

The musical transformation of the pipa: sound, symbolism, and the pipa's performance of feminine identity

Jun tong Dou ¹, Chitsanupong Intarakaew²

¹Master's degree student in Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

²Lecturer (Ph.D) in Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

*Corresponding author, E-mail: 840916080@qq.com

Abstract

This study reviews the history of the ancient Chinese instrument, the pipa, through the lens of ethnomusicology and contemporary philosophy, in order to better understand gender dynamics, musical aesthetics, and the construction of female musicians' identities in ancient and modern Chinese settings.

According to the study, in the past, female artists were frequently cast in evening roles, which contributed to their image being stigmatized in terms of gender and entertainment. Female pipa musicians, such as Liu Dehai and Wu Man, have been adding Western rhythms and electronic sounds into their work since the beginning of the 20th century. Wu Man exemplifies the use of the pipa in contemporary ensembles and represents the Chinese instrument in the Western world. She has given concerts alongside popular worldwide performers. Thus, contemporary female pipa musicians are more than just cultural heirs; they are also sociopolitical agents in the reshaping of female identities. A critical approach reveals power dynamics in art, emphasizing music's ability to create a counterspace with substantial political and cultural ramifications.

Keywords: Musical transformation, Papa, Female Performers, Feminism, Asian woman.

Introduction

The pipa, an essential component of China's national musical instruments, has a rich historical and cultural significance. Research on the pipa has gained traction in recent years, coinciding with an increased focus on traditional culture. However, contemporary research focuses mostly on its historical progression, performance skills, and musical compositions,

leaving out the importance of female performers in the pipa's development. The pipa has a rich history, beginning in ancient times and changing through numerous dynasties. Its evolution is inextricably linked with the social, cultural, and musical contexts of each era. Female performers, as an integral part of the pipa performing community, have surely contributed significantly to the pipa art's inheritance and invention. As a result, examining the evolution of the pipa and the role of female performers is critical for gaining a more complete knowledge of the pipa art form and its cultural implications.

Despite the rich research on the pipa itself, there is a significant research gap in the comprehensive exploration of the interaction between the pipa's development and female performers. Most existing studies treat the development of the pipa and female performers as independent topics, failing to delve into their mutual influence (Mei, 2024). There is a very important relationship between musical instruments and performers. The development of the pipa, including changes in its form, performance techniques, and musical works, must have had a profound impact on female performers' artistic expression and career development (Liu, Li, & Zhang, 2024). Conversely, female performers' unique perspectives, artistic expressions, and innovative attempts should also have affected the development of the pipa (Wu, 2022; Cheng, n.d.). However, this two-way interaction has not been systematically studied, which is the core issue that this research aims to address.

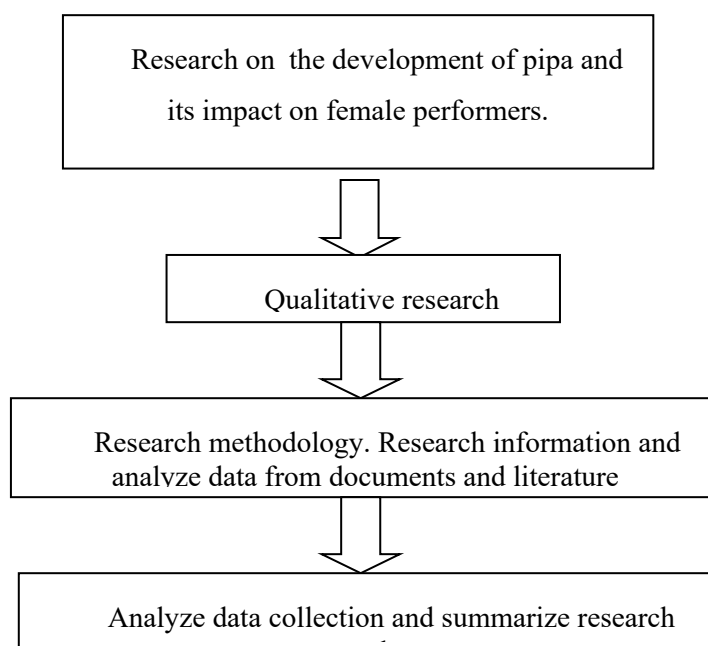
This research aims to reveal the mutual influence mechanism between the development of the pipa and female performers. By exploring the historical development of the pipa and the performance activities of female performers in different periods, we will analyze how the development of the pipa has affected female performers' artistic expression and career development (Bai, 2024), and how female performers have in turn influenced the innovation and dissemination of the pipa (Cheng, n.d.; Wu, n.d.). Moreover, the dynamics of traditional techniques assimilated into modern contexts (Wu, n.d.) and the evolution of musical literacy in Beijing (Liu et al., 2024) will further underline the complexity of this ecosystem. It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the pipa art ecosystem—particularly highlighting the overlooked role of female performers in this ongoing process (Mei, 2024).

