



## A Study on the Evolution of the Artistic Style of Hakka Music in the Contemporary Cultural Context

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### Abstract

Traditional Hakka music, carried and performed in the Hakka dialect, possesses a strong rustic flavor. It constitutes an essential part of Hakka traditional culture and serves as a mirror of Hakka people's lives. With the intensification of China's urbanization process, the artistic style of Hakka music has undergone adaptive changes. Today, Hakka music has transitioned from "fields and countryside" to "urban stages" and from "resonating across China" to "spanning the globe", becoming a vital symbol of cultural identity for Hakka communities worldwide. This paper, based on the contemporary cultural context, explores the current development of Hakka music, the reasons for its transformation, and its inheritance and developmental pathways. The study aims to provide references and insights for the preservation and continuation of this cultural heritage.

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### 1. Introduction

Hakka music is deeply rooted in the daily lives of Hakka people, carrying the rich historical memory and unique cultural characteristics of the Hakka community. As a vital component of Hakka culture, it stands out with its distinctive artistic style and profound cultural connotations. Hakka music is not only popular in Jiangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan provinces but also widely appreciated in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas Hakka communities. Serving as a spiritual vessel for Hakka people, Hakka music, with its rich cultural content and comprehensive artistic form, has become an important symbol of Hakka cultural identity. It is a radiant gem in the treasure trove of Chinese national arts and a significant intangible cultural heritage of China, representing one of the most iconic forms of Hakka folk music (Shi, 2010) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Before the reform and opening-up era, Hakka music grew quietly within the community. Afterward, it gradually transitioned from "fields and countryside" to "urban stages". In the 21st century, with the acceleration of urbanization in China, cities have replaced rural areas as the primary hubs of politics, economy, and culture. Under the influence of diverse external cultures, Hakka music has experienced a decline. Confronted with the opportunities and challenges brought by the contemporary cultural environment, the artistic style of Hakka music has undergone both conscious and unconscious transformations. By inheriting its traditional core spirit while keeping pace with modern trends, Hakka music has made adaptive changes, securing better development prospects and earning admiration from Hakka communities both domestically and internationally.

### 2. The Artistic Style of Contemporary "New Hakka Music"

Hakka music, shaped by the long-term living practices and cultural accumulation of Hakka people, represents a crucial component of Hakka culture. It encompasses a variety of forms, including folk songs, ballads, opera, and storytelling, reflecting not only the historical evolution and folk customs of the Hakka community but also the values of diligence, frugality, courage, and reverence for education. The artistic style of contemporary "New Hakka Music" demonstrates new developmental trends in its musical content, performance forms, and international dissemination.

### 2.1. Outstanding Examples of Global Dissemination from China

The migration of Hakka ancestors from northern to southern China brought Hakka music from the Central Plains to border regions and eventually to foreign lands, leaving footprints across the globe. Through Hakka music, one can perceive the historical hardships, changes of the times, reverence for Chinese traditional culture, and aspirations for the future. Iconic musical works such as *Ten Farewells to the Red Army*, *Azaleas in Bloom*, and *Moonlight* embody the resilient spirit and grand demeanor of the Hakka people.

Apart from its domestic popularity, Hakka music began to influence Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, during the late 18th to 19th centuries, as large numbers of Hakka emigrated to the region. Hakka music culture contributed to the multicultural development of local societies and created unique cultural fusion landscapes. Today, Hakka music enthusiasts and inheritors in Southeast Asia actively promote the genre through international cultural exchange events and social media platforms. For example, in Singapore, small parks by the Kallang River estuary often host performances of Hakka music, and local radio stations feature dedicated dialect programs such as *Hakka Music*, which broadcasts traditional songs like *Qiao Mei* and *Two Sisters Watching the Groom*. These examples illustrate how Hakka music has crossed oceans, extending its influence from China to Southeast Asia and beyond.

### 2.2. Continuous Innovation in Transmission Methods

Historically, the large-scale southward migration of Han people occurred five times between the Eastern Jin Dynasty and the late Qing Dynasty. These settlers moved from Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, and Anhui to mountainous areas in eastern and western Guangdong, western Fujian, and southern Jiangxi. Geographic isolation, combined with the Hakka community's strong clan consciousness and enduring cultural customs, shaped their unique lifestyle, traditions, and linguistic traits. Additionally, the prolonged southern living environment resulted in Hakka music featuring a narrow tonal range, mostly within a fifth, and retaining the melodious and elegant characteristics of southern music.

