

SUCCESSION, REFLECTION, AND COMMUNICATION: SHEN ZHENGGUO'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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Abstract

From a **micro-historical perspective**, it is crucial for understanding the development trajectory of traditional musical instruments. In the second half of the 20th century, China's modern national musical instruments underwent comprehensive reforms. In particular, the reforms centered on aligning with the Western symphony orchestra model and the 12-tone equal temperament system brought about earth-shaking transformations to China's musical traditions.

Along with the emergence of new education systems, innovative musical instruments, and original works, the music field took on a brand new look, thus forming the **new tradition of the 20th century**. Meanwhile, the old tradition was almost forgotten within the new institutional framework. However, in recent years, a wave of **looking back to tradition** centered on ancient traditional musical instruments has quietly emerged, gradually evolving into a prevailing trend in the field of traditional music.

Shen Zhengguo stands as a core figure in this academic upsurge. The research and practical work he has carried out are of profound significance for this wave of looking back to and reflecting on tradition.

This paper takes Shen Zhengguo as the research subject, focusing on his multiple identities and the practical journey he has undertaken over decades in deeply cultivating the field of traditional Chinese musical instrument culture. From engaging in the practical work of musical instrument production to carrying out cross-disciplinary exhibition curation and publishing academic monographs and from collaborating with experts and scholars in various fields to conducting joint research projects with internationally renowned museums, he holds multiple roles including musical instrument maker, restorer, photographer, researcher, and cultural communicator. He not only devotes himself to the meticulous study of craftsmanship with a file in hand, but also records the inheritance context through his written works.

Different from the influence-building paths of outstanding figures in other fields, Shen Zhengguo has delved deep into the local craftsmanship of musical instrument making, broken down the barriers between industrial practice and academic research, and effectively promoted the inheritance and dissemination of traditional musical instrument culture through cross-disciplinary and cross-border academic and artistic cooperation. He has not only become an important bridge connecting the inheritance of local traditional musical instruments with global cultural communication, but also created unique and irreplaceable value and exerted a far-reaching impact on the development process of traditional musical instruments.

Keywords

Shen Zhengguo, musical instrument making and restoration, musical instrument research, cultural communication

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, modern Chinese national music underwent comprehensive reforms. In particular, the musical instrument reforms centered on aligning with the Western symphony orchestra model and the 12-tone equal temperament system brought about earth-shaking transformations to China's musical traditions.

Along with the establishment of new education nationwide, the emergence of innovative musical instruments, and original works, the music field took on a completely new look, thus giving shape to the new tradition. Meanwhile, the old tradition was almost forgotten within the new institutional framework. In recent years, a wave of looking back to tradition centered on ancient traditional musical instruments has quietly emerged, gradually evolving into a prevailing trend in the field of academic traditional music represented by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Shen Zhengguo stands as a core figure in this academic upsurge.

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THE TREND OF LOOKING BACK TO TRADITION AND SHEN ZHENGGUO

In 20th-century China, there existed two books: one was the **wordless book of rural folks**, and the other was the **standardized textbook of urban dwellers**. The wordless book of rural folks, passed down orally and through practical demonstration, embodied the practice of local musical cultures. By contrast, the textbooks of urban dwellers established a dissemination model of **universal knowledge** by means of standardized, normalized, and pedagogic hierarchy-based instruction (Xiao Mei, 2020). Thus, in the second half of the 20th century, China's traditional music developed a new tradition of instrumental performance, represented by the academic school and centered on the conventional instruments of the national orchestra.

Discussions surrounding this new tradition sparked a minor upsurge at the turn of the century, epitomized by the special column *Creation and Development of Chinese National Instrumental Music* launched in the journal *People's Music* in 1995. Running for over six years, this series of discussions engaged nearly 40 participants and published 43 papers, garnering substantial public attention.

The contributors included composers, performers, theorists, and conductors, with their papers covering a wide array of topics: the historical instrumentation of the national orchestra, musical instrument reforms, composition, genres, value evaluation, and existing challenges. Examples of the debated issues included the feasibility of integrating modern national instrumental music with traditional music (Cui Xian), the composition of small-scale national instrumental works (Qin Pengzhang, Qiao Jianzhong), and the third model of Chinese national instrumental music proposed by Tian Qing.

