

The Cultural Connotation of the Chinese Yangqin

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This article focuses on the in-depth analysis of the cultural roots of the introduction and evolution of Chinese Yangqin and its development in China, based on an elaboration of the world distribution of Yangqin. The aim is to illustrate the growth and evolution of the Chinese Yangqin over the past few hundred years, with every detail reflecting deep-seated cultural connotations and aesthetic needs. Therefore, “embodying the beauty of Chinese cultural tradition” remains the internal mechanism for developing Chinese Yangqin.

Keywords: Yangqin, worldness, nationalization, cultural connotation

Art is a realistic expression of culture, and behind every form of art lies an interpretation of local culture. The national instrumental music art of various countries fully reflects their national culture and spirit. Among the numerous ethnic musical instruments in China, the Chinese Yangqin is the only one with a wide global scope. Since its introduction to China in the 17th century, the Yangqin has rapidly integrated with traditional ethnic culture and gradually formed a unique national style. In addition to being ‘global’, ‘national’ has become the shining point of the lively body of the Yangqin. Nowadays, Chinese Yangqin art occupies a significant position in the world of Yangqin music culture.

The Wide Worldness of Yangqin

The Yangqin has spread to dozens of countries and regions in Asia, Europe, the United States, Africa, and Oceania, becoming a commonwealth of world culture. It has a long history and a wide variety and has been accepted by different ethnic groups around the world. A culture and art that has long been rooted in different cultural soils will inevitably permeate their respective cultural characteristics. Therefore, the world’s Yangqin has different forms, styles, and playing methods. From the distribution situation, it can be roughly divided into three major systems, namely the European system, the West Asian and South Asian system, and the Chinese system.

The European Yangqin system includes all European countries and North America and Oceania, which were previously European colonies. For example: the UK, USA, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Hungary, Australia, etc. The name of the Yangqin also varies, mainly including “Dulcimer”, “Psaltery”, “Hackbrett”, and “Cimbalom”. In the 15th century, the Yangqin gradually spread in various European countries, from the court to the common people, becoming a fashionable instrument during the Renaissance period. It is worth mentioning that in 1874, the first “concert yangqin Cimbalom” was developed in Budapest, Hungary. Its characteristics

include a large body, a rich tone, a wide range that extends up to four octaves, complete semitones, and the ability to be freely tuned. It is equipped with stop pedals, and it has wooden hammers with hammerheads that are generally wrapped in thick wool felt or cotton (Yang, 2020, p. 24). In this concert, Yangqin has a strong European music style.

The Yangqin system in West Asia and South Asia is situated in the context of Arab Islamic culture and Indian subcontinent culture. The Yangqin of this system is commonly known as the “Santur”. It involves Iran, Iraq, Syria, Türkiye, Kuwait and other countries. Due to the uniqueness of the Arabic music system, the “Santur” with its cultural background has formed a completely different musical colour from the other two systems in terms of rhythm, mode, glissando, and improvisation in performance, full of exotic charm.

The Chinese Yangqin system, including the Yangqin from countries such as North Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Thailand, and Southeast Asia, is derived from the transliteration of the Chinese Yangqin. The earliest discovered textual and visual record of the Yangqin was recorded in the book “Okinawa and Chinese Artistic Ability” by Ryukyuan scholar Sheng Zhaoting; In 1663, Chinese envoy Zhang Xueli was appointed to Ryukyu and used the Yangqin and Yaoqin his singing and performance; In the appendix of the book, there is a picture of the son playing the Yangqin, wearing Ming Dynasty clothing and holding bamboo (keys) to play. The surface of the qin is a trapezoidal panel with two qin codes and carved patterns (Zheng, 1995, p. 4). The Yangqin was introduced to China in the 17th century and was widely circulated during the Ming Dynasty.

Nationalization in China

The current understanding of the origin of the Chinese Yangqin is mostly focused on the theory of “European introduction”. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, a capitalist economy sprouted, cities prospered, and commerce developed. As a result, music culture—also expanded its development space. Traditional Chinese opera and folk art were unprecedentedly flourishing, while folk songs were beginning to boom. In the process of the development and evolution of ethnic music culture, the Yangqin, which had European foreign factors, quickly integrated into it at the beginning of its development and spread widely throughout China. Although it failed to be incorporated into court music, it was deeply rooted in the folk society and thrived in this fertile soil. There are many historical records about this. For example, in the book “Qing Bai Lei Chao”, it is recorded that “blind girls play and sing, which is known as ‘blind girls’ in Guangzhou. They sing fish songs accompanied by foreign qin, melodious and pleasing to the ear. When there are happy events in the family, they often invite them” (Xiang, 1990, p. 27). There is also an article called “Jin Chi Quan Listening to Foreign Qin”, which provides a detailed description of “foreign qin” and reflects people’s love for “secular Yangqin”.

With the popularity of traditional Chinese opera and folk art in various regions of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Yangqin, as an accompanying instrument, left a life trajectory. With the popularity of traditional Chinese opera and folk art in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the yangqin, as an accompanying instrument, left a life trajectory. Many genres of drama and music, such as Shandong Qinshu, Sichuan Qinshu, Xuzhou Qinshu, and Guizhou Wenqin, have continued to use the yangqin to this day and directly refer to the singing form as yangqin. Early Yangqin accompaniment used the melodic accompaniment method, with the accompanying voice mainly consisting of the accompaniment melody of the singing style, decorated and played through the door. At this point, it was difficult to find the European Yangqin’s ability to freely play music of different tones and its

