

The Literacy of Traditional Chinese Music and Modern Practices in Contemporary Music Therapy in China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of traditional Chinese music into contemporary music therapy practices in China, with a focus on how cultural heritage and modern therapeutic approaches intersect to support psychological and emotional well-being. Employing qualitative methods—including interviews and observational analysis—this research examines the therapeutic use of traditional Chinese instruments such as the Guqin, Erhu, Pipa, and Guzheng. These instruments are not only valued for their aesthetic qualities but are also deeply rooted in the philosophical and medical principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), particularly the Five-Tone Therapy system, which links musical tones to internal organs and emotional regulation. The findings reveal that while traditional music remains central in many therapeutic contexts, particularly among older populations and in culturally conservative regions, there is a growing trend toward integrating modern music genres, including Chinese pop, Western classical, and electronic music. In urban centers such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, music therapists are increasingly adopting client-centered approaches and leveraging technological innovations, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality to enhance personalization and engagement. This study contributes to the expanding discourse on culturally informed therapeutic models, proposing a framework that harmonizes traditional practices with contemporary innovations to address the diverse emotional and psychological needs of patients in modern Chinese society.

Key words: Music therapy/Chinese music/Traditional music

BACKGROUND

Music has been an important part of Chinese culture for thousands of years, with deep connections to philosophy, medicine, and emotional well-being. In ancient China, music was believed to be a bridge between humanity and the universe, with the power to harmonize body and mind. Traditional Chinese instruments such as the Guqin, Erhu, and Pipa are used in both solo and collaborative performances, known for their unique tones and meditative qualities. They have often been linked to mood-lifting, stress-reducing, and spiritual healing. These traditional beliefs about the healing power of music have persisted to the present day, and continue to influence healing practices in China.

As society has modernized, the therapeutic applications of music have expanded, particularly with the formalization of music therapy as a recognized profession. Music therapy, which began in the West in the mid-20th century, has spread globally, gaining traction in China as a means of treating mental health issues, emotional disorders, and cognitive dysfunction. What makes music therapy in China unique is its blend of ancient Chinese musical traditions with contemporary therapeutic practices, incorporating both traditional

music and modern genres. This fusion highlights the cultural significance of music and its evolving role in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of individuals in an increasingly fast-paced, modern world.

The importance of understanding this cultural integration cannot be overstated. Music therapy in China stands at the intersection of cultural preservation and therapeutic innovation, making it a critical area of study for researchers and practitioners alike. As more individuals turn to music therapy for emotional and psychological relief, it is essential to examine how traditional Chinese music is being adapted in contemporary therapeutic contexts and how modern musical influences are reshaping therapeutic approaches. This research aims to explore these intersections, providing insights into the therapeutic efficacy of traditional and modern music in Chinese music therapy practices across various settings and demographic groups.

The development of music therapy in China reflects a broader trend of integrating traditional cultural elements with modern scientific practices. While Western countries such as the United States and Europe formalized music therapy as a profession in the 20th century, the therapeutic use of music in China dates back thousands of years. Ancient Chinese

medical texts, such as the “Huangdi Neijing” (The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine), document the use of music to regulate qi (vital energy) and the body’s internal energies, in accordance with the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water). Specific tones and musical modes were believed to correspond to different organs, emotions, and elements, creating a holistic system of music-based healing.

The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of research on culturally informed approaches to therapy, offering valuable insights into how music therapy can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse populations. By exploring the intersection of cultural heritage and modern therapeutic practices, this research will provide a framework for understanding how music can be used not only as a therapeutic tool but also as a means of preserving cultural identity and promoting emotional well-being in a rapidly changing world.

OBJECTIVE

This study addresses the following objective:

- To explore for the musical styles in Music therapy in China, including the influence of social, cultural and historical factors.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research method aimed at exploring the integration of traditional Chinese music elements and modern music styles in contemporary music therapy practices in China. It focuses on the application of traditional Chinese music in modern music therapy. The scope includes both historical and modern perspectives, aiming to understand how cultural heritage influences therapeutic approaches and objectives across different regions.

The Criteria for Selecting the key Informants

Music therapists

The music therapist must formal qualifications and professional music therapy experience. They must have at least 3 years of practical experience working in therapeutic environments such as hospitals, music therapy centers, or rehabilitation centers. Prioritize those who combine traditional Chinese medicine with modern treatment methods.

Musicians

Musicians have experience more 3 years including those from traditional Chinese music and western music backgrounds as well as contemporary genres. While not directly involved in music therapy, they contributed insights into how various musical forms are perceived and applied in the therapeutic context.

