



# Chinese Cultural Music “Gu Zheng” in Thailand

*Rujee Srisombut*

*Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand*

---

## **Abstract**

The research entitled “Chinese Cultural Music “Gu Zheng” in Thailand” is a qualitative research which aims are 1) to study the history and features of Gu Zheng, 2) to study the role of Gu Zheng in Thai society, 3) to study institutes that offer “Gu Zheng” lessons, and 4) to improve the educational process of the subjects, coded MUE 311 and FA 523 using the results of the research. The results found are as follows:

Gu Zheng is a Chinese musical instrument with a long history and various beliefs as to its origin. According to Chinese history, it is believed that Gu Zheng was created during the era of Emperor Qin Shi Huang by developing an ancient local musical instrument of the Qin region known as “Gu Qin”. However, Gu Zheng went missing due to several wars during the Emperor Qin Shi Huang era. Later when peace was restored, a number of arts reformations were initiated. Gu Zheng once again became a part of Chinese society. Gu Zheng has been constantly developed and spread, and now it is widely known in China and abroad.

Gu Zheng is a 21-string plucked zither. Each string is tied to a post at the head, and stretched across the body to the other end where it is tied to another post. These posts are also used to tune the strings. Each string of Gu Zheng is supported by a bridge on the body. The length of a Gu Zheng is around 160 cm, the width of the head and the end is around 33 and 29 cm respectively, and the height of the body of Gu Zheng is around 7 cm. The body of Gu Zheng is made of wood covered on both sides and the bottom by wooden slabs keeping the centre of the body hollow as a resonating box. A set of 3 holes are pierced on the bottom slab in the centre and either side to propagate the sound made. The head and the end of Gu Zheng is often crafted and decorated with pearls or jade stones.

Gu Zheng has a role in Thai society, even though learning Gu Zheng is still not among the list of music learners’ preferences. It is restricted to those who are really interested because of the limited availability of the instruments, few teachers and steep price of the instrument. Gu Zheng is not included in the Thai education curriculum, so students only learn from private schools or private teachers. From a religious perspective, Gu Zheng is played in some rituals but it is not essential because it is difficult to find the players and the instrument is hard to move. Therefore, *çKhimé*, is played instead. Gu Zheng has been used as a bond in international relations between Thailand and China, especially since Professor Dr. HRH Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol became interested in Gu Zheng. This has made the relationship between Thailand and China more profound. On the economic front, a rise in people playing Gu Zheng has seen Gu Zheng classes being taught in several musical institutes in response to society’s needs. There is also an increase in the Chinese musical instrument business, Chinese language and Chinese calligraphy which has boosted the economy. Thailand and China has had a great relationship for a long time. It is not difficult to see the harmony between the musical culture of Thailand and China. Gu Zheng

of China can play many Thai pieces, highlighting the cultural blend in Thailand. Institutes that offer “Gu Zheng” lessons from the research:

Luang Pradit Pairoh Foundation 47, Setthasiri Road, Samsennai, Phayathai, Bangkok, Thailand 10400  
Tel: (662) -279-1509

Oriental Culture Academy 87, Charatmueang Road, Rongmueang, Pathumwan, Bangkok, Thailand 10330  
Tel: (662)-216-2826-8 Fax: (662)-216-2829

Silapabunlaeng School Sena Nikhom 1, Phahonyothin 32, Phahonyothin Road, Chankasem, Chatuchak, Bangkok, Thailand 10900  
Tel: (662)-9419914-6 Fax: (662)-941-9918

Suteerattanachaisangkeetsil School 12/33, Moo.11, Latphrao-Wanghin Road, Latphrao, Bangkok, Thailand 10230

Nonthasin Ngamwongwan School 619/4142, Ngamwongwan Road, Bangkarso, Mueang district Nonthaburi, Thailand 11000

Nonthasin Tiwanon School 37/3, Prinyaluck, Samakkhi Road, Tha Sai, Mueang district Nonthaburi, Thailand 11000

Gu Zheng is a part of the teaching and learning, MUE 311 (bachelor’s degree) and FA 523 (Master’s degree), of the Music Education Department, Faculty of Fine & Applied Arts. The students are competent, more practical and their experience of music has increased both in theory and practice. Today, Thai people are more interested in Gu Zheng. Private schools have started Gu Zheng courses and have hired Chinese teachers to teach the instrument. At the same time, Thai teachers are gaining knowledge of Gu Zheng and can compose music for the instrument. This shows the interweaving cultures of Thailand and China. As a result of this cultural spread, the people are free to apply it to benefit their own culture and society.

