

# Study traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance through playing techniques

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## Abstract

The purposes of this study were to study traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance through playing techniques. This study examines the integration of traditional and modern elements in pipa performance through a detailed analysis of playing techniques, employing a multi-faceted methodology that includes a literature review of academic sources such as CNKI and books to trace the evolution of pipa styles, alongside case studies of representative works through score analysis and interviews with professional performers to gather practical insights. Theoretical analysis is applied to dissect stylistic and technical aspects of both traditional and contemporary pipa music, while interviews with two expert musicians specializing in blending old and new techniques provide firsthand perspectives on performance practices. Data collection methods encompass in-depth interviews, structured observations, and documentary analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding. The findings reveal that foundational techniques like 'Tui', 'La', 'Yin', and 'Rou' remain crucial for conveying emotion in classical pieces such as 'Chen Sui', while modern innovations like 'Double Glissando' and 'Flesh Strumming', along with Western influences including jazz harmonies and electroacoustic accompaniment, expand the instrument's expressive possibilities. This fusion not only preserves the pipa's cultural heritage but also adapts it to contemporary musical contexts, enhancing its artistic depth and ensuring its continued relevance in both traditional and modern performance settings.

**Keywords:** Traditional, Modern, Elements, Pipa, Techniques.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research background

Traditional Chinese pipa pieces can be categorized by style and technique into "Lyric Pieces" (文曲), "Martial Pieces" (武曲), and "Combined Lyric and Martial Pieces" (文武曲). "Lyric Pieces" express introspective emotions through delicate techniques like 'Tui' (推), 'La' (拉), 'Yin' (吟), and 'Rou' (揉), creating poetic imagery. In contrast, "Martial Pieces" emphasize narrative intensity with vigorous rhythms and techniques like 'Saonian' (扫弦) and 'Jiaonian' (绞弦), while combined pieces blend both styles (Sun Liwei, 2001).

In traditional "Lyric Pieces," left-hand techniques like 'Yin' and 'Rou' serve as 'Runqiang' (润腔), ornamenting melodies to enhance their expressive depth. As Lu Yingying (2019) notes, these techniques refine the music's "ethnic style and charm." For example, 'Chen Sui' (陈隋) employs 'Tui', 'La', and 'Da' (打) to evoke a melancholic atmosphere, depicting a young woman's sorrow in imperial seclusion. Lin Shicheng observed that nuanced control of

dynamics and timbre—such as varying plucking angles—is central to conveying emotion in such works (Sun Liwei, 2001).

"Martial Pieces," like 'Ten-Sided Ambush' (十面埋伏), use 'Saoxian' and 'Shayin' (煞音) to dramatize battlefield scenes. Lin Shicheng highlighted how performers innovate within notation; for instance, the "Heavy Siege" section's single character "合" (combined sound) is rendered through dynamic strumming and rolling techniques to depict layered attacks (Zhu Liguang, 2009).

Modern pipa compositions integrate Western influences and experimental techniques. Electroacoustic elements and vocal accompaniments now augment performances, broadening appeal. Collaborations with instruments like electric guitars—featured in programs like 'Our Band'—demonstrate the pipa's adaptability (Huang Yanjia & Wang Min, 2021). Cross-genre fusions with jazz, rock, and Latin music further modernize its sound (Lijing, 2021).

