



# Analysis of the Development Status of Changshu Guqin

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**Abstract.** Changshu, also known as Qinchuan, has been a performance exhibition and research center of the Chinese guqin since the Tang and Song dynasties. As the hometown of the Guqin, the history of guqin can date back to the mid to late Ming Dynasty. Nowadays, Changshu has excellent guqin makers and inchoate workshops to promote the guqin business and bring guqin into the public view. Whereas, there are many problems in the industry that cannot be ignored. This article analyses the current situation of guqin in Changshu in terms of the conservation measures that have been implemented, guqin makers, development flaws and suggestions for countermeasures.

**Keywords:** Changshu · guqin production · Yushan School

## 1 Introduction

According to legend, Confucius' southern disciple, Yan Yan (Zi You), a native of Changshu, was appreciated by Confucius for his "rule by strings and songs", which he civilized the people of Wucheng. He then brought this idea and practice to the Wu region in the south of the Yangtze River, so Changshu was also called Qinchuan. In the mid to late Ming Dynasty, the famous Yushan School of Guqin was born in Changshu, which advocated a clear, light and distant, broad and peaceful style, and was loved and respected by many literati and scholars. Leading the development direction of guqin for 400 years, Changshu is regarded as the center of Chinese guqin performance and research and the hometown of the Chinese Guqin named by UNESCO.

At present, domestic academic circles, including local scholars, have not yet reviewed the overall development of the research on Changshu Guqin and practical investigation. Based on this, in 2021, we set up a research team, conducted detailed field visits to enterprises and individuals engaged in guqin work in Changshu, recorded 10 h of video interviews, and completed more than 30,000 words of interview reports. Subsequently, we also went to Yangzhou and other places to learn the most advanced guqin technology and culture in China. After more than a year of research activities, in this paper, we put forward the factors and existing problems in the development of Changshu Guqin, and put forward some suggestions for its future development.

## 2 Success Factors

### 2.1 Government Support and Social Co-creation

To do a good job, one must first sharpen one's tools. In order to showcase Changshu's guqin skills and promote Changshu's guqin culture, the Changshu government has collaborated with folk guqin makers to build the Changshu Guqin Making Skills Heritage Exhibition Centre. The guqin makers from the Yushan Tianchi Guqin Workshop demonstrate the process, so that the public can see the process and learn about the culture of the guqin in a very visual way. At the same time, for some individual workshops, the Changshu government has also supported them by providing spatial and financial support. In addition to government support, schools in Changshu have also been involved in learning about the culture at various stages, and have organized a series of lectures and activities on the subject of Guqin in Schools. The only university in Changshu with a unique geographical location and educational function, Changshu Institution of Technology has taken on the important task of passing on the guqin, and has offered a pan optional course in music education since 1998, in which many students have been able to appreciate the ancient rhythms of traditional culture and develop a love for the guqin.

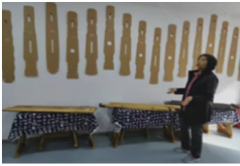


### 2.2 Artisanal Craftsmanship and Innovative Exploration

At present, according to our research, some of the mature guqin institutes in Changshu are: the Yushan Tongsheng Guqin Studio, the Yushan Songxian Company and the Yushan Tianchi Guqin Workshop as shown in Table 1.

The Yushan Tong Sheng Guqin Studio in Changshu is a personal workshop where guqins are made by hand. As a cultural project supported by the government, the studio also takes on the function of demonstrating and exchanging the culture of guqin playing. Ms. Ji Lijuan studied with Mr. Weng Shoucang, the first president of the Yushan Guqin Society, and her interest in guqin was sparked by her interest in playing the guqin, and she has been researching and studying the culture of guqin for ten years. Since the guqin is made by an individual, it takes about a year to make a fine guqin. If there are deviations and improvements need to be made, it will take at least two to three years to complete. As a representative inheritor of Changshu's intangible cultural heritage, Ms. Ji has always been on the path of spreading traditional culture and is an example of a guqin maker in Changshu.

