

1 **Bridging Tradition and Innovation: Cheng Gongliang's Role in the Globalization and**
2 **Technological Evolution of Guqin Culture**

3

4 **Abstract :** The guqin, as China's oldest plucked string instrument, was inscribed on the
5 "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2008. Its inheritance and
6 development hold significant cultural importance. Cheng Gongliang, a nationally recognized
7 inheritor of guqin art, has played a pivotal role in modernizing and globalizing its heritage. Within
8 China, the guqin is seen as a key part of "classical music," while internationally it is categorized as
9 "traditional Chinese music." The guqin has profoundly influenced the development of Chinese
10 music, integrating humanistic thought, historical legacy, and aesthetic values. Despite its
11 importance, global research and dissemination of the guqin remain limited. Only a few Western
12 scholars, such as Robert van Gulik and Cecilia Lindqvist, have studied and introduced the guqin to
13 the West. Compared to Western classical instruments like the violin and piano, the artistic value and
14 cultural significance of the guqin have not yet achieved widespread recognition. Since the late 20th
15 century, Chinese guqin musicians have engaged in international exchanges to promote its global
16 presence. Cheng Gongliang, a leading figure in this effort, has explored innovative approaches
17 while honoring the guqin's historical traditions through international tours and cross-cultural
18 dialogue. With the rapid advancement of technology, the introduction of AI technology has further
19 expanded the methods and pathways for disseminating guqin culture. This article uses case studies,
20 literature review, fieldwork, and cultural analysis to examine Cheng Gongliang's contributions,
21 highlighting his role in preserving the guqin's aesthetic heritage and enhancing its global impact.

22

23 **Keywords: Cheng Gongliang;Guqin; Aesthetic Values; Performance Techniques; Artificial**

24 **Intelligence**

25

26 **1. The Development of Guqin Culture in Historical Context**

27 The guqin, a traditional Chinese silk-stringed instrument, is often referred to as the "seven-stringed
28 zither" due to its characteristic use of seven strings. Legend attributes its creation to the ancient
29 cultural figures Fuxi and Shennong, suggesting a history spanning over 3,000 years(Gaywood,
30 1996). Since ancient times, the guqin has been revered as the foremost of the "four arts"(Liu, 2022).
31 From the saying" Confucius's renowned practice of combining singing with guqin playing"(Deng,
32 2020), the historical anecdote highlight its significant role among ancient Chinese scholars, officials,
33 and royalty.For these groups, guqin performance was not only an essential skill of personal
34 cultivation but also an integral part of their daily lives, reflecting its stature as a highly symbolic art
35 form within Chinese culture. As a musical tradition, the guqin embodies both aesthetic refinement
36 and profound cultural meaning, making it a distinctive and enduring symbol of Chinese intellectual
37 and artistic heritage.

38

39 Since the late Qing Dynasty, amidst the backdrop of intense social upheaval, the guqin, along with
40 the broader literati culture it symbolizes, began a period of decline(Nathanson, 2012). The abolition
41 of the imperial examination system and the disintegration of the literati class significantly reduced
42 the guqin's social standing and influence, leading to a gradual weakening of its cultural ecosystem.

43 After 1966, with dramatic political shifts, the guqin and other traditional art forms were labeled as
44 symbols of "feudal culture." (Tsai, 2016)Many guqin players faced persecution, and a large number

45 of valuable guqin instruments, scores, and related artifacts were destroyed. The system of
46 transmission nearly collapsed, and societal recognition of and demand for the guqin's cultural value
47 almost entirely vanished. Furthermore, the forces of modernization and the introduction of Western
48 culture dealt a significant blow to the guqin's cultural ecosystem. The widespread adoption of
49 Western musical systems and instruments severely marginalized Chinese traditional music.
50 Institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, which embraced Western music education
51 as their core framework, further sidelined traditional instruments, including the guqin (Grenier Borel,
52 2019). Under the pressure of modernization, the guqin culture gradually lost its ability to adapt to
53 contemporary times and failed to reestablish its unique position within the new cultural
54 framework. This predicament not only reflects the decline of the guqin during a specific historical
55 period but also highlights the structural challenges traditional arts face when confronted with
56 modernity and external cultural influences.

57
58 By the late 1970s, the guqin art entered a pivotal phase of cultural revitalization. With the
59 implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the guqin gradually regained its traditional
60 status and embarked on a new stage of development. At that time, the guqin was still a relatively
61 unfamiliar "Eastern" instrument to Western audiences. In 1985, West German sinologist Manfred
62 Dahmer, in his German-language book "Qin", described the guqin as "a Chinese zither with a
63 fingerboard," offering a Western musical perspective on this traditional Chinese
64 instrument (Dahmer, 1985). However, European scholarly interest in the guqin dates back even
65 further. As early as the 1930s, Dutch sinologist Robert van Gulik developed a deep fascination with
66 the guqin. He made multiple visits to Beiping (now Beijing) to collect guqin-related literature and

67 completed his English-language monograph "The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay on the
68 Ideology of the qin in 1938(Xiao, 2017). Additionally, Swedish sinologist Cecilia Lindqvist studied
69 the guqin while learning Chinese at Peking University during 1961–1962, becoming a member of
70 the Beijing Guqin Research Association to deepen her understanding of the art(Cassel,2023).In
71 November 2003, the guqin was included in the second batch of the "Masterpieces of the Oral and
72 Intangible Heritage of Humanity".(Yin,2024). This milestone not only reignited academic interest
73 in the preservation and transmission of guqin culture but also, in the context of contemporary
74 cultural revival and national identity, fostered a redefinition and reinforcement of the guqin's
75 symbolic significance. By this time, however, the cultural ecosystem sustaining the guqin had
76 undergone significant changes. Instrument-making techniques, performance methods, music
77 composition, and modes of appreciation were all experiencing profound transformations.
78 Confronted with these shifts, modern guqin artists actively explored innovative development paths.
79 Through cross-cultural exchanges and modernization efforts, they infused new vitality into the
80 guqin tradition.

