Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies
ISSN: 3080-986X (Print), ISSN: 3080-9878 (Online) | Vol. 2, No. 3, 2026

An Analysis of Regional Cultural Differentiation of Huqin Instruments: Erhu, Xiqin and Morin Khuur From a Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: Originating from the nomadic production system of the northern Xí people during the Wei, Jin, and Northern-Southern Dynasties, the ancient Xiqin is a highly representative early bowed string instrument in ancient China and the common ancestor of today's erhu, Korean Xiqin, and Mongolian horsehead fiddle. After the Wei and Jin periods, frequent migrations and deep cultural integration among northern nomadic groups intensified regional cultural exchanges. The ancient Xiqin, originally rooted in the northern grasslands, gradually spread outward, reaching the agricultural heartland of central China, the mountainous Korean settlements in northeastern China, and the vast Mongolian steppes. Due to significant differences in natural geography, production modes, and aesthetic systems across various regions, the ancient Xiqin did not remain fixed in its original form upon arrival in different areas. Instead, it underwent continuous adaptive improvements and artistic reconfigurations tailored to local cultural characteristics. Over time, prolonged regional influences and artistic accumulations led to distinct artistic divergences in instrument structure, acoustic properties, performance practices, and folk applications for this originally unified instrument, ultimately giving rise to several regionally identifiable and artistically independent branches of the huqin family. Based on the theoretical framework of comparative musicology, and integrating existing academic research with primary data collected through fieldwork, this study explores the internal driving mechanisms behind regional cultural differences in shaping the artistic evolution of these three huqin types, focusing on four core dimensions: instrument evolution, craftsmanship features, performance aesthetics, and folk cultural values. It systematically summarizes the key patterns underlying their localized development. The research clarifies the deep logic connecting regional humanistic environments with traditional musical instrument evolution, and identifies the core characteristics of indigenous adaptation and coexistence of multiple forms in the development of related instruments. The findings provide solid theoretical support and practical guidance for the living preservation of ethnic minority traditional instruments and the inheritance and innovation of huqin art.

Keywords: Huqin instrument, Haegeum, horse head string instrument, regional culture, cultural differentiation.

1. Introduction

As a unique nomadic musical instrument created by the Xie ethnic group in the northern region during the 4th century AD, the ancient Xie lute holds a foundational position in the entire guqin system. It not only has the earliest origin time but also has the most complete musical development lineage, laying the core foundation for the evolution and development of all subsequent branches of guqin. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, as the channels of interaction between the northern and southern ethnic groups continuously expanded, this originally confined instrument began to break through regional boundaries and initiated a large-scale cross-regional dissemination process. By the Song dynasty, the ancient Xie lute had deeply integrated into the folk entertainment life, and with its highly adaptable performance characteristics, it became one of the most widely spread and most stable folk stringed instruments with a well-established inheritance system. The complex and diverse regional cultural environments have led to the development of the ancient Xie lute showing strong differentiation features. Its dissemination and evolution process has never formed a unified and fixed standard form, but has continuously completed shape reshaping and artistic upgrading under the nourishment of different regional cultures. During the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, the folk performing arts were continuously enriched, with diverse demands for stage performances, folk folk music, and opera and storytelling arts, constantly pushing the ancient Xie lute to optimize its instrument structure and innovate its performance techniques. Eventually, in different regions, multiple distinct styles and independent systems of guqin categories were nurtured [1].

By examining the development history of Chinese musical instruments, it is not difficult to find that the widely popular erhu, Korean Xie lute and horse-head lute all originated from the thousand-year iteration of the ancient Xie lute. All three have always inherited the core principle of the ancient Xie lute's double-string structure and horsehair rubbing sound production. Even though they have completely identical artistic roots, under the long-term nourishment of different regional cultures, these originally similar in shape musical instruments gradually broke away from the basic practical functions and grew into independent and well-structured ethnic musical categories. Looking at the current research status of the academic community, most studies still focus on a single type of guqin for specialized analysis, mostly discussing performance techniques, acoustic features, and stage application value. There are few studies that incorporate the three types of homologous guqins into a unified analysis framework to deeply explore the shaping logic of regional environment on the artistic form, aesthetic style, and cultural function of musical instruments. Based on this research gap, this article takes regional cultural differentiation as the core entry point, combines field observations during field research and historical research verification, systematically examines the local evolution paths of the three types of guqins, analyzes

the multi-dimensional influence of natural geography and human ecology on the development of musical instruments, with the aim of providing new research ideas for the diversified inheritance and innovative development of guqin art [2].

