



## Introduction to Erhu Music in China

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### ABSTRACT

The early music written for the erhu featured short melodic lines and patterns. Some of the pieces were even reworked versions of folk songs; all of these factors contributed to the widespread popularity of the early erhu compositions. Therefore, these erhu works became ingrained in people speedily and profoundly. People's conceptions of the timbre of the erhu and its musical style were shaped by frequent exposure to the instrument. Even in modern times, the Chinese government emphasizes the propagation and improvement of the country's traditional musical styles.

**Keywords:** Erhu Music , China

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### Introduction

Around 4,000 years ago, the erhu was widely considered to be one of the most important musical instruments in the annals of Chinese culture. In spite of the fact that it just only two strings, this instrument is capable of conveying a wide range of emotions. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the erhu has been referred to as the "Chinese violin," the two instruments are very unlike in a number of important respects. After being played vertically at first (which often takes place on the musician's lap), it is then turned sideways and played horizontally. Because this instrument does not include a fingerboard, players are required to just make use of their fingers in order to hold and vibrate the strings. Since the hair on the erhu bow is already connected between the two strings, it may be dragged either forward or backward to catch a string. This allows for more versatility. The sound is amplified by the instrument's hardwood drum in a very natural way. One of the most significant issues with the instrument is the fact that the pitch of the free-floating strings may be significantly changed simply adjusting their positioning and the amount of pressure applied.<sup>1</sup>

The expressiveness of the erhu is unparalleled; it is capable of imitating sounds as diverse as the chirp of birds and the neigh of horses. When performed by an alto, its melodies, which have a range that extends from the middle to the upper register, may be soft or loud. Because the bottom and middle tones of the erhu produce a sound that is especially rousing and sad, this instrument is well suited for conveying the sentiments of the Chinese people as well as China's rich history. Jiqin was the name given to the huqin instrument during the Song Dynasty, which lasted from 960 to 1279 A.D. In China, stringed instruments played with bows were still referred to as xiqin. A excellent illustration of this can be seen in the material that Shenkuo included in his book. In it, he said that the court musicians were to play the xiqin in order to entertain the guests. One of the strings broke before he had even started playing the instrument. Sheng was able to play the whole of the tune with just one string as a result of this.<sup>2</sup>

The huqin was the major instrument in Chinese opera orchestras throughout the Ming and Qing eras (1368–1644), and it was also commonly employed in small ensembles. These periods span China's history from 1368 to 1644. During this time period, the instrument started to be used in a wide range of operas, some of which are Qin Qiang, Beijing opera, Henan opera, Cantonese opera, and Mongolian tale singing, and so on. What is now known as the erhu descended from a version of the instrument that was common in southern China and was once known as nanhu (nan is Chinese for south). It wasn't until the last century that someone came up with the term erhu for this instrument.<sup>3</sup>

While being played, the erhu is often held on the player's lap. The bow is placed in the middle of the instrument's two strings, each of which is tuned to a fifth. The erhu does not have a fingerboard of any kind. The player's fingers are placed such that they rest on the strings rather than the wooden neck. This arrangement enables the player to change the tone of the instrument by applying varied amounts of pressure to the strings. The resonator of the erhu is made of snakeskin, and the most frequent types of wood used for the instrument are ebony, sandalwood, and rosewood. This technological advancement has been available for some time. Despite this, the majority of players continue to choose the sound of snakeskin over that of wood. Both the structure and the materials used in the sound boxes of the folk interpretations are different. To make the bow, a horse hair bow string is wrapped around a bamboo shaft. Since the 1960s, steel strings have been used instead of silk ones, taking a lead from the violin, which had been the standard for a long time. Because the expressive tone of the erhu is reminiscent of that of the human voice, it has become a popular instrument for performances both solo and in groups. Because of its foundation in vocal performance and opera, its repertoire is extensive and has a lengthy history.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the erhu is a thousand years old as an instrument, its modern repertoire was not created until the early 20th century. Composers and erhu players Liu Tianhua (1895-1932) and Hua Yanjun were considered to be the most renowned and important of their time (1893-1950). He simultaneously played the erhu, pipa, and qin in the performance. He devoted his whole life to music, working in the field in many capacities including composing, teaching, and inventing. She started playing the erhu while Liu was still young in her life. During his time at the high school, he was exposed to a variety of instruments and musical concepts, including western music theory, the violin, the piano, and brass instruments. In order to become an expert in China's traditional music, he sought out a large number of well-known folk musicians and apprenticed himself to them. Both

Western and Chinese musical traditions inspired his in-depth study of the erhu and the pipa, two traditional Chinese stringed instruments. 1922 was the year when Liu first started his career as a professor of Chinese music at Beijing University. It's possible that his meticulous approach to teaching inspired the establishment of modern music institutions in China.<sup>5</sup>

