

# The History and Music of Cantonese Zheng

Liao Lei and Niwat Vannatham

Bangkokthonburi University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail: nicha.musiced@gmail.com

\*\*\*\*\*

## Abstract

The Cantonese Zheng, a traditional Chinese zither, holds a significant place in the cultural and musical heritage of Guangdong Province. This article traces the historical evolution of the Cantonese Zheng, exploring its origins, development, and the unique features that distinguish it from other regional variations of the instrument. Emphasizing both its artistic and social roles, the article delves into the Zheng's repertoire, performance styles, and the influence of local Cantonese culture on its music. Through a detailed examination of historical records, musical structures, and regional aesthetics, this study highlights the Cantonese Zheng's contribution to the broader Chinese musical tradition while also addressing the instrument's role in modern contexts, including its place in contemporary performance and education.

**Keywords:** History; Music; Cantonese Zheng

## Introduction

According to the entry in the Encyclopaedia of Guangzhou, Cantonese music "originated in Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta, and has been in existence for only a hundred years or so. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the arrival of many opera groups from Anhui, Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Hunan provinces, the ancient music of the Central Plains, the Kunqu Opera, and the small songs and tunes of Jiangnan were introduced to the folklore of Guangdong. They were influenced by the local language, customs and habits and combined with local folk songs and ballads over a long period of time, giving birth to Cantonese music." (Guangzhou Encyclopaedia Compilation Committee, ed. (1994). Encyclopaedia of China Publishing House: Encyclopaedia of Guangzhou. <https://bitly.com>) According to the book "Cantonese Music" (Li, 1999), the development of Cantonese music to maturity has gone through three periods, which are the gestation period, the formation period, and the maturity period.

The earliest period of Cantonese music can be traced back to the period between the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty and the pre-Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty, and it has been developed for about 300 years. Cantonese music is a fusion of many musical cultures. Before its formation, the local music of Guangfu had long coexisted with the ancient music of the Central Plains, the Kunqu Opera and the minor songs and tunes of Jiangnan, and in the long term of fusion with each other, and under the influence of the geographic, historical, linguistic and customary environments of Guangfu, it slowly formed its own distinctive style. During this period, the spontaneous mass instrumental performances of the folk, as well as the Banyin classes and gong cabinets, comprehensively integrated local music with music from outside the province, and provided sufficient cultural heritage and musical talents for the formal formation of Cantonese music afterwards.

Between 1860 and 1920, the period of the formation of Cantonese music, this music genre with the characteristics of the Lingnan style already had a corresponding mass base, and the first representative figures and repertoire also appeared. Ho Pok Chung and Yim Lo Lieh were two of the most important founders of Cantonese music. He Bozhong was born into a musical family and was proficient in the pipa, with masterpieces such as "The Hungry Horse Shakes the Bell" and "The Rain Hits the Banana"; Yan Laolie was a renowned yangqin player and composer, with masterpieces such as "Drought Heavenly Thunder" and "The Ring of Buckles". The successful compositions of the two Cantonese music sages led to the development of Cantonese music and made very significant contributions to its formation.

The period from the 1920s to 1936, before the Anti-Japanese period, was the mature period of Cantonese music and the first golden period of its development. As a result of the proliferation of folk music societies, a large number of outstanding performers and composers were trained, and many new compositions appeared in Cantonese music, such as "Step by Step" and "Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake" composed by Lü Wencheng, which are still classics nowadays. During this period, a large number of folk music societies were set up by Cantonese people in different parts of the country. As a result, Cantonese music spread rapidly throughout the country and even abroad, and became a trend-setting popular culture. As Cantonese music slowly developed into maturity, five basic instrumental combinations were formed, namely: the blowing and beating combination of large and small suona with percussion; the "hard bow" combination of the "old five-frame head"; the new five-frame head combination, which was created with the creation of the Cantonese hu; and the new five-frame head combination, which appeared after the reform of the yangqin. The "soft bow" combination based on the new five-legged head emerged after the creation of the Yuehu and the reform of the yangqin; the instrumental combination based on the accompaniment form of local Cantonese opera; and the combination of Western instruments (Cao, 2019).

## **The History and Music of Cantonese Zheng**

The history of the zheng in Cantonese folklore can be traced back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. During this period, "in addition to the zheng being played in the homes of the scholarly gentry, it was common to see blind people playing and singing Nanyin with the accompaniment of the zheng in remote streets and alleys" (Liu, 2011). Dictionary of Chinese Folk Art; Culture and Arts Publishing House. ) The zheng was known as the "blind zheng", and because of its small size, it was also known as the "mang gong zheng".