2. Origin and Trace: The Geographical Differentiation Pattern beneath the Common Origin Base

2.1. The Common Origin of the Ancient Xiqin

By cross-referencing the recorded historical documents with the unearthed musical instruments, the original development process of the ancient Xihui lute can be determined. This nomadic musical instrument, born in the Xie ethnic settlement area in the western Liaoning and northern Hebei regions, became a stringed instrument with the widest cultural influence and the most profound impact in ancient northern culture during the several hundred years from the Wei-Jin period to the Sui-Tang dynasties. With its simple structure and unique sound, it became the most widely spread and influential stringed instrument in the northern cultural radiation area. The basic shape and production model established by it formed the core standard of the Xihui-type musical instruments. The subsequent designs and technological innovations of various Xihui-type musical instruments all took the original structure of the ancient Xihui lute as an important reference. During the reigns of Emperor Gao Tai and Emperor Kai Yuan in the Tang Dynasty, the northern nomadic ethnic groups frequently migrated southward, and the cultural integration between the north and the south reached its peak. The ancient Xihui lute was thus introduced to the core area of the Huohe River Riverine culture in the north, and was recorded as "Ji Qin" in folk literature, officially integrating into the Chinese cultural system [3].

After entering the mature artistic ecosystem of the north, the ancient Xihui lute quickly adapted to various artistic scenarios such as dance performances and opera accompaniment in the local area, completely breaking the single attribute of nomadic musical instruments and gradually becoming a popular folk instrument widely used in the north. The prosperity of court music and opera in the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty not only further expanded the dissemination boundaries of the ancient Xihui lute, but also promoted its production technology towards refinement and standardization. Based on the accumulated artistic experience of previous generations, the double-string fixed structure and horsehair wiping-string sound production mechanism pioneered by the ancient Xihui lute officially established the common production standards and performance guidelines for Xihui-type musical instruments, laying an indispensable foundation for the subsequent optimization of techniques and the construction of the artistic system of the erhu, Xihui lute, and horsehead fiddle.

2.2. The Differentiated Inheritance Paths of the Three Regions

The localization development of instrumental music is always deeply intertwined with the natural endowment of the region, the production mode, and the folk culture. The humanistic characteristics are the core key that determines the formation of the artistic style of the musical instrument. The unique mountainous and isolated landform in the Northeast Korean ethnic settlement area has formed a relatively independent cultural circle, making it difficult for foreign culture to deeply penetrate, and allowing the original indigenous folk culture to be completely preserved. This pure and stable cultural ecology has maximally retained the original shape and traditional nomadic performance mode of the ancient Xieqin. Through long-term folk practices, the local people integrated the Xieqin into various scenarios such as sacrificial rituals, folk songs and dances, and daily artistic performances, continuously fine-tuning and improving it, gradually establishing a highly recognizable and distinctive Korean Xieqin art system with its own unique style [4].

The cultural resources reserves and artistic development demands of different regions have led to completely different inheritance and improvement directions for the ancient Xieqin. The Northeast region pays more attention to preserving the nomadic cultural origin of the ancient Xieqin, maximizing the retention of its original artistic style; the Central Plains region, relying on mature opera industries and exquisite folk handicrafts, has carried out comprehensive structural optimization and artistic upgrading of the ancient Xieqin. In the mid-Ming Dynasty, after generations of folk artists' practical refinement and innovation, the shape of the ancient Xieqin became complete, fully adapting to the aesthetic preferences of the Central Plains people and the performance needs of the opera stage. The basic shape of the modern erhu was thus officially determined. Different from the above two, the Mongolian people, based on the production and living characteristics of the grassland nomadism and their local aesthetic traditions, have undergone continuous adjustment and improvement for hundreds of years, eventually cultivating a style that is uniquely distinctive the horse-head fiddle. From the overall evolution pattern over thousands of years, the artistic forms of the three types of qin today are all the inevitable results of traditional instrumental music adapting to the regional environment, integrating local culture, and undergoing long-term natural iteration [5].

