

Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Folk Music: A Research of Zheng Music

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Abstract: Chinese folk music is a treasure of Chinese culture, embodying a long history and rich emotions. With the acceleration of globalization and the deepening of cross-cultural exchanges, the dissemination of Chinese folk music overseas has attracted increasing attention. As an important component of traditional Chinese music, the zheng, with its ancient history and unique musical style, has gained popularity among music enthusiasts both domestically and internationally. Since the last century, zheng has gradually stepped onto the world stage, receiving wider attention and recognition. This paper aims to explore the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music by focusing on the origin and development of zheng music, the historical and current status of its overseas dissemination, as well as the impact and challenges of its overseas dissemination. I also want to share some Feasible development recommendations for the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music.

Keywords: Chinese Folk Music; Zheng; Overseas Dissemination; Opportunities and Challenges.

1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic country where 56 ethnic groups have their own unique cultures and music traditions. From ancient court music to folk music, from Beijing Opera to the Mongolian horse head string instrument, Chinese folk music exhibits diverse forms with distinct regional and ethnic characteristics. The 21st century has brought about opportunities for cultural exchange and integration through globalization, facilitating the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music. Cultural exchange activities and art festivals on an international scale, as well as the development of digital media, have made Chinese folk music more accessible and appreciated by audiences around the world. This paper will investigate the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music from three perspectives: the origin and development of zheng music, the historical and current status of its overseas dissemination, and the impact and challenges of its overseas dissemination.

2. The Origin and Development of zheng Music

The historical origin of the zheng remains a topic of debate, and the earliest known written record about the zheng can be found in Sima Qian's *Shih Chi* during the Han Dynasty, he mentioned a scene of someone using the zheng as an accompaniment. So, some scholars think that the origin of the zheng can be traced back to the Western Zhou Dynasty. From the Warring States period to the Western Han Dynasty, the zheng gained popularity in the states of Qi, Lu, Zheng, Wei, and Zhao. *Ancient and Modern Annotations* recorded a talented and courageous woman who played the zheng. (Bian, 2014) During the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the zheng began to enter the realm of high culture and gained wider recognition and appreciation. Shen Yue, a poet from the Southern and Northern Dynasties, praised the beauty of zheng music in his poem *Song of the Zheng*. The zheng flourished during the Tang Dynasty, with the thirteen-string and twelve-string zheng widely used in court music and folk music, zheng

performances became popular and widespread, giving rise to different regional styles such as the Qin School, the Western Qin School, the Wei School, and the Chu School. Many Tang Dynasty poets also mentioned the zheng in their poems. Prominent performers included Xue Qiongqiong, Yao Meiren, Cui Qi, Zheng Nv, Li Qingqing, Li Congzhou, and Li Zhou.

During the Song Dynasty, with the development of civic arts, zheng music further evolved while continuing the tradition of the thirteen-string zheng. Zhou Mi, a writer during the late Song and early Yuan Dynasty, documented the diverse forms of zheng performances at that time, which were used for solo, leading, and ensemble performances and often served as accompaniment for storytelling arts. During the Yuan Dynasty, a fourteen-string zheng gradually emerged among the common people, while the twelve-string and thirteen-string zheng continued to be used. In the Ming Dynasty, a fifteen-string zheng appeared in folk music and was recorded in Zhu Zaiyu's *Ming Zheng Shizi Se Pu*. Representative performers of this period included Xue Susu and Li Jie. During the Qing Dynasty, zheng music found wider applications and underwent significant development and improvement in terms of structure and craftsmanship. However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese zheng music faced setbacks due to wars and other factors.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, traditional Chinese music and folk arts experienced a renaissance. During this period, the zheng transitioned from folk music to higher education institutions, embarking on a path of professional development. In the late 1950s, Wang Xunzhi from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and staff from the Shanghai National Instrument Factory successfully experimented with the production of the 21-string S-shaped zheng, which featured steel wire nylon-wound strings and became the basic model and specification for contemporary zheng. Representative performers of this era included Cao Zheng, Cao Dongfu, Luo Jiuxiang, Liu Tianyi, and Su Wenxian, who also recorded numerous zheng music albums, contributing to the dissemination of zheng music among the general public.

In the 1980s, with the development of music education and

traditional Chinese music, the number of people studying the zheng gradually increased, leading to its widespread popularity and new developments in the professional field. In October 1986, the National Zheng Academic Exchange Conference was held in Yangzhou, further promoting the exchange of zheng art. This academic event has been held since the last century. Representative performers of this period included Li Wanfen, Qiu Dacheng, He Baoquan, Sun Wenyuan, Wang Changyuan, Xiang Sihua, and Fan Shange. In the 21st century, zheng music has continued to develop rapidly from various aspects.

