

The Impact of Overseas Competitions in Chinese Traditional Instrumental Music on the Development of the Global Musical Landscape

Jiang Yang^{1, a*}

1. Central Conservatory of Music Central Conservatory of Music No. 43, Baojia Street, Xicheng District Beijing, China 100031

a. musicjiangy@163.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: Within the context of accelerating globalization, overseas competitions have increasingly served as a mechanism for the international circulation of Chinese traditional instrumental music. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative observation of multiple international competitions since 2006, this study explores how competition-based platforms may relate to audience diversification, non-Chinese participation, and institutional embedding within global music ecologies. The findings suggest that such competitions extend beyond performance, operating as cultural infrastructures that support learner engagement, pedagogical development, and intercultural dialogue. Through converging organizational practices from Chinese and Western traditions, these platforms facilitate standardized training frameworks, enhance international visibility, and contribute to the growth of learning communities. The analysis also notes structural challenges, including financial precarity, logistical complexity, and variability in adjudication criteria. It outlines possible responses involving diversified funding models, coordinated organizational mechanisms, and complementary educational initiatives. Overall, overseas competitions may contribute to ongoing processes of globalization in Chinese traditional instrumental music and offer perspectives on positioning non-Western musical traditions within global music ecosystems.

Keywords: Chinese traditional instrumental music; overseas competitions; music globalization; intercultural exchange; music education

The first two decades of the twenty-first century marked a crucial phase in China's reform and opening-up process. During this transformative period, China's engagement with the global community expanded significantly, reshaping its position on the international stage. This era witnessed notable advancements in national development, cultural openness, and institutional capacity, evident across various sectors. Concurrently, Chinese philosophy, art, and culture were situated within a broader, more interconnected global context. This sustained engagement fostered a deeper appreciation for China's rich cultural heritage, particularly its music, which garnered growing recognition for its aesthetic value and expressive potential. Through continuous cross-cultural exchanges, confidence in Chinese musical traditions was reinforced, and its international appeal grew steadily.

Chinese traditional instrumental music is one of the most iconic forms of national culture, deeply embedded in China's historical and cultural identity. It has also emerged as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy, playing an increasingly prominent role on the global stage. Over nearly five decades of steady development, this musical tradition has made substantial strides in technical expressiveness. The repertoire has expanded not only in quantity but also in artistic sophistication. Additionally, distinct interpretive frameworks based on Chinese cultural principles have emerged, enabling performances to reflect the unique qualities of Chinese heritage. As a result, traditional Chinese instrumental performances have established a stable presence on major international music stages, continuing to attract growing attention from musicians and audiences worldwide.

This increasing international attention can be analyzed through two interrelated dimensions. First, traditional Chinese instruments have been more widely incorporated into various musical practices both within China and abroad. These include concertos with symphony orchestras, mixed chamber ensembles,

collaborations with vocal music, and integrations with electronic media. Such performance formats are now regularly showcased on prestigious international stages, where they have received widespread recognition for their expressive depth and artistic value. Second, overseas competitions dedicated to Chinese traditional instrumental music have become influential platforms for promoting this art form. Over the past two decades, many such competitions have expanded beyond China to various countries and regions. Before 2000, however, such international events were relatively rare.

Since 2006, continued involvement in these overseas competitions has provided a solid foundation for observing their long-term development. Initial engagement occurred through participation in the "Flying Cup International Chinese Instrumental Music Competition" in the United States. Since then, roles as a judge in more than ten international competitions have been undertaken. In addition to these, numerous similar events have been successfully organized in different regions, further contributing to the internationalization of Chinese traditional instrumental music.

Years of participation and observation have shown that overseas Chinese communities, cultural institutions, and related organizations play a key role in sustaining and promoting these competitions. Their influence is especially evident in countries with large Chinese populations and in Western nations, where these competitions have become important platforms for promoting Chinese traditional music. Through these competition-based platforms, Chinese traditional instrumental music has gradually been integrated into the daily cultural practices of local music enthusiasts. Many of these competitions have become regularized and institutionalized, helping to establish the study and performance of Chinese traditional instruments outside China as a sustained cultural practice. In some cases, these events have even fostered a distinct mode of cultural engagement, further solidifying the global presence of Chinese musical traditions.

