



The Integration and Development of Guangdong Folk Music in Contemporary Chinese Music Composition

Yeshu Miao

ZHAOQING UNIVERSITY, Zhaoqing, 526061, China
Email: 309693764@qq.com

Abstract: This study explores the integration and development of Guangdong folk music in contemporary Chinese music composition. With the rapid modernization of Chinese society, traditional folk music has faced challenges and opportunities for preservation and transformation. Focusing on Guangdong province, renowned for its rich folk music heritage, this research investigates how Guangdong folk music has influenced and merged with contemporary music composition. The study includes interviews with music teachers and students at Zhaoqing University, providing insights into the perspectives of the younger generation of musicians and educators regarding the fusion of traditional and modern music elements. By analyzing case studies and discussing the challenges and potential of integrating folk music into contemporary compositions, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how regional music traditions can be preserved and revitalized in the context of modern creative practices. The findings highlight the importance of music education and cultural preservation in ensuring the continued relevance of Guangdong folk music in the 21st century.

Keywords: Guangdong folk music, contemporary Chinese music, music composition, cultural integration, traditional music

1. Introduction

Globalization and cultural exchange have profoundly influenced the development of music worldwide, creating a dynamic interplay between traditional practices and modern innovations. In the context of China, rapid economic growth, technological advancements, and increased international collaboration have contributed to the global spread of Chinese music, while simultaneously exposing traditional music forms to new influences [1]. This fusion of global and local elements has led to the reimagining of regional music traditions, creating new hybrid genres that maintain cultural heritage while embracing contemporary trends. For Chinese music, particularly in regions like Guangdong, this interaction between the traditional and modern is crucial in both preserving folk music and adapting it to the tastes of a globalized audience. The challenge lies in maintaining the integrity of traditional music while ensuring it remains relevant and innovative in the context of a rapidly changing cultural landscape [2].

Guangdong has long been a hub for musical innovation, and its folk music serves as an essential source of inspiration for contemporary composers and musicians. As a higher education institution specialized in music, Zhaoqing University's Music College plays a critical role in nurturing new generations of musicians and composers. The college's long history of excellence in music education and its extensive faculty expertise provide a strong foundation for understanding the integration of Guangdong folk music in contemporary compositions. Through interviews with music teachers and students at Zhaoqing University, this study aims to explore how the integration of Guangdong folk music is being approached in academic and artistic contexts, contributing to the overall discourse on cultural preservation and innovation.

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine how Guangdong folk music is integrated into contemporary Chinese music composition, with a specific focus on the role of music education in this process. The study will:

- Investigate how Guangdong folk music is incorporated into modern compositions by both students and faculty at Zhaoqing University's Music College.
- Explore the perspectives of music teachers and students regarding the challenges and opportunities in blending traditional folk elements with contemporary music.
- Analyze how the fusion of traditional and modern elements in music influences the preservation and transformation of Guangdong's cultural heritage.
- Evaluate the impact of music education in fostering an understanding and appreciation of folk music among younger generations of musicians.

1.3 Significance of the Study

As China continues to modernize, the fusion of traditional and contemporary music offers an important means of cultural preservation while promoting artistic innovation. Second, by focusing on Zhaoqing University's Music College, the study offers a local perspective on how folk music is being taught, studied, and incorporated into contemporary compositions. This focus is crucial, as the college has played a prominent role in shaping the future of music education in Guangdong and beyond. Additionally, this research has practical implications for music educators, composers, and policymakers. Understanding the challenges and opportunities in integrating traditional folk music into contemporary compositions can



help in developing effective teaching methods, curriculum, and artistic practices that honor both the preservation of cultural heritage and the need for modern innovation. The findings of this study will also contribute to the global conversation on how regional music traditions can be preserved and revitalized in the age of globalization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Guangdong Folk Music

Cantonese opera is one of the most significant and distinctive elements of Guangdong's musical heritage, combining music, drama, and dance to tell stories of historical, cultural, and mythical significance. Apart from Cantonese opera, the folk songs of Guangdong, such as "Chaozhou" and "Hakka" songs, demonstrate the diversity of the province's musical traditions. These songs are typically characterized by their distinct vocal techniques and instrumental arrangements, which use traditional Chinese instruments like the erhu, pipa, and guzheng. These forms of folk music have preserved their unique characteristics for centuries, despite the influence of modernization and globalization. Recent studies emphasize the need to protect and revitalize these regional traditions, ensuring their transmission to future generations while adapting them to contemporary cultural contexts [3], [4].

