



# Biography and Works of Zhang Xiaoqin: The Transmitter of Ganzhou Folk Songs in Societal and Anthropological Context

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## Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Zhang Xiaoqin is a transmitter and custodian of Ganzhou folk songs and her contributions to the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage within the Han ethnic group in China. The aim is to explore Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works as the transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs within societal and anthropological contexts.

**Materials and Methods:** This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and thematic analysis. Data collection included immersive fieldwork in Ganzhou, interviews with Zhang Xiaoqin, alongside a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the cultural transmission and the sociocultural significance of folk music.

**Results:** The findings demonstrate that Zhang Xiaoqin's work not only sustains the musical traditions of Ganzhou but also adapts them for contemporary audiences, ensuring their relevance and continuity. Her initiatives in educational settings and public performances are pivotal in maintaining community engagement with Ganzhou folk songs, highlighting the dynamic interaction between cultural preservation and societal change.

**Conclusion:** Zhang Xiaoqin's research highlights the importance of individual agency in cultural preservation and the adaptability of intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization. It highlights the potential of traditional arts to thrive in modern societies and emphasizes the need for strategic educational programs and public-private partnerships to support cultural custodians.

**Keywords:** Zhang Xiaoqin; Ganzhou; Cultural Transmission; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Preservation

## Introduction

The rich of Chinese cultural heritage is intricately woven with the melodies and rhythms of traditional folk songs, each carrying stories of history, emotions, and societal values. Among these treasures, Ganzhou folk songs stand out as a vibrant expression of the cultural heritage of the Han ethnic group in China. At the heart of this musical legacy lies Zhang Xiaoqin, a distinguished figure revered as the transmitter and custodian of Ganzhou folk songs. This study endeavors to delve into Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works, offering a comprehensive exploration of the societal and anthropological contexts that have shaped and preserved this musical tradition (Howard, 2016; Erjian & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Xiaomo & Yongqing, 2023; Guo & Karin, 2024; Li & Choatchamrat, 2024).

Ganzhou, nestled within the historical tapestry of China, has been a cradle of cultural exchange and artistic expression for centuries. Its folk songs, with roots dating back to ancient times, encapsulate the essence of the region's history, traditions, and societal values. Zhang Xiaoqin emerges as a central figure in the preservation and transmission of these folk songs, embodying a legacy that spans generations. Her journey as a musician and custodian of Ganzhou folk songs mirrors the broader narrative of cultural continuity and adaptation in a rapidly evolving world (Yao et al., 2023; Chao & Nicolas, 2024; Sheng, 2024).

Despite the enduring appeal and historical significance of Ganzhou folk songs, there exists a gap in scholarly understanding regarding the life and contributions of Zhang Xiaoqin as the transmitter of this musical heritage (Silverberg, 2022; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024). While her influence and impact are widely acknowledged within musical circles and local communities, a comprehensive study that situates her biography and works within broader societal and anthropological frameworks is notably absent. This research seeks to address this gap by providing a nuanced exploration of Zhang Xiaoqin's life, artistic journey, and cultural significance, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of individuals in preserving intangible cultural heritage (Falzon, 2016; Campbell, 2017; Zhou, 2022).

The significance of this research extends beyond the realms of musicology to encompass broader societal and anthropological dimensions. By unraveling Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works, this study





offers insights into the complex interplay between individual agency, cultural heritage, and community identity. Moreover, it sheds light on the challenges and opportunities faced by custodians of traditional folk songs in an era marked by rapid globalization and cultural homogenization (Pieterse, 2019; Amico, 2020; Siringo-Ringo et al., 2022). Understanding Zhang Xiaoqin's experiences and strategies in transmitting Ganzhou folk songs not only enriches our appreciation of this musical tradition but also underscores the resilience and adaptability of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary contexts and community resilience in safeguarding our shared heritage for future generations.

## Objective

To explore Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works as the transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs within societal and anthropological contexts.

## Literature review

The literature review of this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works as the transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs within societal and anthropological contexts. The review encompasses various research theories and perspectives that contribute to the exploration of cultural transmission, musical heritage, and individual agency in preserving intangible cultural heritage.

