



# The knowledge and development of the Chinese yangqin

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## Abstract

This study used a qualitative research methodology. The research objective was to describe the knowledge and development of the Chinese yangqin. discusses the current situation of the yangqin in Chinese music culture from the three aspects of its origin, evolution, and development. Using literature and interview methods, the distribution, name, and form of yangqin in various countries around the world are combs, and the origin theory of yangqin is compiled and supplemented. The area was selected in China. The fieldwork method is mainly used for collecting data, together with the information from the document. The study's result showed that Yangqin has long communicated with Chinese folk art since its introduction into China. It has developed into a unique Chinese national musical instrument through the improvement and innovation of shape, timbre, percussion instruments, and rhythm. Chinese yangqin not only absorbed the essence of Chinese traditional music culture but also drew lessons from western composing techniques and performance techniques of other musical instruments, which provided new ideas for Yangqin's works and was conducive to the development of Yangqin music and the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** Yangqin, Dulcimer, Knowledge, Evolution, Development.

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## 1. Introduction

Yangqin is a worldwide musical instrument with a long history, a wide variety and wide distribution. Different countries and ethnic groups call yangqin by different names, and all countries have distinct national characteristics in terms of shape, playing technique and musical style. The yangqin, an ancient instrument whose predecessor was a plucked instrument without a resonance box, neck and fret, first appeared in Assyrian reliefs (Zhu, 1994). After centuries of evolution and development, various types have been derived so far. From the point of view of music, the hearing and feeling of different ethnic groups are

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influenced by special music and its language and culture, showing different musical views. From the historical background, geographical environment and social culture, Mr. Xiang Zuhua divided the world yangqin into three systems: European yangqin, West Asian and South Asian yangqin, and Chinese yangqin based on factors such as the shape, structure and playing style of yangqin (Zhang, 2005; Tse, 2007; Peterson, 2010; Fei, et. al., 2019; Tang, et. al., 2021).

Yangqin was introduced into China in the 17th century, and its social status has been in the civilian class for a long time. At the end of the 17th century, palace music gradually lagged behind and folk music rose. Yangqin was introduced into various performance forms of local folk music and integrated with local folk music, opera music and local folk art. Through the practice and accumulation of previous musicians, it gradually formed its own unique local style and had its own traditional repertoire and representative pianists. Among them, Guangdong music yangqin, Jiangnan Sizhu yangqin, Sichuan yangqin and northeast yangqin have great influence. After 1959, yangqin developed professionally and entered local professional schools and orchestras. Looking back on the introduction of foreign yangqin into China, it has experienced the development process from folk to professional team and from local to national popularization. Yangqin has truly become a traditional musical instrument in China and plays an important role in Chinese national music (Li, 2001; Rushefsky, 2009; Chen, 2017; Chan, 2022).

Therefore, this paper takes the development of yangqin in Chinese music culture as the starting point, pays attention to the inheritance and development process of yangqin since it was introduced into China and the music characteristics of mutual integration with other national music in different periods, combs the evolution of yangqin and yangqin music in time and space, and explores the symbiotic relationship between yangqin music and history, society and national music. This will not only help to fully understand the development context and evolution process of yangqin music, but also help to expand the new field of national instrumental music research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 European yangqin*

The European yangqin includes all European countries and the former European colonies of North America and Oceania. The names of yangqin mainly include dulcimer, cimbalom, psaltery, ha ckbrett, etc. The name of dulcimer is mainly used in English-speaking countries and comes from Greek and Latin. In 1139, on the cover of an ivory carving book in Byzantium, Turkey, there is a record of dulcimer, which is the earliest picture of dulcimer found so far. The predecessor of dulcimer is the satelli psaltery piano which was first handed down in Asia and pronounced by plucking fingers or feather tubes. In the middle ages, psaltery was brought back to Europe by pilgrims and Crusaders.

One way was from Arabia to North Africa, then to Spain, and then to southern Europe; On the other hand, it spread from Arabia to Turkey and northeast Europe. When the people of Byzantium in Turkey changed the original plucking to the pronunciation of striking with a wooden mallet, the piano body evolved into a trapezoidal box. The percussion instrument dulcimer began to spread to European countries in the 12th and 13th centuries (Kettlewell, 1974; Denis, 1949; Crépy, 2015).

