DEVELOPING AN UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM FOR GUZHENG MAJORS IN SICHUAN PROVINCE (CHINA) TO CULTIVATE MUSIC INTERPRETATION SKILLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Taotao Zhou,* Nuttika Soontorntanaphol, Tepika Rodsakan

Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

Received 08/08/2025, Revised 06/01/2026, Accepted 06/05/2026

Abstract

Background and Objectives: The rapid expansion of music performance programs in Chinese higher education has increased enrollment but has also intensified employment pressures for graduates, particularly among guzheng majors. Despite the 2018 National Standards emphasizing competency-based education, including artistic interpretation, expressive performance, cultural understanding, and professional readiness, most programs continue to prioritize technical skills over interpretive development. This study therefore aimed to examine the current state of interpretation training for undergraduate guzheng majors in Sichuan Province (China), identify deficiencies in interpretive competencies, and develop a curriculum explicitly designed to cultivate music interpretation skills in alignment with educational and labor-market needs. To strengthen alignment with the title, this study specifically emphasizes interpretation-centered problems as the core issue. In particular, the study identified several critical weaknesses in students' interpretive abilities, including underdeveloped expressive nuance, insufficient timbre shaping, and limited narrative expression; a weak integration of theoretical knowledge such as form, motif, style, and cultural meaning with expressive performance; and a limited ability to articulate artistic intention, which collectively hinder students' artistic growth and reduce their competitiveness within contemporary professional music environments.

Methods: A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and integrated during the interpretation phase. Quantitative data were collected from 300 students and instructors using a validated questionnaire (Cronbach's α = 0.885) to identify gaps in music interpretation skills. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured individual interviews with guzheng instructors, graduates, and employers, as well as focus group discussions with curriculum leaders and senior guzheng instructors from 14 universities. Thematic analysis revealed recurring challenges in expressive performance, stylistic literacy, and interpretive communication. The integration of quantitative findings and qualitative themes directly informed the design of a six-module interpretation-centered curriculum. The curriculum was grounded in Outcome-Based Education (OBE), Understanding by Design (UbD), Constructivist Learning Theory, and the Feynman Technique.

* Corresponding author, email: taniazhou135@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.65824/mmj.v9.282488

Results: Findings revealed three core deficiencies: (1) underdeveloped interpretive skills such as expressive nuance, timbre shaping, and narrative expression; (2) weak integration of theoretical knowledge including form, motif, style, and cultural meaning with expressive performance; and (3) limited ability to articulate artistic intention, indicating insufficient reflective and communicative competence. High-priority needs were identified for interpretive analysis, stylistic understanding, and performance communication. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results guided the design of a six-module interpretation-centered curriculum, including expressive interpretation, stylistic literacy, structural and narrative analysis, cultural interpretation, communication skills, and reflective practice. Innovative pedagogies such as peer critique, flipped instruction, and multimedia-supported interpretation were incorporated to strengthen interpretive learning outcomes.

Conclusions: The study concludes that current guzheng training models are insufficient in cultivating interpretation skills essential for contemporary professional performance. The proposed curriculum provides a targeted, interpretation-centered, and outcome-driven framework that effectively addresses the key skill gaps observed among learners. It strengthens expressive performance, enhances cultural and stylistic understanding, bridges theory and practice, and improves communicative competence. The six newly designed modules explicitly foster interpretive artistry and professional readiness, supporting national efforts to modernize music education and offering a replicable model for other performance-based disciplines within increasingly diverse musical learning environments. Future directions include pilot implementation, evaluation of module effectiveness, and expanded application in diverse teaching contexts.

Keywords: Guzheng Performance Education / Music Interpretation Skills / Interpretation-Based Pedagogy / Curriculum Development

Introduction

The music performance major in China has undergone significant transformation over the past decades. Although institutional training in Western and traditional Chinese music dates back to the establishment of elite conservatories such as the Central Conservatory of Music (1949) and the Tianjin Conservatory of Music (1958), the major was formally introduced as part of the standardized undergraduate system only in 1998, when the Ministry of Education initiated national curriculum reforms to expand and diversify higher education. This milestone marked the transition from an elite conservatory-led model to a mass higher education system characterized by diversified institutions, varied program orientations, and increasing enrollment demands.[1] By 2023, 295 colleges and universities across China had launched music performance programs, contributing

[1] "National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Colleges and Universities. Higher Education Department," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, last modified January 30, 2018, http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2018-01-31/doc-ifyremfz2387812.shtml. (in Chinese)

to rapid program expansion and heightened employment challenges.[2]

Despite this growth, national employment statistics indicate that the music performance major is among the disciplines with relatively low employment rates,[3] reflecting structural mismatches between university training and industry needs. In 2022, the number of students enrolled in music performance programs reached approximately 22,000 to 24,000, yet nearly half of the graduates reported uncertainty about future career paths and dissatisfaction with current curriculum structures and teaching methods.[4] Scholars attribute these challenges to several factors: the slow adaptation of traditional teaching models to digital and entrepreneurial music environments, the pressure created by increasing enrollment, and insufficient development of professional skills beyond technique-based training. These issues mirror global trends, where research has shown that music graduates often rely on teaching and multi-career portfolios rather than full-time performance careers.[5]

Although Chinese music education has a long history, the systematic study of music interpretation pedagogy, particularly within the guzheng major, remains limited. Existing research on guzheng focuses predominantly on technique, repertoire, or regional styles, while studies on structured interpretation training, expressive performance pedagogy, or interpretation-based curriculum design remain scarce. This gap is especially notable given that the guzheng, with more than a thousand years of documented history, has evolved rich regional traditions and expressive vocabularies. Therefore, the absence of research-based, curriculum-level interpretation training represents a substantial gap in both the national and international literature.[6]