Yet, an invisible barrier has long stood between academic discourse and practical implementation. The two have remained disparate, failing to form effective synergies. In 2003, Xiao Mei advocated for carrying forward the scholarly wisdom of past sages (Xiao Mei, 2003). By 2020, she called for retrieving what we have lost from the dustbin of history, arguing that the core of inheriting the old tradition and its musical practices lies in the dynamic, living performance by musicians (Xiao Mei, 2020).

Building on this perspective, the author of this paper proposes that we should start from the ontology and turn back to old musical instruments—within archival records—to explore the untapped potential of traditional instruments in terms of intonation, performing techniques, and timbre (Xing Yuan, 2025).

In recent years, a wave of looking back to tradition, centered on the research and performance of **old musical instruments as physical archives**, has quietly emerged. In 2019, the Center for Ritual Music Studies at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music presented *Silk Strings and Pure Tones: Reminiscing about the South of the Yangtze River*, bringing old musical instruments forgotten by society onto the stage. In the same year, the author participated in curating a series of events at the Oriental Musical Instrument Museum, including the *Centennial Datong Exhibition of Musical Instruments and Cultural Relics & Historical Materials*, as well as the *Datong Surviving Musical Instruments Concert*. From 2021 to 2022, the author continued to take part in planning a sequence of themed exhibitions on musical instruments, such as *Ode to Snow and Plum Blossoms: Commemorating Yueqin Maker Han Changshu through Ancient and Modern Yueqin*, *Looking Back at a Century of Erhu: Commemorative Exhibition of Wang Genxing's Craftsmanship Works*, and an *Exhibition of Surviving Pipa from the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, along with corresponding activities of instrument trial performance and appreciation.

The distinctiveness of these old instruments in terms of form, materials, and craftsmanship has sparked discussions between the old and new traditions regarding playing techniques, timbral colors, temperament standards, physical perception, and listening habits embodied in these vintage instruments (Cheng Zhiyi [程之伊], 2025).

Adopting methods of applied ethnomusicology and action ethnography as the paradigm for knowledge reproduction, the author has participated in Xiao Mei's research project, *Retrieving the Sound of Silk Strings*, since 2023. The project aims to reveal the driving forces behind the century-

long evolution of silk-string instruments in the Jiangnan region in terms of structure, timbre, playing techniques, and traditional repertoire through practical actions. It has also established the Yueyue Ensemble, composed mainly of students from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The project team has published a series of papers, addressing issues such as the restoration processes of erhu and pipa over the years, historical evidence discovered during restoration, challenges and key points in restoration, and various playing techniques and sonic aesthetics generated by different string materials.

The paramount keyword underlying all these theoretical and practical endeavors is: **silk strings**. And the source of all the instruments exhibited and performed is none other than the research subject of this paper: **Shen Zhengguo**.

Driven by this series of events, attention to **silk-string instruments** within the music community has been on a steady rise. In 2023, Qi Jie released her solo album *Anthology of Traditional Silk-String Pipa Works*. In 2024, Wu Man recorded and issued the album *Inquiring the Strings—A Century of Silk-String Pipa*. In 2025, Cai Xiangqin launched his album *Savoring Serenity—The Art of Cai Xiangqin's Silk-String Pipa*. Additionally, the recording projects featuring silk-string pipa and silk-string erhu by Tang Xiaofeng and Chen Chunyuan from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music are soon to be completed. Behind all these endeavors stands the core figure and the protagonist of this paper: Shen Zhengguo.

SHEN ZHENGGUO'S CAREER IN MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CRAFTSMANSHIP

Shen Zhengguo was born in Shanghai in 1962. His career in the field of traditional Chinese national musical instruments can be divided into three phases: the apprenticeship phase, the management phase, and the research phase.