In conclusion, from the above information and various important sources, the researcher would like to conduct research on the Study the development of pipa and its impact on female performers. Female musicians playing the traditional Chinese string instrument "Pipa" have evolved from being only entertainers of the imperial court or the upper class to being agents of the formation of new cultural identities in modern society. Musical spaces have become forums for gendered power negotiations, where female musicians' bodies and voices are no longer only "visual objectifications" but locations of emancipation and identity reconstruction in the context of globalization.

Research Objective

To Study the development of pipa and its impact on female performers.

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design and employs literature research methods, focusing on collecting and analyzing historical documents, academic literature, and relevant images and musical score materials related to the development of the pipa and the role of female performers in Chinese musical traditions.

2. Data Sources

2.1 Primary Documents

Historical records on the development of the pipa, including court documents, inscriptions, and ancient paintings. Ancient pipa scores from various dynasties and images of changes in the pipa's形制 (form and structure). Records on the historical development of the status of female pipa musicians, including changes in the status of female pipa performers across dynasties.

2.2 Secondary Documents

Books, research articles, and academic papers on the history of the pipa, especially its development. Commentaries and performance analyses published in academic journals, documentaries, or online media regarding the role of women in Chinese musical traditions, as well as gender and cultural analyses in music and performance.

3. Document Selection Criteria

Documents must be directly relevant to the research topic. Sources should be credible and authored by experts or institutions engaged in pipa-related studies, musicology, ethnomusicology, or gender studies. Preference is given to materials from different time periods to trace historical development. Focus is placed on literature discussing the socio-cultural roles and contributions of female pipa performers to the development of pipa music.

4. Data Analysis

The study uses content analysis as the primary interpretive method, divided into two main analytical directions.

Historical and Musical Analysis: Investigating the structural development of the pipa, innovations in playing techniques, and the evolution of musical styles associated with the instrument.

Gender and Cultural Analysis: Examining changes in the roles and images of female pipa performers across historical periods, from "pipa women" under ancient feudal social values to modern professional pipa artists. Attention is paid to how their roles reflect or challenge gender norms in traditional musical culture.

5. Data Credibility

Reliability is ensured through cross-verification of multiple sources, including historical documents, modern academic analyses, and art critiques, following systematic and rigorous referencing methods. Where possible, expert commentaries from the fields of Chinese music and gender studies are used to validate interpretations.

Results

Throughout the long history of its form, the pipa, like an art sprite constantly undergoing transformation, has witnessed earth-shattering changes over the course of a thousand years. In its early days, the pipa presented itself with a straight neck and a round sound box, exuding a sense of simplicity and antiquity. This was its original appearance, carrying the musical memories of ancient times. As time went by, the pipa gradually evolved from a straight neck to a curved one, and its sound box transformed from round to pear-shaped. This evolution was no accident; rather, it was the result of the pipa's continuous self-innovation, driven by cultural exchanges and changes in musical aesthetics. In terms of material selection and manufacturing techniques, the pipa has never ceased its exploration, with each transformation embodying the wisdom and painstaking efforts of craftsmen.