81

82 Cheng Gongliang, a representative figure in the modernization of guqin art, began his deep
83 engagement with traditional guqin techniques at a young age. During his studies at the Shanghai
84 Conservatory of Music, he was influenced by its strong "Westernized" academic atmosphere and
85 exposure to interdisciplinary knowledge. This environment helped him develop a unique
86 perspective that seamlessly integrated Eastern and Western cultural elements.Cheng's admiration
87 for Western music not only broadened his musical horizons but also had a lasting impact on his
88 aesthetic approach to guqin composition and performance. This cross-cultural influence inspired his

89 later artistic practices and collaborations, fostering innovation in both creation and
90 interpretation. Under the dual influence of traditional and modern cultures, Cheng remained deeply
91 committed to the historical heritage and cultural essence of guqin art. At the same time, he actively
92 explored its innovation and relevance in contemporary contexts. Central to Cheng's philosophy of
93 guqin studies was the belief that the Confucian and Daoist ideas embodied in the guqin still hold
94 profound value in the modern era, symbolizing personal cultivation, moral aspiration, and inner
95 tranquility. In today's fast-paced society, these principles are seen as a vital cultural counterbalance
96 to superficiality and restlessness. Cheng Gongliang's decades of research and practice have not only
97 enriched the modern guqin scholarly framework but also cemented his status as an outstanding
98 figure in the contemporary guqin art world. His contributions continue to shape the dialogue
99 between tradition and modernity, ensuring the guqin's enduring resonance in the 21st century.

100

101 Although Cheng Gongliang passed away in 2015 due to illness, a deeper understanding of his
102 artistic philosophy and guqin practices was pursued through an interview with his closest student,
103 Guo Ping. This conversation further uncovered Cheng's artistic perspectives and provides valuable
104 insights for related research. As previously mentioned, Cheng Gongliang integrated Western
105 musical aesthetics into his guqin philosophy. Guo Ping noted during the interview: "Teacher Cheng
106 often listened to Western music, particularly melodic violin works. He had a deep love for violin
107 concertos and symphonies, which were among his favorite pieces. "This reflects Cheng's ability to
108 balance tradition with an appreciation for Western musical aesthetics, thereby opening new
109 pathways for innovation in guqin artistry. When discussing the inheritance and development of
110 guqin art, Guo Ping emphasized the importance of authentic historical examination: "The guqin is

111 not the erhu, the pipa, nor the bass or flamenco guitar—it is the guqin. Its themes, emotional
112 expression, historical depth, and aesthetic judgment require profound traditional knowledge,
113 cultivation, and an aesthetic orientation rooted in tradition. Without these, the guqin’s artistry risks
114 becoming superficial and uninspired."Guo Ping also highlighted Cheng Gongliang’s unique
115 understanding and masterful application of "resonance": "resonance involves the journey of the
116 target note to its realization, its departure, and the embellishment that follows—all of this
117 constitutes resonance . It is a crucial element of guqin music. The presentation, distribution, and
118 analysis of resonance often determine the difference in evaluation between one performance and
119 another. Of course, the complexity of performance involves other factors, such as tone quality and
120 breath. Teacher Cheng’s resonance is extraordinarily rich, as intricate as a building adorned with
121 delicate carvings, elaborate patterns, and meandering flourishes."He further explained that the
122 presentation and precise interpretation of "resonance" directly define the artistic level of guqin
123 performance, and Cheng’s mastery of "resonance" demonstrated exceptional artistry.Finally, Guo
124 Ping commented on Cheng Gongliang’s personality: "Teacher Cheng was not one to gather large
125 groups of friends; he valued a refined and self-sufficient lifestyle. He aspired to a state of spiritual
126 freedom, which made his artistic and personal pursuits aim for ever higher goals. He longed for an
127 unbounded and transcendent freedom, which imbued his art and character with profound passion
128 and idealism."Guo Ping’s reflections not only affirm Cheng Gongliang’s contributions to the
129 inheritance of guqin art but also reveal his deep inner world as both an artist and a spiritual seeker.
130 These insights provide important guidance for further study of Cheng’s guqin philosophy and his
131 enduring legacy.

