

The Transformation of the Role and Symbolism of Female Pipa Performers and the Impact of Pipa Development in China

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Abstract

This study's objective is to investigate The Transformation of the Role and Symbolism of Female Pipa Performers and the Impact of Pipa Development in China. This qualitative research methodology has collected a wide range of important papers and literature from both ancient and musical texts for investigation and interpretation. To evaluate and discuss the data, in-depth interviews were held with well-known female pipa musicians in Yunnan Province, as well as new generations of pipa students.

According to this study, the role of female pipa performers changed in response to historical, social, and cultural factors in each era. Female pipa performers were a part of court culture during ancient times, including the Tang Dynasty, maintaining an elite status. However, their status waned during the Song Dynasty, and they became the inheritors of the arts among the common people. This trend aligns with the gender dynamics of Chinese society. In the 21st century, they not only preserve traditional practices but also maintain global cultural interaction, elevating the pipa to power. These pieces integrate Western musical concepts with Chinese musical history, displaying female musicians' ability to communicate thoughts about current Chinese culture through music. Female pipa musicians also use their instruments' sounds to negotiate power, role, and meaning. Represents women's power.

Keywords: Pipa, Transformation of the role, Symbolism, Female Pipa performers, Woman

Introduction

The book provides a broad picture of women's social standing and musical activities as pipa players in ancient China. The author follows the history of the pipa, exploring the origins and evolution of the instrument as a Chinese cultural symbol (Bai, 2024). The research

indicates that women pipa players were not only musicians but also symbols of culture, often associated with grace and sophistication. Bai examines the role of such performers in imperial courts and their engagement in ceremonial and social roles. The book also touches upon the issues that women pipa performers encountered, including social expectations and the constrained roles available to women in the arts. Through meticulous historical research, Bai reveals the dual role of female pipa performers as both artists and cultural icons within traditional Chinese society.

Frederick Lau's study offers a rich examination of the professions and achievements of women musicians in historic Chinese society, with particular focus on pipa players. Lau explores how these women navigated the complex social hierarchies of their time, balancing their careers as performers with cultural expectations. The author discusses the education and training of female pipa performers, often within court or domestic settings, and how they were shaped by cultural expectations in their playing. The symbolic role of the pipa in Chinese culture and its relationship to femininity and refinement are also discussed by Lau. Based on the analysis of historical records and music scores, Lau presents in depth an appreciation of how women pipa players influenced and were influenced by the culture and society politics of their era. (Lau, F. 2008)

Mei's study adopts a gendered lens to explore the performance art of female pipa performers within Chinese society. She demonstrates how gender roles have shaped both the construction and execution of pipa performance in traditional and modern Chinese music. She highlights the paradoxical situation where female pipa performers are celebrated for their cultural contributions yet constrained by societal expectations, reflecting the tension between their artistic creativity and the gendered norms of their time. By analyzing case studies and musical practices, She critically examines the intersection of gender, performance, and cultural identity in Chinese musical traditions (Mei, 2024).

Myers's book accounts for a complete historical record of the pipa and female practitioners of the instrument, their positions and roles documented from the earliest times up to the contemporary era. Myers examines the cultural significance of the pipa as a musical instrument and its association with women musicians as figures representing Chinese art and ideals. The author talks about the various contexts in which women pipa musicians operated, including court entertainment, ritual practice, and public concerts. The author also describes the impact of social and political change on the status of women pipa players, particularly

