

Divergent Historical and Storytelling Functions of the Chinese *Pipa*, Japanese *Biwa*, and Korean *Bipa*

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Abstract: The comparison of similar musical instruments provides insight towards the processes of higher culture and history. In this paper, the Chinese *pipa*, Japanese *biwa*, and Korean *bipa* are discussed to be similarly plucked lutes which share a common origin, but came to play different functions and roles in the respective three societies discussed. Concentrating on the cultural and religious prestige of the Chinese *pipa*, the Buddhist and narrative culture of the Japanese *biwa hoshi*, and the cross-cultural but relatively minor role of the Korean *bipa*, this paper investigates how each instrument served as a tool of telling stories through symbolism as well as performance. Although the *biwa* and the *bipa* were created by the same channels of transmission, they took different paths that cannot be viewed as similar to the perpetual popularity of the *pipa*. The historical variations are manifested in the contemporary cultural status of the instruments and their cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Pipa*; *Biwa*; *Bipa*; East Asian Lutes; Musical Storytelling

1. Introduction

Comparing differences among related musical instruments can provide cultural and historical insights. The Chinese *pipa*, Japanese *biwa* and Korean *bipa* have been used to tell different stories in their cultures, and were respected in their various societies. This paper discusses the cultural importance of the Chinese *pipa* since its introduction to China during the Han Dynasty to its later performance in the world today; the Buddhist *biwa hoshi* tradition of the Japanese *biwa* since its genesis in the late 7th century until its degradation during Japanese colonisation and up to date; and the cross cultural role of the Korean *bipa* since its transmission to the Korean peninsula until the present time. This demonstrates that, although they originated from the Chinese *pipa*, the *biwa* and *bipa* followed different historical trajectories and played distinct cultural and storytelling roles, reflected in their varied modern musical standings. Figure 1 shows the comparative forms of the Chinese *Pipa*, Japanese *Biwa*, and Korean *Bipa*.



(1) Chinese Pipa

(2) Japanese Biwa

(3) Korean Bipa

Figure 1. Comparative Forms of the Chinese *Pipa*, Japanese *Biwa*, and Korean *Bipa*

2. The Chinese Pipa: Origins and Assimilation

Originally migrating from the Silk Road to China beginning 200 BC, the Chinese *pipa* of ancient China was derived from a variety foreign lutes. First was the spike-lute derived from ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, with a neck that passed through the resonance box to end in a stub at the bottom ^[1]. It had organographic similarities to the *qin pipa* of so-called Chinese origin, which began as a percussion instrument as an accompaniment for dance. The *qin pipa* was created during the building of the Great Wall in 300 B.C. for workers as “dance props for performance”; however, the Middle-Eastern spike-lute “predates the Chinese instrument by over a millennium”, suggesting possible cultural dialogue between civilisations ^[2]. The *han pipa*, most similar to the modern *pipa*, had a pear-shaped body and 4 strings and was popularised during the Han Dynasty originating in Gandhara, an ancient Indo-Aryan civilisation in South Asia. Last was the *wuxian pipa*, or literally five-stringed *pipa*. Both literary and iconographic sources indicate that India is the origin of the instrument, where a comparable lute exists in the form of the *veena* ^[2].

As these variants were imported to ancient China during the Han to the Sui Dynasties (c. 200 B.C.–A.D. 617), they gradually assimilated within Chinese culture from the Tang to Yuan Dynasties (A.D. 618–1367). As they were Sinicised, the *pipa* was popularised enough to develop distinct styles and subcultures. Notably during the early Qing Dynasty (A.D. 1644), different schools of teaching emerged, specifically the southern and northern schools of tradition, which were eventually compiled into the *Pipa Scorebook* which is still in use today ^[2].

3. Cultural, Religious, and Symbolic Status of the Pipa

Apart from its musical status, the *pipa* also enjoyed a high social and religious importance. It was integrated during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–960) into “China’s ancient system of correlative cosmology [where] numbers, time, directions, instrumental timbre, colors, politics, and many other phenomena are associated with each other by traditional belief and ritual”, demonstrating its assimilation into number symbolism ^[2]. Its importance was also demonstrated through participation in rain ceremonies, a critical shamanic practice intended to evoke rain which dated back to the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1100 B.C.), since “only an instrument of the highest status would have been used in conjunction” ^[2].

