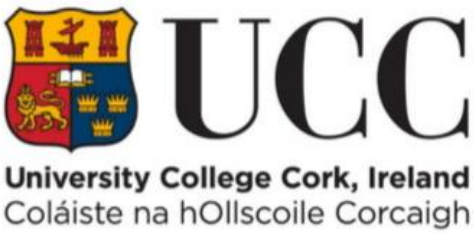
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Training, Performance and Music Creation on *Erhu* in the Global Era

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for the degree of

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Abstract

This PhD thesis explores how the *erhu* tradition evolved from the 1920s to the 21st century in an increasingly globalised world. By examining the lives and musical accomplishments of five prominent *erhu* musicians—Liu Tianhua, Sun Wenming, Min Huifen, Liu Changfu and George Gao—the study reflects the development of the *erhu* within the global dynamics.

Fieldwork was conducted based on my dual identity as an ethnomusicology scholar-*erhu* player, allowing me to gather a range of representative viewpoints from *erhu* participants and contemporary composers. These observations include novel modes of musical manifestation that incorporate ethnic, historical, Western and modern components. The research integrates the viewpoints of performers, composers, educators and adult students by using ethnological methodologies, music analysis and literature review.

The thesis is organised into five main chapters, each addressing different aspects of the impact of globalisation on the *erhu*. Chapter 1 introduces Liu Tianhua's efforts to integrate Chinese and Western music, establishing a modern *erhu* tradition. Chapter 2 examines *minjian erhu* player Sun Wenming as an example of *minjian yinyue* transitioning into the modernised music system. Chapter 3 focuses on Min Huifen's career, revealing the interaction between *erhu* composition and political policy. Chapter 4 highlights Liu Changfu's work in professionalising *erhu* through "scientific" methods, while Chapter 5 explores George Gao's contributions to globalising the *erhu*, explaining its adaptability in cross-cultural contexts.

Finally, I discuss the music ecology of Chinese *erhu* and emphasise how globalisation has influenced and shaped *erhu* and Chinese music culture, including how the *erhu* gradually evolved into an important symbol of Chinese cultural identity through the interaction of globalisation and localisation, while also revealing its influence and changing process on the dissemination of Chinese music throughout history. From the analysis of the several generations of *erhu* performers, I reflect on the significance of the *erhu* as a cultural intermediary, highlighting its role in connecting Chinese music heritage with the global music environment through exploration on the training, performance and music creation of lineages of *erhu* performers.

摘要

本博士论文探讨了二胡传统如何在全球化加速的背景下从20世纪20年代发展至21世纪。通过研究五位著名二胡演奏家——刘天华、孙文明、闵惠芬、刘长福和高韶青的生平和音乐成就，本文反映了二胡在全球动态中的发展过程。

基于我作为民族音乐学学者兼二胡演奏者的双重身份开展田野调查，使我能够收集到来自二胡参与者和当代作曲家的多种代表性观点。这些观察包括结合了民族性、历史性、西方和现代元素的新型音乐表现模式。研究结合了演奏者、作曲家、教育家和成年学生的视角，通过民族学方法、音乐分析和文献回顾进行深入探讨。

论文分为五章，每章聚焦全球化对二胡影响的不同方面。第一章介绍了刘天华融合中西音乐的努力，奠定了现代二胡传统。第二章以民间二胡演奏家孙文明为例，探讨民间音乐如何进入现代国际音乐体系。第三章聚焦闵惠芬的职业生涯，揭示二胡创作与政治政策之间的互动。第四章强调了刘长福通过“科学”方法推动了二胡的专业化和职业化，而第五章则探讨了高韶青对二胡全球化的贡献，阐释其在跨文化语境中的适应性。

最后，我讨论了二胡的音乐生态，强调全球化如何影响和塑造了二胡及中国音乐文化，包括二胡如何在全球化与本土化的互动中逐渐演变为中国文化身份的重要象征，揭示了其在中国音乐传播历史上的作用和变迁过程。通过分析几代二胡演奏者的传承，我反思了二胡作为文化中介的重要意义，并通过对二胡传承体系中的培训、演奏与创作的探讨，强调其在连接中国音乐遗产与全球音乐环境中的角色作用。

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I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Jonathan Stock, who has been a constant source of encouragement and inspiration throughout my PhD journey. His insightful advice, patient guidance and our thought-provoking tutorial meetings have been essential to the completion of this dissertation. Always empathetic, he has patiently answered many of my questions and explanations to ensure my understanding. His support has been both a comfort and a motivating force in completing this work.

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I am grateful to my parents, Liu Haijie and Yuan Suhua. Raising and supporting a child like me, with all my quirks, has not been an easy task and I am immensely thankful for their patient companionship and love.

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Technical Notes

All interviews in this doctoral thesis were conducted in both Chinese and English. The Chinese portions were translated independently by the author. The Hanyu Pinyin system is used for Chinese Romanisation and Chinese names are written according to Chinese custom, with the family name preceding the given name, such as Min Huifen. However, for Chinese individuals living abroad, I respect their personal preferences by using their English names, for example, George Gao and Sunny Wong.

According to the development of Chinese music, most Chinese compositions before 1980 had only Chinese titles. However, as these works spread globally in contemporary times, many were gradually translated into English for the convenience of international readers. For instance, the *erhu* solo *Jianghe shui* 江河水 (River of Sorrow). Some contemporary works composed after the 1980s often featured both Chinese and English titles in their initial official releases—for example, *The Great Wall Capriccio* (长城随想曲, *Changcheng suixiangqu*). To better respect the original intentions of the composers, in this thesis, I present the original titles of earlier compositions in pinyin, followed by Chinese characters and an English translation. For pieces that originally included an English title, I place the English title first, followed by the Chinese characters and pinyin in parentheses.

For key Chinese concepts, I choose either Chinese or English terminology based on the historical context and content to ensure accuracy and alignment with the context. For example, the 国乐 (*guoyue*, National music) style established in the early twentieth century primarily focused on Han Chinese music. However, in contemporary Chinese contexts, *guoyue* encompasses traditional, regional and ethnic minority music genres. To clarify this concept, I use the *pinyin* term *"guoyue"* in this instance. I also use the Chinese term *"minjian yinyue"* (民间音乐) and *"minjian yinyeujia"* (民间音乐家) rather than its common English translation "folk music" and "folk musician". This choice is intentional, as *folk music* in the Western context often evokes specific assumptions tied to romanticised or fixed national traditions. In contrast, *minjian yinyue* better reflects the fluid, grassroots music-making practices and local social dynamics particular to China, emphasising its

cultural distinctiveness and avoiding potential misunderstandings associated with Western conceptual frameworks (Lau 2008).

Additionally, as social attitudes evolved, 1980s Chinese society enthusiastically adopted 科学 (*kexue*, scientific) as a metaphor for correct choices and directions. Although "scientific" is fundamentally metaphorical, it represented a clear, systematic approach that aligned with natural laws—a method directly applied in *erhu* training. Thus, when describing this content, I use the English term or "scientific" to reflect musicians' expectations within that historical context. Finally, the bibliography and citations in the thesis follow the Chicago citation style.

Introduction

0.1 General Background

The *erhu* (二胡), also known as the *huqin* (胡琴), is a Chinese bowed string instrument. It has two strings tuned a fifth apart and a bow threaded between them. The instrument features a small, hollow wooden soundbox, traditionally hexagonal or octagonal, covered with python skin to amplify vibrations.[1] A long, slender neck extends from the soundbox, allowing musicians to press the silk or metal-wound strings directly against it for pitch modulation. The horsehair bow, positioned between the strings, produces sound through friction as it moves laterally across them (see Fig 0.1).

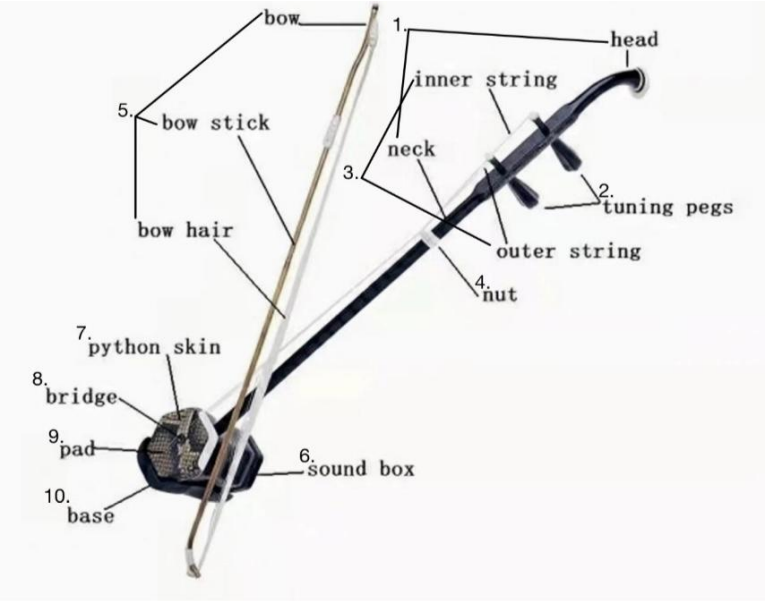


Fig 0.1 Illustration of the *erhu* physical components from "Principles of *Erhu* Playing and Teaching", provided by Kong Yanyan during an interview on November 17, 2022.

Historically, the *erhu* traces its origins to a broader family of bowed string instruments that gradually took shape through continuous cultural exchanges with neighbouring regions.[2] The *huqin* family was not simply a foreign instrument adopted into Chinese music but rather emerged through ongoing interactions between external musical traditions and indigenous Chinese practices. In China, *huqin* serves as a general term for bowed string instruments and as a colloquial reference to specific types

[1] Traditional *erhu* features python skin, though contemporary makers have introduced new fiber technologies as substitutes. However, python skin remains the predominant material in erhu craftsmanship. For details, see George Gao's *shaoqin* in Chapter 5.

[2] For a detailed discussion on the historical development of the *erhu*, see section 0.4.1 below.

of *huqin*; for instance, in northern China, a suffix is often added to refer to the *jinghu* or *erhu*, that called *huqiner* (胡琴儿). Before the modern *erhu* took its present form, its physical structure was neither standardised nor fixed. Over centuries, this instrument was reinterpreted, adapted and refined in response to evolving performance and social demands.

Before the 1920s and 1930s, the *huqin* was primarily a *minjian* accompaniment instrument, embodying both "presentational music" and "participatory music" characteristics. As presentational music, it was commonly performed in local opera troupes, professional theater groups, teahouses, and entertainment venues for audiences to appreciate. At the same time, as participatory music, it was deeply embedded in community life, widely used in *minjian yinyue* ensembles, rural celebrations and religious ceremonies, allowing different groups to engage in interactive performances. Prior to its establishment as a professional solo instrument, the *huqin*, or more specifically the *erhu*, was mainly played by itinerant musicians and *minjian* performers, relying on oral transmission rather than formal education. Different regions and musical traditions developed their own distinctive playing styles.

In the 1920s, Liu Tianhua borrowed Western music techniques to improve the traditional *huqin*, establishing the embryonic form of the modern *erhu* and introducing it to institutes of higher education. His disciples, later known as the *xueyuan pai* (学院派, school style), became a distinct group of professional musicians, setting themselves apart from the original *minjian erhu* players in modern China. The musician group refined the *erhu* through contact with modern Western knowledge around the world, gradually forming a new "tradition" of solo *erhu* performance. Despite being modified and reinterpreted by generations of musicians and reformers, the *erhu* and its cultural heritage, as a product of the integration of Chinese and global influences, remain faithful to their essence in modern styles as key cultural models. However, as the *erhu* continues to evolve, an important question arises: how can this deeply rooted traditional instrument remain culturally relevant in an increasingly globalised and modern musical landscape?

In the present day, Chinese musicians actively perform Western classical pieces and new *erhu* works that incorporate novel musical knowledge and techniques, thus showing the modern capabilities of the *erhu*. This challenge of modernisation is a task passed down from one generation

to the next within the new *erhu* tradition. These efforts reflect the artistic practices of the musicians and represent an ongoing quest to ensure the *erhu*'s practical relevance in a rapidly globalising world. However, it reflects an inherently substantive question, namely, how does the fusion of East and West affect the cultural significance of the *erhu*? Can it transcend the binary opposition between tradition and modernity and provide new insights into global music discourses such as modernity and postmodernism? Even after a hundred years, there is still a gap in musicians' understanding of how the transformation of the *erhu* reflects broader cultural changes and the connection between *erhu* and Western musical thought.

This doctoral research highlights the music ecology of the *erhu* and emphasises how globalisation has influenced and shaped the culture of both the *erhu* and Chinese music more generally, which includes how the *erhu* gradually evolved into an important symbol of Chinese cultural identity as a result of the interaction between globalisation and localisation, while revealing its influence and transformational power over the dissemination of Chinese music in different historical periods. Through an analysis of the training, performance and music creation of several generations of *erhu* performers, I reflect on the significance of the *erhu* as a cultural intermediary, highlighting its key role in connecting Chinese musical heritage with the global musical environment and reflecting its importance in promoting the integration and communication between Chinese and global music.

0.2 Autobiography with Reflections on the *Erhu*

Before starting my research in ethnomusicology, as an *erhu* player, the following questions had never occurred to me: "How should I define myself?", "How can I explain the different *erhu* landscapes I see?", "How do I introduce this musical instrument to others?" These confusions persisted within me for a long time.

My mother chose for me to learn the *erhu* when I was nine years old because it appeared in the closing ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympics, even though the *erhu* player was probably an actress rather than a professional musician. For my mother, who was born in 1971, the *erhu*'s appearance in the Olympic Games shattered her stereotype of this musical instrument. My mum was born in a rural

township and lived there until she went to college. When she was a child, the *erhu* was played more by beggars on the streets than by the local *Hebei bangzi* (河北梆子, Hebei Clapper Opera) Troupe. Moreover, even the members of the opera's *erhu* accompaniment always sit on the side of the screen; they are never the main characters. However, for me, only 9 years old in 2004, which was the first time I ever watched an *erhu* performance on the stage, all I knew was that it was a Chinese musical instrument, but that I was not seeing it in China but in Athens. Therefore, I didn't have any notion of "beggar" status during that initial period, so I gladly accepted to learn *erhu* as a speciality and hobby for my extracurricular time.

However, when I started to learn the *erhu* in a serious and systematic way, the stereotypical, step-by-step training model challenged my patience and my interest. In the early years of my learning, it always sounded boring and the music couldn't flow well due to my lack of coordination between both hands. I still remember my neighbour on the third floor, He Yitong, who was also my classmate at primary school and who was learning the violin at that time. As beginners, the difficult sounds produced by our instruments were often compared. I recall our neighbours comparing us to Lü Siqing (吕思清 b. 1969) and Abing (阿炳 1893–1950) when commenting on He Yitong's (b. 1994) and my musical performances.

Neighbours rarely commented directly with critical thinking on the music He Yitong and I played, they preferred to maintain good community relations by offering compliments on our performance, although we were both beginners on complex stringed instruments and our music didn't sound that good. I began to feel resentful when I learned about Lü Siqing's and Abing's status —one is a renowned classical Chinese violinist and another a destitute, blind beggar known for playing the *erhu* on the streets in the last century. I didn't understand their "compliments" and felt offended when the neighbours compared my *erhu* playing to Abing. I felt envious when they called my classmates "Lü Siqing", because this name always conveyed the image of a graceful and romantic classical musician. Although I never thought this at the time, they were surely encouraging me to practise by referencing Abing's status as a *huqin* master, rather than using his beggarly status as a metaphor or accusation.

These interactions made me question the impression of the *erhu* I had formed from seeing it at

the closing ceremony of the Olympics, as well as question my mum's choice. Even so, my mother encouraged me to keep practising the instrument. One of the core reasons is that, in the mainland educational system, learning Chinese musical instruments, including the *erhu*, was considered a valuable skill that could provide preferential treatment in some entrance exams as a literary and artistic speciality in Chinese educational institutions.

At that time, my view of the world was limited to my neighbourhood, my family's television and slow computer, my primary school and a few important test-taking periods prior to higher education in China. These elements, however, formed the backdrop for my initial impression of the *erhu* and its first transformational effect on my perception. Driven by a desire to move beyond the social identity represented by Abing, I continued to practise and refine my performance skills. To enhance these, I relied on monotonous training modules and self-guided exploration for a long time. Gradually I discovered the nuances of the *erhu*'s bright tone and the rapid switching of fingers and wrist, which was an element of technique beyond the textbook and teacher's training. It was only when I became recognised as a professional level *erhu* player at university that I truly felt I had escaped all possibility of comparison to "Abing".

However, I could not avoid learning and performing music pieces related to Abing, such as *Erquan yingyue* 二泉映月 (Two Springs Reflecting the Moon) , *Tingsong* 听松 (Listening to the Pine) and *Hanchun fengqu* 寒春风曲 (Cold Spring Wind), which are classified as "traditional music" in the professional *erhu* repertoire. While these pieces are considered "traditional" or "*minjian yinyue*", I interpret them based on my professional *erhu* performance skills. By that time, I already knew the professional *erhu* as a Chinese stringed instrument, the identity of which is difficult to criticise or undermine. The professional status of the *erhu* is also reflected in its institutionalisation, extending even to tertiary education, which highlights its recognition and establishment as a distinct and respected category within the music performing arts.

Thus, I have long adhered to the performance "tradition" of the *erhu* and its established history and identity within the Chinese mainstream *erhu* performance narrative. For a significant period, my understanding of *erhu* was confined to a closed and singular narrative and I never questioned the history or tradition of this "perfectionism" in *erhu* performance. I developed through oral instruction

from *erhu* teachers at a musical conservatory in China, until I graduated from Northeastern University and started studying ethnomusicology at the University of Sheffield. At that time, I still held the hopeful and somewhat naive ambition of contributing a broader global perspective to the development of Chinese music. I had learned that ethnomusicology originated in Europe and that it involves not just the study of music itself, but also its connections to culture, society and history. By studying ethnomusicology, I believed I could gain a deeper understanding of the cultural roots of the *erhu*, uncover the processes by which it has been shaped and expressed within Chinese culture and thereby enrich my overall comprehension of *erhu*. During this period, I tried to develop my critical thinking, then I re-examined my identity as an insider in *erhu* performer and the authenticity of the "perfect history" of the instrument.

For example, I remember that I struggled to find the right words to introduce the *erhu* to my three British classmates with whom I was engaging in group work and who had no Chinese cultural background. Should I call it traditional, folk, national, or simply Chinese music? In the end, all I said was that it was a Chinese-made *erhu* with two fiddle strings and I didn't even dare to specify that the *erhu* does not have the same fingerboard as the cello or violin.[3] They might have thought I was joking, but I understood my situation. It is hard to find a single or fixed word or short sentence to accurately describe it.

It is difficult for me, such an "over-anxious" person, to cater to people from various cultural contexts and who all have different understandings of Chinese music and the *erhu*. I do not have enough wisdom to tell such a huge story in just a few words, I am also afraid that my verbosity will damage people's imaginative interest in the *erhu*. I was envious of my classmate Paul, a guitarist from Doncaster. He showed his identity through his performances. He often spent his evenings playing in local pubs with bands and singers. However, if I said I was playing the *erhu* in the theatre, that would have sounded so arrogant to people. I still remember several courses during my master's degree that included a presentation as part of the assessment. As I didn't know how better to introduce the *erhu*, I did music analysis with scores and combined it with my performances to tell my classmates that *erhu* music has these different styles in the present day, but how many types of music

[3] George Gao invented the "shaoqin *erhu*" in the 2010s and added removable fingerboards to his practice one, "QQ shaoqin", for communication and training.

could I perform in the limited time I had to introduce them all? Even in the demonstration presentation for credit assessment that followed, I didn't use my relative familiarity with the *erhu* but instead gave a cursory presentation on the Maori *Haka* (war-dance and chant) I had just learnt in the first semester of the first year of my master's degree.

Although these negative experiences in attempting to share my knowledge of the *erhu* often made me feel at a loss, they indirectly led to the birth of my doctoral research project: how to interpret objectively *erhu* music in the context of complex global dynamics and varying perceptions. So, I returned to the "*erhu* universe" after my research masters on the function of music in *yangbanxi* (样板戏, revolutionary opera).

Although I had some basic knowledge of ethnomusicology, my understanding was possibly superficial and at the beginning of my doctoral studies, I vividly recall one of the assignments in the "Research Skills" course, which involved mock interviews. A Chinese classmate and I conducted interviews with each other and because we were so familiar with each other's cultural contexts, we asked and answered questions with ease, almost without thinking, as if we were merely completing a routine task.

However, as I organised the transcribed materials, I realised that my reliance on historical memory and conventions meant that I rarely needed to explain the specific context when discussing Chinese music in Chinese. In fact, this unconscious fluency obscured my explanation of the *erhu* narrative, resulting in a lack of deeper contextualisation and critical thinking in my English writing. I also did not fully consider my readers, leaving my use and interpretation of key terms unclear for an extended period. This realisation prompted a long period of self- reflection. Finally, I began to imagine a non-Asian reader, curious about Chinese music, sitting beside me as I was writing. I asked myself how I could tell my story clearly in a way that would truly engage and satisfy their curiosity.

Subsequently, to better convey the story of the *erhu*, I began to reflect on my own position within this research, recognising that my interpretations are shaped by my personal context. This self-awareness helps readers understand the potential limitations of my interpretation. I also reached out to ethnomusicologist-musicians who, like me, navigate the space between insider and outsider

perspectives. Their work has reinforced my own identity, providing me with the motivation and confidence to pursue my research.

For example, Li Huan's PhD research project on *qinshi* (琴师, *jinghu* master) of the *jingju* (京剧, Beijing Opera) illustrates this well. As an *erhu* player, she has some knowledge of the performance of bowstring instruments. So, her experience of learning the *jinghu* during her fieldwork allowed her to connect deeply with the *jinghu* masters. Through her laborious studies, the relationships she established and the respect she earned through hard work and practice, she was able to achieve an adequate level of compatibility in her academic interviews with these masters.

Another example is Liu Lu's study of the *pipa* (琵琶, 4-stringed Chinese lute) in the present day, in which she highlights her own personal experience as a "school style" *pipa* performer who migrated to Australia to become a diaspora musician, analysing the relationship between her cultural roots and her experience of living abroad. She studies the intertwining of these two elements of her experience, which she uses to exemplify and reflect the *pipa*'s presence in the contemporary world (Liu 2019, 8). In addition, Balosso Bardin also utilised her professional knowledge of classical music as the core of her identity and an important research tool for her fieldwork. She also participated in on-site performances with folk musician, flexibly switching between her emic and etic perspectives to meet the needs of the community, thus making herself a part of the music group (Bardin 2022).

When I look at these studies, as someone who has received primary, secondary and third-level undergraduate education in mainland China, I am deeply impressed that this kind of study of the relationship between the individual and the cultural context, presented as a personal experience, challenges the binary boundaries of the traditional ethnographic researcher in some of the more boring Chinese academic textbooks. I see a more realistic and vivid interpretation of the culture by means of self-reflection, which brings the research closer to the people and life itself and makes it easier for the reader to be transported to and accept the musical landscapes depicted by the author. Therefore, during my doctoral studies, I adjusted my positioning as an intermediary—both *erhu* player and ethnomusicology scholar—entering the *erhu* field for observation and research, reflecting on and exploring uncharted realms of knowledge about the *erhu*. I also hope my identity will help to establish trust and harmonious relationships, thereby improving the effectiveness of field

investigations and data collection to interpret and analyse music phenomena more accurately from the insider perspective, enriching the content and depth of *erhu* research. These stories demonstrate a few impressive and thought-provoking moments in my academic career and life and although I may still not be able to explain what the *erhu* is in a simple way by the time I finish this thesis, I should nonetheless be able to tell the story of the "*erhu* universe" clearly and coherently by organising my knowledge and training myself to write systematically for the reader.

0.3 Research Methodology

The primary goal of this study is to examine the history of the Chinese musical instrument *erhu*, with particular emphasis on its development through the interplay of globalisation and localisation. To achieve my research aim, I have employed a mixed methodology that integrates fieldwork (interview and data collection), a global musicological perspective and biographical analysis. These approaches not only facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the *erhu*'s cultural and musical evolution but also offer insights into the broader socio-cultural contexts influencing these developments. My PhD research commenced on 1 April 2021, following the approval of the ethical review (Log 2021-180) by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee on 15 November of the same year. After that, I began fieldwork, which was essential in capturing the lived experiences of *erhu* musicians and understanding their interactions with the global music landscape.

0.3.1 Fieldwork Interviews

My interviews involved mainstream *erhu* performers, composers, students and music lovers active in China and abroad. Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, sometimes I had to conduct the interviews online. At the same time, some housebound musicians were more active in their music making on internet platforms, which prompted me to observe musical expression in the virtual space. Subsequently, through interaction and support, I maintained continuous contact with most of them, who promptly answered my questions via email and We Chat platforms. During these formal interviews and informal consultations, I also observed and recorded some performances and live broadcasts with the interviewees' consent. For the musicians on which this study was focused, I also analysed their early biographies and yearbooks, publications, including reviews of their

performances by other people, album catalogues and covers. This allowed me to track musical career trajectories and work processes.

0.3.2 English Definitions of *Erhu* and Related Terms

My study includes several English translations and explanations of proper nouns. By giving pinyin, Chinese and English explanations side by side, readers should gain a deeper understanding of these terms' cultural background and practical use in music. This bilingual approach not only helps English readers comprehend the terminology and its context, but it also provides readers who know Chinese with a worldwide perspective. As a native Chinese speaker, I am concerned about my English translation abilities. As a result, for more regularly used terminology, I use English idioms coined by Jonathan Stock and Colin Huehns in their *erhu* study.

Every researcher has their limits, though, and thus they might not be able to fully capture the larger "*erhu* universe". To remedy this, I widened the scope of my sources by using data from the YouTube channel of Dr Nicholas Ng, the Australian composer, *erhu* player and curator that I interviewed. His rather popular YouTube account, (www.youtube.com/@Errrrrwho), is where I found English translations of his *erhu* musical works. The English titles of these *erhu* pieces are becoming quite well recognised within the community.

Furthermore, another interviewee, *erhu* musician Kong Yanyan, who has extensive expertise in instructing *erhu* in North America and Singapore, generously shared her textbooks with me. These textbooks contain literal translations in English of the physical components of the *erhu* (see Fig 0.1 on page 12). This approach has been used in her everyday instruction and presented to students who do not have a Chinese cultural or ethnic background.

The use of this terminology, which has been actively promoted and has gained a certain level of acceptability, may enhance the precision and reliability of the terminological translation. Additionally, it can minimise any possible misconceptions arising out of language barriers. Within the framework of globalisation, my translation work effectively encapsulates the multifaceted nature of *erhu* musical compositions by combining scholarly research with practical implementation. This approach not only enhances readers' comprehension but also facilitates the broader dissemination

and global acceptance of *erhu* music culture.

0.3.3 The *Erhu* in the "Third Space": Perspectives on Global Musicology

In my study, I extended my previous approach comparing cultural phenomena with further explorations of the *erhu*'s role in contemporary society. Through interactions with mainstream musicians, I observed that their understanding of the *erhu* often reflects a strong sense of self-awareness, meaning a deep identification with the Chinese cultural heritage associated with the instrument. This identification trend may cause individuals to primarily understand the *erhu* through the lens of local culture, potentially overlooking the influence of abroad culture. These gaps in understanding may present communication challenges for peoples during the increasingly globalised era of *erhu*'s history, culture and music. After recognising these limitations of knowledge and oral expression, I shifted my focus to their musical activities, uncovering a more dynamic and diverse landscape of *erhu* performance. The way they present their musical performances can often reveal the underlying motivations for their choices and offer insights into their more authentic selves.

As I looked at more of the *erhu*'s dynamic landscapes, I found a commonality that often comes alive in cross-cultural performances and creations, based on global cultural exchanges, including the cultural convergence to create new meanings. This intermingling allows for new angles and the formation of a "third space" cultural state, which is a dynamic environment where the interplay of different cultural elements stimulates the emergence of innovative and hybrid identities. This characteristic has been a defining feature of the *erhu* since its inception. According to Bhabha, this space acts as a nexus of cultural convergence and a dynamic environment where diverse cultural elements spark innovation and hybrid identities. Even the same symbols can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and reinterpreted (Bhabha 1994/2012, 36-39). This evolution dismantles the traditional binary distinction between "self" and "others", redefining and renegotiating identities within current cultural or social frameworks. These dynamics foster a deeper understanding of cultural exchange and evolution (Smith 2008, 11).

In my research on reflection, "self" and "others" represent Chinese music and global music cultures respectively. Specifically, in the context of *erhu* research, "self" refers to the *erhu*, while

"others" includes the external methods and approaches adopted in its creation, performance and training. As an *erhu* player, I perceive that the *erhu* has experienced significant flow and change in the "third space" of global influence since its inception as a solo instrument. The modern *erhu* emerged from China's Westernised educational institutions in the 1920s, absorbing Western influences and creating a richness of sound and meaning that transcended traditional boundaries, hence the term "school style" *erhu*. *Erhu* players continue to reinvent themselves through global interaction, evolving through absorption of Western cultural traditions and integration into the global musical landscape.

On the other hand, the "school style *erhu*" with its "third space" has promoted cultural exchange and integration, providing greater opportunities for the world to access and appreciate Chinese culture. The acceptance of Chinese culture has made music in Western countries more diverse and inclusive in the globalised era. Some professional musicians around the world have begun to explore and create music specifically tailored to this instrument. For example, French *erhu* player Eliott Tordo has gained recognition for his innovative creations and free performances that demonstrate the musical expression of the instrument through the perspectives of non-Chinese *erhu* musicians.[4] Australian composer Bruce Crossman composed an *erhu* piece, "Blooms late when spring is gone", which was inspired by the theme of the *Mudanting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion), reflecting his deep understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.[5] American composer Zack Browning's "Silk Dynasty", a piece for violin, *erhu* and *guzheng* (古箏, Chinese plucked zither), added to the repertoire of Chinese and classical instruments.[6]

Thus, to explain my observations and thinking on the "*erhu* third space", I have focused on global music theory, aiming to challenge traditional narratives and the resulting confusion, including discourses presumed to be centred on a unified historical memory, because assertions of inherent originality or "purity" within a culture are fundamentally unsustainable (Bhabha 1994/2012, 37). Why did I choose this methodology? Beyond my own observations, there are several scholars active

[4] Eliott Tordo, "YouTube personal homepage", accessed July 4,2024. https://www.youtube.com/@EliottTordo_*Erhu* [YouTube].
[5] Crossman Bruce, "Blooms late when spring is gone", released November 23, 2017.accessed July 4, 2024. https://youtu.be/CUEQz6FlJso?si=2LhTPYqbamwz7XIf
[6] Browning Zack, "Silk Dynasty", released November 2,2011, accessed June,2024. https://youtu.be/T-1ueFH_Ssw?si=5-16ZRMnAKJgjCSK [YouTube].

in the field whose perspectives also influenced my approach.

Lynn Hunt's *Writing History in the Age of Globalisation* advocates that although the past appears to be over, it is in flux due to changes in historians and the purposes of history. Exploring the past reveals new sources and conclusions and this diversity also reflects the vitality of the history (Hunt 2014, 11). The integration of diverse cultures and ideas has grown in importance as globalisation has progressed, owing to technological advancements and increasing international interactions. Musicology can no longer be based on out-of-date principles. Daniel Chua proposed shifting the research perspective to global musicology to overcome the limitations of international models (which assume uniformity) and world models (which emphasise differences), thus revealing the complex relationships and dynamic evolution inherent in the music ecological environment (Chua 2022). This philosophy enables us to categorise and organise music based on distinct cultural backgrounds and social situations, dividing sound parts into discrete islands of meaning. By mean of this method, we may adapt and understand music practices in diverse cultures with more flexibility, rather than trying to assess all music with a single standard (Semi 2022, 240).

My research seeks to uncover how the *erhu*, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, has maintained its deep-rooted cultural significance while simultaneously absorbing and integrating foreign influences within the context of globalisation. When considering this dynamic cultural exchange, global musicology offers a more inclusive and comprehensive perspective, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intricate interactions and evolutions of music and culture in a globalised world. This advantage makes global musicology an ideal framework within which to study and analyse the culture of the *erhu*'s "third space".

0.3.4 Biographical Study

I use a biographical approach in my thesis. Biography is also an effective tool for research in the social sciences. Tsao-Lin Fong translated Rainer Kokemohr's study into the effectiveness of biographical research. Kokemohr argues that individuals and societies need to balance the maintenance of traditions and the innovation of adaptations in the process of survival and development. Maintaining current societal systems is about stability and continuity, but creating new

worldviews is about adaptability and advancement. Biographical study allows us to obtain a better knowledge of how this equilibrium is realised at the individual level, demonstrating the complexity and dynamism of social evolution (Fong 2001, 47).

Similarly, ethnomusicological research also emphasises the role of the individual, as Helen Rees discusses in the "Introduction" to *Lives in Chinese Music.* Rees mentions the impact of globalisation on music studies and points out that globalisation and its accompanying modern world system may challenge or even erase traditional understandings of culture and society (Rees 2010, 3). In this context, it is particularly important to examine the role of the individual in musical practice and experience. Furthermore, each of the seven chapters in this book is a case study of a Chinese musician, reflecting their refractive, social and communal relationships. These are excellent instances and resources for my studies.

As a result, biographical writing allows my study to record the lives of main individuals while showing the wider cultural and social contexts in which they lived, which can help us understand how musicians contribute to and are influenced by the dynamic processes of cultural diffusion and transformation. My PhD dissertation explores the stories of five *erhu* musicians and the cultural phenomena they represent, spanning almost a century, from the 1920s to the present. By concentrating on people, I delineate the evolutionary trajectory of the *erhu* through various historical contexts, elucidating the interplay between individuals and historical occurrences.

By following the careers of key musicians, I demonstrate how they introduced new elements to advance the art of the *erhu* while preserving "traditional" skills. This longitudinal perspective highlights the changing aspects of cultural inheritance and how different generations have reinvented *erhu* art. My goal is to uncover complex cultural and social phenomena through these personal stories, providing readers with insights into *erhu* cultural patterns and their global impact through real-life examples. This approach not only served as an ideal framework for my study but also represents my contribution to the study of the ecology of the "*erhu* universe".

0.3.5 Balance of Contextual Description and Transcription

In the modern day, the *erhu* within "school style" settings has evolved into a professional solo instrument characterised by standardised training patterns and performance techniques, a process reflected in the physical movements of musicians and the equipment they use. *Erhu* training methods, performance practices and even musical interpretations show a tendency towards convergence, with students taking pride in imitating their masters (tutors). This has led to a proliferation of uniform score analyses in *erhu* studies, while analyses of musical expression have become homogenised due to the reverence for the masters. Younger generations of *erhu* musicians, shaped by this academically oriented environment, approach music in similar ways to their master, an approach which is reflected in a similarity of textual annotations and interpretations. Consequently, the direct study of musical analysis is of relatively limited significance in my case.

However, even within this rigid, standardised system, dominated by entrenched power structures, there remains an implicit expression of intrinsic, individual-based creativity in the "*erhu* school style". From Haywood's study of strict Buddhist ritual music tradition, we see that emotions can be conveyed through an individual's inner state, interactions with others, synchronisation of body and voice, cultural background differences, material technology use and unique experiences. Even in the most regulated music practices, these factors enrich and personalise emotional expression (Haywood 2023).

My PhD research has naturally evolved into a nuanced, contextualised study of the *erhu*'s development over time, examining the various factors that may have shaped both the music and the personalities associated with the instrument. In this process, I have combined contextual research with targeted musical analysis, showing an exploration of multiple interpretations of the music's meaning rather than limiting it to a single, fixed expression. Through the methods, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these musicians developed their artistic styles within an academically oriented environment and how these styles both reflected and were influenced by broader cultural forces.

0.4 Literature Review

To analyse the development of the *erhu* in the context of global movements, I focus on its gradual evolution within Western music education systems since the 1920s, examining its trajectory in terms of composition, training and performance. To provide a clearer understanding of the subsequent literature review, this section begins by explaining some key concepts, including the distinctions and connections between "*huqin*", "*erhu*" and "modern *erhu*", as well as the meanings of "modernity" and "tradition" in different historical contexts. These explanations establish the contextual foundation for the discussion of the *erhu*'s modernisation that follows.

Next, I review the historical development of the *erhu* as a solo instrument and analyse the interplay between "modernity" and "tradition" in *erhu* music creation, with particular emphasis on the far-reaching impact of historical changes, political policies and globalisation on the *erhu*'s musical style and expression. I also critically analyse the current state of contemporary *erhu* research. This literature review not only aims to reveal the developmental path of the *erhu* in the context of globalisation but also seeks to reflect on the limitations and shortcomings of current academic research on the instrument, ultimately laying a theoretical foundation for a deeper understanding of the *erhu*'s process of modernisation.

0.4.1 *Huqin*, *Erhu* and "Modern *Erhu*"

In the research and reports of contemporary Chinese scholars and even among mainstream *erhu* performers, the *erhu* is often considered a musical instrument with a history spanning thousands of years. The terms "*erhu*" and "*huqin*" are frequently confused and used interchangeably. Scholars and performers like to refer to the form of *huqin* that has been passed down through history as the predecessor of the modern *erhu*, supporting the claim that "*erhu* has a thousand-year history" (Feng 1999; Yu 2007; Jiang 2008). However, the history of the *erhu* being performed as a solo instrument has not yet reached a hundred years (Chu 2009, 269). Furthermore, Stock clarified in his research that "*huqin*", as a musical instrument, was originally used exclusively by a non-Han ethnic group known as the "*huren*" (胡人, Hu people) in Chinese. He brings different perspectives to its introduction to China, considering cultural and geographical influences that may have contributed to

its development. He believes that the conceptual ancestors of the *erhu* or modern *erhu* were likely introduced to China in the late 11th century. Subsequently, "*huqin*" was combined with traditional bamboo friction string instruments, utilising the ponytail bow technique to create a lasting string sound for the new musical form. Stock's research distinguishes myths from historical facts, emphasising the complex historical evolution of this instrument from a foreign item to a core element of traditional Chinese music (Stock 1993).

The evolution of the *erhu* is not only a section in the history of music but also a significant part of Chinese societal history. During the conflicts and communication between the "Hu" and the "Han", cultural elements from different ethnic groups often needed to adapt to new environments for survival. The introduction of the *huqin* and its transformation into the *erhu* exemplify this process of cultural adaptation. By merging with traditional Han Chinese instruments, the *huqin* not only persisted but also evolved into a key component of traditional Chinese bowed string instrument. And within the cultural spaces of different ethnic groups and regions, it adapted to local conditions, evolving into various forms of the local *huqin*. For example, contemporary Chinese musicologist Xiang Yang, based on historical and archaeological research, categorises *huqin* into two major types: ethnic minority *huqin*, such as the *yehu* (椰胡), coconut fiddle of the Li ethnic group, the *gijhak* of the Uyghur and Uzbek ethnic groups,[7] and the *guhu* (骨胡), bone fiddle of the Zhuang ethnic group; and the type of *shuochang huqin* (说唱胡琴),[8] such as the *zhuqin* (筑琴) used in *Xuzhou qinshu* (徐州琴书), the *erxian* (二弦) used in *nanyin* (南音) and the *sihu* (四胡) used in *errentai* (二人台) etc. (Xiang 313, 1999). These *huqin* gradually integrated into the wider "*huqin* family" as China's political landscape changed and modernisation progressed. Consequently, the term "*huqin*" has become a generic label for stringed instruments from these regions, symbolising the shared evolution of different areas and ethnic groups through cultural exchange and adaptation.

To distinguish between *huqin* and *erhu* in the complex contexts of ancient and modern times, Huehns added an explanation of the noun's historical context in his research, referring to Liu

[7] Chinese scholars often classify the Gijhak within the *Huqin* family, perhaps to align with China's cultural policies toward ethnic minorities, which may overlook local traditions. However, different ethnic groups have distinct perspectives on the Gijhak. Sometimes, these differences are deliberately emphasised to highlight the cultural distinctions between neighbouring groups. For more details see During 2005.

[8] *Minjian* storytelling and singing with *huqin* playing.

Tianhua's reformed *erhu* as "modern *erhu*" (Huehns 2001). The emergence in China of the concept of "modern", a term rooted in Western society, reflects the recognition by Chinese intellectuals of the progressiveness of Western society at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. They promoted China's reform by introducing these ideas. Therefore, Professor Tsai Ping-heng from the National University of the Arts in Taiwan stated that the "modern *erhu*" developed by means of navigation and it was inevitable for Western cultural genes to be transplanted to all corners of the world at that time, reflecting a microcosm of "cultural exchange between China and the West" (Tsai 2007, 131).

The introduction of modern concepts explains the improvement of the *erhu*, distinguishing it from other members of the *huqin* family. This improvement is reflected not only in its structure and playing techniques but also in its musical style and expression. By incorporating Western music theory and techniques, the modern *erhu* has significantly enhanced its timbre, range and expressiveness, enabling it to perform more complex and varied professional musical works.

0.4.2 "Modernity" and "Tradition"

In some studies, the term "modern *erhu*" refers more to the style of contemporary music creation, such as the composition and teaching research of "Rhapsody" and "Concerto" (Zhu 2014; Wang 2014; Lei 2017). The ten *erhu* solo pieces created by Liu Tianhua are often referred to as traditional works in this context, even if they are played using the "modern *erhu*" style. For example, musicologist Lin Junqing believes that *erhu* works can be roughly divided into two categories. One type belongs to the traditional repertoire, which includes pieces of original *minjian yinyue* transplanted to the *erhu* and played as *erhu* music, such as *Zhonghua liuban* 中花六板 (Moderately Ornamented Six Beats), *Hua huanle* 花欢乐 (Ornamented Happy Tune), *Hangong qiuyue* 汉宫秋月 (Autumn Moon over the Han Palace) etc. The *erhu* pieces by Liu Tianhua and Abing also belong to traditional *erhu* solo music. The other type is the creative repertoire composed by modern musicians, including the adaptation of some foreign works (Lin 1998, 36).

In the face of this phenomenon the "modern *erhu*" and "modern *erhu* musical style" intertwine and redefine each other in the field of contemporary *erhu* music. Chinese musicologist Qiao

Jianzhong (b. 1941) subdivided the development of the *erhu* into three periods in his classic article "Yijian yueqi he yige shiji: *erhu* yishu bainianguan" 一件乐器和一个世纪：二胡艺术研究百年观 (A Musical Instrument and a Century: A Century of *Erhu* Art): 1915–1949, 1949–1979, and 1979–1999. This classification method not only reflects the profound impact of major historical changes on *erhu* creation but also demonstrates the complex interaction between political policies and *erhu* music. Most contemporary scholars also study the development of the *erhu* based on this classification system (Yang 2003; Wang 2007; Wang 2019). Subsequently, the *erhu* educator Song Guosheng (b. 1938) divided traditional from modern works based on their time of composition. He suggested using the start of the reform and opening (1979–1980) as a boundary, referring to works from before this period as "traditional" and those after as "modern" (Song 2015).

However, while these classifications offer a broad historical framework, they may oversimplify the *erhu*'s more nuanced and overlapping stylistic transitions. My research does not strictly adhere to Qiao or Song's models but instead considers the *erhu*'s evolution as a dynamic process shaped by institutional structures, artistic practices and transnational influences. In my opinion, the stylistic shifts in *erhu* music do not always correspond neatly to political or institutional milestones. For instance, certain performance skills associated with contemporary *erhu* playing had already begun to emerge before the so-called "modern" period, while some music works categorised as "traditional" exhibit characteristics that align with later developments. This reflects that modernity in *erhu* music is not defined by rigid historical boundaries but instead a fluid and continuously evolving process, which is shaped by structural changes and the creative agency of individual musicians. Therefore, by moving beyond fixed chronological divisions, my research points out that modernity and tradition in *erhu* music are not opposing forces but interconnected elements that continue to shape its artistic trajectory.

0.4.3 Overview of *Erhu* Music Creation and Playing Technique

Modern *erhu* music presents diverse and complex forms in both composition and performance. Scholars have interpreted the technical characteristics of modern professional *erhu* music by comparing the iterative changes in compositional structure and performance techniques across different eras, using Western music analysis methods. These analyses, rooted in comparative cultural studies, reveal the developmental trajectory of *erhu* music. Existing literature leaves no doubt that the composition and performance of modern *erhu* music have undergone significant changes under the influence of Liu Tianhua (Huyan 1994; Ling 1998; Zhu 2000).

As the founder of modern *erhu*, Liu Tianhua integrated Western musical techniques into his compositions, creating a new chapter in *erhu* music. By analysing Tianhua's works, scholars have shown how he enriched the expressive power of the *erhu* by drawing on Western transposition of the five degrees of relationship and combining it with variations in tempo and intensity found in violin music (Jiang 1980; Shang 1980; Yu 1982). In the ten *erhu* pieces he composed, he used the Western major and minor key systems and compositional structures and integrated elements of traditional Chinese literature into musical titles.

During the second period of *erhu* development (1949–1979), the government's emphasis on exploring ethnic and *minjian yinyue* led to the emergence of *erhu* works with regional or ethnic characteristics in their titles, often praising life under communism. This contrasts with Liu Tianhua's music titles, which took their inspiration from classical Chinese literature and art. The *erhu* music of this period was compiled in *Erhu quxuan: 1949–1979* 二胡曲选 (Selected Erhu Songs: 1949–1979), which includes thirty-two music scores. I conducted literature research on these pieces and summarised their characteristics. During this period, 28 compositions were mainly based on A-B-A musical structures, continuing Liu Tianhua's creative approach towards *erhu*. Additionally, nine pieces feature tonal transitions, while the rest maintain a consistent tonality throughout. In terms of melody, many compositions are directly based on traditional regionmaterials, primarily using the pentatonic scale, such as *Jiangnan chunse* 江南春色 (Spring in Jiangnan) and *Qinqiang zhuti suixiangqu* 秦腔主题随想曲 (Capriccio of Qinqiang Tunes). Furthermore, songs like *Jianghe shui*

江河水 (River of Sorrow) were directly adapted from a *guanzi* (管子) pipe music, influencing subsequent *erhu* works, such as the adaptation of *suona* (唢呐, double-reeded) music in the *erhu* solo piece *Yizhihua* 一枝花 (A Flower) and the adaptation of *dizi* (笛子, Chinese transverse flute) music in *Qinchuan shuhuai* 秦川抒怀 (Train of Thoughts).

