



The Development and Characteristics of Zhuang Folk Songs in the Liujiang Vernacular Area, Guangxi, China

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area have undergone significant historical transformations, reflecting changes in social structures, political environments, and cultural policies. However, modernization and globalization have posed challenges to their preservation and transmission. This study explores the historical development and musical characteristics of Zhuang folk songs, analyzing their evolution and role in contemporary society.

Materials and Methods: A qualitative research approach was employed, incorporating literature review, fieldwork, and case analysis. Nineteen representative Zhuang folk songs from *The Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume* were analyzed, focusing on melody, rhythm, lyrics, and performance techniques. Data collection included historical document analysis and field observations.

Results: Findings indicate that Zhuang folk songs have adapted to historical and sociopolitical changes while maintaining unique musical features influenced by the Liujiang dialect, *including* improvisational singing and non-isochronous rhythms. Though modern adaptations have simplified certain traditional elements, digital media has expanded their reach but also introduced challenges, *including the potential loss of traditional performance practices due to* commercialization and artistic fragmentation.

Conclusion: Zhuang folk songs demonstrate resilience amid cultural transitions. Balanced preservation strategies, including education, digital archiving, and innovative reinterpretations, are essential for their sustainable development. Future research should explore regional comparisons and the evolving role of folk songs in cultural identity and the creative industries.

Keywords: Zhuang Folk Songs; Liujiang Vernacular; Musical Characteristics; Cultural Preservation; Modernization

Introduction

The Zhuang ethnic group is the largest minority in China, with Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region serving as the primary settlement area, accounting for 87.81% of the total Zhuang population. The Zhuang people have long upheld the tradition that "every joyful occasion must be celebrated with song," making folk songs a crucial medium for expressing emotions and preserving cultural heritage. Throughout history, Zhuang folk songs have not only embodied the collective memory and ethnic identity of the Zhuang people but have also developed into a distinct and intricate musical system (Ming, 2008).

The Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area of Guangxi, China, are a significant part of China's rich intangible cultural heritage. These songs are deeply rooted in the daily life, traditions, and spiritual world of the Zhuang people, who are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in China. The Liujiang dialect region reflects unique characteristics due to its geographic, linguistic, and cultural distinctiveness. Zhuang folk songs, particularly in the Liujiang vernacular area, are characterized by their antiphonal (call-and-response) singing style, rich oral traditions, and themes related to love, nature, farming, and social customs. These songs are typically passed down orally and play an important role in cultural transmission and community cohesion (Huang, 2016). The Liujiang variant, influenced by both the Zhuang language and the local Han dialect, demonstrates a unique linguistic and melodic structure that differentiates it from other regions.

Studying these songs is vital not only for preserving linguistic and musical diversity but also for understanding the socio-cultural fabric of the region. As modernization and urbanization continue to



challenge the survival of such traditions, academic research helps document and revitalize endangered folk expressions (Chen & Wang, 2020).

As a significant branch of the Northern Zhuang dialect, the Liujiang vernacular area exhibits unique musical characteristics in terms of melody, tonality, and lyrical structure, making its folk songs a valuable subject for academic research. The phonetic and lexical distinctions of Liujiang Zhuang dialect differentiate it from other regional Zhuang dialects, directly influencing the vocalization and tonal structure of local folk songs (Yang, 2016). Moreover, due to the long-standing interaction between Zhuang and Han cultures, Liujiang's folk music has absorbed melodic and structural elements from Han folk traditions while maintaining its indigenous musical identity. Beyond being a form of artistic expression, Zhuang folk songs in Liujiang serve as cultural vessels that encapsulate historical narratives, social values, and aesthetic principles. Functionally, these folk songs permeate various aspects of daily life, including labor, romance, rituals, and historical storytelling, acting both as a record of everyday experiences and as a medium for cultural transmission (Wen, 2007).

With the acceleration of modernization, the transmission of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area is facing significant challenges. The decline in the use of the Zhuang language, due to the widespread adoption of Mandarin in the formal education system, has directly impacted the continuity of folk songs, as they primarily rely on oral transmission. Furthermore, traditional folk song inheritance depends heavily on the expertise and memory of folk artists. As older generations of singers gradually disappear, the repertoire and performance techniques of Zhuang folk songs risk being lost. Additionally, the rise of popular culture and digital media has contributed to a decline in interest among younger generations, leading to a shrinking audience base for traditional folk songs.