Gu Yufan, from Yushan Songxian Company, is a young man of the post-90s generation. He grew up in a family with a strong cultural atmosphere and has been influenced by traditional Chinese culture. He learned traditional instruments such as the erhu and the flute during his primary school years, and later developed a keen interest in the guqin when he was exposed to Guqin. He first learned to play the instrument under Ma Yichao, the director of the Yushan Guqin Club, and then learned to play the instrument on his own by searching through ancient texts and consulting guqin masters around him. He has now set up his own company and brand, Yushan Songxian. The instruments he makes reflect the individuality and uniqueness of young people, in line with traditional rules and modern aesthetics, and are a true inheritance and promotion of good traditional culture. He has also been actively involved in the promotion of guqin culture, and has

**Table 1.** Survey Form of Changshu Guqin Institutions

Agency name	Person in charge	Guqin Production Quantity (piece/year)	Social honor	live pictures
Yushan Tong Sheng Guqin Studio	Ji Lijuan	≤10	In 2018, it was rated as the representative inheritor of Changshu City's intangible cultural heritage	
Yushan Songxian Company	Gu Yufan	≤10	In 2020, he was approved as the training object of the second batch of local talents in Jiangsu Province and three-belt experts; in 2023, he was awarded the title of Gusu Local Talents	
Yushan Tianchi Guqin Workshop	Hongyu Xie	≥100	In 2019, Tianchi Guqin Workshop was established as a key cultural and creative industry supported by Changshu City	

cooperated with Changshu Cultural Relics Bureau to carry out public service activities such as demonstrations of the guqin, spreading the charm of guqin culture [1].

Yushan Tianchi Guqin Workshop, named after the founder of the Yushan School of Guqin-Yan Tianchi, is a production oriented guqin workshop. The founder, Hongyu Xie, who is now in his seventies, became interested in traditional Chinese culture and Ming and Qing dynasty furniture when he was a young carpenter, and then started hacking the guqin by chance when chatting with a friend. Today his workshop has produced over 1,000 guqins in a dozen styles, including Zhongni, Fuxi, Hundun and Zhonghe. In order to make the instruments loose, transparent and puff, he has also created his own instrument cultivation device, in which a dozen instruments are bundled together and plucked by rotating the strings to simulate human plucking, thus loosening the woods and giving the instruments a more rhythmic sound. The guqin maintenance device proves that innovation while respecting tradition can be a good way to integrate the guqin into

modern society and give it a new lease of life. Through participation in fairs and other events in recent years, the workshop has gradually promoted its reputation, with guqin lovers from all over the world visiting and buying.

Thanks to the development of transportation and global trade, there has been a break with the traditional preference for making guqin from cedarwood and parasol wood. Changshu guqin makers have access to an ever-increasing range of woods. On account of the vast expanse of China, materials from the north and south have their own unique properties, and there is a wide variety of materials from all over the world, so knowing the characteristics of each material and adapting it to the needs of the individual has given life to the traditional culture of the guqin. Nowadays, the wide variety and variety of forms of guqin has attracted the attention of many guqin lovers and has become a major tool in making Changshu the home of the guqin. From the selection of materials to the completion of the production, it had to go through more than ten processes, two or three years or even four or five years of polishing before a guqin is perfected and comes into the public view. Almost all these processes are done by hand. In today's fickle society, many people are looking for immediate benefits in terms of low investment, short lead time and quick results, but making a guqin, passing on the craft and promoting guqin culture is not something that can be achieved overnight, and requires the explorations of a guqin maker day in and day out.

It is because of the combined efforts of the government, the society and individuals that Changshu has developed a certain capacity for the guqin industry, which has resulted in a certain potential market and some economic and social benefits, contributing to the hometown of the Guqin as it is called. However, during our research, we also found several problems with the Changshu guqin industry.