3. History and Current Status of the Overseas Dissemination of Zheng Music

The history of overseas dissemination of Chinese zheng music is ancient and can be traced back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties. It has been introduced to countries such as Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

3.1. Historical Dissemination

During the the Northern and Southern Dynasties, zheng spread to Korea. At that time, King Jiasi of the Gaya kingdom (present-day South and North Gyeongsang) in Korea adopted the form of the Chinese zheng and added features of the Korean ethnic group, creating the gayageum, which still enjoys popularity among the Korean people today (Bian, 2014). In the 7th century, zheng was introduced to Japan. According to the *Biography of the Sui Dynasty on the Wakoku Kingdom*, Japan began sending numerous personnel to China to study Chinese culture, including zheng music. The shape and structure of the zheng in Japan during the Nara period were imitations of the thirteen-stringed zither of the Tang Dynasty. During the late Tang Dynasty and early Song Dynasty, zheng music spread to Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and other countries and regions (Zhou, 2001).

After 1840, with the migration of people from Guangzhou, Fujian, and other places to Southeast Asia, the art of zheng was introduced to countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Chaozhou string poetry music, Hakka silk string music, Fujian ancient music, and emerging Guangdong music experienced a prosperous period of development. They not only spread rapidly and flourished in Guangdong and Fujian but also gained wide popularity among the Teochew communities, business circles, and overseas Chinese living in Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries (Wang, 2023).

3.2. Current Status of Overseas Dissemination

The overseas dissemination of zheng music from the late 20th century to the present mainly focuses on three aspects: cultural exchanges and performance events, music education and academic research, and digital media and online platforms.

3.2.1. Cultural Exchanges and Performance Events

Chinese folk music groups and artists actively participate in various international cultural exchange activities and performance tours, bringing Chinese folk music to different parts of the world. In the early 1990s, Chinese professional music groups and experts from music academies were invited to perform and give lectures in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam. In 1992, the zheng Ensemble of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music visited Singapore and

Malaysia, where they held seven concerts and six academic lectures, receiving a warm welcome and high praise from the people of both countries, especially Chinese and Chinese music enthusiasts. (Wang, 2023) In 2011, the Second Hong Kong International Zheng Competition was held, with regional competitions held in multiple Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia held the “Malaysia Preliminary Competition” on 19 March 2011. In 2015, the “China-Japan-Korea International Zheng Competition” was held in South Korea, promoting the cultural exchange of zheng music among the three countries.

Furthermore, in the 21st century, various countries, primarily composed of Chinese musicians and music enthusiasts, have formed Chinese music associations and societies. For example, the Zheng Society was established in Singapore in 2015.

3.2.2. Music Education and Academic Research

The overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music is also benefiting from the promotion of music education and academic research. In the 1980s, some Chinese musicians started to immigrate abroad for developing their music careers. In 1984, zheng performer Wang Changyuan went to Kent State University in the United States to teach zheng. In 1995, Wang Changyuan established two art organizations in New York, the “New York Overseas Chinese Orchestra” and the “Wang Changyuan zheng Art Center”, laying the foundation for zheng education and dissemination in the United States. In the 1990s, zheng performer Fan Shang’e immigrated abroad and later established the “Fan Shang’e Zheng School” in Canada, promoting the development of zheng in Canada. Since the beginning of the 21st century, some foreign scholars and music enthusiasts have come to China to study and research Chinese folk music. Music and art academies such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the Central Conservatory of Music, the China Conservatory of Music, the Nanjing University of the Arts and the Guangxi University of the Arts have been admitting international students who love music from around the world, providing them with opportunities to study Chinese music. Many international students also choose to study zheng.

In terms of academic research, in November 2021, the China Conservatory of Music held the “Belt and Road” International Zheng Music Academic Exchange Season Activity in Beijing. Many outstanding performers and musicologists from China and abroad were invited to exchange and discuss the spread and development of “Chinese zheng Music” at home and abroad. Professor Bi Minghui from the China Conservatory of Music said that “the development of communication instruments and instrumental music is a global event since the 20th century, in which the Chinese Zheng blossoms infinite charm, and the zheng plays an important role in the image construction of China’s international cultural exchange”. (Wang and Tan, 2022) Additionally, zheng performer Fan Shange and Li Wei from Canada, Wang Changyuan from the United States, and Yin Qun from Singapore introduced the development of zheng in their respective countries during the conference.

At the same time, Chinese music academies are actively carrying out overseas music education programs to impart knowledge and skills of Chinese folk music to the world. Since 1990, the Central Conservatory of Music of China, in collaboration with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and the Central Academy of Arts in Malaysia, has been conducting graded examinations for Chinese traditional

instruments in several major cities in Malaysia. The examination subjects mainly focus on solo instruments such as zheng and Erhu. (Zhai, 2013). Many Confucius Institutes around the world offer zheng courses, helping local students, overseas Chinese, and foreigners to better understand zheng music and traditional Chinese culture.

