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The Zhonglü Yun Repertoire in Wuxue Shanfang Qinpu Part II: Interpreting the Cultural Imagery of Bijian Liuquan

Huijun Lan[1]; Min Li[2*]

[1] Department of Chinese, School of Education, Guangdong Baiyun University

[2] Institute of Music Research, Xinghai Conservatory of Music

Corresponding author: Min Li (13751833619@139.com)

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Abstract: Bijian Liuquan (Flowing Springs in a Verdant Ravine) is a representative piece of the nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage of Lingnan guqin music. As a work classified as Zhonglü yun with a shang final, its musical form and aesthetic meaning are rooted in Lingnan's natural landscapes and humanistic traditions. This article examines its tonal characteristics, tablature transmission, and cultural imagery, tracing connections between its tonal organization and musical depictions of water. Comparison with Shishang Liuquan of the Zhucheng school clarifies their shared origins and divergent regional development. Drawing on literary and artistic aesthetics, the analysis interprets the cultural imagery of mountains, rivers, springs, and rocks embodied in the music. Within contemporary cultural diversity, Bijian Liuquan carries growing artistic value and significance for regional cultural identification. The piece thus articulates a specifically Lingnan cultural identity. Its distinctive Lingnan expression offers a musical perspective on the diversity and unity of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Bijian Liuquan, Zhonglü yun with a shang final, Lingnan qin school, water imagery, cultural interpretation

1. Introduction

The art of the guqin, a seven-string zither, has developed over three thousand years as an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, giving rise to schools with distinctive regional styles. In 2008, the Lingnan guqin tradition was added to China's national intangible cultural heritage list. As a representative piece of one of China's nine major qin schools, *Bijian Liuquan* [Flowing Springs in a Verdant Ravine] evokes Lingnan's mountains, rivers, springs, and rocks through fresh, lively musical language. It has become an important vehicle of Lingnan qin culture. Mountains and water give the piece its spirit, while springs and rocks provide its substance. Its musical world remains that of wooded mountains and secluded ravines. Its appeal joins refined technique with deeply rooted regional cultural meaning.

As intangible cultural heritage safeguarding has advanced, the transmission and development of Lingnan qin music have attracted growing scholarly attention. However, existing studies concentrate on tracing tablature sources and analyzing performance techniques, leaving the cultural imagery of *Bijian Liuquan* without a

systematic aesthetic interpretation. This article examines the piece's tuning, the development of its tablature versions, and its cultural imagery to clarify its artistic value and cultural significance. It offers a new perspective on the regional character of the Lingnan qin school.

2. Zhonglü Yun With a Shang Final and the Aesthetics of Bijian Liuquan

2.1 The Tonal Meaning of Zhonglü Yun With a Shang Final

Zhonglü yun is an important term in traditional Chinese pitch organization. In *Zhixinzhai Qinxue Lianyao*, the Qing qin musician Wang Shan names the instrument's five tunings by five *yun*, or pitch frameworks. Zhonglü yun is commonly called *gongdiao*, but its tonal meaning extends beyond a simple identification with the *gong* mode. The designation "Zhonglü yun with a shang final" refers to standard tuning, in which the first string is Huangzhong, with the third string, Zhonglü, serving as *gong* and the piece ending on *shang*. This relatively distinctive combination in the qin repertoire expresses the characteristic balance of firmness and gentleness associated with *shang*, whose clear resonance carries an element of heightened intensity.

Wuxue Shanfang Qinpu explicitly labels *Bijian Liuquan* "Zhonglü yun, shang final, seven sections" (Huang, 2010, p. 358). Its tonal characteristics resonate with the mountains and water evoked by the music. In the pentatonic system, *shang* is associated with metal among the five phases, and its sound is described as "plaintive and impassioned." Joined to the image of flowing springs, this quality gives the piece both the liveliness of ringing water and an inward composure. Zhan (2021) observes that "Bijian Liuquan and Shishang Liuquan are extremely similar in their tonality and principal tones" (p. 28). This shows that the tonal choice is intrinsically connected to the piece's subject of mountains and water.

2.2 Shang and the Aesthetic Resonance of Water Imagery

The cross-sensory association between sound and imagery is central to the aesthetics of *Bijian Liuquan*. A flowing spring can ring clearly or surge with force, and the heightened intensity associated with *shang* answers these audible qualities. The Lingnan technique of *lingkong jixian*, striking the strings from above, brings qin sound closer to the image of spring water. It requires "the right thumb to support the index finger at its first joint, maintaining a 45-degree angle directly above the string to be struck." The resulting sound has "no dragging or muddiness" (Chen & Zhang, 2016, p. 39), resembling the clear impact of water against rock.