### 1. Societal and Anthropological Context

Zhang Xiaoqin's contributions to Ganzhou folk songs are not just musical but also cultural and historical, reflecting a continuum of traditions shaped by societal dynamics and anthropological influences. The review examines how Ganzhou folk songs have been transmitted and evolved, intertwining with societal norms, cultural exchanges, and anthropological insights. By contextualizing Zhang Xiaoqin's works within these broader frameworks, the literature review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and anthropological implications of Ganzhou folk songs as conveyed through her musical endeavors (Trehub et al., 2015; Lomax, 2017).

### 2. Cultural Transmission Theories

Cultural transmission theories provide insights into the preservation and transmission of traditional folk songs. Cultural evolution theory focuses on the dynamic interplay between continuity and adaptation, with Zhang Xiaoqin playing a crucial role in preserving these traditions. Social learning theory emphasizes the role of social networks, communities of practice, and mentorship dynamics in facilitating cultural knowledge and skills. These theories help us understand Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and the broader cultural transmission mechanisms within Ganzhou's musical landscape (Reyes-García & Fernández-Llamazares, 2019; Stadler Elmer, 2021).

### 3. Anthropological Perspectives on Musical Heritage

Symbolic anthropology and cultural ecology offer insights into the socio-cultural significance of Ganzhou folk songs and the role of Zhang Xiaoqin in shaping community identities. Music serves as a symbolic language, communicating shared meanings, emotions, and historical narratives within a cultural group. Zhang Xiaoqin's journey as a transmitter of these songs can be analyzed through these perspectives, revealing how music contributes to the construction and maintenance of cultural identities (Zhong & Wei, 2023; Han & Sensai, 2024; Yang & Theerapan, 2024).

### 4. Individual Agency and Cultural Preservation

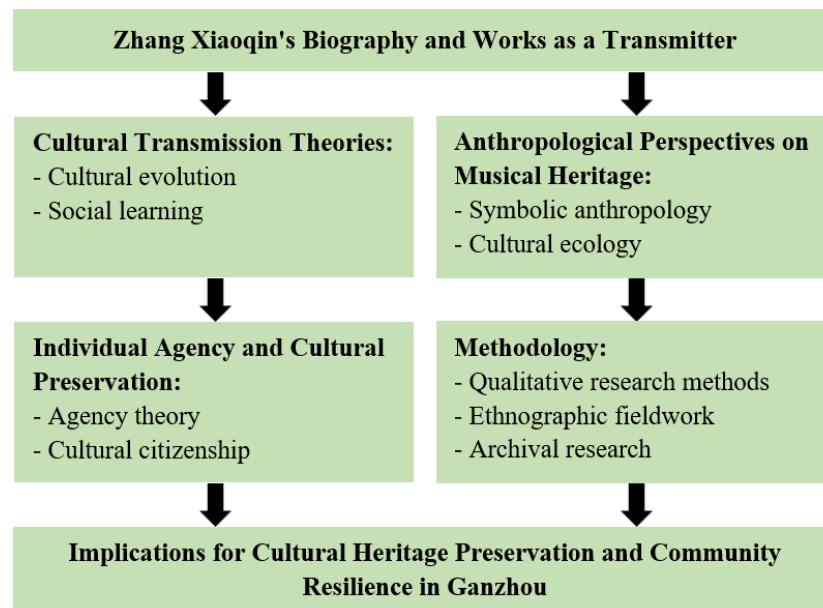
Zhang Xiaoqin's biography explores her role as a cultural custodian and innovator within her community, highlighting her agency in preserving Ganzhou folk songs. Agency theory emphasizes the active role of individuals in shaping cultural practices and norms. Cultural citizenship emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of individuals in safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage and fostering cultural ownership among community members. This understanding of individual agency, cultural preservation, and community resilience in Ganzhou's folk music tradition provides a nuanced understanding (Shepherd, 2017; Jagielska-Burdak et al., 2021; Guèvremont, 2024).

## Conceptual Framework

The research focuses on Zhang Xiaoqin's vital role in preserving and transmitting Ganzhou folk songs, embedded within broader societal and anthropological frameworks. This study leverages cultural transmission theories, anthropological perspectives on musical heritage, and the concept of individual



agency to understand how Zhang Xiaoqin has contributed to cultural preservation and identity formation within her community. By examining these dimensions, the research aims to highlight her impact on sustaining cultural continuity and fostering community resilience in the face of modernizing influences.



