

The inheritance of Guangdong music in overseas Chinese communities: the maintenance and construction of cultural identity

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Abstract:

Guangdong music, as a key element of Lingnan culture, is a crucial means by which overseas Chinese communities maintain and construct cultural identity. This paper employs a literature review to examine how Guangdong music is transmitted within these communities and analyzes its specific role in identity preservation and reconstruction. The paper first outlines the historical background and artistic features of Guangdong music, then discusses how it is inherited overseas and how it impacts cultural identity. It further identifies current challenges in this process and offers targeted strategies by examining typical cases. The findings demonstrate that Guangdong music significantly supports cultural identity in overseas Chinese communities through diverse inheritance forms, though it faces obstacles requiring effective responses. This study provides new insight into the cultural value of Guangdong music among overseas Chinese and serves as a reference for the broader dissemination of Chinese folk music.

Keywords: Guangdong music; Overseas Chinese; Cultural inheritance; Identity; Maintenance and construction

1. Introduction

Guangdong music is a vital part of traditional Chinese music, born in the Pearl River Delta with distinctive regional and artistic traits. Its melodic and rhythmic features have earned it wide popularity. Beyond its artistic merit, Guangdong music represents Lingnan culture and holds deep historical and cultural meaning. As Chinese communities migrated, this music spread abroad, serving as both a cultural

symbol and a shared heritage for overseas Chinese. Overseas Chinese communities, facing identity challenges in new societies, use music to maintain and shape their connection to heritage. Guangdong music thus acts not only as a performance but as a dynamic expression of identity and engagement between Chinese roots and host cultures. The adaptation of Guangdong music in these contexts is complicated by globalization and generational change, presenting new challenges for its preservation. This paper

analyzes how Guangdong music is currently inherited in overseas Chinese communities, details its influence on identity construction, and proposes strategies to address pressing challenges. The results provide a deeper understanding of Guangdong music's cultural role and guidance for its international dissemination.

2. Overview of Guangdong music

2.1 Historical development of Guangdong music

The formation and development of Guangdong music has undergone a long and complex historical process, which is important for understanding its present role. Its origin can be traced back to the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, and it gradually developed on the basis of folk music, opera music, and court music in the Pearl River Delta region. Progressing through time, at the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, Guangdong music entered a golden period of development. During this stage, a number of outstanding musicians such as He Liutang, Lv Wencheng, and Yin Zizhong emerged. They created a large number of classic songs, such as "Dragon Race for Gold", "Pinghu Autumn Moon", and "Bubugao", which established the artistic status of Guangdong music. At the same time, continuous innovation in musical instruments and playing

techniques led to the formation of Gaohu, dulcimer, Qin qin, Dongxiao, coconut hu, and other instruments based on the "five head" group, which has become a typical expression of Guangdong music. This progression from early formation to artistic innovation helps to illuminate its current significance within Chinese communities.

Since the 20th century, Guangdong music has further integrated the elements of Chinese and Western music, absorbed the playing techniques of Western instruments such as the violin and saxophone, and enriched the expression of music [1-4]. After the founding of New China, Guangdong music was systematically organized and studied under the promotion of professional groups, and a number of new works reflecting the style of The Times were created to enrich its artistic connotation.

2.2 Characteristics and forms of music expression of Guangdong music

Guangdong music is renowned for its distinctive artistic style and musical expression, featuring smooth melodies, lively rhythms, and bright, crisp timbres. It is performed in various formats, including small instrumental ensembles and large national orchestras, and frequently accompanies Guangdong opera. The flexible instrumentation, which incorporates both Chinese and Western instruments, highlights the open and inclusive nature of Guangdong music. Table 1 summarizes its artistic characteristics and forms of expression (seen in Table 1).

Table. 1 Artistic characteristics and forms of expression of Guangdong music

category	Specific content	Instructions
Artistic characteristics	Smooth and beautiful melody	With progressive, jumping as a supplement, the lines are coherent and rich in singing, and the melody is gorgeous and delicate through the decoration of "adding flowers", such as the melody of "Pinghu Autumn Moon" is graceful and melodious.
	The rhythm is lively and bright	Vivid rhythm, a large number of syncopated rhythm and dotted rhythm, enhance the music dynamic and vitality, such as "Bubugao" rhythm bright and high, full of positive atmosphere.
	The sound is crisp and bright	Gaohu plays the main instrument (clear and bright tone), with the dulcimer (crisp), Qin Qin (soft), etc., to build a unique and harmonious sound effect.
	Full of life	Most of the songs depict the natural landscape and daily scenes of Lingnan, containing the customs of water towns, such as "Rain on Plantains" showing the vivid picture of swaying plantains after rain, and "Birds in the Forest" simulating the smart scene of birds returning to their nests [5,6].

Form of expression	Small instrumental ensemble	With “five heads” as the core, it is suitable for small occasions, highlighting the delicate cooperation between instruments.
	A large folk band plays	Expand the scale of the band, integrate more national instruments, enhance the musical momentum and sense of hierarchy, suitable for large-scale performance activities.
	Guangdong opera accompaniment	As an important accompaniment music of Guangdong opera, it is closely combined with traditional Chinese opera singing and performance actions to set off the atmosphere of the story.
	Flexible and compatible	It can be adjusted according to the needs of the performance, which not only retains traditional folk instruments, but also integrates western instruments such as violin and piano, reflecting the artistic characteristics of openness and inclusiveness.

