



Evolution

and Expression: A Comprehensive Study on Erhu Techniques, Styles, and Cultural Development

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Abstract

This study examines how a distinctive regional community—Meizhou artists shaped by the Hakka ethos of perseverance, education, and intercultural openness—catalyzed the modernization of Chinese art. Addressing a gap in integrated, group-level accounts, the research investigates: (1) how the Hakka spirit informed artists' identities, creative choices, and sense of national responsibility; (2) the roles Meizhou artists played in institution building, cross-cultural innovation, and major art movements; and (3) how regional traditions were translated into a global visual discourse. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining qualitative case studies of representative figures (archival analysis and textual interpretation) with a structured survey of stakeholders in art education; data were analyzed through thematic coding and descriptive statistics. Findings show that the Hakka value complex functioned as a durable cultural resource, enabling Meizhou artists to (a) articulate and operationalize “integration of Chinese and Western art,” (b) found and reform modern art-education institutions, and (c) reposition tradition through cultural translation rather than mere preservation, thereby linking local heritage to national narratives and global modernism. Practically, the results suggest three priorities: strengthen archival recovery and oral-history documentation; embed localized aesthetics and regional case studies in art-school curricula and evaluation systems; and pursue comparative, cross-regional research programs to refine China's contemporary art discourse. The study demonstrates how regional cultural subjectivity can drive national artistic transformation and inform policy, pedagogy, and heritage strategy.

Keywords: Erhu, Performance Techniques, Stylistic Features, Inheritance And Development

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Introduction

The erhu, a two-stringed bowed instrument, is one of the most emblematic and expressive instruments in traditional Chinese music, playing a vital role in the heritage of Chinese ethnic musical culture. With its uniquely vocalized timbre and emotional range, the erhu has long been regarded not only as a musical instrument but also as a medium for conveying the spiritual and cultural sentiments of the Chinese people (Duan, 2021). Historically, it has been extensively utilized in opera accompaniment, folk ensembles, narrative singing, and religious ceremonies.

This study centers on the performance art of the erhu, combining historical analysis and musical interpretation to explore its developmental trajectory and stylistic evolution. It begins with an overview of the instrument's origin and transformation across dynastic periods and then investigates its technical systems and aesthetic expressions within both traditional and contemporary repertoires. Through detailed analysis of melody, rhythm, bowing, and timbre, this paper identifies stylistic markers across major erhu schools, emphasizing the contrast and continuity between Northern and Southern styles.

Furthermore, the research examines the challenges faced by the erhu in modern cultural contexts, such as weakened transmission, a shrinking traditional audience, and limited global dissemination. At the same time, it highlights the instrument's capacity for innovation, particularly in its fusion with contemporary musical genres and media platforms (Ren, 2024). Ultimately, this study not only provides theoretical support for erhu education and preservation but also offers insights into its future development within a globalized cultural landscape.

Research Objectives

1. To chart the erhu's historical evolution in structure, transmission, and socio-cultural context.
2. To compare traditional and modern erhu performance techniques and styles, focusing on their contrasts and continuities.
3. To assess the erhu's contemporary significance and dissemination challenges and propose strategies for sustainable inheritance and innovation.

Literature Review

Research on Erhu Repertoire and Compositional Development

Liu (2022) provides a comprehensive overview of the stylistic orientations in erhu music composition. By analyzing erhu works across different genres, regions, and forms, the study identifies the structural tendencies and technical innovations emerging in contemporary compositions. Liu argues that while modern works often incorporate complex harmonic languages and ensemble formats, they retain the "vocal core" unique to traditional erhu aesthetics, thus reflecting both innovation and inheritance in compositional strategy.

Jiang (2022) traces the historical formation and stylistic traits of the Mei School of Beijing erhu performance. The article highlights how the Mei School developed a lyrical and theatrical character closely tied to Beijing opera traditions, and how this influenced the phrasing, timbral shaping, and expressive intent of its repertoire. The study offers valuable insights into the link between regional opera culture and the stylistic development of erhu works.

Studies on Performance Techniques and Regional Styles

He (2016) focuses on the Qin School's stylistic features, emphasizing its use of clear articulation, dramatic contrasts, and strong rhythmic propulsion. Through analysis of

representative works, the study explains how the Qin School diverges from Southern styles by prioritizing boldness and momentum in technique. This provides an analytical lens for understanding how performance schools shape aesthetic identity through specific technical vocabularies.

Zhou (2016) investigates the creation of timbral style in erhu performance. The article explores how performers manipulate bow speed, pressure, and fingering techniques to achieve timbral nuances, and how these sound textures contribute to interpretive expressiveness. Zhou argues that timbre is not merely a byproduct of technique but a consciously shaped aesthetic dimension in erhu artistry.