Finally, the *pipa* was also an important cultural symbol that was frequently portrayed in ancient Chinese culture. The *han pipa* is associated with two tales which took place during the Han Dynasty. First, of princess Xijun marrying the *Susun* (ancient Turks) to broker peace; she brought with her a *pipa*, which legend states was crafted to sooth her longings for home. Second, princess Zhaojun, also given in a diplomatic marriage to the *Xiongnu* (Tartars) and played the *pipa* whilst on her journey ^[2]. It’s also the subject of the famous poem “Pipa xing”, literally “Song of the pipa”, by poet Bai Juyi, which describes meeting a female *pipa* player on the Yangtze river and her delicate performance through onomatopoeic imagery. The poem itself has also had a great cultural impact, inspiring paintings and related poems, and is still commonly quoted today to refer to the modern *pipa*.

4. The Pipa as a Solo Storytelling Instrument

Although an important plucked instrument in Chinese ensembles, the *pipa*’s most prominent role is as a solo instrument. Due to the extremely large range of sounds it can make, the *pipa*’s pieces are largely categorised as either civil or martial, and either big or small ^[2]. Civil refers to a slower, more melodious style, whilst martial typically has a quicker tempo and may include interesting sound effects, such as slapping the resonance box. Big or small refers to the length or the sections of the piece: a small piece may only have one section and are typically shorter, whilst big pieces have multiple sections and are lengthier ^[3].

“The King Doffs His Armor” is a famous traditional pipa virtuoso that demonstrates how the *pipa* was used for storytelling. It refers to the Battle of Gaixia during the Qin Dynasty between the Chu and Han armies. Notably including both elements of civil and martial pieces, “The King Doffs His Armor” first describes the clash between both armies, before Chu’s King Xiang Yu retreats with his men. His men cross the river on ships, but Xiang Yu stays: he is unwilling to return and face his people after losing the battle and causing his men to die. He bids goodbye to his wife in a famous civil section, then commits suicide in a final act of defiance. The varied timbres within the piece are only possible with the auditory

versatility of the *pipa*.

Today, the *pipa* enjoys relative popularity compared to its Korean and Japanese counterparts. Traditional Chinese music is rigorously studied in conservatories across China, Chinese Hong Kong, and Chinese Taiwan. The most famous modern *pipa* player, Wu Man, has intentionally collaborated with influential composers and musicians, arguing that cross-genre collaboration is crucial for the *pipa*'s survival [4]. The *pipa* is used in film soundtracks such as *Eat Drink Man Woman* and in video game music, including *Black Myth: Wukong*. Traditional Chinese orchestras now perform worldwide, not only within East Asia, reflecting the *pipa*'s sustained cultural relevance and continued prominence.

5. The Japanese Biwa and the Biwa Hoshi Tradition

The Japanese *biwa*, similarly to the Korean *bipa*, arrived in Japan from Chinese influence around the late 7th century. Also similar to the Korean *bipa* and Chinese *pipa*, there were many variations of the *biwa*; the most prominent and the variation discussed in this essay, however, was the *moso-biwa* or *kojin-biwa*, with four strings and a narrow body [5]. During the Edo period, the *biwa* was typically played as a musical pastime for samurais as well as merchant-class men, typically in the Kyushu region, most notably Satsuma. However, the *biwa* also played a dual role in religious contexts: it was performed in rituals for local religious belief, as well as spreading Buddhism through related musical pieces [5]. The *wuxian pipa* of Chinese culture had Buddhist aspects and was a popular tradition “associated with narrative singing” [2]. This tradition was believed to have travelled from India to China, and then Japan, where this musical practice “survived...for over a millenium” [2]. This section will address the *biwa*'s influence on the *biwa hoshi*, or “lute priests,” and their impact and role in securing the *biwa*'s cultural relevance.

