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The Origins of the Huqin: Competing Theories, Organology, and Cultural Transmission

Asal-usul Huqin:
Teori-teori yang Bersaing, Organologi, dan Transmisi Budaya

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ABSTRACT

The origins of the huqin have long been debated, with explanations emphasizing development within Han Chinese traditions, contributions from non-Han communities, and transmission from other regions. This article critically reviews these explanations through a comparison of the historical records, instrument structures, playing techniques, and transmission routes discussed in the literature. On balance, the evidence reviewed favors an account of early development within present-day China involving interaction between Han and non-Han communities. Cultural exchange provides an important framework for understanding this process, rather than attributing the instrument's formation exclusively to a single group. Nevertheless, its precise place of origin and sequence of development remain unresolved, and contributions from cross-regional transmission warrant further investigation. Further research integrating dated textual, iconographic, and archaeological evidence is needed to clarify how different instrumental traditions contributed to the emergence and development of the huqin.

Key words: *Huqin; Origin Hypothesis; Bowed String Instrument; Cultural Exchange; Instrument Evolution*

ABSTRAK

Asal-usul huqin telah lama diperdebatkan, dengan pelbagai penjelasan yang menekankan perkembangan dalam tradisi masyarakat Cina Han, sumbangan komuniti bukan Han, serta penyebaran dari wilayah lain. Artikel ini menilai penjelasan tersebut secara kritis melalui perbandingan catatan sejarah, struktur alat muzik, teknik permainan dan laluan penyebaran yang dibincangkan dalam literatur. Secara keseluruhannya, bukti yang diteliti lebih menyokong penjelasan bahawa perkembangan awal huqin berlaku di wilayah yang kini termasuk dalam China, dengan melibatkan interaksi antara komuniti Han dan bukan Han. Pertukaran budaya menyediakan kerangka penting untuk memahami proses ini, berbanding mengaitkan pembentukan alat muzik tersebut secara eksklusif dengan satu kelompok. Walau

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bagaimanapun, tempat asalnya yang tepat dan urutan perkembangannya masih belum dapat dipastikan, manakala sumbangan penyebaran antara wilayah memerlukan penelitian lanjut. Penyelidikan lanjut yang menggabungkan bukti tekstual, ikonografi dan arkeologi yang telah ditentukan tarikhnya diperlukan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana tradisi alat muzik yang berbeza menyumbang kepada kemunculan dan perkembangan huqin.

Kata kunci: *Huqin; Hipotesis Asal-usul; Alat Muzik Gesek Bertali; Pertukaran Budaya; Evolusi Alat Muzik*

INTRODUCTION

The huqin (胡琴) is a prominent family of bowed string instruments in Chinese music. By the Song dynasty(960–1279 CE), Chinese bowed instruments had already been categorized into two main types（Xiang,1999）: the first type features the bow placed between two string; the second type places the bow outside the strings, separate from the body of the instrument, and requires the bow to be applied directly onto the strings during performance, similar to the violin or cello.This distinction concerns construction and playing technique and provides a framework for comparing the instruments considered in origin studies.

This article focuses primarily on the first category of bowed instruments. It has been widely used in numerous regional operas, theatrical forms, and musical traditions, exerting nationwide influence and becoming the mainstream of Chinese bowed string instruments. The huqin belongs to the family of two-string spike fiddles, whose defining structural features include: a slender wooden neck; two wooden tuning pegs aligned vertically at the upper end; two strings stretched along the body and played with a horsehair bow; and a resonator—circular, hexagonal, or octagonal in shape—covered on one end with snakeskin, python skin, or a thin wooden plate, serving as the sounding membrane. A wooden bridge is set on this membrane to support the strings. The neck, tuning pegs, and resonator are all made of wood(Stock, 1993).

The earliest textual records of the huqin can be traced back to the Tang dynasty(618–907 CE), indicating that the instrument had already emerged prior to this period. It was later transmitted to neighboring regions such as Japan and Korea, where it was documented in texts such as Shikkaishō by Ton'in Kōken and the Korean classic Akhak Gwebeom.（Xiang,1999; X. J. Zhang,2010）

During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, huqin instruments became increasingly important in the accompaniment of Chinese opera.Regional performance traditions contributed to the diversification of the huqin family, including the erhu, jinghu, banhu, gaohu, and zhonghu (see Figure 1). These instruments differ in construction, register, tuning, and performance practice. The erhu is a widely used member of this family and is known for its lyrical tone and expressive capabilities (Stock, 1993).



