

# 3rd International Conference on Education, Environment, Arts and Social Science (EEAS 2026)

Article

## Evolution of Notation Systems in Ming and Qing Dynasty Guqin Tablatures and the Formation of Regional Performance Traditions

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**Abstract:** The Ming and Qing dynasties represent a transformative era in the history of the guqin, characterized by a significant proliferation of printed tablatures and the formalization of regional aesthetic schools. This paper examines the evolution of the guqin notation system, specifically the transition from the relatively skeletal Jianzipu (abbreviated character notation) of the early Ming to the highly sophisticated and rhythmically suggestive systems of the late Qing. It argues that this technical evolution was not merely a pursuit of precision but a fundamental driver in the formation of regional performance traditions. By analyzing seminal works such as the Shenqi Mipu, Songxianguan Qinpu, and Wuzhizhai Qinpu, this study demonstrates how subtle modifications in fingering symbols and the introduction of Huifen (decimal position markers) allowed schools like Yushan and Guangling to codify their unique sonic identities. The transition from oral transmission to a "text-centered" lineage enabled these regional styles to maintain consistency across geographical distances. Furthermore, the standardization of these tablatures facilitated a broader dissemination of musical knowledge among the literati class, deeply embedding the instrument into the cultural fabric of the era. Ultimately, this research highlights the dual role of the notation system as both a functional record of musical performance and a cultural vessel for regional artistic identity, providing a new perspective on the interplay between musical technology and aesthetic divergence in late imperial China.

**Keywords:** guqin tablature; jianzipu; regional schools; ming dynasty; qing dynasty; musical notation

Received: 06 April 2026

Revised: 16 May 2026

Accepted: 30 May 2026

Published: 04 June 2026



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### 1. Introduction

The guqin, a seven-stringed zither with over three millennia of history, holds a preeminent position in Chinese musical culture as a symbol of literati refinement and philosophical depth. However, the instrument's developmental trajectory reached a critical juncture during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This period was marked by an unprecedented surge in the compilation and publication of qinpu (guqin tablatures), shifting the tradition from a predominantly oral-aural transmission model to one increasingly grounded in sophisticated textual documentation [1, 2]. This chapter introduces the central premise of this research: that the evolution of the guqin notation system was the primary catalyst for the crystallization of regional performance traditions, transforming the guqin from a unified ancient legacy into a diverse landscape of distinct aesthetic schools.

The unique notation system of the guqin, known as Jianzipu (abbreviated character notation), serves as the primary medium for this evolution. Unlike Western staff notation,

which prioritizes pitch and duration, Jianzipu provides a technical roadmap for the hands, detailing string numbers, fingering techniques, and stopped-string positions. During the early Ming dynasty, as seen in the seminal Shenqi Mipu, notation was relatively "skeletal," acting as a mnemonic aid for players who had already received oral instruction [3, 4]. However, as the printing culture flourished and the literati class expanded, the demand for more precise and autonomous texts grew. This led to a "textual turn" where the notation itself began to carry more weight than the oral lineage, eventually incorporating rhythmic indicators and refined positioning markers like Huifen. The evolution of Jianzipu thus reflects broader cultural shifts, including the increasing reliance on textual documentation as a means of preserving and transmitting artistic knowledge.

As the notation system became more granular, it allowed for the codification of subtle stylistic nuances that had previously been ephemeral. By the late Ming, the Yushan School, centered in Changshu, emerged, advocating for a "pure, subtle, light, and far-reaching" aesthetic through its influential Songxianguan Qinpu. This was soon followed by the Guangling School in Yangzhou during the Qing dynasty, which utilized even more intricate notation to capture the elaborate and "flowing" fingerings favored by the local salt merchant class. These developments underscore the role of notation as a deliberate tool for constructing and preserving regional styles. The emergence of these schools was not merely a geographic coincidence but a reflection of how textual innovations in tablature facilitated the articulation and perpetuation of distinct aesthetic identities [3].