Hackbrett is the name of dulcimer in German speaking countries. In addition to Germany, it is also used in Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and so on. From the 16th century to the 17th century, it was widely used in folk music. The shape of the piano body was mostly trapezoidal. The two rows of bridges were arranged according to the interval relationship of small second, large second and small third in the vertical direction, and the horizontal part (the adjacent relationship of one to four bridges on the left from below was five degrees) was arranged according to the interval relationship of six degrees, which gave good play to and reflected the Swiss national music.

Cimbalom is mainly used in Eastern European countries. It comes from Greek and specifically refers to percussion instruments. Hungary is called cimbalom, Romania tambal, Poland cymbaly, Belarus tsimbali, Ukraine tsymbaly, Latvia cimbole, Lithuania cimboli and Czech cymboli. Similar names include cemballo in Italy, tympanon in France and timpanon in Spain. The above names are derived from variants of the Greek kymbalon. European dulcimer has a long history. From the Renaissance, from the palace to the common people, cimbalom has been popular in all levels of European Society and has become a fashionable instrument. Since the 18th century, a number of "Gypsy bands" have been popular in European cities and towns. This band consists of two violins, a cello and a double bass, and some add wooden tubes. The yangqin sometimes leads the melody in the band, sometimes plays harmony, and adds auxiliary sound, passing sound and octave bass to make the whole band flow and harmonious. The yangqin has become the core of this band (Touchin, 1973).



Figure 1. Cimbalom

In the period of classical music school, yangqin in Europe appeared the scene of rise and prosperity, and began to create some yangqin Sonatas, concertos, and concertos. In the 19th century, with the advent of great changes in the history of European music, taking the reform of musical instrument production as the first.

## *2.2 West Asia, South Asia yangqin*

Yangqin in West Asia and South Asia is collectively referred to as Santur, which comes from Persian and means "hundred strings". According to the Grove Dictionary of music, Santur is homologous with Sateri and comes from Greek (psallo). It is said that "he arrived in Iran in the 17th century and may have passed through Turkey". The cultural background of Bangladesh, India, and West Asia is in almost all the countries of the Islamic continent, including India, Pakistan, and South Asia. Santur's music in different countries has different rhythm modulation and ranking. Each country has debugged the scale and rhythm system suitable for its own local music style to adapt to its own national music culture. In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament records that "Santur" appeared in many musical instruments of the band of King Nebuchadnezzar II of cartia (604-562 BC). Persian Music has an ancient tradition. Court music is inherited from generation to generation in Iran. Santur will join the music performance every time the court coronation ceremony, banquet, traditional festival, and other celebrations (Hinton, 1964)

Yangqin also plays an important role in the local traditional folk music in the Caucasus countries such as Turkey, Syria, and Armenia; As one of the main musical instruments of folk bands, it often accompanies their own national songs and dances and folk poems. The history of Yangqin in South Asia is short. Islamic music, especially musical instruments, spread to all parts of the East, starting with India. Due to the strong traditional power of Indian classical and Buddhist music, while accepting the influence of Islamic music, India formed its own music in the Middle Ages, which is still called Hindustan music today. Yangqin in this area has carried out a series of reforms due to the traditional melody format in Indian classical music, so that Yangqin, a fixed pitch instrument, can flexibly meet the needs of vocal cavity changes in Indian music.

Santur is trapezoidal in shape and small in shape, with a long side of about 90cm, a short side of about 35cm and a thickness of about 6cm. There are 72 strings in total. The string is fixed on the pull shaft on the left and wound on the metal torsion shaft on the right. The string can be adjusted with a chord adjuster. The sound range is narrow. A single movable bridge is used to facilitate temporary movement and sound change. There are octave interval relations on both sides of the left bridge. There are two rows of Bridges, each row of Bridge has nine to thirteen tones, and the sound range is about three octaves. The right bridge is the bass string, and the left bridge is the treble string. Strike the strings with a light mallet, and the tone is loud and open. The playing tool is a light wooden mallet, and the head is covered with a layer of felt or cotton cloth. The rhythm system and mode

system of music in West Asia and South Asia are relatively complex, such as the 24 average rhythm of Arab music, 22 tones per octave of Indian music and the characteristics of improvisation, forming an exotic and magical color completely different from Europe and China yangqin (Tsai, 1994; Baumann, 2000; Zhou, 2010).

