The Transnational Guqin Revival in Flushing, New York

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NEW YORK CITY’S GUQIN COMMUNITY

In 1965, the United States Congress passed the “Nationality and Immigration Act” which overhauled the nation's immigration system and expanded migration opportunities for non-European immigrants. Among those to come were the Chinese, who had been prohibited access to the United States since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As a result, the population of people of Chinese descent rose from 189,863 in 1900 to approximately 3.79 million according to the 2012 census.¹ Many flocked to the Chinatowns of New York City, which today has the largest population of ethnic Chinese people outside Asia. One of its fastest growing neighborhoods is Flushing, Queens, where a large Taiwanese population has developed a thriving cultural and economic center. As the neighborhood evolves, there is a struggle between maintaining tradition and assimilating into American culture. At first, it seemed that immigrant parents wanted their children to learn Western classical music, and it was seen as a mark of upward mobility to be trained in this way. Recently, however, there is a trend toward once again embracing traditional Chinese music and, in particular, the music of the guqin² has gained in popularity with a growth of guqin players from less than 90 players sixty years ago to thousands of players worldwide³ today and a marked increase in guqin societies in 2017 (41 in Asia, 7 in North America) as well as many guqin schools.⁴ Among the students of guqin in Flushing, there


² The guqin is sometimes referred to as “qin.”

³ These numbers are an approximation based on Zha Fuxi’s Ethnomusicology study conducted in 1956 and research on the amount of members in guqin societies throughout Asia and North American currently. Most guqin societies have at least fifty members based on the information on their websites.

are Chinese Americans, and newly arrived immigrants from China and Taiwan, most of whom are international students who plan to return to their homelands or to create a new life in the United States. Despite their naturalization intentions, these students are examples of the new transnational migrants who make obsolete previous models of assimilation.

The guqin boasts the longest history of written repertoire in the world, with pieces dating back 3000 years. Traditionally, the guqin was not an instrument of the masses, but was an instrument for the elite who used the guqin to connect emotionally with poetry that addresses philosophical and existential issues. With the political turmoil and economic changes of the twentieth century, the guqin seemed to be destined for extinction or obscurity with less than ninety guqin players in China, according to a 1954 survey by the Ethnomusicology Research Institute. UNESCO declared the guqin part of the World Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003, and it was featured in the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics that depicted important aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Since these events, the guqin has seen a rapid growth in popularity, with guqin schools popping up in China as well as in the United States.

Although many studies have been written about the history of the guqin, its performance practice and repertoire, there are lacunae in our knowledge about its importance to immigrants in the United States and specifically New York City. I analyze how guqin is taught, including aspects of notation and technique. On a larger scale, the thesis considers the cultural context of guqin music in public performances and in musical-sharing spaces like the yaji, where a casual party-like atmosphere includes guqin performances by a majority of the attendees. Additionally,


the study seeks to illuminate why immigrant parents and students are motivated to establish a link to this aspect of ancient Chinese culture, a link that in previous generations was missing.

Theoretical Framework

The thesis adopts concepts from migration studies to interpret and analyze data gathered in interviews and statistical studies. The research focused on the phenomenon of “cumulative causation,” 7 where each new immigrant is able to take advantage of transnational migrant networks already in place in the receiving culture. This evolving transnational migrant group eventually can become independent of the historical, economic and political causes of immigration. Migration becomes more fluid because the usual difficulties of immigrating become much easier to overcome, and changing nationalities becomes a matter of choice and opportunity, rather than necessity. As each new member joins the network, it is further expanded, allowing for greater opportunities and ease for future immigrants. 8 Organizational transnationalism directly affects factors of assimilation economically and socially.

Within New York City’s small community of guqin players, made up of Chinese and Taiwanese international students as well as immigrants seeking naturalization, one finds an already-established network which facilitates an easier transition to life in the United States as well as a community where one can find companionship with peers who have a shared interest (in this case, music). This exemplifies to the importance of the yaji, the regular gathering of guqin players, as a way for students to come together on a regular basis and to become


acquainted, sharing information and resources in addition to the aesthetic enjoyment of the art they are studying. It serves as a site of homeland culture within the receiving community. This, in fact, might explain why many of these participants, who were non-musicians before arriving in New York, are motivated to take up a difficult instrument like the guqin. This is in addition to their college studies that have an added layer of difficulty due to the challenge of a new language. They take on this added challenge and expense because it serves an essential purpose beyond musical training, connecting them to a broader network of more established immigrants and a community away from home that is reminiscent of home. The international student network is a set of transnational migrants that has an established history in the United States. Y.C. Wang’s 1939 study of *Who’s Who in China* found that “56.2 of the highest ranking figures in the Chinese Nationalist government, academic institutions, and the military had received advanced education in the United States.”

9 Contemporary students are drawn to the United States due to the highly competitive and difficult Gaokao test that students must pass in order to attend universities in China. Because of its difficulty many parents consider the daunting prospect of sending their child, often their only child due to China's one-child policy, abroad to receive an education that might be unavailable to them in their home. As an added incentive, learning English is a valuable asset. This begs the question as to whether Chinese international students actually engage and attempt to assimilate to American customs and culture or whether they mainly socialize with fellow students from China.10

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The interest in the guqin by international students is also indicative of the transnational inclination of contemporary immigrants from China and Taiwan who want to maintain a cultural connection with the homeland. The recent resurgence in popularity of the guqin is mainly a phenomenon in China and Taiwan. However, students who had previously never played the instrument, nor had musical training in the sending community, are now taking up the guqin in the United States as a means to connect with other international students and immigrants as well as with their home culture.

This project seeks to answer and understand the following questions within the small guqin community of New York City: How do transnationals use the established networks in New York City to stay connected to their home culture? How do transnational networks ease assimilation into the new culture for immigrants? How do these networks attenuate “streamline” or “convergence” assimilation\(^\text{11}\) for immigrants and instead provide replicas of cultural institutions from the sending communities in the receiving ones? Why do transnational students connect to a new aspect of their homeland culture while in the United States when they did not partake in it while residing the sending community?

\(^{11}\)“Streamline” or “convergence” assimilation refers to the classic view of immigrant assimilation. Overtime these immigrants become progressively more similar to the dominant population in custom, language, and culture. This theory is in contrast to racial or ethnic model of disadvantage that claims that immigrants are prevented from mainstream institutions because of discrimination. Another theory, “segmented assimilation,” focuses on how immigrants fail to rise economically because of structural barriers, such as poor schools in ethnic enclaves. Transnational immigration theory views movements from the sending community to the receiving one as more fluid due to technological advances in the past twenty years that allow for easier contact and transportation between the two sites. For transnationals, assimilation is less streamline and is more of a hybrid between the two cultures. Alejandro Portes (2007) observed that more established migrants are more transnational than new immigrants.
Structure of Research

The research for this project was grounded in participant observation and sought to gain trust and familiarity within the group of students and with their teacher. By becoming a guqin student, taking regular private lessons, and attending gatherings of students in the form of recitals and the seemingly-casual *yajís*, I came as close as possible to being accepted into the group and learning from the interactions. Most of the members of the group speak Mandarin and a few Cantonese. I studied Mandarin in order to have greater access into the group and to their more subtle codes of conversation, conduct, and aesthetic. Obviously being a “foreigner” I understood that my presence was not immediately (and probably not at all within the limited time span of the study) normalized. Most of the students speak English very well, and one in particular has agreed to be interviewed and translated for me when needed. The teacher, Judy Yeh, speaks English with some difficulty, but I actually found her careful stumbling for the correct terms to be very elucidating, as she often gave a short list of synonyms before landing on a word with which she was satisfied.

As a means for collecting data, I recorded my lessons and gatherings using a recorder. After each event I took descriptive notes about what occurred and formulated follow-up questions to garner new terms for taxonomical analysis. After five lessons, I conducted interviews with Judy Yeh and one of her principal students asking grand tour and mini-tour questions. There was a journal kept of my own thoughts and emotional responses to learning in a novel environment and to acknowledge the perspective and biases originating from my background.
Finally, there was a thematic and narrative analysis of field notes and interviews. These included taxonomic analysis and charts detailing the terms and symbols used by guqin players in notation and in cultural procedures.

Literature Review

In regards to scholarly research there are three main fields of inquiry that this study was based on: 1) History and Aesthetics of the guqin until the Reformation Period; 2) Revival of the guqin in the Reformation Period; and 3) Chinese American History and Transnational Identity.

*History and Aesthetics of the Guqin until the Reformation Period*

The early Western pioneer in the study of guqin was Robert H. Gulik, a Dutch anthropologist who learned how to play the instrument in the 1930s and published the book *The Lore of the Chinese Lute* in 1940, introducing Western scholars to the history of the instrument and celebrating its music throughout his life. In addition to Gluck’s research, there is copious scholarship about the history of the guqin, its repertoire, and the poetry that it traditionally accompanied. Contemporary guqin players and scholars like John Thompson have websites devoted to the guqin that are available in English. The guqin probably has the longest written history of any musical instrument in the world with texts mentioning the qin dating back 3,000 years and notation 2,500. The instrument came to be associated with the aristocratic literati and was seen as an instrument of contemplation. K’ung Fu Tzou (Confucius) favored this instrument and cultivated knowledge of it. The guqin traditionally was to be played alone for the cultivation
and enjoyment of the player himself. It was never played professionally, and the only audiences were the players' closest confidants. Indeed, playing was akin to meditation with strict guidelines to avoid ornamentation and overly emotional playing so that the emotion occurred internally. Popular folk melodies and foreign music were looked down upon by the literati who insisted on the subtlety and restraint of guqin performance. Poet and guqin player of the Six Dynasties Period, Tao Yuanning, played a qin without strings echoing the idea that the most profound sound is that of silence.

Another important aspect of guqin music is that it has a programmatic feature which dominates. There is a literary predicate that informs the meaning of the song and guides the guqin player in their performance. Indeed the music is the vehicle, whether serving as a mnemonic device for the content of the poem, or evoking the emotions and content of the poem and its mood. The skill of performing is in interpreting the words of the poem and bringing about the desired mood. Since the notation system does not dictate phrasing, meter, or even rhythms, there is a great deal of freedom for the guqin player to interpret and to express the desired emotional state. Western trained musicians tend to think of emotions as being dramatic and that a musician with skill can evoke pathos in the audience, bringing them to joy or to tears. For the guqin repertoire the subtlety of playing carefully releases the emotions in a kind of controlled catharsis, as a means to transcend the baser of human mental states. The guqin is used as a tool for the player to improve herself, turning one’s focus toward supernatural powers and questions of philosophy.

