



# Si Zhu Yue Music: A Historical and Ethnomusicological Perspective on Jiangsu's Cultural Identity

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Received: 18 September 2024; Revised: 19 September 2024; Accepted 20 October 2024  
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**Abstract:** Si Zhu Yue, or Silk and Bamboo music, is a traditional Chinese ensemble style with deep roots in Jiangsu Province. This paper explores the historical and cultural significance of Si Zhu Yue, tracing its evolution from the Tang and Song Dynasties to its contemporary role in Jiangsu's cultural landscape. The study examines how Si Zhu Yue reflects regional values of harmony, balance, and community while also analyzing the challenges it faces in modern times, including urbanization, globalization, and the decline in traditional music education. Modern adaptations of Si Zhu Yue, such as fusion performances with Western music, are discussed alongside efforts to preserve the tradition through education, media, and cultural festivals. This paper also suggests future research into lesser-known regional variations and highlights the need for ongoing efforts in preserving this vital element of Jiangsu's cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Si Zhu Yue, Silk and Bamboo music, Jiangsu cultural identity, traditional music preservation, Chinese music heritage

## 1 Introduction

Si Zhu Yue, commonly referred to as "Silk and Bamboo music," is a traditional Chinese ensemble music style that derives its name from the materials of its primary instruments: silk-stringed instruments (such as the pipa and erhu) and bamboo wind instruments (such as the dizi and xiao). It is an essential part of China's classical music tradition, originating from the Jiangnan region, which includes Jiangsu Province. The ensemble style emphasizes elegant, light melodies, embodying the refinement and grace associated with Chinese cultural aesthetics (Jones, 1995).

In Jiangsu Province, Si Zhu Yue plays a vital role in both community and ceremonial contexts. It is often performed during local festivals, religious ceremonies, and social gatherings, where it serves as a unifying force that ties the community together. The communal aspect of Si Zhu Yue reflects traditional Chinese values of harmony and collective identity (Yung, 1984). Its presence in weddings, ancestral rites, and temple fairs underscores its role in the preservation of cultural practices and traditions in Jiangsu (Qin, 2018).

Studying Si Zhu Yue from a historical and ethnomusicological perspective offers deep insights into the cultural identity of Jiangsu Province. The music is not merely an artistic



expression but a reflection of social values, religious beliefs, and the historical development of the region. As a form of intangible cultural heritage, Si Zhu Yue encapsulates the essence of Jiangsu's traditions, connecting the past with the present. By understanding how Si Zhu Yue has evolved over centuries, we gain a greater appreciation of the social and cultural forces that have shaped the identity of Jiangsu (Wong, [1991](#)).

The relevance of this study lies in its examination of Si Zhu Yue's evolution, its current state, and the challenges it faces in a modern, globalized world. The thesis of this paper focuses on exploring the evolution, preservation, and cultural significance of Si Zhu Yue music in Jiangsu, tracing its historical roots and examining its role in contemporary society. The study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on preserving traditional music and cultural heritage in the face of modern challenges.

## 2. Historical Context of Si Zhu Yue in Jiangsu

### 2.1 Origins of Si Zhu Yue Music

Si Zhu Yue, also known as "Silk and Bamboo" music, can be traced back to the Tang (618–907 AD) and Song (960–1279 AD) Dynasties, which were pivotal in China's cultural development. During these periods, China saw significant advancements in the arts, with music playing a central role in court life. Si Zhu Yue ensembles, which consist of silk-stringed instruments like the pipa and erhu, and bamboo wind instruments like the dizi and xiao, became prominent in the musical traditions of Jiangnan, a region that includes Jiangsu (Wang, [2002](#)). Jiangnan culture, known for its refined artistic traditions, provided an ideal environment for the flourishing of this ensemble music. This is reflective of a broader trend during the Song Dynasty, where music was often linked to literary culture and was integral to the lifestyles of the scholar-official class (Wang, [2013](#)).

The region's connection to Si Zhu Yue is deeply intertwined with the landscapes and cultural aesthetics of Jiangsu Province. Jiangsu, with its sophisticated urban centers like Nanjing and Suzhou, served as cultural hubs where arts, including music, were highly valued (Zhao, [2015](#)). As Jiangnan's reputation as a center of refined culture grew, Si Zhu Yue became a hallmark of its musical output. The music's balance of structured melodies and the flexibility for improvisation mirrored the region's philosophy of harmony and spontaneity, essential characteristics of Jiangnan culture (Chen, [2006](#)).