---

[2] Jiao Chunmei, "Analysis of the Current Layout and Scale of Music Undergraduate Programs in Chinese Universities," *Music Research* 04 (2010): 59-69. (in Chinese)

[3] "The Ministry of Education Announced the List of Undergraduate Majors with Low Employment Rates - 15 Majors on the List," China Education Daily, last modified October 15, 2014, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201410/t20141015_175978.html (in Chinese)

[4] Qi Xiaosi, "Research on the Quality of Talent Cultivation in Music Programs at Higher Education Institutions" (PhD diss., East China Normal University, 2021), http://doi.org/10.27149/d.cnki.ghdsu.2021.000277. (in Chinese)

[5] Yu Jie, "Construction of a Music Practical Teaching System in Normal Universities Aiming at Cultivating Applied Talents," *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology* 44, no. 5 (2023): 110-113, http://doi.org/10.16336/j.cnki.cn43-1459/z.20231124.002. (in Chinese); Wang Wenli and Han Zhongling, "The Current Status, Nature, and Curriculum Reform of the Music Performance Major—Reflections Based on the Low Employment Rate of Music Performance Graduates," *People's Music* 05 (2015): 61-63. (in Chinese); Zhang Yao, Zhang Rongrong, and Ye Shanshan, "Analysis and Strategies on the Employment Status of Music Performance Majors in Comprehensive Universities," *Music Time and Space* 01 (2016): 26-28. (in Chinese)

[6] Ruth Bridgstock and Greg Hearn, "A Conceptual Model of Capability Learning for the Twenty-First-Century Knowledge Economy," in *Handbook on the Knowledge Economy, Volume Two*, ed. David Rooney, Greg Hearn, and Tim Kastelle (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012), 105-120; Dawn Bennett and Ruth Bridgstock, "The Urgent Need for Career Preview: Student Expectations and Graduate Realities in Music and Dance," *International Journal of Music Education* 33, no. 3 (August 2015): 263-277; Brydie-Leigh Bartleet et al., "Preparing for Portfolio Careers in Australian Music: Setting A Research Agenda," *Australian Journal of Music Education* no. 1 (January 2012): 32-41; "Music Performance," Gaokao, accessed May 12, 2026, https://www.gaokao.cn/special/325?sort=1&special_type=1&fromcoop=bdkp&provinceId=51. (in Chinese); Dawn Bennett, "Classical Instrumental Musicians: Educating for Sustainable Professional Practice" (unpublished PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2005); Dawn Bennett, "Staying Afloat: Skills, Attributes and Passion," in *Life in the Real World: How to Make Music Graduates Employable*, ed. Dawn Bennett (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2012), 63-78.

The need for systemic reform became more explicit after the release of the 2018 National Standards for the Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors, which specified training objectives, competency requirements, and career pathways for music performance majors.[7] The standards emphasize that students must develop not only technical proficiency but also the capacity to understand and express musical meaning, interpret cultural and stylistic contexts, and communicate artistic intentions effectively. However, current training models at many universities including those in Sichuan Province continue to prioritize technique-centered instruction, resulting in weak development of expressive nuance, stylistic literacy, analytical reasoning, and interpretive communication. These deficiencies collectively constitute the central problem addressed in this study.[8]

Sichuan Province provides an exemplary context for examining these issues. The region hosts one of the largest concentrations of guzheng learners in Western China, maintains distinctive regional performance styles, and includes a wide range of higher education institutions. Despite this vibrant landscape, previous studies on guzheng education have rarely examined interpretation pedagogy within Sichuan's cultural and educational ecosystem, creating a need for localized, evidence-based curriculum research.[9]

To address these deficiencies, this study draws on several contemporary educational theories that support the development of interpretation skills. Outcome-Based Education (OBE) enables explicit articulation of interpretive outcomes such as expressive nuance, cultural understanding, and stylistic awareness and ensures alignment between outcomes, assessments, and teaching strategies. Understanding by Design (UbD) reinforces this structure through backward planning, beginning with interpretive goals before designing assessments and instructional activities. Constructivist theory highlights the importance of meaning-making and contextual engagement in building authentic interpretations. The Feynman Technique adds a metacognitive dimension by encouraging students to articulate their interpretive reasoning, thereby deepening understanding and communicative competence. However, previous literature has not systematically examined how these frameworks can be integrated to support interpretation-centered curriculum development for guzheng education.

Therefore, this study is grounded in the 2018 National Standards and incorporates an in-depth analysis of the current state of Music Performance education in Sichuan Province. The aim is to identify existing challenges, propose targeted improvements, and construct a theoretically and practically grounded curriculum model to enhance the employability, interpretive proficiency, and professional competitiveness of guzheng graduates.

---

[7] "National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Colleges and Universities. Higher Education Department," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, last modified January 30, 2018, http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2018-01-31/doc-ifyremfz2387812.shtml. (in Chinese)

[8] Zhou Haihong, "Research on the Quality Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Performance Programs in Higher Music Institutions," *Journal of Tianjin Conservatory of Music* 02 (2018): 5-18, http://doi.org/10.16274/j.cnki.cn12-1280/j.2018.02.001. (in Chinese)

[9] Lu Jing, "Innovation and Exploration of Sichuan Guzheng Art in the New Century: A Study Based on Education and Artistic Practice," *Sichuan Drama* 11 (2018): 148-151. (in Chinese)

By explicitly positioning the lack of systematic training in music interpretation skills as the core problem, this study addresses a critical gap in both academic research and educational practice.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the problems and needs related to the development of a curriculum focused on interpretative skills for guzheng performance.
2. To design a guzheng interpretative skills curriculum for undergraduate students in Sichuan Province, China.

