

Research on Sima Chengzhen and His Treatise on the Plain Zither

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Abstract: As a Daoist priest, literary scholar, and musician during the flourishing Tang Dynasty, Sima Chengzhen made outstanding contributions to Daoist theory while also achieving profound mastery in musical arts. His work *Treatise on the Plain Zither* offers a profound exposition of guqin culture, establishing itself as a crucial text for studying Tang Dynasty guqin art. This article examines the subject from three perspectives: Sima Chengzhen's life and character, an analysis of the musical aesthetic philosophy in *Su Qin Zhuan*, and a comparative study of *Su Qin Zhuan* with other qin treatises.

Keywords: Sima Chengzhen, *Suqin Zhuan*, Qin Theory.

1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty represented the zenith of ancient Chinese cultural and artistic development, witnessing the emergence of numerous outstanding literary figures, artists, and thinkers. Among them, Sima Chengzhen, a Daoist priest, literary scholar, and musician of the flourishing Tang period, made exceptional contributions not only to Daoist theory but also demonstrated profound expertise in musical arts. His work *Suqin Zhuan* offers profound insights into guqin culture, establishing itself as a crucial text for studying Tang Dynasty guqin art. This paper explores Sima Chengzhen's life and musical philosophy, focusing on analyzing the musical aesthetic concepts presented in *Suqin Zhuan*.

2. Sima Chengzhen: The Man

Sima Chengzhen (639–735), courtesy name Ziwei, monastic name Daoyin, and self-styled Baiyunzi, was born in Wen County, Henan Commandery (present-day Wen County, Henan Province). A Daoist master of the High Tang period and the twelfth patriarch of the Maoshan School, he authored works including “On Sitting in Forgetfulness,” “Tianyinzi,” and “Essentials of Breath Cultivation.” Sima Chengzhen was both a highly literate scholar and a musician proficient in musical theory. According to *The Complete Book of Qin Music*: “He once wrote *Treatise on Sitting in Forgetfulness*. While playing the qin, he composed the prelude *Forgetfulness in Seated Meditation*. He also favored the shang tone when tuning strings, cherishing its clear, soaring, and ethereal quality, hence he sang the *White Cloud Prelude*. His monastic name thus became Dao-Yin.” He composed the qin piece “*Seated Forgetfulness Prelude*” for his treatise. Additionally, he created qin compositions like “*Penglai Melody*” and “*White Cloud Prelude*,” and authored the qin treatise “*The Pure Qin*.” Sima Chengzhen was a versatile musician who could play, compose, and craft qins.

3. Analysis of Musical Aesthetic Thought in *Suqin Zhuan*

Sima Chengzhen delves deeply into the musical aesthetics of the qin in *Suqin Zhuan*, primarily through four concepts: the Theory of the Symbolism of the Qin, the Theory of the Taboos of the Qin, the Theory of Crafting the Qin, and the

Theory of the Virtues of the Qin.

3.1. The Theory of the Symbolism of the Qin

The Theory of the Symbolic Form of the Qin refers to the symbolic interpretation of the qin's structure. In ancient Chinese thought, the qin, from its very inception, was inherently connected to the cosmos and all things within it.

When crafting the qin, ancient artisans first sought to embody the cosmic principles of heaven and earth through its form. Huan Tan's *New Discourses: The Way of the Qin* records that the Divine Farmer crafted the qin from paulownia wood, drawing inspiration from heaven and earth: “In ancient times, the Divine Farmer succeeded Fuxi as ruler of the world. He observed heaven above, drew from earth below, drew near from the human body, and drew far from all things. Thus he began by carving paulownia into a qin, stringing it with silk cords, to communicate the virtues of the divine and harmonize with the harmony of heaven and earth.”