At this time, although the zheng had not yet entered into Cantonese music, it had already had a certain mass base and began its production history in the Guangfu area. According to scholars' research, "the 'Golden Sound' musical instrument shop, which was established in the early Qing Dynasty as both a workshop and a shop, had already reached a considerable scale, and its zhengs were exported to Southeast Asia and Latin America, etc. By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Civil War, the Guangzhou-based zheng shop had become the first one to produce zhengs in Guangzhou. By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Civil War, there were as many as a dozen musical instrument workshops based in Guangzhou's Haoxian Street" (Gao, 2010). There are two broad reasons why the zheng initially failed to make its way into Cantonese music: one is due to prejudice, according to the famous zheng player, Mr Chen Anhua (1990), who describes it in Chinese Lingnan zheng Spectrum , "Due to prejudice against the blind Gongzheng, no one was willing to learn it, so it did not become a popular instrument. " Secondly, due to the inconvenience of

transposition, the zheng is seldom used in the ensemble of folk instruments, as described by the zheng player Li Meng in the book "Guangdong Hakka - Cantonese Zheng Music Collection The Art of Mr Rao Ningxin's zheng Performances and Pieces" (Li, 2019). It was not until the end of the 1940s, with the emergence of a large number of new compositions by talented musicians in Cantonese music, that the zheng was slowly adopted, as there was a need for more new tones to be added to the compositions. The zheng was slowly adopted. For a long time, the zheng was mainly used in Cantonese music as an accompaniment to the music of the opera, centred on the yuehu, dongxiao and pipa. Subsequently, in the process of long-term accompaniment and ensemble, the zheng has gradually played a greater and greater role in artistic expression, and a number of zheng solo works with Guangfu style have been formed as a result. These works are characterised by the technical methods and aesthetic interests of the Guangfu region, thus gradually forming a new style of local zheng music. As the teaching of zheng in major conservatories nowadays puts more and more emphasis on the inheritance and protection of the local zheng, the Cantonese zheng is gradually promoted in the teaching, and the techniques and aesthetics are becoming more and more standardised and systematic, and the concept of the Cantonese zheng school is also gradually emerging.

The main representatives of the Cantonese zheng are Liu Tianyi, Chen Anhua, Rao Ningxin and Li Wei. Among them, Liu Tianyi's contribution to the Cantonese zheng is particularly outstanding. He is a famous Yuehu and zheng player, "He learnt the zheng from the Han musician Luo Jiuxiang, and he created a unique style by fusing the styles of the Cantonese zheng and the Han-tuned zheng together" (Li, 2016). Mr Liu Tianyi composed the first zheng solo piece in history with a Cantonese music theme, "Busy Weaving". The piece innovatively adopts part of the yangqin's playing technique in the right hand, and incorporates some of the playing styles of the gaohu into the rhyming technique of the left hand, making the piece full of strong Cantonese music styles. With the rich performance experience of Mr Liu Tianyi, the Cantonese zheng piece "Busy Weaving" has also appeared on foreign stages and was well received by foreign audiences. In addition, Liu Tianyi also used zheng to score many films at that time, making zheng music come into the view of film audiences. Liu Tianyi can be regarded as an important figure in the early days of Cantonese zheng playing in Guangdong, and since then, performers have been more or less influenced by him in their performance of Cantonese zheng music.

### **Monographs related to the Chinese Zheng**

Chinese Musical Instruments - zheng" by Zhao Pu, Taiwan: the Executive Yuan Cultural Construction Committee subsidies published by the Taiwan scholar Zhao Pu in the 1980s, edited one after another. The author gives the Chinese zheng a detailed history check and combing, providing rich theoretical information for the study of pieces of musical instruments; "zhengology Scattered Essays" by Jiang Baohai, Shandong: Shandong Literature and Art Publishing House, June 1995. It is the first work in China that raises the theoretical study of the zheng to the height of the study of "zhengology"; The History of the Qin Zheng by Jiao Wenbin, Beijing: China Federation of Literature and Art Publishing House, September 2002

