

Preliminary Exploration of the Similarities and Differences between the Yatga and Guzheng Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This study summarizes the origin of the yatga and compares the structural intricacies, tuning systems, and playing techniques of the yatga and the guzheng against diverse cultural backdrops. It illuminates the pivotal role and distinctive significance of the yatga in shaping Mongolian musical traditions. By contextualizing the yatga's evolution within the historical and cultural milieu of nomadic life and Mongolian ethos, this study enriches our understanding of contemporary guzheng performances and theories. It contributes meaningfully to the vibrant tapestry of zither culture, fostering its broader collision and development.

KEYWORDS

Guzheng; Nature; Playing Technique; Tonality; Yatga.

1. INTRODUCTION

The yatga is one of the traditional musical instruments with a long history, closely linked to the historical development of the Mongolian people. Similarly, the Chinese guzheng has over 2,000 years of cultural history. Although the two instruments are very similar, they exhibit certain differences in aspects such as bridge arrangement, string order, tuning, and playing techniques due to the influences of their respective local customs and cultural variations. Each has its unique style and is well-loved by people. As the yatga and the guzheng continue to be passed down and developed, their shapes, timbres, ranges, and playing techniques are constantly being innovated and refined to suit various forms of solo, ensemble, and orchestral performances. Their unique styles are kept to this day. As intangible cultural heritage, their preservation and development require the support of the government, integration with folk activities, educational institutions, and effective promotion through online channels. This study systematically reviews the yatga's origin and conducts a comparative study between the yatga and the guzheng, including aspects such as structural characteristics, tuning, and playing techniques. This systematic analysis seeks to deepen the understanding of the yatga and the guzheng, offering reliable references and valuable insights for academic research.

2. ORIGIN OF THE YATGA

Mongolia translates to the land of eternal blue sky. Geographically situated between China and Russia in central Asia, it is a landlocked country surrounded by these two nations. Mongolia has limited arable land, with vast expanses covered by grasslands. Its northern and western regions are mountainous, while the southern part comprises the Gobi Desert. The predominant ethnic group is

the Khalkha Mongols, with minority groups including the Kazakhs. The primary language is Mongolian, with Ulaanbaatar as its capital. Throughout history, Mongolia has been ruled by various nomadic peoples such as the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Rouran, Turkic, and Khitan. In 1206, Genghis Khan established the Mongol Empire, and in 1271, his grandson Kublai Khan founded the Yuan Dynasty. After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, Mongolia fragmented into numerous factions, gradually forming three main divisions based on geographical regions. These are the Southern Mongols, known as the Khorchin Mongols, residing in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the northeastern provinces of China; the Northern Mongols, known as the Khalkha Mongols, dwelling within the present borders of Mongolia; and the Western Mongols, known as the Oirats or Uriankhai, residing in Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu provinces of China.

The Mongols have traditionally inhabited the grasslands, relying on animal husbandry for their livelihoods. Their nomadic lifestyle, characterized by moving in search of water and pasture, has shaped their passionate and bold personalities. Music plays a crucial role in their lives, despite the weakening of nomadic traditions in modern society, it remains a hallmark of Mongolian culture. Traditional musical instruments in Mongolia include the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle), yatga, Khöömei (throat singing), sihu (Mongolian fiddle), ikh khuur (large horsehead fiddle), and huqin. Among these, the yatga, known as yatug in Mongolian, is a traditional instrument closely resembling the Chinese guzheng, with deep cultural connections between them.

According to a study titled “Research on Narengerel’s Inheritance of Yatga: Taking Aser Repertoire as an Example,” the origin of the yatga is attributed to the “bamboo trough making a zither” theory, a popular belief among the people of Inner Mongolia [1]. Legend has it that a young man, while feeding horses in the early morning, poured water into a bamboo trough. Each time the water was poured, it produced different pitches. Intrigued by this, the young man dismantled his whip and used it as strings on the bamboo trough, sitting down to play it on the spot. The resulting sound was so beautiful that it moved the surrounding flowers, trees and birds. Thus, the yatga was born. The yatga is predominantly popular in Mongolia and regions of Inner Mongolia, such as the Yeke Juu League, Xilingol, and Horqin.

