

An Initial Exploration of the Historical Development and Origin of the Guzheng

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Abstract: The guzheng (ancient zither), also referred to as han zheng, qin zheng, yao zheng, and luan zheng, is hailed as the “King of Music” and the “Eastern Piano.” It holds a significant place as a plucked instrument within the realm of traditional Chinese musical instruments, serving as a unique and important national treasure in China’s musical landscape. Dating back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), it gained popularity in Shaanxi and Gansu regions. In 237 BCE, Li Si vividly depicted a traditional guzheng performance in his correspondence with Qin Shi Huang, describing the performer’s actions and the captivating music, henceforth leading to the instrument being commonly referred to as “Qin zheng.” He wrote, “The performer strikes the drum and beats the fou (an ancient Chinese percussion instrument), plays the zheng while rhythmically patting their thighs, and sings with deep emotion. The authentic music of Qin delights both the eyes and ears.” This study endeavors to delve into the origin and evolution of the guzheng, providing a dependable resource for the vast community of guzheng enthusiasts and practitioners.

Keywords: Dynasty; Form; Guzheng; Representative Work.

1. Introduction

The zheng, with a history of over 2,000 years, is one of the prominent representatives of traditional Chinese musical instruments, deeply rooted in Chinese culture. As an ancient plucked string instrument of the Han people, the zheng has a rich cultural heritage and a long history. Throughout its extensive history, the evolution and development of the zheng in different periods have shown significant differences from its contemporary form. This paper delves into the historical development of the guzheng, tracing its origins and its transformation through various periods, including the Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, Six Dynasties, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Liao, Song, Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. By reviewing extensive references, particularly works like “Historical View on Qin Guzheng,” the study aims to present a comprehensive historical overview and detailed account of the zheng’s development. The profound cultural heritage of the zheng has enabled each period’s iteration of the instrument to connect with and surpass its predecessors, innovating while maintaining traditional foundations. This has propelled the development of zheng music in the 20th century to new heights, achieving a considerable level of maturity. Through analyzing the historical development of the zheng, this study seeks to accurately reconstruct the true developmental features of the zheng in different historical periods, thereby providing a more scientific explanation and reflection on its origins and evolution.

2. Different Stories of the Guzheng’s Invention

The guzheng is a rare instrument adorned with the term “ancient,” which is gu in Chinese, signifying its long and storied history. When listening to guzheng music, one can almost envision the scenes from over two millennia ago when the instrument first emerged. The melodies and sounds of the

guzheng evoke a sense of antiquity, carrying with them a rich cultural heritage and atmosphere. Regarding the origin of the guzheng, three mystical folk legends have been passed down through generations. One legend attributes the creation of the zheng to Hou Kui who was tasked with educating the people through music during the primitive Yao and Shun eras. He revised music theories and invented many instruments. The Guzheng was believed to be one of his inventions. The guzheng’s unique appearance and its ability to produce elegant, loud and clear sounds garnered widespread admiration. Even in the wilderness where guzheng music was played, birds and animals responded harmoniously. The soothing melodies of the guzheng filled the air, evoking a sense of peace and unity, which contributed to its widespread appeal.

The second legend is the well-known story of Zhong Ziqi and Yu Boya during the Spring and Autumn period. Legend has it that Boya often played the qin (a type of Chinese zither) on the high mountains, and the melody he played was called “High Mountains and Flowing Water.” However, despite playing it every day, no one could understand the emotional expression and meaning of this musical piece. One day, Ziqi passed by and understood the meaning of his music, and they became very good friends. When Ziqi passed away, Boya was grief-stricken, believing that no one in the world could understand the music he played anymore. He smashed his qin at Ziqi’s tomb to express his mourning and respect for his soulmate.

Another legend is the story of Meng Tian creating the zheng.

The earliest zheng unearthed so far was found in a tomb in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province and in the Cliff Tomb Cluster in Guixi County, Jiangxi Province. According to the excavation report of the tombs in Jiangxi, they were from the Spring and Autumn period to the Warring States period [1]. Therefore, the earliest history of the guzheng dates back to the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. Physical

evidence, including textual records indicates that the history of guzheng can be traced back for at least 2,500 years. The earliest zheng was made with five strings, corresponding to the five-tone scale: Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu. Later, it gradually evolved into the 12-string zheng, corresponding to the twelve ancient tones of China: huangzhong, dalü, taicu, jiazhong, guxian, zhonglü, ruibin, linzhong, yize, nanlü, quyi, yingzhong. Following that, the 13-string zheng emerged. Subsequently, the 21-string zheng, now the most prevalent and extensively available version, came into existence, along with the 25-string zheng. It is with these kinds of zheng that people play many rich and wonderful music pieces.