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There are many sociological factors to consider when interpreting musical content in relation to Chinese culture and history. Alan Thrasher’s essay “The Sociology of Chinese Music: An Introduction”\(^\text{13}\) serves well to elucidate the sociological underpinnings of aesthetics and performance practice for many of the classic Chinese arts, guqin included. The Confucian values of harmony, moderation of action, and education mixed with the Taoist notions of creativity, intuition, and love of nature form the essential bedrock for Chinese arts. Guqin was primarily the domain of the literati, who were the most educated members of society. They, in turn, were the ruling class as they had the prerequisite education to be able to pass the difficult civil-service examinations. This class system was self-perpetuating, as those with wealth could afford the education for their progeny, although there were no restrictions on upward mobility if a peasant could educate himself. The primary concern for Confucian musical thought was whether or not it promoted moderate behavior and social harmony; "moderate and easy-going music” was considered the way to instill these virtues. The concept of “Dan-Xie-Man-Yi” served as the recipe for music aesthetics (“*dan* refers to long, broad rhythms; *xie* means ‘unison’; *man* indicates a ‘slow tempo’ and *yi* means ‘simple’ melody”).\(^\text{14}\) For example, the use of the pentatonic scale was seen as exemplifying social harmony as there are no half-steps which create tension and dissonance, even in Western music.

Tradition was much more highly valued than innovation. The term “Guya” is defined as “old-refined” and is essential to understanding the literati tradition in China as well as the aesthetics of the guqin (old-zither). The primary purpose of the *yaji*, or elegant gathering of the literati was to preserve the ancient cultural traditions and to embody Confucian virtues.


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 26.
Therefore, the purpose of performance was to instill a sense of social harmony and focus on self-cultivation, an amateur pursuit only sought for its own ends. Performance was to be restrained, avoiding empty virtuosity or impassioned playing meant to seduce. All levels of performers were encouraged, and there was no sense of competition.

The twentieth century brought revolutionary changes to China and all but eradicated the centuries-old Confucian system as well as Confucian-based economic and social relations. It began with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 which ignited factionalism in the political forces that culminated in the Communist takeover of government in 1949 and the Nationalists fleeing to Taiwan. Instigating these rifts was a sense that traditional Chinese culture was not up to meeting the demands of the modern world and its industrial nature. As it was happening in Europe, artists and writers were challenging the classical approach and beginning to see it as out of touch with common people and that its elitist paradigm fit the feudal systems of the past. In the late 1920s sacrifices to Confucius ended. There was also a mass exodus of university students to Europe, America, and Russia fleeing the Sino-Japanese War and its aftermath.

The social hierarchy in China radically shifted as well, with merchants and entertainers acceding to highly esteemed positions and the literati scholar and official quickly becoming an obsolete position. The shift of the economy from agricultural endeavors to industrial ones forced an internal migration and breakup of the centuries old familial structures. The extended family which would have lived together in villages was dispersed to urban centers. This, in turn, led to the loss of cultural values centered on familial piety, a tenet of Confucianism. Regional and village identity gave way to a sense of nationalism.

Music, like all other facets of life, followed suit and changed aesthetically as well as functionally. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the musical aesthetics based on
Confucian ideals of simplicity, moderation, and constraint were replaced by Western aesthetics of contrast, climax, and complexity. Chinese musicians felt that Western music was superior to traditional Chinese music and began performing works by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. Western-style auditoriums were built and orchestras were formed. Western music conservatories opened in the major cities. Music began to focus on the needs of the common people, whereas it had served the individual's cultivation in the past. Concepts of musicianship changed drastically from the amateur yaji setting, where everyone, despite their skill level was encouraged to participate. Now highly skilled professional musicians were sought for government-funded orchestras which performed programs of propaganda. “Virtuosity, patriotism, and professionalism,” became the most valued attributes for musicians.15

Thrasher ends his essay with speculation about a possible return of the Confucian values to music:

If in the future there is to be a renaissance of the Confucian spirit of moderation, virtue, social harmony, and its basic assumptions about beauty, then traditional music may continue or return to reinforce this ideology. If, however, Western ideologies continue to influence the direction of Chinese thinking, the more popular currents of new music will probably dominate over the traditional, and musical attitudes will continue to change. The direction of Chinese music will be largely determined by these social considerations.16

This condition is the state of Chinese culture presently: a society in search of a sense of identity as it deals with the influence of Western ideology and globalization.

Thrasher’s work was limited to Hong Kong and Thailand as his research took place when it was difficult for Westerners to gain access to Mainland China. Because of this, the

15 Ibid., 42-47.

applicability of his research is limited in its analysis of the Mao period in China proper. However, this essay does illuminate the Taoist and Confucian elements associated with guqin aesthetics that are still in full practice today.

Revival of the Guqin in the Reformation Period

Zha Fuxi’s “Report on the Coverage of guqin Work Done in 1956” is an important document in the history of the guqin. The future of the guqin was so dire in the 1940s and 50s that an effort was made to preserve what was considered a dying musical tradition. Guqin players like Zha Fuxi were able to work towards preserving a dying art by collecting recordings and manuscripts. In 1954, Chinese Musician Assistance Organization and the Ethnomusicology Research Institute discussed plans to send field workers to conduct interviews and to make audio recordings of as many guqin pieces as could be found. In addition, workers would collect biographical information and data pertaining to the living conditions of the surviving masters. The project did not commence until April 1956 but was able to record 264 pieces in 22 different cities by 86 guqin players. What they found was a population of musicians who had not played their instruments for twenty to thirty years and had only taken up the instrument to practice because they had been contacted to participate in the field work. As a result, the recordings yielded performances that were often lacking the masterful skill that is associated with classic guqin aesthetics. Many players were very much out of practice and used valuable studio time at the participating radio stations to do multiple takes for the pieces performed. Additionally, they discovered that there were only a “few semi-specialized qin teachers scattered in just a small number of places” and amateur musicians who were trained “in the old days by retainers
[attendants to the emperor or wealthy people who were highly skilled guqin players] or qin teachers.” Gone also was the presence of guqin ensembles or guqin players in orchestras. All that the ethnomusicologists found were solo performers.

Fuxi’s report troubles any narrative that oversimplifies the reasons for the changing relevance of the guqin for Chinese culture. Certainly, the success of Maoist philosophy in China and the subsequent Cultural Revolution influenced whether traditional arts like the guqin survived. However, after reading this study, it appears that the guqin’s popularity and presence throughout China was drastically in decline long before Mao came to power.17

The guqin began to reemerge after the Maoist era (1949-76) and eventually was promoted by the Chinese government. After the Cultural Revolution, China was in search of national identity and the government once again warmed to the Confucian tradition as well as the traditional arts as a means of uniting the country. “The Qin Revival in Mainland China”18 by Zhao Yuxing compares the recent revival of the guqin in China to other ethnomusicological models of music revivals to show how the recent popularity of the guqin is tied to a “cultural memory” and sense of identity for Chinese who experienced revolutionary changes in the twentieth century. Basing her thesis on Tamara Livingston Tore Lind’s work about revivals, Zhao situates the guqin’s reemergence as a past reimagined for the benefit of the present. Whereas the guqin was traditionally an instrument for the elite literati (primarily male) who used the guqin as a means to atone with nature, today’s guqin player is connecting with the cultural traditions. Chinese people interested in ancient Chinese culture transport “themselves to a

17 Zha Fuxi, “Report on the coverage of guqin work done in 1956,”

bygone era of serenity and moral integrity...enacting their imaginings of ancient China."\(^{19}\)

Imagination is a key concept in the article as it posits that revivals are the present reviving an aspect of the past which is often idealized and is primarily an imagined one. At the heart of this impulse to reconnect is a sense of lost identity that is a result of globalization and Westernization of Chinese culture as well as an attempt to get back to a time before the Cultural Revolution that aimed to destroy “four illnesses” (old culture, old ideas, old customs and old habits). Because the guqin was and is today seen as embodying this sense of oldness, what made it a target during the Cultural Revolution is the source of its appeal today.

The changes that occurred in Chinese music aesthetics continue to influence revivals of traditional arts. In the article “Music of Qin: From the Scholar's Study to the Concert Stage,”\(^{20}\) Bell Yung analyzes the effects on guqin performance practice and aesthetics to a talk given by Mao Zedong in 1942 entitled “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art.” This talk was a general statement on the arts, not particularly pointed at the guqin but Yung makes certain connections that assert that Mao was alluding to the ancient instrument. For Mao, the arts were not for the elite or the literati. Instead he said the arts should "shift their stand; they must gradually move their feet over to the side of the workers, peasants and soldiers, to the side of the proletariat ..." No longer is art meant for the elite class to entertain and enrich themselves in solitude or among friends. There is a call from Mao to bring a unity between “The Spring Snow” (Yangchung baixue) and "Song of the Rustic Poor" (Xialiba ren). “The Spring Snow”

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 17.

represented the elite, refined, and hard to understand work of the literati. “Song of the Rustic Poor” stood for the folk, popular arts, and the easily understood arts which are much more dramatic and entertaining. These declarations by Mao caused a change in the social and ideological milieu in which the musical tradition operated. The guqin would no longer be played in private, and its performance practices shifted in order to garner the approval of an audience. Its function changed from facilitating solitary meditation for an individual to entertainment for many on a concert stage. Its audience changed from being members of well-educated elite to workers.

To facilitate these changes the guqin’s morphology and aesthetics were altered. The size of the body was increased. Amplification was used for the first time with the instrument. The strings changed from silk to nylon. For thousands of years the guqin was never played for money. In the 1980s and 90s professional guqin players begin to emerge. There was a change in the repertoire where twenty-minute-long pieces like “Niezheng Assassinates King Han” were shortened to five minutes in order to have greater appeal to the audience. There was also a shift away from focusing on the literary background of each piece. In the past, the poem was primary and the music was meant to evoke the emotion of the poem with the listener knowing the poem well. In the new guqin audience the “attention is drawn instead to the music sound and structure; techniques are emphasized” and with this a greater focus on technical ability, virtuosic playing, and techniques which exaggerate the inner emotions of the player (borrowing from Western classical music and the behavior of those performers). To draw a contrast with the past, the "Seven Grave Ills of Playing the Qin" lists: ‘Shaking one's head and moving one's feet; holding one's mouth open and staring with anger; eyeing up and down and left and right; rapidly shifting one's line of sight; heavy breathing; hand movements without control; general appearance of
looking lost; quick changes of facial expressions; looking blue and flushed as if feeling guilty.’”

To contrast, Bell Yung quotes a recent review of guqin performance that seems to break every single one of the “ills”: “‘He played it with an intensity and lyricism building to controlled violence as he plucked the strings and hammered the sides of his instruments with his hand. His hair flopped across his face, his spectacles fell to the ground as he ‘bent' and ‘slid' the notes in a way I had never heard outside of North American blues.’” One can see, with these rapid changes in aesthetics within the last fifty years of guqin performance practice, a total upheaval of the motivation for playing the guqin as well as its audience and the performance practices of the musicians.