## Methodology

The methodology adopted for exploring Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works as the transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs within societal and anthropological contexts involves a multi-faceted approach encompassing qualitative research methods, ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and thematic analysis. The following table outlines the detailed steps involved in the methodology, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Research Methodology Steps

Methodology Step	Description
Literature Review	Conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on Ganzhou folk songs, cultural transmission, and anthropological theories related to musical heritage.
Ethnographic Fieldwork	Engage in immersive fieldwork within Ganzhou communities to observe, document, and interview key stakeholders, including Zhang Xiaoqin and local musicians.
Archival Research	Explore archival materials, historical documents, and musical records about Ganzhou folk songs, tracing their historical development and cultural significance.
Interview and Observation	Conduct semi-structured interviews with Zhang Xiaoqin to gather insights into her biography and musical contributions.
Thematic Analysis	Analyze interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data using thematic coding techniques to identify recurring themes, narratives, and socio-cultural contexts.
Interpretation and Discussion	Interpret the analyzed data within the framework of cultural transmission theories, anthropological perspectives, and individual agency in cultural preservation.



Methodology Step	Description
Research	Synthesize key findings, draw conclusions regarding Zhang Xiaoqin's impact as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs, and discuss implications for cultural heritage preservation.
Conclusion and Implications	

**1. Research Resources:** This research uses various scholarly resources to study Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and work as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Zhang Xiaoqin's contributions to the societal and anthropological contexts of Ganzhou folk music transmission, utilizing academic journals, books, articles, and online databases.

**2. Research Instruments:** This research uses interviews, archival research, field observations, surveys, and questionnaires to gather data on Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works. These instruments aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of Zhang Xiaoqin's role as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs, capturing a wide range of perspectives and opinions.

**3. Data Collection:** The study uses systematic methods to gather information about Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and works, including interviews, archives, field observations, and surveys. Archival research is conducted in libraries, museums, and online repositories, while field observations are conducted during cultural events.

**4. Data Analysis:** The data analysis phase involves collecting, organizing, and analyzing data to understand Zhang Xiaoqin's role as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs. Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes and cultural implications, while statistical methods generate numerical findings. The goal is to uncover Zhang Xiaoqin's significance in Ganzhou folk music transmission.

## Results

The name "Ganzhou" has its roots in the Western Wei Dynasty, with the name originating from Zhangye County in the Han Dynasty and Xiliang Prefecture in the Western Wei Dynasty. During the Tang Dynasty, the name was used interchangeably with Zhangye County, reflecting its administrative significance. The name "Ganzhou" is associated with significant musical compositions, including "Ni Chang," "Zhe Zhi," and "Ganzhou," which encompass various facets of music. These songs, deeply embedded in the spiritual culture of the region, serve as a reflection of national sentiments, customs, culture, and thoughts.

However, contemporary challenges from rapid economic development and globalization have threatened the preservation and transmission of Ganzhou folk songs. The influx of foreign cultures and the dominance of modern music forms have posed challenges to the preservation and inheritance of ancient musical traditions. This underscores the need for reevaluating strategies for excavating, protecting, and transmitting Ganzhou folk songs within contemporary contexts. The responsibility to protect and promote traditional music cultures lies at the intersection of cultural preservation and societal evolution, highlighting the ongoing dialogue between heritage conservation and cultural adaptation, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Key Themes and Findings Related to Ganzhou Folk Songs

Themes	Summary
History of Ganzhou Folk Songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Originated in Ganzhou</li><li>- Entered Tang Dynasty court</li><li>- Integrated into folk after the Anshi Rebellion</li><li>- Includes various musical forms</li><li>- Influenced Chinese music culture</li><li>- Cultural richness in Zhangye and Hexi Corridor</li></ul>
Evolution of Ganzhou's Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Historical name evolution</li><li>- Prominence in the Tang Dynasty</li><li>- Multiple significant musical compositions</li></ul>

Themes	Summary
Characteristics and Cultural Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Extensive repertoire</li><li>- Cultural cornerstone in ancient Chinese music heritage</li></ul>
Cultural Preservation and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Diverse musical characteristics</li><li>- Reflection of regional culture</li><li>- Spiritual and artistic expression</li><li>- Identity and memory representation</li><li>- Real-life artistic appeal</li><li>- Integral part of Ganzhou and Hexi's cultural identity</li><li>- Impact of economic development and globalization</li><li>- Threats to traditional music</li><li>- Importance of preservation</li><li>- Responsibility of contemporary society</li><li>- Balancing heritage conservation and cultural evolution</li></ul>

