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Review

A Review of Research on the Transmission and Preservation of the Guqin as Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Within China's rich musical intangible cultural heritage, the art of the Guqin holds a pivotal position. With the continuous advancement of technology, digital and information-based modes of communication have increasingly become vital channels for people to exchange information and acquire knowledge. However, this transformation has also posed certain challenges to the transmission and development of Guqin art culture. This paper aims to introduce current research on the transmission and preservation of Guqin art, followed by targeted recommendations for the future development of the Guqin, with the hope of providing valuable insights and references for the domestic Guqin art community.

Keywords

Guqin art, Intangible cultural heritage, Transmission and preservation, Transmission strategies, Digital preservation

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1. Introduction

As we enter the glorious chapter of the digital age, musical intangible cultural heritage (ICH)—an integral part of China’s outstanding traditional musical culture—carries the legacy of Chinese civilization and the accumulation of cultural achievements across generations, holding profound significance for the construction of modern civilization. In 2003, following Kunqu Opera, the art of the guqin was inscribed by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” (UNESCO, Guqin and its music) [1], sparking widespread public attention regarding the protection and transmission of ICH music, with the Guqin at its forefront.

The Guqin, an ancient Chinese artistic treasure imbued with profound historical depth and rich cultural significance, has always been an indispensable jewel of Chinese civilization. It not only carries millennia of historical memory but also embodies the Chinese nation’s unique aesthetic pursuits and spiritual aspirations. However, amid the rapid pace of social development and the intense impact of globalization, traditional art forms such as the Guqin are facing unprecedented challenges. These challenges are not only reflected in the fragmentation of traditional transmission chains and the gradual marginalization of cultural values in the mainstream discourse, but also in the need to actively address the urgent demands for innovation and development while preserving the essence of tradition in order to keep pace with the ever-changing times. This research review aims to explore the transmission and preservation of Guqin art within the context of ICH. By reviewing and evaluating existing studies and practical cases, the paper discusses transmission schools, preservation strategies, digital preservation, and the integration of Guqin art with contemporary music. Rather than constructing a complete theoretical framework, this study primarily seeks to identify current research trends, major concerns, and existing gaps in Guqin studies, with the aim of providing useful references for future research and the sustainable development of Guqin culture.

2. Research on Schools of Guqin Art Transmission

2.1 The Transmission and Development of Lingnan Guqin Songs

As a national-level ICH, Lingnan Guqin songs embody rich local characteristics and historical and cultural value. Chen Yaqi’s research focuses on the transmission and development of Guqin songs in the Wuyi region of Jiangmen, analyzing favorable factors and exploring pathways for their dissemination and promotion [2]. Additionally, Lin Chubin et al. have conducted research on the innovative development of Lingnan Guqin art culture in the context of new media, proposing new ideas and strategies for utilizing digital technology to balance tradition and modernity, thereby protecting and developing Guqin culture [3]. By comparing these two studies, we can see the importance of integrating traditional culture with modern technology and its role in promoting cultural transmission.

2.2 Artistic Transmission and Preservation of the Jinling School of Guqin

As a significant school within Guqin art, the Jinling School has been systematically documented by Dai Xinyi and Liu Chenghua through interviews with national-level ICH inheritors, capturing its artistic techniques and cultural traditions. This research not only emphasizes the protection of traditional skills but also highlights the importance of systematic documentation for cultural transmission [4]. A comparison with Shi Yong’s survey on the current state of transmission of the Meian School of Guqin reveals differences in transmission methods and challenges faced by different schools, but a common thread is the emphasis on the importance of ICH protection [5].

2.3 Current Status and Strategies for Guqin Transmission in Shandong

The transmission of Guqin art in Shandong Province possesses unique regional characteristics. The research by Ding Kewen and Yang Chunhong focuses on the current state of the Zhucheng School of Guqin in Shandong, and through an analysis of representative Guqin masters and scores, highlights the importance of both transmission and innovation [6]. Additionally, Wen Zengyuan’s research analyzes the cultural connotations and the development of artistic schools within Shandong’s three major Guqin transmission communities from a more macro perspective [7]. Synthesizing these studies, we can conclude that regional cultural transmission requires not only the preservation of tradition but also adaptation to changes in modern society, necessitating the adoption of effective strategies for transmission and development.

