

FROM COURT INSTRUMENT TO CULTURAL REVIVAL: THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTION OF “KONGHOU”*

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Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution and contemporary reconstruction of the Konghou, an ancient Chinese plucked-string instrument with a history of over two millennia. Drawing on perspectives from history, cultural studies, and communication studies, this research employs a qualitative methodology involving historical document analysis, archaeological interpretation, and a systematic study of Dunhuang grotto murals. To establish empirical credibility, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 purposefully selected participants, including 5 professional performers, 7 research experts, 10 audience members, and 2 cultural officials, supplemented by participant observation in professional rehearsal settings.

The study traces the morphological and aesthetic transformations of the Konghou, identifying the socio-cultural factors behind its historical decline and modern revival. Findings indicate that the contemporary reconstruction represents not a simple restoration, but a process of cultural reinterpretation.

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Crucially, this research identifies specific technological innovations—namely the dual-row 76-string configuration and the advanced pedal modulation system—as the key drivers that have resolved historical tonality limitations and enabled integration into modern orchestral systems. Despite this progress, challenges such as high manufacturing costs and a lack of standardized pedagogical materials persist. To ensure sustainable development, this study proposes strategic pathways involving educational policy (integrating Konghou into school curricula), digital media (leveraging VR/AR for heritage archiving), and economic incentives (tax support for instrument manufacturers). These insights contribute to the broader discourse on the preservation and reconstruction of traditional musical heritage in a globalized context.

Keywords: Konghou, heritage reconstruction, cultural revival, performance transformation, cultural sustainability, traditional Chinese music

Introduction

Konghou, a traditional Chinese plucked-string instrument with a history spanning over two millennia, occupies a distinctive position in the development of Chinese musical culture. Historically flourishing during the Qin and Han dynasties and reaching artistic maturity in the Sui and Tang periods, Konghou gradually declined in the Song and Yuan dynasties and ultimately disappeared during the Ming and Qing eras (Zhang et al., 2025). Once performed in imperial court ensembles and widely circulated among the public, its structural variations—including the horizontal Konghou of the Central Plains and the vertical and phoenix-head Konghou transmitted along the Silk Road—reflect rich intercultural exchanges and regional adaptations.

In recent decades, the revival of traditional cultural heritage in China has brought renewed scholarly and artistic attention to Konghou, driven significantly by contemporary national cultural policies such as the "Fine Traditional Chinese

Culture Preservation and Inheritance Program." This socio-political framework has transformed the Konghou from a museum relic into a symbol of national cultural confidence. However, unlike continuously transmitted musical traditions, Konghou experienced a long historical discontinuity, resulting in fragmented documentation, lost performance techniques, and limited pedagogical systems. While modern instrument makers and performers have reconstructed its physical structure and repertoire, systematic academic research remains relatively insufficient. Specifically, existing scholarship often prioritizes historical organology or iconographic descriptions, leaving a critical gap in understanding how the instrument's historical identity can be authentically translated into modern performance aesthetics and standardized pedagogical frameworks.

To address these gaps, this study clarifies the dual nature of "Reconstruction," referring both to the physical manufacturing of the modern double-row pedal Konghou and the conceptual artistic revival of its performance practice. The reconstruction of Konghou raises several critical questions: How did its structural form and performance techniques evolve across historical periods? What socio-cultural factors contributed to its decline and disappearance? In what ways can modern reconstruction balance historical authenticity with artistic innovation? Addressing these questions not only contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural continuity and transformation in Chinese traditional music but also provides insights into broader issues of heritage revitalization and artistic sustainability.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the historical evolution and contemporary reconstruction of Konghou, analyzing its structural development, performance practice, and cultural significance. By integrating historical analysis with qualitative research methods, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on the preservation, reinterpretation, and sustainable development of traditional musical heritage in contemporary contexts.

Objectives

1. To analyze the relationship between the formal evolution of the ancient Konghou and the cultural exchanges and dissemination along the Silk Road.
2. To analyze the intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to the rise and decline of the ancient Konghou.
3. To investigate the performance techniques and musical expressiveness of the modern Konghou.
4. To explore promotion strategies for the dissemination and popularization of the modern Konghou.

