



Characteristic Musical Instruments and Sonority Features of Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang

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Abstract. Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang use folk musical instruments to play traditional Kunqu Opera music. Shifan is a characteristic form of music of the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions of China. The typical instruments in a Shifan ensemble have a unique timbre and ensemble sonority. Shifan instruments (the reed whistle *meyguan*, edge blowing *qudi*, plate vibrating *tiqin* and *shuangqing*, and membrane vibrating *huqin* and *sanxian*) can achieve sonorous balance, contrast, and complementarity. These characteristics are formed by the arrangement and collocation of traditional musical instruments' form, structure, and sound characteristics.

Keywords: traditional musical instruments · sonority · *meyguan* · *tiqin* · *shuangqing*

1 Introduction

Suichang is located in the mountainous areas of southwestern Zhejiang, in the upper reaches of the Qiantang River and the Oujiang River. It is bordered by Wuyi and Songyang in the east; Longquan in the south; Jiangshan and Pucheng in Fujian in the west; and Qujiang, Longyou, and Wucheng in the north. Suichang covers an area of 2,539 km² and has a population of 227,000. Approximately 81.3% of the county is covered by forest and the county is known as the forest of southern Zhejiang, the origin of the Qiantang River and Oujiang River, rich in gold and silver, and a landscape of cloud and mist, with tea trees growing in the mountains. Suichang was established as a county in 218 AD and is extremely rich in natural and cultural landscapes, with a long history that has profound cultural connotations and colorful folk art. The Shifan of Kunqu is a traditional feature at folk temple fairs, and has been passed down for hundreds of years. It has been praised as Naxi ancient music in eastern China by domestic and foreign experts.

“Shifan rose to prominence at the end of the Ming Dynasty and can be found throughout China. Owing to differences in local cultures and customs, its content is performed with different types of musical ensembles. Suichang Shifan is relatively unique. It uses a unique combination of musical instruments and Kunqu Opera scores to perform the instrumental music, which is unique to Suichang Shifan” [1].

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1.1 Introduction of Shifan Kunqu Opera in Suichang

In 2000, Zhaorong Luo, a music cadre of the Cultural Center of Suichang County, discovered that several older musicians in Shikengkou Village, Shilian Town, such as Xineng Lai and Genqi Xiao, played the *xiao*, *guan*, *di*, *tiqin*, *shuangqing*, and other string and bamboo musical instruments during an investigation of China's rural areas. The music they played was the Kunqu Opera (the example of Folk performance of Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang shown in Fig. 1) tunes recorded on *gongche* music scores. This surprised Zhaorong Luo. With further investigation and more in-depth visits, comrades from the local cultural department learned that this form of instrumental music performance combined with local folklore performances also existed in Miaogao, Dazhe, Shilian, Hushan, and other places in Suichang. They also discovered a transcript of *Xiang E Xing Yun* (*Sound that Stops Moving Clouds*). It was authored by Wen in the early years of the Republic of China, who transcribed 93 tunes and attached general notes for various musical instruments. Among the tunes were 38 Kunqu Opera tunes from the "Four Dreams," which included Tang Xianzu's famous works, such as *Mudan Ting* ("The Peony Pavilion"), *Nanke Ji* ("The Southern Tributary State"), *Handan Ji* ("The Handan Dream"), and *Zichai Ji* ("The Opera of Zichai"). The score of *Bai Xue Yang Chun* (White Snow and Warm Spring) was composed in the 38th year of the Republic of China (1949) and preserved by the artist Genqi Xiao in Shikengkou Village, Shilian Town. It includes 22 tunes—among them, 17 are tunes from the "Four Dreams." The tunes in the two transcripts confirmed that peasants played and sang tunes from the "Four Dreams" in Kunqu Opera. It came as a surprise that traditionally elegant Kunqu Opera music was being performed by peasant musicians in Suichang when Xianzu Tang was the county magistrate. After careful research, researchers agreed unanimously that this form of instrumental music that uses traditional instruments, such as the *sheng*, *xiao*, *meyuan*, *tiqin*, *biangu*, *shuangqing*, *sanxian*, and *yunluo* to mainly play tunes from Kunqu Operas, could be traced back to folk music that was an important part of the culture of Xianzu Tang. This phenomenon of music culture soon aroused great interest from local cultural departments and domestic experts and scholars through media reports. As a result, the instrumental form "Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang" (here after referred to as SKOS) was finally established. It was subsequently included in the Zhejiang Province Non-Material Cultural Heritage List in 2007 and added to the State-Level Non-Material Cultural Heritage List in 2008. It has thus become a cultural business card of Suichang County. As an ancient music genre, SKOS has been present in this region of China for 400 years, and has become part of the region's cultural memory.