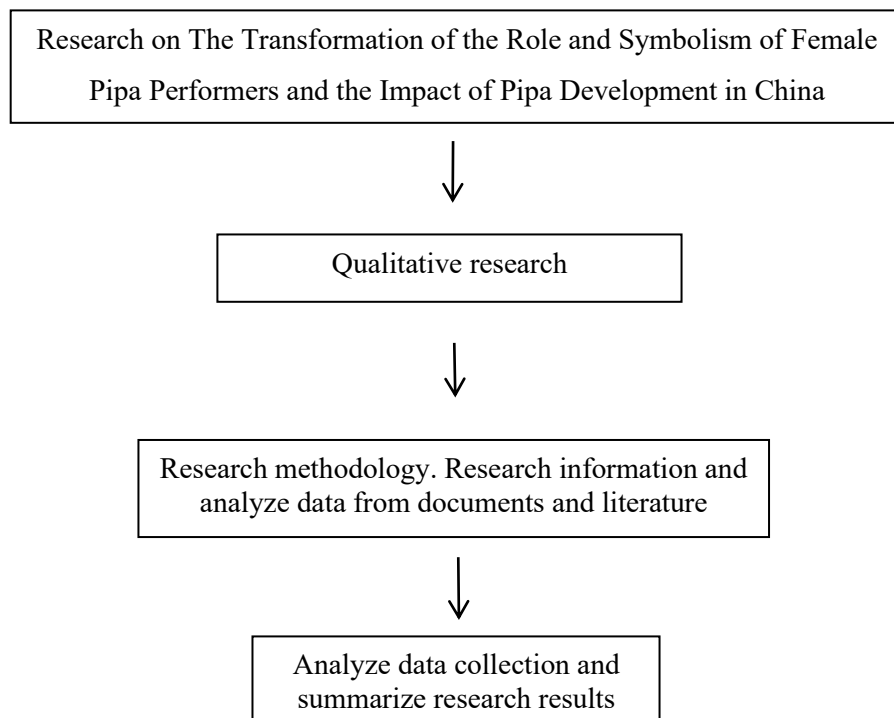
when there was cultural upheaval. By an exploration of historical texts, music notation, and visual representations, Myers provides an extensive overview of how female pipa performers have shaped and have been shaped by Chinese cultural history. The book also concludes with a discussion of how female pipa performers remain relevant in the present day, highlighting how they have helped preserve and innovate traditional Chinese music in the globalized setting. (Myers, 1992)

In conclusion, from the above and other substantive sources, the researcher wishes to study the Transformation of the Role and Symbolism of Female Pipa Performers and the Impact of Pipa Development in China.

Objectives

To analyze The Transformation of the Role and Symbolism of Female Pipa Performers and the Impact of Pipa Development in China.

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

1. Historical Research Analysis

Material Collection

Extensively gather numerous materials like old government historical documents. These documents give an official history of the past, and such a history is usually necessary to know in which context female pipa players existed.

Include musical treatises from other dynasties. The treatises often contain specialized accounts of musical instruments, performing techniques, and the fame of musicians, with pivotal discussions on how the pipa and female pipa players changed over time.

Employ literary compositions. Literary compositions can reflect the social perception of women pipa players, as they can outline their performances, roles in society, and emotions that they evoked, thus augmenting the research data.

Comparative Analysis:

Employ the comparative analysis technique. Contrast materials across different periods. It is in this manner that patterns and differences in terms of how female pipa players were represented and what they were and stood for during each period can be traced.

This contrast helps in the clear demarcation of the changing trends. For example, it may suggest the manner in which the role of female pipa players changed from being largely in the court entertainment circuit in one period to acquiring a more public and diverse space in another.

Thematic Analysis:

Apply the thematic analysis approach. Use the method to examine in-depth how female pipa artists interacted with social class. Understanding how different social classes interacted with female pipa artists can indicate their social status along with opportunities or limitations they had.

Explore the relationship between gender norms. Think about the way that societal gender norms influenced the role and symbolic meaning of women pipa players, such as whether there were expectations about style of performance or the kinds of venues they could perform at based on gender.

Examine the women's subjectivity articulation. Determine how women pipa performers used their art to articulate their own subjectivities and lives and how the latter changed over time.

Unravel the complex processes that shaped their development. These could include such factors as political change, cultural fashion, and instrumentation technological advances, all of which affected the growth and development of women pipa players.

Conclusion Drawing:

Summarize the laws of historical evolution. Based on the analysis of materials and identification of trends and factors, draw conclusions about the historical development of female pipa performers.

Reach conclusions regarding the changes in the status and symbolic meanings of female pipa performers in different periods. These conclusions can provide a comprehensive understanding of how this group has evolved throughout history.

2. Interview Analysis

Interviewee Selection:

Invite two female pipa performers from Yunnan for interviews. The choice of Yunnan as a location might be due to its unique musical culture or the prevalence of pipa performance in the region.

Select Professor Shi quanyun, a pipa educator at the Yunnan Arts Institute. Her rich teaching and research experience make her a valuable source of information, as she has witnessed and influenced the development of pipa performance from an educational perspective.

Choose Hu Pingting, a young performer. She graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music, indicating a high level of professional training. Her childhood - long exposure to professional pipa teaching and extensive performing experience add to her significance as an interviewee. Additionally, her management of a multimedia social media account provides a modern - day aspect to her career, which can offer new insights into the industry.

Interview Question Design:

Design questions covering various aspects. Include questions about the interviewees' learning experiences, such as their initial exposure to the pipa, their training process, and any challenges they faced during learning.

Inquire about their performing experiences. This could involve details about their most memorable performances, the types of audiences they have encountered, and how they prepare for performances.

