

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION OF GUZHENG IN MALAYSIAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES: A SYSTEMATIC-INFORMED INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This study aims to systematically sort out the existing research results on the development of the guzheng in the Chinese society of Malaysia and respond to the current problem of insufficient theoretical integration in the construction of ethnic identity and the inheritance of music culture in this field. As a traditional musical instrument with both historical and cultural symbolism, the guzheng is not only a carrier of artistic practice in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia but also increasingly a medium for the expression of ethnic identity and cultural negotiation. Therefore, clarifying the dissemination path, educational mechanism, and social function of the guzheng in Malaysia is of great significance for understanding how overseas Chinese music can be continued and recreated in the local context.

This study employed a systematic-informed integration methodology (Toronto & Remington, 2020), which combines the transparency of systematic with the thematic induction of an integration. Eight representative studies were selected from the literature between 2000 and 2024 for analysis. The research content mainly revolves around four aspects: historical development, teaching practice, cultural identity, and intergenerational inheritance and interaction. The results show that the guzheng in Malaysia has gradually transformed from the early family inheritance to institutionalized teaching in schools and communities and has strengthened identity recognition and intergenerational cultural continuity in the Chinese community. However, most of the current related research focuses on the Chinese community and is mostly qualitative analysis, lacking in-depth discussion on the participation of other ethnic groups, the process of learner identity change, and localized teaching content.

This study not only outlines the overall knowledge landscape of guzheng research in Malaysia but also clearly points out that in the future, teaching experiments, questionnaires, and ethnic comparative studies can be used to promote the sustainable development of guzheng in any Southeast Asian society and expand the theoretical discussion space of ethnomusicology on culturality, cross-cultural communication, and formal educational practice.

Keywords

Malaysian guzheng, cultural identity, Chinese community, intergenerational inheritance, music transmission

INTRODUCTION

As one of the representative instruments of traditional Chinese music culture, the guzheng has gradually spread to Southeast Asia since the beginning of the 20th century with the migration of Chinese immigrants. In the Chinese community in Malaysia, the guzheng was mainly used in traditional rituals and festivals in the early days, such as the Yulan Festival of the Teochew community, the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations, and the sacrificial ceremonies of temples and ancestral halls (Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022; Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010). Literature records show that the guzheng initially

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played the role of accompaniment in these rituals and was not the focus of the musical performance (Zhai Yuan [翟源], 2013; Zhou Yun [周耘], 2000).

However, after entering the second half of the 20th century, the role of the guzheng in Malaysia has undergone a significant change, from traditional ritual music to an important part of community cultural activities and the formal education system. This improvement in status is mainly reflected in the fact that about 60 Chinese independent schools and many national secondary schools across the country have Chinese orchestras with guzheng sections, which have become the main platform for cultivating guzheng talents (Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022; The Guzheng Academy [马来西亚古筝学院], 2022). In addition, various music competitions in Malaysia (such as the various national and regional Chinese music competitions) have set up special guzheng categories, highlighting the core position of guzheng in local Chinese music education.

When exploring the development of the guzheng in the Malaysian Chinese community, several core concepts are particularly critical. Firstly, ‘cultural transmission’ refers to the process of cultural knowledge, skills, and values continuing between generations (Assmann, 2011). Secondly, ‘localization’ refers to the integration of foreign cultural elements with local culture and the gradual formation of new cultural characteristics. In addition, ‘cultural identity’ refers to the understanding and cognition of an individual or group of their own cultural background in social interaction and cultural practice. By clearly defining these terms, this chapter will establish a theoretical foundation for a deeper understanding of the cultural context of the Malaysian guzheng.

In recent years, although the study of Malaysian guzheng has gradually attracted academic attention, the existing research results are still very limited and fragmented. Some studies have initially focused on historical development, teaching practice, and cultural identity expression. For example, Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) explored the spread of the Chinese guzheng in Malaysia, and Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文] (2022) focused on the relationship between guzheng teaching practice and Chinese cultural heritage. In addition, related academic activities (such as the Malaysian Guzheng Art Festival, which has been held for many consecutive sessions) also provide opportunities for academic exchanges and discussions. However, most of these results are case studies or overview articles, lacking more in-depth theoretical analysis and systematic integration.

This lack of literature and dispersion has obviously limited an in-depth understanding of the status of the development of the Malaysian guzheng. Specifically, the current literature has not yet explored the following issues in depth: Has Malaysia formed a unique local guzheng performance style or repertoire? How are the differences in guzheng participation among different ethnic groups and genders reflected? What is the role of the guzheng in a multicultural society, especially how does it play a role in cross-ethnic music exchanges? The research gaps on these issues are mainly due to the lack of literature and data, which seriously restricts the ability to further research and cultural policy formulation.

In summary, the status of guzheng research in Malaysia can be summarized as having just started, and the results are sporadic but of great significance. Some existing studies have revealed the basic context and status of the development of the guzheng in Malaysia, such as education promotion, performance activities, and Chinese cultural significance. However, overall, these results have limited coverage, are independent of each other, and have not yet formed a systematic and in-depth research system. There are differences in research focus and viewpoints among the existing literature: some focus on music education practice, some focus on historical heritage narratives, and some emphasize cultural identity significance, each of which lacks dialogue. This scattered state not only makes the overall picture unclear but also leads to inconsistent conclusions or biased perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to sort out and compare the existing results and explore the connections and differences between them, find common points, and analyze contradictions. Clarifying such research status and problems in the introduction helps to highlight the research value of this article, that is, by integrating and commenting on existing literature, clarifying the development context of guzheng research in Malaysia, identifying the shortcomings of current research, and then pointing out the direction for subsequent in-depth research. Based on this, this paper will conduct a comprehensive review of the research results related to the Malaysian guzheng, sort out its context, evaluate its contributions and limitations, and lay the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

To address these questions, this study adopts a systematic-informed integration approach (Toronto & Remington, 2020), which combines the transparency of systematic with the thematic synthesis of an integration.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic-informed integration approach (Toronto & Remington, 2020). Unlike strict systematic reviews, which typically require comprehensive coverage of a large literature base, this study acknowledges the limited number of relevant articles on Malaysian guzheng research ($n = 8$). Therefore, this study is not a strict systematic review but rather a hybrid approach that combines the transparency and search standards of a systematic review with the thematic synthesis and critical analysis of an integration. This approach is particularly suitable for emerging fields with limited research but an urgent need for theoretical integration. It maintains methodological clarity and standardization while revealing research patterns, scholarly gaps, and theoretical implications within a limited literature base.

QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

Building on the integration methodology proposed by Toronto and Remington (2020), this study raises two main questions: (1) What is the status of Malaysian guzheng research? (2) What are the main limitations and shortcomings of existing research? By clarifying the above research questions, this review aims to systematically review and integrate the current relevant research results on Malaysian guzheng, identify the limitations and research gaps in the research, and provide clear directions and a basis for future research.

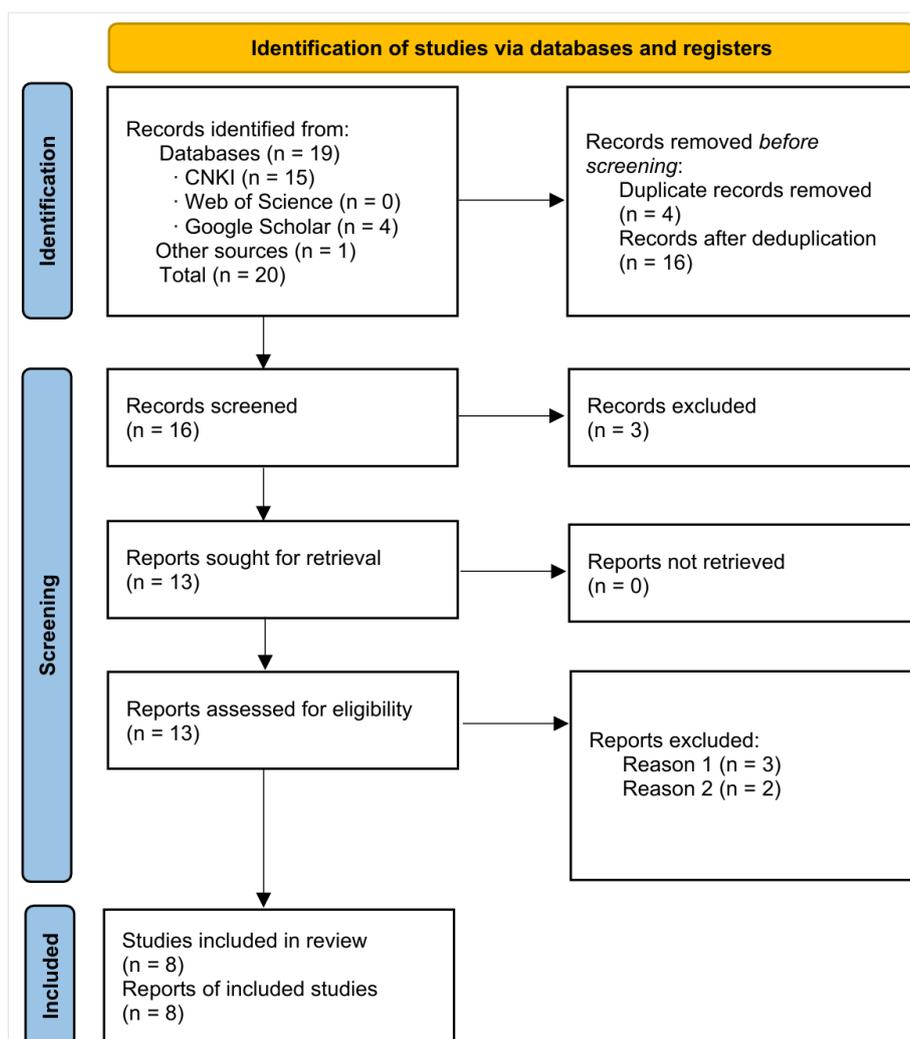


Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart of the literature screening process as drafted by the authors.

SYSTEMATICAL SEARCH AND SELECT LITERATURE

This study systematically selected three academic databases, namely, CNKI, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, for literature searches from 2000 to 2024. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the search, the search formula was used in the CNKI database: ‘guzheng AND (Malaysia OR Malaysian Chinese OR Cultural Identity OR Music Education OR Traditional Music OR Transmission)’; the search formula was used in the English databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar): ‘guzheng AND (Malaysia OR Malaysian Chinese OR Cultural Identity OR Music Education OR Traditional Music OR Transmission)’. The initial search yielded 20 records (CNKI: 15; Web of Science: 0; Google Scholar: 4; Other sources: 1). After removing 4 duplicates, 16 records remained. Following title and abstract screening, 3 records were excluded, leaving 13 for full-text assessment. Of these, 5 were further excluded (2 not related to the Malaysian guzheng and 3 lacking sufficient academic rigor). Ultimately, 8 studies were included in the review, consisting of peer-reviewed journal articles, master’s theses, doctoral theses, and one published book chapter. The inclusion of one published book chapter ensures that practice-oriented and contextual perspectives are also captured. The eight publications included in this study include journal articles, master's and doctoral dissertations, and a published book chapter to ensure the diversity and completeness of the data.

The detailed process of literature search and screening is shown in the PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1). Figure 1 clearly shows the entire screening process of literature from initial identification to final inclusion in the review.

QUALITY APPRAISAL

Considering the limited number of included research literature, this analysis did not use formal quality assessment tools such as CASP or Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) but instead used a narrative quality assessment method based on the recommendations of Toronto and Remington (2020). Each literature was recorded and evaluated in detail from the aspects of the suitability of the research design, the rigor of the methodology, the reliability of the data source, and the depth of the theoretical framework, and these factors were comprehensively considered during the analysis process to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

DATA ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS METHOD

In the data analysis and synthesis stage, the data used the constant comparison method for systematic thematic analysis and synthesis. The specific analysis process includes data reduction, data display, data comparison, and conclusion drawing and verification. This study uses a systematic literature data extraction and matrix analysis method to construct a multi-dimensional research comparison framework, which not only achieves a structured combining and comparison of existing literature but also reveals the heterogeneity of different studies in three dimensions: theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches, and empirical findings. This analytical framework significantly improves the systematicity and analytical rigor of the literature review and provides a replicable analytical methodology for subsequent research.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EXISTING STUDIES

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSMISSION

The development and spread of the guzheng in Malaysia are deeply influenced by the history of Chinese immigration. It is a typical case of the continuation and transformation of traditional Chinese guzheng music overseas. Among the eight included documents, at least four systematically involve the historical path and dissemination mechanism of the guzheng in Malaysia (Wang Xiyong [王惜盈], 2016; Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010; Zhai Yuan [翟源], 2013; Ren Yanran [任嫣蓓], 2024), which together depict the dissemination trajectory from ‘ethnic cultural transplantation’ to ‘local cultural rooting’.