However, during this period, professional composer Liu Wenjin's *erhu* music works *Yubei xushiqu* 豫北叙事曲 (Ballad of Yubei) and *Sanmenxia changxiangqu* 三门峡畅想曲 (The Sanmen Dam Capriccio) did not directly use Chinese *minjian yinyue* elements (Xiao 1983). Instead, they absorbed and sublimated national tones, forming structures with variations and blending Chinese and Western music elements. These pieces, featuring multiple segments of reproduction and combined with piano accompaniment, achieved an enriched musical expression and were a challenge to the traditional *erhu* accompaniment of *yangqin* (扬琴, Chinese Dulcimer). Mainstream *erhu* musician Zhao Hanyang (1999) believes that Liu Wenjin's music surpassed Liu Tianhua's works and established a level of technical difficulty that remained unsurpassed for over 30 years.

Subsequently, Liu Wenjin (1937–2013) continued his compositional ideas and, in 1982, released the concerto *The Great Wall Capriccio* (长城随想曲, *Changcheng suixiangqu*) premiered by Min Huifen, pioneering the multi-movement concerto. The style of *erhu* composition also shifted from a single compound three-step style to narrative, multi-tonal, multi-sectional medium- and large-scale pieces (Qiao 1983). Additionally, this period saw the emergence of a series of *erhu* rhapsodies composed by Wang Jianmin (b. 1956). He imagined unique tunings based on *minjian* tones and used these as the foundation for his compositions, achieving a peak in musical expression and playing technique. From the perspective of the *erhu* musician using "school style", Wang considered the rapid advancements in *erhu* playing techniques and the current level of accomplishment of master performers. He added a higher degree of difficulty to his works, making these pieces richly challenging for the performers. This approach may enhance the longevity of the pieces, as the development of performance technique is often driven by composition (Wang 2003).

Erhu virtuoso Sun Huang (b. 1981) summarised the difficulties of rhapsodic *erhu* music. For example, in the fast sections of the *No.3 Rhapsody*, rapid position changes and wide leaps are crucial, especially in the final arpeggio and octave leap sections, which are the most technically demanding

parts. The overtone techniques, including natural and artificial harmonics, are widely used in the *No.1 Rhapsody* and *No.3 Rhapsody*, adding variety and purity to the tone. The rapid continuous bowing technique is mainly used to express joyful moods and imitate laughter, such as in the Allegretto section of the *No.3 Rhapsody.* Additionally, the three rhapsodic pieces employ various special techniques such as striking the bow, hitting the instrument's skin with the right hand and combining pizzicato with bow strikes. These techniques greatly enrich the *erhu*'s expressive power, providing a novel auditory and visual experience and their use also reflects the composer's innovative spirit in *erhu* music creation (Sun 2006).

However, some music scholars hold a different view. For example, contemporary scholar Chen Yuehong believes that the solo music primarily aims to highlight the *erhu* performer's skills and create a mood, depicting a context that is very different from the traditional Chinese aesthetic and auditory contexts (Chen 2022). As the professional *erhu* repertoire expanded and the standard of teaching improved, *erhu* music began to emphasise high-level playing techniques more than the music itself. The emergence of the avant-garde during this period also added to this lack of a clear melody in *erhu* compositions.

There are some *erhu* pieces inspired by the "twelve-tone system". For example, Tan Dun (b. 1957) used the theme from Liu Tianhua's *erhu* piece *Liangxiao* 良宵 (The beautiful evening) to compose *Shuangque* 双阙 (Poem in Two Parts) for *erhu* and yangqin in 1985, along with He Xuntian's (b. 1953) *Four Dreams* (梦四则, *Meng size*) and Zheng Bing's (b. 1956) *Erhu Concerto No. 1.* (第一二胡协奏曲, *Diyi erhu xiezouqu*) The musical characteristics of these works include an increase in relative pitches, irregular rhythmic movements and the appearance of noise tones (Bu 2003). These compositions seek to break the integrity and distinctiveness of the solo melody in terms of tuning and tonality. Some of them even abandon the singing quality for which the *erhu* is best known, focusing instead on revealing its diverse timbres. This is rather than using the familiar tones to which the "traditional ear" is accustomed and in some cases where the listener does not even hear a complete melodic fragment, these pieces use the *erhu* performer's skills to express a variety of human responses such as hallucinations, fears and cries through long vibrato notes, wide jumps of different lengths and glissandi (Chen 2022).

In addition, the direct appropriation of Western music by *erhu* has become an important way in which to showcase superb skills, gradually forming an essential category of academic *erhu* performance known as "transplanted music". The earliest instances can be traced back to the 1960s, when Wang Guotong (b. 1939) recorded in his memoir that he and his colleagues began playing fragments of Western music to explore the possibilities of *erhu* performance (Wang 2020). After the Cultural Revolution, *erhu* pieces transplanted or adapted from foreign music works, such as violin and piano compositions, emerged one after another. Examples include *Sunshine Over Tashkurgan, Csárdás, Zigeunerweisen, Carmen Fantasy, Perpetual Motion and Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*. These music pieces challenged the traditional fingerings and movement trajectories of *erhu* playing.

In summary, the creation of contemporary *erhu* music is inextricably linked to the demonstration of technique. Advances in performance technology have strengthened the distinction between mainstream and *minjian erhu* players, contributing to the "classicisation" of *erhu* music. However, changing times have made this vision seem rigid in the contemporary Chinese context, leading to a competitive rush in *erhu* music-making. For instance, some contemporary *erhu* musicians and composers frequently reference Liu Tianhua's vision of "making the *erhu* stand out in the world of music" in their ideology. However, in the contemporary era, *erhu* performance increasingly reflects competition with other stringed instruments worldwide, both in the performance of large-scale Western compositions and local Chinese pieces, as well as in the pursuit of a beautiful timbre, smooth phrasing and fast technique (Chai 2012). As early as the 1980s, Lu Ping observed this trend and expressed concern about the focus on the *erhu*'s rapid technique, citing Jascha Heifetz (1901–1987), Arthur Rubinstein (1887–1982) and Vladimir Horowitz (1903–1989), who warned against musicians prioritising technical training over musical expression (Lu 1982).

However, not all contemporary composers and performers from the musical conservatory have overlooked the importance of the *erhu*'s musicality. For instance, Georges Gao (b. 1967) has revitalised the *erhu*'s capriccio with his series of compositions that blend Chinese tones with global elements such as reggae, jazz and rock, emphasising the universal value of "good sounding" music. His work transcends the traditional Western classical music framework, incorporating both world

music elements and distinct Chinese tonalities. This eclectic mix of styles and rhythms brings a fresh and enjoyable quality to *erhu* music, achieving the effect Gao intended.[9] Similarly, composer Li Bochan (b. 1992) focuses on the *erhu*'s lyrical and melodic strengths within the context of Western compositional structures and performance techniques. By doing so, he reintroduces the *erhu* to popular audiences, balancing broad appeal with virtuosic skill (Li 2022).

In short, among some contemporary professional *erhu* players and scholars in China, there is a general agreement on the modern and traditional concepts of the *erhu*. However, this apparent unanimity is still marked by a certain degree of ambiguity, while also reflecting the adaptability of *erhu* compositional techniques to different eras within an academic context. Furthermore, it highlights the nature of "tradition" in professional *erhu* music as a dynamic mode rather than a static heritage. In other words, tradition is not simply transmitted chronologically but is constantly reorganised in the process of creating the present moment. In the era of globalisation, the relationship between tradition and modernity is interdependent and complementary, rather than contradictory (AlSayyad 2003, 7-8). Therefore, in my research, I did not seek to place tradition and modernity in opposition to each other but instead recorded the development of *erhu* in different contexts throughout its historical evolution.

0.4.4 Chinese Modernity in Musical Culture

Modernisation, a process that originated in the West, gradually spread across the globe. Various aspects of Western modernity influenced the non-Western world, contributing to a seemingly homogeneous modern civilisation. However, non-Western societies increasingly recognised the importance of forging their own cultural identities and distinct paths towards modernity (Robertson 1994).

Since the late Qing Dynasty, Western forces had entered the East, gradually introducing Western learning to China. China was pulled into the wave of modernisation through Western imperialism. Following the 1911 *Xinhai* Revolution, the *New Culture* movement emerged, representing a clash between Western technology and traditional Chinese thought. Western influence permeated Chinese culture, reflected in the reform and reshaping of Chinese music in the early 20th century, directly

[9] For more detail, see Chapter 5.

influencing its transformation (Zhang 2009). Chinese intellectuals adapted Western methods in art and literature, while remaining conscious of maintaining cultural identity.

One of the earlier manifestations of Western musical influence in China was *xuetang yuege* (学堂乐歌, school songs), which became an integral part of modern educational reforms. These songs, often adapted from Western and Japanese melodies with newly written Chinese lyrics, introduced students to Western notation systems, harmony and structured musical training. According to Micic's PhD research, *xuetang yuege* carried a powerful metaphorical meaning, symbolising a transition towards modernity and a break from the feudal past. Reformers utilized these songs as a tool to construct a new vision of Chinese identity, embedding within them aspirations for a reformed society that embraced progress while redefining tradition. The term "new" (新), frequently invoked in the discourse surrounding education and culture at the time, further underscored how music served as a metaphor for a broader ideological shift. As these songs transitioned from educational settings to broader public spaces, it reinforced the notion that music itself could serve as an agent of political and social transformation (Micic 1999, 129-169).

At the same time, during this period, three perspectives emerged in Chinese musical thought: "retro" "Westernisation" and "improvement". Wu Weixi (b. 1979), in the book, *Liyue yu guoyue: Yishi xingtai yujinghzongde zhongguo jinxiandai yinyuesichao* 礼乐与国乐：意识形态语境中的中国近现代音乐思潮 (Ritual Music and National Music: Modern Chinese Musical Thought in Ideological Contexts), when discussing the concept of *guoyue* (Chinese national music), stated that it is necessary to place it in the context of the emergence of national consciousness. For example, in analysing Liu Tianhua's ideas on improving Chinese music, the author fundamentally understands the difference between his attitude towards traditional music and the attitude of "national quintessence" towards traditional music. Specifically, Liu Tianhua modernised traditional music by adapting its instrumental techniques and practical methods to align with the emerging national consciousness, whereas the "national quintessence" ideology always adheres to a policy of treating traditional music with a culturally centred consciousness. In other words, the former emphasises the improvement and adaptation of traditional music, while the latter places more emphasis on maintaining cultural purity (Wu 2019, 87-97).

As defined by mainstream Chinese scholars, the establishment of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music at the beginning of the 20th century was an important step in the integration of Chinese music into the modernised educational framework.[10] This was achieved by incorporating Western classical music training methods into the conservatory system, while also adapting certain aspects of the Chinese musical tradition (Feng, 2010). According to Grenier Borel, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music initially followed the model of the European Conservatory of Music, reflecting a broader shift in the integration of Western classical techniques into the discourse of Chinese musical modernity. At the same time, these adaptations were situated within nationalist narratives that positioned Western musical training as a means of enhancing and redefining Chinese music within modern educational structures (Grenier Borel, 2019). The importance of the Communist Revolution is undeniable in our understanding of present-day Chinese society. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, national music was further renamed *minzu yinyue* (民族音乐), which reflecting the plebeian tendencies of the Communist Party's ideology (Lau 2008, 33). Then, the Communist Revolution furthered the revival of Chinese music within the framework of socialist culture (Xiao 2009). The state organised efforts to collect and preserve *minjian yinyue*, institutionalising the teaching and research of traditional music. *Minjian yinyuejia* were invited to higher education institutions, elevating their social status and embedding their art within formal education systems (Su 2023). This period saw the professionalisation of traditional arts in line with national identity building. Traditional Chinese music was innovatively developed through urbanisation and professional training as part of the promotion of national policies and modernisation processes, while still maintaining cultural and ethnic characteristics (Kouwenhoven, Chen and Rees 2016).

During the Cultural Revolution, creative freedom was stifled and traditional music was suppressed or repurposed to serve political ideologies. The educational work of music academies also came to a standstill and musicians lost valuable performance and teaching opportunities, with some even losing their lives (Diao 2009). Music creation was limited to revolutionary songs and model plays. Despite the constraints, some music still persisted, incorporating *minjian* elements even

[10] It was founded in 1927 as the National Conservatory of Music (國立音乐院), the first independent institution of higher education for music in China, by Xiao Youmei, and was renamed the National Shanghai Music College (國立上海音乐专科学校) in 1929, the National Shanghai Conservatory of Music (國立上海音樂学院) in 1945, and the current Shanghai Conservatory of Music (上海音樂学院) in 1956.

under political repression (Wang 2011). Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was a revival of music education and creation. The reopening of music conservatories in the late 1970s and early 1980s facilitated the resurgence of Chinese music practices (Zhao 2017). Competitions and associations began to flourish, promoting the modernisation and professionalisation of Chinese music (Gao 1985). This resurgence was reflected in a systematic music education approach, integrating performance, creation and research.

The institutionalisation of Chinese music throughout the 20th century mirrored China's broader cultural development strategies. By integrating Chinese music into modernised educational frameworks while preserving its traditional, *minjian* and ethnic roots, China hoped to navigate the balance between cultural preservation and global modernity, a process that continues to this day.

0.5 Thesis Structure

The seven chapters of this dissertation consist of an introduction, five main body chapters and a conclusion. In the introduction, I clarify the research objectives and scope of the thesis, introduce the overall organisational structure and discuss the significance of the research. At the same time, I briefly introduce the broad context of modern *erhu*, review relevant literature on contemporary *erhu* research and outline the research methods adopted.

In the first chapter, I explore the history of the establishment of the modern *erhu*, analysing it as a product of the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures and the formation of a new professional *erhu* tradition distinct from the traditional *minjian huqin* in the modern context. Particular emphasis is placed on the significant contributions of Liu Tianhua and his disciples to the development of the solo *erhu* tradition, as well as the role of intellectuals and artists in promoting cultural transformation in the 1920s. The discussion of *erhu* music composition, training methods and physical modifications to the instrument within the context of the Western classical music system reflects the dynamics of *erhu* development amid the tension between modernisation and tradition in Chinese context.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the transformation of cultural capital in the development of the *erhu* within professional music institutions after 1949. This transformation involved drawing the original, unexploited and natural state of *minjian yinyue* culture into systematic music academies for further development. I examine examples of *minjian huqin yinyuejia* entering Western conservatories after 1949, focusing on the story of blind musician Sun Wenming. I detail the transformation process, whereby China collected outstanding *minjian* culture to construct a national music culture, elegantly adapting and improving it. The valuable skills and experience of *minjian yinyuejia* were introduced into music conservatories, allowing traditional *minjian yinyue* to be preserved and transmitted within the Western educational system. Additionally, I assess the importance and value of *minjian yinyue* within the modern education system.

Chapter 3 examines the representativeness of the training of *renmin yinyuejia* (人民音乐家, People's musicians) under the communist regime by exploring the musical career of Min Huifen, from the 1960s until her death in 2014. It documents her musical contributions and examines how she and her *erhu* symbolised political power during different historical periods, including the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening Up era. Min Huifen's experience illustrates the complex relationship between music and politics, as well as the artist's existence within various historical contexts, highlighting the interaction between elite and popular culture. Through Min's endeavours, I reveal how state power has transformed *minjian* arts into a significant component of national culture by adapting and enhancing it. This reflects the identification and reconstruction of "people's musicians" with their own musical culture amid the processes of globalisation and modernisation.

Chapter 4 details Liu Changfu's significant contributions, as China's first postgraduate student in the 1980s, to the development of the *erhu* professional training system, highlighting the contemporary significance of scientific (科学的, *kexuede*) performance methods based on music conservatory training. By examining Liu's achievements, I elaborate on the systematisation of modern *erhu* teaching and the critical role of scientific training methods in enhancing *erhu* performance. Contemporary mainstream musicians have enabled the *erhu* to achieve qualitative leaps in terms of tonal brightness and playing speed. This development has not only brought the *erhu*

closer to classical music on a technical level, reflecting the underlying sense of cultural competition of Chinese music within the context of globalisation, but has also led to a marked separation of the *erhu* from *minjian yinyue*, with elite techniques and skills gradually becoming centralised in the discourse of mainstream musicians.

Chapter 5 details George Gao's contributions to the globalisation of the *erhu* and his achievements in cross-cultural development. Gao has maintained a global awareness of musical innovation since the 1980s, which persists to this day. He was proud to be the first musician to perform a *Carmen Fantasy* on the *erhu*, marking the start of his musical career with creativity. By collaborating with musicians from different cultural backgrounds, Gao brought the *erhu* to the international stage and facilitated the worldwide spread and acceptance of *erhu* music. I explain how Gao's cultural identity and memories has driven his *erhu* music-making and how his efforts have demonstrated the potential of the *erhu* in cross-cultural exchange and highlighted the innovation and adaptability of indigenous cultures in a global context.

Finally, the conclusion of this doctoral study analyses the significant changes and advances that the modern *erhu* has undergone in the process of globalisation. By adopting an ethnographic approach with a focus on musical biography, it traces the historical evolution of the *erhu*, examines performance composition and training in different historical periods, investigates how generations of musicians have brought reform and innovation to the instrument and explores the interplay between modernity and tradition in the Westernisation or globalisation of Chinese instrumental music. In addition, this study enriches the contextual discourse on the globalisation of Chinese music, contributes to the English-language scholarly literature and is intended to enhance Western readers' interest and understanding of the *erhu*.

Chapter 1. "*Guoyue*", Modern *Erhu* and Westernisation: Liu Tianhua's School in the 1920s

Introduction

Western countries have led globalisation and capitalist transformation, with the bourgeoisie promoting their production methods and lifestyle worldwide. Since the Opium Wars in China, Western science, technology, political systems and cultural concepts have flooded into Chinese feudal society. Faced with modern Western civilisation, the Chinese, once confident under feudalism, began to lose faith in their government and way of life. Consequently, learning from the West and adopting its values became essential for enlightenment and progress. In 1911–1912, China transitioned from a "feudal state" to a "nation state" with Western ideals shaping the cultural elite's understanding of self and the world. As Benjamin Schwartz summarised, the intellectuals of the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century were the true revolutionaries of values and carriers of new Western ideas (Schwartz 2020, 2-3).

During this period, cultural and artistic changes also took place. For example, in the early twentieth century, the musical instrument *erhu* transitioned from its origins as a small *minjian* ensemble and local opera accompaniment instrument, traditionally linked to entertainment and daily life, into a solo instrument of distinct musical expression and object of training in institutes of higher education. Liu Tianhua is widely recognised as the key figure in this evolution.

Liu Tianhua (1895–1932) lived during the final years of feudal society and the early Republic of China, with his musical vision deeply shaped by the cultural movements of his era. He founded a professional *erhu* school, which later became known as the "school style" *erhu*. Liu integrated Western musical concepts into the *minjian erhu,* refining and adapting them to the instrument's unique characteristics. His students further developed his work, advancing *erhu* education, performance and composition according to Liu's idea of "Chinese and world music progressing hand in hand." This transformation turned the *erhu* into a "cultural repository", blending Chinese and

Western musical traditions and creating a “new tradition” in modern solo *erhu* performance (Huyan 1994).

In this chapter, using history as the main thread, I trace the musical legacy of Liu Tianhua and contextualise it within the historical backdrop of the modernisation movement and discuss how the *erhu* became a “*guoyue*” (国乐, national music) in context. I explore Liu’s contributions to music, including the improvement of the traditional *erhu*, innovations in *erhu* techniques and his musical creations. Then, I analyse the stylistic characteristics and creative ideas in Liu Tianhua’s *erhu* compositions and discuss his direct influence on later generations, including the artistic achievements and historical contributions of his three main disciples.

1.1 Who is Liu Tianhua?



Fig 1.1: Liu Tianhua ca.1920 (Liu Beimao and Liu Yuhui 2004).

Liu Tianhua is an important symbol of the identity of the *erhu* “school style”. He devoted his life to the performance, training and creation of musical instruments *erhu* and *pipa* and made significant

contributions to the development of modern Chinese music.

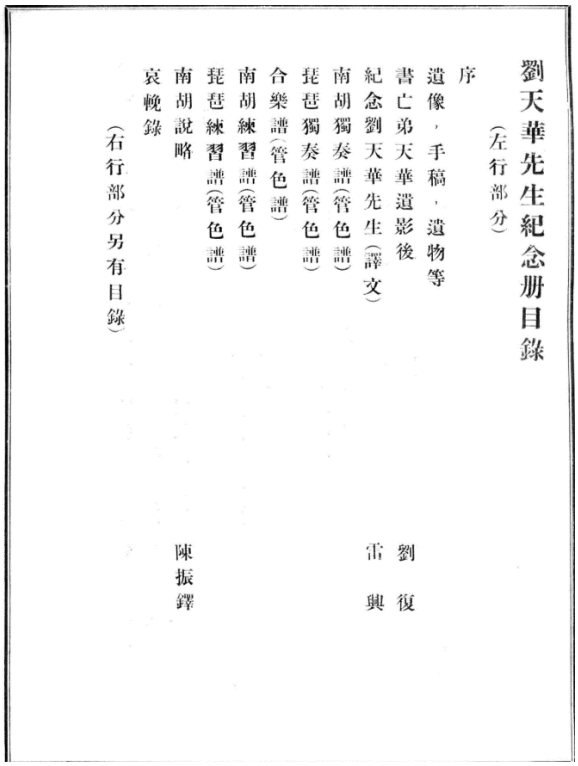
Liu Tianhua's life was tragically brief, lasting only 37 years. Twelve days after his death, the pictorial newspaper *Le Monde* 世界画报 (Shijie huabao) dedicated a "special page" on mourning and tribute to him (see Fig 1.2). In the year following his death (1933), under the auspices of his brother Liu Bannong, his friends and disciples collaborated to prepare a *Liu Tianhua xiansheng jiniance* 刘天华先生纪念册 (Memorial Book of Mr. Liu Tianhua) (see Fig 1.3), with support from institutions such as Peking University, the Institute of History and Language of the National Central Academy of Sciences and the National Library of Beijing. The booklet includes a short biography of Liu Tianhua, all his compositions in both *gongche* musical score 工尺谱,[11] and stave, critiques of his musical style by Chinese and foreign scholars and poems of condolence from friends and relatives.

A more detailed account and interpretation of Liu Tianhua's life can be found in his younger brother Liu Beimao's (1903–1981) memoir, *Liu Tianhua yinyue shengya* 刘天华音乐生涯 (Liu Tianhua's Music Career). Written as a biographical memoir, the book recounts Liu Tianhua's childhood and musical education from a family perspective, delves into his creative process and offers a wealth of detailed and authentic realia from his life.

[11] Traditional Chinese Character Notation



Fig. 1.2. “Liu Tianhua’s Eulogy”. *Shijie huabao*, no. 345, 21st year of the Republic of China (1932). Collected by Jiangyin Museum. Accessed 2024. Sep 10. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/RJz24ZIp9BykDs-4Xlso5Q.


劉天華先生紀念册目錄

（左行部分）

序 劉復
遺像、手稿、遺物等
書亡弟天華遺影後
紀念劉天華先生（譯文） 雷興
南胡獨奏譜（管色譜）
琵琶獨奏譜（管色譜）
合樂譜（管色譜）
南胡練習譜（管色譜）
琵琶練習譜（管色譜）
南胡說略 陳振鐸
哀輓錄
（右行部分另有目錄）

Fig 1.3 The Booklet Catalogue of *Liu Tianhua xiansheng jiniance*, Liu Fu, Guoli zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1932.

These memory records have become main sources for contemporary Chinese scholars studying Liu’s life and musical work. Some of the typical examples are also included in *Liu Tianhua jiyi yu yanjiu*

jicheng 刘天华艺术研究 (Liu Tianhua's Memory and Research), a compilation jointly edited by Fang Liping and mainstream *erhu* musician Min Huifen in 2009. This collection presents the introduction and research on Liu Tianhua by Chinese scholars. Notably, the book also includes pictures of cultural relics from Liu's life, along with manuscripts and papers.

From these contemporary studies, scholars interpret his spiritual contributions in the context of the mainstream ideology shaped by the policies of their own era, seeking connections between them. Sometimes, they view Liu Tianhua as a pivotal figure in the professionalisation of Chinese *minjian yinyue* and base their "perfect narratives" on that perspective.

At same time, Chinese *erhu* performers regard Liu Tianhua and another *minjian erhu* musician, Abing, as revered figures in the realm of *minjian yinyue* or *erhu*. Liu is seen as a modern, professional and refined *erhu* musician, while Abing is often characterised as a folk, street performer and non-standard local musician. This distinction highlights how Liu Tianhua and his students embodied the intellectual pursuit of elevating the *erhu* to a modern level through the process of Western classical musicalisation, while also affirming their identity as professional musicians.

For example, in 1960, Chinese scholar Yuan Shi published an evaluation of Liu Tianhua's music and in the second part, in which he examined how Liu's musical contributions are viewed, the author cites Abing and his social status as a man from a lower social class, mainly a street performer, in contrast to Liu Tianhua, who had received formal education, to emphasise how different personal experiences profoundly affect style, expressiveness and social values, thus highlighting Liu's special place in Chinese music history (Yuan 1960).

Building on this discussion, musicologist Li Xi'an (1937–2020) offered an explanation, stating that Abing captures the essence of the "old" era by preserving the integrity of traditional spirit and musical heritage. On the contrary, Liu Tianhua broke free of the shackles of tradition and combined Western compositional techniques with ancient Eastern traditions, injecting a new vitality and the vision of world music into Chinese music. While Liu Tianhua's works express more personal experiences or the experiences of the class to which he belongs, Abing's music expresses the voice of the toiling people struggling at the bottom of the social ladder (Li 1983, 36-37). Therefore, Chinese

musicologist Qiao Jianzhong eventually determined that Abing and Liu Tianhua were outstanding exemplars of China's "*minjian erhu*" and "literati *erhu*" respectively. This further highlights the status of Liu Tianhua as a symbol of orthodoxy in the history of modern *erhu* with "school style" in China (Qiao 2000).

Overall, this anecdotal approach to the story of Liu Tianhua tends to produce homogenised conclusions and an idealised narrative. Such a "unifying" perspective may oversimplify the *erhu*'s development and overlook the complex and diverse cultural interactions at play. Therefore, I combined the historical events of Liu's life, including his family and direct student's memory, emphasised the complementarity between Chinese "tradition" and "modernity" in the global perspective and explored how these culture elements intersect and collaborate in the evolution of the *erhu*.

1.1.1 Early Life in and around Jiangyin

The life of Liu Tianhua is detailed in the memoirs of his younger brother, Liu Beimao. These memoirs describe how Liu's musical activities spanned four major cities: Jiangyin, Changzhou, Shanghai and Beijing, each marking significant milestones in his musical reforms. Liu Tianhua was born in 1895 in Jiangyin, a city known for its highly developed commodity economy since the Song Dynasty. During the Self-Strengthening Movement of the Qing dynasty, local entrepreneurs took practical steps to save the country through industrialisation, leading to Western-style advancements across various sectors. The introduction of modern looms, representing the textile technology of the industrial revolution in the West, brought efficient productivity and ensured product quality. This had a profound impact on traditional handicrafts, which relied heavily on human experience and affected the economic benefits of manual production (Zhou 2012, 46-48). Liu Beimao mentioned that their ancestors also relied on traditional textiles for their livelihood. Liu Tianhua's grandmother was a significant source of income for the family, but after her death and the gradual replacement of manual labour by machines, the family's financial situation deteriorated (Liu 2004, 6).

According to Liu Beimao, his father Liu Baoshan (?–1915) had three sons: Liu Bannong (1891–1934), Liu Tianhua, and himself. Unlike his sons, Liu Baoshan was the only child in his family. He

was adopted by his grandfather, Liu Han, and raised by Liu Han's wife, Xia, who supported the family through the region's well-developed weaving industry. Liu Baoshan eventually passed the initial level of the imperial examination during the Qing dynasty, earning the title of *xiucai* (秀才, Scholars under the feudal system in China) and later founded a private school in his hometown. As Western technological knowledge began to influence traditional China, he adapted to these changes, embraced Western learning and transitioned from an old-fashioned private tutor to a teacher in a new-style academy (Liu 2004, 5-6). The mother of the three Liu brothers, Ms Jiang, had an even more challenging life. Orphaned at a young age after her father's death, she was abandoned by her impoverished family. One harsh winter morning, the three brothers' grandmother Xia rescued her from an icy river, took her in as a child bride and raised her until she married Liu Baoshan (Liu 1958, 148-149).

Liu Baoshan's transformation from a poor peasant to a merchant and finally to an intellectual laid the educational foundation for the three brothers, allowing them to grow up in an "intellectual" family and shaping their future paths. From an early age, they received both Chinese and Western style education from their father, witnessed the decline of the feudal system and observed the weakening of the traditional economy in global campaigns.

Jiangyin is located in the southern part of Jiangsu Province, connecting Shandong in the north and Zhejiang and Shanghai in the south. This region boasts a rich musical and cultural history, with the *minjian yinyue* of Southern Jiangsu Province reflecting the unique characteristics of the local community. And historical population migrations have enabled the integration of *minjian yinyue* and opera from other regions into the original *minjian yinyue* of Southern Jiangsu.

According to contemporary Chinese music scholar, Ma Ling's classification study, the local *minjian yinyue* in this region includes various types such as *Jiangnan sizhu* (江南丝竹, *Jiangnan silk and bamboo*), *shan'ge* (山歌, mountain songs), *Suzhou pingtan* (苏州评弹),[12] etc. These diverse forms make Southern Jiangsu *minjian yinyue* distinct within Chinese traditional music. In terms of musical forms and thematic types, Southern Jiangsu *minjian yinyue* includes five major categories: *minjian* songs, song and dance music, *xiqu* (戏曲, Traditional Chinese Opera) music, *quyi* (曲艺,

[12] A regional variant of *quyi* and a popular musical/oral performance art form in the Jiangnan region of China.

Chinese narrative arts) music and *minjian* instrumental music (Ma 2021, 123). Although these musical forms share cultural materials, they differ in social function, performance style and structural pattern, showing the artistic characteristics and musical styles of the Southern Jiangsu region.

Additionally, Liu Yuhe's study of his father, Liu Tianhua, highlights the influence of Buddhist music on compositions. Monk Chechen, who performed on various *minjian* instruments, often played music with the young Liu Tianhua and taught him Buddhist music (Liu 1992, 4-5). So, growing up in an environment where such *minjian yinyue* flourished, Liu Tianhua carried these historical memories throughout his musical career, drawing inspiration from them in his later compositions.

Like his older brother Liu Bannong, Liu Tianhua was educated by their father and, in 1903, began attending "Hanmolin" (翰墨林), a primary school that offered a blend of Chinese and Western knowledge. The school's curriculum included traditional Confucian studies in the morning, such as *Guwen guanzhi* 古文观止, [13] and a Western-style curriculum in the afternoon, covering subjects such as English, mathematics, art, music and physical education. Liu Beimao and his wife, Yu Zuzhen, recalled that both Liu Bannong and Liu Tianhua studied as teenagers under Yu Zuzhen's father, Yu Yongchun (1882–1937). Yu Yongchun, who was among the first generation of Chinese students to study in Japan, was proficient in Western painting, *guqin* (古琴, plucked seven-string) and literature and provided Liu Bannong and Liu Tianhua with a broad global perspective in their early education (Zhou 1981).

1.1.2 Period in Changzhou and Shanghai

In 1904, the Qing government enacted the *guimao xuezhi* (癸卯学制, Guimao School System), introducing Western education to China through the Japanese system. This reform included school rules, content, management and administration (Ding 1935, 12-14). In 1905, the Guangxu Emperor abolished the imperial examination system, which was the traditional Chinese method for selecting talent. This abolition, along with the introduction of the new school system, was part of the Qing government's efforts to implement educational reforms in response to external pressures from the

[13] *Guwen guanzhi* is a classical Chinese anthology compiled in the Qing Dynasty, containing exemplary prose essays from ancient literature.

West, including economic, technological and military challenges (Liu 2004).

Changzhou Middle School, where Liu Bannong and Liu Tianhua studied, was established following the promulgation of the *kuimou* school system. According to the school's history, the headmaster at the time, Tu Yuanbo (1879–1981), had recently returned from studying in Japan,[14] where he joined the League of Alliance. Several other members of the party and progressive-minded students were also part of the teaching staff. Before the Xinhai Revolution (1911), which ended the Qing Dynasty, the members frequently and enthusiastically promoted the democratic and patriotic ideas of Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) and others to the students. Tu also offered a rich curriculum, including Chinese literature, arithmetic, history, painting, music, geography, foreign languages and physical education. He placed great importance on extracurricular musical activities, establishing groups for *kunqu* (昆曲, Kun Opera)[15] military and Chinese music (Xu 1989, 16).

With the construction of the *huning* railway (沪宁铁路), which connected Nanjing to Shanghai, Changzhou became an important stop and a key transport hub. The railway line also ran along the Grand Canal. This development connected a rich array of social landscapes, cultural resources and economic benefits, leading to unprecedented population movements (Yue 2014, 157-158). Following in the footsteps of his elder brother Liu Bannong, Liu Tianhua enrolled at Changzhou Middle School in 1909 after leaving his hometown of Jiangyin. There, he began studying Western music, including the trumpet, while also being exposed to local *minjian yinyue* and *kunqu* performances. Additionally, his daily school life immersed him in modern ideas of science and democracy, introduced by those teachers with an overseas academic background in modern education systems (Liu 2004).

In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution broke out, leading to the closure of the school. Forced to return to his hometown, Liu Tianhua joined the military band of the Youth League, founded by Liu Bannong, to oppose the Qing Dynasty's feudal rule, where he played the trumpet. This marked the beginning of his musical career. During this period, Liu Bannong also led league members to

[14] In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, many Chinese students chose to study in Japan mainly because of its geographical proximity, cultural closeness, affordable study abroad costs and the inspiring role of its modern education system and political and economic development model in China's modernisation reform.

[15] Kun Opera, is one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese Opera.

participate in dramas criticising feudalism, promoting science and democracy and raising funds to support the revolution. In the first year of the Republic of China (1912), Liu Tianhua accompanied his brother, Liu Bannong, to work at the *kaimingshe* (开明社, Enlightenment theatre). Liu Bannong's job was to write plays that exposed and denounced the old feudal ethics and morals and advocated a more egalitarian and civilised social order. Liu Tianhua's job was to play the trumpet. Soon after, Liu Tianhua joined the *wanguo yuedui* (万国乐队, Nations musical ensemble), where he learnt the piano, violin and compositional techniques (Liu 2004, 41-51).

The gradual move to larger cities provided Liu Tianhua with opportunities to encounter more integrated musical landscapes, encompassing diverse cultures and regional characteristics. Influenced subtly by this environment, Liu Tianhua began to compare various musical concepts, which sparked his initial idea of improving Chinese music. According to Liu Beimao's memory:

> Once, when returning home to Jiangyin from Shanghai for Chinese New Year, Liu Tianhua remarked emotionally, 'Chinese people still prefer their own music. Western music is inherently beautiful, but it doesn't feel as intimate or accessible to us as Chinese music does. However, it's unfortunate that the status of Chinese music is so low these days, with no one paying attention to or promoting it. That's why I feel compelled to work hard to improve Chinese music (Liu and Liu 1984, 55).

In 1913, the *kaimingshe* theatre group was disbanded. Their performances, which satirised the decadent lifestyle of the bourgeoisie in addition to their anti-imperialist and anti-feudal themes, were unacceptable to both traditional theatre troupes and local authorities. Consequently, Liu Tianhua returned to Jiangyin unemployed and took a position as a music teacher at Huacheng Primary School (华澄小学). However, six months later, the school's leadership was angered by Liu Tianhua's frequent interactions with lowly *minjian yinyuejia*, believing it had a negative impact on the school's reputation. As the school was privately run by a capitalist for his relatives' children, Liu Tianhua's behaviour was deemed to be inappropriate to the school's identity, which led to his dismissal. Shortly thereafter, his father Liu Baoshan passed away at the age of 48 (Liu 2004, 53-58).

In the intricate era of the 1910s–1920s, Western ideas of freedom and democracy were intertwined with traditional Chinese feudal concepts. Although the society advocated democracy, equality and freedom, the remnants of feudalism still existed, making this a period full of ideological contradictions and confusions. These confusions were reflected in the social hierarchy and power

structure. Liu Tianhua personally witnessed the turnover, mixing conflict and convergence in social trends during this period of change. In this uncertain social context, he completed the first draft of his *erhu* piece *Bingzhongyin* 病中吟 (Despair in Illness).

According to the music score, the structure of the music piece is clearly in four parts, showing an intention to present different emotions and rhythms through variation and contrast (see Table 1). The piece begins with a slow, calm tone, gradually transitioning to a middle section that adds dynamics and tension, then returns to the slow section to provide emotional reflection or relief and finally reaches a peak of emotion and dynamics with an Allegro coda that demonstrates a change in tempo from slow to fast and then slow again. The melodic unfolding also reflects the compositional characteristics of variation and free extension inherited from Chinese *minjian yinyue*.

Table 1: *Bingzhongyin*

Section	Bars
A	a 8 b 8 a^1 6 b^1 10
B	b^2 15
A	b^3 8
CODA	b^4 8

In terms of performance techniques, this music uses a variety of violin techniques such as long bow, short bow, split bow, broken bow and staccato to express emotional changes. It fully confirms the possibility of using the Chinese instrument *erhu* to express complex thoughts and feelings and constitutes the *erhu's* first step from *minjian* primitive state to the professional and modernised musical system.

1.1.3 Toward Becoming a Professional Musician

Liu Tianhua eventually secured his third job, leveraging his unique musical skills to become a music teacher at a public school. He carried this experience into his next role as a music instructor at Changzhou Middle School, later renamed Jiangsu No. 5 High School. Drawing on his experience with Western music, Liu Tianhua led the school's military band, which soon became recognised as the top high school military band in the province. Building on this success, he helped establish the school's *sizhu* (丝竹, silk and bamboo) band, aiming to revitalize Chinese music by adopting arrangements, sound structures and rehearsal methods of Western bands based on the classical music system (Liu 2004, 67-77).

In 1916, at the age of 21, Liu Tianhua had a momentous experience, which directly influenced the exact direction of his musical career. He met Zhou Shaomei (1885–1938), a *minjian yinyuejia* who gave Chinese music lessons at Wuxi No. 3 Normal School and formally studied Chinese musical instruments under him. Zhou Shaomei was highly skilled, known for his ability to effortlessly switch between three positions on the *huqin* strings, allowing him to play a wider range of scales. His exceptional technique earned him the nickname "*Sanbatou huqin*" (三把头胡琴). While Liu Tianhua learned a broad range of playing skills from Zhou Shaomei, Zhou also drew teaching inspiration from Liu Tianhua. Zhou not only incorporated Liu's newly composed music but also began using notation for teaching and training. Through his contact with Zhou Shaomei, Liu Tianhua mastered Zhou's exceptional performance techniques and skilfully integrated his own knowledge of Western music and violin experience, establishing himself as an unparalleled performer and music creator of that time (Ni 1988 and Wang 1990).

Then, Liu Tianhua began to promote and establish industry standards for the *erhu*, distinguishing it from the traditional *huqin* through innovative playing techniques and performance styles. According to the recollections of his younger brother Liu Beimao, during the summer vacation of 1921, Liu Tianhua used the Liyan Academy (礼延学堂) in Jiangyin as a venue for his music activities. During this time, Liu Tianhua interacted with *minjian yinyuejia*, including religious figures (Taoist priests and monks) and some students and introduced them to newly composed *erhu* music drafts, *Kongshan niaoyu* 空山鸟语 (Birdsong on Empty Mountain) and *Yueye* 月夜 (Moonlit

Night) . As the summer vacation ended, Liu Tianhua organised a concert. Liu Beimao depicted the soundscapes of that time,

> The concert was about to begin, and the audience waited with curiosity, eager to know what this group had been working on for the past two months. The opening performance featured a lively ensemble of 锣鼓 (Chinese gong and drum music), which sent the audience into laughter, as they assumed it was nothing more than the same old music. However, when Liu Tianhua and his students took the stage, everything changed. Especially Liu Tianhua, whose effortless elegance and artistic presence captivated the crowd. His three *erhu* pieces—*Bingzhongyin,Yueye and Kongshan niaoyu*—were innovative and deeply moving, leaving the audience in awe of how expressively erhu music could convey such profound emotions (Liu 2004, 87-92).

In this concert, we can see Liu Tianhua set himself apart from the improvisational and casual nature of traditional Chinese *minjian yinyue* by presenting an elegant and refined artistic performance. Rather than relying on spontaneous embellishments or verbal transmission, his performances demonstrate a structured, carefully crafted musical language. Elevating the *huqin* from its folkloric roots to the medium of the *erhu* concert stage. Defines the artistic potential of the *erhu* by fusing Chinese tradition with Western compositional techniques.

1.1.4 *Guoyue Gaijin* with Westernisation at Peking University

Liu Tianhua's music career reached a turning point in 1922. One of his students Xiao Boqing remembered that, by that time, he had gained recognition for his nearly seven years of teaching at Changzhou No. 5 Middle School. He was frequently invited by other schools in the province to conduct part-time classes and lead musical activities. Several students who had graduated from Changzhou No. 5 Middle School and had been accepted into Peking University maintained contact with Liu. These students, who had participated in the military band and *sizhu* ensemble led by Liu, were also involved in the *Yinyue yanjiuhui* (音乐研究会, Music Research Association) at Peking University, established in 1916. After the association's *pipa* mentor, Wang Lu (1877–1921), passed away, leaving the position vacant, the students thought of Liu Tianhua and recommended him to be the new *pipa* tutor. As a result, the *Yinyue yanjiuhui* at Peking University decided to hire Liu Tianhua for the job (1984).

Since Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) became the president of the university in 1917, his eclectic and

inclusive academic philosophy led to the recruitment of a diverse array of talented individuals. By 1921, the university had already become a hub for scholars, including many who had studied in Europe, the United States and Japan (Liu 2015). Liu Tianhua's older brother, Liu Bannong, was recruited to the university as a faculty member due to his previous work in novel writing and translation. However, with only a junior high school diploma and no overseas study experience, Liu Bannong faced discrimination from some of those faculty members who had this background. To integrate into the mainstream at the university, he underwent a process of resocialisation and self-transformation, which included travelling to Europe to further his education. He eventually earned a doctorate from the Institut de Phonétique at the Sorbonne, University of Paris (Yuan 2020, 75).

Liu Tianhua's tenure at Peking University was fraught with challenges. According to Liu Beimao, he was assigned the title of "*pipa* supervisor and clerk" for the *Yinyue yanjiuhui*, a position that was not a formal teaching role. Alongside teaching, Liu Tianhua was responsible for various administrative tasks of this kind. Given the university's wealth of talent across disciplines, the "Music Research Association" was viewed as a student-run amateur club, leading to limited recognition for Liu Tianhua. His first performance for the association, where he imitated the singing style of *jingju* (京剧, Beijing Opera) on an unfamiliar *sanxian* (三弦, three strings) instrument, was dismissed by some colleagues as *"nandeng daya zhitang"* (难登大雅之堂, not regarded as high art) (Liu 2004, 100-102).

When Liu Tianhua first joined Peking University, he received little attention and was unable to pursue music activities as he had hoped. For his *huqin* teaching and training, Liu Tianhua had to work discreetly, as there were some voices in his environment opposing Chinese *minjian yinyue*. At that time, the university's *Yinyue yanjiuhui* had limited exposure to Chinese music and instruments. The music in the association was primarily focused on classical and elegant forms favoured by the literati, such as *guqin, silk and bamboo ensembles* and *kunqu*. The *huqin* was still regarded mainly as an accompaniment or ensemble instrument (Lin 2010). So, when did Liu Tianhua get the opportunity to truly showcase his music at Peking University?

In the autumn of 1922, the *yinyue chuanxi suo* (音乐传习所, Music Teaching Institute), the first modern higher institute of music education in China, was established. Its purpose was to align with

Principal Cai Yuanpei's emphasis on aesthetic education. The institute required weekly concerts to stimulate students' interest in aesthetics, in addition to daily extracurricular activities. Former mentors of the *Yinyue yanjiuhui* were hired as teachers at the *yinyue chuanxi suo*, while former members served as elective students (Zhou 2006). For Liu Tianhua, the most significant aspect of his appointment was the recognition of *pipa* and *erhu* as subjects in advanced music education. This marked the first time the *erhu* was included in the curriculum of a higher music institute in Chinese history. Cai Yuanpei's requirement for weekly concerts provided Liu Tianhua with the opportunity to showcase his new *erhu* compositions.

According to Liu's student Xiao Boqing, in 1923, mathematics student Xu Binglin premiered Liu Tianhua's debut work *Bingzhongyin* at a concert, marking the first time the *erhu* was featured as a solo instrument on a professional stage. Additionally, Xu premiered two other solo pieces by Liu Tianhua, *Yueye* and *Kongshan Niaoyu*, at Peking University between 1923 and 1936. It is worth noting that Xu's training for these performances was conducted privately and in secret (Xiao 1984, 110). In the following five years, Liu Tianhua only created one *erhu* piece, *kumen zhiou* 苦闷之讴 (Recitation of Melancholy).

Liu Tianhua did not make a name for himself at Peking University, since in his early unstructured learning and performance experience, he had not had the advantage of a systematic western classical music education and a macro understanding of world music. For example, his initial view upon arriving at the university was that Chinese music, with its pure and subtle sound, should be ranked first in the world. He believed that Western musicians would eventually come to China for research and that those engaged in traditional Chinese music should not be discouraged. However, this perspective was criticised by the musicologist Xiao Youmei, who felt that Liu Tianhua lacked a proper understanding of Western music at that time (Xiao 2004).

These challenges from others meant that Liu Tianhua and his musical ideas did not receive as much attention in larger cities and specialised institutes of higher education as they otherwise might have, since that society at the time placed greater value on Western knowledge and culture. The influence of Western ideals led to China's cultural elite acquiring a sense of self and other and a comparative perspective on the world. This preference likely led to Chinese music being overlooked

or undervalued, especially when compared to Western musical traditions. Consequently, despite Liu Tianhua's innovative contributions to *erhu* music, they were not fully recognised in the intellectual social climate of the time.

In the highly Westernised and elitist environment of Peking University, Liu Tianhua may have recognised that adopting Western ideas was the prevailing mindset among young intellectuals at the time. Embracing foreign influences to reconstruct Chinese music became a strategic approach and it was essential to elevate the *erhu* beyond its association with street performances, giving it a modern and refined identity that resonated with the cultural elite who had embraced Western ideals. Later, in addition to teaching and management, Liu Tianhua studied the violin with Russian musician Nicholas Tonoff and continued to collect *minjian yinyue*. Liu not only continued to compose *erhu* solos using Western musical structures, but also ingeniously integrated violin techniques into *erhu* performance. He further incorporated these techniques into teaching materials, establishing a modern education system for the *erhu* that broke with the traditional method of oral transmission.