This study examines the development and characteristics of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area, analyzing their transformations across different historical periods and their contemporary manifestations. By investigating key musical elements such as melody, rhythm, lyrics, and performance techniques, this research aims to highlight the artistic and cultural significance of these folk songs. The findings not only contribute to a deeper understanding of Zhuang musical heritage but also provide theoretical support for the preservation and revitalization of Zhuang folk music, promoting its continued adaptation and innovation in the modern era.

Objectives

1. To document the historical development of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area, focusing on the influence of socio-political changes.
2. To identify and classify the key musical characteristics of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area, including melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, lyrical themes, and performance techniques.

Literature Review

This study examines the Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area from the perspectives of cultural anthropology, folklore studies, historical documentation, musical morphology, and ethnomusicology. By providing a detailed description and analysis of their historical context and lyrical and musical structures, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of their evolution and artistic significance.

The book *A History of Zhuang Literature Development* (Ming, 2008) constructs a literary history framework from an anthropological perspective, reconstructing the development trajectory of Zhuang literature, including folk songs and song fairs, through the lens of cultural evolution. The author assesses literary history based on the ethnic and cultural background, structuring historical periods and terminologies according to the realities of Zhuang society, ethnic history, cultural transitions, and literary development. This work systematically presents the emergence and progression of Zhuang literature from ancient times to the late 20th century, using a combination of historical documents and folk literary works collected





through fieldwork. It follows the principle of reflecting social life through literary creations, uncovering and evaluating literary phenomena, authors, and their works from different historical periods, thereby outlining the overall trajectory of Zhuang's literary evolution.

To this day, Zhuang folk songs remain irreplaceable in the spiritual life of the Zhuang people. Zhang Miaoying (2020) explores how Zhuang communities preserve and transmit ethnic memory in a cross-cultural context. Her study highlights the significance of song fairs as cultural spaces for transmitting ethnic memories and examines the historical continuity of song fair traditions. Zhang attributes the persistence of these cultural phenomena to factors such as historical remnants of primitive marriage customs, folk religious rituals, and the integration of external cultural influences. She further analyzes the psychological structure underlying song fair culture, demonstrating its functional role in maintaining collective identity and social cohesion among the Zhuang people.

The gradual transformation of Zhuang folk songs necessitates an examination of the rituals associated with their performance. The intrinsic study of folk songs plays a crucial role in their preservation and subsequent research. Wang Henghua (2020) argues that the evolution of folk songs is inevitable, as they naturally adapt to societal changes. He asserts that the development of Zhuang folk songs follows its inherent logic, balancing inheritance and innovation. While changes in the social function of folk songs reflect shifts in the broader cultural landscape, he emphasizes that modern adaptations should respect and preserve the traditional cultural essence of Zhuang folk songs rather than solely pursuing contemporary trends at the expense of their original artistic integrity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area. Through literature review, fieldwork, and case analysis, it provides an in-depth examination of the musical development and characteristics of these folk songs.

1. Research Sample

The study sample comprises 19 representative Zhuang folk songs from the "Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume" selected based on their musical style, lyrical content, performance format, and cultural significance. This selection ensures the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the research.

The study involves a total of 200 participants, including five Zhuang folk song inheritors, five ethnomusicology experts, five cultural heritage professionals, and five folk singers from the Guangxi Song and Dance Theater. Additionally, 80 students (40 from music programs and 40 from non-music disciplines) were included, along with 100 residents and independent practitioners. This diverse participant pool helps capture a broad perspective on the recognition, transmission, and cultural identity associated with Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area. Fieldwork was conducted to gather first-hand data on the perception and transmission of these folk songs among different demographic groups.

2. Research tool

This study employs literature review, fieldwork, and case analysis as primary research tools. The literature review encompasses historical records, scholarly research on Zhuang folk songs, linguistic studies on the Zhuang language, and relevant works on cultural heritage, providing a theoretical foundation for the study. Case analysis focuses on the melodic characteristics, rhythmic structure, tonal-linguistic relationships, and singing techniques of Zhuang folk songs. These aspects are examined in conjunction with textual analysis and field observations to gain deeper insights into their artistic attributes.