One aspect of guqin tradition that hasn’t changed radically is its repertoire. Despite its three thousand year history of relatively uninterrupted tradition, the current guqin repertoire is limited. There exist over one hundred and fifty guqin handbooks which contain over three thousand pieces but many of these pieces are simply repetitions of pieces found in other compilations. There may be some slight variation in melody or performance technique but the pieces are considered similar enough to be called the same piece. When all of these variations are distilled into a core body of unique melodies, what remains is roughly three hundred pieces. Of these only about one hundred are still played and only about thirty are performed in public. Surprisingly, this fact hasn’t diminished the popularity of the guqin, as audiences flock to hear the same pieces, possibly focusing on the slight variations and interpretive elements that each performer brings. In fact, if one surveys the compositions found on commercial recordings of guqin there is an even smaller repertoire of no more than ten (top ten of guqin).21

There are a few recent online and print articles that document the rising popularity of the guqin as a hobby in China. “Reviving the Old Crafts: Guqin Enthusiasts Keep Tradition Alive” focuses on guqin master Pei Jinbao and his dedication to repairing ancient instruments and promoting guqin music. Jinbao started the Wu Society of Guqin which regularly holds *yajis* where traditional Chinese arts, and especially guqin, are performed. The article shows that the society has been attracting many more young students since the UNESCO listing.

**Chinese American History and Transnational Identity**

The story of Chinese immigration to the United States is one of large swings of public opinion from the encapsulating society. At times Americans welcomed Chinese immigration and considered this group the “model minority,” providing essential labor and skills with the expectation of “cheap labor.” At other times their presence was met with scorn and an attempt at exclusion. Like many minority groups in the U.S. the conditions inflicted on Chinese Americans were severe. As recently as 2001, as Iris Chang points out, Chinese Americans were targets of vitriol in relation to the events surrounding the collision of a US spy plane with a Chinese fighter plane and the capture of US military men by the PRC.

Initially immigrating to capitalize on the California Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants mined for gold, were instrumental in the transcontinental railroad, worked domestic jobs seen as unfit for white men, and worked in factories for lower wages than white workers. Factory owners

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soon began to use the threat of the Chinese to break union power and, as a result, they were scapegoated for the strife of white laborers and this division was exploited by ambitious politicians. As a result, the “Chinese Exclusion Act” was made law in 1882. It prohibited any Chinese from entering the country and prevented naturalization for even long-established Chinese families. California saw the greatest backlash to Chinese immigrants, and many people moved east to avoid hostile treatment. Having always identified with region or village, the identity of “Chinese” was forced upon them and the community banded together to protect themselves. During the years of exclusion (1882-1943), Chinese used the judicial system to fight against discrimination and to find loopholes to bring their families to the United States. The exclusions were partially lifted when public sentiment changed toward Chinese-Americans due to their enlisting in the war effort. With the Civil Rights Act of 1965, immigration bans were completely lifted and immigration from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong increased, bringing the population into the millions from roughly 200,000.  

There is still a great deal of strife that confronts Chinese immigrants, especially in large cities with Chinatowns. As Peter Kwong has illustrated, working-class immigrants are the victims not only of outside discrimination, but also of an economic system that overburdens immigrants in regards to fulfilling basic needs. Currently gentrification threatens to destroy Chinese communities and the very organizations that provide cultural connections and resources. Despite the public assumption that Chinese are now predominantly middle-class and make up the “model minority,” there is a vast population of new immigrants with limited


English and meager job skills who are being exploited by the restaurant and garment industries, especially in New York City’s Manhattan Chinatown. These revelations beg the question as to how is it across the river in Flushing where a population of Taiwanese have created a community which bases itself on avoiding the dynamics of Manhattan’s Chinatown. Are the same oppressive forces prevailing in Queens as well or are the transnational organizations providing a network of resources that help new immigrants there?

Music is an important aspect of creating and sustaining community as well as constructing identity. How does music play a role in the lives of these new immigrants? Su Zheng has conducted research into the music made by transnational immigrants in New York city in her book *Claiming Diaspora: Music Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America*. Zheng, an Asian-American immigrant musician herself, takes as a point of departure that Chinese musicians living in receiving communities are not at the end of a unilateral journey, but live in relation to both cultures, whether living part time in each or being connected to the homeland through technology or their imaginations. Music, as she notes, is a neglected field of study when it comes to constructing cultural identity, and she gives a thorough history of Chinese-American music in New York City. The book’s field research takes place in 1992-3 when she was working on a doctoral dissertation and so there is a lack of information as to how her findings relate to current situations. In addition, the book focusses mainly on the operatic traditions coming from China and spends few words describing the *yajis* related to guqin music, possibly because the guqin was out of vogue at the time. The subjects of her study are mainly recent immigrants who have closer ties to the home country than to the United States, and little attention is given to established Chinese families who are enrolled in Western classical

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music programs or who consume mainly American popular music. However, what is especially useful about this book is its theoretical framework of looking at how music consumption contributes to the construction of identity for transnationals.27

Wei-Ting Lu’s study28 of Western classical music schools in Flushing, that serve Chinese American immigrant children, bases its analysis on and against Pierre Bourdieu’s concept that “cultural capital”29 serves the dominant class and is a means of reproducing social relations. Lu shows how Chinese American families believe they have found an escape of class immobility by adopting aspects of upper-class European culture. Chinese American children take music lessons more than any other racial group in the United States, including whites, and Lu ties this to the aspiration capital of their parents who believe that by providing their children with training in aspects of the dominant culture, that are assumed to have cultural capital, their children will have greater educational and economic opportunities. Lu’s research, conducted at classical music schools in Flushing, shows that the focus for families is not on maintaining traditional Chinese culture, but on obtaining “new cultural resources in order to orient their families to mainstream educational institutions.”30 While this may be true for established immigrant families, it ignores the transnational flow of the economy and globalization of culture that influences choices among other groups in Flushing. As economic and political powers shift, the need for assimilation is


30 Lu, "Confucius, Yamaha, or Mozart?" 18.
changing from straight-line to transnational, where new immigrants may participate, but do not abandon traditional culture and identity. With the rise of China’s upper and middle classes, due to the country’s growing economy, assimilating to upper-class America may not be the only path toward prosperity for Chinese immigrants.

There is a growing body of research that is moving away from emphasis on transnational individuals and toward “organizational transnationalism.” This research shows that instead of merely assimilating to the new host culture, immigrants are connecting through various organizations as a way to “engage their ancestral homelands,” and this, in turn, strengthens the infrastructure of the community, providing not only symbolic, but material and informational resources which ease immigration. These groups are not only perpetrated by immigrants, but are supported by the Chinese government that funds outreach programs for expatriates, conducting events like youth festivals for transnationals so they can bring back aspects of Chinese culture to those who only reside in the USA. These groups require much more study, especially as the issues of immigration grow in political intensity in Europe and especially the United States where there is an expectation of assimilation for immigrants. How also do these groups perpetuate the revival, occurring in Mainland China and Taiwan, of traditional Chinese arts like the guqin?


CHAPTER II: THE NEW YORK GUQIN SCHOOL

The New York Guqin School is located a few blocks north from the heart of downtown Flushing. Its building is interspersed with storefronts that speak of the dynamic nature of the neighborhood with parts reminiscent of Chinatowns elsewhere along with the signs of gentrification and change. Across the street are the tell-tale signs of a police station with cars backed in along the sidewalk. The Guqin School, which teaches ancient Chinese arts, is located in a seemingly Korean enclave of Flushing’s diverse Asian sub-neighborhood, on 37th Avenue between Union and Bowne Street. One block to the south are Korean beauty salons and soft tofu soup restaurants interspersed with corporate phone stores, travel agencies, and pharmacies. Traveling further south, Chinese restaurants and storefronts become much more common, with dim sum banquet halls and xiaolongbao restaurants serving food mainly from the Jiangsu and Guangdong provinces.

The neighborhood’s history is incredibly rich and dynamic and its cultural stewardship has switched hands with waves of new immigrants. A block north of the school is the John Bowne House, Flushing’s oldest building built in 1661, which marks the first immigrants in Flushing and their struggle for religious freedom. A few blocks away on Northern Boulevard is another Quaker landmark, the Quaker Meeting house, which has been holding weekly prayer meetings for the last three-hundred-twenty-three years. Today, Flushing is no longer associated with Quakers and the Flushing Remonstrance, but with Asian-Americans and a Chinatown that rivals Manhattan’s.

New York City contains the largest population of Asians outside Asia and the greatest number of Asian-Americans in the United States. Flushing, one of six Chinatowns in New York City, developed in ways that distinguish it from Chinatown in Manhattan and has grown to be
the largest population of Chinese Americans with 237,484 people of Chinese descent compared to Manhattan's 107,609. Manhattan's density of Chinese-Americans, however, is greater with 4,713.5 people per square mile to Flushing's 2,178.8. The Manhattan and Flushing Chinatowns differ in language and economic status of their respective inhabitants. Manhattan was the original destination for Chinese immigrants mainly speaking Cantonese and originating from Fuzhou region of China. As the Flushing Chinatown began to be developed in the 1980s and 1990s, populated by Mandarin-speaking immigrants from Taiwan, there emerged a socioeconomic divide between the two Chinatowns. The outer borough setting of Flushing became much more expensive, and many immigrants flocked to the cheaper rents and job opportunities in Manhattan, many working in restaurants and garment factories. Today, the language divide between Cantonese and Mandarin speakers seems to be disappearing as Mandarin is taking over Manhattan while, at the same time, the Chinese government pushes for its implementation as the official language in China.

Until the 1970s, Flushing was predominately a white neighborhood. A group of Taiwanese immigrants, unable to relate to Manhattan's population of low-income Cantonese-speaking Chinese, established a *Little Taipei* or *Little Taiwan* in Flushing which quickly grew in population until it surpassed that of Manhattan. New immigrants spoke mainly Mandarin, and so were attracted to Flushing because of its ease for immigrants. By 1990, 41% of Flushing was Asian.

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Flushing's Chinese-American population is predominantly middle to upper-middle class compared to Manhattan’s lower economic demographics among the Chinese (although this may be rapidly changing due to gentrification in the neighborhood). There is also a high degree of education among Chinese-Americans living in Flushing, especially Taiwanese of which 73.6% hold bachelor’s degrees, the highest of any demographic in the United States.\(^{36}\)

The sidewalk outside the building for the school is shaded by a tall, single spruce tree. An awning for a dental office hangs above the doorway. As one enters the building there is an empty lobby possibly designed as a waiting and reception area for the dental offices that occupy the first floor. One eventually finds the door downstairs to the basement labeled “New York Guqin School” and knocks on the wooden door with faint sounds of guqin and guzheng being played. As the door opens Shih-Hua “Judy” Yeh welcomes you inside. The first task after greeting is to sign the “registration” form noting that the lesson was initiated. “Pardon my English. My English is not that good,” she says. She excuses herself to finish a lesson. On the wall are hung three guqin as well as posters for past concerts presented by the school that showcase their students’ playing. In the adjacent room, a virtuosic fast-paced (196 BPM) duple-meter guzheng duet begins with rapid-fire tremolo followed by harp-like sweeps of cascading notes. Shih-Hua’s voice is heard instructing in Mandarin over the playing and once the piece ends. She stops to sing phrases, further elucidating the technique to her student whom she explains later has a competition the following week.

The basement has three adjoining rooms. The first is for group instruction and primarily is set up for guzheng instruction. The middle room where one enters is the office space with two desks and guqins mounted to the wall. The third room is the room where guqin instruction occurs.

