

Colloquium April 16, 2025
Ruixue Hu, Dissertation Proposal Defense

Title: “Harmony in Diversity 和而不同: Theorizing Form, Performance, and Aesthetics in Traditional Qin Music”

Abstract:

Focusing on the Chinese philosophical idea of *harmony* 和, this dissertation seeks to theorize musical forms in traditional qin music through a close study of its performance practices.¹ Encompassing a range of roughly four octaves, the qin is a seven-string plucked melodic instrument with a subtle soundscape and various timbral qualities. Known for its profound connections to Chinese literature and philosophy, the qin has long been an instrument of traditional Chinese literati who perform for moral and intellectual refinement, usually in a meditative solo setting (Yung 2010). One of the oldest native Chinese instruments, the qin boasts a vast and diverse collection of historical manuscripts, including a significant body of traditional repertoire preserved in *jianzipu* 减字谱, a native tablature notation using elements of Chinese characters for fingering information. *Jianzipu*'s lack of specific rhythmic and ornamentation details results in immensely contrasting interpretive and performing styles among various qin Schools. Still, these interpretations share many ways of establishing musical structure, from kinesthetics, phrase articulation, and timbral organization to melodic variation, calling for a generic theory of qin musical forms.

Complementing existing literature on qin's history and aesthetics, my dissertation aims to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework for qin musical forms by 1) conducting a pioneering corpus study of some of the oldest surviving qin repertoire from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) to gain empirical data and making deductive observations about qin musical forms at all levels, from articulations, motives and phrases to large-scale forms; 2) combining my performing experience with contemporary theories of performance and transformations; and 3) contextualizing qin music in traditional Chinese aesthetics, especially Daoism and Confucianism. I hope this theory will be not only useful for interpreting and composing qin music idiomatically but also for understanding musical forms and performative kinesthetics across global musical genres and cultures.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, *harmony* in this proposal exclusively refers to the Chinese philosophical idea.