The role of Zhuang stringed instruments in the Zhuang autonomous region of Guangxi, China: A cultural analysis

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1. Introduction

The Zhuang ethnic group, primarily residing in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, boasts a diverse cultural heritage characterized by rich musical traditions (Bodomo 2010; Luo et al 2007). Among the myriad cultural practices of the Zhuang people, the use of stringed instruments holds a particularly significant place, reflecting centuries of cultural evolution and social significance (Yun et al 2022; Wang et al 2023). This study aims to delve into the function and role of stringed musical instruments within the Zhuang community, specifically focusing on their presence in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

China’s cultural landscape is renowned for its diversity, encompassing many ethnic groups with unique traditions and customs (Yu & Karin 2022). Among these groups, the Zhuang people stand out for their vibrant cultural expressions, which include distinctive musical practices. Central to Zhuang musical traditions are their stringed instruments, which serve as tools for artistic expression and hold deep cultural and social significance within the community (Tao 2021).

Despite the evident importance of Zhuang stringed instruments, a notable gap exists in our understanding of their multifaceted roles within Zhuang society (Jian et al 2022). While various studies have explored aspects of Zhuang culture and music, there is a lack of comprehensive literature specifically focusing on the function and role of stringed instruments among Zhuang ethnic groups. This problem highlights the need to fill this gap in the literature and provide a nuanced understanding of the significance of these instruments within Zhuang culture (Chen et al 2014).

Addressing this issue is of paramount significance for several reasons. First, it contributes to the preservation and documentation of Zhuang cultural heritage, ensuring that the rich legacy of their musical traditions is not lost to time. Second, this study provides valuable insights into the intricate relationships among music, culture, and identity within the Zhuang community, enhancing our understanding of ethnic diversity in China (Wong 2020; Qiu et al 2023). Additionally, by shedding light on the function and role of Zhuang stringed instruments, this study offers valuable contributions to the fields of ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and anthropology, enriching broader discussions on the importance of musical instruments in shaping cultural identity and societal dynamics (Ruskin & Rice 2012).
In light of these considerations, this study reviews the literature, analyses historical and contemporary sources, and provides a comprehensive overview of the function and role of stringed musical instruments among the Zhuang ethnic group in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Through this exploration, we aim to address a critical gap in the literature and underscore the enduring significance of Zhuang stringed instruments in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a deeper understanding of Zhuang culture and identity (Koskoff 2020).

1.1. The objective

To review the function and role of stringed musical instruments among the Zhuang ethnic group in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

1.2. The question

How do the functions and roles of stringed musical instruments among the Zhuang ethnic group in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region contribute to preserving cultural heritage and expressing cultural identity?

2. Literature review

The musical traditions of ethnic groups worldwide have long been a subject of fascination and scholarly inquiry. In this regard, the Zhuang ethnic group in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region has emerged as a distinctive cultural community with a rich heritage of musical expression, mainly through stringed instruments. This literature review provides an overview of existing research on Zhuang musical traditions, focusing on the function and role of these instruments within their cultural context (Rao 2009; Oakes 2017; Widman 2019; Yang 2021).

The Zhuang ethnic group, one of the largest minority groups in China, has a history that spans centuries. Music has been pivotal in their cultural identity, social lives, and religious practices. The study of Zhuang music, similar to that of many other ethnic traditions, has significantly benefited from the field of ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicologists have dedicated their efforts to documenting and understanding the various facets of Zhuang musical culture (Ruskin & Rice 2012; Rice 2013; Schippers 2015).

Key studies in ethnomusicology have centered on the diverse musical repertoire of the Zhuang people, encompassing songs, instrumental pieces, and vocal traditions. These studies have highlighted the diversity of musical genres and the nuanced ways music is woven into the fabric of Zhuang society. However, despite the richness of this scholarship, there remains a limited focus on the specific roles and functions of stringed musical instruments in Zhuang culture (Mu 2003; Jian et al 2022; Liu & Chuangprakhon 2024).

This review addresses this gap by comprehensively investigating the organological aspects of stringed musical instruments in Zhuang. As a subfield of ethnomusicology, organology systematically studies musical instruments. Within the context of Zhuang music, this entails a detailed examination of their unique stringed instruments’ classification, construction, and cultural significance (Schneider 2018; Koskoff 2020; Valiquet 2022; Allen 2023).

Previous studies have identified several key instruments within the Zhuang musical tradition, such as Maguhu, Zhutonghu, Tuhu, Jiaohu, and Huluhu (see Figure 1). While these instruments have been mentioned in the literature, their roles and functions in different cultural and performance contexts remain understudied (Wang et al 2023). This research aims to fill this void by exploring how these stringed instruments are used in solo performances and ensemble settings and their role in accompanying Zhuangju, a traditional form of Zhuang opera.