### 2.2 Role of Si Zhu Yue in Traditional Society

Si Zhu Yue has long held a prominent place in traditional Chinese society, serving both ceremonial and social functions. During the Song Dynasty, it became an integral part of religious rituals, festivals, and community gatherings, reflecting its role in reinforcing social cohesion (Liu, [2010](#)). It was often performed during important life events, such as weddings, funerals, and festivals, which brought the community together in celebration or mourning. The presence of Si Zhu Yue at these events not only entertained but also reinforced the shared values of harmony and balance within the community (Wong, [1991](#); Li, [2018](#)).

Si Zhu Yue also found its way into court performances, particularly during the Tang and Song Dynasties, when it was played for the emperor and his court. The music's association with the elite class contributed to its refinement over the centuries. Eventually, however, it spread to the common people, where it became an important part of folk traditions in Jiangsu and other parts of China (Yung, [1984](#); Duan, [2011](#)). This diffusion of Si Zhu Yue from court to common life showcases its adaptability and cultural significance across different social strata (Liu, [2010](#)). In rural Jiangsu, for example, Si Zhu Yue became a popular form of entertainment in villages during temple festivals and market days (Chen, [2006](#)).

### 2.3 Regional Variations within Jiangsu

Jiangsu Province, as part of the Jiangnan region, has historically been home to several distinct regional variations of Si Zhu Yue. In Nanjing, the provincial capital, the music has traditionally been more formal and structured, reflecting its connections to the court music that was prominent during the Song Dynasty (Zhao, [2015](#)). The Nanjing style of Si Zhu Yue often features more complex compositions and requires higher levels of technical skill from the musicians. This formal style is believed to have influenced other variations of the music across Jiangnan (Liu, [2010](#)).

In contrast, the Suzhou style of Si Zhu Yue is known for its more relaxed and lyrical approach, often reflecting the city's famous garden culture. Suzhou's Si Zhu Yue performances are typically more intimate, emphasizing beauty, flow, and expressiveness over technical virtuosity (Chen, [2006](#); Wang, [2013](#)). Suzhou's literary and artistic communities embraced Si Zhu Yue, incorporating it into private gatherings and social clubs, where the music was enjoyed in smaller, more personal settings. This reflects the aesthetic sensibilities of Suzhou, which prioritize subtlety and grace (Qin, [2018](#)).

Throughout Jiangsu, different cities and towns have developed their own distinct styles of Si Zhu Yue, each contributing to the rich diversity of this musical form. These local adaptations highlight the flexibility of Si Zhu Yue and its capacity to reflect the specific cultural contexts of the regions in which it is performed. While each variation maintains the core elements of silk and bamboo instrumentation, the interpretation of the music can vary significantly from one place to another, making Si Zhu Yue a dynamic and evolving tradition (Zhao, [2015](#); Duan, [2011](#)).

### 3. Ethnomusicological Analysis of Si Zhu Yue

#### 3.1 Musical Structure and Instrumentation

Si Zhu Yue, or "Silk and Bamboo music," is defined by the unique combination of silk-stringed and bamboo wind instruments that create its distinctive sound. The silk-stringed instruments used in Si Zhu Yue include the erhu (a two-stringed bowed instrument), the pipa (a four-stringed lute), and the yangqin (a hammered dulcimer), among others. These instruments produce a soft and mellow tone, which is often complemented by the bamboo wind instruments such as the dizi (a transverse bamboo flute) and the xiao (a vertical bamboo flute) (Jones, [1995](#); Yung, [1984](#)). The interaction between these silk and bamboo elements forms the foundation of Si Zhu Yue's delicate, melodic character.

The musical structure of Si Zhu Yue is typically based on traditional Chinese scales, such as the pentatonic scale, which provides the characteristic sound of much traditional Chinese music (Wang, [2013](#)). The melody in Si Zhu Yue is often fluid and continuous, with few breaks or pauses, reflecting the music's emphasis on creating a smooth, harmonious flow. Harmony is generally subtle, achieved through the interweaving of melodic lines from different instruments rather than through Western-style chordal harmony (Chen, [2006](#)). The tempo of Si Zhu Yue is usually moderate to slow, allowing the musicians to fully explore the nuances of each phrase, though faster tempos are sometimes employed in more lively pieces (Qin, [2018](#)).