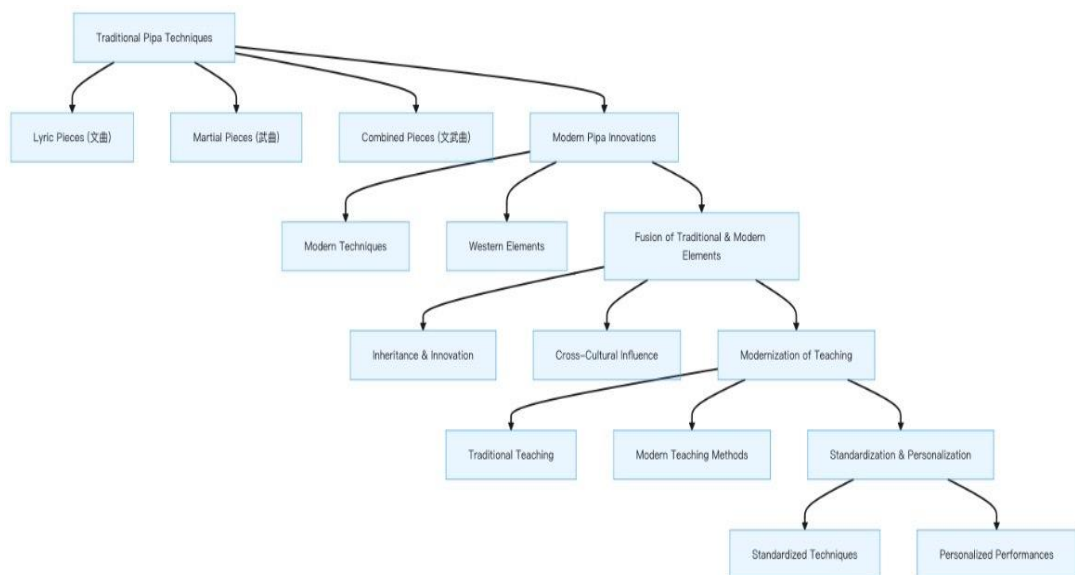
Technique innovation includes 'Flesh Strumming' (肉扫), developed by Liu Dehai, which uses the thumb's flesh for a robust tone, and 'Fixed-number Picking' (定数轮), standardizing rotational plucking durations (Song Changfeng, 2017). Such adaptations balance tradition and modernity, ensuring the pipa's relevance.

As Li Jie and Li Kunli (2013) assert, the pipa endures because it mirrors human emotion—"all sounds originate from the heart." From ancient lyricism to modern electroacoustic fusion, its evolution reflects both cultural heritage and contemporary vitality.

## 2. Objectives

Study traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance through playing techniques.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Original figure by the authors

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a tripartite research methodology comprising literature review, case study approach, and expert interviews to investigate traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance, with a focus on playing techniques.

#### 3.1 Literature Review

The study begins with an extensive literature review to establish a theoretical foundation. Academic databases such as CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) were utilized to access relevant scholarly articles, books, and historical documents related to Pipa performance. The literature review focuses on:

1. Traditional Pipa Techniques: Examination of historical playing techniques, including "Tui" (Pushing the String), "La" (Pulling the String), "Yin" (Vibrato), and "Rou" (Pressing and Vibrating the String), as well as their roles in traditional Pipa pieces.
2. Modern Pipa Innovations: Analysis of contemporary playing techniques and innovations, such as "Double Glissando," "Flesh Strumming," and the integration of Western musical elements like jazz and rock.
3. Stylistic Features: Exploration of the stylistic differences between traditional "Lyric Pieces" (文曲), "Martial Pieces" (武曲), and "Combined Lyric and Martial Pieces" (文武曲), as well as the evolution of these styles in modern compositions.

For the determination of research methodology, the researcher, using a qualitative research approach, has defined a specific sample of the population. For this study, two participants were selected for interviews based on their expertise in the integration of traditional and modern styles in Pipa performance art. The selected individuals and their assumed names are as follows:

1. Yang Yu: A renowned pipa performer, serves as an Expert Committee Member of the Yunnan Provincial Youth Musicians Association, holds the title of National First-Class Performer (China's highest professional rank for performing artists), acts as Deputy Head of the Folk Orchestra at Yunnan Huadeng Theatre, serves as a Council Member of the Pipa Society of the Chinese Musicians Association, and has been awarded the prestigious "Young Performing Artist" title by Yunnan Province.
2. Liu Henan: An Associate Professor and Master's Supervisor at South China Normal University, a Pipa Professional Teacher, and the Executive Director of the Pipa Professional Committee of the China Nationalities Orchestra Society.