132

133 **2. Cheng Gongliang: Artistic Exploration from a Cross-Cultural Perspective**

134 2.1 Cheng Gongliang's International Exchange and Improvisational Creativity

135 In May 1986, Cheng Gongliang was invited by the Federal Republic of Germany–China Friendship
136 Association (GDCF) to perform a solo guqin concert tour in West Germany, making him the first
137 guqin artist to be invited for a tour in West Germany under his own name (Cheng, 2009). This tour
138 was met with enthusiastic responses from German audiences, and numerous local newspapers and
139 radio stations covered and praised Cheng's distinctive performance style, lauding his ability to
140 convey the unique charm of Chinese traditional culture. Among them, "Frankfurter Allgemeine
141 Zeitung", one of the five most influential newspapers in West Germany, highly praised the guqin in
142 its coverage, stating: "No instrument can compare to the guqin in its ability to embody the grandeur
143 of China's traditional cultural spirit. (Cheng, 2009) "This marked the first appearance of the term
144 "guqin" in a major West German publication, where it was lauded with high praise and closely
145 associated with China's rich cultural heritage. This reception underscores the fascination Western
146 music researchers developed for the guqin's embodiment of Chinese humanistic thought during the
147 tour. It also marked the beginning of an exploration into and interpretation of this ancient Eastern art
148 form, highlighting its profound historical and cultural significance.

149
150 In 1989, Cheng Gongliang was invited by renowned German harpist Rudiger Oppermann to
151 participate in a second concert tour in Germany(Cheng, 2009).As the concert tour drew to a close,
152 flutist Cornelius Hentz invited Cheng Gongliang to collaborate on an experimental project aimed at
153 blending and contrasting the distinct sounds of the guqin and the flute. The two artists later recorded
154 the album "Chinese Landscape" at Hentz's home in the Netherlands, which featured a collection of

155 eleven pieces. Among them, "Dialogue Between Taihu and Windmills" left a particularly profound
156 impression on Cheng. The term "dialogue" vividly captured the interplay and interaction between
157 the tonal qualities of the guqin and the flute. Cheng recalled that the performance that evening
158 transcended the boundaries of language, leaving only the responsive dialogue between the guqin
159 and the flute. This was, in his words, "pure improvisation." Immersed in this organically formed
160 musical synergy, the two performers collaborated seamlessly, achieving a rare and spontaneous
161 harmony. The recording process lasted three days, and during post-production, elements such as
162 electronic accompaniment, vocal harmonies, and natural sound effects were added, creating an
163 atmospheric, layered spatial depth imbued with a sense of "water-like fluidity." This marked Cheng
164 Gongliang's first attempt at incorporating Western-style improvisation into guqin music.
165 Remarkably, the fusion of the guqin and flute sparked a strikingly unique musical chemistry. This
166 collaboration not only expanded the expressive possibilities of guqin performance but also allowed
167 Cheng to experience the boundless potential of cross-cultural musical dialogue.

168

169 2.2 The Artistic Starting Point of Cross-Cultural Exchange for the Guqin

170 Since the mid-20th century, as cultural barriers in Chinese society gradually diminished and the
171 ecological environment for traditional music improved, the infiltration of foreign musical cultures
172 sparked a deep interest among Chinese musicians in Western music(Maitenaz,2021). This cultural
173 exchange further propelled the widespread development of traditional Chinese music. Many
174 traditional instrumentalists began to break away from conventional institutional settings or
175 professional folk music education models. They ventured overseas to study the theories and
176 practices of other musical forms, using these experiences as a foundation to explore new

177 performance styles for their instruments. Against this backdrop of cultural integration, a new
178 generation of innovative young musicians emerged. Taking the erhu as an example, these musicians
179 diversified the expressive forms of traditional Chinese music and contributed to the creation of "new
180 folk music" styles (Qiaoyi, 2024) . These include collaborations between the erhu and electronic
181 music, as well as partnerships with international musicians. This "new folk music" style has
182 successfully met positive societal demands and gained widespread acceptance among the public.

183

184 The guqin has taken a relatively conservative stance amidst this wave of innovation, primarily
185 because its development necessitates a heightened focus on its historical significance. The guqin
186 inherits the ancient sages' extensive research on tonality, acoustics, and instrument craftsmanship,
187 culminating in a comprehensive and meticulous theoretical system. This emphasis on historical and
188 traditional values sets the guqin apart from other Chinese folk instruments in terms of its
189 developmental trajectory. As Cheng Gongliang remarked, "Whether the taboos and regulations
190 attached to the guqin by the ancients allow for such new integration remains an open question.

191 (Cheng, 2009) "In the context of globalization, the challenge for modern guqin musicians lies in
192 preserving and promoting the unique qualities of national music while embracing openness and
193 innovation. Ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam observed that , "Music reflects issues of development
194 and change, inevitably involving processes of transmission, creation, acceptance or rejection, and
195 fusion between musical traditions." These processes not only reveal the evolution of music itself but
196 also highlight its interactions with society, culture, history, and technology. Cheng Gongliang's
197 album "Chinese Landscape", featuring improvisations between the flute and the guqin, represents
198 not only an innovative artistic experiment but also a vivid demonstration of the diversification of

199 Chinese traditional folk music at the end of the 20th century. However, this groundbreaking step
200 carries the weighty burden of guqin cultural identity. Cheng's cautious reflections on the fusion of
201 guqin and Western music reveal the practical challenges faced by the guqin tradition as it seeks to
202 move forward. These challenges underscore the delicate balance required to innovate while
203 maintaining the integrity of an art form deeply rooted in history and culture.