In February 1976, during the era of Chinese educated youth going to the countryside and mountainous areas, the 14-year-old Shen Zhengguo enrolled in the vocational middle school sponsored by Shanghai No. 1 National Musical Instrument Factory, embarking on his work-study career in traditional Chinese musical instruments. The school system at that time arranged half a day for learning the cultural knowledge of musical instruments and instrumental performance, and the other half for working as an assistant to master craftsmen in the workshop to learn musical instrument making.

In 1980, Shen Zhengguo officially apprenticed himself to Shen Jueqing in the wind instrument workshop specializing in xiao, di, and sheng production, where he studied the playing and crafting techniques of wind instruments such as sheng and bawu. Thanks to his diligence and eagerness to learn during his apprenticeship, he was formally transferred to the Technology Section from 1984 to 1986, taking charge of documenting and sorting out the traditional craftsmanship of musical instrument making. Professor Shen refers to this period of experience as **immersive fieldwork**.

Over the 3-year period, Shen Zhengguo conducted interviews with nearly 20 renowned master craftsmen spanning the four major categories of Chinese musical instruments—wind, bowed-string, plucked-string, and percussion instruments. These masters included zheng maker Xu Zhenggao, bow maker He Shoukang, jinghu maker Xu Jinyuan, and erhu maker Zhang Longxiang. The scope of the interviews covered multiple dimensions, such as the masters' own apprenticeship experiences, material identification methods, craftsmanship techniques, technical expertise, and schemes for the optimization and improvement of musical instruments. Through the masters' **oral instruction and hands-on mentoring**, coupled with his persistent documentation and collation work, Shen Zhengguo gained a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the traditional craftsmanship of Chinese national musical instruments. This experience not only laid the groundwork for firsthand materials for his subsequent entry into enterprise management and staff training, but also enabled him to build profound friendships with the veteran masters, thus forging a solid network foundation for his later work in musical instrument research and restoration.

In 2008, Shen Zhengguo left the enterprise and founded **Dahetang Musical Instrument Culture Studio**, devoting himself entirely to musical instrument making and research. He integrated elements of traditional Chinese culture into instrument design, reproduced ancient musical instruments, restored dilapidated ones, built websites dedicated to traditional musical instruments, curated themed

exhibitions related to musical instruments, and published academic monographs, among other endeavors.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENT DESIGN AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

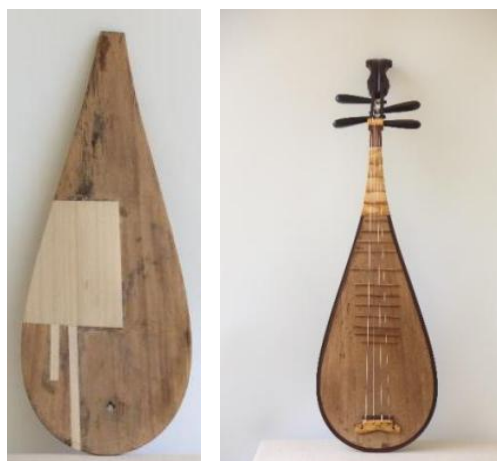
Shen Zhengguo has been fond of traditional Chinese culture since childhood and once studied traditional arts such as Chinese calligraphy and seal cutting. In musical instrument design, he excels at integrating traditional cultural symbols into instrument craftsmanship. For instance, a C-shaped jade dragon unearthed in 1971 from the Hongshan Culture (Neolithic Age) in Inner Mongolia is hailed as the **First Dragon of China** (Figure 1). Shen Zhengguo drew on this artifact as the design prototype for erhu peg boxes. He also designed the shape of erhu peg boxes inspired by *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, a widely known literary work in China (Figure 2).



Figures 1 and 2: Peg boxes of erhus (Photography by courtesy of Shen Zhengguo, 2021).

In the restoration of old musical instruments, he adheres to the fundamental principle of preserving **historical information to the minimum extent**, restoring these vintage instruments to their original appearance and sound while retaining their aged patina (Xing Yuan, 2022).