#### 3.2 Case Study Approach

To gain deeper insights into the practical application of traditional and modern Pipa techniques, a case study approach was adopted. This involved the selection of representative Pipa works from both traditional and modern repertoires. The selected pieces were analyzed in terms of their musical scores, playing techniques, and stylistic features. The case studies include:

1. Traditional Pieces: Analysis of iconic traditional Pipa pieces such as "Chen Sui" (陈隋) and "Ten-sided Ambush" (十面埋伏), focusing on the use of traditional techniques like "Runqiang" (Melody Polishing) and "Saolian" (Strumming the Strings).

2. Modern Pieces: Examination of contemporary Pipa compositions that incorporate modern elements, such as electroacoustic accompaniment, human voices, and Western musical styles like jazz and rock.

### 3.3 Interviews with Experts

To complement the literature review and case studies, in-depth interviews were conducted with two experts in the field of Pipa performance. The interviewees were selected based on their expertise in both traditional and modern Pipa repertoires, as well as their experience in teaching and performing. The interviews focused on the following areas:

1. Evolution of Pipa Techniques: Experts were asked to share their perspectives on how traditional Pipa techniques have evolved and how modern innovations have been integrated into contemporary performances.
2. Teaching Methods: The interviewees discussed the modernization of Pipa teaching methods, including the use of technology and the balance between traditional and modern approaches in pedagogy.
3. Cross-Cultural Influences: Experts provided insights into the impact of Western music on Pipa performance and the role of cross-cultural collaborations in shaping modern Pipa music.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Integration of Traditional and Modern Pipa Playing Techniques

In interviews, Yang Yu (Performer's Perspective) noted: "Traditional techniques are the cornerstone of Pipa artistry. For instance, the 'pushing' and 'pulling' techniques in 'Chen Sui' can precisely convey classical charm through dynamic control. However, modern compositions require breakthroughs—when blending with jazz, I layer improvised glissandos over 'vibrato' and 'bending' to create a dialogue between tradition and innovation." Liu Henan (Educator's Perspective) emphasized: "Teaching must balance tradition and innovation. Modern techniques like 'flesh strumming' can engage students, but foundational skills such as 'rolling fingers' (轮指) and 'crossed strings' (绞弦) must be mastered first. My students often practice 'fixed-number rolling' by adapting rock pieces, preserving traditional frameworks while nurturing creativity." Through this study, we found that modern Pipa performance has incorporated many modern musical elements on the basis of traditional techniques, forming a unique playing style. Traditional Pipa playing techniques, such as "Tui" (Pushing the String), "La" (Pulling the String), "Yin" (Vibrato), and "Rou" (Pressing and Vibrating the String), still play an important role in modern performances, especially in expressing lyrical pieces. These techniques effectively convey subtle emotional changes. However, modern Pipa performance has innovated on this foundation, introducing new techniques such as "Double Glissando" and "Flesh Strumming," which enrich the timbre and diversity of the Pipa. These innovations not only preserve the traditional charm of the Pipa but also inject new vitality into it.

In interviews, experts mentioned that modern Pipa performers often incorporate modern musical elements, such as jazz and rock, into traditional pieces, making them more contemporary while retaining their original style. This fusion not only attracts younger audiences but also provides new possibilities for the international dissemination of the Pipa as a traditional instrument.

## 4.2 Cross-Cultural Influences in Modern Pipa Performance

In interviews, Yang Yu shared: "In collaborations with electric guitars, I combine 'strumming' techniques with Western pick styles, such as using 'muted sounds' (煞音) to mimic heavy metal effects. Such cross-genre experiments were well-received in the program 'Our Band', proving traditional instruments can adapt to diverse stages."

Liu Henan analyzed: "Cross-cultural fusion requires caution. My team once infused Latin rhythms into 'Ambush from Ten Sides' but retained traditional 'crossed strings' to simulate warhorse neighs. The key is to prioritize the Pipa's native vocabulary while supplementing with Western elements."