In the People's Republic of China, Hua Yanjun, better known by his stage name A Bing, was a well-known folk musician. When he was a child, his father, who was a priest in the Taoist religion, instructed him in Taoist music. By the time he was 12, the young guy already had a high level of proficiency in playing a variety of instruments and taking part in religious rites. When Hua was just 18 years old, he had already established himself as a well-known musician. When he was 22 years old, his father passed away, and he took over as the senior priest of the temple. Due of his drug addiction, he was ultimately kicked out of the temple, and it was all because of his behavior. After suffering complete blindness at the age of 35, he turned to making a living as a street performer in order to make ends meet. He often delivered satirical political songs in the style of impromptu performances. During the summer of 1950, Yang Yinliu, a student at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, traveled to record his most recognized solo pieces on the erhu and pipa. He had no clue what to anticipate when he arrived at the studio. His masterpiece "Erquan," also known as "Moon Reflection on Erquan," is widely considered to be the most famous piece ever written on the erhu.<sup>6</sup>

In China, Taiwanese towns like Taipei, as well as the United States, primary schools, conservatories, and colleges are increasingly teaching the erhu to their students. In a Chinese orchestra, the number of erhus, which are string instruments tuned a fifth higher, and gaohus, which are string instruments tuned a fifth lower, vary according to the size of the orchestra (fifth lower). There are factories that make erhus in Shanghai, Beijing, and Suzhou, China. Additionally, there are private studios and even residences in China that are used to make the instrument. Erhu that is manufactured to a high degree is handcrafted by famous traditional instrument makers who compete in national contests. These manufacturers of erhu are known as erhu masters.

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## About Erhu

The history of the erhu originates with the civilization of the proto-Mongols, and it eventually made its way to China around the year 618 AD, when the proto-Mongols arrived in China. Particularly, it is postulated that the erhu might represent the development of an even earlier arch instrument known as the "Xiqin," which was used by the Kumo Xi people who were situated in northeastern China beginning in the year 207 AD.

The structure of the erhu can be broken down into the following parts: the part of the neck, which includes a ring to help better secure the strings and whose upper part, in addition to being slightly curved, contains the pegs used to modulate the tuning of the instrument; finally, there is a third part, which is the sound box, which also includes the bridge of the ropes. The majority of erhu models come equipped with a base that may be used to rest the instrument on while it is being played. This is done to avoid the sound box from coming into direct contact with the player's left knee.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1. The Erhu (<https://www.easonmusicschool.com/chinese-orchestra-instruments/huqin-chinese-string-instruments-bowed/erhu/>)

Bamboo and horsehair are the most common materials used in the construction of the erhu arc. The soundboard is traditionally covered in leather, traditionally python leather, due to its sound characteristics being in line with the instrument, which produce a characteristic sound vibration. In addition, there is a ring located between the case and the pegs that is used to better secure the horse hair in the instrument.<sup>8</sup>

Red sandalwood or padauk is traditionally used to craft the section of the neck that attaches to the violin and the remainder of the instrument that makes up the Chinese violin. Approximately 80 or 82 centimeters (cm) is the height of the erhu, while the bow is a touch shorter. In the past, both of the erhu strings were made of woven silk; today, however, metal is used as a material for ropes (with the gradual replacement taking place around the middle of the twentieth century); the harmonic case is typically realized in the shape of a hexagon or an octagon; however, round cases do exist.

Even though it only has two strings, the erhu is capable of producing a wide range of sounds: from the first classic, "The Sound of Agony," through a faultless imitation of the voices of Peking Opera singers, or even the melody of birds chirping. The second character that makes up the name of this stringed instrument is "胡" (h), which means "barbarians," meaning people of the "Wu Hu" populations, which is a group of non-Chinese peoples who settled in China at the beginning of the first millennium AD, overturning the balance of China at that time. Analyzing the name of this stringed instrument, we note that the first part consists of "二" (èr) which in Chinese means 2 (èr)<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes referred to as the "barbarian chordophone," the "Chinese violin," or the "southern violin," the erhu is also known by these names. During her trip to Shanghai a week ago, Hollywood actress Sharon Stone said that she believes her "flaws make me special." This is also the case with the erhu, which is a Chinese traditional instrument consisting of two strings and a bow. It is the youngest member of the family of Chinese traditional instruments.



**Figure 2. Arch of the Erhu ([https://favpng.com/png\\_view/africa-lobular-red-sandalwood-erhu-erhu-musical-instrument-violin-string-instrument-png/GrNQQ4B](https://favpng.com/png_view/africa-lobular-red-sandalwood-erhu-erhu-musical-instrument-violin-string-instrument-png/GrNQQ4B))**

The erhu has undergone tremendous change over the course of the last century, becoming virtually the most popular Chinese instrument played on international stages, despite having the most straightforward historical record, the most unassuming beginnings, and one string more than the minimum number of strings. According to Xing Liyuan, a young erhu performer and lecturer at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, "there are very few historical records about erhu which developed from xiqin, a similar instrument introduced into central China by minority tribes from along the northern frontier during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD)." The xiqin was a similar instrument introduced into central China by minority tribes from along the northern frontier. "The modern erhu has a history of fewer than one hundred years, beginning in 1915 with the creation of the first solo piece for erhu by maestro Liu Tianhua (1895-1932).""The Sound of Agony" was the first solo work written for the erhu.<sup>10</sup>

She explains that before to 1915, the erhu was a lowly and unpretentious traditional instrument that was exclusively played as an accompaniment or as part of a group performance at events such as local operas, banquets, weddings, or burial rites. Because to Liu's work, the erhu was elevated to the status of a solo instrument and was given a position in performance halls and conservatories.

