

# Exploring the Historical Origins, Artistic Charm, and Heritage Development Path of Sichuan Yangqin

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**Abstract:** This paper first reviews the origins and development of Sichuan yangqin, analyzing its unique artistic features and artistic value. It then highlights several key issues currently facing Sichuan yangqin: first, the aging audience, with a lack of younger viewers; second, the excessive length of traditional pieces, which fails to meet modern aesthetic demands; third, the serious loss of performers and the lack of an effective talent pipeline; and fourth, the scarcity of new works and insufficient creative innovation. To address these issues, the paper proposes several solutions: using modern media to expand its influence, streamlining traditional pieces to align with modern rhythms, promoting the creation of new works, expanding educational channels to cultivate new talent, and improving the living conditions of performers. Through these measures, it is hoped that the traditional characteristics of Sichuan yangqin can be preserved while also promoting its organic integration with modern elements, fostering the diversification and modernization of its repertoire, and ensuring its sustainable development and inheritance in the contemporary era.

**Keywords:** Sichuan Yangqin; Origins and Development; Artistic Features; Development Strategies Research

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## 1. Introduction

Sichuan Yangqin, also known as "Sichuan Qinshu," is a representative form of traditional Chinese quyi (narrative singing) from the Ba-Shu region. It artistically combines speaking and singing parts of local traditional quyi, using the yangqin as the main accompanying instrument, hence its name. It is a significant component of the four major schools of Chinese Yangqin and was recognized by the State Council of China in 2008 as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage. Over the course of its evolution, spanning more than two centuries since its inception during the Ming Dynasty, Sichuan Yangqin has developed a distinctive performance style that integrates sophisticated lyrics, a fixed personnel structure, and rich theatrical elements. However, with the evolving times and the rapid integration of diverse cultural influences, Sichuan Yangqin, like many traditional Chinese art forms, is facing significant challenges. The question of how to effectively promote and develop Sichuan Yangqin is a pressing issue that we must address.

## 2. Origins and Development

The yangqin's popularity in China's Guangdong coastal region during the Ming Dynasty (circa 1580) is well-documented. During the Kangxi and Qianlong periods of the Qing Dynasty (approximately 1671-1776), the government encouraged people from various provinces to migrate to Sichuan for development, and the yangqin was introduced to the region as a result. According to renowned yangqin masters Li Decai and Zhao Yutai, in the late Kangxi period, Sichuan Yangqin primarily featured solo performances where a single musician would play and sing, similar to storytelling with musical accompaniment<sup>[1]</sup>. In the early Qianlong period, yangqin artists began collaborating with percussionists, leading to the development of an early ensemble style of Sichuan Yangqin known as "Heye Yangqin." During this period, storytelling assumed a dominant role, with pitch shaping primarily derived from dialect intonations in the lyrics.

The Jiaqing to Xianfeng periods of the Qing Dynasty witnessed the incorporation of pitch elements from Sichuan Qingyin, contributing to the enhancement of the Sichuan Yangqin's melodic nature. The repertoire structure became more diverse with the addition of the sanxian and wanwanqin to the instrumental ensemble. The content primarily featured stories from the Three Kingdoms, attracting numerous scholars to collaborate, significantly contributing to the literary sophistication of Sichuan Yangqin. From the Daoguang to Xuantong eras (approximately 1821-1911), Sichuan Yangqin gradually evolved, with performances involving over ten musicians. Artists explored diverse instrument combinations, culminating in the development of the "Five-Direction Seated Singing" performance style, featuring the yangqin, sanxian, guban, and wanwanqin. This style continues to be a hallmark of contemporary performance.

### 3. Artistic Features

Today, Sichuan Yangqin has become a key branch among the four major schools of Chinese yangqin, boasting a number of distinctive features that set it apart.

Sichuan Yangqin is characterized by its bright timbre and frequent use of jumping melodies. Both vocal and instrumental performances frequently exhibit contrasts in dynamics and tempo, showcasing a wide range of emotional expression. The singing styles are differentiated according to the characteristics of the characters in the play, with male and female voices being the most iconic.

Traditional Sichuan Yangqin libretti consist of seven- or ten-word parallel phrases, and performers select fixed musical qupai to combine melodies with text based on the libretto content. The tunes are divided into “major tunes” and “Lunar tunes,” with major tunes being dominant and following a banqiang musical structure; lunar tunes follow a qupai structure, commonly used for lyrical expression and appearing less frequently in traditional repertoire.