In 1927, Liu Tianhua discovered his musical direction within the intersection of Chinese and Western ideas. Along with 34 like-minded individuals, he founded the *Guoyue gaijinshe* (国乐改进社, Chinese Music Improvement Society) to create a platform for sharing and developing Chinese music. To further this goal, they launched *Yinyuezhazhi* 音乐杂志 (Music Magazine), publishing the first issue in early 1928. The magazine aimed to advance Chinese music and inspire aspiring musicians and Liu used it to publish his *erhu* compositions, complete with musical notation and his musical philosophy. In 1932, at the young age of 37, Liu Tianhua died of a sudden bout of scarlet fever while working on the *minjian yinyue* collection (Liu 2004, 196-198).

1.1.5 Liu Tianhua's Music Creation with *Erhu* Tradition

Improving Chinese music became Liu Tianhua's lifelong pursuit. He believed that the key to this improvement was to reconcile Chinese and Western music. According to "Guoyue gaijinshe yuanqi" 国乐改进社缘起 (Origin of the Chinese Music Improvement Society), enhancing national music required embracing of the inherent essence of Chinese traditions while also incorporating foreign influences. By allowing elements from both East and West to coexist and interact naturally, Chinese

music could evolve while maintaining its essence. Liu was convinced that drawing from the essence of Chinese *minjian yinyue*, while borrowing techniques and ideas from Western music, was the way to advance and elevate Chinese *minjian yinyue* (Liu, etc. 1927/2004, 4). Liu Tianhua's enhancements to the modern *erhu* are most evident in its design, musical creation and the incorporation of modern educational and training techniques.

The contemporary Chinese musicologist Fang Liping and mainstream *erhu* musician Min Huifen were able to identify the *erhu* used by Liu Tianhua at that time (2009, 60) and they found that Liu Tianhua made modifications to enhance that *erhu*'s tone and volume. He replaced the traditional strings with high-stiffness silk strings and borrowed the design of a violin bow. He attached the *erhu* bow to a screw knob, allowing for adjustable tension and flattened the horsehair to increase the friction area between the bow hairs and the strings, which improved the volume of the traditional *huqin*. Additionally, Liu Tianhua collaborated with the Beijing *Wenxingzhai* (文兴斋) Musical Instrument Shop to launch his own improved *erhu* (Liu 1997, 33). The body was made of mahogany or rosewood and the barrel was covered with snakeskin, which marking the beginning of the standardisation of the modern *erhu*. I show a *huqin* from the Qing Dynasty period and Liu Tianhua's modern *erhu* for comparison (see Fig 1.4 and Fig 1.5).



Fig1.4 "*Huqin*",19th century. Accession Number: 89.4.39. On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 681. Available online at https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/500616.

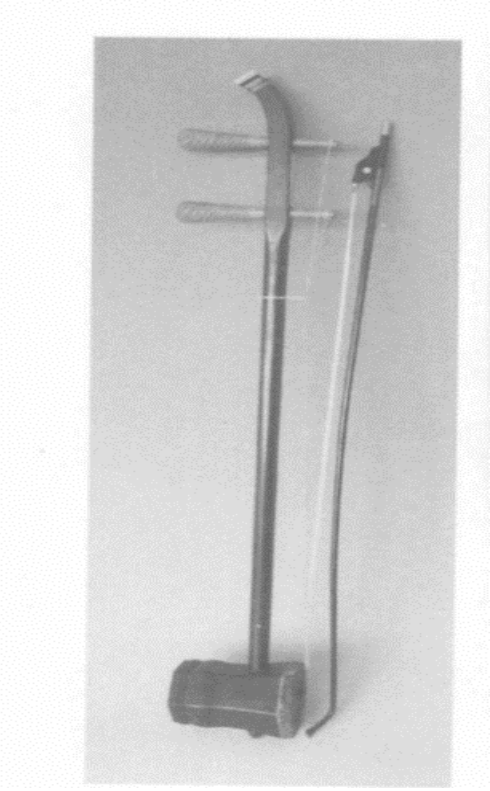


Fig 1.5 “Liu Tianhua’s *erhu*”. Fang Liping Min Huifen. Liu Tianhhua. Memory and Research [M]. Shanghai Education Press, 2009. 60.

Moreover, Liu Tianhua’s adoption of the International Standard Pitch Method brought an end to the longstanding, subjective and arbitrary string tuning method for the *erhu*, which previously had no fixed pitch. This established a crucial foundation for the scientific and standardised teaching of the instrument. Liu Tianhua defined fixed pitches for the inner and outer strings (d’ for the inner strings and a’ for the outer strings), leading to the development of four pitch ranges: low, middle, high and highest. The distinct timbre of each range allowed Liu Tianhua to create music with greater contrast and expressive depth. For example, in *Kongshan niaoyu*, the technique of finger twirling is used to mimic various bird calls across different registers. By these means Liu set a template for a greater musical expressivity of the *erhu.*

In addition to drawing on Western music as a benchmark for reform, Liu Tianhua also placed great importance on elevating the best aspects of local culture. Throughout his career, he composed ten *erhu* recital pieces, each infused with classical Chinese cultural themes. For instance, in music solo *Yueye* and *Liangxiao*, he used *erhu* music to capture the melancholic beauty of moonlight, a motif often found in classical Chinese literature. His earlier *erhu* works, such as *Bingzhongyin*,

composed during his time in Changzhou, reflect the melodic qualities of *jiangnan sizhu* music and incorporate elements of *xiqu*, that reflect them a distinctive *minjian* character.

Even though Liu Tianhua did not complete his middle school education, his background in Chinese private schooling distinguished him from many other Chinese musicians. This education infused his music with themes rooted in Chinese classical poetry and culture. In the context of China's internal cultural landscape, his compositions were often characterised as "cultural" or "literary" music. Over time, musicians and scholars came to view his work as embodying a more refined and advanced expression of Chinese music, particularly in terms of its thematic depth (Hu 1992).

With the deepening of his study of Western music, his works in the Beijing period adopted more Western composition methods, such as *Beige* 悲歌 (Elegy), *Guangmingxing* 光明行 (Towards A Brighter Future) and *Zhuyingyaohong* 烛影摇红 (Flickering Candle Lights), etc. *Beige* adopts the melodic progression of a rhapsody, *Guangmingxing* adopts the style of a march and *Zhuying yaohong* adopts the rhythm of a dance, etc. All these works show signs of Western classical compositional style and violin performance techniques, such as rapid position changes, arpeggios, trills, harmonics, tremolo and spiccato. In terms of musical form, he adopted the principles of ternary form and the use of the juxtaposition of contrasting materials.

Liu Tianhua also cleverly incorporated his experience of learning the violin, a Western instrument and drew upon classical music teaching and training methods to explore the guiding effect of a systematic practice regimen on learners. For instance, according to the recollections of Liu Tianhua's student Shen Zhongzhang, when Shen first met Liu at Peking University, he performed the self-taught piece *Yueye* for him. Then they discussed performance techniques. Liu observed that Shen's fingers had a relatively large contact area with the strings, a characteristic of the traditional *jiangnan sizhu* style. Liu suggested that Shen use only his fingertips to touch the strings, similar to violin technique, to improve intonation. In later training, Liu Tianhua developed a comprehensive, step-by-step technical program using his 47 *erhu* practice pieces. These exercises include left-hand drills for changing positions, vibrato and four-finger techniques, as well as right-hand drills for staccato, vibrato, long bow and short bow, providing a foundation before progressing to solo

performance. In Shen Zhongzhang's case, he skipped this basic training and started learning to play Liu Tianhua's *erhu* recital pieces straight away. Liu also taught him to play the violin, aiming to explore violin techniques with him (and his other students as well) and incorporate them into future *erhu* creations (Shen 2015).

It is evident that Liu Tianhua fostered a modern educational environment where teaching and learning were mutually reinforced, transcending the traditional oral transmission of Chinese skills, where only the teacher was revered. However, during the teaching process, he tended to personalize the instruction according to the characteristics of the student, in a way that better transmitted the "spiritual" part of the culture and the technique. This foundational improvement, related to the education and dissemination of *erhu* art, established a new tradition in the training of solo *erhu* performers.

1.2 “School Style” and “Professional” *Erhu*: The Disciples of Liu Tianhua

After Liu Tianhua passed away in 1932, his students continued to uphold his musical ideology in *Guoyue* (or Chinese national music) by reflecting his approach in their own creative works, training and performances. Their efforts were also shaped by the broader cultural trends toward modernisation and national consciousness prevalent at that time. They standardised the *erhu* as a discipline within a modern music education framework and integrated it more closely into the professional world of classical music. Shen Zhongzhang (1905–1987) recalled that, since most of Liu’s Peking University students were pursuing different fields of study, several did not continue with *erhu*-related music after graduation (Shen 2022). For example, Xu Binglin, a mathematics student who premiered Liu Tianhua’s compositions *Bing zhongyin, Yueye* and *Kongshan niaoyu*, did not pursue a career in *erhu* after graduation and disappeared from the verifiable records in the *erhu* field. Instead, it was the students from the affiliated Music Institute, rather than the official Peking University students, who preserved and carried forward Liu Tianhua’s musical legacy. Veteran Chinese musicologist, Qiao Jianzhong, believes that Chu Shizhu (1901–1955), Chen Zhenduo (1904–1999) and Jiang Fengzhi (1908–1986) are the three main successors who perpetuated Liu Tianhua’s influence on contemporary Chinese musicology and *erhu* performance (2003). Below I have collated the musical contributions of these three that show evidence of the inheritance of Liu Tianhua’s musical ideas and illustrate the development of the modern *erhu* tradition.

1.2.1 Chu Shizhu (储师竹)

Chu Shizhu, originally named Chen Zhenhua, was a native of Zanglin, Yixing, Jiangsu Province. He grew up during the late Qing and early Republican era, a time of political upheaval and cultural transformation, as China faced internal struggles and external pressures to modernise. In 1916, he moved to Changzhou to study at the Provincial No. 5 High School, where Liu Tianhua was a music teacher. Chu recalled his first encounter with Liu as a transformative experience, likening it to “a spring breeze” and describing how Liu introduced him to Western musical knowledge. He became one of Liu’s earliest *erhu* students. In 1922, Chu responded to Liu’s invitation and went to Beijing to

study at the Music Training Institute affiliated with Peking University He participated in the institute's first teacher training class, learning the *erhu* from Liu and studying music theory, composition and other subjects under Xiao Youmei. During his four years at the institute, Chu laid the foundation for his lifelong pursuit of both Chinese and Western musicology (Chu 1933).

In 1927, following the Nationalist government's promotion of cultural reconstruction and education reform, he returned to his hometown to begin a nearly thirty-year career in music education, teaching at Yixing County High School, Hangzhou First High School and the College of Arts and Sciences of Zhejiang University. During World War II, he moved from Zhejiang to Chongqing, Sichuan Province, where he taught at various institutions, including Beibei National High School and Jianshan High School. In 1941, he became an associate professor at the National Conservatory of Music and the following year, he was appointed professor and director of the National Music Group (Zheng 2000, 80). During this period, many Chinese intellectuals and musicians in Chongqing actively engaged in preserving and promoting national culture as part of the war effort. In these educational institutions, he carried out his own Chinese music practice and continued Liu Tianhua's musical ideology.

For instance, Chu Shizhu's contributions to the *erhu* perpetuated Liu Tianhua's East-meets-West compositional techniques and innovative spirit of artistic expression on stage. He also improved the performance skills of the *erhu* repertoire. Among his major compositions is *Zuguozhilian* 祖国之恋 (Love of Motherland), composed in 1940, which featured the first use of the technique of striking the *erhu*'s body with the bow. In the same year, Chu composed the *erhu* trio *Changye* 长夜 (Long night), originally a song that was later adapted as an *erhu* trio, expressing his love and longing for his classmates and friends. The 1940s also saw the composition of *Kaixuna* 凯旋 (Triumph), another *erhu* trio intended to depict the lively scene of the Chinese soldiers' victory (Zhang and Jiang 1989, 56). Additionally, Chu Shizhu carried forward Liu Tianhua's vision of modern *erhu* education and related teaching materials, including *Guoyue* 国乐 (Chinese music) and *Erhu quxuan* 二胡曲选 (Selected *Erhu* Pieces) in 1945.

As one of the early builders of the *erhu* "tradition", Chu Shizhu also indirectly helped in the publishing of the famous *erhu* music piece *Erquan Yingyue*. According to Zhang Shao's (1927–2015)

memory, Li Songshou, a student, became acquainted with Abing. Li once casually played a few bars of the tune of *Erquan Yingyue* before class. Chu Shizhu inquired about the song's title, but Li stated that the music was untitled, he had just heard it from Abing. After that, Chu Shizhu spoke to musicologists Yang Yinliu and Cao Anhe and arranged Yang's journey to visit Abing in 1950, where he recorded and gathered three *erhu* pieces, *Erquan Yingyue, Tingsong and Hanchun Fengqu* (1997, 480). Subsequently, Chu Shizhu authored a paper titled "*Huqin* zhifa fuhao shuoming" 胡琴指法符号说 (Explanation of *Huqin* fingering symbols) and "Abing *huqin* gongfa de jige tedian" 阿炳胡琴功法的几个特点 (A few characteristics of Abing's *Huqin* skill) and assembled Yang Yinliu's music papers to create a bowing and fingering method.

Chu Shizhu adheres to Liu Tianhua's views on the integration of Western and Chinese music notation systems. As Liu said, "I studied Western music in order to better organise Chinese music in the future." This is one of the reasons why Liu Tianhua paid special attention to the achievements of Western music. In "Mei lanfang gequpu: bianzhexu" 梅兰芳歌曲谱-编者序 (Mei Lanfang Song Score: Editor's Preface), Liu pointed out that the existence of musical scores is as important as the existence of words in language. The reason why the ancient music of China had not been preserved is that the method of notation was imperfect and for Chinese music to progress, it was necessary to have a complete musical score. In the future, academics would need to be scientific and precise in everything they did to gain a foothold in the world music (Liu 2009, 21- 22). At this point, Liu Tianhua had already established his determination to make the study and training of *erhu* into a rigorous discipline using the modern music system.

Therefore, Chu Shizhu's standardisation of improvised *minjian yinyue* using Western notation and professional performance techniques has significantly influenced the repertoire and performance forms of the "school style" *erhu*. This process transformed traditional, improvised and orally transmitted *minjian yinyue* into a format that can be documented and disseminated through the Western system of musical communication. As a result, this standardisation began to replace the diversity and individuality of *minjian yinyue* with a unified model, highlighting how the transformation of *minjian yinyue* during China's modernisation process and the formation of "classical" Chinese music relied on the Western music framework.

1.2.2 Chen Zhenduo (陈振铎)

Chen Zhenduo's career as a musician was closely linked to Liu Tianhua. His son, Chen Zhuguang, recorded in his memoirs that Chen Zhenduo was one of Liu Tianhua's official students. In 1929, Chen enrolled in the Music Department of the Art College at the National University of Beiping, where he received systematic training in the "school style" *erhu* technique, distinct from the *minjian yinyue* training method. Liu Tianhua taught Chen only his final composition, *Zhuying yaohong* （Chen 2000). After Liu's death in 1932, under the guidance of Liu Bannong, Chen contributed to the article "Nanhu shuolue" 南胡说略 (Introduction on *Nanhu* (*erhu*)), which briefly introduced Liu Tianhua's reasons for reforming national music, the meanings behind his compositions and offered a deconstruction of his ten *erhu* and three *pipa* muisic pieces, analysing their historical context, content and artistic interpretation while reflecting on his experiences with Liu and the society in which Chen was living (Chen 1933).

From that point on, Chen Zhenduo dedicated himself to carrying forward Liu Tianhua's musical ideology for the improvement of Chinese music. In February 1935, at Tianjin Women's College, he published *Nanhu quxuan* 南胡曲选 (Selected Songs of the Nanhu) which became China's first *erhu* monograph and teaching material after Liu Tianhua's Memorial Catalogue published in 1933. During Chen's tenure at the Qingmuguan National Conservatory of Music (1940–1946), in July 1945 he was the first to convert the stave and *gongche* notation into numerical notation. He published *Zenyang xuexi erhu* 怎样学习二胡 (How to Learn to play the *Erhu*) which helped popularise the instrument by making it easier for people to learn. Compared to Liu Tianhua's notation, this approach was a more direct means of promoting the *erhu* and was better aligned with Liu's idea that Chinese music should be accessible to the Chinese public.

In his musical creations, Chen Zhenduo diligently composed numerous *erhu* pieces and, like Liu Tianhua, focused on exploring new *erhu* techniques. *Yuhou chunguang* 雨后春光 (Spring Light after Rain) was the first to experiment by including the combined technique of performing vibrato and pizzicato simultaneously; *Hongguang* 红光 (Red Light) , formerly known as *Yinguang* 银光 (Silver Light) appropriated rapid string crossing and short bowing techniques from the violin. These innovations challenged Liu Tianhua's "traditional" melodic approach to *erhu* performance and

enriched the instrument's technique. Chen Zhenduo not only expanded the traditional techniques of the modern *erhu* but also contributed to the systematic transmission of *erhu* culture within academic institutions (Chen 2000).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, as part of the state's efforts to formalise and regulate traditional music education, Chen Zhenduo was transferred to the Central Conservatory of Music in Tianjin in April 1950, where he assisted in the establishment of the *minjian yinyue* department, which later became the Department of Chinese Music. In 1956, he played a key role in shaping this department at the Central Conservatory of Music, marking a significant step in integrating Chinese music, including the *erhu*, into the structured framework of higher education. This development aligned Chinese music education with conservatory-style training, ensuring its institutional recognition and standardised pedagogy. In 1961, in accordance with the Ministry of Culture's plan, Chen joined the Central University for Nationalities, where he oversaw the education and organisation of *minjian yinyue*. During his teaching career, he trained numerous *erhu* students, including some from minority groups, such as Yi, Zhuang and Tibetan (Meng 2019).

It is evident that, with the modernisation of the *erhu*, the state is actively working to integrate minority and local cultures by consolidating educational resources. This effort bolsters the influence of school-style *erhu* musicians within Chinese musical culture, with universities in major cities serving as key platforms. Consequently, academic performers have long benefitted from the influence and authority conferred by national policies in the shaping of *erhu* music within these mainstream urban music schools. As a direct successor to Liu Tianhua, Chen Zhenduo played a pivotal role in shaping modern *erhu* art and preserving the tradition of Liu Tianhua's *erhu* school throughout the last century.

1.2.3 Jiang Fengzhi (蒋风之)

Jiang Fengzhi was a late-life student of Liu Tianhua and after Liu's death, Jiang combined his artistic explorations with the foundations laid down by Liu to establish his own school of *erhu*, known as the "Jiang school" (蒋派). This school, based in the China Conservatory of Music, emphasises delicate performances of Chinese music in the classical tradition (Xiang 1986; Liang 2009). Jiang Fengzhi, a

native of Yixing, Jiangsu province, began studying *erhu* with Chu Shizhu in 1922 at the age of 14. His early education coincided with a period when conservatory-based music education was gaining ground as an institutional alternative to traditional master-disciple transmission in *minjian* settings. In August 1927, he was admitted to the Shanghai University of Fine Arts. Later that year, when the National Shanghai Conservatory of Music was established, Jiang transferred there to study under the guidance of *pipa* master Zhu Xingqing (1890–1954). Simultaneously, he learned the *erhu* from Wu Bochao and, in the summer of 1929, he was admitted to the Department of Music at the College of Arts of Beiping University, where he studied *erhu*, *pipa* and violin with Liu Tianhua (Jiang, 1997).

Unlike Chen Zhenduo's varied music compositions, Jiang Fengzhi excelled at adapting traditional Chinese music and silk-and-bamboo music into his *erhu* creations, with pieces like *Xunfeng qu* 熏风曲 (Southern Breeze), *Huanhuanyue* and *Yunqing* 云庆 (Song of the cloud) (Li 2014, 27-46). This approach continued Liu Tianhua's vision of integrating Western musical knowledge into Chinese music. In June 1927, Liu Tianhua stated in the musical journal *Xinyuechao* 新乐潮 (*New Music Tide*), "Chinese music today is like treasure hidden in the sand, which must be panned out before it can be found." So how do we find the essence in Chinese music?

Jiang used Western structural thinking to explore the unique characteristics of *erhu* art, in addition to incorporating elements of traditional *minjian yinyue* into it. He focused on Chinese philosophy, applying it to musical expression, particularly in the relationships between musical phrases and the overall structure. This approach emphasised the inner changes in *erhu* playing and enhanced the artistry and aesthetics of the "school style". Based on Jiang's musical practices and training, he also made subtle modifications to the bowing and fingering techniques in Liu Tianhua's ten *erhu* compositions, reflecting his refined aesthetic of music performance (Jiang, 1994).

Jiang Fengzhi's performance skills are rooted in his rich imagination and cultivated through his extensive engagement with Chinese calligraphy, painting and other art forms. He gained a profound understanding of abstract art from ancient Chinese literature, which he used to explore the relationship between matter and spirit in *erhu* performance. This explains why contemporary *erhu* performers and scholars generally believe that Jiang infused this instrument's performance with deeper cultural meanings and emotional depth (Yang 2003). This approach illustrates how Chinese

classical literature, through the modern *erhu*, serves as a symbol of cultural inheritance, reinterpreted and recreated within music schools. In doing so, Jiang Fengzhi endowed the modern *erhu* with a cultural identity, further solidifying the elite status of the academic *erhu* in the modern music education system already established during Liu Tianhua's era.

Conclusion

The development of modern *erhu* art is the outcome of a global cultural exchange between Chinese and Western musical traditions. As a pivotal reformer, Liu Tianhua drew upon the rich musical environments of two key phases in his career: that of the Jiangnan region and the vibrant social landscape of Beijing. In Jiangnan, his early exposure to both Western education and local traditions shaped his worldview and fostered his recognition of the need to elevate the status of Chinese music. The sense of inferiority surrounding traditional Chinese culture, exacerbated by China's repeated defeats in politics, diplomacy and military engagements at a modern level, strengthened Liu Tianhua's determination to reform Chinese musical instruments and culture.

Liu Tianhua's tireless efforts in Beijing ultimately secured a place for the *erhu* in the curriculum of the *Yinyue chuanxisuo*, marking the formal integration of the modern *erhu* into professional music education. This milestone allowed the *erhu* to emerge as a solo instrument, fully recognised within academic institutions. His work not only preserved and enhanced the local *huqin* tradition but also symbolised the broader effort to reconcile and integrate Eastern and Western cultural elements, creating a new, globalised identity for the Chinese *erhu*.

The standardisation, specialisation and academisation of modern *erhu* education have been shaped by the integration and adaptation of Western musical systems. Musicians like Chu Shizhu, Chen Zhenduo and Jiang Fengzhi, through the inheritance and evolution of Liu Tianhua's musical ideas, not only preserved the *erhu* techniques established by him but also expanded on them by further incorporating Western music theories and techniques. As a result of this evolution, the traditional master-disciple relationship, that remains to this day a crucial method of cultural transmission, has nonetheless moved beyond the confines of the oral tradition into a more structured and internationally oriented educational framework.

The *erhu* "school style" led by Liu Tianhua's disciples, became the epicentre of *huqin* performance in the subsequent decades, serving as a model for other members of the *huqin* family and for the development of Chinese musical instruments. They organised various musical events to incorporate more traditional Chinese *minjian* or ethnic music, demonstrating a concrete commitment to preserving the best traditions and national heritage. However, this shift presented a setback for *minjian yinyuejia*. The inclusion of *minjian yinyue* and performers in professional music institutions often diluted the focus on the content of their lived experiences and personal qualities, leading to a loss of the original essence of *minjian yinyue* when adapted to the Western music system. In Chapter 2, I take the example of *minjian huqin* player Sun Wenming to explain the dilemmas and challenges faced by *huqin* in the context of the modern academic setting of the *erhu*.

Chapter 2. *Minjian Erhu* Reinterpreted: Sun Wenming's Legacy in the Music Conservatory

Introduction

While many *minjian yinyuejia* are active in Chinese society, music history often focuses on those few renowned performers who have made significant contributions to *minjian yinyue* and gained widespread recognition. The works of lesser-known *minjian yinyuejia*, although sometimes included in musical scores, are frequently credited anonymously (Rees 2009, 1-20). Unlike artists who perform in regular venues supported by government institutions and who cater to the upper classes with steady incomes, many Chinese *minjian yinyuejia* struggle to achieve fame due to their mobility and nomadic lifestyles. This transient existence contributes to their classification as a "nameless group". However, their exclusion from scholarly research is unjustified. Even if their names are not well known, their music provides a more nuanced and diverse reflection of the evolution of musical culture over time. In the ecology of the *erhu*, the local experiences of these musicians are intertwined with global cultural flows and play a crucial role in the current process of global musical re-imagination.

With the establishment and development of the Liu Tianhua *erhu* school, efforts to shape a national music identity gained further momentum in China. In the process, *minjian erhu* and its musicians were gradually marginalised. Unlike the traditional styles of *huqin* or *erhu*, mainstream *erhu* players in conservatories often suppressed their individual expression, conforming to the collectivist and unified approach to music-making promoted by the post-1949 Chinese Communist social system. This system favoured a musical canon that blended traditional Chinese elements with European tonic-dominant harmonics (Lau 2015, 35). Additionally, some *minjian yinyuejia* with distinctive styles were rebranded as "national" *minjian yinyuejia* after entering conservatories, where they were either reintegrated or replaced through professional music education influenced by international standards.

For example, the *pipa* musician Wei Zhongle (卫仲乐 1906–1997), who learned his craft from

folklore and knew a wide range of musical instruments such as *dizi*, *sanxian* and violin, was recruited by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music as a teacher in the Chinese music department, where he worked from 1956 until his retirement, due to his rich experience in folkloric music performances (Li 1997, 24-25). *Dizi* musician Feng Zicun (冯子存 1904–1987) consolidated his unique performing skills based on personal study and practice in the folklore tradition, was elected director of the Chinese Musicians Association in 1960 and was transferred to the China Conservatory of Music as a teacher in 1964. Later, he became a representative figure of the northern school of Chinese flute performance (Wang 1985).

Similarly, the *minjian erhu* musician Abing (阿炳 1893–1950) became an iconic figure representing *minjian yinyue* within the modern *erhu* tradition. His social success depended not only on his unique music playing and melodious *erhu* music but was also inextricably linked to the support of the music system of the time. His music achieved widespread circulation thanks to the efforts of Yang Yinliu from the Music Research Institute of the Central Conservatory of Music, who recorded and transcribed his work under the CPC government's "collecting *minjian yinyue*" policy.[16] Abing's early recognition in the public sphere gave him a lasting legacy that positioned him as a benchmark for *minjian erhu* musicians, making it difficult for those who followed to surpass his influence after he died.

Moreover, the professional music system, which sought to create and preserve a national musical identity, amplified the contributions of *minjian yinyuejia* like Abing. Their roles were often elevated and romanticised to align with cultural and political narratives of the time. This exaggerated interpretation has been passed down through the generations, shaping the modern understanding and recognition of their roles in Chinese musical history, and cementing their names and biographies in the modern musical literature canon.[17] This romanticised reading not only established Abing's place in Chinese music history, but also indirectly shaped perceptions of other *minjian erhu* musicians, causing their roles to be redefined in the modern music landscape.

In contrast to the prominent conservatory-style *erhu* school, the subject of this chapter, *minjian*

[16] The CPC's "collecting *minjian yinyue*" policy aimed to document, standardise and integrate traditional music into national cultural frameworks, often reshaping it to align with socialist ideology and professionalised music education.
[17] For more information, see Jonathan Stock, *Musical Creativity in Twentieth Century China: Abing, His Music, and Its Changing Meanings* (1996)

erhu musician Sun Wenming (孙文明), has had a much smaller presence in Chinese society compared to the well-known musician Abing. Like Abing, Sun was a blind *erhu* player who lived on the streets. Initially drawn to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music due to political and cultural policies, he was later marginalised and forgotten for nearly half a century. He did not receive a lifelong teaching position like Wei Zhongle and Feng Zicun who both became recognised as Chinese national level *minjian yinyuejia*. It was only in recent times, when rediscovered by contemporary mainstream musician Ru Yi and *minjian erhu* artist Sun Yicheng (b. 1945), that Sun Wenming's eleven musical creations were finally brought back to light. Based on recordings left behind by his, they transcribed them into musical scores and published *Sun Wenming erhuqu quanji* 孙文明二胡曲全集 (The Complete Erhu Pieces of Sun Wenming) and *Sun Wenming erhu yishu yanjiu* 孙文明二胡艺术研究 (Research on the Erhu Arts of Sun Wenming) respectively (Ru 2018 and Sun 2022). In this chapter, I will explore historical accounts of Sun Wenming showing the challenges his music encountered within the context of the modern derived Chinese conservatory music education system, alongside interviews with Sun Yicheng, a *minjian* artist and third-generation descendant of Sun Wenming. The focus will be on Sun Wenming's artistry and how this struggled to gain acceptance in the professional music establishment, which was a conservatory conception of the *erhu* as "internationally oriented", Chinese and modern but decidedly not "folk" *erhu.*

2.1 Sun Wenming: Oscillating in Time and Space on the Fringes of Mainstream Narratives



Fig 2.1 “In 1956, Sun Wenming went to Nanjing to participate in the Jiangsu Province Agricultural and Forestry Amateur Art Exhibition”. Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023.

Sun Wenming was a *minjian erhu* musician who has always existed on the fringes of the mainstream “school style” *erhu*’s scene. While his contributions have received brief acknowledgment, they have never achieved lasting recognition within the mainstream *erhu* community. As I analysed texts related to him, I sensed a strong tension and conflict. This contradiction arises from the disparity between the expectations of mainstream narratives and Sun’s personal experiences. Mainstream narratives tend to construct a seamless, optimistic and aspirational developmental trajectory, whereas Sun’s musical career was marked by personal hardships, regional characteristics and a folkloric style that stood in stark contrast to the elite-oriented *erhu* tradition.

Wu Ganbo and Zhou Hao (1929–2023), students of Sun Wenming who graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, briefly recounted Sun Wenming’s life and wandering experiences in their joint 1986 publication, *Sun Wenming erhu quji* 孙文明二胡曲集 (Collection of Sun Wenming’s *Erhu* Music). This provided the historical backdrop for future scholars who sought to

enquire into Sun Wenming and his musical output. It also became his official public biography within the context of the "school style" *erhu* tradition. In addition, the memoirs of Lin Xinming (1934–2024) and Wu Zhimin (1935–2022), which are included in the "Minjian yinyuejia Sun Wenming" 民间音乐家孙文明 on 2000, provided valuable firsthand accounts that are crucial for analysing his musical career.

Furthermore, Jiang Xiaofeng (b. 1932), the son of mainstream *erhu* musician Jiang Fengzhi, recorded his interactions with Sun Wenming (Jiang 1980), along with materials from local cultural centres (Wang 1957; Chen 2002; Jin 2015, etc.), which also served as significant sources for my research. In addition, I interviewed Sun Yicheng, a student of Wu Zhimin, whose recordings demonstrate the continued transmission of Sun Wenming's *erhu* music in the contemporary era. These records provided me with a rich perspective on observing Sun Wenming's musical career. To better focus on the research questions in this chapter, I introduced Sun Wenming's background. Here is a summary of the essential details from his official biography translated into English:

> Sun Wenming was born in 1928 into the family of a poor tailor in Shangyu (上虞) County, Zhejiang Province. At the age of four, he lost his sight due to smallpox, a devastating blow to his already struggling family. After his mother, Sun Dafeng, passed away, his father remarried, but his stepmother showed little care for Sun and his brother, even subjecting them to abuse. Due to the family's poverty, he and his brother were forced to leave their hometown and begin a life of wandering.
>
> To earn a living, Sun Wenming learned to play the *erhu* in Gaochun (高淳) County, Southern Jiangsu Province, where it was customary for fortune-tellers to carry an *erhu* to attract customers. At the age of sixteen, he met a blind man skilled in playing the *erhu*, and from that point on, he focused on mastering the instrument. Throughout his years of wandering, he travelled widely, studying various forms of *minjian yinyue*, including *jingju, Jiangnan sizhu* and *Guangdong yinyue* (广东音乐, Cantonese music). His playing skills, based on local music, steadily improved and despite the hardships of life, music became his only solace and his primary means of livelihood
>
> In 1952, Sun Wenming married into a family call Pan and settled in Fengxian County, where his life became somewhat more stable. During this period, he assumed the pseudonym Pan Zhiwang (潘旨望) and began to compose music based on his experiences. In the mid-1950s, he continued to achieve musical success, taking part in various performances and winning accolades, including an award at the 1957 National *Minjian yinyue* and Dance Festival. Later, he was invited to teach at the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he composed new *erhu* repertoire. However, upon his return to Fengxian in 1961, his life took a tragic turn, culminating in his untimely death in 1962

at the age of 34 (Wu and Zhou 1986).

From the details, we see that Sun Wenming's short life spanned two distinct ideological eras: the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. Before 1949, he endured a harsh life as a vagabond, relying on playing the *erhu* to make a living. This difficult period allowed him to develop exceptional skills and a deep dedication to studying various forms of *minjian yinyue*, which provided him with a wealth of material for his compositions, eventually establishing him as a local expert. This allowed him to stand out in officially recognised music and dance competitions after 1949, subsequently leading to a position in a professional music education institution. What was the reason behind this opportunity?

After 1949, the ruling Communist Party swiftly took action across all areas of Chinese society, urgently seeking to establish a system with distinct characteristics that could be presented to the outside world as more refined and civilised, particularly in the fields of culture and education. By that time, a professional system of music education had already taken shape in China. In the 1950s, a trend emerged amongst teachers in *erhu* training at music colleges of highly praising Liu Tianhua's achievements while at the same time neglecting the integration of performance techniques and local aesthetics from *minjian yinyuejia* (*Zhongyang yinyue xueyuan yanjiubu* 1953).

To address this imbalance, the Government implemented a series of cultural policies to collect *minjian yinyue* and integrate it into professional educational institutions. The status of *minjian yinyuejia* was thus indirectly raised. Mainstream artists and scholars began to collect, study and extensively recreate *minjian yinyue*. As a result, many *minjian yinyuejia* were offered teaching positions at conservatories. These policy changes enabled Sun Wenming, with his experience and skills, to enter modern music education institutions, where he contributed to the enrichment of "school style" *erhu* composition and performance. This development reflected the state's effort to integrate *minjian* cultural resources into the broader national cultural framework. So, when did Sun Wenming first come to the attention of the conservatory *erhu* community? As one of the inheritors of his musical arts, Zhou Hao recorded the relevant experience:

In August 1958, the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra conductor instructed me to locate a blind *Erhu* player in Shanghai's outskirts. I rushed to Fengxian after getting a letter from the Cultural Museum of Fengxian

> County about a blind artist named Pan Zhiwang. I tracked down Mr. Sun and listened to his impressive playing abilities. I learned *Liubo qu* from him and went to his place several times. I conveyed his talent to my superiors, who agreed to invite Sun to give lectures in Shanghai.
>
> However, our attempts to meet him were futile because he was usually on the road performing. Finally, in May 1959, I went to meet Sun in Liantang Town, but he had already left for Kunshan County. I tracked his movements until we arrived in Wuxi, Abing's hometown. There, I saw Sun perform in a tea house in a variety of musical styles, including *quyi* (曲艺),[18] traditional Chinese *xiqu* (戏曲) and his own creations. I invited him to Shanghai, where he taught at the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. In September 1961, he returned to Fengxian (Zhou 2006).[19]

This was the first time Sun Wenming was evaluated by the standards of the elite music system, but it was not the first time he had attracted attention. According to Zhang Bin's account, while Sun Wenming was wandering around Wuxi making a living, the local cultural department heard him play and invited him to perform at schools and institutions. This marked the first time Sun Wenming was treated with respect and consideration (Zhang 2016, 100-101). Although the exact date is not specified by the author, a record by Pan Yonggang, a staff member of the Fengxian Cultural Museum in Zhejiang, notes that in 1952 Sun Wenming was recommended by the Wuxi Cultural Museum to give a special two-and-a-half-hour performance at a high school, which was well received by both teachers and students (Pan 2000).

This record indicates that, despite being a *minjian erhu* musician without formal musical training, Sun Wenming possessed solo performance abilities and had already excelled in composing pieces such as *Tanle* 弹乐, *Liubo qu* and *Sifang qu* 四方曲 (Prelude). In 1956, Sun Wenming participated in the Jiangsu Provincial *Minjian yinyue* and Dance Performance and received a certificate of commendation from the conference. The following year, he participated in the National *Minjian yinyue* and Dance Festival in Beijing and won the second prize for *erhu* performance. The Central People's Broadcasting Station also broadcast the two pieces of music played: *Liubo qu* and *Renjing xin'an* 人静心安 (Tranquillity of mind) (Wang 1957).

In 1959, Zhou Hao and Xiang Zuying (1926–1999) transcribed six of Sun Wenming's musical compositions into cipher notation, which were subsequently published by the Shanghai Chinese

[18] *Qiyi* is a collective term that encompasses more than 300 regional genres of traditional Chinese oral performing arts.
[19] Author's compressed version.

Orchestra that named *Minjian yiren Sun Wenming erhu liushou* 民间艺人孙文明二胡六首 (Six *Erhu* Pieces by Minjian yinyuejia Sun Wenming) (see Fig 2.2). This reflects a great appreciation for Sun Wenming's music, and he showed his identity as a musician with an independent creative ability. But why didn't he pursue a lifelong career in music education at the institutions or become a stage musical artist? And what was the cause of his untimely death?

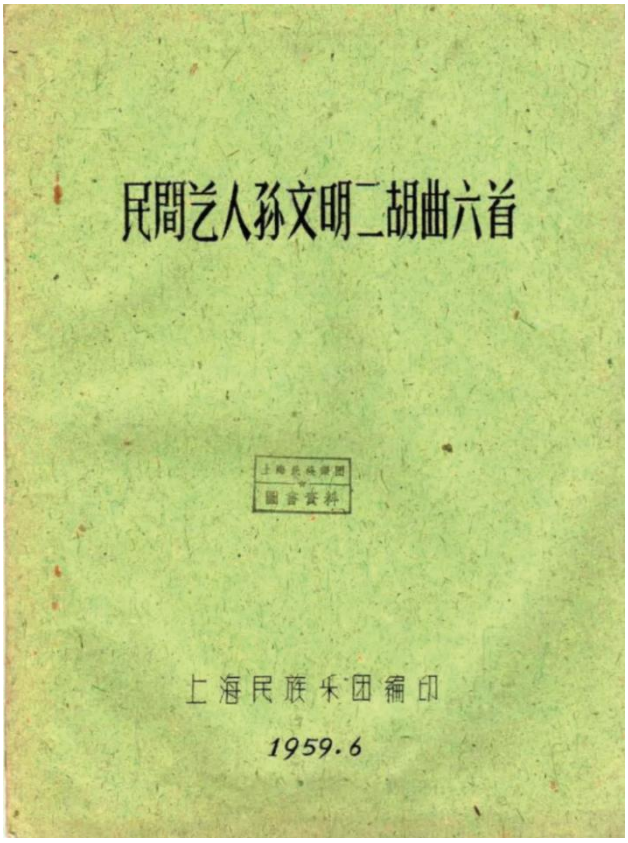


Fig 2.2 *Minjian yiren Sun Wenming erhu qu liu shou.* Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023.

The specifics of Sun Wenming's departure from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the circumstances of his death have largely been overlooked by academics and scholars or have been deliberately downplayed. Scholars, relying mostly on official biographies, generally state that after his contract with the Shanghai Conservatory of Music expired, Sun Wenming was invited to teach *erhu* at an art school in Qiqihar (齐齐哈尔), Heilongjiang Province, in northeastern China. However, it is said that Sun, who had long lived in the southern region of the Yangtse River, feared he would not adapt to the northern climate and thus declined the offer. When his son passed away in 1962, Sun was overcome with grief and succumbed to a pre-existing illness. The *erhu* he used is also buried

with him in his hometown.

I was intrigued by Sun Wenming's departure and sudden death, which seemed to come out of nowhere. Given the aforementioned "unified narrative", I shifted my focus away from mainstream musicians and instead concentrated on interviewing Sun Yicheng, the third generation "folk" heir of Sun Wenming. Although Sun Yicheng graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music, unlike many academic musicians he chose to serve in the army during the Cultural Revolution. After his discharge, he spent a significant amount of time in Zhejiang Province, where he engaged in local *minjian* arts and also developed a fondness for the *chiba* (尺巴, end-blown flute)[20] and sculpture. Out of curiosity about Sun Wenming's music and while tracing local *minjian* traditions, Sun Yicheng began training on October 9, 2003, with Wu Zhimin, a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music who had studied under Sun Wenming. In 2019, Wu confirmed Sun Yicheng as a third-generation inheritor of the *erhu* tradition. Sun Yicheng curiosity also led him to interview surviving members of Sun Wenming's family. Throughout our interactions, he was highly supportive of my research and provided a wealth of valuable information. Regarding the tragic end of Sun Wenming's life, Sun Yicheng believes that,

> In addition to the official explanation of his contract expiring, another factor was his sudden illness with a lung disease that, given the medical conditions in China at that time, was considered highly contagious. The Shanghai Conservatory of Music had a large number of students who were regarded as musically talented, and the school leaders, fearing the risk of infection but also concerned about maintaining appearances, decided to recommend Sun Wenming move away to a distant location, which is Qiqihar Arts School in Heilongjiang Provence. But Sun refused and chose instead to return to the Pan family. During this time, the conservatory provided medical assistance to Sun Wenming. However, as a live-in son-in-law, Sun was considered to have low status in traditional Chinese family society, and he chose to give all the medication to his father-in-law Pan Boxiang, which worsened his own condition.
>
> In 1962, China faced severe natural disasters and significant food shortages, particularly in the typically affluent Jiangnan region, under the shadow of the policies of the Great Leap Forward. These shortages led to widespread malnutrition, affecting numerous individuals, including Sun Wenming. His previous teaching experience in professional institutions made him reluctant to return to his old profession of

[20] In an interview, Sun Yicheng provided me with his personal introduction, identifying himself as a *chiba* player and continuing the Tang-era naming of the instrument. However, he actually plays the *dongxiao*. I have respected Sun's preference here. According to Thrasher's research, the term "*chiba*" is still used in Minnan music and is associated with the *dongxiao*, although the modern Minnan dongxiao is larger than the Tang-era *dongxiao* (Thrasher 2008, 55–56). For more details, see *Sizhu Instrumental Music of South China*. 2008

> performing in teahouses or on the streets after his departure from the conservatory. His daughter recalls that attempts by her mother and grandmother to seek financial support from the cultural centre were unsuccessful. When Sun Wenming was in financial distress, he often sought help from his colleagues and students at the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra. However, due to transportation and communication limitations at the time, he did not receive assistance from Zhou Hao, a member of the orchestra. Shortly thereafter, Sun Wenming's child passed away, and Sun himself died in his hometown of Fengxian, devastated by the emotional and physical toll (Sun 2023).

From the records, it is evident that entering a professional *erhu* school to teach marked a significant turning point in Sun Wenming's music career. He transitioned from a struggling street performer who played the *erhu* in teahouses and on the streets to make ends meet to a teacher and musician in a musical conservatory, and his mindset evolved along with his new identity. According to his student Wu Zhimin's recollection, after Sun began teaching at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, he started wearing Zhongshan suits and smoking expensive cigarettes *Rongyu* (荣誉, Honor) cigarettes. Previously, during his years of wandering, he had smoked *Laodong* (劳动, Labor) and *Yongshi* (勇士, Warrior) cigarettes (Wu 2000). Sun Wenming's explanations also metaphorically reflect his transformation in identity

> Last year, Mr. Zhou from the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra invited me to come to Shanghai. Today, the leaders of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music have recognised me and invited me to teach at the university. I feel very happy, joyful and honoured. It's all thanks to the support of the higher-ups! (Wu 2000)

As a result, Sun Wenming acknowledged changes in his professional and social status, attributing these shifts to external forces such as government and policy recognition and support. His gratitude also indicates his acceptance of this new identity and a reassessment of his own value. This sense of "good leadership" reflects not only his appreciation for his personal achievements but also his sense of identification with the CPC system and culture policy at that moment.

From this we can see that Sun Wenming, as a street musician who had long faced adversity, found himself suddenly receiving attention from professional musicians and the government. This newfound recognition placed him on a more elegant and modern stage, surrounded by a clean, bright teaching environment and well-educated intellectuals. Such an environment might have given him an illusion of belonging within the academic music community. However, despite this shift, Sun

Wenming did not truly belong to the mainstream group of academically oriented *erhu* players.

Here is an example support that, in Chinese musicologist Qiao Jianzhong's article, he summarising the inheritance system of the *erhu* profession at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Qiao cites the "*erhu* family tree", a compilation created by Wang Yongde (b. 1945), a teacher at the conservatory (Qiao 2017). This family tree lists *erhu* teachers from the establishment of *Guoli Yinzhuan* (国立音专, National Music Institute) in 1927 to the present. Notably, while Wu Zhimin (1935–2022) and Lin Xinming (b. 1934) did study under Sun Wenming, the official lineage chart credits Wang Yi (1919–2002) as their mentor. Sun Wenming's name is absent from this official chart (see Fig 2.3).



Fig 2.3 S*hanghai yinyue xueyuan erhu yishu jiaoxue chuancheng tubiao.* Data from Wang Yongde, *Shangyinerhu yu haipaiwenhu*a, 2017.

English Translate:

Establishment of the National Conservatory: 1927
Current Faculty: Zhu Hengjing Wu Bochao (Transferred in 1928) — Jiang Fengzhi Chen Zhenduo Wang Peilun Gan Tao Lu Xiutang (Taught from 1956–1966) Wang Yi — Shen Fengquan — Tang Chunguang — Wu Zhimin — Lu Jianye — Lin Xinming — Chen Longzhang — Wu Ganbo— Chen Dacan — Xiang Zuying— Wang Yongde — Liu Shubing

From this we can see Sun Wenming was largely excluded from the narrative of the "*erhu* tradition", which further reflects the reality of his marginalisation in the mainstream *erhu* development history. Therefore, I speculate that the stark shift in status and identity led to a profound psychological disparity, which accelerated Sun Wenming's death after he left the professional music institution and returned home.