3.2.3. Digital Media and Online Platforms

With the rapid development of digital media and online platforms, Chinese folk music has reached every corner of the world through the Internet. Music streaming platforms, video sharing websites, and social media have become important channels for the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music, allowing music works and performances to be enjoyed by global audiences anytime, anywhere. In China, popular video platforms include Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili, and WeChat Video Accounts. Popular music apps include QQ Music and Wangyi Cloud Music, while WeChat Public Accounts and “China Zheng Webiste” serve as learning and communication platforms. Among them, “China Zheng Webiste” has been operating since 2008 and has gradually become a professional website in the zheng field, known for its authority and standardization. It has greatly helped zheng enthusiasts at home and abroad in learning and appreciating zheng music. International platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are primarily used for video playback. The zheng video blogger “Peng Peng Peng Peng Jingxuan” on YouTube has 870,000 subscribers and often performs on the streets of various cities in France, attracting numerous people with diverse styles of Chinese zheng music. Many of her uploaded videos have garnered millions of views, with the highest reaching 16.2 million views. The zheng video bloggers “guzhengcodung” on TikTok have uploaded 75 videos and have over 45,000 followers, while the zheng video blogger “Zheng Teacher Xiaochen” has uploaded 46 videos and has over 39,000 followers.

4. The Impact and Challenges of zheng Music Overseas Dissemination

The overseas dissemination of zheng music has had different impacts at different times. Currently, its influence mainly manifests in three aspects: promoting cultural identity and exchange, stimulating economic and tourism development, and promoting music education and art development.

As one of the representatives of traditional Chinese music, the overseas dissemination of zheng music promotes cultural exchange and understanding between China and western countries. Overseas audiences can learn about the music history, artistic styles, and traditional values of China through zheng music, further enhancing their understanding and interest in Chinese culture and fostering cultural identity and exchange between China and western countries. Through the language of music, emotional connections have been established among different countries and national groups, deepening mutual understanding and friendship.

The overseas dissemination of zheng music has brought business opportunities and economic benefits to related industries. Performances, concerts, and educational training activities related to zheng music attract a large number of international audiences and students, stimulating the development of tourism, performing arts, and education, and providing more employment opportunities for zheng practitioners. Moreover, it has played a positive role in

promoting China's economic development and tourism industry. Since the 21st century, China has gradually attracted numerous music enthusiasts and cultural tourists to come and experience the charm of Chinese folk music, bringing new development opportunities to the cultural industry and tourism industry.

The overseas dissemination of zheng music also has a positive impact on music education and artistic development. Overseas music universities and art institutions have begun to introduce the teaching of Chinese zheng music, cultivating a group of talented zheng performers and music educators. For example, in recent years, the University of Sydney has gradually admitted undergraduate and graduate students majoring in zheng, and excellent zheng performances are featured in the annual “Chinese Music Ensemble Concert”. Several Zheng Training Classes have been established in cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane in Australia.

Currently, the overseas dissemination of zheng music faces challenges primarily in the areas of cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, market competition, and heritage education. As part of traditional Chinese music, zheng music suffers from a lack of cultural awareness among overseas audiences. Their understanding of zheng music's history, background, playing techniques, and musical language is limited, which may affect their appreciation and understanding of zheng music. Therefore, effective cultural introduction and education are necessary to help overseas audiences better understand the value and charm of zheng music. It is important to engage in effective cross-cultural communication and adjustment during the dissemination process, allowing zheng music to better integrate into the local musical environment.

During the dissemination of zheng music overseas, collaboration and exchange with different cultures are required. However, cultural differences always create barriers in language communication, aesthetic concepts, and performance styles. Such difficulties are widespread among Chinese music students studying abroad in music academies worldwide. Finding ways to accurately convey the emotions and meanings of music to overseas audiences through translation, subtitles, and commentary is an ongoing challenge that requires continuous effort and innovation.

In the overseas music market, zheng music faces competition from other genres of music and forms of cultural arts. The diversity of music and artistic forms provides audiences with more choices. In Western countries, symphony, opera, and musicals hold dominant positions in the artistic landscape, often with sold-out performances, while most Chinese music performances rely on “acquaintance support”. Therefore, zheng music needs to find its unique position and meet market demands in the highly competitive market to attract more audiences and supporters.

As a highly technical art form, the inheritance and cultivation of zheng talents are important tasks. Overseas, the system of zheng heritage and education may be relatively weak, lacking professional teachers and training institutions. To promote the overseas development of zheng music, it is necessary to establish a sound zheng education system, cultivate more zheng talents, and ensure the inheritance and development of zheng art.

5. Conclusion

The overseas dissemination of Chinese folk music is an important way for Chinese culture to reach the world, and the

international dissemination of zheng music has brought positive impacts on cultural exchange and the development of music and arts. However, when facing challenges such as cultural differences and the need to protect innovation, it is necessary to strengthen international communication and cooperation, improve education levels and professional skills, and innovate promotional methods to further promote the dissemination and development of Chinese zheng music overseas. Through continuous efforts and collaboration, Chinese zheng music will continue to emit its unique musical sound on the world stage, allowing more people to experience the charm and beauty of Chinese culture, and further promote the prosperity and development of world music and arts.

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