The Communication Dilemma of Guqin Art Within the Context of New Media

Zhang Yan

College of Music & Dance, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, China

Email address:
117239859@qq.com

Abstract: It is difficult to avoid the impact that digital technology has had on the media. Maintaining the original form of traditional art and music within the changing media environment is vital for Chinese traditional art and music communication, especially there is a lack of Chinese traditional art and music inheritors at the same time. This paper takes the Guqin instrument as an example, adopting the space perspective of cultural geography to study its contemporary communication. The article applies media ecology theories to illustrate how modern media techniques change the Guqin stem, dispel the tradition of this art, and bring the new development opportunity to Guqin. The paper also references the point made by György Márkus about modernity and tries to explore the cultural reason for the existence of traditional art in modern times. Finally, the author points out that the key to communicating traditional art is to understand multiple dimensions of modernity and find the communication logic and cultural background behind these media phenomena. It is essential to clarify Guqin art changes during the modern period and, based on these, to adopt different communication and inheritance strategy and techniques. That's how to inherit better and develop this old but precious art treasure.

Keywords: Guqin, New Media, Communication, Media Ecology, Modernity

1. Introduction

In *A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy*, Karl Marx stated the following: "But the difficulty is not in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It rather lies in understanding why they still constitute with us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment."[1]This point concerns how traditional art maintains its original aesthetic principles to attract an audience in a changing society. The problem related to the Guqin—an ancient instrument in China—is how to balance the traditional aesthetics with the challenges that arise from new media against the background of the cultural renaissance trend.

As an ancient instrument in China, the Guqin has existed for almost 3000 years. In Chinese music history, the Guqin was regarded as 'literati music,' reflecting cultural excellence. For thousands of years, along with the cultural veneration of intellectual spirit, the Guqin existed within a stable cultural and social environment. In 2003, the Guqin was listed in the 'intangible cultural heritage' list produced by UNESCO.

Since the late 1970s, the concept of 'new media' has gradually become used worldwide. At the beginning of the 21stcentury, there was a rapid development of media techniques. The discussion about 'new media' has become very popular. Digital communication, such as through the internet, wireless communication networks, satellite, television, and cellphones, provides information and services. In the present day, new media mainly includes network media, mobile phone media, and internet protocol television. [2]An increasing number of communicators select new media as an essential communication platform.

In recent years, some artists began to use contemporary communication techniques to pass on and spread traditional art, such as when the old Guqin meets new media. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the ancient Guquin to adapt to modern times, given that it has always maintained a traditional technique throughout history. The changes in social culture and the media environment have brought about some contradictions between Guqin's elite culture and the mass culture represented by mass media. A paradox is also evident

in the different aesthetics of modern scientific techniques and traditional Guqin. How can the Guqin exist within a cultural trend of commercialization and massification? What changes have occurred within the current media context in the cultural communication and inheritance process? What opportunities do new media offer for the Guqin, when it was once beset with inheritance difficulties?

It is becoming evident that the ancient artistic tradition and modern culture impacted the Guqin together, and this particular contemporary communication situation is the research object for the current paper. The paper will discuss the changes that happened to the Guqin throughout the environment.

2. Development and Barriers: Contemporary Guqin Communication Within Cultural Space

Since the 20th century, drastic changes have happened in society. In the 20th century, Guqin art's inheritance was facing difficulties because of the evolution of the cultural environment. Many books and instruments had been lost, and fewer people engaged in playing the Guqin. "From 1953 to 1956, the Chinese National Academy of Arts surveyed local libraries, museums, and artists, the survey found that there were less than 100 people could play Guqin, and there were only 82 pieces of Guqin music they could play." [3] Furthermore, "there were more than 3000 pieces Guqin music which was documented in almost 150 books". At the beginning of the 20th century, "in Beijing Qin Academic Society, only dozens of people regularly took part in Guqin activities." [4] Until the beginning of the 21st century, people's view of the Guqin was driven by some policies of 'intangible cultural heritage.'