### 3. Methodology

Using the methods of field investigation of ethnomusicology and putting music into culture, this paper not only studies the musical attribute of yangqin and yangqin works, but also studies the cultural context that produces it, that is, putting yangqin and its music in the cultural context for research, but also explores the relationship between music and region, music, and people. Through extensive reading and searching of Chinese and foreign literature on the development of yangqin in China and paying attention to the collection of written records from the mid-17th century to the early 20th century, combined with relevant materials of modern Chinese ethnomusicology, this paper explores the origin and development of yangqin. This paper makes an in-depth analysis and careful study of Chinese dulcimer. The researchers mainly use the methods of interview, literature research, classification, analysis, comparison, field investigation and so on.

### 4. Result

#### 4.1 *The origin Chinese yangqin*

Chinese yangqin includes China and other countries affected by Chinese Han culture in eastern, northern and Southeast Asia. Mongolia is called "yoochin", North Korea and South Korea are called "yanggum", Japan is called "yankin", and Thailand is called "Kim". Most of these words come from the transliteration of yangqin in Chinese.

In the 19th century, with the decline of Chinese court music and the rise of folk instruments, Yangqin was absorbed into local folk music performances and became one of the accompaniment instruments of local opera and rap music. The instrument is also called "butterfly piano" because it looks like a butterfly; The sound made by knocking is also called "yaoqin" and "qiaoqin"; In the early days, copper wire was used as the material of strings, also known as "gangsiqin". Yangqin was introduced into China. It was played with wooden hammer in the early stage and bamboo hammer in the later stage.



Figure 2. Chinese yangqin

#### *4.2 The way of Yangqin's introduction into China*

Yangqin has been introduced into China for more than 400 years since the 17th century. Several generations of yangqin artists have taken root in the national music culture and continuously reformed and innovated in the long-term artistic practice, which has made this foreign musical instrument take on a new look. No matter from the system reform, skill practice or music creation, yangqin art has been endowed with Chinese characteristics. Tracing back to the source, how did yangqin come to China? There are two views on this issue in academic circles: One is introduced by land, and the other is introduced by sea.

##### *4.2.1 The route into China by land*

Xinjiang is a famous "Silk Road" in ancient times. It was recorded in mukamutanwei: "Santur, that is, yangqin, was thought to have been introduced from the sea through the coastal area in the 17th century. In fact, it was an Arab musical instrument, which had long been introduced into the north and South of Tianshan Mountain in Xinjiang. It was probably introduced into the mainland from Xinjiang, and this musical instrument was inherited by the Uighurs". Professor xuxinping of China Conservatory of music believes that Yangqin in Xinjiang used to be called "Chang" "From Persian, Chang is very close to Santur of Persia in terms of shape, so Chang is likely to come directly from West Asia. In addition, from the aspects of musical instrument shape, phoneme arrangement and the reform of stringing tools, yangqin in Xinjiang and yangqin in Central Asia of the former Soviet Union still maintain some common characteristics, and the popular yangqin in Xinjiang is different from other countries in China There is a long distance between the two systems of yangqin, so he came to the view that yangqin with two different systems may be introduced into China from the sea and land routes respectively (Xu, 1992). Because there was no record of yangqin in early China, the argument that yangqin originated from land and introduced two lines could not be strongly supported. Therefore, we need to further find out the literature and historical materials to explore.



Figure 3. The route into China by land

#### 4.2.2 *The route into China by sea*

In 1663, the Chinese envoy Zhang Xueli went to Ryukyu and used yangqin and huqin as accompaniment instruments in singing performances. The appendix of the book also contains pictures about yangqin. The sound board is trapezoidal, with two bridges and carved patterns on the sound board, playing with Qin Bamboo. It is recorded in the book "qingbaileichao": the musical instrument imported from the sea is yangqin. It can be seen that Yangqin was introduced into China at least 1663 years ago. During this period, the economic and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries were frequent, and the maritime routes were relatively developed. Yangqin was brought into China from the coast with the exchange of trade and was popular in the coastal areas. Recorded in reference pictures of Chinese Music History: Yangqin, playing string instrument. It was popular in Europe in the 14th century Probably passed from Arabia and Persia. It was introduced into China from the 14th to the 17th century. It was popular in Guangdong at the beginning and then in the whole country. (China Music Research Institute, 1954) in addition, the explanation of yangqin in books such as Cihai art volume and China Encyclopedia music and dance volume is also roughly the same. Therefore, the saying that Chinese yangqin originated from Persia and was introduced into China's coastal areas through the sea road has been widely recognized by most scholars.