Literature Review

1. The Origin and Morphological Evolution of Konghou: A Scholarly Synthesis

The origin of the horizontal Konghou has long been a focus of debate in Chinese music history. Instead of a simple chronological progression, the academic consensus has evolved from mythological attribution to evidence-based historical research. While early texts like *Shiben* suggest a Shang Dynasty origin, modern scholars increasingly favor the Western Han Dynasty theory (Yang, 2007). This shift is grounded in the "Records of the Grand Historian", which positions the horizontal Konghou within the formalized ritual systems of Emperor Wu's court, suggesting that its "origin" was as much a political institutionalization as it was a musical invention.

From the perspective of "Cultural Diffusion," the introduction of the upright and phoenix-headed Konghou via the Silk Road represents a pivotal moment of transcultural synthesis. Archaeological evidence dating back to 2711±61 years (Zhou, 2011) challenges the traditional timeline of China's musical exchange with the West, pushing the interaction back to the Western

Zhou Dynasty. This suggests that the Konghou was not merely an "imported" object but a mediating cultural artifact that underwent centuries of regional adaptation before reaching its artistic zenith in the Tang Dynasty (Yang, 2022; Jianan & Aupatumnarakorn, 2025).

2. Socio-Cultural Roles: From Sacred Rituals to "Soft Power"

While previous studies categorize the Konghou's functions by performance venues (court vs. folk), a more nuanced analysis reveals its role as a vessel for religious and political ideology. During the Tang Dynasty, the Konghou functioned within a "sacred soundscape," where its use in Buddhist rituals alongside bells and flutes facilitated a state of meditative devotion (Bin, 2025).

This historical role parallels the use of the harp in Western liturgical music, yet the Konghou's trajectory is marked by a unique sociological phenomenon: its total disappearance during the Qing Dynasty. This decline was not merely a loss of popularity but a systemic exclusion by rulers who favored percussion-heavy ensembles, leading to what scholars call a "historical discontinuity." Analyzing this hiatus is crucial for understanding the contemporary revival, which acts as a form of "Invention of Tradition"—where modern practitioners are not just restoring a tool, but reconstructing a lost national identity.

3. The Contemporary Reconstruction: Technical Innovation and Practical Utility

The modern revival of the Konghou represents a transition from "museum relic" to "living tradition." A critical milestone in this process was the shift from the static reconstructions of the 1930s (Datong Music Society) to the functional breakthroughs of the 1970s and 80s. Unlike the Western harp, which underwent centuries of organic evolution, the modern Konghou's development was a concentrated "technological leap" led by experts like Han Qihua. The introduction of the double-row 76-string system with a full-pedal modulation

mechanism (Figure 1) resolved the historical limitation of fixed tonality (Hu, 2014). This specific technological innovation—allowing for simultaneous glissando and vibrato (Chanyou)—distinguishes the modern Konghou from both its ancient ancestors and its Western counterparts, providing a unique "hybrid" sonority that satisfies the aesthetic demands of contemporary global orchestras.



Figure 1 Modern Konghou Design

Methodology

1. Research Participants and Sampling Criteria

This study employs purposeful sampling to select 24 participants across four categories, ensuring a multi-dimensional perspective on the Konghou’s revival. To ensure the credibility of the findings, specific inclusion criteria were established:

Performers (n=5): Must have over 10 years of professional experience with the modern pedal Konghou and have performed in national-level theaters.

Research Experts (n=7): Scholars or instrument makers with a minimum of two peer-reviewed publications or patents related to Konghou organology.

Audience Members (n=10): Selected from attendees of Konghou-specific recitals to capture modern reception.

Cultural Officials (n=2): Involved in intangible cultural heritage (ICH)

management.

This stratified composition allows for the triangulation of "technical mastery" (performers), "historical accuracy" (experts), and "societal impact" (audience and officials).

2. Research Instruments and Validation

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, organized around four core domains: 1) historical understanding; 2) structural evolution; 3) contemporary challenges; and 4) dissemination strategies.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the initial interview guide underwent a two-stage validation process: First, a pilot interview was conducted with one senior performer to refine the wording of technical questions. Second, the protocol was reviewed by two independent musicologists to ensure that the questions effectively addressed the research gaps identified in the literature.

A structured observation framework was also utilized, focusing on dimensions such as the interaction between pedal coordination and hand techniques (Chanyou) and pedagogical exchanges. This dual-instrument approach ensures that "stated beliefs" in interviews are cross-referenced with "actual practices" in rehearsals.

3. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data collection followed a rigorous three-step protocol to ensure data saturation:

Documentary Analysis: A systematic review of archival texts (e.g., Tang Dynasty "Tongdian") and modern technical blueprints.