204

205 While the balance between tradition and innovation has long been a central theme in the arts, the
206 more pressing issue for the guqin during this period was how to carve out a distinctive niche in the
207 modern musical landscape. Entering the 20th century, the development of global music entered a
208 new era of diversity, accompanied by the growing acceptance and exploration of concepts like
209 aleatoric and chance music. As early as the mid-20th century, the sitar—a fellow Eastern
210 instrument—began making its mark on the world stage. At the 1963 Edinburgh Festival, a unique
211 duet caused a sensation among Western audiences: a collaboration between two legendary
212 musicians from vastly different cultural backgrounds, Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar (Cairns,
213 Goodwin, Porter, Warrack & Mann, 1963). Dubbed "East Meets West," this violin-and-sitar duet
214 vividly demonstrated how music can transcend cultural boundaries and weave together musical
215 languages from diverse traditions. Through numerous collaborations with Western instruments,
216 Ravi Shankar not only promoted Indian traditional music on the global stage but also exemplified
217 the profound significance and impact of cultural exchange.

218

219 For the guqin to establish a presence on the world stage, it is essential to ensure people learn about,
220 understand, and appreciate this unique instrument. Confucius once said: "Aspire to the Way, abide

221 by virtue, align with humanity, and delight in the arts. (Ji, 2006)." Modern guqin artists such as
222 Cheng Gongliang, Li Xiangting, and Lin Youren have embraced this ethos by introducing the guqin
223 to global audiences through participation in international music festivals and cross-cultural
224 exchange projects. These efforts have not only increased the guqin's international visibility but also
225 expanded the expressive possibilities of Chinese improvised music, opening new avenues for the
226 integration of Eastern and Western musical traditions. From the perspective of global musical
227 diversity, the guqin's cross-cultural improvisational collaborations have enriched the variety of
228 world music while providing a window for deeper understanding and appreciation of different
229 cultures.

230

231 2.3 AI's Role in Promoting the Cross-Cultural Development of Guqin

232 As history progresses, the coexistence of artificial intelligence (AI) and multiculturalism has
233 become a defining feature of 21st-century cultural development (Tilovska-Kechedji, E. 2023). In
234 the context of a digital society, Chinese traditional music culture is actively adapting to the times,
235 reaching new heights. On April 13, 2024, the first AI-composed Chinese music concert, "Zero · One
236 | Colors of China," was successfully held, showcasing the integration and collision of cutting-edge
237 technology and traditional Chinese music. This concert not only marked a breakthrough in
238 combining AI large models with traditional Chinese music, moving from "zero to one," but also
239 indicated that the development and application of AI software are transitioning from mere technical
240 assistance to becoming a tool for music composition. For the guqin, the collaboration between AI
241 and guqin music has emerged as a significant pathway for exploring the modernization and
242 globalization of traditional art forms. To commemorate the 20th anniversary of guqin's inclusion in

243 UNESCO's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", Tencent Games,
244 under the academic guidance of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of
245 Arts, launched the "Digital Preservation of Chinese Traditional Instruments " project in 2023. Along
246 with QQ Music, they co-produced the theme song for the project, "Ancient and Modern with the
247 Qin." Through deep learning of a large corpus of guqin scores and performance techniques, AI was
248 employed to compose new pieces and used timbre conversion technology to recreate the tonal
249 qualities of Ming Dynasty guqin. This project not only demonstrated the potential of combining AI
250 and guqin artistry but also showed how digital restoration technology can safeguard the cultural
251 heritage of guqin music while serving as an efficient medium for its global dissemination. By
252 enabling people worldwide to overcome language, spatial, and cultural barriers, this technology
253 allows audiences to experience the traditional charm of guqin through sound.

254

255 In terms of modern cultural dissemination, Cheng Gongliang made a significant contribution to the
256 internationalization of guqin by collaborating with international musicians, introducing this
257 uniquely Eastern art form to Western audiences for the first time. In the contemporary era, AI
258 technology has further advanced the cross-cultural development of guqin. One of its most
259 significant contributions is breaking the geographical limitations of traditional dissemination
260 methods. With AI support, guqin music can be showcased globally through advanced technologies
261 such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). For example, virtual performance
262 technology not only accurately simulates the playing styles of guqin masters but also provides
263 interactive experiences that allow audiences to deeply immerse themselves in the cultural essence of
264 guqin. Furthermore, AI-generated guqin compositions, like those created through the collaboration

265 between Tencent Games and QQ Music, have been rapidly distributed through global online music
266 platforms and social media, attracting music enthusiasts from diverse cultural backgrounds. This
267 form of dissemination has opened new avenues for the cross-cultural exchange of guqin music. AI
268 also facilitates the fusion of guqin with other musical genres, such as jazz and electronic music. This
269 technological approach not only transcends the physical limitations of traditional performance
270 methods but also alleviates the need for performers like Cheng Gongliang to travel overseas to share
271 their art. Instead, AI enables the efficient creation of globally appealing new music forms that
272 seamlessly blend traditional and contemporary styles, significantly enhancing the international
273 influence of guqin.

274

275 Accordingly, the integration of AI technology offers unprecedented possibilities for the
276 preservation, innovation, and cross-cultural dissemination of guqin. It accelerates the digital
277 preservation of guqin music and promotes its exchange and integration on a global scale. This
278 synergy between technology and tradition breathes new life into guqin, positioning it as a dynamic
279 and evolving cultural symbol in the contemporary world.

