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Constructing a Generational Framework for Guzheng Practice in Malaysia: Social Location, Cultural Memory, and Transmission

Construção de um Quadro Geracional para a Prática de Guzheng entre os Chineses da Malásia: Lugar Social, Memória Cultural e Transmissão Musical

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Abstract: Within Malaysia's postcolonial social context, the guzheng has undergone not mere technical continuation but structural reconfiguration. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur and Penang (2022–2025) and integrating Mannheim's generational location with Turino's diasporic/cosmopolitan distinction and Slobin's micromusics framework, this paper constructs an intergenerational analytical framework. Through comparative analysis of learning pathways, authority sources, and capital forms, three generational patterns emerge. The first generation relied on clan networks and embodied memory, yet with internal tensions between elite and community transmission. The second generation undertook localization experiments but operated as competing logics rather than a coherent trajectory. The third generation pursues institutional legitimacy through Chinese conservatory credentials and digital media, while maintaining structural closure beneath

hybrid performance surfaces. The core of transmission lies in the transformation of legitimacy-validation mechanisms from embodied memory to institutional certification, and increasingly to bureaucratic legitimacy reinforced by mediatized visibility and episodic state co-optation. This framework elucidates how the guzheng continually reshapes its cultural authority, offering a structural perspective on the evolution of diaspora music.

Keywords: Generational Analysis, Guzheng, Malaysian Chinese, Cultural Transmission, Social Location

Resumo: No contexto social pós-colonial da Malásia, o guzheng não se limitou a uma mera continuidade técnica, mas passou por uma reconfiguração estrutural. Com base em trabalho de campo etnográfico realizado em Kuala Lumpur e Penang entre 2022 e 2025, e integrando o conceito de posição geracional de Mannheim, a distinção diaspórica/cosmopolita de Turino e o quadro das micromúsicas de Slobin, este artigo constrói um quadro analítico intergeracional. Por meio da análise comparativa de trajetórias de aprendizagem, fontes de autoridade e formas de capital, emergem três padrões geracionais. A primeira geração apoiou-se em redes associativas e na memória incorporada, embora houvesse tensões internas entre a transmissão de elite e a de caráter comunitário. A segunda geração empreendeu experiências de localização, mas operou como lógicas concorrentes, em vez de uma trajetória coerente. A terceira geração busca legitimidade institucional por meio de credenciais de conservatórios chineses e mídia digital, mantendo, no entanto, um fechamento estrutural sob superfícies de performance híbridas. O cerne da transmissão reside na transformação dos mecanismos de validação da legitimidade da memória incorporada à certificação institucional, cada vez mais voltada para uma legitimidade burocrática reforçada pela visibilidade mediatizada e pela cooptação estatal episódica. Este

quadro elucida como o guzheng reconfigura continuamente sua autoridade cultural, oferecendo uma perspectiva estrutural sobre a evolução das culturas musicais em diáspora.

Palavras-chave: Análise Geracional, Guzheng, Chineses da Malásia, Transmissão Cultural, Lugar Social

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Introduction

In 2023, in a studio cluttered with old scores and spare strings in Kuala Lumpur, I encountered a sixteen-string steel-string guzheng (see figure 1). Its lacquer was chipped, its strings darkened with age. At Budong Academy, the owner pulled it out from a corner and told me: "Most people don't play this anymore. Everyone uses the twenty-one-string nylon-wound zheng now. This old one can only play traditional pieces; it can't handle the kind of repertoire popular in mainland conservatories. But we used to play on this. If you replace it? That taste is gone."

Figure 1 - sixteen-string steel-string guzheng from the 1960s

Source: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork at Budong Academy, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 20 March 2023. Description of the image: A sixteen-string steel-string guzheng from the 1960s, showing aged lacquer and strings.

He casually played the Hanya Xishui (寒鸦戏水). The metallic ring of the steel strings was bright and prolonged. When his left hand pressed down and vibrated, that yunwei seemed to seep out from between the steel wires.

At that moment, I realized that between this old instrument and the row of twenty-one-string nylon zhengs leaning against the wall stood not merely decades of technical refinement, but a whole set of competing criteria about what counts as "right."

Within the context of Malaysia's postcolonial, multi-ethnic society, musical practice transcends mere aesthetic engagement. It constitutes a vital social mechanism through which collective

memory, cultural legitimacy, and identity are continually negotiated (Tan, 2000; Sarkissian, 2005). As one of the most widely disseminated and institutionalized instruments in China's musical tradition, the guzheng underwent significant transformations in performance practices after its introduction to Malaysia by Chinese immigrants in the mid-20th century. These shifts encompassed a progression from early protective practices reliant on clan associations and community networks, through explorations of localization pathways within the Cold War and national cultural policy contexts, to the present highly academicized, mediatized, and transnationalized professional forms. This transformative process has long been simplistically characterized as "transmission" or "continuity" (Chen, 2024).

Existing research, whilst valuable for archival accumulation, has primarily focused on individual figures or chronological accounts (e.g., Chen, 1991; Yuan & Loo, 2024), often portraying overseas Chinese music as a passive extension of Chinese tradition due to a lack of structural analysis of variations among performing groups. Consequently, the subjective capacity for reconfiguration demonstrated by guzheng practices across historical phases is frequently overlooked. To overcome the limitations of this linear historical perspective and gain deeper insight into the evolutionary logic of dispersed musical cultures, this paper addresses two core research questions. Legitimacy is conceived not merely as a cultural value or symbolic attribute, but as a structural mechanism embedded within shifting fields of power. Rather than asking whether tradition is preserved or transformed, the analysis focuses on how authority is produced, validated, and reorganized under changing historical conditions. (1) Based on a generational perspective of social location, what structural differences do Malaysian Chinese guzheng practitioners exhibit across different historical stages? (2) During this process of generational succession, how have the sources of authority and mechanisms of legitimacy for guzheng transmission been reorganized?

This paper argues that generation serves as a key analytical entry point for answering these questions. However, generation here is not defined in the conventional sense based on biological age or birth year, but rather as a sociological unit of analysis. Drawing on Karl Mannheim's theory of social location, this paper defines a generation as a group of practitioners who, under specific historical conditions, confront similar institutional opportunities, educational resources, and media environments, thereby forming a shared logic of practice and a shared structure of experience (Mannheim, 1952). In this sense, generations are not naturally generated; they are the result of the combined effects of social structure, historical opportunity, and the cultural field (Pilcher, 1994).