FIGURE 1. Selected instruments in the huqin family

The xiqin is widely regarded in Chinese scholarship as an early ancestor of the huqin (see Figure 2), while its earlier sources and the subsequent development of huqin construction remain debated (Xiang, 1999; Zha, 1995). The literature reviewed here emphasizes three broad explanations: development within Han Chinese instrumental traditions, contributions from non-Han communities, and transmission from regions such as India or the Arab world. These explanations are not wholly exclusive: the first two concern interacting communities within present-day China, while the third emphasizes cross-regional transmission. This review compares their evidence and distinguishes the history of instrument names from changes in construction and playing technique.



FIGURE 2. Xiqin in Yueshu

HYPOTHESES OF DEVELOPMENT IN HAN CHINESE TRADITIONS

Xiang (1999) argued for the development of Chinese bowed string instruments within local traditions. Historical geography forms part of this argument: X. C. Song's (1991) account of

regional conditions has been used to emphasize the barriers posed by mountainous terrain. This relative isolation or semi-isolation from the outside world determined the indigenous character of Chinese culture, which for a considerable period followed an independent path of development.The geographical argument therefore needs to be considered alongside the evidence for particular instruments and routes of exchange.

Within explanations emphasizing Han Chinese traditions, scholars differ over the proposed instrumental antecedents. Some trace early bowed instruments to struck-string instruments, while others emphasize plucked-string prototypes.

THE STRUCK STRING INSTRUMENT HYPOTHESIS

Xiang (1999) approached the study of Chinese bowed string instruments through philology, archaeology, ethnology, cultural anthropology, cultural geography, communication studies, and climatology. His monograph, The History of Chinese Bowed String Instruments, draws on historical documents, excavated artifacts, and folk customs to argue for development within China.

The zhu (see Figure 3) was an ancient struck-string instrument discussed in accounts of early Chinese instrumental history, including the Strategies of the Warring States. In the reconstruction summarized by Xiang (1999), it resembled the zheng in some respects, and its strings were sounded with a bamboo stick while the other hand altered their pitch. The relevance of this instrument to huqin origins lies in the proposed transition from striking to frictional sound production.



FIGURE 3. Zhu

In Xiang's (1999) reconstruction, the zhu provides a possible antecedent for the yazheng through a shift from striking strings to rubbing them with a stick (see Figure 4). The Old Book of Tang, Music Treatise, records that the yazheng was sounded by rubbing its strings with a moistened bamboo tip. This description identifies frictional sound production, but it does not by itself establish direct descent from the zhu. Xiang also discusses the wenzhenqin tradition of Putian, Fujian, as comparative material for examining the relationship between plucked and friction techniques.



FIGURE 4. Yazheng in Yueshu

The cited textual description identifies the yazheng as an early Chinese instrument that produced sound through friction against the strings. Xiang (1999) proposed that inspired by this, the Xiqin—created by the Xi people—emerged as a portable bowed instrument suitable for nomadic life. Since the Xi people were active mainly during the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang dynasties (618–907 CE), and lived on the northern grasslands where daily life was closely tied to horses, the bamboo bow was gradually replaced by a horsehair bow, which facilitated performance. Thus, the xiqin can be understood as evolving from the percussion instrument zhu, representing a joint creation of the Han people of the Central Plains and minority groups such as the Xi.

Xiang's (1999) synthesis draws together textual, visual, and archaeological material relevant to this hypothesis. W. Y. Zhou (1992) likewise examined ancient texts, challenged an Indian origin, and identified the zhu as a proposed antecedent of Chinese bowed instruments. Xiao (1981) argued that their development combined the friction technique associated with the yazheng with features of instruments used by non-Han communities. These accounts allow for technical borrowing between traditions rather than requiring an unchanged instrument to pass through every proposed stage.

THE PLUCKED STRING INSTRUMENT HYPOTHESIS

An important textual description of the xiqin appears in *Yueshu*, compiled by Chen Yang during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE). Chen Yang explicitly states that the xiqin derived from the xiantao and resembled it in form. He also identifies it as an instrument favored by the Xi people and describes its two strings being sounded by rubbing them with a bamboo strip.

The xiantao has in turn been explained as a stringed form of the tao, a small handled drum (see Figure 5). These descriptions underlie proposals connecting plucked-string prototypes with the early huqin tradition.



FIGURE 5. Tao in a Tang-dynasty mural

Chen Yang's account is important for its association of the xiqin with the Xi and its description of friction between the strings. Its comparison with the xiantao has been interpreted as evidence of a historical connection. The description of form and playing technique, however, must be distinguished from a complete account of how one instrument developed into the other.

