UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Naxi Folksong in the Age of Intangible Cultural Heritage

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Ethnomusicology

by

Tingting Tang

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Naxi Folksong in the Age of Intangible Cultural Heritage

by

Tingting Tang

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnomusicology

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Professor Helen M. Rees, Chair

This doctoral dissertation employs ethnomusicological methodologies and perspectives to examine the impact of China's UNESCO-style intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation movement—initiated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—on ethnic minorities and their musical traditions, with a focus on Naxi folksongs. The Naxi, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group with a population of 326,295 primarily distributed across the Hengduan Mountains in southwestern China, are renowned nationally and internationally for the unique pictographic script of their indigenous animist *dongba*/*dobbaq* priests, and for the traditional instrumental ensemble-based genres widely known as "Naxi ancient music." Less well known is the rich variety of Naxi folksong, which has historically been still more widely practiced among the Naxi population. Moreover, outside recognition of the distinctive musical heritage of the Naxi initially

focused primarily on their cultural epicenter, Lijiang, in northwest Yunnan Province, with prolonged regionalism and administrative boundary divisions marginalizing non-Lijiang Naxi subgroups and their musical traditions. Drawing on over a year of fieldwork on folksong across multiple Naxi communities (Lijiang and Sanba in northwest Yunnan Province, Eya and Yanyuan in southwest Sichuan Province, and Mangkam in eastern Tibet), this study offers an ethnographic analysis of how Naxi actors in divergent sociocultural positions engage with ICH systems and their traditional culture, revealing varied strategic practices and dilemmas. Simultaneously, it critiques the hierarchy of heritage perpetuated by China's ICH framework, which exacerbates intra-ethnic cultural centrism and unequal access to cultural capital. The dissertation concludes by analyzing the value regimes of China's ICH apparatus. The Naxi case underscores the inherent tension between the political-authoritarian expectations embedded in China's ICH framework and grassroots cultural agency—a dynamic that compels communities and individuals to perpetually renegotiate cultural diversity and creativity against the demands of institutionalized collectivity as China's ICH movement evolves.

The dissertation of Tingting Tang is approved.

Mark Kligman

Timothy D. Taylor

Yunxiang Yan

Helen M. Rees, Chair

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2025

To the practitioners of Naxi music traditions—past, present, and future

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VITA

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2019–2020	Dr. Marjory Bong-Ray Liu Scholarship, UCLA
2015	Chinese National Social Science Foundation, Research Award

Selected Publications and Creative Projects

2025	Co-presenter, translator, guide, and consultant for two-week tour of four Portuguese cities by Naxi musicians He Jinhua and Huang Limei (lectures and performances, workshop, and CD recording)
2024	Co-creator and consultant, Episode 11: "Snow Mountain Melodies," in documentary series *Yunnan Music Meets the World* broadcast over 100,000+ times in Yunnan's premium TV channel. https://h5.video.weibo.com/show/1034:5105624690655286.
2022	Author, "With Fascination and Urgency, He Jinhua Sings Naxi Ballads of Southwest China." *Folklife Magazine* (Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage), 14 March. https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/he-jinhua-songs-of-the-naxi-of-southwest-china.
2019	Author, "中缅边境地区跨国外劳生存现状的空间研究" (Research on the Transnational Migrant Laborers' Living Space in the China-Myanmar Border Area). 云南社会科学/*Social Sciences in Yunnan* 2019(04): 104–110.
2013	Author, *云南纳西民歌研究* (Initial Studies on Naxi Folksongs in Yunnan).

Beijing: Minzu chubanshe.

Selected English-language Conference Papers

2025a "From Cultural Adaptation to Representation: The Naxi People in Tibet and the Tibetan *piwang* (Fiddle) of Markam County." 8th Lisbon Conference: Chinese Music and Musical Instruments—Expanding Horizons: Embracing the Wide Variety of Asian Music and Dance, Mafra, Portugal

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2025c "TikTok (Douyin) Effects on Soundscape Composition of Naxi Intangible Cultural Heritage in Practice: A Case Study in Eya Big Village." 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Southern California and Hawai'i Chapter, Los Angeles

2023 "Cultural Expressions in the Cracks: The Naxi Folk Song and Dance *al ka bba laq* in Sanba Township of Sub-Tibetan Shangri-La, China." 68th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Ottawa, Canada

2023 "Cultural Expressions in the Cracks: The Naxi Folk Song and Dance *al ka bba laq* in Sanba Township of Sub-Tibetan Shangri-La, China." 47th World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

2022 "From Funeral Song to Intangible Cultural Heritage in Southwest China: The Effect of Heritagization on the Naxi Dance-song *req mei co*." 63rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Southern California and Hawai'i Chapter, Los Angeles

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Research Topic

This dissertation presents a multi-sited ethnography of Naxi folksong (including its associated dance, festivals, and rituals) in southwest China. Through in-depth fieldwork and archival research conducted across the Naxi people's primary distribution areas—Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet's sole Naxi ethnic township—this study examines the shifting political and cultural ecosystems surrounding Naxi folksong as a case study of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation movement since the early 2000s. It examines the interactive practices between the Naxi people and their musical and cultural traditions, their adaptive actions in response to broader social structures, and the processes of interpreting and making both economic and non-economic forms of value.

Primarily farmers and herders living in the foothills of the Himalayas, often in close proximity to Tibetans or Han Chinese (China's ethnic majority), the Naxi are a small Tibeto-Burman group of around 326,295 in China (2010 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo renkou pucha tongji biao:44). Renowned internationally for their elegant Han-influenced *Dongjing* instrumental ensemble music (Rees 2000), they also boast a wealth of Naxi-language folksongs that traditionally permeated every aspect of life, yet are much less known—work songs, love songs, funeral songs, etc., around each of which unique social norms and taboos have formed. Like the folksongs of all other ethnic groups in China, the Naxi tradition was suppressed during

the extremist Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) but gradually began to be revived as the Chinese government adopted a more liberal cultural policy starting in the late 1970s. The economic transformation and modernization driven by China's post-1978 reforms thereafter have created new pressures on Naxi folksong traditions in the 1990s alongside the rapid spread of popular music and modern media and the rise of tourism. However, beginning in the 2000s, these traditions have received unprecedented state support under a newly adopted, UNESCO-inspired ICH regime of value with Chinese characteristics, as a result of policies implemented across China over the past two decades. These social dynamics have generated a new cultural ecosystem in which tradition-bearers negotiate competing valuations of heritage, individual expression, and state-promoted collective nationalism.

Research Questions

Since 2000, China has embraced UNESCO-style intangible cultural heritage protection policies with extraordinary fervor. Hundreds of performing arts, handicrafts, and forms of traditional knowledge from across the country have been designated national-level ICH, and over forty—including world-renowned traditions such as acupuncture, calligraphy, and Peking opera—have been inscribed in UNESCO's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity," far more than from any other nation (UNESCO 2023). Officials have launched thousands of national-, provincial-, and local-level projects designed to honor these traditions, to encourage their transmission, and to use them to promote cultural nationalism and economic growth at home, together with soft power abroad, thus burnishing China's international image as

a sophisticated nation with a storied past and rich living culture (Kuah and Liu 2017). Several studies have examined the impact of this national cultural policy on the changing ecosystems and perceived values of traditions of China's ethnic majority, the Han Chinese, and larger ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs (Kuah and Liu 2017; Harris 2020). My central research questions focus, instead, on the Naxi, one of China's numerous small ethnic groups, almost all of whom live in border regions remote from Beijing and often have more in common culturally and linguistically with other local groups than with their Han Chinese compatriots. I ask: How does China's top-down ICH policy impact the ecosystem for local arts, customs, and traditional knowledge in these communities (Schippers and Grant 2016)? How do individuals occupying different positions within the cultural field navigate, negotiate, or work with and around the policy? And how does their interaction with the ICH policy shape their lived experience, actions, and dual sense of identity as both Chinese citizens and members of officially recognized ethnic minorities (Liu Zhiyi 2022)?

My dissertation focuses on how this vigorous top-down ICH protection movement in China has reinvented the regimes of value surrounding traditional music, in particular Naxi folksongs, and created a radically new cultural ecosystem by sinicizing ICH values adapted from UNESCO-driven models that align with internationally accepted norms. I argue that this process of revaluing the Naxi folksong tradition is constituted as a sonic dialogue and implantation of desired value between the Naxi, conceived of by policy-makers as a monolithic entity, and modern Chinese society, ecology, culture, politics, and bureaucracy. Simultaneously, this multi-sited ethnographic study reveals how Naxi communities and individuals situated across divergent

geographic, cultural, and social positions employ markedly varied strategies when engaging with top-down ICH initiatives—including adoption, adaptation, resistance, and circumvention - within the micro-contexts of intra-Naxi dynamics.

Field Sites

I grew up in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan—a mid-sized Chinese city with a Han-majority population and a diverse mix of ethnic minorities. Yunnan is home to more ethnic minority groups than any other Chinese province, and the Naxi are one of its 25 officially recognized minorities. Despite living in this culturally rich environment, my first real awareness of the Naxi people came only in 1996, when a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Lijiang, followed by extensive media coverage of the restored Old Town's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997. My first visit to Lijiang in 2001 was as a tourist. What left the deepest impression then was the "Naxi ancient music" performances hosted by Xuan Ke (宣科), an English-speaking Naxi elder, and the international travelers I encountered throughout the ancient town. Like most outsiders, I came to see Lijiang as the quintessential Naxi homeland, where women wore blue Liberation caps and sheepskin shawls. It wasn't until years later, when I became interested in Naxi folksong, read more about their history, and visited increasingly remote Naxi villages, that I witnessed firsthand the profound cultural diversity within the Naxi community and their varied musical traditions. I realized then that Lijiang was never the only home of the Naxi people.

The Naxi people are primarily distributed across northern Yunnan, with Lijiang City as their demographic and cultural center. Their communities extend northwest into northeastern Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and further north to Mangkam County in Qamdo/Chamdo, Tibet, while northeastward migrations have reached Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan (Figure 1.1). Accordingly, I conducted fieldwork and interviews across these regions, including Sanba Naxi Ethnic Township in Diqing; the Naxi Ethnic Township in Tibet's Mangkam County; Eya Naxi Ethnic Township and Yanyuan County in Muli County, Sichuan; and Tai'an Township and Tacheng Township in Lijiang's Yulong County, alongside Lijiang's Old Town District, Dadong Township, and Yongning in Ninglang County (Figure 1.2). I aim to map—however incompletely—the contours of Naxi folksong traditions throughout these southwestern Chinese territories through their daily practices.

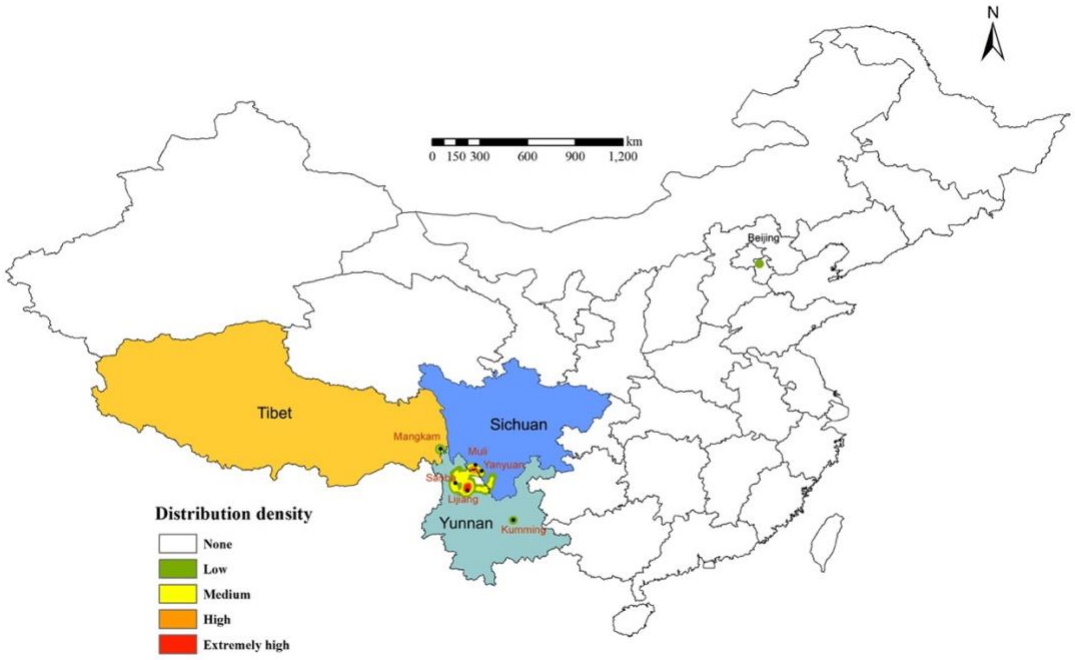


Figure 1.1: Distribution of Naxi populations in China, highlighting major provinces and settlements with significant Naxi communities. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志).

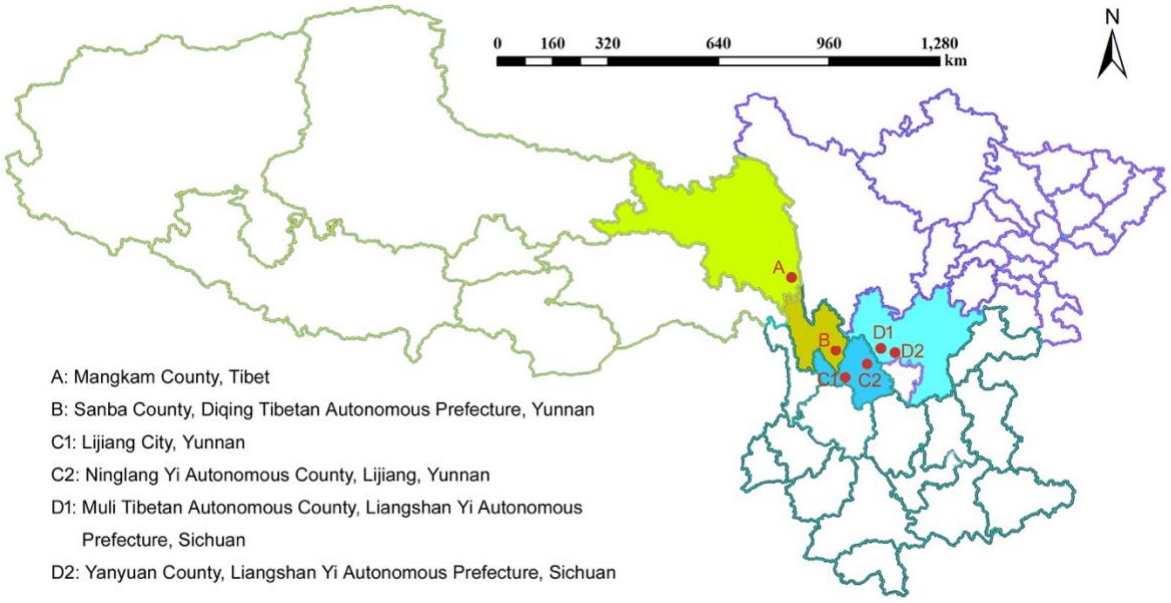


Figure 1.2: Distribution of fieldwork sites (A–D2) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志).

This dissertation builds upon and significantly expands my earlier work on the socio-cultural functions and transmission modes of Naxi folksong in Lijiang (Tang Tingting 2016). Beyond re-examining existing research data, its primary focus lies in exploring the status of folksong traditions among non-Lijiang Naxi subgroups—communities situated at the geographic and cultural periphery of the Naxi mainstream—and investigating how cultural bearers navigate and ascribe meaning to their heritage within China's ICH framework.

Theoretical Considerations

This project draws inspiration from and dialogues with five major areas of scholarship: the sinicization of ICH ideology, cultural identity studies, soundscape, music cultures as ecosystems, and music and value.

SINICIZATION OF ICH IDEOLOGY: As noted above, in 2000, China publicly embraced UNESCO-style ICH protection practices. After learning from the experiences of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Europe, many state-led localized practices have been experimented with among the Han Chinese and various minority groups across the country, generating today's sinicized ICH ideology. As state-led ICH research and protection organizations and related laws continue to grow, numerous ethnologists, folklorists, historians, and anthropologists have joined the discussion. Some have combed the movement's history (Yuan Li and Gu Jun 2005; 2009), some the philosophy of cultural conservation (Feng Jicai 2003; Fang Lili 2009), while others have studied the basic institutional setup of China's ICH protection practice (Yuan Li and Gu Jun 2009). My research, drawing on this work, will compare the ecosystems of Naxi music distributed across three provinces with widely varying experiences of ICH practice to reflect on the practical significance of this state-led preservation logic in the past twenty years.

CULTURAL IDENTITY STUDIES: After the Second World War, ethnicity became an important and practical issue in many newly established multi-ethnic countries or regions. In addition to Marxist nationality theory, Western anthropologists and sociologists have discussed ethnicity and nationalism extensively (Leach 1954; Naroll 1964; Geertz 1963; Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Gladney 1996). In 1950, newly founded socialist China was trying to turn what

had previously been a rather pluralistic empire into a more unified nation-state (Harrell 2001). Following Soviet nation-state theory, the Chinese nation and national identity became the primary focus of the Communist Party of China and scholars. Around theories of identity and nation, my study will build on and dialogue with two important lines of scholarly engagement:

(1) Cultural boundaries: The Chinese did not have a stable concept of "nationality" until Liang Qichao (梁启超) invented the political concept of the "Chinese nation" in 1902 (Hao Shiyuan 2004:68; Liu Zhiyi 2022:37). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, three large-scale ethnic identification projects have been carried out, resulting in the official recognition of fifty-six ethnic groups in the Constitution (Mullaney 2011). However, the use of Marxist-Stalinist criteria for "nationalities" classification aims to incorporate all ethnic groups into greater China. The concept of ethnic boundaries has been redefined by Barth (1969) through the discussion of cultural boundaries. The static geographical boundary division is challenged by the notion of dynamic cultural space and cultural boundaries (Linnekin and Poyer 1990; Vermeulen and Govers 1994; Astuti 1995; Cohen 2000; Bauman 2001; Thomas 2002). Historical anthropologists have discussed the boundaries of China and Chinese ethnic groups, emphasizing that the social system is an open system and that peripheral peoples should be examined from the perspective of identity change and national integration (e.g., Lattimore 1940; Heberer 1989; Nari Bilige 2000; Wang Mingke 1997, 2003; Jian Zhixiang 2006). To build on the theories of moving cultural boundaries and the dynamic periphery, this study will explore the cultural boundary of the Naxi from a macro perspective and examine the cultural boundaries between the mainstream Lijiang Naxi and the Naxi subgroups on the Naxi periphery from a

micro perspective. The focus will be on the support for the protection and reproduction of local folksong repertories under the geographically-based static ICH recognition system.

(2) Collective memory: Since the 1980s, scholars of "collective memory" have emphasized the transmission of collective memories through various media, including words, songs and dances, regular rituals, oral accounts, or artifacts (Yates 1966; Radley 1982). Artifacts or images often reinforce collective memory by visualizing knowledge and experience to facilitate recall.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, maintaining the unity of the Chinese nation has been the overriding political goal of the state. Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) puts forward the theory of "the pluralistic and integrated pattern of the Chinese nation" (1988) as the core principle adopted to advocate national identity and harmonious inter-ethnic relations within that sense of national identity. While pursuing national unity and modernization, the Chinese leadership has long tried to shed aspects of traditional cultures and ethnic identities considered "backward" (Harrell 1995). However, the rise of the ICH protection movement gave all ethnic groups an opportunity to re-evaluate and construct their traditional cultural memory and national identity. The Naxi have successfully recovered, reconstructed and represented their national cultural memory to the world through the heritagization of their music (Rees 2000; Zou Ji 2008; Tang Tingting 2010a, 2010c; Xiong Yi 2017; Cao Qi 2020), dance (Feng Li 2021a), traditional ceremonies (Bao Jiang 2003; Guang Yingjiong 2020) and handicrafts (Yang Fuquan 2012; He Yunfeng 2019). Further, I propose a hypothesis that the ICH protection system plays a role as a "tournament of value" (Cavanaugh 2007) that has brought local folk musicians/music inheritors into conflict over the authenticity of their music products, impacted the social

networks, and called into question the basis of local identities.