Composers

Composers, whether working in traditional or contemporary genres, who are familiar with or interested in the use of music in therapeutic settings.

Intellectuals

Individuals with a general understanding of the development and application of music therapy in China. These participants, including academics and professionals from related fields, have experience more than 3 years

REVIEW LITERATURE

Introduction to Music Therapy in China

Music therapy in China is a field deeply rooted in traditional practices, yet it is rapidly evolving to incorporate modern therapeutic approaches. Historically, music therapy in China has drawn heavily from traditional Chinese medicine, where music was believed to help regulate the body’s “qi” (气) and harmonize emotions with physical well-being. Traditional Chinese instruments such as the Guqin, Pipa, and erhu have played a central role in therapeutic practices, especially in facilitating emotional and spiritual healing (Huangdi Neijing).

This research aims to explore the continuity and change in musical styles within music therapy in China. Traditional Chinese music therapy is deeply rooted in the philosophies of Traditional Chinese Medicine, where music was regarded as a vital tool to restore harmony within the body. The core of this therapeutic approach lies in the concept of Wuyin Liao Fa (五音疗法), or Five-Tone Therapy, which connects the five musical notes to the body’s internal organs through the five elements theory. Music, according to ancient Chinese texts such as the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon), was believed to regulate the body’s “Qi” (vital energy), and support physical health. While traditional Chinese music remains a cornerstone of therapeutic practice, younger generations in urban areas are increasingly engaging with modern music genres such as Chinese pop, electronic music, and Western classical music. The blending of traditional and modern music within therapy reflects broader cultural shifts and societal changes. Music therapists now tailor their practices to the preferences of a more diverse client base, balancing the emotional depth of traditional music with the accessibility of modern styles.

The norms and standards of music used in Chinese music therapy are still evolving. Despite the growing popularity of music therapy in China, there remains a lack of standardized guidelines for selecting appropriate music based on therapeutic needs. Interviews with therapists reveal that while personalization and flexibility are central to therapeutic practice, there is still no unified system guiding music selection across different settings and patient demographics. Therapists often rely on their personal judgment, using their cultural knowledge and understanding of a client’s emotional state to choose the music that will be most effective.

One of the critical gaps in the current practice of music therapy in China is the absence of a standardized framework for the selection of music. The creation of such a framework would involve formalizing the process of selecting both traditional and modern music based on emotional,

psychological, and cultural factors. By systematically analyzing the therapeutic impact of various musical elements such as tempo, rhythm, and instrument choice therapists could better support patients across a wider range of emotional states and therapeutic contexts. This study seeks to explore how such a framework could be developed, taking into account the diverse cultural and musical landscape of contemporary China.

The current norms and practices in music selection, and the challenges of establishing a standardized framework for music selection in Chinese music therapy. Through these explorations, the study will highlight how music therapists in China are navigating the intersections of tradition, modernity, and personalization in their practice.

History of Traditional Music Therapy in China

Philosophical foundations: music as a regulator of “Qi”

In traditional Chinese philosophy, health was understood as a state of harmony, particularly in relation to the flow of qi (气), or vital energy, through the body. Ancient Chinese belief posited that “百病生于气，止于樂” (all diseases arise from disturbances in qi, and can be healed through music). Music was thus considered not merely as an art form but as a powerful tool for regulating the flow of qi and restoring internal balance. Each note or tone in traditional Chinese music corresponded to different organs and elements within the body, according to the five elements theory wood, fire, earth, metal, and water which is a fundamental concept in Chinese cosmology and medicine (Huangdi Neijing).

The Huangdi Neijing, a seminal text in Traditional Chinese Medicine, elaborates how the five musical notes (宫, 商, 角, 徵, 羽) in the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale correspond to the five major organs: the spleen, lungs, liver, heart, and kidneys, respectively. Through these musical connections, it was believed that music could help balance qi in the body, leading to both physical and emotional healing. The pentatonic scale was seen as a reflection of the natural order and harmony of the universe, and its healing properties were integrated into traditional Chinese Medicine practices as a means to restore balance between the internal and external worlds of individuals (Huangdi Neijing).

This association of music with the regulation of qi has continued to influence the use of traditional Chinese music in therapeutic contexts today, particularly in modern interpretations of music therapy in China, where both historical perspectives and contemporary medical practices are often blended.