The primary objective of this paper is to trace the technical "flow" of Jianzipu and analyze how specific changes in notation, such as the transition from "no-breath" (unmeasured) to "rhythmic suggestion" and the introduction of decimal subdivisions, facilitated the rise of the regional schools [5]. Through a comparative analysis of key manuscripts and printed editions from the Qin-qu Jicheng (Collection of Guqin Compositions), this study bridges the gap between musicology and bibliography. By examining the guqin tablature as a "dynamic record" rather than a "static archive," this dissertation seeks to contribute a new understanding of how musical technology shapes artistic identity in the context of late imperial China. The research highlights the interplay between technical advancements in notation and the broader cultural forces that shaped the guqin tradition, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between textual documentation and artistic expression.

## 2. The Notation System from Early to Mid-Ming: Standardization and Expansion

The early to mid-Ming dynasty marked a pivotal era for the structural consolidation of guqin music. Following the Yuan dynasty, the Ming court undertook significant cultural restoration efforts to revive Han Chinese traditions, with the guqin emerging as a central instrument for both ritual and intellectual rejuvenation. This chapter examines how early Ming imperial initiatives, coupled with the rise of commercial printing, transformed Jianzipu from a fragmented and inconsistent collection of hand-copied notes into a standardized and authoritative system of musical documentation. These developments not only unified the notation system but also elevated its status as a cornerstone of cultural identity [6].

A major milestone during this period was the publication of the Shenqi Mipu (Celestial Secret Tablature) in 1425, compiled by Zhu Quan, the Prince of Ning. This work represented more than a mere collection of musical pieces; it was a monumental effort to preserve ancient music that was at risk of being lost. Zhu Quan meticulously gathered scores from the Tang and Song dynasties, categorizing them into sections such as the "Sublime Gems of Veritable Antiquity" (Taigu Shenpin). Through this compilation, the Ming court established a formal orthography for Jianzipu [7]. By defining a standardized set of abbreviated characters, such as the radical "Ren" for daozhi (walking finger) or "Xi" for waizhi (outside finger), Zhu Quan created a unified technical language that would serve as a foundation for future generations of guqin players.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the notation system of this era exhibits a distinct balance between archaic complexity and emerging structural clarity. The standardization process

suppressed the localized and idiosyncratic variations that had characterized earlier centuries, establishing a "classic" template that subsequent generations of players would regard as authoritative. This visual and structural uniformity not only facilitated the preservation of ancient musical traditions but also provided a stable framework for the continued evolution of guqin music.



**Figure 1.** A Section from the Shenqi Mipu (Celestial Secret Tablature), Compiled by Zhu Quan in 1425. This Exemplar Demonstrates the Standardized but "Skeletal" Notation Characteristic of the Early Ming Dynasty, Where Rhythmic Cues Are Absent and Fingerings Are Relatively Concise.

During the mid-Ming period, the internal logic of the notation system evolved significantly, transitioning from a "suggestive" to a more "prescriptive" approach. Early notations were often skeletal, offering only the basic essentials of string number and position, with the expectation that performers would rely on oral tradition to fill in rhythmic and decorative details. However, mid-Ming manuscripts began to exhibit increased rigor, with symbols for complex ornaments, such as *chuo* (sliding up) and *zhu* (sliding down), becoming more precisely defined in terms of execution depth [8]. This shift reflected a broader transformation in the guqin's social function. No longer confined to private self-cultivation among a small elite, the guqin became a subject of rigorous study, necessitating more detailed and user-friendly instructional materials to accommodate a growing audience of learners.