**Keywords:** *Chinese traditional music, Gu Zheng, string instrument*

## Introduction

Culture is a measure of the evolution of a country. Moreover, culture is also the best indicator for traditional customs, way of life, and history. Each country has a different culture. National identity is expressed through culture and music is one dimension of that. It is an expression of the uniqueness of the culture of each nation and is considered a national treasure.

China is a country with a rich culture in history, language, and arts, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and performing arts, including musical story. The culture of China has been bound to the life of the Chinese community, in the past in the royal court and outside the territory in general. Its musical instruments represent the rich culture of China, which has all types of musical instrument such as plucking (plucked string instruments), bowing (bowed string instruments), striking (percussion instruments and hammered dulcimer), and blowing (wind instruments).

Gu Zheng is a Chinese plucked string instruments with a sweet and smooth sound. This musical instrument is known by many names depending on the local language of each area. For example, in Chinese Tae Chew it is called “Gou Cheng” or “Cheng”, in Thailand it is called “Cheng” or “Chakea Chené (China zither), in Mandarin or on the Chinese mainland it is called “Gu-Zheng” and “Zheng”, and Europeans call it Gu-Zheng. The name of this instrument is called by a single syllable, Cheng or Zeng, and the word “Gu” or “Go” is a prefix in Chinese meaning something ancient. If the name was translated into the Thai language to give it its full meaning, it would be called “Pin Chen Boran” (The ancient Chinese harp). It would be called “Pin Chen Boran” (ancient Chinese harp instrument) because it has a long history of a thousand years. It is as old as the Great Wall of China, or maybe even older. Gu Zheng is an instrument that has a history that reflects its ties with the Chinese people, which has made Gu-Zheng mu-

sical instruments popular with the people of China up to the present day.

Thailand has had a sisterly relationship with China in terms of trade for a long time. The country has adopted many things from Chinese culture. Chinese art has poured into Thailand and Chinese music is prevalent in Thai culture as well.

Gu Zheng is a Chinese instrument that spread into Thailand a long time ago, but no one knows the exact date. Immigrants from China came to Thailand from time to time. Mainland Chinese immigrants settled in Thailand because China has a large population. The people wanted to seek a better life than before. It appears that there are many ethnic Chinese in Thailand. The story of Gu Zheng is that it was imported into Thailand gradually over time due to the appeal of its sweet melody. The shape is beautiful, as is typical of China. In Chinese film, the player plays Gu Zheng with smooth or aggressive gestures performed to show the emotional story in the film at that time. Even academics of Gu Zheng are televised by the state agency to provide the opportunity to young people and the general public to be students, such as at universities, colleges, government agencies or music schools. Now Gu Zheng has become established in Thailand's music industry as a valuable and important musical instrument. When listened to, it will make a pleasant and comfortable experience. Although playing a musical instrument is not easy, it has become a popular practice. When playing, players will feel proud and happy.

Researchers are interested in the story of "Gu Zheng" culture in Thailand and its origin from China. This is an instrument that is very old. For at least 2000 years, it has been important and widespread in China. It spread into Thailand where it began to influence Thai people and the music industry of Thailand. Researchers, therefore decided, that the study of "Gu Zheng" music culture in Thailand will benefit young people who are interested in music and Thailand in general.

## Objectives

1. To study the history and features of Gu Zheng
2. To study the role of Gu Zheng in Thai society
3. To study institutes that offer Gu Zheng lessons
4. To improve the educational process of the subjects coded MUE 311 and FA 523.

## Methodology

### Populations

1. A study of the history of Gu Zheng, the components of Gu Zheng and the activities, including the role of Gu Zheng in Thailand.
2. A study of 4 places of Gu Zheng musical training in Bangkok and 3 suburbs.