The theory of qin imagery in the “*Sū Qín Zhuan*” (*Treatise on the Plain Qin*) is primarily encapsulated in these lines: “The design of the qin: its upper part rises to mirror heaven, its lower part levels to emulate earth, its center hollows to contain the void, its exterior resonates to reflect radiance. This radiance manifests in thirteen aspects: twelve correspond to the six fundamental tones and six supplementary tones, while the central one embodies the primal energy—the interplay of yin and yang.” “The upper section represents the human neck and shoulders, positioning the sound source; The middle section represents the phoenix's wings, symbolizing graceful arrival; the lower end resembles the dragon's jaw, evoking profound resonance. Other features derive their names from their functional roles.” The qin's form mirrors cosmic principles: its arched top mimics the heavens, its flat back emulates the earth, its hollow interior nurtures primordial energy, and its frets resonate with sound. Twelve of the thirteen frets symbolize the twelve musical tones, while the seventh fret at the center governs the qin's vital energy, achieving yin-yang balance. The qin's structure mirrors human anatomy, featuring a neck, shoulders, and dragon's jaw.

The *Sayings of the Court* records: “Governing a state is like tuning a zither. Turbid waters suffocate fish; harsh decrees stir the people to rebellion; steep walls inevitably collapse; towering banks must crumble. Thus, governing a state is like tuning a zither: tighten the thick strings too much, and the thin

ones snap.” This theory links statecraft to the harmonious tuning of the qin's seven strings, emphasizing that governance requires proper coordination. A ruler who acts arbitrarily will cause state affairs to falter and the people to suffer. The sovereign must be virtuous, wise, and respectful of talent, while ministers should practice self-restraint, serve the public good, and uphold their duties. Only through mutual checks and balances can governance be harmonious and the people prosper.

In summary, the qin-as-model theory reflects the ancient mindset of “creating objects to embody symbols,” expressing the ancient attitude toward the relationship between humanity and nature, and embodying the aesthetic pursuit of the unity of humanity and nature.

3.2. On the Restraining Power of the Qin

The Biography of the Plain Qin states: “The qin is a means of restraint, curbing perverse emotions while preserving noble aspirations. It cultivates the self, refines reason, and restores one's innate nature.” In Sima Chengzhen's conception, the ancient qin instrument serves to restrain deviant emotions and preserve noble aspirations. Through playing the qin, one achieves self-cultivation and rational refinement, ultimately returning to humanity's natural essence and primordial state. This passage reveals that while Sima Chengzhen fully affirmed the qin's role in self-cultivation, his purpose in playing extended beyond the Confucian pursuit of inner peace. He sought to restore humanity to its most authentic state—a return to the natural, infant-like purity of life—embodying the philosophy of cultivating the Dao through the qin.[1-3]

The concept of “qin prohibition” first appeared in Huan Tan's *New Discourses: The Way of the Qin*: “The word ‘qin’ signifies restraint; the noble person guards it to restrain oneself. Loud sounds do not clamor but flow gently; soft sounds do not vanish into silence but remain audible. Among the eight musical tones, the qin's virtue is most excellent. In ancient times, sages and virtuous men played the qin to cultivate the heart.” From a modern perspective, the earliest interpretation of “qin prohibition” likely referred to regulations on the volume of qin music. That is, while the sound may be loud, it must not create a sense of clamor; it should flow like water, gentle and unhurried. Though soft tones may be faint, they must not approach inaudibility. This emphasizes the need for moderate volume, allowing the gentleman to cultivate self-restraint and inner steadfastness through this unhurried, balanced, and harmonious sound.

