

Exploring the Feasibility of Applying the Yangqin in Chinese Pentatonic Music Therapy: A Case Study of The Lament of Zhaojun

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Abstract. The five-tone therapy in traditional Chinese medicine is a common application in music therapy, but current academic research mainly emphasizes the passive performance of existing pieces, often in forms such as band collaborations or guqin versions. There is a lack of exploration of flexible improvisation, ensemble cooperation, and diverse musical styles, especially study in yangqin solo music in therapy. With the development of music therapy, traditional Chinese pentatonic music has draw increasing attention, and the repertoire used in therapy is mostly performed with traditional instruments. As a traditional Chinese national instrument, the yangqin, renowned for its rich techniques and distinct regional styles, can play different traditional pentatonic sounds, which are indispensable in music therapy. The Lament of Zhaojun, a representative work of Guangdong music, has had a profound influence. And the yangqin, as an indispensable instrument of Guangdong music, also plays an important role. This paper takes The Lament of Zhaojun as an example to analyze the therapeutic effects of the yangqin version of traditional Chinese music. By using qualitative analysis, musical form analysis and performance analysis, this study seeks to explore the positive mobilization and good therapeutic effects of the yangqin in the five Elements music therapy on human physiological functions.

Keywords: Music therapy, Yangqin, The Lament of Zhaojun, Traditional Chinese music

1. Introduction

In recent years, driven by social, economic, and technological changes, music therapy has developed rapidly in China. Many clinical practitioners have proposed and applied the five-tone therapy of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), often in combination with traditional Chinese medicine-based therapies and drugs. This therapy has been used to address mental disorders, mood disorders, physical illnesses with emotional components, sub-health conditions, pain, and insomnia, thereby improving patients' quality of life. However, the field still faces systemic deficiencies. Existing studies have mostly focused on passive playing of musical pieces, with insufficient theoretical and empirical exploration of instrument selection, repertoire structure, and playing techniques, resulting in insignificant therapeutic effects and limited promotion.

This paper explores the application value and mechanism of the yangqin, a traditional Chinese instrument in pentatonic therapy. Using *The Lament of Zhaojun* as a case study, the research combines literature review, musical form and performance analysis, and empirical practice in professional courses and workshops. Specifically, the study analyzes melody, rhythm, and timbre, while also drawing on performance-based evidence. The objective is to systematically reveal how the timbre and techniques of the yangqin can enhance the healing effects of the five-tone and five-element framework. This research seeks to provide a theoretical basis for clinical music selection and therapy promotion, enrich the discipline of music therapy, and promote the inheritance and application of the yangqin. The findings are expected to offer evidence-based recommendations for repertoire choice and clinical interventions, foster deeper public understanding of traditional music, and contribute to the protection of ethnic musical heritage.

2. Literature review: theory and practice of pentatonic therapy

More than two thousand years ago, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* proposed that music could "harmonize the heart" and "fit the movement." In the *Huangdi Neijing: Suwen*, the concept of "five zang sounds" was first established: Gong corresponds to the spleen, Shang to the lung, Jiao to the liver, Zhi to the heart, and Yu to the kidney. This framework emphasized the close connection between the "five sounds" and the "five zang organs." By employing different modes and instruments, music was used to regulate the zang organs and balance Yin and Yang, thereby achieving both health preservation and disease treatment. In the 1980s, Western music therapy was introduced into China and combined with the traditional Chinese theory of the Five Elements and Five tones giving rise to modern Chinese music therapy. This theory has been widely accepted due to its simplicity, safety, low cost, and demonstrated effectiveness [1].