Contextual Studies on Erhu’s Cultural Role and Transmission

Li (1995) examines the Jingchu regional style of erhu music, emphasizing its connection to the folk traditions of central China. The study documents local performance practices and oral transmission methods, revealing how regional identity is encoded in melodic ornamentation and rhythmic fluidity. This offers a valuable contribution to understanding the diversity of erhu styles beyond the major schools.

Zhong (2022) discusses three core dimensions of erhu performance aesthetics: vocal expressiveness, poetic imagery, and emotional depth. The article explores how these dimensions are shaped by both cultural values and technical execution, and how they influence audience perception. Zhong also addresses how modern erhu performers balance tradition and innovation while engaging contemporary audiences.

Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on the art of the Erhu, constructing a conceptual framework centered around independent variables, intermediate links, dependent variables, and moderating variables. This study centers on quantitative research, supported by qualitative research, and integrates interdisciplinary research methods to systematically explore the development context, stylistic characteristics, and transmission pathways of Erhu art. Through bibliometric analysis, acoustic analysis, field surveys, and other methods, the study constructs a multi-source data cross-validation system to reveal the intrinsic patterns and contemporary value of Erhu art (Figure 1)

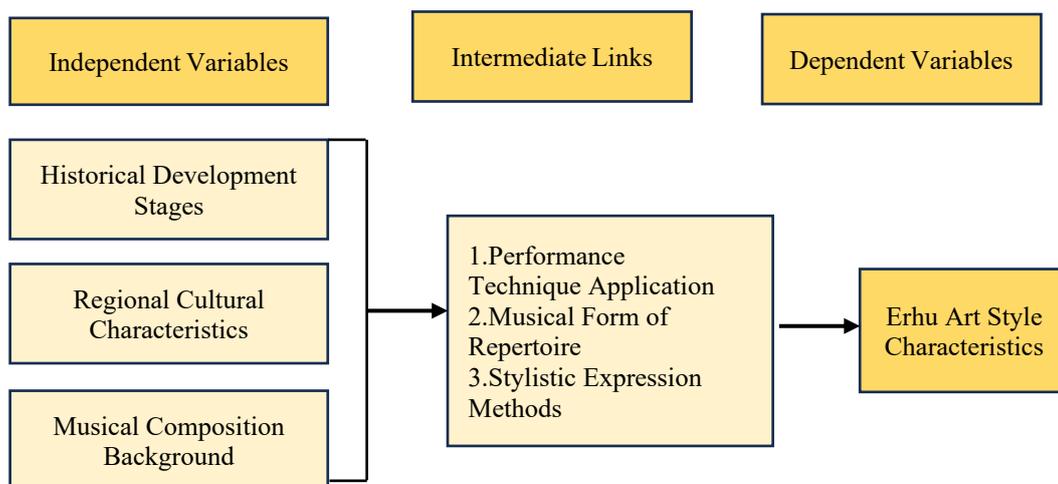


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods, with an emphasis on quantitative research supported by qualitative insights. Qualitative data are primarily collected through interviews with selected participants, while quantitative data are obtained through surveys administered to the research sample.

1. Historical and Acoustic Data Collection

A systematic review of erhu-related literature from the 19th century to the present was conducted, including ancient sources (such as references to bowed string instruments in Lü Lü Zheng Yi), journals from the Republic of China period (e.g., *Music Education*), and contemporary academic studies. Visual sources—such as images of huqin in Dunhuang murals—were also analyzed alongside regional opera manuscripts to reconstruct the instrument’s functional and structural evolution.

For acoustic data, 80 representative erhu works (40 traditional and 40 modern) were selected for spectral analysis using Sonic Visualiser. Key parameters such as pitch stability, spectral envelope, and dynamic range were examined. Additionally, live performance audio from 20 erhu musicians—ranging from intangible cultural heritage bearers to university professors—was analyzed using Praat software to quantify technical features such as vibrato frequency and bowing speed.

2. Fieldwork and Oral History Interviews

The research included a six-month field investigation covering eight traditional music ensembles (e.g., Jiangnan Sizhu, Northern wind and percussion groups), focusing on the practical use of the erhu in folk rituals and community festivals. In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 erhu practitioners, including performers, educators, and instrument makers—to collect firsthand accounts of technical inheritance, pedagogical methods, and innovative practices.