SOUNDSCAPE: The concept of the "soundscape" as described by Schafer (1994 [1977]) refers to the distinctive sounds, settings, and significances of the musical environment, and opens the auditory dimension for the political understanding of sonic production. Beginning in 1971, R. Murray Schafer conducted the World Soundscapes Project, which aimed to examine all sounds that constitute "the soundscape," a term Schafer used to refer to the entirety of the global "sonic environment." This project sought to study all audible sounds in natural and human-made environments worldwide, including sounds produced by both humans and animals. In certain sonic environments, specific sounds can become "soundmarks," which Schafer (1994 [1977]: 227) defined as a community sound that helps identify and protect a specific place and time, and the unique acoustic qualities that make it notably regarded or noticed by the people in that community. The sonic texture not only reflects a community's social history but also shapes its musical identity through interactions with the rapidly changing social and cultural ecosystem. However, this process can also lead to stereotypes, such as the perception that "Beijing is rock, Shanghai is jazz" (Field 2018). In the case of the Naxi, their musical identity is often associated with "Naxi ancient music," while studies and data on Naxi folksong are comparatively scarce. More importantly, the Naxi people comprise multiple subgroups and a diversity of cultural (including musical) traditions. Beyond focusing on their "soundmarks," I argue that other sounds deserve equal attention. The presence or absence of sounds, human or non-human, in modern soundscapes raises awareness of the politics of aurality (Feld and Brenneis 2004; Cavarero 2005; Levin and Süzükei 2006; Urciuoli 2013). Furthermore, shifts in cultural practices and

preferences can lead to the prioritization of specific sounds, resulting in the exclusion or marginalization of traditional auditory elements. China's evolving ICH preservation ideology—particularly the state-promoted "ICH + livestreaming" model, which has gained popularity among the general public—has introduced a new element into the soundscapes of Naxi traditional rituals: the human voices of livestreamers. However, in these livestreamed spaces, some traditional sounds are marginalized, relegated to the background behind the anchors' voices. A notable example can be found in the Naxi village of Eya, Sichuan, which I will examine in detail in Chapter Six.

MUSIC CULTURES AS ECOSYSTEMS: In my dissertation, I examine the changing ecosystems in which Naxi folksong culture persists and develops. I employ the term *ecosystems* in the specific sense articulated by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant in their seminal edited volume *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* (2016). They identify five major domains essential to sustaining a music genre: systems of learning music, community engagement, contexts and constructs (i.e., the physical and conceptual environments surrounding music), regulations and infrastructure, and media and the music industry (ibid.:334–339). I find this ecological framework particularly useful for analyzing the world in which Naxi folksong is embedded, as the age of ICH has radically transformed all five domains. By examining diverse genres of Naxi folksong—including its recent derivatives such as neo-folksong and Naxi pop songs—across these domains, I offer a systematic method for analysis and comparison against a backdrop of rapid historical change. However, I propose augmenting Schippers and Grant's model with a sixth domain: individual agency, as their original framework arguably

underemphasizes this dimension. In Chapter Four, I address this gap by re-interviewing my earlier interlocutors (Naxi musicians) to highlight their roles as active participants in shaping these ecosystems.

MUSIC AND VALUE: The value of music practice, apart from the result of productive labor (in the Marxist sense), can be examined in terms of its economic value and the value created from human action (Graeber 2001; Taylor 2015). Drawing on Appadurai and Kopytoff's discussion on the "social life of a thing" (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), this study aims to follow the social life of Naxi folksong within the dimensions of modern Chinese history and to understand the principles and motivations of the value orientations in the spheres of exchange (Firth 1959, 1964), and spheres of sociability (Sahlins 1972). Naxi folksong in modern times has experienced different circumstances in different historical periods, and people's evaluation of the songs' value is constantly changing. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, Naxi folksong, like other folk music genres in mainland China, was regarded as a remnant of feudal and traditional ideology needing to be abolished. In the early 1980s, during the first wave of China's open-door policy, Naxi folksong was regarded as backward and needing to be improved. After the millennium, China's embrace of UNESCO-style intangible cultural heritage, a cultural representation of universal values, introduced minority music into a new regime of value. The hierarchical ranking of ICH from the county level to the national level bestows on minority music a "transcendent value" (Weiner 1992) in terms of cultural capital. Soon after, within the framework of sustainable protection and development of ICH, heritage tourism and the heritage economy took off in China, granting commercialized Naxi folksong not only sociability (Taylor

2015, 2020) but also exchange value (a concept from Marx's labor theory of value).

Additionally, folk music in China's ICH protection movement has been ascribed a more multifaceted value dimension, encompassing national soft power (Kuah and Liu 2017), socialist core values (Shan Sanya 2005; Huang Shengjin 2006; Zheng Ledan 2010), and nationalism (Liu Zhiyi 2022). In light of the multifaceted value dimension ascribed to folk music in China's ICH protection movement, I further hypothesize that there is another dimension to the value of Naxi music, namely individualism (Yan Yunxiang 2009). Therefore, analyzing the motivations and strategies of various actors and agents in the ICH era will aid us in gaining a deeper understanding of the significance of Naxi folksong to its cultural holders (the Naxi people as a whole, the subgroups of the Naxi, and individual Naxi singers and community members). In this project, I am interested in the regime of value for ICH, which is created through various forms of sinicization that assign symbolic and/or economic value. These recognized ICH items created under such a regime of value continually shape social relations across different groups of people, scales, and contexts. What, then, is the impact of these different spheres of values in constant movement on the Naxi people and Naxi music itself? Does it influence and create people's tastes and expectations of minority music?

Research Methodology

A unique contribution of my project is its comparative, multi-sited approach, looking at the role of music in shaping ethnic identity and cultural practices in diverse Naxi subgroups located across provincial boundaries, rather than just the best-known group in Lijiang. Furthermore,

drawing on my training in China in ethnology and my specialization with UCLA's ethnomusicology program in anthropology, my dissertation project brings together methodologies from the fields of ethnomusicology and anthropology to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interrelationships among the Naxi culture bearers, ICH policy, and broader Chinese social structures. Data collection for this study involved a variety of methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, performance analysis, archival research, and restudy techniques.

My project is especially well suited to restudy techniques, pioneered in the field of anthropology by Margaret Mead, with her remarkable restudy in the 1960s of her own work in the 1920s on Samoan culture (Mead 1970), and Annette Weiner, who conducted a restudy of the Trobriand Islanders in the 1970s, over fifty years after Bronislaw Malinowski's pioneering ethnographic work in the region (Weiner 1988). In the field of ethnomusicology, I have been particularly inspired by Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin, who began a restudy in the 1980s of Indian folk musics based on audiovisual materials collected in the 1930s by Dutch scholar Adrian Bake (Jairazbhoy and Catlin 1990). Not only is my dissertation, in part, a diachronic study of changes in the musical ecosystem, there is also a substantial body of prior documentation on Naxi folksongs with which to work.

Building on my previous field and archival research from my preliminary study among the main Naxi subgroup in Lijiang over 2005–2010, and my two summers' visits (August 2021 and August 2022) to the sites of different Naxi subgroups in Yunnan (Dadong township in Yulong County and Sanba township in Xianggelila City), I carried out my major fieldwork for my

dissertation from August 2023 to the end of November 2024. Textual materials and historical recordings relevant to this study were sourced from multiple locations: the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive and the libraries of UCLA, Sichuan University, and Yunnan Minzu University. Additionally, I consulted Helen Rees's personal collection. Furthermore, I obtained internal materials from local intangible cultural heritage protection centers (ICHPCs) in various regions, including the Yunnan Province ICHPC, Lijiang City ICHPC, Yulong County ICHPC, Gucheng District ICHPC, Shangri-La ICHPC, Mangkam County ICHPC, Chengdu City ICHPC, and Xichang City ICHPC. This wealth of materials allowed me to examine the changes and continuities in Naxi folksong between the 1950s and 2024, and to go beyond previous work by moving outside the core Naxi area of Lijiang, Yunnan, extending my ethnography and analysis to highlight the social actors and folksongs of the Naxi subgroups that exist in neighboring Sichuan Province and Tibet, on the periphery of the Naxi region.

Chapter Overview

One goal of this dissertation is to provide the most inclusive snapshot possible of the actual subsistence status of Naxi folksongs in the ICH era. To the best of my knowledge, there is still little research on Naxi folksongs that covers all three provinces where the Naxi people are distributed. Most existing studies focus on case analyses of specific melodies, song-and-dance traditions, or thematic genres, primarily centered on the Naxi music and traditions of Lijiang. During my first visit to Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, many locals were unaware that Naxi communities even existed in Sichuan. Some even remarked mockingly,

"Shouldn't research on the Naxi be conducted in Yunnan?" This reaction, in fact, underscores the very limitation I aim to challenge in this study—and the reason I deliberately avoided the conventional approach of single-site ethnographic documentation focused on a single village or county. Instead, I seek to delineate the broader boundaries of Naxi distribution for those unfamiliar with its geographical scope in China. While I cannot provide the highest-resolution picture at this stage, my goal is to first map out several representative coordinates, laying the groundwork for future researchers—myself and others—to gradually fill in the gaps.

Owing to time constraints during the fieldwork for this doctoral project, I adopted a strategy of prioritizing observation field sites based on the timing of the most representative traditional festivals, rituals, and events in different Naxi subgroups' regions, thereby maximizing research efficiency. That said, I remained open to any unplanned folksong or music-related activities that arose spontaneously. In this study, each chapter revolves around a central theme but may draw from multiple field sites rather than a single location. This comparative approach—examining subgroups within the same ethnic group—proves especially effective for observing the dynamics between individuals and communities, as well as between individuals and the state-driven logic of ICH values, across administrative regions under China's top-down, highly institutionalized societal framework.

Chapter Two serves as the foundational cornerstone of this dissertation, providing an indispensable knowledge base for subsequent discussions by offering a comprehensive review of the research subject—the Naxi—through four key dimensions: (1) the legitimization of Naxi ethnic identity, (2) historical Naxi relations with surrounding groups, (3) scholarly research on

and contextual frameworks for Naxi music and dance, and (4) major genres of Naxi performing arts.

Chapter Three continues to establish the historical and contemporary context for the dissertation's broader discussion on China's ICH movement. The chapter begins by examining China's pre-ICH era cultural heritage documentation history, then analyzes the impact of UNESCO-style ICH frameworks on the country since 2000 and the subsequent sinicization of ICH policies, with particular attention to the top-down bureaucratic management system. In the final section, my discussion shifts to the Naxi, using Yunnan Province as a case study of localized ICH policy and practice, focusing on the ascent of one Naxi folksong genre (*Naq xi ssiul ssiuf bee*, Naxi nursery rhymes) through the four levels of the ICH bureaucracy to reach national-level ICH status.

Chapter Four employs a restudy methodology and comprises two main sections. The first section revisits my previous ethnographic study of Naxi folksongs in Lijiang, Yunnan (Tang Tingting 2013), which was conducted when the ICH movement was still in its early stages within the Naxi community. Through a comparative analysis of this restudy and new fieldwork data, I aim to demonstrate the impact of ICH policies on China's ethnic minority cultures and their bearers. In addition to responding to key findings from my 2005–2010 research period, this section examines ecological transformations in Naxi folksong traditions, tracing developments from Lijiang's tourism boom to the local implementation of ICH policies. The latter part of the chapter focuses on the dynamic strategies and responses of various Naxi actors to the ICH listing system, highlighting their actions during the heritagization of their everyday traditions in the

post-initial phase of the ICH movement.

Chapter Five focuses on the musical traditions of three Naxi communities outside Lijiang, belonging to lesser-known Naxi subgroups located on the periphery of the cultural heartland. Through two case studies and a vignette—one case study in Sanba Township of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan), the second case study in the only officially recognized Naxi township in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Mangkam County, Chamdo), and the vignette at Lugu Lake on the border between Sichuan and Yunnan—this chapter examines intergroup dynamics as expressed through the recognition of ICH items and the selection of official inheritors. Naxi subgroups occupying different positions engage in controlling, competing for, and utilizing the symbolic capital of ICH, revealing subtle yet ongoing micro-level tensions shaped by regionalism, both between and within these subgroups.

Chapter Six is based in Eya and examines the prevalent "Internet + ICH" phenomenon in China's digital era—part of the nation's soft power strategy—beginning with an analysis of three factors driving villagers, particularly young women, to engage in livestreaming: the rise of Douyin (TikTok) in China, the trend of migrant workers returning to their home towns, and state encouragement of livestreaming. Drawing on my evolving "listening" perspective of the soundscape during livestreamed Naxi New Year celebrations, I then subjectively compare the different roles and effects of streamers' voices between the actual ritual events and virtual online space. The Eya livestreaming case study not only highlights the dilemma young streamers face in balancing the "constraints" inherent in traditional culture with the algorithms of social media platforms but also exposes the complexities involved in valuing ICH.

Chapter Seven presents an exploration of the state-oriented significance of China's ICH movement and the stratified value systems embedded in the heritagization of traditional culture. Given the inherent complexity of ICH value, this chapter examines the career of Naxi singer He Jinhua (和金花), tracing her life trajectory, her professional journey, and the dynamic interplay between her songs and the ICH listing system. Through this lens, my analysis probes the shifting forms of value attached to Naxi folksongs: their pre-ICH values, their post-heritagization values, and the value-making practices of performers positioned within different social identities. This retrospective study of Naxi folksongs and their practitioners reveals that the ICH system functions as a state-orchestrated collective "call" in service of patriotism and nationalism. This dominant value ecosystem profoundly shapes both the artistic practices of Naxi musicians and the aesthetic sensibilities of their audiences.

Chapter Eight, the final chapter, synthesizes key discussions from preceding chapters, systematically reviewing core arguments and findings. While providing an essential summary, it also highlights how the Naxi case study offers unique insights for ICH research—particularly in understanding how local traditions interact with national heritage frameworks.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NAXI AND THEIR PERFORMING ARTS

The Naxi people live in the Hengduan Mountains region bordering Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet, with the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to their north and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau to their south and east (Figure 2.1). According to statistics of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国国家民族事务委员会),[1] as of 2010, there were 309,858 Naxi in Yunnan Province, the majority of whom are distributed throughout Lijiang City (including Gucheng District of Lijiang City, Yulong County, Yongsheng County and Ninglang Yi Autonomous County). Most of the rest live in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Shangri-La City, Weixi Lisu Autonomous County and Deqin County), Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (Gongshan Dulong Nu Autonomous County and Lanping Bai Pumi Autonomous County), and Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (Jianchuan County and Heqing County) (Figure 2.2). There are also 8,725 Naxi people in Sichuan Province, mainly living in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Panzhihua City, and Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. In Mangkam County, Chamdo City, in the southeastern part of Tibet Autonomous Region, there are also a small number of Naxi people (Xu Jun 2000:1). Traditionally, the vast majority of Naxi have engaged in farming and herding, with handicrafts such as carpentry,

[1] See the official website of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China: https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/ztzl/nxz/gk.shtml.

leather-working, and copper-smithing also highly developed in Naxi areas (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu1994:139–148).

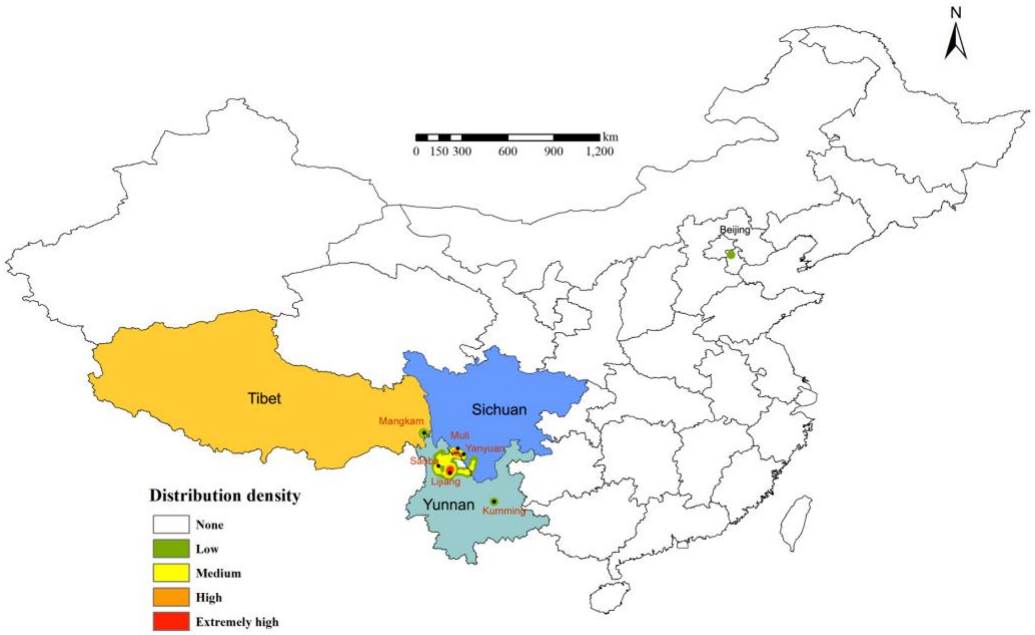


Figure 2.1: Distribution of Naxi populations in China, highlighting major provinces and settlements with significant Naxi communities. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志).

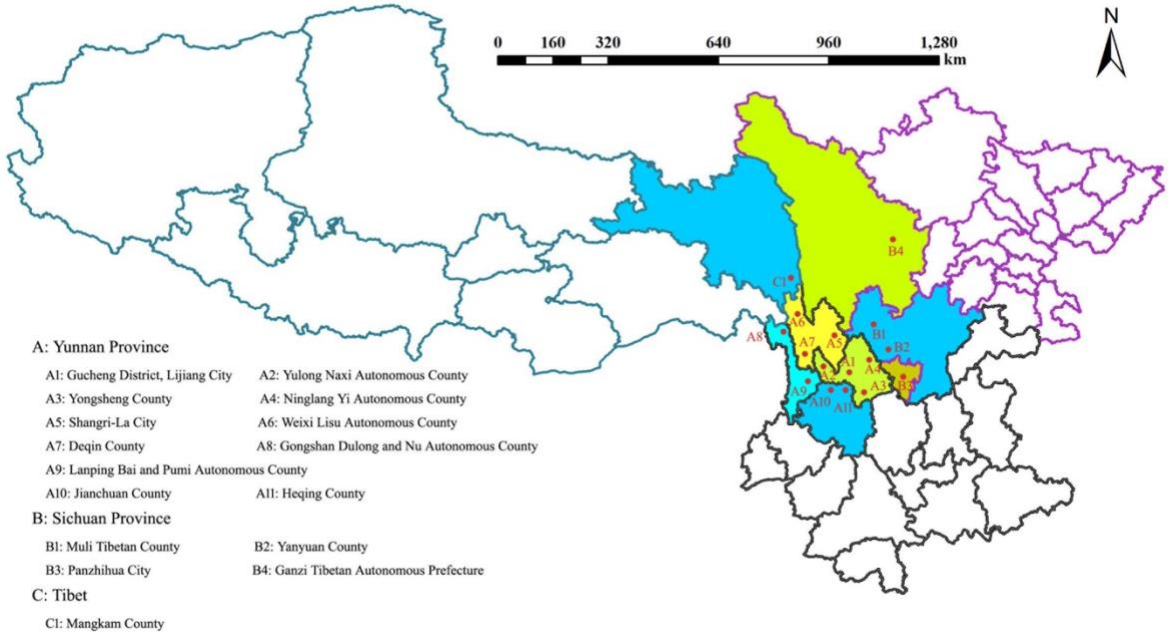


Figure 2.2: Distribution of Naxi populations in southwest China, highlighting major counties and settlements with significant Naxi communities. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志).