3. COMPARISON STUDY BETWEEN THE MONGOLIAN YATGA AND THE CHINESE GUZHENG

3.1. Structural Characteristics

Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the presence of the yatga can be found in royal palaces, courts, among the populace, and in temples[2]. Due to factors such as social class, status, and occasion, yatgas of different sizes and string numbers are selected for various uses. Therefore, there are distinctions in the yatgas used by different classes of Mongolian society. Typically, the military employs the fourteen-string yatga, specifically for military activities such as campaigns, battles, and triumphal returns. The thirteen-string yatga is commonly used in royal palaces for ceremonial activities like welcoming guests and banquets. Meanwhile, the twelve-string yatga is used in temples and among the populace for religious ceremonies, chanting, and festive gatherings, such as the Naadam festival. In summary, various types of yatgas are widely used and disseminated in the Mongolian region. With the extensive economic and cultural exchanges and development, the yatga has gradually evolved, giving rise to the nineteen-string yatga, and even the twenty-one-string yatga, which aligns with the Chinese guzheng[3]. Although the yatga and the guzheng have fundamentally similar structures, there are also differences between them. Firstly, the yatga is made of paulownia or white pine, with a relatively shorter body compared to the guzheng. The tail of the yatga droops to the left, and its colorful patterns on the side are usually painted in bright colors such as red, blue, yellow, and white. The strings are made of silk, and the bridges are divided into two rows. In contrast, the guzheng’s soundboard is typically made of paulownia wood, and the sides are often made of high-

quality woods such as rosewood, boxwood, or red sandalwood. The guzheng's body is longer, usually around 163cm, with the tail maintaining the same height as the soundboard. The sides of the guzheng feature various patterns, including carvings of shells, bronze, and even inlays of precious metals such as gold. Some guzhengs have plain surfaces without any patterns. Before the mid-20th century, the guzheng strings were traditionally made of nylon[4]. With rapid economic and social development, advancements in guzheng playing techniques and the increasing demands for speed, strength, and tone, nylon-coated steel strings were adopted. The superior material led to significant advancements in guzheng playing techniques and received widespread acclaim. Therefore, nylon-coated steel strings have also been widely popularized. Different from the guzheng, the yatga's bridges are divided into two rows, with the lowest notes separately arranged in one row, and the other notes neatly arranged in a separate row. The guzheng only has one row but the direction of the bridges is the same. Both instruments use a one-string-per-bridge installation method. Performers move the bridges left or right to change the pitch and tuning of the strings to meet the requirements of modulation in some pieces.

3.2. Tuning Systems

Despite the differences mentioned above, the yatga and the guzheng are closely related. They share similarities in tuning systems and scales. The tuning of the yatga still falls within the category of the pentatonic scale. The most common tunings include: Chagan tuning, corresponding to the D major scale on the guzheng; Khagas tuning, corresponding to the G major scale; Kharal tuning, equivalent to the C major scale on the guzheng; and Degelm tuning, corresponding to the F major scale on the guzheng. Although the tuning systems are similar to those of the guzheng, the arrangement of the scale notes differs due to the yatga's two-row bridge setup compared to the guzheng's single-row bridge setup. In the guzheng, the notes of the D major scale are arranged in the order of the sub-bass, bass, mid range, treble, and double treble, with the string sequence following the ancient pentatonic scale of gong, shang, jue, zhi, yu, distributed across different registers, with the same scale in each register. However, in the yatga, the traditional twelve-string yatga is tuned in four sets: Khun Tun, Tav Tun, Orkhon Tun and Bura Tun. The strings are divided into three different names: Bura (bass), Tavilga (middle), and Noyon (upper). Starting from the lowest register, the Bura consists of one string, followed by seven strings of the Tavilga, and the highest four strings are called Noyon. The string sequence follows a stack of thirds, with the thirds stacked one on top of the other. The notes that are not part of the chord are separately arranged above the strings of the instrument, which also showcases the Mongolian people's nomadic lifestyle. Mongolia is said to be a nation born on a horseback. Mongolians frequently travel on horseback, the yatga is often tied behind them as they ride, allowing them to sing and play their beloved instrument while riding. They rhythmically accompany their singing by occasionally striking the horsewhip on the specially separate row of strings, creating an accompaniment. In the daily performance of the yatga and the guzheng, the most commonly used keys are often D major and G major.

3.3. Playing Techniques

The structural characteristics, tuning, and other factors of the guzheng and the yatga contribute to their distinct playing styles. The guzheng typically consists of two stands, with the larger stand supporting the head of the instrument and the smaller one at the tail. Players sit on a stool positioned near the head of the instrument, commonly performing indoors. In contrast, yatga's playing style reflects Mongolian ethnic characteristics, allowing for indoor and outdoor performances. Players often sit cross-legged in the vast grasslands, placing the yatga's tail on the ground and the head on their laps. With the great exchanges and development of Chinese and Mongolian cultures, the playing style of the yatga has evolved, including variations where the tail rests on the ground while a stand supports the head and the player sits on a stool to play, enhancing stability for expressive performance.

