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

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

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

### 1. The Development of Guqin Culture in Historical Context

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

Since the late Qing Dynasty, amidst the backdrop of intense social upheaval, the guqin, along with the broader literati culture it symbolizes, began a period of decline (Nathanson, 2012). The abolition of the imperial examination system and the disintegration of the literati class significantly reduced the guqin's social standing and influence, leading to a gradual weakening of its cultural ecosystem. After 1966, with dramatic political shifts, the guqin and other traditional art

forms were labeled as symbols of "feudal culture." (Tsai, 2016) Many guqin players faced persecution, and a large number of valuable guqin instruments, scores, and related artifacts were destroyed. The system of transmission nearly collapsed, and societal recognition of and demand for the guqin's cultural value almost entirely vanished. Furthermore, the forces of modernization and the introduction of Western culture dealt a significant blow to the guqin's cultural ecosystem. The widespread adoption of Western musical systems and instruments severely marginalized Chinese traditional music. Institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, which embraced Western music education as their core framework, further sidelined traditional instruments, including the guqin (Grenier Borel, 2019). Under the pressure of modernization, the guqin culture gradually lost its ability to adapt to contemporary times and failed to reestablish its unique position within the new cultural framework. This predicament not only reflects the decline of the guqin during a specific historical period but also highlights the structural challenges traditional arts face when confronted with modernity and external cultural influences.

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

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

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



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

Although Cheng Gongliang passed away in 2015 due to illness, a deeper understanding of his artistic philosophy and guqin practices was pursued through an interview with his closest student, Guo Ping. This conversation further uncovered Cheng's artistic perspectives and provides valuable insights for related research. As previously mentioned, Cheng Gongliang integrated Western musical aesthetics into his guqin philosophy. Guo Ping noted during the interview: "Teacher Cheng often listened to Western music, particularly melodic violin works. He had a deep love for violin concertos and symphonies, which were among his favorite pieces. "This reflects Cheng's ability to balance tradition with an appreciation for Western musical aesthetics, thereby

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

guqin philosophy and his enduring legacy.

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

### **2.1 Cheng Gongliang's International Exchange and Improvisational Creativity**

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

In 1989, Cheng Gongliang was invited by renowned German harpist Rudiger Oppermann to participate in a second concert tour in Germany (Cheng, 2009). As the concert tour drew to a close,

flutist Cornelius Hentz invited Cheng Gongliang to collaborate on an experimental project aimed at blending and contrasting the distinct sounds of the guqin and the flute. The two artists later recorded the album "Chinese Landscape" at Hentz's home in the Netherlands, which featured a collection of eleven pieces. Among them, "Dialogue Between Taihu and Windmills" left a particularly profound impression on Cheng. The term "dialogue" vividly captured the interplay and interaction between the tonal qualities of the guqin and the flute. Cheng recalled that the performance that evening transcended the boundaries of language, leaving only the responsive dialogue between the guqin and the flute. This was, in his words, "pure improvisation." Immersed in this organically formed musical synergy, the two performers collaborated seamlessly, achieving a rare and spontaneous harmony. The recording process lasted three days, and during post-production, elements such as electronic accompaniment, vocal harmonies, and natural sound effects were added, creating an atmospheric, layered spatial depth imbued with a sense of "water-like fluidity." This marked Cheng Gongliang's first attempt at incorporating Western-style improvisation into guqin music. Remarkably, the fusion of the guqin and flute sparked a strikingly unique musical chemistry. This collaboration not only expanded the expressive possibilities of guqin performance but also allowed Cheng to experience the boundless potential of cross-cultural musical dialogue.

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

Since the mid-20th century, as cultural barriers in Chinese society gradually diminished and the ecological environment for traditional music improved, the infiltration of foreign musical cultures sparked a deep interest among Chinese musicians in Western music(Maitenaz,2021). This cultural

exchange further propelled the widespread development of traditional Chinese music. Many traditional instrumentalists began to break away from conventional institutional settings or professional folk music education models. They ventured overseas to study the theories and practices of other musical forms, using these experiences as a foundation to explore new performance styles for their instruments. Against this backdrop of cultural integration, a new generation of innovative young musicians emerged. Taking the erhu as an example, these musicians diversified the expressive forms of traditional Chinese music and contributed to the creation of "new folk music" styles (Qiaoyi, 2024). These include collaborations between the erhu and electronic music, as well as partnerships with international musicians. This "new folk music" style has successfully met positive societal demands and gained widespread acceptance among the public.