While Mannheim's sociology of generations provides the foundational framework for understanding how historical positioning shapes practice, Thomas Turino's (2008) distinction between diasporic and cosmopolitan formations offers a more musically grounded lens for interpreting the generational shift observed in Malaysian guzheng practice. In Music as Social Life, Turino defines diasporic practices as those oriented toward "maintaining homeland connections in a new context," whereas cosmopolitan practices involve "a self-conscious, reflexive stance toward the wider world" (Turino, 2008, p. 7). This distinction directly illuminates the Malaysian case: the first generation's embodied, homeland-centered transmission rooted in clan networks, oral instruction, and the sonic markers of Teochew traditions aligns with the diasporic model. In contrast, the third generation's strategic alignment with Chinese conservatory credentials, transnational competition circuits, and digital media visibility reflects a cosmopolitan strategy for professional legitimacy. Turino's framework thus moves beyond a purely sociological understanding of generations to a more nuanced analysis of how musical practices themselves enact different modes of cultural positioning from the preservation of an audible homeland to the pursuit of institutionally certified professionalism.

Situating Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice within Mark Slobin's framework of micromusics further sharpens the analytical focus. As Slobin (1993) argues, micromusics are small musics in big systems, cultural formations that are embedded within, yet constantly negotiate with, dominant supercultures and cross-cutting intercultures. In the Malaysian context, the guzheng operates at the intersection of three structural forces: the Chinese community's internal desire for cultural continuity and authenticity (the subculture), the Malaysian state's discourse of multicultural diversity (the superculture), and the transnational authority of Chinese conservatory standards (the interculture). Rather than treating Malaysian guzheng practice as a marginal or exotic anomaly, Slobin's perspective reveals it as a strategic negotiation between multiple centers of cultural authority at the local, national, and transnational. This framework moves the analysis beyond a linear narrative of transmission as continuation toward understanding how peripheral musical traditions actively reposition themselves within shifting power structures.

Based on this understanding, this paper proposes a three-generation framework for analyzing Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice. This framework is not a pre-set chronological division but is generated through a comparative analysis of long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2025). Specifically, by examining dimensions such as the practitioners' learning pathways, sources of authority, forms of capital, and primary fields of practice, this paper systematically compares the action logic of guzheng practitioners in different historical stages. It identifies three generational types with significant structural differences: the First Generation, centered on diasporic memory and community preservation, established authority primarily upon embodied mastery and clan networks; the Second Generation, operating amidst political and cultural institutional uncertainty, engaged in exploratory practice, reshaping the social function of the guzheng through localization efforts and staged performances (Carstens, 2005); the Third Generation, coming of age in an environment of globalization and digital media, increasingly relies on academic accreditation and the accumulation of institutionalized capital for cultural legitimacy.

The core contribution of this paper lies in redefining the concept of transmission, a term frequently used but often naturalized in ethnomusicological research. This paper contends that rather than understanding transmission as the linear continuation of skills and styles, it should be viewed as a process of continuous structural reconfiguration driven by changes in social structure (Rice, 2014). In the case of the Malaysian guzheng, tradition is not a fixed cultural object, but a set of continuously re-validated mechanisms: the first generation established orthodoxy through *xiangyin*（乡音）[1] and ritual practice; the second generation sought adaptability through localization and the reshaping of social functions; and the third generation obtains legitimacy through diplomas, institutions, and media visibility. The content of tradition may change, but the pursuit of orthodoxy remains constant throughout.

By constructing this generational analytical framework, this paper not only provides a structural perspective on the historical evolution of Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice but also offers transferable analytical tools for studying the mechanisms of reorganization of musical traditions in diasporic contexts. Finally, the paper notes that while this framework lays the foundation for future research on the strategic actions of specific generations (especially the third generation), the in-depth discussion of relevant micro-mechanisms will be left to subsequent studies.

1. Materials and Analytical Framework

1.1 Fieldwork and Data Sources

This article draws upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Malaysia between 2022 and 2025. The fieldwork primarily focused on two representative urban centers: Kuala Lumpur and Penang. As the hub for Malaysian Chinese music

1 *Xiangyin* (乡音), literally translating to "hometown sound" or "native accent," originally refers to the distinct phonetic and tonal characteristics of a specific regional dialect (e.g., Chaozhou or Cantonese). In the context of diasporic musicking, this term extends beyond linguistics to encompass specific musical nuances, modal inflections, and timbral aesthetics that distinguish a regional style from standardized forms. For the first generation of immigrants, preserving *Xiangyin* served as a vital mechanism for maintaining an affective bond with the ancestral homeland and asserting the authenticity of their cultural lineage against the pressures of assimilation.

education, professional performance, and transnational cultural exchange, Kuala Lumpur encapsulates the trends of academicization and institutionalization within guzheng practice. Conversely, Penang retains denser community networks and historical memory structures, serving as a crucial site for observing early modes of transmission and generational continuity. Through sustained engagement and comparative observation across these two locales, this study captures the distinct manifestations of guzheng practice embedded in their respective social structures and cultural milieus.

In terms of data collection, this study integrates diverse qualitative materials typical of ethnomusicological research to ensure analytical depth and multi-source triangulation. First, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 guzheng practitioners (including teachers, performers, and students) across different historical periods and generations. These interviews systematically explored their learning trajectories, lineage backgrounds, performance pathways, understandings of authenticity, and perceptions of their own generational locations. Second, sustained participant observation was carried out throughout the fieldwork period. The researcher documented specific contexts, including daily instruction, rehearsal processes, public performances, and community rituals, thereby uncovering the implicit norms and power dynamics operating within these practices.

Furthermore, the study systematically collated relevant archival and media materials, such as course syllabi, examination repertoires, concert programs, and performance videos, to compare how different generations engage with institutional frameworks. To supplement contemporary ethnographic data, the researcher also examined early publications from Chinese associations, newspaper reports, and social media content. These archival and digital traces are instrumental in tracing the evolving public presentation of guzheng practice and understanding how shifting media environments have influenced the construction of cultural authority.

Methodologically, this study adheres to the principles of long-term ethnography and data triangulation emphasized in ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Rice, 2014). By cross-referencing interview transcripts, observational field notes, and archival documents, the research minimizes the narrative biases inherent in relying on a single data source. It is important to note that this study does not aim to achieve statistical representativeness of the sample to generalize to the entirety of Malaysian guzheng practice. Instead, it aims to uncover the dominant patterns of generational structures and transmission mechanisms through an in-depth analysis of typified practice pathways and social locations.