SKOS has been categorized as "Wen (Civil) Shifan" and "Wu (Military) Shifan." The distinction between the two is reflected in the combination of musical instruments and the timbre and sonority produced by the combination of musical instruments. Wen Shifan mainly refers to the Shifan in Shilian, where string and bamboo instruments, such as the *sheng*, *di*, *meyuan*, *tiqin*, *shuangqing*, *sanxian*, *biangu*, and *yunluo*, are used together to play well-known tunes from traditional repertoires, including Kunqu Opera, such as the "Four Dreams" and *Changsheng Dian* ("The Palace of Eternal Youth,") and *Huansha Ji* ("A famous Legendary Play about Xishi"). The style is fresh and elegant. Wu Shifan refers to the Shifan in Hushan, which, in addition to the above-mentioned string and bamboo instruments, adds wind instruments and percussion, such as the *xianfeng*,



Fig. 1. Folk performance of Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang

suona, *luo*, and *gu* to perform traditional repertoires in Zhezi Opera, such as *Baxian Cifu* (“Blessing from Baxian – the Eight Immortals in the legend”), *Pantao Baxian* (“Baxian and the Feast of the Peaches,”) and “*Chuyu*.” It has a rough and lively style, and they are therefore also referred to as “Xi (Soft) Shifan” and “Cu (Rough) Shifan.”

The original performance function of SKOS has always been for parades, festive hall meetings, festivals, God-welcoming temple fairs, and lantern exhibits in Chinese New Year Festivals. Drama storylines are not performed and the music is not accompanied by opera singing or acting performances. The original function of the Shifan ensemble was to amplify the atmosphere and to provide entertainment at ceremonial occasions. Consequently, the adoption and organization of the musical instruments in the ensemble are interdependent and inseparable from the corresponding folklore event.

2 Typical Musical Instruments in Shifan of Kunqu Opera

In the instrumental performances of SKOS, in addition to the commonly seen musical instruments, such as the *qudi*, *sheng*, *erhu*, small *sanxian*, *pipa*, *yunluo*, *biangu*, and *paiban*, there are also three unique instruments—the reed-whistle wind instrument (the *meyguan*), the bow-wiping instrument (the *tiqin*), and the plucked instrument (the *shuangqing*). These three musical instruments play an indispensable role in the ensemble by regulating, contrasting, and balancing the overall sonority of the ensemble. Furthermore, the simultaneous appearance of these three instruments in the Shifan ensemble must have historical rationality. The following section combs through the literature to explain and analyze these three musical instruments in terms of form and structure, sonority, and function in the ensemble.

2.1 Meyguan

The *meyguan* (as shown in Fig. 2) is a double-reed wind instrument. The pipe usually has eight holes, seven finger holes on the front and one thumb hole at the back. This type of reed whistle exists throughout Central, West, and Southeast Asia. Their common feature is that the reed whistle is installed at one end of a blowpipe. Their shape and size differ by region. The material of the pipe's body can be bamboo, reed, or wood. The general notes for the *meyguan* in the *gongche* score transcript of the Shifan of Kunqu Opera says, "*Meyguan* is made of bamboo tubes. It is only a few inches long. Its shape is like a pen body, but it is hollow with seven holes." The word *meyguan* is not recorded in dictionaries published in China. From its shape, it is actually a *guanzi*, also known as a *bili*, *beili*, or *touguan*. *Bili* is a transliteration in an ancient Kucha language. Murals in the Kumutura Thousand Buddha Caves in Kuqa County, Xinjiang, which date from the third century, the Kizil Grottoes in Baicheng County, and the Bezeklik Caves in Turpan, all contain images of *bili*. The *bili* could be regarded as a relic of the ancient Kucha music culture. The *Miscellaneous Records of Yuefu*, written by Anjie Duan in the Tang Dynasty, describes the *bili* as follows: "*Bili* is originally the national musical instrument of Kucha. It is also known as *beili*. It is similar to *jia*." [2]. *Tong Dian*, written by You Du in the Tang Dynasty, notes, "*Bili*, whose real name is *beili*, comes from the nomads. It sounds sad" [2].

