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A Brief Comparison of Korean Gayageum, Chinese Guzheng and Japanese Koto

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Eun Chae, one of my students, submitted this interested topic for her writing. I thought it was quite intriguing so I thought I would publish it. She didn't do exceeding amounts of research but enough for all of us to benefit. Enjoy and thanks, Eun Chae.

Why do musical instruments that come from Korea, Japan, and China look similar? All three countries were in the same cultural area, and shared commercial relationships, and musical elements such as instruments, and songs. Just like the evolution and changes that occurred culturally between the regions, music and instrument variations also occurred. People in their respective countries improved the instrument to benefit their unique playing methods. Therefore, the instruments in each country do not look identical. The reason why they updated the instrument was a result of a lack of understanding of those methodologies, and to make clear their own respective and unique national identities. Thus, one cannot state that Korea, China, and Japan have the same instruments. After comparing the three countries' typical stringed instruments: the Gayageum (Korea), the Guzheng (China) and the Koto (Japan), the differences will become apparent. [caption id="" align="alignnone" width="220"]



Chinese Guzheng[/caption] A good starting place to begin to explore the

similarities between the Korean Gayageum and the Chinese Guzheng is that both are Asian traditional long zithers, and both are made of paulownia. An Asian traditional long zither is a square, elongated, stringed wooden resonance box that looks like the harp but played lying horizontally on the floor. The paulownia is a tree that produces the best wood for musical instruments because it is not vulnerable to fire and because it resonates well. In addition, both the Gayageum and the Guzheng have bridges and both are played with the fingers, and people usually push the left side of string to produce a vibrato effect on both instruments. There are also differences between these two cousins. While the Gayageum has twelve strings made of silk thread, the Guzheng has twenty-one strings made of metal. The Gayageum player performs a vibrato technique - the gentle bending of the string to create a wavering effect on the sound wave- but the Guzheng creates a celestial sound by doing rapid alternate picking. Lastly, the Gayageum is played with the bare fingers, but the Guzheng requires picks on the player's right thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. [caption id="" align="alignnone" width="220"]



Korean Gayageum[caption] The Korean Gayageum and the Japanese

Koto also have similarities and differences. The Gayageum and the Koto are similar in that they are both made of paulownia, and they are classified as Asian traditional long zithers. Also, both instruments' bridges can change the pitch of the string by manipulating or moving the bridge. In regards to their strings, they are usually made out of silk. The Gayageum and the Koto are different in that the Gayageum players put the instrument on their knees in a cross-legged position when they play it, where the Koto is placed on the floor in front of the kneeled player. On the top surface of the body of the Koto, there are tuning pins like a piano's, to facilitate tuning. The Gayageum sounds soft, and lingering, but the Koto has sharp, clear tones and its sound limited sustain. While the Gayageum is played with the bare fingers, the Koto requires the use of picks on player's right three fingers like the Guzheng. Finally, the Gayageum was invented by Wu Ruk, who was commissioned by Gaya's king, but the Koto is an



ancestor of the Guzheng. [caption id="" align="alignnone" width="210"]

Japanese Koto[caption] Comparing the Japanese Koto and the Chinese Guzheng reveals more similarities than differences. Both have clear, and sharp sound. In addition, unlike the hand controlled tuning pegs of a violin, they have a tuning mechanism for tightening and loosening the strings more like a piano. Both musical instruments usually use rapid alternate picking when the players want to make the sound ornate. Furthermore, their movable bridges along the body look similar, in that they are angular arch-shaped and have two long legs while the Gayageum has round arched bridges with short legs. However they differ in that the Koto has thirteen strings, while the Guzheng has twenty-one strings. It is difficult to find the differences between these two instruments because the Koto originated from the Guzheng. The Chinese Guzheng, the Korean Gayageum, and the Japanese Koto have individual, indigenous sounds distinguishing one from the other, though they look similar externally. Each respective country's musicians redesigned the instrument by applying to it their character which contributed to the unique sound of each one. Also, traditional instruments are connected to their own country, so people who might think that those three musical instruments look the same and have almost the same sound could find the differences easily after hearing them individually. One should not be surprised because China, Korea, and Japan share similarities between their cultures, while maintaining their own unique customs.

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