Given these developments, the organization and expansion of overseas competitions have become crucial mechanisms for the international dissemination and cross-cultural integration of Chinese traditional instrumental music. Their contribution to the broader development of global music fields is significant. This study aims to examine the positive impacts of these competitions from multiple perspectives, identify challenges at different stages of their development, and explore how competition-based mechanisms can further enhance the international influence of Chinese traditional instrumental music.

1. Competitions as an effective approach to expanding the participant base and engaging non-chinese audiences

Competitions in the arts are widely recognized for their capacity to attract participants and concentrate public attention, making them highly effective tools for cultural dissemination. In China, traditional Chinese instrumental music competitions have experienced significant growth over recent decades. These events, organized by government bodies, professional associations, social organizations, and foundations, have seen marked expansion in both scale and scope. Over time, they have become increasingly regularized and institutionalized, typically being held on an annual or biennial basis. This regularity has been instrumental in the substantial growth of the domestic learning population, drawing in participants from a variety of age groups and regions.

This expansion is closely linked to the refinement and professionalization of competition structures. Over the years, the age-group divisions within various instrumental categories have become more detailed and methodologically consistent, ensuring inclusivity and facilitating participation across a broad age spectrum. As a result, the number of learners of traditional Chinese instrumental music has risen substantially, with notable increases observed over the past two decades. This trend is particularly evident in representative instruments such as the guzheng, pipa, and erhu, which have seen remarkable growth in the number of learners.

The guzheng serves as a prime example of this trend. In the mid-1980s, the number of guzheng learners nationwide was estimated at approximately 1,000. By 2004, this number had increased to around one million, and today, the total number of learners is estimated at approximately 3 million. In graded music examinations, the guzheng has surpassed the piano to become the instrument with the most examinees. This dramatic rise in participation reflects the widespread adoption of traditional Chinese instrumental music among younger generations, as well as its increasing popularity across a broad demographic spectrum.

In parallel, the learner demographic has become more diverse. The learner population now spans a wide range of ages, from children as young as five or six to elderly adults. This diversity corresponds to a shift in learning objectives. While professional training remains a primary focus for many, there is a growing trend of individuals engaging with Chinese traditional music for personal enrichment, cultural identity, and self-expression. Consequently, the motivations for learning have expanded to encompass a broader range of personal and cultural goals.

Internationally, competitions in traditional Chinese instrumental music have been established, benefiting from the well-developed frameworks of domestic competitions. These events are frequently supported by experts from leading Chinese conservatories and professional orchestras, ensuring a high standard of competition. Additionally, many of these competitions have incorporated organizational structures and evaluation practices from Western classical music competitions, successfully merging elements from both traditions. The formats of the competitions, the assessment criteria, the age-group divisions, and the award distribution systems have been carefully refined to enhance fairness and credibility. These improvements have increased the recognition and prestige of these competitions within overseas Chinese communities. As a result, the competitions have gained greater respect, contributing significantly to the global recognition and promotion of traditional Chinese instrumental music.

As an adjudicator, the author has long been involved in two prestigious annual competitions held in Singapore, both of which have now become well-established events within the global musical landscape. These competitions—the Singapore Nanyang International Music Competition (Chinese traditional music category) and the Singapore International Solo/Ensemble Competition (Chinese traditional music category)—have earned a solid reputation over the years and are gaining increasing international recognition.

The Nanyang International Music Competition, in particular, has seen substantial growth in recent editions. In its latest iteration, over 1,600 contestants from nearly 10 countries participated, reflecting the event's growing global prominence. This surge in participation highlights the expanding international appeal of Chinese traditional music, which is gaining broader recognition in diverse cultural contexts.

