

Differences in Singing Styles of “Guniang Song” in Different Spreading Areas of the Leizhou Peninsula

Dong Lu

Zhanjiang University of Science and Technology, Zhanjiang 524000, Guangdong, China

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Abstract: Guniang song is a representative of Lingnan rap art that was included in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2021. It is performed in the Leizhou dialect and is widely spread in Leizhou, Suixi, Maziang, and Xunwen counties. It has a history of over 400 years of oral transmission. Previous studies have mostly focused on comprehensively exploring its musical form, historical origin, and cultural function, but have paid insufficient attention to the differences in regional singing styles within it. This paper is based on field recordings of 12 representative inheritors from three areas—inland Leizhou, coastal Suixi, and suburban Maziang—from 2025 to 2026. It compares the singing style differences of the Guniang song in different dissemination areas and analyzes the causes from aspects such as geographical environment, production methods, transmission venues, and dialect accents. The study finds that the inland style of Leizhou is high-pitched and simple, the coastal style of Suixi is gentle and lively, and the suburban style of Maziang is lively and easy-going. The three styles together form a diverse and symbiotic artistic pattern of the Guniang song, providing a reference basis for the systematic protection of intangible cultural heritage and the transformation of university vocal music teaching.

Keywords: Guniang song; Leizhou Peninsula; Performance style; Regional differences

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1. Introduction

As a national intangible cultural heritage inscribed in 2021, “Guniang song” on the Leizhou Peninsula is a representative form of folk talking-singing art in Lingnan. Performed entirely in the Leizhou dialect, it is widely spread across cities and counties such as Leizhou, Suixi, Mazhang and Xuwen, with a history of over 400 years of oral transmission among local communities. Previous studies have mostly sorted out the musical form, historical origin, and cultural function of Guniang song from a holistic perspective ^[1,2], but paid little attention to the internal regional differences in its singing styles. In the framework of living heritage safeguarding advocated by UNESCO, regional stylistic diversity is not a deviation from authenticity

but a core manifestation of the vitality of folk art. In fact, after hundreds of years of circulation across the peninsula, Guniang song has gradually developed distinct regional singing styles under the influence of geographical environment, production modes, dialect accents, and inheritance scenarios. Such differences are not only a natural outcome of the living inheritance of folk art, but also an important embodiment of the cultural diversity of Guniang song. Based on field recordings collected between 2025 and 2026 from 12 representative inheritors across three regions—the Leizhou hinterland, Suixi coastal area, and Mazhang suburban area—this paper sorts out the differences in singing styles across different spreading areas and explores their underlying causes, so as to provide references for the systematic protection and teaching transformation of Guniang song.

2. Differences in singing styles across different spreading areas

2.1. Leizhou hinterland: Vigorous and authentic style in the context of traditional song halls

Leizhou (formerly Haikang) is the core origin and inheritance hinterland of Guniang song, where traditional song hall culture flourishes most in towns such as Leicheng, Baisha, and Kelu. As the core venue for the traditional inheritance of Guniang song, folk song halls are mostly set up in clan ancestral halls and village threshing grounds, closely tied to the settled rice-farming society and strong clan structure of the region^[3]. Singing performances are mainly held for ritual occasions such as moral persuasion gatherings, spring sacrificial ceremonies, and clan festivals, serving as a medium for ethical education and communal bonding rather than mere entertainment^[4]. They present an overall style of vigor, authenticity, and solemnity that matches the serious nature of these events.

In terms of vocal features, Guniang song in the Leizhou hinterland is mostly based on the standard Zhi pentatonic mode, with a wide pitch range spanning over an octave (from low la to high mi) and frequent large melodic leaps^[5]. The singing is loud and resonant, delivered with full chest resonance to ensure strong penetrating power in open village spaces without amplification. The trailing tones are long and rich; especially at the final notes of lines, there are often large descending portamentos stretching over a minor third, accompanied by deep vibrato, creating a profound and lasting charm with the steady texture typical of traditional farming culture. There are diverse and expressive ornamentation techniques, with extensive use of large glides, staccato accents, and tremolos to emphasize key words and emotional peaks. The articulation is forceful with full rhymes, and every initial and final sound of a character is clearly delivered, reflecting the aesthetic pursuit of “clear pronunciation and perfect tone” in traditional song halls.