Figure 4. The route into China by sea

### 4.3 The development of yangqin shape

Shape refers to the external shape and structure of musical instruments. As the external style of musical instruments, shape reflects people's cultural concepts behind musical instruments and people's aesthetic views on the shape of musical instruments. After Yangqin was introduced into China, its appearance characteristics, material characteristics and phonemic characteristics were injected with Chinese cultural elements, which condensed the labor wisdom of the Chinese people, reflected the productivity and production level of China at that time, and expressed the thoughts and behaviors of the Chinese people. Yangqin was introduced into China from the coastal areas of Guangdong and the western regions, which reflects a variety of forms and styles of yangqin bred by different geographical environments, production methods and cultural customs. The appearance characteristics of Yangqin from "trapezoid" to "fan" and the hammer used from "wood" to "bamboo" all reflect the historical process of foreign dulcimer in China. Nowadays, yangqin has made great improvements in shape design, material workmanship, performance tools and phoneme arrangement. Yangqin with rich timbre and various varieties has been developed.

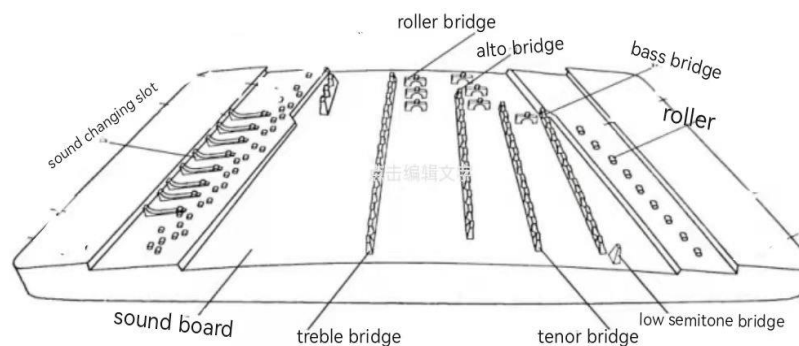


Figure 5. Structure of Chinese yangqin

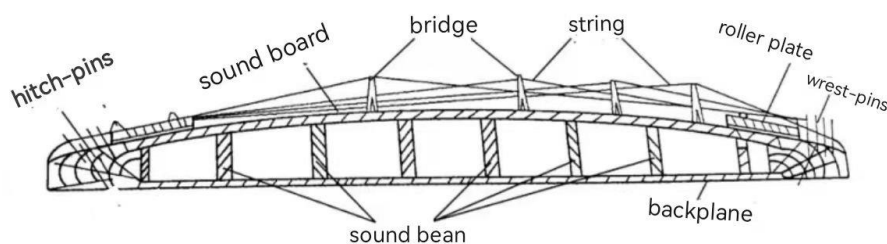


Figure 6. Profile of Chinese yangqin

#### 4.3.1 From two bridges to three bridges

Yangqin came to China. After a little improvement by folk artists, it spread among the people for a long time and was still widely used until the early 1960s. We usually call this kind of yangqin traditional yangqin. The traditional yangqin's body is fan-shaped or trapezoidal. The front and rear webs of the fan-shaped yangqin show the shape of a wavy line, like the shape of a butterfly, so it is also called "butterfly piano" and "fan piano", while the left and right sides of the trapezoidal piano are straight lines. The whole body is mainly made of Tung wood. There are two circular sound holes on the panel, which are decorated with bone carvings. It is beautiful and increases the conductivity of sound at the same time. The bridge is made of wood, mainly in square and arc shapes. The hitch pins and wrest pins on the left and right sides of the piano body are exposed to fix the strings. The strings are steel wire strings, bare strings for high voice and wrapped strings for low voice. The soundbox is usually made of two sound beams, and some exquisite patterns are drawn on the soundboard to improve the beauty of the musical instrument. There is a small drawer in front of the piano body for placing tuning tools, which is convenient for players to use.