3. Qin, Han and Six Dynasties (221 BCE–589 CE)

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the zheng instrument flourished, particularly in folk culture, becoming prevalent from temple ceremonies to private gatherings and entertainment. It was esteemed as a noble and elegant instrument. With the establishment of the Silk Road during the Western Han Dynasty, cultural exchanges and prosperity in music were further promoted across Eurasia. The Han Dynasty established the Han Music Bureau, which primarily served imperial banquets, where instrumental music, including the zheng, played an indispensable role. Concurrently, a plethora of musical compositions emerged, gradually spreading widely and exerting increasing influence, laying a solid foundation for the emergence of many genres in the future.

Naturally, during this period, many notable figures emerged, with the most famous being Hou Jin of the Eastern Han Dynasty. From his existing literary work “Zheng Fu,” it is evident that during the Han Dynasty, the Qin zheng was quite popular in the Dunhuang area [2]. Hou Jin himself must have been a proficient player and expert, possessing an extremely high degree of skills. It can be inferred that even during this period, there were already highly skilled performers and theorists. According to historical records, Hou Jin was deeply moved by this instrument and gave it high praise. According to him, zheng music could move heaven and earth, as well as spirits. From temple rituals to banquet entertainment, it was an instrument loved by many, capable of transforming customs and pleasing people. Practicing playing the guzheng brings joy and sorrow in moderation. Guzheng music resonates with people from the depths of their souls. Therefore, the guzheng is hailed as the “Master of All Music,” which is due to its popularity among the masses. As Ruan Yu of the late Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE) said: “The guzheng stands out among instruments with its unique sound, surpassing all other instruments to become the master of music.” His comment indicates the guzheng’s long-standing prominence. Another significant feature of the guzheng, which contributes to its title as the “Master of All Music,” is its important playing technique known as “yun.” Yun refers to pressing the strings with the left hand, which not only changes the pitch but also enhances its charm. This characteristic is a unique charm possessed by no other instrument.

During this period, in addition to the previously mentioned figures such as Hou Jin and Ruan Yu, there were also other zheng performers, theorists, or connoisseurs who had attained high proficiency in zheng appreciation. For example, during the Three Kingdoms period, the brothers Cao Zhi and Cao Pi

had achieved remarkable proficiency in the zheng. Cao Pi’s poem, *Shanzai Xing* says, “The dancers of Kingdom Qi danced the dances of the East, and the guzheng of the Qin land played the melodious songs of the West.” Cao Zhi’s poem, *For Dingyi* (Zeng Dingyi) writes, “The Qin zheng played the music of Western Qin, and the Qi Se (an ancient plucked zither of Chinese origin) accompanied the music of Eastern Qi.” Their poems show that these two individuals were not only highly skilled performers in zheng technique and emotional expression but also had a deep love for the instrument. They also composed numerous works for the zheng. The Three Kingdoms period witnessed the miraculous story of Lü Bu playing the zheng to disrupt enemy forces. Other famous performers include You Chu from the Three Kingdoms period and Fu Xuan from the Western Jin period. Fu Xuan wrote in his “Zheng Fu,” “The strings of the guzheng symbolize the twelve months, organized across four bridges representing the four seasons, and producing five tones.” Here, “four seasons” refers to spring, summer, autumn, and winter, while “five tones” are Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu. “The strings imitate the twelve months” refers to the 12-string guzheng of that time, indicating that the guzheng had undergone further development in its structure during that period. Another figure worth mentioning is Ji Kang from the Wei-Jin period. In his treatise on aesthetics of music, *Shengwu Aile Lun* (On the Absence of Sentiments in Music), he evaluated the Qin zheng, sharing his profound understanding of the instrument’s characteristics, functions, and emotional expression. He advocated for a focus on the form and aesthetics of music, emphasizing the liberation of music from the constraints of rituals to show human nature. These viewpoints demonstrate his unique experiences and insightful perspectives. Additionally, a female zheng artist surnamed Chen, Emperor Yuan of Liang, Emperor Jianwen of the Liang, and poet Shen Yue of the Southern and Northern Dynasties in their poems mentioned zheng playing and compositions dedicated to zheng which had already spread widely in the south at that time.

