

From Margins to Center Stage: The Changing Role of Women in Guqin Musical Tradition

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Abstract: The art of the guqin is an important component of traditional Chinese musical culture and has long been lauded as the “instrument of the gentleman”. Over the course of its long development, the art of the guqin has developed a unique cultural significance. However, throughout the history of guqin art, men have long dominated the field; the presence of female guqin players has not been prominent, and research on this aspect remains limited. By reviewing historical documents and contemporary sources, this paper analyzes how the gender structure of guqin art has evolved over time, and examines the influence of female guqin players at various stages of this history. This study adopts the analytical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence, along with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, combining theory with historical evidence to reveal the gender power relations and their changes embedded in the field of guqin art. The results show that female qin players in ancient times were exceedingly rare and remained marginalized for a long period, a phenomenon rooted in unequal distribution of cultural capital and the workings of symbolic power. Since the 20th century, however, female qin players have gradually risen and played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of guqin traditions. In contemporary guqin art, the gender structure has shifted significantly, with women now becoming the central force in guqin heritage transmission and dissemination. This transformation has not only injected new impetus into the development of guqin art, but also challenged existing gender norms by reinterpreting the traditional gender image of the “qin dao ren”(琴道人). This paper not only fills a gap in research on female qin players, but also holds significant implications for understanding gender equality issues in the realm of traditional arts.

Keywords: guqin Art; Gender Structure; Female guqin Players; Symbolic Violence; Gender Performativity.

1. Introduction

Guqin is one of the oldest plucked string instruments in Chinese civilization and is imbued with rich cultural symbolism. It has a history of more than three thousand years and has been listed by UNESCO as part of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Historically, the art of the guqin was closely connected to the culture of the Chinese literati; playing the qin was seen as a refined activity for self-cultivation and emotional expression. As a result, the guqin was often referred to as the “instrument of scholar-officials” or the “instrument of gentlemen.” This traditional positioning meant that for a long time the art of the guqin was mainly dominated by elite men. Most of the classic stories in the qin tradition across history revolve around male qin players. For instance, in the pre-Qin era, there is the tale of Bo Ya and Ziqi and the melody “High Mountains and Flowing Water”(高山流水); in the Wei-Jin period, Ji Kang famously played “Guangling San”(广陵散) before his execution; in the Song dynasty, Fan Zhongyan used the qin for self-motivation, and Su Shi played the qin to convey his sentiments. In the long historical lineage of qin studies, those who achieved notable accomplishments were overwhelmingly male, with female qin players being very few, and very little historical documentation about them has survived.

This gender imbalance in the field of guqin art is manifested not only in practice, but also in the dearth of research on the topic. In this context, “gender structure” refers to the makeup of participants of different genders in the field of guqin art — including their numbers, roles, and positions of authority. This imbalance raises thought-provoking

questions: over the course of the guqin’s millennia of development, what role did women actually play? Why are their artistic practices and cultural contributions so little known? These questions are crucial not only for a comprehensive understanding of guqin history, but also for re-examining gender relations within the realm of traditional musical culture. This article is grounded in the intersection of guqin history and gender studies, and holds important academic and practical significance: on one hand, it enriches our understanding of the developmental course of guqin art by incorporating historically overlooked female experiences into the discussion; on the other hand, it resonates with contemporary society’s concern for gender equality in traditional arts, providing new cases and perspectives for exploring gender roles in cultural heritage transmission. Furthermore, this topic aligns with the trend of feminist research in the international musicology community. Since the latter half of the 20th century, Western scholars have begun to introduce gender analysis into music studies and have called for uncovering female musicians who have been ignored by history (McClary 1991). Therefore, research on the gender structure of guqin art and on female qin players not only broadens the scope of traditional Chinese music research, but also offers a valuable Chinese case for music-and-gender studies in a global context.

To deepen the exploration of the above issues, this paper introduces a sociocultural theoretical perspective, utilizing Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and theory of symbolic violence to analyze the underlying causes of gender imbalance in the field of guqin art. At the same time, it applies Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to analyze how female qin players construct and challenge gender identity through artistic practice. Bourdieu’s theory

emphasizes that the possession and distribution of cultural resources relate to the reproduction of social power structures (Bourdieu 1986). From this perspective, guqin mastery, as a form of cultural capital, was long monopolized by men, and the impact of this monopoly on the gender structure warrants closer examination. So-called symbolic violence refers to how those in power legitimize and naturalize their domination through cultural symbols, leading the dominated (women) to also accept and internalize the notion that “the Way of the Qin belongs to men, and women’s music cannot ascend to the halls of elegance”, and thus—whether consciously or unconsciously—women distance themselves from this field (Bourdieu 2001). This gentle and covert exercise of power caused the absence of female qin players to be seen not as an injustice, but rather accepted as part of the cultural tradition, resulting in a “misrecognition” of gender inequality. Meanwhile, Butler’s theory of gender performativity points out that gender is not an innate essence, but rather the result of repeated behaviors “performed” in social contexts (Butler 1990: 191). From this perspective, we can explore how women, when they engage in the practice of guqin art, either adhere to or break with prevailing gender norms. Using these theoretical frameworks in conjunction with extensive historical and contemporary sources, and without altering the original narrative framework or historical facts, this paper provides a comprehensive review and interpretation of the evolution of the gender structure in the history of guqin art and the influence of female qin players. This research not only aims to fill the academic gap in studies of female qin players, but also hopes to offer new ideas and perspectives for gender studies in the field of traditional arts.