With the development of globalization, Pipa performance has gradually been influenced by Western music, especially in terms of playing techniques and performance forms. Modern Pipa performers have begun to integrate Western musical elements into their performances, such as the addition of electroacoustic bands and vocal accompaniment. This cross-cultural fusion not only enriches the expressive power of the Pipa but also enhances its competitiveness on the international music stage.

By analyzing modern Pipa compositions, we found that many works incorporate Western musical rhythms and harmonic structures on the basis of traditional Pipa techniques. For example, some modern Pipa pieces integrate the improvisational style of jazz or the heavy rhythms of rock, making the performance forms more diverse. This cross-cultural fusion not only broadens the musical language of the Pipa but also provides new avenues for its global dissemination.

## 4.3 Modernization of Pipa Teaching Methods

In interviews, Liu Henan: "In undergraduate teaching, we use video demonstrations—such as slow-motion replays of 'vibrato' techniques in 'Chen Sui'—to help students observe wrist movements. However, traditional one-on-one modeling remains irreplaceable, especially for conveying nuanced tonal variations."

Yang Yu added: "In grassroots teaching, students compare online videos of different performers' 'strumming' techniques in 'Ambush from Ten Sides' to better understand stylistic diversity. Yet, instructors must guide them in analyzing which interpretations align with traditional aesthetics. I also ask students to record 'vibrato' practice with smartphones, then use AI to analyze sound waves and quantify 'artistic flavor.' Data feedback helps younger learners grasp the precision of traditional artistry."

This study also explored the modernization of Pipa teaching methods. Traditional Pipa teaching mainly relies on oral transmission, emphasizing the imitation of traditional pieces and the mastery of techniques. However, with the development of modern educational technology, Pipa teaching has gradually introduced modern teaching methods, such as video lessons and online courses. These new teaching methods not only improve teaching efficiency but also make Pipa learning more accessible.

In interviews, experts mentioned that modern Pipa teaching not only focuses on the transmission of techniques but also emphasizes students' understanding of music and the cultivation of creativity. By combining traditional teaching methods with modern educational technology, teachers can better guide students to understand the historical background and cultural connotations of Pipa music while encouraging them to innovate in their performances.

This modernized teaching approach not only helps preserve Pipa art but also lays the foundation for its future development.

#### 4.4 Standardization and Personalization of Pipa Playing Techniques

Liu Henan noted: "The academic community continues to debate the standardization of technical parameters, particularly regarding 'rolling fingers' tempo. Our research team has identified at least three distinct notational approaches to this technique in graded examination materials. Rather than imposing artificial uniformity, effective instruction should illuminate the historical evolution of these variations, enabling students to appreciate the rich diversity within our tradition." Yang Yu shared: "Artistic innovation must honor structural integrity. When young performers reinterpret 'The King Doffs His Armor', they may creatively extend 'muted sounds' (煞音) for heightened drama. However, such modifications should never compromise the fundamental narrative logic inherent to this 'martial repertoire' (武曲) - this constitutes the essential boundary of meaningful innovation."

In modern Pipa performance, the balance between the standardization and personalization of playing techniques has become an important topic. Traditional Pipa playing techniques have formed relatively fixed patterns over long periods of 传承, especially in techniques such as "Lunzhi" (Picking in Rotation) and "Saoxian" (Strumming the Strings), where performers often need to follow certain norms. However, with the diversification of modern Pipa performance, performers have begun to innovate on these traditional techniques with personalized approaches.

By analyzing modern Pipa works, we found that many performers add personal touches to traditional techniques, such as incorporating different rhythmic variations in "Lunzhi" or applying varying degrees of force in "Saoxian." This personalized approach not only makes Pipa performances more colorful but also provides performers with greater creative freedom.

This study, through a comparative analysis of traditional and modern Pipa playing techniques, reveals the evolution and development of Pipa art in the process of modernization. Traditional Pipa playing techniques still hold an important place in modern performances, but modern Pipa performers have injected new vitality through innovation and cross-cultural fusion. The improvement of modern Pipa teaching methods has also provided new pathways for the 传承 and development of Pipa art.