Unlike the Chinese *pipa* or Korean *bipa*, the Japanese *biwa* was largely played whilst singing or speaking. It was performed according to the three fundamentals of Japanese vocal arts: spoken delivery (*ginsho*) or syllabic diction with heightened speech but without stable pitch or rhythm; recitation (*rosho*) or syllabic diction with stable pitch; and song (*eisho*) or non-syllabic diction with stable pitch. There were also pieces of narrative text: *fushi*, which was “emotive, poetic text with song-like delivery”, and *kotoba*, or “descriptive, prosodic text, with speech-like delivery style”. This unique bridging between instrument and voice also allowed for a greater storytelling aspect of the *biwa* than its other counterparts [5].

6. Biwa Hoshi, Oral Transmission, and Historical Narrative

The Japanese *biwa* is closely connected to the *biwa hoshi*, influencing how they developed their artistic and storytelling practices from the 12th century until its decline [6]. *Biwa hoshi* were blind travellers of low status who played the *biwa* in conjunction with spoken or sung verse, depicting grand tales or battles. They began, however, as a medium for performing “rituals to placate unsettled spirits attached to home or village”, with its plucked sound being able to transcend the mortal realm and reach the spirit world [7]. The blind nature of the *biwa hoshi* was related to an idea of karmic justice: if one was born blind, it was perceived as a “fortunate early warning that in this life one should at once occupy oneself with activities conducive to improved karma” [6]. In this manner, by committing oneself to learning and playing the *biwa*, a *biwa hoshi* would be most efficiently preparing oneself for reincarnation in hope for better next life, as they would directly be transmitting Buddhist messages and repenting for their past lives. Rather than simple ritualists, the *biwa hoshi* were then elevated into genuine “artist-performers of vocal narratives” [6].

One famous *biwa*-related work is Akashi no Kakuichi's (1299–1371) “Tale of the Heike”, or simply “Heike”. “Heike” has been christened as “Japan's greatest of all medieval narratives” and is an “oratio-like work made up of some 182 cantatas for solo bass voice and *biwa* accompaniment, each lasting for thirty to forty minutes”. “Heike” was so popular that it created its own subgenre of *biwa* playing called *heike biwa*, the act of chanting its episodes with *biwa* accompaniment [8].

“Tale of the Heike” details the Gempei War between the Genki and Heike clans, and the subsequent annihilation of the latter clan. The Gempei War was one which greatly affected the Japanese population: it “tore apart families on all levels of society” and “was everyone's history”. By immortalising the events in an art form, Kakuichi was then able to preserve the War's impact, so that rather than an unfortunate footnote in history, the Gempei War became “the war with which all subsequent wars were compared”, eventually leading to the downfall of the opposing Genki clan that won the Gempei war. In doing so through the *biwa*, Kakuichi linked the instrument to recent historical storytelling, expanding on its

previous use as a medium for old legends or Buddhist pieces. He and his work were instrumental to furthering the influence of the *biwa* [7].

However, following the Meiji Restoration (1868–1962) and an increased interest in Westernisation and Western instruments, the use of the *biwa* fell into decline [9]. Today, however, the *biwa* is still culturally present. For example, 20th century composer Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) composed four pieces during the 1960s and 1970s that include the *biwa* in their instrumentations. Two of these pieces combined the *biwa* with the Western orchestra, one of which was commissioned and performed by the New York Philharmonic, and two used them in combination with other traditional Japanese instruments [10]. In addition, popular Japanese anime Demon Slayer portrays supporting antagonist Nakime as a *biwa* player, highlighting that the *biwa* is still culturally significant [11].

7. The Korean Bipa: Cross-Cultural Role and Decline

The Korean *bipa* played a cross-cultural role between China and Korea. However, within Korea, it fell out of cultural significance. There are many variations of instruments under the umbrella term *bipa*. These include the *pipa*, a long necked lute plucked using an artificial nail, the *wolgum*, also called the *wanham*, a shorter lute with a straight neck played through striking with a wooden stick. The *wolgum* is also assumed as the oldest type of *bipa*, with archaeological evidence that it had been “introduced to the Northern part of Korea no later than the Fourth Century”, and generally accepted that China was the source of this transmission [12]. However, the most popular forms were the *tang-bipa* and the *hyang-bipa*. *Tang* was derived from the Tang Dynasty of China and literally translated as Chinese, whilst *hyang* literally translates to Korean. The main difference between the *tang-bipa* and the *hyang-bipa* is that the former has four strings and the latter has five. The distinction between the two will be expanded on later [12].