It is thought that the Naxi forefathers migrated from east of the Yalong River (雅砻江) to the southwest during the early Three Kingdoms Period through the early Tang Dynasty (circa 220–690) and eventually settled in today's Lijiang (*Zhongguo dabaike quanshu* 1986: 345). Prior to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the Lijiang region was not governed by the Chinese emperor. Instead, it was successively controlled by the Tubo Kingdom (吐蕃)[2] and the Nanzhao Kingdom (南诏).[3] In 1253, Kublai Khan led the Mongol army to march into Yunnan, marking a major turning point in the historical trajectory of the Naxi people. The Naxi areas were removed from Nanzhao's control and incorporated into the jurisdiction of the imperial court, with Naxi tribal leaders appointed as *tusi* (土司, native chief) (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1994:247). In 1271, Kublai Khan officially established the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the first and only unified dynasty in Chinese history established by the Mongols. This became an important period for the development and formation of the Naxi ethnic group. In the Yuan, Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the Naxi were primarily governed by Naxi chiefs of the Mu lineage (today, many of their descendants still bear the surname Mu, 木).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the central government strengthened its control over the entire southwest and implemented the *gaitu guiliu* policy (改土归流, literally "replacing the

[2] The Tubo Kingdom, or Tibetan Empire, lasted from the 7th to 9th century AD. It was located in Tibet and neighboring regions, and at its height, controlled a vast territory that included parts of present-day China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan (Xu Jun 2000:187).

[3] The Nanzhao Kingdom existed in what is now Yunnan province of southwest China, as well as parts of modern-day Burma and Laos. It was founded in 649 AD by the Yi ancestor, and its capital was Dali. The Nanzhao Kingdom was eventually conquered by the Tang Dynasty in 902 AD (Xu Jun 2000:192). Nanzhao (南诏), also known as Mengshe Zhao (蒙舍诏), originated as an ethnic minority tribe that settled in what is now Weishan Yi and Hui Autonomous County, Yunnan Province during the mid-7th century. At that time, it coexisted in the Erhai Lake region with five other tribes, collectively called the "Six Zhao" (六诏). The Yi ancestors of the Nanzhao Kingdom eventually unified these six tribes, establishing a powerful regional regime that dominated China's southwestern frontier (Li Zhaoming 1978:31).

local, reverting to the mainstream"), which involved abolishing the chiefdom system in the frontier regions and replacing it with direct rule by government officials appointed by the central government, many of whom were Han Chinese. The extensive implementation of the *gaitu guiliu* policy occurred during the Qing Dynasty. Starting from the first year of Yongzheng (1723), the Qing government reclaimed many chieftain-governed areas of Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hunan, and Hubei provinces, bringing Lijiang under the direct administration of the central Chinese government from 1723 on (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1994:362–365). As a result of the policy, Lijiang came under the official governance of the central Chinese government and underwent numerous reforms. These reforms included the adoption of Chinese-language Confucian education in government-supported schools for local boys, the further spread of Han Chinese Buddhist and Taoist beliefs among the Naxi population, and the abandonment of traditional cremation customs in favor of Han Chinese-style earth burial. This was probably also the period when the internationally renowned musical genre now known as "Naxi ancient music" (*Naxi guyue* 纳西古乐) entered Lijiang, as the repertoire accompanying the rites of the lay ritual *Dongjing* associations (*Dongjinghui* 洞经会), which were widespread throughout Han Chinese and ethnically Bai areas of Yunnan. By the 19th century, these associations, melding Chinese-language Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist devotional texts, had become a key part of male social life in the more sinicized Naxi areas (Yang Fuquan 1998:99–105).

At the same time, the indigenous animistic religious practices of the Naxi, conducted by *dobbaq* (Chinese: *dongba*, 东巴) priests,[4] continue to this day, as in some Naxi areas do Tibetan Buddhist practices. Indeed, the elaborate *dobbaq* rituals and unique pictographic script of the *dobbaq* have since the 1990s become unique calling cards of the Naxi, much invoked in the tourist industry and exhibitions overseas (McKhann 2010).

State Recognition of Naxi Identity

While there has long been a strong sense of Naxi ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity, it was in 1954 that the ethnonym *Naxi* received official recognition from the Chinese government (Bai Gengsheng, Sun Shuling, and Baixi 2014:14). During the period from the 1950s to the late 1970s, the Chinese government employed a Stalinist definition of ethnicity to classify all ethnic groups in China.[5] Today, as a result of that exercise, every Chinese citizen is assigned membership in one of the fifty-six ethnic groups granted official government recognition. Each person's ethnic affiliation is printed on their domestic identification card, and in some cases can affect entitlements to educational and other preferential treatment (Ma Lijuan and Wu Qionghua 2011).

[4] Naxi-language terms are rendered using the official Naxi pinyin romanization system.

[5] The investigation of the social history of ethnic minorities was officially launched over 1956–1964. This was an important event in contemporary Chinese ethnology and anthropology, and was also an important turning point and milestone in the development of the field of ethnology in China. Together with *minzu shibie* (民族识别, ethnic identification) and *shaoshu minzu yuyan diaocha* (少数民族语言调查, minority language investigation), this project was called *minzu da diaocha* (民族大调查, ethnic investigation), which is regarded as an important starting point of contemporary China's *minzu gongzuo* (民族工作, ethnic work). The investigation involved almost all ethnic minority areas, and was divided into two stages, with sixteen investigation groups and more than 1,000 participants. The follow-up work of sorting, editing and publishing lasted for twenty years (Wei Zhilong 2011). For an excellent English-language investigation of this process as it unfolded in the southwest, see Mullaney 2011.

In Yunnan Province, more than 260 ethnic claims were made by various groups based on their own traditional knowledge and preferences (Qin Heping 2013:22). The state ultimately recognized twenty-five ethnic minorities in Yunnan after conducting an ethnic identification process (ibid.:23). Some subgroups or ethnic branches continue to use traditional auto-ethnonyms that have not been officially recognized, such as the Ruerka people residing in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, whom the state classifies as Naxi.

Language is also important. The Naxi people have their own language, which belongs to the Yi language branch of the Burmese language group of the Tibeto-Burman language family and is distinct from any form of Chinese. Linguistically, the Naxi people are identified as having two main subgroups: the western dialect subgroup, encompassing Lijiang, Yongsheng County, Shangri-La County, and Weixi County, who refer to themselves as *Naxi*, and the eastern dialect subgroup, including Ninglang County in Lijiang and Muli and Yanyuan counties in Sichuan, who identify themselves as *Nari*/*Na* and *Mosuo*. The Mosuo people in Yunnan are classified as Naxi and the Mosuo people in Sichuan as Mongolian (Yang Fuquan 2006:52). The Mosuo people distributed in Yunnan Province mainly live in Yongning Township, Ninglang Yi Autonomous County, Lijiang City (Shih 1993:1; Yang Fuquan 2006:53). It is worth noting that there are some discrepancies in the ethnic identity of the Naxi people between Yongning and Lijiang (Shih 1993; McKhann 1995; Huang Ze 2003:2). In Yunnan, some Naxi scholars, such as Yang Fuquan (杨福泉) and Yang Jiehong (杨杰宏), actively advocate for using *Na* as a broad identity that includes Naxi, Mosuo, and other related subgroups. However, this classification is not universally accepted. Some Naxi and Mosuo in Sichuan—except for those in Eya

Township—are officially recognized as Mongolian and do not fully embrace this broader self-identification.

History since 1911

In the early 20th century, the Naxi, like other ethnic groups, experienced significant political and social transformations. Following the Wuchang Uprising in 1911, Yunnan swiftly joined the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命) with the Yunnan Double Ninth Uprising (云南重九起义) on October 30 (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1994:299–300; Mu Shihua 2016:281–282). By November 17, officials and gentry from Chuxiong (central Yunnan) and Lijiang publicly supported the revolution, and the "Five-Colored Flag" (五色旗) of the Republic of China was raised, signaling the end of imperial rule (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1994: 300). Shortly thereafter, a local government under the Republic of China was established in Lijiang.

Amid these sweeping changes, many Naxi actively participated in subsequent national movements. For instance, during the Anti-Yuan National Protection War (反袁护国战争) (1915), 3,420 Naxi youths, including He Chaoxuan (和朝选), Wang Jiexiu (王洁修), and Xi Ziqiang (习自强), joined the fight against Yuan Shikai's attempt to restore the monarchy (Mu 2016:282). After 1929, under Yunnan's provincial governor Long Yun (龙云), the Kuomintang expanded its control over Naxi regions, establishing the Lijiang Administrative Inspectorate and enforcing the Baojia system (保甲制度)[6] (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1999 [1994]:301). In 1936,

[6] The baojia system was a local governance and population management system in imperial China, organizing households into units of 10 (*jia* 甲) and 100 (*bao* 保) for mutual surveillance and control.

as the Red Army's Second and Sixth Army Groups, led by Ren Bishi (任弼时) and He Long (贺龙), passed through Lijiang, they received strong local support (Mu Shihua 2016:282). That same year, Li Qunjie (李群杰), a Naxi student at Sun Yat-sen University, became one of the first Naxi members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and later led underground party activities in Yunnan (Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1994:306).

During the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945), many Naxi joined the Yunnan Army and the Chinese Expeditionary Force. Lijiang's Baisha airbase, built in 1941, became a key Allied outpost. By 1948, as the Civil War intensified, Naxi resistance groups such as the "Peasant Anti-Enemy Association" mobilized against Kuomintang forces. In January 1949, the CCP sent Naxi member He Wanbao (和万宝) to Lijiang to accelerate the region's transition. On July 1, 1949, a mass rally of 30,000 people gathered at the Horse Fair Square (骡马会广场; later renamed Democracy Square, 民主广场) in Lijiang as its peaceful liberation was declared (ibid.:307–308). The following year, on March 21, 1950, the People's Liberation Army entered Lijiang, establishing the Lijiang Prefecture National Democratic United Government (ibid.:310; Mu Shihua 2016:283). After 1951, the Naxi region underwent land reform, cooperative campaigns, and the implementation of public ownership of agricultural production. On April 10, 1961, Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County was established (*Lijiang Naxizu zizhixian zhi* 2001:150).

Shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Central Ethnic Affairs Commission was established on October 22, 1949, to oversee ethnic policies and minority affairs (Jin Binghao 2009:4). Recognizing the varied social development among ethnic minorities, the

government adopted a phased approach—ethnic reform followed by socialist transformation—rather than uniformly applying Han-region policies (ibid.:7–8). By 1958, most minority regions, including Naxi areas, had completed this transition.

The institutionalization of regional ethnic autonomy was formally established with the 1954 Constitution, which for the first time recognized the right of ethnic minorities to self-governance within designated autonomous areas under the unified leadership of the central government. As China advanced socialist development in the 1960s, leaders such as Zhou Enlai reaffirmed this policy (Jin Binghao 2009:12). Following this period, one of the main components of China's national ethnic policy and the central task of ethnic work increasingly focused on accelerating the economic development of minority regions and improving living standards. Zhou Enlai emphasized the importance of assisting ethnic minorities in socialist construction and transformation, particularly in developing agricultural and pastoral production (ibid.:13).

However, in 1956, China experienced a nationwide surge in the "Great Leap Forward" and the people's commune movement. In ethnic minority regions, these campaigns disregarded objective economic laws, leading to severe economic disruption. Although China made adjustments to the national economy in ethnic regions between 1958 and 1965, errors and missteps persisted. From 1966 to 1976, during the Cultural Revolution, the previously established ethnic policies were almost entirely dismantled, and ethnic affairs came to a standstill or even regressed (Jin Binghao 2009:17–19). Owing to the severe lack of reliable and formally published detailed records on Naxi society from the 1950s to the 1970s, this research relies on

the broader historical and social context of China during this period to infer the overall social conditions in Naxi areas.

The post-1949 period is documented in the local gazetteers of key Naxi distribution areas in southwest China in a variety of ways. In the county gazetteers of Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County, Zhongdian County, Muli County, Yongning County, and Yanyuan County, the accounts of the period from 1949 to the 1980s primarily consist of statistical records on the phased changes in the number and administrative divisions (place names) of people's communes every three to five years. According to the *Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County Gazetteer* (*Lijiang Naxizu zizhixian zhi*) (2001), in 1979, Lijiang Dayan Commune was restructured into Dayan Town. In the first half of 1984, the system integrating administrative and commune governance was reformed, abolishing the people's communes and establishing districts and townships. In the first half of 1988, districts were abolished, and former small townships were reclassified as administrative villages (ibid.:44–45).

The *Zhongdian County Gazetteer* (*Zhongdian xianzhi*) (1997) records that in October 1958, eight people's communes were established in the county, including Sanba Commune in the Sanba region, where Naxi people predominantly resided. In 1962, Sanba Commune was reclassified as Sanba District, only to revert to a commune in 1968. It was redesignated as Sanba District in 1984, then as Sanba Township in 1988, and finally approved as Sanba Naxi Township in 1989 (ibid.:50, 63). Between 1958 and 1979, the festival of the eighth day of the second lunar

month[7] was discontinued, but in 1980, local residents in Baidi spontaneously revived it at the famous limestone terraces of Baishuitai (白水台), a site of deep significance to the animist *dobbaq* religion (ibid.:178).

The *Mangkam County Gazetteer* (*Mangkang xianzhi*) (2008) contains little documentation on this period, and even fewer references to the Naxi people in the county. It only briefly mentions that in April 1986, Tibet's first ethnic township—the Naxi Ethnic Township—was officially established in Yanjing, Mangkang County (also written as Markam in English), with a Naxi population of 1,086 at the time. By 2000, the township's Naxi population had grown to 1,169 (2008:369).

Beyond records of changes to the people's commune system, the *Muli Tibetan Autonomous County Gazetteer* (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi*) (1995) contains very few specific accounts of the local Naxi and Mongol populations between 1949 and 1990. Most of the information consists of population distribution data, historical lineage overviews, customary practices, and descriptions of their mixed livelihood of agriculture and animal husbandry (ibid.:861–870). After the restoration of township-level administration in 1983, the Sichuan Provincial Government approved in November 1984 the reclassification of Eya Township as Eya Naxi Township, Wujiu Township as Wujiu Mongol Township, and Xiangjiao Township as Xiangjiao Monguor Township (ibid.:123).

[7] Various interpretations exist regarding this festival's origins: (1) worship of Baishuitai's (白水台) white travertine formations; (2) veneration of the "Dragon Pool" (龙潭) spring and its associated dragon deity; or (3) pilgrimage traditions tied to Baishuitai's status as a sacred *dobbaq* practice site (Wang Lei 2015:27). While no consensus prevails, scholarly discussions generally synthesize the latter two explanations based on my fieldwork data.

Similarly, Yanyuan County, also in Sichuan Province, only provides introductory texts on the population distribution, ancestral origins, religion, and customs of the Naxi and Mongol populations (including the Mosuo people) in the *Yanyuan County Gazetteer* (*Yanyuan xianzhi*) (2000). The majority of the text documents the transformation of the production system across the entire administrative region.

Yongning County, administratively part of Lijiang Prefecture in Yunnan Province, is located across Lugu Lake from Yanyuan County and is home to Naxi communities. However, the *Yongning County Gazetteer* (*Yongning Xianzhi* 1995) records the presence of the Naxi people during this historical period only in terms of population statistics, with almost no mention of the Mosuo people.

It was not until 1979 that the State Ethnic Affairs Commission was reinstated, redefining the objectives of national ethnic work and initiating the re-establishment of the regional ethnic autonomy system. Additionally, ethnic performing arts groups and cultural publishing units that were dismantled during the Cultural Revolution have gradually been restored (Jin Binghao 2009:22, 26, 28).

Meanwhile, starting in 1958, the Chinese government implemented the people's commune system nationwide to promote agricultural collectivization, including in the Naxi region. While the number and scale of communes were periodically adjusted, the collective production system remained in place until the early 1980s. With China's shift toward reform and opening, communes were gradually replaced by the household contract responsibility system. In Lijiang,

this transition began in early 1984, dismantling the people's communes and establishing an administrative system of districts and townships (*Lijiang Naxizu zizhixian zhi* 2001:43–45).

Subsequently, the 1982 constitutional amendments further expanded the rights of autonomy in ethnic minority regions, granting them some authority over local financial, economic, cultural, and educational affairs, as well as the responsibility to preserve and promote ethnic cultural heritage and economic development (Wang Dede 2011:17–18). Given the widespread distribution of the Naxi people across Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet, additional administrative measures were implemented to safeguard their rights and interests. To complement regional ethnic autonomy, four Naxi townships were established between the 1950s and 1990s in accordance with national and local policies: Ya'an Naxi Township in Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province (1984); Yanjing Naxi Township in Mangkang County, Qamdo Prefecture, Tibet (1986); Sanba Naxi Township in Shangri-La County, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province (1987); and Daan Yi-Naxi Township in Yongsheng County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province (1988) (Mu Shihua 2016:37). These townships serve as administrative units within China's ethnic autonomy system, aiming to preserve the cultural and political identity of the Naxi people while integrating them into broader national governance structures.

After 1978, China adopted the policy of reform and opening, carrying out reforms in many areas, including rural regions, cities, and foreign trade. This reform policy in China also marked the beginning of significant tourism development in western ethnic minority regions, with Lijiang County opened to foreign tourists in 1988 (Rees 2000:151); tourism exploded in the

1990s, initially with a majority of foreign visitors, and later via mass domestic tourism (ibid.:151–152; McKhann 2001).

Building on these administrative and economic transformations, national policies further influenced the development of Naxi regions in the 21st century. In 1998, the Chinese Central Economic Work Conference identified tourism as a new growth driver for the national economy. Following this, the CPC Central Committee introduced a series of major strategies and policies aimed at promoting tourism in western ethnic minority regions (Zhai Ming'an and He Ming 2014:6). In 2000, to further deepen reform and opening, the Chinese government officially launched the Western Development Strategy (西部大开发). This initiative aimed to promote economic and social development in western China through policy support, financial investment, and infrastructure construction, narrowing the economic gap between eastern and western regions. The strategy covered 12 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, including Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang (ibid.:1). The western region is home to 49 ethnic minorities, among which the Naxi are one of the smaller groups.

In 1997, UNESCO designated Lijiang Old Town as a World Cultural Heritage site, significantly enhancing its international recognition and tourism appeal. Supported by the Western Development Strategy, Lijiang invested heavily in tourism infrastructure, including hotels, transportation, and telecommunications, attracting a large influx of domestic and international visitors. As a result, tourism became the backbone of Lijiang's economy. In the following decades, Lijiang's tourism industry has also served as the main utilitarian purpose for

the development, utilization, protection and inheritance of the local natural and cultural resources. Lijiang's tourism economy model has even developed into a model for all of China and has been praised by Yunnan Province and other ethnic minority regions (He Lianghui 2005:46).

After 2000, the administrative ranks and names of certain areas in Yunnan with significant Naxi populations underwent changes. In 2001, Zhongdian County (中甸县) was officially renamed Shangri-La City (香格里拉市).[8] In 2002, Lijiang Prefecture (丽江地区) was renamed Lijiang City (丽江市), and the former Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County (丽江纳西族自治县) was abolished and replaced by Gucheng (Old Town) District (古城区) of Lijiang City and Yulong Naxi Autonomous County (玉龙纳西自治县). Gucheng District became the main urban area of Lijiang City, while Yulong Naxi Autonomous County retained its autonomous status for the Naxi people. Lijiang City also encompasses Yongsheng County (永胜县), Huaping County (华坪县), and Ninglang Yi Autonomous County (宁蒗彝族自治县), whose names and administrative divisions remained unchanged following the administrative restructuring.[9]

Overview of the History of Research on Naxi Performing Arts

Because southwest China did not experience major Han immigration until after the Yuan Dynasty, and Lijiang did not come under centralized Chinese control until 1723, there are very

[8] Official government documents are available via the official website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61350.htm. Accessed August 11, 2025.
[9] Official government documents are available via the official website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2003/content_62554.htm. Accessed August 11, 2025.

few Chinese-language historical documents on Naxi music. Indeed, it was not until the late 1920s that Chinese scholarship on southwest minority music began to accumulate (Xiao Mei 2007:32–54).[10] In Lijiang, some of the earliest writings by non-locals that touch on Naxi performing arts are by Austrian-American scholar Joseph F. Rock (1884–1962) and Russian co-operative manager Peter Goullart (1901–1978), but while both offer some description of local music and dance (e.g., Goullart 1957; Rock 1963), neither was musically trained, and neither gives in-depth analysis of Naxi musical traditions at that time.