From the record, the musical conservatory officially acknowledged Sun Wenming's contributions to folklore and ostensibly elevated his musical work from the margins of *minjian* tradition to formal recognition by integrating it into their academic curriculum. Yet this acknowledgment felt more like an empty gesture, lacking genuine commitment or depth. It was a

surface-level recognition that did little to challenge the established norms within the conservatory *erhu* "school style". Although Sun Wenming taught at the conservatory for a year and a half, his presence did little to disrupt the entrenched professional and modern *erhu* education system. While he was nominally respected, the institution's focus remained on its Westernised elite—those whom the government sought to protect—who would go on to represent China's cultivated and modern musical skills on the global stage. These musicians, with their refined spirit and modern playing techniques, were thought to better represent China's cultural image at a global level.

In contrast, although Sun Wenming's music embodied folk influences and distinctive personal expressions, his improvisational and spontaneous playing style did not align with the standardised and regulated approaches to *minjian yinyue* favoured by the conservatory. While the official discourse at the time indeed emphasised drawing inspiration from folk traditions, the conservatory pursued a refined, regulated version of folk music suitable for representing China's modern cultural image on the international stage. His work, with its random and unorganised performances and techniques, though integrated into the academic setting, was still seen through the lens of his origins and did not translate into a deeper acceptance of his unique artistic legacy. The unequal treatment meted out to Sun Wenming and his *minjian yinyue* in the Chinese music academy, where modern elite musical genres are brought together, reflects the discrepancy between global and local music traditions, and the tendency of globalisation to promote and reproduce certain art forms in China's music scene deemed to be of international appeal. As such, and notwithstanding an ideological emphasis on art from the working classes, globalisation promoted and reproduced certain forms of music that were considered to have international appeal, while marginalising or simplifying those cultural expressions that were perceived to be too local in character.

2.2 Sun Wenming and his 11 *Erhu* Music Pieces

Sun Wenming's *erhu* music, in their transformation from improvised performances to formal notation, not only reflect his creative journey but also highlight the integration and adaptation of *minjian yinyue* forms within modern music education systems. The following discussion delves into Sun Wenming's teaching experiences, creative characteristics and the transmission of his works in the context of modern music education, while also exploring in detail why he did not integrate into the mainstream "school style" circle.

As we know, the use of sheet music and teaching materials marks the *erhu*'s entry into modern music education, yet very few official biographies written in China mention the circumstances of Sun Wenming's original *erhu* compositions or his methods of notation. Jiang Xiaofeng's account includes a meeting with Sun Wenming, where Sun revealed that he had learned *gongche* notation from a *minjian* artist. Due to a visual impairment, this knowledge was orally transmitted to him by this artist, and Sun's performances and compositions were largely based on memory (Jiang 1980). This raises the question: how was Sun Wenming's music passed down? Lin Xinming and Wu Zhiming, who were then students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, documented their experiences receiving lessons from Sun Wenming.

> Due to his visual impairment, Sun Wenming was always accompanied by his wife, Pan Ya'e, and sometimes his daughter, Pan Yinyue, during every lesson. In the first lesson, he taught me to play the *Sifang qu* and the *Liubo qu*. He explained that these two pieces were originally one, but after 1949, to conform with the *Yiku sitian* (忆苦思甜, Remembering the Bitter and Thinking of the Sweet) government campaign, the slow section was separated and became the *Liubo qu* while the fast section became the *Sifang qu*. These two pieces were learned together due to the similarity in their techniques. Additionally, I learned *Ren jing xin'an* 人静心安 (Tranquillity of mind and heart), *Yejing xiaosheng* 夜静箫声 (A Xiao Sound at Night) and *Tanle*. His playing techniques were very different from ours; for instance, he held the *erhu* between his legs and used a high or sometimes no bridge, resulting in large shifts and many wide leaps, making intonation difficult to master. His use of both solid and airy strokes was so varied that it was extremely difficult to replicate his realism, especially in *Tanle*, which imitates the *pipa* and the three-stringed lute, and in *Yejing xiaosheng*, which imitates the musical instrument *dongxiao* (洞箫, end-blown bamboo flute) (Lin 2020).

Although Sun Wenming taught at higher music education institutions, he still adhered to the *minjian* tradition of oral teaching methods. He adapted to the context of the conservatory, summarising his personal experience into technical essentials that he endeavoured to pass on to his students. Wu Zhimin, one of his students, revealed that each of Sun Wenming's demonstrations was different, highlighting one of the most essential differences between Chinese *minjian* artists and academic musicians. Additionally, when Wu and other students played according to sheet music, Sun Wenming would often correct them, saying, "That's wrong!" (Wu 2015, transcribed by Sun 2021).

Considering this situation, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music recorded nine of Sun's pieces in 1961, with the repertoire selected by Sun himself. The pieces included *Liubo qu, Sifang qu* , *Chunqiu hui* 春秋会 (Meeting of Spring and Autumn), *Tanle* , *Zhiyuanjun guiguo* 志愿军归国 (Return of the Volunteer Army) ,*Ye jing xiao sheng, Du Shiniang* 杜十娘, *Songting* and *Renjing xin'an.*

However, the *erhu* textbook *Gaodeng yinyue yuanxiao erhu jiaocai: Erhu quxuan diyiji* 高等音乐院校二胡教材: 二胡曲选 第一辑 (*Erhu Textbook for Higher Music Colleges: Selected Erhu Songs, First Collection*) published in 1963, only included music pieces *Ren jing xin'an* and *Liubo qu* (see Fig 2.4). In the same year, during the first conference on teaching materials for music colleges organised by the Shanghai Music Institute, Lin Xinming played the *Liubo qu* and *erhu* musicians from other regions learned to play it through the transcription made by Zhou Hao and Xiang Zuying (Sun 2023).



Fig 2.4 *Goadeng yinyue yuanxiao erhu jiaocai: erhu quxuan diyiji.* Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023.

It can be seen that Sun Wenming's *erhu* solo music underwent a significant transformation, evolving from improvisational and oral *minjian* traditions into formalised sheet music. This transition from spontaneous, fluid melodies to fixed compositions underscores the role of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, not only in preserving these musical forms but also in exerting control over knowledge production and cultural authority. For example, Ru Yi from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music has been officially recognised as the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Sun Wenming's *erhu* music, while Sun Yicheng, who also contributed to the restoration of that music, reluctantly refers to himself as a "Volunteer for the dissemination of Sun Wenming's *erhu* music arts". This is because his recognition is limited to an inheritor certificate and verbal acknowledgment personally issued by Wu Zhimin.

In addition, the process of formalising music through modern recording technology integrates *minjian* culture, which is otherwise marginal, into the mainstream discourse, elevating it to a

recognised form of professional musical and artistic expression. However, despite Sun Wenming having composed 11 *erhu* pieces, only 2 of them, *Liubo qu* and *Renjing xin'an*, were included in early academic textbooks, highlighting the selectivity of academic recognition. This selective inclusion reflects the dominant role of academic institutions in determining which aspects of musical heritage are preserved, while also revealing the limitations of this process. Even when *minjian yinyue* is brought into the mainstream, it may still be partially excluded if it does not fully align with standardised criteria. This highlights how the inherent diversity of traditional music forms is often simplified when institutionalised within modern modern music education systems.

I discovered that *Liubo qu* has been consistently featured in *erhu* textbooks and repertoires from the 1960s to the present. Based on an analysis of the transcribed scores and my personal experience playing the piece, the recorded version of *Liubo qu* is structured with an introduction, six passages, and a coda. The introduction sets the theme using just five notes, which then undergo several variations throughout the piece. The theme is revisited in a circular manner, with the rhythm gradually tightening to express the mood through repeated variations.

The compositional technique of cyclic variations, commonly found in *minjian yinyue*, is evident here, where several seemingly different passages actually share similar tonalities. The entire piece is built around the five notes introduced at the beginning, employing standard *erhu* techniques such as common note playing and staccato. This music is one of the few pieces by Sun Wenming that is less characterised by his distinctive performance techniques.

Liu Changfu, a retired professor at the Central Conservatory of Music, mentions that he began practising Sun Wenming's *Liubo qu* 流波曲 (Song of the Wanderer) in the late 1950s when he was a student at the conservatory's secondary school, but he did not study Sun's other musical works extensively (Liu, 2016). In his article, Liu Changfu does not specify the reasons why he overlooked Sun Wenming's music in his youth. But, according to my interviewee Sun Yicheng, who was a middle school classmate of Liu's, the key reason was that almost no one at the time could master Sun Wenming's folkloric performance techniques, leaving many musicians uncertain and hesitant about his repertoire. Therefore, "school style" musicians tend to favour practising and performing pieces that align with the formal structure and technical requirements of the professional performance

system, and *Liubo qu* is a good one in this context (Sun, 2023). This raises the question: what specific styles and characteristics in Sun Wenming's other works have led to them being selectively overlooked by academic *erhu* players over decades of musical practice?

As a *minjian erhu* musician, Sun Wenming roamed through streets and alleys, even travelling between different regions. He extensively observed and studied local musical elements through auditory perception, using them as the raw materials for his musical innovations. Based on Sun Wenming's biographical records and contemporary music score collections, the author has compiled a table that clearly display his music creations and the reference elements he utilised at that time.

Sun's Music Creation:

Years	Music work	Influencing elements
1950-1951	*Tanle* 弹乐	*Jiangnan sizhu: sanliu*
1952	*Sifangqu* 四方曲 Prelude	*Guangdong minjian yinyue*
1952	*Liuboqu* 流波曲 Song of the Wanderer	*Guangdong minjian yinyue*
1956	*Zhiyuanjun guilai* 志愿军归来 Return of the Volunteer Army	Onomatopoeia (train, flag raising, march)
1957	*Renjing xinan* 人静心安 Tranquillity of mind and heart	*Guangdong minjian yinyue*
1957	*Songting* 送听 Farewell	*Guangdong Music and Jiangnan sizhu*
1957	*Yejing xiaosheng* 夜静箫声 A Xiao at Night	Dongxiao
1950s	*Dushiniang* 杜十娘	*Jiangdiao "Du Shiniang"* 蒋调杜十娘
1950s	*Songchun* 送春 Departure of Spring	*Quyi - Shanghai Pudong Storytelling* (曲艺-上海浦东说书)
1950s	*Erqin guangliang* 二琴光亮 Shining Strings	*Matouqin* (马头琴, Horse-head fiddle), humai (呼麦, hula)
1959	*Chunqiu hui* 春秋会 Meeting of Spring and Autumn	*Kunqu* 昆曲
1959	*Zhouyehong* 昼夜红 Diurnal Red (lost)	

Sun Wenming's localised compositions encompass a complex array of musical genres from different regions, which he absorbed through listening during his wanderings. This creative process did not

originate from a systematic, Westernised musical education but rather developed through his exposure to various musical traditions during his life of constant movement. He drew inspiration from *minjian yinyue* across different regions, incorporating diverse styles and elements into his *erhu* playing.

For instance, during Sun Wenming's period of wandering the streets of Gaochun city Jiangsu, he appropriated the music of the *minjian* ceremony *"Songchun"* (送春) for the *erhu*. In Gaochun city, *"Songchun"* is a Chinese Spring Festival performance in which two people walk along the streets and lanes in partnership, one beating a gong, the other a drum. And the players send good wishes for the Spring Festival to thousands of households. The festival begins at the end of the lunar month and ends at the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the first month. Wei Yunlong of the Gaochun Local Culture Research Association examined the recordings of the *Songchun* sung by *minjian* artists nowadays, and the melody is almost identical to that performed by Sun Wenming. This proves that Sun's *erhu* piece was taken from the Gaochun *minjian shuochang* (说唱)[21] (Wei, transcribed by Sun 2023).

According to Pan Yonggang of the Fengxian Cultural Centre, in his early years, Sun Wenming extensively studied a wide range of musical forms. His repertoire included *minjian* songs like *Meng jiangnu* (孟姜女) and *Sichuandiao* (四川调, Sichuan tunes) as well as the *jingju*'s two major music and singing style *xipi* (西皮) and *erhuang* (二黄) parts. He also mastered various *jingju* tunes, along with the Guangdong *minjian yinyue*. Through self-directed study, Sun gradually mastered these complex musical styles. He later began learning the *sihu* (四胡), which inspired him to lay the foundation for the *erhu*'s ability to play octave doublings using two strings. Sun believed that the best way to practice *erhu* techniques was by playing *xiqu* music. By practising the overtures and arias of traditional *xiqu*, he improved his position-shifting skills, demonstrating his adaptability to various forms of *minjian yinyue*. Over time, Sun Wenming's repertoire expanded to include a diverse array of musical forms, ranging from *minjian* songs and opera tunes to *huqin* performances, self-accompanied Wuxi *tanhuang* (无锡滩簧, Wuxi Opera)[22] and *Jiangnan sizhu* music pieces (Pan

[21] Shuochang is a traditional Chinese performing art that blends rhythmic speech, storytelling and sometimes singing, often accompanied by simple musical instruments.

[22] Tanhua is a general term for locally rooted *minjian* operas in Jiangnan, emerging with the rise of various luantan styles during the

2000).

Sun Wenming's music was deeply influenced by the culture and environment in which he lived. His works reflect the unique experiences and insights he gained during his travels and exposure to various *minjian yinyue* traditions. Through observing and imitating local musical elements throughout his peripatetic life, Sun Wenming gradually developed a distinctive musical style. This style is not merely a technical showcase; it also embodies a deep understanding and integration of different regional cultures.

For example, from 1951 to 1956, Sun Wenming performed across various locations in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, with teahouses being his primary venues. His repertoire was extensive, covering over 170 traditional songs, *minjian yinyue*, *xiqu*, popular songs and what he referred to as "acrobatic" simulation music. The titles of these pieces were engraved on bamboo slips, which were placed on the tables in the teahouses each day for the audience to choose from (Jiang 1980). Teahouses were not only the focal points of public life and entertainment in the Jiangnan region but also provided Sun with rich opportunities for interaction to get more *minjian* culture elements from the other *minjian yinyuejia*, thereby enriching and broadening his performance perspective. In the spring of 1951, this blind musician completed his first *erhu* composition, *Tanle* in Qingpu, working entirely from memory. The piece combines the opening sound of *pingtan* (评弹)[23] and the *sanliu* sound of *Jiangnan sizhu*, which was frequently used in *minjian* celebrations. In his performance, Sun boldly removed the bridge, plucking the strings with his left hand while bowing with his right, mimicking the playing styles of the *sanxian* and *pipa* that were popular in the teahouses at the time, thereby challenging the conventional form of the "school style" on *erhu* performance.

Sun Wenming was also keenly aware of the music market, which required him to adapt and react quickly to connect with his audience. As a street performer, Sun Wenming had to swiftly adjust to different performance environments and cater to audience demands to attract a larger audience and make a living. This market-driven necessity led him to develop a flexible playing style, enabling him

Qing Dynasty. It developed distinctive local forms in Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Huzhou, Ningbo and other regions.

[23] Pingtan, known for its roots in the Jiangnan region, blends musical and oral performance in a unique style

to improvise and meet audience expectations through a combination of imitation and innovation.

In the structured environment of music conservatory lessons this creative background is difficult to replicate. The systematic and formal teaching methods in academic institutions of mainstream *erhu* musicians differ greatly from the dynamic and informal atmosphere of *minjian yinyue* that Sun Wenming experienced. Academic instruction typically emphasises the accuracy of sheet music, the standardisation of techniques and the systematic study of theory. However, it often lacks the improvisational spirit and deep cultural sensitivity that Sun Wenming cultivated during his wandering life. Wu Zhiming, a student of Sun Wenming at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, reflects on his own experience of studying Sun Wenming's music, highlighting the unique influences and techniques that shaped Sun's compositions.

> The characteristics of Sun Wenming's *erhu* playing techniques were rooted in the performance methods of "imitation and simulation" that he developed during the time of the old society when he busked for a living. Among these, "singing" simulation is particularly significant, as it serves as the primary means of expression in the performance of opera and operatic art. In this context, simulation involves first learning to "sing" and then striving for accuracy in mimicking the sound, making the mastery of "singing" an essential part of the process. Additionally, Sun's techniques also include imitating "objective" sounds, such as the "bugle sound", "drill sound" and "slogan sound", which are crucial aspects of his playing style and based on his hearing in daily life.
>
> Sun's uniqueness in stringing the *erhu* lies in his use of "octave stringing" in addition to the traditional fifth-degree stringing taught in the academy. This allows for playing in high octaves, low octaves, and even double tones, as demonstrated in works like *Renjing xin'an* and *Songting.* Furthermore, he often placed his jacks very high, and as I recall, he didn't even use silk strings to tie the jacks but instead directly used the tuning pegs of the outer strings to support the inner strings. This method created the "octave fixing" technique for both the inner and outer strings, which can be seen in pieces like *Yejing xiaosheng*. He also employed a very unique technique for octave stringing, in which he split the horsehair of the bow in half, clamping one half between the inner and outer strings, and leaving the other half outside the outer strings. This approach allowed for the simultaneous playing of both inner and outer strings to produce an octave double-tone effect, as used in *Zhiyuanjun guiguo* and *Songting* (Wu 2015, transcribed by Sun 2021).

This firsthand account demonstrates that Sun Wenming's playing skills extend beyond mere technical proficiency to also encompass his unique perception of sound environments and his ability to improvise. This ability was honed through keen observation of the external world and deep

personal experience, making it difficult to fully impart through sheet music or modern music education systems. Modern music teaching methods primarily focus on standardised techniques and score training. However, Sun Wenming's playing style relies heavily on immediate perception and inspiration, which cannot be effectively conveyed through conventional classroom instruction. Instead, it requires performers to personally experience and engage with the actual environment.

Sun Wenming's improvisational music was shaped by his long-term street performances, interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and constant adaptation to various performance conditions. The development of this skill involved imitating environmental soundscapes and improvising upon traditional musical elements, which he gradually accumulated and refined through daily life and performance. As a result, although his music has been transcribed into sheet music, academic musicians still find it challenging to capture the instant creativity and dynamic spontaneity inherent in Sun Wenming's works during their studies.

Sun Wenming's development as a musician was shaped by informal and unpredictable learning experiences, influenced by his lack of formal musical training and reliance on aural transmission. His inability to transcribe musical scores meant that he learned through imitation, experimentation, and personal interpretation, leading to his distinctive and unconventional use of the instrument.

This is a key reason why his techniques are so difficult for academically trained *erhu* musicians to replicate. On one occasion, Sun Wenming accidentally fell while walking along a path, causing the main stem of his *erhu* to break. Upon returning to the small inn, he resourcefully replaced the broken stem with a piece of copper pipe from a wire bed and used a matchstick, folded several times, to substitute for the instrument's bridge. Surprisingly, this "upgrade" had an unexpectedly positive impact on the instrument, enhancing its aesthetic qualities according to his personal taste. From that moment on, the brass *erhu* and matchstick bridge became the perfect combination for Sun Wenming's playing and remained with him for the rest of his life (Sun 2023).

As a wandering *minjian yinyuejia* with limited means, Sun Wenming often lacked sufficient rosin, yet he was flexible enough to turn this limitation into creative inspiration. He discovered that the tone produced by a bow lacking rosin was very similar to the sound of a *dongxiao* and thus he

composed the solo piece *Yejing xiaosheng*, which exemplifies how he was able to keenly capture sound details and transform them into artistic creations despite the limitations of his circumstances (Jiang 1980). Contemporary musicologist Chen Zhengsheng suggests that the *langyin* (狼音, wolf tone) produced by Sun Wenming's unique *erhu* materials is something professional players typically strive to avoid. Such sounds often result from a poorly made *erhu* or improper performance techniques. The *yejing xiaosheng* is undeniably shaped by the same conditions that produce noise, yet it stands apart from both noise and overtones due to its elusive and difficult-to-define nature (Chen 2000).

This highlights the unique trajectory of Sun Wenming's *erhu* development. Despite his limited resources, Sun Wenming was able to fully maximise the potential of his *erhu* playing, yet his musical evolution followed a path that diverged significantly from the Western classical string traditions upheld by conservatory standards.

In the 1950s, China modified its musical instruments to meet the harmonic demands of Chinese orchestras and align with international tuning standards, which led to the creation of a more popularised and serialised version of the *erhu* (Li 1955). This standardised *erhu*, which uses the same metal strings as the violin and has almost identical dimensions and craftsmanship, makes it difficult to perform Sun Wenming's *erhu* music effectively.

For example, one music solo that challenges the conventional school style *erhu* performance paradigm is found in the piece *Zhiyuanjun guiguo*. In the section that imitates the "train whistle", the left hand must rotate the tuning peg while the right hand holds the bow and rubs it up and down. With the high elasticity of the steel strings commonly used in the school style's playing tradition, abruptly adjusting the strings to a lower frequency can cause the strings to become completely slack. However, the silk strings typically used by Sun Wenming and other *minjian erhu* performers, due to their lower elasticity, do not experience this issue when lowering the tuning peg (Ru 2018, 109-10).

At the same time, when we come to performing Sun Wenming's musical compositions, the standardised *erhu* struggles to convey the subtle, "imperfect" rustic qualities that are integral to his music, even for performers with advanced technical skills. The physical characteristics of these

mass-produced instruments play a crucial role in shaping musical performance, often making it difficult to faithfully reproduce many of Sun Wenming's works. This challenge is further intensified for performers trained in the new *erhu* "tradition" shaped by modern music education, as they may find it hard to grasp and embody the inherent randomness and improvisational elements that are central to Sun Wenming's music, particularly within the context of *minjian yinyue* traditions. As a result, they often find themselves missing something essential in Sun's music.

Lin Xinming makes no secret of the fact that when he was training his students to play Sun Wenming's *erhu* pieces, he could only incorporate about 40% of Sun's playing techniques into his teaching (Lin 2016). Ru Yi documents his experience transcribing the music *Erqin guangliang.* He acknowledges that in today's context, where the understanding and study of the *erhu* are deeply rooted in Liu Tianhua's modern *erhu* concepts, interpreting Sun Wenming's *erhu* presents significant limitations. For instance, after several attempts to transcribe the piece using a standard *erhu,* he decided to adopt Sun Wenming's open *qianjin* (千斤, nut) setup: bend a wire into a hook, tie it to the pole with a string, hook the strings when in use, and let it down when not in use (Ru 2018)**.**

It follows that Sun Wenming's music, filled with so many personalised *minjian* techniques, became one of the reasons why some of his *erhu* compositions were "lost" in the modern music education system. Before 2000, there were only eight scores of Sun Wenming's works readily available, as well as three pieces of recorded music, *Zhiyuanjun guoguo, Erqin guangliang* and *Song chun*, which were difficult to notate. For example, the recital music *Zhiyuanjun guoguo* depicts the scenes of the return of the volunteer army after the victory in 1953 in the fight against the U.S.A. in Korea, with military bugles, wake-up bugles, rallying bugles, flag-raising bugles, drilling, marching, solo, chorus and rounds of singing and the sound of the train starting up and the sound of the whistle, etc.; *Erqin guangliang* mimics the method of playing the *matouqin*; and *Song chun* simulates the sound of gongs and drums being sung and beaten. These elements may not align with the standards and aesthetic preferences of the *erhu* solo pieces as defined by the academic tradition. As a result, Sun Wenming's contributions were not fully appreciated by the modern *erhu* community during his lifetime.

2.3 Sun Wenming's Cultural Legacy in Contemporary Times

Based on the content of the previous section, we know that performing Sun Wenming's works presents practical difficulties, especially for modern *erhu* players. Despite the training received at conservatories to handle challenging techniques and complex hand position changes, reproducing Sun Wenming's works is hard due to their unique performance requirements. For instance, during performances, the jacks need to be removed and re-tied and the string winding must be adjusted: all steps that are time-consuming and tedious.

Additionally, Sun Wenming's stringing techniques challenge the most common "do-sol" (1-5; d'-a') 5-octave tuning mode with some pieces using less common tunings. For example, *Renjing xin'an* and *Songchun* use 2̇-2 (c-c') mode; *Zhiyuanjun guihuo* uses 1-5 Mode at the beginning and in the third section of "*Woshi yi ge bing*" 我是一个兵 (I am a soldier) the strings are tuned to 2̇-2 Mode. This adjustment has to be carried out while the music is being played. Furthermore, the special treatment of the bow hair makes simultaneous playing more complex. These unique playing techniques make Sun Wenming's musical works particularly challenging to perform on the modern stage.

From the introduction above, we know that in contemporary China, two individuals, Ru Yi and Sun Yicheng, are devoted to studying Sun Wenming's *erhu* music and ensuring it gets passed on to future generations. What contributions have they made toward "restoring" Sun's *erhu* music?

Out of reverence for Sun Wenming, Sun Yicheng has, since 2017, repeatedly listened to recordings, reflected on them and revised the scores over a hundred times. After nearly two years of continuous research, he finally deciphered these three pieces of music: *Zhiyuanjun guiguo, Songchun* and *Erqin guangliang.* Sun Yicheng told me that his ability to fully perform Sun Wenming's 11 pieces of music is largely due to his personal experience and exploration. He also reconstructed the instrument that Sun Wenming used at the time, based on historical recordings, which he named the "*wenming qin*" (文明琴) (see Fig 2.5). An important feature of the *wenming qin* is the 1 cm distance between the two strings, so that the left finger can press the strings separately and play different intervals in harmony (Sun 2023). This instrument is capable of playing all of Sun Wenming's music,

just as Sun Wenming did when he recorded nine pieces in Shanghai using a single *erhu*.

To closely replicate Sun Wenming's performance style, Sun Yicheng also improved the bow of the *erhu* to effectively showcase certain pieces that utilise dual-tone techniques (see Fig 2.6 and Fig 2.7). He told me that he was moved by the German documentary "The Story of the Weeping Camel"[24] and its musical soundtrack with elements of Mongolian music, and since he also wanted to present the *matouqin* elements in the piece *Erqin guangliang* authentically, after due consideration he decided to upgrade the bow (Sun 2023). This cross-cultural artistic influence reflects how musicians in the context of globalisation borrow musical elements from different cultures and incorporate them into the revival of local traditions. Globalisation has brought about a subtle reflection that has allowed contemporary musicians to expand the boundaries of their compositions, exploring more diverse sounds and forms of expression for the *erhu* "tradition".

[24] *"The Story of the Weeping Camel"* (2003), a Mongolian documentary directed by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni, focuses on a family of nomadic shepherds in the Gobi Desert who use a traditional musical ritual to reunite a mother camel with her calf.



Fig 2.5 Wenming qin. Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023



Fig 2.6 Sun Yicheng's *erhu* bow. Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023



Fig 2.7 The detail of Sun Yicheng's *erhu* bow. Picture provided by Sun Yicheng, interview 2023

Furthermore, Ru Yi has made a substantial contribution to the rehabilitation and preservation of Sun Wenming's *erhu* music. His goal as a teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music is to include Sun Wenming's *erhu* compositions in his classes. He also takes care to guarantee that Sun's improvised pieces are understandable to pupils who may not be acquainted with the *minjian* traditions from which they originate by meticulously transcribing and modifying them for modern *erhu* players.

In the 2017 concert of Sun Wenming's works, presented by Ru Yi, the official inheritor of Sun Wenming's legacy at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, he utilised three *erhu* instruments in performance of the *erhu* solo *Zhiyuanjun guiguo*. Ru connected various musical themes, such as *qichuanghao* 起床号 (Reveille), *zhiyuanjun shengqi* 志愿军升旗 (Volunteer Army Flag Raising) , *huoche mingdi* 火车鸣笛 (The Train Honks its Horn) etc., while verbally explaining the theme of the upcoming music to the audience before each performance, effectively stringing together musical vignettes with several simulated scenarios to form a cohesive piece of music. Throughout the concert, Ru Yi used a total of eight *erhu* to complete the eleven pieces, demonstrating the musicianship of an elite performer with a near-perfect, articulate stage presence.

The process of Ru Yi's theatrical adaptation of Sun Wenming's music involves reinterpreting the original music, thereby enhancing its expressive and emotional impact based on contemporary *erhu* performance aesthetics. By presenting Sun Wenming's music in a more dramatic and visually compelling manner on stage, this approach exemplifies how works that integrate Sun Wenming's musical culture can be incorporated into the modern music education system. This not only broadens the global perspective and increases the accessibility of these works, it also provides opportunities for a global audience to appreciate and understand this cultural heritage. Moreover, Ru Yi's musical activities bring up a question: why has the music conservatory resumed the revival of Sun Wenming's music in the present day?

Since the 1950s, Chinese music conservatories have undergone a significant transformation in their approach to globalisation. Initially, this process was characterised by the structuring of Chinese music education along Western classical music frameworks, with an emphasis on standardising traditional and *minjian yinyue* to fit within an internationally recognised system. Professional musicians prioritised the acquisition of Western techniques and theoretical models, positioning Chinese music within global classical traditions. However, in the twenty-first century, the notion of globalisation within conservatories has evolved beyond the mere adoption of Western classical music to encompass broader cultural exchanges and interactions. This shift has influenced not only performance and pedagogy but also the creative models underpinning modern composition.

This shift in the globalisation perspective is closely linked to the teaching practices and creative models of music conservatories. However, it is within this transformation that the limitations of the modern music education system in conservatories have become increasingly evident. Based on my observation and self-reflection, in modern music composition and performance, the international music education system at the Conservatory has gradually developed a rigid structure due to its high level of standardisation, making it difficult to produce new breakthroughs. This issue is further compounded by the clear division of labour between composers and performers. Composers often create works using Western compositional methods, tend to overlook the individual expressive needs of performers. On the other hand, performers are constrained by fixed instrumental forms and techniques, making it challenging for them to achieve real innovation within the existing framework.

Therefore, *erhu* musicians have sought to break away from this trend of homogenisation by reviving Sun Wenming's *erhu* works, seeking a way to express their own uniqueness. Sun Wenming's music, with its unique *minjian* techniques and improvisational style, provides Conservatory musicians with a distinct opportunity to explore and emphasise their individuality. These musical pieces, characterised by their improvisational nature and folkloric elements, allow academic musicians to rediscover and bring out personal nuances in their performances. By deeply engaging with and performing these works, musicians not only push their technical boundaries but also forge meaningful connections with historical *minjian yinyue* expression. This process allows them to cultivate a more distinctive cultural identity, particularly within the broader context of globalization.

However, the contemporary interpretation at the Conservatory can also be seen as a "new age interpretation" of Sun Wenming's music. In the context of globalisation, Conservatory musicians have attempted to integrate Sun 's music into the modern music education system by absorbing and reinterpreting it. As this interpretation inevitably leads to some standardisation of the original works, offering a more systematic means of dissemination, it may also risk diluting their original expressive power and individuality.

Conclusion

Sun Wenming, as a local *minjian yinyue* artist, lacked knowledge of Western music and did not understand its inner logic and techniques. Instead, he created *erhu* solo works within his familiar cultural context by imitating external forms. Sun Wenming's compositional style was primarily influenced by his living environment, life experiences and performance settings. Without formal musical training from an academy, his creative process relied heavily on personal experience and immediate perception. During his wanderings and performances in various regions, Sun Wenming unintentionally absorbed musical elements from different places and integrated them into his compositions. This fusion was not a result of conscious innovation but rather his natural adaptation and imitation of different musical styles, leading to a unique form of musical expression. This reflects the adaptability and vitality inherent in the music of *minjian yinyue* artists.

Sun Wenming's *erhu* music acts as an intermediary between the landscape and the people of his time, resembling an indescribable "experiential" knowledge. As a street musician without formal compositional training, the freedom, openness and unstructured nature of his music also characterise the aesthetics of his art and expertise. This unique expertise, which ran counter to the development policies of the musical establishment in the context of state collectivism, is the primary reason for his initial obscurity. However, political policies, specifically the struggle for intangible cultural heritage, have led to the revival of Sun Wenming's music and its recognition as a cultural asset, after years of being overlooked. Sun Wenming and his music have survived many setbacks to gain recognition in contemporary times. Academic legacies have positioned Sun's contemporary status as an *erhu* player on a par with Liu Tianhua and Abing, drawing more attention to him. However, Sun Wenming and his compelling music have always been intertwined with the intellectual system shaped by Liu Tianhua's modern professional *erhu* school.

Moreover, Sun Wenming's current revival shares a more complicated narrative regarding the shifting status of *erhu* music in a globalised setting. Sun's music was first overshadowed by the academic process of Westernising *erhu* performance, but it has subsequently found a new platform for development within today's globalised framework that promotes variety and cross-cultural interchange. Sun's story demonstrates how human understanding of the world has altered not only musical techniques but also the meaning of musical values and how traditional *minjian yinyue*, which was once marginalised, is now becoming central to national cultural identity, directly or indirectly, as the influence of globalisation expands.

Chapter 3. The First Generation of *Erhu* Musicians after 1949: Exploring Min Huifen's Global Impact

Introduction

Throughout the nearly century-long evolution of the "modern" *erhu*, musicians have continuously explored and experimented with various creative and performance techniques. Beginning with Liu Tianhua's integration of Chinese and Western musical elements in the early 20th century, a distinctive "modern" musical education system has gradually taken shape. This system, deeply rooted in both global influences and specific cultural contexts, has played a crucial role in shaping the power, influence and status of China's musical elite. Among the most important figures in this tradition is Min Huifen (闵惠芬 1945–2014). As a leading *erhu* performer of the first generation trained in conservatories after 1949, Min exemplifies the unique qualities of post-1949 *erhu* musicianship, which is notably intertwined with the political landscape of the time.

Since the 1960s, Min Huifen was a driving force in elevating *erhu* performance, transforming it into an esteemed form of aesthetic art through her personal performances and practices. Additionally, as a creator, she actively engaged in composition and adaptation, passionately working to expand the expressive range of the *erhu*. Her musical career evolved in tandem with China's political landscape, earning her the title of *Renmin yinyuejia* (人民音乐家, People's Musician). Min Huifen's personal life is equally legendary, including her role as a pioneering female artist. Despite battling cancer three times, she remained dedicated to her music career and activities. During her recovery, she collaborated with composer Liu Wenjin (1937–2013) on the creation of the *The Great Wall Capriccio* (长城随想曲, *Changcheng suixiangqu*) a groundbreaking piece that brought the *erhu* closer to the Western concerto genre while incorporating Chinese national metaphors. This work has inspired numerous *erhu* compositions in mainland China after 1980.

In this chapter, I discuss three main questions based on a literature review and insights from my personal connections with mainstream performers, scholars and *minjian erhu* players. Firstly, I explore the narrative of the female performer's musical career. Then, I explain how Min Huifen

emerged as a public figure, embodying both her identity as a woman and a symbol of the communist regime. Finally, I discuss how she adapted her musical practice, transforming the *erhu* from a local *minjian* instrument into one that represents Chinese national *minjian yinyue*, influenced by the hybridisation of global cultures, which also allows me to introduce her masterpiece, *The Great Wall Capriccio.*

3.1 Who was Min Huifen?



Fig 3.1 “Min Huifen at the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference”. Source: Fu and Fang, *Min Huifen erhu yishu yanjiu*, 2004.

When I first started interviewing *erhu* players, whether musicians, composers or college students from the mainstream “modern” musical education system, they preferred to highlight Min Huifen as a symbol of a specific era, making reference to her impacts on performance, training and musical creativity from the 1970s–2000s. Some even directly referred to that era as the “Min Huifen’s period”. Experts from among this group curated collections, commemorative books and biographies of for her, crafting what has become a “flawless” narrative—so deeply ingrained in their minds that it functions like a seal, permanently shaping positive perceptions. Contemporary Chinese scholars such as Qiao Jianzhong (2014), Xiao Mei (2000) and Yang Yandi (2018), for instance, emphasise Min Huifen’s legacy, particularly focusing on the depth of her lasting impact. Their assessments

uniformly highlight her as the archetype of a powerful *erhu* musician in the broader world of Chinese music. In their narratives, Min Huifen is portrayed as an *erhu* musician and creator with outstanding expressive qualities who set new standards for musicians in the modern *erhu* tradition. For example, Xiao Mei lauded Min Huifen as the second most significant woman in the *Guoyue* tradition, following musicologist Cao Anhe (1905–2004) (Xiao 2000). This consistent emphasis on Min Huifen's role as a pioneering female artist reflects her contribution to both the musical arts and the status of women in modern Chinese music history.

It is evident that, Min Huifen has significantly influenced her academic lineage on *erhu* school style. The most direct way she influenced *erhu* performance, as a celebrity icon, was by imparting a sense of gendered power, shaping how female successors approached and interpreted the instrument. For example, certain female *erhu* musicians, such as Ma Xiaohui (b. 1965), Song Fei (b. 1969), and Duan Aiai (b. 1975), all acclaim Min Huifen in their publications, describing her as their primary inspiration for taking up the *erhu* in the first place. Ma Xiaohui recalled that when she was 11 years old, she saw Min Huifen's *erhu* performance in a movie and so began to study *erhu*, exclaiming that, "It turns out that women can also perform *erhu* with heroic charm!" (Ma 2023). Song Fei (a female musician hailed by Xiao Mei as the third-generation representative of *Guoyue*) pointed out that she aspired to perform like Min when she was a child, a time when the field of *erhu* playing was filled with male musicians (Song 2015, 66-67). Duan Aiai' s article reflects on her initial impression of Min Huifen and also metaphorically represents a stereotypical contrast between genders, "her music has a towering and dignified sound, but she is extremely warm and pleasant in daily life" (Duan 2014, 68). These quotes are an indication of the effect that Min Huifen had on professional female *erhu* playing, as she became a figurehead for the younger generation of professional performers and female *erhu* musicians more widely. After Min, more and more women started to learn and engage in *erhu* performance.

Min Huifen's influence has shaped the gender dynamics within the *erhu* community, leading to a seemingly natural progression in which the number of female *erhu* performers has steadily increased across generations. This trend is evident among younger musicians born in the 1980s and

1990s. For instance, at the 2012 *Guangrong zhanfang* (光荣绽放, *Glorious Blossom Concert*) ,[25] 10 musicians were recognised as new icons representing the next generation of *erhu* performers, eight of them being young women. This suggests that the predominance of female musicians in the professional *erhu* field has evolved almost instinctively as part of a generational development, influenced by the path Min Huifen helped to forge.

As can be seen from the above, researchers and artists have constructed a coherent and focused narrative around Min Huifen, with a number of female musicians in particular developing a deep emotional connection with her. This has led to Min Huifen's femininity playing a crucial role in how later generations interpret her. Although gender is often mentioned only in general terms in some macro-level descriptions of her musical contributions, this underlying gender influence further elevates her status in Chinese society. This elevation is closely tied to how Min Huifen's artistry transcended traditional boundaries of *erhu* musicians' identity and functions. According to Min Huifen's childhood neighbour, the librarian Fei Aineng (b. 1948):

> When Min became ill, China's high-quality medical technology leaned towards her, and Chinese leaders issued instructions to save Min's life. For instance, in the 1990s when foreign exchange was tight, the government coordinated to help Min Huifen purchase tamoxifen in Hong Kong. Music aficionados from all over brought local remedies and spiritual encouragement to save Min Huifen. There was a craze throughout Shanghai to help Min Huifen purchase traditional Chinese medicine and doctors of Chinese medicine from Suzhou and Zhengzhou sent their own prescriptions to her (Fei 2017, 24).

This account demonstrates that Min Huifen established deep connections with audiences across the country. Even during her illness, these connections did not weaken; rather, they further emphasised how her influence transcended music, uniting the nation through the expressive power of the *erhu* and solidifying her status as a cultural icon. Additionally, the government's heightened attention towards Min Huifen's health condition indicated their recognition that her artistic achievements had extended beyond her personal contributions, becoming part of the nation's image and cultural soft power. The government's support was not only a recognition of Min as an individual but also an endorsement and promotion of the entire field of *erhu* culture.

[25] Glorious Blooming New Top Ten *Erhu* Performers Concert. Accessed October 1, 2024. https://youtu.be/Ju--T_3rcTQ?feature=shared

In general, the career of an *erhu* musician would not typically attract such widespread social attention, even if they have been recognised as artists or educators for years. Yet, Min Huifen's influence managed to transcend these expectations. So, how did Min gain such widespread support? Why does she, as an *erhu* musician, hold such strong appeal, almost like a film or pop music star? To explore these questions, I first introduce and analyse her early career and background. I study Min's biographies written by her acquaintances, such as her neighbour Fei Aineng, her colleagues Li Qingfang, musicologist Xiao Xinghua, etc. Then, I review her memoirs to construct her narrative.

3.2 Min's Early Music Career

Min Huifen was born in 1945 in Yixing County, Jiangsu Province, and was the oldest child in her family. Her father, Min Jiqian (1923–2020) loved music, and had been a student of Chu Shizhu (1901–1955), a disciple of Liu Tianhua before becoming an *erhu* teacher at Nanjing Normal University (1956). Min Jiqian's passion for music greatly influenced his children's interest in the art form. Min Huifen's younger brother Min Lekang (b. 1956) grew up to be a conductor, and her younger sister Min Xiaofen (b. 1959) is now a noted jazz *pipa* player in the United States after receiving *pipa* training in China. The Min family children grew up hearing *Jiangnan sizhu*, Sunan *minjian yinyue*, *Tanci*, and Buddhist melodies, among other musical influences (Xiao 1983). like Liu Tianhua, Min Huifen's childhood recollections are replete with *minjian yinyue* and songs. She said, "people in my hometown have a natural love for music: almost every family has a Chinese instrument such as the *erhu* and *dizi*…" (Min 2004, 3).

As a young child, Min Huifen spent a lot of time watching her father play *erhu*, which sparked her own interest in the instrument. As part of a children's musical arts troupe in Nanjing she gained more formal learning opportunities, which had certain modern elements, including training as a choir conductor, as well as piano and music theory (Fei 2017, 21-22). Before preparing her for audition for the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Affiliated Middle School, Min Jiqian invited mainstream musicians, the *dizi* musician Lu Chunling (1921–2018) and a current student, Qu Chunquan (b. 1941), to his home to evaluate Min Huifen's performance and discuss her future career plans. The two musicians noted that there were few girls playing *erhu* in China at that time and felt that higher numbers of female musicians would improve the image of the country or government in the eyes of

the wider world (Fei 2017, 24). At the age of thirteen, in 1958, Min Huifen was accepted by Wang Yi (1919–2002) into the school, where she began her formal music education based on the *erhu* school style.

1963 was a dazzling year for Min Huifen, when she won the one of the first places in the first prize in the *Shanghai zhi chun: erhu bisai* (上海之春：二胡比赛, Shanghai Spring *Erhu* Competition), the first national *erhu* competition held since the establishment of the People's Republic of China.[26] At that time, Min was widely regarded as having surpassed her older competitors, and people from all walks of life came to know Min Huifen in an era when culture and entertainment were not abundant in Mainland China. For instance, comments from the judges were widely circulated, being published in journals like *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐 (*People's Music*), indicating that the authorities had already decided to promote Min Huifen as a model musician (Ding 1963 and Zhang 1963).

Among other things, the repertoire of this competition reveals the development of the "school style" *erhu* in the 1960s, marking an important historical milestone in the *erhu* ecosystem. This competition was not only a contest of skills but also an exploration and impetus for the future development of the *erhu*. According to Qiao Jianzhong's record, the competition was divided into two rounds. In the first round, there are three music pieces to be played and each contestant must also play the solo piece *Bing zhong yin*. Another one is a new piece of music created after 1949. The last one is a self-selected piece of Chinese classical or *minjian yinyue*. Additionally, the second round of the competition consists of four music pieces, including the set pieces, *Kongshan niaoyu* and *Erquan yingyue*; an optional modern and contemporary work and a titled piece *Canlan de wuyue* 灿烂的五月 (Brilliant May), composed by Lu Xiutang (Qiao 2012). This competition format provided participants with a certain degree of personal creative freedom on playing.

Min Huifen's choice of repertoire showcased her playing skill as adaptable to both traditional and modern styles. In the first round, Min Huifen played a piece of music called *Chunnuan huakai* 春暖花开 (Blossoms in the Warm Spring) by Ma Shaochang, as well as *Tingsong* for her traditional

[26] Jiang Xunfeng (b.1935), from the prominent Jiang family and trained by his father, Jiang Fengzhi—one of the deputy directors of the judging committee—also won first prize. However, his score was lower than Min Huifen's, and despite his family's status, his popularity never matched hers.

minjian yinyue piece in the first round of the competition. Then, she competed in the second round with the music solo, *Chunshi* 春诗 (Poem of Spring) which was produced by Guangxi Song and Dance Troupe composer Zhong Yiliang in 1959 and incorporates the *Wubashan* (五把扇) elements of the local *xiqu caidiao* (彩调) in Guangxi Province (Shen 2017). These two *erhu* pieces are full of beautiful melodies and softer musical expression.

Min Huifen's competitors were equally significant in showcasing the development of *erhu* music. They included accomplished musicians who played compositions blending *minjian* or traditional Chinese musical elements with Western musical techniques. These included Lu Rirong's (b. 1933) creation and performance of *Qinqiang zhuti suixiangqu*, Huang Haihuai 's (1935–1967) creation of *Saima* 赛马 (Horse Racing) and *Jianghe shui* and Song Guosheng's performance of *Henan xiaoqu* 河南小曲 (Ditty of Henan), created by Liu Mingyuan (1931–1996). And Wang Guotong played the two new *erhu* pieces *Yubei xushiqu* and *Sanmenxia changxiangqu*, which were composed by Liu Wenjin. These pieces further demonstrated how the *erhu* was evolving beyond its *minjian* roots into more complex and Western musical forms.

The new *erhu* music introduced during the 1963 competition remains well-known and includes challenging solo pieces of the contemporary "school style". However, the competition also highlighted the growing tension between traditional performance expectations and innovative musical creations. One of the most notable examples of this tension was Wang Guotong 's (b. 1939) experience. He referred to the musical match as the "Battle of Waterloo" of his musical career, saying that:

> In the 1963 "Shanghai Spring" *erhu* competition, Xiang Zuying, who acted as the judging committee's secretary, noticed that several judges gave me zero points when collecting scoring sheets. Huang Haihuai, Lu Rirong, and I were ousted in the first round but later advanced to the second round of competition. I was quite emotional at the time and had to continue participating. In the end, I received third place and the Excellent Performance Award for my new piece, "Sanmenxia Fantasy". When I started playing the music before the competition, in addition to some praise, there were also people who alarmingly said that I was leading the *erhu* on a path towards suicide, which reflected their aversion to the innovation in *erhu* performance and composition... (Wang 2019, 108-109).

The 1963 competition not only evaluated performers' technical skills but also served as a

battleground for the acceptance of new musical ideas. Wang Guotong's experience underscored the challenges faced by composers seeking to Westernise *erhu* music. His innovative approach, incorporating Westernised expressive techniques, capriccio form, and piano accompaniment, was met with skepticism from more conservative musicians within the *erhu* community. This controversy highlighted the tension between traditionalists and innovators, with many mainstream musicians resistant to embracing these new forms and techniques.