3. Data Collection

The primary data sources for this study include a literature review and fieldwork documentation. First, historical records, previous research on Zhuang folk songs, and academic papers were systematically reviewed to compile information on the historical background, cultural characteristics, and developmental trends of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area. Second, fieldwork was conducted to observe



the methods of learning, transmission, and performance techniques of these folk songs, providing firsthand empirical data for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

A comprehensive analytical approach was adopted to organize and interpret the collected data, focusing on musical morphology, cultural significance, and social impact. The study conducts a detailed examination of the melodic structure, rhythmic patterns, tonal-linguistic relationships, and singing techniques of representative Zhuang folk songs from the Liujiang vernacular area, aiming to identify their artistic characteristics and regional distinctiveness.

Literature Review

The conceptual framework of this study integrates historical evolution, musical structure, and modern challenges to analyze the development of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area. Historically, these folk songs have adapted to socio-political changes while preserving their cultural essence. Their melodic and rhythmic structures are deeply influenced by the tonal characteristics of the Liujiang dialect, shaping their distinct musical identity. However, modernization and digital media present both opportunities and threats, as commercialization and linguistic shifts impact traditional performance practices. Balancing cultural preservation with innovative adaptation is essential for ensuring the continued vitality of Zhuang folk songs in contemporary society (Figure 1).

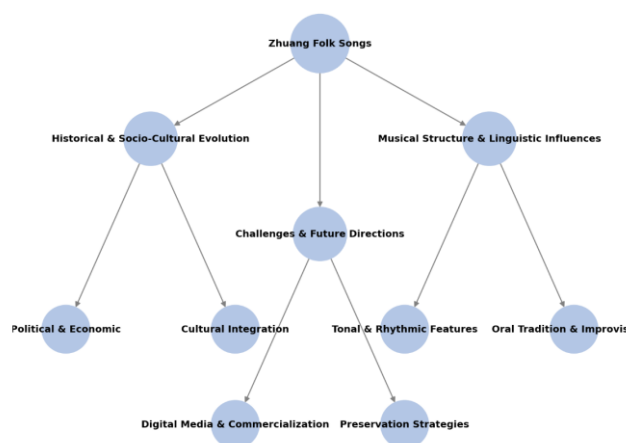


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher

Results

1. The Development of Zhuang Folk Songs in the Liujiang Vernacular Area

From its formation during the Tang Dynasty to the late 20th century, traditional Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area have undergone over a thousand years of evolution and dissemination. Throughout history, these folk songs have continuously adapted to changing social environments, reflecting the profound influence of political, economic, and cultural shifts on their development. The rise and decline of Zhuang folk songs are closely linked to historical contexts and national policies, leaving distinct imprints of different political ideologies and dominant cultural narratives across various historical periods.

1.1 Historical Evolution of Zhuang Folk Songs in the Liujiang Vernacular Area

Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area have experienced multiple transformations across different historical stages. Influenced by shifts in social structures, political climates, and cultural transitions, these songs evolved from being freely developed folk art forms to becoming constrained by feudal moral codes, before ultimately receiving modern recognition and innovation. This trajectory highlights both the resilience of Zhuang culture and the adaptive capacity of its musical traditions.



During the Song and Yuan dynasties through the Ming and Qing periods, Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area were characterized by spontaneous singing traditions and vibrant song fairs. The establishment of the "Tusi" (Names of Chinese ethnic minority officials) system allowed Zhuang communities to retain a relatively autonomous cultural identity, with song fairs serving as vital social spaces for young men and women to engage in courtship. Love songs during this period were performed with considerable freedom. However, the implementation of the "Gaitu Guiliu" (replacement of native chieftains with direct imperial administration) policy during the Ming and Qing dynasties led to the deep infiltration of Confucian feudal ethics into Zhuang society. Free romantic expressions were suppressed, and song fairs came under government scrutiny, being condemned as "corrupting customs" and often banned. As a result, love songs gradually shifted in theme from expressing joyful courtship to lamenting arranged marriages. Simultaneously, kujia songs (bridal laments) evolved from merely expressing sorrow over family separation to overtly protesting against feudal marriage constraints, reflecting the discontent of Zhuang women with marriage inequality (Fan, 2009).

Despite these societal transformations affecting love and wedding songs, labor songs remained relatively stable. After the "Gaitu Guiliu" policy, Han Chinese agricultural techniques were introduced to the Zhuang regions, enhancing farming efficiency. Consequently, labor songs continued to serve as a means of boosting morale and reinforcing communal identity, allowing Zhuang folk songs to persist despite the restrictive influence of feudal moral doctrines.