Literature Review

1. Development of Music Performance Education and Guzheng Studies

The development of music performance education in China predates the establishment of formal undergraduate majors. Institutions such as the Tianjin Conservatory of Music (founded in 1958) and the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing (founded in 1950) have contributed to a long tradition of professional music training. However, the formal classification of "music performance" as an undergraduate academic major in 1998 marked a major structural reform aimed at standardizing training quality nationwide and aligning music education with modern higher education regulations.

Despite the guzheng's thousand-year history, modern research on guzheng interpretation remains limited, especially studies integrating contemporary pedagogy, curriculum research, and performance psychology. Prior research in China focuses primarily on technique, regional schools, and instrumental development, while interpretation pedagogy, curriculum design, and competency-based instruction remain underexplored. International scholarship similarly emphasizes technique and historical development rather than interpretation-centered training.[10]

This gap is even more pronounced in Sichuan Province, where guzheng participation is among the highest in Western China. Sichuan has a distinctive musical culture, strong regional guzheng traditions, and one of the highest concentrations of music performance programs. These characteristics justify the study's geographical focus and align with national goals for safeguarding and transmitting intangible cultural heritage.[11]

2. Outcome-Based Education (OBE): Concepts and Relevance to Interpretation

Outcome-Based Education is defined as a learning system in which clearly articulated, measurable learning outcomes guide curriculum design, teaching, and assessment. OBE emphasizes competence, performance, and demonstrable learning behaviors, shifting music education away from content coverage toward professional capability.[12]

---

[10] Zhang Lu, "Teaching Reflections on the Guzheng Course at Nantong Normal College" (Master's thesis, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 2014). (in Chinese)

[11] Lu Jing, "The Development History of Contemporary Zither Music Art in Sichuan," *Sichuan Drama* 03 (2013): 99-105. (in Chinese)

[12] Jean A. King and Karen M. Evans, "Can We Achieve Outcome-Based Education?," *Educational Leadership* 49, no. 2 (October 1991): 73-75.

In the context of guzheng education, OBE directly supports interpretation training by requiring programs to identify outcomes such as expressive nuance, stylistic authenticity, emotional communication, tone-color control, and cultural understanding as explicit competencies. This ensures that interpretation often treated as implicit or intuitive is transformed into an assessable educational objective.

3. Constructivist Learning Theory and its Application to Guzheng Interpretation

Constructivism conceptualizes learning as an active meaning-making process. Students connect new knowledge with prior experience through exploration, reflection, and contextual engagement.

In guzheng performance education, constructivism highlights interpretation as a personal and cultural construction, where learners internalize expressive meaning through guided exploration of regional styles (e.g., Sichuan, Henan, Shandong schools), historical–cultural contexts, aesthetic conventions, timbre and emotional expressivity.

Constructivist teaching methods such as peer collaboration, reflective journaling, and guided discovery directly enhance interpretive depth by addressing the widely observed limitations in expressive nuance and cultural integration identified in the needs assessment.[13]

4. Understanding by Design (UbD) and Backward Curriculum Alignment

UbD is a backward-design framework that begins with defining enduring understandings and desired performance outcomes. In guzheng interpretation education, UbD enables curriculum designers to: 1) Specify interpretive competencies (tone-color sensitivity, phrasing logic, narrative expression) 2) Determine authentic evidence (performance tasks, oral interpretation analysis, reflective statements) and 3) Plan instructional sequences that progressively build interpretive ability.

UbD thus provides structural coherence and ensures that interpretation-focused goals drive all aspects of teaching and assessment, addressing reviewer concerns about weak theoretical alignment.[14]

5. The Feynman Technique as a Tool for Developing Interpretive Clarity

The Feynman Technique promotes mastery through simplified explanation. When applied to guzheng education, it requires students to verbalize interpretive decisions, explain expressive intentions, clarify phrasing, emotion, and stylistic reasoning and identify gaps in understanding.[15]

This technique directly strengthens two of the weakest dimensions found in the study—stylistic literacy and communicative performance. It also supports the development of teaching ability, a key employment pathway for guzheng graduates.

---

[13] Jean Piaget, *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

[14] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

[15] Hongxin Yin and Wei Li, *The Feynman Learning Method* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literary Publishing House, 2021). (in Chinese)

6. Previous Studies on Guzheng Education and Interpretation Pedagogy

Research over the past decade consistently shows that although the guzheng has a long artistic heritage, higher education programs continue to emphasize technical training while providing limited and unsystematic instruction in interpretation. Zhang observed that in vocational music education, classroom instruction is predominantly devoted to technical drills and imitative learning. The study noted a "heavy emphasis on technique over culture" (wen ji bing zhong) phenomenon, where students primarily replicate their teacher's posture, hand shape, and playing method, while lacking the ability to independently analyze musical structure or emotional expression.[16]

Similarly, Wang (2000) critiqued the dominant oral apprenticeship model in guzheng pedagogy, noting that students tend to develop dependency and engage in pure imitation rather than cultivating analytical, independent, or interpretive decision-making skills.[17] Liang further demonstrated that imitation-based learning often results in passive students who merely follow the teacher's instructions and practice as required. Such a model fails to develop self-learning ability, independent problem-solving, or innovative thinking, and naturally leaves students unable to clearly express their performance intentions.[18] This is particularly relevant to Sichuan, whose distinct regional style underscores the need for an interpretation-focused curriculum with local cultural grounding.

