

# PLAYING JIANGNAN SIZHU AS A SOCIAL GAME: AN EVENING OF BEAUTIFUL MUSIC

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## Abstract

This review combines Li Ya's thesis on "Ensemble Tradition and Cultural Interpretation of *Jiangnan Sizhu*"<sup>1</sup> and the project of "Reviving Sonic Memories from the Past: Historically Informed Performance in *Jiangnan Sizhu*", which took place in Shanghai on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2019.

*Jiangnan sizhu* (江南丝竹) refers to the ensemble music played by musical instruments considered being made of silk and bamboo in the Yangtze Delta, including the south of Jiangsu Province, West Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai. This area is called Jiangnan. In terms of the applications and functions, there are two types of traditional silk and bamboo music in the Jiangnan area, of which one is the ritual performance, another is playing for entertainment. In Shanghai, some people play *sizhu* (丝竹) music in their daily life and call it "*bexiang sizhu*" (白相丝竹) in Shanghai dialect, which means having fun. *Jiangnan sizhu* is played as an ensemble music in tea houses, cultural activity centres in street communities and at home.

The project of "Reviving Sonic Memories from the Past: Historically Informed Performance in *Jiangnan Sizhu*" is based on the thesis of Li Ya [李亚]. Her thesis explored the cultural contexts of playing *Jiangnan sizhu* in Shanghai and analysed the behaviour of the performers and important factors forming musical features of *Jiangnan sizhu* in order to reveal hidden interpersonal relationships in the musical context. What is particularly important is her understanding of the Shanghai dialect, including "*ge jiasheng*" (哏家什, which means playing some musical instruments together) and "*tan tou*" (摊头, places where people play *Jiangnan sizhu*). This is necessary in exploring the aesthetic concepts of the *Jiangnan sizhu* performers, a process of culturally recognizing interpersonal communication and social interaction.

This review is insofar dedicated to this thesis as well as to the event that was supported through the preceding research on local musical knowledge and cultural concepts of *Jiangnan sizhu*.

**Key Words:** Jiangnan sizhu, social interaction, cultural environment, structural analysis, interpretation of terms

Traditional *Jiangnan sizhu* not only has a musical expression full of interesting and mysterious tones, but also contains customs and meaning from outsider the music realm. These customs and meanings have an unbreakable bond with regional culture. The following are some characteristics of *Jiangnan sizhu* activities:

## "哏" – CULTURAL SEMANTICS EXPRESSED IN SPECIFIC TERMS

Playing *Jiangnan sizhu*, performers described as "go to *Tān Tóu Báixiàng Xiāng*" (摊头白相相). They don't have to bring their own musical instruments. Before the event, the host, *Tan Tou*, tunes the instruments and put them on the table for the musicians to choose. It shows that the activities of the *Jiangnan sizhu* are flexible and have the characteristics of a game. Of particular interest is that musicians use "哏"[ghak in Shanghaiese] to express their musical behaviour. This term is interpreted in Shanghaiese as: "1) two hands together; 2) hug; 3) clamp it in the armpit." It can be seen that the word is related to establishing a relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Li Ya [李亚]. 2018. Ensemble tradition and Cultural Interpretation of Jiangnan Sizhu. Music Research, 5: 84 – 92. [江南丝竹的“合乐”传统及其文化阐释,《音乐研究》2018年第5期,第84-92页]. The modified excerpts provided here, were translated by Gisa Jähnichen.

There are other words similar to it, such as "ghak bhangyhou", which means falling in love, or "ghak dhao", which means making friends with somebody. These words show that “ghak”(𪛗) not only refers to making friends, but also for playing *Jiangnan sizhu* as a way to get acquainted with each other. Regarding “𪛗”, musicians involved in the research explain the following:

“If two crickets fight we call it ‘𪛗’. This word means we are competing with each other. It is the fun of playing *Jiangnan sizhu*”.<sup>2</sup>

"I think there are three meanings of '𪛗'. Firstly, it refers to making friends; secondly, it means combat. Finally, it means the exchange of the ideas and the emotions between us."<sup>3</sup>

The insights obtained through semantic analysis is that the music experience of the player refers to the relationship in performing *Jiangnan sizhu*, and the sound highlights the meaning in the communication of performance, as talking with each other. Therefore, the interpretation of the *Jiangnan sizhu* has to consider the cultural environment and interpersonal relationships in a specific way to that place and time.