3. Inheritance of Guangdong music culture in overseas Chinese communities

3.1 Emotional Identification and Transformation of Guangdong Music in Overseas Chinese Communities

For the first generation of immigrants, Guangdong music is the direct carrier of “auditory homesickness”. Lv Wencheng’s “Autumn Moon on a Flat Lake” and Yi Jianquan’s “Birds in the Forest” and other classic songs can instantly arouse their memories of Lingnan customs and produce strong emotional resonance [7]. This kind of identity is not only a private emotional experience, but also a public cultural practice through collective musical activities (such as community rehearsals and festival performances), which has become an important symbol of the identity of the Guangdong Chinese community.

It is worth noting that this identification shows significant differences in geography. In traditional Guangdong Chinese communities in North America (e.g., San Francisco, Vancouver) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Singapore) [8], there is generally a high degree of recognition of Guangdong music. However, in areas with a large number of new immigrants and diverse sources of Chinese origin (such as some European cities), the function of Guangdong music as a symbol of overall Chinese identity is relatively weak, and it is more confined to the Guangdong cultural circle.

The identification of the second and third generations of Chinese with Guangdong music presents a complicated situation. Although most young Chinese recognize the cultural value of Guangdong music, they lack a deep emotional connection and motivation to participate. However, in recent years, there has been a noteworthy phenomenon: some young Chinese who grew up in a multicultural environment have begun to rediscover the significance of Guangdong music as a “cultural root”. In a way of “reflective identification”, they regard learning Guangdong mu-

sic as an important way to explore their cultural identity.

This shift in identity is particularly evident among college students. For example, the Guangdong music clubs organized by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association of some universities in North America not only attract the participation of Guangdong students, but also arouse the interest of non-Guangdong students. This shows that Guangdong music is expanding from a regional cultural symbol to a broader symbol of Chinese culture.

3.2 Maintenance and construction of Guangdong music inheritance in overseas Chinese communities

3.2.1 Institutionalized inheritance mechanism

The core role of community organizations: Overseas Guangdong music inheritance mainly relies on various Chinese community organizations. These associations have formed a relatively perfect inheritance system. They include: (1) Established music clubs: The Singapore Chinese Orchestra is a relatively successful case of overseas cultural inheritance. With the mission of being a “people’s orchestra”, it promotes Chinese music through community concerts, school art education programs, outdoor concerts, and other activities [9]. Such as the Dunhuang Opera Troupe in Singapore and the Southern Chinese Music Club in San Francisco, which have a history of several decades and regularly conduct rehearsals, performances and teaching activities; (2) Affiliated music groups of local associations: Many regional associations (such as Taisan Association and Zhongshan Association) have music groups to perform Guangdong music in friendship activities; (3) Emerging cultural groups: Cross-cultural music organizations that have emerged in recent years, such as the “Chinese and Western Orchestra” in Vancouver, try to integrate Guangdong music with local musical forms.

The gradual establishment of the education system: some areas began to incorporate Guangdong music into the formal education system, such as some primary and secondary schools in Singapore have incorporated Guang-

dong music appreciation into the music curriculum; Some Chinese schools in North America offer Guangdong music interest classes on weekends.

3.2.2 Living inheritance in festivals and ceremonies

Guangdong music plays an indispensable role in important festivals and life rituals of overseas Chinese: These include the accompaniment of the lion dance in the Spring Festival, Guangdong music performances in the welcome performance, the combination of traditional music and modern innovation in the Mid-Autumn evening party, the retention of Guangdong music elements in the traditional ceremonies of weddings and funerals, as well as community celebrations, Chinatown cultural festivals, Chinese history anniversaries and other activities, which have enabled Guangdong music to go beyond mere artistic performance and become a cultural ceremony to maintain community cohesion.

3.2.3 Innovative modern expression

The inheritance of overseas Guangdong music is not a simple copy, but a creative re-creation, including (1) the innovation of performance forms: for example, the diversification of musical instrument combinations: the addition of Western instruments such as cello and piano on the basis of the traditional “five heads”; (2) Innovation of performance forms: try to combine with multimedia, dance, drama and other art forms; (3) Innovation in repertoire creation: new arrangement of traditional repertoire: such as new composition of jazz version of “Rain Basho”, works reflecting the life experience of overseas Chinese, such as “Chinatown Ballade”; (4) Innovation in communication methods: digital dissemination, sharing of performance videos through YouTube, B station and other platforms[10].

4. Challenges in the Overseas Transmission of Guangdong Music and Pathways for Cultural Identity Construction

4.1 Challenges and difficulties in the overseas inheritance and development of Guangdong music culture

Although Guangdong music, as an important local music in China, plays an indispensable role in maintaining the cultural identity and nostalgia of overseas Chinese communities, and has achieved certain inheritance results, its deep-rooted and sustainable development still faces many severe challenges and structural difficulties.