The water imagery in *Bijian Liuquan* develops acoustic imitation into an expression of inner meaning through sound. Lingnan performers' treatment of "phrasing, melodic figures, and rhythm" enables "the expansion of musical ideas characteristic of the Guangfu region, bringing out the regional cultural inheritance of Lingnan folk music" (Chen & Zhang, 2016, p. 36). Through this close integration of music and imagery, water becomes a projection of the performer's inner life as well as the object depicted. The movement from water in nature to water within the mind unites aesthetic subject and object.

3. Common Origins and Divergent Transmission in Bijian Liuquan and Shishang Liuquan

3.1 Tablature Sources and Structural Development

The relationship between *Bijian Liuquan* and *Shishang Liuquan* [Flowing Springs over Rocks] provides a way to understand the artistic character of the Lingnan school. Surviving documentary evidence traces both to *Shishang Liuquan* in the Ming collection *Xilutang Qintong* of 1525. Its explanatory note states:

> This too was composed by Boya. He placed his feelings among mountains and waters and formed a bond with springs and rocks, as though cold streams descended from cliffs and waterfalls scattered leaping pearls, seizing the eye and mind. A close appreciation of the piece reveals the wonder of flowing together with heaven and earth. (Wang, 2010, p. 157)

This account places mountain and water imagery at the center of the piece from its inception.

Across centuries of transmission, the two pieces followed different regional paths, combining a common source with divergent development. *Bijian Liuquan* first appears in *Qinxue Renduan* of 1828 and was later included in *Wuxue Shanfang Qinpu* (completed in manuscript in 1835, prefaced in 1836, and first printed in full in 1842), which identifies its source as *Gugang Yipu*. *Shishang Liuquan* survives in several dozen tablature collections, and the Zhucheng version differs markedly from *Bijian Liuquan* in sectional divisions. The version of *Bijian Liuquan* in *Qinxue Rumen* has five sections, while the *Wuxue Shanfang* version has seven. Section four in the former is written as sections four and five in the latter, and its fifth section corresponds to the latter's fifth and sixth sections, producing two additional formal divisions (Zhan, 2021, p. 28). These differences reveal structural change during the regional transmission of a shared piece. Lingnan musicians expanded *Bijian Liuquan* to seven sections to accommodate more detailed musical evocations of flowing springs and give its musical narrative greater fullness.

3.2 Regional Culture and Stylistic Differentiation

Divergence from a shared source lies in the regional differences expressed through each school's distinctive interpretation. Lingnan *Bijian Liuquan* uses more sliding tones than Zhucheng *Shishang Liuquan*, particularly the ornamental gestures *chuo* and *zhu*, which approach a pitch from below and above. Zhan Yuting's count gives *Bijian Liuquan* 48 more *chuo-shang* gestures, 33 more *zhu-xia* gestures, and 17 more *zhuang* gestures than *Shishang Liuquan*. These sliding movements display qualities characteristic of Guangdong music and echo the region's many streams. By comparison, Zhucheng *Shishang Liuquan* has a calmer, lighter style, evoking the broad, slowly extending flow of the Yangtze River (Zhan, 2021, p. 28). The difference is rooted in contrasting natural settings and aesthetic traditions. Lingnan's dense network of waterways and the meeting of springs and rocks provide one kind of sensory experience, while the broad rivers of the northern plains nourish a more level, spacious expression.

The most distinctly Lingnan passages in *Bijian Liuquan* are the "Little Flowing Water" sections, four and five. These use numerous gestures associated with light or understated sounds, including *xuyan*, *shang shi*, and *daiqi*. The technique of striking strings from above combines with a rhythm that alternates light and full sounds, producing the ringing effect of water splashing against rocks (Zhang, 2017, p. 42). This imitation of natural sound shares Guangdong music's lively, bright character. Throughout the piece, stopped tones and vibrato evoke the motion of flowing water in a secluded wooded ravine. The rapid middle passage uses syncopation to depict rushing water striking rocks, while the harmonic coda creates a lingering resonance. These features account for its description as "Little Flowing Water."