ease of playing harmonic textures and semitone melodies in the descendants' Yangqin. With the widespread development of folk music forms, the Yangqin has also been added to the performance forms of some folk instrumental music genres. Under the infiltration of music culture in various regions, and through the continuous practice and accumulation of senior musicians, many traditional schools and unique local styles have been formed. The playing methods and timbres of various schools are generally the same, which is a commonality formed in history, but they also have their own characteristics in charm, style, and techniques. This is the diverse and colourful personality left by different ethnic groups, regions, and eras to different music genres. From the lively, bright, and elegant tranquillity of the "Guangdong Music Yangqin" to the sonorous brightness of the "Sichuan Yangqin", and from the delicate and timeless beauty of the "Jiangnan Silk and Bamboo Yangqin" to the melodious melody of the "Northeast Yangqin", each school has its own unique style, techniques, repertoire, and representative figures. In the process of continuous integration, the Yangqin fully absorbs the nutrients of traditional Chinese music culture. Until today, from the transformation of form to the diversity of performance forms, from the formation of ten major techniques such as "chanting, kneading, sliding, and trembling" to the richness and diversity of repertoire, the Yangqin has completed the transformation from "foreign" to "yang", becoming a truly national instrument.

The Cultural Foundation of the Development of Yangqin in China

China is an ancient civilization with a history of five thousand years and one of the earliest countries in the world to develop a music culture. The profound historical accumulation, vast country, and diverse ethnic groups cultivate a rich cultural soil. And with its colourful cultural connotations, the Chinese Yangqin system stands out on the world stage.

From the primitive music and dance of ancient China to the flourishing large-scale song and dance suite, and then to the increasing prosperity of folk music, instrumental music is a highly developed product of music in these three important stages. Tracing back to the Zhou Dynasty, there were seventy or eighty recorded musical instruments, classified according to the "Eight Tones". After generations of development, there are hundreds of ethnic musical instruments that have been passed down to this day among only a few ethnic groups. However, through historical records, we can see that the emergence of the Yangqin in China was not a coincidence of historical development. The "Strategies of the Warring States and Qi" record that "Linzi was very rich and practical, and its people all played the yu, drum, and zither" (Liu, 1998, p. 337). From this, it can be seen that plucked instruments such as "qin," "se," and "Zheng" had already appeared in the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period. Later generations also described it as "the builder, whose shape was like a fan, made of wood, stretched strings, and struck with bamboo hammers to make a sound" (Hu & Sierguleng, 1979, p. 50). "Zhu" is one of the earliest known stringed instruments in the world, which is very similar to the Yangqin in terms of shape and performance. Although "Zhu" was widely circulated during the Warring States Period, this ancient stringed instrument disappeared without a sound when the instrument "Zheng," which directly plucked strings to make sound appeared. According to the "Dictionary of Foreign Music" compiled by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Research Institute, "dulcimers originated from Eastern stringed instruments and were introduced to Europe in the Middle Ages". From this, it can be seen that although we cannot directly infer that the Yangqin originated from "zhu", it contains certain Chinese elements in its cultural foundation.

In addition, the stylistic and ethnic characteristics of Chinese art are closely related to people's aesthetic tastes. Curved beauty "is one of the aesthetic habits sought by various ethnic arts in China". Poetry and literature emphasize the importance of avoiding direct and complex melodies, while calligraphy emphasizes the importance of creating intricate and profound gardens. In terms of music, it is reflected in the development and application of curved melodies. Based on this, in the development practice of the Chinese Yangqin, new techniques with Chinese characteristics and reflecting traditional aesthetics have emerged. For example, techniques like sliding and kneading. These techniques can well reflect the national characteristics of the Yangqin—the rhythm of music. The "bamboo" culture is a reflection of the traditional spiritual connotation of China, and the introduction of wooden "hammers" as playing tools for Yangqin, which were replaced with bamboo "qin Zhu", is also a manifestation of Chinese nationalization. Bamboo-made "qin Zhu" plays lightly, has good elasticity, and is crisp and bright, making the "melody line" of music more melodious. In addition, another aesthetic tendency, "the beauty of harmony" and "clarity, subtlety, lightness, and distance," is particularly prominent in music creation. European music emphasizes the motivation and harmony of melody and sound, with a focus on contrast in music structure. In contrast, traditional Chinese music emphasizes unity and expresses contrast in a gradual manner, pursuing natural and gentle changes, which is reflected in the composition of the Chinese Yangqin. The structure of the works is mostly characterized by "scattered, slow, medium, fast, and slow", which is almost present in all ethnic music. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that the Yangqin art, which has been rooted in folk music for more than 400 years, inherits and develops many characteristics of folk music.

Chinese traditional music is a profound and open cultural system. From the evolution of history to the current reality of music, it continues its artistic life through continuous flow, absorption, harmony, and variation. The inherent cultural mechanism of "ethnicity" should still be regarded as the foundation of the Chinese Yangqin. From the European Yangqin to the traditional Chinese Yangqin and then to the modern Chinese Yangqin, the art of Yangqin has deeply penetrated the context of Chinese ethnic music culture and shone brightly in the art garden of Chinese ethnic instrumental music.

Conclusion

The art of Yangqin is a historical accumulation of the traditional civilisation of the Chinese nation and is an integral part of the history of world civilisation. If the future development of Chinese Yangqin art is to be unique in the world system and maintain its characteristics, we should start from the following aspects: Firstly, it inherits the beauty of Chinese cultural traditions and incorporates the Chinese philosophical thoughts of 'unity of heaven and man' and 'harmony' throughout, to achieve the purpose of shaping the pure human character of 'truth, goodness and beauty'. This will lead to a more harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, as well as between human beings and each other. Secondly, the creation of modern Yangqin works should firstly reflect the characteristics of 'national tone', to better reflect the Chinese music style and national meaning. Thirdly, based on the 'cosmopolitan' attributes of Yangqin, we should endeavour to carry out international exchanges, promote the traditional national culture, and make Yangqin a messenger of world cultural exchanges.

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