Wang Xiyong [王惜盈] (2016) systematically sorted out the development of traditional Chinese guzheng music in Malaysia from the perspective of cultural communication and music sociology by combining literature analysis with field interviews. The study pointed out that before the 1950s, the guzheng was still rare in Malaysia and was mainly passed on in a small range through early Chinese clan associations, Teochew opera performances, or private school-style education; after entering the 1970s, with the gradual establishment of the Malaysian Chinese education system and the rise of Chinese music groups, the guzheng began to enter the public education system through primary and secondary schools, music centers, and other institutions, and its dissemination showed institutional and collective characteristics.

The study emphasized that ‘ritual dissemination based on group cultural identity’ was the key mechanism for the dissemination of early guzheng music (Wang Xiyong [王惜盈], 2016). However, the study also pointed out that there is currently a lack of detailed records of the specific roles played by early individual disseminators (such as folk artists and traveling guzheng players), which is still a gap in dissemination research.

Zhang Yunxiang’s [张云翔] (2010) master’s thesis used qualitative interviews and participant observation as methods and, from the perspective of music anthropology, traced the actual path of guzheng dissemination in Malaysian Chinese society. The study analyzes in detail the process of the guzheng’s gradual shift from ‘family-style private transmission’ to ‘systematic education in music colleges’ around the 1980s and reveals the interactive relationship between the three-layer communication mechanism of ‘master-apprentice relationship-group performance-social performance’ by visiting local performers, teachers, and guzheng groups. Zhang emphasized that although the structure of guzheng communication is constantly modernizing, the ‘blurring of school consciousness’ and ‘localization of traditional repertoire’ have also led to the gradual convergence of Malaysian guzheng’s appearance with China’s modern teaching system, weakening the original local differences (Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010). This view reveals the tension between ‘standardization’ and ‘locality’ in communication, which is a very valuable perspective in the study of Malaysian guzheng communication.

Zhai Yuan [翟源] (2013) put forward the three characteristics of guzheng in Malaysia in the form of a brief review: ‘unclear starting point of communication, fragmented path, and explicit results’. The article argues that although the frequent guzheng competitions, grading examinations and performances in recent years, have increased the ‘visibility’ of the guzheng, the compilation and genealogy of its early historical documents are still lagging behind (Zhai Yuan [翟源], 2013). Although the article is limited in length and does not provide empirical support in terms of methodology, it raises an important issue, namely, the lack of systematic construction of the literature level in the spread of the guzheng in Malaysia, which affects the cognition and narrative of its historical continuity.

Furthermore, Liu Haitao’s [刘海涛] (2022) research, through a case study, focuses on the artistic career of Malaysian zheng master Louis Chen. Louis Chen was not only the first representative figure to systematically promote Teochew zheng music in Malaysia, but his teaching and performance activities spanned China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau, Europe, and the United States, profoundly influencing the establishment of Chinese music education and its international dissemination. This research emphasizes the irreplaceable role of individual communicators in early transmission, providing concrete support for the macro-transmission process ‘from transplantation to localization’ (Liu Haitao [刘海涛], 2022).

In addition, Ren Yanran [任嫣苒] (2024) emphasized the ‘re-localization’ characteristics of the guzheng in Kuala Lumpur and Penang in her doctoral dissertation based on cultural geography and identity theory. She pointed out that guzheng music has transformed from the original ‘nostalgic instrument’ to a representative symbol of cultural vitality in the Chinese community and has assumed different cultural functions in different generations (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024). Through interviews with guzheng instructors and students in many primary and secondary schools in Penang, she further proposed that the three-dimensional structure of ‘space-generation-function’ helps to understand the dynamic mechanism of guzheng dissemination. This research perspective goes beyond the linear description of time and provides a richer spatial social analysis framework for the study of guzheng dissemination.

In summary, the development of Malaysian guzheng can be summarized into four stages: the initial ‘ritual input period’ (before the 1950s), the community-based ‘folk cultivation period’ (1970s–1980s), the ‘institutional expansion period’ of the school/examination system (1990s–2010s), and the current ‘local identity construction period’ for cross-cultural dissemination (2010s to present). Each study has a different focus in revealing the dissemination path: Wang Xiyong [王惜盈] focuses on the cultural identity driving mechanism, Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] focuses on teacher inheritance and institutional transformation, Ren Yanran [任嫣苒] emphasizes space and community interaction, and Zhai Yuan [翟源] calls for the systematic construction of dissemination historical materials. Liu Haitao [刘海涛] highlighted the important role of individual communicators through the case of Louis Chen. Although the existing literature is diverse and complementary, it still lacks in-depth exploration and genealogical reconstruction of early dissemination nodes (such as traveling guzheng players and Nanyang scholars), and the guzheng acceptance path of non-Han communities is rarely involved. These constitute the current shortcomings and future development potential of this topic.

PERFORMANCE AND TRANSMISSION

The performance and teaching practice of guzheng in Malaysia presents a dual development trajectory: on the one hand, it converges with the modern teaching system of mainland China in terms of professionalization and institutionalization, and on the other hand, it also reflects the diverse explorations of local educational institutions and individual teachers in teaching methods, local teaching materials, and student participation. Among the 8 included documents, 5 explicitly involve the teaching environment, curriculum setting, grading system, performance style, and education model of guzheng in Malaysia (Liang Yibin [梁毅彬], 2015; Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022; Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010; Wang Xiyong [王惜盈], 2016; Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024), providing rich first-hand investigation and field observation data.