### 1. Biographical Overview of Zhang Xiaoqin

Zhang Xiaoqin, a female of Han ethnicity, is a significant figure in the preservation and promotion of Ganzhou folk songs as part of the Gansu intangible cultural heritage project. Born in 1983, she received mentorship under Ren Jiquan and subsequently established the Tianlai Guzheng Art Training Center in April 2010. Recognized for her contributions, Zhang Xiaoqin founded the Ganzhou Folk Song Orchestra in October 2018, assuming the role of its leader. Throughout her career, she has delved into the rich repertoire of Ganzhou folk songs, including classics such as "Bapu Er," "Hu Ma Xiao Dou Zi," "Man Tian Xing," and "Sha Hat Wing." Her involvement extends beyond mere performance, as she actively participates in various intangible cultural heritage exhibitions and performances at both city and district levels. Additionally, she incorporates these songs into educational curricula, fostering a sense of appreciation and pride in local culture among children. Notably, Zhang Xiaoqin has curated a special production titled "Echoes Across a Thousand Years - Ganzhou Folk Songs," showcasing over 100 songs and arranging more than 20 for performance. Her dedication to cultural preservation is further evidenced by her roles as a member of the 11th session of the District Political Consultative Conference, principal of Tianlai Guzheng Art School, and vice chairman of the District Music Association, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Zhang Xiaoqin  
**Source:** Sihan Wu, from fieldwork in March 2023

Zhang Xiaoqin, a member of the 11th session of the Ganzhou District Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), has been dedicated to her responsibilities since her election in 2016. She actively engages in learning and inspection activities, providing valuable advice and suggestions. Zhang Xiaoqin

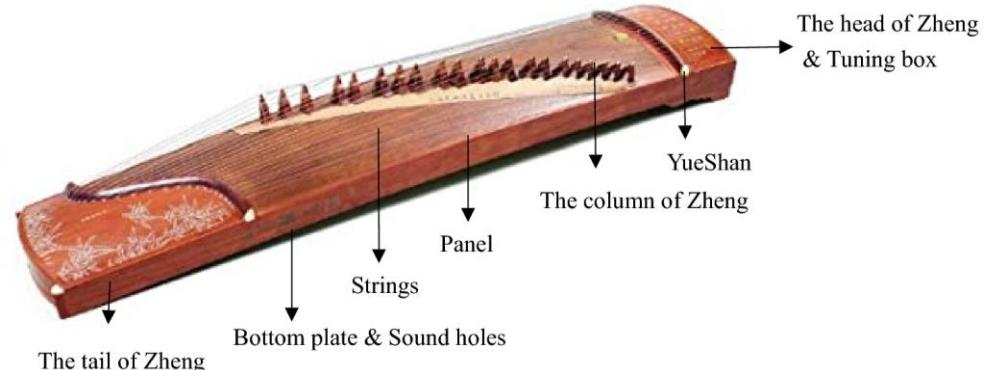
excels in the cultural and artistic domain, actively participating in political affairs and presenting insightful suggestions. She has spearheaded 12 public welfare education initiatives, providing Guzheng lessons to underprivileged students and fostering appreciation for traditional art forms. Zhang Xiaoqin also has a supervisory role, proposing measures like "Building Characteristic Cultural Blocks and Vigorously Developing Cultural Industries" and "Exploring and Promoting the Reduction and Exemption of Preferential Treatment for Local Residents in Tourist Attractions."