Subsequent texts like the *White Tiger Treatise on Rites and Music* further defined the “restraint” of the qin: “The elegant is the ancient standard, serving to distance oneself from vulgar music... The qin is restraint, serving to restrain licentiousness and correct the heart.” Confucianism fully affirmed music, recognizing its mutual influence with human emotions and physicality. The “Zheng and Wei melodies,” deemed “licentious and perverse,” were rejected by Confucians due to their excessive emotional expression, failing to align with Confucian musical aesthetics in both content and form. Confucianism consistently advocated for music that was moderate, harmonious, dignified, and serene. It affirmed that music should contain emotions that were in harmony with ritual propriety and measured, avoiding excess. It opposed music containing excessively licentious content that could adversely influence listeners. The *White Tiger Treatise*, a classic of Han Dynasty Confucian thought, posited that harmonious qin music influences the character and

cultivation of its performer. Thus, qin music must prohibit “licentiousness” in both content and form, aiming to “rectify the human heart” by correcting moral conduct and behavior. Ultimately, it “restrains evil inclinations and guides one back to the righteous path,” elevating both the music and its practitioner.

In summary, Sima Chengzhen once remarked in his “*Treatise on the Plain Qin*” regarding the instrument's origins: “The qin signifies restraint—restraining perverse emotions to preserve noble aspirations, cultivating virtue and understanding, and returning to one's innate nature.” This reveals that Sima Chengzhen's aesthetic philosophy of qin music transcended the confines of either Confucianism or Daoism alone, embracing elements from both traditions.

3.3. Discourse on Qin Craftsmanship

The “*Treatise on the Plain Zither*” is a Tang Dynasty essay by Sima Chengzhen documenting his own zither-making process. It primarily explores the cultural significance of the zither as an instrument, along with the selection of materials and craftsmanship involved in its construction.[4-8]

Sima Chengzhen placed great emphasis on the selection of zither wood, believing it must grow in Taoist sacred lands to be imbued with spiritual energy. Only then could the resulting instrument produce melodies capable of communicating with the divine. In the *Treatise on the Plain Zither*, he meticulously describes the growth environment and characteristics of the paulownia tree: “The paulownia zither, named for its purity and simplicity, is crafted from wood sourced from the sacred groves of Mount Tongbai in Linhai. Since the dawn of creation, it has absorbed the essence of the Horned Star, imbued with the energy of the Young Yang, flourishing from the fertile earth and rising majestically from lofty peaks. Nourished by the spirit of water and stone, it cultivated a noble and lofty nature, its trunk growing straight and elegant, its branches spreading gracefully.”[9-11]

During the instrument's construction, Sima Chengzhen personally carved and modified the body, blending traditional forms with innovative design. His “*Biography of the Plain Zither*” documents this process: “In the year of the Water Rabbit, I resided at Lingxu. By the year of the Fire Horse, a paulownia tree grew before my steps. By the year of the Rat, it had matured for seven years, its wood becoming straight and magnificent, its branches and leaves lush and flourishing. Surrounded by forests of pine and bamboo, its steadfastness enhanced its noble character; accompanied by mountain streams, its coolness cultivated its hollow heart. I wished to preserve it as a phoenix's perch, yet no phoenix came to dwell there; better to carve it into a zither, for the zither's virtue endures.”

Sima Chengzhen's qin-making adhered to the ancient principle of modeling the instrument after the cosmos. He viewed the raised soundboard as symbolizing “Heaven,” while the base representing “Earth.” Noting that the qin's form resembled a human with shoulders and neck but lacked a head, he deemed this incomplete in its symbolic representation. Thus, he modified it by “rounding its head.” Evidently, Sima Chengzhen's craftsmanship not only inherited tradition but also infused his Taoist philosophy. For instance, he described the hollow center of the zither—designed to resonate sound—as embodying “the void containing the void.” As he stated in his *Heaven and Earth Palace Diagram*: The Dao originates from emptiness and nothingness, yet through the hazy and indistinct, things come into being. “The essence of the Dao is

emptiness, and within this "nothingness" lies the 'something'-the primordial source of all things. Infusing the qin with "emptiness and nothingness" endows it with the "nature of the Dao," distinguishing it from other objects.

