

Performing Identities in Flux: The Erhu as a Cultural Mediator in the Dynamics of Tradition, Modernity, and Globalization

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Abstract

Erhu, as one of the representatives of traditional Chinese bowstring instruments, has long been a symbol of Chinese cultural heritage. However, in the context of the rapid development of modernization and globalization, its role has been greatly impacted and transformed. Considering the ongoing academic debate on the future development of erhu performance, this paper constructs a theoretical model, the Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework, to explore the mediating role of the erhu in the intersection of tradition, modernity, and globalization. This theoretical model challenges the static concept of cultural identity, showing that the erhu is a place where different cultures encounter, and its cultural identity is constantly reconstructed in each performance. By situating the erhu within a discussion of identity, performance, and globalization, this paper provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding how traditional music adapts to the forces of modernity and globalization, and mediates the tension between preserving heritage and embracing the effects of globalization. Therefore, the Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework provides a valuable way to examine the complexity of cultural identity in the era of globalization and provides a research basis for other traditional arts in similar situations.

Keywords: cultural mediator, erhu, globalization, modernity, tradition

Introduction

At present, our social development has entered the era of globalization and modernization (Powell, 2014). With the rapid development of globalization and increasing cultural exchanges, the increasingly fierce collision between tradition and modernity highlights the necessity for people to understand how traditional symbols develop in the new cultural context (Doku & Asante, 2011).

The erhu, a bowstring instrument with a history of more than 1,000 years, is considered one of the most representative instruments in traditional Chinese music culture (Wang, 2017). Its delicate timbre and rich expression are deeply loved by a wide audience, making it a symbol of Chinese musical heritage and identity (Xiao, 2020). However, in the course of China's rapid development in various fields in

recent decades, the erhu is no longer limited to playing traditional Chinese music but is increasingly involved in playing music genres such as pop and jazz, thus challenging its identity as a "pure" traditional instrument (Tong & Ji, 2024; Zhang, 2010). By now, the erhu has become more than just a traditional Chinese instrument; it energetically walks the boundaries of tradition and modernity, local and global. This paper addresses the critical question: How does the erhu function as a cultural mediator in the negotiation of identities at the confluence of tradition, modernity, and globalization?

Although the erhu has undergone many changes over the course of modern society, its evolving role has not been thoroughly theorized in academic research. Previous studies on the erhu mainly focused on performance techniques, repertoire analysis, education, and aesthetics (Lv et al., 2021), or on the history, musical genre, and its role as a marker of identity in Chinese diasporic communities (Hu & Liu, 2024; Liu, 1988; Stock, 1993; Xiaoyu & Dongxing, 2023). However, such studies often fail to account for the complex ways in which the erhu navigates between tradition and modernity, local and global.

To address this gap, this paper constructs a novel theoretical model—the Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework—to analyze the instrument's function as a cultural mediator that negotiates and reconstitutes cultural identities in a globalized context. This model shifts from viewing the erhu as a static symbol of Chinese tradition to understanding it as a cultural mediator that actively negotiates and rebuilds identity through hybrid performance. Such a framework not only addresses existing gaps in the literature but also provides a more nuanced understanding of how traditional art forms adapt and transform in a rapidly globalizing world.

Literature Review

China's national bowstring instrument is believed to have originated in the Sui and Tang dynasties of ancient China more than a thousand years ago (Xiang, 1999). The erhu, as the most representative member of Chinese bowstring instruments, mainly served as accompaniment for folk opera and played in small traditional folk bands such as Jiangnan music and Luogu music in feudal society, so it did not form an independent art system (Wang, 1997; Li, 2006).

During the Period of the Republic of China, the development of erhu performance was divided into two different paths because of the political turmoil (Qiao, 2000). On the one hand, due to the impact of modernity and globalization, intellectuals led by Liu Tianhua improved the shape and form of traditional Chinese musical instruments, and adopted Western music theories to create erhu solo pieces, transforming the erhu from an accompaniment instrument in folk opera to a solo instrument (Yu, 2004; Xie, 2018). On the other hand, the state of erhu art in the folk tradition did not change much compared with the feudal society. Folk artists, represented by Abing, integrated opera and folk music elements, gaining richer traditional connotations (Hei, 2018).

With the founding of the People's Republic of China, music education and discipline in China greatly developed, and the mode of inheritance and performance

of traditional music shifted from the performer as the core to the composer's repertoires as the center (Xiao, 2020). During this period, many outstanding composers such as Liu Wenjin and Wang Jianmin drew on modern music composition techniques to create abundant music repertoires for the erhu, which greatly enriched its musical genre, performance skills, and stage expression (Qiao, 2000).