The preservation and innovation of Hakka music have long garnered attention from academia and the arts. On one hand, various government agencies, research institutions, and universities have intensified efforts to collect, document, and protect Hakka music. Several educational materials, such as *Hakka Music Textbook*, *A Thousand-Year Hakka Rhythm: Chinese Hakka Music*, and *Traditional Hakka Music in Western Fujian*, outline topics ranging from the origins and evolution of Hakka music to its dissemination (Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2024; Shi, 2010) [3, 5, 1]. Notably, *A Thousand-Year Hakka Rhythm: Chinese Hakka Music* adopts a broad perspective, including national and international dimensions, providing in-depth analysis of Hakka music's origins, dissemination, societal functions, integration, and modern transmission. These resources lay a strong theoretical foundation for integrating Hakka music into educational curricula and advancing professional transmission and development.

On the other hand, innovative works such as *Shouting Mountain*, the first original Hakka musical theater created by the Guangdong National Orchestra and Meizhou Hakka Music Heritage Protection Center, combine Hakka music with contemporary national instrumental music. The theater

showcases the unique cultural characteristics and humanistic spirit of the Hakka region. Through artists' reinterpretations, Hakka music returns to the grassroots, thriving with renewed vitality and charm in modern times. The production was selected for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's 2024-2025 "Symphony of the Times" creative support plan, marking a significant achievement in the innovative development of contemporary Hakka music. Similarly, the documentary *A Thousand-Year Hakka Rhythm: Chinese Hakka Music* provides a panoramic exploration through its 12 episodes, delving into the history, culture, societal functions, and modern innovations of Hakka music. This demonstrates that the contemporary transmission and development of Hakka music span traditional and modern domains, as well as music and film, fully showcasing its rich historical heritage and distinctive artistic allure.

### 2.3. Diverse Fusion in Presentation Forms

Hakka music features a wide array of performance forms, including folk songs, dances, operas, and more, playing a crucial role in various cultural events. For example, in annually held events such as the "World Hakka Reunion Conference", "Hakka Music Festival", and "Hakka New Talent Singing Competition", Hakka music performances are indispensable highlights, widely appreciated by the public. These cultural activities not only promote the dissemination and development of Hakka music but also strengthen cultural identity and cohesion among Hakka communities.

To preserve and protect Hakka music, creators and performers have continuously sought innovation by integrating traditional Hakka music with modern musical compositions and performance elements. A prominent example is *Symphonic Folk Songs: New Hakka Melodies*, composed by Wang Ning, which merges Hakka music with symphonic traditions. This work achieves a direct connection and transmission between folk art and symphonic culture. The first movement, *Prelude: Folk Songs*, uses representative Hakka music as its foundation, adapting *Songkou Folk Song* through refinement and creative processing. The prelude begins with a grand momentum, transitioning into an original singing style that blends the authentic essence of Hakka music with symphonic choral arrangements. The second movement, *The Past*, employs orchestral language to deeply convey the suffering and heroic history of the Hakka people. Other movements include a setting of the Hakka children's song *Moonlight* and depictions of laboring life scenes, where traditional male-female duet forms are artistically incorporated into symphonic compositions.

This work marks the first large-scale artistic creation to incorporate Hakka music's original singing style into symphonic composition. Beyond original singing, it features solo, duet, children's choir, and mixed choir performances, highlighting the inclusivity and unique charm of Hakka music. *Symphonic Folk Songs: New Hakka Melodies* is the first symphonic choral work reflecting Hakka people and culture, emphasizing inheritance and innovation. It also contributes to the cultural identity of millions of Hakka people worldwide and to the promotion of Chinese national music and contemporary symphonic music culture (Shi, 2010) [1].

Hakka folk songs represent the voice of the Hakka people, through which they express their aspirations for life. These songs vividly portray the hearty and forthright personality of the Hakka while also capturing their subtle and delicate

emotions. They retain the rhythms of traditional central plains music while exhibiting distinctive local characteristics (Liu, 2007) [6]. Deeply rooted in the daily lives of Hakka people, Hakka music reflects their genuine emotions and sentiments, naturally emerging from their long-term labor and life experiences.