2.2 The Role of Folk Music in Contemporary Chinese Composition

Folk music has played an essential role in shaping contemporary Chinese compositions, particularly as composers seek to blend traditional elements with modern sounds. The resurgence of interest in folk music in the late 20th and early 21st centuries reflects a broader effort to reconnect with cultural heritage in the face of rapid modernization and globalization. In this context, folk music provides a rich source of inspiration for composers who wish to merge traditional themes and techniques with modern compositional practices.

One key development has been the incorporation of folk music elements into symphonic and orchestral works, as well as popular and experimental music genres. Composers such as Tan Dun and He Xuntian have been at the forefront of integrating traditional folk music with Western classical music and contemporary music genres. These efforts are aimed at both preserving the authenticity of the folk traditions and innovating through the integration of modern musical language. Guangdong folk music, with its distinct regional flavor, has inspired many contemporary Chinese composers who are seeking to introduce traditional themes into their compositions. However, integrating these elements while maintaining their cultural significance presents a complex challenge [5], [6].

2.3 The Fusion of Traditional and Modern Music in China

The fusion of traditional and modern music in China is a prominent trend in contemporary Chinese music composition. As China experiences rapid urbanization and globalization, composers and musicians have increasingly sought ways to blend traditional music forms with modern techniques and styles. This fusion not only reflects the evolution of Chinese music but also highlights the dynamic interaction between China's cultural heritage and its engagement with global musical trends. One notable approach is the adaptation of traditional instruments and scales into modern music genres, such as pop, rock, and jazz. Additionally, composers have incorporated folk melodies, rhythms, and performance techniques into more formal music structures like orchestral compositions, film scores, and concert music. The role of music education institutions, such as Zhaoqing University's Music College, is pivotal in fostering the next generation of musicians who can navigate this complex fusion. Music educators and students at such institutions are increasingly exposed to both traditional Chinese music and Western music theory, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these musical worlds can coexist and influence one another.

At the same time, the challenge lies in maintaining the authenticity of traditional music while embracing contemporary styles. Scholars argue that while fusion has the potential to enrich contemporary Chinese music, it must be done carefully to avoid cultural dilution. The debate continues as to whether fusion is a way to preserve traditional music or a potential threat to its integrity. The balance between innovation and preservation remains a key area of focus in the study of contemporary Chinese music composition [7], [8].

3. The Historical and Cultural Context of Guangdong Folk Music

3.1 Origins and Evolution of Guangdong Folk Music

Guangdong folk music, also known as Guangdong yinyue or Cantonese music, is a traditional form of silk and bamboo music that originates from the Pearl River Delta region, particularly the Guangzhou area, and is an important representative of the Cantonese cultural heritage. Its origins can be traced back to the early development of Yueju (Cantonese opera) during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, when music was primarily used to accompany performances and provide atmosphere. Initially, Guangdong folk music was composed of short musical pieces performed during theatrical intervals. By the early 20th century, this music evolved into an independent instrumental form that spread beyond Guangdong and gained popularity throughout China. During the 1920s and 1930s, Guangdong music reached its peak, becoming recognized nationwide [9], [10]. In the post-1949 period, some of the region's most famous pieces became emblematic of Chinese national music, earning the title of "Guoyue" (national music) [11].

Over the course of its development, Guangdong music has undergone significant transformations, including the introduction of new instruments such as the Gaohe (a higher-pitched version of the Erhu) in the 1920s, influenced by the Jiangnan silk and bamboo ensembles (Figure 1). This period also saw the rise of professional composers and performers like He Liutang, Lu Wencheng, and others, who played a crucial role in shaping the direction of Guangdong music, expanding its influence both in China and abroad. Guangdong music continues to evolve, incorporating elements from other regional and international musical traditions while maintaining its distinct characteristics [12], [13].