Gao Cheng's Shiwu Jiyuan(960–1279 CE) provides another account used in support of the xiantao hypothesis. It links the xiantao to laborers building the Great Wall at the end of the Qin dynasty(221–207 BCE), and describes a handled drum with attached strings, comparing its form with the xiqin. As a later historical account, this passage records a proposed connection; its explanation of events in the Qin period requires evaluation against other evidence.

Zhu (1984) presents a sequence linking the tao, xiantao, xiqin, Nanyin erxian, and huqin. In this reconstruction, the Nanyin erxian provides a later point of comparison (see Figure 6). Zha (1995) also argued for a Han Chinese origin and treated the xiantao as a plucked-string prototype. His account describes stages extending from the Tang–Song period to the Ming and Qing dynasties. These reconstructions situate the xiqin within a longer history of Chinese string instruments, although the proposed links preceding it require further evidence.

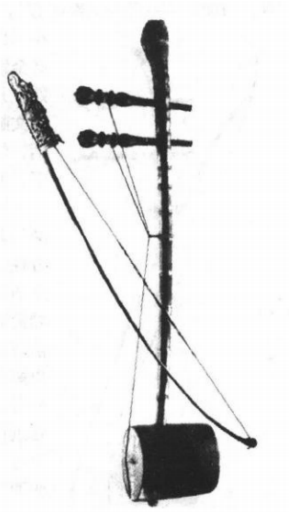


FIGURE 6. Nanyin erxian in Chinese Instruments Great Dictionary(Yue,2002)

HYPOTHESES EMPHASIZING NON HAN COMMUNITIES

Other explanations emphasize the role of non-Han communities, particularly the Xi, in the formation of early huqin instruments. The identification of the xiqin with the Xi is central to these accounts. This perspective has been widely adopted by online platforms such as Wikipedia and ChatGPT. Historically, Han settlements and centers of political authority were concentrated in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, namely the Central Plains. In ancient Chinese usage, the term “Hu” often carried connotations of “foreign peoples” or “frontier ethnic groups.” It typically referred to nomadic peoples active in the northern and northwestern frontiers of the Central Plains, including the Turks, Mongols and Jurchen(B. J. Li & Yue, 2002). Their territories were called “Hu lands,” and by association it was easy to infer that the “huqin” derived from these “Hu regions.”

The Xi were a non-Han population discussed in accounts of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE). They inhabited the Xar Moron River basin, spanning present-day eastern Inner Mongolia and northwestern Liaoning Province. In the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), the Xi experienced a significant migration when their leader Quli led part of the tribe into present-day Hebei Province; this group became known as the Western Xi, while those who remained were called the Eastern Xi (Zhong, 1989).

Zha (1995) used the distribution of bamboo, a material associated with early xiqin playing, to argue for the Western Xi rather than the Eastern Xi as its makers. This is a geographical inference rather than direct evidence of invention, since access to materials need not have been limited to local production. Liao (1964) placed the xiqin’s origin among eastern hu communities in northern China. X. Song (2005) also argued for contributions from communities in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia. M. Y. Feng (1999) emphasized the convergence of Hu, Western Regions, and Central Plains traditions in the erhu’s development. Together, these interpretations highlight interaction between communities rather than an exclusively Han process.

The Mongols' affinity for bowed instruments is well attested in history. During the Yuan dynasty(1271–1368 CE), when the Mongols ruled China, they displayed a marked preference for these instruments. The huqin gradually became a generic term for bowed string instruments. It was not only used as court music in grand banquets but also served as an important military instrument, and its popularity spread more widely among the people.

HYPOTHESES OF TRANSMISSION FROM OTHER REGIONS

Explanations emphasizing transmission from outside present-day China commonly focus on India, Sri Lanka, and the Arab world. They compare instrumental forms and propose routes by which playing techniques or instruments may have moved into China. The following sections distinguish these proposed connections from evidence establishing a continuous history of transmission.

INDIA AND SRI LANKA

Tanabe (1937), in Shina ongaku shi, recounts a legend attributing the invention of the ravanahaththa to King Ravana of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka (see Figure 7). The legend places the instrument in a distant past, but this chronology should not be treated as a documented date of invention. Descriptions of the instrument include a neck of bamboo or wood and a resonator made from coconut shell or gourd and covered with animal skin.