The *bipa* was mainly used in the royal court, in folk music, and for religious purposes. The *tang-bipa*, *hyang-bipa* and *wolgum* were all used, and during King Sejeong’s reign from 1418 to 1450, female musicians studying music were required to learn the *tang-bipa*. Concerts were also held at the Royal Court Music Department Training Institute. Apart from being used to accompany dance and song, it was also used to celebrate the birthdays of Ladies and Kings [13].

Korean court music and dance generally consists of *tangak* (Chinese court banquet music in Korea) and *hyangak* (court banquet music of Korean origin). *Tangak* previously simply referred to court music originating from China during the Tang Dynasty, but later came to refer to Chinese court banquet music from the Tang Dynasty onwards. However, there was still crossover between the two genres. *Tangak* instruments including the *tang-bipa*, *tang-p’iri* (double-reed pipe) and *tang-jok* (transverse flute) were frequently used in *hyangak* ensembles during the early Yi Dynasty [13].

The *bipa* – specifically the *tang-bipa* – was also used in folk music with the common people as well as literary scholars, which is mainly inferred by paintings and poems which speak on the *bipa*. The poem “Portrait of a Scholar-Gentleman”, for instance, depicts a scholar playing the *tang-bipa*, accompanied by objects symbolising literary and artistic pursuits around him such as a sword, brush and inkstone. In the painting “Danwon Do” by, the *tang-bipa* is similarly seen hanging in the background of a musical gathering, further demonstrating the ubiquitous nature of the *bipa* as well as great cultural importance [13].

Lastly, the *bipa* was also used for religious purposes. During the Unified Silla period, the *bipa* was popular amongst Buddhist monks. The *hyang-bipa* and *tang-pipa* were used in conjunction in religious and sacrificial rites. The Four Heavenly Kings are important Buddhist figures and protect the four cardinal directions. The symbol of one of the Kings, the King of the East or *jiguk-cheonwang*, is the *hyang-bipa*, demonstrating the importance of the *bipa* Buddhist contexts [13].

During colonisation of Korea by Imperial Japan, however, the *bipa* and Korean music and culture in general suffered a decline. This may have been partly due to changes of musical preference and less interest in traditional music due to globalisation, modernisation, and Westernisation. *Bipa* playing suffered so much that the original method of playing was lost [14]. In addition, compared to its Chinese and Japanese counterparts, there is no evidence that the *bipa* played as large of a storytelling role, with a largely symbolic legacy of cross-cultural communication between ancient China and Korea. Today, there are fewer than 10 players in Korea [15].

The differing cultural and narrative roles of the *pipa*, *biwa*, and *bipa* are summarised in Table 1. The comparison highlights how each instrument, despite shared origins, evolved to fulfil distinct storytelling

and social functions within its respective culture.

Table 1. Comparative cultural and narrative functions of the pipa, biwa, and bipa

Instrument	Primary Performance Context	Storytelling Role	Cultural Status
<i>Pipa</i>	Solo instrumental performance	Historical and narrative depiction (e.g., <i>The King Doffs His Armor</i>)	High social and religious status
<i>Biwa</i>	Vocal–instrumental narration	Buddhist teaching and historical narrative (<i>The Tale of the Heike</i>)	Religious and artistic
<i>Bipa</i>	Court, ritual, symbolic	Limited narrative function	Symbolic and ceremonial

8. Conclusion

Even though the Chinese *pipa*, Japanese *biwa* and Korean *bipa* have common roots, they evolved different functions in their respective cultures. The *pipa* gained long-term popularity due to its great social and religious importance, full solo repertoire, and flexibility of modern performance. Vocal narrative and Buddhist transmission were an inseparable part of the Japanese *biwa*, including the *biwa hoshi* and *The Tale of the Heike*, but it waned in the wake of Westernisation. The Korean *bipa*, in contrast, served its purposes mainly in courtly, religious and symbolic contexts and did not build the same powerful storytelling tradition. These two very different paths show the influence of common musical roots but with vastly varied cultural results.

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