The air in the guqin instruction room has a cool moisture to it as humidifiers emit water vapor in order to keep the guqins from cracking in the cool winter weather. In addition to the white noise of the humidifier are the steady stream of airplanes flying over on their way to landing at LaGuardia airport and the occasional rumble of the subway below. Around the perimeter of the room are bookshelves containing volumes of guqin repertoire and treatises on guqin aesthetics as well as books of classic guqin pieces written in Western notation. The walls contain calligraphy of the poems that were put to music and accompanied by guqin. There are also multiple photos of Shih-Hua dressed in traditional Chinese dress holding a guqin in a natural setting.

In the center of the room are two thin tables with two guqins and two benches, one on each side, so that the teacher and student face each other for instruction.37

37 This is how guqin has been taught for centuries and only recently has technology changed the method of pedagogy for students, who often want to take a video of the song and study it at home.
Although the guqin are placed on tables in the school setting, they were traditionally played on the lap, as is depicted in many ancient Chinese paintings including the one below:

![Guqin master Boya](image)

The guqin is a made up of two boards, with the topmost one curved onto the lower one which creates a cavity that serves as a resonating chamber. There are two sound holes on the bottom of the guqin and two feet that allow the body to be suspended for the sound to escape into the air below. The body of the guqin is about four-and-a-half feet long and eight inches wide at its broadest end that gradually narrows to the other end. The entire length in Chinese measurements is 3 chi, 6 cun and 5 fen (approx. 136 cm). The 365 represent the days of the year. There are seven strings that bend around the narrow end of the guqin. On the broader side (seven inches wide) the strings flow through narrow holes and wrap around seven tuning pegs. At this same end is a bridge which elevates the strings off the fingerboard.

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The only markings on the upper side of the guqin are thirteen *hui* which are essential to providing players with points of reference. Moving away from the bridge the *hui* increase in numerical value with the closest being one and the farthest from the bridge being thirteen. These points are used for left hand notes made by pressing the string and also for harmonic notes. Musical notation will often call for playing between the *hui*. For example it may say play 7.6 on the 4th string.

*Morphology of the guqin.*

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Each aspect of the guqin represents something beyond technically pragmatic purposes. The thirteen *hui* represent the thirteen months of the Chinese Lunar calendar. The seven strings that stretch along the guqin body represent the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, soil, the king of the literati, and the King of the Western Jiao). The body of the guqin and its special wood represents heaven.

The guqin is given a Hornbostel-Sachs classification number of 312.22, as a “Heterochord half-tube zither.” It is given this classification because it creates sound by one or more vibrating string(s), is constructed with two parts: a string-bearer and string(s), the string-bearer has a vaulted surface, the strings are stretched across a convex gutter, and is a heterochord.  

### An Initial Guqin Lesson

The lesson begins and Shih-Hua instructs me to sit facing the middle *hui* (sixth hui). If the left hand is not performing some aspect of the music it rests above the first and lowest string between the ninth and tenth *hui*. The right hand stays close to the bridge when plucking and floats above the strings when only the left hand is employed. Shih-Hua places some sheet music in front of me and apologizes.

“I am sorry; I used to have English versions of this, but not anymore.” Shih-Hua begins her lesson with an explanation of the notation system:

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“I always tell my students that the score for the guqin tablature or notation is irreplaceable. You cannot replace it using staff score because our guqin scores have the fingering and number of the strings, and the number of the hui, all combined together. Say, if on piano we play central C, Do, it’s this note (she plays the lowest open guqin string). On piano it is only this note, but on the guqin have open string Do (plucks string again), the overtone Do (plays harmonic), the pressed string Do, and this is also Do (plays harmonic on a different string). So without the Chinese ancient guqin score, you don’t know how to play guqin. We have three different sounds: the open string sound (），the overtone (），and an yin (） (the pressed string). These three kinds of sounds we say are heaven, human, and the earth. The earth is the open string sound. Human is pressed string. Heaven is overtone. On the guqin we have these three sounds so even if you say I want to play this note, you still need to know if you want to do the open string, the overtone, or the pressed string. So it’s very hard to use other scores to replace guqin.\textsuperscript{41}

There is a great deal different with guqin notation compared to Western systems. A player needs to know more than what note to play. The player must know the timbre of the note based on how the string is to vibrate. A note can be played in three different ways. There are three types of notes when it comes to the left hand. San Yin is an open string where only the right hand is engaged and it is represented by this symbol: \textsuperscript{41}. San Yin notes are said to represent the sounds of the earth. An Yin (） is a string pressed and plucked with the left hand pressing or sliding into one of the thirteen markings on the guqin known as hui. An Yin is supposed to represent the sounds of humanity. The third type of notes is Fan Yin (） which is a harmonic made by lightly touching the string at a hui with the left hand while the right hand plucks the string. The sound is said to represent heaven.

In this way the score gives very specific instructions so that there is little room for interpretive error when it comes to note and timbre. The interpretation comes in when it comes to the duration of notes so that the performer can hold out notes for greater emphasis and expression.

\textsuperscript{41} Shih-Hua Judy Yeh, interviewed by Tyler Burba, Interview and Lesson, New York Guqin School, Flushing, NY, May 8th 2016.
Shih-Hua explains: “but the guqin score also has its problems: it doesn’t have rhythm. The ancient guqin score is like this. The original guqin notation actually shows every detail of what we need to do.”

The original notation system developed for guqin was extremely specific and wrote out directions in prose for where to place one’s left hand and which string to pluck. The notation was more of a step-by-step process for playing the piece as opposed to the short-hand method used today.

Example of early guqin notation which reads much more like prose than a system of symbols.

Shih-Hua says “nowadays we use this simplified score combined with guqin score. This is the original Chinese Character and in the guqin we use Jianzi pu, which means you simplify

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42 Ibid.

43《碣石調幽蘭第五》 "Jieshi Diao Youlan No.5" in longhand form, A photocopy of part of the Tang manuscript, Jieshidiao Youlan, held at Kyoto, Japan.
the stroke of the original character and then take out the character and combine together again. One character shows what string we play and what fingering, both right hand and left hand."

Through the simplified character, or Jianzi pu, one symbol made up of multiple smaller symbols can quickly instruct the player what string the right hand is to pluck, what kind of stroke (explained below), whether the note is to be pressed or open or harmonic, what spot or hui the left hand should press, what finger the left hand uses, and many other elements that go into the expression of one note. The notation system, called Jianzi pu, employed for guqin was developed in the Tang Dynasty and is an exacting system with precise instructions as how each note is to be played.

\[ Jianzi pu \text{ (減字譜) character}^{45} \]

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45 Juni L. Yeung, Standards of the Guqin, 34.
The symbol (above) represents both the right hand and left hand actions made up of abbreviated Chinese characters. These characters reveal the string that is to be played (one through seven with the first string being the lowest and farthest away from the player). It also shows which finger is to be used to pluck the string with the right hand.

“The notation shows the right hand scale, the left hand fingering, which hui hui, which dot to go.”

Shih-Hua explains each part of the simplified character and how it shows precisely how the note is to be played. The character can be deciphered by the diagram above. The top of the character dictates the left hand gesture with the upper-left signifying what finger is to be used to press:

![Left-hand finger notation symbols.](image)

The upper-right symbol tells on what hui the finger is to be placed, either one through thirteen or some place in between a hui. In the bottom of the symbol are generally the directions for the

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right hand, but in the case above there are also instructions for the left as we see with the symbol for sliding which tells the performer to slide from the previous note played on the same string down to the next note with the left hand. The symbol for *tiao* directs the player to pluck the string with the index finger, pushing away, and the lower number symbol for six denotes the string to be plucked. There are eight different possibilities for the right hand, with each finger being able pull or push the string; however, the most common strokes are *tiao* (the index finger being pushed away from the player with support from the thumb) and *gou* (the middle finger pulled inward). The chart below details the symbols for the right hand fingering:
Within the Jianzi pu, these right hand gestures are incorporated into the symbol along with the left hand position.

Shih-Hua explains that in the notation system of Jianzi pu, there are very specific instruction as to slides between notes, but some are added without notation. For example, the first and last notes of a phrase are usually slid into without notation telling the player to do so. Also vibrato is added to notes that end a phrase, if the note is held long enough to do so.

“In all kinds of Chinese music...in Western score it always writes very specifically. If it needs a decoration notes, then it will write it on the score. But in Chinese music it always isn’t written out. We always add the slide, even if the notation doesn’t have it. It’s always at the beginning of the phrase and always at the end. ‘Shàng’ (上) means going up. I was on seven, so when it says going up, I slide. It is not always about going one dot. We will go in between.”

After explaining how the notation system works, Shih-Hua shows three common right-hand basic fingerings. After explaining each, we do a quick exercise playing each string in order using the fingering and then jumping strings (1-3, 2-4 etc.) The first is called “Tiaò” and is the index finger pushing away from the player with the thumb behind it:

47 While plucking the string with the right hand, the left hand is pressing one finger and sliding to the point (hui) indicated in the score.

The second common right-hand stroke is called “Gou 勾” and it involves the middle finger pulling the string toward the player like so:

![Hand gesture](image1)

The third is called “Muó 抹”. The index finger pulls toward the player:

![Hand gesture](image2)

Now that the notation system has been explained she flips to the first piece to be played. She sits facing me, each of us at our guqin. The format of instruction is that the teacher plays a phrase, narrating the notation aloud, and the student imitates. She sings the number of the string with the pitch of the string, plays it, and waits for me to imitate. Since the Jianzi pu contains Chinese characters, the player has to know what all the sub-symbols mean. In this case, the non-repeating aspects are the numbers of the strings.

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49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.
The piece is entitled “Chimes” and is guqin adaptation of “Westminster Quarters,” the common clock chime used in churches throughout the Western world. Shih-Hua uses this to also signal to her younger students that the class is almost over because of its association with the end of a school day.
Analysis of “Chimes”

The first line of the piece is set up in two layers. The upper layer has vertical lines that indicate bars as in European art notation, and within the bars are numbers that correspond to degrees in the pentatonic scale. Below each number is a dot that indicates the duration of each note with one dot being counted as a quarter note (two dots a half note). The second layer is written in Jianzi pu. The first figure gives the instruction for the right hand to pluck, with the “Gou” (手势) gesture (middle finger pulling in) the third string, san ( strings), as an open string, or san yin ( strings). The second character gives no indication of whether it is open, pressed, or a harmonic and so one is to keep with the previous character’s state (In fact, the whole piece is only open strings.) It indicates that the fifth string, or wu ( ) is to be plucked using a tiaǒ ( gesture (index finger, with thumb support, pushes away). The third character denotes that the fourth string, or sì ( ) is to be plucked with a Tiaǒ ( gesture. The fourth character is a “Gou” ( ) plucking the first string, or yī ( ). The piece continues in this with the same set of notes and gestures.