2.4 The Role of Guqin Societies in the Transmission of Schools

As important social organizations for the transmission of traditional arts, Guqin societies play a significant role in the transmission of Guqin schools. Zhang Yiwen uses the “Zhe School of Guqin” Xiaying Qin Hall as an example to explore this role [8]. Compared to Zhou Minglei’s research on the preservation and transmission of the Meian School of Guqin [9], it becomes evident that Guqin societies not only play a vital role in transmission activities but also serve as a significant force for promotion and innovation. Through these studies, we can understand how Guqin societies promote the transmission and popularization of Guqin art through various activities and platforms.

2.5 The Structure of Guqin Schools and Research Methods

Understanding the structure of Guqin schools is of great significance for in-depth research into their artistic characteristics and transmission. Yang Chunwei's research proposes a structural research method aimed at comprehensively understanding the social existence of Guqin schools through systematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. The introduction of this methodology provides new perspectives and analytical frameworks for subsequent research on Guqin schools [10]. Through this study, we can recognize the importance of systematic methods in researching the transmission and development of traditional arts.

In summary, through a review of the literature on Guqin transmission schools discussed above, we can see that different perspectives and methods—ranging from tradition to modernity, from individuals to social organizations, and from single schools to systematic research approaches—have all provided us with profound insights into the transmission of Guqin art. These research findings not only enrich our understanding of Guqin art but also offer multi-faceted reflections and recommendations for its future development.

3. Research on the Evaluation of Guqin Art Transmission Methods and Strategic Practices

3.1 Research on the Evaluation of Guqin Art Transmission Methods

This section will delve into a comprehensive evaluation of the practical effectiveness and far-reaching impact of Guqin art transmission methods. Given that the diversity and innovation of transmission methods play a pivotal role in the continuity of Guqin art, a precise assessment of transmission outcomes will undoubtedly provide valuable decision-making grounds and practical references for future preservation efforts.

Li Cheng's research pioneered a new conceptual framework for the protection of ICH music, offering an in-depth analysis of the distinct yet interdependent objectives and implementation pathways of productive preservation and cultural industry development [11]. This study not only broadens the scope of preservation but also provides theoretical support for the revitalization and utilization of traditional cultural heritage such as Guqin art.

In Shi Yong's research, through detailed field investigations, the current state of the protection and transmission of Guqin cultural heritage is meticulously depicted. Taking the Guqin cultural heritage of Nanjing as a case study, the research profoundly reveals its unique protection strategies and distinctive characteristics of transmission [12]. These research findings not only provide detailed data support and vivid case analyses for evaluating the effectiveness of Guqin art transmission methods but also help us gain a deeper understanding of the specific impacts and outcomes of various conservation measures in practice.

Upon comprehensive consideration, the path of Guqin art transmission must keep pace with the development of modern society, preserving the essence of tradition while boldly innovating and seeking change. . At the same time, it is particularly urgent to establish a continuous, scientific evaluation mechanism to periodically review and optimize transmission methods. Only by implementing diversified transmission strategies combined with a rigorous evaluation system can we more effectively propel the art of the Guqin forward steadily amid the tides of the new era and achieve its sustainable prosperity and development.

3.2 Research on the Practice of Strategies for the Transmission and Protection of Guqin Art

This section focuses on exploring strategies and practices for the protection and transmission of the Guqin as an ICH. Given the unique value and historical significance of Guqin culture, preservation efforts must encompass not only the physical instruments but also the documentation and transmission of the associated intangible cultural elements.

Liu Kuili's research proposes the principle of holistic protection for ICH, emphasizing the need to view preservation issues from a global perspective and suggesting holistic protection strategies [13]. This indicates that the protection and transmission of the Guqin involve not only safeguarding its physical form but also recognizing and respecting its cultural value, as well as cultivating and supporting its inheritors.

Furthermore, Li Tingting's research, through an examination of the historical overview, current development, and contemporary significance of Guqin art, proposes strategies for the transmission and development of Guqin art in today's social context [14]. Through an analysis of the history and current state of Guqin art, Peng Yan concludes that "what the Guqin needs to protect is 'culture' rather than 'cultural relics'; as an ICH, the Guqin requires protection not only as a physical instrument but also for the cultural and spiritual essence it embodies [15].

Shi Yong's research, through investigation and reflection on the current state of Guqin cultural heritage protection and transmission, proposes strategies for protection and transmission. In particular, the practice of protecting and transmitting Nanjing's Guqin cultural heritage highlights the importance of local and living heritage preservation. These studies provide practical guidance and theoretical support for the protection and transmission of the Guqin [16]. Huang Yijun et al., drawing on the cultural cycle framework, examined the preservation and transmission of ICH music from the dimensions of creation, production, dissemination, transmission, and participation [17]. Their study provides a useful theoretical reference for future research seeking a more systematic perspective on Guqin studies.

