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The Evolution of the Shape of the Chinese Pipa and Its Artistic Prosperity

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ABSTRACT

As the most representative plucked instrument among traditional national musical instruments, the pipa has continuously evolved and developed in the long history of China and has gradually become a symbol of Chinese traditional music and culture. The development of music in the Sui and Tang dynasties in China was unprecedentedly prosperous, and it occupies an important position in the history of Chinese music. As an ancient plucked instrument, the pipa has been passed down from the Qin and Han dynasties to the present and has experienced thousands of years of history. It is a national musical instrument that has been increasingly improved in shape and playing methods through the continuous efforts of the Chinese people, integrating the advantages of local and foreign musical instruments. The Sui and Tang dynasties in China were the first peak period of the development of the pipa. For this reason, this article sorts out the development of the pipa in the Sui and Tang dynasties in China and the role of the pipa in promoting later music.

INTRODUCTION

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the highly developed material and spiritual civilizations also attracted many students from Japan, Silla, India, and other countries. They came to China one after another to learn the advanced system and culture of the Tang Dynasty. At the same time, the unprecedented prosperity of productivity during the Sui and Tang dynasties also promoted the development of foreign trade, and economic exchanges were “two-way”. On the one hand, merchants and merchant ships from various countries came and went in an endless stream, and they introduced Chinese silk, porcelain, etc. to the West. On the other hand, the clothing, products, and diet of Central Asia, India, the Middle East and other countries also Chinese culture, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Princess Wencheng's entry into the collection of the Potala Palace

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Research Review

Regarding the pipa and its development history, the most

influential research in the academic community includes “A Study of East Asian Musical Instruments” (Lin, 1999) by a Japanese cultural scholar and “A Draft History of Ancient Chinese Music” (Yang, 1981) by a Chinese music researcher. Among them, “A Draft History of Ancient Chinese Music” systematically expounds and analyzes ancient Chinese music based on historical facts, cultural relics, and historical documents, and explores the meaning of the ancient word “pipa”, and straightens out the process of the development and innovation of the pipa from the source. In addition, he also sorted out and investigated the historical data of the pipa, which provided rich materials for other scholars to study. “A Study of East Asian Musical Instruments, mainly analyzes the shape, playing techniques, and tuning system of the Tang Dynasty pipa based on the existing Tang pipa cultural relics in Japan.

Many music historians have studied the origin and shape changes of the pipa, among which Han Shude's “A Draft History of Chinese Pipa” is more representative. In his paper, researcher Zheng Zuxiang introduced the earliest written historical materials about the pipa and verified these historical materials. Li Jianzheng completed the comparison between the Han pipa in the Central Plains and the pipa in the Western Regions. At the same time, he proposed the view that the pipa originated in the Western Regions in “The Ancient Silk Road and the Chinese Pipa” (Zhang, 2010).

With the increasing improvement of people's musical aesthetic taste, the pipa has also regained its youth in modern folk music, and its status in folk music has also been greatly improved. This has also attracted the attention of more and more researchers, and the research based on the art of the pipa has gradually increased. These have provided more and more materials for the

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development and spread of the art of the pipa in my country, and promoted the development and innovation of the pipa.

In terms of the current research status, there are many papers and books on the study of the pipa. However, in terms of content, they are mainly distributed in the evolution and origin of the pipa. Many scholars have sorted out the macro development context of the pipa through the reference of many ancient documents and the historical evidence of archaeological relics. However, there are still few papers that analyze and study the pipa in a specific dynasty. In particular, there are few studies on the evolution of the shape of the pipa in the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Based on the understanding of the above issues, this article will take the music and cultural background of the Sui and Tang Dynasties as the starting point to study the evolution and characteristics of the pipa shape, playing techniques, and the contribution of the prosperity of pipa music in the Sui and Tang Dynasties to the development of pipa music in later generations, and then objectively evaluate its historical value in the overall development of pipa music.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Forms of the Central Plains Han Pipa

The Pipa has a long history of development in China. In the initial stage, it only appeared as a percussion instrument. However, as it developed as an accompaniment instrument for dance, it developed rapidly based on the most primitive drum and gradually differentiated into the stringed drum (Qin Pipa), Qin Hanzi and Ruanxian (Zuo, 2007).