Existing research on the guqin is primarily concentrated in fields such as musicology, history, and cultural studies, and relatively limited attention has been paid to the gender dimension of the guqin art. Research on the guqin has been gradually emerging in overseas Sinology, but works that focus on gender issues remain few. Domestically, scholars like Dai Wei (2013; 2019) and Ye Mengjia (2023) have begun to pay attention to topics such as female qin players of the Han, Song, and Ming dynasties. Comprehensive historical works have also included chapters on women qin players—for instance, Yi Cunguo’s *Chinese Guqin Art* (Yi 2004) and *Charm of Qin Melody* (Yi 2010) each contain chapters titled “Guqin and Women”. Additionally, Zhang Zhentao (2017: 107–131) conducted biographical studies of female qin players. Overall, systematic research on the gender structure of the guqin field is still in its early stages. This paper aims to fill this academic gap by conducting a historical review and multi-case analysis to present a complete picture of the evolution of the gender structure in guqin art, and to analyze its underlying causes and impacts. This study is significant not only for music history, but also for understanding how traditional culture’s gender roles change in modern social transformations, thereby providing useful insights for broader research on intangible cultural heritage transmission.

2. Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach that combines historical document analysis with sociocultural theory. First, by systematically combing through literature such as qin treatises from various dynasties, prefaces and postscripts of qin music scores, biographies, poetry collections, and modern music history works (for example, *History of the Qin, Biographies of Qin Players Through the Ages, Collected*

Works on Qin Studies, etc.), we have collected data and cases of female guqin players from different periods, including information on their lives, musical activities, and social contexts. In this process, attention was paid to cross-comparing official historical records with informal notes and miscellaneous accounts, in order to reconstruct as much as possible the activities of female qin players in history. Second, we compiled relevant accounts, interviews, and oral histories of guqin transmission practices from the modern era onward (such as *Oral History of Qin Players in Shu* and *Oral History Study of Guqin Transmission among Guangzhou Qin Players*, etc.), focusing on the roles and contributions of female qin players in the revival of guqin art since the 20th century—for example, their participation in music education, repertoire compilation, qin society activities, and other areas. At the same time, contemporary survey data on guqin transmission were consulted to ascertain the current gender ratio in the guqin field.

At the stage of analysis, this paper introduces Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of cultural capital and symbolic violence to interpret the gender inequality phenomenon in the field of guqin art from a sociological perspective. This theoretical perspective helps to reveal the power reproduction mechanisms behind the gender imbalance in the qin world. Meanwhile, Butler’s theory of gender performativity is used to examine how female qin players “perform” their gender roles within the qin community, construct their own agency, and challenge established norms. By corroborating multiple sources and incorporating these theoretical perspectives, this paper, while preserving the original narrative framework and viewpoint, strengthens the in-depth analysis of the materials.

3. Discussion and Results

3.1. Female Qin Players in Ancient Times: Few and Far Between

In ancient Chinese society, the art of the guqin was deeply integrated into the cultural life of the male literati class; while female qin players were not entirely absent, they were indeed extremely rare. In historical records from the pre-Qin and Han through the Ming and Qing periods, only scattered references to women playing the qin can be found. These include talented young ladies from literati families as well as courtesan entertainers from common backgrounds, but they are often absent from official qin histories, existing only in fragmentary and marginal forms. The iconic images of female qin players recorded in qin history are only a handful. For example, at the end of the Eastern Han, Cai Wenji was proficient in music theory and is said to have composed the qin piece “Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute” (*hujia shiba pai*, 胡笳十八拍) which has been passed down through the ages, making her a legendary female figure in qin history; in addition, texts such as the Eastern Jin dynasty *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (Liu 2017) include stories of virtuous women adept at the qin, serving to highlight models of women possessing both talent and virtue. In the Song dynasty, the talented woman Zhu Shuzhen was reportedly skilled at the qin and wrote poetry extolling the delights of the instrument. In the Southern Song, Yang Guizhi (historically known as Empress Yang) was also versed in music and was mentioned in historical documents (Dai 2019). Around the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties, there emerged some highly talented female qin players. For instance, Liu Rushi (late Ming to early

Qing) was accomplished in poetry and skilled in qin music, and she is often depicted together with the guqin (Dai 2013). In the Qing dynasty, female qin players like Ye Xiaoluan and Xu Fo also made a name for themselves in literati gathering circles (Dai 2013).

Besides written records, paintings from the Tang dynasty onward also frequently depict female qin players. For example, famous paintings such as *Diao Qin Chuo Ming Tu* (调琴啜茗图) by the Tang painter Zhou Fang, *Jiapai Tu* (筇拍图) by Song painter Gong Kai, *Xie Qin Shinv Tu* (携琴仕女图) by Qing painter Huang Shen, and *Shinv Baoqin Tu* (仕女抱琴图) by Gai Qi all depict women playing the qin, showing that women playing the qin was an activity of elegant interest in boudoirs and a form of courtly entertainment (Zhang Liuyi 2022). In the Qing dynasty, Xu Zhen in *Portraits of Beauties* (*meiren tu*, 美人图) even explicitly listed “qin playing” as the foremost skill that a beautiful woman should possess (Xu 2014). These examples fully demonstrate that women were not entirely unconnected with the qin throughout history. However, compared to the grand situation of male qin masters writing treatises and taking on many disciples, female qin players could usually only appear sporadically in the form of “boudoir qin pastimes” or anecdotal tales. Their real deeds and contributions to qin art were seldom systematically recorded, let alone thoroughly researched. In most cases, women’s qin-playing activities were treated merely as an accessory or ornament to their virtues and talents; historical narratives often brushed over them, making it difficult for women to occupy a place in the official history of qin scholarship.