The Symbolism of “樂” and “藥” in healing

One particularly striking connection between music and healing in Chinese culture is the etymology of the Chinese character for medicine, “藥” (yào). The character itself is composed of the radical “艹” (representing herbs) and “樂” (yuè), the character for music. This composition reflects an ancient belief that music is one of the most powerful forms



Figure 1. Names of ancient Chinese pharmacies

Source: baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1661337734754452866 &wfr=spider&for=pc



Figure 2. The changes of Chinese character “樂” in History

Source: http://www.360doc.com/content/23/0704/20/8180336_1087335256.shtml

of medicine. The symbolism suggests that music “樂” was considered a significant part of therapeutic practice, as potent as herbal remedies in promoting well-being.

The character “樂” (yuè) is rich in symbolism, tracing its roots back to ancient Chinese script. In oracle bone script, it often depicted a figure resembling a dancer, reflecting the close relationship between music and dance in ancient times. Over the centuries, the character evolved but maintained its core connection to music, joy, and celebration. Even in its simplified modern form, “樂” retains its essence, representing the cultural significance of music in bringing emotional expression and harmony to people’s lives throughout history.

Music, much like herbal medicine, was believed to have the capacity to “heal the heart”, a phrase often used in ancient Chinese texts to describe the impact of music on emotional and spiritual health. By harmonizing emotions and calming the mind, music was thought to prevent the onset of physical diseases, which were believed to arise from emotional imbalance or disturbances in “Qi”. This concept is not just an abstract philosophy; it has practical applications in modern music therapy practices in China.

The role of music in traditional Chinese medicine: a holistic approach to healing through five-tone therapy

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, Wuyin Liao Fa (五音疗法), or Five-Tone Therapy, connects music to the body's organs through the five elements. Each element and organ correspond to specific musical tones: Gong (宫) for the spleen, Shang (商) for the lungs, Jue (角) for the liver, Zhi (徵) for the heart, and Yu (羽) for the kidneys. By playing specific melodies on traditional instruments like the Guqin, Pipa, or erhu, Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners believe they can restore emotional and physical balance (Huangdi Neijing).

The Five-Note Therapy is a music therapy approach rooted in traditional Chinese medicine. It is based on the relationship between the five notes-Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu (analogous to Do, Re, Mi, Sol, and La in Western music)-and the five organs of the human body (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys). This therapy stems from the ancient Chinese theory of the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water), which posits that each musical note corresponds to a particular organ, influencing bodily functions and emotions, thus promoting health and well-being.

1. Gong (宫) (Do) corresponds to the spleen and is associated with Earth. It promotes a sense of stability and relaxation, often used to alleviate anxiety and nervous tension.



Figure 3. Traditional Chinese Music Therapy

Source: www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZNDQwMjYxNjQ=.html

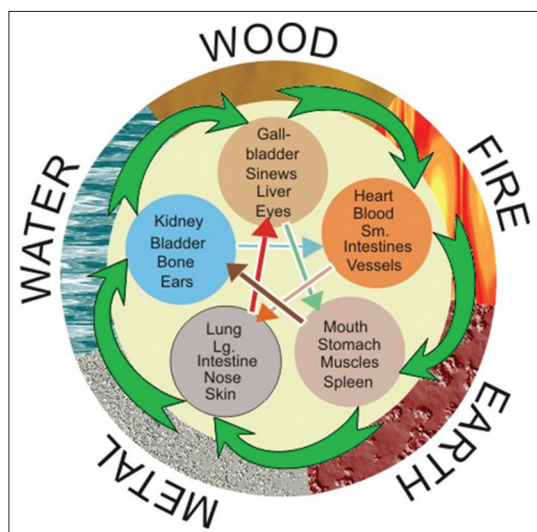


Figure 4. Five Elements

Source: www.bloom.com.sg/music-as-therapy-in-tcm/

2. Shang (商) (Re) corresponds to the lungs and is associated with Metal. It helps release sadness and grief, improving respiratory health and emotional relief.
3. Jue (角) (Mi) corresponds to the liver and is associated with Wood. It aids in easing anger and irritability, benefiting liver function and emotional regulation.
4. Zhi (徵) (Sol) corresponds to the heart and is associated with Fire. This note stimulates vitality and enthusiasm, helping to regulate the heart and improve blood circulation.
5. Yu (羽) (La) corresponds to the kidneys and is associated with Water. It balances fear and stress, supporting kidney function and reducing anxiety.

In practice, therapists use specific tones or combinations based on the patient's emotional and physical condition, using music's vibrational and frequency properties to restore balance. Five-Note Therapy is commonly applied in stress management, psychological healing, and as a complementary treatment for chronic conditions in both traditional Chinese medicine and modern music therapy contexts.