The establishment and sustained success of these competitions have played a critical role in the global expansion of the learning community for Chinese traditional music. Singapore, as a key focal point for this development, serves as a clear example of this trend. In 2023, approximately 10,000 students in Singapore's primary and secondary schools selected the Chinese Orchestra as part of their Co-Curricular Activities (CCA). This number closely mirrors the 2013 figure of 10,044 participants. While there have been slight fluctuations, the participation rate has remained relatively stable, consistently ranging from 700 to 1,000 students annually.

At the tertiary level, the field of Chinese traditional music education has also experienced significant growth. Nationwide, an estimated 240 to 1,000 students are currently enrolled in diploma or undergraduate programs specializing in Chinese traditional instrumental music. Moreover, a diverse range of educational institutions—ranging from integrated schools and private educational centers to community organizations and adult education programs—now serve an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 active learners studying Chinese traditional music. This figure includes students from primary and secondary schools, universities, and adult learners.

Beyond Singapore, the study of Chinese traditional music is gaining traction internationally, particularly in the United States and Europe. In these regions, a growing number of higher education institutions have introduced dedicated programs in Chinese traditional instrumental music. For example, the Central Conservatory of Music has partnered with Bard College Conservatory of Music to establish a specialized performance program focused on Chinese traditional music. This collaboration underscores the growing academic interest in the genre. It provides students with opportunities to engage deeply with China's rich musical heritage.

In addition, competitions and events related to Chinese traditional music have gradually emerged in the United States and Europe, reflecting the broader international integration of this musical tradition. As Chinese traditional music continues to gain recognition in the global musical community, it is expected that the scope and reach of these competitions will expand further, attracting greater participation from learners worldwide, including both overseas Chinese and non-Chinese individuals.

The growing involvement of non-Chinese learners in these educational programs and competitions is particularly noteworthy. This trend indicates that Chinese traditional instrumental music has transcended its cultural origins and is attracting individuals from diverse backgrounds eager to engage with and appreciate Chinese musical traditions. These learners perform on instruments such as the pipa, guzheng, and erhu. Interviews conducted by *People's Daily Overseas Edition* and *Shenzhou Scholars* with the London Chinese Music Association have revealed that the learners in London include not only overseas Chinese but also foreign adults and children.

Among these non-Chinese learners, many adults have either lived in or visited China or developed a strong personal interest in Chinese culture. Additionally, foreign children often take up Chinese traditional instruments as part of their parents' emphasis on multicultural education or out of curiosity about East Asian musical instruments. This growing engagement among non-Chinese learners highlights the universal appeal of Chinese traditional music, demonstrating its ability to bridge cultural divides and foster a deeper global understanding and appreciation of China's musical heritage.

2. The global promotion of chinese traditional music: beyond stage performances

Over the past five decades, performers of Chinese traditional instrumental music have achieved significant recognition on prominent international stages, gaining widespread acclaim for their artistry and technical expertise. These performances have enabled Chinese traditional music to gradually integrate into the global musical landscape, with audiences and professionals alike acknowledging its distinctiveness, professionalism, and cultural significance. Despite these noteworthy accomplishments, it is apparent that relying solely on stage performances is insufficient to effectively promote and ensure the long-term sustainability of Chinese traditional music on a global scale. A comprehensive and sustainable development strategy for any art form requires a multifaceted approach—one that includes not only performances but also education, community engagement, and public outreach. In this regard, music competitions have proven essential for advancing the global dissemination and promotion of Chinese traditional music.

The significance of goal-setting and reward mechanisms in this process cannot be overstated. For overseas learners of Chinese traditional music, challenges related to cultural differences, unfamiliar social structures, and varying regulatory environments can hinder motivation. In such contexts, the lack of clear objectives and tangible rewards may undermine the drive to pursue learning. Competitions, therefore, serve as a central catalyst, converting abstract goals into concrete incentives that sustain learners' motivation and foster a deeper commitment to the discipline. In recent years, the growing prevalence of international competitions has had a measurable positive impact on the global spread of Chinese traditional instrumental music, contributing to a more interconnected international community of learners and practitioners.

