

Guqin in the Process of Heritagization: Transmission Practices, Symbolic Alienation, and Ontological Reconstruction

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Abstract: This article examines the social "craze" surrounding Guqin art following its inscription on UNESCO's "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." Set within the specific context of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) protection, the study provides a multi-dimensional scrutiny of this phenomenon. It systematically outlines the manifestations of the Guqin "fever" across transmission communities, commercial markets, and media dissemination. Furthermore, the paper dialectically analyzes the dual role of ICH protection mechanisms: while providing institutional safeguards and cultural legitimacy that promote democratization, these mechanisms also expose the art form to risks of "alienation" and "cultural hollowing" due to over-commercialization, performativity, and symbolic consumption. On this basis, the article argues that the sustainable development of Guqin must transcend superficial trends and return to its cultural ontology as a "vessel of the Dao" (*Dao Qi*). By integrating "skill, artistry, and the Way" (*Ji, Yi, Dao*) through "living transmission," the study seeks to provide a viable path for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Guqin; Cultural Transmission; Reflexive Thinking

1. Introduction

As one of China's oldest plucked instruments, the Guqin embodies over three thousand years of Chinese civilization. Historically revered by the traditional literati class as a "vessel of the Dao" (*Dao Qi*) for self-cultivation and spiritual expression, its cultural status far exceeds that of a mere musical instrument. However, since the 20th century, under the dual impact of profound

social structural transformation and Western cultural trends, Guqin art once faced a survival crisis characterized by a rupture in its transmission chain. In 2003, the Guqin was successfully selected for UNESCO's "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," marking a significant turning point in its contemporary fate. Driven by the protection system for Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH"), the Guqin has gradually transitioned from the private spaces of scholar-studios and elegant gatherings into the public eye, forming a large-scale social "craze."

According to the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ICH refers to "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." The Convention also emphasizes that this heritage should be constantly recreated in response to the environment and interaction with nature and history, thereby maintaining a sense of identity and continuity. The inclusion of the Guqin on this list is not only an international confirmation of its long history and outstanding value but also provides an institutional framework for its transmission and development in contemporary society.

Since then, "ICH" and "Guqin" have rapidly become hotspots for academic research and social concern. Data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) shows that literature with "Intangible Cultural Heritage" as a keyword has accumulated 57,800 articles, with 93.2% published between 2004 and 2013; literature with "Guqin" as a keyword totals 8,516 articles, with nearly 80% published in the last decade. Simultaneously, the scale of Guqin learners has grown several-fold, reflecting its broad social influence.

However, does this "fever" signify a

contemporary revival of traditional culture or a cultural illusion under the logic of consumerism? This article argues that within the cultural-political field constructed by "ICH," the Guqin "craze" is a complex entity filled with internal tensions and contradictions. It benefits from the legitimacy and resource support brought by institutional protection, yet it faces the risk of being reshaped, instrumentalized, or even alienated during the safeguarding process. Therefore, an academic reflection on the Guqin "fever"—analyzing its generative mechanisms, potential problems, and future directions—is of practical significance for the art form's development and provides a theoretical reference for current ICH protection practices.

2. Phenomenological Mapping: the Multi-dimensional Manifestation of the Guqin "Fever"

2.1 The Cultural Ontology of Guqin and Its "ICH" Status

The Guqin, also known as the seven-stringed zither, is a comprehensive system encompassing the instrument's construction, strings, notation (*pu*), repertoire, history, songs (*qin ge*), societies, and schools. Ranking first among the "Four Arts" (*qin, qi, shu, hua*), its cultural origins are deeply rooted in Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions, earning it the reputation of "philosophical art." In ancient society, the Guqin was regarded as an essential tool for self-cultivation (*Shi wu gu bu che qin se*—a scholar does not part with his zithers without good reason), occupying a high cultural position. Its performance techniques constructed an aesthetic paradigm pursuing "clarity, subtlety, and tranquility" (*qing wei dan yuan*) and "balance and harmony" (*zhong zheng ping he*), reflecting the philosophy of harmony between nature and humanity. Its inclusion in UNESCO's list in 2003 was a global affirmation of this cultural spirit.

2.2 The Role of ICH Protection Mechanisms

UNESCO's recognition brought the Guqin into the national cultural protection system, granting it unprecedented resources. The significance of this inclusion lies in "enabling people to recognize the unique cultural and artistic value of Guqin art, thereby implementing rescue and protection work," with the fundamental goal of "protecting the diversity of human culture" [1].

Under the ICH framework, Guqin moved from a marginalized, endangered skill to a national priority, receiving substantial momentum in its transmission.

