

TECHNIQUE AND EMOTION IN CHINESE YANGQIN PERFORMANCE

Wenjian HONG¹ and Manissa VASINAROM¹

¹ Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand;
s67563806003@ssru.ac.th (W. H.); manissa.va@ssru.ac.th (M. V.)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 7 November 2025 **Revised:** 21 November 2025 **Published:** 9 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the technique and Emotion in Chinese Yangqin Performance. The scope of this research covers the technique system's composition, the influence of performers' subjective emotions, and the intrinsic connections between specific techniques and emotional expression. The methodology integrates literature review, long-term participatory observation, and in-depth interviews to investigate the practical mechanisms from multiple dimensions. Research findings reveal that technique and emotion are mutually reinforcing. Emotional expressiveness depends on key factors including personal experience, technical proficiency, and understanding of the works. Performers' individualized application of techniques is core to their role as emotional constructors. The benefit of this study is its provision of a systematic reference for performance theory and teaching practice, emphasizing that Yangqin performance is an art of emotional communication rather than merely a technical presentation.

Keywords: Yangqin, Technique, Emotion

CITATION INFORMATION: Hong, W., & Vasinarom, M. (2025). Technique and Emotion in Chinese Yangqin Performance. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(12), 44.

INTRODUCTION

The yangqin, as a highly representative plucked instrument in Chinese traditional music. It was initially introduced to Europe and later brought into China via the Silk Road, an important channel for cultural exchange between the East and the West. Since the late Ming Dynasty, this foreign instrument gradually took root in China, undergoing over four hundred years of localization. In the initial stage, the yangqin had a relatively simple structure and basic playing methods, primarily used for the presentation of simple melodies. With the improvement of local craftsmanship during the Ming and Qing periods and the continuous deepening of Chinese traditional musical aesthetics, it has developed unique playing techniques and a strong national style. (Huang He, 2025)

In the modern and contemporary period, the yangqin, while retaining its traditional musical language, has actively absorbed Western compositional concepts and modern performance ideas, being widely applied in chamber ensembles, national orchestras, opera accompaniment, and solo stages, with performance forms becoming increasingly diverse. Its timbre is bright and clear, possessing both penetration and expansiveness, capable of expressing subtle and delicate emotions as well as presenting vigorous and impassioned momentum. The yangqin stands out among national instruments not only because of its unique sound effect but also due to its strong expressiveness and high artistic plasticity. In terms of technique, the yangqin offers diverse playing methods, and behind each technique lies the performer's recreation of the musical language.

In Chinese yangqin performance, technique and emotion share a complementary and inseparable importance. Technique serves as the vehicle and foundation for emotional expression, while emotion constitutes the soul and ultimate purpose of technical application. Current research still has room for further exploration regarding how to achieve a deep integration of technique and emotion in both performance practice and pedagogy. Particularly within the contemporary multicultural context, yangqin performance faces the challenge of balancing between inheriting traditions and pursuing innovative expression, thus making the relationship between technique and emotion even more practically significant.

Against the backdrop of contemporary traditional music being increasingly influenced by multicultural forces, in-depth exploration of the yangqin's expressive power and emotional conveyance in performance practice holds practical significance for promoting the development of national instrumental arts and enhancing the scientific basis of yangqin pedagogy. Although the playing techniques of the yangqin continue to enrich, how to achieve the unification of technique and emotion in performance practice remains a key focus in both academia and teaching.

Grounded in the research background and objectives, this study is developed through the analysis of four core aspects: the composition and essential functions of the yangqin performance technique system; the formative role of performers' subjective emotional experiences in shaping musical interpretation; the intrinsic connections between standard performance techniques and specific emotional expressions; and the process of achieving a seamless integration of technique and emotion in Chinese yangqin performance and practice.