280

281 **3. Musical Expression in Guqin Performance**

282 3.1 The Interaction Between "Emotion" and "Technique"

283 Zhuangzi once stated, "Art has its way (Hansen, 2014) ."Guqin technique adheres to the natural
284 order, embodying the philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature and the integration of
285 all things. Playing the guqin not only clarifies the mind but also expresses emotion (Kaplan,
286 Cortina,Ruark, LaPort & Nicolaidis, 2014). In actual performance, emotional changes influence

287 the application of techniques, while the nuanced execution of techniques enhances emotional
288 expression. Similarly, in playing Western instruments, advanced technical skills enable performers
289 to precisely control rhythm, pitch, tone, and dynamic variations, thereby creating multi-layered
290 musical expressions (Chong, 2016) . For example, the precise control of touch and pressure in piano
291 playing and the flexible application of bowing techniques in violin performance are key methods for
292 infusing emotion into music. The mastery of technique directly determines whether the performer
293 can freely channel their emotions into the music. Cheng Gongliang, in his guqin practice,
294 emphasizes the use of refined techniques to convey emotions. He argues, "Through superb
295 technique, the performer can more precisely express inner emotions, achieving harmony between
296 guqin music and nature, thereby realizing deeper musical expression. (Cheng, 2012) "Thus,
297 technique serves as the vehicle for emotion. Without solid technical foundations, the malleability of
298 sound cannot be fully realized, and emotional expression would lack support. Finger diagrams
299 provide an external representation of technique, but the internal interplay of strength and string
300 responsiveness determines the auditory effect. Understanding the nature of strings is paramount for
301 the performer. Subtle deviations in pressing pressure or string angle can significantly affect tonal
302 quality. Cheng Gongliang noted, "A performer must focus on three key factors: the pressure applied
303 to the strings, the contact position on the string, and the direction of plucking. By coordinating
304 finger techniques and hand gestures, one can achieve precise control over dynamics, from soft to
305 strong, and convey a wide range of tonal colors. (Cheng, 2012) "For example, in the handling of
306 harmonics, the duration of finger placement is crucial—light and fleeting, like a dragonfly
307 skimming water, to ensure a clear and bright tone. Additionally, the expression of "soft" and
308 "strong" is not merely about applying force but involves adjusting the contact point along different

309 frets to achieve the desired tonal effect. Observing Cheng Gongliang's playing posture reveals his
310 seamless and natural finger movements, demonstrating exceptional control and achieving a
311 harmonious state of "fingers merging with strings."

312

313 Conversely, "emotion" serves as the soul of "technique" (Illouz, 2008) . No matter how refined the
314 technique, without genuine emotional engagement, the music risks becoming hollow and lifeless.

315 As noted in "Xishan Qinkuang": "The greatest sound is scarcely heard; ancient melodies are hard to
316 revive. If one approaches music merely as a technical endeavor without harmony of mind and

317 emotion, the more time passes, the further one drifts from its essence. (Xu, 2011)"The creation of

318 guqin compositions often draws inspiration from natural scenery, historical events, and personal

319 reflections, making the emotional core traceable. In Western music, the interaction between

320 emotion and technique varies across different musical styles due to their distinct characteristics,

321 placing diverse demands on performers (Juslin & Laukka, 2003) . For instance, Baroque music

322 emphasizes structural and formal rigor, with technique primarily serving to highlight the beauty of

323 musical architecture. In contrast, Romantic music prioritizes the free expression of individual

324 emotions, where technique is often employed to create intense emotional atmospheres and dramatic

325 effects. These stylistic differences require performers to balance emotion and technique within

326 various historical contexts and musical traditions, fostering a deeper understanding of the work's

327 essence to achieve a more expressive interpretation. For Guqin, the "truth" of guqin music lies in

328 tracing back to the emotional expressions of the ancient composers. Performers, by following their

329 inner feelings, aim to convey authentic emotions. The emotional direction of a piece depends on the

330 performer's interpretation, making their understanding of the composition pivotal in bringing out its

331 genuine emotional content. Although times change, successive generations of guqin practitioners
332 have managed to strike a balance between preserving the overarching style of a piece and
333 incorporating their personal expression, thus achieving harmony between "style" and "content."

334

335 Therefore, in his performances, Cheng Gongliang consistently prioritized the exploration of
336 "ancient intent". During the early stages of "dapu" (reconstruction of ancient scores) and notation
337 studies, he not only traced multiple versions of historical scores to uncover the origins of the pieces
338 but also meticulously examined their emotional shifts and aesthetic nuances through performance.
339 This allowed him to align emotional expressions with the envisioned mood of the guqin
340 compositions. Cheng emphasized the importance of a delicate understanding of "the intent of the
341 guqin" during performance, organically integrating historical tradition with personal interpretation.
342 Through this approach, he breathed new life into guqin music, enabling it to resonate meaningfully
343 within a contemporary context.

344

345 3.2 Cultural Interpretation of "Scene" and "Emotion" in the Artistic Conception of Guqin Music

346 Guqin compositions often draw on the artistic conception of literary works, using literary or poetic
347 titles to suggestively reveal the content of the music (Lee, 2023) . From the perspective of the artistic
348 conception conveyed by guqin titles, categorizing them as "realistic" or "abstract" offers a more
349 intuitive approach. In guqin composition, the emotional projection embedded in the depiction of
350 scenery is often driven by the creator's inner emotions, which are reflected in the selection,
351 composition, and representation of the scenery(Clore& Ortony, 2013). These choices ultimately
352 determine whether the piece adopts a "realistic" or "imaginary" presentation. This duality of

353 "realistic" and "abstract" is inherently inseparable and is shaped by the performer's subjective
354 intention. Therefore, modern guqin players must first conduct an in-depth investigation into the
355 origins of the piece and the versions of its notation to ensure an accurate understanding and
356 expression of its essence. At the same time, performers should incorporate their own "re-creation"
357 during the performance to fully explore and convey the depth and breadth of the multiple artistic
358 conceptions inherent in guqin music.