However, with the rapid development of erhu music, scholars have debated its influence in the process of modernization and globalization. Wang (2017) stated that performers constantly pursue complex musical structures, difficult performance techniques, and exaggerated stage performances, which has destroyed the connotation of traditional Chinese music and lost the identity of traditional music. Yang (2016) worried that numerous traditional music forms are becoming extinct due to the influence of globalization and modernization. On the other hand, Xiao (2020) believes that the erhu has risen from the original small region to the national level during the development of China's modernization, so traditional musical instruments need to remain creative in contemporary times to adapt to the development of society. Although the "de-traditionalization" of erhu performance has aroused many scholars' concerns, it has stimulated the potential of erhu performance and is an inevitable result of social development (Ru, 2011). Faced with these controversies, this paper proposes the following theoretical framework to try to explain the role of the erhu in a complex cultural context.

Theoretical Framework

The Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework proposed in this paper aims to understand how the erhu acts as a mediator of cultural identity in the context of the integration of tradition, modernity, and globalization. This framework, by drawing on the theories of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Judith Butler, provides a new perspective to analyze that the cultural identity of Chinese music is not simply inherited or diluted, but constantly rebuilt in a dynamic process.

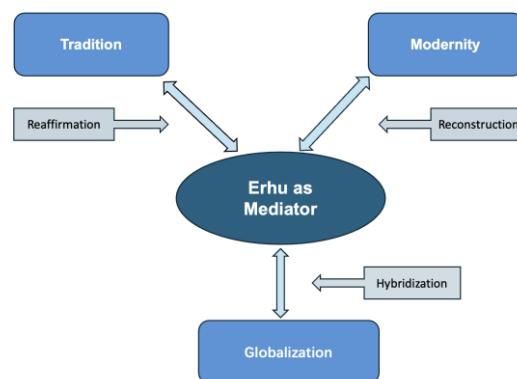


Figure 1. Author's lead sheet transcription of Nickelback's 'Rockstar'

Stuart Hall argued that cultural identity is like a product that is always in production but is never finished and will never be finished. Hall (1990) believed that identity is not static, but a process that is constantly influenced by history, culture, and power relations. In the case of the erhu, its identity is shaped by its traditional roots, but it has been constantly reinterpreted during the development of modern society. The erhu does not convey a rigid concept of "Chineseness"; rather, it redefines what it means to be Chinese in a globalized society.

The "Third space" proposed by Homi Bhabha further enriches this model, emphasizing the creativity that arises when different cultures encounter. Bhabha (1994) believes that the "Third space" is a place of cultural negotiation, and that different cultural elements merge in this space to produce a hybrid identity. When the erhu is played as a traditional Chinese instrument with Western instruments or non-traditional genres of music, a new hybrid identity emerges that transcends the simple dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In this case, it becomes a site where many cultures interact and create new meanings.

Butler's concept of performativity plays an important role in the erhu performance itself within the framework. Butler (1990) argues that identity is not defined by the person itself, but rather by the repetitive behavior (performativity) of a person in a cultural context. Take the erhu as an example: every player's performance is a generation of cultural identity. Every act of performing or playing a different genre of music in a different way, whether in a traditional or modern cultural context, is a performance act that redefines cultural identity.

In summary, by regarding the erhu as a site of cultural negotiation and the generation of cultural identity, we no longer see it as a static piece of traditional Chinese heritage, but as a positive factor in the constant redefinition of cultural identity in a complex cultural context.

Application and Discussion

This part places the Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework in two cases to illustrate the explanatory power of this model. By analyzing the Erhu's performance in global fusion music and its application in contemporary film scores, the paper explains how the erhu serves as a mediator for cultural negotiation to reconstruct cultural identity.

Erhu in Global Fusion Music

Young Chinese Erhu player Chen Yimiao performed with a jazz band during a concert at Berklee College of Music. The Erhu's traditional identity has been reinterpreted during jazz performance to suit a global audience. In addition, the performers skillfully integrated a piece of Chinese folk music into the performance of the jazz band to increase the musical tension during the performance. In this intermediary space where Eastern and Western music encounters, the players perform creative and interesting music without diluting either tradition. In this performance, the Erhu actively constructs a new, cross-cultural hybrid identity to show that its "Chineseness" is not static, but adaptive.

Erhu in Modern Film Scores

In the famous animated film *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), the music played by the Erhu is rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics to highlight deep emotions. Firstly, the tunes of Erhu music in the film scores connect elements of Chinese culture with international audiences, making the Erhu reaffirm its traditional Chinese identity. Secondly, the Erhu connects traditional Chinese cultural elements with the globalized cinematic narrative, thus forming a new hybrid space that is expected to resonate with global audiences. Finally, the erhu repeatedly performs "Chineseness" in the context of modern cinema through its unique timbre and playing techniques, reconstructing identity through each note.

Conclusion

The Erhu Cultural Mediation Framework provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding how the Erhu plays a mediator between tradition, modernity, and globalization. In the contemporary, complex cultural context, the identity of Erhu performance is no longer a static cultural heritage but is constantly redefined in each performance in different contexts. Instead of seeing tradition and modernity as opposing forces, this framework emphasizes the performing arts as a place of mediation where different cultural elements are brought together. Future research could use this framework to examine other traditional art forms from different regions and further explore how cultural identity is enacted and performed in a globalized world.

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Biography

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