Guanzi is believed to have been introduced into the Central Plains from Xinjiang. In the brick tombs in Deng County, Henan, there is a colorful portrait of a *gu* and a wind ensemble from the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi all depict *guanzi* players. After being introduced to the Central Plains along with Kucha music, the *bili* became an important wind instrument in court music during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Many highly skilled *bili* performers were produced during this

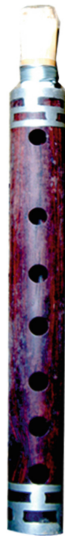


Fig. 2. Folk instrument: Meyguan

period. In the poems of Juyi Bai, Qi Li, and others, there are vivid descriptions of people listening to the *bili*.

Guanzi, with a double reed, can be found in most parts of Asia, especially in Central and West Asia, but they are called by different names and have slightly different shapes. For example, they are called *balaman* in Xinjiang, *balaban* in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Iraq, *duduk* in Armenia and Georgia, *piri* on the Korean Peninsula, and *Pi nai* in Thailand. The *guanzi* is no longer called *bili* in Xinjiang today, but *balaman*, *pipi*, or *bibi* after leaving the etymology of Kucha. In the *Royal Ritual Instrument Schema* of the Qing Dynasty, the mouth of the *bili*'s pipe, which belongs to the dance music of the Anwar Cob tribe, has a horn shape. However, the *bili* and *balaman* do not have the same form. The *balamanc* that belongs to the music and dance of the Hui tribe is similar to the modern *guanzi*, and is now called the *balaman* in Xinjiang.

“*Balaman* - a musical instrument from the ‘YanXiangHuiBu’. In the 25th year of Qianlong’s administration, the Western Regions were suppressed. Eight musical instruments from ‘YanXiangHuiBu’ were obtained. The Emperor gave a feast and put these instruments at the end of the various musical instruments. *Balaman* is a wooden pipe decorated with copper. It is shaped like a *touguan* but has a bottom, with small holes for sound. The pipe is 31.33 cm in length. Its upper diameter is 2.67 cm, and the lower diameter is 4.33 cm. There are seven holes in the front. Its upper part is connected with a wooden pipe that is slightly larger, and it is also decorated with copper. There is a hole at the back, which can be blown with a reed whistle. Its length is 9.1 cm. A little above the whistle, a horizontal copper piece is clamped. Three silk strings are tied at the two ends and the mouth of the pipe, forming a ring that hangs at the lower end. The copper mouth has four small rings, where colorful tassels are hung” [3].

Wind instruments, such as the *dongxiao* and *guanzi*, have been used as early as when Liangfu wei created the “Shuimo Tune” of Kunqiang. He wrote, “The *dongxiao* and *guanzi* to pair with lyrics and music is just like plucking *gu qin* to pair with poems.”

Interestingly, the name of the *meyguan* in SKOS is the same as the name of a similar wind instrument in Turkey. Double-reed pipes are also present in Turkey, and their pronunciation in Turkish sounds like *mey*. With transliteration, it becomes *meyguan*. Could it be that these two wind instruments with the same pronunciation and the same shape have a common origin? Otherwise, how could there be such a coincidence? If *balaman* in Xinjiang also has the name of *meyguan*, it is easy to explain the spreading relationship. Perhaps, the Seljuk Turks, a tribe of Western Turks, brought this instrument, the *meyguan*, to West Asia during their westward migration during as early as the 12th century AD. How the name *meyguan* was preserved in SKOS as it has been passed to the Central Plains over thousands of years, and how it intersects with the present-day Turkish *mey*, is a matter for further research based on etymology and historical data.