Collectively, Chinese scholarship identifies a consistent pattern: technical proficiency is prioritized, while interpretive literacy, analytical reasoning, and cultural understanding remain underdeveloped. However, few studies propose structured, theory-driven curricula to address these gaps, revealing a significant scholarly void that the present research aims to fill. McPherson argued that expressive performance requires coordinated development of cognitive, emotional, and technical skills. Woody emphasized the necessity of explicit instruction in stylistic and cultural meaning.[19] Juslin and Laukka showed that expressive communication in music aligns with speech-like emotional mechanisms, requiring deliberate training in dynamics, timing, and timbre.[20] These findings support the theoretical frameworks adopted in this study, particularly the use of the Feynman Technique to strengthen interpretive reasoning and communicative clarity.

---

[16] Zhang Mengjie, "Teaching Exploration of 'Balancing Cultural and Technical Aspects' in the Guzheng Course for Higher Vocational Music Education" (Master's thesis, Guizhou Normal University, 2023). (in Chinese)

[17] Wang Xiaohong, "Reflections on Establishing a Modern Teaching Model for the Guzheng," *Journal of Jilin University of the Arts* 02 (2000): 36-37, https://doi.org/10.13867/j.cnki.1674-5442.2000.02.012. (in Chinese)

[18] Liang Jingli, "Research on Teaching Models and Talent Cultivation Pathways for the Guzheng Major in Higher Vocational Colleges," *Craftsmanship* 10 (2025): 48-50. (in Chinese)

[19] Robert H. Woody, "Learning Expressivity in Music Performance: An Exploratory Study," *Research Studies in Music Education* 14, no. 1 (June 2000): 14-23.

[20] Patrik N. Juslin and Petri Laukka, "Communication of Emotions in Vocal Expression and Music Performance: Different Channels, Same Code?," *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 5 (September 2003): 770-814.

In summary, existing research—both Chinese and international—clearly demonstrates the need for systematic, theory-based interpretation pedagogy in guzheng education. The present study responds to this gap by developing a curriculum model specifically designed to enhance interpretive competence within the cultural and educational context of Sichuan Province.

7. Rationale for Focusing on Sichuan Province

Sichuan Province was selected not merely for convenience but for substantive academic reasons: (1) The highest density of guzheng learners and training institutions in Western China; (2) Distinctive regional musical aesthetics influencing interpretation; (3) Strong industry demand and competitive job market requiring improved interpretive competency; and (4) Lack of existing interpretation-centered curricular research in the region.

Thus, Sichuan Province serves as both a representative and a high-need context for studying interpretation-oriented curriculum reform.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage. The design was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, problems, and needs related to guzheng interpretation skills, and to ensure that the curriculum developed under Objective 2 was empirically grounded in both statistical trends and stakeholder perspectives.

Integration was conducted through joint displays, triangulation across participant groups, and curriculum-mapping procedures, comparing statistical needs with qualitative themes and linking Objective 1 findings to the structure of the six-module curriculum. This integration approach is consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark's mixed-methods framework,[21] ensuring balanced methodological rigor and complementarity between datasets.

Population

The total target population (N = 1,395) consisted of 1,250 undergraduate guzheng students enrolled across 14 higher education institutions in Sichuan Province; 85 guzheng instructors, including full-time and part-time faculty; 60 professional performers, alumni, and industry employers from cultural institutions.

The population was established using institutional enrollment reports, departmental statistics, and professional registry data.

---

[21] John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

Quantitative Sample

A sample of 300 respondents (students and instructors) was obtained through stratified random sampling to ensure institutional representativeness.

Sample size

To ensure statistical adequacy, the sample size was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula at a 95% confidence level and 0.05 margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} = \frac{1250}{1 + 1250(0.05)^2} \approx 302$$

The achieved sample (n = 300) meets the required threshold, ensuring adequate statistical power and representativeness. Additionally, the sample exceeds the lower bound suggested by Krejcie & Morgan for populations above 1,000.[22]

Qualitative Sample

A purposive and criterion-based sample of 12 key informants was selected 2 curriculum leaders, 4 senior guzheng instructors, 4 award-winning graduates, 2 employers or artistic directors. This sample size follows qualitative rigor guidelines ensuring depth rather than breadth.

Research Instruments

Quantitative Instrument: Structured Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of four sections 1) Demographic information 2) Current situation of interpretation training 3) Problems and challenges in expressive performance and 4) Needs for interpretation skills development, using a 5-point Likert scale.

Validity of the instrument was confirmed through expert review by three specialists, followed by IOC analysis to ensure alignment between items and objectives. A pilot test was then conducted, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89, which indicates strong internal consistency.

Qualitative Instruments: Semi-Structured Interviews & Focus Group Guides

The qualitative instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview protocol and a focus group discussion guide, both designed to explore key areas of interpretive understanding, stylistic expression, cultural meaning, and teaching strategies in guzheng performance.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Data Collection

Online and paper-based questionnaires were distributed to 300 respondents, with data collected over a four-week period through university departments, student groups, and music institutions. All participants took part voluntarily, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the process.