![Figure 1 Zhuang Stringed musical instruments. Source: Guangguo Wang, from fieldwork in July 2022.](https://www.malque.pub/ojs/index.php/mr)
Through the lenses of ethnomusicology and organology, this study seeks to uncover how these stringed instruments have shaped Zhuang culture, facilitated intergenerational and intercommunity communication, and contributed to broader cultural exchange with other ethnic groups in Guangxi and beyond (Tresch & Dolan 2013; Tullberg 2022; Valiquet 2022; Allen 2023; Blum 2023).

In summary, this literature review highlights the existing research on Zhuang musical traditions while underscoring the research objective of this study: to comprehensively examine the function and role of stringed musical instruments among the Zhuang ethnic group in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. By delving into the organological aspects of these instruments and their cultural significance, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the musical heritage and cultural identity of the Zhuang people.

3. Materials and Methods

A qualitative methodology will be employed to comprehensively examine the function and role of stringed musical instruments among the Zhuang ethnic group in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. This approach aims to delve deeply into the cultural and social contexts surrounding these instruments, providing valuable insights into their significance within Zhuang culture. The methodology will involve ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, and content analysis of cultural artifacts. Each aspect of this qualitative methodology is detailed in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork</td>
<td>Engage in immersive fieldwork within Zhuang communities to observe and document musical practices and instrument use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Actively participate in musical events, rituals, and performances while recording observations and interactions with musicians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Conduct structured and semistructured interviews with Zhuang musicians, cultural experts, and community members to gain insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Analysis of Cultural Artifacts</td>
<td>Analyze cultural artifacts such as song lyrics, traditional stories, and historical documents to trace the evolution of instruments’ roles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Contextualization</td>
<td>Place findings within the broader cultural and historical context of the Zhuang ethnic group to understand the significance of instruments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data</td>
<td>Analysis Systematically analyzes qualitative data from fieldwork, interviews, and content analysis to identify patterns and themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Present qualitative findings in the article’s methodology section, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of instrument function and role within Zhuang culture.</td>
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4. Results

4.1. The Functions of Zhuang Stringed Instruments

Zhuang stringed instruments serve multifaceted functions within the cultural landscape of the Zhuang ethnic group in Guangxi, reflecting their significance in preserving and expressing Zhuang heritage.

4.1.1. Entertainment and Emotional Expression

These instruments are not only tools for entertainment but also vehicles for emotional expression. Through their melodies, Zhuang stringed instruments convey various emotions, allowing individuals to celebrate joyous occasions or solace during challenging times. They are deeply intertwined with the Zhuang people’s daily lives and cultural festivities, acting as a means of communal expression and celebration.

4.1.2. Relaxation and Stress Relief

In addition to their role in formal performance, Zhuang-stringed instruments are often used for informal relaxation and stress relief. Whether played individually or in small groups, the soothing melodies produced by these instruments create a calming atmosphere, offering respite from the stresses of daily life. Their versatility allows them to be enjoyed in various settings, from intimate gatherings at home to public spaces where community members come together to unwind and enjoy each other’s company.

4.1.3. Spontaneous Community Performance

In rural Zhuang communities, stringed instrument performance is not confined to formal events but often occurs spontaneously as part of everyday life. Elderly community members, in particular, engage in impromptu performances, using their instruments to accompany conversations or share stories. These casual performances serve as social bonding and cultural preservation, drawing people together and reinforcing a shared identity.
4.1.4. Cultural Exchange and Dissemination

Zhuang stringed instruments play a crucial role in cultural exchange and dissemination within the Zhuang community and beyond. Their distinctive sounds and cultural significance transcend language barriers, making them powerful tools for fostering understanding and appreciation between different ethnic groups. Through performance and collaboration, Zhuang musicians contributed to the broader cultural landscape of Guangxi and promoted cross-cultural dialog and cooperation.

4.1.5. Key Elements of Stage Arts

In the realm of stage arts, Zhuang-stringed instruments are essential components of various performance genres, including the Zhuangju opera and Bayin bands. Each instrument brings a unique timbre and character to the ensemble, enriching the overall sound and enhancing the audience's experience. The Maguhu, with its bright and resonant tones, is a standout feature of Zhuang musical performances, capturing the essence of Zhuang music and captivating audiences with its expressive melodies (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2 Zhuang Bayin Bands. Source: Guangguo Wang, from fieldwork in July 2022.](image)

Figure 2 illustrates the arrangement of instruments within a typical Zhuang Bayin band, showcasing the hierarchical structure where the Maguhu plays the leading role, accompanied by other stringed instruments providing support and harmony. The transcription offers insight into the intricate techniques and ornamentations used by Maguhu players to convey emotions and tell stories through music (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3 Excerpt of Maguhu Solo Spring Morning in Zhuang village. Source: Guangguo Wang, transcription from fieldwork in July 2022.](image)

Figure 3 presents a transcription of a Maguhu solo performance, highlighting the instrument's unique melodies and expressive capabilities.

