

Retrospect and Prospect—Exploration of the Development History of Chinese Guitar Making^{*}

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The guitar, an ancient stringed instrument originating from medieval Europe, was introduced to China around the 18th century. However, Chinese guitar-making technology only began to develop significantly in the 1930s and 1940s. Initially imitative, the industry later evolved toward independent research and development, eventually forming a unique identity. This paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the historical development, current status, and future trends of guitar manufacturing in China. Today, Chinese guitar production is advancing through innovation, gaining prominence on the global stage while fostering a distinctive domestic guitar culture. Nevertheless, the Chinese guitar-making industry also faces fierce market competition and diverse consumer demands.

Keywords: guitar-making, technology, history

The Origins and Early Development of Guitar Making in China

The guitar is a chordophone instrument primarily constructed from wood, with nylon or steel strings. In performance, the left hand presses the strings to adjust pitch, while the right hand plucks them to produce sound. Although the guitar's origins can be traced back to ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome around 3000 BC, the modern guitar owes much to medieval Europe, particularly Spain, where the Moors introduced the five-string instrument known as the “shamshir”. The guitar underwent significant evolution during the European Renaissance, with Spanish luthier Antonio de Torres making revolutionary changes in 1850, expanding the guitar body, adjusting proportions, and implementing the “fan bracing” system, thus laying the foundation for the modern classical guitar, characterized by a fuller sound and purer tone.

In China, the guitar's history dates back to the late 17th to early 18th century, when it was introduced by missionaries in the form of a five-string guitar. The instrument, referred to at the time as the “gourd-shaped moon lute” or “foreign pipa”, made its way into the imperial palace during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor. Over time, modern six-string guitars began to be introduced in China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with preliminary development occurring in the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, China exhibited impressive manufacturing capabilities, producing guitars domestically and establishing key production bases in Shanghai and Guangdong. By the mid-20th century, guitar-making in China had reached a notable level, with Shanghai—a city where diverse cultures converged—providing fertile ground for the guitar's development.

^{*} **Funding:** Project Affiliation: 2023 Category III School-Level Scientific Research Project (Project Category: Young Innovative Talent) “Retrospect and Prospect—Research on the Development History of Chinese Guitar Making” (Project Number: 2023XHQN06, Research Duration: 1 year).

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Professor Chen Zhi of the Central Conservatory of Music, revered as a “pioneer” of guitar music in China, was profoundly influenced by the multicultural environment of Shanghai during his upbringing. Immersed in Western and Eastern cultures, Chen Zhi developed a passion for the guitar, influenced by his Russian music teacher. Shanghai’s rich cultural backdrop, infused with Russian aristocratic influences, helped lay the groundwork for Chen’s career. His passion and artistic vision helped spread the guitar’s charm across China. The development of guitar-making in China reflects not only technical advancements but also the cross-cultural exchange and inheritance of art.

Throughout the Republican era, guitar performances in China were abundant, and newspaper reports frequently covered guitar-related events. Over the decades, guitar-making techniques steadily improved, and guitar brands flourished, as did the education and training of professional talent. The application of new materials and the expansion of production further fueled the rapid growth of the Chinese guitar industry. With the rise of popular music and the expansion of state-owned musical instrument factories, China’s guitar manufacturing industry transformed from a technology importer to an independent developer, fostering a unique guitar industry with Chinese characteristics.

Evolution and Inheritance of Chinese Guitar-Making Techniques

Professor Tan Ruobing, a prominent Chinese music educator, once provided insights into the relatively slow development of guitar music in China. He attributed this to the influx of foreign music experts during the world wars, which propelled the professional development of violin, vocal music, and piano, leaving the guitar—considered a modern Western instrument—on the periphery. This reflects the challenges and untapped potential in the popularization and development of the guitar in China.

With the reform and opening-up policies, the guitar, particularly the Hawaiian guitar associated with pop songs, began to gain popularity in China. However, the instrument was still regarded as countercultural at the time. Enthusiastic guitar lovers formed small, grassroots groups that played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting guitar culture in China. Although these early efforts faced significant challenges, they laid the groundwork for future growth.