Therefore, during this period, zheng music experienced significant development. First, there was a considerable improvement in the structure and status of the zheng. Not only did the structure of the zheng become more sophisticated, with an increase in the number of strings and a broader range of tones, but also its status as a musical instrument was greatly elevated, earning it the title of “Master of Music.” Second, a large number of zheng artists, performers, theorists, and connoisseurs emerged, leading to not only advancements in performance techniques but also enriching theoretical research on zheng music. Guzheng studies became more systematic and paved the way for new frontiers in the development of zheng music artistry. Moreover, with the development of the instrument and the emergence of numerous theorists and performers, there was a proliferation of zheng compositions. This period also witnessed the emergence of many music connoisseurs, such as Hou Jin and Emperor Jianwen of the Liang. Finally, the status of zheng music was greatly enhanced, being not only performed by aristocrats and dignitaries but also widely used in various settings, including temple ceremonies, banquet performances, and daily recreational activities. It became a beloved instrument among the people, particularly in the Jiangnan region.

4. Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties (581–960)

In 581 CE, the Sui Dynasty was established, ending the political turmoil of the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, and allowing for further development of cultural exchanges among various ethnic groups. The unification of power led to significant economic development, making the development of music and culture inevitable [4]. During this period, Ten Musical Divisions were established in the court, which performed music and accompanying dance from various Asian nations or Chinese regions: Qingshang, Xiliang, Goryeo, Tianzhu, Anguo, Kucha, Kangguo, Shule, Yan, and Gaochang. Several of them, such as Yan, Qingshang, Xiliang, Goryeo, Kucha, and Kangguo, featured the use of the zheng, indicating the significant status of the zheng during this time.

In 618 CE, the Tang Dynasty was established, continuing the ethnic policies of the Sui Dynasty and engaging in more extensive foreign exchanges, further integrating the music cultures of various ethnic groups. Economic development laid the foundation for the development of music culture, resulting in the characteristic of the Tang Dynasty's music culture being inclusive and embracing. At the same time, significant music institutions were established in the Tang Dynasty, including the Jiao Fang and the Liyuan. Consequently, many musicians emerged, and instrumental music and instruments flourished. During this period, the zheng also saw further development, with the emergence of 12-string and 13-string zheng, yunhe zheng, and zhazheng. There also appeared the famous figure known as the top zheng player of the Jiao Fang, Xue Qionqiong. She was the zheng master of that time. In the subsequent years, numerous legends were created about Xue Qionqiong, which were widely circulated in songs, poems, and dramas, demonstrating her profound social influence at that time. The number of musicians in the Jiao Fang and Liyuan was very large. However, following the An Lushan Rebellion, many of them scattered to various regions, with Chang'an being a primary destination. This contributed further to the advancement of zheng-related disciplines and knowledge, including techniques and theories, in the Qin region.

Many Tang poems are about zheng players. Whether as a primary accompaniment instrument at court banquets or in Qingshang music, dramas, or folk music, the zheng received considerable praise in poems and songs. Some poems praised the beauty of the zheng music and the depth of emotion it expressed, while others praised the noble and lofty sentiments of the zheng players. Some also praised how listening to the zheng could refresh the mind and nourish the spirit. Although during the Tang Dynasty, there was a flourishing cultural scene influenced by foreign cultures and styles, including Kucha and the western regions, the zheng, as one of China's traditional and excellent cultural artifacts, still maintained its mainstream status and stood out among other instruments. Many famous poets of the time were proficient in zheng music and skilled in playing the instrument, such as the Tang poet Bai Juyi. In many of his poems, he expressed his love for the zheng, demonstrating not only his affection but also his deep understanding of techniques and emotional expression, as he was also very adept at playing. In one of the important references for this study, "Historical View on Qin Guzheng," the author identifies over 20 different names for the zheng mentioned in the Complete Tang Poems, and lists 16 of them, categorizing them according to four major elements: the

zheng's structure, the artistic effects, the techniques, and the zheng's decorations. Among them, the classification based on the zheng's structure includes the Qin zheng which is the most common term and highlights its historical inheritance. Its variants include Qin Sheng and Qin Xian. The classification based on the artistic effects includes Ai Zheng and Xiangfu Zheng. The classification based on decorations includes Dai Zheng, Dian Zheng, Bao Zheng, and Yu Zheng. The classification based on playing techniques includes Tan Zheng and Ming Zheng. It can be seen that the development of the zheng during this period was very prosperous.