Nourishing the Heart. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the heart is associated with fire and the note Zhi (徵). Music featuring strings like the Guqin or erhu is believed to soothe heart qi, improving circulation and promoting emotional peace. A well-known recommendation is the piece Zizhu Diao (紫竹调), which balances fire and water, aligning with the I Ching's water and fire complement theory for heart-kidney balance. Listening time: 9-11 PM (亥时), to relax before sleep, supporting the heart's function during optimal rest.

Nourishing the Liver. The liver corresponds to the element wood and the note Jue (角). Wind instruments like the flute or bamboo xiao help soothe liver qi, aiding in emotional expression and the nervous system. Hu Jia Shi Ba Pai (胡笳十八拍) is recommended, as its "Shang" tone (商) cuts excess liver qi while the "Yu" tone (羽) nourishes it. Listening time: 7-11 PM (戌时、亥时), for easing liver energy before nightfall.

Nourishing the Spleen. The spleen relates to the earth element and the note Gong (宫). Instruments such as the sheng or hulusi with deep, resonant tones help harmonize the digestive system. Shi Mian Mai Fu (十面埋伏), which includes the fire-based Zhi tone (徵), is used to promote digestion. Listening time: During or after meals, supporting healthy digestion.

Nourishing the Lungs. The lungs correspond to metal and the note Shang (商). Percussion instruments like bells, gongs, or brass instruments are used for lung qi regulation. Music such as Yang Chun Bai Xue (阳春白雪) is recommended for invigorating and cleansing the lungs. Listening time: 3-7 PM (申时、酉时), a time linked with lung activity in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Nourishing the Kidneys: The kidneys are associated with water and the note Yu (羽). Drums and water-like sounds are believed to nurture kidney qi. Mei Hua San Nong (梅花三弄) is used to replenish kidney energy, calming the mind and promoting vitality. Listening time: 7-11 AM (辰时、巳时), when yang energy is rising, promoting kidney health.

RESULTS

Traditional Chinese Music in Therapeutic Contexts

Traditional Chinese music plays a foundational role in the therapeutic practices of music therapy in China. Its deep roots in Chinese philosophy, medicine, and culture have long been associated with emotional regulation, spiritual healing, and maintaining harmony between the mind and body. In music therapy today, traditional Chinese music is still used for these purposes, offering both cultural relevance and emotional resonance, particularly among older patients. The therapeutic use of instruments like the Guqin, Pipa, Erhu, and Guzheng reflects an enduring belief in the healing properties of music. Traditional Chinese instruments are central to music therapy practices in China, particularly for their ability to evoke emotional responses and promote relaxation.

Guqin

As one of the oldest and most respected musical instruments in China, Guqin not only holds a unique position in Chinese culture, but also demonstrates its unique value in the field of music therapy. Guqin music is highly praised for its soft and meditative tone, believed to calm the mind and promote spiritual reflection. In history, the Guqin has been closely related to personal cultivation, and its application in therapy is often associated with promoting introspection and emotional clarity.

Guqin music therapy adjusts emotions and improves physical and mental states by listening to or playing Guqin music, in order to achieve health and therapeutic goals. This therapy is considered a part of the traditional Chinese medicine psychosomatic medical system, and its healing principles are mainly based on the principles of “regulating the spirit”, “regulating the Qi”, and “transforming essence into Qi” in traditional Chinese medicine. Clinical studies in the past 20 years have shown that Guqin music can affect people’s psychological state, relieve negative emotions, and improve sleep and quality of life (Feng & Dai, 2022).

In a broader cultural and philosophical context, the Guqin is regarded as a tool for Chinese literati to cultivate their character and a symbol of perfect personality. Its cultural and



Figure 5. Guqin (古琴)

Source: www.barduschinamusic.org/events/sls/chinese-music-composition

philosophical connotations are profound, influencing generations of people. The music therapy philosophy of Guqin is not limited to its music itself, but also includes its profound connection with traditional Chinese culture, such as the unity of heaven and man and the spirit of music (Li, 2013).

Erhu

In therapeutic settings, the effectiveness of Erhu may be related to its ability to express and convey deep emotions. Research has shown that Erhu can convey rich emotional colors through its unique timbre and playing techniques. For example, the playing techniques of Erhu, such as vibrato, glissando, and string rolling, can enhance the energy and emotional expression of music. In addition, the timbre and playing style of Erhu are closely related to human voice, which gives it a unique advantage in expressing human emotions.