The development of the pipa's strings is also a historical chapter filled with innovation and breakthroughs. In the early days, the pipa mostly used silk strings, which produced a soft and gentle tone, like a gentle spring breeze caressing people's hearts. However, silk strings had a fatal flaw - they were prone to breakage and lacked durability, which to some extent limited the pipa's expressiveness and playing duration. During the Tang Dynasty, the prosperous trade along the Silk Road served as a bridge, introducing the steel string technology from the Western Regions to the Central Plains. Astute craftsmen seized this opportunity and boldly experimented with combining steel and silk to create composite strings. These composite strings ingeniously retained the warm and delicate characteristics of silk strings while significantly enhancing the tension and durability of the strings. More surprisingly, they expanded the pipa's range and enriched its expressiveness, enabling the pipa to play a more diverse and complex range of musical melodies. During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, with the increasing richness of playing techniques, musicians had higher demands for the pipa's range and expressiveness. To meet these requirements, the number of strings on the pipa

gradually increased from four, and each additional string added more musical possibilities to the pipa, making the performance of complex pieces possible.

The Tang Dynasty was undoubtedly a crucial turning point in pipa manufacturing. At that time, the craftsmen, driven by their persistent pursuit of art, conducted in-depth research and exploration of pipa manufacturing techniques. They were like masters carving artworks, carefully pondering the thickness of the wooden panel. After numerous trials and adjustments, they achieved the perfect thickness. At the same time, they meticulously matched the maple backboard with the paulownia panel. The perfect combination of these two types of wood greatly enhanced the pipa's resonance effect. When the strings were plucked, the sound seemed to emerge from the depths of a distant valley, Deep and ethereal, the lingering sound coils around the beams, captivating people in its enchantment. In the Ming Dynasty, there were new breakthroughs in pipa manufacturing. The application of ebony fingerboards and hawksbill picks injected new vitality into the pipa. The ebony fingerboard, with its hard texture and delicate grain, not only enhanced the pipa's aesthetic appeal but also provided a more comfortable playing feel. The hawksbill picks could make the pipa produce a more layered sound, with a rich and full tone, which was especially suitable for the gentle playing techniques of female performers. When female performers gently plucked the strings, the plaintive melodies seemed to tell touching stories.

From the Tang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, these improvements to the pipa were of far-reaching significance. It not only achieved a qualitative leap in sound quality but also became more user-friendly in design. The curved neck of the pipa seemed to be tailor-made for female performers, perfectly conforming to the natural posture of their arms and wrists. Even after long hours of playing, their arms and wrists would not easily feel fatigued, allowing performers to fully immerse themselves in the world of music and express their emotions freely.

From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, the pipa continued to be improved and innovated in appearance and playing methods. In terms of appearance, the number of frets and semi-frets on the instrument continuously increased, evolving from the initial "four semi-frets and ten frets" to the commonly seen "six semi-frets and twenty-four frets" today. The increase in frets and semi-frets was like opening doors to a broader musical world for the pipa,

expanding its range and enabling it to handle various complex pieces with ease. In terms of playing styles, this period was a time of great diversity, with the emergence of many pipa schools such as the Pinghu School, Pudong School, and Wang School. Each school had its unique playing techniques and artistic styles, showcasing their own charm and competing for excellence. Female performers joined different schools one after another, studying under masters and absorbing the essence of each school, using the pipa to interpret rich and colorful music and express a myriad of emotions. In addition, there was a major transformation in string materials, as traditional silk strings were gradually replaced by metal strings. The use of metal strings changed the pipa's tone from soft to clear and bright. When played on a large stage, the sonorous and powerful sound could instantly capture the audience's attention and was highly infectious.

