

The Cultural Value of the Chinese Yangqin

Qiqi Luo¹, Chalernsak Pikulsri², Pornpan Kaenampornpan³

Abstract

This research article is part of a dissertation on "The Chinese Yangqin: Performance Practices and Aesthetic Characteristics", which found that the cultural values of the Chinese yangqin were mainly influenced by Chinese politics, social culture, and the aesthetics of the people, reflecting the changes in society and culture and the aesthetic preferences of the people.

As an introduced instrument, the Chinese yangqin came with its own cultural values of cultural invasion and fusion. Pre-1949 yangqin music was rich in cultural values and was used in folk cultural events with a sense of ritual, serving to promote friendship and maintain social harmony. Secondly, it served a political function as a means of diplomacy, and an entertainment function in the folklore or at court. The cultural value of music after 1949 is relatively homogeneous, mainly for entertainment and cultural integration.

Keywords: *Chinese yangqin, cultural value.*

Introduction

The dulcimer originated in the ancient countries of Assyria and Persia in the Middle East and was later introduced to Spain, Turkey and Hungary, where it became known as the cimbalon. The yangqin is a stringed instrument with a wide cosmopolitan and distinctly national character. Among Chinese musical instruments, the yangqin is the only one with a wide cosmopolitan scope. (Zheng Baoheng, 1995)

This study looks at the cultural values of the Chinese yangqin before and after 1949, as well as the changes in society, the transmission of cultural ideas, and the cultural influences from around the world, and it can be said that the richer the cultural values of the Chinese folk instrument are when there is bad politics and social instability. Conversely, if the politics are good and the society is stable, the quality of life of the artists is good and the more homogeneous the cultural value of Chinese folk musical instruments. The researchers studied the cultural values of the Chinese yangqin before and after 1949, taking into account the social context, politics and culture.

Objectives of Research

A study of the cultural values of the Chinese yangqin before and after 1949.

¹ Doctor of Philosophy Program in Music, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, qiqi.l@kkumail.com

² Professor of Fine and Applied Arts Program in Music, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts Khon Kaen University, chapik@kkumail.ac.th

³ Assistant Professor of Fine and Applied Arts Program in Music, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts Khon Kaen University, pompan@kku.ac.th

Scope of Research

In this study, the researchers examined the cultural value of the Chinese Yangqin, in the context of Chinese politics, society and culture, and the aesthetics of the people. A thesis on "The Chinese Yangqin: Performance Practices and Aesthetic Characteristics" was completed over a period of time. It began with a search for relevant literature, field data collection and data analysis in 2021 and continued with the results of the study in 2023, a total of two years.

Definition Of Research Terminology

Chinese yangqin refers to the Chinese folk instrument that has been localised in China, and this paper is concerned with the Chinese yangqin before and after 1949, the year of the founding of New China and a turning point in the evolution of the Chinese yangqin from folk music to professional academia.

Cultural value refers to the cultural value of yangqin music, which, in addition to being 'aesthetic' and 'entertainment', is also a multifunctional cultural tool focused on the purpose of human existence; for the creators and users of yangqin music, it may be used in their production, life, communication, ritual, entertainment, knowledge transmission, and the use of the music in their lives. For the creators and users of yangqin music, it may have served as a special cultural tool for survival purposes in many aspects of their production, life, communication, ritual, entertainment, knowledge transmission, interpersonal regulation, religious beliefs, etc.

Research Conceptual Framework

The cultural value of music is identified by the people in society and the researcher in this study uses the concept of musicology as the main concept of the study.

The music of the yangqin is conveyed from the composer to the listener through the secondary creation of the performer, and the three aspects of culture, economy and politics, as a whole, influence each other on the cultural value of the yangqin. The three groups - composer, performer and listener - as a whole, influence each other on the cultural value of the yangqin. Musical compositions are a grabbing of human perceptions of the real world, blending them with imagination and then distilling them into a musical score. This is then conveyed to the listener by the performer, and in this cycle, music and society and culture become one, expressing both the needs of society at different times and reflecting the thoughts of the people. Based on the above concepts, it demonstrates the relationship between the Chinese yangqin and Chinese society and the different groups of people around which it revolves.