### Tools

In this research, the researchers used a collection of documents from textbooks on Chinese music education in Thailand and research that is associated with exploration, observation, and interviews. The interview discussion was intended to set pre-knowledge and understanding of the issues in the research. The form of the questions will be open-ended questions. The advantage of in-depth interviews is it helps to get an insight in to the comments. With this form of discussion, it allows the researchers to ask for further information at any time. The people interviewed are those who have knowledge and expertise about the Gu-Zheng such as Master Chanok Sarik, Master Li Yang, Master Guo Yunseng, Master Jia Chongkang and Master Maitree Siripisudwimon. The data acquired is systematically organised and reviewed if it does not fully provide the complete information.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. The History and Composition of the Gu Zheng

The Gu Zheng is a Chinese musical instrument

with a long history and various beliefs as to its origin. According to Chinese history, it is believed that Gu Zheng was created during the Emperor Qin Shi Huang era and was developed from an ancient harp called “Seg”. Gu Zheng, however, went missing due to several wars during the Emperor Qin Shi Huang era. Later when peace was restored, a number of arts reformations were initiated and Gu Zheng once again became a part of Chinese society. In the early days, this instrument was made from a hollow length wooden box and 25 strings were stretched across the top. According to Chinese legend, the origins of the instrument come from a variety of different backgrounds. Some believe that the instrument came from heaven because it plays such melodic sounds, looks different from other instruments and has a long history. Some believe that it was developed from a folk instrument of the Qin region called “Gu Qin” because the “Gu Qin” is a string plucked zither just like Gu Zheng. The only difference is it is smaller than the Gu Zheng. In addition, some legends believe that Gu Zheng and Goto have a related history as the shape looks very similar.

Gu Zheng is a 21-string plucked zither. Each string is tied to a post at the head, and stretched across the body to the other end where it is tied to another post. These posts are also used to tune the strings. Each string of Gu Zheng is supported by a bridge on the body. The length of a Gu Zheng is around 160 cm, the width of the head and the end is around 33 and 29 cm respectively, and the height of the body of Gu Zheng is around 7 cm. The body of Gu Zheng is made of wood covered on both sides and the bottom by wooden slabs keeping the centre of the body hollow as a resonating box. A set of 3 holes are pierced on the bottom slab in the centre and either side to propagate the sound made. The head and the end of Gu Zheng is often crafted and decorated with pearls or jade stones.

Each string of a Gu Zheng is strung from the head (right) to the end (left), stretching across the body

to the other end. The string is also tied to a post at the other end and these posts are used to tune the strings. The strings are supported by a bridge on the body. The original tuner of the strings was made from silk, but now metal is used. Furthermore, the Gu Zheng is also equipped with a sound stretching box which is inside the instrument. This is used to tune the volume of each string and is tied to the centre inside the sound box. The strings stretch from the dampener at the end, across the Gu Zheng front down into the sound box. The bridges are made of wood and triangular-shaped with a curve at the middle. The top of the triangle uses materials such as ivory or white plastic connected to wood and serves as a support for the strings. At the bottom of the body a hole is drilled at the head and at the end of the body for turning and to amplify the sound. While playing the Gu Zheng, four plectra (picks) attached to the fingers are used. The players may use picks attached to the fingers of both hands.

### **The Role of Gu Zheng in Thailand**

Gu Zheng has a role in Thai society, even though learning Gu Zheng is still not among the list of music learners’ preferences. It is restricted to those who are really interested because of the limited availability of the instruments, few teachers and steep price of the instrument. Gu Zheng is not included in the Thai education curriculum, so students only learn from private schools or private teachers. From a religious perspective, Gu Zheng is played in some rituals but it is not essential because it is difficult to find the players and the instrument is hard to move. Therefore, “Khim”, is played instead. Gu Zheng has been used as a bond in international relations between Thailand and China, especially since Professor Dr. HRH Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol became interested in Gu Zheng. This has made the relationship between Thailand and China more profound. On the economic front, a rise in people playing Gu Zheng has seen Gu Zheng classes being taught in several musical institutes in response to society’s needs. There is also an increase

in the Chinese musical instrument business, Chinese language and Chinese calligraphy which has boosted the economy. Thailand and China has had a great relationship for a long time. It is not difficult to see the harmony between the musical culture of Thailand and China. The Gu Zheng of China can play many of Thai pieces, highlighting the cultural blend in Thailand. Institutes that offer Gu Zheng lessons from the research:

Luang Pradit Pairon Foundation 47, Setthasiri Road, Samsennai, Phayathai, Bangkok, Thailand 10400 Tel: (662) -279-1509

Oriental Culture Academy 87, Charatmueang Road, Rongmueang, Pathumwan, Bangkok, Thailand 10330 Tel: (662)-216-2826-8 Fax: (662)-216-2829

Silapabunlaeng School Sena Nikhom 1, Phahonyothin 32, Phahonyothin Road, Chankasem, Chatuchak, Bangkok, Thailand 10900 Tel: (662)-9419914-6 Fax: (662)-941-9918