### JIANGNAN SIZHU: THE SOCIAL GAME

The understanding of the meaning of *Jiangnan sizhu* cannot be separated from the performing context and the behaviour. A typical afternoon session lasts about three hours. The traditional instruments are placed on a large round table and the performers are seated in a circle. Usually, a particular combination of musicians plays a set of two or three pieces, after which most of the players get up and either yield their places or switch to other instruments. The activities are mostly hosted by a senior or the owner of the place. Sometimes, an out-of-town visitor may be asked to take part, which is considered of being a special honour. During one session, it is common that different combinations of musicians play the same piece several times. In this way, one is able to hear the different improvisation styles used by the performers and get a taste of their individual artistic conceptions.

Performing musicians don't have any music score, and they are also not simply playing from memory. Instead the music puts a strong emphasis on interpretation. Each time there is a little difference and many new ideas are generally encouraged. With regard to the combination and number of musical instruments used, players are divided into two categories. The one is named ‘*dan dang*’ (单档) and the other ‘*shuang dang*’ (双档). *Dan dang* is the most common combination, it refers to an ensemble consisting of one *pipa*, one *yangqin*, one *sanxian*, one *dizi*, one *sheng*, one *xiao* and possibly others. Although two *erhu* might be used, they play different tunes and fingerings, The different roles are known as "main *erhu*" and "assistant *erhu*". Asked for the reason why the two *erhu* are so different, the musicians explained: “*Jiangnan sizhu* has to avoid that everyone is playing the same melody. If we play the same melody together, we will be unhappy with each other. ‘Main *erhu*’ and ‘assistant *erhu*’ have different tunes and playing methods. So, we can avoid this situation. If one is playing, so this player has to give others space to play freely. Then, we will be happy.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, *Jiangnan sizhu* activities focus on social interaction and creating friendships based on the participants' mutual interest in the music. As the performers don't have scores to follow while playing, but rather play from orally stimulated memory, they are more in a position to show themselves individually in the music they are playing. Different understandings of every piece of music and even the player's disposition will show off naturally in the course of performance. Moreover, the techniques and temperament have both become decisive factors in a lasting partnership. Therefore, within the *Jiangnan sizhu* community, each group of musicians has different styles and strengths and will be called to perform for different types of occasions based on their strengths. These music sessions provide an open forum for musicians to naturally develop their individual personalities, concepts, and creative

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<sup>2</sup> Liu Yuehu [刘跃华]. 2015. Audio recording, 18 May, at Shanghai Changqiao Shenyun Jiangnan Sizhu Club [上海长桥申韵丝竹乐团].

<sup>3</sup> Yang Pingsheng [杨平生]. 2016. Audio recording, 12 January, at Shanghai National Music Research Club [上海国乐研究会].

<sup>4</sup> Yao Weiping [姚卫平]. 2015. Audio recording, 8 April, at Shanghai Changqiao Shenyun Jiangnan Sizhu Club [上海长桥申韵丝竹乐团].

abilities. The previous explanation is only one small part out of Li Ya's article delivered in 2018. A number of highly appreciated articles on *Jiangnan sizhu* were already published about it in various Chinese journals.

## THE EVENING OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2019

The event of importance to this review took place on the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2019, at the 'Beaufort Terrace' (海上梨园), No. 10, Wenchang Road, Yuyuan, Shanghai. It was the result of a close collaboration between musicians, instrument makers, and scholars.<sup>5</sup> Listening to *Jiangnan sizhu* is also a spectacular memory that evokes the 'past' of Shanghai's old town through string instruments, specific aesthetics and style, embodied history and how this history may have sounded. Li Ya explained already in her doctoral thesis many details and based her research on direct observation, face to face communication with the musicians, and previous important literature.

Entering the performance hall, the title "Exploration of a Musical Culture with Historical Awareness" was displayed on top of the stage. It turned out that this music gathering, which has been in preparation for more than a year, needed a lot of detailed work and that during the preparation still many surprises were found on old records interesting to researchers and the participating community that is collecting and restoring early musical instruments. The old recordings were studied and combined with everything that is known about the tradition of *Jiangnan sizhu*. This undertaking reflects a search and longing for some unique local Chinese music culture. As the general plan of the event, Xiao Mei [萧梅], professor at Shanghai Conservatory of Music, said when talking about the original intention of this gathering: "Aesthetics and auditory perceptions are constructed. A century of modern education has left traces and moved away from the historical practice. Newly shaped performance and listening habits of the 'Concert Hall' type are far different from a 'historically aware performance'. The gathering does not aim at returning to the past, but through retrospection of history and tradition, it aims at the returning to the truth, realizing the vitality of the people in trying to explore future possibilities." (Xiao Mei [萧梅], 2019).