#### 3.2 Performance Practices and Social Function

Si Zhu Yue is traditionally performed in a variety of social settings, ranging from intimate gatherings of family and friends to larger public performances at festivals and religious ceremonies. In small, private settings, Si Zhu Yue is often played by small ensembles for the enjoyment of the performers themselves, as well as their audience. These performances emphasize a close connection between the musicians and their listeners, allowing for a highly interactive experience (Yung, [1984](#)). In larger public settings, such as temple fairs or community festivals, Si Zhu Yue may be performed by a larger ensemble, providing entertainment and cultural enrichment for the broader community (Liu, [2010](#)).

One of the key features of Si Zhu Yue performances is the role of improvisation. While there are set pieces in the Si Zhu Yue repertoire, performers are often expected to add their own embellishments or variations, creating a sense of spontaneity and personal expression within the music. This improvisatory tradition is passed down through oral transmission, with younger musicians learning from older masters by listening, observing, and imitating their performances. This method of teaching ensures that each performance is unique and that the tradition remains flexible and adaptable (Duan, [2011](#)).

### 3.3 Interaction with Other Musical Forms

Si Zhu Yue has not existed in isolation but has been influenced by and has influenced other musical forms. Within China, it has interacted with various regional folk music traditions, incorporating elements of local styles while maintaining its core characteristics. For example, in Jiangnan, Si Zhu Yue has absorbed aspects of local opera music, which can be heard in the dramatic expression and ornamentation used in certain pieces (Wong, [1991](#)). This blending of musical forms reflects the dynamic nature of Si Zhu Yue and its ability to adapt to changing cultural contexts.

In more recent times, Si Zhu Yue has also been influenced by Western musical styles, particularly through the introduction of Western instruments and compositional techniques during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Liu, [2010](#)). Some contemporary Si Zhu Yue ensembles incorporate Western harmonic structures or use Western instruments like the piano alongside traditional Chinese instruments. This fusion of East and West has allowed Si Zhu Yue to remain relevant in modern musical contexts while still preserving its traditional essence (Chen, [2006](#); Wang, [2013](#)).

## 4. Cultural Significance and Preservation Efforts

### 4.1 Si Zhu Yue as a Cultural Identity Marker

Si Zhu Yue is a vital expression of Jiangsu's cultural identity, deeply embedded in the social fabric and reflective of the province's emphasis on harmony and community values. The music itself, with its gentle, flowing melodies and balance between silk-stringed and bamboo wind instruments, mirrors the philosophical and aesthetic principles that have shaped Jiangsu's cultural traditions for centuries (Wong, [1991](#)). The balance between silk and bamboo instruments symbolizes the dual forces of yin and yang, representing the interdependence and harmony that is central to Chinese philosophy. This balance is not only musical but also metaphorical, encapsulating the ideals of continuity, balance, and harmony that are core to Jiangnan and Jiangsu's cultural identity (Jones, [1995](#); Chen, [2006](#)).

In addition, Si Zhu Yue reflects the communal values of Jiangsu's towns and villages, where the music has historically been performed during social gatherings, festivals, and religious rituals. These performances are more than mere entertainment; they are moments of shared cultural identity that reinforce a collective sense of belonging and continuity. The communal aspect of Si Zhu Yue is crucial, as it strengthens local identity and helps preserve the region's cultural heritage across generations (Qin, [2018](#)).

### 4.2 Challenges to Si Zhu Yue's Survival in Modern Times

The survival of Si Zhu Yue faces significant challenges in the modern era due to modernization, urbanization, and globalization. As China rapidly modernizes, traditional musical forms like Si Zhu Yue have struggled to maintain their place in a society increasingly dominated by Western cultural influences and popular music (Liu, [2010](#)). Urbanization has further complicated matters, as rural communities, where Si Zhu Yue thrived, are increasingly fragmented or absorbed into larger urban centers, disrupting the traditional communal settings where this music was performed (Zhao, [2015](#)).