2.2 Tiqin

In SKOS, there is a bow-wiping string instrument called the *tiqin* (as shown in Fig. 3). Of course, this *tiqin* is not the same as a violin (also pronounced *tiqin* in Chinese), and must not be associated with the violin in Western orchestras. Hence, what kind of instrument is the *tiqin* in SKOS? There are general notes on the musical instrument in a transcript of the *gongche* score of the Shifan of Kunqu Opera: “The *tiqin* has two strings, also known

as *sansi*, whose batou and pitches are the same like other two strings instruments, for example, *erhu*...” This brief description provides no details on the shape and structure of the instrument. The rest of the text is devoted to teaching the novice musician to not be half-hearted, but to resolve to be diligent.

Tiqin has always been referred to by various names, such as *huqin*, *piqin*, and *banqin*. It refers to a string instrument with a gourd as a resonance box. It can be either a plucked string instrument or a bow-wiping instrument, such as the *erhu*, *tiqin*, or *banhu*. Xie Yao, who lived in the Qing Dynasty, wrote the following in *A Textual Research of Music Today...Musical Instrument*: “*Huqin*: can have four strings, three strings, or two strings. *Tiqin* is popularly mispronounced as *piqin*. It is used to play with lyrics. *Banqin* is used for luantan.” [4] Unlike the *huqin* family of musical instruments, which traditionally use skins to cover the pot of the instrument, the name *tiqin* refers to instruments with pots made of natural materials, such as coconut shells and gourds, with its resonance cavity covered by a thin paulownia board. These instruments gradually developed into instruments with a board vibration system, such as the *banhu* and *yehu*, which have paulownia boards over their resonance cavities. These instruments are called *tiqin*, a bow-wiping instrument of the *huqin* family. The *Royal Ritual Instrument Schema*, written in the Qing Dynasty, recorded the following description:

“*Tiqin*, a musical instrument for ensembles from ‘yanxiangfanbu’. This administration regulates that *tiqin*, which can be used in ensembles during feasts, has a wooden trough with bamboo handles and is covered with snake skin; it has a dragon head and four strings. It is usually 78.23 cm in length, with the handle being 70.56 cm, the diameter of the trough being 7.66 cm, and is 7 cm thick. The four shafts stick through the handle and are stringed—all of them are on the right side and 15.17 cm long. They are tied with



Fig. 3. Folk instrument: *Tiqin*

gold rings, tied in the handle, and wrapped with strings. A column is set on the surface of the trough. The string is 51.9 cm from the first axis to the column. The bamboo bow is tied with two pony tails tied between the four strings. The dragon head is made of pear wood. The shaft is made of sandalwood. The ends of the handle and shaft are decorated with ivory. The handle has yellow tassels.” [3].

The *tiqin* depicted here has four strings. As the pony tail is divided into two strands, the two string groups—the first and third strings are the same sound, and the second and fourth are the same sound—play unison notes, similar to the Mongolian *sihu*. Therefore, it is actually a two-stringed instrument. However, the sound produced by the pot covered by snake skin belongs to membrane vibrating bow-wiping instruments.

The earliest use of the *tiqin* can be traced back to the Wanli administration in the Ming Dynasty. It was introduced by Liangfu Wei to the Kunqu Opera to accompany the singing, and later generations adopted it. It was mostly used in literati music, such as music for strings and the Kunqu Opera in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Qiling Mao’s *About Lyrics by Xihe, Volume 2*, written in the Qing Dynasty, contains the following text:

“The use of the *tiqin* started in the Ming Dynasty. From the Gods’ temples, there was Xingren Feng among the clouds. He served as an envoy to King Zhou’ mansion to bestow musical instruments, one of which was the *tiqin*. It was brought back without knowing how to use it. It used pear wood as the pole, decorated with ivory and a dragon’s head, with two strings coming out of the dragon’s mouth. The belly of the instrument was embellished with snake skin like a *sanxian*, but smaller. There were mane strings winding around curved wood on the outside, which looked like a bow. Nobody knew its name. The Taicang musician Zhongxiu Yang knew about ancient musical instruments. At the first sight, he said, “This is a *tiqin*.” However, it lacked some notes when it was played. Therefore, the wood was replaced by bamboo, and the snake skin was replaced with a gourd. Then the notes could be played. At that time, Liangfu Wei in Kunshan liked to create new music. He greatly appreciated the *tiqin*. Therefore, he brought it to Dongting Lake and played it continuously for one month. Thus, the *tiqin* became popular. However, it is still unknown in which dynasty this instrument was invented. Even though Zhongxiu knew about ancient things, he did not know when it started. Examining the old musical instruments of the Tang and Song Dynasties, they were very familiar, but they disappeared over time. It would be very strange if it was created in the Tang or Song Dynasties, but only this instrument is not popular. Some older teachers said, “it was said that its players were mostly in the Wanli administration.” [4].

Liangfu Wei used it to accompany the Kunshan Opera. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the *tiqin* has been mainly used to accompany Kunqu Opera and in string and bamboo ensembles. *Xian Qing Ou Ji* by Yu Li in the Qing Dynasty has the following description:

“Compared with *string instruments*, the *tiqin* is smaller in shape and clearer in sound. It is thought to be indispensable for people who like fresh music.” [4].

Since then, a variety of shapes and forms have been derived from the *tiqin*, such as the *banghu* and *chaohu*, which have decorated boards. Compared to other types of *huqin* instruments, the biggest difference of *tiqin* is that there is no *qianjin*. However, for the convenience of tuning and performance, *qianjin* has now been set.

Among the accompaniment instruments of Kunqu Opera, the *sanxian*, *tiqin*, *di*, and *sheng* are known as the four major pieces, and the *tiqin* is the most important instrument. Therefore, the *tiqin* is not unique to Kunqu Opera in Suichang. The *tiqin* has also featured in various operas, such as *Gaoqiang*, *Kunqiang*, *Luntan*, and *Tanhuang in Wuju* in the Jinhua area. Its early form adopted the gourd as the pot and was covered with a board. *Tiqin* is used as a mid-bass instrument in the ensemble, and plays the role of the *zhonghu* or *dihu*. It should be noted that the depiction of the shape and size of musical instruments in the *Royal Ritual Instrument Schema* is extremely accurate, and it is also the most reliable record of historical materials. However, the musical instruments in SKOS have not strictly followed historical forms. The main features that have been inherited are mainly the name, the board cover of the pot, and the absence of a *qianjin*.

2.3 Shuangqing

Another lute-type stringed instrument in the SKOS is called the *shuangqing* (as shown in Fig. 4). The general notes for musical instruments in the transcript of the *gongche* score of Shifan of Kunqu Opera recorded the following:

“Shuangqing is the musical instrument with four strings. The method of playing is the same as for the Sanxian. Anyone who wants to learn it must work on it day to night and cannot alternate working and resting. Nothing is impossible to a willing mind.”

Unfortunately, there is no detailed description of the shape and structure of the *shuangqing*. The name *shuangqing* means that both thoughts and actions are clean and not secular. The ancients often referred to the idea that both the heart and environment should be clean. Fu Du said in his “Three Poems on Screen,” that “I use a quinoa stick and my hair is white. I’m happy that my heart and actions are both clean.” The *shuangqing*, commonly known as a *bajiao* (octagonal) *qin*, *meihua* (plum blossom) *qin*, or *yue* (Moon) *qin*, is an important plucked string instrument used in various operas and *quyi* in Fujian music. It is popular in Fujian, Taiwan, Chaozhou-Shantou and Southern Zhejiang. Therefore, it is also called the Fujian *yue qin* and the Taiwan *yue qin*. The shape, tuning and performance of the *shuangqing* in various places have developed their own characteristics in line with different local operas and music genres.