In terms of ensemble arrangement, “Five-Direction Seated Singing” is the primary form of Sichuan Yangqin. The yangqin is positioned centrally, with the sanxian on the left front, guban on the right front, wanwanqin on the left rear, and small huqin on the right rear. This configuration creates a “three front, two back” arrangement.

These characteristics designate Sichuan Yangqin as a highly representative traditional art form in the Ba-Shu region, possessing tremendous artistic and cultural value akin to Sichuan Opera. However, despite its long history and rich cultural heritage, Sichuan Yangqin faces many challenges in its inheritance and development in modern society. To promote its revival, collective efforts from all sectors of society are required.

### 4. Exploring the Inheritance and Development of Sichuan Yangqin

Despite its noteworthy artistic and cultural value, Sichuan Yangqin has not received its share of public awareness. This is particularly evident when compared to Sichuan Opera, another cultural treasure of the Ba-Shu region. While Sichuan Yangqin is listed in the second batch of China’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage, it is important to note that it has yet to be adequately promoted and recognized. Over the past few decades, Sichuan Yangqin’s development has been sluggish, and there is a risk of it becoming a lost art form. In recent years, the inheritance of Sichuan Yangqin has encountered numerous challenges.

#### 4.1 Aging Audience

The younger generation's preference for popular music and modern musical theater, considering the traditional quyi "outdated", has led to a decline in the audience for traditional Sichuan Yangqin performances. According to a social survey conducted by Peng Yong, a graduate student in Ethnomusicology at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music, among the audiences of traditional Sichuan Yangqin performances in Chengdu, less than 10% are under 60 years old<sup>[2]</sup>. There is a marked imbalance in the audience's age structure.

#### 4.2 Excessive Performance Duration

In today's fast-paced society, individuals generally prioritize efficiency. In contrast, Sichuan Yangqin performances range from half an hour to nearly two hours, requiring high and sustained attention from the audience. The Sichuan Yangqin Art Troupe of the Sichuan Province Quyi Research Institute endeavored to present fragmentary performances; however, the outcomes were unsatisfactory. The brief duration of these performances made it difficult to effectively showcase the unique charm of the Sichuan Yangqin, potentially leaving audiences perplexed and with negative impressions.

#### 4.3 Limited Learning Opportunities

Contrary to Sichuan Opera, Sichuan Yangqin lacks professional educational programs and structured courses, with its transmission primarily occurring through traditional apprenticeships. According to contemporary Sichuan Yangqin inheritor Ms. Wu Xia, "For a long time, professional schools in China rarely offered courses in Sichuan quyi, and regular schools did not offer related specialized courses."<sup>[3]</sup> Consequently, some children may develop a strong interest after watching Sichuan Yangqin performances, but without accessing structured educational pathways, they might ultimately abandon it or pursue other areas of study.

#### 4.4 Loss of Performers

Due to a limited number of learning channels, it is challenging to cultivate high-quality young professional performers for Sichuan Yangqin. As senior artists gradually retire and middle-aged performers face livelihood pressures that hinder their ability to dedicate themselves fully to this art form, some performers even choose to change careers. The generational gap among performers has also led to a significant reduction in the traditional Sichuan Yangqin repertoire, dropping from over 300 pieces to less than 100.

#### 4.5 Conflict Between Traditional "Flavor" and Modern Music Integration

Sichuan Yangqin, like many traditional Chinese instruments, has a unique tuning system that differs significantly from the modern

twelve-tone equal temperament. This creates challenges when integrating it with other musical instruments. For instance, on the yangqin, the notes E, B, and F# are relatively low, while B b and F are relatively high<sup>[4]</sup>. These characteristics, in terms of tuning systems, make it difficult for the Sichuan yangqin to integrate with modern instruments.

In light of the aforementioned issues, I hereby propose the following targeted solutions, drawing upon my experience in artistic creation and cultural promotion.