359

360 Realistic guqin compositions primarily focus on the direct depiction of "scenes," using a
361 representational approach to reflect both objective reality and subjective emotions, with an
362 emphasis on the pursuit of "authenticity." True imagery and genuine emotion are indispensable. As
363 Wang Guowei remarked, "The poet's sincerity is not only required in human affairs but also in their
364 depiction of even the smallest grass or tree; otherwise, their work becomes superficial.(Wang,
365 2014)" Through these compositions, guqin players capture the beauty of nature not only as a tribute
366 to its splendor but also as an expression of their inner emotions and ideals. Whether portraying the
367 "object-scene" of natural landscapes and the emotional resonance they evoke, as in "High
368 Mountains, Flowing Water" or "Mist over the Xiao and Xiang Rivers", or depicting the
369 "emotion-scene" of human joys and sorrows, as in "Three Variations on Yang Pass" or "Moon over
370 the Mountain Pass", these compositions reveal the ancient connection between the human spirit and
371 the cosmos. They encompass both the recreation and portrayal of natural sceneries, offering a sense
372 of liberation and immersion in nature, and the depiction of human experiences of joy, sorrow,
373 parting, and reunion, prompting profound reflection on life and its encounters with society.

374

375 Since the Han Dynasty, the aesthetic concept of "implicit beauty " has been a cornerstone of
376 traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly valued in Daoist philosophy(Huang,2022). This aesthetic
377 is expressed as "meaning beyond words" in poetry, "images beyond images" in visual art, and the
378 pursuit of "sound beyond the strings"—commonly referred to as "resonance"—in music. Some
379 contemporary guqin players, when interpreting landscape-inspired pieces, tend to de-emphasize
380 explicit depictions of the "scene" and instead focus on connecting with its spirit through "resonance".
381 By transcending surface-level expression, they aim to convey and experience the profound beauty
382 of artistic intent. As Guo Ping mentioned in the interview, Cheng Gongliang's use of "resonance" in
383 his performances was not only frequent but also deeply expressive. When performing guqin pieces
384 themed around scenic depictions, Cheng placed particular emphasis on conveying the imagery
385 through the resonance of his music. This not only allowed listeners to feel as if they were immersed
386 in the depicted scenes but also evoked profound emotional resonance. His approach showcased
387 exceptional musical artistry and a nuanced ability to convey complex emotions through sound.For
388 instance, in the guqin piece "Clouds and Waters of Xiaoxiang", composed during the Yuan army's
389 southern invasion, its creator Guo Mian relocated to the area around Mount Heng in Hunan and
390 often roamed by boat at the confluence of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers.In his interpretation of this
391 piece, Cheng paid meticulous attention to the precise control of tone and dynamic variations, using
392 the physical movement of musical notes to depict the grandeur of the Xiaoxiang landscape, where
393 rivers seem to meet the heavens and clouds obscure the Nine Peaks. He vividly recreated the natural
394 magnificence of surging waters and shifting clouds, evoking the dynamic interplay of nature's
395 elements. Through delicate adjustments of weight and pressure, he created a poetic sense of
396 ambiguity, immersing the listener in the scene. In terms of emotional expression, Cheng infused the

397 imagery with the sorrow of national collapse and familial loss that Guo Mian experienced when
398 moved by the scenery. The "length of resonance"—a direct means of conveying emotion—was
399 particularly prominent in Cheng's performance. He excelled at handling the connections between
400 notes within musical phrases, skillfully managing the "breath" in pauses to make it resemble a
401 subtle and tender narrative, adding vitality to the piece. By integrating rhythm and emotional tone,
402 Cheng effectively linked the changes in the scene's imagery with profound emotional depth,
403 highlighting the finest nuances of the inner world and delivering an intensely captivating artistic
404 impact.

405
406 Abstract types of qin compositions, on the other hand, emphasize the creation of a "constructed
407 scene" . In such compositions, imagination and association are given full play and freedom,
408 focusing primarily on the sincere and moving expression of the player's inner emotions and
409 ideals(Medler& Magerko,2010). These pieces emphasize the transmission of "emotion" and the
410 depiction of the psychological states associated with human joys and sorrows, such as in "Recalling
411 an Old Friend", "Return to Tranquility", and "Forgetting Worries."Taking "Forgetting Worrie"s as
412 an example, both Yao Bingyan and Cheng Gongliang transcribed and performed this piece. The
413 meaning of the piece is clear: it is about forgetting the troubles of the world. Yao Bingyan's
414 performance of "Forgetting Worries" is simple and tranquil. Starting from the second phrase, the
415 beginning of each musical phrase falls on the second half of the beat, infusing a slight sense of joy
416 into the steady rhythm, showcasing a characteristic of freedom and ease. In Cheng Gongliang's
417 interpretation, the "fast" marking at the beginning of the piece immediately draws the emotion into
418 the music, expressed in a direct and precise manner. His fingers move smoothly across the strings,

419 imbuing the piece with a unique dynamism and tension. This illustrates that abstract types of ancient
420 qin compositions offer players a broader creative space. While adhering to the fixed thematic intent
421 of the piece, players can use diverse emotional expressions and performance techniques to imbue
422 the same piece with different layers of emotion and artistic conception.