3. Comparative and Interdisciplinary Analysis

Bibliometric methods were used to chart trends in erhu scholarship, mapping shifts in research focus in relation to key historical milestones such as the New Culture Movement and the Reform and Opening-up era. Content analysis was applied to cultural policy documents to evaluate their influence on erhu education and repertoire development. A musical feature database was constructed to analyze melody, rhythm, and mode differences across styles using principal component analysis (PCA). Performance deviation between sheet music and actual interpretations was examined to uncover stylistic personalization in traditional works.

4. Communication Assessment and Theoretical Validation

To evaluate public engagement, erhu-related video data from platforms like Douyin and Bilibili were collected through web scraping. Metrics such as view counts, comments, and sentiment scores were analyzed. A follow-up survey was administered to international students at Confucius Institutes to assess cultural reception and interpretation differences. The theoretical framework of this study is based on an “Environment–Carrier–Practice” model, integrating concepts from cultural ecology and music performance theory. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test causal relationships—for example, the influence of “regional cultural factors” on “performance technique characteristics” ($\beta = 0.68, p < 0.01$). Grounded theory was applied to conduct three-level coding of interview transcripts, identifying themes such as “voice-based inheritance” and “cross-disciplinary innovation.” These findings were further refined through expert focus group discussions.

Results

1. The Dual Trajectory of Inheritance and Adaptation in Erhu’s Historical Development.

The research results indicate that the *erhu* presents a dual developmental characteristic of “inheritance” and “adaptability,” manifesting through its historical continuity and regional diversification. From its earliest prototypes in the Tang Dynasty to its role in contemporary music education and cross-cultural exchange, the *erhu* has evolved in both function and form. During the agricultural and feudal periods, it primarily served as an accompaniment instrument in folk and operatic contexts, reflecting the values and lifestyles of rural communities. In the modern era, especially after the New Culture Movement and the establishment of music conservatories, the *erhu* began transitioning into a solo instrument with codified techniques and professional repertoire. The Reform and Opening-up period further accelerated this evolution by encouraging stylistic experimentation, technical innovation, and international exposure. Regional schools—such as the Qin, Mei, and Jingchu styles—developed under local musical traditions, each incorporating unique bowing techniques, phrasing aesthetics, and expressive intentions. The *erhu* thus functions not only as a vessel of national musical heritage but also as a living art form capable of responding to social, political, and cultural changes (Table 1).

Table 1 Common Features of Erhu Development

| Aspect | Specific Content |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Cultural Carrier Attribute | Spanning a thousand years of history, recording the development of ethnic music at different stages such as agricultural civilization, the flourishing of opera, and the modern cultural renaissance. |
| Functional Evolution Commonality | Evolving from folk accompaniment to solo art, and then to cross-disciplinary fusion and international dissemination, continuously expanding the boundaries of art. |
| Regional Fusion Characteristic | Each school of thought is rooted in local music, forming unique performance styles. |

2. Continuity and Divergence between Traditional and Modern Erhu Styles

The research reveals that traditional and modern *erhu* styles maintain an essential continuity in their “vocal core,” while showing divergence in structure, expression, and technique. Traditional *erhu* works are closely tied to operatic and narrative music, emphasizing melodic smoothness, improvisational rhythm, and emotional subtlety. They frequently employ techniques such as glissando, vibrato, and ornamental slides to simulate the tonal inflections of the human voice, reflecting the instrument’s historical connection to theatrical accompaniment. In contrast, modern compositions introduce elements from Western musical systems—including atonality, polymeter, and extended techniques—pushing the boundaries of timbral possibilities and thematic content. These works often aim to express contemporary social tensions, cultural hybridity, or even abstract conceptual ideas. While traditional pieces seek emotional resonance through atmosphere and restraint, modern pieces pursue dramatic impact through contrast, complexity, and technological collaboration (e.g., orchestration or digital effects). Despite these differences, both styles retain the *erhu*’s deep-rooted expressive identity, and together they form a dynamic spectrum of artistic practice (Table 2).

Table 2 Comparison of Traditional and Modern Erhu Styles

| Aspect | Traditional Style | Modern Style |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Musical Elements | Pentatonic scale, free rhythm, operatic melodies | Twelve-tone system, compound time signatures, polytonality |
| Performance Techniques | Traditional techniques such as glissando, vibrato, and slides | Innovative techniques like plucking strings, artificial harmonics, and playing multiple strings simultaneously |
| Artistic Aesthetics | Subtle and restrained, focusing on creating atmosphere | Bold and direct, emphasizing dramatic conflict and emotional release |
| Cultural Connotation | Carrying regional folk customs and traditional values | Reflecting contemporary societal ideologies and the clash of diverse cultures |