#### **4.5.1 Developing New Approaches to Communication to Engage Younger Demographics**

The potential for leveraging social media, short video platforms, and other contemporary media for the production of captivating content, including music clips, behind-the-scenes footage, artist interviews, and themed film and television works, is significant. By emulating the success of the film "Song of the Phoenix" in showcasing the traditional Chinese suona, this approach offers a promising avenue for capturing the interest of young demographics through more engaging and impactful means. Integration of interactive experience segments within traditional performances can foster audience participation in specific segments, leveraging elements such as playing or singing. Such engaging additions are poised to resonate strongly with younger demographics, making them valuable tools in the promotion of Sichuan Yangqin.

#### **4.5.2 Streamlining Traditional Repertoire and Creating New Works**

The integrity of traditional repertoire is of invaluable importance. However, it is my belief that, under the condition of preserving its essence, overly lengthy plays can be elaborately adapted through reduction with the assistance of distinguished playwrights and composers. At the same time, new concepts can be incorporated to collaboratively create and launch a series of refined new works. While maintaining the traditional essence of Sichuan Yangqin, efforts can be made to interpret structurally simple stories with modern elements.

Furthermore, introducing highly accomplished composers to create new works is a key step in resolving the conflict between Sichuan Yangqin's traditional "flavor" and modern music integration. The short flute quintet "Sichuan Qingyin" is a successful example of this approach in recent years. Composed by Song Mingzhu, professor at the Composition Department of Sichuan Conservatory of Music, it combines Sichuan quyi elements with techniques from the modern era. New Sichuan Yangqin works can fully reference these innovative forms, integrating professional composers' music theory, creative experience, and expertise in designing appropriate pitch materials based on the tuning characteristics of various traditional instruments in Sichuan Yangqin. By establishing these innovative foundations, composers can explore new performance methods and timbres by adjusting and adapting tuning and pitch performance rules of modern instruments.

#### **4.5.3 Expanding Learning Channels**

In the internet era, limited learning pathways should not become an obstacle to cultural heritage. I suggest that Sichuan Yangqin inheritors collaborate with various online education platforms to offer courses via the internet. They should harness internet advantages to create an online teaching platform for Sichuan Yangqin. Concurrently, relevant cultural departments should spearhead partnerships with existing Sichuan quyi schools, to establish professional Sichuan Yangqin teaching courses. Senior Sichuan Yangqin inheritors and professional performers should be considered as potential teaching faculty to provide students with comprehensive, professional education. The long-term financial support from the government and relevant departments would be crucial for this endeavor.

#### **4.5.4 Improving Performers' Living Environment**

Government entities with relevant jurisdiction should augment their backing for Sichuan Yangqin inheritance by allocating dedicated financial resources to subsidies for inheritors and performers, as well as performance funding and creation rewards. Furthermore, cultivating collaborative initiatives with diverse cultural institutions, enterprises, and tourist attractions could emulate the comprehensive thematic performance format of renowned Chinese attractions such as Jiuzhaigou and Song City. Such initiatives might include large-scale performance projects that seamlessly integrate Sichuan Yangqin's distinctive artistic nuances with the narratives of the Three Kingdoms.

There is a direct correlation between the popularity of Sichuan Yangqin and the living environment of its performers. If the previously mentioned solutions enhance the recognition of Sichuan Yangqin within China and globally, performers will naturally gain increased visibility. This, in turn, will allow them to participate in more high-quality performances and consequently earn better income. The resulting cycle of increased visibility, participation, and income is a virtuous one.

In conclusion, collective efforts are essential for the inheritance and development of Sichuan Yangqin, involving inheritors, government, society, educational institutions, and artists. To promote the development of Sichuan Yangqin as an intangible cultural heritage in the new era, innovative communication methods, digital learning systems, the optimization of performers' living environment, and the joint undertaking of traditional work refinement and new work creation are crucial.

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### Term Explanation:

Sichuan Qingyin: Another form of Sichuan traditional folk art.

Wanwanqin: An early type of huqin

Sanxian: A traditional Chinese plucked string instrument with three strings

Guban: Single-headed drum and Wooden clapper

Four major schools of Chinese yangqin: Guangdong Music Yangqin, Jiangnan Sizhu Yangqin, Sichuan Yangqin, and Northeast Yangqin

Qupai: A general term for a series of fixed melodies, upon which singers can set lyrics.

Banqiang: A modern structural form of opera and quyi music. Based on symmetrical upper and lower phrases, performers can modify rhythm and tempo within these phrases.

Lunar tunes: Using qupai as basic structural units, artists can combine several different qupai to form a complete play.