Zou and Liu emphasized that traditional Chinese music contains philosophical concepts and aesthetic pursuits, emphasizing the concept of "harmony" [2]. Ancient practices illustrate this dual regulation of body and mood—for instance, Tao Tangshi used music and dance to resist illness, while qin playing was employed to cultivate character. As a non-pharmaceutical intervention, music therapy works by influencing the brain's auditory centers, stimulating neurotransmitter release, and thereby bringing pleasure or relaxation to relieve anxiety and improve overall health. Liu and Wang further pointed out the correspondences: Gong tones benefit the spleen, with *Ambush on All Sides* as an example; Shang tones aid the lungs, with *General's Order* regulating breathing; Jiao tones soothe the liver, with *Spring River Moonlit Night* helping to relax the mood; Zhi tones harmonize qi and blood, exemplified by *Liang Zhu (Butterfly Lovers)*; and Yu tones nourish the kidney, with *Moon Reflected in Erquan* strengthening the kidney qi. By choosing the music specifically, the function of the corresponding organs can be improved to some extent [3].

Modern clinical pentatonic therapy is divided into active, passive, and integrative forms. Active therapy involves patient participation in singing, dancing, or playing instruments to trigger physiological resonance. Passive therapy, the most common form, involves listening to recorded or live music. Integrative approaches combine pentatonic therapy with acupuncture, massage, or aromatherapy to form multi-dimensional interventions. Wang et al. suggested that information technology allows passive therapy to be tailored to pathological conditions through databases and programs, improving treatment efficiency and reducing costs [4]. Through different combined therapies, patients can not only alleviate symptoms in the short term but also benefit from long term regulation of physical and mental health. The five-tone therapy of TCM thus plays an important role in both prevention and treatment.

To sum up, scholarly research on the "five tones" and the "five zang organs" has laid a solid theoretical foundation for the development of five-tone therapy in China. Today, it is applied as an adjunctive treatment for insomnia, tinnitus, advanced cancers, and geriatric diseases, significantly advancing both theory and practice. However, due to the relatively limited range of repertoires and methods studied, this paper aims to expand the scope by analyzing the therapeutic effects of the yangqin in Chinese pentatonic therapy, with particular focus on its ability to stimulate physiological functions and promote healing outcomes.

3. The traditional and therapeutic context of the yangqin

3.1. Origin and timbre characteristics of the yangqin

The yangqin is a global musical instrument, with variations found in dozens of countries across Europe, Asia, the Americas and Africa. Introduced to China from Persia in the 17th century, it first became popular along the coast of Guangdong before spreading nationwide. Since the mid-20th century, the Chinese yangqin has undergone significant modernization—from the Lü-style yangqin developed in 1953 to the "401" and "402" models with extended ranges and improved tuning systems, and more recently, the professional Die Meng yangqin. These innovations in structure, sound quality, and pitch arrangement have greatly enhanced its acoustic performance. This instrument has thus evolved from a folk accompaniment tool into a core instrument in Chinese orchestras, with an established performance system and increasing international recognition [5, 6].

The yangqin's timbre is bright yet mellow, natural, and clear. Regional cultural traditions have shaped distinct performance styles: the Jiangnan school is delicate and elegant, exemplified by the graceful and lively Zizhu Tune; the Sichuan style is vigorous and bold, with works such as the powerful General's Order; the northeastern tradition blends strength and grace, represented by the mournful and grand Su Wu Herding Sheep; and the Guangdong style is lively and cheerful, with pieces such as the energetic Dry Thunder rooted in folk life and resonating with popular sentiment [7].

This instrument features a rich variety of playing techniques, including plucking (with bamboo sticks or fingers), sliding and rubbing, and tapping (producing percussive effects like flowing water hitting stone). These diverse methods generate rich tonal variations that correspond to the characteristics of the five notes. In treatment, choosing appropriate pieces based on different symptoms can improve the efficiency and accuracy of the treatment.

3.2. Functional role in pentatonic therapy

The yangqin and traditional music share a deep cultural memory, reinforced by their continued presence in modern education [9, 10]. In music therapy, the yangqin's distinctive timbre is highly appealing to listeners, providing an emotional outlet, fostering connections with patients, and complementing other interventions such as pharmacological treatment.

The yangqin often appears in the traditional Chinese music used in pentatonic therapy. For example, in the appetite-stimulating band version of Flower and Moon, the yangqin not only has important accompaniment patterns but also plays melodies that connect the sections, giving the audience a refreshing feeling.