Liang Yibin’s [梁毅彬] (2015) master’s thesis is one of the most systematic large-scale empirical studies at present. The author used a combination of questionnaire surveys, case interviews, and market analysis to investigate the distribution of guzheng teachers, student sources, teaching models, and market supply and demand in the Chinese region of Malaysia. Research shows that guzheng teaching in Malaysia is mainly concentrated in urban Chinese communities, such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru, and teaching institutions are mainly private music schools, community centers, and cram schools (Liang Yibin [梁毅彬], 2015). In terms of teaching content, more than 90% of teachers use guzheng grading textbooks published in mainland China (such as the China Conservatory of Music and the Central Conservatory of Music series), but teaching methods are highly diverse, including one-on-one teaching, group practice, workshop mode, etc. In addition, the study also pointed out that some teachers tend to teach ‘by rote’ due to limited resources, that is, teaching according to the progress of the textbook, ignoring the differences in students’ interests and abilities, resulting in students’ lack of performance, initiative, and musical expression. The study finally suggested the establishment of a localized guzheng education certification system to reduce the bottleneck of teachers’ professional development and the problem of uneven teaching quality.

Mok Vivien’s (2019) study further focused on the revival of the guzheng ensemble in the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor regions of Malaysia. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participatory observation, the study summarized five thematic dimensions of the ensemble revival: motivation and vision, historical reinterpretation, authenticity, dissemination methods, and reconstruction and innovation. Mok Vivien pointed out that ensemble teaching not only enables guzheng to shift from individual teaching to group learning mode but also provides an important platform for cultural revival and community cohesion. She emphasized that ensemble practice is both a form of educational innovation and a process of cultural reconstruction, which enriches the spectrum of guzheng teaching models and breaks through the previous binary opposition of ‘examination-oriented’ and ‘master-apprentice inheritance’.

Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) focused more on the field observation of ‘teacher–student relationship structure’ and ‘teaching process’. Through in-depth interviews with several senior local guzheng teachers and their students in Malaysia, Zhang pointed out that guzheng teaching in Malaysia is currently in a state of ‘intersection of two modes’: on the one hand, it continues the ‘traditional master-apprentice teaching’ and focuses on individual guidance and emotional integration; on the other hand,

it transitions to ‘hierarchical and institutionalized’ academic teaching, focusing on skill standards and performance results (Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010). The author specifically pointed out that although the grading system has promoted the popularization of the guzheng, it has also brought about the problem of ‘single performance purpose’—some students ignore music understanding and artistic expression to cope with exams. Zhang called for paying attention to the ‘cultural context behind the performance’ in teaching and improving the theoretical training of local teachers on music aesthetics and teaching strategies.

In Liang Yibin’s [梁毅彬] (2015) study, the in-depth analysis of teachers’ perspectives and teaching concepts was further supplemented. Through interviews with teachers from three independent secondary schools and four music education centers in Malaysia, this paper reveals that teachers generally face problems such as insufficient structuring of teaching content, uneven musical foundations of students, and misalignment of cultural context of teaching materials ((Liang Yibin [梁毅彬], 2015). The concept of ‘culturally adaptive teaching’ is proposed in the paper, which encourages teachers to adjust teaching strategies according to the language background and cultural cognition of local Malaysian students, such as improving teaching affinity through Malay folk song adaptation exercises and introducing life-oriented theme repertoires. This study particularly emphasizes the role of teachers as ‘cultural intermediaries’ in cross-cultural teaching environments, that is, they need to impart Chinese traditional culture and understand students’ identity construction in the Malaysian context. This study has a broad perspective and provides an important reference for the localization of guzheng teaching.

Wang Xiyong [王惜盈] (2016) placed guzheng teaching in the larger context of ‘public cultural participation’, arguing that guzheng teaching in Malaysia is not limited to the classroom but is gradually integrated into school clubs, art festival performances, community cultural promotion, and other scenes, forming a ‘music-education-community’ trinity communication ecology (Wang Xiyong [王惜盈], 2016). The article mentioned that many secondary school Chinese orchestras have listed the guzheng as a permanent part, and some schools have also carried out guzheng ensemble and duet competitions and local tours, further expanding students’ learning space. However, the author also pointed out that the current guzheng teaching activities are often dependent on the individual ability of teachers and resource allocation, lacking institutional support and policy promotion. For example, some non-Chinese schools have a wait-and-see attitude toward setting up guzheng courses, which restricts the ethnic diffusion of guzheng teaching.

Ren Yanran’s [任嫣苒] (2024) doctoral dissertation provides us with an analytical framework of ‘teaching ecology’ in a macro context. After conducting field research in many music institutions in Penang and Selangor, she pointed out that guzheng teaching in Malaysia has a triple tension of ‘institutional adaptation-teacher autonomy-student identity’ (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024). That is, teaching activities are not only subject to the curriculum and examination requirements of the school or institution but also rely on the teacher’s teaching strategy selection and personal expression. They are also affected by the students’ emotional projection of cultural identity and interest maintenance. Ren specifically pointed out that if the students’ ‘emotional connection mechanism’ is ignored, it is difficult to form a deep cultural identity even with standardized teaching processes. This analysis provides a multi-layer structural perspective for understanding the effectiveness of guzheng teaching.

Based on the above research, it can be seen that guzheng teaching in Malaysia presents the following characteristics:

1. The teaching system is highly dependent on the Chinese model in terms of system, and the teaching materials and grading system are mainly based on the mainland standard.
2. The teaching mode is diverse, ranging from one-to-one to ensemble groups, from private teaching to school courses.
3. The teacher has multiple roles, both as a performer and as a cultural transmitter.
4. The teaching concept is shifting from ‘technique-oriented’ to ‘cultural cognition-oriented’.

However, there are also many challenges: the professional development path of teachers is unclear; the teaching content lacks local cultural integration; students’ learning motivation is easily affected by exams; there is a lack of multilingual or multi-ethnic teaching experiments; and there is insufficient policy support and a systematic evaluation mechanism.