With the acceleration of globalization and the increasing cultural exchanges and mutual learning, Hakka music has stepped onto the global stage. Through cultural exchanges, performances, and platforms such as Chinese broadcasting and radio programs, Hakka music is presented to global audiences. This has significantly enhanced the understanding and recognition of Hakka music culture worldwide, establishing it as an essential vehicle for disseminating Chinese traditional music culture abroad.

### 3. Analysis of the Causes behind the Evolution of Contemporary Hakka Music's Artistic Style

Traditional Hakka folk songs were typically performed outdoors. Their melodies are often high-pitched and resonant, with free and elongated rhythms, serving as a medium for laborers to freely express their emotions (Liu, 2007) [6]. Although the original ecological transmission of Hakka music, including Hakka folk songs and nursery rhymes, still exists today, it is undeniable that the advancement of urbanization in China has profoundly altered the cultural and artistic ecology of traditional Hakka music.

#### 3.1. The Impact of Urbanization

In the past, Hakka music was an indispensable part of daily life. Hakka people used folk songs and ballads to convey emotions and exchange information. However, with urbanization, many young people have left traditional Hakka villages to work and live in cities. This large-scale migration from rural areas to urban centers has led to significant changes in lifestyles and value systems, directly resulting in the shrinking of Hakka music's traditional audience. Consequently, the transmission and development of Hakka music have experienced disruptions.

For instance, the Hakka music of southern Jiangxi, which was once a unique and popular folk music genre in the region's rural areas, has lost its audience base as urbanization accelerates. As more young people from Jiangxi's countryside migrate to cities like Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan, rural areas face severe population aging. The number of elderly individuals who can sing and appreciate Hakka music is dwindling each year, and younger generations lack exposure to or recognition of Hakka music, further impairing its transmission and development.

Additionally, the urbanization process has caused a significant shift in the audience for Hakka music and similar traditional art forms. Young people in cities, often driven by curiosity, are more inclined toward foreign music cultures, leaving traditional Hakka music outside their sphere of interest. On one hand, fewer young people show an interest in or affection for Hakka music. On the other hand, some elderly individuals maintain their passion for Hakka music but face the awkward reality that few people are willing to engage with this culturally rich but "rustic" art form.

Urbanization has brought a profound impact on the inheritance and development of Hakka music culture. Traditional Hakka music, with its rich cultural heritage and slower rhythms, is gradually marginalized. Meanwhile, the fast-paced and high-stress urban lifestyle drives people to

favor fast, mainstream music forms over traditional genres. These challenges compel a reevaluation of the contemporary pathways for Hakka music's survival and its adaptation to the rhythm of urbanization, thereby charting a new course for its revival in modern contexts.

#### 3.2. Modern Media as a Double-Edged Sword

As an integral part of Chinese traditional music culture, Hakka music carries rich historical connotations and regional characteristics. Modern media has a significant impact on the dissemination of Hakka music, acting as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, modern media offers unprecedented opportunities and platforms for Hakka music. The global reach of the internet, television, and radio allows Hakka music to be rapidly disseminated to audiences worldwide, greatly expanding its reach. Furthermore, modern media supports diverse forms of communication, including text, images, audio, and video, enabling Hakka music to be presented to global audiences in more vivid and direct ways. This not only broadens the cultural impact of Hakka music but also enhances its appeal and influence. By leveraging modern media technologies, Hakka music can easily transcend geographical limitations, achieving rapid and efficient dissemination and providing strong support for its promotion and popularization.

However, while modern media enables efficient, high-quality dissemination of Hakka music culture, it also introduces challenges and issues. For example, the globalized dissemination of modern media can lead to cultural homogenization, causing Hakka music to lose its unique regional and ethnic characteristics during the transmission process. This can diminish its cultural value and undermine its effectiveness in heritage preservation. Additionally, the vast volume of information available through modern media may overwhelm audiences, reducing their focus on Hakka music and making it difficult to foster deeper understanding and recognition.

The commercialization and entertainment-oriented tendencies of modern media further complicate the issue. Excessive packaging or adaptation during dissemination can strip Hakka music of its original cultural essence and artistic value. Thus, modern media's impact on Hakka music is twofold: on the positive side, it provides broad platforms and diverse formats for dissemination, aiding its promotion and popularization; on the negative side, it risks cultural homogenization, information overload, and the commercial and entertainment pressures that may threaten its authenticity and sustainability.