In the 1960s, *erhu* musicians who attempted to innovate often encountered opposition from traditional forces, reflecting a broader resistance to new repertoire and performance styles. The debate sparked by Wang's work raised important questions about whether *erhu* compositions should remain localised or adopt more global, Western influences. This resistance not only demonstrated the mainstream *erhu* community's cautious attitude towards global musical methods but also revealed a deeper conflict between the arts and political ideologies of the time.

In the 1950s and 1960s, all industry in China was subject to the *"youhong youzhuan"* (又红又专, red and specialist) ideology.[27] The ideas of "prospering socialist culture" and "literature and art serving the people" were central to the government's philosophy, which meant that working-class people should create their own music rather than being affected by the narrow bourgeois ideologies of the West. In the course of various political movements, the government also tightened its grip on music development. For instance, during the educational revolution (1958–1960s), efforts were made to eradicate any inclinations in music instruction that were detached from politics, the general public, reality and conventional wisdom (Li, 1958). The key to suppressing "new *erhu*" music was, therefore, to remove components of music transmission that were not aligned with mainstream culture, political philosophy, or CPC's values.

Mao Zedong (1893–1976) issued a directive in the same year as the Shanghai Spring *Erhu* Competition, highlighting numerous issues in the fields of literature and the arts in China, including theatre, opera, music, fine arts, dance, cinema, poetry and literature, and asserting that the socialist transformation had yielded limited success. Mao argued that although the socio-economic base had

[27] "Red" means having a proletarian world view, and "special" means professional knowledge and skills. This term represents the relationship between politics and techniques in each industry.

changed, the arts sector, as the superstructure, still faced major challenges that required serious investigation and research. He accused some Communists of favouring feudalist and capitalist art rather than actively promoting socialist art (Zhou 2003, 66). As a result, Western-themed musical compositions, such as ballads and fantasies, were criticised harshly in the context of Chinese music serving political aims, as they were seen as being detached from the aesthetic preferences of the masses. The policy restricted how much the impact of the global music system on Chinese music might be accepted and integrated.

Therefore, the two new *erhu* solos Min Huifen chose for the competition did not very clearly emphasise Westernised *erhu* behaviour but were in line with what their predecessors had considered to be the "traditional" content of the *erhu* at the time, i.e. "the *erhu* is not suitable for performing fast music, nor is it suitable for great intensity. It is better at playing slow music and expressing beautiful and deep emotions" (Cui 2010, 33).

Although some of the new *erhu* repertoire had been controversial, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music also included the new musical works emerging from this competition in new training material, and Min Huifen also expanded her repertoire. With practice, her performance even surpassed that of those who had premiered the pieces, such as Wu Suhua (b. 1940), a female musician from Hubei province, who gave the premiere of *Jianghe shui* in the Shanghai Spring competition of 1963. Therefore, besides choosing the "right" music and demonstrating superior playing skills, what other reasons made Min Huifen stand out in this elite contest? Records from the mainstream *erhu* academy system indicate that prior to Min, there had never been a socially significant female *erhu* performer in China. This raises the question: why was this the case?

From a historical standpoint, female *erhu* performers came into their own relatively late, since Han society primarily views music as a male profession. This is because gender roles are determined by deeply embedded social and Confucian norms. The adage "*nanzhuwai, nuzhunei*" (男主外，女主内，male leads outside, female leads inside), taken from the ancient classic *Zhouyi* 周易 (Book of Changes), embodies the principles of gender roles. The feudal system officially ended in 1912, but social traditions prevented women from pursuing higher education until well into the 20th century. However, in the late Qing Dynasty, certain progressive women—like Jin Meiya, Ke Jinying, Kang

Aide and Shi Meiyu—benefitted from Western equality and went on to get advanced degrees on medicine (Wang 2014, 126). Though it happened gradually, the 1920 founding of coeducational universities like Nanjing Normal University signalled a substantial movement in favour of gender inclusion in education (Ren 2019). However, there was still not enough representation of women in the professions, including music.

For example, despite Chen Yaxin being trained in the modern *erhu* system by Liu Tianhua after 1927, her lack of academic background in a music conservatory limited her broader recognition (Yu 2010). Min Huifen's professional development was significantly enhanced by her official music school education and exposure to Western music education, which highlights the disparity in opportunities amongst her predecessors.

Despite the Shanghai Conservatory of Music's tendency to favour male *erhu* students during the 1960s, Min Huifen received significant support from her teachers, as noted in Fei Aineng's record. Key figures like He Luting, Wang Yi, Lu Xiutang (1903–1999), Xiang Zuying, her senior classmate Chen Dachan and Wu Zhimin played crucial roles in her development (Fei 2017, 29-33). Min Huifen successfully navigated these gender biases with help from these individuals and the support of conservatory authorities. Her success not only mirrored the broader societal transformations following the Communist Party's rise to power in 1949 but also challenged the male-dominated *erhu* community. The Communist Party's efforts to promote gender equality in all aspects of life, including the arts, and to mobilise women for national development were part of this shift (Zhang 1996). Min Huifen's personal achievements, in conjunction with these changes, not only redefined the *erhu*'s role in Chinese music but also expanded the audience's appreciation and enhanced the visibility of female musicians in a society in transition.

Shortly after the music competition, Shanghai Record Company in China recorded her *erhu* solo piece, *Kongshan niaoyu*, which was the first time Min Huifen had been recorded (Fei 2017, 39). At the same time, at the Shanghai Conservatory it was decided to let Min Huifen go straight to college level and study under Lu Xiutang, who was also the chairman of the judging committee in 1963. From that point on, Min Huifen embarked on a twin-track journey as both a professional *erhu* performer and a freshman student at Shanghai Conservatory of Music. She gained more Western

musical knowledge and had the opportunity to participate in more musical activities. Her first musical creation was imbued with the political spirit of the times.

The ideological quest for "model" communes, labourers and entertainers simultaneously raised several impoverished personalities to the position of national or local idols. The renowned musician favoured blending artistic achievements with appropriate low socioeconomic status or revolutionary origins (Rees 2009, 4). The first time Min's musical creation reflected this trend was when she formed the *erhu* and *guzheng* trio *Laopinnong hua jiashi* 老贫农话家史 (Recounts of an Old Farmers) with her female classmates Pu Qizhang, Wang Changyuan (b. 1945) and Wang Zheng at the Shanghai Spring Music Festival in 1965. In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution in July 1966, the music was published by the Chinese record agency (see Fig 3.2). In the terms of content, this music originated from three northern *minjian* songs taught at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music at that time, *Langong nan* 老农难 (Difficulty in Recruiting Workers), *Fang Sijie xiang niangjia* 方四姐想娘家 (Fang Sijie Misses her Hometown) and *Fanshen daoqing* 翻身道情 (Joy of Emancipation) (Zhang 2007, 190).



Fig 3.2 "*Laopinnong hua jiashi*", Album cover. Photograph by author.

In the cover of this album we can see some metaphorical information. Firstly, the overall colour scheme presents the colour of a five-star red flag (national flag), with red as the fundamental tone. The sickle symbolises the Chinese worker using non-electrical tools, the rifle with a bayonet reflects the army and the golden rice ears represent the peasant class, which is consistent with the colour of the stars on the five-star red flag. On the upper right corner, there are the signs of the China Record Group, Tiananmen and ornamental column. They symbolise the absolute control of the CPC regime over the spread of culture and art. In the overlapping part of the pattern, we can also see that the sickle rifle and rice ears are both in front of the music staff, which could metaphorically represent the idea that in the red regime music should first express political correctness, rather than the music itself. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the cover features a musical staff chart set against a vibrant red background, with the title "*Laopinnong huajiashi*" elegantly inscribed in Chinese brush script. It implicitly acknowledges the necessity of incorporating Western experiences and technologies in the dissemination of music.

The record cover is an accurate portrayal of Chinese music since 1960, in that all music is subordinate to the communist regime and music and the arts need to connect with the majority of people in the context of the CPC, namely farmers, workers and soldiers. It also shows the collision and integration of Chinese music and Western culture, a process that, despite ongoing interactions, remained fundamentally shaped by the CPC's authoritarian control. The impact of politics on music became increasingly intense and reached a peak of unity of thought and consciousness during the Cultural Revolution. By 1967, in addition to continuing hostile relations with the United States and the Soviet Union, China had diplomatic disputes with Britain, India, Czechoslovakia, etc. (Bu 2006, 37-41). During this time, China employed a strategy of "open hiding" where it outwardly rejected foreign influences while subtly preserving and incorporating certain global practices. This approach was part of China's stance against both the First and Second Worlds, allowing the country to assert its ideological and political independence while still selectively benefiting from global interactions.

Min Huifen's musical work reflected this dynamic, particularly through both her compositions and performances. Her engagement with ensemble performance, a form rooted in the Western musical system but adapted and integrated into Chinese music during this era, exemplifies this

interaction. Through her musical creations, Min showcased profound insight into the development of music within the intertwined realms of politics and art—an insight that permeated her entire musical career.

3.3 Min's Performances in the Era of the Cultural Revolution

The modern music education system at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music was a clear product of Western music knowledge, which was strongly criticised by politically correct thinking during the Cultural Revolution. Min Huifen recalled this history in the 2000s. In 1966, Min was 21. Her main tutor, Lu Xiutang, committed suicide by jumping into the river, and the imprisonment of her former tutor, Wang Yi hampered Min Huifen's training. Because Min was supported by He Luting in 1963, when he was criticised during the Cultural Revolution, Min was also boycotted and was referred to as a "black seedling of He Luting" by the Red Guards. Subsequently, Min was sent to the suburbs of Shanghai, Fengxian, for labour reform. The college career of Min was completed during a difficult period of political turbulence in China (Min 2004, 83).

As Min Huifen wrote in her recollection, there was only class struggle between people at that time, the people who had knowledge and skills were overthrown and Chinese music was suppressed (Min 2004, 83). However, this challenging social environment did not hinder Min Huifen's musical practice during that extraordinary historical period. I checked Min Huifen's music activities during the Cultural Revolution on her official website.[28] Her identity as a female in the male-dominated erhu field, along with her keen understanding of the political climate and ability to align with it, allowed her to access performance opportunities that were unavailable to most other *erhu* musicians. Min also interpreted the meaning of *erhu* music from the standpoint of the government and connected it with political movements, which transformed her into a public celebrity in the framework of the CPC during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1973, Min Huifen was ordered to perform in Beijing during her labour work in the village and prepared to perform the music pieces *Xisong gongliang* 喜送公粮 (Happily Delivering the Communal Grain) and *Erquan yingyue* on stage in Beijing. However, due to Jiang Qing's (1914–

[28] Min Huifen's official website: http://minhuifen.com/performance.php?lang=zh&pk=1&dptnam=5#

1991) decision,[29] *Erquan yingyue* was replaced with the *erhu* recital piece *Jianghe shui*. This change underscores how even *minjian minjian yinyuejia* like Abing, renowned for *Erquan yingyue,* could be targeted and maligned during the Cultural Revolution. Abing was publicly denounced for his Taoist beliefs and drug addiction, reflecting the regime's broader campaign against what it deemed "backward" feudal superstitions. Conversely, Huang Haihuai, the composer of the *erhu* solo *Jianghe shui*, despite facing criticism and enduring delayed medical treatment for liver cancer, saw his composition stand the test of time. Its longevity can be attributed to the piece's exceptional adaptability and its capacity to resonate with evolving cultural and political narratives, shaped by interpretations from both musicians and politicians.

Originally a light and lively northeast *minjian yinyue* used in local rituals, *Jianghe shui* underwent a profound transformation when adapted into a *guanzi* (pipe) solo and premiered in 1962. Its mood shifted to a sympathetic melody that expressed the sadness of the people's life. Later, the melody of *Jianghe shui* was selected in 1964 as the soundtrack for the first scene in *Dongfang Hong* 东方红 (*The East Is Red: A Song and Dance Epic*), an epic portrayal of the struggles and resilience of the poor. This adaptation preserved and sanctioned *Jianghe shui* during the Cultural Revolution, symbolising a forced representation of the harsh realities of the old era and metaphorically reflecting people's struggle against suffering (Fei 2017, 65-69).

As a result of cultural leader 's interpretation, this *erhu* solo piece lost all its original significance as an element of *minjian* ritual. In Min Huifen's memory essay "Sujin renjian beiqie" 诉尽人间悲切 (Telling All the Sorrows of the World),[30] Min eloquently revisited the profound connection between the iconic *Dongfang hong* and the thematic essence of *Jianghe shui*, interpreting the political and musical dance motifs as a deep reflection of the *Jianghe shui* 's narrative. She shared a poignant episode from 1966 when, while navigating the Yangtze River in Sichuan Provence, she engaged with local fishermen, drawing inspiration from their interactions to lament on the existential challenges faced by those who dwell along its banks. She described it as capturing an

[29] Mao Zedong's fourth wife (Mao was her third husband), she was one of the main leaders of the Communist Party of China during the Cultural Revolution.

[30] These words were spoken by the Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa. In the spring of 1977, he listened to the author of this article perform *Jianghe shui* in the rehearsal hall of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Deeply moved, he wept over the table and uttered the above words. The author cites this phrase as the title to honour Ozawa's profound understanding of the emotions of the Chinese people.

overwhelming sadness that resonates deeply with the listener, thereby underscoring the authentic emotional depth of the music and the enduring melancholy that survived the tumultuous era of the Cultural Revolution (Min 2004, 44-48).

During the Cultural Revolution, Min Huifen was once again connected to the people of the impoverished lower middle class who had recently gained political status through the *erhu*. Under the ideology of the time, cultural and artistic expressions, including the *erhu*, were redefined to align with the values of the working class. As an instrument historically associated with *minjian* traditions and grassroots performance, the *erhu* was embraced as a medium for expressing the struggles and triumphs of the labouring masses. Through state-supported propaganda and model works, music became a tool for reinforcing class consciousness, allowing those from formerly marginalised backgrounds to assert their political presence.

Min Huifen infused the sorrow and silent resistance of society's lower classes into the strings of the *erhu*, conveying profound emotions and compassion for suffering through her music. In the third section of the piece, she introduced an intensely emotional, explosive expression, emphasising that it "requires the performer to channel the utmost passion and strength" (Min 2004, 48). As a result, Min and her *erhu* music also became one of the voices of confrontation on behalf of the labouring masses exploited by capitalism and feudalism at that time.

However, composer Huang Haihuai initially intended for the emotional tone of the piece to be personal and sorrowful, rather than adopting the typical heroic and combative style of revolutionary works. According to the original performer Wu Suhua, when she practised the *erhu* music, she thought of women who missed their husbands serving in the military, particularly *Meng Jiangnu.*[31] Wu also recalled Huang Haihuai humorously using a metaphor, saying, "during the performance, it shouldn't exude the revolutionary resistance spirit of *The Red Detachment of Women*..."[32] Wu

[31] Chinese folktale, Meng Jiangnu, known as the eldest daughter of Qin in the pre-Qin period, whose story was fixed in the Tang Dynasty as taking place at the Great Wall under the reign of the Emperor Qin Shi Huang. Shortly after her marriage, her husband Wan Qiliang was conscripted to build the Great Wall and died tragically. Meng Jiangnü, who had travelled a long way to bring him clothes, arrived at the Great Wall to learn the sad news, wept so bitterly that the Wall collapsed, and eventually found her husband's bones in a pile of white bones. Qin Shi Huang was so impressed by her chastity that he wanted to take her as a concubine, but she eventually killed herself on Qinhuang Island to show her loyalty to her husband.

[32] The film *The Red Detachment of Women*, made in 1962, was a great success and was adapted into a ballet in 1964, which was classified as one of the models plays during the Cultural Revolution. The story is set in the 1930s, Wu Qionghua, a servant girl from

believed that the original way Huang Haihuai taught her to play *Jianghe shui* at the time set the standard for *erhu* performance of the piece (Wu, 2007).

The reinterpretation of *Jianghe shui* reflects why did *erhu* playing become an efficient propaganda tool of the CPC? One important reason could be the CPC's desire to use *minjian* or regional instruments to communicate easily digestible concepts to the Chinese people. Tunes played on these instruments have the potential to lift people's spirits and become entangled with their daily lives. As a result, the Party intended to develop a common ground and use music to strengthen ties with the masses. Although these instruments had been brought to the stage and higher education, their *minjian* attributes were still strong. This is an excellent example of how Chinese musical instruments can bring people together. When these instruments collectively express a consensual perspective in a larger community, that is, when they are entwined with human perception and impression, they begin to acquire symbolic features and become signs of this group's macro narratives, created by politicians.

Since then, musical performers such as Min Huifen continued to serve as a mediators between the CPC government and the outside world. Later, the government organised these musicians into the Chinese Art Troupe. The aim for this art group was to express the government's philosophy through music. In 1974, Min Huifen was transferred from Shanghai Conservatory of Music to the Chinese Art Troupe.[33] That was an important opportunity in Min Huifen's musical career. So, how did Min Huifen function in this context?

To take one example, Min Huifen chose the *erhu* solo, *Jianghe shui* and *Xisong gongliang* to perform in the Republic of Mongolia, but she also wanted to show more recent ideology of the CPC, so she collaborated with the female composer Shen Liqun (b. 1932) to adapt and create another *erhu* piece with a communist identity, *Hongqi qushui rao Taihang* 红旗渠水绕太行 (The Red Flag Canal Winds Around the Taihang Mountains) to celebrate the deeds connected with the Red Flag

Hainan Island, escapes from landlord Nanbatian with the help of Communist Party member Hong Changqing and joins the Red Women's Army. After a failed military operation, Wu Qionghua realises the true meaning of joining the army. Later, after Hong Changqing dies in a battle, Wu Qionghua leads the Red Maiden Scouts to destroy Nanbatian and eventually becomes a company commander.

[33] In accordance with Chairman Mao's 'May 7th Directive,' members of the Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music were sent to rural areas in batches to participate in labour training. In 1968, Min Huifen was assigned to the 15th Squad of the Hongxing Brigade in Nanhui County, a suburban area of Shanghai. In 1970, Min officially joined the Shanghai Conservatory of Music as an assistant instructor.

Canal in Henan Province, excavated by Chinese workers and peasants in an era of food and clothing scarcity. (Fei 2017, 77-82).

This example shows how Min Huifen skilfully used *erhu* playing to complement and propagate the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, which also reflects how music culture can be used as a tool in the process of globalisation to disseminate specific political and social ideologies internationally. By performing abroad, Min Huifen not only showcased Chinese music and art, but also conveyed the values and stories of the Chinese Communist Party, an approach that embodies the strategy of "soft power" in cultural globalisation. Through her music, Min Huifen helped shape international perceptions of Chinese politics and culture, an example of the combination of cultural exchange and political advocacy in globalisation.

As a "*renmin yinyuejia*" in the context of the CPC at time, Min not only used *erhu*, but also took the human voice to speak for China. There is an event recorded in Min Huifen's autobiography, the performance for USA President Nixon's visit to China in 1974, which included a recital of the *erhu* piece *Saima*. This music was questioned by the Mongolian government as its music element originate from one of their military songs, suggesting that its use in China's international affairs was inappropriate (see Fig 3.3). To which Min Huifen pointed out, in defence of her own state, that China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region borders Mongolia and that consequently such music, with elements of Mongolian ethnic style, can also legitimately be used in China (Min 2012, 24).



Fig. 3.3 *Part of the Red Flag Song from Huang Haihuai's version of* "*Saima*". Source: Wang, *Erhu qu Saima liangge banbende chuancheng yu chuanbo*, 2006.

After that, the quick-witted Min Huifen used this chance to invite composer Shen Liqun to change the overlapping melodies and condense the complete musical structure as an encore. She copied the program tradition of Western concerts, with the goal of providing audiences with a brief, compact and technically expressive encore music at the conclusion to heighten their excitement. The new version of the *erhu* recital piece *Saima* often lasts only one and a half minutes, which is considerably shorter than Huang Haihuai's three and a half-minute performance. The adaptation of Shen Liqun goes like this:



Fig. 3.4 *Part of the Red Flag Song from Shen Liqun's version of* "*Saima*". Source: Wang, *Erhu qu Saima liangge banbende chuancheng yu chuanbo*, 2006.

Later, Min Huifen using her playing skill to make the music more vivid, going beyond the original music score, making the modified *Saima* a performance version that has been passed down to contemporary performers. *Saima* has become one of the best-known representative works of Min Huifen at a global level. So, what does this famous *erhu* piece reflect, triggered as it was by international conflicts?

The cultural conflict over Mongolian military songs shows China's territorial growth and the intricate history it has generated with an interconnected world. And the intrinsic conflict over ownership of music culture between China's Mongolian ethnic group and Mongolia's homogeneous culture illustrates the two countries' efforts to establish uniqueness for their separate ethnic identities through fragmentation and competitiveness in the 1970s.

From which it can be seen that Min Huifen and the *erhu* played a role in promoting sovereignty and territorial power on that time. From Min Huifen's defence, the musical piece *Saima* reconceptualised people's conventional ideas about the origin of the *huqin,* underlining the point that the *huqin* originated from nomadic ethnic groups in northern China, which reflects the CPC's attempt to emphasise regional and ethnic ownership from the historical map of feudal society and imperial conquest. Although Shen and Min intended for their adaptation of *Saima* to imbue the piece with a "Mongolian stylistic flavour" this version also exemplifies a specialised and globalised approach to music creation. Yet, despite these intentions, the adaptation shares little in common with traditional local *minjian yinyue* (D'Evelyn 2018, 26).

However, Min Huifen fulfilled her promise as a "*renmin yinyuejia*" through her musical activities. Her performances and adaptations were not merely artistic expressions but were deeply embedded in the larger socio-political fabric of China during a time when cultural diplomacy played a critical role in national and international politics.

In 1975, Min Huifen received a "special mission" to perform for Mao Zedong who was being operated on for cataracts in Beijing. She used the erhu to imitate the singing of several famous *jingju* players. Such as *Yeshenchen* 夜深沉 (The Deep Night) , *Wenzhaoguan* 文昭关 (Wenzhao Pass), *Xiaoyaojin* 逍遥津 (Xiaoyao Ford), etc. which are also famous melody segments that Mao liked (Min 2004, 24). In the process of imitation and learning, Min Huifen developed her own playing ideology into a musical style, the *erhu* "shengqianghua" (二胡声腔化) , which means the erhu imitating the human voice. In her subsequent music career, she continued to expand the skill, going beyond the Beijing Opera to delve into other Chinese opera genres as well, such as local operas accompanied on the *minjian huqin*. She thus made of the *erhu* a powerful national *minjian* instrument that surpassed the *huqin* and rivalled the human voice.

Min Huifen's prestige was elevated by Mao Zedong's actions with the support of the nation, which enhanced her political identity and the legitimacy of her professional performance and made her not only a musical star but also an expert on the *erhu* in academia. At the same time, Beijing Film Studio produced a colourful stage art film, *Baihua zhengyan* 百花争艳 (A Hundred Flowers Compete for Beauty), which included excellent musical works and featured experts in the field of

Chinese culture and art in the 1960–1970s. As a leading figure of the era, Min Huifen was featured in the tenth program, where she performed *Jianghe shui* and a compressed version of the "new" *Saima* (see Fig 3.5).



Fig 3.5 Min Huifen performing *Jianghe shui.* Screenshot taken by the author from the film "*Baihua zhengyan*".

Insofar as we are aware, during the Cultural Revolution, due to strict government control, people had limited options for entertainment. The premiere of this movie helped foster a perception of *erhu* performance as a civilised profession, which went beyond a stereotyped impression of a non-feudal society. For example, Zhang Zunlian (b. 1968), a professor of *erhu* at the China Conservatory of Music, also mentioned in Min Huifen's memorial article that his first impression of *erhu* originated from Min Huifen's performance of *Jianghe shui*:

> I remember in the 1970s when I watched an arts film called *Baihua Zhengyan*. At that time, the tearful sound of the female *erhu* performer Min Huifen, who played *Jianghe shui* shook my heart. I hoped I could study at a music conservatory … In October 1976, I was admitted to the School of Music Affiliated to the Central University of the Arts in Beijing, and began a formal and professional music journey… (Zhang 2013, 259-61)

This “tearful” style in music performance reflects the official advocacy of artistic expression during the Cultural Revolution, which conveyed political information and social education through exaggerated emotions and actions, rather than authentically depicting the musician’s personal inner world. Another *erhu* musician, Wang Guotong, mentioned in his memoirs the specific requirements of the authorities for *erhu* musicians to perform *Jianghe shui* at that time. Wang Guotong was encouraged to include exaggerated expressions in his performances in order to highlight the distinct temperament of the Cultural Revolution when he travelled to Venezuela and other Latin American nations in 1975 with a Chinese art group. Due to Min recording *jingju* music for Mao Zedong at that time, Wang had the opportunity to participate in international performances (Wang 2020, 114-115). The government’s tight control over creative forms of expression and its ability to utilise art as a vehicle for political messaging are demonstrated by this standard performance requirement, and Min Huifen is the candidate who best aligned with the political expression of the CPC during the Cultural Revolution.

During the period spent working in the Chinese Arts Troupe, Min Huifen and her *erhu* entered the stage of literature and art in a political environment. Therefore, the *erhu*, as the highest form of Chinese national *minjian yinyue*, began to feature in entertainments provided for visiting heads of state. According to Fang Liping’s collected documents on Min Huifen’s chronology, from 1975 to 1976, Min Huifen performed *Jianghe shui* for the leaders of North Korea and Sudan. The *erhu* had become a political bridge connecting countries. And *Jianghe shui*, reinterpreted by the regime, was believed by Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiry (1930–2009) to be consistent with the suffering of the Chinese people and the African people, as well as recognised by Kim Il sung (1912–1994), the former President of North Korea. After listening to the music, Kim Il sung held Min Huifen’s hand and said that her performance had captivated him. He also asked his family to listen and appreciate her music (Fang 2004, 319-320). Min Huifen and her *erhu* imaginatively employed music on the stage of international diplomacy to connect with heads of state, with their diverse languages and the countries they represented at a macro level.

However, as we know, music without lyrics can be freely interpreted and imagined and occupies a space inside human consciousness and expression. When Jiang Qing's leadership came to an end,[34] the Chinese Art Troupe, which had been the voice to politics, was disbanded. On January 1, 1977, the Shanghai cultural and artistic community celebrated the political organisation's demise with a major joint performance on the enormous stage of Shanghai Cultural Square. A sizable crowd witnessed the debut performance of Min Huifen's *erhu* solo, *Honghu renminde xinyuan* 洪湖人民的心愿 (The Wish of the People of Honghu) (Fang 2004, 320). When the socioeconomic situation stabilised, Min Huifen renamed her composition *Honghu zhuti suixiangqu* 洪湖主题随想曲 (Honghu Capriccio). Once more going with the political flow and using the logic of appropriation, Min Huifen made an *erhu* solo of the significant aria *Kantianxia laokurenmin dejiefang* 看天下劳苦人民得解放 (To See Liberation for All Oppressed People) performed by the female lead Han Ying in the Chinese Opera *Honghu chiweidui* 洪湖赤卫队 (Red Guards of Honghu Lake).

This decision symbolically celebrated the political decisions of the era that liberated those who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the fact that this story was created in the 1930s, it portrays the conflict between the Kuomintang and the CPC. It narrates how communist guerilla troops overthrew the tycoons and freed the poor through the Communist Party. Min took a CPC's policies, that liberation is always the people's wish, and connected it with the current political situation. Additionally, we may observe that Western musical forms such as the Capriccio were reintegrated into Chinese compositions, marking a revival of Chinese music's development within the broader global musical context at the end of 1970s.

After that, Min Huifen let the *erhu* continue to serve as a Chinese national musical instrument and continued to promote its role in current affairs and politics. For instance, she also brought the music to console the troops on Xu Shiyou during the Vietnam War in 1979 (Fei 2017, 123-124). Furthermore, Min never forgot to interact with the common people as part of her musical ideology. In 1979, Min Huifen officially transferred to the the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, which was established in that year. Then, she accepted the commission to perform in Zhejiang to connect with the memories and the sense of identity of the audience's hometown. Therefore, she especially

[34] "Jiang Qing lidership" refers to the radical political and cultural administration led by Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), notorious for imposing strict ideological control over arts and culture.

transplanted the singing style of the same name from the *yueju* (越剧, Yue opera) *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 (Dream of Red Mansions) into the *erhu* solo *Baoyu Kuling* 宝玉哭灵 (Cry of Baoyu) and performed it for the first time in Zhejiang Province (Fei 2017, 117). In 1981, during a medical examination, Min Huifen unexpectedly discovered a tumour in her waist, after which her body began to deteriorate.

Chinese officials were concerned about Min Huifen's devastating illness. Many *erhu* fanatics, including Jiang Zemin (1926–2022), Zhu Rongji (b. 1928), Zeng Qinghong (b. 1939) and others, brought her illness to the attention of the public. According to Min's memory, she responded as follows:

> Comrade Zeng Qinghong's driver came to my hospital bed with a tape recorder and said that it was given to me by Zeng as decided upon by the Shanghai Municipal Committee. The leader of the Committee said, "When you recover from your illness, it will be useful for your musical work." This matter was confirmed by Comrade Zhao Qizheng, the leader of the Shanghai municipal party committee and deputy city mayor, during this year's National Day. He said, "During the Spring Festival, Comrade Qinghong visited Min Huifen's home. Speaking of it, Chinese artists are so poor that Min Huifen doesn't have a decent recorder." The decision was made to invite the driver to deliver a tape recorder from the municipal party committee to my ward. I was moved to tears at the time and was greatly encouraged in spirit.
>
> This indicates that the municipal party committee leaders did indeed do their best to save me, a severely ill person. In the past, they came to the hospital time and time again, and helped me in various ways, from the formulation of treatment plans to the care of life, as well as offering spiritual encouragement. At that time, I made a solemn oath: if I could overcome my illness, I would become a hero and contribute to the cultural cause of the Party and people, as well as the development of Chinese music (Min 2004, 30-35)

Even though Min Huifen's public image was designed to show her as humble and unassuming, there is evidence that some elements of her life story may have been exaggerated. Fei Aineng's memoirs state that she received a recorder from Marshal Ye Jianying (1897–1986) during the Cultural Revolution, which demonstrated her high standing (Fei 2017, 76). As a well-known people's musician, Min continued performing and teaching despite facing medical challenges and undergoing surgery. Her performance of Liu Wenjin's grandiose concerto *Great Wall Capriccio* at the 1982 "Shanghai Spring" music festival marked her debut of the piece. She was compared to the

everlasting Great Wall in these performances, which might have enhanced her determination and led to an idealised depiction of her persona. While her strong resolve and deep faith were genuine, this image also served a larger political purpose. Min's music not only reflected personal strength but also embodied China's cultural resilience, symbolizing an alternative vision to Western dominance. Her performances represented a powerful narrative of national endurance, aligning with China's efforts to project a unique and independent identity on the global stage.

3.4 The Era of The Great Wall Capriccio

The Cultural Revolution caused significant harm to China's ethical principles and societal framework, resulting in the disregard and dilapidation of several domains of arts and culture. Nevertheless, with the increasing relaxation of constraints, the creative and cultural community managed to identify fresh prospects for expansion. In due course, this transition created new opportunities for musicians. Furthermore, with the introduction of "economic reforms" in the 1980s, the formerly ambiguous boundaries with Western culture (including music) started to become more evident and had a growing impact on the Chinese art scene. The exposure marked the beginning of a new period of worldwide cultural inclusivity for Chinese musicians, including *erhu* performers, allowing them to engage in and make valuable contributions to the global interchange of musical concepts.

Using an independent movements and symphonic structure, the Capriccio *erhu* piece entitled "The Great Wall" was premiered at Shanghai Spring in May 1982, with composer Liu Wenjin, soloist Min Huifen and the Shanghai National Orchestra soloist and conductor Qu Chunquan. The initial performance of the musical work was inspired by the soaring Chinese nationalism at a specific cultural moment of official recognition of China's openness and integration with the world in all aspects. Min Huifen mentioned the inspiration for *The Great Wall Capriccio*.

> The large-scale erhu concerto *The Great Wall Capriccio* was born in 1982. That era marked a period shortly after the end of the tumultuous ten-year Cultural Revolution in China, a time when the country was struggling to recover and rebuild. The economy was impoverished, people's lives were difficult and the younger generation had lost their ideals and pursuits. It became our generation's historical responsibility to awaken the patriotic spirit of the Chinese nation, using the power of music to inspire the Chinese people's sense of dignity and determination.

> Composer Liu Wenjin worked meticulously on this piece for three years, from 1979 to 1981, planning, conceptualising and composing until the completion of the full score. It was an enormous creative endeavour and I was a witness to the process (Min 2002/2004, 13).

What kind of story does this music tell and what can we say about the inner logic of its creation? Below I summarise the various interpretations Liu Wenjin and Min Huifen gave about *The Great Wall Capriccio*.

Composer Liu Wenjin takes an imaginary journey across northern China, utilising the Great Wall, which has a history of over two thousand years, as the title to describe his feelings as he travels through the landscape. On the surface, each movement elaborates on the title, but when viewed holistically, it leverages the Great Wall's cultural and historical position as a carrier of meaning, conveying profound affiliation with the nation and the future of China. From *Guanshanxing* 关山行 (First Movement: Through the Mountain Pass) through the setbacks and destruction of *Fenghuocao* 烽火操 (Second Movement: Beacon Fire) to the sorrow of *Zhonghunji* 忠魂祭 (Third Movement: Memorial Ritual) and finally to *Yaowangpian* 遥望篇 (Fourth Movement: Looking Afar) the four movements are full of poetry and sincerely carry the composer's thoughts (Liu 1984, 109-111).

The opening movement *Guanshanxing* evokes a remote yearning for the past with a spirit akin to *guqin* music. The *erhu* solo is like a poet, wandering around Mountain Guan at times, or drifting off into contemplation, engrossed in the thousands of years of history that have shaped the Chinese people and reflecting on the country's ups and downs. Following the first movement, the second movement *Fenghuocao* uses the musical elements of *jinghu* and *jingju* music to describe war scenes with swords and knives and praises through music the heroic spirit of laying down one's life on the battlefield. The third movement clearly conveys the artistic notion of loyal souls buried everywhere in the green mountains and heroes both inside and outside the Great Wall. It communicates sadness and reverence for the nameless heroes who gave their lives over thousands of years to defend their motherland through the melancholic melody and introspective demeanour at which the *erhu* excels. Finally, the capriccio leads without a break in the music onto the intensity of celebrating the heroic spirit in the joyful fourth movement. The brilliant theme of the *jingyun dagu* (京韵大鼓, Story-Telling in the Beijing Dialect with Drum Accompaniment), which is rich in dance rhythm, and the

increasingly speeding stacker board in the fourth movement *Fenghuocao* symbolise the hopeful spirit of marching forward with plentiful and complete musical power. In the magnificent ending, the theme of *The Great Wall* in the preface of the first movement is reproduced, once again emphasising the firm belief in China with its feet on the ground, looking forward to the future of the world at that time (Liu 1984, 111-14).

Min Huifen wrote a modern Chinese poem inspired by this musical ideology and expression, showcasing her romantic interpretation and figuratively reflecting the spirit of nationalism and China's ascent in political economics and global stature. This performer sets the intellectual and emotional tone for this music in the school style's playing. (Min 2008/2013, 41).

《长城随想》之 "随想"

山海关，天下第一关，龙头掀浪渤海湾。
八达岭，雄踞人云端，北国霜天红烂漫。
关山重，故城万里远，龙尾横扫大漠边。
噫！
阅尽千古兴亡，凭吊世代豪杰。
吁！
咏怀捐躯英魂，悲怆疆场泪血。
呜呼！感叹华裔汉胄，力创丰功伟绩。
巨龙腾飞，长啸万里，方展宏图伟业。
金蛇狂舞，天地共震，势同电闪霹雳。

***The Great Wall Capriccio*: "Imagination"**

Shanhaiguan, the first pass under heaven,
Dragon's head stirs waves in Bohai Bay.
Badaling, majestically stands above the clouds,
The northern sky is ablaze with frost and crimson.

Mountains upon mountains,
The ancient city stretches far into the distance,
The dragon's tail sweeps across the desert edge.

Ah!

I witness the rise and fall of millennia,

Paying tribute to heroes across generations.

Alas!

I sing in memory of the souls who sacrificed

Their blood and tears shed on the battlefield.

Oh!

I sigh in admiration of Chinese descendants,

Who strove to create monumental achievements.

The mighty dragon soars,

Roaring across the vast lands,

Unfolding its grand vision.

The golden serpent dances wildly,

Shaking heaven and earth,

With the force of lightning and thunder. (Author's translation 2024).

The authoritative interpretations provided by the principal musicians of *The Great Wall Capriccio* set an international standard and intellectual framework for subsequent *erhu* performances. This piece of music not only represents recent shifts in state authority and the creation of novel foreign relations strategies but also encapsulates the increasing assurance among artists to explore a broader musical realm. The concerto's unique structural design reflects this confidence by deviating from the conventional single–A-B-A layout of older *erhu* pieces and adopting a more intricate arrangement. Furthermore, the musical style exhibits two main characteristics.

First and foremost, in terms of creative qualities, it demonstrates the amalgamation of Western and Chinese musical components. This fusion represents a wider pattern in worldwide cultural interactions, where indigenous customs are deeply integrated with global influences, exemplifying a fundamental part of cultural globalisation theory: the blending of global and local components to generate novel cultural manifestations. Over the following four decades, this pattern led to the

development of a new model in the production of large-scale *erhu* music, characterised by the appearance of symphonic *erhu* compositions like the two Rhapsody series of Wang Jianmin and George Gao respectively. This community of composers has passionately embraced the instrumental genres that were prevalent during the European Baroque period, combining them with the traditional Chinese *erhu* for the global recognition of the instrument. The trend highlights the important role of globalisation in revamping conventional cultural manifestations, thus enhancing their accessibility and resonance with worldwide audiences.[35]

Secondly, as regards *erhu* performance techniques, the composition of this piece inherits the *erhu*'s "traditional" playing skills, such as vocal simulation, and highlights expressions similar to those achieved on the violin, such as fast fingering, hand positioning and rich string rubbing colours, promoting *erhu* musical expression once more (Min 1985/2012, 23-24). Furthermore, the accompaniment of the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra also indicates that *erhu* music had moved beyond the constraints of the traditional performance paradigm using *yangqin* or small *minjian* band accompaniment, and has taken a more professional, academic and globalised mode. This transformation not only advanced the reform of *erhu* performance techniques but also laid the foundation for its development on the international stage.

During this period, as China fully integrated into international competition, cultural soft power gradually became a key aspect of its national image. The new form of *erhu* music encouraged Min Huifen and the *erhu* to engage with the world in innovative ways while also taking on the mission of showcasing China's cultural identity. As a symbol of traditional Chinese music, the *erhu* engaged in international exchanges, using its innovative forms to enhance the nation's cultural influence. And this point was stressed in the media promotion of the recording made of the piece by a Chinese media industry that had recovered energy following the reform and opening up of the 1980s. On the cover of the vinyl album released by a Chinese record company in 1982, we can clearly see the music title translated and annotated in English on a sketch of the Great Wall using Western art techniques, and the English version of the introduction and explanation is also printed on the back cover. It expresses the *erhu*'s desire to go global as a Chinese national music (see Fig 3.6 and Fig

[35] More comprehensive analysis of these advancements will be presented in the subsequent two chapters, emphasising the *erhu*'s capacity for adaptation to and growth in the globally recognised field of music.

3.7). And the other two pieces of music on the album, *Yue'er gao* 月儿高 (The Moon Rises High) and *Feitian* 飞天 (Flying Apsaras) can metaphorically represent the fact that the world has a common moon, and China hopes to receive equal treatment and international breakthroughs in more fields in the future.



Fig 3.6 "Music Album, *The Great Wall Capriccio* Front Cover". Photograph by the author.



Fig 3.7 "Music Album, *The Great Wall Capriccio* Back Cover". Photograph by the author.

Min Huifen toured internationally and recorded multiple albums over the next several decades, attracting *erhu* fans from all over the world. She also took *The Great Wall Capriccio* with her *erhu* and ventured into new places. For instance, she gave annual concerts in Taiwan from 1991 to 1997. In addition, her playing has been featured on important stages and in recording studios in the United States, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. The album "*Jianghe shui*", which was recorded in Canada in 2000, was released by First Impression Music Inc. in the United States and ended up in the "Top Ten" of the World Ten Thousand Records Competition organised by Hong Kong's "Sound World" magazine in 2001.[36] These achievements reflected Min Huifen's aspiration to transcend musical and geographical barriers, linking her national identity to the music she played and improving blood ties with Taiwan, Macao and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asian countries, tempering the intricacies of politics and the heterogeneity of people's thinking and beliefs.

In addition to music, Min Huifen transformed her dynamic performance techniques into materials and sold them around the world. She has made significant contributions to the school style *erhu* promotion through textbooks, media dissemination, performances and by other means. In the 1990s, radio recording equipment became more popular in family homes and became an auxiliary tool for some students to learn music in China. Min published a set of teaching materials called *Erhu mingqu kalaok* 二胡名曲卡拉 OK (*Erhu* Famous Song with Karaoke), which is of pioneering significance for training. From July to October 1991, Min Huifen recorded the "*Erhu* Famous Songs Karaoke" cassette and released two scores under the same title, conducted by Qu Chunquan and accompanied by the Shanghai National Orchestra. In 1992, it was released by the Shanghai Company and China Record Company and contains 23 classic *erhu* pieces dating back to Liu Tianhua's era, as well as a large number of performance skills and music exercises written by Min Huifen herself.

Composer Lu Yun (b. 1981) told me in an interview that she flew from Taiwan to Shanghai practically every winter and summer during her middle school years to study with Min Huifen. During the semester in Taiwan, Min Huifen's textbooks were used for daily practice. Her classmates were also using it. Min enjoys a high level of popularity and a huge fan base in Taiwan.[37] Unlike

[36] Min Huifen Official Website. "Activity Timeline." Accessed September 15, 2024. http://minhuifen.com/activity.php?lang=cn&pk=7&dptnam=4.
[37] Lu Yun, personal communication. October 10, 2021.

other mainstream *erhu* musicians who settled overseas after the reform and opening,[38] as a purveyor of school style erhu playing and a representative figure of official power, Min's political affiliation and influence gained her Communist Party honours, and she served as a representative of the Communist Party of China's National People's Congress and the March 8th Red Flag bearer. Her musical career is inextricably linked with the CPC's politics (Liu 2014). Therefore, Min's activities abroad were not merely personal artistic practices but were closely tied to the political goals of the state. Her presence on the global stage demonstrates that music, to some extent, carried a political mission, serving as a tool for conveying the nation's image and ideology.

To meet political correctness standards, Min used her political identity, as well as some academic expertise, to begin the process of popularising the *erhu* to teach Chinese audiences about "school style". Min went on to visit firms, villages and schools, while concentrating on universities with young elite groups. Min Huifen seized the opportunity once more, meticulously planning a series of performances and lectures on musical activities at Chinese institutions. In terms of speech content, Min Huifen excelled at connecting the *erhu* with the policies and spirit of the Chinese nation and emphasised political guidance in her performance. She said that:

> As long as I live, I will persist in carrying out the sacred artistic mission entrusted to me by the People's Republic of China— to pursue and create endlessly for the development of the art of the *erhu* in China (Min 1985/2004).

I distinctly recall witnessing Min Huifen's performance at the North China Electric Power University auditorium in my hometown when I was 10 years old in 2005. The illuminated stage, her resplendent performance dress, and her unique Jiangnan dialect made a profound effect on me—it was my first experience of attending a live *erhu* concert. The performance and accompanying lecture significantly influenced my understanding of the essence of an *erhu* performer: a synthesis of femininity, professionalism and global presence.

[38] Such as Huang Anyuan (b. 1945), Jiang Jianhua (b. 1961), Xuke (b.1960), Jia Pengfang (b. 1958), George Shaoqing Gao (b. 1967), etc.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Min Huifen's position as a primary inheritor of Liu Tianhua's *erhu* "school style" and an important member of the first generation of musicians following the establishment of the People's Republic of China. She adeptly employed the *erhu* to reconcile personal and governmental disparities, while also facilitating dialogue between China and the international world. Her career underscores the intricate relationship between the history of the *erhu* and political influences, showing how cultural practices may promote public acknowledgement of the *erhu* in its journey from humble *minjian* musical instrument to representative of Chinese national identity. Min's life and work exemplify a comprehensive and lasting social experiment, wherein her ideas and performances express a social identity intricately connected to politics. She strove to foster a national or community cultural identity, utilising the *erhu* to unify Chinese groups both nationally and globally.

Min Huifen, as a significant character in the modern history of the *erhu*, transformed both *erhu* performance and identity via her unique technique and ideological choices. Her endeavours transcended mere artistic expression, evolving into politically allegorical representations that illustrated the selective endorsement of academic *erhu* playing methods by governmental authorities. The interconnectedness between academic musicians and political goals exemplifies how power dynamics significantly affected the distribution of music.

Furthermore, Min Huifen's influence also encouraged the growing acceptance of large-scale erhu concerto creation by composers and performers, that set them apart from traditional *minjian erhu* music. This change made the music less approachable for everyday listening and more sophisticated due to the large orchestral accompaniments, which led some *minjian* tradition enthusiasts to turn away from this more recent version. After Deng Xiaoping's (1904–1997) return and the opening up of China's market economy,[39] Min realised there were prospects around the world and modified her style to appeal to a wider audience. She was able to take the *erhu* to new

[39] Deng Xiaoping was the actual top leader of the People's Republic of China and the CPC from 1978 to 1989; Reform and opening up is a national policy implemented by China since 1978, which has promoted rapid economic development and social modernization through internal economic system reform and market opening to the outside world.

heights on the international scene by making this tactical change. But this development also accentuated the rifts already there among the *erhu* community. As more localised, grassroots traditions were eclipsed by dominant cultural identities moulded by power systems, *minjian yinyuejia*—who embody the historic origins of the instrument—saw an increase in marginalisation.

Ultimately, the *erhu*'s function in academia broadened markedly after the Cultural Revolution, propelled by Min Huifen's endeavours to remain relevant and participate internationally. *The Great Wall Capriccio* has inspired *erhu* artists with innovative creative and performance concepts, heralding the progression of *erhu* school styles into an era of "high-speed rhapsody" which significantly impacted pedagogical approaches. In Chapter 4, I will examine the conservatory faction's training methodologies and their scientifically rigorous approaches to *erhu* instruction, demonstrating how globalisation theories—highlighting the exchange and adaptation of cultural practices across borders—have significantly influenced the evolution and perception of the *erhu* worldwide.