Rhythmically, the tempo is generally slow with steady and regular beats, mostly in 2/4 time. There are few improvisational embellishments, and greater emphasis is placed on the orthodoxy of singing and faithfulness to traditional repertoire. The representative piece Exhortation Song, a core work performed at clan ceremonies in the Leizhou hinterland, features steady rhythm, extended vocal lines, and long lingering trailing tones after each seven-character line. It combines edifying moral content with dignified artistic appeal, serving as a typical example of the traditional orthodox style.

2.2. Suixi coastal area: Soft and graceful style under the integration of fishing and farming

Suixi County is located in the western part of the Leizhou Peninsula, bordering the Beibu Gulf to the

west, with coastal fishing villages such as Jianghong and Caotan interlaced with inland farming areas. Its production mode combines both offshore fishery and rice cultivation, creating a mixed cultural landscape different from the purely agricultural hinterland. Influenced by this dual economic foundation, Guniang song in Suixi retains the basic structure of traditional talking-singing while incorporating the agile temperament of coastal fishing work songs, presenting a soft, lively, and delicate singing style.

Different from the loud and vigorous style in the Leizhou hinterland, Guniang song in Suixi is still dominated by the Zhi mode, but with an overall pitch roughly a whole tone lower and a narrower pitch range of around a sixth. Large melodic leaps are significantly reduced, while stepwise motion and minor third skips are more frequently used, making the melody soft and flowing. The length of trailing tones is shortened; instead of pursuing heavy chest resonance, more attention is paid to delicate changes in ornamentation. Small upward portamentos and light head-voice vibratos are more commonly used, endowing the singing with the gentle, floating charm typical of coastal fishing songs. In terms of articulation, the Suixi dialect accent is relatively soft, with lighter initial consonants and less forceful entering tones. The initial sounds are not as heavy as those in the Leizhou hinterland, and the rhymes are lighter and more connected, creating a more agile and natural auditory effect.

Rhythmically, the forms are more diverse and flexible. In addition to the traditional steady rhythm used for ceremonial occasions, performances at festivals and wedding/funeral gatherings in fishing villages often include faster recitative passages with a bouncier beat, which are lively and vivid with a stronger sense of daily life. For instance, Tea-Picking Song and Shed-Building Song spread in Suixi feature brisk rhythm and smooth vocal lines, with obvious characteristics of work songs that closely match the pace of collective farm and fishing labor. This functional adaptation to production life is a key feature that distinguishes the Suixi style from the more ceremonial hinterland style.

2.3. Mazhang suburban area: Lively and popularized style in urban contexts

Mazhang District is adjacent to Zhanjiang's central urban area, serving as a transitional zone where rural culture and urban culture of the Leizhou Peninsula converge. Over the past two decades, rapid urbanization has transformed large areas of farmland into residential communities, university campuses and commercial districts, fundamentally reshaping the living environment of Guniang song. The inheritance venues have gradually shifted from traditional village song halls to urban stages, community cultural galas, campus intangible heritage festivals and tourism promotion events ^[6], expanding the audience from homogeneous local villagers to a mixed group of urban residents, young students and non-local tourists. Influenced by this dramatic change in performance context, the singing style of Guniang song in Mazhang shows a noticeable shift toward popularity and stage performance, with brisk overall rhythm, flexible forms, and greater emphasis on audience appeal.

In terms of vocal delivery, the traditional long, elaborate trailing tones are greatly simplified and replaced by more compact phrase structures, as lengthy ornamentation might feel tedious to modern audiences unfamiliar with the tradition. The vocal lines are smooth and straightforward, avoiding overly complex decoration to adapt to the aesthetic habits of urban listeners. To enhance stage expressiveness, choreographed body movements and designed eye contact between singers are often added to performances. The antiphonal singing sections are more dramatic, with humorous exchanges and playful interactions, and the improvisational content is more life-oriented and entertaining, focusing on daily stories and contemporary

topics rather than traditional moral teachings. The edifying function of traditional exhortation songs is weakened, while the entertainment attribute is significantly enhanced.