The guqin has taken a relatively conservative stance amidst this wave of innovation, primarily because its development necessitates a heightened focus on its historical significance. The guqin inherits the ancient sages' extensive research on tonality, acoustics, and instrument craftsmanship, culminating in a comprehensive and meticulous theoretical system. This emphasis on historical and traditional values sets the guqin apart from other Chinese folk instruments in terms of its developmental trajectory. As Cheng Gongliang remarked, "Whether the taboos and regulations attached to the guqin by the ancients allow for such new integration remains an open question. (Cheng, 2009) "In the context of globalization, the challenge for modern guqin musicians lies in preserving and promoting the unique qualities of national music while embracing openness and innovation. Ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam observed that , "Music reflects issues of

development and change, inevitably involving processes of transmission, creation, acceptance or rejection, and fusion between musical traditions." These processes not only reveal the evolution of music itself but also highlight its interactions with society, culture, history, and technology. Cheng Gongliang's album "Chinese Landscape", featuring improvisations between the flute and the guqin, represents not only an innovative artistic experiment but also a vivid demonstration of the diversification of Chinese traditional folk music at the end of the 20th century. However, this groundbreaking step carries the weighty burden of guqin cultural identity. Cheng's cautious reflections on the fusion of guqin and Western music reveal the practical challenges faced by the guqin tradition as it seeks to move forward. These challenges underscore the delicate balance required to innovate while maintaining the integrity of an art form deeply rooted in history and culture.

While the balance between tradition and innovation has long been a central theme in the arts, the more pressing issue for the guqin during this period was how to carve out a distinctive niche in the modern musical landscape. Entering the 20th century, the development of global music entered a new era of diversity, accompanied by the growing acceptance and exploration of concepts like aleatoric and chance music. As early as the mid-20th century, the sitar—a fellow Eastern instrument—began making its mark on the world stage. At the 1963 Edinburgh Festival, a unique duet caused a sensation among Western audiences: a collaboration between two legendary musicians from vastly different cultural backgrounds, Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar (Cairns, Goodwin, Porter, Warrack & Mann, 1963). Dubbed "East Meets West," this violin-and-sitar duet vividly demonstrated how music can transcend cultural boundaries and weave together musical

languages from diverse traditions. Through numerous collaborations with Western instruments, Ravi Shankar not only promoted Indian traditional music on the global stage but also exemplified the profound significance and impact of cultural exchange.

For the guqin to establish a presence on the world stage, it is essential to ensure people learn about, understand, and appreciate this unique instrument. Confucius once said: "Aspire to the Way, abide by virtue, align with humanity, and delight in the arts. (Ji, 2006)." Modern guqin artists such as Cheng Gongliang, Li Xiangting, and Lin Youren have embraced this ethos by introducing the guqin to global audiences through participation in international music festivals and cross-cultural exchange projects. These efforts have not only increased the guqin's international visibility but also expanded the expressive possibilities of Chinese improvised music, opening new avenues for the integration of Eastern and Western musical traditions. From the perspective of global musical diversity, the guqin's cross-cultural improvisational collaborations have enriched the variety of world music while providing a window for deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultures.