From a statistical perspective, the women recorded in qin history from ancient times are very few in number. According to collations of qin historical materials, among the roughly over 700 individuals included in qin biographical records through the ages, only about one tenth are women (Thompson 2016). Although this ratio is not entirely precise, it directly reflects the extent of gender imbalance in the qin world. In fact, female qin players generally came from two social groups: first, talented young ladies from prominent families who received a good education and for whom learning the qin was mostly a form of self-cultivation or part of a family artistic tradition; second, professional courtesans and songstresses active in social circles, who used qin performance to entertain, often displaying superb skill and gaining considerable fame in their time. For example, in the first category, Empress Dowager Yang of the Northern Song imperial clan was reputed to be proficient in qin art; in the second category, famous courtesans like Li Shishi were renowned for their qin skills. Whether it was praise for literati women playing the qin or enthusiastic talk about the qin skills of courtesans, both indicate that although women had opportunities to engage with qin music, their social and artistic activity space was confined to private households or specific courtesan entertainment venues. Their artistic achievements lacked formal evaluation systems and lineages of transmission at the time, making it very difficult for them to be enshrined in qin history like their male counterparts.

From the perspective of Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, guqin skill, as a form of cultural capital symbolizing elite status, was traditionally monopolized by men and transmitted across generations through master-apprentice relationships (Bourdieu 1986). Mastery of the qin not only signifies artistic

accomplishment, but also serves as a marker of social status and cultural cultivation. In a patriarchal society, women generally lacked equal avenues to acquire this form of cultural capital, and their scarcity in the qin field was taken as only natural. This phenomenon can be seen as an embodiment of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence: the dominant group (male literati) legitimizes and naturalizes their monopoly over cultural capital, causing the subordinate group (women) to also accept and internalize the notion that “the Way of the Qin belongs to men, and the sounds of the inner chambers cannot reach the halls of elegance”, and thereby, whether consciously or unconsciously, to stay away from this field (Bourdieu 2001). This mild and hidden power operation made the absence of female qin players not seen as unjust, but rather taken as a part of cultural tradition, forming a “misrecognition” of gender inequality. As a result, historical writing often overlooked the existence and contributions of female qin players; even if they occasionally appeared, they lacked the voice to make themselves heard. Behind the historical reality that female qin players in ancient times were exceedingly rare lies the influence of a deep-seated social and cultural structure at work—male elites, by monopolizing qin artistry as cultural capital, reinforced the association of qin practice with masculine literati identity, and in a subtle, unconscious way excluded women from the orthodox qin community. We have reason to believe that many extraordinarily talented female qin players may not have been recorded in history; their artistic lives were buried by the social norms of their time, which is exactly an illustration of symbolic power at work.

It is worth noting that the ancients did not completely deny the value of women learning the qin. Some traditional views even regarded qin skill as a virtue and talent that an accomplished woman should possess. The Qing-dynasty playwright Li Yu, in his work *Xianqing Ouji* (闲情偶寄), argued that women in the inner chambers should also be versed in the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting, and he particularly emphasized the importance of learning the qin (Li 2000). Similarly, in the Qing novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*honglou meng*, 红楼梦), the character Lin Daiyu also commented on the function of qin music, saying: “The qin is an instrument of restraint. The ancients created it originally to regulate oneself, cultivate one’s temperament, suppress licentiousness, and eliminate extravagance” (Cao 2008). This shows that the ancients expected qin music to have a moral edifying effect on its player. These discourses affirm the act of women playing the qin on the level of moral ideals, viewing qin proficiency as an important component of a talented lady’s character. However, such views mostly remained at the level of ideals; in reality, the circumstances and opportunities for women to study the qin were still extremely limited. The bias of formal educational resources, the restrictions of social etiquette, and the network barriers in the transmission of skills all made it exceedingly difficult for the vast majority of women to step into the public qin arena. Only a few women, either those from high-ranking gentry families or those in professional music positions, had the possibility of receiving systematic qin training and achieving success.

3.2. Modern Transition: Emergence of Female Qin Players and Continuation of the Tradition

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese society

underwent intense turmoil and transformation, and the traditional cultural ecosystem was impacted. The guqin, as a symbol of the old literati lifestyle, at one point faced the crisis of decline or even possible extinction. Yet in the midst of crisis, opportunity also emerged: some women from scholarly families began to have the chance to learn and carry on guqin techniques, becoming key figures in bridging ancient and modern. It can be said that in the early to mid-20th century, the emergence and active presence of a few female qin players was a signal that the gender structure of the guqin world was beginning to loosen.