In summary, the protection and transmission of the Guqin as an ICH is a multi-layered, multidimensional process involving various aspects, ranging from policy formulation and educational promotion to specific implementation strategies. By integrating different preservation methods and strategies, the Guqin, as a precious cultural heritage, can be effectively preserved and promoted.

4. Research on the Digital Preservation of Guqin Art

This section focuses on the application of digital technologies in the preservation, development, and utilization of Guqin art. Through innovative digital approaches, we not only provide new methods for the preservation of the Guqin but also create a platform for its commercialization and wider dissemination.

4.1 Development of Digital Applications for Guqin Art

Huang Yonglin's research highlights the crucial role of digital technology in the preservation and transmission of ICH, offering specific recommendations for technical applications [18]. Miao Jianhua describes how the Central Conservatory of Music leverages its "ICH" Center to pursue innovative preservation and transmission through initiatives that integrate ICH music with digital technology—such as the construction of the "Chinese Guqin art Culture Database"—specifically tailored to the field of Guqin art [19]. Chen Weiting believes that digital media provides a broader space and more diverse forms for the dissemination of Guqin art. Through digital media platforms, Guqin art can transcend geographical limitations to achieve global dissemination and exchange [20].

4.2 Overseas Research on Digitization

Although overseas studies specifically focusing on the Guqin remain relatively limited, international research on the digitization and preservation of ICH still provides useful comparative perspectives and methodological references for Guqin studies. In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized that the digitalization of ICH is not only a means of cultural preservation, but also a key driving factor in the transformation and integration of cultural tourism. Chun Yi Lin argues that the digitalization of intangible musical heritage has become a core factor in promoting the integration of culture and tourism, expanding the social influence and contemporary value of traditional music culture [21]. Among these studies, Iris Kico et al. argue that the digitization and visualization of ICH is an increasingly active field of research in computer science, and that such digitization and visualization will become increasingly feasible and applicable in cultural dissemination and heritage revitalization [22]. In their research, Codrina Csesznek et al. argue that ICH strengthens community identity and serves as a resource for sustainable community development [23]. They point out that the current widespread access to the internet facilitates the digitization of cultural dissemination, including ICH. In his study on the digitization of historical documents related to China's "Kunqu Opera," Gen-Fang Chen explores the theoretical and practical significance of digitization for the protection and transmission of important cultural heritage [24].

4.3 Challenges Facing the Digitization of Guqin Art

The process of digitizing ICH is not without its hurdles. It presents both technical challenges and unprecedented opportunities. Huang Yonglin's research highlights that, given the rapid pace of technological advancement, selecting appropriate digitization technologies and ensuring their long-term viability remain major challenges for digital preservation [25]. Furthermore, Ma Xiaona's research analyzes the current state of ICH digitization, highlighting existing issues and shortcomings [26]. For example, Song Junhua's research proposed the concept of "participatory digital preservation," emphasizing the importance of the participation of inheritors and custodians in the digital preservation process [27]. This approach not only ensures the authenticity of the culture but also promotes its sustainable development. It offers a new perspective on the digital preservation of Guqin art.

In summary, digital technology provides new technical support and innovative pathways for the preservation, transmission, and development of Guqin art. Through digital means, historical materials related to the Guqin can be better preserved, its dissemination in the new era can be promoted, and new opportunities for the rediscovery and creation of its cultural value can be created.

5. Research on the Innovative Preservation of Guqin art through Integration with Contemporary Music

This section will delve into how the Guqin ingeniously integrates elements of contemporary music to achieve innovative artistic reinvention. The fusion of the Guqin with modern musical elements not only infuses the ancient art of the Guqin with new vitality for its transmission and preservation but also opens up fresh sources of inspiration for modern musical composition.

Li Songlan's research, through a profound historical-anthropological analysis of the historical context, geographical distribution, and cultural diffusion of Guqin art, vividly illustrates the boundless possibilities for the fusion of the Guqin with other diverse musical forms. She points out that the openness and inclusivity of Guqin art enable it to transcend the boundaries of time and space, drawing upon various musical styles to jointly interpret unique musical chapters [28].

Meanwhile, Feng Tong's research further emphasizes the Guqin's significant status and profound influence in contemporary music. She proposes a series of innovative approaches to integrating the Guqin with contemporary music, which not only enrich the expressive techniques of Guqin art but also provide more diverse materials and inspiration for modern musical composition [29]. Feng Tong's research demonstrates that the incorporation of Guqin art into contemporary music is not only a tribute to tradition but also an exploration and pursuit of innovation.