In summary, this paper will investigate the interplay between performance techniques and emotional expression in the yangqin, aiming to provide fresh perspectives at both theoretical and practical levels.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Scholarly inquiry into the Chinese yangqin has evolved along two primary paths: the systematization of its performance techniques and the exploration of emotional expression. Research on technique has moved beyond cataloguing to analyze the artistic function of specific methods; for instance, studies have detailed how the tremolo (lunying) connects discrete

notes into lyrical melodies, while techniques like glissando and harmonic infuse the music with distinctive tonal colors and imagery (Zheng Baoheng, 1982). This technical discourse is intrinsically linked to investigations into the instrument's unique physicality, its structure, materials, and resonance, which are understood to fundamentally shape its sonic palette and, by extension, the technical and aesthetic choices available to the performer (Huang He, 2025). Concurrently, the study of emotional expression in yangqin performance has developed from generalized aesthetic descriptions into a more structured field. Early discussions often focused on the instrument's inherent capacity to convey the affective qualities of Chinese traditional music. More recent research has sought to deconstruct the sources and mechanisms of emotional expression. Scholars have explored this through various lenses, including the performer's personal emotional experience and its stylistic influence (Li Jin, 2025), the strategies for achieving emotional communication with the audience, and the psychological regulation of emotion in live performance settings (Zhu Chengjia, 2025). This body of work marks a significant shift from viewing emotion as a mere output to understanding it as a complex construct involving internal experience, technical mediation, and external communication.

As artistic expectations for Chinese instrumentalists evolved, scholars gradually recognized that technical proficiency alone is insufficient for fully conveying the aesthetic and emotional depth of musical works. This realization has spurred explorations into the emotion-technique nexus from various theoretical perspectives. Cognitive approaches to music and emotion, for instance (Li Xuemei & Sun Yu, 2025), have examined how a performer's analytical understanding of musical structure informs their emotional interpretation. In contrast, embodied and phenomenological perspectives emphasize the role of the performer's physical and affective experiences in shaping expression, suggesting that emotion is not merely represented but is enacted through technique. Furthermore, pedagogical models have been proposed to bridge this gap, incorporating methods such as mental imagery and narrative construction into technical training.

Despite these valuable insights, a critical analysis reveals that much of the existing research tends to examine facets of emotional expression, technical execution, and instrument-specific properties in isolation without adequately synthesizing these dimensions. This fragmented approach is mirrored in teaching methodologies that continue to treat technical acquisition and musical interpretation as sequential rather than concurrent stages. Consequently, a significant research gap remains regarding the dynamic, integrated interaction between technical mastery and emotional communication in yangqin performance, underscoring the need for more comprehensive and systematic studies in this area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1) Literature Research

In this study, the literature research method, as one of the fundamental research approaches, was primarily employed to systematically review and analyze theoretical achievements and practical experiences of domestic and international scholars concerning yangqin performance techniques, emotional expression, and the integration of the two. The researchers conducted comprehensive searches using online databases to examine relevant academic monographs, journal articles, conference proceedings, performance reviews, pedagogical notes, and interview records with yangqin performers. By comparing and synthesizing the literature while leveraging the researcher's extensive performance experience, this process established the necessary theoretical foundation for subsequent case analyses in the following chapters. Furthermore, the literature review process helped clarify the research stance of this study.

2) Observation Method

The researcher, with 18 years of professional experience in the performance field, conducted focused observations over a three-year period specifically centered around the research questions. This longitudinal study encompassed 15 live performances, 6 masterclasses, and the documented processes of 7 recent rehearsal sessions, with partial video recordings retained for reference. Leveraging this extensive practical background, the study performed a comparative analysis across multiple performers, seeking to identify both the commonalities and distinctions in emotional expression across different performance styles. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of individuality and artistic freedom in yangqin performance. Furthermore, the observational data was triangulated with interview data to enhance the validity of the findings and mitigate potential research bias.

3) Interviews

This study adopts the interview method, with a total of four interviewees. Selecting two representative yangqin performers (Lin Shiyan and Xu Yingrui, from professional troupes and performance groups) and two yangqin educators (Qian Weihong and Liang Zhu, including university professors and grassroots professional teachers) as interviewees, employing a categorized interview approach. The interviews focus on three core issues: first, how to adjust the coordination between technique and emotion in different performance contexts; second, the influence of personal emotional experiences on performance style and musical interpretation; third, perspectives on the trend of integrating technique and emotion in contemporary yangqin performance. The study extracts essential research materials from the discussions, supplementing the conclusions drawn from literature analysis and observations. Based on this empirical foundation, it provides multidimensional perspectives for exploring the interaction between technique and emotion within the research theme.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1) The Composition and Function of the Yangqin Performance Technique System