The *shuangqing* is believed to have evolved from the ancient *ruan*. Its shape and form are similar to those of the *qinqin*, which has a long neck and four strings. The resonance box has a flat cavity and has an octagonal, plum blossom, or round shape. Both sides of the resonance box are covered with thin paulownia boards. The *shuangqing* was used in instrumental ensembles and for opera accompaniment in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The music section of *The Sequel of The General Literature Research in Qing Dynasty* notes the following:

“The *shuangqing* is like the *ruan*. It is a midrange musical instrument. It is 106.67 cm long, with a head 21.67 cm long, and a groove 26.67 cm long and 4.67 cm thick. It has three strings—one can play two notes—and thirteen frets. Pluck it to play.” [4].

The three strings can play two notes. In other words, the inner string plays one note, and the middle and outer strings play notes in unison. Those with four strings also play two notes. In other words, both the inner two strings and the outer two strings play notes in unison. The *Royal Ritual Instrument Schema* in the Qing Dynasty records a musical instrument with the same shape and form, called a *yueqin*:



Fig. 4. Folk instrument: Shuangqing

“The *yueqin*, a musical instrument for ensembles from yanxiangfanbu. This administration regulates that the *yueqin*, which can be used in ensembles during feasts, is made of sandalwood. The groove surface is made of paulownia. It is octagonal, and has a curved neck and four strings. It is usually 101.67 cm in length. The handle is 60.67 cm long, with an upper width of 2.56 cm and a lower width of 3.03 cm. The groove has a diameter of 23.53 cm and a thickness of 4.32 cm. Four strings go through the hollow curved neck and are wound over four axes, two on each side. Each axis has a length of 12.15 cm. There is fushou on the surface of the groove. From shankou to fushou, the length of the string is 76.8 cm. Below the Shankou, there are 14 ivory frets. Fish teeth are decorated on the string holes at the end of the axes and Fushou.” [5] Fanbu is often used in Chinese history books to refer to ethnic minorities or foreign countries.

The resonance box of the *shuangqing* in SKOS is a flat octagonal cavity with boards on both sides. There are ten frets on the neck and it has four strings. As the inner two and outer two strings are set up to play notes in unison, it can only play two notes. The *shuangqing* in Suichang is the most similar in shape to the *shuangqing* (also known as *bajiaoqin* and *bajiaoxian*) in Putian and Quanzhou. They are a similar type, the only difference being that the resonance box is slightly smaller, although both have four strings. It should be noted that these three instruments are not unique to the music of SKOS. They have appeared and been used in different historical periods in local operas in Zhejiang.

3 Sonority Characteristics of the Characteristic Musical Instruments of Shifan of Kunqu Opera

Excluding the performance content of the tunes in Kunqu Opera (the example of Traditional ensemble for Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang shown in Fig. 5), SKOS is actually a form of instrumental music expression. “Shifan” has many other names, such as “Shipan” and “Shiyangjin.” Shifan, as a form of folk instrumental music performance, prevailed in the Nanjing and Suzhou regions during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. Folk instrumental music Shifan was originally composed for *Gu*, *Di*, *Ban*, *Luo*, and *Ba*—mainly percussion instruments. From the Chongzhen administration, influenced by local string instruments and Kunqu Opera, the Suzhou people created a “New Shifan,” and then added the *sheng*, *guan*, *saxian* and other musical instruments to it. SKOS should be produced under the influence of this new Shifan.

3.1 Timbre and Sonority of Traditional Kunqu Opera

In terms of the sonority characteristics of the instrumental music performance of SKOS, the three instruments, the *meyguan*, *tiqin* and *shuangqing*, have their own characteristics. As the characteristic musical instruments in the SKOS, they are “not only the direct expression of the local style and performance personality of this music type, but also an important basis for us to understand the historical levels of the traditional culture of music types” [5].