Ask about their understanding of their own roles and symbolic meanings. This helps to understand their self - perception and how they see their place in the world of pipa performance and in society at large.

Probe into their experiences in different music projects. This can reveal the diversity of their work, the collaborative aspects of the music industry, and any innovative or unique projects they have been involved in.

Comprehensive Understanding:

Use the interview responses to comprehensively understand their individual career development. By piecing together their learning, performing, and project experiences, a detailed picture of their career paths can be constructed.

Gain insights into their views on the industry. Their perspectives can range from opinions on the current state of pipa performance, the challenges and opportunities in the industry, to predictions about its future development.

Results

Last but not least, female Chinese pipa players' roles evolving reflect vividly in what way cultural heritage and social-political changes are locked in with one another in a dynamic way. In the Tang Dynasty, we already had female artists such as Duan Shanben. They played the pipa exceptionally well, and their presence further meant that society was fairly liberal at the time. Their actions were not just about showcasing their music talent but also indicated that women did have some place in the art world. But then the Song Dynasty arrived, and everything changed so drastically. The way individuals told stories that were related to the pipa became more masculine. In the past, the women playing pipa were highly prominent, but currently, they started to be displaced and more focus was given to male - centered narratives. Let us move forward to the current times, we have equality - based practices. Women pipa musicians today find themselves in another social environment where they have more opportunities, and they just keep adapting and redefining their roles because the gender expectations around them also continue to change. The pipa is not just a musical instrument. It's almost like a carrier of culture. It has given women pipa musicians a unique space. Here they are not restricted to be something else, and express their own thoughts, which we call female subjectivity. Here, they can utilize the pipa to challenge the ancient beliefs that make men masters forever, so-called patriarchal constraints. In the process, they also uphold the

long - standing artistic traditions of the pipa. Fast - forward to the situation in contemporary China today. There is renewed gender - inclusive training of the pipa. That is really meaningful. It shows us how reform from within the system, like in educational policies, can make the voices of the likes of women who were once forced to the fringes even stronger, like those of female pipa students and performers. It also makes sure that the pipa, this ancient instrument, can still remain relevant and meaningful in our globalized world. It's almost like a way of keeping this old art form alive and kicking amongst a new generation.



Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/>

Figure 1 The image of the Pipa-playing Woman in "Song of the Pipa" written by the poet Bai Juyi

Sadly, society has always had a prejudice image. Female pipa performers have frequently been unjustifiably denigrated with denigrating names like "geisha" or "brothel women." These not only are entirely unwarranted but also show sheer disrespect for their superb pipa-playing abilities and for the outstanding contributions they've made toward this art. It's as though other people are making the worst possible assumptions without even realizing their real worth. This is an earnest issue since it completely distorts their reputation and the value of their art. We must strongly protest against these biased, and unfair comments. They are by no means the low-class individuals these derogatory terms attempt to portray. Instead, they are highly talented musicians who have dedicated themselves whole-heartedly to the pipa. Their art has spanned generations. They have played a significant role in promoting the development and progression of the pipa art itself. They've maintained traditional methods of operation and also evolved new and innovative ways of playing, causing the pipa to be more dynamic and intriguing.

The symbolic value of female pipa players has evolved considerably through the years, which accurately reflects the general perception of society toward gender. Women had a quite

high status during the Tang Dynasty. Female pipa players were regarded as representative symbols of "femininity," which was also considered an integral part of culture. Their music was not only music but also about demonstrating the beauty and talent of women. However, in the period of the Song Dynasty, everything changed dramatically. Both men and women began paying greater attention to men's heroism. Women pipa players, who previously occupied leading roles, were devalued. Their position was not as highly valued as it had been previously, and for the most part, they simply transmitted the abilities of pipa playing to local populations of people. Nevertheless, in our modern period, we can observe something quite different. Modern female pipa players are accomplishing some pretty cool stuff. They are combining ancient traditional methods of playing pipa with new and modern concepts. They are using the pipa as a vehicle to express women's ideas and feelings, what we call feminist expression. This fusion of the new and the old, this "co-existence of tradition and modernity," shows the adaptability of the pipa as a cultural symbol. It can change and conform to the development of the perception of people regarding gender and remain important and pertinent in different eras of time.



source :<https://www.sohu.com/>

Figure 2: Descriptions of ancient brothel courtesans on the Internet

The development of the Chinese pipa has actually benefited a great deal from the contribution of female players. These women pipa players have been predominantly occupied with the art throughout history, and their performance practices have contributed immensely to many aspects of the pipa. From a technical point of view, female performers have done a lot of work. They have always attempted to find and try out new methods of playing. For

example, some of them have created more nuanced finger - plucking techniques that have the potential to deliver more delicate and beautiful sounds. Not only have these new techniques contributed to the technical vocabulary of the pipa, but also enhanced the ability of the instrument to express a wider range of feelings, thus greatly contributing to the aesthetic aspect of pipa music. Their acts, based on these newly acquired approaches, have brought the music an unusual novelty and additional depth in emotion, making it more fascinating and engrossing to the listeners.