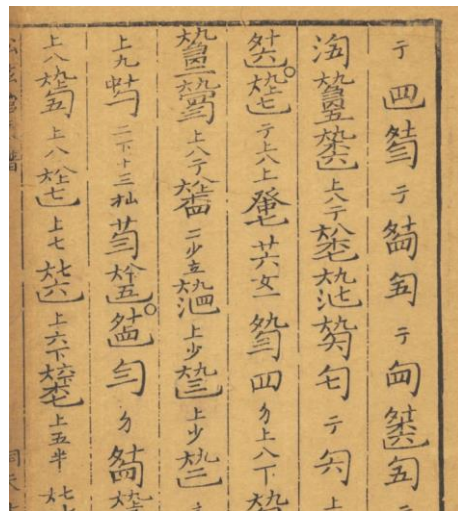
The expansion of the notation system was closely tied to advancements in woodblock printing technology. Unlike hand-copied manuscripts, which were prone to errors and inconsistencies, woodblock prints enabled the mass reproduction of identical scores. As commercial printing houses in centers such as Suzhou and Jianyang began producing qinpu, the literary market for guqin music flourished. This technological innovation democratized access to standardized fingerings, allowing amateur players outside the imperial court to engage with the instrument. Furthermore, the visual uniformity of printed scores reinforced the perception of guqin notation as a stable and unchangeable text. This era of expansion and standardization laid the foundation for subsequent developments in guqin history, where later masters would introduce rhythmic and regional nuances to the established system [7].

### 3. The "Additions" to Late Ming and Early Qing Notation: Awakening of Rhythm and Detail

The transition from the late Ming to the early Qing dynasty marked a pivotal "textual awakening" in guqin notation. During this period, the philosophy of Jianzipu shifted from merely recording the fundamental "skeleton" of a melody to capturing the ephemeral "flesh and breath" of a performance. This chapter analyzes how the introduction of rhythmic indicators and the transition toward mathematical precision in finger positioning fundamentally altered the relationship between the performer and the score, laying the technical groundwork for regional stylistic divergence.

As the guqin community expanded beyond the imperial court to include a broader spectrum of the literati and merchant classes, the limitations of "skeletal" notation, which relied heavily on direct oral transmission for rhythmic interpretation, became increasingly apparent. The late Ming period saw the emergence of "suggestive rhythm" within tablatures. In influential works such as the *Songxianguan Qipu* (1614), compiled by Yan Tianchi of the Yushan School, the spacing between columns of characters and the grouping of symbols began to hint at phrasing and tempo, offering performers a more intuitive understanding of the musical flow.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, although a formal bar-line system did not yet exist, the visual arrangement of the text in the *Songxianguan Qipu* began to suggest the "pulse" of the music more clearly than the earlier Ming editions. This "awakening of rhythm" allowed for a more consistent transmission of style across geographical distances, as players could now infer the phrasing of a piece directly from the page. The gradual refinement of notation during this period contributed to the preservation and dissemination of stylistic nuances, ensuring that regional interpretations could be maintained even as the art form spread.



**Figure 2.** A Folio from the *Songxianguan Qipu* (1614) Illustrating the Transition Toward Standardized Phrasing. While the Notation Remains "Clean" in Accordance with Yushan Aesthetics, the Vertical Alignment and Subtle Spacing Begin to Mirror the Temporal Flow of the Melody *Liangxiao Yin*.

Source: *Shenqi Mipu* (1425 edition), digital archive via Wikipedia Commons.

Parallel to the development of rhythmic clarity was the pursuit of tonal precision through the evolution of the *hui* (stop-position) system [9]. However, as evidenced in Figure 2, the late Ming stage still relied on traditional, somewhat approximate markers. Terms like *qi-ba-jian* (meaning "between the 7th and 8th studs") are still visible, maintaining the classical "betweenness" of the Tang and Song traditions. This marks a critical threshold: while the Yushan School prioritized aesthetic restraint, the subsequent Qing period would soon witness the systematic adoption of *Huifen* (decimal subdivision), which introduced a higher degree of precision in tonal placement.