The ethnographic fieldwork and collected materials constitute the empirical foundation for the generational division and analytical framework proposed in this article. They directly substantiate the subsequent comparative analysis of practice logics, sources of authority, and the structural differences in capital allocation across different generations.

1.2 Analytical Logic of Generational Division

This study employs thematic analysis using an inductive approach, a bottom-up data-processing strategy aimed at extracting core patterns from raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This implies that the concept of generation in this study is not a predetermined biological periodization. Rather, it is a structural outcome that naturally emerged through the coding and constant comparison of ethnographic interview transcripts, observation notes, and archival documents.

During the data analysis phase, drawing upon Bourdieu's field theory and recent discussions in the sociology of music regarding "music learning ecologies" (Bourdieu, 1993; Wright, 2010), this study established four core comparative dimensions:

- *Learning Pathways:* Examining the evolution of knowledge transmission media, namely the shift from early oral

transmission to mid-stage semi-institutionalized association teaching, and ultimately to late-stage highly standardized conservatory training and online learning (Schippers & Grant, 2016).

- *Sources of Authority:* Analyzing the criteria defining "who is a qualified musician," and tracing how authority transfers from lineage relationships to academic credentials and digital traffic (Waldron et al., 2020).
- *Forms of Capital:* Distinguishing between embodied cultural capital and institutionalized cultural capital and observing the differences in their conversion rates as perceived by different generations (Bull, 2016).
- *Fields of Practice:* Tracing the diffusion of guzheng performance spaces from clan associations to public stages and virtual environments.

Through a comprehensive analysis of these dimensions, this study found that although practitioners of varying ages coexist in the same temporal and spatial context, they exhibit distinct clustering characteristics across the four dimensions. It is precisely these structural differences that demarcate the boundaries of the three generations. The generational analysis framework of Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice proposed in this study, along with the core structural characteristics of each generation, is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Generational framework of Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice: a structural comparison

Analytical Dimensions	**First Generation** (1950s–1970s) The Diasporic / *Preservation*	**Second Generation** (1970s–2000s) The Explorers / Localization	**Third Generation** (2000s–Present) *The Professionals / Reconstruction*
Learning Pathway	**Oral / Master-Apprentice** Oral transmission; reliance on clan and geo-linguistic networks.	**Semi-Institutional** Association-based group classes; attempts at localized teaching materials.	**Institutional / Digital** Standardized conservatory training; online courses.

Source of Authority	**Lineage & Memory** Master-disciple lineage; diasporic memory. *(e.g., Louis Chen)*	**Local Adaptation** Local adaptability; stage performativity. *(e.g., Tan Chong Pen)*	**Credentials & Media** Academic credentials; competition awards; online visibility/traffic. *(e.g., Sara Heng)*
Capital Form	**Embodied Capital** Embodied techniques; sounds of the homeland.	**Social Capital** Localized social networks, functional utility.	**Institutional Capital** Academic degrees; professional certificates; transnational recognition.
Primary Field	**Clan Associations** Clan associations; ritual spaces.	**Public Halls / Schools** Chinese assembly halls; Chinese-medium schools.	**Concert Halls / Social Media** Professional concert halls; virtual spaces.

Source: Adapted from the author's fieldwork analysis.

1.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was not a discrete phase following data collection but an iterative process that began with the first fieldwork encounter and continued throughout the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 167). Following a reflexive ethnographic logic, the analysis moved between emic understandings, which captured how guzheng practitioners themselves categorized their learning experiences and evaluative standards, and etic analytical categories developed through systematic comparison (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, pp. 238-241). The goal was to ensure that the generational framework emerged from the empirical material without being mechanically imposed.

Progressive focusing and open coding

The initial fieldwork was exploratory, guided by foreshadowed problems concerning how transmission and evaluation practices might have changed across generations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 22). Early interviews and observations were transcribed and subjected to open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 195-197). This involved breaking data into discrete incidents, asking questions of the data (e.g., "What is this an example of?" "What conditions surround this practice?"), and assigning conceptual labels. For example, when a first-generation participant described

learning by watching a teacher without written scores, this was coded as oral/aesthetic transmission; when a third-generation participant discussed preparing for graded examinations, this was coded as institutional certification. Approximately 80 initial codes were generated. Rather than treating this coding as a mechanical procedure, the researcher remained attentive to the interpretive work involved, recognizing that categories were constructed through an ongoing dialogue between data and emerging analytical ideas (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 173).

Axial coding, constant comparison, and negative cases

Through constant comparison across interviews, observations, and archival materials, similar codes were grouped into higher-order categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 156-160; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, pp. 177-178). For instance, codes related to master-apprentice relationships, ornamentation as aesthetic core, clan performance, and community elders as judges converged into the category of embodied legitimacy for the first generation. Codes such as conservatory diploma, competition repertoire, and university lecturer position converged to confer institutional legitimacy on the third generation. Throughout this process, negative cases, defined as instances that did not fit the emerging pattern, were actively sought and examined (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 184; Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 308). For example, second-generation practitioners who maintained traditional notation against standardization trends were analyzed not as anomalies to be discarded but as counterpoints that validated the overall generational logic by clarifying its boundaries. This iterative process consolidated the initial 80 codes into 24 concepts and subsequently into 6 core categories.

Theoretical integration, saturation, and memoing

The relationships between categories were explored through diagramming and analytical memo writing. A core category, the reconfiguration of legitimacy validation mechanisms, was

identified as the central theme that integrates all other categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 187-190). Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new properties or dimensions of the core categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 135). However, following Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019, p. 173) caution against treating saturation as a mechanical rule, this judgement was based on the researcher's cumulative understanding of the field rather than on a pre-set number of cases. Throughout the analysis, memos were written not only to record analytical decisions but also to document the researcher's own evolving interpretations, uncertainties, and shifts in focus, thereby making the analytical process transparent and accountable (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, pp. 163-164). This systematic yet reflexive process ensured that the generational categories are grounded in practitioners' lived experiences and are neither chronologically deterministic nor imposed by prior theoretical presuppositions.

1.4 Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

This study strictly adheres to the ethical guidelines of ethnomusicological fieldwork. All participants engaged in the research with informed consent. To protect privacy, pseudonyms are used for any sensitive data concerning non-public figures (Barz & Cooley, 2008).