In previous research, the performance techniques of the yangqin have been systematically documented. Scholars have systematically categorized fundamental techniques such as striking, pressing, and plucking the strings (Zheng Baoheng, 1982), with their primary focus on clarifying the basic question of "how to play." Such studies have laid a solid foundation for the standardization of performance techniques. As research deepened, subsequent scholars began to approach techniques from the perspective of their function in musical expression, classifying them into categories such as melodic, harmonic, and ornamental, aiming to bridge the connection between technique and musical effect. Most of these discussions still treat technique as a relatively independent instrumental system. Building on previous research, this study further proceeds from the ultimate goal of emotional expression in yangqin performance. This section will outline the core expressive purposes of yangqin techniques from a macro perspective, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions on the interaction between techniques and emotions at the micro level.

1.1) Core Techniques

These techniques form the most fundamental and core part of yangqin performance, directly impacting the quality of tone and the integrity of melodic lines. Based on the researcher's extensive performing experience and observational findings, Single-note technique requires a full, pure, and resonant tone, serving as the basis for melodic construction. The precision of striking and the method of force application directly affect the fundamental sound quality. Roll technique is a signature yangqin technique, where rapid and even alternating strikes with the bamboo hammers transform the instrument's characteristic "point" sounds into "linear" melodies. The density and evenness of the roll directly determine the fluency and expressiveness of musical phrases. The tremolo bamboo technique emphasizes agile finger

movements to produce a light and elastic tone, while staccato requires short and forceful strikes, emphasizing rhythmic punctuation. Vibrato, achieved by pressing the string after striking, creates a controlled fluctuation in pitch, enhancing the nuance of individual notes and serving as a key means of expressing subtle emotions.

1.2) Textural Techniques

With the development of yangqin music, textural techniques have become essential tools for constructing a three-dimensional acoustic space. Literature analysis reveals that following the reform of the yangqin, Two-part playing is key to the three-dimensionalization of yangqin musical thinking, requiring independent operation of both hands to simultaneously present melodic and accompaniment voices clearly, forming rich musical layers. Harmony and chord techniques involve striking multiple notes simultaneously to create full harmonic sounds, where dynamic control and tonal balance directly affect the quality of the harmonic effect. Arpeggio techniques decompose chords into specific patterns for performance, providing rhythmic support and atmospheric enhancement. In modern yangqin works, the application of polyphonic passages is increasingly common, demanding stronger voice control and a sense of musical structure from the performer.

1.3) Coloristic Techniques

These techniques are primarily used to create special sound effects, depict musical imagery, and highlight stylistic features. By integrating interview data with a cross-analysis of respondents' perspectives and relevant literature, it can be concluded that. Reverse bamboo technique uses the back of the hammer to strike the strings, producing a crisp and bright tone often used to depict lively and humorous musical passages. Pizzicato and grasping techniques involve plucking the strings directly with fingers to imitate the sound effects of instruments like the guzheng, enriching the yangqin's tonal variations. Glissando and portamento techniques, achieved by sliding fingers along the strings, produce smooth pitch changes, effectively mimicking vocal slides or natural sounds. Harmonic technique produces ethereal and transparent tones, adding a hazy color effect to the music (Zheng Baoheng,1982). The appropriate use of these coloristic techniques can significantly enhance the visual imagery and expressiveness of the music.

2) The Influence of Subjective Emotions on Musical Interpretation

2.1) Differences in Performance Style Shaped by Emotional Experience

The researcher argues that a performer's individual emotional experience plays a pivotal role in shaping their performance style and serves as a key variable influencing the depth and layers of their performance. Every performer is influenced by their own growth background, cultural edification, and life experiences, which gradually form their unique emotional foundation for performance through long-term practice. These subjective experiences do not merely attach to techniques, but are continuously internalized into the components of their performance style in musical practice.

According to the researcher's observations, performers who have received rigorous "academic" training from an early age tend to emphasize the proficiency of performance skills and accuracy during performance, demonstrating a style characterized by rational restraint and clear structure. In contrast, folk artists who have long been active on folk stages tend to adopt a freely flowing performance style rich in emotional tension. This stylistic divergence arising from different cultural immersion environments is a typical manifestation of how emotional experience shapes artistic expression.