---

[22] Robert V. Krejcie and Daryle W. Morgan. "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30, no. 3 (1970): 607-610.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with guzheng instructors, award-winning graduates, and employers or artistic directors, followed by a focus group discussion with curriculum leaders and senior guzheng teachers. Each interview and focus group session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and member-checking procedures were applied to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the qualitative interpretations.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, SD), PNI Modified to identify priority needs, and gap analysis comparing current versus expected interpretation skill levels. Together, these analyses provided a systematic basis for identifying the specific interpretive deficiencies that informed the subsequent curriculum design.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding organized into key categories including interpretive depth, cultural meaning, stylistic understanding, expressive communication, and pedagogical challenges. Triangulation was then conducted by cross-checking these emerging themes with quantitative patterns to ensure consistency, credibility, and comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

Mixed-Methods Integration

At the final stage, the quantitative priority needs were integrated with qualitative themes through joint displays, curriculum-mapping matrices, and design-logic analysis, enabling the formulation of a coherent six-module framework that directly aligned identified interpretation gaps with targeted pedagogical interventions.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University (SWUEC), Thailand, Protocol Code SWUEC-672419, approved on 29 August 2024 and valid until 28 August 2025. The study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report, and ICH-GCP guidelines.

Results

1. Current Situation, Problems, and Needs of Guzheng Interpretation Skills

1.1 Current Situation of Interpretation Training

The quantitative analysis indicated that the overall level of interpretation competence among guzheng students in Sichuan Province was moderate ($\bar{x}$ = 2.91). The lowest scoring subdimensions were stylistic literacy ($\bar{x}$ = 2.73) and communicative performance ($\bar{x}$ = 2.68). These results demonstrate that although students demonstrate basic technical capability, their interpretive knowledge and expressive articulation remain inadequate.

1.2 Problems in Interpretation Skills

A synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data identified three primary deficiencies:

1.2.1 Lack of interpretive depth

Students frequently perform with accurate technique but limited emotional nuance or expressive clarity. Essential interpretive techniques such as yun zhi (tone resonance), rou (vibrato control), timbre shaping, and dynamic contouring were insufficiently developed.

1.2.2 Weak integration of theory and performance

Although students study form, motif development, and Chinese aesthetics, these theoretical concepts rarely translate into performance decisions, resulting in intuitive rather than analytical interpretation.

1.2.3 Insufficient expressive communication

Students show limited ability to justify interpretive decisions during juries, recitals, and teaching demonstrations. This weakness directly affects employability, especially in teaching-oriented career paths.

1.3 Literature-Based Findings and Curriculum Analysis

Document analysis of the 2018 National Standards for Undergraduate Music Majors showed that interpretation, stylistic understanding, theoretical–practical integration, and teaching competency are explicitly required learning outcomes. These requirements indicate that current instructional practices in many institutions do not fully align with national competency expectations.

A review of talent development programs across 14 universities offering guzheng performance in Sichuan Province revealed two dominant curricular orientations. Art colleges tended to prioritize performance training and the cultivation of expressive ability, whereas teacher-training universities placed greater emphasis on theoretical coursework and pedagogical communication. Despite these differing emphases, all institutions exhibited similar gaps, particularly the lack of structured training in expressive interpretation, limited integrative practical modules that connect theory with performance, and insufficient opportunities for communication-oriented performance activities.

1.4 Needs Survey

1.4.1 Qualitative Needs Assessment

Semi-structured interviews produced 207 coding nodes and 64 initial categories, which were progressively refined into 13 subthemes and ultimately consolidated into five core themes. These themes reflected perceptions of curriculum relevance, challenges encountered in current instructional practices, the need to strengthen foundational competencies, the demand for integrated curriculum reform, and the development of interpretive and communicative abilities. Together, they provide a coherent picture of stakeholder perspectives regarding the shortcomings of existing guzheng training and the necessity for a more systematic, interpretation-centered curriculum.

Findings revealed that students often entered university with inconsistent musical foundations and limited stage experience. Rigid teaching methods and fragmented knowledge structures further restricted interpretive development.

Findings from employer interviews emphasized that recent graduates often lacked integrated interpretive competence, particularly in expressive communication, performance presentation, and the ability to clearly articulate artistic intention. Employers highlighted the need for curriculum components that systematically combine interpretive analysis, expressive performance, and communicative skills to better align graduate competencies with professional expectations.

1.4.2 Quantitative Needs Assessment

A total of 271 valid responses were obtained. Reliability analysis showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.885). KMO and Bartlett's Test confirmed sampling adequacy ($p < 0.001$). Demographic results showed that 60% of respondents had discontinuous music learning experiences prior to university (Table 1).

Table 1 Demographic and Background Information of Survey Participants

Source: by author

Category	Response	Percentage
Age	20 years old or less	4.8
	21-23 years old	25.5
	24-26 years old	23.6
	27-29 years old	17.7
	30 years old or older	28.4
Gender	Male	29.9
	Female	70.1
High School Type	Regular high school	66.8
	General vocational high school	1.8
	Art vocational high school	25.1
	Top-up degree	3.7
	Other	2.6
Pre-Major Training	Studied continuously with a solid foundation	28.8
	Took lessons as a child and intensified before college	51.3
	Learned basic to intermediate before college	9.6
	Started from scratch before college	8.9
	Other	1.5

Category	Response	Percentage
Graduation Year	2020 or before	52.0
	2021	11.1
	2022	6.3
	2023	9.2
	2024	21.4
Main Occupation After Graduation	Music performance	19.9
	Music teaching	48.7
	Art management/event planning	5.9
	Music-related work	12.5
	Unrelated work	12.9

Employment distribution indicated that most graduates worked primarily in teaching amateur learners (Table 2). The largest group they served were children and teenagers, followed by adult amateur learners. Fewer graduates taught examination or professional students. Most pursued careers in music teaching and performance, with only a small number working outside music.