Overall, Pipa art, through the collision of tradition and modernity, not only retains its unique cultural essence but also gradually moves toward internationalization through continuous innovation and fusion. Future research could further explore the impact of technology on Pipa performance and the role of cross-cultural collaboration in shaping modern Pipa music, providing more theoretical support for the sustained development of Pipa art.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance, with a particular focus on playing techniques. Through a combination of literature review, case studies, and expert interviews, the research has provided a comprehensive understanding of how Pipa art has evolved over time, blending traditional techniques with modern innovations. The findings reveal that while traditional Pipa techniques remain foundational, modern

performers have successfully integrated contemporary elements, creating a dynamic and evolving art form that resonates with both domestic and international audiences.

The research began with an extensive literature review, which established the historical and cultural context of Pipa performance. This foundational work highlighted the importance of traditional techniques such as "Tui" (Pushing the String), "La" (Pulling the String), and "Yin" (Vibrato) in conveying the emotional depth of traditional pieces like "Chen Sui" (陈隋) and "Ten-sided Ambush" (十面埋伏). The literature also underscored the role of modern innovations, such as "Double Glissando" and "Flesh Strumming," in expanding the expressive potential of the Pipa.

The case study approach allowed for a detailed analysis of selected Pipa works, both traditional and modern. By examining the musical scores and performance practices of these pieces, the study revealed how traditional techniques are being reinterpreted and expanded in contemporary compositions. For example, modern Pipa pieces often incorporate Western musical elements like jazz and rock, as well as electroacoustic accompaniment and human voices, creating a richer and more diverse soundscape.

Interviews with experts provided valuable insights into the evolution of Pipa techniques and the modernization of teaching methods. The experts emphasized the importance of balancing tradition and innovation, both in performance and pedagogy. They highlighted how modern teaching methods, such as the use of technology and online courses, are making Pipa more accessible to a wider audience while preserving its cultural heritage.

Observational data collection offered a practical perspective on how Pipa techniques are applied in real-world performances and teaching settings. The observations confirmed that modern performers are creatively adapting traditional techniques to suit contemporary compositions, resulting in performances that are both technically impressive and emotionally resonant. The data also revealed that modern teaching methods are effective in fostering a deeper understanding of both traditional and modern Pipa practices among students.

Throughout the research process, it became clear that Pipa art is in a state of dynamic evolution. The integration of traditional and modern elements has not only preserved the cultural essence of the Pipa but also allowed it to thrive in a globalized world. The study has shown that the adaptability of Pipa music is one of its greatest strengths, enabling it to remain relevant and appealing to new generations of performers and audiences.

One of the most striking findings was the role of cross-cultural influences in shaping modern Pipa music. The incorporation of Western musical elements and the use of modern technology have opened up new possibilities for Pipa performance, making it more accessible and appealing to international audiences. This cross-cultural fusion has also enriched the expressive potential of the Pipa, allowing it to convey a wider range of emotions and themes.

The study also highlighted the importance of modernizing Pipa teaching methods. By combining traditional teaching techniques with modern pedagogical approaches, educators can ensure that the rich heritage of Pipa music is preserved while also encouraging innovation and creativity among students. This hybrid approach not only makes Pipa more accessible but also fosters a deeper appreciation for its cultural significance.

This research has laid the groundwork for further exploration of Pipa art in the context of globalization and technological advancement. Future studies could investigate the impact of technology on Pipa performance, such as the use of digital tools for composition and

performance. Additionally, the role of cross-cultural collaborations in shaping modern Pipa music could be further explored, providing insights into how Pipa art can continue to evolve in a rapidly changing world.

Finally, this study has demonstrated that the interplay between traditional and modern elements is essential for the continued evolution and appreciation of Pipa music. By embracing both tradition and innovation, Pipa art can remain a vibrant and dynamic form of cultural expression, cherished by audiences around the world.