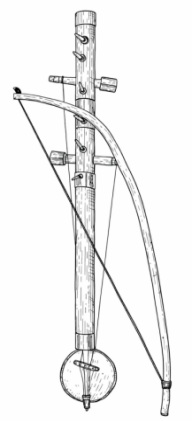


FIGURE 7. Ravanahaththa

The instrument is sounded with a horsehair bow. Its neck, skin-covered resonator, and bowed strings provide points of comparison with other Asian bowed instruments, although such features alone cannot determine the direction or date of transmission.

The ravanahaththa has been presented in some historical and online narratives as a precursor of the violin (Lochan, 2024). Meddegoda (2018), however, critically examines its promotion as the world's "first violin" and questions the reliability of such claims. Proposed genealogies linking the ravanahaththa, the Arab rebab, and the Western violin therefore require critical evaluation rather than acceptance as established transmission histories (AlShurman & Mulender, 2024; Bogen, 2019).

Kishibe (1982) is cited in discussions of the proposed Indian connections of Asian bowed instruments. B. L. Zhang and Yang (2004, p. 338) also associate Chinese bowed instruments with the ravanastron. Their account proposes that mobile populations carried the instrument eastward into northern China, after which it developed within regional musical traditions. Such accounts suggest a route of transmission whose chronology and intermediate forms require examination.

Hayashi (1962), in Tōa gakki kō, discusses an Indian connection in the history of Asian bowed instruments. Sonnerat's (1782) account of bowed instruments in India has likewise been invoked in support of an Indian origin. These accounts contribute to the history of the hypothesis, but the existence of bowed instruments in India does not alone establish that the Chinese huqin descended from them.

THE ARAB WORLD

J. B. Zhou (1987) proposed a route: the Arab rabab (see Figure 8)→ the Persian kamanche → the Uyghur khalzak → the Chinese huqin of the Central Plains. In this narrative, two to three thousand years ago the Arabian Peninsula produced a one-stringed plucked instrument known as the rabab. As it spread eastward, the Persians developed a two-stringed variant called the kamanche. Later, Turkic and Xiongnu nomadic groups carried bowed instruments further east into northern China, eventually influencing the Central Plains.This account places movement between western and central Asia at the center of the explanation.

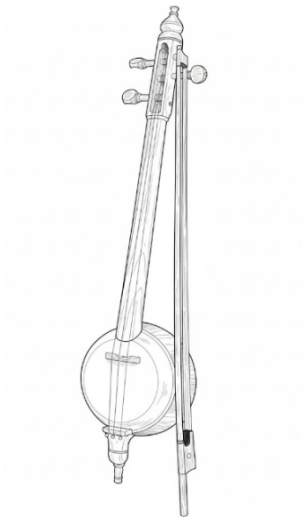


FIGURE 8. Rabab

X. J. Wang (2008) examined horsehair-bowed huqin forms and proposed connections based on their construction, imagery, and terminology. He noted that many of the terms used to describe such instruments contain phonetic elements related to "ma," such as Martin and Marteau. In Chinese, the syllable *ma* denotes "horse," and the huqin is likewise referred to as a horsehair huqin due to its use of a horsehair bow. Linguistic comparisons can suggest avenues for research, but phonetic resemblance alone does not establish a shared etymology or an instrument's geographical origin.

X. J. Zhang (2010) raised chronological objections to a proposed route through particular Uyghur instruments, placing the forms considered in that argument later than the Chinese xiqin. This comparison challenges the specific sequence under discussion, but dates assigned to one form do not determine the history of all bowed instruments in a region. The chronology of a name, a technique, and a particular construction must therefore be assessed separately.

CULTURAL INTERACTION IN ORIGIN STUDIES

Recent contributions continue to examine the debate over huqin origins and the historical development of the erhu (Y. H. Chen, 2018; X. X. Li, 2020; X. J. Zhang & Dai, 2017). These studies belong to a wider literature that includes Stock's (1993) historical account. Reading

the competing explanations together raises the possibility that different elements of construction and playing technique followed different paths before being combined. Cultural interaction therefore provides a useful framework for comparison without requiring a single source for every feature of the later huqin family.

DISCUSSION

The origin theories reviewed above differ in the roles they assign to local invention, movement between communities, and transmission across regions. Their evidence also concerns different historical questions. A name appearing in a text, a description of frictional sound production, and an image of a bowed instrument do not necessarily document the same stage of development. Distinguishing these forms of evidence allows the competing explanations to be compared without assuming that the huqin emerged at one moment as a complete and unchanging instrument.