One of the primary benefits of competitions is their ability to foster engagement and stimulate interest in learning. Through live performances, media coverage, and international outreach, these events offer non-Chinese audiences the opportunity to experience the distinct and captivating sounds of Chinese traditional instruments. This exposure often sparks curiosity and enthusiasm, motivating many individuals to pursue the study of Chinese traditional music. For instance, during participation in the *Flying Cup International Chinese Instrumental Music Competition* in San Jose, USA, many non-Chinese participants were introduced to instruments such as the pipa and guzheng for the first time. Their eagerness to learn and considerable enthusiasm reflected the capacity of these competitions to generate interest and attract new learners.

Beyond engagement, competitions also provide structured educational platforms that promote skill development. Many of these events are accompanied by the establishment of educational centers or the expansion of related academic programs designed to provide learners with the knowledge and tools necessary to master traditional Chinese instruments. Countries such as the United States, Germany, Singapore, and Japan have recognized the value of formalizing education in Chinese traditional music by establishing universities and professional institutions that cater to non-Chinese learners. A notable example is the Central Conservatory of Music's establishment of a teaching center in New York, the first of its kind outside China. This initiative has created a professional platform that enables non-Chinese learners to receive comprehensive training in traditional Chinese music, thereby further advancing the international dissemination of these art forms.

Competitions also serve as platforms for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. They offer non-Chinese participants the opportunity to engage directly with Chinese musical culture, deepening their appreciation and recognition of its richness and complexity. Learning to play instruments such as the pipa, guzheng, and erhu involves not only acquiring technical proficiency but also gaining an understanding of the historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts from which these musical traditions have evolved. This holistic approach to learning encourages participants to form more accurate and respectful interpretations of Chinese musical works, fostering greater respect for Chinese cultural traditions. Furthermore, these experiences contribute to cultural diplomacy by strengthening the cultural ties between China and other countries.

Moreover, competitions play a pivotal role in enhancing the international visibility and influence of Chinese traditional music. By increasing awareness and recognition of its artistic and cultural value, these events attract an ever-growing number of non-Chinese participants, encouraging more individuals to learn and perform Chinese traditional instruments. As global interest in Chinese traditional music continues to expand, the number of non-Chinese musicians and enthusiasts is steadily rising. This increased engagement is essential for the continued development and internationalization of Chinese traditional music, ensuring that it remains an integral part of the global musical dialogue.

In conclusion, while stage performances have played a vital role in introducing Chinese traditional music to international audiences, the expanding network of global competitions has emerged as a key factor in ensuring the continued growth and sustainability of this art form. These competitions not only stimulate interest and engagement but also provide essential educational resources, facilitate cultural exchange, and enhance the international visibility of Chinese traditional music. Consequently, they play an instrumental role in the ongoing global promotion and development of this unique and irreplaceable musical tradition.

3. Challenges and solutions in organizing overseas competitions

Overseas competitions in Chinese traditional instrumental music offer a potential platform for disseminating Chinese musical culture worldwide. These events may play an important role in fostering cross-cultural appreciation and recognition of Chinese music. However, organizing such competitions within international contexts presents several unique challenges that must be addressed to increase the likelihood of their success and long-term sustainability. These challenges can arise at various stages, including planning, organizing, and executing the competitions. To fully explore the potential of these competitions to expand the learner base, enhance professional recognition through awards, and increase international visibility, a more strategic approach may be necessary. The main challenges and possible solutions are outlined below.

3.1. High financial and resource demands

Organizing overseas competitions involves substantial financial commitments, including venue rental, international transportation of musical instruments, and adjudicator fees. Even when local government agencies initiate these events, the financial burden is often shared by co-organizers, such as overseas Chinese associations or cultural institutions. However, these organizations may face significant financial constraints, making it difficult to sustain competition from planning through execution. To address these financial challenges and ensure the continuity of these events, stable, diversified sponsorship may be essential.