Chinese ethnomusicologists, musicians and ethnologists began to study ethnic minority music in southwest China in a more systematic fashion in the 1950s. The earliest major study of Naxi music was on the funeral genre *Bbe sheeq xil liq* (known in Chinese as *Boshi xili* or *Baisha xiyue*, 勃石细哩 or 白沙细乐), published by the Chinese Music Research Institute, edited by Mao Jizeng[11] in 1964 (Mao Jizeng 1964). After that, it was not until the 1980s that more publications on Naxi music began to appear, for example on music of the *dobbaq* priests (Yang Dejun 1983),[12] folk musics of the Naxi and Pumi ethnic groups (Lijiang diqu wenjiaoju 1985),

[10] The Naxi language does have a traditional script, but it has been used exclusively by the *dobbaq* priests. Until the invention of romanization systems in the 20th century, most notably Naxi pinyin, ordinary Naxi had no way to write their own language. Thus even Naxi scholars writing on Naxi culture have consistently done so in Chinese.

[11] Mao Jizeng (毛继增) was a pioneering musicologist affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Arts in Beijing. As a specialist in Chinese traditional music, he joined the national Ethnic Minority Survey (1956–1964) (中国少数民族社会历史调查) to study southwestern China's folk music. In 1962, Mao Jizeng led a team of eleven musicologists and musicians, including He Mujing (和睦晶), Zhou Lin (周霖), Wang Naiqin (王乃勤), Zhao Jingxiu (赵静修), He Han (和汉), Lü Dou (绿豆), Kou Bangping (寇邦平), Wu Jingming (吴景明), Fan Jun (范钧), and Luo Yunping (罗云平), in groundbreaking fieldwork in Lijiang, focusing on *Baisha xiyue* and *Dongjing* music (Mao Jizeng 1964:2).

[12] Yang Dejun (杨德鋆) (1935–2018) served as a researcher at the Yunnan Provincial Institute of Ethnic Arts. During the 1980s, he conducted extensive fieldwork in regions inhabited by the Yi, Bai, Naxi, and other ethnic groups in Yunnan, systematically collecting and documenting local folk art traditions. He is recognized one of the seminal scholars in the study of Yunnan's ethnic minority music.

and polyphonic folksongs of the Naxi (Fan Zuyin 1985). Most literature to date on Naxi music focuses on the central Naxi area of Lijiang, where over half the Naxi live,[13] neglecting music from other regions or subgroups—a shortcoming I seek to remedy in this dissertation.

In the 1980s, Zhang Xingrong (b. 1941), a professor at the Yunnan Art Institute in Kunming, became the first scholar to systematically analyze Naxi music while collecting and organizing a substantial repertoire of Naxi folk music in audio and video formats. During his extensive fieldwork on the music of Yunnan's ethnic minorities, spanning from the 1980s to the early 21st century, Zhang documented the fact that twenty-one of Yunnan's ethnic groups, including the Naxi, have historically practiced and continue to preserve multi-voice singing (Zhang Xingrong 2010). This groundbreaking finding challenged the longstanding stereotype that traditional Chinese music lacks polyphonic elements. Zhang's published works and recordings on the music of Yunnan's twenty-six ethnic groups encompass invaluable collections and musical notations of Naxi instrumental music (Zhang Xingrong 1986, 1990, 1998), folk songs and dances (Zhang Xingrong 2006, 2010), and religious music (Zhang Xingrong 1990, 1998, 2007), offering immense research and archival value. Since 1995, some of his field recordings have been released by independent Western labels based in the Netherlands and New Zealand, garnering unprecedented international attention. Zhang's annotated field recordings have significantly elevated the global recognition of Yunnan's diverse ethnic music, establishing

[13] For example, Kou Bangping1986; He Xinmin 1991; He Yunfeng (Sangde Nuowa) 1992, 1995, 2004, 2019; Rees 1996, 2000, 2019; Wang Jianmin 2000; Li Lifang and Yang Haitao 2002; Hai Jiang 2004; Zou Qi 2008; Tang Tingting 2010b; Li Zhidian and Yang Zenglie 2012; Peters 2013; Sang 2016; Ge Jingrun 2017; Zhao Yawei 2020; Liu Tianming 2021.

the region as one of the best-documented areas for traditional music in China's southwest (Rees 2020:126–127, 143, 145).

Starting in the 1980s, Xuan Ke (宣科, 1930–2023), a prominent Naxi schoolteacher and musician, began developing and promoting traditional Naxi performing arts. As the leader of the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association (丽江大研古乐会), a renowned ensemble dedicated to preserving and performing Naxi musical traditions such as *Dongjing* music (洞经音乐, a genre previously performed in Lijiang by the lay ritual *Dongjing* associations [洞经会], whose practices combined Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist beliefs and texts) and *Bbe sheeq xil liq* (白沙细乐, Refined music from Baisha), he helped elevate these art forms to national prominence in China during the 1990s (Rees 2000:157–161; Wang Zhigang 2002:49; He Hongyan 2009:107–108). In the 1980s, Lijiang's *Dongjing* music was rebranded "Naxi ancient music" (纳西古乐) a term that gained widespread usage (Wu Xueyuan 2003). Because the Dayan Ancient Music Association focused predominantly on *Dongjing* repertoire, the two terms became interchangeable in public perception (Sun Mingyue 2008:58). The group also achieved international success, sparking widespread discussions among Chinese musicians about the essence of "Naxi ancient music" (Huang Lin 2003; Wu Xueyuan 2003; Xuan Ke 2003).

Xuan Ke, who also had aspirations as a scholar, offered influential perspectives on topics such as the origins of human music (1986), the development of Naxi *Dongjing* music (1984, 1991, 2001), and the traditional Naxi song and dance *sseiq mei co* (2001). For instance, drawing from his personal experiences growing up in the Naxi region, he proposed that music originated from fear (2001). Under his leadership, Naxi performing arts found significant opportunities

during China's rapid economic development and the growth of Lijiang's burgeoning tourism industry. His work profoundly shaped the development of Lijiang's music scene and inspired a generation of musicians and artists who remain central figures in Lijiang's cultural landscape today.

He Yunfeng (和云峰) (Naxi name: Sangde Nowa, b.1960), the first scholar in China to earn a doctorate in ethnic minority music, is a prominent Naxi indigenous researcher in the field of Naxi music studies. Currently a professor of ethnomusicology at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, he has made significant contributions to the discipline. In his seminal work, *The History of Naxi Music* (纳西族音乐史) (2004), revised and published from his doctoral dissertation, He Yunfeng examines the subject from an insider's perspective, combining direct interviews with Naxi musicians, extensive fieldwork, and the collection of Naxi music materials, including Chinese-language literature, *dobbaq* manuscripts, and oral traditions. His work represents the first comprehensive study of the historical development of Naxi music, filling a major gap in the historical research of Chinese minority music. By integrating the broader historical, social, political, economic, and cultural transformations of the Naxi people, he proposed a distinctive periodization theory for the evolution of Naxi music. This framework, widely accepted and adopted by scholars, divides the development of Naxi music into the following stages: ancient times to the Tang Dynasty, the period under Nanzhao rule, the era of disputes among chieftains, the governance of the Mu chieftains, the period under the *gaitu guiliu* policy (改土归流), the democratic revolution period, and the socialist period. He not only conducted a diachronic study on the formation and evolution of Naxi music (He Yunfeng 2004)

but also explored the breadth of Naxi religious genres (e.g., He Yunfeng 1995, 2009) and secular music (e.g., He Yunfeng 2005, 2009), with a particular focus on *dobbaq* ritual music (He Yunfeng 2010).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, spurred by the state's emphasis on preserving ethnic cultures and promoting ethnic cultural and tourism economies, documentation of case studies and oral histories related to Naxi performing arts grew significantly. These efforts incorporated richer and more diverse perspectives compared to earlier approaches, resulting in numerous published papers, books, and master's and doctoral theses. Two key trends emerged.

First, indigenous Naxi scholars and researchers from other ethnic groups, drawing from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, conducted increasingly detailed studies of Naxi performing arts. As ethnology and anthropology played a growing role in field investigations, research perspectives expanded significantly. For example, studies have explored the inheritance of Naxi *dobbaq* sacrificial dances (Ge Agan1992; Feng Li 2005, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Hu Diya 2009; He Chunyun and Hu Xiaoming 2014) and analyzed *dobbaq* and Naxi folk dances through the lens of sports science (He Chunyun and Ni Yike 2019; He Chunyun 2021). Semiotics and symbolic theory have been applied to interpret folk song and dance, and sacrificial dance scores in the Naxi *dobbaq* scriptures (Li Lifang and Yang Haitao 2002). Other discussions include the construction and expression of ethnic artistic identity through the lens of Naxi *Dongjing* music (Yang Jiehong 2015), the collection and analysis of Naxi children's rhymes from different regions (He Dongmei et al. 2014), and the examination of Naxi love-pact suicide culture through folk songs, folklore, poetry, and *dobbaq* beliefs (Yang Fuquan 1997, 1999, 2005, 2008, 2011;

Tang Tingting 2015). Additionally, the inheritance of Naxi folk songs and their interaction with modern culture has been studied (Tang Tingting 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). Finally, Naxi performing arts have increasingly been situated within the broader context of Yunnan's diverse ethnic cultural characteristics (Zhou Kaimo 2004). At the same time, among the many studies conducted by native Naxi ethnologists and anthropologists on their culture, ethnic relations, religion, and folklore, some also touched upon traditional performing arts within the context of Naxi customs.

Second, after many decades' absence from the region, Western scholars gained opportunities to conduct ethnographic studies in southwest China following the 1990s. Although their numbers remained small, some began studying Naxi culture, music, and the *dobbaq* script, while a few Chinese scholars published research on the Naxi in English (Hu Diya 2012). The most representative figure among the Western scholars to publish on Naxi music is Helen Rees, whose in-depth fieldwork and research on the folk music of southwest China, with an initial focus on Naxi *Dongjing* music, has spanned more than thirty years.[14] Her work has resulted in a widely cited monograph on Naxi music, *Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China* (2000), and several articles and essays (1995–1996, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2012, 2021, 2022),

[14] A number of Western social scientists have worked in Naxi areas since the late 1980s and produced influential publications. The earliest of these was Charles F. McKhann, the first non-Chinese scholar allowed to work in Lijiang since 1949 (e.g., McKhann 1992, 2001, 2010). A few years later, Tami Blumenfield conducted several years of research on the matriarchal culture (Blumenfield 2016) and community dynamics (Blumenfield 2010, 2018) of the Mosuo people (who call themselves Na and are officially classified as a branch of the Naxi in Yunnan Province, while formally recognized as Mongolian in Sichuan Province). She has also collaborated with local Mosuo communities in Yunnan on cultural conservation projects. Duncan J. Poupard, whose research primarily focuses on the translation of Naxi texts (Naxi pinyin and *dobbaq* script) and cultural representation through native languages (Poupard 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024), has actively participated in Naxi language preservation and education projects in collaboration with local Naxi communities and NGOs. However, none of these scholars has specifically studied Naxi music in their work.

commercial recordings (*Naxi Music from Lijiang*, 1997; *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*, 2022), and transnational cultural initiatives.[15] Overall, only a limited amount of literature has been published in English about this region's performance traditions. Aside from Rees's book, articles, and essays, the main items are two MA theses: Nicholas Karl Kircher's (2014) on *Bbe sheeq xil liq* (*Baisha xiyue*, 白沙细乐), and Shuo Yang's (2014) on the music tourism phenomenon in the Old Town District of Lijiang.

Genres of Performing Arts Among the Naxi

Precisely how to classify and categorize the world of Naxi performing arts, as with the wider world of China's performing arts traditions, deserves an entire discussion of its own (He Yunfeng 2004; Tang Tingting 2013). Here I provisionally adopt a categorization echoing that used in most scholarship to date.

[15] While conducting long-term fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation in southwest China, particularly Yunnan, in the early 1990s, Helen Rees studied with Professor Zhang Xingrong during the 1991–1992 academic year. This experience—including her collaboration with Zhang and his wife, Li Wei'er, in making music recordings and videos in several ethnic minority and Han regions in Yunnan—provided her with an understanding of the music, culture, geography, and local knowledge of various ethnic groups in the region. Additionally, it enabled her to co-plan and contribute to the production and release of a notable series of ethnographic CDs featuring Yunnanese folk music, issued since 1995 by independent recording companies based in the Netherlands and New Zealand (Rees 2020:125). In terms of international exchange, the first overseas tour of Naxi Dongjing music occurred in October 1995, when ten members of the amateur Dayan Ancient Music Association (大研古乐会) from what was then Lijiang's Naxi Autonomous County were invited to England by the English concert promoter Asian Music Circuit. Owing to to her established connections with the Naxi community, Rees was invited to serve as translator andco-presenter for this historic tour, enabling her full participation throughout the English engagements. The tour program included concert performances and lecture-demonstrations, and culminated in Nimbus Records' seminal CD *Naxi Music from Lijiang* (1997) (Rees 2002:432; 450). Her most recent CD production is *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2022).

Folksongs

Naxi folksongs, in terms of "popular memory" (Yates 1966; Carruthers 1990; Coleman 1992), are a product primarily of secular life, passed down orally through generations, and were once widely sung and had a significant audience in Naxi society, playing an essential role in the collective memory of the community. Joseph F. Rock spent a significant portion of his time in Lijiang, Yunnan, from 1922 to 1949, using the area as a hub for his extensive explorations of Northwest Yunnan and the Sino-Tibetan frontier. In his writings from 1939, he vividly described the spontaneous, back-and-forth folk songs sung by the Naxi youth, highlighting their impressive ability to improvise (Rock 1939:21). Despite being excluded and suppressed during a number of political movements after 1949, in particular the Cultural Revolution, Naxi folksongs continue to have a tenacious vitality in the form of individual memory. They serve many social functions such as entertainment, accompanying certain rituals, cultural representation, and ethnic identity, and are integral to various rites of passage from birth to death. They include several major types:

- Work songs, such as *xiq dvq bee* (Chinese: 栽秧调, transplanting song) and *ee leeq bee* (Chinese: 犁牛调, ploughing song);
- Ritual songs, such as *oq mei leeq bee* (Chinese: 谷神调, song of the Spirit of the Grain, sung traditionally as the harvest was being stored);
- Songs associated with rites of passage, such as *mil bvl bee* (Chinese: 嫁女调, song) and *ail jiuq bbv ddaq pil* (Chinese: 鸡鸣哭祭, dawn lament, the funeral elegy sung to the deceased before burial);

- Nursery rhymes and children's songs, such as *e pv gguq nee ee lvl keel* (Chinese: 我跟着爷爷去放牛, I went with Grandpa to pasture cattle);
- Drinking songs (*ree bee*, Chinese: 酒歌);
- Love songs, which can be sung to regional variants of the ubiquitous melody *gguqqil* (Chinese: 谷气) but also include the darker topic of love-suicides (in particular, the folksong widely known by its Chinese name, *dadiao* (大调, literally "big song").[16]

The Naxi love-suicide folk song *dadiao* serves as a compelling example of how closely Naxi folksongs are intertwined with local life and culture. The song reflects the historical memory of the widespread practice of love-suicide on the Lijiang plain during the Qing Dynasty, when star-crossed lovers, unable to accept marriages arranged by their parents, chose to end their lives together. This poignant tradition, and the song that arose from it, emerged as a response to the restricted freedom of marriage during that era (Chen Yanping 2006; Tang Tingting 2015). In contrast, other Naxi regions, which were less influenced by Han culture at the time, did not experience the same prevalence of love-suicide. According to Naxi ethnologist Yang Fuquan (2008:2), the phenomenon of love-suicide was deeply rooted in Naxi philosophy, spiritual beliefs, worldview, perceptions of life and death, relationship with nature, attitudes toward love and sex, national psychology, and individual personality.

Naxi folksongs include a wide variety of nursery rhymes and a small number of children's songs, known in Naxi as *ssiul ssiuf zzer bee* (children's song melody; Chinese: 儿童歌曲旋律)

[16] Renditions of all these types of songs, other than *dadiao*, may be found on the CD *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China* (2022). This was the first CD of Naxi folksong published outside China, and is notable for including the lyrics transcribed in Naxi pinyin, alongside Chinese and English translations (Tang Tingting 2022).

and *ssiul ssiuf ju juq bee* or *ssiul ssiuf dal bee* (children's speech melody; Chinese: 儿童言语旋律). These nursery rhymes are categorized into twelve types according to He Dongmei (和冬梅) (provincial-level inheritor of Naxi nursery rhymes, as well as collectors and researchers): game rhymes, finger songs, counting rhymes, question songs, prefix songs, lullabies, narrative rhymes, madrigals, age songs, upside-down songs, riddle songs, and new nursery rhymes. In 2021, Naxi nursery rhyme was officially placed under the "folk literature" category and included in the fifth batch of the "National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Projects List"[17] in China. In recent years, Naxi nursery rhymes have been highly regarded and widely recognized by the Naxi cultural elite as a vital tool for introducing young children to the Naxi native language and folklore. Some of the rhymes are now included in the educational curriculum of many kindergartens and elementary schools in Lijiang City.[18]

Serving as another form of social memory stemming from top-down influence, the texts of a few genres of Naxi folk songs vividly record their use as tools of political propaganda. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, lyrics were written to the melodies *gguqqil* and *we muf ddaq* (Chinese: 默达调) promoting the Communist Party's revolutionary ideas and policies. These included "We are the People's Liberation Army" (Chinese: 我们是解放军) and "Come and Fight" (Chinese: 大家赶快来斗争), which were performed locally in a mixture of Naxi

[17] Details of Naxi nursery rhymes on the official website of the "China Intangible Cultural Heritage · Digital Museum of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage" may be found at https://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/23636.
[18] In February 2024, I interviewed He Dongmei (和冬梅), provincial ICH inheritor of Naxi nursery rhymes and music teacher at Huangshan Primary School in Lijiang's Old Town District, about her work collecting and incorporating these rhymes into local school curricula since 1999. She shared teaching materials she co-developed for primary and kindergarten levels. Informal interviews with Naxi scholars (including linguists Zhao Qinglian (赵庆莲) and He Jiezhen (和洁珍), ethnologists He Zhonghua (和钟华), Yang Fuquan (杨福泉), and Yang Jiehong (杨杰宏) and ICH officers revealed widespread support for using these rhymes in Naxi language and cultural education.

language and Chinese (Tang Tingting 2010a). The late Naxi folk singer He Yaosu (和耀淑) (1930–2022) adapted traditional folk tunes and created improvised lyrics to compose numerous songs promoting the principles, policies, and directives of the Communist Party of China during the 1970s and 1980s. She also served as a member of the second Lijiang County Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and as vice chairperson of the Lijiang County Folk Song Association (Interview with He Yaosu's son, He Zhengjun 和正均, November 28, 2024).

Dances

In Naxi culture, dance traditions are primarily characterized by collective performances, with the notable exception of *dobbaq* sacrificial dances, which can be performed either solo by a single *dobbaq* priest or by a group of ritual specialists. Among the Naxi, communal dance gatherings are known locally as *dal laq li* or *Naxi co*; many Naxi people (especially those under 60 years old) are increasingly using the Chinese term *datiao* (打跳) also.[19] These dances serve both social and musical functions, blending rhythmic movement with communal entertainment. The traditional dances of the Naxi people exhibit distinct regional characteristics. For example, *sseiq*

[19] *Datiao* (打跳) is a general term for folk song and dance activities in northwest Yunnan. Naxi oral traditions trace its origins to the late Song and early Ming dynasties, when it was referred to as *tage* (踏歌) in written sources. In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese scholars have begun to analyze it through the lens of sports science, considering it a form of national folk sport (Liu and Zhou 2015; Ge Jinrun 2016, 2017; Zhe Shengxing 2018; Li Zhou 2023; Zhou Yumeng 2024; Ge Jinrun et al. 2024). Different forms of *datiao* are practiced in various Naxi communities. In the eastern Mosuo dialect, it is called *jia co* (Chinese: 甲搓), where *jia* signifies beautiful, good, and auspicious, and *co* means to dance—thus, *jia co* translates to "dancing at beautiful and auspicious times." In the western Naxi dialect, it is referred to as *zi co* (Chinese: 姿蹉), where *zi* means singing, and *co* means dancing, collectively meaning "singing and dancing."

mei co (热美蹉), also known as *o sseiq sseiq* (哦热热) is primarily found in Dadong Township in eastern Lijiang (Figure 2.3), Yunnan Province, as well as in Shigu, Fengke, Baoshan, Mingyin, Datu, and Tacheng in the west, extending to Sanba Township in neighboring Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The folk dance performed around Lugu Lake in Yongning County, Lijiang, is known as *al ha bbi li* (Chinese: 阿哈比哩). Additionally, Naxi communities in Diqing have their own distinct folk dances, including *yal ha li* (Chinese: 呀哈哩) in the Baidi area, *yal li li* (Chinese: 呀哩哩) and *al ka bba laq* (Chinese: 阿卡巴拉) in Sanba Township, and *sseiq chi co* (Chinese: 热尺蹉), which is popular in both Sanba and Luoji Townships. Among the Mosuo people in Lugu Lake at the junction of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, the popular dance is *jia co* (Chinese: 甲搓 or 甲蹉). In Sichuan Province, *ji zzoq zol* (Chinese: 金佐措) is considered to be the most representative folk dance among the Naxi people in Eya Township.