Terminology is particularly important because the meaning of huqin changed over time. Ke (1999), Zhong (1989), and B. J. Li and Yue (2002) discuss distinctions among names and instrumental forms, while J. Feng (2013) examines the transition between the terms xiqin, jiqin, and huqin. B. J. Li and Yue offer a phonological explanation for the relationship between jiqin and xiqin, showing why a name need not preserve a literal account of invention. Early references to huqin therefore cannot automatically be read as descriptions of the later bowed instrument, and the character hu cannot by itself identify a foreign birthplace. Terminological evidence needs to be interpreted in its historical and instrumental context.

Ethnic and geographical explanations also operate at different levels. A contribution by the Xi or another non-Han community is compatible with development within the regions of present-day China. In this review, that geographical expression does not imply that historical communities understood their identities through modern national boundaries, or that Han musicians independently created every component. Instrument bodies, string arrangements, friction materials, and bowing practices could have developed within different traditions before being combined. This distinction makes interaction between communities central to the analysis rather than treating Han and non-Han contributions as mutually exclusive.

For the proposed Indian and Sri Lankan connections, origin legends and similarities of form must be separated from dated evidence of transmission. Narratives concerning the ravanahaththa are relevant to the cultural interpretation of instrumental history, but their antiquity cannot be established simply by repeating the legends. Meddegoda (2018) questions claims promoting it as the first violin, whereas Lochan (2024) discusses narratives linking Asian bowed instruments. The sources reviewed here do not establish a continuous route from the ravanahaththa to early Chinese huqin forms. This limits the support for direct descent, but it does not demonstrate that contact or influence was absent. Stronger evidence would connect identifiable forms, dates, and intermediate locations.

The proposed rabab connection requires the same standard of comparison. Particular historical forms should be compared through their resonators, neck construction, string arrangements, bow placement, and playing posture. Similarities may suggest contact, while differences may reflect distinct traditions or modifications after transmission. Neither resemblance nor difference alone is decisive. The routes outlined in the literature consequently remain hypotheses to be tested against dated evidence, rather than conclusions that can be accepted or rejected from a small number of visual comparisons.

An account of development within present-day China must likewise rest on positive evidence, rather than follow automatically from weaknesses in the external-origin

hypotheses. The historical descriptions and instrumental practices considered by Xiang (1999) provide a basis for investigating local friction techniques and their application to different string instruments. The sequence from plucking to stick-rubbing and then bowing offers a comparative model, but it should not be assumed to describe a universal or uninterrupted path. The development of a friction technique, its application to a new body structure, and the adoption of a horsehair bow are related questions that require separate examination.

The xiqin's established place as an early ancestor of the huqin provides a point of continuity, while its relationships with earlier proposed prototypes remain disputed. Xiang (1999) emphasizes possible connections in playing technique; Bai (2014) discusses the struck-string hypothesis; and B. J. Li and Yue (2002) raise structural objections to deriving xiqin-type instruments directly from classical Central Plains string instruments. Similar friction materials may support the possibility of technical borrowing, but they do not prove direct descent from the yazheng. A hypothesis in which techniques were transferred between communities and combined with different body structures can accommodate both the similarities and the differences. The direction and circumstances of such borrowing, however, remain to be established.

On balance, the evidence considered in this review favors early development within present-day China through interaction among Han and non-Han communities. This interpretation draws on the early instrumental descriptions and friction practices discussed in the literature, while recognizing that they do not establish every step in the process. It also leaves room for contributions from wider exchange. The principal unresolved questions concern where particular innovations occurred, how techniques moved between communities, and how earlier forms were transformed into the later huqin family. Addressing these questions would refine the explanation without reducing the instrument's history to the exclusive achievement of a single group.

CONCLUSION

This review has compared explanations of huqin origins that emphasize Han Chinese traditions, contributions from non-Han communities, and transmission from other regions. The comparison shows the importance of distinguishing the history of names from the development of playing techniques and instrument structures. Terminology, origin legends, and morphological resemblance provide useful clues, but none alone establishes a complete history of invention or transmission.

Within the limits of the sources reviewed, the evidence favors early development within present-day China involving interaction between Han and non-Han communities. This is a provisional historical interpretation: the precise place of origin and sequence of development remain unresolved. The proposed Indian, Sri Lankan, and Arab routes have not been sufficiently established by the materials considered here, but contributions from cross-regional exchange cannot be excluded.

Further research should bring securely dated textual, iconographic, and archaeological evidence into closer comparison, tracing changes in construction, friction materials, and performance practice. Identifying connections between specific forms and communities will help clarify the respective roles of local innovation, technical borrowing, and cross-regional transmission in the emergence and development of the huqin.

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