3. Form and Craft: Variations in Object Forms Enabled by Production Models

3.1. The Simple and Practical Form of the Xiqin (a Traditional Korean Musical Instrument)

The complex terrain and cold, dry climate of the northeastern mountains have shaped the pragmatic and simple development characteristics of local folk art. This is most evident in the design of the Xiqin, a traditional Korean musical instrument. Through on-site research and observation, it can be seen that northeastern folk musical instruments are mainly used for daily improvisational performances and outdoor folk cultural shows, and do not require complex stage adaptation structures [6]. Therefore, the Xiqin has completely inherited the original structure of the ancient Xiqin, discarding all redundant decorations. The overall design is centered on practical functions. The lightweight and exquisite body of the instrument, as well as the structure without a heavy load, make this musical instrument highly portable. It can perfectly adapt to the free and life-oriented entertainment performance scenarios of the mountain people and is in line with the spontaneous and natural development characteristics

of local folk art.

In the complete folk cultural system of the Korean ethnic group, the Xiqin holds an indispensable core position. It is the core accompanying instrument for agricultural music performances, folk dances, and clan sacrifices in traditional scenes, and plays an important role in continuing the folk cultural heritage and inheriting the ethnic culture. The simple and plain shape of the instrument, combined with the warm and soft original sound, is highly consistent with the solemn and restrained, elegant and harmonious folk atmosphere of the Korean ethnic group [7]. Unlike the erhu and the horse-head fiddle, which actively adapt to professional stages and continuously upgrade, the Korean Xiqin has always remained rooted in the folk countryside and has never deliberately modified the instrument structure and appearance to cater to stage aesthetics. This adherence to the original practical form features not only directly reflects the simple and pragmatic lifestyle of the Korean ethnic group but also completely retains the unique folk cultural imprint of the northeastern region.

3.2. The Well-structured and Exquisite Shape of the Zhongyuan Erhu

The well-developed agricultural system, exquisite folk handicrafts, and abundant traditional opera culture resources in the Central Plains region provided unique and favorable conditions for the evolution of the shape and improvement of the craftsmanship of the erhu. Compared to the rough and simple original structure of the ancient xiqin, the later improved erhu completed systematic technological innovations and structural optimizations, gradually establishing a standardized and refined modern musical instrument production system. Among all the improvements and innovations, the addition of the thousand-pound structure was the most groundbreaking. This design effectively expanded the resonant efficiency of the instrument, enriched the melodic layers, completely compensated for the weak acoustic performance and monotonous melody of the ancient xiqin, and significantly enhanced the artistic expressiveness and scene adaptability of the erhu [8].

The mature wood selection techniques and python skin covering technology in the Jiangnan region continuously optimized the resonant efficiency of the erhu cavity, creating its characteristic sound of transparency, richness, warmth, and elegance, which can be adapted to various artistic performances and creative scenarios. The standardized and uniform shape gave the erhu strong universal attributes. It can meet the professional performance needs of opera accompaniment, stage solo performances, and instrumental ensemble, as well as the popular entertainment scenarios of folk self-entertainment. By comparing the shape characteristics of the three similar-origin erhus, it can be seen that the Korean xiqin focuses on folk practicality and simple structure, the horse-head fiddle focuses on adaptation to the natural environment and rough shape, while the erhu, with its refined production techniques and diversified scene adaptability, prominently showcases the core characteristics of the Central Plains agricultural culture, such as meticulousness, inclusiveness, and close connection with the people [9].