Chapter 4. Liu Changfu and the *Erhu* Master: "Scientific" Training Skill in the Contemporary Era

Introduction

In the 1980s, the *erhu* discipline was officially granted a graduate degree, marking a new phase in the development of the "*school style" erhu*. This academic institutionalisation of the *erhu* constituted a recognition on the part of the People's Republic of China's in its wider efforts to formalise and professionalise its music education system, by situating it within a global context of musical exchange and competition. With the development in *erhu* training, performance and musical creation in a modern music education institution, the image of a "Chinese music master" has took on a new meaning — no longer just a musician with higher playing skills, but a formally trained and certified academician. This transition to an international academic system introduced a more structured approach to music education, in which performance skills are systematically taught along with Western classical music theory, composition and teaching methods.

This shift reinforces the self-identity of contemporary *erhu* musicians, who are empowered by national education policies and cultural development directions to believe that the style of the *erhu* school represents the highest level of Chinese *erhu* art music and to see this achievement as the result of a "*kexuede*" (科学的, scientific) approach that goes beyond the "*jiankangde*" (健康的, healthy) approach advocated in the 1950s and 1960s (Zhongyang yinyue xueyuan yanjiubu 1953) and "*guifande*" (规范的, normative) playing method of the 1970s (Yang 2014b, 40). These principles have been foundational in shaping the professional training of *erhu* musicians across different generations, reflecting the conservatory system's broader effort to modernise music education through structured, research-based methodologies.

Within this institutional framework, Liu Changfu (刘长福 b. 1944), whose work I focus on in this chapter, witnessed the development patterns of *erhu* in three eras and is a representative builder of the new "scientific" *erhu* training and knowledge. Liu was admitted to the Junior Class of the

Central Conservatory of Music in 1956 (later to become an affiliated secondary school). He taught at the Inner Mongolia Art Academy from 1963—1979 and returned to the Central Conservatory of Music in 1979, being the first *erhu* performer to receive a master's degree and joining the faculty as a teacher there after graduation, retiring in 2010s.

During his music career, Liu Changfu embarked on comprehensive research into the *erhu*, integrating roles as an educator, composer and performer. He witnessed and participated in the creation of training systems for the *erhu*, organising the inherent logic of formerly fragmented *erhu* knowledge into a unified philosophy. Liu believed that tuition on the *erhu* should follow a progressive sequence, beginning with "*Jichu jiqiao, fengge jiqiao, yinyue biaoxian*" (基础技巧，风格技巧，音乐表现 fundamental skills, stylistic techniques, musical expression).[40] He elucidated the distinctive timbre of the *erhu*, drawing parallels to qualities found in the soundscape of Western music and specifically to "*meisheng*" (美声, *bel canto*).[41] He developed a method for enhancing musical memory training through imagination,[42] which was intended to help the *erhu* learner progress toward professional performance standard. Liu nurtured numerous *erhu* elite performers, including Yu Hongmei (b. 1971), Ma Xianghua (b. 1975) and Sun Huang (b. 1981).

In 2017, the Central Conservatory of Music took the lead in establishing a doctoral degree programme in Chinese music performance. Yu Hongmei served as the first doctoral supervisor for the *erhu* programme. Subsequently, Ma Xianghua and Sun Huang were also appointed as doctoral supervisors in the 2020s. In 2022, during a live charity broadcast on TikTok, Liu's assistant, Feng Ying, affectionately referred to Liu as the "doctoral supervisor's supervisor".[43] This remark highlights the evolution of the *erhu* as an academic discipline, signifying the technical lineage and foundational contributions stemming from Liu Changfu's contribution. In this chapter, I delve into and dissect Liu Changfu's musical philosophy, exploring the essence of school style in *erhu* performance with a particular focus on training and playing techniques in relation to the current state of *erhu* playing and training, within the broader context of global music education influences in the

[40] Liu Changfu, "*Erhu* Teaching Series (3): Basic Skills Training," *Musical Instruments*, 2003, (1): 59
Liu Changfu, "*Erhu* Teaching Series (5): Stylistic Techniques and Musical Expression," *Musical Instruments*, 2003, (3): 80.
[41] Liu Changfu, "*Erhu* Teaching Series (4): Vocalisation Techniques and Tone Color Changes," *Musical Instruments*, no. 2 (2003): 68-69.
[42] Liu Changfu. "*Erhu* Teaching Series (9): Stage Effects and Performance Psychology." *Musical Instruments*, 2003, (7): 35-45.
[43] Liu Changfu. TikTok live broadcast. 9 July 2022.

contemporary era.

4.1 Liu Changfu's Early Musical Life



Fig 4.1 "Liu Changfu". photograph, Canaday C Music Academy, accessed September 25, 2024, https://canadaycmusicacademy.com/liu-changfu/.

A prominent character in *erhu* academia, Liu Changfu's personal history and noteworthy contributions to the academic advancement of the *erhu* during a 50-year career are highlighted on the Central Conservatory of Music website. He symbolises the elite of the school style's *erhu* community (see Fig 4.1 for a personal photograph of Liu). These include his position as the first person to hold an *erhu* master's degree, his award-winning students, textbook publications and his involvement in music-related activities as an *erhu* specialist at other universities.[44]

Contemporary *erhu* musicians often narrative events related to themselves on a macro level, creating attention-grabbing statements as personal symbols. These statements are frequently quoted by scholars and contribute to knowledge generation. This approach, while engaging, often glosses

[44] "Introduction on Liu Changfu", Central Conservatory of Music, last modified November 23, 2023, accessed October 7, 2024, https://www.ccom.edu.cn/info/14931/222041.htm.

over intricate details and processes. To insiders, this might seem either inconsequential or efficient, yet it presents a lack of thorough explanation and cohesive connection for outsiders. For example, the narrative about Liu Changfu often emphasises his achievements after becoming the first *erhu* master, while his early musical career before earning his graduate degree is only partially documented. I have collected and integrated these scattered details to present a more complete picture of this *erhu* musician's full journey.

Liu Changfu was born in Tianjin in 1944. At the age of 11, he began to receive professional music education, studying clarinet at the affiliated amateur music primary school of the Central Conservatory of Music's Youth Class in 1955. Later, due to certain physiological conditions in his nasal membrane, which were deemed a hindrance to his musical career, he switched to learning the *erhu*, studying under Nie Jingyu (1929–2023), a third-generation disciple of Liu Tianhua (Zhongyang yinyue xueyuan 2023).

Under the slogan of "Learning from the Soviet Union" preached by the CPC at the time, a trend of learning the Russian language was set in motion in China to disseminate the experience of the USSR in various fields of socialist construction. Beginning in 1952, China began to follow the example of Soviet colleges and universities, adapting teaching programmes and organising translations of textbooks from Soviet colleges and universities. With reference to the Soviet experience in music education, the Central Conservatory of Music converted the former attached juvenile class into an attached secondary school in 1957 and started an integrated musician training model going from primary all the way through to tertiary levels (Li 2011, 78).

In 1958, Liu Changfu moved with the Central Conservatory of Music from Tianjin to Beijing, seizing the enhanced educational opportunities offered by this Soviet-style model in the capital city. At this time the Central Conservatory of Music was actively adapting itself to become a standardised international music education institution. This was the place where Liu Changfu refined his musical skills (Pu 2020). For example, he mentions that the musical training he received for his aural music skills at the attached secondary school brought him a detailed musical knowledge and imagination (Xu 2011, 4).

At the same time, in the 1950s, artistic exchanges between China and the Soviet Union in film, theatre and music surpassed those of preceding eras (Peng 1957, 260-289). In an interview, Liu Changfu mentioned that during his junior high school years, he had watched the Soviet Film *The Road of Life*.[45] The film tells how Makarenko, an educator, patiently guides street boys and eventually raises them to become new Soviets with a love for collectivism. This touched Liu deeply and made him realise that the power of education lies in shaping people's souls, an insight that led him to aspire to become an *erhu* teacher and train more *erhu* students for China (Xu 2011, 4).

In 1963, Liu Changfu graduated from the attached secondary school. This was at a time when the Director of Culture of Inner Mongolia went to the Central Conservatory of Music to recruit teachers for the Inner Mongolia Arts Academy, established in 1957 by the CPC. Liu Changfu among those selected (Guo 2015, 2) and from 1963 to 1979 he worked as an *erhu* teacher at the Academy. In order to meet the demands of daily teaching, Liu Changfu began composing etudes and adapting music pieces, including compositions based on Mongolian *minjian yinyue*, such as adapting the piano piece *Xisong fengshou liang* 喜送丰收粮 (Joyfully Harvesting Grain), originally based on *errentai minjian* dance skit music, and the *pipa* solo *Caoyuan xiaojiemei* 草原小姐妹 (Grassland Sisters) in 1966. He also composed new music of his own, in 1973 creating the *erhu* piece *Caoyuan xinmumin* 草原新牧民 (New Pastoralists of the Grassland) and in 1976 he wrote the *zhonghu* solo *Huainian* 怀念 (Remembrance in Memory) dedicated to the deceased CPC leader Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) (Liu, 2022).

When interviewed, Liu Changfu always emphasised that even during the Cultural Revolution, his *erhu* teaching did not stop and that he took his students on a workers' propaganda tour to coal mines in the Northwest to give sympathy performances, insisting on giving lessons to his students on the way and using his free time to prepare teaching materials (Guo 2015, 2). According to Liu's memory of his early teacher career, the 16 years he spent working in Inner Mongolia made him passionate about local *minjian yinyue* and its instruments, such as *matouqin* and the *sihu* and he learned about composition from another Central Conservatory of Music alumnus, Xin Huguang (1933-2011), composer of the symphonic poem *Gada Meilin* (嘎达梅林, 1956). Upon returning to

[45] *The Road of Life*, directed by Nikolai Ekk (Soviet Union: Len film, 1955).

Beijing, Liu went on to compose further pieces with Mongolian musical elements, such as *Saiwai qingsi* 塞外情思 (Affection for the Northern Frontier) in 1988 (Liu 2020).

After the official end of the Cultural Revolution, when regular teaching, composition and performance activities resumed in the conservatories, *erhu* musicians once again began exploring international music standards and reasserted their elite status. As an experienced *erhu* teacher, Liu Changfu took the same entrance exam as college undergraduates so that he could then go on to pursue graduate studies at the Central Conservatory of Music. Returning to study under his mentor, Lan Yusong, Liu immersed himself in a deeper exploration of music, encompassing aesthetics, psychology and history. Drawing on this solid foundation, Liu gradually integrated his personal characteristics and musical insights, achieving a level of performance that reflected both his individuality and profound musical understanding. His extensive experience was distilled into a cohesive academic argument in his master's thesis, *Erhu yanzou zhongde fengge jiqiao* 二胡演奏的风格技巧 (The Style and Techniques of *Erhu* Performance) (Pu 2020). Graduating in 1981 as China's first *erhu* performer with a master's degree from an international music training institution, Liu continued to refine his teaching methodologies. Over time, his approach evolved into what is now considered the "scientific" method of *erhu* training, which has become standard contemporary practice.

While the idea of *kexuehua* (科学化, scientisation) in the humanities and arts had already been discussed during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, it was in the 1980s that it became a guiding principle in the professionalisation of music training. As China reopened to the world, the government placed renewed emphasis on *scientisation*, framing it as essential to modernising and legitimising academic disciplines. According to Chinese scholar Wang Xuedian's review, during China's official re-engagement with the world in the 1980s, the leader Deng Xiaoping emphasised the importance of both the humanities and social sciences, elevating them to the same status as the natural sciences. While the social sciences were central to understanding societal structures and policymaking, the humanities played a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and fostering intellectual development. These fields collectively advanced the development of both the CPC and the Chinese nation (Wang 2019). In line with this, the government policy of "*kexuhua*" provided

legitimacy and momentum for the structured development of disciplines like music and arts. Within this political framework, the term "scientific" became a central concept in the professional development of the *erhu* as part of the humanities, shaping how composition, performance and training is approached within conservatories, a process which continues to evolve along these lines today.

4.2 Liu Changfu's Training Mode

Yang Guangxiong (b. 1947), a classmate of Liu Changfu, recalled that since the 1970s, their mentor Lan Yusong had proposed a "normative" standard for *erhu* performance, which not only emphasised technical precision and systematicity, but was also a very different teaching concept from that of the traditional *minjian erhu* or *huqin* performances. This standardisation in *erhu* playing and training is different from the improvisation and casual style common in *minjian* performances, as well as from the teaching mode of oral transmission. With the cultural changes against the background of reform and opening up, this "norm" gradually developed into a more "scientific" teaching method, emphasising systematic training and the close integration of theory and practice. Liu Changfu's musical practice is the result of this scientific model. In compliance with Lan's stringent criteria, Liu enhanced his methodology by integrating western classsical music education methods, thereby creating a comprehensive training system specifically designed for the distinctive attributes of the *erhu*. This system reflected his basic pedagogical philosophy, summarised in the three principles: "*jichu jiqiao, fengge jiqiao, yinyue biaoxian*" (fundamental skills, stylistic skills and musical expression) (Yang 2014b, 40-41). How do these concepts manifest in the precise physical practices necessary for learning the *erhu*?

4.2.1 The *Erhu*'s Fundamental Playing Skills

Liu Changfu's *erhu* training methodology is characterised by structured approach. He analysed the hand movements during *erhu* performance, believing that to be the beginning of a scientific approach to training. For example, he said the basic techniques of the *erhu* are divided into two parts: the left-hand techniques include holding the instrument, fingering, changing positions, vibrato (trill), glissando, harmonics, while the right-hand techniques include holding the bow, long bowing, short

bowing, legato, staccato, fast bowing, dynamic bowing and mixed bowing. During performance, these techniques are coordinated between the left and right hands and they are applied in various combinations to create different musical expressions, reflecting a variety of musical emotions (Liu 2003a, 59).

Subsequently, Liu Changfu's student Sun Huang, drawing on Liu's training and her own daily experience, further compiled a more precise set of practice content and schedules, published in *Erhu yanzoujiqiao gaoxiaoxunlian* (Advanced Training in *Erhu* Performance Techniques) in 2012. her work echoes Liu Changfu's theory. For the sake of clarity, I have compiled the practice mode into a table.

Content of *Erhu* Training Skills (for one day)			
Playing Technique	Requirement	Aim	Time
Kongxian manchanggong (Open string slow long bow)	To master the stability and control of the right hand technique.	a. Bowing should be flat, straight and even. b. Bow speed should be slow. c. Bow changes should be seamless.	5 min
Kongxian manchanggong yinjie (Open string slow long bow with six scales)	To enhance the accuracy of intonation.	a. Without vibrato or glissando. b. Seamless shifting and bowing changes. c. Three positions, two octaves on six common tunings. d. Practise each tuning at least twice.	15 min
Huigong (Returning bow exercise) Playing with consecutive down-bow or up-bow strokes, called "returning bow"	To enhance the explosive power and control of the right hand; to strengthen the wrist of the right hand.	a. The returning bow should be quick and clean. b. During the returning bow, the bow hair should be tightly pulled against the string to avoid any extraneous noise. c. Minimize unnecessary movements during the returning bow, using wrist strength to accentuate the beginning of the note. d. It is best to use the full bow for	5 min

		playing, to practice the arm strength of the forearm.	
Kongcian kuaisu fengong qiehuan (Open string quick staccato bowing exercise)	To enhance the sensitivity of the right hand; to promote coordination between both hands.	a. Minimise the traces of changing strings (the right hand can aim at a target point for practice). b. The volume and duration of both inner and outer strings should be consistent.	5 min
Kongxian kuaisu liangong huanxian (Open string quick slurred bowing exercise)	To enhance the flexibility of the right hand's middle and ring fingers; to strengthen the endurance of the right hand.	a. Bow smoothly (the right hand can aim at a target point for practice. b. Bow speed should be slow and consistent, with a quicker string changing speed. c. Reduce the amplitude of string changing. d. Maintain consistent force and volume on both inner and outer strings.	5 min

Huanba (Shifting exercise) There are two common methods of shifting: 1. Wrist shift; 2. Direct up-and-down shift. Wrist shift refers to using the wrist as the main force to drive the hand to change positions, whereas the direct up-and-down shift means not primarily using the wrist to drive the movement but relying on the up-and-down movement of the left forearm to directly drive the hand to change. This type of shifting exercise is more suitable for quick shifts. This section mainly introduces this method and can carry out the basic exercises for the "direct up-and-down" shifting.	Increase shifting speed; reduce the visibility of shifting marks.	a. The left arm should form a 45-degree angle with the neck of the instrument, avoid drooping. b. The base of the left thumb should be relaxed, avoid gripping the neck of the instrument too tightly which causes it to shake up and down.	3 min
Dayin (Pizzicato exercise), also known as tremolo or fluttering fingers, is a commonly used finger technique in *erhu* performance.	To enhance the functionality training of the left-hand fingers; to strengthen finger independence; to improve finger flexibility.	a. Lift fingers high for strength training, doubling the speed from slow to fast. b. Practice pizzicato with intervals of seconds, thirds, fourths and on open strings (including skipping fingers) in succession. Please note: This exercise may cause slight soreness in the left-hand fingers, which is normal. However, overly prolonged practice should be avoided.	5 min

Huayin (Glissando exercise) is one of the richest expressive techniques in *erhu* performance, serving to beautify melodies, decorate tunes and highlight musical styles. Common glissando techniques on the *erhu* include ascending glissando, descending glissando, returning glissando and cushioned finger glissando, among others.	To enhance the flexibility of the left wrist; to master different glissando playing techniques.	a. Pay attention to the dynamic changes of different types of glissando. b. Note the range of slide for different types of glissando. c. Master different speeds and dynamics of glissando according to the needs of different styles.	3 min
Rouxian (Vibrato exercise) is one of the most important and commonly used expressive techniques in *erhu* finger technique, playing a crucial role in the musical expression of different styles, similar to the "singing" of the human voice. There are many types of vibrato, such as rolling vibrato, pressing vibrato, plucking vibrato, sliding vibrato and delayed picking vibrato, etc. Here, we primarily introduce how to practice the most basic form of vibrato, the "rolling vibrato".	To adjust the method of vibrato (here mainly referring to the most commonly used rolling vibrato), making the left hand relaxed and the vibrato even and smooth.	a. Every finger joint should be naturally relaxed, using a circular motion to perform the vibrato. b. The base of the thumb should be relatively fixed during vibrato, to avoid shifting the pitch position and affecting the stability of intonation. c. Practice the vibrato from slow to fast speeds and from wide to narrow ranges. d. The frequency of the vibrato should be even and the pitch position during the vibrato should be fixed.	5 min

Liandungong (Staccato bowing exercise) The bowing technique that involves momentarily pressing the bow hair against the strings for playing is called staccato bowing, which generally includes separated staccato and slurred staccato techniques. This section primarily introduces the playing essentials of slurred staccato (i.e., producing two or more staccato notes within a single bow stroke).	To strengthen the middle finger of the right hand, enhance the elasticity and power of all the fingers of the right hand	a. Mainly rely on the strength of the right hand middle finger to push the bow stick (on outer strings) or bow hair (on inner strings), with the wrist naturally relaxed. b. For rapid slurred staccato, the shorter the bow stroke, the better and slower the bow speed. c. Practice in the order of slow separated staccato, fast separated staccato, slow slurred staccato and fast slurred staccato.	5 min
Paogong (Spiccato bowing exercise) is a special colouristic bowing technique that utilises the elasticity produced by lifting the bow hair and the inertia formed when placing the bow hair back down. Due to its sound effect resembling that of a horse's hoof, it is colloquially known as "horse's hoof bow". Spiccato is divided into two types: up-bow spiccato and down-bow spiccato (i.e., pulling bow spiccato and pushing bow spiccato).	To practice the stability and bounciness of the right hand's bow hold.	a. Avoid lifting the right hand too high and do not make too large up and down movements with the arm. b. Minimise unnecessary movements to avoid extraneous noises and hitting the bow stick.	3 min
Zhuanggong (Collé bowing exercise), also known as artificial spiccato, is a variation of the staccato bowing technique. Its speed is generally faster than staccato but slower than spiccato and it can also be considered a bridge between the two. It is typically suitable for playing faster quavers and slower semiquavers.	To fully utilise the elasticity of the bow stick, enhancing the training of the right arm's strength, finger strength and wrist strength.	a. Reduce the amplitude of vertical collisions, primarily exerting force in the horizontal direction. b. Push the bow stick outward with the right thumb to avoid hitting the body of the instrument. c. Maintain consistent force in both pulling and pushing the bow, ensuring uniform tone colour. Please note: This exercise may cause	3 min

Method: a. The arm strength used for initiating the bow in spiccato, b. The strength of the middle finger in staccato; c. The wrist strength for accentuating the beginning of the note with the wrist.		slight soreness in the right arm, which is normal. However, overly prolonged practice should be avoided.	
Ziranfanyin yu rengongfanyin (Natural and artificial harmonics scales exercise) Natural Harmonics Method: Place the left-hand finger precisely, lightly touching and barely pressing on the string at a fraction of the distance between the nut and the bridge to make the string vibrate. Artificial Harmonics Method: a. Fourth harmonics: The index finger presses down on the string firmly, while the little finger lightly touches its perfect fourth interval, producing a pitch two octaves higher than the actual note pressed by the index finger; b. Fifth harmonics: The index finger presses down on the string firmly, while the little finger lightly touches its perfect fifth interval, producing a pitch one octave higher than the harmonic note touched by the little finger.	Since producing artificial harmonics relies on the extreme accuracy of both the index finger and the little finger, practising artificial harmonics can effectively improve intonation.	a. Both the index finger and the little finger must be extremely accurate, without any deviation. b. The index finger must press firmly; lightly pressing will also result in impure tone. c. The right hand's bow hair must stay close to the string and firm bowing is necessary to achieve a crystal-clear tone.	10 min

Tiaogong (Sautille bowing exercise) The bowing technique that utilises the rebound force from touching the strings with the bow hair and the elasticity of the bow during motion is called Sautille bowing. This technique is most suitable for playing fast semiquavers, which is often used on the outer strings, as controlling the tone on the inner strings is generally more challenging and thus less commonly employed.	To specially practice the bounciness of the bow.	a. Avoid lifting the bow stick too high or flipping it over. b. Do not excessively flick the wrist to avoid unwanted noise. c. Use the left half of the bow (near the bow tip) for bouncing, as different parts of the bow provide varying degrees of elasticity. Bouncing with the middle of the bow is slower and more powerful, while bouncing with the tip (left half) is quicker and more agile.	8 min

Through this table, we can see that the school style has developed a very standardised and detailed disciplinary template, as well as efficient training methods, which are praised as advanced and "scientific" and mainly aimed at practising and adapting the large and medium-sized contemporary *erhu* works. Sun Huang and Liu Changfu both emphasised the importance of gradual practice and cautioned against skipping basic exercises to dive directly into fervent practice on a musical piece (Sun 2012, 12). Sun Huang's continuation of the Liu Changfu model exemplifies the institutionalisation of the conservatory's cultural transmission and reflects a form of identity recognition. Similarly, mainstream *erhu* musicians such as Zhang Shao, Yan Jiemin (b. 1968) and Zhao Hanyang (b. 1954) believe that the "scientific" method, with its "step-by-step" approach and breakdown of essential techniques, is crucial for mastering each aspect of performance and is the first step toward professional *erhu* playing (Zhang 1983; Yan 2002; Zhao 2010b).Therefore, does a rigorous commitment to the "scientific" standards guarantee a mastery of playing skills on the *erhu*? In fact, it is just a basic version of performer training.

One of Liu Changfu's student, Ma Xianghua, recounts her evolution from amateur to professional *erhu* musician during her childhood, particularly when she was preparing for the primary school affiliated with the Central Conservatory of Music. Ma mentions that she confronted the monotonous and repetitive nature of her training regimen with determination. It was imperative for her to execute every music piece flawlessly during practice and she was not to cease playing until

she had completed each composition in full. As a result of the mode of intense training, she consolidated her playing skills and joined the educational system of the Central Conservatory of Music in 1986. Ma Xianghua began her professional *erhu* studies from the 4th to 6th grade in primary school and continued through middle school, high school, undergraduate and then into master's programs. Upon graduating with her master's degree in 2001, Ma Xianghua transitioned into a teaching role at the Central Conservatory of Music, a position she holds to this day (Song 2017, 60-61).

However, Ma Xianghua' s record may not have conveyed her experience very clearly and specifically. In my own interpretation this account lacks credibility, given that my academic background does not fall within the conservatory system. Therefore, to better explain the specific process and details of training, I interviewed a familiar *erhu* teacher whose son is about to take the college entrance examination. According to the interview with my *erhu* teacher Wang Gang (b. 1976), who graduated from China Conservatory of Music in 1998, his son, like Sun Huang is keen on the practice strategy and divides his practice time into two parts on a day-by-day basis, with half of the time practising the fundamentals skills and the other half devoted to practising the music piece, i.e. the musical performance with expression.

When I visited Wang Gang's home one afternoon, his son was practising the solo music in another apartment within the same complex. The boy didn't have time to meet me due to his strict music practice schedule. So, Wang Gang showed me a video of his son's music performance and suggested we start with the allegro section of the recital music. I could sense Wang's intent to showcase his son's exceptional playing skills to me, highlighting the preparation for the formidable challenge of the upcoming university entrance exams at the Central Conservatory of Music. Wang Gang then mentioned that this part is considered the most crucial test of a performer's abilities in the present day. He had personalised the strict schedule further for his son; for instance, an allegro section had to be played 50 times without any breaks to ensure the integrity of these 50 performances. Accordingly, he said that "Any pause would necessitate a restart of the count to guarantee a 100% accuracy rate for the continuous 50 times".[46] This personal methodology seems to

[46] Personal communication. January 18, 2024.

have similarities to Ma Xianghua's training, which means to stabilise each performanceno matter where it takes place.

Therefore, another question arises: how can we play very fast? Wang Gang's answer aligns with my actual experience and observations. Without doing so, it is hard to produce a sound with a sense of granularity and a clean tone at a certain speed. Wang elaborated that it involves a progression from slow to fast practice. He underscored the necessity of employing a metronome throughout the practice session, initiating at a tempo of 60 beats per minute. As soon as the finger actions and tones have been mastered at that tempo, the pace is to be incrementally heightened by 10 beats per practice session until it aligns with the tempo specified on the sheet music. For every increment in tempo, a reinforcement of 50 repetitions is essential.

Reflecting on my training with Wang Gang in my childhood and adolescent years from 2004 to 2013, the above realisation led me to seek further clarification from him. I mentioned about the parallels between developing "*jirou jiyi*" (肌肉记忆, muscle memory) in the body[47] and the training methodologies employed by athletes. Wang Gang acknowledged the comparison without objection, revealing that his son, mirroring my own experiences from roughly a decade ago, had yet to appreciate the importance of such practices. Sometimes, his son often neglected the training, overlooking the benefits of implicit and procedural memory in the learning process on musical instruments.

From Wang Gang's stated belief, it is evident how he secured his place at the China Conservatory of Music at the age of 18 on 1994. This method of enhancing body memory proved effective for him and his students (including his own son) in performance practice. Similarly, as someone with insider knowledge, I have observed that despite not having performed formally for nearly seven years, when I played the *erhu* during a fieldwork session in 2023,[48] my technique and tone were still up to the standard, though my proficiency had slightly diminished. Therefore, it is difficult for me to question the effectiveness of this training method in enhancing *erhu* performance. Before participating in a gathering with *minjian yinyuejia*, I immerse myself in Sun Huang's

[47] For a more elaborate explanation, see Krakauer and Shadmehr's "Consolidation of motor memory" 2006.
[48] I attended a *minjian yinyue* event in November-December 2023 in Fengyu Township, Eryuan County, Yunnan Province.

instructional guide, adhering to its detailed, step-by-step methodology to stabilise my foundational *erhu* skills, (Of course, I haven't repeated the skills that many times). This meticulous preparation aims to ensure that my performance is technically silky and smooth, even though technical perfection may not always be the primary focus of *minjian yinyue* activities.

However, musicians trained in the school style prioritise stability in every performance, striving to achieve the precision of a CD playback. This meticulous approach underscores their status as professional, elite musicians, endorsed by China's official institutions and sets them apart from *minjian yinyuejia* through a distinct discourse. In line with this, Liu Changfu, a teacher who employs an observational approach coupled with self-reflection, summarises the concept of stability in *erhu* performance. He advocates that *erhu* students diligently engage in fundamental practices tailored to their individual needs. He details a structured training process composed of three main stages: mastering individual movements, seamlessly alternating between different movements and ultimately attaining perfect coordination. According to his teaching experience, Liu pointed out that:

> At the beginning of practice, performers can only focus on a single movement and often overlook the details of the movement, leading to errors. Therefore, the performance movements in this stage tend to be stiff and uncoordinated, such as uncoordinated bow movements, unnatural pressing and changing of strings and the hands easily rotating against each other during continuous and rapid bowing. After a series of individual movements are mastered, performers enter a more comfortable stage, gradually organising previously isolated movements into an organic system of actions, thus completing the performance uninterrupted. This coordinated and alternating system is known as the motion chain. At this stage, the performer's tension gradually decreases and the interference between the hands lessens, replaced by mutual coordination, thereby reducing the reaction time to incorrect movements and improving practice efficiency. In the third stage, the performance movements of various individual skills form multiple groups of motion chains and coordinate with each other during practice to complete the performance together. This stage is called the "Dongli dingxing" (dynamic stereotyping). Through continuous consolidation and refinement, the music performance movements can evolve into an automated form on playing (Liu 2003a, 59).

From Liu Changfu's point of view, the automation referred to here is more than a natural process; it is a deeper manifestation of a perception akin to innate intuition, whereby the technical movement somehow transcends the body's instinctive response. This phenomenon manifests itself in the fact that when players can present music perfectly, effortlessly and without thinking about it, they have

achieved a high degree of autonomy in their performance. In the process, the virtuosity of the performance has been internalised as natural to the performer, allowing the quality and depth of the performance to be precisely controlled and regulated within certain limits. This naturally based perception precedes well-regulated and trained body movements. However, although Liu seems to have explained the intrinsic logic of *erhu* training, he still downplays the fundamental "50 times theory" due to his status as a professor and performer at the highest institution in the music field in China. This is the essential path to success for any professional musician, even those with talents beyond the ordinary. Liu's classmate, *erhu* musician Yang Guangxiong summarised the training of the *erhu* at the Central Conservatory of Music from the 1980s to the 2010s.

> The principle combines Chinese and Western academic teaching methods. Standardisation is about seeking scientific precision in teaching. It requires moving away from simply relying on tradition and oral knowledge and instead embracing advanced performance concepts boldly… The goal is to remove any mistakes through scientific methods in *erhu* performance… (Yang 2019).

Therefore, performance stability has become an essential standard for academic *erhu* performance, demanding instantaneous, flawless execution anywhere and at any time. The secret to attaining such unwavering consistency is to solidify stability through daily practice and to overcome technical hurdles with persistent rehearsal. Faced with the structurally Westernised compositions of post-1980 composers, mainstream musicians are increasingly committed to focused and stringent practice routines. These include adjusting to unfamiliar scales and intervals, developing new auditory skills and learning more extensive scores, among other challenges.

4.2.2 "Stylistic Skills" with Musical Imitation

Although modern *erhu* compositions are more structurally aligned with Western classical music and some include piano accompaniment, the core themes of *erhu* music remain deeply rooted in the *minjian* tradition. Most new compositions, especially those created in the 1980s and earlier, still exhibit the distinctive characteristics of *minjian yinyue*. For example, Duan Qicheng (1924–2018) composed the *erhu* piece *Miaoling zaochun* 苗岭早春 (Early Spring in Miaoling) in 1978, based on the Miao ethnic minority group's *minjian* song *feige* (飞歌) collected during his fieldwork in Taishan, Guizhou (Yu 2011). Guan Ming's (b. 1939) *Lanhauhua xushiqu* 兰花花叙事曲 (Ballad of

Lan Huahua) created in 1981, is an adaptation of the *Shanbei minge* 陕北民歌 (Northern Shanxi local song), *Lan huahua* (兰花花); Zhou Wei's (b. 1961) *erhu* solo *putaoshule* 葡萄熟了 (The Grapes Are Ripe), composed in the 1980s, is based on the *minjian* melodies of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, etc.

Liu Changfu argues that these *minjian* elements, which blend with Western compositional styles, should be highlighted and imitated in performance to preserve the unique identity of *erhu* music (Liu 1986). Liu introduced the term *fenggejiqiao* (风格技巧, stylistic skills) in the context of *erhu* training to emphasise the importance of precise imitation, particularly regarding specific sounds and melodies associated with the landscape, ensuring both precision and expressive depth in *erhu* performances.

For example, the typical *erhu* solo of the 1980s, *Jiangnan chunse* 江南春色 (Spring in Jiangnan), uses the Suzhou *minjian* song *Dajiu lianhuan* (大九连环) for its musical theme, etc. (Yang 2021, 111). Liu Changfu mentioned that when performing *Jiangnan chunse*, to emphasise the characteristics of *Jiangnan sizhu music* the player must master its specific playing techniques, such as fingered glissando, spiccato and trills (Liu 2006b, 38). Later, he refined and continued to break down each musical part and give the relevant regulations. I have collated his core strategies for the different playing purposes of each section in this music piece:

> Section 1: Dominated by vibrato and natural overtones, the purpose is to express the softness and spirituality of the music of Jiangnan through delicate timbres. These techniques of the *erhu* can mimic the soft texture and long melodies of *Jiangnan sizhu* music and enhance the fluidity of the piece. In this section, the flexible use of vibrato and hand change further emphasises the delicate emotion of the piece, making the melody flow naturally like water.
>
> Section 2: The main techniques used in this section are the pad-finger glissando and syncopated bowing, which are derived from the lively and jumping style of *minjian yinyue* and are especially important in expressing vigour and dynamics. The piece gradually transitions from softness to excitement through these techniques, as if imitating the scene of the revival of all things. In this process, the rapid techniques of the *erhu*, such as fast bowing, effectively present the life-affirming rhythm of *minjian yinyue*.
>
> Section 3: In this climactic section, the piece demonstrates strong emotional fluctuations through techniques such as large bowing and fast vibrato. The use of techniques in this section not only shows the vastness and passion of the music but also imitates the grandeur and sense of power found in northern

Chinese *minjian yinyue*. This technique allows the performer to express the deep power of the piece, echoing the impassioned mood of the *minjian yinyue* (Liu 2006b).

Liu Changfu's teaching strategies focus on providing students with a holistic, macroscopic arrangement of musical styles in practice and performance. So, how does Liu's "stylistic technique" materialise in both of these playing contexts? In other words, how should a performer accurately imitate the style and ultimately realise the goal of musical expression? I caught a clue from one of Liu's early articles. According to him, in order to master these techniques, one must first familiarise oneself with the relevant *minjian yinyue* styles and performance characteristics of the instruments and find the rules through repeated inculcation. At the same time, it is also necessary to systematically analyse the stylistic techniques in the music and practice them step by step to gradually master these means of expression. He stated that mastering stylistic techniques produces an artistic effect known as *shenyun* (神韵 charm) and *weidao* (味道 flavour), a dynamic artistic expression that simple notation cannot completely reproduce (Liu 1986, 58).

This point of view raises new questions: How does one learn from *minjian yinyue*? What are the principles underlying *minjian yinyue*? My *erhu* teacher, Wang Gang, suggests that students rely on recorded or video-based *minjian yinyue* for study. He mentioned that when he was studying at the China Conservatory of Music, he faced similar challenges. However, due to the demanding daily coursework and the high transportation costs involved in conducting fieldwork, it was difficult for the conservatory's *erhu* musicians to carry out field investigations.[49] As a result, the ideals of conservatory education often diverge from the practical realities, making it challenging for students to fully engage with and understand the essence of *minjian yinyue*. Relying on recordings or video materials alone makes it hard to capture the original emotional expression and interactive atmosphere *minjian yinyue* in its natural cultural setting.

As Turino notes, in the context of *minjian yinyue*, there are two key styles: "presentational music" which focuses on artistic expression and performance skills, making it more suited to observation and imitation, and "participatory music", which emphasises community interaction rather than individual technique (Turino 2008, 59). Participatory music is difficult to fully grasp

[49] Personal communication. January 18,2024.

through recordings or videos alone, as it requires the performer to be immersed in a specific socio-cultural setting, engaging directly with both the people and the environment. For *erhu* students who rely primarily on media materials, this may mean missing the rich, immersive experience that participatory *minjian yinyue* provides. For instance, the cultural element of the *erhu* piece *Miaoling zaochun* lies in the lively scene of young Miao men and women dancing and singing enthusiastically to the sound of the *lusheng* (芦笙),[50] with their sleeves fluttering and skirts twirling (Yu 2011). Simply studying the *lusheng* music and *feige* alone makes it difficult to fully grasp the broader social and ceremonial soundscape.

While learning the essence of *minjian yinyue* can be challenging for *erhu* players, their performance remains relatively unaffected, as the pieces they perform are not the most original *minjian yinyue* but rather adapted versions created by composers with a background in Western compositional techniques. It can be seen that the school style's *erhu* performances emphasise more the normative and formal expression of the music rather than relying entirely on an in-depth understanding of the original *minjian yinyue*. Therefore, Liu Changfu proposed the concept of "stylistic techniques" with the fundamental aim of narrowing the gap between performers and composers in their respective understanding of the norms and requirements of performance methods, because these stylistic techniques show a reflection of the elite composer's ability to capture the linguistic characteristics of the local music (Liu 2003e, 80).

As the *erhu* has evolved in the modern music education system, Liu Changfu has placed greater emphasis in his teaching on preserving cultural uniqueness through the roots of *minjian yinyue*. However, this type of teaching, which emphasises stylistic techniques, is also to some extent coloured by formalism. It appears to protect cultural uniqueness, but in reality is more of a superficial resistance to the impact of standardised music, without digging too deeply into the true connotations of *minjian yinyue*. Such a format tends to ignore the core qualities of *minjian yinyue*, such as improvisation and community, and instead reinforces the power of composers to adapt *minjian yinyue*, making *erhu* players lose the deep cultural uniqueness of their music, even though

[50] The *lusheng* is a traditional mouth organ instrument made of bamboo pipes, commonly played by ethnic minorities in southwestern China.

they follow international standards in the context of globalised music.

As time progressed, *erhu* compositions began to evolve dramatically. These changes suggest that simple imitation is no longer applicable to contemporary *erhu* playing. More Westernised and modernised compositions emerged after the 1990s, such as Wang Jianmin's "*Erhu* Rhapsody series",[51] which weakened the figurative musical titles and emphasised rapidly changing finger techniques. As well as transcending the traditional *erhu* compositions in pentatonic tuning, he also refined the dominant notes and generated his own modulations based on the melodic elements of Chinese *minjian yinyue*, called "*rengong diaoshi*" (人工调式). Since then, more and more composers have begun to develop larger pieces of *erhu* music that surpass the traditional *erhu* "A-B-A" compositional structure. This situation became the norm of *erhu* compositions after 2000, with the *erhu*'s modern or contemporary large and medium-sized pieces often lasting more than 10 minutes, with accompaniment usually on piano or orchestra.

In addition to untitled rhapsodies and concertos, the contents of the music also adds some further grand and abstract themes, such as Liu Wenjin's (1937–2013) suite *Rulai meng* 如来梦 (Tathagata Dream) created in the 2000s, Guan Naizhong's (b. 1939) *erhu* concerto, *Shihun* 诗魂 (Poetic Soul) in 2006 and *Xiangeyin* 弦歌吟 (Chant on Strings) in 2016, created by Li Bochan (b. 1992). Since then, composers have continued to omit any reference to elements of Chinese *minjian yinyue*, resulting in a situation where "stylistic technique" is not a main part of the music of post-2000 compositions

The stylistic *erhu* music with "A-B-A" musical structure was mostly adapted from Chinese *minjian yinyue* and was easily apprehended. These works are often based on specific life scenes, natural landscapes or *minjian* legends and performers can directly understand the composer's intentions through exposure to relevant *minjian yinyue* culture and soundscapes. Due to the relatively simple content, melody and structure of these works, learners can easily immerse themselves in the context and emotional expression of the works by imitating and participating in local music practices, thus presenting the composer's original intention in performance.

[51] Wang Jianmin (b. 1956). Since 1988, he has been composing *Erhu* Rhapsodies. Up to 2024, he has created six music works, each of which has a potential macro narrative theme of Chinese *minjian* regions, such as Yunnan and Guizhou region, Hunan Province, NorthWest region, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet.

However, with the emergence of contemporary *erhu* works, this direct and concrete expression has gradually been replaced by abstract musical concepts. Contemporary composers use more complex musical structures and more abstract themes, surpassing traditional *minjian* soundscapes. This requires performers not only to possess a high level of technical proficiency when performing these works, but also to follow the composer's musical philosophy through imagination and creative expression. This change means that performers can no longer rely on direct imitation from the past and the introduction of *minjian* soundscapes but that they need rather to engage in deeper artistic recreation by understanding the composer's more abstract emotions and imagery.

4.2.3 Training in Musical Expression on the *Erhu* in Contemporary China

Since 1980, following the CPC's "*gaige kaifang*" (reform and opening), Western culture has been reintegrated into Chinese society, leading to widespread borrowing of Western ideas, practices, and aesthetics across more sectors. This era witnessed the *erhu* performing arts being significantly influenced by modern musical aesthetics. It reignited a potential competitive dynamic with Western music, driving efforts to internationalise musical compositions by introducing concertos and rhapsodies, as well as adopting Western musical works. If we consider the characteristics of *erhu* music composition in the 1990s, the works have not only expanded in length and improved in performance techniques but have also achieved a richness and diversity of musical expression from a technical point of view. This shift raises a key question: how can one use the *erhu*, a Chinese instrument, to interpret music with musical expression symbols of Western culture? This requires not only a deep mastery of *erhu* techniques but also innovative adaptation and interpretation in understanding and internalising Western musical elements. Amid this evolution, *erhu* performers started to ponder deeply the future direction of *erhu* aesthetics: in this new age, what kind of sound or timbres should their *erhu* produce and what should their music express? In several published articles Liu Changfu through self-reflection offered a profound response to these questions.

Regarding the precise definition of the *erhu*'s timbre Liu Changfu gave a unique perspective. In his article "Meisheng zoufa yu yinsebianhua" (Beauty, Sound Technique and Timbre Changes), Liu vividly delineates the contrasts and transitions between *erhu* timbres using stark antonyms in the Chinese language, such as "gang- rou" (刚−柔, hard versus soft), "xu- shi" (虚−实, hollow versus

solid), “ming- an” (明−暗, bright versus dark), “nong- dan” (浓−淡, dense versus light) and “bo-hou” (薄−厚, thin versus thick). This ideology provides deep insights for understanding and mastering the nuanced variations in *erhu* timbre. Importantly, these timbral variations are not isolated occurrences but are grounded in solid foundational techniques and standardised movements.

Notably, the concept of “*meisheng*” (美声), which originated from Italian vocal traditions, was introduced to China through globalisation and was later adapted and localised to become a fundamental technique in *erhu* performance, representing a unique approach to *erhu* sound production. By deepening and expanding the basic articulation techniques found in the “*meisheng*” technique, a rich diversity of timbres can be achieved (Liu 2003b, 68-69). It is evident that Liu Changfu’s ideology, which emphasises interpreting musical emotions through a beautiful timbre *(meisheng)*, plays a pivotal role in *erhu* performance. And these nuanced modifications encapsulate the distinct emotions embedded in musical notation and must be precisely communicated within the realm of beautiful timbre, complemented by standardised body movements.

Moreover, it can be clearly seen that these musical notations of performance, unique to Chinese music, encapsulate its distinct aesthetics and philosophical notions. However, interpreting these abstract symbols often lacks specificity, rendering them challenging for some students to implement in their playing. To address this challenge, Liu Changfu proposes a practical method focused on cultivating and enhancing imaginative thinking. He emphasises the integration of this approach into daily practice, thereby solidifying the role of imagination in the musical interpretative process. Liu also explained the specific steps in this regard:

> Starting with the score, performers must initially engage in a thorough study of its symbols and markings through score reading. Utilising textual hints about the piece’s background, they gain an initial understanding and form associations with the musical images and moods intended to be conveyed. Upon beginning the sight-reading phase, instructors are tasked with employing various techniques to depict a range of musical images and emotions during the performance. It is crucial in this phase for instructors to stimulate students’ imaginations, enabling them to transform abstract concepts into vivid imagery… For instance, during the instruction of “The First *Erhu* Rhapsody” students are encouraged to envision ‘the vast mountains’ and ‘the enigmatic scenes within the forest’ in the staccato and introductory segments, expressing these scenes through diverse fundamental techniques. In the initial part of the first section in 6/8 time, they should aim for a light visual sense but also enhance the expressive capacity in conveying

nuanced musical images and styles… (Liu 2004, 69).

Later, Liu Changfu emphasised that idea in musical performances, that the concept of "imagery thinking" should be manifest during the practice and processing phases of the music, rather than exclusively at the moment of performance on stage. This stems from the understanding that the musical imagery conveyed during a performance closely relates to the performer's prior technical arrangement, timbre selection and musical interpretation (Liu 2004, 70). Therefore, as Liu's training ideology, the expression and conceptualisation of music must be established in a definitive pattern before the performance, ensuring that each rendition achieves the same consistency and precision one would find on a CD. This requirement goes beyond merely solidifying basic skills; it represents a mental discipline aimed at attaining higher levels of artistic expression.

At the same time,[52] the *erhu* musician Zhao Hanyang, Liu Changfu's colleague at the *minyue jiaoyanshi* (民乐教研室, Chinese Music Research and Teaching Centre, Central Conservatory of Music), also proposed a linear guide to "imagery thinking" in the teaching of *erhu*. Zhao provided more specific explanations of imagination in the article "*Erhu* yanzou chong de xianxing xingxiang siwei wenti" (The Linear Figurative Thinking in *Erhu* Performance). For example, he took as an example the *erhu* solo *Benchizai qianli caoyuan* 奔驰在千里草原 (Galloping in the Boundless Prairie) with his imagination of imitating the scene of a horse running:

> The numerical values in the score example merely signify their relative positions on the graph, rather than the beat. Characterized by a lively and buoyant personality, the melody, rich in rhythms reminiscent of galloping horses, is primarily associated with the movement of horses. Therefore, it corresponds to the diagonal line within the category of vertical line picking (see Fig 4.2) (Zhao 1991, 72).

[52] Liu Changfu's music theory began to take shape in the 1980s-1990s, although it was published centrally after the 2000s.