Furthermore, the researcher navigates a dual positionality as both an insider and an outsider throughout this study. As a professionally trained guzheng performer, the researcher utilizes this insider identity to acutely perceive technical nuances and implicit industry norms grounded in embodied knowledge. However, operating simultaneously as a researcher engaged in theoretical production within an academic institution requires maintaining a constant reflexive distance from personal aesthetic preferences. It is crucial to avoid imposing individual artistic standards on the diverse logics of practice across generations.

Such a reflexive stance permeates the entire trajectory of data collection and analysis, ensuring that the generational framework is constructed on the lived experiences of practitioners rather than the researcher's subjective presuppositions.

2. Empirical Findings: The Generational Evolution of Guzheng Practice

Drawing on the aforementioned ethnographic data and analytical methods, this section systematically presents the primary empirical findings on Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice, organized by the proposed generational framework. It must be emphasized that the following analysis is not a linear recounting of guzheng development history. Instead, through generational comparison, it demonstrates the structural differences among practitioners across periods in social locations, learning pathways, sources of authority, and capital allocation. To enhance readability and comparability, this section proceeds chronologically by generation, analytically describing the core practice logic, basis of legitimacy, and the supporting social fields for each cohort. Through this structural presentation, this article aims to reveal how the guzheng transmission mechanism underwent dominant reconfigurations across different historical stages.

2.1 The First Generation: Echoes in the Clan Association and the Embodiment of Diasporic Memory

For the first generation of Malaysian Chinese guzheng practitioners active between the 1950s and 1970s, the guzheng was not a delicate instrument displayed under concert hall spotlights. Rather, it was a cultural artifact deeply embedded within the vibrant, everyday soundscapes of clan associations and geo-linguistic organizations. During this period, the practical logic of playing the guzheng was not the pursuit of artistic excellence in a modern sense. It functioned as a form of "musicking" (Small, 1998)

aimed at sustaining emotional connections with the homeland within diasporic spaces filled with dialect chatter and festival rituals.

Oral Transmission and Bodily Memory

Regarding learning pathways, this generation did not rely on standardized textbooks or grading systems as intermediaries. The transmission of skills was a highly embodied, interactive process in which learners typically attached themselves to senior association members and acquired techniques through intensive observation and imitation. This oral master-apprentice model was not merely a transfer of skills but a process of bodily discipline and the inscription of memory. As embodied by early masters such as Louis Chen, the charm, or yunweiwei, of the guzheng was not recorded in musical scores; it was concealed within the dynamic subtleties of right-hand plucking force and left-hand vibrato and portamento. One of Louis Chen's students, a second-generation practitioner, recalled his learning experience this way:

> He really cared about that yunwei, that specific flavor. He wouldn't just tell me 'You need more yunwei.' He would sing it for me first, how the pitch rises and falls, what kind of flavor that yunwei should have. If my playing sounded 'flat' and lacked that yunwei, he would say, 'This is no longer Teochew zheng.' Then he would keep correcting my left hand until I pressed out that exact flavor. (Interview with P02, May 2024)

Such tacit knowledge, transmitted face-to-face and inscribed in bodily memory through repeated correction and imitation, could not be extracted through the rational analysis of modern conservatories. It had to be internalized as muscle memory, almost physiologically, through prolonged master-disciple co-presence. For the first generation, playing the instrument was less about performance and more about allowing the body to re-experience a distant cultural memory.

Localized Authority: Sounds of the Homeland and Relational Networks

During this stage, the authority to define "good music" was not held by distant music conservatories but was rooted in the relational networks within the local community. The legitimacy of first-generation practitioners was established on the basis of auditory authenticity. The ultimate criterion for evaluating a performer's proficiency was whether their music sounded sufficiently authentic and whether it could evoke the auditory imagination of the sounds of the homeland among community elders. This authority was pre-institutional, relying heavily on the performer's long-term service and accumulated reputation within the clan association. As ethnomusicologists have noted, although authority built upon cultural intimacy is difficult to convert into cross-ethnic universal capital, it possesses immense emotional mobilization power within the Chinese immigrant community (Herzfeld, 2016).

Embodied Capital as an "Emotional Vessel"

From Bourdieu's perspective on capital, the first-generation practitioners primarily possessed embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Their techniques were tightly intertwined with specific interpersonal relationships and regional dialects, making them difficult to extract and convert into modern diplomas or awards. In that era, the public display of the guzheng was largely functional. It appeared alongside the gongs and drums of Cantonese opera, backstage at Teochew theater, or during festival rituals. Although this practice lacked the independence of the modern stage, it possessed strong social cohesion. Here, the guzheng was not merely an instrument but an "emotional vessel" carrying the diasporic group's imaginative reconstruction of their homeland.

Beneath this narrative, however, a tension persisted: between Louis Chen's elite, text-based legitimacy and the kinship-oriented, oral transmission of ordinary clan musicians. This internal division between orthodox canon and lived experience prefigured later field differentiation.

In summary, the first generation of guzheng practice exhibited a distinct logic of preservation. This logic aimed not at innovation but at resisting amnesia. By repeatedly performing the sounds of the homeland on foreign soil, first-generation guzheng practitioners transformed diasporic anxiety into embodied techniques, thereby establishing the initial cultural anchor for Malaysian Chinese music.

2.2 The Second Generation (1970s–2000s): Field Differentiation and the Emergence of Generational Units

The second generation of guzheng practitioners was active from the 1970s to the 2000s. During this period, Malaysia was undergoing a transition following the implementation of the National Culture Policy. Compounded by political isolation from the Chinese motherland, the development of the guzheng faced the dual structural constraints of resource rupture and identity marginalization (Tan, 2000). Based on the aforementioned analytical framework, this study finds that this generation of practitioners did not form a homogeneous preservation model like the first generation. Instead, significant field differentiation emerged. As Mannheim (1952) pointed out, individuals of the same generation form different generational units due to their varying strategies for coping with social change. In this stage, four representative figures reconstructed the local survival space of the guzheng by occupying different social spaces and mobilizing various forms of capital across four dimensions: public performance, educational networks, theoretical discourse, and traditional lineage.