In the 20th century, the development of the pipa entered a new stage. In terms of manufacturing techniques, it achieved industrialized upgrades, combining traditional craftsmanship with modern technology to make pipa production more precise and efficient. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, instrument makers, adhering to the concept of inheritance and innovation, boldly experimented with new materials and standardized production methods to transform the pipa while preserving the essence of traditional craftsmanship. By carefully altering the curvature of the backboard and skillfully adjusting the sound beam structure of the pipa, they successfully increased the pipa's volume and made its tone more uniform. Whether on the stage of a large concert or in a small indoor performance, the pipa could fully display its unique charm. The subsequent emergence of the electronic pipa was a bold breakthrough and innovation. It changed the tone through pickups and effectors, breaking the limitations of the traditional pipa's tone and enabling the pipa to play various styles of music, including rock and jazz. This innovation provided female performers with a broader creative space, allowing them to participate in modern music creation and fully showcase the artistic charm of the pipa. At the same time, as an outstanding representative of traditional Chinese musical instruments, the pipa frequently appeared on international stages. In the exchanges and collisions with music from various countries around the world, the playing techniques of the pipa began to incorporate characteristics of Western music. Female performers actively explored and constantly experimented during this process,

gradually forming their own unique playing styles and making the pipa shine brightly on the international music stage.

In terms of playing techniques, the development of the pipa is like a magnificent epic of musical evolution. As early as the Han Dynasty, when the pipa was just emerging, its performance mainly relied on two simple techniques: "tan" (plucking outward) and "tiao" (plucking inward). This linear playing method, although seemingly simple, laid the most basic "sound production rules" for pipa performance, like laying the foundation for a musical edifice. Despite their simplicity, these techniques held infinite potential and sowed the seeds for the vigorous development of pipa performance in the future.

During the Tang Dynasty, with the Silk Road trade and cultural exchanges reaching their peak, the playing techniques of the pipa underwent a revolutionary transformation. The court musicians, with their exceptional talent, ingeniously integrated the playing techniques of Western Regions instruments with the aesthetic concepts of the Central Plains, creating the highly distinctive and advanced technique of "lun zhi" (wheel technique). Lun zhi involves rapidly and continuously touching the strings, producing a continuous and clear sound, just like a string of crystal-clear beads crackling and falling onto a jade plate, which is incredibly beautiful and intoxicating. Bai Juyi's famous line, "Large pearls, small pearls, falling on a jade plate," vividly depicts the exquisite sound effect of playing the pipa with the lun zhi technique, becoming the most classic interpretation of this pipa technique.

In modern and contemporary times, in the wave of integration between Eastern and Western music, the pipa has continued to transform and innovate. Composers and performers boldly introduced jazz syncopation rhythms into the "sao xian" (sweeping strings) technique, causing the traditional pentatonic scale system to collide with Western polyrhythmic thinking, giving rise to a modern playing style with complex and changing rhythms. The mature application of harmonic techniques is a significant milestone in the development of pipa playing techniques. Through the organic combination of natural and artificial harmonics, the pipa's range has been greatly expanded, breaking through traditional limitations and extending to four full octaves. This enables the pipa not only to accurately interpret microtonal effects but also to endow musical works with delicate color layers. In the contemporary pipa concerto *Clouds and Flowers*, the performer skillfully interweaves harmonics and real notes, creating an

illusory soundscape where reality and illusion blend. In this musical fantasy world, the audience seems to be transported to a mysterious and wonderful realm, experiencing the infinite possibilities and unique charm of traditional instruments in a modern context.

Female pipa performers have played an indelible and crucial role in promoting the development of pipa art. At the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, society was undergoing drastic changes, and traditional art faced unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Against this backdrop, Liu Dehai's mother bravely broke free from traditional constraints and changed the performance form of the pipa from sitting to standing. This seemingly simple change was of great significance. Standing performances allowed performers to stretch their bodies more freely and use a rich range of body movements to express the emotions and connotations of the music. She also painstakingly studied and developed a set of gestures, dance steps, and body movements that perfectly matched the rhythm of the music, transforming pipa performances from a purely auditory art into a comprehensive audio-visual art. From then on, pipa performances were no longer just about "listening to the sound"; they became a wonderful audio-visual feast, greatly enhancing the artistic charm of the pipa and captivating the audience.