In-depth Interviews: Conducted either in-person or via secure video conferencing. Interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, were recorded with informed consent, and transcribed using a "double-blind" verification method where two researchers checked the transcripts against the audio.

Participant Observation: Conducted in 3 professional rehearsal settings and 2 pedagogical workshops.

4. Data Analysis and Transparency in Coding

Thematic analysis was employed following the framework of Braun & Clarke (2006). To ensure transparency and replicability, the coding process was divided into three distinct phases:

Open Coding: Identifying raw concepts such as "tuning instability" or "silk road aesthetics."

Axial Coding: Grouping initial codes into higher-order categories, such as "Technological Constraints" or "Nationalistic Symbolism."

Selective Coding: Synthesizing categories into the final themes that directly address the research objectives.

To enhance credibility and dependability, the study utilized triangulation of data sources, member checking (returning transcripts to participants for approval), and inter-coder reliability checks during the thematic clustering phase.

Results

1. Evolution of Konghou Form and Structure

The findings indicate that the formal evolution of the ancient Konghou was closely intertwined with patterns of cross-cultural transmission along the Silk Road. Early archaeological and textual evidence confirms that the horizontal Konghou originated in the Central Plains during the Han period as a locally developed instrument characterized by a rectangular resonance body and shared string pillar structure (Yang, 2022b). Its morphology reflects indigenous musical aesthetics and performance practices.

Visual analysis shows that variations in resonance box structure, neck curvature, and string configuration correspond with different performance postures and ensemble contexts. During the Northern Wei through Tang periods,

mural imagery reflects increasing structural standardization, coinciding with intensified Silk Road exchange and cosmopolitan court culture.

Interview data further support this interpretation. Performers and scholars consistently described the Konghou as a “mediating instrument” shaped by intercultural negotiation rather than linear indigenous evolution. They emphasized that structural features such as angular frame design and decorative phoenix-head carving symbolized both imported craftsmanship and localized aesthetic reinterpretation.

Participant observation revealed that contemporary performers consciously acknowledge these historical structural origins in posture and instrument positioning. This indicates that historical form continues to shape embodied performance practice.

Taken together, the evidence confirms that the formal evolution of the Konghou was dynamically linked to intercultural exchange, adaptation, and localization along the Silk Road.

2. Sociocultural Factors in the Rise and Decline of the Konghou

The rise and decline of the ancient Konghou were shaped by both intrinsic musical factors and extrinsic socio-political conditions.

From an extrinsic perspective, documentary analysis shows a strong correlation between the prominence of the Konghou and periods of centralized court patronage, ritual music systems, and political stability. Statistical patterns from Dunhuang murals reveal a peak in visual representation during the Sui and Tang dynasties, followed by gradual decline during periods of political fragmentation. Interviewees consistently emphasized that the instrument’s survival depended on institutional sponsorship and ideological alignment with court ritual systems.

From an intrinsic perspective, structural complexity and maintenance demands may also have influenced its historical trajectory. Early forms were relatively compact, but later Tang models became larger and more string-dense,

increasing technical and material requirements. Interview participants suggested that this structural expansion, while artistically enriching, may have reduced accessibility outside elite court settings.

Participant observation contributes a contemporary perspective: modern performers note that instruments requiring high craftsmanship and specialized technique tend to rely heavily on institutional ecosystems. This observation provides an interpretive bridge to understanding historical decline.

Overall, the rise of the Konghou was supported by political patronage, ritual centrality, and cultural openness, whereas its decline corresponded with institutional disruption, shifting musical tastes, and reduced structural adaptability.

3. Contemporary Performance Techniques of the Konghou

Findings indicate that modern Konghou performance represents a reconstructed technical system characterized by both historical continuity and contemporary innovation.

Structurally, the modern dual-row, pedal-modulating Konghou expands tonal range and harmonic flexibility. Interview data confirm that this redesign intentionally integrates historical structural principles with modern orchestral requirements. The instrument's extended range and modulation system allow it to function as both solo and ensemble instrument.

Participant observation during rehearsals reveals that performance technique is governed by coordinated bodily mechanics involving shoulder balance, bilateral hand alternation, pedaling precision, and nuanced control of string tension. Performers consistently stressed that tone production depends on relaxation and kinetic integration rather than isolated finger strength.