Tan Chong Pen: The Shift from Ritual Space to Public Stage

Tan Chong Pen's practice pathway epitomizes the fundamental shift of the practice field from private to public spaces. As a public institutionalizer of this era, he was the first practitioner to detach the guzheng from the ritual accompaniment of clan associations and integrate it into the modern public performance system. According to archival records, his solo recital at the Penang Chinese Girls' High School auditorium in 1974 marked the formal entry of the

guzheng into the presentational performance field, establishing the legitimacy of solo performance as an independent aesthetic object. Regarding learning pathways, unlike the first-generation private master-apprentice system, Tan opened public courses at a piano shop in 1971. This initiative incorporated guzheng teaching into the logic of modern commercial music education, giving the learning pathway early semi-institutionalized characteristics. Through this spatial displacement, Tan stripped the guzheng of its ritual attachments and endowed it with the independent authority of modern stage art.

Lai Ah Lai: Network Capital and Localized Standardization

Lai Ah Lai's contribution lies in addressing the rupture in capital accumulation and social reproduction within guzheng education. Rather than relying on a fully institutionalized conservatory-based pathway, Lai developed an alternative mechanism by accumulating and converting network capital. By integrating the resources of Chinese orchestras in local secondary schools, including both national-type and independent schools, and by establishing the Zhongyi Chinese Music Center, he constructed a community-based support system that enabled students to continue their musical participation beyond the school setting. As he articulated his educational strategy to overcome the phenomenon where graduation often meant the end of musical practice:

> In secondary schools, students treat playing as a mere extracurricular activity. Once they graduate, they usually stop completely because they lose their platform. By establishing the music center, my primary goal was to organize these students who already have a solid foundation, so that our local musical talents will not be lost. We had to build our own network to keep them playing. (Interview with Lai Ah Lai, February 2025)

His authority was therefore not limited to solo performance or classroom instruction but was also grounded in his capacity

to mobilize students, schools, and community-based musical resources on a larger scale. Meanwhile, his 2014 appointment as the Malaysia-based director/examiner for the Chinese Music Examinations of the National University of Singapore Center for the Arts suggests his involvement in an external assessment framework rather than the establishment of a complete certification pathway. This role helped connect local guzheng teaching to a broader regional mechanism for musical evaluation, while remaining embedded in school- and community-based practice. Through this process, Lai transformed fragmented extracurricular activities into a more continuous educational structure, establishing a form of functional authority based on community networks and localized standardization.

Phang Kwong Poh: Aesthetic Reconstruction and Complex Tone Theory

The core of Phang Kwong Poh's practice lies in the theoretical reconstruction of the sources of authority. Diverging from modern schools that prioritized speed and technique, Phang established an interpretive power grounded in localized thinking by proposing the Complex-Tone theory. He opposed treating the *guzheng* as a mere melodic instrument and advocated for establishing its ontological value through left-hand microtonal variations (Wang, 2016). In the competition over capital forms, he rejected "typewriter-like" mechanical techniques. As Phang explained in the interview:

> The melodies of Western music flow horizontally, but the complex tone of the *guzheng* is vertical. It consists of a principal note supplemented by the left hand's variations, such as pressing, gliding, vibrating, and kneading. If you remove the charm (*yunwei*) of the left hand, you are left with only single, dead notes. Playing fast without this soul is merely acrobatics, like a typewriter. (Interview with Phang Kwong Poh, March 31, 2024)

This theoretical stance is not merely discursive; it is enacted in everyday pedagogical practice. In 2024, in Phang's studio, I experienced his "Fuyin Zhengdao" pedagogy firsthand. This was not the usual "teacher lectures, students take notes" format. Instead, it was hands-on, repetitive correction of left-hand finger angles and pressure. He rarely looked at scores, nor did he rush me to complete entire pieces. His attention stayed on the left hand: the angle of pressing, the width of vibrato, the fine-tuning of intonation.

Once, after I finished a phrase, he paused for a couple of seconds and said, "You pressed too hard. The yuwei is not forced out. It seeps out. Feel this..." He placed his hand over mine, guiding my fingertip to press slowly into the string, then released a slight wobble. The sound was not loud, but its lingering resonance carried an indescribable texture, a kind of astringency. "This is a complex tone," he said. "The depth of sound doesn't come from volume. It comes from what's inside the note." (Fieldnotes, March- June 2024; see Figure 2)

Figure 2 - embodied learning in Fuyin Zhengdao.

Source: Photo taken by the author at the Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Che Huan Khor Moral Uplifting, Kuala Lumpur, 10 March 2024, showing Phang Kwong Poh guiding the author's left-hand technique.
Description of the image: A teacher physically guiding a student's left-hand technique on a guzheng during a lesson.

What struck me was that most of his students were not young learners racing toward graded exams, but middle-aged people in their forties and fifties. For them, studying the guzheng was not about certificates or competitions. It was about keeping themselves able to recognize a quality of sound that was slowly disappearing.

By seeking to devalue speed as technical capital, Phang instead elevated the status of tone control and auditory perception as high-context embodied capital. Phang's case demonstrates that second-generation practitioners did not passively accept external standards but proactively engaged in theoretical construction to contest the definition of an authentic *guzheng* practice.

Guo Chenghuan: The Custodian of Embodied Lineage

Guo Chenghuan served as a counterbalance in the field, employing a strategy to steadfastly maintain traditional learning pathways and embodied capital. In his teaching, he insisted on using traditional *gongche*（工尺谱）[2] and *ersi*（二四谱） notations[3], refusing to fully conform to the standardization trends of cipher or staff notation. This pathway deliberately preserved the tacit knowledge inherent in oral transmission and resisted the oversimplification of techniques (Zhang, 2010). Regarding capital forms, he regarded the Teochew charm imparted by Louis Chen as non-convertible core capital. Against the backdrop of the second generation generally seeking transformation, Guo maintained the legitimacy of traditional authority in the field by emphasizing the purity of his lineage. Guo's existence proves that generational evolution is not a linear process in which the new replaces the old. Preserving traditional learning pathways is itself a strategy for maintaining cultural distinctiveness within a modernizing field.

2 *Gongche* notation: A traditional Chinese musical notation system that uses specific Chinese characters to represent musical pitches. Historically, it has been widely used across various Chinese regional operas and traditional instrumental ensembles.

3 *Ersi* notation: An archaic numerical notation system uniquely associated with Chaozhou (Teochew) music. It utilizes Chinese numerals to denote both scale degrees and specific instrumental fingerings, carrying rich stylistic and regional characteristics.

Summary: The Structure of Differentiation.