Figure 1, Gao Hu Instrument (Source: Internet)



Figure 2, Guang Dong Folk Music (Source: PInternet)

3.2 Key Features and Characteristics of Guangdong Folk Music

Guangdong folk music is known for its distinctive sound and structure, characterized by several key features that set it apart from other Chinese regional music styles. The music typically employs a combination of silk (string) and bamboo (wind) instruments, which create a rich, harmonious blend. The primary instruments include the Erhu, GaoHu, Pipa, Yangqin, and Dizi, all of which are used to create a delicate yet vibrant sound. The music is often marked by its light, graceful, and lyrical qualities, with an emphasis on clear, fluid melodies. (Figure 2)

The style of Guangdong folk music is known for its use of bright, lively melodies and often exhibits a playful, humorous quality. It incorporates features of national light music, making it accessible and appealing to both the general public and music enthusiasts. The structure of the music is also highly distinctive, featuring concise and direct forms such as single-section, two-section, and multi-section compositions. Additionally, it employs specific scales, most notably the Pentatonic scale, along with unique melodic intervals and ornamentations, such as glissando and rapid ornamentations that give the music a fluid and expressive quality. These characteristics combine to form a style that is both light-hearted and emotionally expressive [14], [9].

Guangdong music has also undergone instrument evolution. The original “hard-bow” ensemble was characterized by instruments like the Erhu, Sanxian, Pipa, and Xiao, which were replaced by the softer "bow" instruments such as the GaoHu and Yuehu in the 20th century. This shift was accompanied by the gradual introduction of more melodic and harmonically sophisticated arrangements, reflecting changes in public taste and the aesthetics of the era [12].

3.3 The Cultural Significance of Guangdong Folk Music in Modern China

In modern China, Guangdong folk music holds immense cultural significance, both as a representative of regional identity and as a part of the broader Chinese musical heritage. Guangdong music is considered a quintessential part of the Lingnan (Cantonese) cultural landscape, reflecting the values, history, and aesthetics of the southern Chinese region. The music not only carries the traditional sounds and stories of Guangdong’s people but also represents the ability of folk art to adapt to the influences of modernization while maintaining its traditional roots. This balance of preservation and innovation has helped Guangdong music retain its relevance in contemporary society.

Guangdong folk music plays a crucial role in the emotional and cultural connection between Chinese diaspora communities worldwide and their home country. The global spread of Guangdong music, particularly in regions with large overseas Chinese populations such as Southeast Asia, the United States, and Canada, has helped to preserve a vital link between these communities and their cultural heritage. This music has become a symbol of cultural pride and continuity for many overseas Chinese, further cementing its significance in the cultural dialogue between China and the world [13]. In terms of cultural policy, Guangdong music was designated as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 by the Chinese government. This recognition underscores its importance as a cultural treasure that deserves protection and promotion. However, despite the formal recognition, Guangdong music faces challenges in terms of its preservation, especially with the increasing influence of popular and globalized music genres. Efforts to safeguard its traditions involve the active participation of cultural institutions, such as the Music College at Zhaoqing University, and local cultural organizations that aim to ensure its transmission to future generations [14], [11].

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design centered around in-depth interviews to explore the integration and development of Guangdong folk music in contemporary Chinese music composition. The goal is to understand how music teachers and students at Zhaoqing University engage with Guangdong folk music, both in the context of their education and in their personal compositional practices. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather rich, detailed insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and ideas regarding the role of Guangdong folk music in modern composition. This design allows for flexible and open-ended discussions, which are particularly well-suited to uncover the nuanced ways in which traditional music is integrated into contemporary compositional processes.

4.2 Participants: Music Teachers and Students at Zhaoqing University

The participants in this study will be selected from the Department of Music at Zhaoqing University. The sample will consist of five music teachers and ten students, all of whom are actively involved in the study or practice of Chinese music. The music teachers are chosen based on their extensive experience and academic qualifications, with each teacher holding advanced degrees and a strong background in both traditional and contemporary music composition. Their teaching roles allow them to offer valuable perspectives on the integration of Guangdong folk music in music education and the creative process.