From an integrated perspective, the research under this theme provides multi-dimensional insights from practice to concept, from individuals to systems, and from teaching behavior to cultural implications, but it is still weak in the construction of localized teaching materials, the development of teaching evaluation tools, and the empirical research on the impact of ethnic cultural differences on teaching. Future research should combine cultural studies with educational theory to explore the dynamic relationship between ‘cultural understanding-skill training-identity formation’ in teaching interaction. Although the research is diverse, there is still a lack of quantitative surveys and cross-ethnic teaching cases, and mixed methods research should be combined in the future.

CULTURALITY AND GUZHENG PRACTICE

In the context of Malaysia’s diverse ethnic groups and historical immigration, the guzheng not only exists as a traditional Chinese musical instrument in performance practice but also is endowed with profound cultural identity and symbolic significance. Through playing and learning the guzheng, the Chinese community constantly constructs and reconfirms their ethnic belonging and cultural memory, forming an interactive relationship between music and identity. This section integrates the relevant research results on the guzheng and Chinese cultural identity in 8 papers, focusing on its functions and dilemmas in ethnic consciousness, identity construction, and cross-cultural expression. The structure follows the logic of ‘commonality extraction-difference analysis-theoretical sublimation’ in the integrated literature review.

In terms of research methods, most scholars adopt the qualitative research paradigm of field investigation (interview, observation) + literature analysis. Among them, Wang Xiying [王惜盈] (2016) proposed from the perspective of cultural sociology that the guzheng is an important symbolic instrument for the cultural heritage of the Malaysian Chinese community. She pointed out that guzheng performances frequently appear in the fields of strengthening ethnic symbols such as New Year celebrations, National Day performances, and inter-school art festivals. Its function has gone beyond the aesthetic level and has become a cultural means of symbolizing Chinese identity (Wang Xiying [王惜盈], 2016). This study emphasizes that the guzheng carries the dual symbols of ‘collective memory’ and ‘ritual performance’ and builds cultural continuity between generations. However, this study did not further examine the cultural identity transformation mechanism of individual learners, and the discussion on students’ subjective cognition was relatively weak.

Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) analyzed guzheng learners’ understanding of ‘Chinese identity’ in daily teaching and performance practices through in-depth interviews and classroom observations. His research found that some young students established a ‘confirmed sense of cultural belonging’ through learning guzheng, especially gaining ‘cultural pride’ and a ‘sense of intergenerational continuity’ in the performances of the school’s Chinese orchestra. Zhang proposed that ‘...guzheng practice is not only a skill inheritance but also a cultural interpretation’, and he also revealed the constraints of instrumental learning on identity transformation: many students only regard guzheng as an ‘exam item’ or ‘a bonus item for admission’ and lack an understanding of its cultural origin (Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010). This challenges the effectiveness of the guzheng’s identity function in the educational field, suggesting that researchers need to pay attention to the tension between learners’ intrinsic motivation and cultural explanatory power.

Cai Yuwen’s [蔡宇文] (2022) research further expanded the mediating role of ‘teacher cultural awareness’ in identity construction. Through interviews with guzheng teachers, she pointed out that most local guzheng teachers in Malaysia have the consciousness of ‘cultural ambassadors’ and will guide students to understand the connotation of Chinese traditional culture in the teaching process, such as by explaining the background of the work, introducing the composer, or associating festival customs to enhance students’ cultural cognition (Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022). However, teachers’ cultural interpretation ability is closely related to their own training background. Teachers who have received higher music education or have visited China tend to focus on cultural teaching, while teachers who are only ‘skill-oriented’ often ignore cultural interpretation. This study provides a clear path to understanding the role of ‘teacher factors’ in the formation of cultural identity and also proposes that the teacher training system should include cultural content and teaching ethics modules.

Ren Yanran [任嫣苒] (2024) proposed the concept of ‘cultural soundscape’ in her doctoral research and examined the relationship between guzheng performance and cultural identity in the context of urban multiculturalism. Through observations of multiple venues in Kuala Lumpur and Penang (school halls, civic squares, and community halls), she found that guzheng performances often occur in the three-way structure of ‘festival-performance-ethnic cohesion’, which is a two-way expression of ‘external display-internal unity’ (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024). She emphasized that in the context of a multi-ethnic country, the guzheng is not only a tool for Malaysian Chinese to confirm their own cultural identity but also a ‘voice action’ for cultural negotiation and existence struggle with the mainstream society. This analysis helps to break through the one-way perspective of ‘guzheng = Chinese internal culture’ and prompts us to understand its strategic cultural role in a multiethnic country.

In the data integration analysis, we found that the above research presents two levels of cultural identity mechanisms:

1. The first level is the construction of ‘internal ethnic identity’: learning and playing guzheng becomes a symbolic practice for individuals to confirm that ‘I am Chinese’. This identity is repeated and solidified through music courses, festival performances, community organizations, and other scenes.
2. The second level is the construction of ‘external cultural expression’: the guzheng also enters official celebrations, cross-ethnic performances, international exchanges, and other platforms as a ‘bridge to showcase Chinese culture’, becoming a medium for identity negotiation.

This two-layer structure of the identity model has been confirmed by case studies such as Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) and Wang Xiying [王惜盈](2016) and has also been theoretically sublimated in Ren Yanran’s [任嫣苒] (2024) urban cultural analysis. To visually synthesize the hierarchical structure of cultural identity in the practice of Malaysian guzheng, Table 1 summarizes the two main mechanisms and their theoretical support in related studies.

Level of Identity	Manifestations	Supporting Studies/Data Sources	Analytical Focus
Internal Ethnic Identity	Affirmation of ‘I am Chinese’ through guzheng learning Reinforced through school ensembles and community events	Zhang Yunxiang (2010) Wang Xiying (2016) Cai Yuwen (2022)	Personal cultural affiliation and symbolic daily practice
External Cultural Representation	Participation in national celebrations and Malaysia–China exchanges The guzheng as a visible marker of Chinese culture	Ren Yanran (2024) Wang Xiying (2016)	Strategic display of identity and intercultural communication

Figure 2: Table showing dual-level identity mechanisms in Malaysian guzheng practice and supporting literature.