Suteerattanachaisangkeetsil School 12/33, Moo.11, Latphrao-Wanghin Road, Latphrao, Bangkok, Thailand 10230

Nonthasin Ngamwongwan School 619/4142, Ngamwongwan Road, Bangkarso, Mueang district Nonthaburi, Thailand 11000

Nonthasin Tiwanon School 37/3, Prinyaluck, Samakkhi Road, Tha Sai, Mueang district Nonthaburi, Thailand 11000

Development of Learning and Teaching MUE 311 and FA 523

Gu Zheng is a part of the teaching and learning, MUE 311 (bachelor's degree) and FA 523 (Master's degree), of the Music Education Department, Faculty of Fine & Applied Arts. The students are competent, more practical and their experience of music has increased both in theory and practice. In this way, the students can learn the aesthetics of art and music, and because of the melodic sound, those who have listened to it cannot deny its sweetness.

## Conclusions

Gu Zheng is a Chinese musical instrument that represents the uniqueness of Chinese culture. The sound is very beautiful and melodic. Gu Zheng has a long history which is linked with Chinese history. There has been a spread of China's musical culture to neighbouring countries such as Japan which has an instrument shaped like Gu Zheng called "Goto". There are ways to play it using the same plucking technique, but the style of playing, as well as the sound of the instrument is different, depending on the culture and their identity. Korea is another country that has an instrument like Gu Zheng called "Jia Ye Qin". They have their own songs and playing styles which is their so called freedom in the application of this instrument to suit their culture. Thailand has been influenced by the spread of Chinese culture as well. Chinese culture has a role in Thai society in musical ritual and in music for celebrations. One type of instrument that has a very well-known role is the Thai instrument called "Kim" (dulcimer).

For Gu Zheng in Thailand today, Thai people have more interest than before and the study found that the number of schools for teaching Gu Zheng is increasing in society of Thailand. There is a certain system to teaching Gu Zheng. Chinese teachers are invited to teach Gu Zheng, but at the same time there are teachers who have the ability to play Gu Zheng in Thailand. Gu Zheng has also been adapted to Thai styles like playing the Gu Zheng with Thai songs which is called cultural acculturation. Therefore, people are free to use it to benefit their culture and their society as a result of cultural diffusion. This is consistent with the theory of cultural diffusion. Diffusion and invention cause the same things and are instrumental in spreading various cultures. Some researchers have tried to prove that the culture of humanity came from the same source and spread through cultural contact. (Ngamtip Satsanguan. 2000.)

When spreading culture in the world, humanity has to communicate with each other. They exchange

various fields of life because humans have different demands. The exchange theory is the main theory of the sociological theories of George Homans. He said that each human needs many things in life both material and non-material. The needs of humans are infinite and they cannot respond to all of them, so exchange is a response to fulfill human needs. Therefore, people have to communicate and exchange with each other. In music culture, Gu Zheng is also exchanged both personally and nationally. The concert "Thailand-China Two Lands, One Heart Concert" for example, promotes the value of music and mutual association and is consistent with the theory of exchange.

The aesthetic theory is a theory associated with beauty and feelings of humanity to see the beauty in art as a natural beauty and human-made beauty. Playing Gu Zheng is a human made art. The beauty of the Gu Zheng sound is a major characteristic and the technique for playing is a unique ability. Therefore the aesthetic value of the sound being diagnosed as beautiful depends on the person. The variety played depends on the mood of the audience and their satisfaction. This is consistent with the theory of Leo Tolstoy which discusses the value of art as beauty. Whether the artists create art in the visual form or audiovisual, the result or value of art depends on the people who were exposed. They will judge if one piece is greater than the other by seeing the number of people who feel its beauty. For those exposed, it is much appreciated. The beauty is the satisfaction of the people, not music played. Gu Zheng is played by those who have the ability to play using various techniques and technique depends on the satisfaction of the audience and its mood.

This is consistent with the theory of Herbert Blumer that describes how to organise society. The result of the person determines the meaning of the act and how to respond to each other. The relationship is interpreted through symbols and interpreta-

tion of body language expressed in the action as well. The interaction of each other in this theory focuses on the actions of the people in society. Because of the symbolism of particular language, various aspects such as spoken language and body language will convey to one another a recognised meaning to interact with. The Gu Zheng musical theory that is required is a symbol of how the materials are played between the players and the instrument, and how to play beautifully between teachers and the students, between the players and the audience or even between the players and the songs. To show emotion while performing is a symbol to reflect the styles, to convey emotions of the songs and for the audience to achieve the right mood.