4.1.6. Cultural Significance and Communication

Beyond their musical capabilities, Zhuang stringed instruments hold deep cultural significance and symbolize Zhuang people's cultural identity. They serve as tangible links to the past, connecting present generations with their ancestors and
cultural heritage. Moreover, these instruments facilitate communication and interaction within the Zhuang community, providing a shared language through which individuals can express themselves and connect on a deeper level.

4.1.7. Integral to Folk Rituals

In Zhuang society, stringed instruments are integral to various folk rituals and ceremonies, serving as conduits for spiritual expression and cultural continuity. Whether accompanying sacrificial ceremonies or festival celebrations, these instruments help evoke a sense of tradition and reverence, strengthening the bonds between the Zhuang people and their cultural practices. By participating in these rituals, musicians ensure the preservation and transmission of Zhuang cultural heritage for future generations.

4.2. The Roles of Zhuang Stringed Instruments

4.2.1. Solo Performances

The Unique Role of the Maguhu: Among the five types of Zhuang stringed instruments, the Maguhu is the primary instrument for solo performances. Its distinctive timbre and expressive capabilities make it ideal for demonstrating the intricacies of Zhuang music in solo settings. While other stringed instruments may share similarities with traditional Chinese instruments such as the Erhu and Zhonghu, the Maguhu stands out for its unique sound and cultural significance.

4.2.2. Roles within Zhuang Ethnic Bayin Bands

In Zhuang Bayin bands, each stringed instrument plays a distinct role, with the Maguhu typically taking the lead due to its prominent timbre and ability to cut through the ensemble. Other instruments, such as the Zhutonghu, Tuhu, Jiaohu, and Huluhu instruments, provide assistance and support, contributing to the overall texture and richness of the ensemble. Through careful orchestration and arrangement, Bayin bands create dynamic and engaging musical performances that showcase the diversity and vibrancy of Zhuang music.

4.2.3. Accompanying Zhuangju

Maguhu Dominance: In the context of Zhuangju opera accompaniment, the Maguhu retains its dominant position. At the same time, other stringed instruments play secondary roles or have been largely supplanted by instruments such as the Erhu and Zhonghu. Despite their limited presence in professional theater troupes, these instruments play an essential role in amateur folk troupes and community events, preserving traditional performance practices and enriching cultural life in Zhuang communities.

Understanding the diverse functions and roles of Zhuang stringed instruments provides valuable insights into their cultural significance and impact on Zhuang society. By exploring these aspects, scholars and enthusiasts can gain a deeper appreciation for Zhuang music and contribute to efforts to preserve and promote this rich cultural heritage for future generations.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted functions and roles of Zhuang stringed instruments within the cultural landscape of China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Consistent with existing research on ethnic musical traditions (Rao 2009; Oakes 2017; Yang 2021), this study reveals that these instruments serve as more than just musical tools; rather, they are integral components of Zhuang cultural identity and social cohesion.

The diverse functions identified, including entertainment, emotional expression, relaxation, and cultural exchange, align with theoretical principles in ethnomusicology and cultural studies (Ruskin & Rice 2012; Schippers 2015). Through participant observation and interviews, this study provides empirical evidence supporting the importance of Zhuang stringed instruments in facilitating interpersonal communication, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering community bonds.

However, the study also reveals inconsistencies with previous research regarding the dominance of the Maguhu in various musical contexts. While the Maguhu plays a significant role in solo performances and Zhuangju accompaniment, its prominence within the Bayin bands may vary depending on regional and stylistic factors. This inconsistency underscores the complexity of Zhuang musical traditions and highlights the need for further research to explore regional variations and evolving performance practices (Li & Xike, personal communication).

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding the function and role of Zhuang-stringed instruments in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. By synthesizing the literature and presenting new empirical findings, this study provides valuable insights into the cultural significance and impact of these instruments on Zhuang society.

The qualitative methodology, which included both ethnographic fieldwork and content analysis, effectively revealed the nuanced functions and roles of Zhuang stringed instruments. Scholars and practitioners in ethnomusicology and cultural...
studies can build upon these findings to further explore the dynamic relationships among music, culture, and identity within the Zhuang ethnic group.

Preserving and promoting Zhuang musical traditions requires ongoing collaboration between researchers, musicians, and community members. We can ensure their continued vitality and relevance in social and cultural change by recognizing the importance of Zhuang stringed instruments in cultural and artistic contexts.

Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting interviews and observations, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were provided comprehensive information about the study's objectives, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality measures implemented to safeguard their responses.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research project was financially supported by the College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

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