China's first book dedicated to the history of the zheng, a clear compendium of the history of the zheng for more than two thousand years, providing valuable information and ways for the study of the theory of the zheng; "Literary and Historical Talks on the zheng" by Xie Xiaobin, Yao Pinwen, Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, Dec. 2015 This work relates the development process of zheng music to many aspects such as ritual and music system, social customs, folk music, folklore and so on, thus generating a rich cultural accumulation, which is especially closely related to Chinese classical literature, especially poems and song lyrics and fu; Chinese Music Dictionary - zheng Volume (Literature and History) edited by Wang Zhongshan, Yao Yijun, Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, June, 2016. The book starts from the research on various aspects of zheng history, style and genre, performance techniques, instrument reform, musicians, composition, teaching, etc., respectively, and contains a total of 110 essays, 31 ancient zheng artists, and 102 recent contemporary zheng artists, which contributes to zheng studies by collecting, organising, listing, and focusing the general knowledge of zheng, so as to facilitate the access of other researchers or zheng music enthusiasts. The Theory of Development and Performance Technique of zheng Modern Music by Yang Xiaodan, Beijing: China Books Press, May 2017 The book analyses and researches the theory of development and performance skills of zheng modern music, with clear structure and targeted content, which is a reference and reference for the study of zheng music creation, cargo bearing and interpretation; The Essentials of Chinese zheng Knowledge by Sheng Yang, edited by Sheng Yang, Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, July 2018. This book is a tool book for the zheng community, mainly for young zheng practitioners and the majority of amateur zheng music hobby zheng, is a relatively complete, easy to understand collection of information (Sun, 2016).

### **The Chinese Cantonese Zheng**

As mentioned above in the background of this study, the history of the Yue music zheng is still relatively short due to the fact that the zheng's special status as a "blind zheng" led to its initial unpopularity in the Canton area, which in turn led to the zheng's lack of involvement in instrumental ensembles in the early days. Of course, Cantonese music itself is a young traditional music genre, and there is much less research on it at home and abroad than on other Chinese traditional music genres. Therefore, when using the keyword "Cantonese zheng", only two journal articles and one master's thesis were found, namely, Han Jianyong's "New Rhythms of Lingnan", "A Long and Fine Stream of Water", "A Long and Fine Stream of Water", and "A Long and Fine Stream of Water", "A Long and Fine Stream of Water". -- The article mainly analyses the musical form of "Busy Weaving", and it also talks about the different versions and playing techniques, which makes the research more superficial. Both theses start from specific Cantonese music pieces and explore the meaning of Cantonese music through its background introduction, musical tonality, performance techniques and musical performance characteristics, aiming to enable more performers to have a better grasp of the performance techniques and musical styles of Cantonese music pieces when playing them. The master's thesis is from Qiu Yue from South China University of Technology, and the third chapter of her "Research on Rao Ningxin's Zheng Music Art" (2018) focuses on analysing Rao Ningxin's Cantonese zheng art, from the history of the Cantonese zheng to the contribution of Rao Ningxin to the development of the Cantonese zheng, combing through a portion of Cantonese zheng compositions analysing the board structure of some of the music, and summarising the performance characteristics of the Cantonese zheng. The author

researched the performer through interviews and studies of the literature, aiming to work for the Cantonese zheng to become a new genre.

In addition, in the collection of literature on Cantonese music, I accidentally found that searching by "Hong Kong" and "zheng", I found another article by Tse Miu-chun, "The Early Development of the zheng in Hong Kong: Analysing the zheng Art and Influence of So Chun-po" (The zheng Art and Influence of So Chun-po, Hong Kong). (2024), which summarises the solo zheng works adapted by Su Zhenbo from Cantonese music, these traces of the development of the zheng in Hong Kong can also be used as references in the process of Cantonese zheng research.

Throughout the current research, there is still much room for studying the Cantonese zheng. From the literature, it is not difficult to find that Cantonese zheng music has adhered well to the traditional stylistic characteristics of Cantonese music, and has developed according to the instrumental properties of the zheng itself, gradually beginning to form a distinctive zheng music branch, which is an extension of Cantonese music in modern times, and has become a distinctive component in the broader cultural vision of Cantonese music (Huang, 2014).

Historically, the Guangfu area has long served as a port for foreign trade and commerce, and people travelling from the south to the north have brought in cultures from all over the world, which has made the music of Cantonese music very inclusive; at the same time, as a folk music art rooted in the life of the people of Guangfu, the music of Cantonese music is very populist and secular in character. As a folk music art rooted in the life of the people in Guangfu, Cantonese music is very commonplace and secular in its musical temperament. Cantonese zheng music has inherited these characteristics, and therefore the overall style of Cantonese zheng music is easy and bright, sweet and delicate, gorgeous and lively.