Entering the 20th century, China underwent dramatic socio-political changes, which significantly influenced Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area. During the Republican era, widespread social unrest and warfare led to folk songs becoming a means of expressing grievances over national turmoil. The thematic scope of Zhuang folk songs expanded beyond love and daily life to encompass social criticism and resistance narratives. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government initiated efforts to reform and integrate ethnic minority cultures into the socialist framework. Zhuang folk songs were institutionalized as part of state cultural initiatives. In the 1950s, large-scale efforts were undertaken to collect and compile folk songs, resulting in the publication of "Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume". During this period, many traditional folk songs were adapted to align with socialist ideologies, emphasizing themes of collectivism, which marked a departure from their earlier function as personal emotional expressions.

However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Zhuang folk songs, like many other cultural expressions, were suppressed as they were deemed remnants of feudalism and superstition. As a result, the tradition suffered a significant decline, with many songs lost or altered beyond recognition. Following China's economic reforms in the late 1970s, ethnic cultural preservation efforts were revitalized. In 1979, the China Musicians Association launched a nationwide initiative to compile The Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs, with the Guangxi volume documenting a vast array of Zhuang folk songs. This collection provided a crucial academic resource for the study of Zhuang music. Concurrently, the commercial and tourism sectors played a role in revitalizing these folk songs. Events such as the Nanning International Folk Song Festival contributed to their promotion and wider recognition. Nevertheless, modernization and globalization have introduced new challenges to the transmission of Zhuang folk songs. Younger generations show diminishing interest in traditional singing practices, posing a risk to their continuity. To address this, contemporary musicians have sought to merge Zhuang folk songs with popular music elements, thereby making them more accessible to modern audiences. Additionally, efforts have been made to digitize and archive these songs, leveraging online platforms to enhance their visibility and ensure their preservation in the digital age.

1.2 The Development Process of Zhuang Folk Songs

The development of Zhuang folk songs reflects the adaptation and evolution of ethnic culture amidst historical transformations. As an integral part of Zhuang cultural heritage, the folk songs of the Liujiang vernacular area have continuously absorbed external influences while preserving their distinctive musical characteristics and social functions. The melody, themes, social status, dissemination methods, and





audience of these songs have evolved in response to shifting social environments, transitioning from traditional oral transmission to modern media dissemination, demonstrating the vitality and transformation of ethnic culture.

In traditional society, Liujiang vernacular Zhuang folk songs were characterized by the concept of "expressing speech through song," with their melodies deeply influenced by the tonal structure of the local dialect. Singers frequently employ vocal techniques such as drawn-out tones, gliding tones, and vibrato to enhance emotional expression. Additionally, the rhythmic structure of these folk songs often displayed a non-isochronous pattern, aligning with the natural cadence of the spoken language. However, with the influence of modern music, newly composed folk songs in recent years have become increasingly commercialized in their melodic and instrumental arrangements. For example, songs like *Baili Liujiang* (Hundred Miles of Liujiang) and *Liuzhou You Tiao Liujiang He* (Liuzhou Has a Liujiang River) retain certain local melodic features but have adopted more standardized rhythmic structures and modernized orchestrations, resulting in the loss of some traditional elements. Furthermore, with the widespread adoption of Mandarin, many Zhuang folk songs that once relied on dialectal prosody have gradually lost their linguistic distinctiveness, making traditional embellished phrasing and tonal nuances increasingly difficult to preserve (Wang, 2020).

Beyond their function as a form of entertainment, folk songs in the Liujiang vernacular area historically played an essential role in social rituals, including weddings, funerals, and religious ceremonies. For example, in traditional wedding customs, invitation songs, comforting songs, and farewell songs were performed in alternating verses to bless newlyweds and strengthen familial ties. However, with the advancement of modernization, the role of folk songs in these events has gradually diminished. Today, Zhuang folk songs primarily serve as a form of entertainment to enhance the celebratory atmosphere at weddings, while the elaborate ritualistic components that once accompanied their performance have largely been simplified or abandoned. Additionally, in the past, folk songs functioned as an educational tool, with elders passing down agricultural knowledge and life experiences through song. For example, the traditional songbook *Gan Zi Mu Yang* (Herding the Lambs) contains insights into farming and livestock care. However, these educational functions have largely been replaced by formal schooling and modern educational systems, leading to a decline in the everyday significance of folk songs.