Pipa and guzheng

The Pipa and Guzheng are string instruments that play a significant role in music therapy for their ability to produce



Figure 6. Erhu (二胡)

Source: hkewmusic.com/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=1981



Figure 7. Pipa (琵琶)

Source: www.shuangzishu.com/city/cs/course-id-7314.html



Figure 8. Guzheng (古筝)

Source: http://www.bjqfxy.com/images/202103/goods_img

soothing, reflective melodies. These instruments are often used to promote relaxation and reduce physical tension. Their repetitive, flowing musical structures encourage meditative breathing, enhancing both emotional regulation and physical relaxation. Moreover, studies on Pipa music similarly suggest its positive effects on stress reduction and mood regulation.

Firstly, both the Pipa and Guzheng are played with natural breathing, which helps the performer regulate their psychological state and avoid emotional excitement. This natural breathing not only helps the performer relax themselves, but also conveys it to the audience through music, helping them achieve psychological balance and relaxation.

Secondly, due to its gentle and comfortable melody, Guzheng music can guide listeners to slow down their breathing rate, thereby reducing heart rate and blood pressure. This effect is particularly significant in the treatment of insomnia and other cardiovascular diseases. In addition, studies have shown that listening to Guzheng music can significantly lower heart rate and blood pressure, making it an effective tool in therapeutic environments.

Traditional Norm and Cultural Influence

Cultural and historical significance

In China, the use of music in therapy is deeply rooted in traditional practices, particularly those associated with Traditional Chinese Medicine. The historical significance of music as a healing tool can be traced back to ancient texts like the Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine), which outlines the Five Tones Theory. This theory correlates specific musical tones with the five internal organs and their associated emotions, providing a framework for the therapeutic use of music. For example, the Gong tone is associated with the spleen and is believed to promote feelings of stability and calmness, while the Zhi tone, linked to the heart, is used to invigorate and uplift the spirit.

This traditional framework continues to influence the norms of music therapy in China, particularly in regions like

Xi'an, where there is a strong cultural continuity with ancient practices. Music therapists in these areas often incorporate traditional Chinese instruments, such as the Guqin and erhu, into their sessions, aligning their practice with these historical norms. The use of traditional music not only adheres to cultural expectations but also resonates deeply with clients, providing a sense of continuity and connection to their cultural heritage.

Preference for traditional instruments and melodies

The interviews highlighted a prevalent norm of using traditional Chinese music in therapeutic settings, particularly when working with older clients or those with a strong cultural identity. Instruments like the Guqin, Pipa, and Erhu are favored for their soothing qualities and deep cultural resonance. The melodies played on these instruments often follow traditional Chinese scales and modes, which are believed to harmonize with the natural rhythms of the body and mind.

For instance, a music therapist in Xi'an emphasized the importance of using Guqin music in therapy, noting its ability to create a serene and meditative atmosphere that facilitates emotional healing. The slow, lyrical melodies of traditional Chinese music are particularly effective in calming the mind, reducing anxiety, and promoting introspection. These practices adhere to the longstanding norms of using culturally significant music in therapy, ensuring that the therapeutic experience is both effective and culturally relevant.

Research supports the use of traditional Chinese instruments like the Guqin, Pipa, and Erhu in therapeutic settings, particularly for their ability to create a calming and introspective atmosphere. For instance, Feng and Dai (2022) demonstrated that Guqin music, with its meditative tones, effectively regulates emotions and improves mental well-being by fostering serenity and introspection. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) found that the Erhu's expressive timbre and playing techniques, such as vibrato and glissando, are particularly effective in helping patients process deep emotions like grief and trauma. The therapeutic relevance of these instruments is also rooted in the principles of Five-Tone Therapy, as described in ancient texts like the Huangdi Neijing. This approach links musical tones to the body's organs and natural rhythms, promoting emotional balance and relaxation. Furthermore, Chen (2022) emphasized the importance of cultural resonance in therapy, highlighting that using culturally significant music fosters patient engagement and enhances therapeutic outcomes, particularly among older clients. These findings align with the observed practices of therapists in Xi'an, who prioritize culturally relevant music to harmonize with patients' emotional and cultural identities.

Emerging professional standards: Incorporation of modern music and techniques

The traditional norms continue to play a significant role, the field of music therapy in China is also evolving to

incorporate modern music and techniques. The professional standards in Chinese music therapy are increasingly influenced by Western practices, which emphasize a more diverse and flexible approach to music selection. This shift reflects the broader changes in Chinese society, where modernization and globalization are introducing new musical genres and therapeutic methods.

In cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen, where cultural diversity and technological innovation are prominent, music therapists are expanding their repertoires to include Western classical music, pop, electronic music, and even virtual reality applications. These modern elements are integrated into therapy sessions to meet the diverse needs of younger clients and those more attuned to contemporary culture. For example, a music therapist in Shanghai mentioned the use of improvisational music therapy, where clients actively participate in creating music, blending traditional and modern elements to address their emotional and psychological needs.

This blending of traditional and modern music is becoming a standard practice in urban centers, where therapists must navigate the complex musical preferences of a diverse clientele. The ability to adapt and integrate various musical genres and techniques is increasingly seen as a hallmark of professional competency in the field.

Personalization and client-centered approaches

Another emerging standard in Chinese music therapy is the emphasis on personalization and client-centered approaches. The interviews revealed that music therapists are increasingly tailoring their sessions to the individual preferences, cultural backgrounds, and emotional states of their clients. This approach aligns with global trends in music therapy, where the therapeutic process is customized to optimize outcomes for each client.

For instance, therapists frequently conduct pre-session assessments to determine the musical preferences and emotional needs of their clients. A therapist in Shenzhen explained how she uses a music preference survey to guide her selection of music. By adapting the music to the client's preferences and therapeutic goals, the therapist can enhance the effectiveness of the sessions. This practice marks a shift towards more client-centered therapy, where the selection of music is not solely based on traditional norms but is also influenced by the client's personal tastes and emotional needs.

This survey allows me to understand the client's musical tastes, ensuring that the therapy is relevant and engaging for them from the very beginning.

(The Shenzhen Music Therapist, Personal Interview, Aug. 2024)

In a similar vein, a music therapist in Shanghai highlighted how flexibility is crucial to successful therapy. She mentioned how, during sessions, she often shifts between traditional Chinese music, Western classical music, and modern genres like pop or electronic music, depending on the client's mood and progress.

Each client is unique, and so is their relationship with music. It's my job to find the right balance between tradition and modernity to meet their specific emotional and psychological needs.

(The Shanghai Music Therapist, Personal Interview, Aug. 2024)

The personalization of music therapy sessions is becoming a key standard in the field, with therapists expected to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of each client. This requires therapists to possess a broad knowledge of different musical genres and an understanding of how various types of music can impact emotional and psychological states. Such an approach not only ensures a more effective therapeutic experience but also fosters deeper client engagement, as clients feel more connected to the therapy when it resonates with their personal and cultural identity.

Integrating Traditional and Modern Music in Chinese Music Therapy: Future Possibilities

The future of music therapy in China lies in the dynamic integration of both traditional and modern music. As therapists navigate the evolving landscape of mental and emotional health, the blending of cultural heritage with contemporary practices offers numerous opportunities for more effective, culturally resonant therapeutic approaches. This section will explore the potential future directions for integrating traditional and modern music in Chinese music therapy, focusing on how technological advancements, cultural adaptation, and personalized therapy can shape the future of the field.

The role of technology in music therapy

As technology continues to advance, its application in music therapy is becoming more widespread. Virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and other technological innovations are creating new opportunities for personalization and immersion in therapy sessions.

For example, Xin Lin, a composer from Xi'an, imagines a future where AI can generate real-time music tailored to a patient's emotional state. Such technology would allow therapists to offer more precise, emotionally targeted interventions, improving the effectiveness of the therapy.

With AI, we could create personalized music therapy sessions that adapt in real-time, seamlessly blending traditional Chinese instruments with modern compositions.

(The Xi'an Composer, Personal Interview, Aug. 2024)

VR technology could also play a role in creating immersive environments where patients experience music in a multi-sensory way. By incorporating elements of traditional Chinese landscapes and cultural symbols into the therapy environment, patients can engage in a more profound emotional journey that connects them to their heritage while benefiting from modern therapeutic techniques.

Cultural adaptation and personalization in music therapy

One of the greatest strengths of music therapy in China is its ability to adapt to the diverse cultural and personal needs of patients. As the field continues to grow, music therapists are increasingly focusing on personalizing therapy sessions to align with each patient's cultural background, personal preferences, and emotional needs.

For patients with strong ties to their cultural heritage, traditional Chinese music will likely continue to play a central role in therapy. Jiachen Wang, a music therapist from Xi'an, explains that for older patients, familiar traditional music provides a sense of emotional grounding.