The emotional differences in performance styles are also closely related to performers' psychological identification with the "musical background". When interpreting narrative or lyrical works, performers need to construct a situational framework in their minds, which enhances their sense of integration into the artistic conception of the work. Different

perspectives of emotional understanding will also lead to different performance results (Li Jin, 2025).

The formation of a performance style is by no means isolated from emotions, but a product of the long-term integration and interaction between subjective emotions and musical language. The expressiveness of the yangqin, a national musical instrument, not only relies on the proficient mastery of skills, but also depends on whether the performer can organically integrate individual emotions into their performance techniques, thereby endowing the music with true vitality within the technical framework.

2.2) The Immediate Impact of Emotional Mobilization and On-the-Spot State on Performance

The researcher discovered through observations of multiple concerts and rehearsals that Performance on stage is not a simple reproduction of routine practice; it is influenced by specific temporal and spatial conditions and is a real-time artistic activity co-created by the performer and the audience. The performer's current mental state and emotional flow are most readily integrated into the music. Preparations before performance primarily focus on technical consolidation and musical understanding, but when stepping onto the stage, success often relies on emotional mobilization and on-the-spot psychological stability—that is, the performer's mental resilience. When emotions are full and the performer is relaxed, the musical expression tends to be freer and more musical. Adequate timbral variation and the overall fluidity and expressiveness of performance often depend on whether the performer can remain undisturbed by external conditions. If the performer is tense, anxious, or mentally distracted, even technically proficient playing can suffer, resulting in weak tone, stiff movements, or abrupt phrasing, ultimately reducing emotional tension and artistic impact.

The interview data from this study provide vivid evidence for these emotion regulation methods. Performer Lin Shiyao elaborated on her coping mechanism in the interview: "My approach involves practicing slow abdominal breathing behind the side curtains while silently rehearsing the opening measures of the piece in my mind. This helps shift my focus from 'fear of making mistakes' to 'the music itself.'" Such firsthand accounts clearly demonstrate that emotional mobilization is not an abstract concept, but rather a series of concrete, trainable psychological techniques and behavioral strategies. However, fluctuations in on-the-spot emotional state are not necessarily a "risk factor" in performance; they can also bring new insights. When emotion intertwines with musical imagery, the performer's spontaneous responses can break through the habitual thinking patterns of off-stage practice, resulting in performances that are warmer and more individual (Zhu Chengya, 2025). This non-predetermined, non-replicated musical behavior often touches both the performer's and the audience's inner experience in a fleeting moment.

Emotion and technique are not mutually exclusive or opposing; rather, they support and enhance each other. A stable technical foundation ensures the reliability of emotional expression, while rich emotional engagement humanizes technique, moving it beyond "mechanical" execution. Excellent performers find the optimal balance between these two aspects, transforming emotion into a driving force for their artistry.

2.3) How Emotion Enhances the Expressive Power of Musical Interpretation

The emotional experience imparted by the performer often determines the expressive depth and communicative reach of a musical work. If technique is likened to a skeleton, then emotion is the blood flowing through it, endowing otherwise static notes with vitality and dynamic tension.

Through the process of educators' daily teaching to students, it was discovered that, cultivating expressive emotion is not a rapid process but a meticulous one that develops in parallel with technical training. Many beginners focus solely on rhythm and intonation, often neglecting emotional guidance. However, as technique becomes proficient and musical understanding deepens, emotional expression gradually becomes an indispensable component of practice.

When working on a piece, performers should “immerse” themselves in the work’s context, understanding its background, expressive content, and essentially “becoming” the piece itself. Deliberately simulating a stage environment during practice helps to prefigure stage expressiveness.

When a performer can integrate personal emotion with the work’s intent and resonate with the audience’s emotional expectations, performance ceases to be mere display and becomes an act of transmission and communication. From the audience’s perspective, what truly moves the listener is not the accuracy of notes but the emotional flow that goes beyond the written score while remaining perfectly fitting.