Although in terms of the number of compositions (especially original compositions) and national influence, Yue music zheng is still in need of more preparation and still has room for growth before it can be developed into a mature local music school, as a category of zheng music with a strong southern style it has already aroused a great deal of attention in the industry, and nowadays Yue music zheng compositions are favoured by everyone, both in the folk societies and in the professional music colleges. In the future, with the cultivation of more Cantonese music talents, its development should not be underestimated.

## **Teaching Materials for Cantonese Zheng**

### **Cantonese zheng Social Amateur Examination Works**

To write a Guidebook book for Cantonese zheng, it is first necessary to systematically sort out and organise the existing teaching materials for Cantonese zheng pieces. This is because Cantonese music, as a kind of traditional music rich in local characteristics in the Guangfu area, has formed a group of representative pieces through the adaptation and creation of several generations of zheng artists, and the complexity and diversity of its scores and teaching materials require us to have a deep understanding of the existing teaching materials. First of all, we need to have a comprehensive understanding of the historical background and performance characteristics of the Cantonese zheng (Ma, 2012).

As one of the commonly used accompanying instruments in Cantonese music, the Cantonese zheng has a long history and its unique playing style in the Guangfu area. The repertoire and performance style of the zheng are closely related to the musical characteristics of Cantonese music, so it is indispensable to understand the historical origins and performance traditions of Cantonese music when compiling the Guidebook. Previously, this paper has already analysed a large amount of literature on Cantonese music, so we will not repeat it here. Secondly, sorting out the existing Cantonese zheng teaching materials is an important step in the compilation of the Guidebook. It is necessary to systematically collate and analyse all the Cantonese zheng teaching materials that have been published in the market, including traditional score examples, instructions on playing techniques, collections of exercises, as well as modern arrangements and innovative teaching materials, and so on. By categorising and summarising these teaching materials, we can identify the common repertoire, playing techniques and teaching methods used in Cantonese zheng teaching, and then identify the strengths and weaknesses (Wang, 2006).

At present, most of the learning of the Cantonese zheng in the society originates from several commonly used zheng examination textbooks, namely: the National Common Textbook for Social Art Level Examination of the China Conservatory of Music edited by the Examination Committee of the China Conservatory of Music, the Repertoire of the Central Conservatory of Music at Home and Abroad edited by the Examination Committee of the Central Conservatory of Music and the Collection of Chinese zheng Examination Pieces edited by Shanghai Zheng Society.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the history and music of the Cantonese Zheng demonstrate a rich and evolving cultural heritage deeply rooted in the traditions of Guangdong Province. Despite its early exclusion from Cantonese music due to social prejudices and technical limitations, the Zheng eventually found its place in the region's musical landscape by the mid-20th century, becoming integral to the Cantonese music ensemble. Over time, the instrument's role expanded from mere accompaniment to being featured in solo performances that highlighted its distinctive local style. Innovators like Liu Tianyi played a pivotal role in shaping the modern Cantonese Zheng by blending traditional techniques with new influences. Today, the Cantonese Zheng continues to flourish in both professional and educational settings, preserving its legacy while adapting to contemporary musical trends. The growing body of literature and research on this instrument further underscores its importance and the potential for continued development within the wider context of Chinese traditional music.

## References

- Cao, Z. (2019). *The return to simplicity in traditional Zheng music* [Master's thesis]. China Conservatory of Music.
- Gao, Y. (2010). *On the techniques of non-musical sounds in zheng music* [Master's thesis]. Tianjin Conservatory of Music.
- Huang, S. (2014). *Research on the performance style and teaching methods of traditional Henan zheng music* [Master's thesis]. Shanghai Conservatory of Music.
- Li, M. (2019). *Research on sliding tones in traditional zheng music* [Master's thesis]. Hubei Normal University.
- Li, T. (1999). Analysis of three issues in Cantonese music. *People's Music*, 1999(10), 10-12.
- Liu, X. (2011). *Research on zheng teaching in colleges* [Master's thesis,]. Hunan Normal University.
- Li, X. (2016). The importance of traditional zheng music in college zheng teaching. *Art Research*, 2016(3), 138-139.
- Ma, L. (2012). Discussing the teaching of traditional national culture in colleges using zheng education as an example. *Education and Vocation*, 2012(12), 182-183.
- Sun, Y. (2016). *An analysis of the aesthetic expression of "nature" in traditional zheng music* [Master's thesis]. Jiangxi Normal University.
- Wang, S. (2006). *On the tradition and innovation of zheng art* [Master's thesis]. Hunan Normal University.