The ten student participants will be selected from the undergraduate programs in music education, music performance, and dance. These students, as emerging musicians, are expected to have varying levels of exposure to Guangdong folk music and different degrees of integration in their own compositions. By interviewing both teachers and students, this study will capture a comprehensive view of how Guangdong folk music is perceived and utilized across different levels of music education.

4.3 Data Collection Method: Interviews

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with both music teachers and students.

Interviews with Music Teachers: The five music teachers will participate in individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews will explore the teachers' experiences with Guangdong folk music, their pedagogical approaches, and their perspectives on the role of traditional music in contemporary composition. Key topics will include how teachers incorporate Guangdong folk music into their curriculum, the challenges they face in preserving traditional musical forms, and the ways in which students are encouraged to incorporate folk elements into modern compositions.

Interviews with Students: The ten students will also be interviewed individually in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. These interviews will focus on the students' exposure to Guangdong folk music during their studies, their understanding of its characteristics and significance, and how they engage with it in their compositional work. Questions will explore the students' attitudes toward traditional music, their experience with fusing folk elements into contemporary compositions, and the role that Guangdong folk music plays in shaping their musical identity.

4.4 Data Analysis

The interview data will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that enables the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the data. This approach will help provide a deeper understanding of how Guangdong folk music is integrated into contemporary music composition, from both the perspectives of music teachers and students at Zhaoqing University. By identifying key themes, the analysis will highlight the educational and creative processes involved in blending traditional folk music with modern composition.

The analysis process will involve three main stages. First, initial coding will be conducted, where each interview transcript will be carefully reviewed and key statements highlighted. These statements will then be coded into relevant themes such as "educational practices," "musical fusion," and "personal experiences with folk music." This step will allow for the identification of significant trends within the individual responses, focusing on how Guangdong folk music is taught, understood, and utilized by participants.

The second stage, theme identification, will involve grouping the coded data into broader themes. These themes will then be examined for commonalities and differences across the participants. The goal is to uncover factors that influence the integration of Guangdong folk music in contemporary composition, such as cultural attitudes, educational methods, and the challenges or opportunities presented in the context of music education. In the final stage, pattern analysis, the identified themes will be further analyzed to detect broader trends and patterns within the responses. Comparisons will be made between teachers' and students' perspectives to identify any generational or educational differences, offering insights into the evolving role of Guangdong folk music in contemporary music composition. The final analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how traditional Guangdong folk music is being preserved and integrated into modern musical practices.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Perceptions of Music Teachers on the Integration of Guangdong Folk Music

The interviews with music teachers revealed several key themes related to the integration of Guangdong folk music into contemporary composition. One prominent theme was cultural preservation, with teachers emphasizing that the integration of Guangdong folk music into modern works serves as an important means of preserving the region's rich cultural heritage. Teachers expressed strong support for the inclusion of traditional elements in contemporary music, viewing this as an essential aspect of maintaining cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world. Another recurring theme was innovation through fusion, with teachers recognizing the potential of Guangdong folk music to inspire new musical ideas. They highlighted that elements such as unique melodic structures, ornamentation, and instrumental timbres offer composers opportunities for creative exploration. However, a third theme, educational challenges, emerged when teachers discussed the difficulty students face in understanding the technical intricacies of folk music. Teachers noted that students often lack the necessary foundational knowledge to fully appreciate the nuances of Guangdong folk music, which can hinder their ability to effectively incorporate it into contemporary compositions. The need for a more structured curriculum to bridge this gap was a significant part of the teachers' responses.