Figure 2: Drums---Music and Dance

The historical prototype of the development of the Chinese pipa is the “stringed drum” from the Qin and Han dynasties. In the course of its development, it gradually developed by constantly introducing new elements, and finally formed “Qin Pi”, “Qin Hanzi” and “Ruan Xian” (Zuo, 2016). Looking through history, the earliest record of this aspect was seen in the Jin Dynasty. In Fu Xuan’s “Pipa Fu·Preface”, there are two statements about the pipa in the content recorded. The first one points out that

the number of strings of the pipa was originally created by Emperor Wu of Han, when the Wusun princess was married far away; the second statement believes that the creation of the number of strings originated from the construction of the Great Wall, and this statement is more credible.

From the development of the stringed drum alone, its development history is only a dozen years of the Qin Dynasty that the First Emperor worked hard to manage. For an instrument, from its initial appearance to its gradual maturity, this short period of more than ten years is far from enough, and the final promotion of the birth and development of the pipa still comes down to the social environment at that time. In 214 BC, in order to resist the invasion of foreign races, the First Emperor ordered the construction of the Great Wall. During the construction of the Great Wall, the people who participated in the hard work tried to tie the strings to dance props for performance. This is the most primitive form of the drum, and gradually evolved into a plucked instrument with a round resonance box, a straight handle, and a vertical holding. The round resonance box is the drum body of the drum, so people named it “string drum”. This is the “Qin Pipa” that appeared in the literature of later generations, and it is also the earliest form of Pipa.



Figure 3: Musical performance in brick painting of tombs of Wei and Jin Dynasties in Jiayuguan, Gansu

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Shape of Pipa Introduced from the Western Regions

With the opening of the Silk Road, the history of ancient Chinese music, singing and dancing, and musical instruments has undergone tremendous changes, and the Silk Road carries more and more important cultural values.

First, the long pear-shaped pipa. From the shape of the pipa, the pipa with a long pear-shaped outline has the following characteristics, that is, it shows a gradually decreasing trend at the tortoise plate, and this trend continues to the mountain pass of the pipa, and the overall outline is pear-shaped. The image of the pipa with this shape is more common in the cave murals of the Northern Wei, Northern Zhou and Sui dynasties, and is similar to the shape of the pipa presented in the murals

of Xinjiang and ancient India. In terms of holding, the head of the instrument is tilted to the lower left, and the performer holds the pipa and presses the strings with his left hand, and holds the tortoise plate on the right shoulder with his right hand. This long pear-shaped pipa retains the characteristics of the Western Region pipa to the greatest extent (Zuo, 2007).



Figure 4: Pipa playing in Cave 69 of Kizil



Figure 5: Celestial musicians in Cave 30 of Kizil Gaha

Second, the pear-shaped pipa. The resonance box of the pear-shaped pipa is not as long as that of the long pear-shaped pipa, but is more like a pear-shaped resonance box. The neck on the resonance box is thin and long, and there are two peculiar sound holes on the panel. These two sound holes are crescent-shaped. This pear-shaped pipa is common in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, my country, which shows that it was a popular pipa shape at that time.

Third, the round flower-shaped pipa. This type of pipa is quite unique and can only be seen in the murals of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. In the murals, we can see that the pipa being played is a five-string, four-phase, fretless, curved-neck pipa, and the performer is tuning the strings. The murals vividly reflect the scene. As for the round flower-shaped pipa, its resonance box is shaped like a blooming flower, and the neck is also a slender stick, which bends backwards at the head. From the perspective