The thematic content of Liujiang Zhuang folk songs has also transformed from traditional to contemporary subjects. Earlier folk songs primarily focused on themes such as labor, nature, and love, reflecting the daily lives and aspirations of the Zhuang people. However, as society evolved, folk song lyrics began incorporating modern issues such as legal education, environmental awareness, and social responsibility. For instance, in recent years, the Liujiang District has organized the Mountain Song Legal Awareness Competition, using folk songs to disseminate information about constitutional rights, marriage laws, and drug prevention. This innovative approach integrates traditional artistic forms with contemporary social concerns, ensuring that folk songs remain relevant while retaining their cultural essence.

The dissemination of Zhuang folk songs has progressed from purely oral transmission to modern multimedia platforms. Traditionally, these songs were passed down through live performances, with elders teaching younger generations or spontaneous singing occurring at song fairs and during communal labor activities. With the increased literacy rates and widespread adoption of Chinese characters, many folk songs were documented in written collections and local chronicles, preserving them for future generations. By the late 20th century, the introduction of DVDs facilitated the wider distribution of Zhuang folk songs. Local folk singers in the Liujiang area began recording performances on DVD, which were then sold at village markets. These recordings encompassed a range of themes, including family life, labor, and folk customs, and were well-received by rural communities.

The audience demographic for Liujiang Zhuang folk songs has also undergone significant changes. In the past, these songs were predominantly performed and appreciated within the local Zhuang-speaking communities. However, modern dissemination methods have allowed folk songs to reach audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. The interactive nature of social media has transformed





passive listeners into active participants, enabling them to comment, share, and remix folk songs, further amplifying their influence. Additionally, younger generations have shown increased interest in folk songs, particularly through adaptations that integrate elements of contemporary music. Some have reinterpreted traditional folk melodies as background music (BGM) for short videos, making them more appealing to younger audiences. Furthermore, institutions of higher education in Guangxi have incorporated Zhuang folk songs into their music curricula, fostering the next generation of folk singers and researchers. Universities such as the Guangxi Arts Institute and Guangxi University for Nationalities have established programs focusing on ethnic music, organizing field studies, and inviting Zhuang folk song inheritors to conduct workshops. These initiatives contribute to the rejuvenation of Zhuang folk songs by engaging younger learners and ensuring their continued transmission within formal educational settings.

2. The Characteristics and Value of Zhuang Folk Songs in the Liujiang Vernacular Area

2.1 Notation Analysis

The Zhuang folk songs of the Liujiang vernacular area exhibit distinct regional characteristics in terms of their musical structure, rhythm, lyrics, and vocal performance techniques. To provide a more direct analysis of these musical features, this study selects several representative folk songs for notation analysis, focusing on their melodic characteristics, rhythmic patterns, and cultural significance.

The song *Mei Shi Huang Fan Hua* (*Huang Fan Hua* is a type of flower used in Zhuang folk tradition to make five-colored glutinous rice) (Figure 2) is a widely circulated five-character mountain song. The melody of this song follows a well-defined structure, featuring three lyrical stanzas that express the central emotional theme. The melodic contour is smooth, with a moderate vocal range, and is based on the pentatonic scale, which provides a natural and flowing musical texture without excessive leaps. The melody is largely structured around fundamental tones, and its pitch variations are significantly influenced by the tonal structure of the Liujiang vernacular dialect. This linguistic-melodic relationship ensures that the melody closely follows the natural rising and falling intonations of spoken Zhuang. Additionally, the melody incorporates embellishments such as gliding tones and appoggiaturas, with extended note endings that intensify emotional expression—a common stylistic trait in mountain songs. Rhythmically, this song exhibits a free rhythmic structure characterized by non-isochronous movement, maintaining a strong phonetic and rhythmic connection between the lyrics and the melody. Structurally, the song follows a three-section form, where a fixed melodic line accompanies different lyrical content, ensuring cohesion throughout the song. The frequent use of drawn-out notes at phrase endings serves to enhance expressive depth, making the song highly lyrical and emotionally evocative.