In addition, there are more young singers in Mazhang, many of whom have received formal vocal training in local colleges or art troupes. They unconsciously integrate breath control and resonance techniques from bel canto and popular singing into their performances^[7], resulting in a brighter, more polished vocal quality. Their articulation is also closer to Mandarin pronunciation habits, with less emphasis on heavy dialectal tones and glottal stops, making the singing more intelligible and acceptable to non-local audiences. This stylistic shift is both a result of Guniang song adapting to the urban environment and a natural evolution of the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

3. Analysis of the causes for stylistic differences

The regional differences in the singing styles of Guniang song on the Leizhou Peninsula are not formed by accident, but result from the combined effects of geographical environment, production modes, inheritance venues, and language differences that have shaped the art form over centuries.

First, production modes and geographical environment play a fundamental shaping role. The Leizhou hinterland is dominated by traditional settled farming with a stable clan social structure, where folk singing serves primarily ritual and educational functions to maintain social order and pass down values across generations^[8]. This conservative, function-oriented cultural context naturally gave birth to a solemn, steady, and standardized singing style. The Suixi coastal area combines fishing and farming with more diverse and mobile work scenarios, requiring lighter, more rhythmic music to coordinate labor and boost morale. This practical demand has infused the local Guniang song tradition with agility and liveliness. The Mazhang suburban area is deeply impacted by urban culture, with an economy centered on commerce, services, and education. In this context, folk art has shifted from a functional part of community life to a form of cultural consumption, which drives its popularization and performance-oriented transformation. In short, the style of singing is fundamentally nurtured by the local way of life.

Second, changes in inheritance venues drive the core differentiation of styles. Traditional song halls, as the native venues for Guniang song inheritance, are closed, community-based spaces embedded in village daily life. Performances follow established conventions, and singers are evaluated by their adherence to traditional norms rather than audience preference^[9]. This context fostered a conservative, style-stable inheritance system that preserved the orthodox form for generations. In contrast, new venues such as urban stages, community squares and campus auditoriums are open, performance-oriented spaces facing heterogeneous audiences. Success is measured by audience enjoyment and applause, which encourages innovation, simplification, and adaptation to mainstream aesthetics. The transformation of inheritance venues from internal clan spaces to public performance platforms is thus the key driver of regional stylistic divergence.

Third, regional differences in dialect accents form the phonetic foundation of stylistic variation. As a sub-branch of the Min Chinese language family, the Leizhou dialect has developed distinct internal variations due to geographical isolation and external cultural influence^[10]. The “Haikang accent” in the Leizhou hinterland retains the most ancient phonetic features, with heavy initial consonants, full entering tones, and a deep, resonant timbre. These phonetic features directly shape the forceful articulation and rich trailing

tones of the hinterland singing style. The “Suixi accent” is softer, with lighter initials and more relaxed tones, contributing to the smoother, more lyrical quality of local singing. The accent in Mazhang is heavily influenced by Cantonese from nearby Zhanjiang city, with simplified consonants and flatter tone contours. This phonetic shift is reflected in the lighter, more Mandarin-like pronunciation in Mazhang performances, which reduces the dialect barrier for urban audiences.

4. Conclusion

The differences in singing styles of Guniang song across different regions of the Leizhou Peninsula are the result of adaptive development of folk art in different ecological and cultural contexts. There is no distinction between superior and inferior styles, nor is there a single “authentic” version of the art form; together, the vigorous hinterland style, soft coastal style, and lively urban style constitute the rich and diverse artistic landscape of Guniang song.

In current intangible cultural heritage protection and teaching transformation, we should not standardize all performances with a single “canonical version” or prioritize one regional style over others. Instead, we should respect this regional diversity and support the living inheritance of different styles in their respective local contexts, documenting representative repertoires and performers from each region to preserve the complete cultural ecology of Guniang song ^[11]. For vocal music teaching in colleges and universities, understanding the stylistic differences across regions not only helps to grasp the artistic characteristics of Guniang song more comprehensively, but also provides more diverse materials for folk music courses, helping students understand the close relationship between singing style and cultural context. Looking forward, as urbanization and cultural integration continue to advance, it is increasingly important to systematically document and study these regional styles before they gradually blend and fade, contributing to the holistic protection and innovative development of intangible cultural heritage.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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