As an introductory piece “Chimes” works well pedagogically. It transitions students, familiar with Western notation, to read new Chinese characters by providing scaffolding in the form of scale degrees, bar lines, rhythmic notation, and being written from left to right. Because it only uses the two gestures, and no left-hand positioning, students become familiar with the two most common right-hand gestures [Tiaǒ ( ) and Gou” ( )] as well as reading string numbers. Since there are only seven strings on a guqin, starting with this simple and familiar melody provides a necessary building of confidence and automation with reading the simpler aspects of the Jianzi pu notation, namely the string numbers and right-hand gesture markings. It still takes
considerable practice to master this simple tune, but it is not too challenging for average students to feel that it is within their grasp. As a beginning lesson, students are able to move from Western notation to something completely novel. Shih-Hua Yeh explains:

“all the guqin tunes need a lot of practice because it’s still very different from Western Music because they have more of a system of teaching skills. Stuff from very, very simple then builds up. But guqin, I would say, I won’t say I am the best, but I am a good teacher because I only let you start with this very small and very big word pieces. I know a lot of teachers who start with “Mei-Hua-San-Nong (Three Variations of the Plum Blossom)” which is a level eight piece.”

She takes a moment to correct my right hand posture. “The hand posture is the same as it is with piano. It’s like holding an egg. There should be an arch in your palm. Your fingers are all relaxed, but still a slight grip; it’s not like no bones. The wrist should be flat.” In addition the back of the hand should remain parallel to the fingerboard of the guqin.

“In this piece, you want a support. With this string, the third string is good.” When playing a higher string one can rest the unemployed fingers on a string two away for support. She also explains that the strings are counted from the lowest to the highest, the lowest string being the farthest away from the player. The hui are counted from the right to the left with the first hui closest to the bridge.

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51 “This is a list of 94 core pieces approved for the guqin certification examination. They represent just slightly under 10% of the guqin repertoire.” http://www.chineseculture.net/guqin/qinexamlist.htm


Tuning

“In the tuning method for guqin you always need to use overtones. So this is all *fan yin* (harmonics).” The guqin is tuned by playing a harmonic on one string and the same note harmonic on another and then using the tuning pegs at the bridge end of the guqin to tighten or loosen the strings. Since the guqin is not tuned to the western tempered scale, overtones are used to match string pitches.

“Because in guqin we use overtones a lot and we use the hui hui, which is not tempered, so if you used [a Western tuner] to tune, it will sound weird.” However, Shih-Hua will often use a conventional Western tuner to tune the reference string (first string: D), but the remaining notes are tuned relative to other strings and not to a Hertz measurement. The chart below shows which string sets are used for match tuning:
For example, the fifth string is tuned playing an overtone at the fifth *hui* on the seventh string and is to be matched with an overtone played on the fourth *hui* on the fifth string. So it goes for the rest of the strings with the exception to traditional tuning.

“In the original tuning, *zheng diao*, the fifth and third strings, there is a half-step...You see there is a pattern so after six and three it should be three and five but, because in the original
tuning the three and five does not match, we skip and go to five and two… then we go to four and one. After that, one and three is a double-check.” The guqin and the common hui harmonics must be in tune with another.

Xian Weng Cao (仙翁操)

The first “real” guqin piece in the school’s curriculum is entitled “Xian Weng Cao (仙翁操)” and Shih-Hua explains the title:

“Xian is like a god, Weng is like an old man, and Cao is just the form of Chinese music. Cao often occur when you are saying someone is very good. In ancient times when someone is very good and you want to show your respect, we will sing all the good things about them, like praise. In Chinese, we believe that a person who conducts themselves very well will become a god. For us, a man can become a god. It’s Taoist.”

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Right away the difference is clear between an introductory piece like “Chimes” and “Xian Weng Cao” especially in the setup of the music itself. The notes are only in Jianzi pu and are written in columns from top to bottom and right to left. Additionally the scaffolding from the earlier piece is not present. What remain are the simplified characters, and in order to move forward in learning guqin, one must master these symbols. What follows is an analysis of the piece by phrase:

**Phrase 1:**

The character indicates that the seventh string will be played open using the *tiaō* right hand finger gesture.

Play an open fifth string using *gou*.

Once again, play an open seventh string with a *tiaō*.

Make a small slide with the left hand, using the ring finger into the ninth *hui* while plucking the fifth string with *gou*.

“A little break.”
Phrase 2:

Play an open seventh string with a tiaō.

Play an open fifth string using gou (open string denotation carries over from previous note).

Play an open six string using tiaō.

Left hand uses the ring finger to press at the ten hui while plucking the fourth string using gou.

Open seven string using tiaō.

Using the thumb, slide into the nine hui while plucking the fourth string using gou.

Take a “little break.”
Phrase 3:

Play an open six string using *tiao*.

Play an open fourth string using *gou*.

Play an open fifth string using *tiao*.

Using the ring finger, press at 10.8 *hui* with the left hand on the third string using *gou* with the right hand.

Play an open six string using *gou*.

Using the thumb on the left hand, slide into the ninth *hui* while plucking with the right hand using *gou*.

“Little break.”
Phrase 4:

Play an open fifth string using tiaō.

Play an open third string using gou.

Play an open fourth string using tiaō.

With the left hand press the tenth hui using the ring finger while plucking the second string using gou.

Play an open fifth string using tiaō.

The left hand, using the thumb, slide into the ninth hui while plucking the second string using gou.

“Little break”
Phrase 5:

Play an open fourth string using tiao.

Play an open second string using gou.

Play an open third string using tiao.

Left hand, using the ring finger, presses on the tenth hui while the right hand plucks the first string using gou.

Play an open fourth string using tiao.

Left hand, using the thumb, slides into the ninth hui while the right hand plucks using gou.

“Little break.”
Phrase 6:

Play an open fourth string using *tiao*.

Left hand, using the thumb, presses on the ninth *hui* while the right hand plucks the one string using *gou*.

Play and open fifth string using *tiao*.

Left hand, using the thumb, slides into the ninth *hui* while the right hand plucks the second string using *gou*.

“Little break”
Phrase 7:

Play an open sixth string using tiaō.

Left hand, using the thumb, presses on the ninth hui while the right hand plucks the third string using gou.

Play an open seventh string using tiaō.

Left hand, using the thumb, slides into the ninth hui while the right hand plucks the fourth string using gou.

“Little Break”
Phrase 8:

Left hand, using the thumb, slides into the ninth hui while the right hand plucks the fifth string using gou.

Left hand bars across to the sixth string with the thumb (second position\(^{55}\)) while the right hand plucks using gou.

Left hand thumb slides up to 7.9 hui. Right hand is still.

Play open seventh string using tiao.

Left hand, using the thumb, slides into the ninth hui while the right hand plucks the fourth string using gou.

“Little break.”

\(^{55}\)“Second position” means that the part of the thumb used to press the string is below the nail on the side of the thumb. “First position” is the default. For the thumb it means on the side of the thumb, half flesh and half nail.
Phrase 9:

Left hand thumb slides down\textsuperscript{56} (towards the left) stopping at the ninth $hui$ while the right hand plucks the fourth string using $gou$. The bottom notation (帯起) calls for a “Dài Qǐ (帶起)” which means that the left-hand thumb pulls up using some nail to vibrate the string while the left-hand ring finger is in place behind it (in this case the tenth $hui$).

Play an open sixth string using $tiaò$.

Left hand, using the ring finger, slides into the tenth $hui$ while the right hand plucks the fourth string using $gou$.

“Little break.”

\textsuperscript{56} The three lines emanating from the lower part of the character is what signifies this slide down.
Phrase 10:

This symbol denotes that all notes following are harmonics (*fan yin*).

Left hand, using the index finger, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the fourth string using *gou*.

Left hand, using the thumb, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the seventh string using *tiaö*.

Left hand, using the index finger, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the sixth string using *tiaö*.

Left hand, using the index finger, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the fourth string using *tiaö*.\(^\text{57}\)

Left hand, using the middle finger, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the first string using *gou*.

Left hand, using the thumb, lightly touches the seventh *hui* while the right hand plucks the sixth string using *gou*.

This symbol means two notes are played together.\(^\text{58}\) The right hand plucks both *gou* and *tiaö*. The first and sixth strings are plucked with the left-hand lightly touching the seventh *hui* on both.

“Stop”

\(^{57}\) Once again, because there are no left hand markings above the number, the conditions of the previous are played with the fourth string instead.

\(^{58}\) The two left-hand notes are written in very small characters on either side of the lower cross. The left side indicates using the middle finger on the seventh *hui* on the first string. The right side indicates using the thumb at the seventh *hui* on the sixth string.
Conclusion

Despite the fact the majority of her students are fluent in Mandarin and are adept at reading and interpreting characters, Yeh has to adapt her pedagogical practices to cultural trends in Taiwan and Mainland China as well as to those of Chinese-American immigrants. Since the Cultural Revolution, students in China have been primarily instructed in European art Music repertoire and theory with a vast network of conservatories across China and Taiwan that specialize in this training. In addition, as Wei-Ting Lu’s study\textsuperscript{59} has shown, Chinese-American families are taking advantage of the cultural capital associated with European art Music by enrolling their children into classes and private lessons. The majority of Yeh’s students are much more familiar with Western notation and aesthetics than they are with traditional Chinese music. Yeh has adapted her curriculum to take this into account by starting students with “Chimes.” The piece helps students build confidence in reading Jianzi pu characters while having the support of Western concepts of notation like bar lines and scale degrees.

After the initial lesson, students are quickly moved into the first necessary step of guqin playing: reading Jianzi pu. This system is challenging at first because the precision and background knowledge that each instructional character requires. The first few pieces in Yeh’s school offer a balance between repetition and novelty of symbols. Additionally, the beginning pieces solely employ, with only two exceptions, the right-hand gestures of tiaó and gou. Since students only have to become efficient at correctly engaging one or the other, the process of decoding is simplified for the beginner.

The teaching technique employs a face-to-face methodology that provides visual modeling for the student and the synestheteic incorporation of sight, hearing, and touch that serves

\textsuperscript{59} Lu, "Confucius, Yamaha, or Mozart?" 58.
to reinforce and to expedite learning. The student and teacher play together with Yeh, singing the string numbers and providing real time guidance on technical aspects.

The majority of Yeh’s students are transnational students, the bridging of east and west through pedagogy is important. The guqin revival constitutes a minority when it comes to music interests among the Chinese in the United States or overseas. Students who receive their training in this way are connecting to a long tradition of guqin pedagogy which has remained consistent throughout its history, primarily the physical orientation to the teacher and learning through repeating the gestures as the teacher models. Despite its ancient base, the instruction has undergone similar technological advances as migration has, namely the use of smartphones to communicate and capture moments for later review. Many students will go through the slow process of imitation but will also take a video of Yeh performing the piece in order to review and practice on their own.