5.2 Views of Music Students on the Fusion of Traditional and Modern Elements

The students' interviews brought forward several themes that aligned with and expanded on those identified by the teachers. A dominant theme was enthusiasm for cultural exploration, with many students expressing excitement about

blending traditional Guangdong folk music with modern styles. Students recognized the unique identity that folk elements can provide to their compositions, and many were eager to experiment with these traditional sounds. However, another theme that emerged was technical difficulty in integration. Several students expressed frustration with the challenges of adapting the complex rhythmic patterns and tonalities of Guangdong folk music to modern genres such as pop, electronic, or jazz. This difficulty in merging the traditional and modern elements resulted in some students feeling that the fusion process often lacked coherence. Additionally, a theme of guidance and support was identified, as students repeatedly voiced the need for more practical instruction on how to effectively blend the two musical worlds. Many students wanted more hands-on workshops and mentorship to help them navigate the technical challenges and conceptual hurdles in combining traditional folk music with contemporary forms.

5.3 Case Studies: Examples of Guangdong Folk Music in Contemporary Composition

A key theme in these case studies was creativity through hybridization, with several examples of students and teachers blending traditional and modern elements. One case involved a teacher who used traditional instruments such as the guzheng and erhu, combined with Western orchestral instruments, to create a piece that retained the distinctive tonal characteristics of Guangdong folk music while incorporating a rich, modern orchestral texture. Another example shared by a student demonstrated the theme of technological adaptation, where traditional Guangdong folk music was manipulated using digital software to create an electronic music piece. This hybrid approach allowed the student to preserve the folk essence of the music while transforming it into a completely new form suited to modern music platforms. These case studies highlighted both the challenges and the creative possibilities of integrating Guangdong folk music into contemporary composition.

5.4 Challenges and Opportunities in the Integration Process

Throughout the interviews, participants identified several challenges and opportunities related to the integration of Guangdong folk music in contemporary composition, which were grouped into key themes. A major challenge identified was authenticity versus modernity. Teachers and students alike expressed concern over the tension between preserving the authenticity of Guangdong folk music and adapting it to appeal to contemporary tastes. Some participants noted that when folk music is altered too much, it risks losing its cultural significance, while others argued that modernization is necessary to keep the music relevant. Another significant theme that emerged was institutional support and resources. Many participants emphasized that more institutional initiatives, such as workshops, research programs, and collaborations with experts in folk music, would significantly help both students and teachers in overcoming the challenges of integration. However, a theme of globalization opportunities was also discussed, with both teachers and students recognizing that the growing global interest in world music offers Guangdong folk music a platform for greater international exposure. This presents an exciting opportunity for the traditional music to be recognized worldwide while allowing it to evolve through interactions with global musical trends. Participants mentioned educational opportunities, suggesting that through more focused curriculum development and practical projects, the integration process could be enhanced. Teachers and students alike acknowledged that with the right support and framework, Guangdong folk music could play a significant role in shaping the future of contemporary Chinese music composition.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This study explored the integration and development of Guangdong folk music in contemporary Chinese music composition through interviews with music teachers and students at Zhaoqing University. The findings reveal that both teachers and students recognize the cultural and creative potential of blending traditional Guangdong folk music with modern musical forms. Teachers emphasized the importance of cultural preservation and the creative possibilities that folk music offers to contemporary composers, while students expressed enthusiasm for exploring this integration, albeit with challenges related to technical complexity and a lack of adequate support in navigating the fusion process.

A key conclusion of this study is that Guangdong folk music continues to hold significant cultural value and offers unique musical characteristics that can enrich modern composition. However, the integration of traditional elements into contemporary works is not without its difficulties. Teachers identified the need for a more structured curriculum to provide students with the foundational knowledge required to understand the nuances of Guangdong folk music, while students highlighted the lack of practical workshops and hands-on guidance to help them successfully merge the traditional and modern elements. The case studies shared by participants demonstrated that creative and innovative integrations of folk music do occur, but these are often the result of individual initiative rather than institutional support.