Zhang Xiaoqin has addressed challenges faced by private education institutions in the district, such as teaching quality disparities, ambiguous advertising practices, and impact on children's extracurricular training. She formulated the "Proposal on Further Regulating Private Education Institutions in the Whole District," which focused on enhancing oversight and governance, standardizing teaching staff and conditions, and implementing a transparent black-and-white list system for private institutions. Her efforts have contributed significantly to the holistic development of private education institutions district-wide., as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** Zhang Xiaoqin and her students  
Source: Sihan Wu, from fieldwork in April 2023

The evolution of Guzheng from ancient times to the present day showcases its rich development and cultural significance. Originating in the Warring States period, the instrument transformed string numbers and playing techniques, culminating in the creation of the S-shaped 21-string Guzheng, which greatly enhanced its tonal richness and expressive potential. Innovations in playing techniques, such as those introduced by Wang Changyuan and Zhao Manqin, pushed the boundaries of traditional Guzheng music, allowing for faster melodies and new tonal colors, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Zhang Xiaoqin and her students  
Source: Chen et al. (2022)



Furthermore, the contributions of modern Guzheng performers like Wang Zhongshan, Zhai Zhirong, and Liu Le have brought the instrument to international prominence, with performances and engagements across various countries, showcasing the Guzheng as a global musical treasure.

The classification of Guzheng into nine schools reflects the diversity and regional influences that have shaped its music and performance styles over the centuries. This classification underscores the dynamic nature of traditional Chinese music, with each school contributing its unique characteristics to the broader Guzheng repertoire.

## 2. Zhang Xiaoqin's Contributions to Ganzhou Folk Songs

Exploring the life and works of Zhang Xiaoqin as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs within sociocultural and anthropological frameworks unveils a rich tapestry of musical heritage and historical continuity. Her repertoire includes iconic pieces like "Ganzhou Song 1", "Ganzhou Song 2", and "Makeup Platform Ganzhou Song", alongside instrumental ensemble works such as "Ganzhou Song", "Ningruicao", "Xiaoli Spring Breeze", and "Qingluan Dance", as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Zhang Xiaoqin's Contributions to Ganzhou Folk Songs

Category	Description
Main Representative Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ganzhou Song 1, Ganzhou Song 2, Makeup Platform Ganzhou Song</li><li>- Exemplary compositions embodying Ganzhou's musical heritage</li></ul>
Instrumental Ensemble Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ganzhou Song, Ningruicao, Xiaoli Spring Breeze, Qingluan Dance</li><li>- Contributions to enriching Ganzhou folk music through instrumental</li></ul>
Function and Current Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Usage in religious activities, poetry, opera, sacrificial music, and folk songs</li><li>- Revitalization efforts in instrumental ensemble music</li></ul>
Inheritance Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Spread through poetry and literary forms across dynasties</li><li>- Influence and alignment with operatic, Taoist, and courtly musical traditions</li></ul>
Historical Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Insightful windows into ancient societal dynamics</li><li>- Unraveling historical and cultural intricacies embedded in folk songs</li></ul>

Functionally, Ganzhou folk songs play pivotal roles across diverse societal domains, from religious music activities to lyrical poetry, opera performances, folk sacrificial rituals, and everyday folk songs. Despite historical significance, the developmental trajectory of Ganzhou folk songs has faced challenges. Traditional instrumental ensembles, prevalent in ancient sacrificial and religious activities in the Zhangye area, posed a contrast to the evolving musical landscape. However, Zhang Xiaoqin and her team's diligent efforts in collecting, organizing, and innovating these songs have gradually integrated them into contemporary folk music. Notably, Zhang's breakthroughs in performance forms, blending traditional Ganzhou folk songs with elements from musicals, have spurred advancements conducive to the development of Ganzhou's musical heritage.

An anthropological lens reveals diverse pathways of inheritance for Ganzhou folk songs, showcasing their resilience and adaptability across historical epochs. Poetry, particularly during the Tang Dynasty, served as a carrier for the songs, evolving through various poetic forms from five-character poems to seven-character poems and beyond, as evidenced by works like Liu Yong's "Eight Voices of Ganzhou to Xiaoxiao's Evening Rain" in the Northern Song Dynasty and Lu Shilin's "Eight Voices of Ganzhou" in the Ming Dynasty. The realm of opera, spanning from the Yuan to Qing Dynasties, provided fertile ground for the transmission of ancient music in Ganzhou. Representative works such as Wang Shifu's "Record of the Western Chamber" in the Yuan Dynasty and Tang Xianzu's "Peony Pavilion" in the Ming Dynasty signify the symbiotic relationship between Ganzhou folk songs and broader artistic expressions.