38.妹是黄饭花

1 = \flat B (欢) 宜山县

$\text{♩} = 60$

$\frac{2}{4}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ | $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ | $\dot{3}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{6}$ | $\dot{6}$ $\dot{1}$ |

1. 妹 是 黄 饭 花^①, 扎 根 (啊) 小 路 (啊) 边;

$\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{6}$ | $\dot{6}$ 5 | $\dot{2}$ $\dot{6}$ $\dot{6}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{6}$ | $\frac{3}{4}$ $\dot{5}$ - - ||

朵 朵 (啊) 笑 艳 艳 (啊), 怎 叫 哥 不 恋

2. 妈育你精心, 令你有才华;
妹是黄饭花, 扎根小路边。
3. 花开几十里, 看大地黄遍;
朵朵笑艳艳, 怎叫哥不恋。

Figure 2 Mei Shi Huang Fan Hua

Note: "Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume" (Deng,1992)

The song Yi Wang Lai Zuo Zheng (Shi Dakai, one of the leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, a renowned general of the Taiping forces, and a prominent military strategist in modern Chinese history.) (Figure 3) belongs to the category of historical narrative folk songs, differing significantly from the lyrical mountain songs in its melodic and emotional presentation. The melody is more dramatic and dynamic, featuring wider leaps and a storytelling quality that contrasts with the gentle phrasing of five-character mountain songs. This song employs the "five-character tune" or "single ratio tune", a distinctive lamenting vocal style. The melodic structure is characterized by pronounced contour shifts, with alternating ascending and descending phrases that enhance the song's dramatic tension and expressive power. The rhythm is marked by strong contrasts between accented and unaccented beats, with certain phrase endings incorporating extended notes to evoke a sense of grandeur and emotional weight. The lyrics, such as "soldiers fear no death, officials care for the people," serve as a tribute to heroic figures, reflecting how folk songs function as a repository of historical narratives and collective memory. This song not only records historical events but also transmits a sense of national identity and historical consciousness through music, allowing listeners to experience the emotional depth embedded in its melodies.

39.翼王*来坐政

1 = F

(比单·五字腔)

宜山县

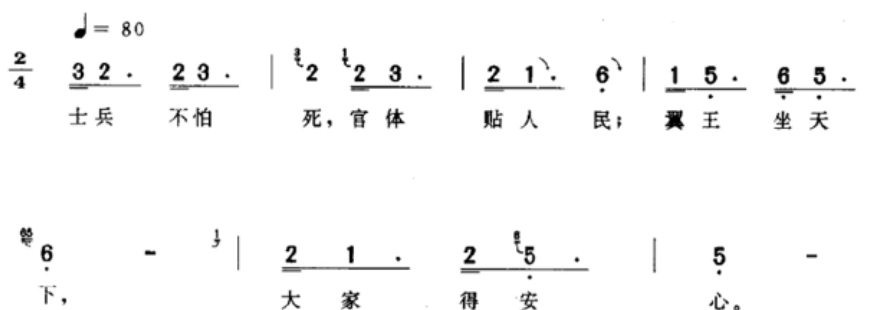


Figure 3 Yi Wang Lai Zuo Zheng

Note: "Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume" (Deng,1992)

The song *Shu Wo Liang Qin Mi* (We are very close) (Figure 4) is a highly lyrical folk song with a flowing melody and free rhythm, focusing on themes of love and emotional connection. The melodic structure is relatively stable, with repeated phrases that enhance its stability. The melodic progression is smooth and symmetrical, making it well-suited for improvisational duet performances while preserving the traditional expressive style of Zhuang folk songs. Rhythmically, this song shares similarities with *Mei Shi Huang Fan Hua*, featuring a non-isochronous rhythmic pattern and extended-phrase endings, which contribute to its emotive nature. The lyrics are rich in imagery and metaphors, symbolizing devotion and the longing for an ideal life, thereby amplifying the song's expressive power.

56.数我俩亲密

1 = ^bB

(重 欢)

忻城县



Figure 4 Shu Wo Liang Qin Mi

Note: "Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs: Guangxi Volume" (Deng,1992)



These representative folk songs highlight the unique melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical characteristics of Liujiang vernacular Zhuang folk songs, demonstrating their role as both a musical tradition and a cultural artifact.

2.2 Summary of Characteristics

Over time, the Zhuang folk songs of the Liujiang dialect area have developed a distinctive musical style, showcasing the individuality and cultural depth of Zhuang ethnic music. In terms of melody, these folk songs predominantly follow a pentatonic scale, featuring naturally flowing melodic lines with moderate pitch intervals, making them accessible for singing and dissemination. Influenced by the tonal characteristics of the Liujiang dialect, the melodic contours align closely with the tonal inflections of the spoken language, resulting in a rhythm that is highly compatible with the phonetic patterns of the Zhuang language. Additionally, the melody design often revolves around key tonal anchors, with certain passages incorporating ornamentations such as grace notes and slides, enhancing the expressive quality of the songs. In terms of vocal timbre, traditional Zhuang folk songs are typically performed using natural vocal techniques, with singers favoring a bright and resonant tone to suit outdoor singing occasions, such as at song fairs.