Promoting the application of the yangqin in music therapy can improve patient outcomes, enhance public aesthetic appreciation, and support the inheritance and globalization of both the yangqin and Chinese traditional music culture.

3.3. Case study: the Lament of Zhaojun

When exploring Five Elements music therapy in TCM, researchers often used traditional music for experimental verification. For example, in the analysis of works such as Moon Reflected on Second Spring, Spring River in Moonlit Night, and Eighteen Beats of Huqia, Five Elements music therapy demonstrated the soothing effect of music [1, 11]. The Lament of Zhaojun showcases the distinct characteristics and charm of Cantonese music. In comparative experiments, As one of the Yu tone pieces, it showed stronger calming effects than those of the control group [11]. Thus, this paper employs The Lament of Zhaojun to analyze multiple yangqin versions and their musical characteristics in order to discuss its feasibility in music treatment.

3.4. Repertoire background and characteristics

The Lament of Zhaojun is based on the historical event of Wang Zhaojun's journey to the frontier during Emperor Yuan of Han's reign. The story recounts her distant marriage to a Xiongnu ruler and her sacrifice for peace and stability. It portrays Wang Zhaojun as a courageous and wise woman who contributed to national unity, highlighting her patriotism and heroic spirit. The tune is gentle and melodious, yet deep and mournful, vividly expressing Zhaojun's sorrow and heroism in a foreign land [12].

Cantonese music, one of China's most representative folk stringed and bamboo ensemble genres, is mainly popular in the Pearl River Delta and the Guangzhou regions. Early ensembles were commonly known as the "five-stringed head," consisting of five instruments: the two-stringed instrument (erxian), the sanxian (three-stringed lute), the ruan (yueqin), the dizi (bamboo flute), and the yueqin (hammered dulcimer). With the development of Guangdong music, the yangqin has become one of the core instruments, and Guangdong-style yangqin has emerged as one of the four major schools of traditional Chinese yangqin. Yangqin players have inherited and developed traditional music, producing numerous representative solo pieces, including Step by Step Higher, Dry Thunder, Rain on Banana Leaves, and The Lament of Zhaojun [13].

3.5. Musical analysis

As a classic traditional piece, The Lament of Zhaojun has been adapted and promoted by many renowned yangqin players and educators. This article selects three representative versions for comparative analysis [13-16].

3.5.1. Form structure

All three versions adopt a two-part form structure, including adagio and allegro, with a short introduction and coda (See Figures 1-3).