By the mid-1980s, the hosting of guitar competitions and the establishment of guitar associations marked a new milestone in the development of the guitar in China. Although limited teacher resources kept performance levels at the amateur stage, the passion of guitar enthusiasts was undiminished. Guitar became emblematic of a cultural trend during this period, with estimates indicating that at its peak, over 100,000 people in China were avid guitar players. Guitar’s rise as a cultural phenomenon helped to stimulate the domestic guitar manufacturing industry.

The establishment of the Classical Guitar Department at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater in 1988 symbolized the formal start of professional guitar education in China. This was followed by the inclusion of classical guitar programs at prestigious music conservatories such as the Central Conservatory of Music and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, which helped revitalize guitar education in the country. By the 1990s, Beijing and Shanghai became central hubs for guitar learning, and a nationwide enthusiasm for the instrument ensued.

China’s guitar-making technology, though late in development, has progressed rapidly. The industry emerged in Shanghai and other regions during the early 20th century, where guitar manufacturing and sales activities began to take root, heralding the future growth of China’s guitar industry.

Known as the “Guitar Paradise” and the “Guitar Capital of China”, Huizhou in Guangdong Province has become a leading center for guitar design, research, production, and sales. The development of Huizhou’s guitar

industry dates back to the 1990s, when local companies mainly imitated foreign guitar designs. In 1991, this landscape shifted as Taiwanese businessmen established the Yucheng Wood Instrument Factory, producing China's first internationally standardized guitar. Following Yucheng's lead, numerous Taiwanese-invested factories helped build a complete guitar industry chain, bolstering the local economy.

The “Nationalization” of Chinese Guitar Making and Its Artistic and Cultural Value

Despite early government support, the development of guitar making in China has been relatively slow, remaining a non-mainstream art form. Although the guitar experienced a surge in popularity after the founding of the People's Republic of China, its artistic value was not fully recognized. To fully realize the potential of the guitar in China, it is necessary to create guitar compositions with distinct national characteristics while promoting the development of classical guitar music. By doing so, the guitar can revitalize its position in Chinese music and enrich China's cultural landscape.

During the Republican era, the guitar was an important accompaniment instrument for many songs. The musician Nie Er, co-author of the “March of the Volunteers”, was an avid guitar player. In 1934, Nie Er used a Hawaiian guitar to accompany the song “Fisherman's Song”, a performance that enhanced the song's charm with the unique sound of the instrument. Nie Er's passion for the guitar, reflected in his diary and compositions, helped lay the foundation for the integration of the guitar into Chinese music.

The fusion of the guitar with Chinese culture is also reflected in the craftsmanship of Chinese guitar makers, who have blended tradition and modernity. These makers continue to push the boundaries of guitar design by incorporating Chinese cultural elements, fostering a unique identity for the instrument in China. With this cultural integration, Chinese guitar makers have found success not only domestically but also on the international stage.

Modern Development Trends and Challenges in Chinese Guitar Making

In recent years, China's music industry has seen rapid growth, and the country now holds a significant position in the global musical instrument manufacturing industry. China has become a world leader in the production of pianos, guitars, violins, and other instruments, showcasing its superior craftsmanship and asserting its presence on the global stage. China's economic growth and expanding market demand present tremendous opportunities for the domestic musical instrument manufacturing industry, including guitar production.

Despite fierce market competition, Chinese guitar manufacturers need to continuously innovate, improve quality, and expand into international markets. Only by pursuing technological advancement and brand-building can Chinese guitar makers remain competitive in the global market.

Contributions of Chinese Guitar Making to the Global Guitar Industry

China's guitar-making industry is not only meeting domestic demand but also exporting guitars worldwide. Regions such as Huizhou and Zheng'an have established industrial clusters that supply a significant portion of the world's guitars. China has become the world's largest guitar production base, playing an increasingly important role in the global guitar industry.

Conclusion

The history and development of guitar making in China is a story of transformation and innovation. From its introduction by missionaries to its current prominence, guitar making in China has undergone numerous

changes. China's guitar-making technology has not only preserved traditional craftsmanship but has also continuously advanced through innovation, establishing itself as a competitive force on the global stage. As China's music industry continues to flourish, the future of guitar making in China holds immense promise.

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