## Recommendations

### 1. Recommendations for the research uses

1.1 Educational agencies of Thailand should encourage the youth to have the opportunity to study Gu Zheng in both government and private schools.

1.2 Those interested can go to learn Gu Zheng at the institutions that appeared in the research including the note scores which can be used to practise and play.

1.3 The government should support Thai people to have knowledge of music, which is part of the culture of countries in ASEAN, because culture is important to the ASEAN community.

### 2. Recommendations for further study

2.1 There should be a research study of Chinese music and Gu Zheng in different regions of Thailand.

2.2 There should be a research study about Chinese musical instruments in Thailand.

2.3 There should be an analytical study of famous contemporary Chinese music that is known in Thailand.

2.4 There should be a study about how to create and produce Gu Zheng.

## References

Satsanguan, N. (2000). *Research in Anthropology*. Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University.

## Further Readings

Amatyakul, D. (1990). *East Asian Music*. Bangkok. Chulalongkorn University.

Angkinan, P. (1971). *The Role of the Chinese in Thailand during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*. Thesis. Bangkok. Graduate Studies of Thammasat University.

Au-Areepaisan, R. (2003). *The Hakka Chinese Funeral Music of Rongjay Kin Shu Um*. Thesis. Graduate Studies. Mahidol University.

Barnett, H.G. (1953). *Innovation : The Basic of Cultural Change*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Public Affairs.

Buruspat, W. (1974). *Chinese People in Thailand*. Bangkok : Praepittaya.

Chinwanno, C. (1989). *On trade relations between Thailand and China*. Bangkok : Printing House of Thammasat University.

Devos, G., Ramanucci-Ross, L. (1981). *Ethnic Identity : Cultural Continuities and Change*. Pola Alto, California : Mayfield Pub. Co.

Hui Yu, S., Iertpanitkun, S. (2000). *Chinese - Thai Relations : Past and Future Prospects*. Bangkok. Institute of East Asian Studies Chulalongkorn University.

Kaimon, Y. (1993). *The Influence of Chinese Culture on Thailand*. Report Institute of Oriental Studies. Bangkok: Thammasat University

Markman, V. (1996). *The Reflection of Musical Culture from çChowzhou Chinese Operaé : A Case Study of çLhao Nee Choong Pungé Group*. Musicology. Bangkok : Mahidol University.

Na-Thalang, E. (1995). *Understanding Culture*. Bangkok : Amarin Printing Limited.

Nettl, B. (1964). *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*. New York : The Free Press.

Ondam, B. (1974). *Some ideas about Chinese people in Thailand*. Journal of Thammasat University.

Pikulstri, C. (1997). *East Asian Music*. Khon Kaen. Faculty of Arts, Khon Kaen University.

Pongsapich, A. (1991). *Culture, Religion and Ethnicity*. Bangkok. Chulalongkorn University.

Sagarik, C. (1994). *çGu Zhengé Harp from Heaven*. Bangkok. The Foundation of Luang Praditpairoh (Sorn Silapabanleng).

Saniddee, S. (1965). *Chinese People in Thailand*. Midkhu. Bangkok.

Sodkhomkham, N. (2011). *An Analysis of Compositions in Thai Music for Playing Gu Zheng of Professor Guo Yunseng*. Thesis. Srinakharinwirot University Prasarnmit.

Sukhumwad, S. (2012). *Chao Zhou Music : A Case Study of Klong Toey Lianglagheng Ensemble*. Thesis. Graduate Studies. Mahidol University.

Suparp, S. (1982). *Sociology*. Bangkok: Thailand Wattapanit.

Turner, V. (1967). *Contemporary Change in Traditional Societies*, ed. Urbana : University of Illinois Press.

Walliphodom, S. *Chinese in Thailand. 200 years, the Chinese people under the Thai Royal*. Bangkok. Sirichai printing.

White, L. (1959). *A history of Ethnology*. New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Marsella, A. (1977) *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press 1961(orig.1922) *Argonauts of The Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.

Wongwan, K. (2004). *Chinese Music (Online)*: <http://classroom.psu.ac.th/users/wkomson/data/western-musuc/CHAINA/China%20Music.htm>. (25 February.2000)

Yang, L. (2002). *Guide to Playing Gu Zheng (Chinese harp)*. Bangkok : Sukkapabjai Publisher.