### **3 Existing Problem**

#### **3.1 Lack of Talent for Guqin Makers Unable to Fill the Demand Gap**

Zhu Changwen, a famous scholar and guqin master of the Song dynasty, wrote in *The History of the Qin - The Perfection of Beauty*: The guqin has four beauties: the first is good material, the second is good hacking, the third is wonderful fingers, and fourth is a righteous heart. If the four beauties are available, then the qin will be the best in the world, and it will be able to be used for all things. It is clear that good playing and good hacking are inseparable and closely linked. If a person does not know how to play a guqin, he will not be able to distinguish between good and bad sound, and will not be able to appreciate the adequacy of resonance and the beauty of tone; likewise, he will not be able to think about the practicality of the guqin from the point of view of the person playing it: how it feels in the hand, whether the strings are finger-resistant. It is not enough to be good at playing, as the art of playing a guqin is a comprehensive skill that combines culture, art, music, aesthetics, woodworking, carving and lacquer techniques. To become a qualified luthier you first need to be able to woodwork and have a basic knowledge of woodworking and the skills to use woodworking tools. Big planes, small shovels; shaping the exterior, digging the belly. Secondly, you need to have some skills in the fine arts as well. The guqin itself is a soothing and elegant instrument, with both cultivative and aesthetic uses. If you want to make a beautiful instrument,

aesthetics is essential. In addition to this, lacquer work is one of the most complicated processes, as the ancient method of making a guqin requires more than 20 strokes of lacquer, and ninety per cent of people are allergic to raw lacquer during the lacquer stage, resulting in swelling. Furthermore, due to the low social recognition of the profession of guqin production, young people lack a sense of career achievement, are unable to realize their self-worth well, and have unstable income. These series of reasons have led most young people who have never had contact with the guqin production industry, resulting in a shortage of professional talents in the guqin production industry, unable to fill the vacancies in related positions, and thus hindering the development of the industry [2].

### **3.2 The Entry Threshold of the Guqin Production Industry is Low and the Market is not Regulated Enough**

Guqin production is a production process of the intangible cultural heritage of guqin. The appreciation space and cultural ancillary value it possesses are immeasurable, especially in the collection and sales market of mid to high-end guqin. However, due to the low entry threshold for guqin production, any skilled carpenter can make guqin shapes, although the quality of guqin timbre cannot be guaranteed. Driven by people's pursuit of profit, uncompliant guqin instruments emerge endlessly in the market, forming a mixed market situation. On the one hand, the qin maker used the gimmick of famous producers to falsely quote and deceive consumers. On the other hand, freshmen lack relevant knowledge in the field of guqin, unable to distinguish issues such as guqin timbre and guqin paint, which can easily lead to chaos in the guqin trading market. Therefore, the field of guqin production particularly requires the supervision and management of relevant departments, and the standardization of market systems [3].

### **3.3 The Low Level of Popularization of Guqin Culture and Insufficient Marketing and Publicity**

In recent years, publicity for the guqin in Changshu has mostly focused on performances, compositions and demonstrations of the instrument, while publicity for the hacking of the instrument is somewhat lacking. The lack of access to information makes it difficult to study the instrument in depth. From the current survey, the government of Changshu has allocated funds for the preservation and inheritance of the guqin art, while the financial support for the industry is very limited and the policies are not perfect. The city government has allocated special funds for the cultural industry to the Tianchi Guqin Factory, but the results have not been significant, and as it is a one-off grant, the follow-up policies are not perfect. To this end, our research team has discussed and proposed relevant responses to improve these issues[4].

## **4 Countermeasures and Suggestions**

### **4.1 Establishing a Sound System for Training Guqin Playing Talents**

At present, the process of guqin production is mainly taught on a one-to-one basis between master and apprentice, which is not conducive to the transmission and development of production skills due to the limited production techniques and the energy of

luthiers, and its popularity is narrow. In order to improve the efficiency of the training of luthiers, a system of talent extraction and a one-to-many transmission system should be established. As a highly skilled craftsman in woodworking, carving and lacquering, the selection of luthiers can be focused on those who have a foundation in the respective crafts. In addition to this, it is not enough to be a luthier to have the craft of making luthiers, but it is also necessary to learn about antiques, language and culture, food and drink, garden art, landscape and nature, and other arts. In addition to the one-to-many heritage [5] teaching, there should also be cultural training courses beyond guqin production.