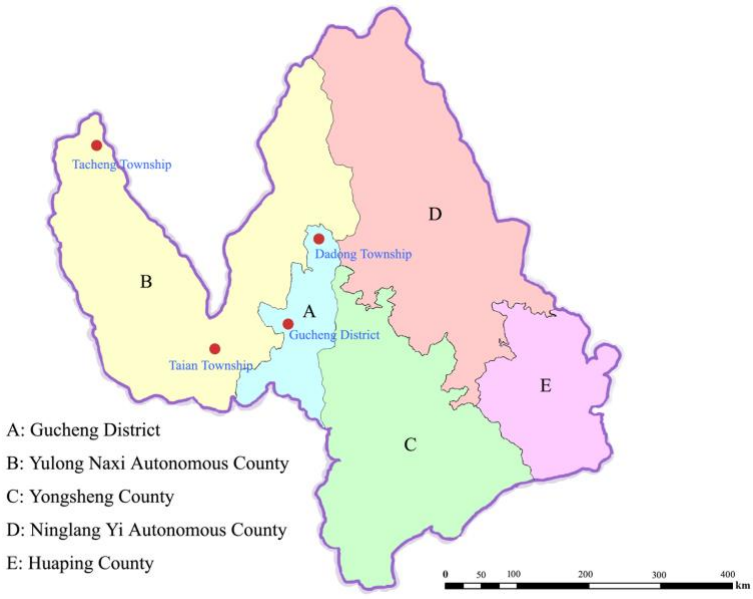


Figure 2.3: Map of Lijiang City, highlighting Dadong Township. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志).

Naxi folk dances often feature vocal or instrumental accompaniment, with vocal accompaniment being more prominent (Li Zhidian and Yang Zenglie 2012). Participants, including men and women of all ages, engage in simultaneous singing and dancing. Typically forming an open circle or semi-circle, they join hands and repeat a simple set of steps while rotating counterclockwise (Figure 2.4). Vocal music in Naxi dances is often characterized by call and response patterns. A male or female lead singer initiates the call, while the other singers respond. This style of musical interaction varies significantly in terms of melodies and regional characteristics, adding to the diverse repertoire of Naxi dance music. The tremendous amount of interethnic influence is very significant in Naxi dances (Rees 2000:59). For example, dances like *sseiq mei co* (*re mei cuo*), *le bbaq* (*le ba wu*, Chinese: 勒巴舞), and *al ka bba laq* popular in Naxi regions of Yunnan Province, exhibit characteristics reminiscent of Tibetan songs and dances (Kou Bangping 1986:72; He Yunfeng 2004:403–413). Across both eastern and western Naxi regions, the *bi liq* (flute) and *ngail* (gourd mouth organ, Chinese: 葫芦笙), are commonly used as accompanying instruments (Li Zhidian and Yang Zenglie 2012). However, in Sanba Township, Diqing, Yunnan Province, the *ngail* is particularly favored.

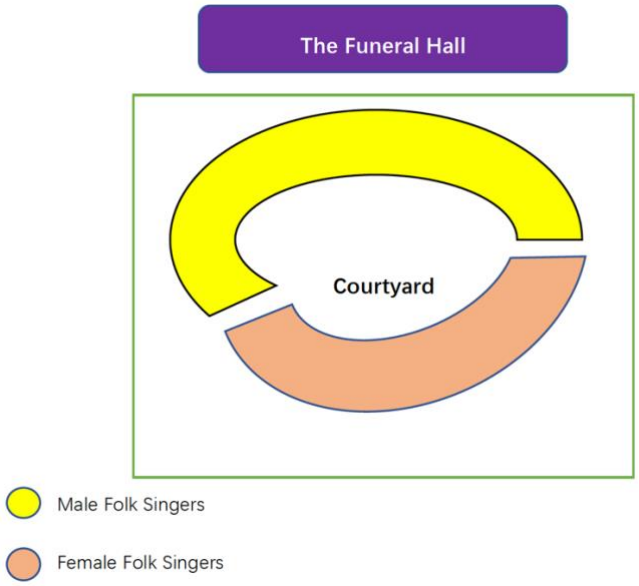


Figure 2.4: Example of the dance formation chart of sseiq mei co, Naxi funeral dance accompanied by vocal music. Fieldwork in Dadong Township, Yulong County, Lijiang City, Yunnan, during Summer 2021.

Additionally, various drums are used in certain dances, such as the *le bbaq* and *dobbaq* sacrificial dances. Instrumentalists, however, often do not join the dance circle directly. Instead, they participate by performing simple dance steps while positioned at the center. For instance, in the *ngail* dance, popular in Sanba Naxi Township of the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, most *ngail* players stand in the center of the dance circle. Occasionally, they take the lead by standing at the front of the dance team, guiding everyone in the dance. Conversely, there are exceptions, such as the *le bbaq* dance, where dancers beat leather drums while dancing. The *le bbaq* dance is popular among the Naxi people living in Tacheng Township of Weixi County within the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, as well as in the neighboring Tacheng Township of Yulong County in Yunnan Province, and in Mangkam County, Tibet. Similarly, in the Naxi *dobbaq* sacrificial dance, *dobbaq* incorporate handheld drums, bells, and other instruments into their movements. (Fieldwork observation)

With the advancement of musical technology and the widespread use of playback devices in rural China, live instrumental accompaniment for many dances—particularly the *dal laq li* or *Naxi co* (纳西打跳) in Lijiang and nearby villages—has become rare. Instead, these performances are often set to pre-recorded melodies featuring strong rhythms and electronic musical instrumentation. Some dances, such as *sseiq mei co* from Dadong Township in Lijiang City and *ji zzoq zol* from Eya Township in Sichuan Province, are performed without any instrumental accompaniment, relying solely on singing and dancing. Naxi group singing, often accompanied by hand-in-hand circle or semi-circle step movements, remains relatively common (e.g., the aforementioned *we muf ddaq*). Owing to its emphasis on lyrical content, this style is frequently categorized as folksong.

As the value attached to traditional culture has increased in the last twenty years, some villages and local primary schools have established folk art troupes specializing in local genres that were once widely popular, such as the Tacheng Township Elementary School *le bbaq* Dance Troupe (塔城乡完小勒巴舞艺术团), the Sanba Naxi Folk *al ka bba laq* Art Troupe (三坝阿卡巴拉民间艺术团), the Dadong Township *Sseiq Mei* Art Troupe (大东热美艺术团), and the Dadong Township *Sseiq Mei Co* Base of Baishui Elementary School (大东白水完小“热美蹉”基地) (Fieldwork observation).

Genres Featuring Musical Instruments

Since the 1980s, scholars have primarily concentrated on the study and arrangement of two Naxi folk genres that include both a vocal component and an instrumental ensemble: the funeral genre

Bbe sheeq xil liq (Refined music from Baisha, Chinese: *Baisha xiyue*, 白沙细乐) mentioned above, and *Dongjing* music (洞经音乐), originally the repertoire accompanying the amateur ritual *Dongjing* associations, also touched upon above (e.g., He Yu 1983; He Qing 1992; He Yunfeng 1993, 1994; Guo Dalie 1994/1999; Rees 2000, 2002; Sun Mingyue 2004; Yang 2014; Kircher 2014; Gao Hua 2022).[20] According to the aforementioned scholars, it is widely accepted that *Bbe sheeq xil liq* represents an "indigenous" (Rees 2000:65) musical form of the Naxi people, whereas *Dongjing* music is believed to have Han Chinese origins and to have most likely been introduced to Lijiang during the Qing Dynasty. In contrast to Naxi vocal music and dances, these two genres, especially *Dongjing* music, captured early attention and generated significant interest from the international community starting in the late 1980s.

Beyond these two well-known genres, there are a few other musical instruments traditionally used among the Naxi, in particular the jew's harp (*gue gueq*), often used historically as a speech surrogate, especially in courtship; the barley-stalk pipe (*we weq*), associated in the Naxi imagination with springtime and courtship; and the tree-leaf (*zzerq piel*), which is used to play folksong and other local melodies (He Yunfeng 1994; Rees 2000: 61–65).

Since 1980, the folk instrumental music groups that have been active in Lijiang, Yunnan Province include:

[20] *Bbe sheeq xil liq* traditionally included a solo singer, transverse and/or endblown flutes , double-reed pipe *bel beq* (Chinese: *bobo* 波伯), and bowed and plucked lutes (Mao Jizeng 1964). *Dongjing* music features a large ensemble of mostly Han Chinese flutes, bowed and plucked lutes, and percussion, although there are also distinctively local instruments included, such as the *bel beq*, four-string plucked lute *shuq ggvdduq* (Chinese: *sugudu*, 速古笃), and the distinctive local variant of the Han Chinese four-string plucked lute *pipa* (琵琶).

- Dayan Naxi Ancient Music Association (大研纳西古乐会), which mainly performs and teaches repertoire such as *Bbe sheeq xil liq* and *Dongjing* music;
- Yulong County Ancient Music Performing Group (玉龙县古乐展演传习组), which mainly performs and teaches repertoire such as *Bbe sheeq xil liq* and *Dongjing* music;
- *Dobbaq* Palace Learning Group (东巴宫传习组), which mainly performs and teaches repertoire such as *dobbaq* singing and dancing, Naxi folksongs, *Bbe sheeq xil liq* and *Dongjing* music;
- Li Family Learning Group (李氏家族传习组) (He Yunfeng 1993:414), which mainly performs and teaches Naxi instrumental music;
- Lijiang Folk Artists Association (丽江市民间艺人协会), which mainly performs and teaches Naxi folksongs and dances, and Naxi instrumental music;
- Lijiang Hongwen・Junyintang Music Ensemble (丽江宏文・钧音堂乐会), founded in 2019 by local cultural heritage inheritors Yang Zenglie, Wang Chaoxin, Niu Shiguang, and He Limin, with funding from Guo Jianxun, which has grown from seven to over twenty members. Dedicated to preserving Lijiang's instrumental music heritage, it hosts annual *Dongjing* ritual ceremonies, including for the birthday of the god Wenchang (文昌帝君), the patron deity of the *Dongjing* associations (2nd lunar month, 3rd day), and the ceremony for *Apu Saddoq* (the tutelary deity of the Naxi) (2nd lunar month, 8th day). Through traditional music and rituals, Junyintang sustains Lijiang's cultural legacy.

Folk artists often participate in multiple groups simultaneously, if their schedules allow. (Interview with Guo Jianxun 郭建勋,[21] February 25, 2024; February 10, 2025)

Sacred Music

Naxi religious beliefs are diverse. The primary religious beliefs among the Naxi include the animist *dobbaq*/*dongba* religion, Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and Taoism (Kou Bangping 1993:13; Guo Dalie 1999 [1994]:200; He Shaoying 2001:93).

The Naxi are well known for the *dobbaq*/*dongba* religion, an indigenous religious practice that is characterized by nature worship and has been influenced by Tibetan Bon practices and Buddhism (Guo Dalie 1999:222; He Shaoying 2001; Yang Fuquan 2005b:156). *Dobbaq* priests play a central role in religious activities, which encompass various aspects of Naxi life, including preserving customs, celebrating festivals, conducting sacrifices, performing exorcisms, and treating illnesses. Many of these rituals involve *dobbaq* chanting and dancing, and the core of their musical repertoire is the tunes to which scriptures are chanted. There are also several percussion instruments, together with a conch shell (*fvl sse*) and yak horn (*bberq ke*), used in the rituals (He Yunfeng 1993; Guo Dalie 1999 [1994]). *Dobbaq* singing and music have had a significant influence on secular Naxi music. In Naxi folk songs, there is a specific theme known in Chinese as *dongba diao* (东巴调, *dobbaq* tune) and a considerable number of lyrics incorporate allusions from *dobbaq* scriptures, proper employment of which serves as an

[21] Guo Jianxun 郭建勋 (b. 1976), Municipal-Level Inheritor of Lijiang *Dongjing* Music and Junyintang (钧音堂) co-founder, shared these observations during fieldwork conducted 2024–2025. Primary sources include interviews and his manuscript.

important criterion for evaluating the proficiency of Naxi folk singers (He Yunfeng 1993; He Wenguang 2002; Tang Tingting 2013). The classification of *dobbaq* music has not been fixed and unified. Some scholars classify it according to the content of scriptures and ritual categories (e.g., Yang Zenglie 1993), while others divide it into instrumental music, vocal music, and dance music (e.g., He Shaoying 2001; He Yunfeng 1993).

While *dobbaq* chant and ritual dances are the most famous of the sacred musics found among the Naxi, and have the greatest influence on Naxi folksong, the other religious practices—in particular Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, and Taoism—also had chant and instrumental music associated with them. Some of the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist practices have been revived since the 1980s (Rees 2000:93–97).

Neo-Folksongs (新民歌)[22]

Following Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) in May 1942, a prolific period ensued where professional literary and art workers produced numerous significant works representing the flourishing socialist ethos of "Yan'an Literature and Art." These works encompassed various art forms such as local operas, neo-folksongs, neo-national operas, novels, reportages, and new woodcuts, all praising the workers, peasants, and soldiers of that era. For example, works recomposed in combination with

[22] Chinese neo-folk songs (新民歌) are a modern folk music genre that emerged after the founding of the People's Republic of China, particularly from the 1950s to the 1980s. While preserving traditional folk elements, it incorporates Western influences and modern composition techniques, often carrying themes that promote socialist ideals. Since the 1990s, the genre has continued to evolve, expanding to include styles that blend traditional ethnic elements with contemporary music, such as the *guofeng*(国风, Chinese national style) trend and folk-pop fusion.

the music styles of ethnic minorities include the neo-Tibetan folksong "Sing a Folk Song for the Party" (唱支山歌个党听); the instrumental ensemble reworking of an Axi folksong from Yunnan, "Axi Dancing under the Moonlight" (阿细跳月);[23] and a neo-Miao folksong of Guizhou, "Miao Mountains Connect to Beijing" (苗岭连北京). Referred to as the "red classics" (红色经典), these literary and artistic works became iconic symbols of Chinese achievements in literature and art during that distinctive time (personal observation as a Chinese citizen).

During the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945), folk and children's songs from inland China spread to Lijiang's Naxi areas, merging with local melodies to create hybrid folk songs, such as *A li li* (Chinese: 阿哩哩), which continues to be performed in various versions across different Naxi regions today. During the Chinese Civil War, the underground Communist Party used folk songs for propaganda, making them a key mobilization tool. Anti-feudal Naxi *da diao* (大调) flourished, alongside new long songs reflecting contemporary themes, such as *Zhuabing diao* (Conscription tune, 抓兵调) and *Yu zhong diao* (Prison tune, 狱中调).[24] Many Naxi short songs from this era shifted from mournful to passionate, heroic styles. The underground Party also nurtured young Naxi singers, leveraging folk music to spread revolutionary messages and engage the masses, such as *Dou li zhen* (Bamboo Hat Battle Formation, 斗笠阵) and *Women shi Jiefangjun* (We are the People's Liberation Army, 我们是解放军) (He Zhonghua and Yang Shiguang 1992:685–687; 704–707). Notable singers like He

[23] The Axi are classified by the Chinese government as a "branch" of the large and very diverse Yi ethnic category, which has since the 1950s subsumed numerous self-identified groups under one umbrella ethnonym (Harrell 1990).
[24] Based on my fieldwork observations, Naxi folksongs of this category usually adopt Chinese-language titles. Performance practices demonstrate hybridity: while some utilize local traditional melodies, others incorporate imported tunes from other regions. The lyrics are sung in a blend of Chinese and Naxi languages.

Shunliang (和顺良, unknown birth and death dates), He Xidian (和锡典, 1906–1989), and He Yaoshu (和耀淑, 1930–2022) emerged during this period (ibid.:707).

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a new era unfolded where the Chinese government exerted firm control over its border areas and displayed a keen interest in documenting, overseeing, and utilizing its citizens' performing arts for propaganda purposes. As a result of various aid and construction policies, a set of songs in the Naxi folk style emerged after 1949, representing a form of neo-Naxi folksongs that reflected the social and historical context of the time. Some Naxi folk songs with impromptu features were rewritten and sung with new Naxi-language words, such as "Follow the Communist Party" (跟随共产党), "Dedicated to Chairman Mao" (献给毛主席), "Sing to Beijing" (唱到北京去), and "Flower of National Unity" (民族团结花).[25] Many such songs were collected after the 1980s and published in Naxi folksong collections, such as *Yunnan Naxi and Pumi Folk Music* (云南纳西族普米族民间音乐) (Lijiang wenjiaoju 1985), *A Collection of Naxi Folksongs* (纳西族民间歌曲集成) (Kou Bangping 1993), and *Annotated Translation of Naxi Folksongs* (纳西民歌译注) (He Zhiwu 1995). Additionally, one should note the significant presence of the Yulong County Folk Song and Dance Troupe in Lijiang (玉龙县民族歌舞团), established in 1965 with government support.[26] Over the years, this troupe has attracted numerous talented folk artists from different villages in Lijiang, many of whom have gone on to pursue professional artistic careers and

[25] The Chinese titles provided in this section reflect the published materials' original nomenclature. The source texts do not include Naxi-language transcriptions of these song titles, nor do they indicate whether the Chinese titles are translations from Naxi or later attributions.

[26] Internal unpublished material provided by He Jinhua (和金花), Naxi folksong singer in the troupe, August 2022.

become accomplished performers, including notable individuals such as He Wenguang (和文光), He Jinhua (和金花), He Huiqiong (和慧琼), He Liyuan (和丽元), and He Guojun (和国军), among others. In 2012, the troupe underwent a name change and became known as the Yulong County Ethnic Culture Work Team (玉龙县民族文化工作队) (Interview with He Guojun, deputy director of the "Work Team," and He Jinhua, July 13, 2024).

In order to meet the needs of the music consumer market, many professional singers mentioned above need to sing either traditional Naxi folk songs or some new Naxi folk songs created in recent times, or even popular songs, according to the needs of the performance. For example, He Jinhua, a national first-class performer who is famous for singing traditional Naxi folk songs, has collaborated with other singers (Jinjia Jinsong [金甲劲松], Dapo Maji [达坡玛吉], Xiao Yuguang [肖煜光], etc.) to sing newly created Naxi pop songs. For another example, Dapo Maji (达坡玛吉), a graduate of the Conservatory of Music at Minzu University of China (中央民族大学), who first began to sing Naxi new folksongs, began to learn traditional folksongs after gradually realizing the important value of traditional folk songs in the process of her career development. In 2008, she and He Jinhua (和金花) formed the "Naxi Sisters" duo singing group and gained recognition by winning the silver award for "authentic folksongs" (原生态民歌) in the 13th CCTV Youth Song Competition of China (第 13 届 CCTV 青年歌手大奖赛) in 2008.[27] The two collaborated to release the albums *Plateau Sisters* (高原姐妹花, 2004) and *Naxi Heavenly Melody* (纳西天籁, 2010).