This forthcoming method divided the space between two *hui* into ten equal parts, allowing for precise notations such as "7.6" instead of a vague "between the 7th and 8th studs." The transition from the "approximate" positions seen in Figure 2 to the mathematical exactness of the later *Wuzhizhai Qipu* represented a fundamental change in aesthetic values. The ability to record and replicate micro-tonal slides through decimal markers eventually allowed master players to "fix" their regional interpretations into the score with unprecedented fidelity, ensuring that stylistic variations could be preserved and transmitted with remarkable accuracy [1].

This era of "notational addition" also saw the proliferation of detailed explanatory notes regarding fingering techniques. While earlier manuals provided brief definitions, Qing dynasty tablatures often included lengthy prose descriptions for a single movement. This granular level of detail became the mechanism through which regional schools established their unique identities. The "addition" of these details did not restrict the art form but rather provided the high-definition tools necessary for the Yushan and Guangling schools to distinguish themselves. By the time the Qing dynasty reached its cultural zenith, the guqin score had evolved from a simple mnemonic aid into a sophisticated cultural vessel capable of preserving the distinct musical "dialects" of China's diverse regions.

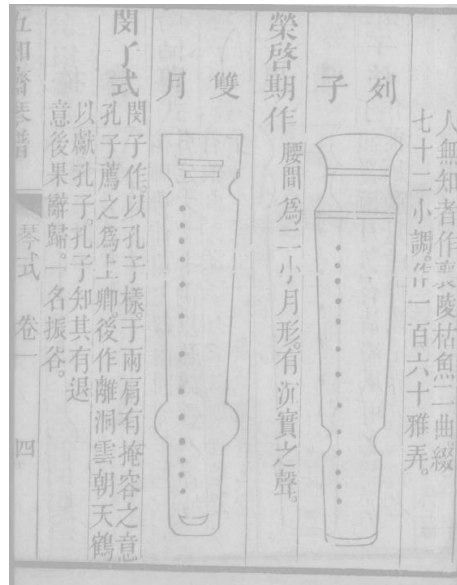
#### **4. The Mechanism of Regional Tradition Formation: Defining Schools through Texts**

The technical advancements in notation during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties were not merely abstract improvements; they served as the essential scaffolding upon which regional guqin schools built their aesthetic identities [9, 10]. This chapter examines the "text-based" formation of regional traditions, focusing on the Yushan School of Changshu and the Guangling School of Yangzhou. These schools were not simply geographic clusters of musicians but were intentionally constructed through the publication of seminal tablatures that codified specific regional "dialects" of performance. The deliberate use of written texts allowed these schools to formalize their unique styles, ensuring their preservation and transmission across generations.

The Yushan School, founded by Yan Tianchi in the late Ming, represents the first true instance of a regional school defined by a specific publication, the Songxianguan Qipu. During this period, the school utilized the evolving notation system to advocate for a "subtractive" aesthetic. By intentionally simplifying fingering symbols and removing what they perceived as "vulgar" or overly ornate decorative techniques, the Yushan masters used the score to enforce their philosophical ideal of qing-wei-dan-yuan (purity, subtlety, lightness, and distance). The Songxianguan Qipu acted as a stylistic manifesto; its relatively clean and restrained notation was a deliberate technical choice that physically prevented the performer from engaging in the flamboyant styles common in other regions. In this sense, the notation system became a tool for "aesthetic policing," ensuring that the regional identity of Changshu remained distinct from the more commercialized musical centers. This approach not only shaped the artistic direction of the Yushan School but also set a precedent for how written texts could serve as a medium for defining and preserving regional musical identities.

In contrast, the rise of the Guangling School in Yangzhou during the Qing dynasty demonstrates how "additive" notation could be used to cultivate a diametrically opposed regional style [11]. The Wuzhizhai Qipu, a cornerstone of the Guangling tradition, utilized the most advanced and granular notation of its time. To cater to the sophisticated and often flamboyant tastes of the Yangzhou salt merchant class, this school introduced highly detailed fingering combinations that captured subtle "lingering sounds" and complex vibratos. This intricate approach to notation allowed the Guangling School to develop a style that was both technically demanding and artistically expressive, reflecting the cultural and economic vibrancy of Yangzhou during this period.