During this prosperous period of zheng development, playing techniques also evolved with various techniques for the right hand, such as plucking, tapping, and pulling. The left-hand technique is one significant feature of the zheng. It not only adds charm but also enriches musical expression, reflecting rich cultural connotations. Therefore, during this period, left-hand technique blossomed into more than a dozen, including covering, suppressing, pressing, and pinching. This diversity imbued the music with richer hues and heightened expressiveness, enabling performers to convey their emotions more effectively. The broader range of performance techniques lent greater nuance to the artistic expression of the music, thereby elevating zheng performance to unprecedented levels of artistry.

During the prosperous Tang Dynasty, craftsmanship reached an unparalleled level of sophistication, yielding exquisite and splendid artifacts. The crafting of the zheng, likewise, exemplified delicacy, beauty, and grandeur. As mentioned earlier, in the Complete Tang Poems, there are many names for the zheng based on its decoration, including Bao Zheng, Yu Zheng, Dian Zheng, and Dai Zheng. From these names alone, the magnificence of zheng manufacturing is evident. Dian Zheng, for example, refers to decorations carved from gold, silver, and jewels, resembling flowers, and embedded on the zheng. Bao Zheng and Yu Zheng are similarly adorned with jewels. However, Dai Zheng is different. Dai refers to materials from deep-sea marine animals, specifically the patterned shell of deep-sea turtles which are now rare and protected animals. It's impressive that such luxurious materials were used for zheng manufacturing at that time.

During the Flourishing Kaiyuan Reign period, a multitude of zheng artists emerged, including the previously mentioned figures like Xue Qionqiong, Xie Haohao, and Xue Qionqiong's teacher, Hao Shansu. Additionally, there were numerous zheng players in the imperial court and educational institutions such as Jiao Fang and Liyuan during this period. Consequently, a vast array of zheng compositions were created, reflecting the high level of zheng development at the time, which had profound implications for that time and the future. This period witnessed a variety of zheng compositions, including solo zheng pieces, zheng accompaniments, and ensemble works. For instance, solo zheng compositions such as Shengtian Le (The Joy of Ascending to Heaven), Bai Ri (White Day), and Shui Diaozi (Water Tune) were prominent. There were also numerous accompaniment and ensemble pieces used for imperial banquets, festival celebrations, and accompanying performances of song and dance. These compositions laid a solid foundation for the collaboration of zheng with other instruments in various genres and themes, as well as for ensemble performances, paving the way for the future development of zheng artistry.

The highly developed musical culture of the Tang Dynasty

had a profound influence on neighboring countries' music, including the music of Goryeo (Korean peninsula), Funan (Laos), Pyu city-states (Myanmar), Wakoku (Japan), Lâm Ấp (Vietnam) and Tianzhu (India). In particular, Korea and Japan dispatched numerous envoys to study Chinese music and culture in the international music and cultural center of Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty [6]. Notably, the introduction of Chinese zheng culture to the Korean peninsula during this period led to the creation of the gayageum, an instrument closely resembling the zheng in terms of appearance, materials, and playing techniques. The gayageum is an ancient Korean traditional instrument that's made of paulownia and has twelve strings, each sequentially named A, B, C, D, E, and so on. Zheng culture also spread to Japan, exerting a significant and far-reaching influence on koto and Japanese music culture. The Tale of Genji, a famous Japanese classical novel, records various aspects of ancient Japanese society, including social, political, economic, cultural, and daily life, as well as the history of local women proficient in playing the zheng. These women were not only skilled zheng players but also highly cultured and refined individuals with a profound reverence for music. Due to the significant number of Japanese missions sent to China during this period to learn about Chinese musical instruments and music culture, Jinchi Yoroku compiled by Fujiwara no Moronaga contains detailed records of zheng scores, techniques, tuning, and modes from the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, the music played in Japan during this period was a cultural import from China, laying the foundation for the development of koto.

During the prosperous era of the Tang Dynasty in China, characterized by significant advancements in politics, economy, and culture, there emerged a large number of zheng performers. They created numerous works, demonstrating a wide range of playing techniques, which contributed to the maturity of zheng performance techniques. Esteemed literati praised the zheng through extensive poetry and literature, highlighting its exquisite craftsmanship during this period. Serving as a cultural ambassador, the zheng symbolized China's friendly exchanges with foreign nations, showcasing the nation's rich traditional culture to the world. This validates the poem, "Among the seated guests at the packed banquet, not a word is spoken, while the row of mournful wild geese produce thirteen different tones." Additionally, renowned Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi wrote a poem to express the significance of the zheng, stating, "Speeding their carts, people go to see the peonies; galloping their horses, they go to listen to the Qin zheng." The thriving development of the guzheng industry today owes much to the foundation laid during this historical period of zheng development.