Chinese scholar Zeng Suijin raised the natural communication [5] of music as an original communication form, which reflected the basic mode—presenting the crucial factors in the communication process and the relationship between them. In this way, only air is the medium for transmitting sound waves between communicator and audience; no other technique or media is involved. (2003) 'Natural communication' and 'technology communication' are common forms of communication in contemporary society. There are several strategies in the two modes of communication. 'Natural communication' is the main form used in the inheritance process of traditional art and music. Because the process is transparent and almost no other media are involved, the content has a more prominent status comparably, and concentrating on the content became a regular communication strategy. In the context of Guqin culture, communicators of this culture try to explore the communication content. They integrate other literati arts such as poems, calligraphy, tea arts, and even modern multimedia art. They illustrate the comprehensiveness of the Guqin culture through a combination of different content and forms. Furthermore, in the context of Guqin music, communicators

take Guqin music as the basis of their research, including a focus on spreading traditional Guqin music and recomposing or recreating Guqin music. Modern technology's involvement in the communication process acts as a 'technology communication' form of music. Influenced by this form, the communicators concentrate more on using modern media techniques in the communication process. They usually take communication platforms such as Weibo (a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter), WeChat (a Chinese social media platform similar to Facebook), many kinds of apps, and internet live broadcasts as a communication channel to make Guqin quickly become widely accessible in today's mass media world.

Different forms of Guqin contemporary communication and inheritance activities often point to separate communication spaces. Because of the transparent character of the 'natural communication' form, Guqin music live shows often are set in locations where there are less media intervention and fewer middle segments. Guqin musicians will choose theaters or music halls in contemporary society or inner spaces such as an intellectual gathering house or an outer space like a silent valley scene that often appeared in traditional Chinese paintings in ancient society. But the communication of Guqin in 'cyberspace' depends on a particular media technique, and this forms another communication landscape. In the post-modern aesthetic view, "space does not only entail physical existence but also reflects culture, politics, and mentality." [6] "Space itself is knowledge and behavior, and even a new society production model, and it has a decisive effect in social reproduction." [7]

Within the contemporary Guqin natural communication environment, such as the modern theater and music hall from abroad or the Chinese traditional performance stage, inside an elegant room or outside in wild space, more and more people have been attracted to enjoy Guqin performances. The audience has some familiar characteristics in behavior, social status, educational background, and even lifestyle and style of dress. To an extent, they could be regarded as a unique cultural group in society. In the traditional Chinese community, the Guqin audience is a literati group with a stable and elite social status. In modern times, a newly formed audience group, fascinated with the Guqin culture, is different from the traditional intellectual one and has new features.

The technology communication form derives from internet technology development, which formed a new environment for Guqin communication. In the same way, as in geographical space, cyberspace provides the material foundation for the consensual interaction of people. The internet community and social media are the primary platforms for Guqin communication in cyberspace. For example, the organizers (communicators) often wrote relevant articles on the Guqin and posted them on WeChat official accounts or established social media groups. In Guangzhou, there are almost 20 Guqin societies. For this paper, I selected several organizations due to their popularity and history, analyzed the data—the content of the articles posted on their WeChat official account from August 2016 to August

2017—and will demonstrate the features of Guqin communication in cyberspace.

Guqin art is still a minority art form, even in cyberspace, filled with countless data and various audiences. Nevertheless, the number of viewers of Guqin content has increased dramatically. In the cyber world, the Guqin audience has specific demands. They want to be informed about the high social status associated with the Guqin. Guqin activities could receive close attention, and content related to something that appears in the mass media could attract a high click ratio. However, the Guqin theory and aesthetics material could only receive a few clicks compared to other content forms. The function of the Guqin in cyberspace is different from that in traditional society. As a cultural symbol, the Guqin is not only an entertainment instrument but also synthesizes classical literature, aesthetics, and philosophy. Further, as a self-cultivated implement, an essential function of the Guqin is to obtain elevated wisdom through playing or practice. Perhaps the case that self-refinement and other parts of the Guqin, emphasized by the traditional musician, are difficult to transmit in cyberspace.

Despite the emergence of different modes of communication and the fact that musicians and communicators experiment with these in different ways, the barrier between modern people and traditional Guqin art still exists.

3. Decomposition and Opportunity: The Impact of Modern Media Techniques on Guqin Art

Media ecology provides a framework for people to understand the relationship between media and content.

Firstly, what kind of media environment has been created by modern media?

In the oral and print communication period, musicians passed on the Guqin tradition face to face and via one-to-one teaching; they explained the Guqin group style and playing features during the process. In the cyber world enabled by information and communication technology, this teaching model has changed. Those elements of Guqin culture that cannot be copied, such as improvisation, the Guqin score, which did not record explicit rhythm, and musicians' temperament, have decomposed in the mass-media world. With the help of digital and copying techniques, Guqin video and audio resources are easier to find. People who aim for efficiency prefer digital teaching to face-to-face teaching. Influenced by the mode of communication, the traditional method of inheritance and the relationship between teacher and student changed to simple skill teaching. However, the spirit of Guqin is challenging to pass on through relevant video and audio, and there is less possibility to achieve Tao, which the traditional Guqin culture emphasized.