In conclusion, the core characteristic of second-generation practitioners is field differentiation. Despite this structural differentiation, internal contradictions persisted. The institutionalization pursued by Tan and Lai risked aesthetic flattening, while Phang's reflexive critique and Guo's orthodox custodianship contested the very definition of legitimate practice. The second generation thus operated not as a coherent trajectory but as a field of competing logics whose tensions prefigured third-generation professionalization. As shown in Table 2, these four generational units occupied distinct ecological niches: the stage, educational networks, theoretical discourse, and traditional lineage. Together, they completed the structural transformation of the *guzheng* from a singular clan ritual tool to a medium for diverse social practices. This transformation provided complex institutional and cultural preconditions for the more intense professional competition of the third generation.

Table 2 - Analytical matrix of generational units in the second generation

Representative	Generational Unit	Primary Field & Strategy	Core Capital & Authority
Tan Chong Pen	Public Institutionalizer	Public Stage Shifted from clan associations to piano shops and halls; established the solo recital format.	Modern Artistic Authority Legitimacy based on independent aesthetic status in the modern performance system.
Lai Ah Lai	Community Networker	Education Network Integrated secondary school orchestras and private centers; linked community teaching with regional assessment frameworks.	Social Network Capital Functional authority derived from the large-scale mobilization of the educational population.
Phang Kwong Poh	Reflexive Constructor	Discursive Field Proposed the Complex-Tone theory; critiqued technical alienation.	Philosophical Authority Capital based on acoustic interpretation rights and high-context perception.
Guo Chenghuan	Orthodox Custodian	Traditional Lineage Persisted with *gongche* notation and oral transmission.	Embodied Cultural Capital Traditional orthodoxy based on the purity of lineage and embodied skills.

Source: Constructed by the author based on ethnographic fieldwork data.

2.3 The Third Generation (2000s- Present): Professionalization and Cross-Cultural Performance Practices

Entering the 21st century, following the implementation of mutual degree recognition policies between Chinese and Malaysian higher education institutions and the popularization of digital media, the demographic composition and activity patterns of Malaysian guzheng practitioners underwent significant transformations. Unlike the previous two generations, who primarily relied on geo-linguistic networks or local self-teaching, ethnographic data from this study indicate that the third generation exhibits distinct academic pathways and cross-cultural performance practices.

The Rise of "Academic Migrants" and Credential Standards

Fieldwork reveals that since the 2010s, a prominent "returning elite cohort" has emerged within the Malaysian guzheng community. In contrast to the second generation, who pursued short-term training or self-studied through records, this generation universally opted to travel to China for full-time higher music education. As shown in Table 3, most core practitioners hold bachelor's or master's degrees from top-tier professional music conservatories in China (e.g., the Central Conservatory of Music, China Conservatory of Music). Upon returning, this cohort rapidly occupied key positions in local universities (such as UCSI University), official cultural institutions (like the China Cultural Center in Kuala Lumpur), and professional competitions. Taking the recruitment requirements of the UCSI Institute of Music as an example, a "recognized professional performance diploma" is now a mandatory prerequisite for hiring guzheng lecturers. Within the analytical framework of this article, this shift signifies that the sources of authority and forms of capital have distinctly concentrated toward institutionalized cultural capital.

Table 3 - Institutionalized cultural capital backgrounds of core third-generation Malaysian guzheng practitioners

Name	Graduated Institution	Degree / Major	Field Position Upon Return
Cloud Teo	China Conservatory of Music	Bachelor, Master (Guzheng Performance)	Guzheng Lecturer at UCSI University; President of the Malaysia Guzheng Association
Sara Heng	Central Conservatory of Music	Bachelor, Master (Guzheng Performance)	Founder of The Guzheng Academy (Malaysia); Instructor at China Cultural Centre
Liang Yibin	China Conservatory of Music	Bachelor, Master (Guzheng Performance)	Guzheng Teacher at Yi Xiang Le Art Centre
Yuwen Ch-uah	China Conservatory of Music	Bachelor (Guzheng Performance)	Teacher at The Guzheng Academy (Malaysia); PhD Candidate at University of Malaya
Jingyeat Ho	China Conservatory of Music	Bachelor (Guzheng Performance)	Teacher at The Guzheng Academy (Malaysia)
Tiong Boon Yik	Xi'an Conservatory of Music	Bachelor (Guzheng Performance)	Teacher at The Guzheng Academy (Malaysia)
Jia Yuit Leong	China Conservatory of Music	Bachelor (Guzheng Performance)	Teacher at The Guzheng Academy (Malaysia)

Source: Compiled by the author based on ethnographic fieldwork and archival review conducted from March to October 2025. The table categorizes the primary institutional backgrounds of the Third-Generation practitioners within the field of Malaysian guzheng.

Visual Transformation and Stage Landscapes

Regarding performance formats, third-generation practitioners place a high value on visual presentation. Unlike the first generation, who did not use dedicated stages in clan associations, and the second generation, who utilized basic lighting in auditoriums, third-generation performances universally employ standardized modern stage technologies. Field observations recorded multiple exclusive *guzheng* concerts led by the third generation, as well as large-scale public performances (such as the ASEAN Summit Gala). On these occasions, the use of transparent acrylic *guzheng* has

become increasingly prevalent. Interviewees noted that although acrylic materials fall short of traditional wood in terms of acoustic resonance, they offer superior visual effects when paired with stage LED lighting and projections. Furthermore, performance attire has shifted from *Hanfu (*traditional Chinese attire) and *Qipao* to formal evening wear or custom-designed outfits with a more modern aesthetic. This phenomenon indicates that in contemporary performance contexts, visual presentation has become a crucial evaluative dimension parallel to acoustic effects.

The Tension Between Repertoire Strategies and Demographic Composition

In terms of repertoire selection and performance partners, third-generation practitioners exhibit two concurrent strategies. On one hand, there is a trend toward great technical difficulty in professional competitions. For instance, in events like the Nanfeng Cup, over 90% of gold medalists selected highly demanding modern *guzheng* pieces composed by Chinese academic factions within the last decade (such as *Xingzhe* and *Cang geyin*). On the other hand, there is a trend toward crossover collaborations in public performances. The *guzheng* frequently collaborates with traditional Malay instruments (e.g., *gamelan*) or Indigenous Bornean instruments (e.g., *sape*) in arts festivals and commercial shows. However, in stark contrast to the multi-ethnic interaction presented on stage, the demographic composition of foundational teaching and orchestra rehearsals remains highly homogeneous. As observed in a rehearsal of a large *guzheng* orchestra, despite the repertoire including adaptations of Malay folk songs, the participating students had a single Chinese ethnic background. Additionally, an analysis of mainstream teaching materials and the language of instruction reveals a continued predominance of Mandarin. This disparity indicates that cross-cultural practices are primarily concentrated at the elite performance level, whereas the foundational educational structure remains relatively stable.