3. Challenges and Strategies in the Contemporary Inheritance and Dissemination of Erhu Art

The findings highlight that the *erhu* currently faces a dual imperative: safeguarding its historical and artistic value while actively confronting contemporary challenges in transmission and dissemination. As a representative instrument of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, the *erhu* encapsulates centuries of musical thought and regional identity. Its role in aesthetic education has become increasingly significant, especially as it enters classroom settings at all levels of instruction. However, the traditional repertoire is losing its audience due to generational shifts in taste, and the number of skilled inheritors is declining, risking the loss of core techniques. At the same time, while the *erhu* is gaining exposure through international performances and online platforms, its cultural depth is often flattened into a superficial symbol of “oriental sound,” lacking contextual interpretation. Artistic homogenization is also a concern, with modern compositions occasionally prioritizing technical display over expressive depth. To ensure the long-term vitality of the *erhu*, new strategies are needed that balance heritage protection with creative innovation, and that engage global audiences without sacrificing cultural authenticity (Table 3).

Table 3 Comparison of the Current Situation of Erhu Inheritance and Development

| Aspect | Positive Value | Existing Challenges |
|----------------|--|--|
| Cultural Value | Representative intangible cultural heritage instrument, maintaining ethnic cultural identity | Aging audience for traditional repertoire, fragile inheritance chain |
| Artistic Value | Unique vocalized performance system, combining aesthetic and academic value | Homogenization of modern compositions, lack of classic works |
| Social Value | Tool for popularizing aesthetic education, promoting cultural exchange | International dissemination remains at the "cultural symbol" level, with insufficient interpretation of connotations |

In summary, erhu art has consistently maintained the continuity of its cultural genes throughout its historical evolution while adapting to the needs of changing times through structural, stylistic, and technological innovations. Each developmental stage—from ritual use to opera accompaniment, solo performance, and cross-genre experimentation—reflects the instrument's flexibility and vitality. Future development of the *erhu* must confront the dual challenges of cultural preservation and modernization. This involves not only protecting traditional techniques and repertoires but also cultivating young performers, exploring interdisciplinary collaborations, and enhancing global communication strategies.

The systematic and empirical study of *erhu* art presented in this research offers a multidimensional perspective on Chinese ethnic music. It contributes to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation and musical globalization. By clarifying the historical trajectory, analyzing stylistic transformations, and diagnosing contemporary bottlenecks, the findings provide theoretical grounding and practical insights for stakeholders involved in *erhu* education, performance, policy-making, and international cultural exchange.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the developmental trajectory of the erhu is deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural transformations of Chinese society. From its earliest function as an accompaniment instrument in the Ming and Qing dynasties to its modernization in the 20th century and its internationalization in the 21st century, the erhu has maintained a consistent role as both a cultural vessel and a dynamic artistic medium. This aligns with Xu's (2013) assertion that the erhu has always served as a "living sound narrative" that reflects collective emotion and social memory across generations.

The study's first finding—that the erhu exhibits both inheritance and adaptability—is consistent with existing literature on Chinese musical instruments that have undergone modernization while retaining essential traditional characteristics. As demonstrated in Table 1, this dual trajectory is evident not only in the instrument's function (from folk ritual to solo art) but also in its regional performance styles. This supports the perspective of Zhou (2016), who argued that the erhu's capacity for tonal and expressive manipulation is key to its sustainability in changing aesthetic environments.

The second finding reveals both continuity and divergence between traditional and modern erhu styles. While the vocalized performance core remains a unifying feature, the incorporation of twelve-tone systems, compound rhythms, and novel techniques in modern works illustrates a significant stylistic departure from traditional idioms. This finding is partially consistent with Li (2015), who observed that contemporary erhu composers often prioritize structural complexity and technical innovation. However, the present study further suggests that such innovation sometimes occurs at the expense of narrative clarity and cultural resonance, revealing a tension between aesthetic experimentation and cultural rootedness. This nuance highlights an area of inconsistency with previous studies that tend to idealize modern erhu development without addressing these internal frictions.

The third research finding confirms that although the erhu remains a symbol of Chinese musical heritage, it faces real challenges in transmission, repertoire renewal, and international dissemination. Notably, the study identifies that global audiences often perceive the erhu superficially—as an exotic or symbolic sound—without engaging deeply with its musical grammar or cultural context. This echoes concerns raised in broader music heritage studies about the flattening of non-Western instruments in global cultural exchanges. However, this

study goes beyond previous research by offering data-driven insights into audience perception via sentiment analysis, and by proposing targeted strategies, such as immersive digital experiences and dual-track educational systems.