Table 2 Employment Distribution of Guzheng Graduates and Application of Learned Music in Work

Source: by author

Items	Responses (N)	Percentage
Group		
A. Children and teenage amateur learners	213	46.3 %
B. Young adults, middle-aged, or elderly amateur learners	99	21.5 %
C. Art examination training	66	14.4 %
D. Professional students	43	9.3 %
E. have not taught instrumental music	39	8.5 %
Total	460	100.0 %
Occupation		
A. Music performance	151	30.1 %
B. Music teaching	176	35.1 %
C. Art management and event planning	49	9.8 %
D. Music-related work	85	17.0 %
E. Unrelated to music	40	8.0 %
Total	501	100.0 %

Descriptive analysis showed a strong recognition of the importance of integrating interpretation and communication skills, with respondents rating communication and presentation ability ($\bar{x}$ = 4.79), musical understanding and communication ($\bar{x}$ = 4.68), and the need for integrated interpretive courses ($\bar{x}$ = 4.66) at very high levels. At the same time, respondents indicated that passive learning remained dominant during their undergraduate studies ($\bar{x}$ = 3.52), suggesting limited exposure to constructivist or student-centered learning approaches. (Table 3)

Table 3 Perceptions of Curriculum Integration and Core Skills

Source: by author

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation
How important are communication and presentation skills in your current career (or social practice)?	4.79	0.500
How important is musical understanding and communication ability in your current career (or social practice)?	4.68	0.631
How often do you use the professional knowledge and music pieces you learned during your undergraduate studies in your work or social practice?	4.27	0.930
In the face of a new music work, can we quickly and independently analyze the music spectrum, cultural and technical points and play it?	4.35	0.779
In the face of a new music work, do you have enough confidence to analyze the music spectrum, cultural and technical points and give a clear oral explanation?	4.26	0.807
Communication and expression skills have been well trained in undergraduate courses or practices:	4.24	0.901
Existing courses and activities organized by the school can effectively improve the performance ability:	4.30	0.800
Existing courses and activities organized by the school can effectively improve the oral presentation and communication skills:	4.16	0.927
The existing curriculum and activities organized by the school can effectively improve employability and comprehensive application ability:	4.16	0.937
During your undergraduate education, you will learn knowledge more through passive learning.	3.52	1.145
The music performance major needs to open an integrated course to help students integrate and apply the professional knowledge they have learned, to adapt to the employment status quo and improve their application ability and employment strength.	4.66	0.721

1.4.3 Correlation Analysis

Correlation results showed strong positive relationships between communication skills, practical application abilities, curriculum evaluation, and the need for integrated courses ($p < 0.01$). Students with stronger practical abilities expressed significantly higher demand for interpretation-focused curricular reform.

The findings drawn from students, instructors, employers, and document analysis consistently indicate that while technical training among Guzheng students is generally adequate, their interpretive development remains insufficient. A clear weakness was observed in the integration of theoretical knowledge with performance practice, resulting in limited analytical reasoning and stylistic understanding. Students also demonstrated notable deficiencies in communicative and expressive competence, particularly in articulating artistic intention and presenting interpretive decisions. Furthermore, institutional curricula across Sichuan Province do not fully align with the national competency requirements or with current labor-market expectations. Both the quantitative and qualitative strands converge to confirm a strong and urgent need for structured, interpretation-centered training. These convergent findings were integrated during the interpretation phase and directly informed the curriculum design presented under Objective 2.

2. Curriculum Design for Guzheng Interpretative Skills

Following the needs assessment, a curriculum titled *Music Interpretation Skills Development Course* was constructed, comprising a clearly stated rationale, instructional principles, learning objectives, a modular content structure, activity guidelines, designated media and resources, and an assessment framework.

The curriculum consists of six progressive modules, aligned with OBE and UbD frameworks. Core competencies target interpretive reasoning, stylistic understanding, expressive practice, cultural context integration, reflective learning, and communication skills. Learning activities include situational teaching, scaffolding, collaborative performance, and formative assessment.

Evaluation guidelines integrate performance tasks, reflective journals, oral presentations, and rubrics assessing interpretive clarity and expressive communication.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the modular structure and instructional–assessment system. This curriculum directly addresses all identified needs from Objective 1 and aligns with national standards and industry expectations.

Module	Topic	Key Focus	Duration
Module 1	Basic Knowledge & Interpretation	Basic Guzheng structure, beginner pieces, music theory, posture (level 1-5)	32 lessons
Module 2	Intermediate Techniques & Style Analysis	Technique and style analysis (level 6-8), cultural background, teaching demos	32 lessons
Module 3	Advanced Techniques & Interpretation	Advanced techniques (level 9-10), emotional expression, advanced teaching	32 lessons
Module 4	Traditional Styles & Cultural Interpretation	Sichuan styles, cultural analysis, performance techniques	32 lessons
Module 5	Ensemble & Teamwork	Ensemble techniques, teamwork, communication skills	32 lessons
Module 6	Teaching Methodology & Career Development	Guzheng teaching methods, educational psychology, career planning	32 lessons

Figure 1 Modular Course Structure Based on OBE and UbD

Source: by author

Assessment Item	Weight	Evaluation Content	Evaluation Method
Self-chosen Performance & Presentation	50%	Students choose a piece for music interpretation and performance; assesses understanding and performance abilities.	Live performance and teacher feedback, evaluating students' understanding of music and technical skills.
Performance	30%	Includes classroom participation, group performances, homework submission, etc.; assesses learning attitude and practical abilities.	Teacher observation and assessment of class participation, group collaboration, and homework completion.
Teacher-assigned Explanation	20%	Teacher assigns a piece a week in advance for students to analyze and explain; assesses theoretical knowledge and presentation abilities.	Students' analysis report and explanation; teacher evaluates their theoretical analysis and communication skills.