The author takes a phoenix-tailed pipa dating back to the late Qing Dynasty as an example. Before restoration, improper storage had caused a hole approximately 18 cm in height and 15 cm in width on its soundboard, through which he put steel springs inside the resonator cavity that were visible. Guided by the principle of preserving historical information, Shen Zhengguo refused to discard the nearly century-old soundboard, opting instead to repair the damaged area. He used a backing plate about 1.5 millimeters thick to mend the original 4-millimeter-thick soundboard (Figure 3). After restoration, he applied an aging and patina treatment to the pipa, making the soundboard still look like a century-old piece (Figure 4). Compared with the major restoration work on the instrument body, the selection of strings—the sound source of the pipa—is also of great importance.



Figures 3 and 4: Restoration of Pipas (Photography by courtesy of Shen Zhengguo, 2024).

As we all know, a massive wave of reform swept through Chinese national musical instruments in the 1950s and 1960s, during which the strings of almost all string instruments were switched from silk to steel. For restored old instruments, in consideration of the compatibility between the strings and the instrument materials, silk strings are chosen for all renovated old pipas, and this one was no exception.

However, silk strings have become an almost extinct musical instrument accessory in China. To address this issue, Shen Zhengguo has collaborated with Japanese silk-string manufacturers for years to develop silk strings of various specifications specially tailored for pipas. The restored pipa, which underwent such a **heart surgery**, has won recognition for its sound quality from many performers. Its owner said emotionally: **Shen Zhengguo has given it a second life!**

DOCUMENTATION AND PROMOTION OF TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CULTURE

The camera lens is the scholar's eye, he repeatedly said, and that was an important hint for further investigations. With the lens as his medium, Shen Zhengguo integrates his understanding and affection for musical instruments, capturing countless exquisite and unique photographs of instruments. Meanwhile, he documents the **instrument–craftsman–story** (object–person–event)

embedded in the processes of instrument making and restoration. These warm, evocative images are all taken with an old-fashioned camera—one that, after more than a decade of use, has developed a rich **patina** (the natural luster formed on an object through long-term handling). His photography relies entirely on natural light, a practice that Shen Zhengguo jokingly refers to as **depending on the weather for a living**.

Armed with these photographic works and a profound passion for traditional Chinese musical instruments, Shen Zhengguo has promoted these instruments through diverse means: curating themed exhibitions, delivering lectures on traditional musical instruments, and providing technical support for performers' recitals and recording projects. As mentioned earlier, he was the chief curator of numerous instrument-themed exhibitions held at the Oriental Musical Instrument Museum of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Thanks to his efforts, the **timbre of silk-string instruments**—a sonic legacy stretching back thousands of years in China, yet nearly lost to history—has been revived and garnered widespread attention. It was this very revival that inspired the launch of the project **Retrieving the Sound of Silk Strings**, with Shen Zhengguo serving as its core figure and contributor to its album releases. To date, two albums featuring this **historical sound** have been issued (Figure 5), and a third is currently in the recording phase.

Figure 5: A CD with cover for the project **Retrieving the Sound of Silk Strings** (Photography by courtesy of Shen Zhengguo, 2025).



Young scholars of the **academic school**, nurtured within the framework of the new and innovative tradition, have shown immense interest and enthusiasm for the so-called old tradition. A prime example is the Yueyue Ensemble, a small musical group composed of current students from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Under the joint guidance of experts from the Retrieving the Sound of Silk Strings project and faculty specializing in traditional instruments from the Conservatory's Department of Chinese Traditional Music, the ensemble has engaged in hands-on practice of performing and studying vintage instruments. In doing so, they have built a bridge between theory and practice—and Shen Zhengguo is the architect of this bridge.

COLLATION AND RESEARCH

Take the project **Retrieving the Sound of Silk Strings** as an example again. What exactly does the sound of silk strings sound like? In the field of Chinese musical instruments, silk strings are only retained on the guqin (seven-stringed zither). Yet, the tonal quality of silk strings on other string instruments such as the pipa, erhu, and sanxian remains unknown. Moreover, most silk strings used on guqin are manufactured in Japan. The craftsmanship of making silk strings has almost been lost in China (Liu Xiaomeng [刘小萌], 2014).