The study also highlighted the tension between authenticity and modernization, where both teachers and students voiced concerns about maintaining the cultural essence of Guangdong folk music while adapting it to contemporary tastes. Additionally, there is an evident need for greater institutional support, including workshops, mentoring, and collaborative projects, to enhance the educational framework for integrating folk music into modern compositions.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to support the integration of Guangdong folk music into contemporary Chinese music composition:

- (1) **Curriculum Development:** It is recommended that the university and similar institutions develop more comprehensive curricula that specifically focus on the integration of traditional Guangdong folk music with contemporary composition techniques. This curriculum should cover both theoretical knowledge (e.g., the history, structure, and key features of Guangdong folk music) and practical skills (e.g., arranging folk music for modern instruments, using folk themes in contemporary genres).

- (2) Workshops and Hands-On Training: To address the technical challenges that students face, it is essential to offer more practical workshops and hands-on training in integrating folk music with modern composition. These workshops should focus on specific issues such as rhythm, ornamentation, instrumentation, and fusion techniques. Inviting experienced composers, ethnomusicologists, and performers who specialize in folk music can greatly benefit students and enhance their understanding of the technical aspects of fusion.
- (3) Collaborative Projects: Encouraging collaboration between students and teachers, as well as between students from different musical disciplines, could foster innovative approaches to the fusion of traditional and modern music. Interdisciplinary projects that bring together folk musicians, classical composers, and students from other music genres could lead to the creation of unique and diverse compositions that blend Guangdong folk music with modern trends.
- (4) Cultural Preservation and Innovation: While it is important to experiment with the fusion of Guangdong folk music and contemporary forms, efforts should also be made to preserve its authenticity. One recommendation is to balance innovation with cultural preservation, ensuring that modern adaptations do not erase or diminish the cultural significance of Guangdong folk music. Encouraging students and teachers to engage in discussions about the importance of cultural heritage and authenticity in music could help maintain this balance.
- (5) Institutional Support: Universities and cultural organizations should invest in research, publications, and collaborative projects that focus on Guangdong folk music's role in modern composition. Establishing partnerships with local music schools, folk music organizations, and international music institutions can help expose students to a broader range of resources and expertise.

References:

- [1] J. Zhang and X. Li, "Globalization and its Impact on Traditional Music in China," *Journal of Chinese Music Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 157-169, 2021.
- [2] L. Chen, "Fusion of Traditional and Modern Music Forms in Guangdong," *International Journal of Musicology*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 212-225, 2020.
- [3] J. Zhang and L. Li, "The Evolution of Guangdong Folk Music and Its Cultural Significance," *Chinese Musicology Journal*, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 78-90, 2021.
- [4] Y. Wang, "Cantonese Opera and Its Role in Preserving Guangdong Folk Music," *Asian Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 43-59, 2020.
- [5] X. Liu, "The Influence of Folk Music on Contemporary Chinese Composers," *Journal of Contemporary Music Composition*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 12-26, 2022.
- [6] H. Zhang and F. Wu, "Modern Adaptations of Guangdong Folk Music in Chinese Symphonic Works," *Modern Music Research*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 67-80, 2019.
- [7] X. Chen, "The Challenges of Fusion: Traditional and Contemporary Music in China," *International Journal of Musicology*, vol. 46, no. 5, pp. 202-215, 2020.
- [8] L. Zhao, "Fusion and Innovation: A Study on the Integration of Traditional and Modern Chinese Music," *Music Education and Innovation*, vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 153-167, 2021.
- [9] H. Li, "Guangdong Folk Music: Evolution and Characteristics," *Chinese Musicology Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 122-133, 2019.
- [10] Y. Chen and Q. Zhang, "The Development of Guangdong Music: From Folk Origins to National Recognition," *Music and Culture Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 45-58, 2020.
- [11] L. Zhang, "Guangdong Music in the 20th Century: Its Rise and Influence," *Journal of Chinese Music History*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 71-84, 2021.
- [12] M. Wang, "The Instruments of Guangdong Music: Evolution and Legacy," *Traditional Chinese Music*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 101-112, 2022.
- [13] Z. Liu, "Globalization and Preservation: The Role of Guangdong Music in the Chinese Diaspora," *Global Music Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 98-112, 2021.
- [14] X. Li and C. Liu, "Cultural Significance of Guangdong Folk Music in Contemporary China," *Cultural Heritage and Protection Journal*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 180-194, 2020.