The traditional yangqin is narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, 90-97cm long, 32-41cm wide and 5.7-7cm high. There are two bridges on the panel (the left side is called "left bridge" and the right side is called "right bridge"), which are divided into three rows of sound columns. The phoneme arrangement is mainly based on the parallel placement of two bridges. The sounds on both sides of the bridge have a five-degree interval relationship, and the seven sound bites are arranged in the way of "horizontal five vertical two". Each bridge of traditional yangqin has seven phonemes, eight phonemes and ten phonemes, so it is called Double Seven yangqin, double eight yangqin and double ten yangqin.

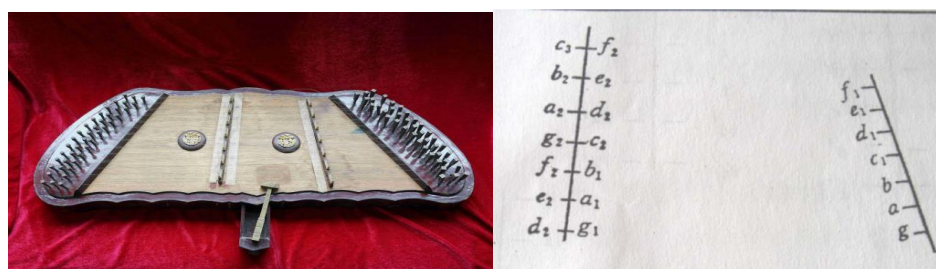


Figure 7. Double Seven Yangqin and Phoneme figure

Source: [www.dunhuanguoyue.com](http://www.dunhuanguoyue.com)

This Yangqin has few phonemes, narrow range and small resonance box, resulting in small volume, no transfer and extremely inconvenient use. Its function can only be accompanied by local operas and rap or participate in the ensemble of national instrumental music.

Three bridges Yangqin. In 1959, Mr. Yang Jingming added a bass bridge on the basis of the traditional two bridges Yangqin, breaking the long-term pattern of two bridges in the

traditional Yangqin, with a range of c-c3. At the same time, a sound changing groove is set on the left roller plate to adjust the pitch, so as to achieve the effect of modulation. Invention is an important milestone in the development history of Yangqin in China. It drives the prosperity and development of Yangqin's performance technology and creation and lays a solid foundation for the rapid development of traditional Yangqin to modern Yangqin.

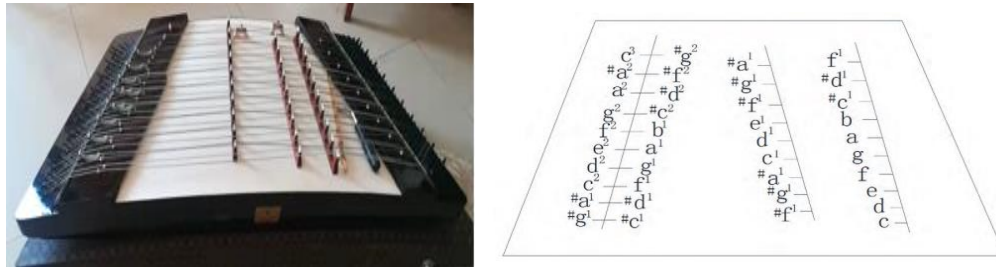


Figure 8. Three bridges Yangqin and Phoneme figure

Source: [www.dunhuangguoyue.com](http://www.dunhuangguoyue.com)

### 4.3.2 From three bridges to four bridges

The success of the three bridges Yangqin did not stop Yang Jingming and others. In the early 1970s, Mr. Yang Jingming put forward ten improvement schemes: adjusting the sound lining, improving the sound quality, adjusting the panel and structure, expanding the volume and thickness, changing the right bridge to ten phonemes, changing the second bridge to nine phonemes, unifying the tone transfer method, arranging the phonemes together, and capping the left and right piano heads. Once the four-bridge variant Yangqin was produced, it was immediately popularized. Some people call it the third generation of Chinese yangqin circles.