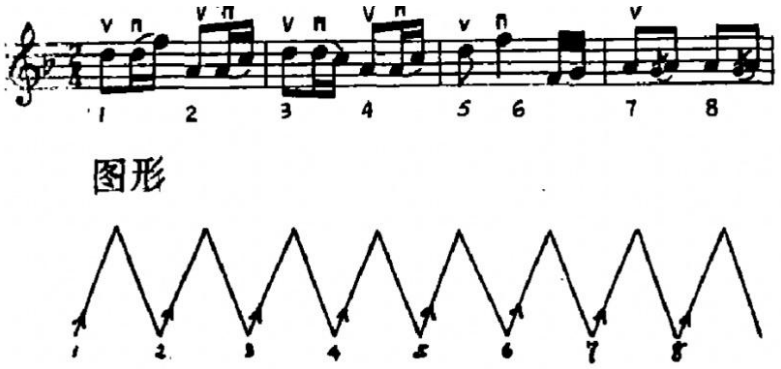


Fig 4.2 Analysis on *Benchizai qianli caoyuan,* Zhao Hanyang, 1991.

From Zhao Hanyang's hand-drawn lines and in conjunction with the musical context, it is evident that this section captures the dynamic motion of a horse's hooves in motion. Zhao then draws upon another recital piece of *erhu* music, *Guangming xing* 光明行 (Towards A Brighter Future), as an example, suggesting that the melody and rhythm of the introduction echo the forceful stride of an advancing army (see Fig 4.3).

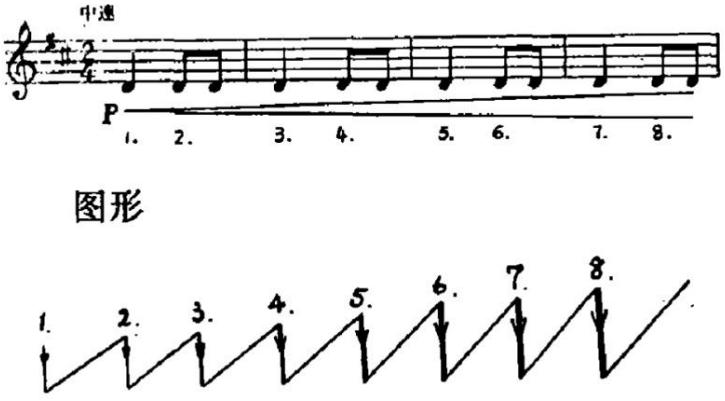


Fig 4.3 Analysis on *Guangmingxing*, Zhao Hanyang 1991.

Zhao Hanyang further juxtaposes the movement of horses with that of humans, suggesting that horses, or animals in general, have a greater capacity for leaping than humans. He thus argues that the distinction should be reflected in the musical performance. From Zhao's ideology, the "linear graphics" encompass the essence of musical information, reinterpreted by the performer. These graphics serve as a visual representation of the music, where the line direction mirrors the flow of musical expression and thickness depicts the dynamics—variations in volume and intensity in the sense of hearing. The height and orientation of lines signify the tonal centre, offering a spatial understanding of musical pitches, while the continuity or breaks in lines reflect the mood and

phrasing. The angles and turns vividly showcase rhythmic variations and the articulation of notes, providing a clear visual guide. This graphical approach greatly enhances the interpretation of music for *erhu* players, making the complexities of performance more accessible.

Moreover, the imagination of "linear graphics" in music playing is more like a personal version of a music score in transcription with the overall description of the landscape emphasised from the third- person perspective in global notation. It is in fact more like a notation method for ethnomusicological study. Killick mentions that for some people who disseminate music knowledge, global notation may be useful for creation and performance (Killick 2020, 240). In the case of *erhu* training, this method can be used to describe visual and auditory experiences, which are also perceptual images that help us understand music and form poetic and aesthetic symbols. They also intuitively express different ways in which different people understand the same short music pieces through the text.

Zhao Hanyang further elaborates on the advantages of this approach for expressing emotions through *erhu* training. This contrasts with Liu Changfu's method of interpreting music through visualisation. Zhao utilises a more straightforward notation to depict the musical expression as it unfolds:

> The texture of these graphics—be it dense, light, smooth, or coarse—parallels the psychological foundation for timbral shifts. When practising music, starting with the construction of these elements proves insightful. Although not all aspects need to be physically drawn, visualising and moving to the music can refine the interpretative process. Engaging with the music in this manner—first through visualisation and then through experimentation on instruments like the *erhu*—enhances understanding and creativity. This approach not only minimises aimless experimentation but also enriches the performance with vivid imagery, making the music tangibly present in the performer's mind (Zhao 1991, 74).

The practice of the "*minyue jiaoyanshi*" of the Central Conservatory of Music faculty reflects the diversity of thinking and approaches in global music education. Liu Changfu's pictorial thinking demonstrates how modern approaches to music education can enhance musical understanding through visualisation and emotional expression. This pedagogical approach is not just limited to training at the technical level but also incorporates a pictorial and symbolic way of thinking about

music, enabling students to form a deeper sense of the piece through visual representation of music. Zhao Hanyang's linear pictorial thinking further exemplifies symbolic and graphic notation in global music education. This method, which has been widely used in ethnomusicological studies worldwide, can help students understand the structure and emotional expression of music through visual images.

The Chinese Music Department of the Central Conservatory of Music, as a paragon in the *erhu* sector, establishes benchmarks and guidance for other music education institutions in China, while also bolstering academic authority through the engagement between its professors and students. Due to their formal status and exceptional musicianship, music educators have garnered the respect and admiration of their students. Based on my interviews and self-reflection, it seems that *erhu* students not only document videos and audio recordings of their classes but also take meticulous notes and utilise these resources for intentional and repetitive practice following the session.

These learning approaches represent a symbolic "ritual" of education and provide a daily interactive experience with the instructor. This educational methodology progressively resulted in the establishment of a standardised assessment criterion, encompassing aspects from technical execution to nuances of musical expression, as well as the use of creativity in performance. This is carefully confined within a defined pedagogical framework, yielding a highly precise and intricate style of *erhu* performance. This systematic training methodology also presents specific constraints, particularly regarding musical expressiveness. This method improves technical proficiency and fosters a consistent playing style among pupils, although it simultaneously constrains the musician's own independence and distinct artistic expression.

This limitation is not just evident in the music but also reinforces the teacher's authority over the student's learning process, establishing an intrinsic power dynamic between teacher and student, as well as over the performance. This educational framework effectively converted music instruction into a hierarchical structure, whereby adherence to conventional and ritualistic pedagogies not only enhanced students' technical proficiencies but also subtly subordinated them to the authority of the instructor and the institution, thereby reinforcing the conservatory's supremacy in *erhu* education and performance.

4.3 The Global Impact of the School Style's *Erhu* Training Model in the Present Day

Today, the professional *erhu* courses are offered not only at major music conservatories and music departments of art colleges and comprehensive universities in China but also at overseas institutions. In the context of globalisation, the *erhu* has been widely promoted thoughout the world through cultural diplomacy and overseas music education programmes led by the Chinese government. In addition, professional *erhu* musicians have been instrumental in promoting the instrument on a global scale. According to my observations, universities such as Bard College in the United States, Wellington University in New Zealand, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and the University of Sydney have all introduced *erhu* majors and elective courses. The number of people learning *erhu* is also increasing, with *erhu* classrooms and studios established in Chinese communities across Europe, America and Southeast Asia.[53]

Sunny Wong (黄晨达 b. 1975), an *erhu* teacher at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, shared his teaching methodologies with me.[54] Because his father, Onyuen Wong (黄安源 b. 1945), was a renowned *erhu* musician trained in the conservatory system before emigrating to Hong Kong, Sunny himself underwent rigorous training, progressing from the affiliated middle school to the undergraduate level at a conservatory and later earning a master's degree from the China Conservatory of Music. He mentioned that although he teaches *erhu* in Singapore, he continues to adhere to the Chinese conservatory's "step-by-step" training model. He noted that after completing their training, his Singaporean students can perform large-scale *erhu* compositions from recent years and often participate in *erhu* competitions in China, competing alongside domestic musicians. However, he differs in that he encourages his students to practise piano and orchestral and choral conducting skills, as he recognises the limitations of *erhu* performance in terms of career options. He believes that piano and conducting offer more opportunities for employment in Singapore, especially for students who wish to pursue professional music careers after graduation (Wong 2022).

[53] After starting my PhD research, I have interviewed professional musicians who are conducting *erhu* education overseas. Please see the list of interviews for details.
[54] Sunny Wong, personal communication. March 01, 2022.

At same time, Xu Ke, a mainstream *erhu* musician who graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music Teaching at Senzoku Gakuen College of Music in Japan, emphasised the genuine passion for the *erhu* among non-professional students in his community. He mentioned that many of these students come from science-related fields and, although they do not intend to become professional musicians, their enthusiasm for the *erhu* is sincere. More importantly, their scientific training helps them better understand the steps and methods involved in *erhu* performance training.[55]

To overcome language barriers in *erhu* training overseas, Kong Yanyan from Zhejiang Conservatory of Music has combined her teaching experiences in Singapore and the United States to develop English-language teaching materials for *erhu*. This effort has significantly aided in the internationalisation of *erhu* education, making the instrument more accessible to non-Chinese speaking students and expanding its reach in global music education. She sent me this unpublished but already tried and tested textbook in 2022 (she said she has used it with a Ukrainian student).[56] When I studied that document, I found that it still employs a structural analysis of the movements involved in *erhu* performance training, explaining the literal meaning of the *erhu* and its playing techniques.

As China's global political power expands, so does its cultural and musical influence, affecting music education worldwide. This has drawn students from around the world eager to study Chinese music. The study of *erhu* technique has become a key focus for many international students wishing to delve into *erhu* music. Since the 2010s, major music academies in China, including the Central Conservatory of Music, where Liu Changfu has held key positions, have been enrolling international students with a focus on technical training. As part of their graduation requirements, these students are still required to express their views on *erhu* learning through an essay written in Chinese.

For example, Cho Eun Soo from South Korea, a master's student at the China Conservatory of Music in 2015, wrote her thesis on the design of her graduation concert, analysing the playing techniques in the different styles of *erhu* music in the programme (2018). Ishiki Yuki from Japan, a master's student at the Central Conservatory of Music who graduated in 2020, explored the

[55] Xu Ke, personal communication. November 24, 2021.
[56] Kong Yanyan, personal communication. November 15, 2022.

application of conservatory *erhu* techniques in the contemporary piece *Japanese Sea* (2020). Similarly, Ulziibayar Sarangua from Mongolia, a master's student at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 2019, completed a dissertation comparing the technical characteristics of academic *erhu* with those of the Mongolian *erhu*, analysing the musical effects of different techniques in an *erhu* concerto that incorporates Mongolian musical elements (2023), etc.

In this way, the school style's approach to *erhu*, with its dissemination of "scientific" training and performance methods, reflects an intention to control cultural narratives to some extent and establish a discourse within the global music scene. By standardising and professionalising technical training, the academy has created an "orthodox" interpretation of *erhu* playing, gradually defining what constitutes "professional" *erhu* performance, while its focus on technique has helped the *erhu* enter the world music market and elevate its status in the professional music sphere.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on Liu Changfu's contributions to the "scientific" training guidance of the *erhu* and analysed how the highly educated *erhu* players he represents argue for the academisation and internationalisation of the *erhu* through systematic training. Liu's professorship at the Central Conservatory of Music reflects not only his own accomplishment but also signifies the preeminent status of this institution in modern *erhu* teaching and performance excellence. This system of training has become the standard in conservatories for assessing performance quality and has also become a symbol of professional musicianship that has had a profound impact on contemporary *erhu* players.

In addition, the technical metaphor of "scientific" training for *erhu* performers reveals the pursuit of a systematic approach to learning within the context of global music education. At the same time, it reflects how musicians like Liu, in the setting of China's reform and opening up, used the concept of "science" to connect *erhu* with the world, engaging in a dialogue with what they saw as global standards via a scientific training system that through detailed analysis of playing techniques, imaginative guidance and the establishment of strict training templates meticulously regulates every aspect of training. This process resembles a scientific experiment, where the performer's technique and body movements are structured and examined to ensure accuracy and

through repeated practice achieve a good musical performance that can be reproduced in any setting.

At the same time, the relationships between mainstream performers often reflect a mentor-apprentice dynamic, that is, a "patron-client" relationship. Within this framework, the student's achievements enhance the teacher's reputation, while at the same time elevating the student to a higher status. At the core of the school style *erhu* community is this reciprocal exchange of prestige. Here, an individual's musical talent is judged by others and the status and authority of the evaluator directly influence the cultural symbolic value of the person's talent. The "scientific" training methods also symbolise the bond that maintains the internal relationships within the school style *erhu* community, reinforcing this system of social and authoritative evaluation (Kingsbury 1988, 37-68).

In fact, there are some contemporary *erhu* performers particularly confused by this entrenched training paradigm around performance. Throughout my interviews, several players articulated their intention to confront the constraints of conventional academic approaches, transcend existing norms and explore more varied forms of artistic expression. These musicians are intrepid and eager to engage with many cultures to broaden their artistic perspectives. In the subsequent chapter, I will examine how certain *erhu* players educated in the conservatories are augmenting their impact on the global music landscape and reinterpreting their positions in a new global era.

Chapter 5. George Gao's Musical Creativity: Blending *Erhu* Artistry with a Global Musical Vision

Introduction

The CPC gradually opened various fields of foreign exchange, including music, after the Chinese government officially declared the Cultural Revolution over in 1976. Despite groups like the Chinese Art Troupe performing abroad for political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, personal freedom of music creation and expression remained strictly restricted. With the opening of the political and economic fields to the outside world, many Chinese musicians also began to go overseas in search of new artistic expression. In the 1980s and 1990s, some *erhu* musicians went abroad, such as Jiang Jianhua, Xu Ke, Ma Xiaohui, etc., embarking on their personalised musical journeys. The ethnomusicologist Zheng Su argues that the works of these diasporic musicians not only reveal geographical dispersion, but also embody their emotional, technical and imaginative frameworks within music practice. These frameworks, in turn, lead to new insights and foster fresh personal narratives. This suggests that the music creativity of diasporic musicians is shaped not just by spatial movement, but also by their internal emotions and accumulated skills, enabling them to continuously reshape their identities and stories through these practices (Zheng 2010, 11).

The subject of my research for this chapter, George Gao (b. 1967), is an important representative of contemporary Chinese *erhu* music on the global stage. From 1979 to 1988, he studied at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, advancing from middle school to undergraduate studies. In 1991, he gained admission as a piano major at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Canada, after which he emigrated. As an *erhu* player residing in Canada, he has not only inherited the art of the Chinese academic *erhu* but also resonates with world music through innovation. In terms of composition and adaptation, he skilfully incorporates various styles of Western classical, world and contemporary music into his *erhu* creations, building a unique hybrid artistic effect. By improving the "traditional *erhu*", he has developed the "*shaoqin erhu*" (韶琴二胡), intended to be more scientific and adaptable to various music genres, further enhancing the expressive power of the *erhu*. His international

performances have earned him widespread recognition and the *erhu* is gaining attention outside of China as part of a global cross-cultural exchange.

Subsequently, the members of the *erhu* "school style" in music conservatories, who placed an emphasis on standardisation and technical precision, began to practise and perform Gao Shaoqing's musical compositions, including six caprices and other chamber works. This training directly contributed to the innovation of the "school style" performance techniques and expanded the expressive power of the *erhu*. This re-territorialisation not only provides new possibilities for the practice of the *erhu* in contemporary global culture but also promotes the artistic practice of the academy and introduces new perspectives and content to *erhu* music education.

In this chapter, I focus on George Gao's development as a distinct musician, showcasing how, after completing his studies under the academic *erhu* music education system, he successfully integrated a variety of cultural elements, including tradition and modernity, *minjian* and classical, homeland and distant places, through his personal cultural memory and subsequent experience of spatial displacement. This resulted in the formation of a unique and distinctive style of music creation and innovation. This process reflects his exploration and practice of repositioning the *erhu* in a global context. I also analyse his modified *erhu*, the *"shaoqin"*, along with his musical compositions, aiming to more clearly showcase his core contributions to the ecology of *erhu* music.

5.1 Who is George Gao?

Before embarking on my PhD research in 2021, I was deeply captivated by George Gao's music creation and playing (see Fig 5.1), which stood out from other professional *erhu* music of the 2000s due to his distinct musical style. Moreover, he often showcases his playing talents with a visually captivating *erhu*, knows as "*shaoqin erhu*" (韶琴二胡). I frequently came across his performances online, which resonated with my personal musical interests and have continued to follow him on YouTube to this day.[57] This interest in his music persists, as I often encounter his updated *erhu* music videos, including professional *erhu* music clips, pop songs, jazz and variations combining *erhu* with electronic music, on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and We Chat short

[57] Gao, Geroge. "YouTube personal homepage", accessed April 12,2024. http://www.youtube.com/@shaoqin*erhu*.

videos platform. This prompted me to shift the focus of my study to a consideration of how he incorporates novel global elements while maintaining the essence of *erhu* music. Additionally, I began to wonder how his music reflects the change in mainstream *erhu* with "school style" via the construction of musicianship of across cultures in the contemporary world.



Fig 5.1 George Gao, photograph provided to the author via personal communication, September 16, 2021.

The first interview with Georges Gao took place in August 2021. I found his contact details openly available on Facebook, which was a different approach compared to connecting with other mainstream *erhu* musicians. Usually, in China, one needs to be introduced by an acquaintance to find such musicians and it is difficult to get into direct contact with contemporary academically-oriented "school style" *erhu* players, even on the official websites of Conservatories of Music.[58] At that time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel, so I conducted an online interview with Gao from my room. After exchanging a few pleasantries, I couldn't resist asking the question that I was most eager to express; I desperately wanted to know the answer. "*Why are your erhu pieces so interesting?*" In fact, when it comes to Chinese music, we rarely describe the academics and "school

[58] In contemporary China, mainstream *erhu* players often fulfil a dual role as both performers and instructors at conservatories.

style" as interesting. Based on my observations, the majority of contemporary mainstream *erhu* musicians prefer terms like "elite", "professional" or "artistic". These terms are used to underscore their formal training and their ability to elevate *erhu* playing to the level of artistic expression, setting them apart from folkloric *huqin* musicians.

I seemed to have forgotten Georges Gao's attributes as a mainstream *erhu* musician due to my excitement and didn't pay attention to whether the words I used would offend him. However, Gao replied to me saying, "Thank you for liking my music. I enjoy interesting things and don't like to be static as it is a bit boring for me. I am a musician, and I want my work to be alive and listenable…"[59] I then went on to ask, based on my identity as an ethnomusicology scholar and my intuition of the discipline, "How do you do it then, to make your music-making so interesting?" Gao said it started with his early musical career. He then briefly introduced himself to me and, even though he was already very well known in the *erhu* mainstream, I followed the fieldwork procedure and wrote a short biography of him after the first interview as a field report and sent it to him to verify its contents. In the second contact, Gao mentioned that he would like me to present all his musical achievements in my research in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the contents of his personal homepage.[60]

5.1.1 The Musical Career of George Gao

George Gao is a Canadian Chinese *erhu* player, born in 1967 in Weiwu, Gansu Province with the name Gao Shaoqing 高韶青. His father was a railway engineer and his mother a primary school music teacher. He began learning the *erhu* at the age of six and was admitted to the Affiliated High School of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1979 (Gao 2021). According to Tang Ruofu's (b. 1980) research, this year saw the normalisation and establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, followed by Isaac Stern's (1920–2001) visit to China and then the visits and performances of conductors Seiji Ozawa (1935–2024), Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989) and the violinist Yehudi Menuhin (1916–1999) which gave Chinese musicians the opportunity to come into contact with some of the world's first-class conductors and virtuosi and inspired them to strive

[59] George Gao, personal communication, September 1, 2021.
[60] George Gao. "*SHAOQIN ERHU* MUSIC: George Gao", accessed April 12,2024. https://www.ggao.com/about/.

for higher artistic standards in their compositions and performances (Tang 2009).

Musicians at the Conservatory are permitted to travel internationally to promote Chinese culture as a representation of China's spirit and style. In 1984, George Gao performed as an *erhu* soloist with a group of Shanghai musicians during a visit to Canada. In the following year, he travelled from Shanghai and won the first prize of the National *Erhu* Competition in Beijing, the capital city, due to his superb playing skills. He was also awarded the Music Performing Arts Prize by the Shanghai Federation of Literary and Artistic Associations and was thus exempted from the examination to enter the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to study for his undergraduate degree (Gao 2021).

George Gao was recognized by the Chinese government and the mainstream *erhu* community for his musical skills and expressiveness. As he said, at the time he played what he thinks would be considered boring and outdated "classic *erhu* repertoire", most of these pieces having been written in the 1960s, with simple melodies and basic musical structures and techniques. Therefore, during his undergraduate studies, he performed the full *Carmen Fantasy* on the *erhu*. This music was recorded by Shanghai Radio and Television Station and caused a controversy in the mainstream *erhu* community. He then went on to try his hand at performing other violin music on the *erhu*, such as *Csárdás*, *Infinite Motion* and other pieces (Gao 2021).

However, even in Shanghai, where politics were relatively open, the academy remained highly conservative and deeply influenced by on teacher-student relationships. Even though George Gao had won several prizes and had extensive experience representing Chinese musicians in the West, these achievements did not help him to stay on as a teacher or to pass on his personal experience within the conservative *erhu* academy system. After graduation, he hoped to make some change in the living landscape, therefore he joined the Central Chinese Orchestra in Beijing and premiered the *erhu* concerto *Qiuyun* 秋韵 (Autumn Poem)[61] in the music hall (Gao 2021).

However, at that time, the Central Chinese Orchestra and indeed the Chinese music industry, was having to deal with the huge impact of the Western music industry. With the implementation of China's open-door policy, Western pop and rock music rapidly entered the Chinese market, attracting

[61] "Autumn Poem" was composed by Liu Wenjin in 1990 at the invitation of Chen Chengxiong, Director of the Taipei National Orchestra, for the 1990 Minzu Instrumental Competition.

a large number of listeners and quickly establishing a wide audience. The cultural impact of this on the conservative Chinese has squeezed the living space of state-run *minjian yinyue* ensembles, leading to a marked decline in the traditional Chinese music industry. As George Gao said, performance opportunities were drastically reduced, with only a handful of performances throughout the year (Gao 2021).

Similarly, another *erhu* performer, Xu Ke, who resides in Japan and graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music, also mentioned in an interview with me about the special period between the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Chinese music encountered the impact of globalisation. In his case, he left the Central Chinese Orchestra in 1988 and moved to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. There, he relied on his piano skills to make a living by performing in bars and also work as a private erhu teacher. That same year, he went to Japan to study. Since then, he has been active in both Japan and China.[62]

The "school style" *erhu* musicians are equipped with skills in Western music because of their modern musical education, which provides them with an advantage for survival in the age of globalisation. Western classical music occupies an important place in the market around the world, so these musicians are better able to find opportunities in the global musical environment and adapt to changes within it. To this day, Sunny Wong, an *erhu* instructor at Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, continues to uphold and emphasise the training in Western music, particularly piano skills, in his teaching. He considers this essential for his students' future career opportunities, as the piano remains dominant in global music education.

In 1991, George Gao applied for the opportunity to further his studies at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, Canada, with a major in piano, where he founded a pop band called "Inner Pulse". In his daily practice and musical activities at school, Gao reflected that although his studies at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music provided him with a solid foundation in international music knowledge, he was destined not to become a pianist because he hadn't practiced piano from a young age. It is also difficult for him to surpass the unique advantages of foreign musicians who have grown up in Western musical contexts and societies. As a result, he decided to leave the

[62] Xu Ke, personal communication. November 24, 2021.

conservatory. Since the *erhu* was not well known in Canada at the time, based on the vast piano market, he initially tried teaching piano to make a living and later got involved in his family's traditional Chinese medicine business. However, he couldn't give up his passion for music (Gao 2021).

After living in Canada for several years, George Gao began to experiment with recording and composing music for film and television. For example, his *erhu* performance on the soundtrack of the sci-fi TV series "Earth: Final Conflict" earned him a prestigious Emmy Award nomination for "Best Original Music" in 1998.[63] Moreover, in 2003, Gao collaborated on the soundtrack for one of the three-part documentaries, "Becoming American – The Chinese Experience", specifically "Program 3: No Turning Back", working alongside Brian Keane (b. 1953).[64] In 2006, he contributed an *erhu* performance for the documentary film "The Blood of Yingzhou District",[65] which went on to win the Oscar for Best Documentary Short Subject.[66] George Gao then continued to collaborate with that film's director Ruby Yang. In 2010, he contributed additional music to the soundtrack in another documentary film, "The Warriors of Qiugang",[67] which received an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Short Subject. During his film scoring period, he has been active on the international stage, collaborating with musicians and band from all over the world, such as "The Silk Orchestra", "George Gao Ensemble", "Memento" and "Bowfire".[68] He also premiered "Four Ancient Scores of Dunhuang"[69] and "Chinese Caprice No.5",[70] which was written by composer, An-lun Huang (b. 1949).

Gao's life and musical practice in Canada are deeply rooted in his Chinese cultural identity and reflection on his historical memory. In multicultural Canada, he gradually manifested his uniqueness through his *erhu* music, skilfully expressing and reinforcing his cultural identity at every opportunity. This process demonstrates Gao's personal strategy of subjective activity, as he flexibly mediates the

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63 "Earth: Final Conflict", Created by Gene Roddenberry. Emmy Awards Official Website. Accessed April 16, 2024. https://www.emmys.com/shows/gene-roddenberrys-earth-final-conflict

64 "Program editor", accessed April 24,2024. https://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/programcredits.html

65 Yang, Ruby, director. *The Blood of Yingzhou District*.39 minutes. Accessed April 16, 2024. http://yangruby.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Bloodofyingzhou_PressKit.pdf

66 Gao, "SHAQIN *ERHU* MUSIC: George Gao".

67 Yang, Ruby, director. *The Warriors of Qiugang* 2010. Documentary, 39 minutes. Accessed April 16, 2024. http://yangruby.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Warriors-US.letter-press-kit-2020.pdf

68 George Gao, personal communication, August 31,2021.

69 Composition date: July 1997.

70 Composition date: May 2002.

cultural differences and challenges of his environment. In his hands the *erhu* has become a powerful symbol of his transnational journey and the cultural heritage he carries from his homeland. Gao's story highlights how the *erhu* resonates on a deeper level with the spirit of diasporic musicians navigating a globalised world.

George Gao became a Canadian citizen in 2013 and two years later, at the inauguration of the Governor General of Canada in 2015, he performed the *erhu* solo *Zhanma benteng* 战马奔腾 (Galloping Horse), which gained him further attention from many people.[71] In addition, he has made his mark as a professional *erhu* composer with a distinctive musical ideology. From 2002 to 2022, he composed six *erhu* capriccios, namely *Capriccio No. 1: Song of Nostalgia* (思乡 *Sixiang*, 2002), *Capriccio No. 2: Mongolian Fantasy* (蒙风 *Mengfeng*, 2008), *Capriccio No. 3: Dazzlement* (炫动 *Xuandong*, 2009), *Capriccio No. 4: Gobi Fantasy* (戈壁 *Gebi*, 2012), *Capriccio No. 5: Nakhi* (纳西 *Naxi*, 2013) and *Capriccio No. 6: Shaoyin* (韶音, 2022). Each of these *erhu* solos brought him back into the limelight of the Chinese mainstream *erhu* community and was highly regarded.

In order to enhance the *erhu*'s expressiveness in playing this music, Gao developed an enhanced version of the instrument, known as the "*shaoqin erhu*", and his rendition of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's (1840–1893) *Violin Concerto in D Major* on this instrument once again stunned the music world.[72] In my interview with another *erhu* player and YouTube blogger, Dr Nicholas Ng,[73] who is active in Sydney, Australia, he stated unequivocally that George Gao's music has surprised him time and again, because of Gao's proficiency in composing, playing and performing with the new musical instrument, "*shaoqin erhu*".[74] So how does George Gao's "*shaoqin erhu*" align or contest with the development of *erhu* history?

[71] "Chinese Instrumental Music 'Galloping Horse'", People's Daily, April 30, 2016. [YouTube]. https://youtu.be/O8os1P1RHls?si=l7i76A2f7GPvNR4E
[72] "The 3rd movement of Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto", George Gao, July 22, 2015. [YouTube]. https://youtu.be/hRReodBEpbM
[73] Nicholas Ng, "YouTube personal homepage", accessed April 14, 2024. www.youtube.com/@nicholasngmusic.
[74] Nicholas Ng, interview by the author, September 16,2021.

5.1.2 The Newly Instruments, "*Shaoqin erhu*"

> At the time, I owned Apple's first-generation mobile phone, which had a notably weak and soft speaker. I often struggled to hear anything through it. One day, by chance, I slightly covered the sound outlet with my hand, unintentionally creating a makeshift resonance box and the sound volume increased dramatically, becoming louder and clearer. This experience sparked an idea for improving the *erhu*. A few years later, while testing a mobile phone in a shopping mall, I subconsciously covered the sound hole when I noticed the volume was too low and again, the sound intensified. This simple action proved enlightening, especially as I frequently faced challenges with the *erhu*'s audibility when performing with large symphony orchestras or Chinese orchestras abroad. The traditional *erhu* often falls short in loudness and tuning precision compared to Western instruments like the violin, particularly in modern concert halls. This ongoing issue inspired me to apply the same principle I used with the phone to the *erhu*, aiming to enhance its projection and clarity in these challenging environments (Gao 2021).

George Gao demonstrated strong hands-on abilities from a young age. In his hometown in Gansu, he assembled a radio by himself and had been involved in studying electronic technology products since childhood. As early as high school, Gao began to try to improve the sound of the *erhu*, for example, by applying oil and water sprays to the skin of the instrument, experimenting with different strings and using medical rubber paste to improve the *qianjin* (千斤, nut). Despite his skill as a professional *erhu* player, these physical limitations still bothered him. He stated, "The limitations of the traditional *erhu* prevented it from realising the music I was seeking. I wanted my music creation to have no limitations." (Gao 2021). This dissatisfaction eventually led him to innovate the *erhu*'s design in search of a more adaptable and expressive instrument.

Consequently, George Gao developed the "*shaoqin erhu*", a modernised version of the traditional *erhu* that maintains the classic playing principles but with an updated aesthetic to meet Gao's expressive needs. The "traditional" or "normal" *erhu* has obvious limitations in musical performance. Firstly, the range is quite limited, with a full range of D_1 to A_3 Specifically, when the pitch range exceeds a3, the *erhu* becomes unplayable. Even in the range from d3 to a3, the sound begins to weaken and the timbre loses its fullness and stability. These physical limitations posed a great challenge to George Gao's artistic pursuits, especially when he was exposed to the classical violin repertoire. In addition to being moved, he felt a stimulus that inspired him to want the *erhu*'s tone to be fuller and more expressive as well. He believed that the limited range and tonal instability of the *erhu* prevented him from realising his complete musical vision.

To facilitate a clearer understanding of the disparity between George Gao's innovative instrument and the conventional *erhu*, I have prepared a graphical juxtaposition of the *erhu* alongside the "*shaoqin erhu*" for interpretation (see Fig 5.2).



Fig 5.2 Shaoqin and *erhu* (Author, 2021).

According to George Gao, the improvement in the "*shaoqin erhu*" begins with the technical innovations of the musical instrument and its benefits for musical expression:

> The newly upgraded removable *qianjin* allows for a wider effective range and the ability to adjust the strings at any time. Additionally, the *qintong* (soundbox), which can be shifted in the direction of sound transmission, increases the effective volume of concert hall performances and allows for multiple timbres on a single instrument… and the premium edition "*shaoqin erhu* can be plugged in and connected to various electronic music effects. This demonstrates that the instrument can be integrated with modern music equipment to enhance the *erhu*'s versatility… (Gao 2021).



Fig 5.3 Comparison between "*shaoqin erhu*" and *erhu* on the box sound and tuning pegs (Author, 2021).

From George Gao's introduction, we can see that one of his design objectives was to optimise the acoustic transmission of the *erhu* in the spatial context of the contemporary concert hall. We can see by referring to the above comparison photos that the traditional *erhu*'s soundbox, typically a hexagon, features a rear-facing sound hole (See Fig 5.3). George Gao believed that this setup leads the sound in the direction opposite to where the audience sits in the concert hall, potentially resulting in a loss of volume and hindering appreciation due to interference of sound waves. His innovative redesign of the "*shaoqin erhu*" addresses this issue.[75] From the comparison pictures, we can see he crafts an upward-opening sound hole at the rear of the soundbox. In this way Gao emphasised a direct sound transmission from the soundbox to the audience, thereby minimising volume loss. He

[75] George Gao, personal communication, September 2,2021.

also mentioned that the rear half of the soundbox is detachable and that the sound hole's 360° longitudinal rotation ensures versatility in specialised venues.[76] This comes from Gao's observations, as a lover of electronics and audio devices, of product updates and iterations.

So, what special sensations does the newly upgraded removable *qianjin* bring to the performer in musical practice? In my experience of playing, the alloy shaft of the "*shaoqin erhu*", which utilises modern technology to mechanically snap the strings together, feels silky smooth when adjusting pitch compared to wooden shafts. The movable *qianjin* mounted on the shaft extends the effective range of the instrument by at least one octave compared to the traditional *erhu*, allowing for instant changes of empty strings to set the pitch. The tuning is from d-d''' (see Fig 5.4). As George Gao said, it can also instantly transform into an "Erquan *erhu*"[77] or a "Changcheng *erhu*"[78] without the need to replace specialised strings or purchase a separate musical instrument. Moreover, the lower part of "*shaoqin erhu*" is designed according to the curvature of thigh and the bottom is engraved with anti-slip patterns, which makes the "*shaoqin erhu*" fit more closely on the legs. George Gao also mentioned that when we play and our body involuntarily dances to the melody, this bottom design ensures that our *erhu* won't sway excessively along with our body movements. This feature allows the player to perform with more enjoyment, without the need to constantly adjust their body position to maintain technique (Gao 2021).



Fig 5.4 Comparison between "*shaoqin erhu*" and *erhu* on lower part (Author, 2021)

[76] Gao, personal communication, September 2, 2021.
[77] The "Erquan *erhu*", specialised in playing "The Moon's Reflection on the Second Spring", often comes with a corresponding string called the "Erquan string." Inner string: G, outer string: D.
[78] To play the *Great Wall Capriccio*, we need to change the special "Great Wall Strings". Inner string: c1, outer string: g1

5.1.3 The User Experience of the *Shaoqin erhu*: Playing and Ideology

As a product developer, George Gao also enquired about my experience of playing it when we talked about this new *erhu*. I honestly shared with him how I felt that, when I tried to play the *Erquan yingyue* on the "*shaoqin erhu*", aside from the novelty, I honestly didn't feel a strong sense of the traditional Chinese music flow. It just seemed too cool and modern. But, when I attempt to play pop music, like *Rolling in the Deep*,[79] I find that the "*shaoqin erhu*" in my hand seamlessly blends with the music, without any sense of contradiction. Conversely, when I play pop tunes, including C-pop with a standard formal *erhu*, I often feel a discomforting awkwardness, which points to a clash between Chinese and Western cultures, as well as contemporary and traditional identities on *erhu*.

Georges Gao responded profoundly to my feelings. He pointed out that as contemporary individuals, our lifestyles are so imbued with modern elements that it is challenging for us to fully grasp the living environments of past artists such as Liu Tianhua and Abing, let alone completely restore their playing styles, even if we were to use an *erhu* in the same form as theirs. And, he said that "what we can do is to reinterpret their (Liu Tianhua and Abing's) music based on our contemporary knowledge and perception of our heart."[80]

George Gao identifies himself as a renaissance man of Chinese music and, with his instrument "*shaoqin erhu*," he achieves cultural reinvention.[81] He practises what he preaches in his musical ideology. Confidently and skilfully, he expresses *erhu* musical creations inspired by "bygone eras and themes" with his new instrument. For example, he used the "*shaoqin erhu*" to perform *Jianghe shui* in a music recital with the Novosibisk Chamber Orchestra.[82] And he showcased the *erhu* piece *Capriccio of Qinqiang Tunes* accompanied by guitar player Bill Bridges, bass player Lew Mele and Percussion at the Nagoya Concert in 2009.[83] In 2015, he posted a reworked version of his *erhu* music on his Facebook page—a quadruple arrangement of *Galloping in the Boundless Prairie* (奔驰在千里草原, *Benchizai qianlicaoyuan*) with three additional voices compared to the original. He

[79] Adele Laurie Blue Adkins, "Rolling in the Deep", 21, November 29, 2011.
[80] George Gao, personal communication, September 2, 2021.
[81] Gao. "*SHAOQIN ERHU* MUSIC: George Gao", accessed April 17,2024. https://www.ggao.com/about/.
[82] George Gao, "River of Sorrow", released February 15, 2021, accessed April 17,2024. [YouTube], https://youtu.be/6wuSs8gG8I4?si=2SyQH270JuPSKZfk
[83] Georeg Gao "Capriccio of Qinqiang Tunes", released December 27,2009, accessed April 17,2024 [YouTube], https://youtu.be/QAPsFzqi3A8?si=cWpQhR4h6ew47jMM

used two "*shaoqin erhu*s" an "alto-*shaoqin erhu*" and a "bass-*shaoqin erhu*" to enrich the main melody. In the accompanying text, Georges Gao emphasised the "fun" and "enjoyment" at the core of his musical creation.[84]

In addition, the expanded range of the "*shaoqin erhu*" now encompasses more than three octaves beyond that of the regular *erhu*, which is almost the same as that of the violin (Gao 2021). Therefore, George Gao began attempting more violin pieces with Western classical music. Alongside the previously mentioned Tchaikovsky *Concerto in D major,* he also attempted the first movement of *Sibelius's* (1865–1957) *Concerto in D minor*,[85] *Minuet in G* by Beethoven (1770–1827),[86] as well as other pieces from the violin repertoire such as the *Chanson* from Faja's Suite of Spanish Folk Songs[87] and so on.

This move goes beyond the traditional conception of transplantation of "school style" of the *erhu* in Western music. Gao fully utilises the performance capabilities of the "*shaoqin erhu*" to faithfully play the original score, without needing to raise or lower the pitch beyond the three-octave range of the *erhu*. This approach lends a new content to the "violinisation" of the modern *erhu* in musical performance. And the "*shaoqin erhu*" can also be a better showcase for other styles of world music. For example, jazz, rock, ambient music, Middle Eastern music, south American, Irish music, etc., which can be found in Georg Gao's daily updates in the short internet video platforms.[88]

The musical activities of *erhu* performers on the global stage not only showcase the instrument's versatility in musical expression but also highlight their responsiveness to global ideologies and movements, such as an increased sensitivity to ecological concerns. In the global era, *erhu* players are embracing a new musical philosophy, actively integrating environmentalism into the performance and composition of *erhu* music. For example, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra embarked on the development of an eco-friendly *huqin* in 2005, completing three generations of upgrades by 2019.[89]

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[84] George Gao, "Galloping in the Boundless Prairie", released November 3,2015, accessed April 5,2024. [YouTube] https://youtu.be/-fSrL42UEXg?si=JzBoYsLSUyA6D4g9

[85] George Gao, "Concerto in D minor", September 14,2021, accessed April 20,2024. https://www.ggao.com/2021/09/14/sibeliusconcerto/

[86] George Gao, "Minute in G", November 1,2020, accessed April 20,2024. https://www.ggao.com/2020/11/01/beethovenminueting/

[87] George Gao. "Chanson", November 9,2020, accessed April 20,2024. https://www.ggao.com/2020/11/09/chanson/

[88] Gao, personal communication, September 2,2021.

[89] "The HKCO Eco-*Huqin* Series Now into the 3rd Generation - Seven-year consecutive awardee, with performances close to the 1500 historical mark", accessed September 9,2022. https://www.hkco.org/en/Instrument-Rd/Eco-*Huqin*s.html

At the same time, George Gao's "*shaoqin erhu*" also exemplifies the same environmental consciousness. Gao has replaced the snakeskin material in the traditional *erhu* with a technological material (see Fig 5.5). He claimed that:

> The use of environmentally friendly synthetic leather material solves the traditional *erhu*'s vulnerability to weather conditions and the instability of each piece of skin, complying with the International Organisation for the Protection of Animals (IOPA)'s requirements regarding the indiscriminate killing, trafficking and trading of python skins.[90]

While we were discussing this issue, George Gao asked me if my regular *erhu* had ever been specially inspected at security during my travels abroad. I mentioned that I had travelled to and from the UK between 2019 and 2021 and that my rosin had been confiscated twice. Consequently, I had to purchase a new piece upon arrival in the UK. Gao remarked that it seems like the situation has improved now. Then, he shared that during his travels abroad in the 1980s and 1990s, his *erhu* frequently caused difficulties due to the snakeskin covering. He believes that the more environmentally friendly *erhu* could help improve the world's stereotyped impression of the regular *erhu* and, by consequence, of Chinese people (Gao 2021).

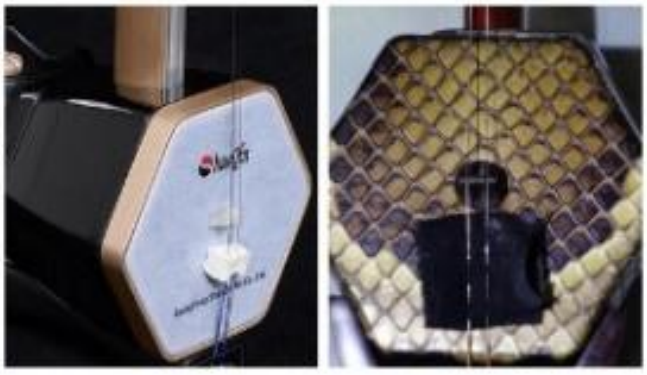


Fig 5.5 Comparison between "*shaoqin erhu*" and *erhu* with its "skin". (Author, 2021).

The environmentally friendly *erhu shaoqin* reflects the *erhu*'s response to global awareness in terms of culture and ecology. As ethnomusicologist Dawe suggested, musical instruments are closely connected with people, places, time and technology; however, they also possess an inherent ability to

[90] In the interview, George Gao gave me a document introducing the *Shaoqin erhu*. September 2 ,2021.

reconnect us with the natural world through the materials from which they are made. Instrument makers are, in fact, "in touch" with the material world. They are agents of material reality, influencing the construction of musical culture on the most fundamental level (Dawe 2015, 109). George Gao contributes to a new *erhu* narrative within the global context, embedding a broader environmental ethic into cultural production. The "*shaoqin erhu*" has also become a cultural symbol within the framework of sustainable development.

5.2 George Gao's *Erhu* Composition

In this section, I explore George Gao's transition from a Chinese to a global musician by analysing his six *erhu* capriccios. Through interviews and contextual research, I demonstrate the spiritual connotations of his works, along with his unique creative style and global influence within a multicultural context.

5.2.1 Debut Work: A Personalised Expression of Inner Emotion

According to George Gao's journey, he moved from Gansu, China, to study in Shanghai, then worked in Beijing after graduation, before emigrating to Canada. He later began travelling frequently between Canada and China, performing regularly across the globe. His identity transitioned from being a Chinese musician to becoming a global musician, which is reflected in his diverse, hybrid and free musical creations. Upon arriving in Canada, George Gao connected with the local community of Chinese musicians, receiving significant support from composer An-lun Huang.

An-lun Huang was born in Beijing in 1949. His father, Huang Feili (1917–2017), was a conductor. In 1961, he was admitted to the piano program at the Central Conservatory of Music Primary School. However, with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, his studies were interrupted and in 1969, he was sent to work in the Zhangjiakou region of Hebei Province. After failing to gain admission to the composition department of the Central Conservatory of Music in 1979, he went to the United States to study composition and obtained his master's degree from Yale University in 1986. Later he emigrated to Canada (Huang 2006, 169-172). His musical creation is known for blending melodies from traditional musical heritage with Western compositional techniques (Huang 2006, 313). Although he had been living in Canada for several years, in 1985, Huang still published

his views on music composition in the *Renmin yinyue* journal.

> In a time when Western contemporary composers have fully developed various techniques such as chromaticism, whole-tone scales, pentatonic scales, "artificial" modes, atonality, polytonality, twelve-tone systems and an array of diverse "noise" composition methods, including "non-musical" compositions and even "silent" music, I firmly choose to adhere to tonal music. By innovating while staying grounded in the solid foundation of excellent traditions, I skilfully apply Western compositional techniques such as harmony and counterpoint to enrich and deepen the melody-focused elements of Chinese music (Huang 1985, 22)

Encouraged by composer An-lun Huang, Gao began composing *erhu* music characterised by melodic performance in 2002. By 2023, he had composed six professional *erhu* solo pieces, all with the theme of caprices. Gao has frequently mentioned in interviews that he dislikes monotony and limitations and he prefers to write with a sense of freedom, fun and enjoyment, making the caprice the most suitable form for him. *Erhu Capriccio No*. 1 was his debut work in the field of professional *erhu* music composition.

Gao explained that the creation of this piece arose when Hong Kong's Dragon Music (Longyin, 龙音) Productions invited composer An-lun Huang to write a concerto and collaborate with the Russian Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra on an album. Huang reached out to George Gao to record the *erhu* melodies for the project and encouraged him to contribute his own compositions to the album, which led to the creation of *Erhu Capriccio No. 1*. Gao stated that the composition was inspired by the structure and harmonies of Huang An-lun's *Chinese Rhapsody* and the ancient Dunhuang scores included in the album. It also incorporates common *erhu* techniques, such as arpeggios, rapid bowing and harmonics. The orchestration and piano accompaniment were completed by An-lun Huang. I have analysed *Capriccio No.1* based on the sheet music provided to me by Gao, as shown here:

Section	Variation	Bars	Tonality	Tempo	Rhythm	*Minjian* influences
Introduction	Theme	I. 1-12 II.13-23	C-F	58	4/4 5/4 2/4 4/4 3/4	Chinese traditional pentatonic modulation
A	I II III	I. 24-33,34-44,45-60 II. 61-67,68-75,76-80 III.81-90,91-107,108-126	C-G C-E^{b}-A^{b}-F D-A-B^{b}-C-d	56 76 96	4/4 5/4 2/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 2/4 4/4 3/4 5/4 4/4 3/4	
B	IV	I.126-141 II.142-153 III.154-165	d-D-C	132 140	3/4 5/4 4/4 6/4 4/4	
A’	V VI	166-159 I.196-215 II.216-237	C C	112	2/4 2/4	
CODA	coda	238-282	C-F-C	160	2/4	

From the music analysis, we can see that this *erhu* music embraces the Western musical compositional structure. Additionally, it incorporates traditional Chinese pentatonic modulation, developing the melody through variations. The tonal modulation layout features both echoes and contrasts of Western compound triadic modes. Moreover, a novel style of pentatonic modulation is locally forged through the manipulation of partial tones.