Shen Zhengguo collaborated with a century-old string-making enterprise in Japan to explore the different string-making techniques shaped by the distinct sonic aesthetic preferences in Chinese and Japanese music, from the perspectives of materials and craftsmanship. Historical records show that traditional Chinese string-making adopted fish bladder glue, while modern Japanese string-making techniques use glutinous rice glue. Even with silk of the same quality and quantity, the silk strings produced with different types of glue present subtle tonal differences: The tone of fish maw glue carries the metallic and **stone-like timbre** typical of Chinese music, while that of glutinous rice glue embodies **the elegance and purity** characteristic of Japanese music (Shen Zhengguo [沈正国] & Chen Shuming [陈书明], 2020).

Through years of exchanges, the Japanese company Marusan Strings has been able to produce strings that conform to the sonic aesthetic tastes of Chinese music on stage, as seen from the perspective of the organizers.

In recent years, Shen Zhengguo has continued to compile and publish the fruits of his research on musical instruments, cultural relics, and collation of historical materials, while promoting the development of relevant academic platforms. The monographs on Chinese national music that he has led or participated in compiling include: *The National Grand Music: A Critical Review of Instruments Made under Zheng Jinwen's Direction* at the Datong Music Society; *The Craft of Music: On-site Records of Traditional Chinese Musical Instrument Makers*; *Sounds Forged in Shanghai: Biographies of Shanghai's Traditional Musical Instrument Makers*, *Appreciation of Chinese Jinghu*, *Appreciation of Chinese Erhu*, *Appreciation of Chinese Pipa* as well as the series of monographs themed on the appreciation of Chinese national musical instruments. He founded **Zhongyue Tujian** [中乐图鉴]—an online museum of traditional Chinese musical instruments—and serves as its chief editor. With in-depth interpretations of national musical instruments in the form of pictures and texts, the platform currently features over 150 instrument case studies, making it an excellent resource for learning about traditional Chinese national musical instruments.

Thanks to his decades of dedication to the field of traditional Chinese musical instrument making and studying, Shen has been appointed as a special researcher at the Oriental Musical Instrument Museum of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Meanwhile, he has also been invited to collaborate with domestic and international collection institutions such as the Dunhuang Academy and the Deutsches Museum on research projects related to traditional musical instruments.

CONCLUSION

As emphasized in the abstract, the micro-historical perspective is crucial for sorting out the developmental context of the traditional musical instrument field—a perspective vividly embodied in Shen Zhengguo's life and career, further enriching our understanding of the tensions and evolutionary processes between the new tradition and old tradition in Chinese national music during the 20th century. In the second half of the 20th century, driven by reforms centered on aligning Chinese musical instruments with Western orchestra models and the 12-tone equal temperament system, China's musical tradition underwent drastic transformations, giving birth to the 20th-century new tradition. Meanwhile, the old tradition was on the verge of being forgotten under the new institutional framework. It is against this historical backdrop that a wave of looking back to tradition centered on ancient traditional musical instruments has quietly emerged in recent years. As the core figure of this wave, Shen Zhengguo, through his practical endeavors, has endowed the contemporary inheritance of traditional music with profound theoretical significance in the process of **continuing the roots of craftsmanship, reflecting on traditional values, and disseminating cultural cores**.

Shen Zhengguo entered the field of traditional Chinese musical instrument making at the end of China's planned economy era. This special historical period provided him with a unique opportunity to connect the fragmented old tradition and the institutionalized new tradition. In Shanghai, China's largest commercial city, the Shanghai No. 1 National Musical Instrument Factory, restructured from over a hundred traditional handicraft workshops, offered him an irreplaceable practical platform. This platform not only witnessed the entire process of China's musical instrument industry establishing a public ownership-dominated production system, enterprises implementing independent innovation and brand strategies, and Chinese musical instruments gradually stepping onto the world stage, but also enabled Shen Zhengguo to access a full range of traditional musical instruments covering various ethnic groups and local operas—a learning condition beyond the reach of other musical instrument craftsmen—laying a solid foundation for **continuing diverse traditional craftsmanship**. As a leading enterprise in the industry, the Shanghai No. 1 National Musical Instrument Factory spearheaded the development trend of Chinese musical instruments. As a participant and witness of this historical process, Shen Zhengguo absorbed the essence of the old tradition through hands-on practice while deeply grasping the core connotation of the instrumental new tradition, laying a solid groundwork for subsequent **reflections on the aesthetics of traditional music appreciation and musical instrument making**.