Repertoire analysis demonstrates that technical devices—glissando, vibrato, tremolo, harmonics, and string manipulation—serve expressive narrative functions. In contemporary works, timbral layering constructs imagery and

emotional depth, while adaptations of traditional repertoire translate vocal aesthetics into instrumental form.

Interviewees emphasized that modern Konghou expressiveness is not imitation of Western harp models but a hybridized system rooted in historical posture and aesthetic philosophy. Thus, musical expressiveness emerges from the interaction between structural redesign, codified technique, and interpretive agency.

4. Contemporary Performance Techniques of the Konghou

Findings from interviews and participant observation indicate that sustainable dissemination of the modern Konghou requires systemic coordination across education, institutional policy, and cultural industries.

Interview participants identified major structural challenges: high economic cost, limited teacher availability, incomplete curricular systems, and low public visibility. They emphasized that isolated artistic efforts are insufficient without institutional infrastructure.

Observation of rehearsal-based pedagogy shows that transmission currently relies on a conservatory-centered model integrating technical training, interpretive coaching, and ensemble collaboration. However, participants noted the need for expansion into broader educational levels, including secondary and community music programs.

Respondents further highlighted the importance of diversified communication strategies, including digital media dissemination, cross-disciplinary collaboration, cultural tourism integration, and international exchange. These approaches aim to reposition the Konghou within contemporary cultural markets while preserving historical authenticity.

The evidence suggests that effective popularization depends on constructing an ecological transmission framework in which education, artistic production, media visibility, and industry development operate in mutual reinforcement.

Discussion

1. Cross-Cultural Transmission: Beyond Passive Replication

The findings of this study extend the "Cultural Diffusion" theory discussed in the literature review by demonstrating that the Konghou's localization was an active "re-authoring" process. Rather than a passive process of transmission, its localization in China followed a pattern of structural inheritance combined with symbolic substitution. This aligns with the scholarly consensus (Yang, 2022) but adds a new dimension: the Konghou did not just adapt to Chinese music; it became a "transcultural mediator."

Performers today perceive the instrument's structure as a "living archive" of Silk Road exchange. Over time, the Konghou transcended its material configuration and became a literary motif, particularly in Tang poetry. This transition from a physical object to a culturally embedded signifier suggests that the "authenticity" of the Konghou lies not in a fixed historical form, but in its capacity for creative adaptation—a finding that challenges more rigid, preservationist views of musical heritage.

2. The Socio-Political Logic of Rise and Decline

The rise and decline of the Konghou, when analyzed through a sociological lens, reveal the "structural fragility" of elite-sponsored art. Politically, its prominence was closely tied to court ritual systems and official patronage. However, this study identifies a critical factor often overlooked in organological studies: the lack of a "grassroots" transmission base.

While scholars like Xie (2007) focus on ensemble configurations, our interview data suggest that the instrument's reliance on the imperial elite made it vulnerable to political shifts. When the Qing rulers shifted their aesthetic preference toward percussion, the Konghou lacked the "social carriers" (folk musicians) needed to survive. This finding supports the argument that the

survival of an instrument depends on an "adaptive balance" between internal technical coherence and its accessibility to broader social strata, moving the discussion from pure musicology to the sociology of cultural loss.

3. Reconstruction as "Invention of Tradition"

The data demonstrate that contemporary Konghou performance constitutes a process of active reinterpretation rather than mere archeological revival. Structural innovations—most notably the dual-row string configuration and the pitch-shifting pedal system—represent a "technological leap" that bridges the historical hiatus.

This process exemplifies Hobsbawm's "Invention of Tradition," where modern technical systematization (e.g., standardized fingerings and pedal coordination) is used to create a sense of continuity with a lost past. Interviewees highlighted that pedal modulation is not just a technical fix but a "conceptual reconstruction" that allows the Konghou to compete with the Western harp in global orchestral settings. This finding contradicts the notion that modern innovations dilute historical authenticity; instead, they are the very tools that make the tradition "authentic" to contemporary ears.

4. Soft Power and the Future of Musical Heritage

Moving beyond artistic fluctuation, the revival of the Konghou must be situated within China's broader "Soft Power" and national identity strategies. The findings from interviews with cultural officials indicate that the Konghou is now viewed as a symbol of "Cultural Confidence" (Wenhua Zixin).

Sustainable transmission cannot rely solely on symbolic promotion; it requires what we define as a "Systemic Ecosystem." This includes:

Institutional Education: Moving beyond professional conservatories to primary education.