The *meyguan* is the only big double-reed blowpipe among the Shifan instruments. Although the *suona* was later added to some ensembles, there is a big difference in sonority. The faint trembling and chanting of the *meyguan* has an innately sorrowful tone, which is in contrast and balance with the clear and melodious timbre of the *qudi*, the other important wind instrument in the ensemble. Indeed, in some music forms for small instruments, such as *jiangnan sizhu*, it is difficult to put the *meyguan* and *qudi*



Fig. 5. Traditional ensemble for Shifan of Kunqu Opera in Suichang

together. Therefore, in the music of SKOS, arranging reed-whistle timbre and the edge-blowing timbre of the wind instruments together has to be recognized to reflect the unique sonority produced by the unique combination of their predecessors.

The *tiqin* is a board-vibrating bow-wiping instrument in terms of its sonority characteristics. As coconuts are not produced in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions, traditional *tiqin* are made with on-site materials. Dried gourds are used to make the pot and produce the deep and loud timbre. It can also well support the mid-bass part. As the traditional *tiqin* does not have a *qianjin*, it is not easy for the player to control the effective string length, and they must grasp the pitch through playing skills. Contemporary *tiqin* imitations do not explore the shape, structure, and craftsmanship of traditional *tiqin*. Instead, they have abandoned rustic gourds and use coconut shells to make the pots, and cover the resonance cavity with a thin board. The sound produced is bright and sharp, and similar to that of the *banhu*. Some even set up *qianjin*, which is far from the function and timbre of the traditional *tiqin*. Obscured by the sonority of the *erhu* and *banhu*, the sonority characteristics of the contemporary *tiqin* have been reduced and weakened. They only exist as a symbol of appellation or cultural symbol of the past.

The *shuangqing* is also a kind of plucked string musical instrument. Its sound is delicate, clear, and beautiful, like the pretty little girl of the ensemble. It uses its bright dotted sound to complement the thick granular sound of the *xiaosanxian* in the ensemble. The traditional *tiqin* and *shuangqing* both make sound by board vibration, and produce a different sonority characteristic in ensemble from membrane vibration. Its dense and crisp sound has a special and unique charm in a Kunqu Opera performance. Meanwhile, it complements and contrasts with the soft and solid timbre of the membrane vibrating *huqin* and *sanxian*. These are the excellent sonority characteristics of traditional Shifan of Kunqu Opera, which should be fully nurtured and preserved.

3.2 Timbre and Sonority of Modern Kunqu Opera

SKOS shows various phenomena under the non-material cultural heritage framework, “such as, its mechanism for the recognition of Suichang Shifan’s inheritance purpose, aesthetic concepts, and local and regional music culture by various subjects, such as folk artists, governments, professionals, and schools. It also shows that the changes in music and social cultural ecology led to the social problem of how Suichang Kunqu Opera was transformed in the 20th century” [6].

Performances of Shifan of Kunqu Opera are usually temporary, improvisational, and spontaneous. In 2008, the Suichang County Government funded the Ancient Yuefang for the Shifan of Kunqu Opera in SuichangCo., Ltd. Together with the County Non-Material Cultural Heritage Protection Center, to give this cultural heritage some protection and greater artistic content and appreciation. The company was officially opened to the public in December 2009.

The traditional SKOS can be described as follows:

“It is an instrumental music performance form, in which eight instruments, such as the *sheng*, *xiao*, *jiuyunluo*, *meyuan*, *tiqin*, *guban*, *shuangqing*, and *sanxian*, play several tunes in turn. As the repertoire is mainly Kunqu tunes, it is also called ‘Kunqu Opera–Suichang Shifan.’ According to experts’ research, ‘Kunqu Opera–Suichang Shifan’ is

different from the current popular Kunqu Opera. Its performance style and content are unique and it is a valuable folk cultural heritage of Suichang” [7].