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

As history progresses, the coexistence of artificial intelligence (AI) and multiculturalism has become a defining feature of 21st-century cultural development (Tilovska-Kechedji, E. 2023). In the context of a digital society, Chinese traditional music culture is actively adapting to the times, reaching new heights. On April 13, 2024, the first AI-composed Chinese music concert, "Zero · One | Colors of China," was successfully held, showcasing the integration and collision of

cutting-edge technology and traditional Chinese music. This concert not only marked a breakthrough in combining AI large models with traditional Chinese music, moving from “zero to one,” but also indicated that the development and application of AI software are transitioning from mere technical assistance to becoming a tool for music composition. For the guqin, the collaboration between AI and guqin music has emerged as a significant pathway for exploring the modernization and globalization of traditional art forms. To commemorate the 20th anniversary of guqin’s inclusion in UNESCO’s "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", Tencent Games, under the academic guidance of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts, launched the "Digital Preservation of Chinese Traditional Instruments " project in 2023. Along with QQ Music, they co-produced the theme song for the project, "Ancient and Modern with the Qin." Through deep learning of a large corpus of guqin scores and performance techniques, AI was employed to compose new pieces and used timbre conversion technology to recreate the tonal qualities of Ming Dynasty guqin. This project not only demonstrated the potential of combining AI and guqin artistry but also showed how digital restoration technology can safeguard the cultural heritage of guqin music while serving as an efficient medium for its global dissemination. By enabling people worldwide to overcome language, spatial, and cultural barriers, this technology allows audiences to experience the traditional charm of guqin through sound.

In terms of modern cultural dissemination, Cheng Gongliang made a significant contribution to the internationalization of guqin by collaborating with international musicians, introducing this uniquely Eastern art form to Western audiences for the first time. In the contemporary era, AI



5 technology has further advanced the cross-cultural development of guqin. One of its most significant contributions is breaking the geographical limitations of traditional dissemination methods. With AI support, guqin music can be showcased globally through advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). For example, virtual performance technology not only accurately simulates the playing styles of guqin masters but also provides interactive experiences that allow audiences to deeply immerse themselves in the cultural essence of guqin. Furthermore, AI-generated guqin compositions, like those created through the collaboration between Tencent Games and QQ Music, have been rapidly distributed through global online music platforms and social media, attracting music enthusiasts from diverse cultural backgrounds. This form of dissemination has opened new avenues for the cross-cultural exchange of guqin music. AI also facilitates the fusion of guqin with other musical genres, such as jazz and electronic music. This technological approach not only transcends the physical limitations of traditional performance methods but also alleviates the need for performers like Cheng Gongliang to travel overseas to share their art. Instead, AI enables the efficient creation of globally appealing new music forms that seamlessly blend traditional and contemporary styles, significantly enhancing the international influence of guqin.

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

### 3. Musical Expression in Guqin Performance

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

Zhuangzi once stated, "Art has its way (Hansen, 2014) ."Guqin technique adheres to the natural order, embodying the philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature and the integration of all things. Playing the guqin not only clarifies the mind but also expresses emotion (Kaplan, Cortina,Ruark, LaPort & Nicolaides, 2014). In actual performance, emotional changes influence the application of techniques, while the nuanced execution of techniques enhances emotional expression. Similarly, in playing Western instruments, advanced technical skills enable performers to precisely control rhythm, pitch, tone, and dynamic variations, thereby creating multi-layered musical expressions (Chong, 2016) . For example, the precise control of touch and pressure in piano playing and the flexible application of bowing techniques in violin performance are key methods for infusing emotion into music. The mastery of technique directly determines whether the performer can freely channel their emotions into the music. Cheng Gongliang, in his guqin practice, emphasizes the use of refined techniques to convey emotions. He argues, "Through superb technique, the performer can more precisely express inner emotions, achieving harmony between guqin music and nature, thereby realizing deeper musical expression. (Cheng, 2012) "Thus, technique serves as the vehicle for emotion. Without solid technical foundations, the malleability of sound cannot be fully realized, and emotional expression would lack support. Finger diagrams provide an external representation of technique, but the internal interplay of strength and string responsiveness determines the auditory effect. Understanding the nature of strings is paramount for the performer. Subtle deviations in pressing pressure or string angle can

significantly affect tonal quality. Cheng Gongliang noted, "A performer must focus on three key factors: the pressure applied to the strings, the contact position on the string, and the direction of plucking. By coordinating finger techniques and hand gestures, one can achieve precise control over dynamics, from soft to strong, and convey a wide range of tonal colors. (Cheng, 2012) "For example, in the handling of harmonics, the duration of finger placement is crucial—light and fleeting, like a dragonfly skimming water, to ensure a clear and bright tone. Additionally, the expression of "soft" and "strong" is not merely about applying force but involves adjusting the contact point along different frets to achieve the desired tonal effect. Observing Cheng Gongliang's playing posture reveals his seamless and natural finger movements, demonstrating exceptional control and achieving a harmonious state of "fingers merging with strings."