When focusing on the pedagogy it is easy to ignore some important aspects of the lesson: the becoming-musician and the music itself. Most of Yeh’s students are just becoming musicians and the rest had mainly Western training. These lessons provide a link back to a past that many in China are interested in, for the love of the guqin music, and admiration of Chinese ancient scholarly tradition. While each student has their own personal reasons for studying the guqin, we will see that there is an underlying need that the guqin is serving to fulfill.
CHAPTER III:
TRANSNATIONAL PRACTITIONERS OF THE GUQIN

Student Demographics

According to Shih-hua, there are twenty-five guqin students who take regular lessons. Roughly half of these are international students from China and Taiwan. Forty percent are Chinese who immigrated and are citizens who currently work in New York. In addition, she has two Caucasian American students. Sixty-four percent of the students have not received any training in the guqin before taking lessons with Shi-hua, with only 36% having played in China and continuing at the New York Guqin School. Most of the students are adults (82%) with only one teenager, and so it seems that the motivation for picking up this difficult instrument is intrinsic, without coaxing from parents. Immigrant parents do not seem to be interested in paying for private lessons for their children. The young adults who take up guqin do so because of their own interest:

“I am always curious and ask them why they want to learn the guqin, because when I was a student nobody wanted to learn it...The currents have changed... Learning guqin is the most popular thing now. The reason, I would say, is that the guqin has always been highly positioned in Chinese history. It was only through the Cultural Revolution that it was hit down, but now people come back to know it, and they still like it. There is a revival of Chinese learning that I think is [promoted] by the Chinese government. Nowadays people start loving Chinese history, Chinese poems, or even guqin...More and more people have come to love the guqin. I think the Chinese government has done a lot. I really think that.”60

She bases this opinion on the fact that in several major international events the government has chosen to use the guqin to represent Chinese culture (i.e. 2008 Beijing Olympics). Prior to this

last decade, the guqin was never used in this way, as a cultural symbol. Also in previous years, Chinese films would only use guzheng and pipa, but “recently a lot of movies or dramas use guqin. So I think it started from the Chinese government and then [it] spread. As a result, there are many more guqin schools in Taiwan and Mainland China today than when we began.” The guqin’s recent popularity is in tandem with a sense of revitalizing a sense of Chinese identity. Many young people are becoming interested in history and traditional arts as a way to understand and redefine what it means to be Chinese.

I conducted an online survey of guqin students of Yeh’s and had eleven students participate. 82% of the students were female with 10% male and 10% preferring not to say. This is an interesting shift from tradition as the guqin was predominantly male instrument throughout its history. 80% of the students were born in China and 20% in Taiwan. All claimed Asian ethnicity. The age of students ranged from thirteen to thirty-four with the largest group (45.5%) being college age (18-24), the second largest (27.3%) were older (25-34), the third group (18.2%) were young teenagers (13-17), and one adult is 65-74 years old. 63% reported to be full-time students and 47% are full-time professionals.


62 The survey was conducted online and students could answer anonymously. I created the survey and it was shared with student through Ms. Yeh. According to Yeh, she had twenty-five students at the time of the study. Eleven students participated and so the data presented in this section relates to less than half of the students (11/25).
The majority of the students (54%) said that they had no musical training before studying the guqin. 45% said they had studied European art music in China or Taiwan before coming to the United States. Only one student had studied a traditional Chinese instrument besides the guqin, the pipa. Others learned piano, flute, bass, and drums.

“They learned piano when they were little. The longest for maybe one or two years and then they stopped. When they grow up to learn guqin is their own choice...For most of them guqin is their first instrument.”

63 Yeh says she doesn’t see an interest in immigrant parents for

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their children to learn guqin. “If they are born here and their parents want them to have some connection to Chinese culture they will chose guzheng or maybe flute, not guqin.” The guzheng is still far more popular than the guqin and has many more students but more adults are interested in the quiet soothing aesthetics of the guqin.

What follows are biographical portraits of Shi-Hua Judy Yeh, founder and primary teacher of the New York Guqin School, and Kingston Lam, a student who was willing to do an extended interview. There are also a few students who agreed to answer a few questions but who wished to remain anonymous.

Shih-hua Judy Yeh

Shih-hua “Judy” Yeh was born in Chiayi, Taiwan. She began her musical instruction with piano but, after a few years, switched to the popular guzheng which she studied at the Mei-An School in China. The school, which was founded in the early twentieth century, originated in the Shengdong province of Mainland China, but broke off into two branches, one in Hong Kong and
one in Taiwan initiated by Master Wu. One day she happened on her teacher playing an instrument she had never played before: the guqin.

“In the time I started learning not too many people know about the guqin...When I was little I started learning the guzheng. I was very lucky because my teacher had majored in guqin and guzheng was her second instrument. When she graduated from college she found not many people were interested in guqin, so if she wanted to make music for a living, she had to teach guzheng. I started learning guzheng from her. One day I saw her playing guqin, and I thought I want to learn it.”

Yeh was one of the first students of the guqin in her region of Taiwan as guqin music was all but wiped out by the Cultural Revolution and the popularity of the guzheng.

“At that time my teacher was the only one in the city [Chiayi]... and she only had three guqin students, including me. It was very very rare.” Shih-hua recalls that there wasn’t even a guqin school in Taipei, Taiwan’s largest city. “By the time I was in second year of high school there were only three colleges that had a guqin major and each school only had around three students.”

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64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 “Map of Taiwan,” http://www.chinahighlights.com/taiwan/map.htm
The guzheng, however, was and is today, ubiquitous. It is easy to find a teacher and fellow players. The guzheng’s history dates back to ancient Chinese culture, but to a later time period than the guqin (roughly 2,500 years ago, compared to the guqin that dates back 5,000 years).

“The guqin has a deeper and smaller sound. Guzheng sounds more bright so most people like the sound of the guzheng in their first impression. After the Cultural Revolution there is even a much bigger gap in people who learn the guzheng instead of the guqin. [In 1956] in China there are less than two-hundred that play guqin. It almost died out. [But] Taiwan kept the guqin going.”

When Yeh attended her first guqin competition in high school there were only a few other students competing, compared to the fifty who were competing on guzheng. Over the next few years, the guqin began to grow in popularity and Shi-hua was able to find a university that offered guqin as major. She found that the conservatories in Taiwan took a different approach to guqin instruction than did those of China. In China there is a focus on technical skill with some neglect to the spiritual and poetic aspects of the music:

“In Taiwan we do consider a lot about the scholarship. We learn a lot of theory, the aesthetic theory and philosophy. A student that majors in guqin needs to take the aesthetic course, for other students it is optional (majors in pipa and guzheng). We study three or four pieces in every semester which is quite a lot...In Taiwan, I would say in truth that I didn’t learn that much skill and technique if compared to a China conservatory, but we got more theory. If you have one student in China and one student in Taiwan that both graduated from college playing in the same concert, I think it would be very obvious that the student that graduated from China will play a lot better. But as they get older, like to my age thirty five to forty, we play a lot better because we have heart in the music and not just technique. We read more. We play less. China is the opposite way.”

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.
When Shi-hua finished her undergraduate studies she played often and developed the same skills that Chinese conservatory students attained, but she had aesthetic training as well. Yeh then went on to study abroad in the United Kingdom at Sheffield University where she completed a Master’s degree in Ethnomusicology studying the use of the guqin in music therapy.

Career prospects for guqin majors were very limited at the time. Most of the early graduates from her undergraduate program went into music teaching and the curriculum they taught was primarily Western music and instruments with little in the way of traditional Chinese music. This is still the way in Taiwan and Mainland China today where students learn classical music when they are young and only take up the guqin at a later age. With the growth in popularity of the guqin, many guqin majors can now have careers as private guqin instructors. None have yet been able to secure a path of performance only, although many supplement their incomes and their student enrollments by giving regular concerts.

“I’ve never seen one like that [who makes a living solely off guqin performance]. We always have to teach and perform. It’s always some percentage, but now I think it’s still more teaching than performing.”

In 2008, Shi-hua moved to the United States with her husband. She founded the New York Guqin School in Flushing and later opened up a branch in Bayside, Queens.

“At first we only started with guqin and guzheng, my instruments, but later we (because I love Chinese culture) added on. Most of the courses I open [are] because I want to learn. We started calligraphy first and then floral arrangement. I do [them] all. Now since we have this place [Bayside], we add some Western music instruments (piano, guitar, singing).”

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.
interest in cultivating an understanding of traditional arts is a connection between Yeh and her students. Indeed, learning an obscure instrument is testament to this sentiment.

The schools have attracted students due in no small part to Yeh’s mastery of her instruments. She has adapted her teaching method to her students, most of whom are new to playing. Instead of focusing mainly on the aesthetics, like the conservatory she attended, Yeh encouraged students to master playing technique first. She also promotes the other traditional arts like calligraphy, poetry, tea ceremonies, and flower arranging. She holds yajis regularly to encourage a sense of a scholarly community of people interested in deepening their understanding of Chinese culture and cultivating themselves spiritually.

“What I tell my students now is: ‘At first, I bring you into the guqin world by teaching you how to play well.’ I will also do a lot of yajis promoting all that is relevant which will bring up their interest of reading. Also I ask all the students to learn calligraphy. Once you do it, you are more calmed down…”

Through the New York Guqin School Yeh has created a community of scholars akin to those of ancient China who regularly meet and share their performances and interest in traditional Chinese arts. What follows are biographical portraits of a few students who were willing to answer questions about their lives and their motivation for taking up this ancient instrument.

\[71\] Ibid.
Kingston Lam

Kingston Lam plays the guqin at a Yaji at the Orchid Tea House.

Kingston was born in a small farming town in the Fujian Province of Mainland China. He remembers being intrigued by aspects of Chinese culture that his relatives engaged in, especially tea culture, and these impressions inspired him to learn more when he became an adult. After the Cultural Revolution ended, the Chinese government allowed people to move, and his family sought the economic opportunities available in Hong Kong. They moved to Hong Kong when he was nine. A few years later, he and his family immigrated to New York City when he was thirteen. From an early age he was interested in Chinese history:

“I think it has a lot to do with identity. I’m curious about what my ancestors did. The more I learn the more I see how little I know them...As a kid I wanted to learn more, but there was no one teaching...I had to pull it together [myself]...until Ms. Yeh started her school in Flushing and I traveled there to learn. For major populations in China, their life is very much modernized and westernized. Most of them will know a McDonald’s menu much more than a list of guqin songs.”

Learning about and engaging with ancient Chinese traditions was a way to balance with the forces of Westernization that were reforming China in the late twentieth century, and he sought a livelihood that could ground life in relation to this tradition.

When asked if he is first or second generation Chinese-American, Kingston says he thinks of himself as 1.5 because he wasn’t born in the United States and immigrated with his parents, but at a young age (13) and so spent many of the developmental years in America. He sees a contrast between himself and his parents as they “are pretty modernized and westernized” having grown up in the Cultural Revolution when the era of feudalism was forgotten and forbidden. While they are supportive of his business (the Orchid Tea Shop which specializes in Chines antiques as well as teas) they are not particularly interested in Chinese history on the level that Kingston is.

Kingston learns about history with a combination of approaches. He reads many ancient books online, he visits museums that have a Chinese collection, and he learns a great deal through the antiques (porcelain and teapots) that come through his shop. Much research is involved in the antique business, including verifying the age and origin of a piece as well as being able to speak about the object with customers.