In Sima Chengzhen's view, the qin also possesses "primordial energy." The seventh fret of the qin is where this primordial energy resides-the point where yin and yang converge and balance. Because it possesses this "primordial energy," the qin gains the power to communicate with the spirits and immortals of heaven and earth. "The paulownia tree extends its roots to the phoenix, and the qin's melody descends upon the mystic cranes-such is the power of resonance. This exceptional quality of music surely stems from its embodiment of heaven and earth, its harmonious notes aligning with the musical scales, guiding the harmony of human spirit and rectifying the emotions and nature." This encapsulates Sima Chengzhen's philosophy of qin-making. He believed that using paulownia wood, where phoenixes dwell, would enable the zither to connect with celestial cranes and harmonize with nature. Only when the zither's form mirrors heaven and earth, and its tones align with the musical scales, can its sound possess the power to soothe the human spirit.

In summary, Sima Chengzhen lived during the zenith of the Tang Dynasty. The magnificent splendor of this era fostered a spirit of freedom, boldness, and passionate exuberance among the Tang people. Correspondingly, Tang musicians favored grand, diverse, and large-scale song-and-dance performances. Against this backdrop, Sima Chengzhen composed his Treatise on the Plain Zither, devoting considerable space to documenting his own zither-making process-from selecting materials and crafting the instrument to tuning it. This reflects his inheritance and advocacy of the traditional musical aesthetic concept of pursuing "unity between heaven and humanity" that predated the introduction of Hu music.

3.4. The Theory of Qin Virtue

The "Suxin Zhuan" frequently mentions "qin virtue" (琴德). Sima Chengzhen's concept of "qin virtue" likely refers to "using the qin to symbolize virtue," imbuing the instrument's physical attributes with human spiritual qualities.

The concept of "qin virtue" is relatively common in ancient texts, first appearing in Huan Tan's *New Discourses: The Way of the Qin*, which states: "The word 'qin' means restraint. The noble person uses it to restrain themselves. Loud sounds do not become clamorous but flow smoothly; soft sounds do not fade into oblivion but remain audible. Among the eight musical tones, the qin's virtue is the most excellent. In ancient times, sages and virtuous men played the qin to cultivate their hearts." The phrase "loud sounds flow smoothly without clamor, soft sounds linger without fading" describes the qin's tonal qualities. Some scholars speculate that "qin de" may have originally described the qin's sound. Additionally, Leng Qian's "Nine Virtues of the Qin" in the *Compilation lists*: extraordinary, ancient, penetrating, tranquil, mellow, rounded, clear, even, and fragrant-all characterizing tonal qualities.

Ji Kang's "Ode to the Qin" states: "Among all instruments, the qin's virtues are the most excellent." Ma Rong's "Ode to the Qin" declares: "Moreover, after three notes, divine spirits descend-how profound are the qin's virtues!" Ancient scholars believed music embodies the radiance of virtue, and among all instruments, the qin possesses the most virtuous qualities. Just as a person's character is reflected through their music, so too is the qin's character revealed through its sound. The

moral essence of the qin's tones mirrors the moral character of its player. Moreover, the qin's harmonious, refined, and dignified tones can nurture the player's will and virtue, fostering deeper insights into life and higher aspirations. Thus, the ancients imbued the qin with human character and moral sentiment, elevating it beyond mere instrument to a tool for cultivating the spirit-capable of resonating with heaven and earth above, and transforming hearts below. The act of playing became a process of self-cultivation and moral refinement, making the qin a symbol of the gentleman's virtue.

In summary, Sima Chengzhen crafted zithers to perpetuate the "virtue of the zither." Though dwelling in humble quarters, he embraced his instrument with song and maintained an optimistic, open-minded spirit. The gentleman channels his emotions into music and his aspirations into the zither. When the strings resonate, the 'virtue' of the gentleman and the "virtue" of the instrument mutually influence and elevate one another.