Summary: The Dual Characteristics of the Third Generation

In conclusion, third-generation *guzheng* practice presents distinct dual characteristics. Institutionally, it relies heavily on certification from the Chinese conservatory system. Performatively, it actively enters Malaysia's public cultural spaces through visual technologies and crossover collaborations. Socially, however, its transmission population and instructional mediums remain largely confined within the Chinese community. These empirical facts constitute the most salient generational structural characteristics of the third generation, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 - Empirical characteristics of the third generation (2000s–Present)

Dimension	Empirical Characteristics
Academic Background	**Prevalence of Chinese Degrees:** Core practitioners generally hold degrees from top-tier music conservatories in China.
Performance Form	**Visual & Mediatized:** Use of transparent *guzheng*, modern stage lighting, and social media dissemination.
Repertoire Strategy	**Technical & Crossover:** Performing highly difficult contemporary Chinese works in competitions; engaging in cross-cultural pastiche in commercial performances.
Demographic Base	**Homogeneous:** Mandarin remains the primary language of instruction, and students are predominantly ethnic Chinese. Cross-ethnic participation is largely restricted to the elite performance level.

Source: Synthesized by the author based on ethnographic fieldwork data.

3. The Reconfiguration of Legitimacy and the Paradox of Boundaries

Fieldwork and generational analysis in this study reveal that the evolution of Malaysian Chinese *guzheng* practice is not a simple linear transmission or a replication of techniques. Instead, it is a process of structural reconfiguration, constantly adjusting to historical conditions, revolving around the core issue of how legitimacy is validated. From the clan associations of the first generation to the professional conservatories and digital screens of the third generation, the social location of the *guzheng* in Malaysian society has demonstrated a structural shift. It has transitioned

from an embodied practice that carries diasporic memory to a form of professional capital that relies on institutional certification and visual presentation. The following sections provide an in-depth discussion from three dimensions: the trajectory of legitimacy mechanisms, the strategic logic of the third generation, and the paradox of boundaries in cross-cultural practices.

3.1 The Trajectory of Legitimacy: From Embodied Memory to Institutional Validation

Reviewing the practice pathways of the three generations reveals three structural transformations in the legitimacy verification mechanism (see Table 5). This process reflects the rewriting of Bourdieu's rules of the field within a diasporic context (Bourdieu, 1993).

Embodied Legitimacy

For the first generation (1950s–1970s), authority originated from the past. In the early diasporic period, the authenticity of the guzheng was not confirmed by academic credentials but by auditory criteria. The ultimate criterion was whether the performer could accurately reproduce the sounds of the homeland. This legitimacy was built on embodied experience and community memory, and was highly relational. It required no intervention from external institutions because the community's ears served as the highest adjudicators.

Functional Legitimacy

The second generation (1970s–2000s) found themselves in a vacuum of institutional rupture. To survive, they shifted the source of legitimacy from the past to the present. Authority no longer stemmed solely from resembling tradition but from the ability to operate within the local society. Whether through Tan Chong Pen's stage adaptations or Lai Ah Lai's educational networks, this generation established a functional authority. Tradition during this

stage was no longer an untouchable sacred object but a resource that could be pieced together and negotiated. This pragmatic strategy successfully transformed the guzheng from a relic of immigrants into a localized cultural asset.

Institutional Legitimacy

Entering the 21st century, the third generation gradually shifted the core reference of legitimacy to the Chinese conservatory system. With globalization and mutual degree recognition, academic credentials replaced master-disciple reputations and community prestige to become the rigid threshold for entering the professional field. During this stage, legitimacy increasingly exhibited institutionalized and bureaucratic characteristics, with diplomas serving as the most decisive form of certification. The orthodoxy of the guzheng was no longer primarily confirmed internally by the community but was consecrated by transnational institutional frameworks.

Table 5 - The structural shift of legitimacy in Malaysian guzheng practice

Generation	Source of Authority	Core Capital	Verification Mechanism
First Generation	Past / Homeland	Embodied Memory	**Relational:** Internal community confirmation (auditory authenticity).
Second Generation	Present / Local	Social Network	**Functional:** Competition in public fields (operational capacity).
Third Generation	Distance / Institution	Credentials	**Bureaucratic:** Professional evaluation systems (institutional certification).

Source: Synthesized by the author based on ethnographic fieldwork data and theoretical frameworks

3.2 Strategic Dual Anchoring: Re-Sinicization as a Survival Strategy

Addressing the coexistence of academicization and crossover practices among third-generation practitioners, this study proposes the concept of strategic dual anchoring. Existing research on diasporic Chinese music often interprets re-Sinicization

as a weakening of local identity or a mere emotional return to the motherland. However, this study argues that, for the third generation, aligning with Chinese conservatory standards constitutes a highly rational professional survival strategy within a framework of double marginalization. In the core-periphery power structure of global Chinese music, Malaysia occupies a peripheral position. To resist the anxiety of being labeled as amateur or culturally inauthentic by the center, the third generation must actively accumulate transnational institutional capital. They anchor their professional authority by acquiring Chinese credentials and mastering highly demanding contemporary compositions, as evidenced by the Nanfeng Cup's repertoire choices, which heavily favor mainland academic pieces. Concurrently, they face a different structural pressure domestically. To secure cultural legitimacy and relevance within the Malay-dominated national arts landscape, they must also anchor their local identity through crossover performances. Collaborating with indigenous instruments such as the sape or Malay gamelan at commercial events and state festivals is not merely an artistic experiment. It is a calculated move to embed the guzheng within the national narrative of diversity. Consequently, the identity of the third generation does not simply oscillate between China and Malaysia. Rather, they simultaneously operate two distinct sets of cultural capital: utilizing transnational Chinese standards to establish rigorous industry status while leveraging localized sonic symbols to negotiate market visibility and political safety.