Review of the Literature

Chinese scholars generally agree that the Yangqin was introduced to China in the Ming Dynasty (1580). It was initially popular in the coastal areas of Guangdong. In the late Qing dynasty, when court music declined and folk music emerged, the Yangqin emerged among the diverse performance forms of local folk music. In the 18th century, it was fused with folk music, mainly as an ensemble instrument, and developed widely in instrumental and vocal genres of folk music throughout China, gradually becoming one of the indispensable instruments in folk music. (Huang He, Liu Gong, 2013)

Yang Jia (2013) points out that the yangqin, together with the sanxian, huqin and pipa, is used in Chinese folk events for red and white ceremonies (funerals or weddings), either in repertoire or in ensemble, accompanied by sung expression. This ceremonial activity with a sense of ritual reflects the traditional Chinese Confucian concept of hierarchy and expresses the ideological feelings of the Chinese people. (p.147)

Yang Jia (2013) points out that the Yangqin serves as a bridge between the musical and cultural exchanges between China and the Ryukyus, reflecting on the one hand the identification of the traditional Chinese culture with the foreign Yangqin, and on the other hand the transformation of the instrument's secular function as a folk self-entertainment into a political function as a diplomatic instrument representing the cultural symbols of the state, showing the transformation of the instrument's cultural function and its cultural symbolism through the change in the class of the instrument's use. (p.150)

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (1 October 1949), the yangqin developed towards specialisation, entering local professional schools and orchestras and beginning to appear on stage as a solo instrument. In order to break away from the traditional role of the yangqin and make it a versatile instrument that could play not only solo repertoire but also concertos and foreign works, musicians made various changes to the yangqin, turning it into a visually and aurally sophisticated solo instrument. (Pui-Sze Priscilla Tse, 2007)

In his book, Shi Yong (2006) mentions the importance of melody in Chinese aesthetics: listeners prefer and are accustomed to a single melody, so they reject to a certain extent the distracting elements of melodic subsidiary parts and require melodies with a complete and smooth singing quality and a beautiful and moving lyricism. This characteristic has long been a stable and habitual bias in the aesthetic psychology of Chinese music, and because of this, Chinese music has a relatively high demand for melody. (p.102)

Research Methodology

In this study, entitled "The Cultural Value of the Chinese Yangqin", the researchers relied on the sociological approach to music and used qualitative research methods to collect data, analysing the data as follows :

1 Preparation phase: In preparation for the fieldwork, the researcher conducted a literature review from the literature and related studies. After the literature review and related research, it was found that the historical timeline of the Chinese yangqin, the political, cultural and economic aspects of society, had a great impact on the yangqin, and the people in different timelines, determined the cultural value of the yangqin. The researcher researched and found preliminary information about the musical culture of the Yangqin and identified the following key sources of information: the cultural values of the Yangqin before and after 1949, and the influences and causes that shaped them. The researcher then designed question guides for the interviews, which were used for field data collection. When the researchers had completed them, they were submitted to Khon Kaen University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for validation.

2 Field data collection: In the field study, the researcher used a tracer research method to interview key informants at different time periods. Using an interview form validated by the Institutional Review Board, researchers interviewed key informants in both formal and informal interviews. In addition, the researcher interviewed representatives from two different periods of Chinese yangqin and recorded data from the field study using an audio-visual data store.

3 Data management and analysis: The information obtained from the literature study and field research was managed according to the research objectives. The researcher then used the perspectives of yangqin creators and audiences to analyse the cultural values of the yangqin in the socio-cultural context of different eras.

Discussion

The musical value of the yangqin is the result of the aesthetic practice of the music resonating with the appreciators and subsequently forming their needs, a combination of constant and variable factors. The invariable factors are the tone and rhythm of the music, while the variable factors are the different needs of the appreciators. The same piece of yangqin music will often reflect different values depending on the needs of the appreciator. When appreciating yangqin music, each person's aesthetic ability varies, and aesthetic judgement differs according to the social environment and cultural background in which they live.

The German musicologist A. Silbermann's books 'Introduction to the Sociology of Music', published in 1955, and 'What Music Depends on for Survival - Principles of Musical Sociology', published in 1957. Taking the interrelationship between political, economic, cultural and other ideologies and music as the main object of study, he argues that music is a social activity and clarifies the various functions of music, while enabling an understanding of the nature of the process of musical development, i.e. the evolution of music. The German scholar T.W. Adorno's 1962 book, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, takes musical works and musical genres as its object of study and gives them a musical meaning by borrowing economic terms such as productivity and relations of production in order to elaborate on various issues in the sociology of music. By productivity he means the production of the composer (the work), the reproduction of the performer (the performance), and the audience's response to and demand for music. Using the sociological theory of music, the author examines the impact of the yangqin on society, including political, economic and cultural influences, in different time periods before and after 1949. The development of the yangqin in different social contexts is studied, and the cultural values of the Chinese yangqin in various periods are analysed.