Another critical challenge is the decline of traditional music education. In the past, Si Zhu Yue was passed down through oral tradition, with older generations teaching younger musicians in informal settings such as family gatherings or community events. However, this system has weakened as formalized education systems focus more on Western music, and fewer young people show interest in learning traditional Chinese instruments (Wang, [2013](#)). The diminishing opportunities for public performance of Si Zhu Yue, especially in modern cities where traditional festivals are less frequent, further endangers its survival.

### 4.3 Preservation and Revival Initiatives

Despite these challenges, there have been concerted efforts to preserve and revive Si Zhu Yue, both at the governmental and grassroots levels. The Chinese government has recognized the cultural significance of Si Zhu Yue and has taken steps to protect it as part of China's intangible cultural heritage. Government-sponsored programs encourage the teaching and performance of Si Zhu Yue in schools and community centers, aiming to rekindle interest among younger generations (Duan, [2011](#)). For example, local governments in Jiangsu have organized cultural festivals that feature Si Zhu Yue performances, thereby providing opportunities for traditional musicians to perform and for the public to engage with this cultural art form (Chen, [2006](#)).

Academic institutions have also played a crucial role in preserving Si Zhu Yue. Musicologists and ethnomusicologists have conducted extensive research into the history and performance practices of Si Zhu Yue, documenting its repertoire, performance techniques, and regional variations (Wong, [1991](#)). These studies serve not only to preserve the knowledge of Si Zhu Yue but also to provide a basis for future generations of musicians and scholars to engage with the tradition.

Furthermore, media and technology have become instrumental in revitalizing interest in Si Zhu Yue. Documentaries, online videos, and social media platforms have introduced Si Zhu Yue to a broader audience, making it accessible to younger generations who might not have encountered it in traditional settings (Qin, [2018](#)). Some musicians are even experimenting with fusion performances, incorporating Si Zhu Yue elements into contemporary genres like jazz or electronic music, thereby creating new ways to keep the tradition alive while adapting it to modern tastes (Liu, [2010](#)).

## 5. Si Zhu Yue in Contemporary Jiangsu

### 5.1 Modern Adaptations of Si Zhu Yue

In recent years, contemporary musicians have sought to adapt Si Zhu Yue to reach new audiences, particularly younger generations who may not be familiar with traditional Chinese music. These adaptations often involve the incorporation of modern elements, such as blending Si Zhu Yue with Western musical genres like jazz, pop, and electronic music. This fusion allows musicians to maintain the core elements of Si Zhu Yue—its emphasis on balance and harmony—while introducing new rhythms, structures, and instruments to appeal to contemporary tastes (Wang, [2013](#)).

An example of such fusion is the collaboration between traditional Si Zhu Yue ensembles and jazz musicians, where improvisation—a key element of both genres—is used to create unique performances that blend Eastern and Western musical traditions. By combining the improvisational techniques of jazz with the traditional melodies of Si Zhu Yue, these performances offer a fresh interpretation of the music, making it more accessible to global audiences (Chen, [2006](#)).

In addition, some contemporary Chinese musicians have incorporated electronic elements into Si Zhu Yue performances. The use of synthesizers, digital soundscapes, and modern recording technologies has allowed for the creation of fusion performances that retain

the essence of Si Zhu Yue while experimenting with new textures and sound layers. These modern adaptations have gained popularity in both domestic and international music scenes, particularly in festivals that celebrate world music and cultural fusion (Zhao, [2015](#)).

## 5.2 Si Zhu Yue in Popular Culture and Tourism

Si Zhu Yue has also become a key element in the promotion of Jiangsu's cultural heritage, both within China and abroad. The music is frequently used in tourism campaigns that aim to highlight the rich cultural traditions of Jiangsu Province, particularly in cities like Suzhou and Nanjing, which are known for their historical and artistic significance. Tourists visiting Jiangsu are often exposed to Si Zhu Yue through live performances at cultural sites, such as traditional gardens, museums, and heritage centers (Duan, [2011](#)).

Cultural festivals in Jiangsu often feature Si Zhu Yue as a central performance, celebrating its role in the region's musical history. For example, the Suzhou Silk and Bamboo Music Festival is an annual event that showcases traditional Si Zhu Yue ensembles, as well as fusion performances that integrate contemporary music styles. This festival not only promotes Si Zhu Yue to local audiences but also attracts international visitors, offering them a glimpse into Jiangsu's cultural heritage through music (Qin, [2018](#)).