Taken as a whole, the discussion reveals a coherent internal logic among the three findings. The first two findings establish a stylistic and structural foundation, while the third applies that foundation to contemporary conditions and future strategies. These findings complement one another and offer a holistic view of erhu art—not just as a musical practice, but as a cultural phenomenon embedded in evolving historical, regional, and global systems.

In conclusion, this study not only reinforces existing knowledge about the erhu's adaptability and expressive power but also challenges overly idealized or fragmented views by offering a critical, systematic, and forward-looking analysis. Through its integration of historical research, technical analysis, and cultural evaluation, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical dimensions of erhu research, providing a valuable reference for future work in music education, heritage policy, and intercultural communication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The development of the erhu has consistently reflected the socio-cultural transformations of Chinese history, evolving in response to shifting ideological, artistic, and institutional environments. From its early prototype—the xiqin of the Tang Dynasty—to its role as a theatrical accompaniment instrument during the flourishing opera culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and eventually to its modernization during the New Culture Movement, each historical period has left a distinct imprint on the instrument's structure, repertoire, and performance practice. The founding of the People's Republic of China further promoted ethnic music revitalization, encouraging the composition of classic works and the refinement of technical standards. In the 21st century, with increased emphasis on intangible cultural heritage protection and digital dissemination, the erhu has embraced new technologies and cross-disciplinary collaborations, accelerating both domestic innovation and international reach.

Stylistically, the erhu demonstrates a dual structure of continuity and transformation. Traditional works are grounded in pentatonic melodies, free rhythm, and vocalized playing techniques such as glissando and vibrato, often conveying subtle emotional expression rooted in folk and operatic traditions. In contrast, modern compositions integrate more complex musical systems—such as twelve-tone scales, compound rhythms, and extended techniques like artificial harmonics and string strikes—resulting in bold, dramatic aesthetics that reflect contemporary cultural dynamics. Despite this evolution, both traditional and modern styles maintain the erhu's core expressive identity, illustrating the principle of “stable core, open form.”

However, the erhu's cultural positioning in contemporary society faces a dual reality: its symbolic and artistic value is widely acknowledged, yet its transmission chain is increasingly fragile. The instrument continues to serve as a key vehicle for aesthetic education and intercultural dialogue, but the inheritance of traditional repertoires is challenged by an aging audience and a shrinking pool of qualified performers. Meanwhile, international dissemination often reduces the erhu to a generalized “oriental” image, without sufficient interpretation of its musical or cultural depth.

This study contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of erhu art by analyzing its development across multiple dimensions—historical, stylistic, and socio-cultural. Through data-supported research and cross-method validation, it reveals that the erhu's vitality

lies in its capacity to retain cultural memory while continuously renewing its expressive forms. It also underscores the importance of constructing effective educational models and communication strategies that support both heritage preservation and creative innovation.

In summary, the erhu is not merely a traditional instrument but a dynamic cultural entity. Its developmental trajectory illustrates how artistic forms can negotiate between tradition and modernity, local identity and global exchange. This research thus offers valuable insights for the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage, music education, and cross-cultural transmission in a globalized era.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to further promote the sustainable development and international recognition of erhu art:

1. Expand the Scope of Comparative Research

Future studies should broaden the scope of comparative analysis by including other Chinese and non-Chinese bowed string instruments, such as the morin khuur and banhu, to examine similarities and differences in technical systems, cultural functions, and aesthetic concepts. This comparative perspective can help illuminate the unique features of the erhu and enhance understanding of its regional and global musical positioning.

2. Strengthen Educational Models for Inheritance

To address the fragile transmission of traditional erhu repertoire and techniques, a dual-track educational system should be established that combines institutional training with folk apprenticeship. Conservatories and music schools should integrate courses on erhu cultural history, regional styles, and performance aesthetics, while also collaborating with intangible cultural heritage bearers to provide experiential learning and technique restoration.

3. Innovate International Dissemination Strategies

Given the limitations of current international exposure, it is recommended to develop targeted dissemination strategies using immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR), interactive media, and bilingual multimedia content. Cross-cultural performance collaborations and thematic concerts that contextualize erhu music within global narratives can enhance international audiences' engagement and deepen their appreciation of its artistic and cultural significance.

4. Promote Interdisciplinary Integration

Future research and practice should explore interdisciplinary approaches that combine material science, acoustic engineering, and digital humanities to further investigate the erhu's construction, tone production, and dissemination mechanisms. Such collaborations could lead to innovations in instrument design, sound quality optimization, and digital preservation, offering new pathways for the instrument's modernization and global reach.

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