Yangqin music is a crystallisation of human thought, an expression of the composer's own emotions and ideas using yangqin music. The richness of emotion expressed in yangqin music works is expressed through the performance, which is predicated on the creation of the music. The value of yangqin music is abstract, but when a yangqin work is composed, the emotions it expresses and the composer's creative ideas are concretized, which is an important basis for researchers to judge the value of the music. Cultural values, however, can have different effects at different times, with more beneficial effects for society and people.

Conclusion

Studies have shown that the yangqin was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mainly in ritualistic cultural activities such as weddings, funerals and festive banquets among the people, where it played a functional role in promoting friendship, bonding, maintaining social and cultural harmony and facilitating the organic functioning of people in society. The second is the political function as a means of diplomacy.

When the yangqin was first introduced to China, it was added to traditional Chinese folk activities, expressing traditional Chinese notions of etiquette and participating in the maintenance of social order and harmony. In folk rap music, the yangqin is both a percussion and plucked instrument, and as an accompaniment instrument it has the role of leading and guiding the interplay between the instruments in the orchestra. Attached to folk music from the mid-19th century to the end of the 19th century, the yangqin was not only a musical instrument in the hands of folk musicians, but also gradually entered the hands of court and imperial officials, where its function was mainly to perform an entertainment function.

Studies have shown that from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, the cultural value of the yangqin was mainly reflected in social and educational aspects: firstly,

learning the yangqin was a way to improve one's cultivation, cultivate aesthetic sentiments, and achieve the purpose of purifying the body and mind and educating the mind. Secondly, it embodies the idea of patriotism, using music as a form of education to improve people's aesthetic thinking and moral cultivation during the war years.

In the earliest days of its introduction to China, Chinese musical culture was essentially a long-standing feudal society with a closed, small peasant economy. In the 18th century, China was bullied by the powers, and neither its traditional culture nor its military and economic strength could save the nation from its own peril. As a result, from this period onwards, some of the people had a reverence for Europe and America, and the social and spiritual outlook of the people underwent great changes. For example, braids became short hair, and plays, films and paintings began to be accepted by the people.

Studies have shown that the impact of Western culture on China and changes in cultural values since the twentieth century have led to a huge change in the aesthetics of the traditional yangqin. Traditional folk instruments have been heavily modified; the orchestration of musical works has taken reference to a rich harmonic and compositional structure; traditional silk and bamboo bands and drumming bands have been reorganised, and the mode of combination of folk music has changed to that of a Western orchestral symphony orchestra. The cultural value of the yangqin at this stage was not only self-indulgence, but also cultural fusion.

At the beginning of the founding of New China in 1949, the yangqin was very popular and had much to do with works on political themes, and people's thinking was influenced by politics, and the aesthetic was very much in tune with the society at the time. At the end of the 20th century, there was a wide variety of yangqin works, so there was still a good market demand at this stage. In the 21st century, the Chinese economy was closely linked to international contacts and the music of Europe and the United States was widely circulated. Traditional traditional music suffered a serious blow and its popularity declined. The cultural value of yangqin music was not prominent after the 21st century, which affected the decline in popularity, and the limited development of the yangqin. In recent years, the development of the Yangqin has become favourable as traditional Chinese culture has been increasingly valued as a result of Chinese policy.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the strength and prosperity of the great industrial civilisations of Europe and the United States made the Chinese feel a sense of threat and pressure. Some people took European music as a reference, and their aesthetic became more oriented towards European and American music. Others were in favour of borrowing from European and American music while safeguarding China's inherent musical culture. This is why, in order to meet the aesthetics of the audience, the works of the yangqin during this period were composed using Chinese musical materials as well as borrowing from European and American compositions, creating some classic solo yangqin pieces.

In the 1990s China's economic strength began to increase significantly, and the people's confidence in their own culture increased, and the people's open cultural mentality led to the absorption and acceptance of music from Europe and America. Because of the Chinese people's reverence for traditional culture, traditionalists were most concerned about the 'assimilation' of European and American music. However, the Chinese yangqin, with its Chinese characteristics, has not been 'assimilated', as can be seen from its production, instruments and musical compositions, due to its philosophy of 'harmony and difference' and its aesthetic values. The modern school of yangqin music, often self-centred, and the popular yangqin chamber music of the last decade, showcase the aesthetics of some contemporary Chinese people. Some of the Chinese yangqin music of the last twenty years is more of an expression of self-expression, not catering to the aesthetic judgement of the majority of the audience, and therefore does not meet the

aesthetic needs of the majority of the people, and has had very little circulation. The cultural value of the music is more self-indulgent.