3.3. The Environmental-adapted Shape of the Mongolian Horse-head Fiddle

The production mode of the nomadic people in the grassland, which follows the grass and water sources, inherently has a high degree of mobility. Coupled with the harsh climate in the region, which has a significant temperature difference between day and night and strong winds, higher requirements are imposed on the durability, portability, and environmental adaptability of musical instruments. The design of the horse-head fiddle precisely adapts to the special natural environment and production mode of the grassland. The slender body of the fiddle combined with the wear-resistant trapezoidal sound box can effectively resist the erosion of the complex climate in the grassland and ensure the stability of the instrument's long-term use; the lightweight overall structure significantly reduces the carrying pressure for the nomads during migration, outdoor performances, etc., and is fully compatible with the dynamic lifestyle of the nomadic people.

The long-term nourishment of the natural environment and the accumulation of thousands of years of ethnic culture have jointly shaped the unique form and acoustic characteristics of the horse-head fiddle [10]. The iconic horse-head carving pattern on the fiddle head is a cultural totem passed down by the Mongolian people for thousands of years, giving the instrument extremely high ethnic identification. In terms of acoustic structure, the horse-head fiddle abandons the snake-skin cavity design of the erhu and adopts a thick sheepskin covering for the sound box. This structure that better suits the grassland sound field can produce a unique sound with deep and distant, clear and long tones. Overall, the shape of the horse-head fiddle is simple and grand, natural and plain, which not only fully meets the practical demands of nomadic life but also vividly interprets the core of the Mongolian grassland culture of respecting nature, being open and pure, and free and unrestrained [11].

4. Aesthetic Characteristics: Variations in Performance Styles Cultivated by Folk Culture

4.1. The Qi Qin of the Korean Ethnic Group: A Gentle and Prudent Folk Aesthetic Style

The regional humanistic ecology and ethnic character have always subtly shaped the artistic style of local instrumental music, and are also the core driving force for the long-term inheritance of the musical instrument's characteristics. The relatively isolated geographical layout of the Korean ethnic settlement area effectively prevented the strong impact of foreign cultures. The long-term peaceful and stable local humanistic environment gave rise to the gentle and calm temperament and the soothing and simple lifestyle of the people. Under the long-term influence of this folk atmosphere, the xiqin gradually formed a fixed performance style that is simple and elegant, smooth and expansive. It is worth noting that various folk rituals of the Korean ethnic group have always been solemn and restrained, emphasizing the implicit expression of emotions and rejecting exaggerated and expansive artistic forms. This unique aesthetic temperament perfectly aligns with the clear and gentle acoustic characteristics of the xiqin.

Combining on-site listening and performance observation, the sound of the xiqin is clear and soft, the melody and rhythm are smooth and slow, the performance techniques are simple and restrained, completely avoiding the commercial performance form of excessive showmanship [12]. The

overall aesthetic tone is warm and restrained, and it can precisely adapt to various folk performances, dance accompaniment and sacrificial rituals of the Korean ethnic group. After thousands of years of folk accumulation and cultural inheritance, the artistic characteristics of the xiqin have deeply integrated into the local aesthetic system of the Korean ethnic group, becoming an artistic symbol with strong ethnic identification, directly presenting the traditional aesthetic paradigm of the plain and gentle, clear and restrained nature of the Northeast ethnic minorities.

4.2. Han Ethnicity Erhu: A harmonious and Inclusive Aesthetic Style of Ritual and Music

The core attributes of the Central Plains ritual and music culture, which are inclusive and open, and capable of absorbing various strengths, have provided diverse nourishment for the artistic development of the erhu. This has also endowed it with far greater artistic plasticity and scene adaptability than the xiqin and mahoutun. The xiqin and mahoutun developed based on a single ethnic culture, with strong regional and ethnic characteristics, and relatively fixed artistic styles. In contrast, the artistic development of the erhu is not constrained by a single region or folk custom. Its performance format is flexible and diverse, and the dimensions of musical style compatibility are extremely broad. With its delicate and rich high-quality sound, the erhu can perfectly adapt to folk music works from different regions and styles across the country. Its artistic advantages in transcending styles and regions are particularly prominent [13].