Kingston’s peers (those who immigrated to the United States in the 1990s from Hong Kong) are not as interested in Chinese traditional culture as he is. “It’s something strange about me, that I’m more bound with the ancient...I mean, they like Chinese culture but are more into the generalization of things...I am more [interested] in the ancient things. Not so much the things we still [do] today. I’m more interested in things that we’ll probably never do again.” As a result

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For a discussion of immigrants identifying as 1.5 see Kyeyoung Park, "I Really Do Feel I'm 1.5': The Construction of Self and Community by Young Korean Americans,” Amerasia Journal, v25 n1 (1999): 139-63.
of this enthusiasm for the past, Lam says his friends are much older than he, “average about sixty years old. I don’t really click with people [who are] twenty years old.” Through his work and Shi-hua Yeh’s yajis, he has found a like-minded community of scholarship.

Kingston attributes the recent popularity of the guqin to a combination of factors. The opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which featured the guqin, sparked the interest of many to learn the instrument. In 1977, the guqin piece “Flowing Water” was included on the Voyager Golden Record that was sent into space. Additionally, there is an increasing number of dramas that depict life in ancient times and feature the guqin; these have made people curious about the instrument. In the last ten years, the Chinese government has begun to fund museums and cultural events (in China and overseas) that celebrate traditional Chinese culture and Confucian values. However, it is a gradual learning process for the government, the people and scholars. Kingston links this interest and promotion as a way toward defining a Chinese identity as a unique culture that was almost erased during the Cultural Revolution and by the influence of Western culture and globalization.

**X.N.**

X.N. is a twenty-one-year-old student from China studying marketing at Queens College. She has been playing the guqin for two years and was first made aware of the instrument in a documentary film she saw in China. She said she was immediately struck by the beauty of the music and wanted to be able to play. She decided to be a student in New York because there are greater opportunities than in China where it is very difficult to get into a decent school. She plans...

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74 Kingston Lam gave the examples of “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” as well as other dramas about the Tang and Han dynasties.

75 The following participant’s names have been omitted to grant their request for anonymity.
on returning to China once she has completed her degree, but would like to continue learning guqin once she is back, possibly online.76

L.C.

L. came to the United States from Mainland China with her husband who is a student of interior design. As a child she studied drums. When she was a university student she studied *erhu* for a few years, but became too busy with her studies to continue. When she came to the United States she decided to take up the guqin because her mother had taken a study tour and fallen in love with the instrument. She finds comfort in the *yajis* because she can be around like-minded individuals, and it is reminiscent of being home.

D.K.

D.K. is a professional working in the I.T. sector in Manhattan. He is one of Yeh’s few non-Asian students. He developed an interest in Chinese Classical music while studying Mandarin and decided to take up the instrument when he was able to find The New York Guqin School online. He takes weekly lessons, is able to receive instruction in Mandarin and is, thus better equipped to decipher Jianzi pu.

C.T.

C.T. is a medical doctor living in Downtown Flushing. She is in her late sixties and took up the guqin seven years ago, having only played the piano shortly many years ago. She was born in

76 Shi-Hua has a few students who have continued studying with her despite moving back to China. They have regular lessons via Skype.
Hong Kong, but immigrated to the United States many years ago to practice medicine and eventually became a citizen. She is a regular attendee at yajis.
CHAPTER IV:
THE YAJI or “ELEGANT GATHERING”

Another important aspect of a guqin students’ life is participating in regular meetings of fellow “scholars,” as was practiced in ancient China. The gathering is a called “yaji,” which means an elegant gathering. Despite its literal translation, the yaji is informal in dress and etiquette. What makes it elegant are the arts practiced in these meetings and the intension of the community of scholars who have assembled to participate in activities that they believe will cultivate and enrich their character and well-being. The first yaji I attended took place outside of Flushing in another New York City China Town: Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

Bensonhurst has become the Brooklyn’s second major Chinatown (Sunset Park being the first) in the last twenty years. For most of the twentieth century the neighborhood was Italian-American, but over the past few decades it has become populated by Chinese immigrants. The Asian population of the neighborhood increased by 51% between 2000 and 2010.77 At first the Chinese, who immigrated to the neighborhood, were from Guangdong, but recently wealthier Chinese from Wenzhou and Fuzhou have arrived, attracted, in part, by the affordable housing by New York City standards.78 Many immigrants chose Bensonhurst because of another important factor: unlike Flushing,----which has a mixture of Japanese, Koreans and Chinese-----Bensonhurst is predominantly Chinese.79

Shi-hua Yeh called on her students for a yaji, or elegant gathering, to take place on a Sunday afternoon, the day after the lunar New Year. The setting is in the heart of Bensonhurst at

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77 Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY).

78 The average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment along 18th Avenue is $1,000, and $1,500 for two bedrooms, with the average cost of a two-bedroom home at about $100,000.

a business owned by Kingston Lam, a long-time guqin student of Yeh’s. The shop, called the Orchid Tea House, specializes in traditional Chinese arts and sells paintings, sculptures, and other artefacts for connoisseurs of Chinese traditional culture. Along the walls are glass cases with various artefacts: antique tea pots, parchment with calligraphy, miniature statues, and a five-hundred-year-old guqin with silk strings. Its primary business, however, is selling special Chinese teas that have been aged for thirty to sixty years.

Descending the stairs into the shop’s basement showroom, I was greeted by Yeh and a group of eight of her students who were sitting around a large table drinking tea. Kingston was brewing and pouring different types and ages of Pu’er, a fermented tea. He sat behind a large hand-carved tea table, scooping tea into a pot, rinsing the tea with hot water, steeping, and then serving the tea to the guests sitting around the table. He would say the name of the tea (“Qing Dyn Rock Tea” named “Dragon Whisker”) and describe its age and taste. The tea is poured in a small teacup and is to be savored for its rich earthy flavor. The students conversed around the table in Mandarin. Kingston, who is fluent in English, spoke to me and narrated the events of the yaji as they unfolded.

The guqin was placed on a small table a few feet from the large gathering table. Someone tuned the instrument using harmonic references to adjust each string. Kingston offered some small cakes that were brought by another student. He says everyone usually brings something small, usually a pastry. He calls out “Happy New Year” as the date is January 29th, the day after the New Year. He explains that it isn’t just the Chinese New Year, but is also the lunar New Year, celebrated by Koreans, Japanese, Balinese, and most Buddhist countries.
A student begins to play a slow guqin piece, but the group doesn’t focus on the music. Another plays a video of a guqin performance on her phone for friend. A different student takes up the *xiao* and plays a different piece in a different key, and so for a few minutes there are simultaneous melodies filling the room along with the conversations. The atmosphere is very relaxed without focus given to any one activity. There are occasional moments where a silence comes over the group and the music becomes the center of the group’s attention, but it is rare. Shi-hua, however, seems to be paying close attention to the performance, singing along to the melody and offering assistance through singing the forgotten or misplaced note.
Each person at the gathering takes a turn at the guqin and even I am called to perform although “he just beginning” says Shi-hua. I am reluctant at first, but the gathering applauds me at the guqin. I wish to play “Xian Weng Cao,” but Shi-hua doesn’t have the score. It is unusual for a guqin performance to read from a score, and so everyone who plays at the yaji does so by memory. X.I. finds a copy of the piece, and I am called once more to play.

This is an interesting aspect to the culture of the yaji and the community of guqin players. It is in keeping with the ancient literati tradition that there is no judgement of a player’s ability and that novices are welcome and encouraged to play, regardless of their skill level. By the time of this yaji, I had only taken two lessons and had only owned a guqin for a few weeks. While I am playing, the group is completely silent and the relaxed atmosphere I entered is now one of intensity for me. Struggling through to the end of the piece, the group applauds and I feel encouraged. One can understand how this atmosphere would be very comforting to new immigrants looking for a community to be a part of and to learn from. Kingston explains:
“yaji is really about collaboration. Whoever has the interest. You can have a classical interest and bring it to yaji and no one will say ‘no’ or think you are not good enough. So it is primarily informal. If they go to a yaji they want to be like scholars because it’s always been a scholar gathering. The modern yaji is a way to remember those scholars and to live a life like the traditional scholars would have. That’s what they would do in their leisure. They would go up to the mountain and play guqin, have tea, make poems. It’s really the spirit...without that the four arts aren’t as important any more. You want to have a peaceful mind. You calm down. You get together with people who are familiar with tea or guqin or calligraphy and you are basically interacting with scholars or, at least, you try to have a scholastic spirit. I think that’s what makes a yaji a yaji.”

Shi-hua Yeh describes the yaji in a similar way in that it is more like a workshop for guqin players. The playing is not about giving a performance, but about playing and then asking questions about certain phrases. The group of scholars then discusses the questions and come to a consensus. It is about relaxing and not about pressure.

The yaji is considered an elegant gathering because of its tradition among the literati in ancient China. Scholars would gather to drink tea, discuss philosophy and the arts, and inspire one another with their respective expertise in a particular art. Much like a salon, the yaji was where artists would learn from one another and build consensus about aesthetics. The four paintings below depict a yaji separated into the four arts "qin qi shu hua" or guqin, chess, calligraphy, and painting. Primarily, the four arts were practiced by the male aristocracy, but women were also encouraged to cultivate themselves in this way. Royal families would teach their daughters the four Chinese arts as a way to socialize them to aristocratic society. It was seen as a sign of sophistication for a woman to be accomplished in these arts. Families looking for a husband for their daughters would brag about her skill in the four arts as a way of attracting a

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80 Ibid.
spouse. It would also create a connection between spouses as they would have a “common language” with one another.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{center}
\textit{The four arts "qin qi shu hua" or guqin, chess, calligraphy, and painting.}\textsuperscript{82}
\end{center}

Today the term yaji signifies a gathering of guqin students who play for one another. There is an occasional appearance of some of the other arts (calligraphy, painting, and poetry) but the yaji is mainly focused on conversation and students playing. Most students come to know about yajis by taking up one of the four arts and through their teacher learn about the gathering. Occasionally someone attends a yaji and is inspired to take up one of the arts but, as Kingston Lam explained, “It’s usually the other way around” because people aren’t usually invited unless they have shown an interest in the four arts.

Despite the title of “elegant gathering,” the atmosphere is casual. It is not a formal concert, and it is not considered rude to talk while someone is performing a piece. From what I observed at this particular yaji, the group follows the relaxed approach to the traditional


\textsuperscript{82} Du Jin, \textit{18 Scholars}, 16th Century, Shanghai Museum.
gathering in dress and demeanor. The clothing worn by most of the guests was semi-traditional, modern dress with aspects of traditional design and decoration. According to Lam, if you wore traditional clothing twenty years ago in China, people would think you were strange, as most donned modern Western-style clothing. Today people are not surprised to see this type of clothing and assume the person is an artist or a scholar. For the most part, guests were either drinking tea and chatting or playing guqin. There was no sense of the participants focusing too heavily on the playing.