Third generation of yangqin (401 Yangqin) is developed based on the above three bridges and Yangqin practices. Since 1971, it has been officially put into operation by Beijing national musical instrument factory and widely used throughout the country. It is widely used in solo, ensemble, and accompaniment. It improves Yangqin's body structure, expands the range and volume, and has a mellow and thick timbre. It not only has the function of tone transfer, but also is competent for modern innovative techniques. The range is from g-a3 to four octaves, with a total length of about 100 cm and a width of 40 cm. In the later stage, due to the unsatisfactory sound quality, it was further improved: first, improve Yangqin's body structure, adjust the position of the sound beam inside the resonance box, appropriately reduce the height of the left middle bridge bar, and beautify the sound color. Second, the bridge phoneme is added to expand the range, which is four more chord positions than the original 401 yangqin. The three chord positions of the bridge in the upper left corner and the strings on both sides can be used for tuning. The range is f-c4, which reduces the original 11 sound changing slots to eight and try not to use or use less sound



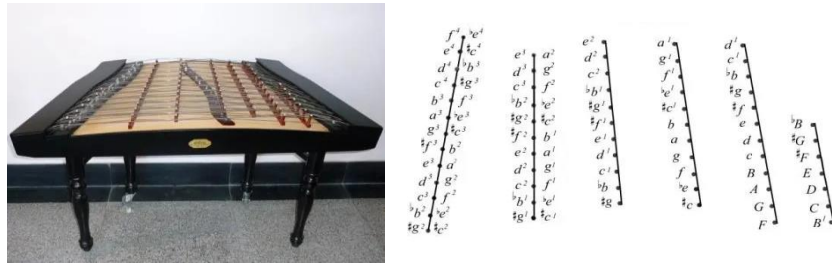


Figure11. New yangqin and Phoneme figure

Huxiao yangqin was developed by Liu Hanli, Huanghe, etc. in cooperation with Hebei Lehai company in 2018. On the basis of not changing yangqin's phoneme arrangement law, the semitone bridge in the bass area is added, which changes the current situation of semitone incompleteness in the bass area of Yangqin for a long time. After repeated comparison by experts, the width is 535mm, the sound beam width is 11 ~ 11.5mm, the timbre is the best, and the bridge distance is 36mm, which is the most comfortable when playing. Equipped with a sound damper, the piano frame is assembled with a detachable plate frame.



Figure12. Huxiao yangqin and Phoneme figure

Source: [www.dunhuangguoyue.com](http://www.dunhuangguoyue.com)

#### 4.4 The development of the Yangqin stick

#### 4.4.1 Single tone sticks

Sticks consists of four parts: head, rod, handle and tail. At first, the bamboo surface was used to directly hit the strings, making the sound clear and bright. Later, in order to adapt to the audience's aesthetics, the bamboo head was coated with rubber to make the sound round and soft. The length of sticks is 32.5cm, the length of sticks head is 5cm, the length of the rod is 27.5cm, the width of sticks handle is 1cm, and the overall width of sticks gradually narrows from the tail to the head.

#### 4.4.2 Double tone sticks

A hammerhead head is added at the back end of the single tone sticks. The distance between the two bamboo heads of the right bamboo is the distance of the longitudinal third interval of the bridge, and the distance between the two hammerhead of the left bamboo is the distance of the fourth interval. This kind of sticks has four hammerhead that can emit four tones at the same time, which greatly enriches yangqin's playing skills and enhances yangqin's expressiveness, especially the strength and thickness of harmony, Can show a more enthusiastic atmosphere. The disadvantage of this two tone sticks is that it is inconvenient to play a single tone. You must raise your hand slightly to prevent the second bamboo head from touching the string. It is usually used in a certain section of the music, such as Lin chongyeben created by Mr. Xiang Zuhua.

#### 4.4.3 Single tone double-sided sticks

This kind of sticks is basically the same as the single tone sticks. The difference is that a small bamboo or mahogany piece is pasted above the hammerhead, which is 5cm long and 0.2cm high. Its advantage is, it is more convenient to play on the reverse side, and the timbre is crisp and bright.