For primary and secondary school students, we can add a section on the appreciation of guqin music and guqin making in music classes, and organize visits to guqin art museums and workshops to expose students to the culture of guqin and guqin making from an early age, so that the responsibility of preserving intangible cultural heritage is firmly rooted in their beliefs. The master will then lead a team of students in a one-to-many way to train them.

#### **4.2 Establishing a Sound Marketing Mechanism for the Guqin**

In order to improve the low threshold of entry into the guqin industry and the lack of regulation in the market, on the one hand, we must strengthen the publicity of guqin through various channels, raise people's awareness of the guqin, so that they can have a certain ability to judge the merits of the guqin and avoid falling into the trap when trading in the guqin market. On the other hand, we must strengthen the supervision and management of the cultural market: firstly, we must improve the laws and regulations of the cultural market. On the other hand, the supervision and management of the cultural market should be strengthened. We need to crack down on illegal practices and protect the legitimate rights of consumers and operators. In addition, the market authorities should regularly inspect the adult guqin sold to the public and grant certificates of recognition to studios and manufacturers who meet the specifications, thus promoting the standardization of the guqin market. At the same time, administrators and enforcers should strengthen their own management, act in accordance with the law and focus their efforts on building a sound cultural market for the guqin together [6].

#### **4.3 Popularizing the Knowledge of Guqin Culture and Let the Public Have a Deeper Understanding of Guqin Culture**

In order to speed up the pace of the guqin culture into the life of the public and vigorously extend the guqin culture promotion activities, on the one hand, we can expand the influence of the guqin culture by displaying the works of local guqin players, combining the science and technology museum with the guqin museum to form a 3D guqin demonstration, and jointly organising large-scale guqin activities with neighbouring cities to fill the publicity gap. On the other hand, the Changshu guqin should be actively combined with the local cultural characteristics of Suzhou, such as Su embroidery and Kunqu, to innovate the mode of cultural promotion and take advantage of the traditional cultural linkage to attract the public to participate and learn about the guqin culture. In addition, the continuous progress and development of the Internet has led to the popularity of

a series of applications such as Tik Tok, Weibo and Little Red Booklitle, which have added new ways of cultural dissemination. The Changshu guqin can make full use of the internet to spread its culture by creating short videos and participating in popular topics to promote awareness and increase public influence [7].

## 5 Conclusion

The development of the guqin culture in Changshu to date has not been possible without the efforts and contributions of each generation. When he visited young luthier Gu Yufan, he mentioned that there are many luthiers in Changshu, but not many luthiers, and that it is something that their generation would like to do. Nowadays, there are a lot of historical materials left behind by their predecessors, and they are rather disorganized, so he also expressed his wish to do his best to collate and improve the information on guqin playing, so that the hometown of the Guqin can have a complete and detailed information. The completion of this worthwhile project will also make it easier for those who come after him to access the information. In every era, the inheritors have different measures and practices, but all of them share the same mission, which is to keep the art and culture of guqin playing alive and well in Changshu.

Today, the luthiers of Changshu have the experience and historical materials inherited from their predecessors, which is standing on the shoulders of giants. They are dedicated to their work and are meticulous in their approach to luthier, which is the spirit of excellence; they respect traditional culture without being bound by it, and have the drive and courage to innovate and inject fresh blood into it, which is the creative spirit of pursuing excellence; they have the heart for future generations, fixing the materials and passing them on to future generations, which is the responsibility and mission to pass on.

The reasons why guqin makers get involved with guqin playing vary. Some of them first played the guqin and then started to work on it halfway; some gave up their jobs to devote themselves to the guqin because they loved it; some came into contact with the guqin by chance and started to learn to play it. Some of them have taken a systematic approach to the study of the guqin, while others have chosen an industrialized mode of operation to promote the guqin to the public. At present, the guqin industry in Changshu is in its infancy, with both opportunities and challenges. The development and promotion of the guqin cannot be achieved by the efforts of just a few guqin masters, but more and more people interested in guqin culture should join the industry. In addition to this, the community at large should also take an active part in promoting traditional culture as their own, adding a splash of colour to Changshu's culture. Finally, it is also necessary to take advantage of the government's policy to make Changshu worthy of its title as the hometown of the guqin and to take a big step forward in the field of guqin production[8].

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