5. Song, Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties (960–1368)

During the Song, Liao, and Jin Dynasties, the development of the zheng continued its flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty. In this era, the zheng experienced vigorous development and gained widespread popularity, benefiting from the groundwork laid in previous times. In the feudal society of the Song and Yuan Dynasties in China, significant changes occurred in politics, economy, and culture, directly resulting in musical differences from earlier eras [7]. The period witnessed a historical transformation in court music, moving away from the grandiose and extensive performances of the Tang Dynasty towards more refined and delicate

compositions. Purely instrumental solo performances on the guzheng gained prominence. Exceptional performances were highly regarded and unprecedented. During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, there was an unequalled prosperity in the commodity economy. The urban population and the middle class grew. As a result, in their leisure time, people developed folk music and arts to cultivate their sentiments, relieve stress, and relax. Fixed performance venues, such as the goulan (theaters in the form of fenced-off rings) in the wazi (tile districts, amusement centers), emerged. Performances now exhibited characteristics of a commodity economy, requiring payment for attendance. Some performers even made a living solely from such performances to support themselves and their families. The guzheng also gained admiration from literati and intellectuals. Xu Chuchu emerged as a prominent figure in this era, akin to Xue Qionqiong in the Tang Dynasty. The Song Dynasty poet Liu Guo highly praised her artistry and admired her skill. Additionally, Yan Jidao and his father Yan Shu, as well as the eminent literary figure Ouyang Xiu, expressed high regard for the guzheng in their poetry. Famous personalities such as Su Dongpo, Zhang Xiaoxiang, the patriotic poet Lu You, and the heroic figure Yue Fei also highly affirmed the value of the guzheng. These accolades boosted the development of the guzheng, enabling individuals to use guzheng to express emotions. Guzheng became much more expressive and artistic. As a result, the guzheng not only flourished in the imperial court but also became widely popular in the streets and alleys across the country. Folk music gradually becoming the mainstream of music culture at that time. These developments injected fresh vitality into the music of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, pushing folk singing and instrumental performance to new historical peaks.

During the Song Dynasty, the guzheng continued to hold a significant position in the instrumental performances of the imperial court. This era witnessed the emergence of various musical performance arts, such as vocal arts, including songs and recitations. Representative works include Jiang Kui's "Slow Tune of Yangzhou" and "Songs of the Whitestone Daoist." Additionally, there were various other musical forms such as changzhuan (narrative singing), yuan sanqu (aria-style poetry), and recitations, which included guzici (storytelling with drum accompaniment), zhugongdiao (similar to chantefables), and huolanger (street vendors' songs). In the realm of theatrical music, traditional forms such as Song zaju (variety play) music, Yuan zaju music, and nanxi (Southern Opera) music emerged. These diverse art forms required accompaniment by the guzheng, leading to the development of a wide variety of small-scale solo and ensemble pieces. During grand festivals and diplomatic celebrations in the imperial court, as well as in everyday entertainment such as singing and dancing, the presence of guzheng performances or accompaniment was indispensable. This underscores that the zheng also gained particular prominence during this period and the level of performance also reached a fairly high level. Consequently, the guzheng gained renewed vitality, leading to the emergence of novel forms of performance art.

Liao, Jin, and Western Xia Dynasties were established by ethnic minorities from the northern regions from the 10th to the early 13th century [8]. These ethnic minorities had close exchanges and frequent interactions with the Han culture of the time, mutually absorbing and learning from each other in terms of music and culture. In accordance with the rules of the imperial Jiao Fang in the Song Dynasty, the guzheng was

considered one of the main solo instruments for singing, performances, festival celebrations, and other occasions. It not only appeared in ensemble performances but also as a solo instrument. The historical records during the Jin and Yuan Dynasties highlighted the guzheng and the pipa as accompanying instruments, resulting in a plethora of ensemble and orchestral music involving the two instruments. The most complete collection of these pieces known today is the *Various Modes of the Romance of the Western Chamber* which documented the art form of *changzhuan* was primarily accompanied by guzheng. One famous representative artist in this regard was Zhang Wuniu. Since then many forms of recitations have used the guzheng as accompaniment, highlighting the significant role of the guzheng in traditional narrative arts. Therefore, the *Various Modes of the Romance of the Western Chamber* serves as a valuable reference for subsequent studies. Thanks to this well-preserved document, scholars can truly grasp how the guzheng evolved during that era and its firm status as a traditional instrument back then. Another notable figure from the Song Dynasty, the poet Zhang Yan, was exceptionally skilled in guzheng performance. In his later years, he authored a specialized treatise on *ci* (song lyrics) titled *Ci Yuan* (Source of *Ci*), which comprehensively summarized and discussed the creation, notation, rhythm, and combination of *ci* and music, making it the first treatise on *Ci Yue* (*Ci* and Music) in China [9]. In this treatise, he not only discussed the guzheng but also demonstrated his profound mastery and detailed descriptions of guzheng techniques. His work played a crucial role in subsequent studies of music theory, *ci*, and music.