However, the above studies still have several common blind spots:

1. Lack of multi-ethnic audience perspective: most of the current literature starts from Chinese learners and lacks empirical data on the cognition and acceptance of the guzheng by non-Chinese groups such as Malays and Indians.
2. Insufficient dynamic tracking of student identity changes: few studies have longitudinally tracked the changes in cultural attitudes of guzheng learners over a long period of time.
3. Absence of gender dimension analysis: it has not yet involved the emotional differences and expressions that may exist between male and female learners in the construction of cultural identity.

In summary, existing studies have well explained the cultural identity function of the guzheng in the Malaysian Chinese society, but to further deepen this issue, it is necessary to introduce a wider audience perspective, time dimension, and social variables so that our understanding of ‘how guzheng practice constructs cultural identity’ can move from local experience to a systematic analysis across groups and across time and space. Figure 2 illustrates the dual-level identity construction model derived from the reviewed studies, along with the three identified research gaps that inform future inquiry.

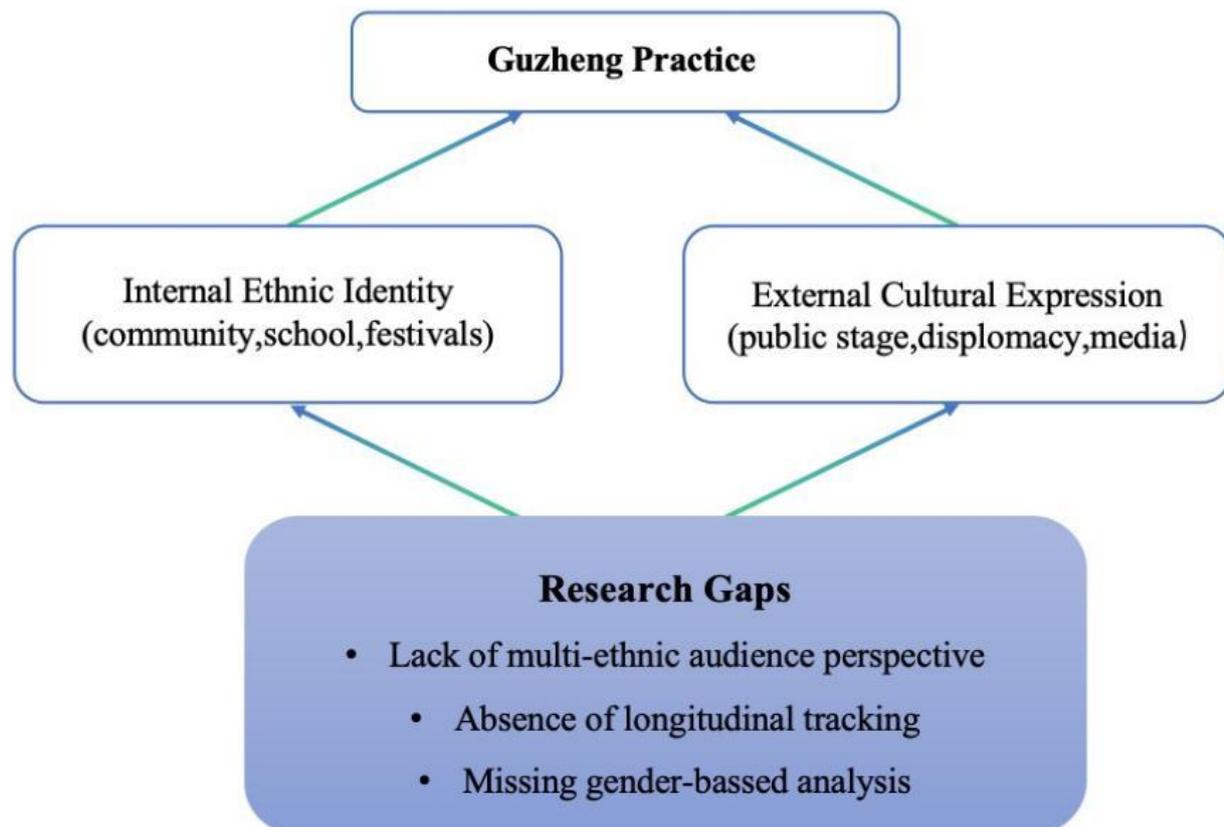


Figure 3: Dual identity framework in Malaysian guzheng practice as depicted by the authors.

SECTION SYNTHESIS AND FORWARD LINKAGE

Through the integrated analysis of existing literature, guzheng is not only a musical practice in Malaysia but also the core medium of a set of constructive cultural identity mechanisms. Current research shows that this identity construction has a two-layer structure: on the one hand, guzheng, as a cultural symbol within the ethnic group, repeatedly appears in school clubs, festival performances, and community activities, strengthening the collective sense of belonging of ‘I am Chinese’; on the other hand, it is also widely used in national celebrations, cross-cultural exchanges, and other occasions, becoming an important tool for Malaysian Chinese to express their cultural identity to the outside world. The above research reveals the close connection between ‘cultural practice-identity construction’ and provides a solid theoretical basis for understanding how music serves cultural reproduction.

However, existing research still has obvious deficiencies in terms of group scope, time span, and social dimensions; most of the literature focuses on Chinese learners, ignoring the cultural contact and acceptance paths of ethnic groups such as Malay and Indian; the change trajectory of individual cultural identity lacks longitudinal tracking; and the impact of variables such as gender and social class on identity formation is rarely discussed. Therefore, future research urgently needs to introduce a more cross-cutting and comparative research perspective to explore in depth how guzheng practice dynamically generates and negotiates cultural identity in Malaysia's multicultural society.

On this basis, we should also pay further attention to the transmission path and dissemination mechanism of cultural identity, especially how different generations can continue, transform, and even recreate their ethnic identity and cultural expression through guzheng practice. How do generations interact? How does the guzheng transcend generational and ethnic boundaries to become a cultural bond? This is the core topic that the next section will explore in depth.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AND INTERACTION

The survival and development of the guzheng in Malaysia depend not only on its symbolic meaning and educational dissemination path within the Chinese society but also on how it completes cultural reproduction between different generations, as well as the process of cultural interaction, boundary negotiation, and value reconstruction in a multi-ethnic environment. This section integrates the empirical and theoretical research results of 8 papers on ‘how the guzheng is passed down from generation to generation’ and ‘how it is spread among ethnic groups’, focusing on its intertwined mechanisms at the institutional, individual, and cultural levels, analyzing the empirical facts and research blind spots revealed by existing studies, and proposing future research directions.