In the 21st century, with the deepening of globalization, The pipa art has ushered in unprecedented new opportunities. Represented by the performer Wu Man, outstanding female artists have been brave enough to experiment and innovate, actively exploring the possibilities of integrating the pipa with other musical forms. With her keen artistic vision and bold innovative spirit, she skillfully combined the pipa with electronic music and musical styles from around the world. In the album Wu Man: Pipa, the traditional and unique sound of the pipa interweaves with the dynamic electronic rhythms, the passionate African drumbeats, and the elegance of Western stringed instruments, creating a highly trendy musical style. This album was released globally and accompanied by international tours, serving as a bridge for musical exchanges between the East and the West. It enabled audiences around the world to appreciate the unique charm of pipa art and presented the pipa in a new guise on the world stage, becoming a shining business card for showcasing traditional Chinese culture.

In recent years, the presence of female pipa performers has become increasingly common on the stages of international music festivals, and the number of professional female

pipa soloists has been steadily rising. With the modern development of pipa art, many novel performance forms have emerged, such as online live streaming performances and virtual reality concerts. These new platforms have provided female performers with a broader space to showcase their talents, allowing them to transcend geographical limitations and convey their music to a wider audience. At the same time, these new platforms also motivate female performers to continuously improve their playing skills, constantly explore and move forward on the path of music, injecting new vitality into the inheritance and development of pipa art.

Figure 1-2: The following two pictures are from the author's solo pipa concert in June 2024.



Source: Jun tong Dou

Conclusion

Pipa development cannot be separated from women's changing roles and expectations playing pipa in society. Changes of pipa's form and make, repertoire, playing location, and standing have had an immediate impact on women's opportunity and constraints and have simply revealed and created Chinese gender politics more generally (Mei, 2024).

From Courtesan Entourage to Artistic Validity. Historically, pipa associations with Tang Dynasty and subsequent courtesan female musicians fixed its gendered character. It gave women a principal playing venue and encouraged virtuosity but connected instrument and player to entertainment, sexuality, and inferior standing in Confucian hierarchy (Mei, 2024). Ming and Qing dynasty pattern of ever more technically demanding performance and ever more technically sophisticated repertoire entailed ever greater elevations of pipa artistic profile.

But most women performers continued to be stuck in interior salons, their own artistry still tarnished by associations of their role in society (Liu, Bhengsri, & Chuangprakhon, 2024).

The watershed was the 20th-century institutionalization of Chinese music. Conservatories were established, the new pipa was standardized to accommodate the increased range and greater projection, and complex concerti like *Ambushed from Ten Sides* and *The King Doffs His Armour* were composed, opening the pathway for pipa as a respected solo concert instrument. This institutional context provided historic opportunity for women to be given formal education and to play professionally on public stages, allowing noted figures to transcend past constraint and to gain public respect mostly as musician (Wu, 2022).

Development of pipa technique and codification of intricate right-hand “martial” virtuosity—flying fingers, hammering effects, and enormous force—also represented problems as much as possibilities. Hitherto, such forceful timbres were culturally entrenched as male domains. Male soloists' playing and performance of such technically demanding pieces were redefined by soloists of either gender as an act of demarcation of enormous force. Performers such as Wu Man represent demonstration of technical virtuosity at a level akin to any male competitor and subtle portrayals of “martial” and lyrical “civil” repertoire, defying simplistic gendered understandings of the repertoire itself (Ma, 2023). Their success marks disconnection of mastery of technique and gender and women's recovery of the whole expressive potential of the instrument.

The dichotomy between the lyrical softness of *wenqu* and the masculine force of *wugu* reflects deeper cultural ideals framed by traditional aesthetics, reinforcing genre-specific gender associations (Zhao, 2019).