Figure 6: Pipa-playing musician in Cave 272 of Mogao Grottoes

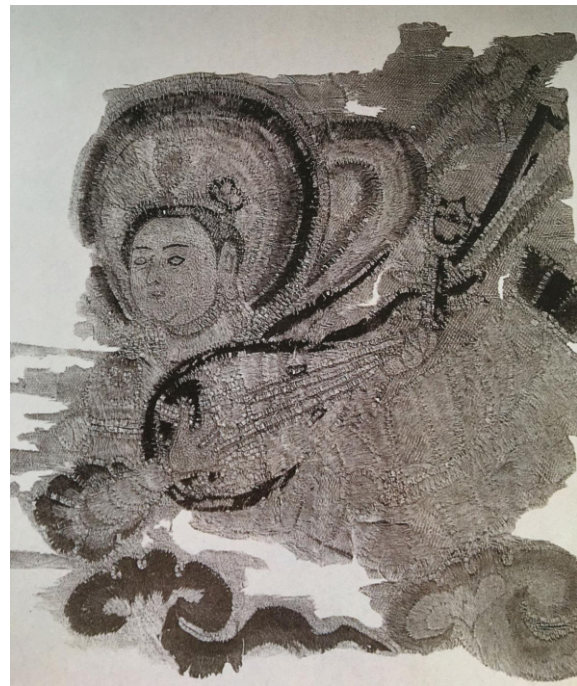


Figure 7: Embroidery of Baixihar playing the pipa in Turpan

of the shape of the entire pipa, on the one hand, it was influenced by the musical instruments introduced from the Western Regions, and on the other hand, it also borrowed from the musical instrument Ruanxian from the Central Plains. Through the fusion of the two, the pipa with this unique shape was finally formed. The round flower-shaped pipa is an objective reflection of the exquisite skills and creative enthusiasm of the skilled craftsmen at that time.

Fourth, gourd-shaped pipa. This type of pipa is quite



Figure 8: Flower-shaped pipa in Cave 220 of Mogao Grottoes

unique, and it is unique to the Mogao Grottoes murals. In the murals, we can see that the pipa being played has a large body, a gourd-shaped sound box, a straight, triangular head, four pegs, and the head of the pipa facing downwards. The pipa is held in the arms, with the left hand holding the neck and the right hand holding the plectrum to play.



Figure 9: Gourd Qin in Cave 322 of Mogao Grottoes (west side of north wall)

Fifth, disc-shaped pipa. Judging from the images of cultural relics, this pipa has been seen in the murals of Buddhist caves in Xinjiang and the Western Regions since the 18th century. The preservation of its performance

images reflects the historical phenomenon that this type of pipa has been used a lot in the music life of Xinjiang and the Western Regions. This type of pipa has a round resonance box and a slender straight handle without a position. The straight handle is wider as it approaches the resonance box and narrower as it approaches the head, forming a trapezoidal shape. The head is triangular and can be seen with four treasures. The panel has a tooth-like cover at the bottom and a pair of sound holes, and the pattern style is like flowing clouds. The connection between the resonance box and the handle of the instrument presents the connection characteristics of an arc curve (Zhang, 2009).

The pipa unearthed in Tomb No. 336 of Astana, Turpan,



Figure 10: The Celestial Musicians in Cave 118 of Kizil

Xinjiang in 1960 gives us a glimpse into the shape of the famous pipa of Gaochang culture. The pipa was made between the 7th and 9th centuries AD. “Astana” means the capital in Xinjiang, and the origin of this name is closely related to the ancient city of Gaochang, Gaochang culture, and Gaochang music. The pipa is made of wood, and its sound box is semicircular. The surface of the sound box is earthy yellow, with red horizontal stripes in the middle of the surface, and the back and sides are brighter red. There are 6 holes on both sides of the pipa neck for the pegs. The pipa is 17.1 cm long, the widest size of the sound box is 6.3 cm, and the thickness is 2.4 cm.

During the Zhenguan period of the Tang Dynasty,



Figure 11: Astana Pipa in Turpan

Princess Wencheng brought many musical instruments and books from the Central Plains to Tibet. Among them

was a pipa, which she brought when she entered Tibet. The sound box is very different from the gourd-shaped sound box after the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 12: Tubo Pipa

During the Tang Dynasty, the development of pipa music reached its peak. Musicians from the Western Regions traveled along the “Silk Road” to Central China to perform and settle down, bringing with them the curved-neck pipa from the Western Regions that was introduced via Qiuci. Xiaohulei is a two-stringed instrument created by Tang Dynasty musician Han Huang with reference to the shape of the curved-neck pipa from the Western Regions. This Xiaohulei is 46.8 cm high and 13.1 cm wide. Made of a whole piece of red sandalwood, the resonance box of the instrument is semi-pear-shaped and covered with rough leather. The neck of the instrument is narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, without frets. There is a flat and long sound hole at the bottom, and the head of the instrument is engraved with an exquisite dragon head. There are two ivory pegs on the left side of the neck, each with a silk string tied to it, and a bridge under the string.



