of Music Research on the heritage of the Guqin art, there were less than a hundred players in China who could play the instrument, and even fewer Guqin Songs were passed down. Di Wang was deeply aware of the importance of passing on the art of Guqin Songs. After the founding of New China, she became the first Guqin master to focus on the transmission of Guqin Songs, and she has many research achievements in the translation of ancient scores of those songs. She has compiled and translated more than 100 Guqin Songs from ancient records, laying a solid foundation for their contemporary dissemination.

In the work of discovering and translating Guqin Songs, Di Wang divided the beats into two categories: single beats and compound beats. The most commonly used are in 2/4 beats, such as *Wenjun Cao* and *Yugezi*, and in 4/4 beats, such as *Five-petal Plum* and *Wu Song of the Night*. The pieces combining 2/4 and 3/4 beats include *Yangguan Sandie* and *Huangying Yin*, which are typical composite tempo songs. Except that, there are also some composite tempo songs, such as *Banqiao Daoqing* in 2/4 and 4/4 beats, *Lvshuang Cao* in 4/4 and 4/5 beats, *Langtaosha* in 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4 beats, etc.

The rhythm of the Guqin Songs is necessarily influenced by the rhythm of the lyrics since the music of these songs is rhythmically inspired by the language of the lyrics and, to a certain extent, must repeat the rhythm represented in the language of the poem. Since ancient times, classical Chinese literary texts have used “sentence

reading” to delineate the rhythm of sentences, which is a specific way of presenting pauses and breaks. Sentence, which is closely related to “rhyme,” is the most fundamental rhythmic unit of each poem from the perspective of the genre of ancient Chinese poetry. The rhythm of the song has the characteristics of a scattered clapper rhythm, most of them are moderate and even. Additionally, the rhythmic structures of Guqin Songs can be broadly categorized as either single or diverse. The *Yanyi Song*, a Guqin Song based on the tale of Du’s acknowledgment of his husband Xi Baili during the Spring and Autumn Period, was included in the *Xilutang Qintong* of the Ming Dynasty. This Guqin Song was passed down during that time, however the Ming Dynasty rendition that was played and sung was not the original. The overall rhythm of the song is relatively even and unified, and only a few points are used dotted notes. The rhythmic patterns of the Guqin Song *Jianzi Mulanhua*, on the other hand, are diverse as a whole, varying from bar to bar and containing both average and combined rhythmic patterns. The length and rhythm of the songs echo the rhythm of the lyrics, showing a rich variation, making the artistic characteristics of the work even more enriching.

It seems that the rhythm of ancient Chinese Guqin Songs is clearly different from other traditional vocal music in China. The rhythm of a Guqin Songs is mainly determined by the periods, commas and style of the lyrics. The Guqin musicians admire nature and do not like to be confined, so they usually create songs with free rhythm, variable beat and slow speed, so that they can express their emotions, express their aspirations and enjoy their temperament freely when singing.

4. Song Structure

There are various types of Guqin Songs in terms of structure, including the following:

First, the structure of a section. There are two types of phrase changes. A kind of Guqin Songs with repeated changes of phrases, such as *Yuge Diao* and *Huangying Yin*. The other type of music is *Yangguan Sandie* and *Zhuzhi Ci*, which have no repeated changes in phrases.

Second, the single two-part structure. There are two types of section changes. A kind of Guqin Songs with repeated changes in the sections, such as *The Arrival of the Guest* and *Jianzi Mulanhua*. The other type of music is *Qiufeng Ci* and *Zuiweng Yin*, which have no repeated changes. There is also a structure in which some of the Guqin Songs have an ending reappearance.

Third, the single three-part structure. There are three types of section changes. A type of Guqin Songs in which each section changes repeatedly, such as *Four Great Scenes*. Another type of songs with repeated changes in some sections, such as *Langtaosha* and *Fengqiu Huang*. There is also a kind of songs with no repeated changes in the sections, such as *Daoyi Qu* and *Long Separation*.

Fourth, multi-part structure. There are three types of section changes. A kind of song like *Hujia shibapai* which repeated changes in each section. Another type of song is the *Five-Petal Plum*, which has repeated changes in some sections. There is also a kind of song with no repeated changes in the music section, such as *Guiqulai Ci* and *Pingsha Luoyan*. In addition to these, some Guqin Songs also use the structure of compound three-part and cyclic form. The analysis shows that there are many types of song structures for the composition of Guqin Songs. The choice of a song’s structure depends on the lyrics’ length and topic.

5. Lyrical Substance

The songs and lyrics are deep in content and are based on old Chinese poetry. The music is a fusion of folk music elements from various places and contains diverse regional characteristics, for example, the gentle and moving tones of the Guqin Song *Zhuzhi Ci*, which shows the folk style characteristics of the Bayu region. The Guqin Songs are also rich in emotion, for example, the melancholy tone of *Xiangfei Grievance*, the lyrics of which describe the form of the Xiang River to express the character’s inner feelings of longing. The *Manjianghong* expresses righteousness through diction, style and rhythm; *Changxiangsi* portrays a lively love; *Boya Diao Ziqi* expresses a sincere friendship; *Pingsha Luoyan* reflects a strong feeling of homesickness; *Song of Wu at Night* is a longing for peace and sentimental nostalgia; and *Yuge Diao* reflects a respect and yearning for nature. Most of the songs for the Guqin that have survived to this day have been written with the true emotions of their composers in between the lyrics and the music, so that they can move the listener and strike a chord that will not be forgotten.

The Guqin Song is a fusion of excellent ancient Chinese literature and music. Its unique artistic characteristics show a high value. As an independent form of expression related to the art of the Guqin, the Guqin Song is a jewel in the history of ancient Chinese music, leaving the world with a treasure for future generations to investigate and appreciate. However, to the present day, Guqin Songs have not really entered the public view. The art of the Guqin is not utilitarian and people are not familiar with this traditional form of Chinese music with a thousand-year history. They don’t fully get the Guqin’s culture, which causes them to mix up the Guqin with the zither. In terms of the dissemination and promotion of Guqin Songs, there are relatively few works of them in wide circulation. Some singers think that thoes songs are simpler and lack of appeal. But in reality, it is not easy

to fully master singing.

The inheritors of Guqin Songs need to have a deep literary background, to understand the words of the songs and to express their emotions as profoundly as possible. Additionally, they must develop through time a broad range of artistic abilities, including the capacity to write music and play the Guqin. As China and the rest of the world work to protect humanity's intangible cultural heritage, Guqin Songs now have more opportunities for development and transfer, overcoming past impediments to transmission. Both opportunities and difficulties exist. In order to leave the world an invaluable treasure to be appreciated and studied, the new generation of Guqin Songs inheritors should take advantage of the new opportunities of the times and let the ancient music burst into a dazzling new light, while inheriting the characteristics of the ancient Chinese Guqin Songs culture.

References

- Qian Sima, (2021). *Historical Records*, 47, 2172-2173. (Western Han Dynasty), Hunan: Yuelu Publishing House.
- Xu Liu, etc, (2014). *The Older Book of Tang Dynasty*, 29, 1325-1327, (Five Dynasties), Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company.
- Yuxi Liu, (2013). (Tang Dynasty). *Mengde Liu's collection of writings*, 9, 46-48, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- Xianling Yi, Cen Zhang, (2020). The Song of Wu at Night from the Donggao Qin Book. *Art in the Grand View*, (26), 13-14.
- Yuan Ruan, (2019). *Annotations to the Thirteen Classics*, 523-524, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).