During the Republican period, influenced by modern education and the women's emancipation movement, the space for women to participate in artistic activities expanded somewhat. Although the guqin circle was still predominantly male, there were sporadic records of women learning the guqin. For example, records indicate that at that time, in guqin society gatherings in places like Shanghai and Beijing, women occasionally attended (Jinyu Qin Society 1937: 235–253). However, because the guqin community was relatively conservative and small in scale, female qin players were still rare and failed to attract broad attention. In the domains of other traditional instruments that were more popular at the time, such as the pipa and guzheng, women performers had begun to rise; but with the guqin being a highbrow, niche art, women's involvement was very limited.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), society promoted the ideal of gender equality and the slogan that “women hold up half the sky”, giving women more opportunities to participate in the arts. However, from the early years of the new nation through the Cultural Revolution, the guqin was regarded as a feudal relic and was largely neglected. Many surviving qin score collections and techniques were lost, and the community of qin players shrank to only a very few stalwarts. In this context, women who managed to persist in studying the guqin were all the more remarkable. Yet it was precisely in this extremely difficult era that a few female qin musicians stepped forward to take on the mission of safeguarding the guqin, and their experiences can only be described as legendary.

According to statistics from a guqin music recording project organized by Zha Fuxi and others in the 1950s, among the qin players whose music was recorded at that time, the proportion of women was very small, constituting only a tiny fraction of those recorded (Thompson 2016). In the *1956 Guqin Interview Work Report*, women accounted for only 14% of the qin players recorded in the 1950s (Lin 2008: 49). This shows that women were still scarce in the qin world at that time. However, these women qin players who emerged in the mid-20th century played an indispensable role at the critical juncture when guqin transmission was in danger of breaking off. Among them, the more notable figures include:

Yue Ying (1904–1974): Born into a prominent musical family in Beijing, she learned the qin from childhood under familial tutelage. She was one of the very few outstanding female qin players in modern times, and was hailed as the only female representative among the traditional “Old Eight Masters” (*laoba zhang*, 老八张) of qin schools. Yue Ying's qin style was vigorous and austere, and her technique was superb. According to records, pieces she played such as “Yueyang Sanzui” (岳阳三醉) and “Dragon Roars over the Sea” (*canghai longyin*, 沧海龙吟) were performed with great depth of expression. In the early years of the PRC, she

took part in activities of the Beijing Guqin Research Society and other gatherings. In 1956, Yue Ying served as a council member of the Beijing Guqin Research Society, and in December 1958 she formally joined the Chinese Musicians' Association, becoming a unique presence in the qin world of her time. Although limited by the era and unable to take on many students, her recordings were preserved in collections such as *Complete Collection of Chinese Music: Guqin Volume and Sounds of Silence—Guqin Audio-Visual Treasures from Recent Masters*, becoming precious references for later generations (Huayin Net 2022).

Cai Deyun (1905–2007): A renowned female qin artist and educator active in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Cai Deyun was a disciple of the Fanchuan school, and her qin style was refined and elegant. During the Japanese invasion of China, she moved to Hong Kong, and starting in 1964 taught guqin at the New Asia College in Hong Kong. She worked diligently for over forty years, and nearly the entire Hong Kong guqin community studied under her either directly or indirectly. It can be said that single-handedly she sowed the seeds of guqin in Hong Kong, nurturing numerous qin players. Cai Deyun was also versed in poetry, calligraphy, and painting, embodying both virtue and artistry. She was honored as the founder and emblematic figure of Hong Kong's qin community (Yung 2008).

Wang Di (1926–2019): A famous guqin performer and ethnomusicologist. Wang studied qin from an early age under Master Guan Pinghu, becoming a transmitter of the Jiuyi school, and later pursued advanced studies in the Composition Department of the Central Conservatory of Music (hereafter CCOM). Beginning in the 1950s, she engaged in guqin research at the China Art Research Institute for over half a century, making great contributions to the excavation and collation of qin pieces. She took part in compiling major qin works such as *Collection of Qin Pieces and Biographies of Qin Players Through the Ages*, and edited and published *Guan Pinghu Guqin Music Collection* and other important qin texts. As the first generation of female guqin professionals trained in New China, Wang Di embodied a fusion of the scholar and the performer (Chen 2010). Additionally, she combined the traditional experience of qin players with modern academic methods by teaching qin studies courses at universities, helping to move guqin art from private transmission into the public education system. From Wang's story, we can see that once female qin players are able to enter professional platforms and accumulate significant cultural capital, the influence they exert in the qin world is in no way inferior to that of their male predecessors.

Ye Mingpei (1929–2022): One of the founders of the Suzhou Wumen Qin Society (*wumen qinshu*, 吴门琴社). Ye Mingpei began studying the qin at age 14, apprenticing under many famous masters such as Yang Ziyong, Zhang Ziqian, Xu Yuanbai, and Li Mingde. Her qin career spanned over 70 years; her playing style was delicate and graceful, blending the styles of various schools. As a woman in the mid-20th century, she bravely became a disciple of multiple male guqin grandmasters, and through diligence and hard work she distinguished herself (Yang and Guzile 2023). Ye not only had exquisite qin skills herself, but also devoted herself to qin society activities and mentoring younger players, becoming a highly respected elder of the contemporary qin community.