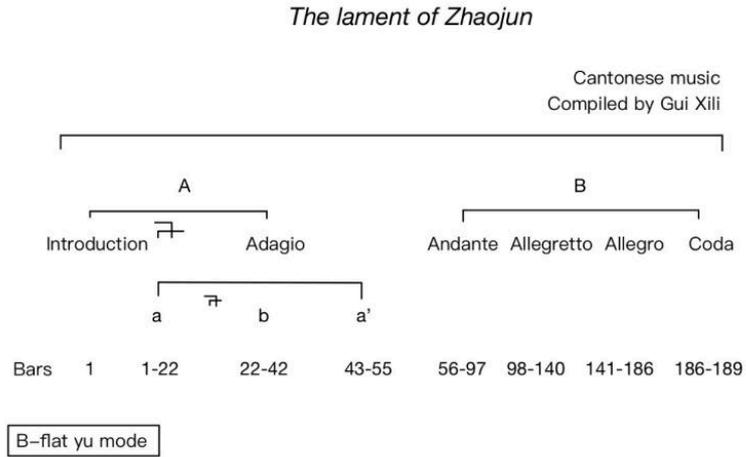


Figure 1. The Lament of Zhaojun, structured form by GUI Xili

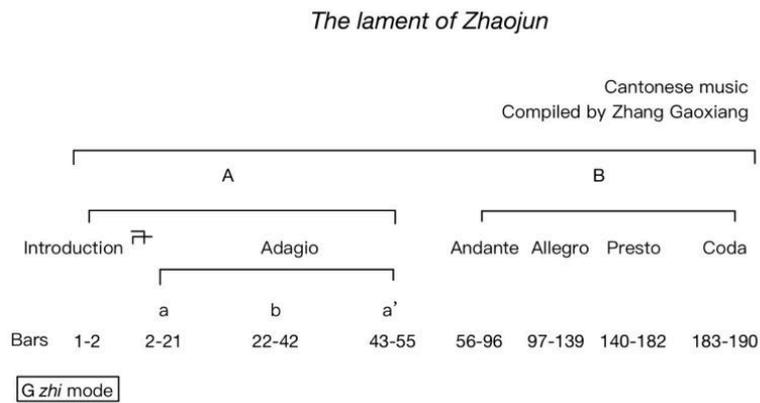


Figure 2. The Lament of Zhaojun, structured form by Zhang Gaoxiang

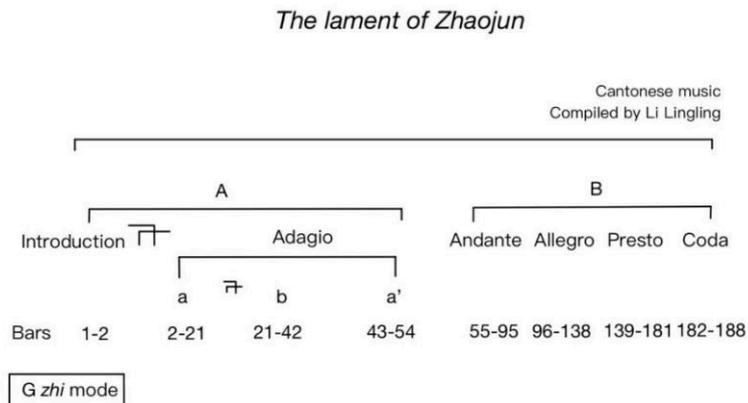


Figure 3. The Lament of Zhaojun, structured form by Li Lingling

The music is based on the pentatonic scale, without mode and tonality changes. The overall length and number of bars are similar, and the structure follows a "beginning-development-transition- conclusion" pattern. The adagio features long, expressive melodies, while the allegro is passionate and unrestrained, with a tightly structured flow. The slow section is in 4-4 time, following the "one beat, three eyes" rhythm of traditional Chinese opera, gentle and delicate. Section a begins with a thematic motif, preceded by a pickup measure, and incorporates lowered intervals for rhythmic effect. Section b develops variations on the theme motif, advancing layer by layer; Section a' reprises the theme, intensifying the protagonist's grief and enhancing audience engagement. The B section features a shift to a 1-4 time, with distinct changes in tempo and intensity. The andante gradually quickens to allegro, reaching the emotional climax, while the coda gradually weakens, echoing the beginning.

3.5.2. Musical expression

All three versions pay strict attention to dynamics and tempo. The piece has a wide range of vocal timbres, deep yet clear, interpreting the gentle, deep, long, and lingering melody. Off-tones enhance the softness and femininity of the music. Dynamics are carefully marked, ranging from soft to strong, with smooth crescendos and decrescendos, effectively portraying the protagonist's inner sighs, despondency, and confusion.

Section a primarily uses high registers, bright and feminine in timbre, while section b shifts to low registers, conveying heaviness and lament. The b-section embellishments gradually transition to the middle register before returning to the high register in a', reinforcing the theme. The allegro section features gradual tempo increases ("slow-slightly fast-even faster"), using the basic rhythm patterns consisting of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note, two eighth notes, and four sixteenth notes to enhance the sense of atmosphere, guide the patient to deal positively with negative emotions, and release the heaviness in the heart.

The introduction and coda are rhythmically free, with slow sections using eighth, sixteenth, half, and quarter notes to create a soothing and contemplative atmosphere. Early phrases employ the Qi Zhu (chord cluster) technique to establish a safe and quiet atmosphere for the patient.

3.5.3. Playing techniques

The work extensively employs tremolo, chord clusters, staccato, ornamentation, harmonics, and tremolo picking, simulating human sighs and confessions, characteristic of Guangdong music.