3.3 The Paradox of Boundaries: Visible Openness and Structural Stability

Although the guzheng has successfully crossed ethnic boundaries in terms of visual landscapes, media presentation, and episodic collaborations, it maintains a remarkably enclosed structure at the foundational level of social reproduction. As previously noted, while a large guzheng orchestra may perform adaptations of Malay folk songs on a public stage to project a

multicultural image, the participating students and the daily pedagogical environment remain predominantly Chinese. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to the educational system's deep-rooted linguistic dependence on Mandarin and the high-context cultural threshold required to internalize traditional aesthetics. The instructional materials, the nuances of expressing musical phrasing, and the organizational networks of private music centers operate almost exclusively within a Chinese socio-linguistic framework. This creates an invisible but rigid barrier to entry for other ethnic groups. This indicates that cross-cultural practice is mainly manifested as a display strategy in presentational fields, whereas changes at the demographic and structural levels of transmission remain notably limited. This paradox implies that cultural hybridity exhibits significant hierarchical differences within Malaysian guzheng practice. In public performance fields, it is highly fluid, performative, and boundary-crossing; in foundational education fields, it primarily serves the internal cohesion of the Chinese community. This finding provides empirical nuance to the broader academic discourse on multiculturalism, revealing how ethnic boundaries can appear highly performative on the surface while maintaining deep structural resilience in the core of their transmission mechanisms.

A third mechanism perpetuates the boundary paradox: the guzheng's episodic visibility in state-orchestrated events, such as the ASEAN Summit Gala Dinner. While such inclusion provides symbolic capital for the official narrative of unity in diversity, this visibility remains performative and bounded. Once the ceremony ends, the guzheng retreats into Chinese community circuits, with no sustained state support for cross-ethnic integration. This exemplifies the festivalization of diversity, ethnic difference contained within celebratory moments that leave power asymmetries untouched. Thus, the guzheng gains momentary national visibility, but its structural marginality persists, reinforcing rather than dissolving ethnic boundaries.

3.4 Synthesis: Historical Structures and the Reconfiguration of Authority

Through a generational framework, this study re-examines the mechanisms of music transmission in diasporic contexts. The differences across generations do not stem from individual artistic choices but are constrained by the historical structures in which they are situated. The first generation was limited by the nostalgic structure of the early diasporic period, the second generation by the political structure of national transition, and the third generation by the globalized bureaucratic system and the attention economy. These external conditions dictated that they must occupy different social locations to secure survival space. Consequently, the essence of generational succession lies in the continuous reconfiguration of legitimacy verification mechanisms (see Table 5).

4. Conclusion

By constructing a generational analytical framework, this article re-examines the historical developmental logic of Malaysian Chinese guzheng practice. The research demonstrates that the process commonly generalized as transmission is not a simple linear continuation of repertoire and techniques. Rather, it is a structural reconfiguration unfolding under constantly changing historical conditions, revolving around the core issue of how legitimacy is established and validated.

Drawing upon Karl Mannheim's theoretical perspective on social location, this study posits that practitioners of different generations are situated in distinct structural environments, thereby cultivating distinct models of authority. The first generation constructed legitimacy through embodied memory and relational authenticity within diasporic community networks. Operating against the backdrop of institutional rupture and political transition, the second generation formed functional authority through social mobilization and strategic adaptation. Concurrently, within an environment dominated by globalization and credential systems,

the third generation increasingly relies on institutional certification and media visibility, thus presenting a more bureaucratic form of legitimacy. The differences across generations are not merely shifts in style or aesthetic orientation but are manifestations of the continuous transformation of legitimacy mechanisms.

Consequently, the developmental trajectory of the Malaysian guzheng should not be understood as a decline of tradition or as the replacement of tradition by modernity. Instead, it is a continuous reallocation process within shifting power structures and institutional environments. Its effectiveness depends on the capacity to convert existing cultural symbols into widely recognized forms of capital under new social conditions.

This study makes three interconnected theoretical contributions. First, it advances a generational framework for analyzing diasporic music transmission. Moving beyond linear historical narratives or biographical accounts, the framework treats generation as a structural location shaped by shifting institutional environments, educational access, and media ecologies, revealing that transmission is not the mechanical continuation of forms but the reconfiguration of mechanisms of legitimacy across historical conditions. Second, it reconceptualizes re-Sinicization as a strategic capital strategy rather than an emotional return. The third generation's alignment with Chinese conservatory standards is shown to be a rational response to double marginalization, securing professional legitimacy in the global Chinese music hierarchy while negotiating local visibility through crossover performances, thus reframing cultural "return" as an active, calculative practice within transnational power structures. Third, it introduces the concept of "sound-based distinction" to explain the persistence of ethnic boundaries. Beneath hybrid performance surfaces, implicit thresholds linguistic dependence, high-context aesthetic judgment, and episodic state co-optation maintain structural closure, challenging simplistic narratives of multicultural integration and showing how musical practice can simultaneously perform openness and reproduce exclusion.

From a broader sociological perspective, the Malaysian guzheng case demonstrates not merely a shift of legitimacy sources, but a transformation of legitimation regimes under diasporic structural constraints. Each generation operates within a distinct configuration of power relations, institutional opportunities, and capital hierarchies, thereby producing different criteria for cultural authority. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not an inherent property of tradition, but an outcome of structural positioning within changing fields of power.

Beyond the specific Malaysian case, the generational framework proposed in this article offers a transferable analytical perspective for examining issues of authority transition, institutionalization processes, and cultural continuity in other diasporic music traditions across Southeast Asia. Future research could further investigate specific actors and micro-practices to explore how different generations strategically mobilize cultural capital within distinct educational and performance fields. Future comparative research could also examine how other ethnic instruments in Malaysia (e.g., gamelan, sape) navigate similar tensions between heritage preservation and cross-ethnic visibility, and whether analogous generational patterns emerge in other Chinese diaspora communities across the region. Such inquiries will ultimately deepen the academic understanding of musical reproduction mechanisms under the complex conditions of diaspora and globalization.

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Authorship contribution

Zhang Yu: conducting the literature search, collecting and curating sources, performing the ethnographic fieldwork, transcribing and coding the data, conducting the formal analysis of the generational framework, drafting and writing the manuscript

at all stages, related visual materials, formatting and technically preparing the manuscript in accordance with the journal's requirements, and finalizing the manuscript for submission.

Camellia Siti Maya Mohamed Razali: conceptualizing the study, defining the overall research direction and manuscript structure, developing and specifying the theoretical framework, supervising the research and writing process throughout, critically revising and editing the manuscript for intellectual content, validating the final version of the text, and providing methodological guidance throughout the fieldwork and analysis phases.

Written informed consent was obtained from all individuals appearing in images included in this study for their publication and academic dissemination.

Research ethics committee approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) (Approval Number: JKEUPM-2024-1064).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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