[27] The neologism "original ecology folksong" refers to a folksong sung in a style that attempts to be "authentic," in the sense that it retains elements of traditional village singing style and dialect, rather than overtly seeking to emulate the bel canto singing style pushed for decades by China's official music conservatories. The craze for

The creation and production of neo-folksongs among the Naxi people, reflecting contemporary life and social changes, has continued into the early 21st century. These songs have progressively incorporated elements of pop music and evolved into Naxi pop music. In my early interviews with Naxi composer He Wenguang (和文光, b.1957), he expressed his enthusiasm for utilizing tunes from the Naxi and neighboring ethnic groups to create new songs that reflect the modern lives of the Naxi people. He took great pride in the fact that these new melodies, imbued with a strong Naxi flavor, have gained popularity among contemporary audiences and younger generations. He mentioned that when his songs were played in the streets, villages, and bars of Lijiang, musicians from other regions often mistook them for traditional Naxi folk songs (Tang Tingting 2013). Examples of his compositions from the early 2000s, such as "Naxi Welcome Song" (纳西迎宾曲) and "Naxi Toast Song" (纳西祝酒歌), are frequently sung by ordinary people during Naxi celebrations and in daily life.[28]

Pop music

In the early 21st century, Naxi popular music began to emerge, spearheaded by notable musicians such as Xiao Yuguang (肖煜光), Li Chenghan (李承翰), He Wenguang (和文光), Jinjia Jinsong (金甲劲松, Chinese name: He Jinsong, 和劲松), and He Ruixin (和瑞新). Younger singers, including Dapo Maji (达坡玛吉, Chinese name: He Qiuxiang, 和秋香)

"original ecology folksongs" began around 2003, quickly becoming a national phenomenon (Rees 2016). Career trajectories of and records of awards for Dapo Maji and He Jinhua were documented through my ethnographic fieldwork observations and interviews conducted between 2006 and 2010.

[28] The album exclusively uses Chinese titles—a practice consistent with He Wenguang's compositional approach and maintained by his family in performance—while the lyrics are rendered bilingually in both Chinese and Naxi.

(daughter of He Wenguang), Dapo Abo (达坡阿波, Chinese name: He Qiushi, 和秋实) (son of He Wenguang), and Jisa Shama (吉萨莎玛, Chinese name: Li Liying, 李丽莹), who received formal music education, have also made their mark. The main feature of Naxi pop music is that it draws heavily on Naxi folk music, folk tunes and vocals in its songs, including singing in the Naxi language, and combines them with Western pop music elements. It has become very popular in recent years for Naxi pop compositions to add a few short phrases of a traditional folksong at the beginning or middle of the song, with the pop singer imitating the traditional folk vocal styles when they sing these short phrases. A good example of this is Jisa Shama's song "My Home" (我的家).[29] Alternatively, the pop artist may invite a folk singer to record the part (as in Jinjia Jingsong's song "Moon Flower" [月亮花]).[30]

Dapo Abo is the only Naxi singer in the Beijing-based China National Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble (中央民族歌舞团) and has released albums such as *Naxi Soul* (纳西魂) (tape) (1999), *Horse Brothers* (赶马兄弟) (2004), and *Naxi Prince* (纳西王子) (2006). Another prominent Naxi singer, Jisa Shama, graduated from Yunnan Normal University with a major in music and dance. She gained widespread recognition in 2019 after competing on *The Voice of China* (中国好声音) on Zhejiang TV. During the competition, she studied traditional Naxi folk singing techniques under He Jinhua and skillfully incorporated folk elements into her

[29] In the opening segment of the song, Jisa Shama skillfully replicates the distinctive vocal style of Naxi folk music. Accessed May 27, 2023, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dxRAtIXqZ8.

[30] In both the opening and middle interlude of the song, renowned Naxi folk singer He Jinhua) was invited to lend her captivating vocals to the recording, delivering several phrases from the traditional Naxi folksong *gguq qil* (谷气).

performance of "Waiting for the Wind" (等风来), earning praise from many Chinese audiences.[31]

Some Naxi popular singers have gained recognition beyond China. On August 1, 2024, the death metal band Juwuxing (俱五形), formed by four native Naxi musicians (Niu Hua [牛骅], Peng Guanglong [彭光龙], Qiao Zhisen [乔治森], and Yang Zhenjiang [杨振江]) in 2014, joined forces with He Jinhua to represent China at the WACKEN 2024 Metal Battle global finals in Germany. Together, they fused Naxi funeral ceremony music with modern death metal, blending traditional folk melodies with contemporary rock to explore the Naxi cultural perspective on death and nature. Competing against bands from thirty countries, they delivered a groundbreaking performance at the Wacken Open Air Festival, securing third place and making history as the first Chinese modern rock band to achieve this honor.

With the success of Lijiang's tourism economy, driven by its rich cultural and natural heritage, the city has become a model for China's tourism industry. This growth has strengthened cultural confidence among local Naxi artists and scholars, positioning them as key figures in preserving and promoting their heritage. Since the late 20th century, there has been a notable revival of Naxi traditional arts, history, religion, and customs in and around Lijiang. While the Lijiang basin remains the economic and cultural center with the largest Naxi population, many Naxi people have begun tracing their ancestral roots, expanding their focus beyond Lijiang to explore connections with Naxi subgroups in surrounding regions such as Diqing and Sichuan.

[31] Jisa Shama's performance of "Waiting for the Wind" (等风来) adapts the Mandarin pop original by incorporating a prelude derived from traditional Naxi folk melodies, as taught by He Jinhua.

Increased engagement through scientific research, government initiatives, and non-profit activities has fostered deeper cultural exchanges between the Naxi people of Lijiang and their counterparts in these areas. Prominent scholars, officials, and artists from Lijiang are frequently invited to other Naxi-inhabited regions, while Naxi representatives from these areas also visit Lijiang to learn from the so-called "Lijiang model" of cultural and economic development.

Among the many forms of Naxi performing arts, the one that most vividly reflects contemporary cultural exchange and spreads the fastest is new Naxi folk songs and Naxi pop music. Celebrated folk musicians from Lijiang, such as He Wenguang, Dapo Maji, and Jinjia Jinsong, along with Naxi pop artists like Xiao Yuguang and Jisa Shama, have gained widespread popularity in other Naxi communities, including those in Diqing and Sichuan. They are frequently invited to perform at local events or compose theme songs for regional celebrations. A notable exception is Naxi composer Li Chenghan (李承翰), who was born and raised in Diqing but has become one of the most prominent figures in Lijiang's new folk music scene. Intra-ethnic connections in relation to other Naxi performing arts are often constrained by factors such as festivals, cultural context, customs, and language. In recent years, such exchanges have remained relatively limited. Even government-supported ICH exhibitions are frequently influenced by administrative boundaries, restricting broader cultural interaction.

CHAPTER THREE

DOCUMENTING AND SAFEGUARDING CHINA'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Even compared with the efforts of its neighbors Japan and South Korea, whose influential invention and promotion of the modern concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) date back to the mid-20th century,[32] China's much newer ICH policies are unprecedentedly ambitious, uniquely wide-ranging, highly bureaucratized, and powerfully driven by the central government. To gauge their impact on Naxi folksong and the responses of Naxi culture-bearers, it is essential to understand the background to today's situation. This chapter first introduces China's long history of documenting its cultural heritage, then elucidates the influence of UNESCO-style ICH on the country after the year 2000, when China's current ICH movement began to take off. It next addresses the sinicization of ICH policy, and the bureaucracy of ICH in China. Finally, bringing the chapter back to the Naxi, the last section focuses on Yunnan Province as a case-study of localized ICH policy, and on the ascent of a Naxi folksong genre (nursery rhymes) through the four levels of the ICH bureaucracy to reach national-level ICH status.

[32] Japan passed its pioneering Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties in 1950, and South Korea its similar Cultural Properties Preservation Law in 1962; these were the first such laws anywhere and have proved influential both in other countries and in UNESCO's approach to ICH (Howard 2012:12–13). There is a considerable body of scholarship on the resulting ICH policies and practices in Japan and South Korea themselves. English-language examples include Arisawa 2012 on Japan and Howard 2006 on Korea.

China's Documentation of Its Cultural Heritage

Documentation records human civilization and culture, acting as a tunnel through which humanity traverses time and history. The invention of writing enabled humans to document knowledge using specific symbolic systems on tangible mediums, giving rise to written records. The emergence of documented records extended knowledge transmission beyond oral traditions, allowing for memory, storage, and dissemination through physical carriers. The use of writing and documentation has traditionally divided human history into two phases: prehistory and recorded history—where history is verifiable through written records. China's documentation of its cultural heritage can also be divided into two major periods: the pre-literate era and the period following the advent of writing. Within the latter, four key stages define China's literary documentation of its cultural heritage: historical methods of documentation, Western-influenced ethnographic narratives from the 1920s to 1949, politically influenced narratives after 1949, and modern technology and digitization in the era of ICH.

Historical Methods of Documentation

Before writing systems emerged, human societies recorded life and expressed ideas through paintings, carved symbols, and oral traditions. For example, the Cangyuan rock paintings in Yunnan of the Late Neolithic through Bronze Age (approximately 3000–500 BC) depict scenes of dancing, hunting, and rituals (Yang Dejun 1998:4), while the Tibetan epic *King Gesar* has been orally transmitted for generations (Zhang Xinyi and Ding Li 1997b:44). Most Chinese scholars believe that the earliest systematic form of Chinese writing can be traced back to the

oracle bone inscriptions of the late Shang Dynasty (14th–11th century BC). These inscriptions represent China's earliest structured historical records and were used to document political, military, agricultural, and ritual activities of the Shang period (He Cheng 2011:403). However, the development of ancient Chinese tribes and cultures followed distinct trajectories, making the invention and use of writing more complex.

In the 1940s, Chinese scholar Xu Xusheng (徐旭生) categorized ancient Chinese tribes into three major groups: Huaxia (华夏), Dongyi (东夷), and Miaoman (苗蛮), noting that these were the primary ancestral sources of the Chinese people during the Qin and Han dynasties (Xu Xusheng 2003:61). By the second millennium BC, the Huaxia and Dongyi in the Central Plains had developed advanced civilizations, leading to the establishment of the Xia and Shang dynasties. Their interactions and trade contributed to the formation of a standardized writing system. By contrast, southern cultural regions developed differently. While some formed cultural centers, they lacked large-scale political entities and had limited contact with dominant northern cultures. The Central Plains script was not widely adopted in the South until the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC) (He Cheng 2011:86–92). As a result, later studies on the indigenous cultures of southern China often rely on historical records from the Central Plains civilization, preserved in national historical and geographical documents written in Chinese characters.

The recorded history of the Chinese nation with an exact chronology began in the first year of the Gonghe Regency of the Western Zhou Dynasty, around 841 BC, with *The Book of Changes* (周易), *The Book of Documents* (尚书), and *The Book of Songs* (诗经) serving as the

foundational works of Chinese historiography. Around the 5th century BC (late Spring and Autumn period), Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋), one of the most important historical texts of ancient China. Written in a concise style, it expressed judgments on historical events, reflecting Confucian political and moral ideals. This tradition of annalistic and biographical historiography continued through successive dynasties until the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods. During the Qianlong reign of the Qing dynasty (r.1735–1796), the emperor commissioned the compilation of the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (四库全书), which included the officially designated *Twenty-Four Histories* (二十四史). Later, in 1921, the Beiyang warlord government added the *History of the Qing and Yuan Dynasties* (清元史), and in 1928 the Republic of China completed the *Draft History of the Qing Dynasty* (清史稿), expanding the official historical canon to the *Twenty-Six Histories* (二十六史) (Zhang Xinyi and Ding Li 1997a:40–42). More importantly, beyond the imperially commissioned official histories, numerous other historical records document the social history and cultural life of various dynasties and regions in China. Notably, historical texts such as the *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记, late 2nd–early 1st century BC) from the Eastern Han period, the *Chronicles of Huayang* (华阳国志) by Chang Qu (常璩, c.291–c.361) from the Eastern Jin, and the *Records of the Man People* (蛮书) by Fan Chuo (樊绰, 9th century) from the Tang dynasty also documented the history and geography of China's ethnic minorities (Zhang Xinyi and Ding Li 1997b:41–42).

Among the ethnic minorities with their own writing systems, some compiled historical and geographical records in their native scripts, such as the Tibetans (formerly known to the Chinese

as the Tubo), Bai, Khitan, Manchu peoples and Naxi. Although for various reasons very few of these historical texts have survived to the present day, a handful are still extant.[33] In addition to written records, many ethnic groups in China have preserved and transmitted their history and culture through oral traditions, including epic literature and folk songs. In other words, oral traditions hold significant value in the study of the history and cultural heritage of China's ethnic minorities.

In summary, since the advent of written records in China, the documentation of its cultural heritages has generally followed four main threads: first, documentation by the dominant Chinese ethnic group of its own culture; second, its documentation of the cultures of surrounding regions and states; third, observations and expressions of self-identity by settlers from the Central Plains as they have migrated to new areas; and fourth, accounts by ethnic groups regarded as outsiders by the dominant Chinese ethnic group, documenting their own history and culture (Dou Xiaochen 2018:15).

[33] For instance, several ancient Tibetan historical documents from the Tibetan Empire period, such as the རྒྱལ་པོའི་མཆན་ཟོར། (*Old Tibetan Annals*, known in Chinese as 吐蕃大事纪年), were discovered in the Dunhuang Library Cave (敦煌藏经洞) in the 9th century. The original manuscripts are now held separately by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Pelliot tibétain collection) and the British Library (IOL Tib series). Digitized versions of some manuscripts can be accessed via the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) database: https://idp.bl.uk/collection/?term=Tibetan+manuscripts (accessed June 3, 2025). The *dobbaq* scriptures, written in the Naxi pictographic script, serve as a vital medium for the Naxi people to record their history and culture. For instance, *chong ban tu* (The Creation Epic, 创世纪) documents the migration history of the Naxi ancestors from the northwestern plateau to the Lijiang region (Zhang Xiaochong 2013), while *ddo bbaq shul gge* (The War Between Black and White, 黑白战争) records the historical conflicts between the Naxi people and neighboring ethnic groups (Chen Lie 1998).

Historical Documentation of Performing Arts

The performing arts appear quite frequently in pre-modern documentation. Extensive archaeological and iconographic evidence has provided rich information on musical instruments and contexts of performance for music and dance from the last three millennia.[34] The most famous such source of information for musical and dance-related interactions between mainstream Chinese cultures and those of other ethnic groups both near and far is the iconography of the Dunhuang caves in what is now Gansu Province, northwest China, whose hundreds of wall paintings, mostly completed between the fourth and fourteenth centuries, offer uniquely detailed pictures of music and dance from China and Central Asia. The depictions provide evidence for the migration of many musical instruments and genres from the latter into the former.[35] Discovered in Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County, Lincheng City, Yunnan Province, the Cangyuan Rock Paintings (dated between 3800–2700 years ago) rank among the oldest rock art complexes ever found in China and are recognized as a significant historical heritage of both ethnic minority culture and ancient social life in Yunnan. A notable section of these paintings depicts a group of people dancing hand-in-hand in a circular formation, which scholars interpret as a ritual dance of the early Wa ancestors (Yang Baokang 2002:70).

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[34] Among the immense amount of scholarship on this topic, see, for example, *An Illustrated History of Chinese Music* (中国音乐史图鉴) (1988), which notes that the carved musician figures in Cave 290 of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes depict instruments imported from Central Asia, Western Asia, and present-day Xinjiang region, including the five-stringed *pipa* and *yizui* flute (73). Besides, Lothar von Falkenhausen, in *Suspended Music: Chime-Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China* (1993), provides a comprehensive analysis of the origins, acoustical properties, ritual functions, and evolutionary development of Chinese *bianzhong* (编钟) chime-bells during the Shang and Zhou dynasties.

[35] See, for example, the music and dance volumes (nos.16 and 17) of the compendium *The Complete Collection of Dunhuang Caves* (敦煌石窟全集) (2001), e.g., Cave 138's "Musical Dance Under Trees" (树下乐舞) mural depicting ethnic musicians from the Hexi Corridor playing *konghou* (harp, 箜篌) and *quxiang pipa* (pear-shaped lute, 曲项琵琶) (2001, vol.16:159).

Textual sources are also abundant. For instance, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Confucian classics such as the *Book of Music* (乐记) documented Confucius's philosophy of music. Later official histories, including the *History of Song* (宋史) and *Book of Sui* (隋书), also preserved records of traditional musical practices. The Tang dynasty marked a pivotal era for ancient Chinese music, particularly in the development of folk narrative singing (说唱) and early opera, and in the adoption of musical instruments and genres into court and common life. This period produced specialized musical treatises like the *Essentials of Music* (乐书要录, 700AD), which systematically theorized musical traditions (Kong Peipei 2002:40–41). Musical notations, some dating back over 1,500 years, have become ever more abundant in the last millennium, providing a wealth of historical information (Sun Zhihong 2001). The presence of all these textual as well as archaeological and iconographic sources allowed renowned Chinese musicologist Yang Yinliu (杨荫柳, 1899–1984) to pioneer the systematic study of Chinese music history (e.g., Yang Yinliu 1981), and has inspired dozens of later scholars to follow suit.

With regard to musical activities in the southwestern border regions that are the focus of this dissertation, numerous scattered Chinese-language sources from the last few centuries provide snippets of information—for example, travel writings, temple inscriptions, poems by local literati, and county gazetteers (Rees 2000:41, 54, 65, 224n12).

Western-Influenced Ethnographic Narratives from the 1920s to 1949

Modern China has continuously absorbed and adapted Western science, culture, and institutions in different ways at different stages. From the arrival of missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties to the comprehensive adoption of Western ideas during the Republican era, China's encounter with Western philosophy, sociology, and anthropology—disciplines that emphasize ethnicity and people—ushered in a dynamic period for traditional folk culture and grassroots movements. In the early 1920s, alongside the promotion of anthropological research, the Chinese Folk Song Movement (中国歌谣学运动), initiated by Peking University professors to collect songs from the lower classes, gained academic attention. Its surveys extended to southwestern regions such as Sichuan and Yunnan. From the establishment of the Republican government in 1928 until 1949, this period marked a significant phase of development and flourishing of anthropological ethnography in China (Wang Lu 2017:78–80).

During the late Qing and early Republican era, Chinese scholars who either studied abroad or were strongly influenced by Western ethnographic methods began conducting ethnological research. For example, Ding Wenjiang (丁文江), trained in zoology and geology in the UK, surveyed ethnic minorities in Yunnan and Sichuan in 1928, including physical anthropological measurements. In 1934, the Institute of History and Philology (IHP) of Academia Sinica dispatched linguist Ling Chunsheng (凌纯声) to investigate ethnic communities along the disputed Yunnan–Burma border. Earlier, IHP assistant Li Guangming (黎光明) documented Sichuanese folk customs. Other scholars like Hu Jianmin (胡鉴民) and Ma Changshou (马长寿) conducted anthropological fieldwork in southwest China before 1937. The renowned Chinese

anthropologists Wu Wenzao (吴文藻) and Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) began their ethnographic fieldwork in Yunnan after 1938, when they relocated to southwest China with leading universities (e.g., Tsinghua, Peking, and Nankai) (Wang Jianmin 2007:4–5).

During the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945), political turmoil led to the relocation of numerous scholars and educational institutions to Sichuan and Yunnan. During this period, scholars conducted extensive fieldwork and research on the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities in southwest China, focusing on ethnology, sociology, history, and anthropology. Their work resulted in a wealth of significant ethnographies and publications (Wang Jianmin 2007:3–8)

In addition to Ding Wenjiang, several more Chinese scholars of this era had studied overseas. Wu Zelin (1898–1990), for example, studied under renowned anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University and earned his PhD in 1927. After 1935, he lived and conducted extensive field research in Guizhou and Yunnan, producing numerous books and papers (Wu Zelin 1991), including *Studies on the Society of the Miao and Yi in Guizhou* (2004) (贵州苗夷社会研究). Fei Xiaotong (费孝通, 1910–2005) earned his PhD at the London School of Economics. During 1938–1946, while relocated to Kunming with Yunnan University amid the Anti-Japanese War, he conducted fieldwork in ethnic minority regions of Dali, Chuxiong, and Honghe, culminating in his co-authored work *Earthbound China: Peasant Life in Yunnan* (云南三村 2021 [1945]) with Zhang Zhiyi (张之毅). Francis L. K. Hsu (许烺光, 1909–1999), another anthropology PhD graduate of the London School of Economics, was invited by Fei Xiaotong to join the Department of Sociology at Yunnan University over 1941–1943. During this period, he

conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Xizhou Town (喜洲镇), a Bai ethnic community in Dali, Yunnan, studying the kinship structures and religious practices of Bai families. This research culminated in his seminal work *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in China* (1971 [1948]). The emergence of ethnography and participatory fieldwork methods promoted by these scholars, many of whom had overseas study backgrounds, brought new ways of recording and narrating China's cultural heritage introduced from the West, complementing the longstanding Chinese tradition of writing historical texts (Wang Lu 2017:70–71).