As evidenced in Figure 3, the notation is significantly more "encrusted" with technical instructions compared to the sparse Yushan style seen in Figure 2. The inclusion of precise Huifen and rhythmic hints allowed the Guangling masters to codify a "flowing and free" style that was previously impossible to record accurately. This high-definition script, where every micro-movement of the left hand was prescribed, created a regional "brand" characterized by dramatic tension and lyrical elegance. The meticulous detail in the Guangling notation not only enhanced the technical precision of performances but also ensured that the school's distinctive style could be faithfully reproduced by future generations [12]. This level of specificity in notation marked a significant evolution in the way regional guqin traditions were documented and transmitted, highlighting the transformative role of written texts in shaping the cultural landscape of the instrument.



**Figure 3.** An Excerpt from the Wuzhizhai Qinpu (1721), Featuring the Melody Pingsha Luo Yan. Compared to Figure 2, This Tablature Exhibits a Much Higher Notational Density, Incorporating Systematic Huiifen (Decimal Markers) Such as "7.6" and "7.9". This "Additive" Approach to Notation Provided the Technical Precision Necessary for the Guangling School to Codify Its Intricate and Lyrical Regional Style.

Source: Wuzhizhai Qinpu (1721 edition), preserved in the Collection of Guqin Compositions (Qinqu Jicheng).

This comparative density proves that by the mid-Qing dynasty, the "regionality" of the guqin was no longer just a matter of oral accent, but a structural feature of the written document. Furthermore, the formation of these schools was reinforced by the "binding" of lineages to specific printed editions. A student was no longer just a disciple of a master, but a practitioner of a "text." This shift from "person-to-person" to "text-to-person" transmission allowed regional styles to stabilize and persist over centuries, effectively transforming the guqin from a singular ancient art into a vibrant tapestry of localized musical cultures. The reliance on written texts not only standardized the teaching and performance of the guqin but also enabled the preservation of regional nuances that might otherwise have been lost in oral traditions. This evolution underscores the profound impact of textual documentation on the cultural and artistic development of the guqin.

### 5. Guqin Tablatures as Vehicles of Regional Cultural Identity

As regional traditions matured, the qinpu (tablature) evolved beyond its functional role as a musical score to become a potent symbol of cultural and sectarian identity. By the mid-to-late Qing dynasty, the possession of and adherence to a specific printed manual served as a "textual lineage," defining a player's social and artistic standing within the broader guqin community. These manuals were not merely instructional tools but also emblematic artifacts that reflected the values and philosophies of their respective regions. This chapter delves into how these documents functioned as repositories of regional pride, examining the intricate tension between the increasing rigidity of written notation and the traditional fluidity of musical expression. The interplay between these elements highlights the dual role of qinpu as both a preserver of tradition and a marker of evolving cultural dynamics.

The relationship between a master and a disciple, which had historically been rooted in oral transmission, became increasingly tethered to the published word. To belong to the Yushan or Guangling lineage was to perform from the specific "authorized" editions associated with those schools. This "text-centered" identity created a sense of "orthodoxy" within regions, where adherence to prescribed fingering and stylistic nuances became paramount. A deviation from the fingering prescribed in a local manual was often

perceived not merely as a musical variation but as a betrayal of the school's philosophical foundations. Consequently, the publication of a new qinpu often served as a formal declaration of a school's existence and its unique aesthetic territory. This effectively turned the notation system into a boundary-marking tool that delineated "us" from "them," reinforcing regional identities while simultaneously fostering a sense of exclusivity within the guqin community.