Figure 13: Small Hulei

The whole body of the big Hulei is made of *Alnus spinulosa* wood, with a total length of 89 cm and a belly width of about 20 cm. The lower part of the big Hulei has an elliptical resonance cavity, and the surface of the cavity is covered with python skin. The upper neck is slender, and the front is the fingerboard for pressing strings, but the fingerboard has no fret marks. The dragon head carved on the neck is vivid and looks like it is opening its mouth to swallow, which is extraordinary. There are sandalwood pegs on both sides of the head of the big Hulei, and the pegs are evenly distributed with straight braids. Two silk strings are inserted into the lower string hole, and the strings are wound around the bone tail post at the lower end of the back of the instrument. The Palace Museum also preserves this small Hulei, which is said to be made by Han Huang. This small Hulei is made of wood and is in a simple purple color. It has a dragon head and a curved neck. The lower sound box is pear-shaped, covered with python skin and inlaid with ivory edges. There are two ivory pegs on the left side of the neck, and a string is tied to each peg. The ivory pegs are located below the silk strings. There is a bow-shaped sound hole on the front of the body. The whole length of the instrument is 46.8 cm, and the width of the belly is 13.1 cm.

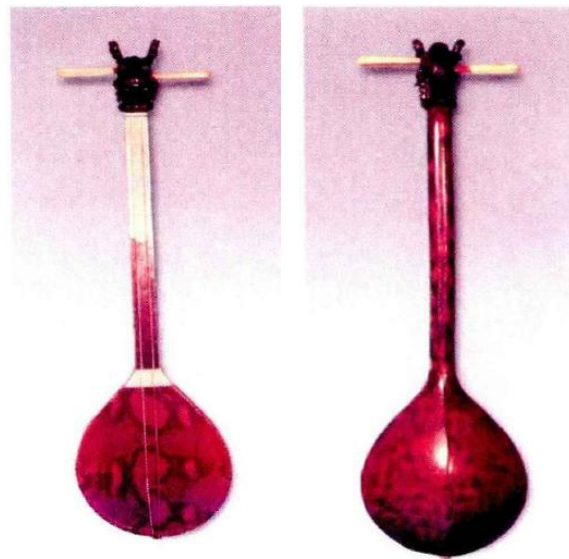


Figure 14: Dahulei (front and back)

The earliest record of the five-string pipa began in the Northern Wei Dynasty. By the Sui and Tang Dynasties and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the five-string pipa could be seen in many singing and dancing performances. The five-string pipa was more widely used and became the main instrument in the band. According to historical documents, in the performance of the ten types of music in the Tang Dynasty, the five-string pipa was widely used in eight types of music, including Tianzhu music, Xiliang music, Qiuci music, Shule music, Anguo music, Gaochang music and Yan music. As the five-string pipa from the Western Regions gradually

came to the Central Plains, it also had a very far-reaching influence among the people. In the Tang Dynasty, there emerged many masters of the five-string pipa. However, considering the short development cycle of the five-string pipa, the five-string pipa had already shown signs of decline by the end of the Tang Dynasty, and by the Song Dynasty, the five-string pipa was on the verge of being lost. Due to its short artistic history, the five-string pipa did not develop its own style like the Qin pipa and the Quxiang pipa. Therefore, in the development history of the Chinese pipa, the importance and historical status of the five-string pipa are far less than those of other types of pipa.



Figure 15: Five-stringed Pipa in Cave 390 of Mogao Grottoes

CONCLUSION

This article sorts out all the historical documents of the Sui and Tang Dynasties in China and expounds the connotation of the form of the history of the Chinese Pipa. However, from the background of the form, it reveals a process of musical development. The Pipa of the Sui and Tang Dynasties was influenced by the Pipa from the Western Regions of Qiuci, and showed unique and rich characteristics in form and playing methods, which was an important historical stage in the development of the Pipa. Through the development and evolution of the Pipa during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, we can get a glimpse of the concepts of acoustics and

aesthetics in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, as well as the spiritual endowment of inclusiveness. There are also two different forms of the Pipa: straight neck and curved neck, and the number of strings is also very different. To this day, we can still find the prototype of the Pipa of the Sui and Tang Dynasties in the Pipa. The solo and ensemble performance forms that were more common in the Sui and Tang Dynasties are still in use today. Through in-depth excavation and exploration of the evolution of the form and artistic development of the Pipa of the Sui and Tang Dynasties, it has certain practical significance for promoting the development of the Pipa art.

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