Furthermore, Huang Yonglin's research delves deeply into the preservation and utilization of ICH in the digital age. He proposes a set of strategies for preserving, protecting, transmitting, and developing Guqin culture through digital technology, providing a strong theoretical foundation for the digital dissemination and popularization of Guqin art [30]. Huang Yonglin's research demonstrates that the application of digital technology not only effectively safeguards the precious heritage of Guqin art but also enables more people to conveniently access and understand Guqin culture through modern technological means, thereby promoting its transmission and development.

In summary, the integration and innovation of the Guqin with contemporary music achieve a brilliant dialogue between tradition and modernity by deeply exploring the essence of traditional Guqin elements and combining them with modern aesthetics and creative techniques. This process involves not only the renewal and evolution of artistic forms but also the ingenious application of technical means, such as the widespread use of digital technology, which has opened up broader spaces and possibilities for the development of Guqin art.

6. Research Review and Outlook

6.1 Research Review

Scholarly research on the inheritance and innovation of Guqin art has expanded in recent years, and the literature reviewed in this paper covers transmission schools, preservation strategies, digital preservation, and integration with contemporary music. This paper reviews the relevant studies from three perspectives—research content, research perspectives, and research methods—and, on this basis, summarizes the main achievements and limitations of current research

In terms of research content, the reviewed literature mainly focuses on the current state of Guqin transmission, transmission schools, transmission methods, preservation strategies, digital preservation, and contemporary musical integration. These studies provide rich material for understanding the development of Guqin art, but most of them remain centered on individual cases or single issues, and systematic comparative discussion is still insufficient.

In terms of research perspectives, studies on the Guqin as an ICH span disciplines such as art, communication, archival science, and tourism, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of ICH research in music. However, research approaching the subject from the perspectives of economic management and digital technology remains scarce, and more attention is needed for localized and specialized forms of Guqin art at the provincial and county levels. Comparative studies across different administrative levels are also limited, indicating that interdisciplinary collaboration and regional comparison both need to be further strengthened.

In terms of research methodology, current literature on the transmission, preservation, and innovative development of Guqin art tends to rely on micro-level case studies and qualitative descriptions. While these studies provide valuable first-hand observations, they are still relatively fragmented, with some overlap in content, and they have not yet formed a fully systematic and comparative research pattern. A limited number of studies have used questionnaires to collect the views and feedback of Guqin enthusiasts, but more detailed quantitative analysis of inheritors and related service organizations is still needed.

Taken together, the above literature shows that Guqin research has developed from single-case description toward a broader discussion of preservation, transmission, digitalization, and contemporary integration, but its comparative depth and theoretical cohesion still need improvement.

6.2 Research Outlook

First, interdisciplinary research should be deepened to broaden research perspectives. The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that future research on Guqin art should place greater emphasis on interdisciplinary integration, especially by bringing together art studies, communication studies, economics, management, and digital technology. Such integration would help move Guqin studies beyond descriptive summaries toward more evidence-based analysis. At the same time, greater attention should be paid to localized Guqin traditions at the provincial and county levels, as well as to comparisons across different administrative levels, so as to enrich the breadth and depth of research.

Second, a systematic research framework should be established to elevate the level of research. Given the fragmentation shown in the literature reviewed here, future studies should further clarify research objectives, define the scope of inquiry, and strengthen the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. In this way, Guqin research can move toward a more comprehensive and methodologically balanced framework.

Third, international exchange and cooperation should be strengthened to promote the globalization of Guqin art. Because international research specifically on the Guqin remains limited, future studies should further engage with scholarship on music heritage, digital preservation, and intercultural transmission, so as to broaden the comparative perspective of Guqin studies. At the same time, attention should be paid to international cases and methods that may offer useful references for Guqin preservation and transmission.

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Ethics Statement

This article is a literature review focusing on the research progress of Guqin art as intangible cultural heritage. The study does not involve human participants, animal experiments, field interviews with human subjects, or collection of personal privacy information. All cited literatures, data and viewpoints are sourced from publicly published academic works and official open resources, and fully comply with academic ethics and relevant academic norms.

Data Availability Statement

All data and materials discussed in this paper are derived from publicly accessible academic journals, monographs, official UNESCO documents and open online resources. The cited references are listed completely in the reference section of this manuscript. Readers can obtain the original literatures according to the provided literature information and links. No additional confidential data are involved in this study.

Author Contributions

The sole author is fully responsible for the whole work of this manuscript, including topic selection, literature collection, content sorting, framework construction, manuscript writing, revision and final proofreading. The author has read and approved the final version of the article for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

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