"Erhu cannot compare with guqin (seven-string zither) and pipa (four-string lute), which have a history of up to 3,000 years," says Xing,

who has twice won first prize in national competitions. "But maybe it's the simple history and humble beginnings that have left erhu more space and freedom in which to develop." During the course of the last century, "the instrument has been consistently enhanced in terms of skill and repertory at an astounding speed—like 'an unrestrained wild horse.'" The erhu is a straightforward musical instrument that resembles a drum and has a body made of either ebony or sandalwood. The rear aperture is left uncovered, while the front opening is protected by the skin of a snake. The vibrations of the strings are amplified and made louder by the body, which is responsible for resonating.<sup>11</sup>

The drum and the erhu's neck are both constructed from the same materials and are around 81 centimeters in length. For aesthetic purposes, the very top of the neck has been curved. Silk or nylon is traditionally used to make the erhu's two strings; however, metal strings are more widely employed in modern times. The erhu is typically tuned to the notes D and A. The bow has a length of 76 cm and is made from a reed. Similar to a violin bow, the reed is curved using steam, and then horse hair is used to create the arch. In the case of the erhu, on the other hand, the horse hair runs between the two strings; hence, it is impossible to remove the bow from the instrument unless one of the two strings is removed or destroyed.

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## Modern Erhu

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), a musical instrument known as the xiqin was popular across a wide variety of ethnic minorities. This instrument eventually gave rise to the current erhu. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), musicians had already started using this sort of huqin to produce a variety of songs, which led to the instrument being fairly popular among the community as a whole. There are very few written documents concerning the erhu that can be discovered in antiquity. This is likely due to the fact that the majority of erhu players were regular people and that the playing skill was handed down by oral tradition. Ancient paintings, sculptures, and murals are the primary sources that art historians go to while doing research on the history and development of the erhu. The oldest depictions of this instrument were discovered on the paintings of Yulin Cave and Eastern Thousand Buddhist Cave in Gansu Province, China. Both of these caverns are part of the Mogao Grottoes, which are a world heritage site located on the historic Silk Road. Experts discovered, upon close inspection of these priceless paintings, that erhus played at the time the murals were painted already had a striking similarity to the present erhu in terms of the posture in which they were held and the playing skills they used.<sup>12</sup>

During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods, the art of playing the erhu went through a period of historical evolution. This was due to the growth of certain folk art forms, such as orchestras, cross-talk, and local operas. In particular, a great advancement in the art of the erhu was brought about by the appearance of tune art, which is a singing technique used in opera. In addition to this, it emerged as a significant accompanying instrument in a wide range of folk operas and even took on the role of principal accompanying instrument in some operas. However, currently its usage is extensively prevalent not only in traditional Chinese music but also in contemporary music, with instances of the use of the erhu in rock, jazz, popular music, and author music. The erhu is performed effectively in orchestras and bands that specialize in traditional Chinese music.<sup>13</sup>

However, currently its usage is extensively prevalent not only in traditional Chinese music but also in contemporary music, with instances of the use of the erhu in rock, jazz, popular music, and author music. The erhu is performed effectively in orchestras and bands that specialize in traditional Chinese music. The Chinese government believed that radio was one of the most efficient instruments for spreading propaganda and educating the general populace, and as a result, they set up a vast number of radio stations and public broadcasting loudspeakers in municipalities and counties all throughout the nation. During the time when radio was the preeminent form of mass communication, the government assigned the medium three mandates: to disseminate news, to provide cultural amusement, and to educate the populace. As a kind of cultural pleasure, the Chinese government places a high importance on music, and in particular music that is considered to be traditional Chinese music. After the establishment of the New China, it was necessary for the Chinese government to swiftly put in place a new socialist structure, as well as to strengthen both the economy and the military. Rebuilding the state's soft power was also necessary in the meanwhile in order to boost national cultural confidence on the home front and increase cultural exports on the international stage. As an expression of Chinese culture, the government put a significant amount of attention on the promotion of traditional Chinese music.<sup>14</sup>

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## Conclusion

The early music written for the erhu featured short melodic lines and patterns. Some of the pieces were even reworked versions of folk songs; all of these factors contributed to the widespread popularity of the early erhu compositions. Therefore, these erhu works became ingrained in people speedily and profoundly. People's conceptions of the timbre of the erhu and its musical style were shaped by frequent exposure to the instrument. Even in modern times, the Chinese government emphasizes the propagation and improvement of the country's traditional musical styles. It is difficult for traditional music to stand out when people are faced with a wide variety of choices on their own because of the rapid development of television and digital media in the twenty-first century and the impact of various popular music trends in the world. However, most contemporary Chinese instrumental compositions, including works for the erhu, are no longer known to the public and only circulate among professional performers. As a result, the general public's knowledge of the erhu and the music played on the erhu is still mired in the early stages of the 20th century.<sup>15</sup>

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