Other renowned Chinese scholars also made substantial contributions: Ling Chunsheng (林纯声, 1901–1978) and Rui Yifu (芮逸夫, 1899–1991) conducted detailed investigations into the social structure, religious beliefs, and customs of the Miao people in western Hunan, culminating in the *Report on an Investigation into the Miao People of Western Hunan* (1947, 2003) (湘西苗族调查报告). In this report, they made a point of including local "dances, stories and ballads" in their ethnography (2003:150–325).

Overall, the ethnographic investigations of southwestern China during the wartime period can be categorized into four types. The first type consisted of surveys conducted by professional academic research institutions (e.g., in February 1939, Great China University [大夏大学] organized the Southwestern Borderlands Expedition Team [西南边区考察团]). The second involved expeditions organized by the government and relevant social organizations (e.g., in summer 1940, the Sichuan Provincial Government dispatched the Sichuan Borderlands Education Mission [四川边区施] to survey Yi society, including customs, historical sites, and

local economies). The third comprised individual investigations, including scholars and certain officials who were either specially dispatched or conducted research alongside their political careers (e.g., Liang Oudi [梁瓯第] and Mao Junru [毛筠如]). The fourth type included surveys organized by universities and related institutions, which sent students for fieldwork during summer breaks (e.g., in 1941, the Ministry of Education launched the first University Student Summer Border Service Corps [大学生暑期边疆服务团], with ten faculty and 47 students from Jinling University, Yunnan University, Wuhan University, and Sichuan University) (Yang Zhicheng 2003:90; Wang Jianming 2007:3–11). During this period, different institutions and individuals produced ethnographic texts with diverse styles and approaches. Many researchers also collected extensive materials on minority religions, ancient poetry, mythology, and other classical texts, leading to the establishment of anthropological museums and cultural heritage collections across the southwest. For example, in 1932, West China Union University established the longest-standing anthropological museum in southwest China; this was followed by the creation of the Miao-Yi (Hmong and Yi Ethnic Groups) Cultural Artifacts Exhibition Hall in Guiyang in 1941. Some also paid at least passing attention to the music and dance they encountered—for example, Francis L. K. Hsu's description of ritual *Dongjing* music among the Bai/Minkia of Xizhou (Hsu 1943).

In addition to Chinese-led investigations, some foreign scholars also conducted research in southwestern China. Notably, Austrian-American botanist, geographer, explorer, and anthropologist Joseph Rock (1884–1962) spent an extended period in Lijiang, Yunnan, conducting in-depth studies on the life, culture, and religion of the Naxi people. His

contributions include the collection of 7,118 volumes of *dobbaq* scriptures (Jackson 1965:169), translations of Naxi manuscripts, and the systematic study of Naxi texts (Sutton 1974:215). Rock's scholarly output spanned from 1924 to 1972, beginning with his *National Geographic* article "Banishing the Devil of Disease Among the Nashi" (1924), and culminating in his encyclopedic two-part *Na-khi–English Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Part I, 1963; Part II, 1972). Following the political changes in 1949, foreign residents in Lijiang—including Joseph Rock, Peter Goullart (a Russian working for the Chinese government), and various Christian missionaries—were compelled to depart. The region subsequently remained closed to foreign visitors until China's reopening in the 1980s (Rees 2000:147). In addition to his extensive in-depth studies of Naxi religious manuscripts, Joseph Rock also sporadically recorded Naxi musical activities during his residence in Lijiang—though, as Rees (2000:38) points out, he never systematically researched them. He remarked on youths' improvisational singing and described the call-and-response traditions among boys traveling through the countryside (Rock 1939:21). His contemporary Peter Goullart, while in no way a scholar, has left us a remarkable account of his seven years in Lijiang, with in-depth descriptions of Naxi life and culture, including several of Naxi ritual music and folk dances (Goullart 1957). One might term Goullart an "incidental ethnographer" (Michaud 2007).

Politically Influenced Narratives after 1949

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prioritized resolving ethnic disputes, consolidating national unity, and strengthening

interethnic cohesion as key objectives of its early nation-building policies (Jin Binghao 2009:1–2). To gain a comprehensive understanding of ethnic minorities and their regions and to provide a reference for government policymaking, the CCP and the government launched a large-scale investigation from 1950 to 1955. This initiative, known as the "Ethnic Identification/Classification" policy, aimed to study the social history, languages, and ethnic identities of various minority groups (Lin Yaohua 1981:48; Mullaney 2011:20).

Subsequently, in 1956, the CCP introduced the political directive of "Salvaging the Backward" (抢救落后), initiating a more in-depth investigation into the social history of ethnic minorities.[36] This effort led to the compilation of numerous brief histories and records of different ethnic groups and the publication of the Five Series on Ethnic Issues (民族问题五种丛书). These two unprecedented, state-sponsored projects drew on Marxist ethnological theories and the Soviet model of ethnic classification based on social-historical formations (Lin Yaohua 1997:118, 146–147). They systematically categorized China's ethnic minorities based on their social structures, political organization, economic conditions, and cultural characteristics (Jin Binhao 2009:5). The findings of these investigations not only served as a foundation for the CCP's subsequent ethnic policies and governance strategies but also became significant documentary sources for later efforts in tracing and preserving ethnic cultural heritage.[37]

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[36] The 1956 ethnic minority social history survey involved a wide range of institutions, disciplines, and scholars, including the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Culture, the Central Institute for Nationalities (renamed Minzu University of China in 1993), Renmin University of China, Peking University, the Preparatory Office of the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts, and the Institute of Ethnic Music at the Central Conservatory of Music, among others (Lin Yaohua 1997:146–147).

[37] China's ethnic classification project, initiated in the 1950s, was "an attempt to apply the basic principles of Marxism to the Chinese context, and also an important practical effort to define ethnicity and develop Chinese ethnological theory" (Zhang and Yao 2017:155). However, the project has left many regrets and has become the

Many musicians, film makers, ethnologists, and anthropologists involved in these projects also employed visual and audio documentation methods, capturing and preserving valuable film footage. Beginning in 1958, 21 scientific documentary films on ethnic minorities, comprising 121 reels, were produced (Lin Yaohua 1997:182; Xiang Li 2006:44; Dou Xiaochen 2018:9), marking one of China's earliest film records of its own cultural heritage. A professional team led by filmmaker Yang Guanghai (杨光海) at the Institute of Ethnic Studies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (中国科学院民族研究所)—established in 1956 and renamed the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院民族学与人类学研究所) in 2002—included photographers, sound engineers, and ethnology experts. Between the 1960s and 1980s, they produced numerous ethnographic films documenting the cultures, daily life, and social transformations of various ethnic groups, including the Derung (1960), Wa (1962), Kucong (1963), Oroqen (1964), Li (1965), Miao (1970s), and Tibetans (1980s) (Dou Xiaochen 2018:9).

In terms of musicological research, a key development after 1949 was the official establishment in 1954 of the Chinese Music Research Institute (中国音乐研究所). By 2018, the institute had collected nearly 7,000 hours of audio recordings of traditional artists, both Han Chinese and ethnic minority (Dou Xiaochen 2018:9). Following the spirit of Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) which promoted the

subject of much scholarly reflection. For example: the wholesale adoption of Soviet ethnic policy and the resulting conceptual confusion between 民族 (nationality) and 族群 (ethnic community or group) (Ma Rong 2011:19); the neglect of grassroots voices and problematic selection of reference frameworks (Zhang and Yao 2017:156); and the failure to adequately reflect real-world complexity and diversity, such as the contested scientific validity of ethnic classifications in Yunnan Province (Mullaney 2011:15, 128–132).

study of minority literature and art, the collection and recording of minority music were also carried out during this period. Over 1950–1951, as part of the "Investigations of the Social History of Ethnic Minorities" (少数民族社会历史调查), the national government organized four special visiting missions (专项考察团) for ethnic minorities according to different geographical regions: the Southwest visiting group, Northwest visiting group, South-central visiting group, and Northeast visiting group of Inner Mongolia. The Southwest visiting group, consisting of more than 120 people, departed from Beijing on July 2, 1950, and traveled to Xikang, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and other areas inhabited by ethnic minorities (Wei Zhilong 2011:16–17). The members of the visiting groups included government officials, teachers, researchers, musicians, dancers, etc.

A number of important musicological publications resulted from the southwestern project. Over 1950–1951, the prominent musician and scholar Tian Liantao (田联韬) participated in the investigation of the Guizhou branch of the Southwest visiting mission (西南贵州组参观访问团) and published many articles on Miao music in 1952 (Xiao Mei 2007:141–142). In addition, musician Niu Chang (牛畅) and others compiled the landmark *Miao, Yi and Ge Musical Instruments of Guizhou* (贵州苗、彝、革族各种乐器曲谱) (1952) (Xiao Mei 2007:143).[38]

More early research by Chinese musicologists and ethnomusicologists on ethnic minority music was initiated alongside the nationwide ethnic minority social history surveys conducted after 1956, which primarily focused on historical, economic, folkloric, and ethnological

[38] For the context on how these studies fitted into the newly energized musicological enterprise of the 1950s and 1960s, which took in both Han Chinese and minority subject-matter, see the exhaustive account by Xiao Mei (2007).

investigations. At that time, three researchers from the Central Music Research Institute—He Yun (何芸), Jian Qihua (简其华), and Zhang Shuzhen (张淑珍)—were planning to collect Miao music in Guizhou. They were invited by ethnologist Wu Zelin, who was then leading the social history survey team in Guizhou, to participate in the Miao survey with a specific focus on music. In 1957, they conducted fieldwork on the music of the Miao people in southeastern Guizhou and subsequently compiled two works: *Miao Folk Songs* (苗族民歌) and *Miao Mouth Organs* (苗族芦笙), published in 1959 by the Beijing-based Music Press (音乐出版社). These works represented the first systematic, scientifically conducted collection and study of ethnic minority music in Chinese ethnomusicology, employing International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription (Xiao Mei 2007:214–216).

In 1958, China's ethnic minority social history survey entered a larger-scale second phase, with music researchers assigned to all sixteen newly established ethnic investigation teams. Among the representative ethnomusicological achievements in southwest China employing anthropological participant observation and fieldwork methods was the 1958–1959 study by Fang Jishen (方暨申) of Dong ethnic music in southeastern Guizhou, particularly their "road-blocking songs" (拦路歌). Fang Jishen's research and documentation on Dong folk songs were later upheld by Chinese conservatories as exemplary fieldwork reports (Xiao Mei 2007:217–218).

The key findings from this phase were compiled in 1962 by the Cultural Ministry's Ethnic Culture Work Guidance Committee as an internal reference publication titled *Compilation of 1958 Ethnic Minority Arts Survey* Materials (1958 年少数民族文艺调查资料汇编). This report

represented the most extensive nationwide collection of ethnic minority music to date, covering groups including the Mongol, Daur, Evenki, Korean, Uyghur, Kazakh, Xibe, Tu, Tibetan, Yi, Dai, Hani, Jingpo, Naxi, Miao, Bouyei, Zhuang, Yao, She, and others (Xiao Mei 2007:222–223).

Owing to the national emphasis and institutional support for ethnic cultures and music during the 1950s, many Chinese musicians and ethnomusicologists were able to conduct comprehensive fieldwork on traditional folk music across China, with particular focus on ethnic minority musical traditions. These systematic investigations produced detailed research reports that became foundational archival materials for subsequent studies of Chinese folk music. Notable examples include works by Yunnan-based institutions and researchers such as *Field Recordings of Folk Music in Yunnan Province* (Jian Qihua and Mao Jizeng 1962), *Love Songs and Dances of the Yi (Suni People) in Daxinzhai* (*Daxinzhai yizu [suniren] qingge gewu* 1965), and *Instrumental Music of the Hani Ethnic Group* (*Hanizu minjian yuequ* 1965), as well as publications by Beijing-based organizations and scholars including *Baisha Xiyue* (白沙细乐) (Mao Zijeng 1964) and *Catalog of Chinese Music Audio Collections Held by the Music Research Institute: Audio Tape Section* (Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan yinyue yanjiusuo ziliaoshi 1994).

At the same time, between 1950 and 1963, the Chinese government issued a series of policies on cultural relic protection and archaeological excavation, emphasizing the documentation and preservation of material cultural heritage (Xiao Bo 2020:17–19). After 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage came to a standstill, with many aspects of traditional culture and heritage suffering severe destruction.

Cultural Heritage Documentation from the Late 1970s to the Late 1990s

After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976), China's cultural heritage protection efforts gradually resumed, with tangible heritage milestones including the second nationwide cultural relics survey in 1981, the promulgation of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics in 1982 (Xiao Bao 2020:19), and China's 1985 accession to the World Heritage Convention, while intangible cultural heritage protection was revived through the 1979 folk arts collection initiative followed by nationwide surveys, publications, and academic symposiums.

For instance, in 1979, the government launched a large-scale survey and the Compilation Project of Integrated Records of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Literature and Art (中国民族民间文艺集成志书编纂工程), mobilizing over 50,000 scholars, artists, and folk performers.[39] Just two years later, in 1981, the government initiated a major project to compile collections of Chinese folktales, ballads, and proverbs, the Three Anthologies of Folk Literature (民间文学三套集成) (Dou Xiaochen 2018:9). On August 5 and 6, 1994, the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts (中国艺术研究院音乐研究所) and the editorial department of *People's Music* (人民音乐), the most influential such magazine aimed at a general audience,

[39] The Compilation Project of Integrated Records of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Literature and Art was first initiated in 1979 by the Ministry of Culture, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the China Federation of Arts and Culture, and other institutions. The project primarily focused on research and compilation throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with most volumes completed by 2000 and the full collection published in 2009. It comprises ten thematic collections: *Anthology of Chinese Folk Stories* (中国民间故事集成), *Anthology of Chinese Ballads* (中国歌谣集成), *Anthology of Chinese Proverbs* (中国谚语集成), *Anthology of Chinese Opera Music* (中国戏曲音乐集成), *Anthology of Chinese Narrative Song* (中国曲艺音乐集成), *Anthology of Chinese Folk Dance* (中国民间舞蹈集成), *Anthology of Chinese Folk Instrumental Music* (中国民间器乐曲集成), *Chinese Opera Chronicle* (中国戏曲志), *Chinese Folk Art Chronicle* (中国曲艺志), and *Anthology of Chinese Folk Art* (中国民间美术集成). Each of these ten thematic collections consists of many volumes subdivided by province or provincial-level administrative unit. This project is regarded as the massive "folk music collecting" movement at the end of the 20th century (Feng Guangyu 1999:26). It represents the largest national survey and compilation effort of folk literature and art in Chinese history.

jointly organized an academic symposium in Beijing titled “Promoting National Music: Recording, Preserving, and Protecting National Music Heritage” (弘扬民族音乐：记录、保存与保护民族音乐遗产). During the symposium, participants emphasized that “in addition to strengthening legal measures, it is essential to prioritize the collection and recording of traditional music, re-evaluate the value of national music culture, and protect the intellectual property rights of recorded works” (Zhong En 1994:39).

The mid-1990s also saw a novel and especially ambitious project take shape. Since the late 1980s, the concept of the “ecomuseum” and related projects abroad had attracted increasing attention from Chinese scholars, emerging as a potential approach for safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage.[40] In 1995, China and Norway jointly designed and established the country’s first eco-museum, the Suoga Ecomuseum, in Guizhou Province. This was officially opened in 1998 in Suoga Township, Liuzhi Special Zone, Guizhou Province (An Laishun 1995; Wang Jing and Zhou Li 2012:27). However, despite the initial intent to protect and transmit cultural heritage through this model, most ecomuseums later established across China ultimately failed, leading to criticism and reflection among scholars (e.g., Liu Zongbi 2017; Yin and Nitzky 2022).

The 1990s were an especially fertile time for thinking about intangible cultural heritage. International concepts of ICH protection began to influence not only governmental and academic

[40] Several foundational works on the ecomuseum concept by Western scholars have been translated into Chinese, including theoretical frameworks by Georges Henri Rivière (1986) and Hugues de Varine (1986). Additionally, case studies of international ecomuseum practices have been rendered into Chinese, such as those by French museologist François Hubert (1986), Canadian heritage specialist René Rivard (1987), and American anthropologist Nancy Fuller (1993).

spheres but also independent and grassroots cultural actors. One prominent figure was musician Tian Feng (田丰), who in 1993 founded the Yunnan Ethnic Culture Training Center (云南民族文化传习馆)—one of China's earliest non-government-funded initiatives for preserving folk arts. After 1995, a wave of ethnic folk art troupes, primarily composed of rural farmers, emerged across Yunnan, contributing further to the preservation and revitalization of traditional arts (Zeng Chun 1995:78).

UNESCO-style ICH and Its Impact on China After 2000

Today, the term "intangible cultural heritage" (非物质文化遗产) is ubiquitous in China. However, it was largely absent from Chinese discourse before the first years of the 21st century. It was not until around 2001, when China submitted its nomination for the first round of UNESCO's marquee program "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," that the concept began to gain wider recognition. That year, a series of initiatives organized by government agencies, academic institutions, and social organizations supported the nomination process for *Kunqu* (昆曲) opera, the elegant classical theatrical genre that was China's nominee for the UNESCO honor, drawing significant media attention (Wang Wenzhang 2006:21).[41]

[41] According to UNESCO itself, the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity program was established in response to growing concerns over the increasing vulnerability of living cultural traditions. These practices were noted as holding universal value as unique testimonies to human creativity and cultural diversity, while facing marginalization due to shifting sociocultural landscapes—particularly globalization and modernization (Gopalakrishnan 2016:1). As stipulated by UNESCO guidelines, "Member States may submit one candidature file every two years" for consideration. For complete program details and submission criteria, see the official UNESCO website: https://ich.unesco.org/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-of-the-oral-and-intangible-heritage-of-humanity-00103?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed June 20, 2025.

Following these efforts, and the success of the project to have *Kunqu* inscribed on this prestigious international list, ICH—a term previously regarded as abstract, obscure, and primarily academic—gradually gained public recognition in China. Chinese scholars also began tracing and interpreting the origins of the concept (Zhu Chengru 2002; Yang Yi 2003; Wang Wenzhang 2006:3–12; Liu Xicheng 2006; Gao Bingzhong 2007; Bamo Qubumo 2008; Wu Bing'an 2009; Yuan Li and Gu Jun 2009:7–11; Xuan Bingshan 2014), comparing it with long-standing Chinese terms such as *chuantong wenhua* (traditional culture, 传统文化) and *minjian wenhua* (folk culture, 民间文化) (Xiang Yunju 2004:69). China's adoption of the ICH concept at this time reflected its growing engagement with global discourse on cultural heritage preservation and values of traditional culture.[42]

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Initiatives and Practices

Since its inception in 1945, UNESCO has played a significant role in bringing attention to various dimensions of heritage through its conventions (UNESCO 1954; 1970; 1972; 2001; 2003). Before the 1990s, much of the academic, policy, and professional interest in heritage predominantly concentrated on material culture, guided by the UNESCO concept of safeguarding cultural property. This concept involved preserving and conserving significant

[42] Prior to China's formal adoption of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) framework, Japanese-derived terms such as 无形文化 (intangible culture) and 无形文化遗产 (intangible cultural properties) were commonly used. Although UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage prompted a gradual shift, Chinese documents continued to employ both terminologies interchangeably until 2004 (e.g., Piao Yongguang 1999; Su Liping 2002; and Wu Xinping 2004). The State Council's 2005 *Notice on Strengthening Cultural Heritage Protection* (关于加强文化遗产保护的通知) officially standardized 非物质文化遗产 (ICH) nationwide, replacing previous terms like 民族民间文化 (ethnic folk culture) and 无形文化.

monuments, buildings, objects, and other physical structures that had cultural or historical importance, as reflected in the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Nevertheless, prodded in part by Japan and South Korea, who had long sought to export their policies of ICH protection, UNESCO eventually expanded its focus to encompass the oral traditions and intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This shift towards ICH preservation began in the early 1990s, initiated with the Living Human Resources program launched in 1993 and the roll-out in 1997 of the prestigious Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, whose three rounds of nominations took place in 2001, 2003, and 2005. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in 1998 and the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 (hereafter, 2003 Convention). The 2003 Convention came into effect on April 20, 2006, establishing a global framework for preserving and promoting ICH. This convention is the result of the consensus on the protection of ICH formed by many member countries (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Blake 2006; Kurin 2007; Smith and Akagawa 2009; Hafstein 2004, 2018).