Conversely, "emotion" serves as the soul of "technique" (Illouz, 2008). No matter how refined the technique, without genuine emotional engagement, the music risks becoming hollow and lifeless. As noted in "Xishan Qinkuang": "The greatest sound is scarcely heard; ancient melodies are hard to revive. If one approaches music merely as a technical endeavor without harmony of mind and emotion, the more time passes, the further one drifts from its essence. (Xu, 2011)"The creation of guqin compositions often draws inspiration from natural scenery, historical events, and personal reflections, making the emotional core traceable. In Western music, the interaction between emotion and technique varies across different musical styles due to their distinct characteristics, placing diverse demands on performers (Juslin & Laukka, 2003). For instance, Baroque music emphasizes structural and formal rigor, with technique primarily serving to highlight the beauty of musical architecture. In contrast, Romantic music prioritizes the free expression of individual

emotions, where technique is often employed to create intense emotional atmospheres and dramatic effects. These stylistic differences require performers to balance emotion and technique within various historical contexts and musical traditions, fostering a deeper understanding of the work's essence to achieve a more expressive interpretation. For Guqin, the "truth" of guqin music lies in tracing back to the emotional expressions of the ancient composers. Performers, by following their inner feelings, aim to convey authentic emotions. The emotional direction of a piece depends on the performer's interpretation, making their understanding of the composition pivotal in bringing out its genuine emotional content. Although times change, successive generations of guqin practitioners have managed to strike a balance between preserving the overarching style of a piece and incorporating their personal expression, thus achieving harmony between "style" and "content."

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

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

Guqin compositions often draw on the artistic conception of literary works, using literary or poetic titles to suggestively reveal the content of the music (Lee, 2023). From the perspective of the artistic conception conveyed by guqin titles, categorizing them as "realistic" or "abstract" offers a more intuitive approach. In guqin composition, the emotional projection embedded in the depiction of scenery is often driven by the creator's inner emotions, which are reflected in the selection, composition, and representation of the scenery (Clore & Ortony, 2013). These choices ultimately determine whether the piece adopts a "realistic" or "imaginary" presentation. This duality of "realistic" and "abstract" is inherently inseparable and is shaped by the performer's subjective intention. Therefore, modern guqin players must first conduct an in-depth investigation into the origins of the piece and the versions of its notation to ensure an accurate understanding and expression of its essence. At the same time, performers should incorporate their own "re-creation" during the performance to fully explore and convey the depth and breadth of the multiple artistic conceptions inherent in guqin music.

Realistic guqin compositions primarily focus on the direct depiction of "scenes," using a representational approach to reflect both objective reality and subjective emotions, with an emphasis on the pursuit of "authenticity." True imagery and genuine emotion are indispensable. As Wang Guowei remarked, "The poet's sincerity is not only required in human affairs but also in their depiction of even the smallest grass or tree; otherwise, their work becomes superficial. (Wang, 2014)" Through these compositions, guqin players capture the beauty of nature not only as a tribute to its splendor but also as an expression of their inner emotions and ideals. Whether

portraying the "object-scene" of natural landscapes and the emotional resonance they evoke, as in "High Mountains, Flowing Water" or "Mist over the Xiao and Xiang Rivers", or depicting the "emotion-scene" of human joys and sorrows, as in "Three Variations on Yang Pass" or "Moon over the Mountain Pass", these compositions reveal the ancient connection between the human spirit and the cosmos. They encompass both the recreation and portrayal of natural sceneries, offering a sense of liberation and immersion in nature, and the depiction of human experiences of joy, sorrow, parting, and reunion, prompting profound reflection on life and its encounters with society.