Regarding playing techniques, the right-hand techniques for the yatga involve thumb plucking, splitting, index finger wiping, flicking, middle finger hooking, kicking, and ring finger striking and

dripping. Additionally, there are continuous plucking, wiping, hooking, large and small pinches, among others. The guzheng incorporates the above-mentioned techniques along with advanced ones like sweeping, rapid finger sequences, strumming, tremolo, and staccato. Left-hand techniques for both instruments emphasize string kneading, pressing, vibrato, and glissando, highlighting the rhythm of the music and realizing the effect of sound and rhyme complementing each other. With the mutual exchanges and learning between Chinese and Mongolian cultures, there is almost no big difference between the playing techniques of the guzheng and the yatga.

Most Mongolian yatga pieces originate from improvised melodies, often played and sung by individuals or accompanying folk songs, or developed from adapted folk tunes. These compositions embody distinctive Mongolian characteristics with short and spirited melodies. Understanding Mongolian folklore, customs, and lifestyle is essential to grasp the intended mood of the music. Representative yatga compositions include “Green Silk,” “Hongar Dance,” “Sengedeema,” “Swan,” “Turkish March,” and “The Girl with Flaxen Hair.” Green Silk is played in D major, with a 4/2 signature and a tempo of 86. The piece predominantly features eighth notes and spans only three and a half lines. Hongar Dance presents relatively greater difficulty, with a longer duration and a 4/4 time signature in C major. It incorporates numerous sixteenth notes and eighth/ sixteenth combo rhythms, interspersed with temporary sharps and flats. Sengedeema is played in D major with a moderate tempo and lively spirit, accentuated by many staccato notes, bestowing the piece liveliness. Swan is performed in G major with a 6/4 time signature. In this piece, the guzheng is transposed to G major in the same way as the yatga, the transposition is accomplished by shifting the mi note by a semitone to the right. It has numerous legato phrases, frequent sharps and flats and an extensive length, vividly portraying the graceful imagery of swans. Turkish March borrows its thematic melody entirely from Mozart’s piano sonata Turkish March. It is played in C major, with a transition to E major midway through the piece before returning to C major to conclude the composition. The piece’s complexity lies in the brisk sixteenth note passage in the middle. Overall, the melody flows smoothly and clearly, ending the piece with enthusiasm and joy. The Girl with Flaxen Hair is performed in G minor with a 3/4 time signature, featuring a rich variety of rhythmic patterns including sixteenth notes, eighth/ sixteenth combo rhythms, along with numerous legato phrases and temporary sharps and flats. Performers should practise regularly, allowing each finger to move flexibly and master foundational exercises to ensure their technical proficiency. They should also gain an understanding of Mongolian customs to perfectly express the essence of Mongolian yatga music.

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the similarities and differences between the guzheng and the yatga in terms of their structural characteristics, tuning, tonality, and playing techniques. Despite their distinct origins, the instruments share striking similarities, with the yatga featuring double rows of strings compared to the guzheng’s single row. Both commonly employ D major, G major, F major, and C major and encompass a wide range of playing techniques, including plucking, splitting, wiping, hooking, kicking, striking, dripping, continuous plucking, wiping, hooking, large and small pinches, sweeping, rapid finger sequences, strumming, tremolo, and staccato. Their left-hand techniques are the same, including string kneading, pressing, vibrato, and glissando.

4. SUMMARY

The guzheng and the yatga are popular in different regions. Various factors such as their respective geographical locations, cultural environments, customs, dialects, ethnic beliefs, and intellectual cultures have contributed to the differences between the two. This paper explores the origins of the yatga and places the guzheng and the yatga within the broader context of regional characteristics and cultural atmospheres to summarize and compare their similarities and differences. It analyzes the structural characteristics, tuning systems, playing techniques, and representative repertoires of the two instruments. It concludes that the yatga plays a crucial and irreplaceable role in Mongolian music, with rich musical expressions and diverse content often reflecting the passionate, heroic, and noble

character of the Mongolian people. The development of the yatga is intricately linked to the historical development of the Mongolian people. Thus, at different stages of development, the yatga had a very unique and important role to play. No matter which stage of the yatga's development is under examination, it is essential to understand the history and culture at that time.

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