Secondly, how has the new media technique influenced or changed the cultural tradition of the Guqin?

Different communication bias in media points to other cultural bias. "A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time, and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics to appraise its influence in its cultural setting. According to its characteristics, it may be better suited to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation, or the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported. The relative emphasis on time or space will imply a bias of significance to the culture in which it is embedded." [8]

The Jian Zi Score is the most crucial carrier of Guqin music; it originated from the Tang dynasty and is still used today. It is a kind of score that signals the location of the note and fingering but does not signal rhythm, so people play the music by learning the fundamental rules of fingering and imitating the teacher's play through face-to-face teaching. Due to different explanations of the rhythm and the lesson method, several Guqin groups were formed in China, and the groups also signify different music styles. Since the late Tang dynasty, the Jian Zi Score has existed for more than 1000 years. The score recorded Guqin music and the history of Guqin art that included the transmission and variation of the music, the differences between Guqin groups, the transition of Guqin culture, and so on. It depended on the print medium for transmission but was limited by spatial communication, which contributed to the formation of various Guqin group styles divided by geographical area. Comparatively, the print media tends to be time-biased that could be saved in the long history. Because of these traits, the musician can learn Guqin art comprehensively and enjoy cultural cultivation.

The new media represented by the digital technology enables more efficient, comprehensive, and faster communication, making it suitable for spatial communication. The features of the traditional Guqin groups separated by geographical areas gradually became obscured when new media broke the space-time boundary. This made Guqin art develop in the direction of personalized style instead of being circumscribed by geographic area. Meanwhile, Guqin online courses and webcasts appeared because they can exist in virtual cyberspace unlimited by time and space. This enables more efficient communication of Guqin art. However, the aesthetic pursuit of 'learn Guqin to practice Zen' [9]is hard to achieve within this context; accordingly, Guqin Tao is challenging to inherit in virtual cyberspace.

"But such prejudices are not always apparent at the start of a technology's journey, which is why no one can safely conspire to be a winner in technological change" [10]. From the appearance of new media, no one can predict what values will be shared and the consequence of communication. If someone realized the probable negative influence of mass media, they would use new media to communicate Guqin art reasonably.

The advantage of new media information transmission is that it enables a massive amount of information about the Guqin presented to the audience. It also allows people to learn about ancient art. If printing enabled cultural communication to be preserved in classical and historical documents, what

opportunities and possibilities will be brought about by rapidly developing digital technology for Guqin art?

Firstly, the powerful communication ability of new media promotes the communication range of the Guqin and enables people to get to know it. However, this is just superficial knowledge for the mass audience and cannot achieve in-depth cultural communication.

Secondly, the trend of decentralized communication offers some opportunities. It enables a personalized service to be provided to a group based on similar traits. Maybe this could correspond to traditional art audiences that have some special interests, such as Guqin art.

Thirdly, the digital technique has an advantage in preserving historical documents. Historic materials can be digitized, inputted into databases, and software can be developed about the Guqin. For example, some apps about the Guqin include traditional knowledge about the Guqin, such as fingering, score, documents, and so on, and online courses, news about the Guqin in modern society. The Chinese government is currently committed to reviving traditional culture and has put some policies that aid communication about the Guqin, especially in terms of internet communication and traditional culture digitization. This situation has provided an excellent environment for communicating Guqin art. However, there are further aspects that we need to establish.

Fourthly, abundant materials, and diverse new media ideas take on a more creative sparkle that facilitates traditional art modernization. Specific explorations of the Guqin's creation involve different art categories and art forms such as fused calligraphy, dance, tea ceremonies, or multimedia art. The contemporary features of the Guqin may be formed within these practices.

To sum up, new media is beneficial for the short and wide range of communication but is limited in terms of depth. Communicators have taken advantage of the ability to spread information and create content, expressing the Guqin on new media; this has introduced the audience to a traditional art world, which they can explore from multiple angles. Based on this, exploring communication offline, combining new media with common inheritance will be a feasible strategy to pursue.

4. Opposite or Diversity: The Collision of Cultural Modernity and Traditional Guqin Culture

As the Guqin exists in modern times, it is difficult to avoid the influence of cultural modernity. It offers a perspective from which to understand aspects of the Guqin within the new media environment. In the meantime, it will lead people to think about the development tendency of traditional art.

The inner contradiction of cultural modernity may promote traditional art massification. The modernity of culture is contradictory, ambiguous, and uncertain. Traditional groups tend to decline, but the value of the individual has become prominent so that the artist is adored like a star. On the other hand, the audience is familiar with the content from mass media that the relevant information will be better accepted. To a great extent, the Guqin audience's cognition is influenced by the mass media and makes it partial and convergent. The communication of the Guqin in modern times will follow mass cultural tendencies and continuously innovate to attract attention. In this case, tradition may itself become a stunt in mass cultural trends.