FROM PRIVATE SCHOOL-STYLE CONTINUATION TO ORGANIZED REPRODUCTION

In a systematic study of the historical context of guzheng education in Malaysia (Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010; Wang Xiying [王惜盈], 2016; Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022), it is pointed out that guzheng has experienced a migration path from ‘family-community-school’ in intergenerational inheritance. Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) traced the growth path and teaching experience of guzheng teachers and found that the first generation of guzheng players were mostly self-taught or privately taught traditional skills, relying on ‘non-institutionalized interpersonal networks’; after entering the 21st century, guzheng inheritance turned to the ‘organized mechanism’ of school courses, music centers, and art festival platforms, and the continuation between generations was gradually institutionalized (Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔], 2010). This evolution not only changed the way of skill transmission but also changed the composition of knowledge discourse power—from ‘elderly experience’ to ‘professional teacher certification’.

Wang Xiying [王惜盈] (2016) specifically pointed out that many Chinese families maintain their cultural memory by encouraging their children to learn guzheng and regard ‘learning guzheng’ as a symbolic act of cultural inheritance. Through field observations, she found that in middle school Chinese orchestras and community cultural centers, ‘mother-daughter co-performance’ and ‘master-apprentice ensemble’ have become common phenomena, forming a three-layer inheritance network of family-school-community (Wang Xiying [王惜盈], 2016). She emphasized that this model not only reflects the vertical continuation of culture but also shows that cultural inheritance is a ‘socialized structure’ that is far beyond the scope of individual learning behavior.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEANING AND THE TENSION OF INHERITANCE

Ren Yanran [任嫣苒] (2024) pointed out in his field interviews with guzheng learners of different ages in Penang and Selangor that there are significant differences in the cultural significance of the guzheng between generations. The older generation often regards the guzheng as a continuation of emotional memory and hometown identity, and their learning motivation is mostly related to the emotional connection with traditional Chinese culture, while the new generation of learners emphasizes the artistic expression and personal expression value of the guzheng and regards it as a medium for skill training or stage performance (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024). Ren called this phenomenon ‘intergenerational migration of cultural soundscapes’, pointing out that the guzheng has been transformed from a symbolic tradition to a cultural tool with personalized and generational expression in contemporary Malaysia.

Cai Yuwen’s [蔡宇文] (2022) research further revealed the connection between intergenerational cultural identity differences and teachers’ teaching concepts. She found that the older generation of

guzheng teachers tend to emphasize the complete reproduction of traditional repertoires and attach importance to the ‘orthodoxy’ and cultural purity of skills; in contrast, young teachers’ pay more attention to teaching interaction and localized content integration and try to stimulate students’ interest and identity by adapting local nursery rhymes or introducing contemporary performance elements (Cai Yuwen [蔡宇文], 2022). This intergenerational understanding of ‘cultural reproduction’ and ‘cultural reconstruction’ reflects the cultural tension that is prevalent in guzheng teaching practice: on the one hand, it is the insistence on traditional purity, and on the other hand, it is the exploration of cultural adaptation and ethnic communication.

This kind of intergenerational cultural cognitive difference not only affects the choice of guzheng teaching methods but also profoundly shapes the new generation of learners’ understanding and identification of the cultural identity carried by the guzheng.

THE REALISTIC DILEMMA OF CROSS-ETHNIC COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL INTERACTION

In existing research, except for some cases of non-Chinese learners mentioned by Ren Yanran [任嫣苒] (2024), most of the literature still focuses on the Chinese community and rarely pays attention to the cross-cultural interaction model of guzheng in the diverse society of Malaysia. In an interview with middle school students on cultural identity, Ren mentioned that there are very few Malay or Indian students learning guzheng in Chinese schools, but due to language barriers in teaching materials, cultural barriers in repertoires, and insufficient recognition from parents, they often find it difficult to ‘stay’ in the regular teaching system (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024).

Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024) also observed in her research that although some middle schools have tried to open ‘open ethnic’ guzheng interest classes, there are very few non-Chinese students who really persist in the long term. She believes that the limited cross-ethnic communication of guzheng is not only due to cultural differences themselves but also the result of the joint effect of the education system, teaching materials compilation, and ethnic differentiation policies (Ren Yanran [任嫣苒], 2024). The existing guzheng teaching system generally lacks a ‘cultural translation mechanism’, such as the lack of Malay/English auxiliary teaching materials, teachers’ insufficient understanding of multiculturalism, and the lack of repertoire creation for ethnic integration, which all hinder the guzheng from becoming a truly ‘cross-ethnic cultural symbol’.

Zhang Yunxiang [张云翔] (2010) pointed out that the ‘public visibility’ of the guzheng in Malaysia has indeed increased, and it often appears in national festivals, international performances, and other occasions, but it is still mostly dominated by Chinese students/performers, and the ‘cultural dialogue’ between ethnic groups has not been truly realized. He called for the promotion of multilingual teaching experiments and ethnic co-performance projects at the institutional level and the strengthening of cultural adaptability training to enhance the dissemination tension of the guzheng in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia.

DATA INTEGRATION AND RESEARCH GAP IDENTIFICATION

Through the integration of the above studies, it can be found that the intergenerational inheritance mechanism of guzheng in Malaysia presents the following three structures:

Dimension	Key characteristics and trends	Supporting literature
Transmission structure	Shift from informal private teaching to institutional transmission via schools and communities; formation of a three-tier network involving family, school, and community.	Zhang Yunxiang (2010); Wang Xiyang (2016)

Intergenerational differences	The older generation emphasizes faithful reproduction of tradition, while the younger generation focuses on personal expression and performance aesthetics.	Ren Yanran (2024); Cai Yuwen (2022)
Barriers to cross-ethnic interaction	Transmission remains largely within Chinese communities due to a lack of strategies for interethnic inclusion and mechanisms for cultural translation.	Ren Yanran (2024); Wang Xiying (2016)

Figure 4: Table showing structural dimensions of guzheng transmission and cultural interaction in Malaysia.