The teams participating in this tea-circle gathering are two long-established *Jiangnan sizhu* clubs, which are indeed very different in their playing compared to the "concert" behaviour in a nowadays familiar sense, since they are set up in the traditional way of "a table". The two club heads sit in a circle, looking at each other and interact. The old instruments used by the performers, including those instruments taken over from the Qing dynasty, *qinqin*, *sanxian*, *erhu*, and the *yangqin*, the *xiao*, the *pipa*, and some others, are taking part in the rejuvenation of the long-awaited cycle 'Jiangnan Sizhu Eight Famous Music Pieces'. The complete version of 'Sihe Ruyi' (四合如意), also known as 'Bridge' (桥), fully demonstrates the structural characteristics of the traditional *Jiangnan sizhu* and the profound interpretation skills of the musicians.

Of the three modes of the piece 'Zhonghua Liuban' (中花六板), the musicians clearly show the changes of the same framework in different adjustments. This kind of "playful" change is not only reflected in the melody extension, the change in the fingering order, but also the different temperaments evolving in the pieces through the dialogue between various instruments. Then, the lyrical piece 'Nichang Melody' (霓裳曲) played on the old instruments becomes a 'new' piece and the delicate silk strings in this gentle and elegant music call for a beautiful imagination.

It is unforgettable that the special guests, Tang Liangxing [汤良兴], Tang Liangfu [汤良甫], and the Shanghai Changqiao Shenyun Sizhu Group (上海长桥申韵丝竹乐团), have presented their great skills in musical communication between the masters. It is seen in the interspersed changes, the embellishments, and the variance in the performance. Tang Liangxing's demonstration of the 'ancestral instrument' on a century-old *pipa* realizes a small climax within the event. The material of the instrument

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<sup>5</sup> The event was organized by the Research Institute of Ritual Music in China (RIRMC) at Shanghai Conservatory of Music, supported by the Shanghai Jiangnan Sizhu Research Institute for the Development of Protection and the Beaufort Terrace, Shanghai Normal University's Music College, the National Music Department, the Yangtze River Delta Jiangnan Sizhu Association, the Shanghai Oriental Musical Instrument Museum, which is also a national 'double-first-class institution, meaning a 'University construction project AND one of Shanghai's supported high-level local college construction projects'.



is fine and the body is light, which is especially delicate in the hands of Tang Liangxing. After plucking the strings one by one, it is felt that the traditional craftsmanship has much to offer. Following a brief introduction to the historical source of this art, Tang Liangxing played it on the spot, and then he cheered the audience up from ‘Lao Liuban’ (老六板) and ‘Fan Wang Gong’ (凡忘工) to the ‘The Golden Snake Dance’ (金蛇狂舞).

As a typical representative of the Jiangnan regional culture, *Jiangnan sizhu* comprises many musical pieces deriving from different sources and styles since the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The representative piece of the Taoist Chenghuang Temple Music played by the Pudong Kangwen Jiangnan Sizhu Club (浦东康文国乐社), ‘Yu Furong’ (玉芙蓉) is calm and delicate. The piece ‘Slow Liuban’ (慢六板), has a quite touching melody, and the artistic conception is far reaching.



Figures 1 and 2: Scenes of the evening (photos courtesy by Zhang Shan [张珊]).

The final part of the evening proceeded with the Xinyue team [昕悦组合] from the Department of Chinese Traditional Instruments at Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Under the guidance of Cheng Haihua [成海华], the group interpreted the music pieces ‘Walk on the Streets’ (行街) and ‘Yangba Melody’ (阳八曲) joyfully and with great care.

The three groups performed in the evening to let the audience feel the typical mood and experience together the changing light with different interpretations of traditions in various time periods. Seemingly, the theme of the event ‘Back into history, finding the roots of the tradition, and changed feelings’ was appreciated. Gao Chunming [高春明], president of the Shanghai Intangible Cultural Heritage

Association, commented that the Collection of *Jiangnan sizhu* is an activity that is preserving history, which means that it is also an exploration of the diversity of music that is not in the focus of protection. Shi Yin [史寅], the director of the Oriental Musical Instrument Museum of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, also spoke highly of the academic significance of the event, and expressed his hopes on how to apply this knowledge of an excellent traditions such as *Jiangnan sizhu* in the educational context.<sup>6</sup>

It was a rainy night, but it could not stop the Shanghai audience's love for *Jiangnan sizhu*. The 180 seats reserved in the Beaufort Terrace were not only packed, but eventually more than 200 people were attending. Many people were standing and listening to the whole performance and the explanations. Fortunately, nearly a half of the audience was young people in this concert, and they all said that 'the traditional *Jiangnan Sizhu* has been yet unmatched.' The concert also received the attention of Shanghai's Opera Radio, which gave full coverage in online interviews and live broadcasting.

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<sup>6</sup> Shi Yin [史寅]. 2019. Comments on the Occasion of the Jiangnan Sizhu-Evening, 20th March, 2019. Private audio recording.