Educationally, women pipa players have played a crucial role. They've done their best to transmit their craft and expertise. Before, learning the pipa could have been reserved for a few, but because of them, increasingly more people have been able to study this art form. Institutional reform has also played an instrumental role in this. Standardized education of music has structured the learning process and made it easier to access. Currently, students are able to learn the pipa in an orderly manner through a standard curriculum. National cultural diplomacy has also been useful. It has helped to spread pipa culture locally and abroad, enabling women to break past limitations that had earlier kept them confined. Before, women might have faced every kind of difficulty in learning and playing the pipa, but these innovations have opened more opportunities for them to shine.

In the contemporary era, with the international "world music" phenomenon, female pipa virtuosos have truly made their mark. They have been driven into the limelight and become Chinese cultural ambassadors, so to speak. They are infusing the traditional pipa motifs, those distinctive airs with which the age - old Chinese culture is imbued, with concepts and aesthetic from various regions of the world. Hence, they are effectively bringing the music of the pipa to a world audience. They are not merely performing to show the old beauty of the pipa but also to render it relevant in the global, modern context. This women-led globalization of the pipa has completely transformed the symbolic meaning of the instrument. Historically, it was considered at best a national symbol of Chinese civilization. But now, it has evolved into a bridge connecting the prosperous Eastern heritage and the multiculturalism of the present. It is rather a chain uniting different cultures, introducing the world to the unique beauty of Chinese pipa art but remaining receptive to and embracing components of other cultures. Lastly, Chinese female pipa players have indeed made a lasting impression along the long river of history.

Throughout the centuries, they have been struggling with a complex and changing social condition. In the old days, society was brimming with rigid rules and discrimination. Women faced so many obstacles in developing their musical dreams. But these brave women pipa players never lost their will. With their indomitable heart, they held on to their passion for the pipa with all their might. Their remarkable artistic talent was a beacon of hope in despair. For example, there were periods when women were not encouraged to perform in public, yet they still practiced and perfected their art behind closed doors. They would gather in tiny groups and share their experiences and secrets, gradually perfecting their techniques. These women entertainers have broken a million barriers. They overcame the social prejudice that sought to restrict their music aspiration. Their efforts have culminated in the dynamic production of pipa art. From the perspective of the roles and symbolic interpretation, they have undergone a substantial transformation. Initially, they were perhaps nothing more than entertainers within certain social contexts. Nevertheless, as time evolved, they restyled themselves. They emerged as representatives of women's strength within the art sector. Their performances were no longer mere entertainment but had become a means of expression and a chance to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the pipa. They matured the pipa art in a comprehensive sense. They did not merely fine-tune the conventional techniques of playing but also fostered new musical ideas. They experimented with different rhythms and melodies, thus enriching the pipa music and making it interesting. In the international cultural exchange field, Chinese female pipa performers have been unbeatable. They introduced the unique charm of Chinese pipa music onto the international stage. Performing at international music festivals and cultural exchanges, they have amazed the world with their shows. They are blending the traditional elements of the pipa with modern musical concepts, winning fans from all over the world. Their lives have incorporated the pipa art into international cultural diversity. They have been the primary driving force in inheriting and developing pipa art over history. Their lives are a pinnacle of how women can achieve great things when it involves music. It also completely displays the immense potential and value of women within the entire field of culture. Women, being imaginative and sensitive, introduce something new to the art, which enriches the cultural environment. In the coming years, it is of great importance that more attention and support need to be given to the development of female pipa players. This art, rich in historical and cultural roots, can do so much to provide. With a gender equal and inclusive environment of diversity, it might be allowed to shine even more brightly. More

investment should be done, such as more schooling opportunities, more stages to perform, and more attention. In this manner, female pipa players can still create outstanding pieces of work. They can still introduce special Chinese strength to world cultural riches. Their music can unite people from different cultures, uniting different people and creating a culture of understanding and appreciation between different cultures.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this study is to explore the development of women pipa players' roles and symbolism, as well as the implications of pipa development in China. As Liu, Bhengsri, and Chuangprakhon (2025) note, understanding the historical trajectory of the pipa within its social and cultural context reveals how gender, tradition, and modernization intersect to shape both musical practice and performer identity. When properly ordered and placed into an appropriate intellectual and cultural perspective, music is able to eloquently convey and evoke emotion, while also reflecting complex layers of cultural meaning. The increasing complexity of musical compositions, when situated within a specific geographic location and historical period, often produces culturally diverse outcomes that mirror broader societal transformations. Such insights are particularly relevant to the study of female pipa performers, whose artistry embodies both the preservation of tradition and the adaptation to evolving cultural landscapes.