Although the above studies provide important materials for understanding the intergenerational transmission of guzheng in Malaysia, there are still three deficiencies in the current research:

1. Lack of systematic observation of informal inheritance mechanisms (such as learning within the family and non-institutional interaction between teachers and apprentices).
2. Lack of longitudinal tracking research on the identity changes of performers from childhood to youth to adulthood.
3. Lack of empirical verification and case comparison on how the guzheng can become a ‘bridge for cross-ethnic communication’.

Existing studies have shown that guzheng in Malaysia can achieve intergenerational inheritance and cultural continuity through three mechanisms: ‘structural reproduction’, ‘intergenerational adaptation’, and ‘cultural negotiation’. It not only undertakes the maintenance function of ‘cultural memory’ in families and schools but also forms the tension of identity construction and value reconstruction between different generations. However, if guzheng is to truly become a cross-generational and cross-ethnic cultural carrier, it is necessary to break through the current limitations of ‘internal circulation of ethnic groups’ and establish a more open education system, more inclusive teaching content, and more culturally adaptable communication paths.

Future research should focus on the following directions: firstly, conduct micro-narrative research on the role of family and informal networks in inheritance; secondly, conduct follow-up case studies to observe the dynamic evolution of cultural identity in the life course of learners; and thirdly, explore how to promote guzheng to become a cultural exchange medium among multiple ethnic groups through policies, courses, and performance mechanisms. This will not only help promote cultural integration in Malaysia but also provide strong local experience support for the cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese music.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

COMPREHENSIVE SUMMARY: KNOWLEDGE LANDSCAPE OF GUZHENG RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA

Through the systematic integration of 8 core research documents from 2000 to date, this study reveals the main achievements of guzheng research in Malaysia under four themes: historical development, performance teaching, cultural identity, and intergenerational inheritance. Existing research generally affirms the role of the guzheng in maintaining cultural memory, confirming ethnic identity, and popularizing art education in the Chinese community in Malaysia, and shows the following characteristic trends:

1. As a symbolic carrier of Chinese immigrant culture, the guzheng’s dissemination path has undergone a transformation from private school-style oral transmission to institutionalized teaching.#
2. Guzheng teaching models are becoming increasingly diverse, covering private education, schools, and community channels, but are still mainly based on mainland China’s textbooks and grading systems, with problems of insufficient localization and innovative exploration.

3. Guzheng plays a dual role in the construction of cultural identity: it is not only a symbolic tool to strengthen the sense of belonging within the ethnic group but also an important means for Malaysian Chinese to express their culture and negotiate their identity with the outside world.
4. There are obvious differences between generations in the understanding of the meaning of guzheng and the teaching philosophy, reflecting the tension between cultural inheritance and cultural reconstruction. At the same time, the actual results of cross-ethnic communication are still relatively limited.

From an integrative perspective, these studies have initially constructed an analytical path of ‘Guzheng as ethnic music practice—educational practice—cultural identity—intergenerational inheritance’, providing a solid foundation for understanding the functions and changes of traditional musical instruments in overseas Chinese societies.

THEORETICAL ENLIGHTENMENT AND PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

From a theoretical perspective, this review helps to deepen the understanding of the interactive relationship between music, cultural identity, and social practice. The function of the guzheng in Malaysia has long surpassed its performance attribute as a musical instrument and has become an important medium for carrying ethnic memory, expressing cultural identity, and intervening in social public space. The two-layer mechanism of ‘internal ethnic identity construction’ and ‘external cultural expression’ sorted out in this chapter not only reveals the symbolic function of traditional music in immigrant communities but also provides a new theoretical connection point and interdisciplinary dialogue platform for Chinese music research, cross-cultural identity theory, and ethnic culture research.

From the perspective of education and cultural policy practice, the current guzheng teaching in Malaysia faces the following key challenges: firstly, the teacher training system lacks professional support at the cultural level, resulting in an imbalance between technology-oriented and cultural-oriented teaching practices; secondly, teaching materials and teaching resources are overly dependent on external input, lacking local original content and ethnic adaptation design; thirdly, the cross-ethnic promotion mechanism is insufficient, making it difficult to form a ‘cultural exchange platform with guzheng as the medium’.

Therefore, in future policymaking and teaching reform, we need to pay attention to the cultural communication function of the guzheng, not just its educational value as a technical subject. We can stimulate the potential of guzheng’s shared identity in a diverse society through the development of multilingual teaching materials, multiethnic cooperative performances, and ethnic cultural integration programs.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

Combined with the above analysis, future research on the development of guzheng in Malaysia urgently needs to draw problem awareness from real teaching situations and cross-cultural communication environments, focus on the three core issues of ‘who is learning guzheng’, ‘how to learn’, and ‘how to spread better’ and explore local and operational research paths.

Firstly, it is recommended to conduct structured questionnaires and interviews in existing Chinese secondary schools and community music education centers to investigate the relationship between students’ guzheng learning motivation, persistence, and cultural identity. Such empirical data will help to establish a student participation path model and identify the key factors that affect the stability of guzheng learning in different regions and family backgrounds. Secondly, the research can cooperate with frontline teachers to conduct small-scale intervention experiments at the teaching site, try to combine traditional Chinese guzheng music with local melodies (such as Malay folk songs and festival songs), analyze their impact on students’ learning interest and cultural acceptance, and promote the development and evaluation of localized teaching content.

At the same time, research on teachers should not be ignored. By interviewing guzheng teachers with multi-ethnic teaching experience, we can gain an in-depth understanding of their practical difficulties and strategies in teaching language, teaching material adaptation, and cultural interpretation, and then

propose targeted teaching support plans. Finally, it is recommended to systematically track the differences in the acceptance reactions and cultural understanding of guzheng performances by audiences of different generations and ethnic groups in various campus music festivals and community performances and compare the cultural communication effectiveness of traditional music and local adaptations to evaluate the practical potential of the guzheng as a cross-cultural communication medium.

The above research directions can all be carried out based on existing educational institutions and community platforms, with high practical implementation, which will help promote the Malaysian guzheng research from ‘theoretical interpretation’ to ‘empirical intervention’ and further respond to the social needs of cultural integration and ethnic communication.

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