423

424 From the above, it can be seen that the creation of a scene is not purely fictional, and the depiction of
425 a scene is not purely realistic. Subjective imagination cannot exist without reflecting natural reality,
426 and the condensation of spiritual essence must be based on an understanding of real life. Both are
427 products of the combination of subjective and objective elements, differing only in the proportion of
428 the real and the imaginary. Similarly, although qin compositions can be categorized as "realistic" or
429 "abstract" based on their emotional and scenic content, in the performance of qin players, "realistic"
430 compositions require the integration of subjective emotional experience, while "abstract"
431 compositions must be grounded in concrete emotional foundations to be fully expressed. This
432 blending of the real and the imaginary achieves an expression that aligns with the natural essence of
433 music through the sound of the qin.

434

435 **4. Reflections on "Autumn Sound"**

436 As Zhuangzi states: "The sound of heaven arises from the myriad things, each different, yet
437 allowing them to be themselves; all are self-determined, so who could provoke their
438 anger?(Hansen,2014)" Here, "The sound of heaven" refers to the sound of nature, emphasizing that
439 the development of all things is uncontrollable and governed by natural laws. Cheng Gongliang's
440 favorite Tang qin is named "Qiulai" ("autumn sound "), where "lai" signifies sound, and "autumn

441 sound "symbolizes the harmony of natural sounds, aligning closely with the concept of "lai" as
442 representing the voice of nature described in Zhuangzi's philosophy. As a modern qin player, Cheng
443 Gongliang embodies the spirit and character of a traditional scholar. His understanding of "Autumn
444 Sound" remains deeply rooted in the ancient philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature.
445 Although the modern context inevitably exposes "natural aesthetics" to the influence of various
446 external media, Cheng remains steadfast in his commitment to tradition. He uses "Autumn Sound"
447 as a medium to explore the profound insights ancient people held about the natural world and human
448 existence. This persistence is not only a continuation of ancient spirit but also a renewed reflection
449 and contemporary interpretation of the relationship between humans and the guqin, as well as
450 between humans and nature.

451

452 4.1 The Connection Between the Player and the Instrument

453 The guqin is crafted from wood, a material imbued with the dynamic vitality of its natural growth
454 environment (Cai & Tai, 2018). For scholars and literati, the guqin's material serves as a vessel for
455 humanistic ideals, with the selection and crafting of the wood aimed at achieving a transcendent
456 state of mind. In their perspective, the guqin's tonal quality embodies the spiritual resonance of
457 nature itself. The beauty of the guqin's sound arises from two key aspects: the use of high-quality
458 materials and exquisite craftsmanship, as well as the interplay between the instrument and the
459 performer. Scientific research indicates that the tonal characteristics of the guqin are closely tied to
460 the age and condition of its material (Borland, 2014). For example, the tonal differences between
461 Song and Ming dynasty guqin instruments are fundamentally attributed to variations in their
462 materials. Ancient wood, after prolonged natural aging, achieves a balance of internal tension and

463 moisture. This state endows the instrument with more harmonious vibration properties, producing
464 purer and deeper tones. Such tonal qualities are the inherent advantage of the Tang guqin "Qiulai"
465 ".Cheng Gongliang's "Qiulai" features a spruce top and bottom, offering a delicate timbre with
466 lingering resonance. Although it does not fully meet the highest standards of the guqin's "Nine
467 Virtues," its tonal characteristics complement Cheng Gongliang's playing style perfectly. In the
468 instrument's sound, one can clearly perceive Cheng's "inner sincerity and sensitivity," which is a
469 key reason for his deep affection for "Qiulai". This profound integration of emotion and artistry not
470 only highlights the cultural significance of the guqin as a traditional instrument but also exemplifies
471 the unique resonance between performer and instrument.

472

473 The relationship between a person and their guqin largely depends on the meaning its "owner"
474 imparts to the instrument. This meaning is not solely derived from the instrument's historical and
475 artistic value but is also reflected in how the player integrates it into their artistic expression and
476 cultural pursuits through practice and emotion(Cook,2001). As Cheng Gongliang's beloved
477 companion, "Qiulai" was not only an essential partner in his performances but also accompanied
478 him on significant tours across Europe, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where he gave many
479 influential performances. This deep affection stems from the profound resonance between "Qiulai"
480 and Cheng Gongliang's artistic life.However, Cheng never regarded "Qiulai" as merely a rare
481 treasure from the Tang Dynasty or a relic to be protected for its historical significance. Instead, he
482 saw it as a living vessel for guqin music, dedicated to using it in performance and sharing it with
483 others to inspire a broader appreciation for the art of the guqin. Whether during academic lectures at
484 universities or public talks aimed at general audiences, "Qiulai" was always Cheng's primary

485 instrument. This not only reflects his high regard for the instrument's tonal qualities and
486 characteristics but also demonstrates his emphasis on the deep emotional connection between the
487 guqin and its player. For Cheng Gongliang, "Qiulai" was more than a tool for performance—it was
488 a vital medium for communicating with his audience. Its delicate and sincere tones perfectly
489 conveyed his understanding of guqin music and his artistic aspirations. Cheng believed that the
490 value of the guqin lies not only in its historical rarity but also in its significance as a vessel for
491 transmitting music and culture. Thus, in his hands, "Qiulai" was not merely a precious antique but
492 an instrument born for performance and artistic expression.