To effectively utilize modern media for the dissemination of Hakka music, it is essential to maintain a clear perspective and a cautious approach. This involves fully leveraging its advantages while being vigilant about its potential risks and challenges. Only through a balanced strategy can Hakka music thrive in the modern media landscape while preserving its unique cultural identity and artistic value.

### 4. Strategies for the Inheritance and Development of Contemporary Hakka Music Culture

Hakka music, a unique art form developed through the long-term production and life experiences of the Hakka people, is characterized by strong local features and a rustic flavor. However, with the accelerating urbanization and deepening globalization, the survival environment for Hakka music has undergone significant changes, posing numerous challenges

for its inheritance and development. Therefore, exploring effective strategies for the transmission and growth of contemporary Hakka music culture is of critical importance (Guo, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 4.1. Innovating Lyric Content

Innovation in lyric content is crucial for the inheritance and development of Hakka music in the contemporary cultural context. Modernized Hakka music lyrics should closely align with contemporary life, emotions, and aesthetic needs while retaining the essence and characteristics of Hakka culture. Hakka music, known for its vitality, must adapt to societal changes, achieving a balance between innovation and tradition. Traditional Hakka music often emphasizes "authenticity" but may lack artistic appeal, potentially causing fatigue among listeners. Therefore, new compositions should incorporate elements of popular music into traditional formats, ensuring that the "unchanged" core values remain intact amid "change", thus engaging modern audiences more effectively. For instance, Shenzhen Hakka folk songs have innovated during their transmission process, incorporating tonal elements from Cantonese opera, which adds regional and contemporary characteristics to the songs. In the creation of "New Hakka Music", it is essential to integrate elements of modern life. The lyrics should reflect the living conditions, work environments, and social changes faced by contemporary Hakka people, such as nostalgia in the context of urbanization and the conveniences and challenges brought by technological advancement.

In expressing modern emotions, reinterpretations of themes like love, friendship, and family are necessary, along with new perspectives on individual growth and the pursuit of dreams in big cities. Throughout this fusion process, preserving the unique charm and grammatical structure of the Hakka language is essential to maintain the cultural authenticity of the lyrics. Drawing inspiration from the lyric styles and themes of traditional Hakka folk songs, creators can embed values such as diligence, resilience, and optimism into their works.

In terms of artistic style, contemporary Hakka music can incorporate forms popular among younger audiences, such as elements of pop, rock, and electronic music, to craft distinctive and innovative rhythms and melodies (Chen, 2024) <sup>[9]</sup>. In summary, the content of Hakka music lyrics must evolve in tandem with the times, keeping pace with societal needs and aesthetic trends while continuously exploring and adapting new resources. This approach will enrich and expand the connotations and scope of Hakka music, ensuring its vitality in modern contexts.

#### 4.2. Leveraging Modern Media

To enhance the influence of contemporary Hakka music, it is essential to fully utilize modern media technologies to reach a broader audience. In the era of new media, the diverse range of media formats has deeply integrated into people's fragmented daily lives. "New Hakka Music" should take full advantage of these varied media formats, such as social networks, online media platforms, and live streaming platforms, to expand its dissemination pathways. For example, releasing music works, hosting online concerts, or streaming live performances through these channels can help more people encounter and appreciate the unique charm of "New Hakka Music".

At the same time, when employing modern media for

dissemination, "New Hakka Music" should prioritize innovation and diversification of content. This involves preserving traditional Hakka music elements while incorporating modern music styles and creative methods to produce music works that are more contemporary and appealing. Creating multimedia content such as music videos (MVVs) and short videos provides a more vivid and engaging way to showcase the allure of "New Hakka Music".

Additionally, the interactive nature of modern media offers significant opportunities for engagement between "New Hakka Music" and its audience. Through social media, feedback and preferences from the audience can be gathered to adjust and refine dissemination strategies. Hosting online polls, Q&A sessions, and other interactive activities can further increase audience participation and a sense of belonging, thereby promoting the spread and development of "New Hakka Music".

Modern media's characteristics—fast dissemination and high influence—provide robust support for the rapid spread of "New Hakka Music". By effectively leveraging modern media resources, "New Hakka Music" can achieve broader reach and deeper impact. Moreover, optimizing content and delivery methods can improve efficiency and quality, enabling more people to truly understand and appreciate "New Hakka Music".