Digital Media Integration: Leveraging "new media" to overcome the historical "elite" stigma.

Sociological Impact: Evaluating how the Konghou contributes to a modern national identity. By integrating these dimensions, the Konghou moves from a "reconstructed artifact" to a "sustainable living tradition" that actively participates in the global cultural dialogue.

Conclusions

Based on the research objectives and questions, this study draws the following conclusions

1. Evolution of Konghou Form as a Culturally Embedded Process

The evolution of the Konghou's form and structure results from sustained interaction between indigenous Chinese musical traditions and cross-cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. The horizontal Konghou originated in the Central Plains during the Han Dynasty, while the vertical and phoenix-headed forms were introduced through intercultural transmission. Changes in morphology were closely linked to performance posture, symbolic meaning, and social function. In the absence of standardized notation, the instrument's physical structure served as a primary carrier of musical logic and cultural expression. Thus, its evolution should be understood not as linear technical progress, but as a historically situated and culturally embedded transformation.

2. Sociopolitical Structures Shaping Rise and Decline

The rise and decline of the Konghou were strongly conditioned by sociopolitical systems, ritual institutions, and patterns of patronage. Periods of imperial support—particularly during the Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties—corresponded with its prominence in court music and religious art. Conversely, political transition, aesthetic shifts, and weakened institutional frameworks led to its gradual marginalization. These findings demonstrate that the sustainability of musical instruments depends not solely on artistic value, but on enduring institutional and cultural infrastructures.

3. Contemporary Performance as Creative Reconstruction

Contemporary Konghou performance reflects reinterpretation rather than simple revival. Modern performers selectively integrate historical playing postures, string configurations, and ensemble roles into present-day composition, pedagogy, and stage practice. This process preserves historical continuity while expanding expressive possibilities in timbre, technique, and cross-genre collaboration. The modern Konghou thus represents a dynamic artistic practice that bridges historical consciousness and contemporary aesthetic demands.

4. Strategies for Dissemination and Sustainable Development

The sustainable development of the Konghou requires coordinated strategies integrating education, institutional support, and cultural promotion. While historical transmission relied on formal ritual systems, contemporary sustainability depends on structured curricula, academic research, diversified performance platforms, and policy support. Active integration into modern educational and cultural frameworks—rather than preservation alone—is essential to ensuring the Konghou's continued vitality and relevance.

Recommendation

1. Practical and Pedagogical Feasibility

To transition the Konghou from a "specialized niche" to a "sustainable musical tradition," practitioners should move beyond fragmented training toward a standardized ecosystem:

Curriculum Standardization: Integrating Konghou into the formal curricula of primary and secondary schools as part of the "National Music Education Reform." This includes developing graded examination repertoires that balance traditional Silk Road melodies with modern polyphonic compositions.

Technical Refinement: Instruction must move beyond rote imitation of fingerings to include "Organological Literacy"—teaching students the mechanical principles of the modern pedal system to ensure better instrument maintenance and performance stability.

2. Policy and Industry Support

National policy support should move from symbolic recognition to concrete structural incentives:

Economic Incentives: The government should provide targeted tax incentives or R&D grants for musical instrument factories specializing in Konghou manufacturing to reduce the high cost of the double-row pedal instrument, making it more accessible to students.

Digital Heritage Initiatives: Establishing a "Digital Konghou Archive" supported by the Ministry of Culture, utilizing VR/AR technology to simulate the historical acoustics of different Konghou variants for both public education and professional research.

Strategic Branding: Positioning the Konghou as a central cultural ambassador in "Belt and Road" cultural exchange programs, leveraging its historical Silk Road identity to foster international diplomatic and artistic dialogue.

3. Future Research Directions

While this study focused on qualitative historical and contemporary reconstruction, the field would benefit from diversifying its methodological approaches:

Comparative Ethnomusicology: Conducting systematic comparative analyses between the Konghou and other ancient harp traditions, such as the Persian Chang or the Western Celtic Harp, to identify universal and culturally specific patterns of evolution.

Quantitative Audience Reception: Future research should employ quantitative surveys or big-data analysis of social media engagement to evaluate the effectiveness of different dissemination strategies on younger demographics.

Interdisciplinary Applications: Exploring the Konghou's unique overtone structure in psychoacoustics and music therapy, particularly investigating the physiological effects of its specific timbre on stress reduction and cognitive rehabilitation.

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