4. Comparison of Su Qin Zhuan with Other Qin Treatises

Ancient Chinese qin treatises underwent a long process of development and maturation from the Pre-Qin period through the Han, Wei-Jin, Sui-Tang dynasties to the Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing eras. Even today, the guqin instrument continues to be imbued with new connotations. The *Suqin Zhuan* preserves many perspectives from earlier qin treatises and exerted influence on subsequent works. Therefore, this study compares the *Suqin Zhuan* with qin treatises from the Tang dynasty and its preceding era.

4.1. Comparison of the Suqin Zhuan with Pre-Tang Qin Treatises

Fragmentary records of ancient Chinese qin theory emerged as early as the pre-Qin period. The *Liezi*: Tang Wen describes a scene where Master Wen's qin playing evoked "gentle breezes soaring, auspicious clouds drifting, sweet dew descending, and nectar springs gushing"-a state of mutual resonance between qin music and nature, representing the highest realm of qin performance. The *Yue Lun* (Treatise on Music) posited that "the noble person uses bells and drums to express their will, and qin and se to delight their heart," affirming the qin's capacity to bring joy to the spirit.

Qin theory during the Han and Wei periods became more detailed in its exposition. For instance, Yang Xiong's "Qin Qingying" opens by stating that the qin possesses the function of "calming the spirit, restraining licentiousness, and banishing evil." It recounts how Emperor Shun's qin playing brought order to the realm, and how Emperor Yao added two strings "to harmonize the affection between ruler and minister." This enhanced the qin's sacred and political significance. Huan Tan's "On the Way of the Qin" in his *New Discourses* perpetuated this sacredness, emphasizing that the qin's creation drew inspiration from heaven and earth to connect with divine spirits and harmonize with the cosmos. It further linked the qin's form and structure to historical rhythms, the four seasons, the five elements, and human ethics, reinforcing the notion that the qin was the foremost among musical instruments. Huan Tan also proposed the theory of "qin prohibition," asserting that qin music had the power to "nourish the heart." Cai Yong's *Qin Cao* of the Eastern Han Dynasty inherited the symbolic theory of qin form from *The Way of the Qin*, but innovatively introduced

the Daoist concept that the qin could enable one to “return to one's natural state.” Ji Kang's “Qin Fu” affirmed that “among all instruments, the qin possesses the most virtuous qualities,” acknowledging its supreme status. Yet he contended that the qin's value and aesthetic appeal did not lie in evoking human emotional experiences; its form determined its timbre, unrelated to human ethics. Finally, he pioneered the notion that the qin's “harmony” originated from the instrument itself, likewise independent of human influence.

In summary, from the Pre-Qin period to the pre-Tang era, qin discourse and qin scholarship underwent continuous enrichment and accumulation. Discussions on the functional role of qin music dominated qin theory, with most of the anecdotes and perspectives in the “Suxin Zhuan” originating from this phase.

4.2. Comparing Su Qin Zhuan with Contemporary Qin Treatises

Tang dynasty qin treatises both continued earlier traditions-elevating the qin's status as the foremost among musical instruments-and notably emphasized the rise of performance theory. This does not imply the absence of performance theory before the Tang, but rather that it held lesser prominence than functional theory, with fewer detailed discussions. Following the Tang Dynasty, the emergence of professional qin players accelerated the maturation of qin performance theory. For instance, the Chongwen Zongmu records Zhao Yeli's *Qin Shou Shi Pu* (Manual of Qin Finger Techniques), which documented left and right-hand fingerings using vivid animal metaphors. Although Tan Zhuo *You Fa* (Right-Hand Playing Techniques) is now lost, its title suggests it focused on right-hand techniques. Xue Yijian's *Qin Jue* and Zhu Changwen's *Qin Shi* preserve complete texts that not only discuss the qin's function but also provide detailed, precise descriptions of performance-related issues. These include: using fingers to produce tonal phrases and rhythmic patterns; the advantages and disadvantages of the right hand's “meat sound” versus “nail sound”; the “seven faults” of qin playing; and the psychological state required during performance. Chen Zhuo's “Qin Shuo” (Discourse on the Zither), preserved in Tian Zizhi's “Taigu Yiyin” (Remnants of Ancient Melodies), proposes the aesthetic principle of “harmonious flow as the practice, refined elegance as the foundation.” It addresses fingering techniques, stylistic variations in zither compositions, and the interplay between mind and hand.