Registration fees are commonly used to cover basic operational costs. However, participants from outside the host country may incur additional expenses, such as travel costs. For contestants from mainland China, these expenses could be particularly high, including international flights and accommodation, which tend to be more expensive than those for domestic competitions. These financial pressures could pose significant barriers to maintaining the long-term sustainability of overseas competitions. Potential solutions to these financial challenges include diversifying sponsorship sources and adopting segmented competition formats. Local and international grants could be complemented by corporate sponsorship and in-kind support from travel agencies and airlines. A potential strategy could involve holding high-investment final rounds in the host country, while organizing preliminary rounds or regional showcases overseas. This model may reduce the financial burden of the final stages while still maintaining international participation and engagement.

3.2. Organizational and logistical constraints

One of the key challenges in organizing international competitions is managing the complex logistics of transporting instruments, arranging visas, and coordinating stage technical requirements. These logistical issues may create lengthy and intricate chains of responsibility, potentially leading to delays and complications. In some cases, these challenges force participants to alter their plans or, in extreme cases, withdraw from the competition altogether. As a result, the number of actual participants may fall short of the initial registration numbers. Similar logistical issues have led to the cancellation of some European classical music competitions, emphasizing the importance of effective logistical planning. While overseas Chinese music competitions are generally smaller in scale, they may encounter comparable obstacles.

To address these logistical challenges, it may be necessary to establish strategic partnerships with Chinese embassies, overseas Chinese organizations, and travel agencies. These collaborations could help streamline logistics by consolidating services such as transportation, visa procurement, accommodation, and meal arrangements into a comprehensive package. Centralizing the management of these services may reduce redundant procedures and minimize the risk of participant withdrawal due to logistical issues. Additionally, working with local service providers enhances the efficiency of the competition organization, ensuring a more seamless experience for all involved.

3.3. Cultural gaps and inconsistent adjudication standards

Despite increasing recognition of Chinese traditional music among local experts and audiences, significant cultural gaps may persist, hindering the standardization of adjudication in international competitions. Foreign adjudicators and audiences may not always share a common understanding of the technical performance standards, tonal aesthetics, and interpretive norms specific to Chinese instruments. Additionally, scoring systems and competition rules may vary across countries, which could limit the international credibility and consistency of these events.

Organizers can address these challenges by offering complementary activities designed to promote cultural understanding. For instance, during the Singapore International Solo/Ensemble Competition, forums and masterclasses were held in which Chinese and Western musicians collaborated. These activities helped align adjudication standards, promoted cultural exchange, and provided a credible foundation for award decisions. Such initiatives could enhance the quality of competition outcomes while fostering mutual understanding and respect for the diverse musical traditions involved.

In today's increasingly interconnected world, interactions among countries, cultures, and ethnicities are becoming more frequent and complex. The promotion of Chinese musical culture may benefit from embracing contemporary international opportunities to increase its diverse, multifaceted presentation and influence on the global stage. Competitions, as high-profile events, could extend the influence of Chinese traditional music beyond concert stages by offering sustainable platforms for talent recognition and professional development.

These competitions present opportunities that may not be replicable through concerts, seminars, or community performances. The competitive format could foster engagement, encourage excellence, and facilitate the identification of exceptional talent. Moreover, the continued success of these competitions in certain regions may indicate a growing professional base increasingly recognized by audiences, suggesting broader public interest in Chinese traditional music. When regions demonstrate sufficient participation and audience engagement to sustain these competitions, it might signal wider recognition and appreciation of the art form.

Collaboration between domestic and international organizations, associations, and individuals is critical to furthering the global reach of Chinese traditional music. Through standardized, rigorous, and professionally managed competitions, both the quality of performance and cultural understanding of Chinese traditional instrumental music could be advanced beyond China's borders. High-quality organization, along with transparent and reliable award evaluation processes, may significantly contribute to reinforcing the vitality and international recognition of this musical tradition.

Rooted in the profound historical and philosophical principles of the Chinese nation, including "harmony in diversity" and inclusiveness, Chinese traditional musical culture has the potential to continue contributing

meaningfully to global music development. Its artistic value and expressive potential hold the promise of generating lasting influence, ensuring that it remains an important part of the global musical conversation.