3.3 Playing From Tablature and the Creation of Lingnan Spring and Rock Imagery

The transmission of *Bijian Liuquan* demonstrates the creativity of the traditional practice of *anpu guqin*, playing the qin from tablature. Musicians sound individual notation signs, connect them into phrases, and assemble larger passages while bringing personal cultivation and regional aesthetic experience to their reading. This approach joins inner cultivation, individual style, and artistic attainment (Chen & Zhang, 2016, p. 36). Through such creative transmission, Lingnan musicians turn regional experiences of mountains, rivers, springs, and rocks into a distinctive musical language. The Lingnan master Yang Xinlun invariably played the piece when meeting musical friends. Contemporary performances largely continue the rhythmic treatment and expressive practices transmitted since the Qing dynasty. Individual interpretation has produced a qin style described as "archaic, vigorous, forthright, and bright" (C. Wu & Li, 2013, p. 398), making *Bijian Liuquan* a classic bearer of Lingnan's spring and rock imagery.

4. Imagery of Lingnan Mountains and Waters in Bijian Liuquan

4.1 Mountains and Water as an Integrated Musical Experience

Confucius's saying that "the benevolent delight in mountains, and the wise delight in water" condenses a central spirit of traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics. The appreciation of mountains and water became a conscious aesthetic practice during the Wei, Jin, and Six Dynasties periods. It expressed both a way of contemplating nature and a sustained inquiry into how the self might find its place among external things. The subtle interaction between subject and object carried a rich understanding of life. Zhu (1983) explains that "the wise comprehend the principles of things and move freely without obstruction, resembling water, and therefore delight in water" (p. 90). Ye (1985) likewise observes that "the aesthetic subject is selective in appreciating natural beauty. Whether natural beauty becomes an actual aesthetic object depends on whether it accords with the subject's moral ideas" (p. 56). Landscape appreciation thus gives artistic expression to the traditional Chinese understanding of humanity, heaven, and the cosmos. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, Xu (1985) defines *qing*, or clarity, as "brightness, the appearance of clear water" (pp. 367–368). Its original reference to the clarity of river water resonates with the qin ideal of clarity as "the foundation of great refinement" and "the governing principle of sound" (Xu, 2013, p. 39). As Y. Wu (2025) writes, "Landscape aesthetics provides a context in which the esteem for clarity can arise and develop; the esteem for clarity forms a deeply meaningful core and a pursuit of transcendence within landscape aesthetics" (p. 95). The title *Bijian Liuquan* itself reveals a close connection to nature. *Bijian* denotes a verdant mountain ravine, and *liuquan* an unceasingly flowing

spring, together forming a living scene. Lingnan musicians give this scene the philosophical meaning of mountains and water as a whole. The contemporary inheritor Xie Dongxiao interprets its three-part structure as follows. “At first mountains are mountains and waters are waters. In the middle, mountains and waters are transformed. At the end they are still mountains and still waters” (Zhang, 2017, p. 37). This reading traces an artistic movement from depiction to inner meaning and from concrete forms to abstraction. Mountains and water become interdependent images that call one another into feeling. Deep, mellow timbres evoke the mountains, and the image of being within mountains and waters joins personal experience to nature. The piece thereby develops musical description into cultural imagery with philosophical depth.

4.2 Springs and Rocks as a Musical Portrayal of Lingnan

Lingnan lies south of the Five Ranges and is characterized by mountains, rivers, and numerous streams. This terrain provided abundant sensory material for *Bijian Liuquan*. Its portrayal of springs and rocks is concentrated in the locally developed technique of striking strings from above and in the contrast between light and full sounds. In the “Little Flowing Water” passage, light sounds fall on strong beats and full sounds on weak beats. Their alternation “precisely imitates the sound of splashes falling onto rocks” (Zhang, 2017, p. 42).

As musical imagery, springs and rocks also give symbolic form to Lingnan regional culture. Musicians' preference for sliding *chuo* and *zhu* gestures, their emphasis on light and full sound, and their use of techniques such as *dayuan* bring the piece's timbre into a striking relationship with the karst terrain of the water-rich landscapes of Lingnan. Blue-green ravine waters, rugged rocks, and winding streams are transformed into notes flowing across the strings. This regional expression makes *Bijian Liuquan* a musical means of apprehending Lingnan's natural features.

4.3 Water Imagery Within Lingnan Culture

The water imagery of *Bijian Liuquan* is rooted in Lingnan's longstanding water culture. Its interlaced rivers, lakes, and seas tie production and everyday life closely to water. This environment shaped patterns of settlement beside waterways and a collective understanding of water as the source of life. Although the piece comes from *Gugang Yipu* and can be traced back to the Song dynasty, successive Lingnan musicians continually brought local aesthetic experience to its transmission. The piece thus became a musical bearer of the region's water culture.