Yuan zaju, developed from the Song and Jin dynasties' *zaju*, is a highly mature form of theatrical art in the Yuan Dynasty [10]. Its historical significance rivals that of Tang poetry and Song *ci* as distinctive cultural symbols. *Yuan zaju* mainly revolves around *Qu* (a type of classical Chinese poetry form), typically organized into four or five acts. The primarily used instruments were still guzheng, pipa, and other plucked instruments. As mentioned earlier, performers during this period had designated performance venues, known as *goulan* in *wazi*, where *Yuan zaju* performances were quite common. Moreover, the ability to perform in such venues was a very important factor in measuring the level of expertise and professionalism of an artist. The widespread use of the guzheng during this time contributed to the formation of two major styles: *Nanqu* (music in the south) and *Beiqu* (music in the north). *Beiqu* tends to be more passionate, vigorous, and mournful, with a preference for modal variations such as *bian zhi* (raised 4), and *bian gong* (lowered 7). In contrast, *Nanqu* is characterized by its delicate, graceful, and slow-paced melodies.

This period is also known for the early famous guzheng piece "*Bai Ling Que*," (white-feathered sparrow) which gained widespread acclaim at the time. The composer of this piece, drawing inspiration from nature, expressed his lofty aspirations and noble character by depicting the courage of the white-feathered bird in battling fierce beasts to protect its homeland. This piece became famous during that era, and its symbolism became widely known, eventually evolving into a well-known traditional guzheng piece, "*Haiqing Na Tian'e*," (*Gyrfalcon Seizes a Swan*) frequently performed by musicians. Additionally, during this period, the guzheng was bestowed with various flattering titles, similar to the decoration and embellishment of the guzheng mentioned in the *Complete Tang Poems*. These appellations included

"silver zheng," "beautiful zheng," "jade zheng," "ivory zheng," "embellished zheng," "treasure guzheng," "thirteen strings," and the newly emerged "fourteen strings," all praising the guzheng. Here, it is worth noting that during the Warring States period, the guzheng was a five-string instrument. By the Tang and Song dynasties, it gradually developed into twelve and thirteen strings. In this period, the 14-string zheng was further developed on the basis of its predecessors, which undoubtedly reflected the improvement of the manufacturing level of the instrument and the enrichment of theoretical knowledge, playing techniques and artistic expression. The development of guzheng conformed to the aesthetics and the changing needs of the times. Guzheng was also favored by the literati at this time. Zheng performers, such as Xue Qionqiong, a renowned guzheng artist from the Tang Dynasty were praised in many literary works, such as *Quan Yuan Qu* (the Complete collection of Qu). Many poems were dedicated to praising Xue Qionqiong. Numerous other zheng players were mentioned in *Quan Song Ci* (the Complete Collection of Song Lyrics). Although countless others were not recorded in these works, they were equally important. The diverse community of guzheng players played a pivotal role in the remarkable achievements in music, culture, and the arts during this era. Among the more famous guzheng players was Zhang Kejiu, who expressed his emotions through guzheng performances, whether during outdoor excursions, banquets, or festive occasions. In the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions during this period, another popular form of guzheng performance emerged known as *zhengge* (guzheng songs). In addition to traditional solo, ensemble, and orchestral forms, people in this region often sang while playing the guzheng. One notable figure in guzheng songs was Jiang Kangzhi, who sang Zhang Kejiu's famous pieces but presented them in a unique style. In addition to new forms, the techniques of guzheng performance also advanced. The use of both hands to play the guzheng, which first appeared in the Tang Dynasty, broke the tradition of using the left hand to press the strings and the right hand to play. By the Song Dynasty, both techniques—left-hand pressing and right-hand playing, and two-handed playing—held equal importance. However, by the Yuan Dynasty, two-handed playing had become widespread, indicating the peak of guzheng artistry during this period, marking a brilliant chapter in its history.

6. Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911)

The Ming Dynasty was established in 1368 after the Yuan Dynasty. During the Ming and the Qing Dynasties there was a significant further development in political, economic, and cultural exchanges. The emergence of capitalism, extensive interactions among ethnic groups, close relations with neighboring countries, and exchanges with foreign missionaries all positively influenced the development of Chinese instrumental music. As a result, the instrumental music of the Ming and Qing dynasties entered a new stage of historical development. There were numerous schools of pipa and guqin. A group of famous performers emerged. Many collections of guqin scores, pipa scores, and other instrumental scores were published. Instrumental ensemble music diversified further during this period, featuring a variety of string ensembles, Xi'an drum music, Fujian Nan Yin, and Chaozhou Xianshi (or Teochew string music) [11].

The development of the guzheng during this period was crucial, laying a solid foundation for the prosperity of the modern and contemporary guzheng industry. The form of the guzheng became increasingly mature, and due to geographical location, cultural factors, regional characteristics, etc., several major schools of guzheng emerged. With the emergence of these major schools came numerous influential pieces known as “traditional repertoire,” which served to assess the basic skills of guzheng performers.

Due to the widespread dissemination of the guzheng piece Bai Ling Que during the Yuan Dynasty, it survived into the Ming and Qing Dynasties. People often performed this piece, but its sound and charm fell far short of the vigor and depth of the original composition. Kang Hai emerged as a prominent musical figure during this period. He developed a close bond with the guzheng, considering it his most intimate companion. Whenever he met with friends for social gatherings, he would spend the entire night playing the guzheng and singing, a habit that became second nature to him. He also frequently used the instrument to express his emotions whenever he encountered a poignant moment. He would also play to celebrate the birthdays of his friends, expressing genuine joy for their happiness. He composed a poem titled Zheng Poem to praise the guzheng, which gained recognition from intellectuals. The poem mainly described his observation of a neighbor playing the guzheng, employing exceptionally delicate language that vividly recreated the scene, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the moment. The poem not only praised the superb skill of the guzheng player but also celebrated the ability of the music to genuinely move the listeners and evoke a resonance with the audience. The organic unity of music, emotion, expression, and performance was achieved at a highly elevated level. Kang Hai's in-law, Wang Jiushi, had a close relationship with him, and their bond was akin to that of lifelong friends. Wang Jiushi held Kang Hai's guzheng skills in high regard. Both men had their unique insights into the guzheng and a strong interest in it. Even when experiencing difficulties in life, Wang Jiushi would play the guzheng with common people, many of whom were proficient players themselves. This reflected the saying “the masters are among the common people” and highlighted the flourishing development of the guzheng during that period. Additionally, the two had a close friend with a huge age gap, Li Kaixian, a renowned literary figure, playwright and bibliophile from Shandong Province during the mid-Ming Dynasty. He was known for his “poetry mountain and ci sea” [12]. Due to his close association with Kang Hai and Wang Jiushi, Li Kaixian brought the guzheng culture back to his hometown, where it became widespread, laying the foundation for the formation of the Shandong guzheng school in the future.

Following the development of Song and Yuan dramas such as zaju and zhugongdiao, there emerged a form of traditional opera called bangzi qiang in Shaanxi and other regions around the mid-Ming period. It absorbed the essence of previous drama genres and adopted regional characteristics. Bangzi qiang was initially named for the use of jujube wood clappers. Since it originated in the Qin region of Shaanxi and Gansu, it is also called Qin qiang. The melodies are high-pitched and intense, with strong and rapid rhythms [13]. Qin qiang possesses strong regional characteristics and is one of China's precious intangible cultural heritages. Qin qiang is renowned alongside the “four major Chinese opera singing styles” of Jiangnan such as Haiyan qiang, Yuyao qiang, Yiyang qiang,

and Kunshan qiang. This period saw the flourishing development of Qin qiang, with a significant contribution from the guzheng as the main accompanying or solo instrument. Therefore, Qin qiang and the guzheng have an inseparable relationship. As it is a drama form with local characteristics, Qin qiang inevitably incorporates local folklore, customs, dialects, and intonations. Qin qiang contains “hua yin” (happy tunes) and “ku yin” (sad tunes), also known as “huan yin” (joyful tunes) and “ku yin” (mournful tunes). The most distinctive feature is the alteration of the “fa” and “si” notes. These two altered notes in Qin qiang and the guzheng accompaniment are different from the ordinary “fa” and “si.” “Fa” is slightly raised by a semitone from the original one, called “wei sheng fa,” while “si” is slightly lowered by a semitone, called “wei jiang si.” The rich cultural heritage helped the guzheng players in Qin qiang improve their skills which reached a state of profound mastery and a harmonious unity of the player, instrument, and music. The skill improvement also led to a deeper emotional expression, with performers fully immersing themselves in the music and demonstrating a profound connection with the music. These veteran artists not only performed in formal settings but also, during their leisure time. After meals, and gatherings, they would take out the guzheng to express their emotions or entertain themselves. It was this deep affection for the instrument that compelled Qin qiang artists to bring their performances to the capital, Beijing. They received praise and even surpassed Kunqu opera from the southern regions. Qin qiang became a leading dramatic genre at the time. The achievements of the guzheng artists, such as Li Jie and female guzheng players, Xue Susu and Liu Rushi, during this period were extensively documented in historical records. They contributed significantly to the glorious development of the guzheng industry in that era.