Since the Han Dynasty, the aesthetic concept of "implicit beauty" has been a cornerstone of traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly valued in Daoist philosophy (Huang, 2022). This aesthetic is expressed as "meaning beyond words" in poetry, "images beyond images" in visual art, and the pursuit of "sound beyond the strings"—commonly referred to as "resonance"—in music. Some contemporary guqin players, when interpreting landscape-inspired pieces, tend to de-emphasize explicit depictions of the "scene" and instead focus on connecting with its spirit through "resonance". By transcending surface-level expression, they aim to convey and experience the profound beauty of artistic intent. As Guo Ping mentioned in the interview, Cheng Gongliang's use of "resonance" in his performances was not only frequent but also deeply expressive. When performing guqin pieces themed around scenic depictions, Cheng placed particular emphasis on conveying the imagery through the resonance of his music. This not only allowed listeners to feel as if they were immersed in the depicted scenes but also evoked profound emotional resonance. His approach showcased exceptional musical artistry and a nuanced ability to convey complex

emotions through sound. For instance, in the guqin piece "Clouds and Waters of Xiaoxiang", composed during the Yuan army's southern invasion, its creator Guo Mian relocated to the area around Mount Heng in Hunan and often roamed by boat at the confluence of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers. In his interpretation of this piece, Cheng paid meticulous attention to the precise control of tone and dynamic variations, using the physical movement of musical notes to depict the grandeur of the Xiaoxiang landscape, where rivers seem to meet the heavens and clouds obscure the Nine Peaks. He vividly recreated the natural magnificence of surging waters and shifting clouds, evoking the dynamic interplay of nature's elements. Through delicate adjustments of weight and pressure, he created a poetic sense of ambiguity, immersing the listener in the scene. In terms of emotional expression, Cheng infused the imagery with the sorrow of national collapse and familial loss that Guo Mian experienced when moved by the scenery. The "length of resonance"—a direct means of conveying emotion—was particularly prominent in Cheng's performance. He excelled at handling the connections between notes within musical phrases, skillfully managing the "breath" in pauses to make it resemble a subtle and tender narrative, adding vitality to the piece. By integrating rhythm and emotional tone, Cheng effectively linked the changes in the scene's imagery with profound emotional depth, highlighting the finest nuances of the inner world and delivering an intensely captivating artistic impact.

Abstract types of qin compositions, on the other hand, emphasize the creation of a "constructed scene". In such compositions, imagination and association are given full play and freedom, focusing primarily on the sincere and moving expression of the player's inner emotions and ideals (Medler & Magerko, 2010). These pieces emphasize the transmission of "emotion" and the

depiction of the psychological states associated with human joys and sorrows, such as in "Recalling an Old Friend", "Return to Tranquility", and "Forgetting Worries." Taking "Forgetting Worries" as an example, both Yao Bingyan and Cheng Gongliang transcribed and performed this piece. The meaning of the piece is clear: it is about forgetting the troubles of the world. Yao Bingyan's performance of "Forgetting Worries" is simple and tranquil. Starting from the second phrase, the beginning of each musical phrase falls on the second half of the beat, infusing a slight sense of joy into the steady rhythm, showcasing a characteristic of freedom and ease. In Cheng Gongliang's interpretation, the "fast" marking at the beginning of the piece immediately draws the emotion into the music, expressed in a direct and precise manner. His fingers move smoothly across the strings, imbuing the piece with a unique dynamism and tension. This illustrates that abstract types of ancient qin compositions offer players a broader creative space. While adhering to the fixed thematic intent of the piece, players can use diverse emotional expressions and performance techniques to imbue the same piece with different layers of emotion and artistic conception.

From the above, it can be seen that the creation of a scene is not purely fictional, and the depiction of a scene is not purely realistic. Subjective imagination cannot exist without reflecting natural reality, and the condensation of spiritual essence must be based on an understanding of real life. Both are products of the combination of subjective and objective elements, differing only in the proportion of the real and the imaginary. Similarly, although qin compositions can be categorized as "realistic" or "abstract" based on their emotional and scenic content, in the performance of qin players, "realistic" compositions require the integration of subjective emotional experience, while



"abstract" compositions must be grounded in concrete emotional foundations to be fully expressed. This blending of the real and the imaginary achieves an expression that aligns with the natural essence of music through the sound of the qin.