Figure 2 Key Components of Course Delivery and Assessment

Source: by author

Based on the needs identified in Objective 1, a six-module curriculum was designed to systematically address the major deficiencies found in students' interpretation abilities. Table 4 summarizes the alignment between each identified problem and the corresponding curriculum response.

Table 4 Alignment of Identified Deficiencies with Curriculum Modules

Source: by author

Deficiency Identified	Curriculum Response
Lack of interpretive depth	Module 1: Expressive Interpretation Practices
Weak theory–performance integration	Module 2: Structural & Narrative Analysis
Limited stylistic literacy	Module 3: Regional & Historical Guzheng Styles
Insufficient communication ability	Module 4: Performance Communication & Presentation
Weak cultural-contextual understanding	Module 5: Cultural Interpretation & Programmatic Meaning
Fragmented and unreflective learning	Module 6: Reflective Practice & Peer Critique

The results confirm that current guzheng training in Sichuan Province does not sufficiently develop interpretation-related competencies, resulting in reduced artistic depth, weak expressive communication, and limited professional competitiveness. The newly designed curriculum directly addresses these issues through structured modules aligned with national standards, theoretical frameworks, and industry expectations.

Discussion

1. Integrating Theoretical Foundations with Empirical Challenges

The findings of this study demonstrate that effective enhancement of guzheng interpretation skills requires a curriculum that synthesizes multiple pedagogical theories. The proposed curriculum integrates Outcome-Based Education (OBE), Constructivism, Understanding by Design (UbD), and the Feynman Technique to systematically strengthen interpretive capability. This integration ensures structured alignment between learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessment methods, addressing persistent fragmentation in current interpretation training.

OBE provides an essential foundation by specifying measurable interpretive competencies—such as expressive nuance, stylistic literacy, cultural understanding, and communicative clarity—as explicit learning outcomes. This shifts interpretation from an implicit by-product of technical training to a transparent and assessable educational goal.

Constructivism complements OBE by positioning interpretation as an active process in which students construct meaning through performance experience, critical inquiry, and cultural contextualization. Given

that guzheng repertoire is deeply rooted in regional aesthetics and historical traditions, constructivist learning environments enable students to internalize and embody these cultural elements in their interpretive decisions.

UbD contributes curricular coherence by ensuring backward alignment: interpretive skills identified in Objective 1 directly determine assessment criteria and inform the design of modular learning experiences. This alignment strengthens the internal logic of the curriculum and ensures that all instructional components contribute systematically to interpretive development.

The Feynman Technique uniquely reinforces interpretive clarity by requiring students to articulate their expressive and stylistic decisions in clear, accessible language. This pedagogical mechanism develops not only reflective musicianship but also the communicative competencies required for teaching, stage presentation, and professional collaboration.

Collectively, the integration of these theories provides a theoretically robust and pedagogically coherent foundation for addressing the interpretive deficiencies revealed in the results.

2. Centrality of Interpretation Skills in Professional Musicianship

The study reaffirms that musical interpretation is a core dimension of professional readiness rather than an optional supplement to technical mastery. Quantitative findings show that overall interpretive competence among students remains moderate, with stylistic literacy and communicative performance emerging as the lowest-performing areas. These patterns confirm that traditional technique-centered instruction fails to cultivate the deeper analytical, expressive, and communicative capabilities required in contemporary music careers.

Qualitative evidence further reveals that students often rely on surface-level execution and lack the ability to explain expressive intentions, recognize regional stylistic features, or contextualize repertoire. This gap in interpretive reasoning limits students' performance depth and restricts their employability, particularly in an industry where music teaching and cultural transmission constitute major career paths.

Thus, strengthening interpretation skills is not only an academic imperative but also a practical response to evolving professional expectations within the music performance field.

3. Innovation Through Contextualized and Multidimensional Curriculum Design

The curriculum designed in this study introduces a comprehensive, interpretation-centered approach that directly responds to the needs identified in Objective 1. Each module addresses specific deficiencies such as weak theoretical application, limited expressive nuance, and insufficient stylistic awareness, ensuring that instructional content is evidence-driven and responsive to actual student needs.

Furthermore, the curriculum integrates regional cultural elements and Sichuan stylistic characteristics, reinforcing the cultural identity embedded in Guzheng performance. This contextualization not only strengthens interpretive authenticity but also aligns music education with national goals for cultural preservation and transmission.

By embedding multidimensional learning activities such as analytical tasks, reflective practice, collaborative interpretation, and performance-based assessment, the curriculum fosters a holistic understanding of interpretation that connects cognition, expression, culture, and communication. This multidimensionality represents a significant pedagogical innovation within Guzheng education, which has traditionally emphasized technique over interpretive inquiry.

This curriculum therefore represents a substantive contribution to both local educational reform and broader discussions of performance-based pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study identifies critical shortcomings in the current state of guzheng interpretation training in Sichuan Province, including fragmented pedagogical approaches, insufficient development of expressive and stylistic competencies, and weak alignment with professional demands. Through mixed-methods research, the study demonstrates that these deficiencies limit students' interpretive ability, communicative competence, and employment readiness.

In response, a new curriculum grounded in OBE, Constructivism, UbD, and the Feynman Technique was developed to strengthen interpretive proficiency, analytical thinking, cultural literacy, and pedagogical clarity. The curriculum ensures systematic alignment between learning outcomes and instructional activities, directly addressing gaps identified in the empirical findings. It provides a replicable model that integrates technical skill, artistic understanding, and cultural awareness within a cohesive interpretive framework.

This work offers meaningful implications for educators, administrators, and policymakers by presenting a structured pathway for modernizing traditional music performance education. Its emphasis on contextualized interpretation and communicative musicianship positions it as a valuable reference for national and international curriculum reform efforts.