From an apprentice to a manager, and from musical instrument making to academic research, Shen Zhengguo's life trajectory is a complete interpretation of the practical path of looking back to and reflecting on tradition. As a rare interdisciplinary musical organologist in the field of traditional Chinese musical instruments, he held a file in one hand to **continue traditional craftsmanship** and

a pen in the other to document inheritance and **reflect on gains and losses**. Through long-term cooperation with experts in both the manufacturing and performing sectors, he broke down the long-standing barriers between industrial practice and academic research under the new tradition system. Unlike the influence-building paths of outstanding figures in other fields, he rooted himself in local musical instrument-making craftsmanship and vigorously promoted the inheritance and dissemination of traditional musical instrument culture through conducting cross-disciplinary and transnational academic and artistic collaborations—such as partnering with Japanese string makers and Australian performers, and carrying out joint research with the Deutsches Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Shen Zhengguo's core contributions are not only a concrete embodiment of the looking back to tradition trend, but also a theoretical supplement to the evolution of China's musical tradition. He has not only promoted the continuous improvement of the craftsmanship of Chinese musical instrument making and restoration, but also reshaped the humanistic value of instrument makers who were once marginalized in the new tradition system, endowing traditional craftsmanship with both cultural depth and humanistic warmth. More importantly, through in-depth exploration of the essence of traditional musical instrument making and with diverse collaborations—such as that with Marusan Strings—as a link, he has provided key support for global research on Chinese musical instrument collections, advanced the development of China's national musical instrument making and research field, and built a crucial bridge between the inheritance of local traditional musical instruments and global cultural dissemination. His practices fully prove that the old tradition is not a dusty historical relic, but a living resource that can coexist with the new tradition, offering important enlightenment for the sustainable development of traditional Chinese music.

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ABSTRACT IN CHINESE LANGUAGE

从微观史学视角出发，这对厘清传统乐器的发展脉络至关重要。20 世纪后半叶，中国现代民族乐器经历了全方位改革。尤其是以对标西方交响乐团建制、契合十二平均律体系为核心的改革，给中国音乐传统带来了翻天覆地的变革。随着新式教育体系、创新型乐器及原创音乐作品的相继涌现，音乐领域面貌焕然一新，由此形成了 20 世纪的新传统。与此同时，旧有传统在新的体制框架下几近被淡忘。而近年来，一股以古传传统乐器为核心的回归传统思潮悄然兴起，并逐步发展为传统音乐领域的主流趋势。沈正国是这一学术热潮中的核心代表人物。他所开展的研究与实践工作，对此次传统回溯与反思思潮具有深远意义。

本文以沈正国为研究对象，聚焦其多重身份，以及数十年来深耕中国传统乐器文化领域的实践历程。从投身乐器制作实务，到跨界策划展览、出版学术专著；从与各界专家学者合作交流，到携手国际知名博物馆开展联合研究项目，他身兼乐器制作师、文物修复师、摄影研究者、学术研究者与文化传播者等多重身份。他既手握锉刀潜心钻研工艺技艺，又以笔墨著述记录文脉传承。不同于其他领域名家的成名与影响力构建路径，沈正国深耕本土乐器制作传统工艺，打通产业实践与学术研究之间的壁垒，通过跨学科、跨地域的学术与艺术合作，有力推动了传统乐器文化的传承与传播。他不仅成为连接本土传统乐器传承与全球文化交流的重要纽带，更在传统乐器发展进程中创造了独特且不可替代的价值，产生了深远影响。

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