Additionally, George Gao makes extensive use of parallel phrases, with short motifs developed in different keys. In terms of metrical layout, he frequently changes the meter when presenting the theme. Such as using alternating 4/4, 5/4, 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures in the introduction section, which contrasts with the fixed metre typical of traditional *erhu* pieces, and this alternating metre persists throughout the entire piece, establishing his unique compositional style. The piece features abrupt modulations, undergoes extensive variations and ultimately returns to the core modulation. In the middle part of the piece, the theme melody is played by both the *erhu* and the symphony orchestra accompaniment, creating a rich musical expression. So, what emotions and thoughts are conveyed by this piece of music?

From the introduction of the album “*Erhu* Capriccio: Favourite *Erhu* Pieces of George Gao (3)” published in 2003, Gao said that “In this world, we are suffering a lot and it is hard to find happiness

and peace. During the composition of *Capriccio for Erhu*, I was trying to find the true meaning of life and although I haven't found answers to all my doubts, I have found hope and light." After that, he released a new version of the introduction and during an interview with me outlined the requirements for how the music can be expressed when played:

> A lonely spirit is searching, searching for the source of joy, for the meaning of life and for the consolation of human suffering. Like a drop of water, it enters a stream after its creation, passing through whirlpools and rapids, navigating twists and turns, flowing through a river and finally reaching the sea.
>
> This musical piece is like a spiritual journey. The *erhu* can be played introspectively, not with affected delicacy or with expressions of bitter weeping in grief and anger. The main emotions conveyed can be loneliness and searching. And the tempo of the piece can be appropriate, but the musical structure can remain unified with the rhythm and the climax can be well planned, reflecting the player's feeling (Gao 2021).

This music piece did not focus on the display of performance techniques on a large scale, like the creation of "school style" music after the 2000s, but fully considered the response to individual inner confusion and hope. This process of searching for answers in music reflects his inner monologue and reshapes his cultural identity as a musician in a cross-cultural context. In addition, there is no established paradigm, such as a fixed musical interpretation or predetermined arrangement of melodic fluctuations for performance. Instead, emphasis is placed on inner feeling, providing *erhu* performers with ample room for imaginative self-expression.

George Gao's metaphorical explanation reflects the insights of a diaspora musician who expresses through music profound thoughts on identity recognition and the meaning of individual survival in the context of globalisation. During my interviews with him, Gao frequently mentioned the word "freedom", a concept present in every phase of his personal and professional journey. Born during the Cultural Revolution, Gao faced numerous challenges. In 1978, when he sought to enter the Central Conservatory of Music middle school, he was rejected because his grandfather was an intellectual. Even after being accepted to study music in Shanghai the following year, he was still required to perform and practice model operas until the mid-1980s. However, after representing China's musical elite on international stages, Gao witnessed the vitality of world music. He demonstrated his creativity by performing violin pieces on the traditional *erhu*, blending Western

techniques to highlight his unique skill set. Despite this innovative approach, Gao was not retained as a faculty member after graduation, a typical trajectory for "legitimate" heirs of the "school style" *erhu* tradition. When he later sought a position with the China Central Chinese Orchestra, the social and cultural landscape had shifted once again—Chinese instruments were falling out of favour under the influence of global music trends. Gao's repeated efforts to integrate into established institutions were met with resistance, leading to his disillusionment.

After moving to Canada, a country steeped in multiculturalism, he and his Asian musician community had to adapt their identities to meet societal expectations of diversity for survival. These experiences deepened Gao's belief in the importance of personal freedom, pushing him to create music that offered him the maximum choice and flexibility within the limits of the circumstances he faced. His music became an expression of his inner world, a defining characteristic of his work. Interestingly, as this "distinctive" quality gained him more recognition, he found himself drawn back into the strong influence of the "school style" *erhu* community. George Gao then explained to me that the *Erhu Capriccio No.1* originally did not have a specific Chinese title, but after it started gaining recognition in China, it was named *Song of Nostalgia* (思乡) (Gao 2021).

In October 2002, the *Erhu Capriccio No.1* became the designated piece for the 2nd "Longyin" Cup Chinese Instrument (*Erhu*) International Competition.[91] This music activity signalled George Gao's return to the attention of the mainstream "school style" *erhu* network, after which he began to be invited to compose as a professional *erhu* composer.

5.2.2 A Musical Ideology of Hybridity

George Gao shifted his creative focus towards a more distinctive fusion of styles, highlighting his overseas identity and experiences and incorporating elements from various global music genres into his music practice as his musical works and performances increasingly return to the school's *erhu* community. His musical works since 2008, which incorporate world music elements like tap dance, rock, jazz, etc., are especially notable for this style growth and demonstrate his creative approach to

[91] "Dierjie 'longyinbei' zhongguo minzuyueqi(*erhu*) guoji bisaizhangcheng" (Competition Regulations: 2nd Longyin Cup Chinese Instrument (*Erhu*) International Competition). Renmin yinyue. April 12, 2002.

fusing Western and eastern influences. This creative perspective helps spread awareness of *erhu* music worldwide and demonstrates how versatile it is in contemporary settings. Based on my discussions with George Gao, I compiled a summary of the musical features of Capriccios No. 2 through 6. Each piece shows Gao's expanding artistic vision and technical advancements, which combine traditional *erhu* techniques with influences from his globe travels.

As the *Erhu Capriccio No. 2 Mongolian Fantasy* is one of George Gao's most famous masterpieces. It was commissioned by the organising committee of the 2008 Shanghai International Invitational Competition and became part of the repertoire for the final contest. This piece was hailed by George Gao as the earliest example of maturity in his professional *erhu* compositions. It was also during this period that he began to use the "*shaoqin erhu*" in music performances (Gao 2021).

Before the interview I familiarised myself with this solo to better interact with him and to have a more in-depth discussion about musical expression. During the interview, I shared my imagination on playing with him. When I played the first part, I envisioned the Mongolian steppes and the blistering winds and in the slower section, I imagined myself in Mongolian robes, singing long tunes on the steppes and playing the horse-head fiddle, but with tap-dancing shoes on my feet. I feel that this is an interesting performance experience that other Mongolian style *erhu* works do not have.

George Gao stated that using melody to depict soundscapes is a common approach in *erhu* composition, yet everyone's perception of the same scene is unique. So musical composition can be reinterpreted based on an individual's musical feelings and rhythm. For example, many *erhu* pieces depict Mongolian landscapes, such as *Saima, Benchi zai qianli caoyuan* and *Caoyuan xin mumin.* These compositions adhere to traditional musical language and styles rooted in the creation of music and resonated with the public under the banner of socialism. Despite being another Mongolian-themed *erhu* piece, *Mongolian Fantasy* expresses his personal perception of that soundscape and his thoughts on composition go beyond the "school style" rule (Gao 2021).

George Gao's compositions emphasise the individual musician's self-awareness and connection to the soundscape, rather than merely repeating a collective voice. In the technical design of music, he did not use techniques like fast bowing or jete, which are typically used in traditional Mongolian-

style *erhu* music to directly depict horses and grasslands. Instead, he used double stops to simulate the wild winds of the steppe and evoke a vast, panoramic landscape. He expresses an independent view of nature and culture through a unique perspective and brings an alternative to the more rigid, tradition-bound interpretations often associated with *erhu* performance.

Furthermore, the global musical outlook and extensive stage experience have helped George achieve success in stage design and interaction with audiences, especially in the rhythmic design of his compositions. Gao mentioned that while watching *Riverdance*, the rhythm of the tap dance music instinctively connected with his body, creating an invisible bond with the performers, making him feel immersed in the music as a member of the audience. This experience led him to reflect: if his *erhu* performances could achieve a similar effect, it would mean his music had established a deeper emotional connection with the audience. This realisation highlighted the importance of carefully crafting the rhythmic elements of his music, as such interactions can be truly inspiring and create unforgettable musical experiences. This understanding influenced the distinctive tap-dance-like rhythm in *Mongolian Fantasy*, a concept of connection with the audience that continues to influence his future compositions (Gao 2021).

In the third piece of music *Capriccio No. 3 Dazzlement*, we can hear a stronger sense of rhythm as it incorporates *minjian* rock inspirations, with lyrical passages in the middle incorporating the musical structure of a canon. The syncopated rhythms, similar to rock music, allow for the appearance of shifts in the weak and strong beats, which are a frequent feature of this piece. The syncopated jazz rhythms are intertwined to create a new and fresh feeling. There is not only a large, syncopated rhythm, but also a jazz-inspired linking of 32nd note and 8th note, which creates a continuous 3-beat syncopation and gives the melody a swinging feeling. Moreover, this piece of music contains a clever touch: the Chinese pentatonic scale used is derived from the introduction of Liu Tianhua's *erhu* composition *Liangxiao* featuring the five notes "3 5 6 1 2" (Gao 2021).

George Gao incorporates rock and jazz elements into his *erhu* compositions, creating a novel pop music style that connects contemporary audiences beyond the "school style" community's exclusive appreciation and critique. By integrating the rhythms and improvisational nature of rock and jazz, he adds a level of spontaneity and expressive freedom to *erhu* performances. This approach

not only diversifies the musical interaction but also allows a broader spectrum of listeners to experience its emotional resonance and infectious energy, fostering a more global connection to the instrument.

In the creation of his fourth capriccio *Gobi*, George Gao also demonstrated a rock-like rhythm, including the fusion of a *Laoqing* (老腔) from his hometown in northwest China. Interestingly, the melody of this music suddenly came to his mind while traveling in Taiwan. When we revisited this music, Gao inquired whether I perceived the singing of *minjian* songs by people in the northwest as akin to the Western rock musical style. He believed that the commonality between the two is the use of shouting to express emotions, which can sometimes sound rough, but is a natural way for singers to express their feelings (Gao 2021). We later discussed 1980s and 1990s Chinese popular music. George told me that after the Cultural Revolution, as we all know, China had a strong atmosphere of popular music, especially rock music. When the music started, everyone hummed along and their bodies moved along with the melody. At that time, many singers came from northwest China with loud voices (Gao 2021).

Wai-Chung Ho's research analysed how northwestern *minjian* songs were transformed into popular music during the mid-1980s. These *minjian* songs usually used a Western-style fast tempo, strong beat and forceful bass lines, attracting many listeners (Ho 2006, 444). The style of northwestern *minjian* songs naturally aligns with the rhythm and emotional expression of rock music, achieving a new vitality in the wave of globalised music. The creation of "Gobi" drew upon the same creative inspiration and paid homage to Chinese popular music at the end of the last century by the composer.

The interest in pop music is also reflected in George Gao's fifth work, *Nakhi,* which features a wide variety of rhythmic genres, including reggae and waltz. Moreover, to vividly express the musical life of the Naxi people, Gao pioneered a new specialised playing technique called "double strings with different fingers" which imitates Nakhi's vocal, instrumental and dance music, including mountain song duets. He uses rapid pizzicato to mimic the playing techniques and acoustics of the jaw harp commonly used by the Nakhi people. He also employs pizzicato bow strokes to mimic the

rhythm in the Nakhi *dongba*[92] ceremonial witch dance, among other elements. George says that this composition involves the most playing techniques he has ever used in the one piece (Gao 2021). In addition to the capriccio, the title of the music also touches on a central metaphor in George Gao's compositions. He borrows from the Chinese language an alternative interpretation of 纳西 (literally "including the West") in this music creation. In the interview, we talked about this metaphor and we agreed that its scope is "global" rather than simply "Western" (Gao 2021).

In fact, George Gao's debut work, *Song of Nostalgia*, exhibits a more Western classical musicalisation than Nakhi. Gao's expanding cultural perspective allows him to create music that not only explores and integrates global music traditions but also transcends the West. This transformation represents a transition from a single to a multicultural identity; that is, the world is gradually shifting from Western-dominated cultural influence to a more diversified global cultural pattern. This allows artists not only to integrate Western elements into their creations but also to incorporate global music resources. At the same time, he emphasised his identity through creativity and musical expression.

George Gao's Sixth capriccio *Shaoyin* was composed in 2023. He uses the metaphor of the Chinese character, and by exploring its various interpretations across different contexts, a connection to musical imagination is established. In the capriccio *Shaoyin*, the Chinese character "shao" (韶) is interpreted in multiple ways. He references an ancient Chinese proverb stating that "when Confucius heard Shao music, he forgot the taste of meat for three months".[93] The music "Shao" refers to the melodies from the ancient era of Emperor Shun.[94] The specific melody George Gao selected is adapted from a *minjian* tune originating in Hunan province, home to Shaoshan (韶山). Concurrently, his Chinese name "Shao Qing" (韶青) and his musical instrument "Shao Qin" (韶琴) are both inspired by the word "Shao" in his Chinese name. Together, these elements symbolise the formation and connection of his Chinese cultural memory and identity.

However, this piece, though deeply rooted in Chinese Han musical traditions, was taken further

[92] Helen Rees. *Echoes of Historary Naxi Music in Modern China.* For a detailed introduction on "dongba", see chapter 3 "The Naxi of Lijiang County".

[93] "Confucius, upon hearing the 'Shao' music in the state of Qi, could not taste the flavour of meat for a long time. He said, 'I never imagined that the beauty of 'Shao' music could be so enchanting."

[94] Shao music, historically known as Shun's music, is a type of traditional Chinese court music. It was the music of the ancient Emperor Shun and is a comprehensive classical art form that integrates poetry, music and dance.

by George Gao through an improvisational segment based on the *Mission: Impossible* theme.[95] In his October 2023 collaboration with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Gao expanded on this improvisation. His interaction with both the conductor and the *dizi* player added layers of emotional resonance, making the performance more dynamic and engaging for the audience, whose reactions mirrored their connection to the energy of the music.[96] The fusion of traditional Chinese elements with a global pop culture reference created an unexpected, yet captivating, musical experience.

Based on my several interactions with George Gao, in person and on social media, he is a fascinating and easy-going musician with an open and inclusive attitude towards music. He also keeps up with the times and pays attention to younger audiences through his music creation. Faced with a contemporary world full of multiculturalism, Gao has attempted to bridge the gap between popular aesthetics and music art, allowing more people to experience the musical expression of *erhu* through popular music or their curiosity about world music.

Furthermore, George Gao has broken through the traditional expectations of the *erhu* audience within the academic music circle, contrasting with the "school style" *erhu*'s emphasis on scholarly and elitist musical dissemination. This shift has liberated *erhu* music from the confines of national traditions and academic aesthetic norms. However, it is worth noting that, despite the innovative nature of Gao's works, they are still crafted for the mainstream *erhu* community, as their technical complexity renders them challenging for amateur players to perform.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with George Gao's identity as a diasporic musician, drawing from interviews to summarise and analyse his fresh contributions to *erhu* music composition, performance and instrument design. His work exemplifies a cultural breakthrough that transcends both generational and national boundaries. As Young Yun Kim points out, cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic, gradual process that follows the inevitable stages of the "stress-adaptation-growth" dynamic model. Within this theoretical framework, adaptation involves continuously confronting cultural shocks and

[95] Lalo Schifrin,1966.
[96] George Gao "Capriccio No.6-Shaoyin", April 16,2024. https://youtu.be/_8EV1k5qHe0?feature=shared . The improvisation section from 6:39 to 10:42.

stressors, as individuals adjust their cognition, emotions and behaviours, gradually adapting to the new culture while preserving elements of their original culture (Kim 2017, 54-61).

George Gao's musical creations embody remarkable transformative and regenerative capabilities, using cultural reconstruction to redefine *erhu* content. His works resonate with self-identity symbolism and remain tightly connected to audience expectations and contemporary relevance, while focusing on the essence of humanity in art. Throughout this process, he explores both the universal value and limitations of the *erhu*, reflecting his unique musical sensitivity and cross-cultural background. The "novel" and "interesting" qualities in his music not only express his true self but also demonstrate his keen grasp of contemporary culture and future trends. His music surpasses certain narratives while maintaining a connection to his internal contemplations.

Moreover, Gao's music not only embodies his own odyssey through various nations and cultures but also underscores the distinct problems and opportunities presented by globalisation. His compositions demonstrate how the world's abundant and varied musical resources foster innovation, encompassing both spatial (distinct ethnic traditions) and temporal (historical and contemporary influences) dimensions. Gao draws on these resources to redefine the musical potential of the *erhu*, while navigating the complexities of musical globalisation. His music neither fully embraces nor entirely rejects global influences; instead, it seeks to balance the allure of innovation with the preservation of cultural identity.

When performing in Canada, Gao's music bridges Chinese and Western sensibilities, resonating with a multicultural audience that appreciates both the novel and familiar aspects of his compositions. Upon his return to China, his music occupies its own realm, which interacts with the nation's enduring traditions, providing a contemporary interpretation of the *erhu* that challenges the conventions of the traditional *erhu* "school style" society. In both situations, his music transcends boundaries; nevertheless, his methodology varies—engaging global audiences through fusion while challenging Chinese audiences with the modernisation of their cultural legacy. In the context of current globalisation, George Gao's experiences and behaviours provide significant cultural insights for *erhu* musicians, urging them to pursue innovation and breakthroughs within expansive cross-cultural frameworks.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to explore the *erhu*'s adaptation within a globalised context, revealing how it reflects multilayered cultural identities through continuous adjustment and reshaping. I have delved into the diverse manifestations of the *erhu* across various social and cultural settings. Through detailed observations of musicians and other cultural practitioners, I have conceptualised the *erhu*'s musical contributions within a global framework. Based on this research, it is anticipated to offer new positioning and directions for the *erhu*'s technical development and deeper global collaboration.

Additionally, my findings confirm the efficacy of biographical research in global music studies, particularly in Chinese music studies. I provided a theoretical rationale for the study of global music by demonstrating how *erhu* musicians forge their own identities in the midst of the interaction of local and international cultures. This biographical perspective improves our understanding of how people develop their identities through cross-cultural contact by emphasising the uniqueness of individual experiences, as well as how artists form themselves by utilising localised cultural resources within global music trends.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, I have contemplated the engagement with respondents throughout the interview process and examined the motivating influence this research exerts on them. During these conversations, respondents conveyed their musical concepts and personal experiences while reassessing their roles within national and global cultures, so enhancing their comprehension of the art of *erhu*. The interview process functions as a mechanism for information acquisition, while simultaneously fostering self-awareness and prompting respondents to reevaluate their cultural positions.

Finally, based on the method and perspective of this PhD study, I propose a new research field focused on the multi-identity culture of the *huqin* family. This research will examine how different *huqin* instruments embody an integration of ethnic characteristics and global influence within a global context, using comparative analysis to demonstrate the complex position of the *huqin* family within China's musical ecosystem and the global cultural landscape. And I also emphasise the value

of the research for learners of other musical instruments in the world.

Erhu Music in a Global Context

The definition of Chinese music has continuously evolved with the social and ideological foundations of each historical period, as well as the concept of China as a nation or ethnicity. While often viewed as traditional Chinese music distinct from foreign music, at different historical stages, its scope has also encompassed local music, opera and ethnically rich musical forms (Lau 2008, 30). Thus, instead of remaining static and immutable over time, Chinese music constitutes an ecosystem influenced by sociological, political, economic and cultural transformations. Understanding the fluidity can enhance our appreciation of the complexity and multifaceted characteristic of Chinese music, leading to a more objective comprehension of its overall history.

As one of the representatives of Chinese music, the *erhu* is of enormous significance in the musical life of the Chinese people. Often associated with the grassroots qualities of participatory *minjian yinyue* or its spectacular presentation on the stage, the *erhu* has also become a focus of research in Chinese cultural scholarship. However, some scholars' studies have tended to focus on the expectation of a unified national narrative for the *erhu*. So, in today's globalisation and in the face of deeper global competition and cooperation, should we bridge this imbalance of knowledge and communication in the world context? Should we revisit the evolving identity of the *erhu* and its cultural resonance in the context of global musical exchange?

Joseph Lam' s approach offers a valuable lens for contemplating the placement of *erhu* culture. He indicated that despite the apparent diversity and complexity of Chinese music, its fundamental essence is the "Chinese self" which refers to a subjectivity shaped by the narratives of the Chinese populace on their identity and wants. The "self" is perpetually recreated to adjust to the dynamic social and global milieu, and the core of China's musical practice is the articulation of inner emotions and thoughts, rather than only the auditory structure. The essence of China's music is in its capacity to preserve the distinctiveness and unity of the "Chinese self" amidst variety and global engagement. This ideology enables China to acclimatise to the contemporary global landscape while safeguarding its cultural innovation and expressive capacity (Lam 2008).

Consequently, my research has examined the adaptation and rebuilding of the *erhu*'s "Chinese self" across various situations, highlighting its cultural distinctiveness and expressive potency within globalisation. This indicates that the *erhu* is not only a musical instrument, but also a dynamic cultural system that is perpetually redefined in response to evolving circumstances, reflecting the tenacity and diversity of Chinese culture.

To support my argument, at the beginning of the main text, I directly emphasised an adaptive relationship, which reflects how traditional *erhu* or *huqin* adapts to modernisation and Westernisation in shaping its identity. In the context of world history, Western ideologies permeated various sectors of early 20th-century semi-colonial and semi-feudal China. The fact of "*xiti zhongyong*" 西体中用 (adopting Western knowledge for Chinese use) has been present in the development of modern *erhu* since its creator Liu Tianhua and has established the "conservatory tradition". As Jonathan Stock summarised, non-Western countries, when facing Western cultural influences, often reform in a "modernised" manner to resist complete Westernisation while retaining national characteristics (Stock 2004, 19-21).

Therefore, Western thought impacted local civilisation and the adaptation of local culture led the "*erhu* ecosystem" toward a "modernised" developmental path, evident in its professional musical framework, including the instrument's physical improvements, performance, training and music creation. This also demonstrates that the emergence of the modern *erhu* aligns with the achievements of modern industrial civilisation, surpassing its singular role as a national instrument. Meanwhile, the *minjian* attributes of the *erhu* were diminished through Western-style modernisation, as *erhu* players began to appear on the professional music stage, surpassing *minjian yinyuejia* and becoming the dominant voices in *erhu* discourse.

As the country established itself politically as a socialist system, this "adaptation" began to align more closely with political orientations. Consequently, the "*erhu* ecosystem" underwent another transformation, filled with contradictions. Although the CPC downplayed Westernisation or modernisation in its messaging, emphasising a return to the *erhu*'s traditional *minjian* roots, in practice, *erhu* performance and composition continued to follow modernised musical forms. Secondly, this contradiction is also evident in the establishment of music conservatories affiliated

with government institutions that met international standards. This system further reinforced the adoption of Western classical music principles in *erhu* teaching, performance and composition. Yet, official rhetoric claimed that the conservatory system was based on the collectivist principles of Chinese socialism, aiming to cultivate musical elites who would embody the ideology of the People's Republic of China.

Thus, even though the *erhu* ecosystem during this period was marked by ideological contradictions, the *erhu* adapted to the times, becoming a tool for expressing the voice of the CPC. *Erhu* music began to focus primarily on *minjian* or ethnic music expression, positioning it as an emotional bridge between the government and the working masses. *Erhu* elites, represented by figures like Min Huifen, were even called "People's Musicians". The modern "*erhu* ecosystem" at this time outwardly appeared to return to its *minjian* characteristics, yet in essence, it adapted to serve political purposes, symbolising the national identity.

Furthermore, upon closer analysis, I found that mainstream *erhu* performers, as "People's Musicians", typically adopted three approaches to align with the CPC's national collectivisation narrative, yet these approaches retain an essential quality of learning from the West and continuing the "modernisation" process.

Firstly, they applied classical composition techniques to adapt *minjian yinyue* elements, creating music that aligned with popular aesthetics, as seen in the musical creation of Min Huifen and Liu Changfu during the 1960s and 1970s (by which time, due to modifications by Liu Tianhua and his students, the *erhu*'s physical characteristics had already enabled it to perform most traditional or *minjian* Chinese music). Secondly, they utilised products of the information age, namely modern recording technology, to fixate the improvisational style of *minjian yinyue*, transforming it into music with the characteristics of stage performance art. Thirdly, they introduced *minjian yinyuejia* directly into conservatories, where their skills and experiences could be passed on within modern music institutions through teaching (see Chapter Two for the case of Sun Wenming). These initiatives, which leverage Western technologies, have enabled certain *minjian* (*huqin*) music to transition from simple *minjian yinyue* to National *minjian yinyue*, merging into the modern sound of mainstream *erhu*. This process of modernisation, influenced by Western civilisation, once again diminished the

minjian identity of the *erhu*.

Meanwhile, as "national folk" music, the *erhu*, in the hands of conservatory-trained elites endowed with national identity, manifests a modern form of cultural dominance. This power selectively absorbs characteristics from neighbouring cultural elements, including *minjian huqin*, *minjian erhu*, minority *huqin* and elements from other Chinese instruments, yet retains only aspects that align with the mainstream narrative. Other features are either eliminated or altered. Consequently, this music, embodying a "Chinese national folk" characteristic, becomes a national symbol representing the voice of China. In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I discussed how *erhu* music within the conservatory system balances political orientation with modern *erhu* expression and conveys a unified cultural image of the nation in both domestic and international performances.

With the advancement of contemporary globalisation, the *erhu*'s presence in cross-cultural exchange projects has significantly increased. To emphasise China's national cultural stance, the "*erhu* ecosystem" has developed characteristics that both serve national narratives and pursue standardisation and comprehensibility in global exchanges. Driven by this dual positioning, the *erhu* has been publicly promoted as adapting to modern scientific principles, transforming the identity of *erhu* musicians from traditional *minjian* masters to roles with academic significance, with the *erhu* now the object of a formal degree in conservatory Master education.

The core purpose of this institutionalised development is to reduce "communication costs" in global field, which relate to the barriers to understanding and coordination that arise from differences in culture, technique and other systems during global collaboration and exchange. Therefore, Chinese musicians have systematically devised and embraced standardised approach for studying and performing the *erhu*, intentionally matching their skills and expressive styles with global music education standards. This deliberate method seeks to enhance communication and foster collaboration in international music settings.

But this adaptation has its drawbacks, as mainstream musicians increasingly converge toward unified technical standards and playing styles, narrowing the space for individual expression. Therefore, the *erhu* performance has become more concentrated on technical display rather than

diverse artistic exploration.

At the same time, this adaptation to a modern "scientific" mode has reinforced the standardisation of *erhu* music, creating a rigid power structure that significantly impacts the selection of new generations of *erhu* musicians, placing the teacher-student relationship at the core of the modern "*erhu* ecosystem". This relationship has become not only a pathway for skill transmission but also a foundation of power and identity within the "*erhu* ecosystem". As the core of the circle culture, mainstream conservatory musicians build a stable generational network and strict hierarchy through their endorsement of disciples and their successors, creating a ritualised tradition within *erhu* performance. Consequently, teacher approval becomes crucial in establishing a musician's identity, granting students a "passport" into elite circles and access to influence, which throughout this thesis I have discovered to be an essential condition for advancing their musical careers.

Thus, this internal power structure makes the teacher-student relationship central to the functioning of the *erhu* ecosystem, deeply influencing musicians' personal career development. Based on my interviews, contemporary musicians often emphasise their teacher-student lineage when introducing themselves to convey their specific identities, thereby distinguishing themselves within the standardised conservatory system. However, this approach does not truly achieve clear differentiation through various lineages alone, as teacher-student relationships of themselves do not suffice to create distinct artistic styles and individual identities for performers.

Therefore, some musicians have begun to re-examine and innovate within global and regional musical languages, reflecting on this mainstream adaptation to reshape the diversity of the *erhu* and reintroduce local traditional *minjian* and ethnic music characteristics as symbols of self-expression in the contemporary arena of global competition. For instance, in Chapter 2, I discussed the contemporary development of Sun Wenming's music. This engagement with global *minjian* culture highlights a strong emphasis on personalised musical expression.

This is particularly evident among diasporic *erhu* musicians, whose musical practices demonstrate a more complex adaptability. Living abroad, they draw on academic expertise to adjust to the global environment while also desiring to express their personal cultural narratives. In this

context, however, they often find themselves prioritising national identity to represent their individual identities and gain recognition. They are reluctant to be entirely confined by traditional academic norms in musical expression, instead leaning toward incorporating global elements and flexibly expressing themselves. Yet, they still struggle to fully break free from the traditional norms and ritualistic constraints of conservatory-style *erhu*. This contradictory state intertwines their musical practices between innovation and academic tradition, reflecting the ongoing adaptation of the "*erhu* ecosystem" between globalisation and national identity in its development.

In summary, the adaptation of the *erhu* within a global framework, alongside individual musicians' adaptation to the academic model, together constitute the core driving force of the "*erhu* ecology". The sustained development of the *erhu* may also rely on this ongoing process of balancing local and global adaptation. However, the *erhu*'s traditional *minjian* attributes have long been weakened, and even if they are occasionally highlighted in contemporary contexts, they cannot fully address the issue of the "formal internationalisation and globalisation" of *erhu* music that ultimately leads to a sense of "substantive rootlessness". This has become an identity recognition issue for the *erhu* in the context of contemporary sustainable development. What we can do is attempt to reconcile and balance this gap based on genuine past experiences, creating varied expressions through diverse performance and creative approaches.

Biography and Global Musicology

My dissertation provides evidence that indicates how biographical research contributes to the theory of global musical study. In order to provide a comprehensive and personalised perspective on the globalisation of the *erhu*, I have concentrated on the personal development, intellectual backgrounds and creative choices of *erhu* players. We are able to get a more concrete grasp of how global musical dynamics appear on a personal level by conducting an analysis of the ways in which *erhu* musicians practise and adapt within distinct cultural settings throughout a variety of periods. The individual viewpoint that has been presented here demonstrates that global music flows are not only a concept; rather, they are concretely reflected in the musical lives of these musicians on a daily basis.

For instance, Liu Tianhua, Sun Wenming and Min Huifen all began their careers in Jiangnan,

and their musical styles are deeply influenced by the region's distinct soundscape south of the Yangtze. This soundscape combines local traditional music culture with a Westernised metropolitan economic environment. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Jiangnan region has steadily established a sophisticated urbanisation and market network, blending traditional commercial agriculture with cottage industries to form a well-formed urban system. This economic foundation expanded from the Republic of China era to the New China period, attracting significant capital and Western technological influences, laying the groundwork for Jiangnan's prosperity while also providing musicians with a rich cultural backdrop and creative inspiration.

At the same time, Jiangnan's prosperity created social class divisions. Liu Tianhua and Min Huifen were from intellectual family and obtained decent educations, but Sun Wenming was born into poverty and made his livelihood by fortune telling and busking. Although all three grew up in the Jiangnan cultural circle, their musical styles differed due to their disparate social origins. Thus, this analysis provides readers with a detailed understanding of *erhu* musicians' unique experiences amidst the complexities of globalisation—they are not only participants in the global flow, but they are also deeply influenced by local culture and personal backgrounds, resulting in distinct musical expressions.

In addition, I have discovered the advantages of this biographical approach for studying Chinese music throughout my research. Given that China's political and social context places a strong emphasis on collectivist ideology, biographical studies of academy elites effectively present the collective landscape through individual experiences and reflect global cultural dynamics. Focusing on these musicians' personal narratives allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how they define their identities as mainstream musicians within the unifying narrative of the national collective cultural framework. Based on my observations and interviews, some professional *erhu* players highly value this collective culture, deriving personal honour and social recognition from it, as well as advancing their careers by gaining access to additional resources and opportunities through internal competition. This suggests that the social influence conferred by the state plays a role in advancing the careers of mainstream *erhu* players.

Reviewing my interviews and research, I found that some contemporary mainstream musicians

do not wish for society to dilute the value of "collectivisation"; instead, they hope to preserve it while adopting various contemporary global cultural approaches to distinguish themselves. These include emphasising the rigour of international music education to enhance *erhu* training and performance, incorporating diverse ethnic music and cultural expressions, and showcasing innovative personal styles. This exploration of such paradoxes is pervasive in the *erhu* field, reflecting discussions on the dialectical relationship between individual and collective identities in the context of *erhu* "school style". Thus, biographical studies have to some extent fulfilled mainstream musicians' aspirations to serve as symbols of their times, while also highlighting their unique qualities within the *erhu* narrative.

Reflection on Interaction with Interviewees

In my whole PhD study journey, I also applied my knowledge of ethnomusicology to offer new insights to *erhu* musicians and researchers during our interview exchanges. Sometimes, these centred around how to position ourselves within a global context and explore opportunities for *erhu* development. Although there are 11 music conservatories in China with professional *erhu* players, including both teachers and students, the fact that most of them have been trained in the traditions and rituals of professional *erhu* musicians from as early as the fourth grade does not guarantee that all of them can become prominent performers. Many expressed concerns about their employment prospects and future careers during our interviews.

In response, I often highlighted the connection between music and community spirit, a concept frequently emphasised in ethnomusicology, as well as the social functions of music. I encouraged them to focus more on the interaction with the communities around them and use music to foster communication and strengthen community bonds. This, I believe, will help them better understand the practical significance of music in their lives and bring new vitality and perspective to their music creations. In addition, I also conveyed the importance of the meaning of "folk knowledge", encouraging them to cultivate an inclusive mindset and to explore diverse forms of music with an open attitude.

Furthermore, some of the people I interviewed were lesser-known or current *minjian* performers.

They frequently voiced misunderstandings regarding my analysis during the interviews since, in contemporary Chinese culture, the term "*yinyuejia*" (音乐家, musician) frequently refers to players who have earned significant recognition, have music conservatory training or are well known. I was able to support and recognise their abilities by being present, even if some of my interviewees often did not consider themselves to be "*yinyuejia*". The perspective of global music studies has broadened despite the restrictive definition of musicianship in the prevailing Chinese context. It highlights the individual value of every musician, which is important even in a Chinese-dominated environment, and it provides musicians with the engagement and self-assurance they require to develop their skills and expressions.

Therefore, my research has the potential to contribute to global music understanding and serve as a case study to demonstrate the importance of researching traditional, *minjian* and national music in a global setting. As globalisation progresses around the world, music from many countries and areas reveals complicated and diverse identity relations between the local and the global. Understanding the origins and cultural identities of these instruments can help people worldwide gain a deeper appreciation of their artistic and cultural values. It can also reduce misunderstandings and biases in cultural exchanges, fostering greater respect and harmony between cultures and ultimately enabling people from diverse backgrounds to live together with mutual appreciation on a global scale. Furthermore, by enhancing the understanding and recognition of such music, musicians can engage more intensively with these traditions, promoting cultural sustainability and contributing wisdom and creativity to global musical diversity.

Directions for Future Research

In 2023, I undertook a tour as a visitor to a Bai gathering in the village of Fengxiang (凤翔) in Dali, Yunnan Province, bringing my musical instrument for participatory observation with some local music experts. I engaged in musical activities in various settings, such as family gatherings, public squares and picturesque venues. Occasionally, I accompanied village singers on my *erhu* or observed local musicians playing. During this fieldwork, I reflected on how members of a Bai band with shared backgrounds and memories create more than just music when they play together; they share a secret emotional language. Their music transcends technical skill, deeply intertwining with their

shared community culture and personal stories, resulting in a unique musical understanding expressed through intuition.

This is just one of many instances where the Chinese *huqin* family comprises numerous instruments that span the landscape of China, some of which have been introduced to the world by diaspore musicians. In the initial stages of my exploration for my PhD project, I conducted preliminary interviews and built connections with Su Laixing, an *erxian* (二弦) musician from Fujian Nanyin; Song Xiyuan and Liang Xianjun, *minjian yinyuejia* from Henan *quhu* (曲胡); *xianzi* (弦子) musician Ding Jianjun who comes from Diqing and Ma Shiqiang, a musician of the Inner Mongolian *sihu* (四胡). Their musical legacies are all potential research subjects that I can delve deeper into in the future with much emotional language within the music waiting to be deciphered and interpreted using ethnomusicological methods.

Moreover, some *huqin* instruments have begun to adopt the standard model of the *erhu* for institutionalised reform of the local *huqin*, such as the *quhu*, whose traditional cadences have shown a gradual process of erosion. It may take a few generations before the sensitivity of the local culture finally disappears, but the current blending with the professional music scene without damaging the core does not guarantee it will not be eventually absorbed by mainstream culture. These are the kinds of research topics I would like to cover in the future and I hope that my participation will add an ethnomusicological perspective to the interpretation of the culture of minority folk *huqin* groups.

Furthermore, in terms of the study of musical instruments in a larger global context, my PhD thesis can also provide future research with a way to learn and understand musical instruments and their history. For students studying other musical instruments, this perspective can help them understand the role and evolution of that instrument in different cultural contexts. Secondly, by analysing national and global interactions, developments in education systems and changes in musical performance, I offer new ways of learning and studying musical instruments. In particular, the application of biographical research helps learners to identify key figures who have influenced the development of the instrument and to clearly refract the historical lineage, providing structure and inspiration for research.

Glossary

The glossary contains four types: Chinese names of musicians and musicologist featured in the thesis, musical institution music solo title piece of *erhu*, names of the Chinese instruments and type of Chinese *minjian yinyue*. I have organised the content into two tables: the first table includes everything except the repertoire, while the second table is dedicated solely to the repertoire.

Pinyin	Chinese characters	Comments
Abing	阿炳（华彦均）	Street musician
Cai Yuanpei	蔡元培	Chinese philosopher and politician
caidiao	彩调	Local *xiqu* in Guangxi Provence
Cao Anhe	曹安和	Musicologist
Chen Zhenduo	陈振铎	Erhu musician
chiba	尺巴	End-blown flute
Chu Shizhu	储师竹	Erhu musician
dizi	笛子	Chinese transverse flute
dongxiao	洞箫	End-blown bamboo flute
errentai	二人台	A genre of song-and-dance duet
erxian	二弦	Two-stringed fiddle instruments
Feng Zicun	冯子存	*Dizi* musician
Guangdong yinyue	广东音乐	Cantonese music
guhu	骨胡	Bone fiddle
guoyue	国乐	National music
Guoyue gaijinshe	国乐改进社	Chinese Music Improvement Society
guqin	古琴	Plucked seven-string
guzheng	古筝	Chinese plucked zither
He Xuntian	何训田	Chinese contemporary composer
Hebei bangzi	河北帮子	Hebei Clapper Opera
Huang Anyuan	黄安源	Erhu musician
Huang Haihuai	黄海怀	Erhu musician and composer
huqin	胡琴	Two-stringed fiddle instruments
Jia Pengfang	贾鹏芳	Erhu musician
Jiang Fengzhi	蒋风之	Erhu musician
Jiang Jianhua	姜建华	Erhu musician
Jiang Xiaofeng	蒋小风	Erhu musician
Jiangnan sizhu	江南丝竹	*Jiangnan silk and bamboo*
jingju	京剧	Beijing Opera
jingyun dagu	京韵大鼓	Story-Telling in the Beijing Dialect with Drum Accompaniment
kaimingshe	开明社	Enlightenment theatre

kexuede	科学的	Scientific
kunqu	昆曲	Kun opera, is one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera.
Li Bochan	李博禅	Chinese contemporary composer
Li Xi'an	李西安	Chinese musicologist
Lin Xinming	林心铭	Erhu musician
Liu Bannong (Liu Fu)	刘半农（刘复）	Chinese Poet and linguist
Liu Beimao	刘北茂	Erhu musician
Liu Changfu	刘长福	Mainstream erhu musician, music educator
Liu Tianhua	刘天华	Erhu musician
Liu Yuhe	刘育和	Piano professor
Liu Yuhui	刘育辉	Chinese Writer
Lu Chunling	陆春玲	Dizi player
Lu Yun	陆槤	Composer
Lü Siqing	吕思清	Violin musician
Min Huifen	闵惠芬	Erhu musician
Min Jiqian	闵季骞	Erhu musician
Min Xiaofen	闵小芬	Pipa player
nanyin	南音	A performing art which combines singing and music
pipa	琵琶	Chinese lute
Qiao Jianzhong	乔建中	Contemporary Chinese musicologist
qinshi	琴师	*Jinghu* master
Qu Chunquan	瞿春泉	Musician
quyi	曲艺	Chinese narrative arts
Renmin yinyuejia	人民音乐家	People's musician
sanxian	三弦	Three strings
Shan'ge	山歌	Mountain songs
Shen Liqun	沈力群	Composer
Shen Zhongzhang	沈仲章	Chinese Linguist, Musician and folklorist
shuochang huqin	说唱胡琴	*Minjian* storytelling and singing with huqin playing
sihu	四胡	Four-stringed fiddle instruments
Song Guosheng	宋国生	Erhu musician and educator
Sun Wenming (Pan Zhiwang)	孙文明 (潘旨望)	*Minjian* erhu musicians
Sun Yicheng	孙以诚	Contemporary erhu musician
Suzhou pingtan	苏州评弹	Musical/oral performance art form in the Jiangnan region of China
Wang Guotong	王国潼	Erhu musician
Wang Yongde	王永德	Erhu musician
wanguo yuedui	万国乐队	Nations musical ensemble
Wei Zhongle	卫仲乐	Pipa musician
Wu Ganbo	吴赣伯	Erhu musician
Wu Suhua	吴素华	Erhu musician
Wu Weixi	伍维曦	Contemporary Chinese musicologist

Wu Zhimin	吴之珉	Erhu musician
Xiao Mei	萧梅	Musicologist
Xiao Youmei	萧友梅	Chinese music educator and composer
xiqu	戏曲	A general term for traditional Chinese opera
Xueyuanpai	学院派	School style
Xuke	许可	Erhu musician
Xuzhou qinshu	徐州琴书	Xuzhou Sing Storytelling
Yang Yandi	杨燕迪	Musicologist
Yang Yinliu	杨荫浏	Chinese musicologist
yangbanxi	样板戏	Revolutionary opera
yehu	椰胡	Coconut fiddle
yinyue chuanxi suo	音乐传习所	Music Teaching Institute
Yinyue yanjiuhui	音乐研究会	Music Research Association
yueju	越剧	Yue opera in Zhejiang Provence
Zheng Bing	郑冰	Chinese contemporary composer
Zhou Hao	周浩	Erhu musician
zhuqin	筑琴	A zither-like instrument

Erquan yingyue	二泉映月	*Two Springs Reflecting the Moon*
Baoyu Kuling	宝玉哭灵	*Cry of Baoyu*
Beige	悲歌	*Elegy*
Bingzhongyin	病中吟	*Despair in Illness*
Changcheng suixiangqu	长城随想曲	*The Great Wall Capriccio*
Dongfang hong	东方红	*The East Is Red: A Song and Dance Epic*
Dushiniang	杜十娘	A popular story and theatre plot in China, which often adapted into local operas.
Erqin guangliang	二琴光亮	*Shining Strings*
Fang sijie xiang niangjia	方四姐想娘家	*Fang Sijie Misses her Hometown*
Fanshen daoqing	翻身道情	*Joy of Emancipation*
Gebi	戈壁	*Capriccio No. 4: Gobi Fantasy*
Guangmingxing	光明行	*Towards A Brighter Future*
Hanchun fengqu	寒春风曲	*Cold Spring Wind*
Hangong qiuyue	汉宫秋月	*Autumn Moon over the Han Palace*
Henan xiaoqu	河南小曲	*Ditty of Henan*
Hongguang (Yinguang)	红光（银光）	*Red Light (Silver Light)*
Honghu renminde xinyuan	洪湖人民的心愿	*The Wish of the People of Honghu*
Hongqi qushui rao Taihang	红旗渠水绕太行	*The Red Flag Canal Winds Around the Taihang Mountains*

Hua huanle	花欢乐	*Ornamented Happy Tune*
Jianghe shui	江河水	*River of Sorrow*
Jiangnan chunse	江南春色	*Spring in Jiangnan*
Kongshan niaoyu	空山鸟语	*Birdsong on Empty Mountain*
kumen zhiou	苦闷之讴	*Recitation of Melancholy*
Langong nan	老农难	*Difficulty in Recruiting Workers*
Lanhauhua xushiqu	兰花花叙事曲	*Ballad of Lan Huahua*
Laopinnong hua jiashi	老贫农话家史	*Old Poor Farmers Talk about Their Family History*
Liubo qu	流波曲	*Song of the Wanderer*
Mengfeng	蒙风	*Capriccio No. 2: Mongolian Fantasy*
Mengsize	梦四则	*Four Dreams*
Miaoling zaochun	苗岭早春	*Early Spring in Miaoling*
Mudanting	牡丹亭	*Peony Pavilion*
Naxi	纳西	*Capriccio No. 5: Nakhi*
putaoshule	葡萄熟了	*The Grapes Are Ripe*
Qinchuan shuhuai	秦川抒怀	*Train of Thoughts*
Qinqiang zhuti suixiangqu	秦腔主题随想曲	*Capriccio of Qinqiang Tunes*
Ren jing xin'an	人静心安	*Tranquillity of mind and heart*
Rulai meng	如来梦	*Tathagata Dream*
Saima	赛马	*Horse Racing Horse Racing*
Sanmenxia changxiangqu	三门峡畅想曲	*The Sanmen Dam Capriccio*
Shaoyin	韶音	*Capriccio No. 6: Shaoyin*
Shuangque	双阙	*Poem in Two Parts*
Sifang qu	四方曲	*Prelude*
Sixiang	思乡	*Capriccio No. 1: Song of Nostalgia*
Songchun	送春	*Departure of Spring*
Songting	送听	*Farewell*
Tanle	弹乐	Music that imitates *pingtan*
Tingsong	听松	*Listening to the Pine*
Xiangeyin	弦歌吟	*Chant on Strings*
Xisong gongliang	喜送公粮	*Happily Delivering the Communal Grain*
Xuandong	炫动	*Capriccio No. 3: Dazzlement*
Xunfeng qu	熏风曲	*Southern Breeze*
Yejing xiaosheng	夜静箫声	*A Xiao Sound at Night*
Yizhihua	一枝花	*A Flower*
Yubei xushiqu	豫北叙事曲	*Ballad of Yubei*

Yueye	月夜	*Moonlit Night*
Yuhou chunguang	雨后春光	*Spring Light after Rain*
Yunqing	云庆	*Song of the cloud*
Zhanma benteng	战马奔腾	*Galloping Horse*
Zhiyuanjun guilai	志愿军归来	*Return of the Volunteer Army*
Zhonghua liuban	中花六板	*Moderately Ornamented Six Beats*
Zhouyehong	昼夜红	*Diurnal Red*
Zhuyingyaohong	烛影摇红	*Flickering Candle Lights*

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