However, when these female qin artists first began to make their mark, they also faced doubts and challenges stemming from traditional mindsets. For example, some argued that

women were physically weaker than men and thus incapable of mastering the pressing and sliding techniques of the guqin; others doubted that women could comprehend the subtle, profound realm of qin Dao. Yet they forcefully refuted these prejudices with their great musical accomplishments and academic contributions. The success of these female qin artists not only changed the gender composition of the qin world, but also prompted a positive shift in society's perception of women's capabilities and cultural roles.

It is noteworthy that the active role of female qin artists during this period was inseparable from support at the levels of education and cultural policy. After the founding of the PRC, traditional music was gradually incorporated into formal music education systems. In 1956, the Folk Music Department of the CCOM was established, with guqin performer and theorist Zha Fuxi as department head, and the conservatory hired Jiuyi school master Guan Pinghu to teach. That same year, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music also established a guqin program (initially only at the attached high school), with Liu Jingshao of the Mei'an school as a dedicated instructor. Subsequently, a group of qin masters including Zhang Ziqian, Gu Meigeng, Yu Shaoze and others took up full-time or part-time teaching positions at professional music institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory, Shenyang Conservatory, Sichuan Conservatory, Nanjing Arts Institute, Xinghai Conservatory, and Tianjin Conservatory, transmitting the guqin within academia and effectively bringing it from private tutelage into the conservatory halls (Su 2023: 33). Although the scale was very small at first, it nevertheless made it possible for women to systematically study the guqin. For example, Wang Di, after advanced studies at the Central Conservatory, went on to a research and teaching position—a path that would have been nearly unimaginable in the old society. Likewise, cultural policies in the late Cultural Revolution gradually rehabilitated traditional arts. In the late 1970s, with the advent of Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*, 改革开放), the art of the guqin welcomed an opportunity for revival. The state's emphasis on intangible cultural heritage also provided policy support for the preservation and dissemination of the guqin. The improvement of these macro-level circumstances created objective conditions for more women to join the ranks of guqin practitioners.

During this period, female qin artists accumulated a large amount of cultural capital through their qin artistry and knowledge, and transformed it into momentum that propelled the development of the qin world. They broke through the gender ceiling of the old qin world, largely changing the situation in which the transmission of guqin art had relied mainly on male masters. To borrow Bourdieu's perspective: once female qin practitioners can command qin-related capital equal to that of men and attain professional authority, they become agents of change in the distribution of power within the qin "field" (Bourdieu 1986). Female qin artists of the 20th century entered this cultural field as a new force, bringing new modes of transmission and research perspectives: some of them integrated the guqin into conservatory education systems, training large numbers of young students; some helped compile and publish old qin tablatures, making public the repertoire that had once been kept secret; others actively organized elegant gatherings and hosted concerts, spreading guqin art to wider audiences. With women taking leading roles in these areas, guqin culture was no longer just a small circle of male master-apprentice

lineages, but began to exhibit a more open, diverse transmission ecosystem. It is due to the efforts of several generations of qin practitioners, including figures like Wang Di, that guqin art gradually emerged from its nadir in New China and was successfully inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003, ushering in broader development opportunities in the new century.

4. Contemporary Changes in the Gender Structure of Guqin Art and the Influence of Female Qin Players

Entering the 21st century, the art of the guqin has experienced a comprehensive revival, especially after 2003 when guqin art was selected for UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2008). A "guqin fever" swept across China, and more and more ordinary people began to approach the guqin. In this new situation, the participation and contributions of women are particularly striking. The gender structure of the contemporary qin world is undergoing profound change: women are no longer mere supporting players, but in both numbers and influence they now occupy a pivotal position.

4.1. Surge in the Number of Female Qin Players

The most evident change is the marked rise in the proportion of women among guqin learners and enthusiasts. Compared to the Republican era (1912-1949) gatherings where it was said "of ten qin players, nine were gentlemen", in 21st-century qin society activities it has become normal to see that "women are no less capable than men". According to audience statistics from guqin online platforms such as "Lvhe Guqin Study Society," female qin enthusiasts account for about 60%, while males account for about 40% (China Report Hall 2024). As Qu Junhong, a Lingnan guqin intangible cultural heritage inheritor, said: "In the past, literati gentlemen were the main group preserving guqin traditions, and most guqin enthusiasts were male; now, the number of female students in qin studios is growing" (Guangzhou Daily 2022). Evidently, at the grassroots level, women have become a main driving force in guqin transmission.

The same is true in the realm of professional music education. Major conservatories have established guqin programs one after another, and female students often outnumber male students in these cohorts. In the guqin classes at top institutions like the CCOM and the Shanghai Conservatory, it is not uncommon for women to rank at the top. In 2004, Wu Na became the first person at the CCOM to earn a master's degree in guqin performance; since then, there have even been women pursuing doctorates in guqin—for example, in recent years the CCOM has admitted female doctoral students to conduct interdisciplinary research on guqin and artificial intelligence. This indicates that women not only have a numerical advantage, but are actively advancing into the highest levels of guqin education, breaking the previous gender ceiling in the academic field.