Shi-hua will occasionally host a yaji in a more traditional outdoor setting like the Chinese gardens found in upstate New York or on Staten Island. These gatherings are usually limited to her students and a few guests which is quite different from yajis held overseas where a huge crowd will gather. According to Kingston Lam, the structure of the yaji is up to the host:
“They can do it very formal, have a program, and follow certain steps, like they do the incense part first then go to guqin, then go to tea, or they can do both at the same time; it’s really up to the host. But the primary elements are music, tea, incense, and sometimes weiqi, or poetry, and calligraphy.”

In the traditional setting of a Chinese garden, the New York Guqin School was inspired to relive aspects of the ancient practice, and donned hanfu, historical dress of the Han people.

![Judy Yeh and Student Performing at a yaji (Chinese Garden, Staten Island).](image)

In the Reform Period, after the Cultural Revolution, as guqin and yajis became popular again, many misunderstood the spirit of the gathering and, instead, put on a concert that they called a yaji. These gatherings had all the trappings of concert: a program, formal attire, a stage, and an attentive audience. The yajis put on by Yeh are more like those that would have taken place in ancient times. There is no set program, no audience as defined today, and no hierarchy of players. “It is more like getting together with some friends and doing something elegant.”

One doesn’t have to be quiet while the guqin is being played. Participants are free to talk and

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move around the gathering to participate in whatever activity is appealing. There is often calligraphy, painting, and a tea ceremony, in addition to various participants playing a piece or two of guqin music. In former years, Shi-hua would be able to partake in yajis with other players at her skill level in Taiwan, but she is unable to in recent years because of the time constraints of child-rearing for herself and fellow players. For now, yajis are only for her and her students to cultivate their learning about aspects of Chinese art.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The guqin revival occurring in Mainland China, Taiwan, and in parts of the United States is connected to several issues related to the rapid change in Chinese culture in the twentieth century into the twenty-first. The Cultural Revolution left a vacuum in cultural identity that was filled first by Western influence and today is marked by some as a curiosity and longing for the culture of the past. The Chinese government has promoted this return to traditional Confucian values and has funded educational programs as well as begun to celebrate Confucian ceremonies that were banned during Mao’s reign. According to my informants, there seems to also be a push from the government to rekindle interest in Confucius’ favorite instrument as well.

The New York Guqin School and its community of students is a manifestation of this trend to reconnect with a lost culture and identity. The past is continually reinvented as it is portrayed in film and in literature or government promotional materials. Guqin music can claim some stance of historical lineage as students learn pieces from the Song dynasty. However, only the tones and fingering were notated. The rhythm of the melody is reinvented each time the piece is played. This confluence of past and present serves as a metaphor for the state of many young Chinese students, looking to the past for a sense of cultural identity, but reinventing the culture while doing so.

For the most part, the guqin is still taught the way it has been for hundreds of years. The teacher and student sit facing one another and the student learns by repeating what the teacher plays while they follow the Jianzi pu notation for the piece. This old pedagogical system yielded a repertoire that would take years to learn as memorizing the rhythmic structure and hand

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gestures would require months to learn for each piece. Technology has changed this tradition in recent years as students often want to take a video of the piece on their phone to use as a reference while they work out the piece on their own. As a result, students are learning much quicker and the repertoire has been expanding past the essential cannon of pieces. In addition, the influence of European art music on China has had an interesting effect on guqin pedagogy. A great deal of Chinese students learn Western notation first, and so it is not uncommon to see guqin notation with solfege numbers above or below the Jianzi pu to give the student a reference with which they are familiar.

The revival of the guqin has also brought back the yaji, the sociable aspect of an otherwise solitary practice. Guqin players meet regularly to share music, tea, and conversation with others who are interested in the scholarly tradition of China. In New York City, the group consists of Chinese immigrants, many of them international students, who have not studied music for many years or at all. The yaji provides for them a chance to take advantage of the knowledge and intellectual resources of their fellow students as well as to find companionship with those who share the same interests, experience as immigrants, and language. The yaji involved performance, but the structure of the ceremony is casual without the pressures associated with a recital or concert. The newcomer and the master share the same seat and instrument.

Transnationals use the established organizational networks that are manifested in the community surrounding the New York Guqin School to maintain a connection to their home culture by practicing an art form they feel is an important part of Chinese history and tradition. The guqin is an unusual case of this phenomenon, as it isn't yet an ubiquitous form of the culture like the guzheng is. Students who seek guqin instruction in the United States are choosing an
instrument that garnered its importance due to its historical significance and the ancient community that embraced it. Although it is slowly gaining in popularity, is not an exemplar when it comes to the phenomenon of immigrant interest in the home culture. Students in New York are at once connecting to their home culture and, at the same time, to something that is not to be found in mainstream Chinese culture. Within the community they meet other students who speak the same language, dress similarly, and may be in the United States for the same reason—either for naturalization or for a college degree. Instead of recreating their home culture in the receiving community, they left home and discovered a deeper historical context of their culture as immigrants. New insights into their cultural identity are gained by the immigrant experience and the questioning of identity: What does it mean to be Chinese? While there is no absolute answer to this, the transnationals in the New York Guqin community are seeking answers in the ancient past, a past that was almost erased by time and political forces. Fifty years ago this would have been considered a subversive act in China. Now it is welcomed and encouraged by the government. Further study is needed in addressing whether this trend is occurring in other regions where globalization is rapidly changing the cultural landscape.

In addition to facilitating cultural identity, the transnational network provided by the school eases assimilation into New York culture for its members. Within the group they can find companionship among people who share the same cultural background and language. The group shares important information which aids navigation of New York City’s intimidating housing market, allowing immigrants to find roommates and affordable housing. Through the group participants are able to learn about other cultural institutions and paths to staying connected to their home culture. Students can help one another to study and understand text and speech in a new language.
Counter to easing assimilation, the school and similar organizational networks attenuate “straight-line” assimilation for immigrants and instead provide nearly identical models of cultural institutions from the sending communities in the receiving one. Immigrants coming to the United States can move into a Chinese neighborhood, continue speaking the same language, eating similar cuisine, and socializing among people of the same ethnic background.\(^6\) This trend in transnational migration contradicts the old paradigm which considered the path to greater economic opportunity as being limited to the dominant culture. In the past, immigrants would need to shed much of their culture in order to assimilate into mainstream America: learning English, moving to white neighborhoods, and engaging in white American culture (as can be seen in the classical music schools of Flushing). The research data gathered from the New York Guqin School shows a trend towards transnational assimilation. Especially among international students, there is a pattern of immigrants forming an ethnic enclave which minimizes interaction with non-Chinese and slows the acquisition of English. This is not surprising as many studies have shown that sub-groups in society tend to stick together. This can have positive effects, such as security and group investment, but can limit the group's chances of upward mobility if the group lacks access to capital. The history of Chinese Americans shows that for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century the Chinese were limited to segmented assimilation as cultural and financial institutions were kept away from due to racist laws and policies. In response, Chinese Americans created their own institutions to raise and loan capital, organize workers, and

\(^6\) Obviously there is no enclave for immigrants that is impermeable to the mainstream culture. Even though immigrants participate in institutions that are similar to ones found in the sending country, they still have to deal with aspects of the receiving culture which cannot be provided by the transnational organization. Some examples include: transportation (buses and trains), currency, interactions with professors, non-Chinese students, landlords, and local politics. In addition, transnationals have to deal with racism, overt and inferential, that shapes their experience of the dominant culture and motivates seeking refuge in ethnic enclave to be among others who understand what it is like to be treated in this way.
lobby and put pressure on politicians to change policy, and to find legal loopholes in order to allow relatives to immigrate.

The community of the New York Guqin School is unique because the immigrants involved have unified due their shared interest in an aspect of Chinese culture that is not mainstream. Guqin music as an art form nearly died out in the twentieth century and has been replaced by the guzheng, pipa, and erhu as cultural symbols and preferred traditional instruments. If an immigrant were longing to reconnect with Chinese culture, s/he is much more likely to take guzheng lessons than to seek instruction in guqin. In addition, most of the students have not studied an instrument before their time in the United States. Under an older paradigm, immigrants would more likely learn Western instruments with the motivation of connecting and assimilating to mainstream culture. As Lu’s study showed, learning European art music is initiated by immigrant parents who want their first generation children to have the opportunities associated with a European art music education. Yeh’s students are predominantly older students (early twenties) who initiate lessons out of their own interest. The value for them is in connecting to their culture and not a sense that it will serve another means like upward mobility and assimilation into the dominant culture.

This study provides the groundwork for future research into migrant networks connected with international students who are in New York City temporarily or who plan to become naturalized citizens. The research shows how migrant networks ease migration by providing newly-arrived immigrants the necessary information and resources as well as a community that shares a common interest in a specific aspect of Chinese culture. The study illuminates aspects of the ever-expanding transnational community, especially among the Taiwanese whose homeland economy is intertwined with that of the United States. Taiwanese Americans retain a direct
connection with their homeland—economically, culturally and politically. Some travel back and forth while others communicate via smartphones. The rapidly changing political and economic conditions propelled by globalization and technology seem to be dissolving borders while conservative forces attempt to solidify them. There is a need for more research into how technology and globalization are providing opportunities for immigrants to maintain a transnational lifestyle and to gain an understanding of how these communities function. With transnationalism comes the prospect of a global community and dissolving borders, a world where immigration is a matter of choice and not of necessity.\textsuperscript{87}

Further research on the guqin among transnationals would be valuable, especially if it were conducted as a longitudinal study. The research in this study was limited to one semester and thus could only offer a glimpse into the dynamics at play among the members of the Guqin School. A study of this kind would also allow for greater acceptance within the group. Many of the students were reluctant to participate in interviews because of the language barrier and fear that too much interrogation by a “foreigner” would lead to problems with their visa status. Additionally, a longer study could give greater insight into how students manage their coursework while taking guqin lessons, how participants interact with one another outside the yaji, how much ancient culture influences students’ outlook and lifestyle, and whether students continue with guqin after they have either returned home or have begun a career and family. Because of their reticence, this information was not obtained but I believe, with longer exposure in the community, a researcher could get to know these more personal aspects of transnational lives.

\textsuperscript{87} CF Arjun Appadurai.
The findings of this study point to a broader issue in transnational migration studies. Technology and Globalization have radically altered the motivation and experience of immigrants in many important aspects. With globalization the differences between sites have been minimized and are mainly a factor of the political and cultural restraints on engagement with a world culture (i.e. internet censorship). The influence of the West on non-Western cultures has the possible effect of creating a crisis of cultural identity beyond one’s identity being tied to consumption of corporate media and merchandise. Many young people, who have grown up after the technological revolution, are seeking a connection with an imagined past when cultural identity was an important aspect of one sense of identity. Revival movements have become common, and further research is needed to determine whether there is a causal relationship between the effects of technology and its ability to shrink distances, to the need for past cultural identities to be reborn. With the spread of globalized culture, localized ones are destroyed. The effects of globalization and the homogenization of world culture seems to have created a crisis of identity for many people. As a result, they are rediscovering, adapting, and reviving past cultural aspects and making them new.


Garip, Filiz and Asad L. Asad, “Migrant Networks,” in *Emerging Trends in the Social, and Behavioral Sciences*, Published Online: 15 May 2015.