A key characteristic of Liujiang dialect-area Zhuang folk songs is their non-isochronous rhythmic patterns, meaning that the rhythm does not strictly adhere to fixed beats but instead adjusts according to the lyrics and emotional expression. This feature is particularly evident in traditional folk song performances, where singers may freely extend or shorten note durations based on linguistic prosody and emotional delivery, resulting in a highly flexible and natural singing style. Moreover, many folk songs employ extended or drawn-out notes and other embellishments to enhance their emotional depth and expressiveness. For instance, in the love song *Mei Shi Huang Fan Hua*, the use of drawn-out notes creates a more melodious and sentimental quality, whereas in the historical folk song *Yi Wang Lai Zuo Zheng*, the rhythm is faster-paced and more forceful, reinforcing the narrative intensity and dramatic tension of the song.

Improvisation and the prevalence of antiphonal singing are also defining traits of Zhuang folk music in the Liujiang dialect area. Song fairs serve as crucial performance venues for Zhuang folk songs, where singers engage in spontaneous lyrical exchanges, showcasing their wit and vocal skills. This improvisational approach imbues Zhuang folk songs with continuous variations in content and melody, enhancing their interactivity and appeal. Some folk songs also incorporate performative elements such as dance and traditional costumes, further enriching their artistic and visual appeal.

Beyond being a musical form, the Zhuang folk songs of the Liujiang dialect area also hold significant literary value as a component of oral folk literature. These songs utilize vivid metaphors, symbolism, and narrative techniques to convey the life experiences and emotional expressions of the Zhuang people. Many of these folk songs exhibit strong storytelling qualities, using lyrics to recount folk legends, historical narratives, and societal transformations, thereby offering substantial cultural research value. As a product of Zhuang-Han cultural integration, the folk songs of the Liujiang dialect area play a crucial role in the preservation and development of Zhuang cultural traditions, serving as a vital vehicle for ethnic identity and heritage.

Discussion

The development of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang dialect area has undergone complex historical transformations, with changes in melody, lyrics, singing styles, and social functions closely tied to the political, economic, and cultural environment of Zhuang society. Although modernization has had a profound impact on the dissemination methods, musical styles, and audience demographics of folk songs, their core role as carriers of ethnic culture remains intact. With the rise of digital media, the performance space for traditional Zhuang folk songs has expanded from physical song fairs to social media platforms, where short videos and live streaming have introduced these folk songs to a wider audience. However, compared to traditional folk songs, which emphasize improvisation and emotional expression, modern dissemination methods—while enhancing visibility—have also led to issues of artistic fragmentation and commercialization. This has resulted in some folk songs losing their rich cultural nuances and becoming more formulaic, lacking the free-flowing nature of traditional performances. This phenomenon warrants further investigation to ensure that the modern transmission of folk songs strikes a balance between innovation and preservation.





Some findings of this study align with existing research, while others reveal notable differences. Zhang Miaoying (2020) argues that Guangxi Zhuang folk songs are not merely a musical form but also a symbol of ethnic culture, embodying the historical memory, social values, and aesthetic concepts of the Zhuang people. The in-depth analysis of Liujiang dialect-area Zhuang folk songs in this study supports similar conclusions, particularly regarding the enduring social functions of folk songs in themes such as courtship, labor, and historical narratives. Wang Henghua (2020) notes that the singing style of modern Zhuang folk songs has undergone significant changes in the contemporary context, with shifts in vocal timbre, rhythm, and melody aligning more closely with modern music, leading to the gradual loss of some traditional singing techniques. This study, however, argues that while modernization has influenced the artistic expression of Zhuang folk songs, traditional elements have not been entirely replaced but have instead evolved through a process of fusion and re-creation.

Furthermore, the social functions of Liujiang dialect-area Zhuang folk songs have also adapted to the modern context. Historically, Zhuang folk songs were not only a form of musical expression but also played vital roles in marriage customs, labor practices, festivals, and historical storytelling. In recent years, although their traditional social functions have somewhat diminished, their role in cultural identity and transmission remains significant, leading to a more systematic approach to the learning and study of Zhuang folk songs. These changes suggest that Zhuang folk songs have demonstrated resilience across different historical periods by adjusting their functions in response to societal needs, thereby maintaining their cultural vitality.