The strong artistic inclusiveness enables the erhu to balance the differentiated aesthetic characteristics of northern and southern folk music. It can not only interpret the gentle and graceful, lively and elegant water-town of Jiangnan pipa music, but also express the expansive, heroic and magnificent regional features of northern folk music. Its diverse expressiveness is unmatched by other types of pipas. The rich performance techniques and full sound layers enable the erhu to simultaneously adapt to folk mass entertainment performances and professional stage art presentations. It is precisely due to this unique compatibility advantage that the erhu gradually breaks through the dual constraints of region and ethnicity, evolving from regional folk instruments to a mainstream ethnic instrument that embodies the aesthetic of Central Plains ritual and music and radiates throughout the country.

4.3. Mongolian Horsehead Fiddle: The Majestic and Vast Aesthetic Style of the Grassland

The natural landforms shape the artistic conception, the national character determines the playing temperament, and the vast and open terrain features of the grassland, combined with the open-minded and generous character passed down by the Mongolian people for generations, jointly constitute the grand and expansive, and ethereal aesthetic core of the horse-head fiddle. The vast and boundless grassland space naturally suits the long, gentle and natural melody form; the free and bold ethnic characteristics of the Mongolian people also give the horse-head fiddle a thick and transparent, extremely penetrating sound characteristic and a flexible and lively performance rhythm [14].

The acoustic sound of the horse-head fiddle can deeply integrate with the natural ecology of the grassland, creating a quiet and vast, and profound auditory effect, forming regional artistic characteristics that cannot be replicated by other types of bowed string instruments. In the complete Mongolian folk culture system, the horse-head fiddle always occupies a core artistic position and is an indispensable core performing instrument for large-scale folk activities such as the Nadam Festival, the sacrific, and ethnic celebrations. Long-term folk application and regional cultural nourishment have continuously strengthened the exclusive artistic attribute of the horse-head fiddle for the grassland, and its ethereal and vast performance style vividly interprets the national spirit core of the Mongolian people, who are attached to their homeland, respectful of nature, and free and open-minded [15].

5. Cultural Function: The Value Differentiation of Instrumental Music Enabled by Folk Scenes

5.1. Xi Qin: The Exclusive Folk Cultural Inheritance Medium of the Korean Ethnic Group

The isolated geographical layout of the mountains has preserved an independent and complete cultural system for the Korean ethnic group, and has also given the xiqin its strong ethnic exclusivity, making it difficult for it to achieve widespread dissemination across regions and ethnic groups. Unlike the nationwide popularity of the erhu and the regional spread of the horse-head fiddle, the development of the xiqin has always been confined to the ethnic circle of the Korean people, deeply integrated into the daily life and folk ritual system of the people. Core folkloric scenarios such as festival performances, folk rituals, and clan sacrifices all cannot do without the accompaniment and enhancement of the xiqin. This instrument has already become an important musical instrument carrier that maintains the ethnic traditional culture of the Korean people and inherits their local ethnic culture [16].

The dual protection of regional barriers and ethnic cultural circles has kept the inheritance system of the xiqin highly pure. Its transmission group has long been dominated by the local Korean people, with almost no modification or intervention from foreign cultures. It has completely retained the original form and traditional performance style of the instrument, maximizing the protection of the original ethnic folk art style of the Korean people. In the domestic intangible cultural heritage protection system, the xiqin, with its unique ethnic cultural attributes, has become the core medium for preserving the group's memory, consolidating ethnic cultural characteristics, and continuing the local folk cultural tradition in Northeast China.

5.2. Erhu: A Multifaceted Instrument for the Dissemination of Ritual Music that is Widely Popular among the General Public

After thousands of years of local adaptation and artistic evolution, the erhu has completely broken through the dual limitations of region and ethnicity, forming diversified cultural values and becoming the core carrier for the popularization and inclusive inheritance of the Central Plains ritual culture. With an appropriate learning difficulty, flexible

and diverse application scenarios, and a solid mass foundation, the erhu has become one of the most widely popular and widely-received ethnic musical instruments in China at present [17].