Behind the surge in the number of female qin players are multiple social and cultural driving factors. The first is education popularization and prevailing social trends. With economic development and a growing sense of cultural confidence, the middle class has increased its investment in traditional arts education. The guqin, with its elegant

connotations, has become favored by women, and many women see learning the qin as a way to elevate their cultural cultivation and express personal taste. Romanticized images such as the notion of “women with qin and xiao” have become popular in the media, further drawing women to the guqin. The marketing by training institutions often portrays the guqin as an elegant woman’s companion. These social trends have created a favorable atmosphere for women’s participation in the guqin.

The second factor is opportunities in universities and community education. Since the beginning of the new century, many universities have offered guqin elective courses and clubs, reaching the general college student population, and female students have enthusiastically signed up. Among the younger generation of qin players emerging from campuses, the proportion of women is quite high. On the other hand, cultural centers and qin societies across various regions have organized guqin training classes, and all sorts of women—housewives, professional women, retired ladies, etc.—have flocked to learn the qin, making it a new platform for either periodic or lifelong learning and socializing.

Lastly, policy support and social advocacy. With the implementation of the national intangible cultural heritage protection project “Guqin Art”, governments at various levels and cultural institutions have funded initiatives such as guqin transmission centers, guqin-in-schools programs, and community classes. Many localities have also named representative inheritors for guqin as intangible cultural heritage, and to date, among the national-level guqin inheritors, there are Xu Xiaoying, Yu Qingxin, Zhao Jiazhen, and Lin Chen—4 women out of 27 total (the rest being men). This means that the government has, in terms of policy, recognized and encouraged the role of women in guqin transmission. Some female qin artists have been employed by cultural centers and universities, receiving official positions and funding support, which enables them to engage in teaching and performance with greater peace of mind.

4.2. Growing Influence of Female Qin Players

The rise of women in the contemporary guqin field is evident not only in their numbers, but also in their influence across multiple dimensions. Today, among the leading figures active in guqin performance, education, and research, there are many women. Through their rich artistic practice and scholarly contributions, they are changing the gender landscape of the qin world.

On the performance stage, female guqin players frequently serve as the leading performers in important concerts. Take Professor Dai Xiaolian from Shanghai as an example. As a representative inheritor of the Guangling school and a renowned performer, she has not only performed on international stages multiple times, but also held large-scale guqin solo concerts in domestic concert halls, interpreting masterpieces from ancient and modern repertoire. Dai Xiaolian has deep roots in tradition yet is bold in innovation. She collaborated with composers to introduce Western elements like string quartets into guqin ensemble pieces, creating a new phenomenon of “guqin music blending ancient and modern”. She is acclaimed as a master of Chinese music who combines traditional foundation with an international vision (Wang 2021). Another example is Professor Zhao Jiazhen of the CCOM. She is a transmitter of the Yushan Wu school of guqin, having studied under masters like Gong Yi, Wu Jinglue, Zhang Ziqian, and Wu Wenguang. In recent years,

she has given countless solo recitals and lectures, dedicating herself to contemporary expression of the guqin and its international promotion. As the president of the China Qin Society, she enjoys high prestige in the qin community. Her solo album *Qin: Zhao Jiazhen* won the Best World Music Album at the 10th Independent Music Awards, highlighting female qin artists’ exquisite artistry and broad influence (Qin 2020). Professor Zhao Xiaoxia of the CCOM initiated a practice of “guqin diplomacy” through her performances, pioneering a new model in which traditional culture aids international exchange. In the past decade, she has performed for the heads of state of more than 30 countries at diplomatic events such as the Asian Para Games, APEC Summit, SCO Summit, and the Beijing International Horticultural Expo, and has twice performed in the main hall of UNESCO headquarters in Paris, establishing a new cultural dialogue model of “qin sound diplomacy”. She has turned the guqin into a “cultural ambassador” conveying Eastern wisdom.

In the education sector, female guqin teachers are the main force in training the new generation. Currently, most full-time guqin instructors at major music and art academies in China are women, such as Dai Xiaolian, Zhao Jiazhen, Zhang Huaying, Huang Mei, Yang Chunwei, Dai Wei, etc. Another well-known female educator is Wu Na at the Capital Normal University. Not only are her teaching results outstanding, she also actively explores cross-over arts, bringing the guqin into new realms such as rock and jazz. These experiences demonstrate that female qin players can integrate tradition and modernity with a more open approach, expanding the boundaries of guqin art (Zhang Qi 2018). In addition, the proportion of women among leaders of local guqin societies is also on the rise. For instance, Yu Qinqin, a Sichuan Shu school guqin inheritor, serves as the president of the Chengdu Hezhen Qin Society, and Tang Ka is the president of the Shaanxi Women’s Guqin Society; they have trained many local young qin players. One can see from this the significant role women play in the grassroots transmission network.

The voices of women have likewise emerged in the field of academic research. Traditional qin studies researchers were mostly men, but in recent years female scholars have begun to make their mark. For example, the aforementioned Dai Wei’s special studies on female qin players of the Song and Ming dynasties have filled gaps in the research. Another example is a young scholar, Lin Chen, who is not only a national-level inheritor but also the author of books such as *Touching Qin History*, and is dedicated to sorting out modern qin history narratives. The introduction of female perspectives has brought new problem awareness to qin studies research—for instance, greater sensitivity to gender issues and an increased critical reflection on traditional discourse. It can be said that female researchers are themselves part of the community of female qin practitioners, yet they can examine gender structure from a high academic vantage point. This will gradually change the “invisible and hidden” status of gender issues in the qin studies field.