493

494 4.2 Qin Music and Nature

495 The ancient pursuit of the meaning of life and the exploration of its spiritual essence were products
496 of the natural worldview in Chinese philosophy(Kohn, 1992). This pursuit was not a fantasy of a
497 surreal ideal world but was embodied in daily life, demonstrating the vibrant "life force" of humans
498 within nature. The guqin, as an instrument for expressing emotions, was not only constrained by the
499 external moral beliefs of rites and music but also imbued with the inner meaning of the "Dao"(Wu,
500 2016). Particularly when the creation of qin music was concentrated within the scholar class of
501 ancient China, its cultural definition extended beyond the societal framework to reflect the scholars'
502 quest for personal character refinement and the elevation of their spiritual state(Kern, 2001). They
503 regarded the qin as a companion, and through playing it, they sought to transcend the material world,
504 contemplate the origins of the universe, and entrust their noble spirit to the instrument. At its core,
505 this connection arose from the mutual resonance between heaven and humanity, drawing from
506 nature and reflecting it in return..

507

508 Cheng Gongliang's works all center on the theme of "Qiulai." In "Walking into Shaowu," he reflects:

509 "Now my age feels like the evening of a day, prompting me to look back on both a day and a

510 lifetime.(Cheng,2014)" Autumn carries the joy of harvest as well as a profound sense of life's

511 transitions.By the late 1990s, Cheng Gongliang had achieved remarkable success in guqin

512 performance and transcription. Yet, he chose to retire early from the Nanjing University of the Arts,

513 seeking to free himself from worldly constraints. Through the "Autumn Resonance" series, he

514 recorded his life in a retrospective manner, intertwining his artistic explorations with his life journey.

515 In "Memories from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," he documented the purest and most innocent

516 parts of his heart—his childhood and learning experiences. In "Lessons from the Studio of Autumn

517 Resonance," "Scores from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," and "Reflections from the Studio of

518 Autumn Resonance," he explored the teaching of guqin, the creation of guqin music, and theoretical

519 considerations of guqin scholarship, reflecting his wholehearted dedication to the guqin during his

520 prime. In his later years, he wrote "Idle Thoughts from the Studio of Autumn Resonance,"

521 chronicling his life in old age, earning him the reputation of being "a man of multifaceted

522 experiences" among younger generations. To Cheng Gongliang, Qiulai symbolized his way of

523 coexisting with nature. Every phase of his life embodied his reflections on life, and through it ran his

524 tireless exploration of life's meaning.

525

526 Cheng Gongliang embodied a persistent and stable vitality, characterized by a profound inner

527 clarity and spiritual freedom. This vitality was not only reflected in his unwavering dedication to

528 guqin scholarship but also in his keen sensitivity to and appreciation of nature. In "Idle Words from

529 Qiulai Studio", even as his life entered the "autumn" phase, Cheng remained deeply engaged in
530 playing the guqin, immersing himself in the landscapes of mountains, rivers, and fields, and
531 channeling the essence of nature into his music. He continued to pursue a lifestyle that embraced
532 simplicity and serenity, aligned with the Daoist ideal of reclusion and harmony with nature. For
533 Cheng Gongliang, all life experiences ultimately served as the foundation for his genuine
534 understanding of guqin music, its composition, and the broader philosophical reflections it inspired.
535 Although he refrained from labeling himself with specific identities, his profound connection to
536 nature and exploration of life's meaning closely mirrored the lofty artistic aspirations of ancient
537 Chinese literati. Cheng infused the art of the guqin with rich philosophical depth, transforming it
538 from a mere musical form into a medium for spiritual exploration and philosophical contemplation.

539

540 **5. Conclusion**

541 The guqin, a traditional instrument embodying over three millennia of Chinese culture, is a
542 significant symbol of Chinese cultural heritage, with profound artistic and spiritual value. In today's
543 context of cultural pluralism, the dedicated efforts of modern guqin practitioners have brought this
544 ancient art form increasing international recognition. However, its deeper meanings and unique
545 value still face challenges in global dissemination and nuanced interpretation, particularly
546 concerning its cultural adaptability and its role as a sustainable emblem of Chinese tradition. Cheng
547 Gongliang, a key figure bridging guqin tradition and modernity, has made invaluable contributions
548 to its globalization. Through collaborations with international musicians, he has integrated guqin
549 music into global cultural discourse, combining the intrinsic power of music with practices of
550 cultural adaptation and exchange. Cheng balances tradition and innovation in guqin scholarship,

551 remaining faithful to its traditional spirit while incorporating modern musical expressions. This
552 approach imbues guqin art with contemporaneity and universality, reflecting Chinese cultural
553 philosophy while addressing contemporary musical needs. Renowned for his academic and artistic
554 achievements, Cheng Gongliang serves as a model in guqin studies and musicology. His scholarship,
555 artistry, and personal integrity provide a foundation for further research and continue to inspire the
556 preservation and development of guqin art.

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