Ancient problems and contemporary paradoxes. Although reform has taken place, pipa's gendered past continues to have effects on women players' lives. Assumptions of culture may still supply perfidious biases defining access to performance or reception of review—e.g., lyricism and elegance instead of sheer power. The past of some of the most prominent soloists may be used in order to deliver the illusion of successful gender fairness, masking structure of barriers still faced by lesser-known performers or teaching and administration personnel of the music schools (Ho, 2023). Furthermore, orientalist tropes may be retranscribed by

commercialization of conventional life in order to otheralize the feminine icon of pipa player with images reminiscent of historic stereotypes(Harris et al., 2021; Mei, 2024).

Feminist Perspectives and Agency. From the feminist hermeneutic perspective, the musical space becomes a space of gendered relations of power. Women musicians' bodies and voices are no longer “visual objectifications” but spaces of emancipation and reconstruction of identity in the shadow of globalization. Unconventional women with the likes of Wu Man and Gao Hong challenge powers of disciplines through recycling of contemporary repertoires, experimental playing itself, and global collaborations and position themselves as producers of tradition rather than transmitters of tradition (Moore, 2018). They challenge symbolic signification of “the pipa” and subvert restrictive definitions of femininity.

In summary, Women pipa players in the past and in the present are more than keepers of cultural tradition but are instead agents moving in the aesthetic and sociopolitical redrawing of art. Their lives are musically the potential of art as counterspace, which records and reconstructs gender relations with profound politico-cultural effects. When these sites are critically examined, the heterogeneity of power in art more noticeably reveals itself and the potential of music to disrupt taken-for-granted patterns and make room for other configurations of women's cultural subjecthood are brought into relief.

Knowledge gained from research

The instrument has long been used as a platform for female performers to express themselves creatively. Historically, it allowed women to express their musical aptitude despite gender limits, enriching performance traditions. In current times, female pipa performers have pushed the bounds of the instrument, breaking gender conventions in music.

The study emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between the pipa and female performers. Their fresh interpretations propel the instrument forward, while the evolving pipa expands options for female musicians, resulting in a circle of artistic development. This study advances our understanding of the pipa and the role of female performers in Chinese traditional music.

Suggestions

1. In-depth interviews with young female pipa musicians to learn about their inner motivations (desires) and identity development.
2. Examine discourse in Chinese and foreign media on female pipa musicians.

3. Conduct research analyzing male/female vocal and gesture exchanges in pipa performances to investigate gender performativity via a feminist lens.

Reference

- Mei, Y. (2024). *Powerful fingers, elegant bodies: Reclaiming Chinese pipa's feminine history* (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas). UNT Digital Library.
- Wu, F.-Q. (2022). Wu Man: *A case study of Chinese pipa performance in a Western context*. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies*, 16(1), 55–75.
- Liu, L., Li, X., & Zhang, H. (2024). Musical literacy in the historical development of the Chinese pipa in Beijing. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 12(1), 43–52.
- Cheng, Y. (n.d.). Reconstruction of the Tang dynasty five-string pipa. *UK Chinese Music Ensemble*. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from <https://www.ukchinesemusic.com/cy5.htm>
- Bai, X. (2024). The evolution of the shape of the Chinese pipa and its artistic prosperity. *American Journal of Arts and Human Science*, 3(2), 44–53.
- Wu, Y. (n.d.). Borrowing and local practice: How “assimilation” leads to innovation in modern pipa performance. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12, 110–118.
- Ma, M.-H. (2023). Wu Man, the pipa and Chinese tradition in a contemporary global context? *Asian Ethnomusicology Review*, 11, 19–38.
- Zhao, H. (2019). Research on the beauty of Chinese pipa *wenqu*’s softness and the masculinity of *wuqu*. *IEESASM Conference Proceedings*.
- Ho, W. C. (2023, November). Gender inequality in higher music education in China: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Studies*, 8(4), 1–16.
- Harris, R., Pease, R., & Tan, S. E. (Eds.). (2013). *Gender in Chinese Music* (Eastman/Rochester Studies in Ethnomusicology, Vol. 4, 316 pp.). University of Rochester Press. ISBN 978-1580464437.
- Moore, A. R. (2018). Gendering the musical canon: Feminist interventions in ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 27(3), 355–374.