In conclusion, in the context of contemporary culture, "New Hakka Music" should embrace the era of integrated media by utilizing diverse media formats, innovating content, enhancing interactive communication, and improving dissemination efficiency and quality. These efforts will transcend the traditional geographical and linguistic limitations of Hakka music, enabling more people to connect with and enjoy "New Hakka Music".

#### 4.3. Educational Transmission

Education is one of the most effective pathways for preserving and transmitting Hakka music. By integrating Hakka music into school curricula, young generations can be introduced to the heritage passed down by their ancestors, fostering a greater appreciation for and commitment to local culture. Introducing Hakka music into educational systems can cultivate more inheritors and enthusiasts of this cultural art form. For instance, schools can establish Hakka music courses and invite folk artists to provide instruction and guidance, enabling students to learn and master the singing techniques and cultural essence of Hakka music.

Additionally, intangible cultural heritage inheritors of Hakka music could be invited to conduct workshops in kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools under themes like "Singing Hakka Folk Songs, Passing on Hakka Culture". Activities such as solo and choral music competitions featuring Hakka music, or Hakka music-specific choral festivals, can provide a variety of educational experiences. These initiatives not only introduce young people to Hakka culture but also offer them opportunities to study and preserve its musical heritage.

#### 4.4. Government Support and Protection

The inheritance and development of contemporary Hakka music culture cannot progress without government participation and support. In May 2006, Hakka folk songs were included in the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage protection projects approved by the State Council. In 2005, Shenzhen conducted a citywide survey of

Hakka folk songs, collecting, categorizing, and filing them for national and provincial recognition, establishing a three-tier protection system across provincial, municipal, and district levels. Shenzhen has also promoted the inheritance and development of Hakka folk songs by organizing events such as folk song festivals and gatherings.

In recent years, Shenzhen Hakka music has also gained international recognition through cultural exchanges. For instance, the Buji Hakka Music Association organized a cultural delegation to Taiwan for Hakka cultural exchanges, earning high praise from local Hakka communities (Zhou, 2024) [7].

Furthermore, the government can spearhead efforts to establish a Hakka Music Heritage Fund to support the creative and teaching activities of folk artists and cultural inheritors. Hosting events such as Hakka music festivals can provide platforms for the display and exchange of Hakka music. As noted by Dong Shuai, Deputy Director of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Department of Guangzhou's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, "Intangible cultural heritage is an indispensable quality resource in the process of urban renewal and development". Activities such as performing Hakka folk songs in urban communities and holding Hakka song fairs in city parks contribute to improving living environments, fostering social harmony, and maintaining psychological belonging.

The examples from Shenzhen and Guangzhou demonstrate that government support and protection are vital for the sustainable development of Hakka music in the contemporary cultural context. In today's society, as awareness of intangible cultural heritage protection grows, increasing calls have been made to strengthen efforts for preserving and inheriting Hakka music. Governments, schools, communities, and other sectors of society are actively participating in these efforts, ensuring that Hakka music, as a valuable cultural heritage, continues to flourish in the modern era.

## 5. Conclusion

Hakka music culture is a valuable treasure of China's ethnic and folk cultural arts. As an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, it holds unique historical value and cultural significance, standing as a radiant gem in the artistic heritage of the Chinese nation. It also serves as a crucial "bond" connecting the thoughts and emotions of Hakka communities. In the contemporary era, the transmission and development of Hakka music face significant challenges due to the impacts of urbanization and globalization. Effective protection and inheritance of Hakka music culture require a multi-faceted approach, including innovating lyric content, leveraging modern media, promoting educational transmission, and ensuring government support and protection. These strategies can foster the sustained prosperity and development of Hakka music (Chen, 2024) [9].

Despite the changes it has undergone in the contemporary cultural context, Hakka music continues to retain its unique charm and value in both its inheritance and development. It enjoys a broad audience base worldwide, particularly in Southeast Asia. Researching the artistic evolution of Hakka music in the current cultural context is not only a subject of ethnomusicological inquiry but also a sociological endeavor to meet the "growing needs of people for a better life". Furthermore, it is a vital area of study for regional and international cultural exchange aimed at fostering "mutual understanding" in the pursuit of a shared future for humanity.

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