4.3. Gender Performativity and the Reconstruction of Cultural Identity

From a gender theory perspective, the large influx and achievements of women in the contemporary guqin field are redefining the gender connotations of guqin art. Butler’s theory of gender performativity holds that gender identity is not an immutable essence, but is produced through repeated social performance (Butler 1990). Applying this view, the

traditional image of the “gentleman discoursing while playing the qin” is in fact a product of male gender performance repeatedly constructed under specific historical conditions. When women in great numbers take to the qin stage and achieve impressive success, their very actions prove that playing the guqin is not an inherent extension of male identity, but rather a cultural practice that transcends gender boundaries. The appearance of female qin players on stage and in the classroom is itself a powerful subversion of the timeworn notion that “Qin belongs to men” — through concrete action, they have reinvented the gender role of guqin art, rewriting qin practice, traditionally seen as a symbol of masculinity, into a spiritual treasure shared by both genders. This re-interpretation and challenge of gender roles is exactly a vivid embodiment of gender performativity in artistic practice: through continuous “performance”, female qin players have altered the gender norms of the guqin field and the way people imagine the gender of qin players. In other words, women’s active presence in guqin art has itself proclaimed the possibility that “Qin has no gender”, dismantling on a practical level the implicit equation for centuries that a “qin player” equals “male”.

It is worth considering whether this process of redefinition also carries new stereotypes about women. Some qin players have privately noted that contemporary media sometimes tends to present female qin artists in a pleasing way, molding them into an image of “qin ji” (琴姬) who is gentle and classical, emphasizing the women’s external elegance and the guqin’s soft, graceful imagery. This kind of packaging of the “female qin player” image, although it increases the guqin’s appeal and promotional effect, may also harbor a new stereotype—namely, treating female qin players as a cultural spectacle for the viewer’s “gaze”. As Yu Qinqin has said, in terms of qin artistry there is no distinction between men and women; in evaluating a qin player, one should look at their artistic caliber, and not their gender (Lü 2023). She reminds us to be wary of the tendency to view female qin players with a prejudiced eye.

Moreover, some conservative views still hold that men have greater advantages at the “highest levels” of artistic achievement, attempting to question the depth of women qin players’ artistry. Such rhetoric reflects deep-seated gender bias and remnants of symbolic power—namely, treating men’s dominant status as a given through cultural discourse, while subtly devaluing women’s professional authority. However, the continual emergence and outstanding performance of female qin artists have posed a powerful challenge to these prejudices. As discussed above, with equal accumulation of cultural capital and professional training, women are fully capable of reaching or even surpassing the heights achieved by men in the art of the guqin. The success of numerous outstanding female qin artists has caused the old gender power structure in the qin world to gradually loosen and even reverse, and it has made more newcomers—whether female or male—realize that the doors of the guqin art are open to all who share a passion for it. It is foreseeable that as the new generation of qin players grows, gender will further diminish as a constraint on discourse power and influence in the qin world, and a more diverse and inclusive guqin transmission ecosystem is taking shape.

Looking broadly at the changes in gender structure throughout the development of guqin art, one finds that its evolution is closely tied to shifts in social environment and ideology. From the extreme rarity of female qin players in

history to the rise of a female cohort today, this change reflects a readjustment in the socio-cultural power structure. Using Bourdieu’s perspective, we understand how the male monopoly of the qin world historically marginalized women through symbolic power; and through Butler’s theory, we see how female qin players have through their own actions gradually loosened and even rewritten this traditional gender script. The rising status of women in the field of guqin art is not only a vivid example of gender equality in cultural heritage transmission, but has also injected new vitality into guqin art.

4.4. Mechanism Analysis: How Multiple Factors Brought About the Gender Shift

Overall, the reason the gender structure of contemporary guqin art has shifted from male monopoly to men and women advancing side by side—and even to women being the majority—is the result of multiple factors working together, primarily in four areas. The first is changes in the education system. The guqin has been incorporated into the formal education system, giving women an equal opportunity for systematic study. University programs and faculty training have enabled female qin players to gain professional credentials and titles, breaking the gender biases that may have existed in the past within master-disciple circles. At the same time, a complete training pipeline from children’s palaces and university clubs to graduate education has allowed large numbers of female qin players to emerge.

The second factor is policy support and social advocacy. Intangible heritage protection policies have elevated guqin art as a cultural emblem, and government investments at all levels have lowered the barriers to learning the qin (through public training, funding subsidies, etc.), from which women, as active respondents, have greatly benefited. In addition, society’s heightened emphasis on traditional culture and the media’s promotion of “elegant music of a great nation” have together made the guqin fashionable once again. This macro environment has increased women’s willingness to learn the guqin and their acceptance in society.