However, by the late Qing dynasty, a counter-trend of integration began to emerge, most notably exemplified by the monumental Ziyuandang Qinpu. Compiled by the Guangling master Wu Hong, this collection sought to synthesize the disparate regional styles that had diverged over the preceding centuries [13]. Unlike the exclusionary manuals of the early Qing, the Ziyuandang Qinpu acted as a "comprehensive archive," collecting pieces from various regions and attempting to reconcile their differing notational habits. This effort at integration reflects a broader scholarly aspiration to create a unified, "universal" guqin tradition. The existence of such massive compendiums demonstrates that the notation system had reached a level of sophistication capable of acting as a translator between different regional musical dialects. This synthesis not only preserved the diversity of regional styles but also provided a platform for cross-regional dialogue, fostering a more inclusive understanding of guqin music.

Yet, this high level of notational sophistication brought with it a significant artistic tension: the conflict between the "fixed text" and the "living performance." As Jianzipu became more prescriptive, dictating every micro-rhythm and decimal position, the traditional space for *dapu* (the process of interpreting and recreating music from old scores) began to shrink [6, 9]. While early Ming scores offered a "skeletal" freedom that required the performer's active creative participation, late Qing scores were so detailed that they risked turning the performer into a mere executor of the written page. This shift underscores a fundamental paradox in the evolution of the guqin: the very technology that allowed regional identities to be preserved and transmitted with such high fidelity also threatened the improvisational spirit and the "unwritten" nuances that had defined the instrument's soul for millennia. The increasing rigidity of notation, while beneficial for standardization and preservation, posed challenges to the dynamic and interpretative essence of guqin performance, raising questions about the balance between tradition and innovation.

## 6. Conclusion

The investigation into the evolution of guqin notation during the Ming and Qing dynasties reveals a profound symbiosis between musical technology and the maturation of regional artistic identities. What began in the early Ming as a state-sponsored effort to standardize and rescue "skeletal" ancient scores through works like the Shenqi Mipu eventually transformed into a highly sophisticated, prescriptive system that could capture the minute idiosyncrasies of local performance styles. This research has demonstrated that the transition from a suggestive to a definitive notation system was not merely an advancement in musical literacy, but a necessary mechanism for the crystallization of regional schools such as the Yushan and Guangling lineages. Furthermore, this transformation underscores the guqin's role as both a cultural artifact and a medium for artistic innovation, bridging the gap between historical preservation and creative expression. By examining the nuanced interplay between notation and performance, this study highlights how the guqin tradition adapted to the evolving demands of its practitioners, ensuring its relevance across centuries.

The core findings suggest that the "additions" to the Jianzipu, specifically the introduction of rhythmic hints and the mathematical precision of *Huifen*, provided the high-definition tools required for regional masters to codify their unique aesthetic philosophies into a transferable format. This "textual turn" allowed for the preservation of localized musical "dialects," ensuring that the "pure and far-reaching" spirit of Changshu or the "flowing and intricate" nuances of Yangzhou could survive geographical and temporal shifts. However, this evolution also introduced a lasting tension between the

stability of the written archive and the traditional spontaneity of the oral lineage, a paradox that remains central to the study of Chinese musicology today. This tension invites further exploration into how modern interpretations of guqin music can balance fidelity to historical texts with the creative liberties inherent in live performance. Future research could investigate how contemporary guqin players navigate this duality, potentially offering insights into broader questions of cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of globalization.

In a broader scholarly context, this study reaffirms the value of the guqin tablature as a "dynamic record" of cultural history rather than a "static archive." The shifts in notation reflect the changing social structures of late imperial China, from the imperial courts of the Ming to the vibrant urban merchant cultures of the Qing. Ultimately, the formation of regional traditions through these texts highlights the resilient nature of the guqin tradition, which used technological evolution to safeguard its artistic diversity. For modern practitioners and researchers, understanding this historical evolution is crucial for the informed preservation of these regional legacies, ensuring that the "living" performance remains in dialogue with its rich textual heritage. Additionally, this study opens avenues for interdisciplinary research, where musicology intersects with sociology, technology, and cultural studies, to further unravel the complexities of how artistic traditions adapt to societal transformations. Such inquiries could deepen our understanding of the guqin's enduring legacy and its potential to inspire future generations of musicians and scholars.

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