Taoist music, with its religious and cultural significance, significantly influenced the preservation and dissemination of Ganzhou folk songs. The fusion of ancient court music elements with folk and religious motifs, such as Fujian Nan'an Taoist music, was instrumental in preserving and disseminating the musical legacy. Court patronage and sponsorship from the Tang Dynasty further fueled the continuity of ancient music in Ganzhou, safeguarding it and fostering artistic innovation. Ganzhou folk songs reflect the region's historical events, customs, and religious beliefs, providing insights into ancient societal dynamics,



art forms, and philosophical underpinnings. Today, efforts to protect and inherit these songs continue, with scholars and institutions actively researching, preserving, and performing them.

## Discussion

The exploration of Zhang Xiaoqin's contributions to the preservation and transmission of Ganzhou folk songs has revealed several significant findings. These results not only highlight her pivotal role within her community but also reflect broader theoretical principles of cultural transmission and preservation.

Firstly, the research findings affirm the theoretical principles outlined in cultural transmission theories, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between continuity and adaptation. Zhang Xiaoqin's efforts to maintain the integrity of Ganzhou folk songs while making them relevant for contemporary audiences embody these principles (Reyes-García & Fernández-Llamazares, 2019). Her role reinforces the importance of individual agency in cultural preservation, as posited by agency theory, demonstrating how individuals can influence cultural practices and contribute to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (Shepherd, 2017).

Furthermore, the anthropological perspectives provided insights into the socio-cultural significance of Ganzhou folk songs and their role in shaping community identities. Zhang Xiaoqin's activities, particularly her educational initiatives and public performances, support the idea that music serves as a symbolic language that communicates shared meanings and fosters community bonds (Zhong & Wei, 2023).

However, the research also uncovered challenges related to the preservation of Ganzhou folk songs, consistent with Pieterse's (2019) discussions on globalization. The influx of modern musical forms poses a significant threat to the survival of traditional musical expressions. Despite these challenges, Zhang Xiaoqin's innovative strategies, such as integrating traditional songs with modern musical styles and incorporating them into school curricula, provide a hopeful outlook on the adaptability and resilience of intangible cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of Zhang Xiaoqin's life and works as a transmitter of Ganzhou folk songs, situated within the societal and anthropological contexts. By employing a multi-faceted research methodology that included ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and thematic analysis, the research has successfully mapped the intricate role played by Zhang Xiaoqin in the cultural landscape of Ganzhou. The findings confirm that Zhang Xiaoqin's efforts in preserving Ganzhou folk songs are not only a reflection of her commitment but also a crucial component of broader cultural preservation strategies. Her work exemplifies how individual initiative and creativity can effectively counteract the homogenizing effects of globalization on local cultures. The strategies she employs underscore the potential for cultural continuity through adaptation and innovation, ensuring that traditional arts remain vibrant and relevant in modern society.

In conclusion, Zhang Xiaoqin's biography and achievements offer profound insights into the mechanisms of cultural transmission and the impact of individual agency on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. These insights not only enrich our understanding of Ganzhou folk songs but also contribute valuable perspectives to the fields of musicology, anthropology, and cultural studies. As societies continue to evolve, the role of custodians like Zhang Xiaoqin will remain pivotal in bridging the past with the future, ensuring that the rich tapestry of human culture continues to inspire and inform generations to come.

## Recommendation

### 1. Integration of Traditional Music into Educational Curricula

Given Zhang Xiaoqin's successful incorporation of Ganzhou folk songs into educational programs, it is recommended that similar strategies be adopted in other regions with rich musical heritages. Educational authorities and cultural organizations should collaborate to integrate traditional music into school curricula, not only to preserve these art forms but also to foster cultural appreciation among younger generations. This approach can utilize the educational framework to ensure the continuous transmission of cultural knowledge and skills, enhancing students' cultural literacy and their connection to local heritage.





## 2. Establishment of Public-Private Partnerships for Cultural Preservation

To address the challenges posed by globalization and the modernization of music, it is recommended to establish public-private partnerships that focus on the preservation and promotion of traditional music forms. These partnerships can involve local governments, cultural institutions, and private entities such as music academies and non-profits. By pooling resources and expertise, these collaborations can organize cultural festivals, workshops, and live performances that not only increase public engagement with traditional music but also provide financial and structural support to artists like Zhang Xiaoqin who are at the forefront of cultural preservation efforts.

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