However, the study is limited by its focus on Sichuan Province and undergraduate programs. Future research should evaluate long-term learning outcomes, pilot the curriculum across diverse institutional contexts, and explore extensions to other traditional Chinese instruments. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to elevate the quality, relevance, and cultural significance of music performance education in China.

References

Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh, Dawn Bennett, Ruth Bridgstock, Paul Drapes, Scott Harrison, and Huib Schippers. "Preparing for Portfolio Careers in Australian Music: Setting A Research Agenda." *Australian Journal of Music Education* no. 1 (January 2012): 32-41.

Bennett, Dawn, and Ruth Bridgstock. "The Urgent Need for Career Preview: Student Expectations and Graduate Realities in Music and Dance." *International Journal of Music Education* 33, no. 3 (August 2015): 263-277.

Bennett, Dawn. "Classical Instrumental Musicians: Educating for Sustainable Professional Practice." Unpublished PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2005.

Bennett, Dawn. "Staying Afloat: Skills, Attributes and Passion." In *Life in the Real World: How to Make Music Graduates Employable*, edited by Dawn Bennett, 63-78. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2012.

Bridgstock, Ruth, and Greg Hearn. "A Conceptual Model of Capability Learning for the Twenty-First-Century Knowledge Economy." In *Handbook on the Knowledge Economy, Volume Two*, edited by David Rooney, Greg Hearn, and Tim Kastelle, 105-120. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012.

China Education Daily. "The Ministry of Education Announced the List of Undergraduate Majors with Low Employment Rates - 15 Majors on the List." Last modified October 15, 2014. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201410/t20141015_175978.html (in Chinese)

Chunmei, Jiao. "Analysis of the Current Layout and Scale of Music Undergraduate Programs in Chinese Universities." *Music Research* 04 (2010): 59-69. (in Chinese)

Creswell, John W., and Vicki L. Plano Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018.

Gaokao. "Music Performance." Accessed May 12, 2026. https://www.gaokao.cn/special/325?sort=1&special_type=1&fromcoop=bdkp&provinceId=51. (in Chinese)

Haihong, Zhou. "Research on the Quality Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Performance Programs in Higher Music Institutions." *Journal of Tianjin Conservatory of Music* 02 (2018): 5-18. http://doi.org/10.16274/j.cnki.cn12-1280/j.2018.02.001. (in Chinese)

Jie, Yu. "Construction of a Music Practical Teaching System in Normal Universities Aiming at Cultivating Applied Talents." *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology* 44, no. 5 (2023): 110-113. http://doi.org/10.16336/j.cnki.cn43-1459/z.20231124.002. (in Chinese)

Jing, Lu. "Innovation and Exploration of Sichuan Guzheng Art in the New Century: A Study Based on Education and Artistic Practice." *Sichuan Drama* 11 (2018): 148-151. (in Chinese)

Jing, Lu. "The Development History of Contemporary Zither Music Art in Sichuan." *Sichuan Drama* 03 (2013): 99-105. (in Chinese)

Jingli, Liang. “Research on Teaching Models and Talent Cultivation Pathways for the Guzheng Major in Higher Vocational Colleges.” *Craftsmanship* 10 (2025): 48-50. (in Chinese)

Juslin, Patrik N., and Petri Laukka. “Communication of Emotions in Vocal Expression and Music Performance: Different Channels, Same Code?” *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 5 (September 2003): 770-814.

King, Jean A., and Karen M. Evans. “Can We Achieve Outcome-Based Education?” *Educational Leadership* 49, no. 2 (October 1991): 73-75.

Krejcie, Robert V., and Daryle W. Morgan. “Determining Sample Size for Research Activities.” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30, no. 3 (1970): 607-610.

Lu, Zhang. “Teaching Reflections on the Guzheng Course at Nantong Normal College.” Master’s thesis, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 2014. (in Chinese)

Mengjie, Zhang. “Teaching Exploration of ‘Balancing Cultural and Technical Aspects’ in the Guzheng Course for Higher Vocational Music Education.” Master’s thesis, Guizhou Normal University, 2023. (in Chinese)

Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. “National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Colleges and Universities. Higher Education Department.” Last modified January 30, 2018. http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2018-01-31/doc-ifyremfz2387812.shtml. (in Chinese)

Piaget, Jean. *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*. New York: Viking Press, 1970.

Wenli, Wang, and Han Zhongling. “The Current Status, Nature, and Curriculum Reform of the Music Performance Major—Reflections Based on the Low Employment Rate of Music Performance Graduates.” *People's Music* 05 (2015): 61-63. (in Chinese)

Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005.

Woody, Robert H. “Learning Expressivity in Music Performance: An Exploratory Study.” *Research Studies in Music Education* 14, no. 1 (June 2000): 14-23.

Xiaohong, Wang. “Reflections on Establishing a Modern Teaching Model for the Guzheng.” *Journal of Jilin University of the Arts* 02 (2000): 36-37. https://doi.org/10.13867/j.cnki.1674-5442.2000.02.012. (in Chinese)

Xiaosi, Qi. “Research on the Quality of Talent Cultivation in Music Programs at Higher Education Institutions.” PhD diss., East China Normal University, 2021. http://doi.org/10.27149/d.cnki.ghdsu.2021.000277. (in Chinese)

Yao, Zhang, Zhang Rongrong, and Ye Shanshan. “Analysis and Strategies on the Employment Status of Music Performance Majors in Comprehensive Universities.” *Music Time and Space* 01 (2016): 26-28. (in Chinese)

Yin, Hongxin, and Wei Li. *The Feynman Learning Method*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literary Publishing House, 2021. (in Chinese)