Today, the application scenarios of the erhu have fully covered various fields such as folk entertainment, opera accompaniment, art education, and stage creation. Its comprehensive artistic influence ranks among the top among ethnic musical instruments in China. By tracing its development history, it can be seen that in the Song and Yuan dynasties, the erhu was only used for self-entertainment among the folk, with a simple function and limited application scenarios; with the vigorous development of traditional opera and storytelling arts in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the performance techniques of the erhu gradually matured and gradually became the core accompanying instrument in the traditional performing arts system; with the development of modern art industries, its techniques, craftsmanship, and teaching system have been comprehensively improved, ultimately evolving into a well-structured and highly specialized mainstream ethnic musical instrument. The thousand-year evolution of the erhu clearly presents the iterative law of traditional musical instruments from simplicity to complexity and from vulgar to refined, and also directly demonstrates the cultural characteristics of the Central Plains ritual culture of inclusiveness and benefiting the masses [18].

5.3. Morin Khuur: The Core Spiritual and Cultural Symbol of the Mongolian People

With the continuous deepening of thousands of years of cultural accumulation and humanistic nourishment, the value of the horse-head fiddle has long transcended its basic function of instrumental performance, evolving into a core cultural symbol that carries the historical memories of the Mongolian people, unites national emotions, and showcases the spirit of nomadic culture. Besides conventional artistic uses such as stage performances and accompaniment for songs and dances, the horse-head fiddle has also deeply integrated into spiritual construction scenarios such as Mongolian sacrificial rituals, cultural inheritance, and folk beliefs, becoming a key carrier for maintaining national cultural identity and continuing the northern nomadic cultural heritage [19].

The unique grassland artistic style and the profound nomadic cultural heritage have endowed the horse-head fiddle with an irreplaceable cultural status. In various contemporary efforts to preserve grassland culture, build ethnic cultural systems, and explore regional characteristic cultures, the horse-head fiddle always plays a core role. As the most representative characteristic instrument of the Mongolian people, it carries the thousand-year cultural connotations and spiritual cores of the northern nomadic ethnic group, and is the core artistic medium for the dynamic inheritance of grassland nomadic culture [20].

6. Conclusion

The common artistic foundation of symbiotic coexistence has enabled the erhu, the Korean folk instrument, and the horse-head fiddle to share the same origin lineage. The thousand-year difference in regional cultures has continuously influenced and refined them, resulting in the continuous improvement and reconfiguration of the three, ultimately forming distinct and characteristic artistic forms and development patterns. The heterogeneity of regional cultures is the core driving force behind the sharp artistic divisions of these three types of related musical instruments. The rich and inclusive agricultural culture of the Central Plains gave rise to the modern erhu with regular shapes and adaptability to various scenarios; the simple and pure folk ecology of Northeast China has fully retained the original artistic characteristics of the Korean folk instrument; the vast and free grassland nomadic culture has shaped the powerful and expansive, ethereal and distant artistic style of the horse-head fiddle. Through continuous optimization and iteration based on the specific regional environment, the three types of erhu eventually each constructed a complete, distinctive, and independent professional artistic system.

The regional differences in natural geographical environment, production patterns, folk customs, and public aesthetics have continuously driven the differentiation of the artistic forms of the related erhu, ultimately creating a unique development pattern of Chinese ethnic music with symbiotic coexistence, evolution based on local conditions, and diversity coexisting. Based on the research results of this historical data review and comparative analysis, this article systematically explains the regional differentiation mechanism and iterative laws of the three types of erhu, and the related conclusions can provide solid theoretical support for the dynamic protection of minority musical instruments, the innovative development of traditional folk music, and the exploration of regional characteristic music culture. For the inheritance of China's diverse and integrated ethnic music culture and the long-term innovative development of traditional folk music, this research also has certain theoretical value and practical guiding significance.

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