From the Yuan Dynasty, narrative arts included guzici, zhugongdiao, huoalnger while Song zaju, Yuan zaju, and Southern Opera were forms of dramatic arts. This evolution continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties. Diverse artistic forms emerged, such as the “four major Chinese opera singing styles” and Qin qiang in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Thanks to the inchoate capitalist economy, numerous folk artists across different regions were able to make a living with instrumental performances. They were required to adapt to the societal development and cater to the aesthetic preferences of the public. As a result, these artists delved into scholarly studies to enhance their professional skills, creating numerous works that resonated with the masses. They continually improved their performances to meet the evolving societal and aesthetic demands, aiming to evoke emotional and spiritual resonance between performers and audience. Moreover, given China's vast territory and rich cultural diversity, local customs, traditions, and cultural factors significantly influenced the styles of music performances in different regions. Over time, these regional styles became distinct, giving rise to various schools of guzheng playing with unique characteristics. Guzheng's popularity extended beyond the Han Chinese population to ethnic minority communities such as Xinjiang, Qinghai, Korean, and Mongolian regions, where it was widely appreciated and circulated. In the Qing Dynasty, guzheng also appeared in poems and literary works. Many poems celebrated the guzheng as an accompaniment or a solo instrument in Qin qiang performances and highlighted its revered position as a cultural emblem. Esteemed poets and scholars of the Qing

Dynasty conveyed their feelings through guzheng-inspired literary creations, each infused with unique traits and emotions.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with a solid foundation laid by earlier developments in instrumental music, solo performances became less common. Instead, ensemble performances featuring various instruments together became increasingly prevalent, occurring in diverse settings. During this time, “Xiansuo Beikao” (String Music Reference) emerged as the earliest and most comprehensive compilation in the history of Chinese instrumental music, containing ensemble scores for stringed instruments. “Xiansuo Beikao,” also known as the “Xiansuo Shisan Tao,” (13 Suites for Strings) was compiled by Mongolian scholar Rong Zhai during the Qing Dynasty. Its preface was written in the nineteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1814) [14]. It comprises a collection of ensemble scores primarily for stringed instruments, representing Chinese chamber music at the time. From the perspectives of performance techniques, notation methods, ensemble repertoire, and performance forms, it stands as invaluable documentation of Chinese ensemble music. Its existence demonstrates a significant breakthrough in performance formats, paving the way for the development of modern and diverse forms of ensemble music featuring different instrumental accompaniments. Prior to the publication of this work, traditional Chinese music pedagogy primarily relied on oral transmission. However, with the publication of complete ensemble scores like “Xiansuo Beikao,” a new era of ensemble music notation began.

In this period, not only did China continue the cultural exchanges with neighboring countries like Japan and Korea, but thanks to the development of Western industry and advancements in maritime navigation during this period, Western missionaries also entered Chinese territory, introducing Western culture. This marked the beginning of formal exchanges between Chinese and Western musical cultures, a historic moment spearheaded by Italian missionary Matteo Ricci. While introducing Western music to China, Ricci also actively introduced Chinese music, operas, and musical instruments to the West. His work, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, written in Italian, was translated into Latin, French, German, English, and other languages, playing a significant role in facilitating Western understanding of Chinese music.

7. Conclusion

From then on, Chinese musical culture embarked on a journey to the world. Simultaneously, China began to recognize the differences between Western and Chinese musical cultures. There are significant differences between Western and Chinese musical cultures in terms of musical instruments, composition theories and techniques, orchestration approaches, compositions, and performers. Over the course of history, from the evolution of performance

styles and notation methods to later exchanges with global musical cultures, the journey towards the birth and development of modern guzheng concertos has been a natural progression. These advancements have provided a sturdy groundwork for the thriving contemporary guzheng industry. Hence, the prosperity and growth of today’s guzheng industry are the organic outcomes of historical evolution and the culmination of long-term interactions.

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