The third factor is the transformation of media. The advent of the digital age has provided new channels for disseminating guqin. From early records and radio to the 21st century’s Internet and social media, guqin enthusiasts can easily access resources for learning and communication. On online platforms, many female qin players share their music through blogs, videos, and live streams, amassing large numbers of fans. The decentralization of the Internet has allowed women to showcase their talents independently, free from the constraints of traditional circles. For example, many young female qin players have posted performance videos on platforms like Bilibili, such as the vloggers with usernames “Nan Yi Xiansheng”, “Huangmei Guqin”, and “Guqin Wang Youdi”. Notably, China’s first PhD in guqin, Wang Youdi, has single performance videos with over 80,000 views. In her videos, she performs the guqin in a rock-style outfit, shattering the singular image of traditional aesthetics and completely undoing the bodily discipline imposed by the literati aesthetic notion that “the qin is a restraining instrument”. The power of digital media has prevented the guqin from remaining an inaccessible highbrow pursuit, and has provided women a space to display their skills to the fullest.

The fourth factor is the reconstruction of academic discourse. Contemporary scholars have begun to reflect on

the gender blind spots in past qin history research, gradually incorporating women into the narrative of guqin history. For example, Dai Wei's research has led to a renewed recognition of the existence of female qin players in the Song and Ming dynasties. This scholarly correction has, on one hand, increased the visibility of the historical status of female qin players, and on the other hand provided current female qin players with spiritual encouragement: they have realized that they are continuing a long-standing tradition rather than being without antecedent. In terms of cultural identity, this is extremely important. Female qin players are no longer seen as "outliers", but are included within the orthodox qin lineage, which helps to strengthen their confidence and status in the qin world.

The above mechanisms are interrelated and together have brought about the drastic change in the gender structure of the guqin world. From a sociological perspective, it is a reflection of the rise of women's social status in a particular cultural field; from a cultural perspective, it reflects an increase in inclusiveness of a traditional art during its modern transformation. Bourdieu might say that the rules and capital structure of the guqin field have changed: cultural capital once exclusively enjoyed by men is now open to more women; at the same time, women have also brought in new capital (such as a broader audience base, more flexible modes of transmission), redefining the value orientation of the field. Butler, on the other hand, might focus on how gender identity is being re-performed and rewritten in this process. In any case, in the successful revival story of guqin art as an intangible heritage, the contributions and strength of women cannot be ignored.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the gender structure in the development history of guqin art has undergone a gradual transition from a male-dominated pattern to one of gender diversity and shared participation. Historically, due to unfair distribution of socio-cultural capital and the covert operation of gender power, female qin players remained at the margins of the qin world for a long time, leaving behind only the sparsest traces. This stage of gender imbalance can be interpreted through Bourdieu's theory: the male elite's monopoly over guqin cultural capital and the resulting symbolic domination caused women's voices to be suppressed and forgotten. However, the progression of the times created opportunities for women to break down barriers. Since the 20th century, a number of outstanding female qin artists have emerged. By mastering qin artistry, they accumulated substantial cultural capital and used it to actively engage in the rescue, research, and dissemination of the guqin tradition, gradually changing the gender ecology of the qin world. In contemporary times, even more women have devoted themselves to guqin art, becoming the backbone of this field. Using Butler's gender performativity theory, we can understand that when women participate on a large scale and successfully "perform" the role of qin artist, the gender meanings inherent in guqin art are redefined — traditional gender norms are challenged and reshaped.

The influence of female qin artists in the development of guqin art is manifested in multiple facets: they are both the guardians and transmitters of a precious cultural heritage, and also the drivers of innovative practice and cultural dissemination. Through their efforts, many qin pieces and techniques that were originally endangered have been

preserved, the guqin art has been revitalized and brought into a much broader public view. More importantly, the rise of female qin artists has brought a new atmosphere of gender equality to the guqin field — the guqin is no longer merely a symbol of male cultural identity, but has become an artistic treasure and spiritual wealth shared by both men and women. This change carries positive significance for the revival and transmission of traditional culture today, and also offers valuable insights for other traditional art fields to achieve gender balance. It accords with the intangible heritage principle of "seeing the people, seeing the object, seeing the life". Only by mobilizing the enthusiasm of different genders and groups, and truly integrating the guqin into contemporary life, can traditional culture achieve creative transformation and continue to flourish.

It must be pointed out that this study still has certain limitations in terms of materials and perspectives. At present, documentary records about historical groups of female qin players are relatively limited, and many individuals' stories remain to be further unearthed and compiled. Future research could incorporate more primary historical sources to conduct in-depth and detailed comparative analyses of the circumstances and contributions of female qin players in different dynasties and regions. For example, differences in the situations of female qin players in different periods (such as Song dynasty versus Qing dynasty) or different regions (such as Jiangnan versus Lingnan versus Sichuan) merit thorough investigation. Likewise, questions regarding gender dynamics within the contemporary guqin community and the specific roles of female qin players in the qin education system still require further empirical data through fieldwork. Due to space constraints, this paper primarily used literature analysis and did not conduct in-depth interviews or field observations with contemporary female qin players, which is a shortcoming of this study. By continuously focusing on and researching gender issues in guqin art, we can not only improve our understanding of the cultural history of qin studies, but also gain insight into the interactions between gender equality and social change in the realm of traditional arts. In sum, the rise of female qin artists' influence heralds a new direction for the development of traditional culture — a more inclusive and diverse ecosystem of transmission is taking shape, in which every person who loves the qin can, free from gender prejudice, freely play their own unique melody. It is foreseeable that as long as we truly embrace inclusiveness and break gender stereotypes, guqin art will continue to grow and thrive by involving people of different genders and backgrounds, and its lineage of transmission will become all the more robust and vibrant.

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