In allegro passages, pedal tones, embellishments, and filling notes enrich the melodic color while preserving the main melody. Tremolo enhances expressiveness, staccato adds crispness, and harmonics create an ethereal atmosphere, evoking the protagonist's emotional landscape and immersing the audience in the narrative [17].

3.5.4. Emotional expression

The piece conveys the profound cultural background and strong regional style of Guangdong music.

The mood is mournful and plaintive, with the first section mimicking sighing through alternating octaves to express Zhaojun's sorrow and resentment. The adagio narrates her heavy, slow steps toward marriage, gradually layering her worries and grievances. As the music progresses, emotions shift from personal lament to reflections on family, country, and spiritual struggle, culminating in

deep audience empathy. The allegro section represents her journey to a foreign land, inspiring hope and transforming negative emotions into positive ones, guiding listeners toward a collective ideal.

While the three versions share similar handling of dynamics and expression, differences exist in mode and tonality. Gui Xili's version uses the yu mode, evoking flowing water conducive to contemplation and meditation, while the other two versions are in the Zhi mode, with F and B-flat as the accents, which has a calming and soothing effect. Insomniacs listening to this kind of music can soothe the liver and relieve depression, calm the mind and nourish the heart. In addition, in terms of playing technique, Zhang Gaoxiang's version does not use trills. In the other two versions, trills, according to the characteristics of Cantonese music, should be played rapidly alternating with the second degree below to highlight the melodic sound, making the overall timbre more gentle and mournful, natural and clear, and extremely rich in national color.

3.6. Therapeutic effects

The yangqin conveys emotions through its expressive playing techniques, diverse timbres, and delicate emotional nuances, which together constitute the unique charm and value of traditional music. In a therapeutic context, patients can project their own emotions onto the music. For example, by engaging with the story of Wang Zhaojun, patients may identify with the protagonist's fate, transforming personal emotions into collective value recognition. Under the influence of this spiritual resonance, emotions can be released and vented. The patient then returns to the personal level, alleviating adverse reactions, easing physical and psychological tension, cultivating temperament, and ultimately experiencing encouragement and comfort.

At present, the music for pentatonic therapy is limited. Incorporating the yangqin into clinical practice would allow for more tailored approaches. Therapists could design suitable pieces based on specific needs, employing improvisation, selecting appropriate tonalities, and introducing variations on existing pentatonic works. Such practices would expand the possibilities of the yangqin within pentatonic music therapy and encourage constant innovation.

In addition, special yangqin works can be added to the repertoire library to expand the five-tone music repertoire library, and AI technology can be used to optimize the music to make it more suitable for music therapy to maximize its effectiveness and facilitate patients' recovery.

4. Conclusion

The yangqin, as a traditional Chinese ethnic musical instrument, boasts a rich range and playing techniques, reflecting unique timbral qualities and distinctive national and regional styles. Within an orchestral setting, it demonstrates remarkable versatility, capable of producing various pentatonic tones. Through the four fundamental functions of music therapy, including physiological resonance, psychological empathy, social integration, and aesthetic sharing, the yangqin contributes to promoting patients' well-being. In this sense, its role in the application of Five Elements music therapy highlights the potential of traditional instruments in therapeutic contexts.

There still remain some controversies and problems. In particular, the therapeutic value of five-tone therapy in TCM continues to spark debate, with varying opinions regarding its efficacy. Clinical and experimental studies often use different music pieces for different symptoms, yet many pieces share titles while differing significantly in melodies and versions. The absence of clarification on which versions were applied raises concerns about the reproducibility and reliability of therapeutic outcomes. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus on a limited repertoire of familiar works without systematically engaging with the broader corpus of traditional Chinese music and

instruments. This lack of diversity restricts the development of pentatonic therapy and overlooks its cultural richness.

Future research should aim to integrate specific instruments such as the yangqin into clinical practice, supported by quantitative analysis and investigation. At the same time, it is necessary to expand the market and implement it in practice so that the two can promote each other and achieve the maximum effect. In addition, electronic music and AI music therapy can be integrated to significantly improve the therapeutic effect.

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