The cultural meanings of water in *Bijian Liuquan* include the philosophical ideal that “the highest goodness is like water,” an awareness of passing time in “what passes away is like this,” and the attitude to life expressed by “washing one's feet in a clear spring.” Lingnan performers emphasize water's movement and vitality, in contrast to the calm and lightness emphasized by other schools. This preference gives greater prominence to the sense of movement and life in water, expressing a distinctly Lingnan water culture.

5. Interpreting Bijian Liuquan in the Contemporary Context

5.1 Regional Cultural Identification and the Transmission of a Qin School

Regional cultural identification has become increasingly significant amid globalization and modernization. As a core piece in the Lingnan repertoire, *Bijian Liuquan* has undergone a transition from direct oral instruction between master and pupil to education in formal institutions. The contemporary Lingnan school "continues to uphold Yang Xinlun's essential qin principles of vigor, forthrightness, and brightness" (Zhang, 2017, p. 1). These principles guide performance and serve as markers of the school's identity.

The value of *Bijian Liuquan* in cultural transmission extends from its artistic meaning to its role as a cultural vehicle. Its imagery of Lingnan mountains and waters is closely tied to the collective memory and emotional experiences of local people, providing a bond of regional identification. As Chen and Zhang (2016) observe, "the environment plays a very important role for qin musicians" (p. 38). Lingnan's natural features and human environment together shaped the distinctive musical character of *Bijian Liuquan*, making it a recognizable musical expression of the region.

5.2 The Contemporary Aesthetic Value of Mountain and Water Imagery

The understanding of mountains and water embodied in *Bijian Liuquan* offers spiritual guidance within contemporary aesthetic experience. The speed of modern society and the noise and restlessness of urban life have intensified the desire for contact with nature. The steadiness of mountains and the movement of water in the piece suggest a condition of life in which stillness and activity find an appropriate balance, offering spiritual comfort and healing.

Lingnan musicians describe the piece through three successive states. First, "mountains are mountains and waters are waters"; then, "mountains are no longer mountains and waters are no longer waters"; finally, "mountains are again mountains and waters are again waters." This interpretation gives the music the philosophical meaning of "moving from the level of nature to the level of wisdom" (Zhang, 2017, p. 37). The aesthetic practice of returning to nature and understanding life through art resonates today with China's strategies for green development and ecological civilization, connecting traditional qin wisdom with contemporary concerns.

5.3 The Value of Common Origins and Divergent Transmission for Cultural Diversity

As cultural diversity receives growing recognition, the regional differences expressed through the divergent transmission of related qin pieces acquire a particular value. The relationship between *Bijian Liuquan* and *Shishang Liuquan* shows how the movement and transformation of a common cultural source across regions can produce a richer variety of artistic forms. Liu (2024) describes common origins and divergent transmission as "an especially prominent feature of traditional Chinese music." It reveals "compilers' purposeful consideration of comparing and combining qin tablatures, that is, the ordered logic of transmission embodied in the original sources" (p. 31).

Difference is an important source of cultural innovation. The transmission of *Bijian Liuquan* in Lingnan continually incorporated regional elements and creatively transformed inherited material. By reinterpreting the motif of spring water and introducing techniques such as striking strings from above, Lingnan musicians "reinforced the descriptive depiction of scenery, making the present Bijian Liuquan more vivid in its portrayal, lighter and more cheerful in style, and more distinctly Lingnan in regional character" (Chen & Zhang, 2016, p. 39). This case demonstrates how localization sustains cultural vitality.

6. Conclusion

As a representative work of the Lingnan qin school, *Bijian Liuquan* depicts the region's mountains, rivers, springs, and rocks through the tonal qualities of Zhonglü yun with a *shang* final and a lively musical language. Comparison with the related Zhucheng *Shishang Liuquan* makes visible the influence of different regional cultures on transmission and the conversion of that influence into musical style. Its distinctive sliding gestures, its use of *chuo* and *zhu*, and the development of striking strings from above express Lingnan musicians' understanding of regional culture through performance.

Within contemporary cultural diversity, *Bijian Liuquan* has become an important symbol of Lingnan culture. The mountain and water imagery and humanistic spirit it carries provide a living example for the study of the Lingnan school and a musical expression of unity within the diversity of Chinese culture. To hear the piece is to hear flowing springs together with a cultural inheritance that has moved through Lingnan for a thousand years.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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