#### 4. Reflections on "Autumn Sound"

As Zhuangzi states: "The sound of heaven arises from the myriad things, each different, yet allowing them to be themselves; all are self-determined, so who could provoke their anger?(Hansen,2014)" Here, "The sound of heaven" refers to the sound of nature, emphasizing that the development of all things is uncontrollable and governed by natural laws. Cheng Gongliang's favorite Tang qin is named "Qiulai" ("autumn sound "), where "lai" signifies sound, and "autumn sound "symbolizes the harmony of natural sounds, aligning closely with the concept of "lai" as representing the voice of nature described in Zhuangzi's philosophy.As a modern qin player, Cheng Gongliang embodies the spirit and character of a traditional scholar. His understanding of "Autumn Sound" remains deeply rooted in the ancient philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature. Although the modern context inevitably exposes "natural aesthetics" to the influence of various external media, Cheng remains steadfast in his commitment to tradition. He uses "Autumn Sound" as a medium to explore the profound insights ancient people held about the natural world and human existence.This persistence is not only a continuation of ancient spirit but also a renewed reflection and contemporary interpretation of the relationship between humans and the guqin, as well as between humans and nature.

##### 4.1The Connection Between the Player and the Instrument

The guqin is crafted from wood, a material imbued with the dynamic vitality of its natural growth environment( Cai & Tai,2018). For scholars and literati, the guqin's material serves as a vessel for humanistic ideals, with the selection and crafting of the wood aimed at achieving a transcendent state of mind. In their perspective, the guqin's tonal quality embodies the spiritual resonance of nature itself. The beauty of the guqin's sound arises from two key aspects: the use of high-quality materials and exquisite craftsmanship, as well as the interplay between the instrument and the performer.Scientific research indicates that the tonal characteristics of the guqin are closely tied to the age and condition of its material(Borland, 2014). For example, the tonal differences between Song and Ming dynasty guqin instruments are fundamentally attributed to variations in their materials. Ancient wood, after prolonged natural aging, achieves a balance of internal tension and moisture. This state endows the instrument with more harmonious vibration properties, producing purer and deeper tones. Such tonal qualities are the inherent advantage of the Tang guqin "Qiulai".Cheng Gongliang's "Qiulai" features a spruce top and bottom, offering a delicate timbre with lingering resonance. Although it does not fully meet the highest standards of the guqin's "Nine Virtues," its tonal characteristics complement Cheng Gongliang's playing style perfectly. In the instrument's sound, one can clearly perceive Cheng's "inner sincerity and sensitivity," which is a key reason for his deep affection for" Qiulai". This profound integration of emotion and artistry not only highlights the cultural significance of the guqin as a traditional instrument but also exemplifies the unique resonance between performer and instrument.

The relationship between a person and their guqin largely depends on the meaning its "owner" imparts to the instrument. This meaning is not solely derived from the instrument's historical and

artistic value but is also reflected in how the player integrates it into their artistic expression and cultural pursuits through practice and emotion(Cook,2001). As Cheng Gongliang's beloved companion, "Qiulai" was not only an essential partner in his performances but also accompanied him on significant tours across Europe, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where he gave many influential performances. This deep affection stems from the profound resonance between "Qiulai" and Cheng Gongliang's artistic life.However, Cheng never regarded "Qiulai" as merely a rare treasure from the Tang Dynasty or a relic to be protected for its historical significance. Instead, he saw it as a living vessel for guqin music, dedicated to using it in performance and sharing it with others to inspire a broader appreciation for the art of the guqin. Whether during academic lectures at universities or public talks aimed at general audiences, "Qiulai" was always Cheng's primary instrument. This not only reflects his high regard for the instrument's tonal qualities and characteristics but also demonstrates his emphasis on the deep emotional connection between the guqin and its player. For Cheng Gongliang, "Qiulai" was more than a tool for performance—it was a vital medium for communicating with his audience. Its delicate and sincere tones perfectly conveyed his understanding of guqin music and his artistic aspirations. Cheng believed that the value of the guqin lies not only in its historical rarity but also in its significance as a vessel for transmitting music and culture. Thus, in his hands, "Qiulai" was not merely a precious antique but an instrument born for performance and artistic expression.