Music from their past helps them connect with their emotions and memories in a way that modern music sometimes cannot.

(The Xi'an Music Therapist, Personal Interview, Aug. 2024)

However, for younger patients, especially those more attuned to modern music styles, personalizing therapy may involve integrating elements of contemporary pop or electronic music. As therapists continue to refine their practices, they will need to carefully balance traditional and modern music, ensuring that therapy sessions are both culturally relevant and emotionally resonant for each patient.

Bridging Tradition and Modernity through Fusion Music

Fusion music, combining traditional Chinese instruments and melodies with modern styles, has become increasingly popular in recent years. This hybrid approach offers a powerful tool for music therapists who are looking to engage patients of different generations and cultural backgrounds.

As seen in the previous sections, the two pieces of music provided one based on traditional collective dances and another blending modern rhythmic complexity with ritualistic elements illustrate how traditional forms can evolve while still maintaining their cultural significance. This fusion of old and new provides a framework for future developments in music therapy, where therapists can draw on both heritage

and innovation to create richer, more engaging therapeutic experiences.

Oushu Lin, a therapist in Shanghai, highlights how this fusion approach works in practice. The future of music therapy will likely see an increase in the use of fusion music, as therapists and musicians collaborate to create pieces that honor traditional practices while incorporating modern elements that resonate with contemporary audiences.

When I use traditional instruments like the Guzheng alongside modern electronic beats, I see a different level of engagement from younger patients; it allows them to explore their cultural roots without feeling disconnected from contemporary life.

(The Shanghai Music Therapist, Personal Interview, Aug. 2024)

The summary in Table 1 highlights the key research findings regarding the integration of traditional Chinese music in contemporary music therapy practices in China.

DISCUSSION

The decline and revival of traditional Chinese music therapy is a complex process that involves the intersection of multiple fields such as culture, medicine, and psychology. From a historical perspective, traditional Chinese music therapy has a long history and profound cultural heritage. As early as the ancient music chapter of the Lü shi Spring and Autumn Annals, there were records of music as a therapeutic method, and the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon first proposed the theory of five tones for treating diseases, laying the theoretical foundation for traditional Chinese music therapy (Li, 2019). This indicates that traditional Chinese music therapy is not only an important component of traditional Chinese medicine, but also a concrete manifestation of the overall concept in the theoretical system of traditional Chinese medicine.

However, traditional Chinese music therapy has faced challenges amid the rise of Western music therapy, leading to its marginalization in mainstream medical and psychological fields (Liao et al., 2023). Despite this, renewed interest in

Table 1. Summary of findings regarding the integration of traditional Chinese music in contemporary music therapy practices

Theme	Findings
Role of Traditional Chinese Music	Traditional music remains foundational in therapy for emotional and spiritual healing, using instruments like the Guqin, Erhu, Pipa, and Guzheng for their calming and expressive qualities.
Guqin as a Healing Instrument	Guqin's meditative sound is associated with emotional clarity and cultivation, integrated into therapy to relieve stress and improve life quality.
Cultural Norms and Historical Continuity	Influence of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), especially Five-Tone Therapy linking tones with organs and emotions, is significant in traditional music therapy norms.
Emerging Professional Practices	Urban centers embrace Western genres and tech (VR, improvisation) for therapy, blending them with traditional forms to meet modern client needs.
Personalization in Therapy	Therapists personalize music selection using client surveys and emotional assessments, adapting to individual cultural and emotional contexts.
Fusion and Future Trends	Fusion of traditional instruments with modern styles and use of AI/VR in therapy is emerging as a key trend to engage diverse clients across generations.

mental health and cultural heritage has sparked a resurgence in traditional practices. Modern research now demonstrates that Five-Element Music Therapy—an approach rooted in traditional Chinese music—can effectively reduce stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, proving its relevance in both Eastern and Western contexts (Liao et al., 2023). In the post pandemic era, with the soaring psychological risk index among the public, traditional Chinese music therapy, especially Guqin music therapy, has received new research and application in regulating anxiety emotions. Research has shown that Guqin music has a significant positive effect on regulating anxiety, providing theoretical support for the application of Guqin music in regulating anxiety. In addition, the application of traditional Chinese music in music therapy has also been further explored and developed. For example, through experimental exploration, the use of Guqin music in music therapy has broadened the research perspective of Guqin music and fully explored the historical value and important functions of Guqin music culture (Yan et al., 2023).