The research starts by going back to the history of the standing and symbolized positions of the women pipa players. From ancient official records, treatises on playing, and literary materials, it portrays the development of the manner in which their standing, popularity before the public, and cultural implications changed with variation in dynasties. This type of historical research helps to comprehend the whole idea of gender and art in the course of Chinese history and how the women pipa players changed in varied societal and cultural contexts. provides a detailed account of female pipa performers' evolving roles, illustrating how women gradually moved from peripheral to central positions in the musical tradition, while highlighting cultural and social factors influencing their status. further examines the representations of women pipa players in literature and public discourse, showing how symbolic portrayals reflected broader societal attitudes toward gender and cultural prestige. (Mei, 2024; Estep, 2021)

For instance, during the Tang period, women pipa players were accorded vast respect and included in the then-rising cultural circuit. However, throughout the Song period, when a male-dominated narrative began to shape the arts, women pipa players gradually stepped aside and were primarily involved in folk-grade transmission. This evolution reflects not merely the development of pipa performance techniques but also the shifting societal and cultural dynamics of the respective eras (Furniss & Lu, 2023). Furniss and Lu (2023) emphasize that the status of women pipa performers was deeply intertwined with broader gender hierarchies, cultural expectations, and political circumstances, illustrating how musical practices can mirror societal changes.

During the more recent times, symbolic significance connected with pipa performers who are women evolved by integrating pipa heritage with modern-day musical themes. Contemporary pipa performers are attempting to redefine the cultural significance of the instrument. Wu Man, a pipa virtuoso born in Hangzhou in 1964 and a globally recognized musician, happens to be an exemplary case in this context. Beginning to learn at age nine and graduating from China's Central Conservatory of Music, Wu Man toured around the world with such organizations as the New York Philharmonic, Kronos Quartet, and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Fusing traditional pipa content with Western musical form, Wu Man opened up the pipa globally and redefined the symbolic significance of the pipa via cross-cultural interactions. Concerts by her demonstrate women pipa performers' potential to draw beyond the pipa's traditional symbolic constraints and give the instrument new culture significance (Ma, M.-H. 2023).

Female pipa performers have also made lasting contributions to the technical and aesthetic development of the instrument. For instance, Wang Jing is renowned for her virtuosic skills and distinctive musical interpretations. Growing up in a musical family, she began learning from her father and later studied under renowned masters, introducing diverse artistic elements to pipa performance. In terms of pedagogy, figures such as Wu Yuxia have dedicated themselves to popularizing and teaching pipa art, playing a pivotal role in training the next generation of players. Furthermore, masters like Guan Yadong have been instrumental in promoting the global dissemination of pipa art by blending Chinese and Western elements, thereby enhancing the instrument's international profile (Li, 2025) (Guan,2025) .

Overall, female pipa players have been key agents in the inheritance, innovation, and expansion of pipa art. Their roles are dynamic rather than static, shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts. From their high-status positions in ancient court society to their more subdued roles in folk traditions, and now as cultural intermediaries on the global stage, female pipa musicians continue to redefine and revitalize the instrument. Their influence extends beyond preservation into active shaping of pipa's present and future.

Consequently, an anthropological critique of female pipa performers should be grounded in critical ethnomusicology, focusing on the negotiation of power, identity, and meaning through musical performance. Further research into the mechanisms by which female musicians produce and adapt identities in contemporary Chinese society will deepen our understanding of this evolving musical form and its cultural backdrop.

knowledge gained from research

Our research into the development of Chinese female pipa artists has made some key findings. We have witnessed extraordinary historical transformations in their function and symbolic significance, and these are owed to social - political and cultural heritage factors. Female pipa artists have not only regained their positions within evolving gender norms but have also contributed significantly to the technical improvement, aesthetic enrichment, and pedagogical propagation of the pipa.

Suggestions

1. Explore specific historical events and cultural shifts triggering female pipa performers' role change. Use detailed historical data and scholars' work to strengthen the analysis.

2. Compare Chinese female pipa performers' development with counterparts abroad and across different generations in China to highlight the Chinese case's uniqueness.

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