## 6. Discussions

According to (Xie Na, 2017), traditional Pipa techniques such as "plucking," "picking," "pressing the strings," and "vibrato" play a significant role in expressing emotions and musical styles. She points out that these techniques form the foundation of Pipa performance, especially in classical pieces like "Ten-sided Ambush" (十面埋伏), where traditional techniques vividly depict the atmosphere and emotions of the battlefield. (Zhang Qi, 2019) also emphasizes the importance of traditional techniques, particularly in the performance of lyrical pieces (文曲) and martial pieces (武曲). The application of vibrato techniques can be flexibly adjusted according to the style of the piece, such as the lyrical nature of 文曲 and the intensity of 武曲.

My research aligns with the studies of (Xie Na, 2017) and (Zhang Qi, 2019) in recognizing the irreplaceable role of traditional techniques in expressing emotions. Their research primarily focuses on the inheritance of traditional techniques, while my study further explores how these techniques have been developed through modern innovations, enriching the expressive forms of the Pipa. My research also highlights the innovation of modern Pipa playing techniques, such as "Double Glissando" and "Flesh Strumming." These techniques expand and innovate upon traditional methods, significantly enriching the timbre and expressive power of the Pipa. These modern techniques not only preserve the traditional charm of the Pipa but also infuse it with new vitality, making it more expressive in contemporary music.

According to (Sun Liwei, 2001), traditional Pipa techniques such as "pushing," "pulling," "vibrato," and "pressing" can convey profound sorrow and emotion in classical pieces like "Chen Sui" (陈隋) through delicate control of dynamics and timbre. These techniques hold a central position in traditional Pipa performance, especially in the performance of lyrical and martial pieces, where they express either lyrical or intense musical styles through variations in dynamics and rhythm. (Sun Liwei, 2001) notes that techniques like "pushing" and "pulling" are often used in lyrical pieces to express delicate emotions, while "strumming" and "twisting the strings" are employed in martial pieces to depict intense battle scenes. These traditional techniques are not only the foundation of Pipa performance but also the source of its unique artistic charm and expressive power.

My research points out that modern Pipa performance emphasizes a balance between traditional and modern elements when integrating them. Traditional techniques such as "pushing," "pulling," "vibrato," and "pressing" remain at the core of modern Pipa performance, especially in expressing lyrical pieces, where these techniques convey deep emotions through subtle variations in dynamics and timbre. This aligns with the perspective



of (Sun Liwei, 2001). However, my study further explores how modern Pipa performance, while preserving traditional techniques, incorporates many modern elements, greatly expanding the expressive capabilities of the Pipa. For example, modern performers integrate Western musical elements such as jazz, rock, and electroacoustic accompaniment into traditional techniques, creating more complex timbral variations to meet the diverse demands of contemporary music. This fusion not only preserves the cultural value of traditional techniques but also provides new possibilities for the international dissemination of the Pipa.

### 6.1 knowledge gained from research

This study highlights the integration of traditional and modern elements in Pipa performance, demonstrating how traditional techniques like "Tui" and "La" remain foundational, while modern innovations such as "Double Glissando" and "Flesh Strumming" expand its expressive capabilities. The influence of Western music, including jazz and electroacoustic accompaniment, has enriched Pipa's versatility and global appeal. Additionally, modern teaching methods, incorporating technology and online platforms, have made Pipa learning more accessible while preserving its cultural heritage. Overall, the fusion of tradition and modernity has ensured the Pipa's relevance in contemporary music.

### 6.2 Suggestions

To further enhance the development of Pipa art, it is recommended to promote the integration of modern techniques and Western musical elements in both performance and teaching, fostering greater creativity and international appeal. Additionally, leveraging digital tools and online platforms can make Pipa education more accessible and engaging for a global audience. Finally, encouraging cross-cultural collaborations and performances will help elevate the Pipa's presence on the international stage, ensuring its continued evolution and appreciation worldwide.

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