The decline and revival of traditional Chinese music therapy is a dynamic process that not only reflects the integration of traditional culture with modern medicine and psychology, but also reflects people's renewed understanding of mental health and traditional cultural values. Through continuous theoretical research and practical exploration, traditional Chinese music therapy is expected to play a greater role in modern society, providing people with richer and more effective mental health services.

Spiritual Healing and Emotional Balance

The role of traditional Chinese musical instruments in emotional regulation and therapeutic practices has been increasingly recognized within the framework of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Instruments such as the *guqin* are noted for their unique timbre and meditative qualities, which are believed to promote inner calm and emotional balance. In the context of music therapy, *guqin* music is used to alleviate stress, reduce anxiety, and improve mental well-being through both listening and performance techniques (Mao & Mastnak, 2022).

One widely practiced approach in TCM is the Five-Element Music Therapy, which is based on the correspondence between the five tones (*gong*, *shang*, *jiao*, *zhi*, and *yu*) and the five internal organs. This method operates under the principle of mutual generation and restriction among the five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—and aims to restore harmony between the body and mind (Zhang & Lai, 2017). In therapeutic applications, each tone is associated with a specific organ and emotional state, and is used to treat related psychosomatic conditions. As such, traditional music therapy in China functions not only as a cultural practice but also as a complementary healthcare strategy grounded in both musical aesthetics and medical theory.

Music therapy has been widely recognized as an effective non-pharmacological intervention in the treatment of mental illness. Studies have demonstrated that it can significantly improve emotional well-being, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and enhance overall psychological health.

For example, a meta-analysis by Tang et al. (2020) confirmed the therapeutic benefits of music therapy in alleviating depressive symptoms across various clinical populations. For example, music therapy can effectively reduce the agitation and impulsive behavior of patients with schizophrenia, eliminate their depression and anxiety, alleviate their mental symptoms, improve their social function, and enhance their self-care ability (Liao, 2019). In addition, music therapy is also used to delay the mental decline of patients with chronic mental illness. Compared with drug therapy alone, patients who receive music therapy have better performance in mental decline (Chen et al., 2008).

The application of traditional Chinese musical instruments in mental therapy and emotional balance is not only reflected in their ability to regulate people's emotions and improve their physical and mental states, but also in their combination with traditional Chinese medical theories, such as the application of traditional Chinese medicine's five tone therapy, as well as their practical effects in the treatment of mental illnesses. These studies indicate that traditional Chinese musical instruments and the music they create have significant value and role in psychotherapy and emotional balance.

Cultural Relevance in Therapy

When exploring the cultural relevance in therapy, the application of traditional Chinese music in music therapy is particularly important. Traditional Chinese music is not only an art form, but also a therapeutic tool deeply rooted in Chinese culture and social structure. The cultural relevance of this music form is manifested in multiple aspects, including its emotional and psychological therapeutic effects on elderly patients, as well as its role in promoting cultural identity and continuity.

Traditional Chinese music has significant therapeutic effects on elderly patients. This effect may stem from the close connection between traditional music and the life experiences and cultural backgrounds of the elderly, making music a bridge of emotional resonance that helps them recall the past and feel connected to society.

Traditional Chinese music plays an important role in promoting cultural identity and continuity. Music is not only a means of emotional expression, but also an important carrier of cultural heritage. In traditional Chinese society, music is regarded as a means of communication that can express emotions that are difficult to express in words. This cultural dimension makes traditional Chinese music particularly effective in therapeutic contexts, as it provides a non-verbal medium for emotional expression—especially valuable for patients who struggle to articulate their feelings. Research has shown that traditional musical elements, such as modal structures and timbral qualities, can evoke deep emotional responses and support psychological healing in ways that spoken language may not (Liu et al., 2022). By using culturally relevant music, patients can feel comfortable and understood, thereby promoting treatment outcomes.

Looking ahead to the future, the integration of traditional Chinese music and modern music therapy practices may provide new possibilities for meeting the emotional and cultural

needs of patients. As music therapists continue to address modern challenges while maintaining cultural integrity, traditional Chinese instruments are likely to remain the cornerstone of Chinese therapeutic practice. This fusion not only preserves the cultural value of traditional music, but also utilizes modern scientific methods and techniques to improve the effectiveness and scientific of treatment (Chen, 2018).

The application of traditional Chinese music in music therapy reflects its profound cultural relevance. This cultural relevance is not only reflected in the treatment effectiveness for elderly patients, but also in promoting cultural identity and continuity. In the future, the integration of traditional Chinese music and modern music therapy practices is expected to provide patients with more diverse and effective treatment options.

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