4.1.1 Inheritance main body fault

The primary participants in the creation, performance, and dissemination of Guangdong music remain predominantly first-generation elderly immigrants. While they possess authentic performance skills and a deep familiarity with traditional repertoire, their engagement is largely rooted in personal memory and emotional ties to their homeland. In contrast, younger generations, including American-born Chinese and children of recent immigrants, have been raised in different cultural contexts and are strongly influenced by Western popular culture, globalization, and digital media. As a result, they often lack the cultural background and emotional connection to the musical traditions of their elders.

4.1.2 limited audience range

The audience group of Guangdong music shows a high degree of homogeneity, mainly concentrated in the Chinese immigrant community whose ancestral home is Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. Its musical language (such as Guangdong singing style, Guangdong song bong-huang), local themes, and aesthetic habits have virtually built a cultural barrier, making non-Guangdong Chinese (such as northern Chinese, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang Chinese) and non-Chinese audiences feel alienated and estranged, and it is difficult to resonate. This phenomenon is called “Cultural Discount” in cultural studies[11][12].

4.1.3 Insufficient resource support

Most overseas Guangdong music associations operate as non-profit amateur organizations, relying primarily on membership dues, limited donations, and occasional income from local festival performances. This unstable funding model makes it difficult to cover essential expenses such as venue rental and instrument maintenance. Insufficient resources also hinder the ability to invite professional artists, acquire quality instruments, or support the creation and arrangement of new works. Consequently, resource constraints limit artistic quality, activity sustainability, market outreach, and educational initiatives.

4.2 Ethnic identity: The musical bond that strengthens the Chinese collective identity

First, establish a systematic ethnic music education system. Guangdong music compulsory modules are set up in weekend Chinese schools and Chinese community centers, and teaching materials suitable for different ages are written, such as “Enlightening Fun Guangdong Music” for children and “Guangdong Music Culture Reader” for adults. Through the intergenerational inheritance project, the “Grandparent and Grandchild Music Workshop” was launched, allowing the older generation of immigrants to

play traditional songs together with the younger generation, and strengthening the family and ethnic memory through musical interaction. Second, create an iconic annual celebration of music. For example, “Guangdong Music and Culture Week” has been set up in San Francisco, Singapore, and other Chinese populated areas, including opening concerts, master workshops, academic seminars, and community Tours. These events not only serve the Guangdong community but also the wider Chinese community, enhancing the collective identity of the “Chinese family” through shared music experiences[13].

The Chinese community in New York innovatively combined Guangdong music with contemporary social issues to create the Epidemic Ballade, which uses traditional musical language to record the experience of overseas Chinese helping each other during the epidemic. This combination of traditional art and group experience has made Guangdong music an effective medium for recording and expressing the collective emotions of Chinese people, greatly enhancing its function of ethnic identity.

4.3 Cross-cultural identity: Building an artistic bridge of cultural dialogue

Cultural identity is constructed during the process of inheritance by appropriating traditions to establish one's own identity and sense of belonging. Meanwhile, traditions are constantly restructured and recreated in this process[14]. First, to innovate the form of cross-cultural musical dialogue. Proactively collaborate with local musicians and groups to create integrated works. For example, the Dialogue Under the Southern Cross, created by the Melbourne Guangdong Music Group in collaboration with local indigenous musicians, juxtaposed the Tahu and didgeridoo, and the Guangdong melodies were interwoven with indigenous rhythms, creating a genuine cultural dialogue and attracting the attention and interest of the mainstream society. Second, develop outreach programs for non-Chinese audiences. Compiled a multilingual introductory textbook “Discovering Guangdong Music” and designed an experiential workshop to let participants feel the charm of music through simple instrument operation; The general course “Guangdong Music and Culture” is set up in the university to analyze its cultural value from various angles, such as musicology and anthropology. Special lectures and demonstration performances will be held in mainstream art venues to break down cultural barriers. The San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, in collaboration with the local Guangdong Music Society, has adapted “Autumn Moon on a Flat Lake” into a symphonic version, demonstrating the aesthetic convergence of music in a dialogue between Chinese and Western instruments. This

professional level of artistic cooperation not only elevates the artistic status of Guangdong music but also makes it a model of cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

By systematically starting from these three dimensions of identity, the inheritance of Guangdong music overseas will shift from passive preservation to active construction, from internal community activities to a broader cultural stage, and ultimately achieve high-quality sustainable development.

5. Conclusions

As an important representative of Chinese folk music, Guangdong music plays an important role in maintaining and constructing the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities. Through community activities, festival performances, educational inheritance, and cultural exchanges, Guangdong music can be inherited and developed overseas. However, its inheritance still faces challenges such as main body fault, limited audience, and insufficient resources. In the future, it is necessary to promote the overseas inheritance of Guangdong music through measures such as promoting intergenerational inheritance, expanding audience groups, strengthening resource support, and new media communication. Chinese folk music has rich cultural connotation and unique artistic value, and has great potential for inheritance and development in overseas Chinese communities, which deserves further attention and exploration.

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