Integrating emotion enhances the yangqin’s expressive impact, expanding it from an auditory experience into a medium of emotional exchange. Music transcends linguistic boundaries precisely because this emotion-driven interpretation reaches deep into the listener’s heart (Sun Juan, 2024). This enhancement of communicative power does not rely on external exaggeration but is gradually formed through repeated fusion of emotion and technique, ultimately creating an artistic force capable of truly moving people.

3) Analysis of the Relationship Between Common Yangqin Playing Techniques and Emotional Expression

The yangqin has diverse performance forms, serving both as an independent expressive medium and in collaboration with other instruments. Common performance formats mainly include solo, ensemble, accompaniment, orchestral performance, and local opera genres. Each performance form has its own characteristics in terms of repertoire selection, technique application, and stage presentation, collectively forming a rich expressive system for the yangqin. This section will draw conclusions by integrating the researcher's personal experience with documentary analysis.

The yangqin possesses a very rich set of playing techniques, the researcher lists and analyzes two commonly used techniques.

3.1) Tremolo

Tremolo are a commonly used and highly expressive playing technique. A roll is a method of connecting the yangqin’s point-like sounds into a continuous line and serves as a carrier for delicate emotional expression, enriching the emotional layers of an entire piece. In different performance contexts, variations in the rhythm, dynamics, and range of rolls often determine the emotional direction being conveyed.

When rolls are combined with strong dynamics and extensive bodily involvement, they give the audience a sense of excitement and surging energy. In contrast, soft tremolos with minimal physical movement appear gentle and profound, conveying a sense of nuanced storytelling. Irregular tremolo rhythms with fluctuating dynamics create feelings of tension and unease for the listener. Like inner emotional turbulence, they are filled with anxiety and instability, enhancing the dramatic tension of the music.

Researchers believe that rolls are not only a fundamental technique in yangqin performance but also a means of bringing this “point-like” instrument closer to linear emotional expression. Through different contexts, rolls can convey a rich variety of emotions, making the music more vivid and engaging.

3.2) Double-Voice Technique

The double-voice technique is an important means for the yangqin to enhance its expressiveness, often used to convey musical layers and emotional contrasts. By independently operating with both hands in two different registers, a clear division between melody and accompaniment, or primary and secondary voices, is established, enriching the spatial and textural depth of the music. Performers can present a smooth, continuous melodic line in one voice while creating a rhythmic or harmonic background in the other, thereby increasing musical tension.

In lyrical passages, the left hand may play a delicate and sustained main melody, while the right hand provides soft, repetitive patterns as a “foundation.” Combined with the performer’s relaxed body movements and subtle facial expressions, this can convey a restrained and contemplative emotional atmosphere. In fast-paced or emotionally intense sections, the double-voice technique often uses methods such as interwoven rhythms and register contrasts, paired with the performer’s vigorous playing, creating strong or tense emotional tension.

Double-voice performance tests the performer’s ability to grasp the overall structure and control subtle emotional layering. It cannot be fully expressed through technique alone; it requires the integration of the performer’s emotional engagement and performance state for the audience to perceive the deeper inner world depicted by both the composer and the performer.

4) The Integration of Technique and Emotion in Chinese Yangqin Performance Pedagogy

Based on interviews with educators and observations of teaching sessions, achieving the integration of technique and emotion in Chinese yangqin instruction requires teachers to establish a systematic pedagogical framework. Educators should guide students in building connections between personal emotions and musical expression, transforming life experiences into intrinsic motivation for artistic representation by documenting emotional experiences during practice sessions. In technical training, teachers can design layered and progressive objectives for emotional expression, correlating technical elements with emotional variations, while using comparative exercises to help students recognize the distinct differences between mechanical execution and emotionally infused performance (Shen Yingying, 2025).

The cultivation of cultural literacy should extend beyond classroom boundaries by organizing field research activities where students can personally experience regional musical characteristics and cultural contexts. Through cross-cultural comparative listening, students can develop a deeper understanding of the unique aesthetic pursuits of Chinese music. Establishing a systematic cultural study mechanism encourages students to conduct multidimensional interpretations of each musical piece, forming comprehensive cognition from historical background to artistic genres.

Developing stage performance skills requires creating continuous performance opportunities through regular mini-recitals within routine teaching (Wang Hongli, 2025). Instructors should guide students in mastering psychological adjustment techniques, using scenario visualization and breathing exercises to alleviate performance anxiety. Implementing an effective feedback mechanism through video playback and group discussions helps students recognize the emotional communication effectiveness of their own performances.