2.3 The Guqin as a National Cultural Symbol

The nomination and protection of ICH are often closely linked to the construction of a national cultural image. Research indicates that the application for heritage status is a "grand government action seeking a spokesperson for the nation-state in the artistic field" [2]. The aesthetic qualities of the Guqin align with the traditional cultural spirit promoted at the national level, making it a "national brand" and a carrier of soft power and national spirit.

2.4 Multi-dimensional Reality of the Craze

The contemporary craze manifests in several social dimensions:

(1)Transmission Communities: A trend toward "democratization" and "diversity," where learners expand from literati to white-collar workers, students, and retirees.

(2)Market Level: "Industrialization" and "symbolization" characteristics, where a complete industrial chain of manufacturing, sales, and training has formed, often treating the instrument as a high-end cultural symbol for consumption.

(3)Dissemination: "Mediatization" and "stage-orientation" transformations. Social media platforms increase visibility but also push performance toward fragmented and visual-centric displays, threatening to dilute the aesthetic essence under the weight of modern sound and light effects.

3. Hidden Concerns: Risks of Alienation in Guqin Transmission

3.1 Dual Effects of ICH Protection: Institutional Catalyst and Potential Distortion

Institutional empowerment reshapes the order of transmission. While official designation of "representative successors" clarifies lineages, it may disrupt traditional folk patterns based on local master-disciple relationships. Furthermore, the pursuit of "authenticity" (*benzhenxing*) faces a constructive dilemma: in a history of diverse schools, what constitutes "authentic"—the Tang dynasty standards or the Ming/Qing notations? This can lead to a rigid "orthodoxy" that stifles

natural fluidity. The shift from "cultural practice" to "cultural display" risks hollowing out the deep philosophical and personal dimensions of the art.

3.2 Alienation in the Transmission Process

The erosion of artistic logic by commercial logic is a primary concern. Value judgments often shift from artistic character to market price and material rarity. Fast-track, large-scale teaching models focus on repertoire quantity and performance speed, neglecting the "heart-method" (*xinfa*), aesthetic cultivation, and historical understanding. The Guqin risks becoming an instrument for "pleasing others" rather than a tool for "pleasing oneself."

3.3 Reflections on Overheating and the Cognitive Crisis

The "fever" often masks a lack of deep understanding. Public confusion between the Guqin and the Guzheng suggests that the surge is symbol-driven rather than understanding-based. Moreover, the inherent "elite" or "literati" nature of the Guqin (meant for solo contemplation) exists in tension with "mass-market" popularization policies. When ICH is viewed primarily as a "revenue stream," the cultural value system is jeopardized, leading to what scholars call an "epistemological error" where cultural problems are oversimplified into economic or governance issues [6].

4. The Path Forward: Constructing an Ecosystem of "Living Transmission"

4.1 Value Reconstruction: Returning to "Qin Dao"

Transmission must move beyond technique (*Ji*) and artistry (*Yi*) to reach the "Way" (*Dao*). This requires: 1) Integrating traditional philosophy and aesthetics into teaching; 2) Reshaping the purpose of practice toward self-cultivation; and 3) Reforming evaluation systems to value cultural interpretation over technical difficulty.

4.2 Practical Innovation: A Diverse and Dialogic Ecosystem

A healthy ecosystem should respect diverse schools and regional styles, avoiding administrative standardization. It should encourage "innovation rooted in tradition"—sincere dialogues with contemporary music and media that expand the Guqin's

expressive possibilities for modern emotions without losing its core cultural gene.

4.3 Institutional Optimization: Balancing Protection and Development

ICH policies should shift from mere "rescue" to fostering "internal vitality." This involves supporting creative transformation and interdisciplinary research while being wary of over-administration. Promoting academic criticism and public discourse is essential for developing social "cultural awareness."

As Liu Mengxi pointed out, contemporary Chinese culture faces a crisis where "tradition cannot be transmitted" [7]. True transmission is not mechanical replication of the "old" but "conscious transmission and reconstruction" based on deep understanding. Only by transforming the Guqin from a "spectacle" back into a "lifestyle" can this "fever" settle into a lasting warmth that nourishes national cultural life.

5. Conclusion

The Guqin "fever" is a complex symptom of traditional culture's modern transformation. It demonstrates the potential for classical arts to regain vitality under institutional protection but also exposes crises of simplification and symbolization. The future of the Guqin lies in transcending the superficial craze and returning to "living transmission." We must foster a system that unifies "technique, artistry, and the Way," creating a cultural ecology that respects diversity and innovation.

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