#### 4.2 Qin Music and Nature

The ancient pursuit of the meaning of life and the exploration of its spiritual essence were products of the natural worldview in Chinese philosophy(Kohn, 1992). This pursuit was not a

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

Cheng Gongliang's works all center on the theme of "Qiulai." In "Walking into Shaowu," he reflects: "Now my age feels like the evening of a day, prompting me to look back on both a day and a lifetime.(Cheng,2014)" Autumn carries the joy of harvest as well as a profound sense of life's transitions.By the late 1990s, Cheng Gongliang had achieved remarkable success in guqin performance and transcription. Yet, he chose to retire early from the Nanjing University of the Arts, seeking to free himself from worldly constraints. Through the "Autumn Resonance" series, he recorded his life in a retrospective manner, intertwining his artistic explorations with his life journey. In "Memories from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," he documented the purest and most innocent parts of his heart—his childhood and learning experiences. In "Lessons from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," "Scores from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," and "Reflections from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," he explored the teaching of guqin, the creation of guqin

music, and theoretical considerations of guqin scholarship, reflecting his wholehearted dedication to the guqin during his prime. In his later years, he wrote "Idle Thoughts from the Studio of Autumn Resonance," chronicling his life in old age, earning him the reputation of being "a man of multifaceted experiences" among younger generations. To Cheng Gongliang, Qiulai symbolized his way of coexisting with nature. Every phase of his life embodied his reflections on life, and through it ran his tireless exploration of life's meaning.

Cheng Gongliang embodied a persistent and stable vitality, characterized by a profound inner clarity and spiritual freedom. This vitality was not only reflected in his unwavering dedication to guqin scholarship but also in his keen sensitivity to and appreciation of nature. In "Idle Words from Qiulai Studio", even as his life entered the "autumn" phase, Cheng remained deeply engaged in playing the guqin, immersing himself in the landscapes of mountains, rivers, and fields, and channeling the essence of nature into his music. He continued to pursue a lifestyle that embraced simplicity and serenity, aligned with the Daoist ideal of reclusion and harmony with nature. For Cheng Gongliang, all life experiences ultimately served as the foundation for his genuine understanding of guqin music, its composition, and the broader philosophical reflections it inspired. Although he refrained from labeling himself with specific identities, his profound connection to nature and exploration of life's meaning closely mirrored the lofty artistic aspirations of ancient Chinese literati. Cheng infused the art of the guqin with rich philosophical depth, transforming it from a mere musical form into a medium for spiritual exploration and philosophical contemplation.

## 5. Conclusion

The guqin, a traditional instrument embodying over three millennia of Chinese culture, is a significant symbol of Chinese cultural heritage, with profound artistic and spiritual value. In today's context of cultural pluralism, the dedicated efforts of modern guqin practitioners have brought this ancient art form increasing international recognition. However, its deeper meanings and unique value still face challenges in global dissemination and nuanced interpretation, particularly concerning its cultural adaptability and its role as a sustainable emblem of Chinese tradition. Cheng Gongliang, a key figure bridging guqin tradition and modernity, has made invaluable contributions to its globalization. Through collaborations with international musicians, he has integrated guqin music into global cultural discourse, combining the intrinsic power of music with practices of cultural adaptation and exchange. Cheng balances tradition and innovation in guqin scholarship, remaining faithful to its traditional spirit while incorporating modern musical expressions. This approach imbues guqin art with contemporaneity and universality, reflecting Chinese cultural philosophy while addressing contemporary musical needs. Renowned for his academic and artistic achievements, Cheng Gongliang serves as a model in guqin studies and musicology. His scholarship, artistry, and personal integrity provide a foundation for further research and continue to inspire the preservation and development of guqin art.

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