However, the modern Shifan ensemble may have overlooked the valuable sonority characteristics of traditional Shifan of Kunqu Opera. Under the name of developing and building a cultural brand, grand sounds and scenes are often pursued, moving closer to the establishment of a so-called Chinese folk orchestra. Excessive use of board vibrating plucked instruments, such as the *zheng*, *yangqin*, *pipa*, *yueqin*, and *ruan*, not only in terms of types of instruments but also in terms of the number of instruments, has caused the timbre of the original instruments, the *meyguan*, *tiqin*, and *shuangqing*, to be obscured. These seemingly fashionable practices ignore the true timbre and sonority of traditional Kunqu music ensembles because the most valuable ancient sonority memories have been roughly stripped away. Instead, it is regarded as a modern innovation. For example, the ensemble composition of the Ancient Yuefang for SKOS is as follows:

1. Wind instruments: *di* (two), *sheng* (two), *meyguan* (one).
2. Stringed instruments: *tiqin* (two), *erhu* (four), *zhonghu* (one), *gehu* (one).
3. Plucked instruments: *shuangqing* (two), *xiaosanxian* (one), *pipa* (two), *yueqin* (two), *guzheng* (one), *zhongruan* (two), *daruan* (one).
4. Percussion instruments: *kungu* (one *gu* and one *ban*), *xiaojiuyunluo* (one), *dajiuyunluo* (one), *tanggu*, *daluo*, etc.

The Ancient Yuefang for Shifan of Kunqu Opera has recently added the *erhu*, *zhonghu*, *bass huqin* (*gehu*), *pipa*, *yueqin*, *zheng*, *zhongruan*, *dayuan*, and *dajiuyun-gong*. The number of musical instruments can be as many as 30. From the performance form and content to the environment, the ensemble's size, structure, and composition has become novel and grand, and the sound and sonority tends to be rich and gorgeous. However, it can be said that it has fundamentally changed the connotation carrier, sonority characteristics, its original folk functions, and the cultural significance of the traditional instrumental music. Of course, people's esthetic concepts have also changed over time; however, more importantly, the traditional cultural awareness rooted in the folk soil must not be weakened or even genetically modified in the name of modernity. These are precisely the shortcomings and deficiencies of the current ignorant pursuit of elegant effects in Chinese traditional cultures.

At present, the cultural connotation of folk customs and heritage are gradually weakening. SKOS is facing the dilemma of declining. There is an urgent need to take appropriate measures to return it to its inheritance in the traditional sense. However, inheritance and promotion lie in protection, and innovation does not mean abuse. If it is at the cost of sacrificing the charm of the sonority of traditional Shifan of Kunqu Opera, the short-sighted pursuit of grandeur in the composition of the ensemble is a mistake in the context of non-material musical cultural heritage. We cannot lose our awareness of the need to protect the precious cultural heritage left to us by our ancestors. Preserving their original form is retaining their cultural roots. The development of non-material cultural heritage projects is to further promote the excellent traditional culture of China, fully integrate and give play to the advantages of regional cultural resources, cautiously innovate, and showcase their characteristics. When we regard SKOS, which was originally a folk culture, as a product with high development value, and try our best to build a cultural brand that embodies regional characteristics, we must not separate it from its

original cultural context. Otherwise, in the end, it will be at the cost of losing its original cultural characteristics.

4 Conclusion

SKOS is mostly a touring performance at folk temple fairs and sometimes at festive hall meetings. From its display content to its form of expression, it shows high historical and cultural research value. The small traditional ensembles of Shifan of Kunqu Opera have experienced hundreds of years of practice and inheritance, whether in terms of musical instrument composition or sonority characteristics. With its unique composition of musical instruments, it shows refined simplicity, balance, contrast, and complementarity, and exudes a long-lasting fragrance and charm. For the typical musical instruments in the SKOS, we should work hard to restore the ancient system and retain their original shape, structure, and ensemble composition, as well as the musicians' performance skills. Only when the hardware and software are preserved, will we be able to preserve the sonority characteristics of Shifan music, and as a result, the essence of the traditional culture of SKOS will be passed on. Shifan of Kunqu Opera came from folklore, so it should be returned to the natural traditional folklore and passed on in the living folklore culture. Only by returning its folklore function, can we preserve the spiritual homeland of Kunqu Opera, which has existed for hundreds of years. This is the fundamental significance of the protection and inheritance of non-material cultural heritage.

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