Artworks turn into cultural commodities in the cultural industry system. "The old opposition between serious and light, low and high art, autonomous art and entertainment, no longer describes the phenomena. All art as means to fill leisure time becomes entertainment that now incorporates also the materials and forms of traditional autonomous art as 'cultural goods'" [11]. This sentence demonstrates the dilemma that traditional art is facing. Guqin is a representative of literati music. Achieving self-cultivation and the expression of art self-discipline are essential cultural functions of the Guqin. "Works of art do not offer thoughtless pleasure, they are 'the affront to dominating needs.' What they offer is – according to Adorno's beloved Stendhalian–Baudelairean formula – the promesse du bonheur. This happiness not only differs from, it is fundamentally opposed to pleasure" [11]. How should the audiences' satisfaction expected in the cultural industry system be balanced with the self-discipline of artists' work?

Although a small group of artists independent from commercialized operations has tried to balance the relationship between commerce and art, "the time for the great, organic works of tradition is irreversibly gone" [11]. This seems to tell us that the aesthetics and spirit of the Guqin are fading away. However, the Guqin exists vividly in modern times, and people remain fascinated by this ancient art. So, is it possible for traditional Guqin art and contemporary culture to coexist?

The key is how to understand the conception of modernity and the relationship between traditional Guqin culture and modernistic culture. The topic of modernity is so complex that many theories have referred to it. Critical classic approaches have motivated people to rethink these communicating activities. However, seeking methods to resolve the contradiction inclusively is also essential. "We need to think deeply about how to make enlightenment and modernity mechanization rather than abandon them. Meanwhile, we need to establish China's enlightenment and modernity plan. It is a contemporary problem we are facing that is as important as the revival of traditional culture." [12]

5. Conclusion

The Guqin had been facing an inheritance dilemma whereby the heirs of the tradition were scarce. It is also the case that the communication dilemma of Guqin art has become more prominent in recent years. Is it relevant to the fundamental problem Guqin existed in modern times that what traditional Guqin art we communicated referred to? The key is to distinguish various forms of Guqin art and the differences between them. We need to recognize the variation in the

current transmission period and then choose the corresponding communication strategy. Based on an in-depth exploration of traditional Guqin art, the connection from ancient to contemporary times will become apparent.

Funding

References

[1]   Karl Marx. A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr &Company, 2014, pp. 180.

[2]   Kuang Wenbo. On the Concept of New Media, Bei Jing. *Chinese Journal of Journalism &Communication*, 2008, Vol. 6.

[3]   Lin Chen. Investigation of Qin in 1956, Bei Jing. *Musicology in China*, 2008, Vol. 3.

[4]   Wei ruiyan. Qin Will Apply for Enrolling the Second Batch of the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, Collection of Wu Zhao's Musicology Works, Bei Jing. *Culture and Art Publishing House*, 2011, pp. 309.

[5]   Chinese scholar Zeng Suijin raised natural communication of music an original communicated form which reflected the essential mode—just presented essential factors in communication process and the relationship between them. In this way, only air as a kind of medium for transmitting sound wave between communicator and audience, no other technique media involved. (2003, 'From Natural Communication of Music to Technique Communication', Wu Han, <Bell>).

[6]   Huang Jigang. 'The evolution of space aesthetics and its theoretical orientation', Cheng Du. *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Science)*, 2015, Vol. 12. pp. 207-212.

[7]   Ying Licheng. 'Space as a Sociological Perspective: The Orientations and Limitations of Spatial Interpretation', Bei Jing, *Sociological Review of China*, 2017, Vol. 6. pp. 11-22.

[8]   Harold Adams Innis. The Bias of Communication, Canada, *University of Toronto Press*, 2009, pp. 33.

[9]   Cheng Yujian (Song Dynasty): 'Talk About Qin', *Collection of Chinese Traditional Music Materials*, Bei Jing, World Publishing Corporation, 2000, pp. 397.

[10]   Neil Postman. *The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, New York, A Division of Random House, Inc. 1993, pp. 14.

[11]   György Márkus. *Culture, Science, Society: The Constitution of Cultural Modernity*. Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2011.

[12]   Zhang Zhiwei: 'Enlightenment, Modernity and the Revival of Traditional Culture', Bei Jing, *Journal of Renmin University of China*, 2015, Vol. 4. pp. 118-128.