Si Zhu Yue is also prominently featured in museum exhibitions dedicated to the history of Chinese music. These exhibitions often include interactive displays where visitors can learn about the instruments used in Si Zhu Yue, watch performances, and even try their hand at playing some of the instruments. This hands-on approach to learning about Si Zhu Yue helps to deepen visitors' appreciation of the music and its role in Chinese culture (Chen, [2006](#)).

In addition to cultural festivals and museum exhibitions, Si Zhu Yue is used in tourism marketing as a symbol of Jiangsu's artistic heritage. Promotional videos and advertisements for Jiangsu frequently include scenes of musicians performing Si Zhu Yue in traditional settings, such as gardens or historical sites, helping to create a cultural image of the province that emphasizes its rich artistic and musical traditions (Zhao, [2015](#)). These efforts to integrate Si Zhu Yue into Jiangsu's tourism industry help to ensure that the music remains relevant and appreciated by both domestic and international audiences.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Synthesis of Key Points

Si Zhu Yue, with its roots in the Tang and Song Dynasties, holds deep historical and cultural significance in Jiangsu Province. As a form of Silk and Bamboo music, it not only reflects the region's aesthetic values of harmony, balance, and community but also serves as a marker of Jiangsu's rich cultural heritage. The music's adaptability—through both its regional variations and modern adaptations—demonstrates its resilience and enduring relevance. Historically, Si Zhu Yue has played an essential role in religious, social, and cultural gatherings, embodying the collective identity of Jiangsu's people.

In today's rapidly modernizing and globalized world, the preservation of traditional music like Si Zhu Yue becomes even more critical. As urbanization and modernization threaten traditional practices, efforts to keep Si Zhu Yue alive through education, public performances, and government initiatives are essential to maintaining a connection between past and present cultural practices. Moreover, the role of media and technology in promoting and modernizing Si Zhu Yue has brought the music to broader audiences, ensuring its relevance in contemporary society.

### 6.2 Future Directions for Research and Preservation

Future research should delve into the lesser-known regional variations of Si Zhu Yue that have not been as thoroughly documented as those in Nanjing and Suzhou. These lesser-

explored styles could provide new insights into the diversity and richness of Si Zhu Yue traditions and contribute to a fuller understanding of its cultural significance across Jiangsu Province. Ethnomusicologists could further investigate how Si Zhu Yue continues to evolve within various social contexts, especially in rural areas where traditional practices are often better preserved.

In addition to research, there is an urgent need for ongoing efforts in education, media representation, and cultural diplomacy to ensure the long-term preservation of Si Zhu Yue. Educational initiatives, particularly in schools and universities, could help inspire younger generations to learn and perform Si Zhu Yue, ensuring its survival. Furthermore, incorporating Si Zhu Yue into media and international cultural exchange programs would provide it with a global platform, fostering a greater appreciation for this unique musical tradition. These efforts would not only preserve the music but also enrich the cultural tapestry of Jiangsu and China as a whole.

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### Originality & Body of Knowledge

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*Originality:* This paper offers a distinctive exploration of Si Zhu Yue (Silk and Bamboo music) from a historical and ethnomusicological perspective, focusing on its cultural and social significance in Jiangsu Province, China. It uniquely blends an analysis of Si Zhu Yue's evolution from the Tang and Song Dynasties to its modern adaptations with an in-depth examination of its role in preserving Jiangsu's cultural identity. Unlike prior research, this study emphasizes the interplay between traditional practices and contemporary influences, such as urbanization, globalization, and fusion with Western music. The originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining historical, ethnomusicological, and sociocultural frameworks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Si Zhu Yue's enduring relevance and challenges in the modern era.

*Body of Knowledge:* This study makes a significant contribution to the academic discourse on traditional Chinese music and cultural preservation. It expands knowledge by tracing the historical development of Si Zhu Yue, analyzing its regional variations, and exploring its role in community life, from ceremonial functions to modern cultural festivals. By highlighting preservation initiatives, including government-sponsored programs, educational efforts, and fusion performances, the paper provides actionable strategies for safeguarding Si Zhu Yue as an intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the adaptability of Si Zhu Yue to contemporary contexts, such as digital media and global music scenes, offers valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners aiming to sustain traditional music in the face of modernization and globalization.

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**Acknowledgements:** -

**Funding:** This study did not receive financial support from any public or private agencies or organizations.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human):** -

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