In summary, *Su Qin Zhuan* emerged during the Tang Dynasty, a period of rapid development for the guqin. Against the backdrop of widespread guqin music throughout society, and in contrast to the flourishing of performance treatises, *Su Qin Zhuan* stands as one of the few extant texts primarily focused on discussing the functional aspects of guqin music. However, Sima Chengzhen's omission of performance theory does not imply a lack of skill. His detailed descriptions of the sound produced when he personally crafted zither instruments in the *Suqin Zhuan* reveal his pursuit of both tonal quality and playing techniques.

4.3. Comparing Su Qin Zhuan with Post-Tang Qin Discourse

The Song and Ming dynasties following the Tang period are regarded as “a crucial era in the development of Chinese guqin, as well as a significant phase in the evolution of guqin performance aesthetics.” Qin schools began to emerge, with

distinct stylistic characteristics becoming increasingly pronounced. This era witnessed a peak in qin composition and the compilation of qin tablature. Monks who practiced qin meditation also proliferated, and qin theory flourished particularly. Well-known works such as Zhu Changwen's *History of the Qin* and Xu Shangying's *Notes on the Qin in Streams and Mountains* were written during this time.

Fan Zhongyan, in his *Letter to Tang Chushi*, advocated that qin music appreciation should follow the “Way of Harmony,” valuing tranquility and serenity as beauty. He believed the “harmony” of qin music originated from the harmony of nature, that music could resonate with heaven, earth, and the human heart, and was also connected to politics. Ouyang Xiu asserted that “it is not the instrument that matters; if one's heart is at ease, no strings are needed,” suggesting that the joy of qin playing lies not in the instrument itself, but in finding comfort and amusement through it. Su Shi's essay “Miscellaneous Notes on the Qin” held that the qin should be “admired for its tranquility and harmony.” Li Zhi's “Ode to the Zither” posited that “the zither is the heart... it sings the heart's melody,” asserting that the instrument's value lies in freely expressing human emotions and challenging the “zither ban”; The qualities of “harmony,” “stillness,” “clarity,” and ‘distance’ described by Xu Shangying in “Streams and Mountains Zither Conditions” are all reflected to varying degrees in Sima Chengzhen's “Biography of the Plain Zither.”

In summary, this chronological examination reveals that ancient Chinese qin aesthetics evolved through a process of continuous enrichment, development, and refinement. Each intellectual contribution formed a vital component, with qin theory accumulating steadily from the Pre-Qin period through the Han, Wei, Sui, and Tang dynasties to the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing eras-a crystallization of successive generations of qin masters' thought. Sima Chengzhen's “The Biography of the Plain Zither” concentrates a wealth of aesthetic ideas concerning zither studies and musical aesthetics, fully synthesizing the thoughts of earlier generations.

5. Conclusion

As a Daoist priest, literary scholar, and musician during the flourishing Tang Dynasty, Sima Chengzhen made outstanding contributions not only to Daoist theory but also demonstrated profound expertise in musical arts. His work *The Biography of the Plain Zither* offers a profound exposition on guqin culture, establishing itself as a crucial text for studying Tang Dynasty guqin art. Through literature review, it is evident that scholarly research on *Su Qin Zhuan* remains limited. The author contends that this work holds substantial untapped potential for further exploration. Future studies analyzing its musical aesthetic philosophy could reveal insights into the development of Tang Dynasty Daoism and the integrative characteristics of Tang thought and culture. This approach offers a glimpse into the social ethical norms embedded within the qin's form and the moral integrity symbolized by the instrument itself.

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