Figure 13. Single tone and Double tone

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

Yangqin is an ancient stringed musical instrument. It has been all over the world from the original prototype to thousands of years. People in various countries have injected their own feelings into yangqin and formed their own musical instruments. No matter where yangqin's prototype first appeared, its shape, its notes and its way of expression all carry the thoughts and wisdom of different nationalities. The music represented by cimbalom in Europe embodies the aesthetic style of broad range and rich sound; The music represented by Santur in West Asia and South Asia shows the aesthetic concept of wandering sound in a unique sound system; The music represented by Chinese yangqin in East Asia shows a euphemistic and tortuous tone and cavity style. It can be seen that yangqin is a musical instrument with rich expressiveness in the world musical instrument family. The two river basins in Western Asia are one of the world-famous birthplaces, where the precious heritage left by ancient nations is preserved, and musical instruments carry the mark left by cultural heritage. The ancient stringed musical instrument condenses people's thoughts

and feelings. With the passage of time, it has traveled across the sea, mountains and mountains, experienced the national culture of hills, deserts, oceans and grasslands, and flowed into the vast land of China. It takes root here, blooms and bears fruit in various places, forming a unique form of folk music in various places. In this long process of change, it can be observed through its appearance, form, mode of existence, music form and other cultural elements.

Chinese dulcimer is a branch of the dulcimer family of the world which has developed rapidly in East Asia, and a typical example of the communication, integration and variation of Chinese and foreign musical cultures. As a percussive string instrument, Chinese dulcimer, compared with dulcimer in other parts of the world, "although similar on the surface, the characteristics of each nation are still fully preserved in the depth of its music, and its different historical backgrounds are also engraved in their respective musical styles.

Yangqin has the characteristics of nationalization and modernization in the development of Chinese Music:

First of all, the strong integration shown in national music is the prerequisite for yangqin's foothold and survival in China. Different from the growth environment of European yangqin in court music, when yangqin was introduced into China, its main scope of activities was folk music. The yangqin in this period has simple production technology, narrow range and single tone playing skills. In order to survive and develop, yangqin uses its own timbre characteristics and performance characteristics to integrate into national music ensemble forms such as "Guangdong music", "Jiangnan Silk and bamboo", "Sichuan Qinshu" and "northeast music", and occupies an important position. Most of the traditional solo repertoire of yangqin comes from traditional ensemble music, and the musical style began to form and has been used until now.

Secondly, after the 1950s, Yangqin entered colleges and universities, marking the transformation of yangqin from informal to formal. After years of professional development, the performance skills have changed in a variety of ways, the music works are extremely rich, and the mode of communication has also been transformed from oral teaching to professional training with perfect teaching system and teaching scheme. Professional performance groups emerge one after another, the theoretical cause is booming, and pay attention to information resources and international exchanges.

Third, the reform of yangqin shape system is the inevitable result of yangqin's pursuit of its own change and development. The development of musical instruments provides necessary material conditions for the improvement of work quality and performance skills. In recent years, yangqin has gradually become a family musical instrument, including treble yangqin, bass yangqin, alto yangqin and sub-Alto yangqin. Since the advent and use of family musical instruments, the yangqin itself can form a band with complete sound parts and rich timbre, which has effectively promoted the progress of yangqin ensemble

music. In order to enrich the timbre and avoid noise, electric yangqin and yangqin stop damper have also appeared in the manufacture of yangqin, and a new attempt has been made in the shape of yangqin.

Fourth, music creation is an important aspect of the development of yangqin art and a direct means to improve the level of yangqin performance. Before the 1950s, due to its small volume and narrow range, yangqin was only a solo work changed from traditional music. It was a development means dominated by single theme variation, and the content of the music was mainly to express the natural scenery. After the 1950s, with the success of the yangqin form reform and the mutual exchange of yangqin scholars, yangqin music works have developed greatly. A large number of music creation techniques have contributed to the birth of new yangqin performance techniques, enriched the yangqin music expression techniques, and promoted the continuous improvement of yangqin performance level. Contemporary yangqin music, whether in the theme, genre and style of works, or in the creative techniques and music language, presents an unprecedented prosperity. Constantly exploring and innovating can make yangqin have higher and wider artistic expression space.

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