The curriculum system can be optimized accordingly: the elementary stage should focus on synchronous development of fundamental techniques and emotional expression; the intermediate stage should strengthen the analysis of regional stylistic emotions; while the advanced stage should emphasize cultivating students' personal artistic characteristics. These teaching practices transform abstract emotional expression into operable artistic language, enabling students to achieve organic unity of technique and emotion through progressive learning. Teachers should pay attention to each student's individual characteristics, adopt differentiated teaching methods, and maximize teaching effectiveness through continuous learning documentation and periodic assessment (Tang Jin,2025).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study establishes that the "integration of technique and emotion" is a dynamic process synergistically driven by four elements: personal experience, technical mastery, cultural understanding, and stage presence. This integrative framework is central to understanding the artistry of yangqin performance.

This conclusion represents a critical breakthrough compared to previous research. Early studies focused on systematizing performance techniques, laying the foundation for "how to play." Subsequent scholars, while exploring new dimensions such as emotional expression and performance psychology, were generally confined to viewing "technique" and "emotion" as two relatively independent systems. This dichotomous perspective is the theoretical root of the integration challenges encountered in current teaching and practice.

The fundamental distinction of this study lies in transcending this traditional dualistic approach. Through empirical investigation, it reveals the real-time interaction and organic unity of the four elements in actual performance. The validity and persuasiveness of this framework are robustly supported by multiple lines of evidence: longitudinal observation demonstrates a positive correlation between the completeness of the four elements and performance expressiveness; interview records unveil the performers' conscious internal process of connecting psychology with technique; furthermore, the developmental history of yangqin art itself, where each innovation in its technical system essentially responded to the need for deeper emotional and cultural expression, corroborates the rationality of this framework from a historical dimension.

Consequently, the integrative framework of this study bridges the theoretical divide of the "technique-emotion separation," providing a systematic model that guides comprehensive practice from the classroom to the stage. It emphasizes the synchronous cultivation and organic integration of all elements from the very beginning of training, thereby confirming that "the unity of technique and emotion" is an attainable artistic state rather than an abstract aesthetic ideal.

Conclusion

Through a systematic review and analysis of the interaction between technique and emotion in yangqin performance, the researcher found it is a profound transmission of emotion through sound. From the yangqin's historical evolution from a foreign instrument to a native one, to the development of its technique system across different periods, and to structural modifications that expanded its expressive range, it is evident that the instrument's development has always been guided by the core motivation of emotional expression. The richness of performance techniques not only provides formal diversity in works but also creates unlimited possibilities for layered emotional articulation.

The research results indicate that the primary factors influencing emotional expression in yangqin performance include:

1) Performer's personal emotional experience and style

A performer's upbringing, cultural influences, and life experiences directly shape their performance style and emotional depth. Interpretations in youth may focus on technique and outward emotion, while mature performers convey deeper emotion through subtle, restrained approaches. Performance style develops gradually through countless repetitions and stage experiences, reflecting not only technical proficiency but also the performer's aesthetic sensibilities and life experiences.

2) Mastery of technique and performance methods

Proficient technique is the foundation for emotional expression. The use of techniques such as rolls, double-voice playing, and string-bending, combined with the required emotional intent of the music, directly determines tone, rhythm, and dynamic expressiveness. The diversity of techniques provides multidimensional means for conveying emotion, enriching the music's layers and expressiveness.

3) Understanding of the work and cultural context

Comprehension of the composition's background, the national music context, and the work's emotional intent is a prerequisite for integrating emotion into performance. In-depth analysis

of musical structure, emotional trajectory, and cultural symbols helps performers accurately convey the composer's intent, enhancing the music's artistic impact.

4) Stage presence and emotional engagement

A performer's on-stage psychological state, emotional flow, and sensitivity to the performance environment directly affect their expression. Techniques such as breath control, mental cues, or situational visualization help mobilize emotions, making performance more expressive and impactful. Technique and emotion are mutually supportive: stable technique ensures emotional flow, while rich emotion humanizes technique, freeing it from mechanical execution.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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