Conclusion

This study explores the historical evolution and musical characteristics of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang dialect area. Through historical document analysis, musical score studies, and field research, it provides an in-depth examination of the transformation trends and cultural value of these folk songs. The key conclusions drawn from this research are as follows:

First, the Zhuang folk songs of the Liujiang dialect area have undergone various transformations throughout history, with their rise and decline closely tied to changes in social structures, political environments, and cultural policies. From the unrestricted singing traditions of the Song and Yuan dynasties to the suppression imposed by Confucian ethics following the "Gaitu Guiliu" policy during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and finally, to the significant societal shifts of the 20th century, Zhuang folk songs have continually adapted their artistic forms and social functions. This evolutionary process highlights that folk songs are not merely a form of musical expression but also serve as historical records of sociocultural changes in Zhuang society. The study indicates that while modernization and globalization have posed challenges to the transmission of traditional folk songs, the Zhuang folk songs of the Liujiang dialect area have demonstrated remarkable adaptability through innovations in musical composition, adjustments in performance methods, and expansions in digital dissemination. Consequently, these folk songs not only carry ethnic cultural memory but also showcase the resilience and vitality of Zhuang culture in contemporary society.

Second, this study systematically analyzes the musical characteristics of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang dialect area, revealing distinct regional features in their melodies, rhythms, lyrics, and singing styles. The tonal characteristics of the Liujiang dialect significantly influence the formation of folk song melodies, ensuring that the melodic lines flow naturally and align closely with the intonation patterns of the language. Additionally, the rhythm of these folk songs is predominantly non-isochronous, a common feature in free-rhythm love songs and labor songs. Improvisational singing and antiphonal singing are also notable characteristics of folk songs in this region. However, under the influence of modern music, newly composed folk songs tend to adopt a more commercialized approach in melody and arrangement, enhancing musical fluidity and accessibility while simultaneously diminishing certain traditional elements such as intricate vocal ornamentations and modal variations. This transformation reflects both the adaptation of Zhuang folk songs to new media environments and the partial erosion of traditional musical components during their popularization. Therefore, striking a balance between modernization and the preservation of traditional culture has become a crucial issue for the continued transmission and development of Zhuang folk songs.

In conclusion, this study not only deepens the understanding of folk music structures in Guangxi but also provides practical insights into the preservation and innovation of ethnic minority traditional music. The findings indicate that the transmission of folk songs is not a mere historical continuation but a dynamic





process of adaptation to evolving social contexts. Moving forward, further research should focus on the cultural value of Zhuang folk songs in the Liujiang dialect area and explore more systematic transmission mechanisms. This includes implementing initiatives in ethnic music education, digital archiving, and innovative interpretations to ensure that this invaluable cultural heritage continues to thrive in modern society.

Recommendations

1. General Recommendations

First, efforts should be made to strengthen educational transmission by incorporating Zhuang folk songs into local cultural curricula in primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. This will help younger generations understand the musical characteristics and cultural value of these folk songs. Additionally, online platforms such as short video platforms and virtual music workshops can be leveraged to enhance interest and expand the reach of these folk songs.

Second, the use of digital technology should be maximized to establish an audiovisual database of Zhuang folk songs and promote online dissemination. Documentaries, short videos, and social media campaigns can be used to increase public awareness and accessibility, encouraging more people to engage with and learn about Zhuang folk songs.

Furthermore, innovation in folk song adaptation should be encouraged by integrating Zhuang folk songs with modern music styles such as pop and electronic music. This approach can make folk songs more appealing to contemporary audiences. Government and cultural institutions can organize folk song composition competitions to boost the visibility and influence of Zhuang folk music in contemporary society.

2. Further Research Recommendations

Future research could expand into comparative studies between the Liujiang dialect area and other Zhuang dialect regions to analyze differences in melody, rhythm, and singing styles, contributing to a deeper understanding of ethnic music variations.

Additionally, further studies should explore the evolving role of Zhuang folk songs in modern society, particularly their new functions in tourism, commercial performances, and community culture. This can provide insights into their development pathways within the contemporary cultural industry.

Lastly, research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing ethnic music preservation policies and the collaboration mechanisms between the government, academic institutions, and folk artists. Understanding these dynamics can help refine transmission models and ensure that Zhuang folk songs continue to thrive amid social changes.

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