The traditional yangqin of the pre-1949 era was characterised by its low volume, narrow range and inability to transpose, and the development of yangqin music was greatly affected. With the gradual development of the national economy, the aesthetics of the creators of the yangqin itself changed, and various improvements were made to optimise the shortcomings of the various yangqins. After 1949, the yangqin was adapted for different occasions, such as the large yangqin for concerts, the small yangqin for portability, the electric yangqin for louder sound and for use in orchestra ensembles, and the butterfly yangqin for pausing in the middle of a piece. The different degrees of optimisation of the yangqin, all of which were aimed at making the range wider, the sound cleaner, the transposition easier and suitable for polyphonic music, were influenced by the music of Europe and America, reflecting the cultural fusion in cultural values.

According to the latest results of modern archaeology, during the long Paleolithic period the Chinese lived mainly as gatherers, supplemented by fishing and hunting. Europeans, on the other hand, have always been hunting as their main means of livelihood, a typical hunting culture. The different ecological environment and production methods have led to differences in the way of thinking and psychological characteristics between the Chinese and the Europeans since the Palaeolithic. The gathering culture is a female-dominated culture, and female wisdom has continued in the farming culture, which has had a significant impact on the Chinese way of thinking and aesthetic psychology, making it distinctly feminine and soft and lyrical in its musical aesthetics. In terms of the structure of the diet, the hunting culture of Europeans has been based on large carnivorous animals as the main source of food since the Paleolithic period, supplemented by plant foods, and the Western diet still has this characteristic today. The Paleolithic culture of China, on the other hand, was dominated by a gathering culture, which, together with the rise of farming, led to a basic diet based on plant foods, which has influenced the Chinese aesthetic over tens of thousands of years. Europeans have a more conquering attitude towards nature, whereas the Chinese seek harmony between man and nature. The Chinese lived a leisurely life, working at sunrise and resting at sunset, digging wells and drinking, ploughing fields and eating, and their musical aesthetic preferred to be calm and lyrical. This is evident from the popularity of traditional Yangqin pieces, such as "Play Three Six", "Dry Heavenly Thunder" and "Su Wu Shepherding Sheep", which show that the majority of audiences in Chinese society have a preference for lyrical pieces.

Music is as national and regional as language, and the ancient Chinese language has the beauty of a 'linear' language, where the vocalisation of the language has a direct impact on the music.

The Chinese yangqin is the only instrument in the world that uses bamboo as a raw material for playing, which has led to some of its techniques being unique in the world, such as the 'trill' and 'slide trill'. The use of bamboo as a raw material is related to the actual situation in China. Bamboo is an indispensable tool in the daily life of the Chinese people, and it is used for eating and sleeping. Wood as a raw material gives the yangqin an overly heavy tone. Bamboo, because of its low density and light weight, has a crisp, bright tone that is suited to the Chinese people's need to express their delicate emotions and fits the Chinese aesthetic for the music of the yangqin.

The Chinese, influenced by traditional Chinese culture, had a preference for linear music and therefore created many techniques with a linear acoustic effect, which led to the invention of new playing instruments such as the "slide ring" and the "wire plectrum", changing the history of the Chinese yangqin. This changed the history of the Chinese yangqin, where the only instruments used were bamboo beater. This was a major innovation in playing technique and opened up new ideas for the development of the yangqin. In recent years, the use of instruments such as "bows" and "coins" has been

innovative, reflecting the influence of European and American music culture and the constant pursuit of new acoustic effects.

Studies have shown that the musical and cultural values of the yangqin before 1949 were more varied, with the creators often also being performers, and their musical aesthetic for the yangqin was more regional and nationalistic; after 1949 the musical values were more homogeneous, with the creators of many musical works, who were not performers of the yangqin, being more diverse in their aesthetic for the yangqin, borrowing from European and American compositional techniques while innovating more sound effects and performance forms. The aesthetic of the audience, although subject to individual differences, has been influenced by Chinese society and culture, with a preference for good main melodies and a preference for lineal, lyrical and singing pieces over complex playing techniques and performance forms. The cultural values of the Chinese yangqin demonstrate, to a certain extent, the cultural connotations and aesthetic preferences of the Chinese people.

Recommendation

The time frame and scope of the study continues to be defined as more time passes. This study has as yet unidentified limitations of other forms that can be compared with other members of the world yangqin family.

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