There are several important contributions of the Convention. First, it further clarifies the definition and scope of intangible cultural heritage. The term “intangible cultural heritage” replaces other familiar terms such as “folklore” and “traditional culture.” The emphasis with the new term is on living heritage, practiced and expressed by cultural communities through oral traditions, performance, rituals, craftsmanship, artistry, and systems of knowledge (Kurin

2007:12). The Convention underscores the notion that ICH is not merely the result of objectified remains, but rather a continuous practice and manifestation of living heritage. The "living" and "persistent" nature of ICH that has been pointed out in the Convention has strongly impacted the cultural policies of many countries.

Second, the Intergovernmental Meeting of Experts in June 2003 arrived at a compromise after diplomatic maneuvering and deliberation. As a central international instrument of the Convention, three lists were established: the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and national inventories of intangible heritage. Despite opposition from some quarters to the creation of lists, the delegates agreed to use the list(s) as a principal measure for safeguarding ICH on an international level. While the principle of selection continues to be upheld, the highly charged vocabulary of "treasures" and "masterpieces" has been abandoned (Hafstein 2018:85).

Third, the Convention recognizes the vital role of community participation in implementing and managing measures for safeguarding ICH (Blake 2006:76). It is vital that Article 15 acknowledges that identifying and effectively managing much of ICH can be extremely challenging without the involvement of various groups and individuals. The article goes beyond mandating their participation in the state's safeguarding activities and urges the States Parties to actively engage them in the management of ICH (Blake 2006:77).

Fourth, the Convention both advocates community participation and underlines the importance of sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO recognized the importance of cultural heritage in development as early as 1990, describing the safeguarding of

living culture as something that "should be regarded as one of the major assets of a multidimensional type of development" (UNESCO 1990, paragraph 209). In 1995, the World Commission on Culture and Development emphasized the important role of intangible cultural heritage in sustainable development and the centrality of cultural groups and communities. The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) recognized the socio-cultural dimension of sustainable development and called for its inclusion in UN programming. In 2013, an International Congress organized by UNESCO in Hangzhou (China) reaffirmed the role of culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development and called for a specific International Development Goal focused on culture to be included in the post-2015 UN development agenda (Blake 2019:20).

As noted by Blake (2019:21), ICH reflects the cross-sectoral nature of sustainable development, encompassing activities across various non-cultural sectors, such as agriculture, environment, health, and tourism. This requires that States Parties take into account not only horizontal cooperation between their different governmental agencies, but also the reality and operability of different fields when setting policy. Therefore, devising a universal model is challenging, and individual countries are left to find their own possible sustainable development paths. Nevertheless, it turns out that integrating culture heritage as a more social and economic resource with tourism has become one of the paths adopted by most countries.

With 180 signatories as of 2021, the 2003 Convention has been playing a pivotal role in shaping policy formulation and protection practices in the field of ICH at the national and international levels. At the international level, the Convention relies on its listing system as the

key mechanism (Articles 16, 17, 18). At the national level, states parties bear the responsibility of safeguarding ICH through various means, as stipulated by the Convention's obligations. These include prioritizing the protection, promotion, and display of ICH within their territories, as well as making every effort to strengthen education and training initiatives. Furthermore, the Convention also mandates that every signatory promote the active participation of all individuals and groups in safeguarding their ICH (Articles 11, 12, 13, 14, 15). It is the consensus and agreements among state parties that significantly impact the preservation, promotion, and transmission of ICH, as well as its recognition and appreciation for cultural significance and diversity.

ICH in Action: China's Evolving ICH Strategies After 2000

As a country that embraced UNESCO's ICH values and safeguarding model relatively late, China took only about two decades to adapt to and fulfill its responsibilities as a signatory state—progressing from introducing and interpreting the ICH concept to learning from other countries' heritage protection experiences (see, e.g., Xiao Yunshang 1999; Gu Jun 2003; Yuan li 2004; Guo Na 2006; Yang Xiu 2007; Liao Bingbing 2008; Yuan Li and Gu Jun 2009:19-35; Lubina 2013; Zhou Fang 2013) and ultimately establishing its own distinctive ICH safeguarding system.

As noted above, before *Kunqu* opera was inscribed on UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list in 2001, the concept of *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* (intangible cultural heritage, 非物质文化遗产) had not yet gained widespread recognition in

China. The earliest mention of the term appeared in a Chinese magazine, *Outlook Weekly* (瞭望新闻周刊), which published an unsigned short article titled "Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (人类口头与非物质文化遗产) in its 30th issue of 2001. This article served as background material for the news of *Kunqu* opera's inscription. Other journal articles from that period primarily focused on celebrating *Kunqu* opera's recognition or on providing introductions to the art form. Most of them did not even use the term "intangible cultural heritage." By the end of 2002, no formal academic papers related to ICH had yet appeared in scholarly journals (Shi Aidong 2009:10).

Although most of China's current scholars of intangible cultural heritage originally came from folklore studies—an academic field that has played a central role in the ICH safeguarding movement—the first to approach ICH protection from a research perspective were actually from the fine arts field. See Table 3.1 for details of ICH initiatives organized by fine arts institutions during 2002.

DATE	EVENT	ORGANIZER	KEY FOCUS
May 8, 2002	Establishment of the Research Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage (非物质文化遗产研究中心)	Central Academy of Fine Arts (中央美术学院)	Transition from Folk Art Research Office to ICH-focused center. (Qiao Xiaoguang 2002:46)
May 16, 2002	Symposium on the Rescue and Protection of China's Oral and Intangible Heritage (抢救和保护中国口头和非物质遗产座谈会)	Chinese National Academy of Arts (中国艺术研究院)	Mobilizing ICH safeguarding efforts; research not yet prioritized. (Yu Ruidong 2002)
October 22, 2002	First Symposium on ICH Education and Teaching in Chinese Higher Education	Central Academy of Fine Arts Research Center for ICH	Integrating ICH into academia; pedagogical approaches. (Chen and Zhang 2002:63)

	Institutions (中国高等院校首届非物质文化遗产教育教学研讨会)		
December 8, 2002	International Symposium on the Rescue and Protection of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (人类口头和非物质遗产抢救与保护国际研讨会)	Chinese National Academy of Arts (中国艺术研究院) and UNESCO Beijing Office	Global perspectives on ICH safeguarding; cross-border collaboration. (Yi Yan 2003:153)

Table 3.1: ICH initiatives organized by fine arts institutions during 2002 (Shi Dong'ai 2009:10).

Nonetheless, the main focus of these mobilization meetings was simply to enhance the recognition and understanding of ICH concepts and to incorporate them into research and teaching. It was not until 2004 that Chinese scholars truly grasped, from a national political perspective, the imminent arrival of China's ICH movement.

The recognition and establishment of the legitimacy of administrative discourse on ICH at the national level reflect China's active engagement and commitment to international ICH protection. In August 2004, during the 11th session of the Standing Committee of the 11th National People's Congress (第十一届全国人民代表大会常务委员会第 11 次会议), China officially ratified UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which had been adopted in October 2003. The session called on all levels of government and cultural authorities to strengthen ICH safeguarding efforts, formulate relevant laws, regulations, and policy measures, and implement specific initiatives to enhance domestic ICH protection, promote international cooperation, and foster cultural transmission and development. This decision laid the legal and policy foundation for China's ICH safeguarding

efforts. In other words, ICH was formally incorporated into the national cultural heritage protection system, and its safeguarding became part of the Chinese government's routine work (Xuan Bingshan 2014:11).

As a result, some Chinese scholars became acutely aware of the significance of "ICH," with its state recognition serving as the strongest validation. They also recognized the necessity of incorporating the concept of "intangible cultural heritage" into Chinese academic discourse. To establish ICH's legitimacy within the Chinese scholarly context, researchers actively conducted comparative studies to highlight the distinctions between the previously unfamiliar notion of *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* (ICH, 非物质文化遗产) and long-standing terms such as *chuantong wenhua* (traditional culture, 传统文化), *minsu wenhua* (folk culture, 民俗文化), and *minjian wenhua* (popular culture, 民间文化). Prominent Chinese ICH expert Wu Bing'an (乌丙安) emphasized that the definition, classification, research, and safeguarding of ICH were all shaped by political objectives and policy strategies set by international organizations and national governments. He underscored that while ICH safeguarding efforts prioritized folk culture, they were fundamentally distinct from folklore studies as an academic discipline. As he noted, "ICH is not equivalent to folk culture, nor can folk culture replace ICH" (Wu Bing'an 2009:2).

Wu Bing'an and Wu Xiaoqun (吴效群) further remarked that the launch of China's ICH safeguarding initiatives in 2003 was so overwhelming that it resembled the transformation described in a classical Chinese poem: "Suddenly, like a night's spring breeze, it arrived" (忽如一夜春风来). This shift turned folklore studies—long considered a marginal discipline—into a widely recognized and popular field in China (Wu Bing'an and Wu Xiaoqun 2009:1). Chinese

folklorists generally believe that participating in the ICH safeguarding movement is an unshirkable social and academic responsibility of folklore studies, as well as a new historical opportunity (Shi Aidong 2009:10). Consequently, Chinese folklorists actively joined discussions on how folklore studies, as a scientific discipline, should engage with ICH research and safeguarding under the guidance of national policies (Xiang Yunju 2004:69; Shi Aidong 2009; Wu Bing'an 2009). In light of the heightened involvement of folklorists, scholars from related disciplines—including ethnology, anthropology, sociology, history, linguistics, literature, museology, art, and tourism management—also joined in shaping and expanding the discourse and knowledge production surrounding China's ICH. As ethnologist An Deming (安德明) commented, "The potential for greater development and new distributions of interests brought by new concepts and movements has led many disciplines beyond folklore studies to scramble to board the train of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding" (2008:18).

To conclude, the impact of UNESCO-style ICH on China first began at the national level. Embracing the international heritage value discourse reflects not only national interests represented by cultural discourse power but also China's efforts to claim and compete for a voice on a broader global stage. The identification of culture and heritage in official discourse at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a highly politicized and strategic endeavor (Ai 2012:129). Therefore, after 2000, the evolution of China's ICH strategy has been a process of sinicizing the UNESCO-style ICH value system under national political directives. The transition from recognizing and adopting the international ICH discourse to the domestic

production of ICH knowledge spans a wide range of fields, including politics, law, culture, arts, education, and economics.

Sinicization of ICH policy and ICH Bureaucracy

Since the 1990s, the CCP leadership has demonstrated a renewed interest in China's cultural traditions, as evidenced by the increasing number of public statements on culture and heritage made by senior party leaders (Ai 2012:129). In contrast to what Sofield and Li (1998:369) described as "cultural vandalism" during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the new official ideology has shifted toward actively promoting the preservation of cultural heritage—initially under the term "traditional culture" and later as "intangible cultural heritage." During his visit to the United States in November 1997, then-President Jiang Zemin delivered a speech at Harvard University, emphasizing the Chinese Communist Party's respect for traditional culture and its significance. As he stated, traditional culture serves as "a constructive factor in unifying the Chinese nation." He noted, further, that "China's cultural tradition has become a strong bond for ethnic harmony and national unity'" (Ai 2012:130). This marked a significant shift in the leadership's attitude toward traditional culture.

In 2004, the Chinese government expanded its nationwide initiative to safeguard ethnic and folk cultural heritage, transitioning from two initial pilot programs to full-scale implementation across the country. To support this effort, large-scale professional training programs were introduced at both national and provincial levels, drawing participation from thousands of grassroots professionals specializing in folklore and folk literature. Folklorists from universities

and research institutions took on a key role in disseminating knowledge and refining methodological approaches within the field. Additionally, many folklorists were appointed as advisory or review committee members at provincial and municipal levels, further integrating academic expertise into the initiative. A significant milestone occurred in September of that year when, for the first time, a specialized lecture on folklore studies, "The Foundations and Profound Influence of Chinese Folk Culture" (中国民俗文化的根基及其深刻影响), was included in the Chinese Communist Party's Ministerial Leadership Cadre Lecture Series on History and Culture (部级领导干部历史文化讲座). This unprecedented event received strong endorsement and high praise from the nation's top leadership (Wu Bing'an 2007:3–4). Thus, the reform of China's policy on the promotion and protection of China's own ICH was launched.

In 2005, the Chinese government officially issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage* (关于加强我国非物质文化遗产保护工作的意见), which marked the nationwide launch of the application and evaluation process for so-called "state-level" ICH projects ("国家级"非物质文化遗产项目). Folk cultural items, which had long been overlooked in China, were redefined as "heritage" under UNESCO's regime, instantly gaining unprecedented cultural significance. Concepts such as "traditional culture" and "folklore"—subject to interpretation, reinterpretation, claim and counter claim, and negotiation—were gradually displaced by the term "intangible cultural heritage," although, as noted by observer Shi Aidong, "according to scholars' current understanding, the connotations of these concepts do not differ significantly" (Shi Aidong 2009:11).

Another local observer of these developments commented perspicaciously that "China's indigenous approach to ICH safeguarding is essentially a state-driven initiative, fully led from the top down by administrative forces and maintained through various levels of the bureaucratic system, reflecting distinct characteristics of Chinese governance. Its driving force does not originate from grassroots society, nor does it possess the fundamental attributes of academic research; rather, it falls squarely within the realm of national politics" (Chen Yingjie 2013:14). Following a slight delay in engaging with UNESCO's global cultural governance framework (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:5),[43] this effort soon became "part of an intentional strategy which allows the CCP to use and appropriate cultural heritage in ways that are most advantageous for the party and to provide the substance for a national level rhetoric" (Ai 2012:131). Consequently, substantial economic resources have been directed toward UNESCO-recognized ICH projects that align with national identity. According to an article titled "Future Brightens for Cultural Heritage," published by *China Daily* on June 13, 2005, Ministry of Finance official Wang Jiaxin stated at a two-day heritage protection conference in Beijing, "Over the next five years, the Chinese government is to allocate 50 million yuan (US$6.1 million) to preserve *Kunqu*—an art form already on UNESCO's protection list" (Wang 2005). However, the economic investment made by the state is only one aspect. The greater changes and reforms lie

[43] Although China was among the first signatory states of UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, it started relatively late in the field of cultural heritage compared to other countries. China did not ratify the 1972 World Heritage Convention until 1985. In 1986, China proposed its first five cultural sites for inscription, which was achieved in 1987 (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:5).

in the heritagization system and institutionalized structural formulation of intangible cultural heritage.

The Heritagization System in China

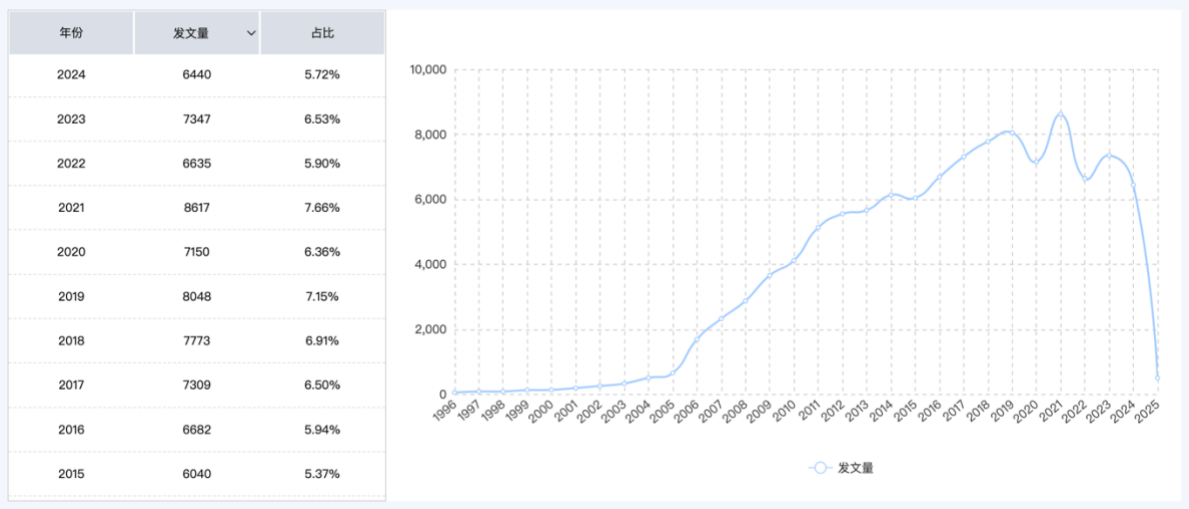
China, as one of the first signatories to the UNESCO 2003 Convention, is naturally a prominent global player in this field (Rees 2009:43). Drawing inspiration from Japan, South Korea, France, and Taiwan, China has embarked on an era of "building an ICH protection system with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色) (Huang Xiaoju 2005; Zhou Xiaoyan 2005), while actively engaging in UNESCO initiatives. With a remarkable level of intensity unlikely to be matched by any other country in the world, so far China has rolled out multiple initiatives at all government levels (Zhang, Yao, and Schippers 2015:45).

To understand the unique ICH protection system in China, it is essential to examine the government's role in promulgating and implementing policies towards traditional culture and ICH, following the initiation of the "reform and open" (改革开放) policy in 1978. The Open-Door era has engendered a substantial shift in China's political climate, resulting in significant changes in the country's external relations and the internal landscape of its social, economic, and cultural values (Rees 2009:54; Zan 2014:101).

Even before the late 1970s, however, there were certainly precedents for government and literatus involvement in the documentation and use of performing arts. China has a long history of the literatus collection of folk songs, for example, and of the creative adaptation of traditional music materials for new purposes (Schimmelpenninck 1997:1–13; Jones 2003). Moreover,

between the 1950s and 1980s, state-employed musicians and scholars were tasked with the responsibility of recording traditional music. Even during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the practice continued on and off (Jones 2003:289; Xiao Mei 2007:269–285). Indeed, as noted above, during the 1980s and 1990s, state-sponsored research and collection projects on Chinese traditional culture, as well as investigations of local arts, formed the prelude to China's current ICH protection movement (Yuan Li and Gu Jun 2009:28).

However, the most iconic political action that brought about a reevaluation of the value of folk music was China's sudden high-profile participation in UNESCO-inspired ICH protection programs, starting in 2001. In particular, what garnered national attention was China's successful nominations in all three rounds of the UNESCO program Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2001, 2003, 2005). Publicity for and national adulation of the selected genres (*Kunqu* opera in 2001, the seven-string zither *guqin* in 2003, and the Twelve *Muqam* of the Uyghur ethnic minority in 2005) skyrocketed, jumpstarting a national obsession with China's intangible cultural heritage (Yung 2009; Rees 2012; Anderson 2019). Since December 2002, a top-down ICH protection agency network denominated under the "X [administrative area] ICH Protection Center" (e.g., Lijiang ICHPC, 丽江市非遗保护中心) nomenclature system (covering all 31 provinces and provincial-level units) under the administrative authority of the Ministry of Culture has been created. Since then, the invention and implementation of ICH regimes of value have been promoted as a political and scientific construction project that conveys core socialist values (Huang Shengjin 2006).



年份	发文量	占比
2024	6440	5.72%
2023	7347	6.53%
2022	6635	5.90%
2021	8617	7.66%
2020	7150	6.36%
2019	8048	7.15%
2018	7773	6.91%
2017	7309	6.50%
2016	6682	5.94%
2015	6040	5.37%

Figure 3.1: Screenshot of search results for "Intangible Cultural Heritage" documents in Wanfang Data, a Chinese academic database. Data accessed on March 22, 2025. https://fx.wanfangdata.com.cn/resultanalysis/paper?q=%E9%9D%9E%E7%89%A9%E8%B4%A8%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96%E9%81%97%E4%BA%A7&Allresults=122244.

The sinicization and localization of the UNESCO-style global cultural governance regime are primarily reflected in the production of cultural discourse, policy formulation, the establishment of administrative bureaucratic systems, and the promotion of the ICH as a potent national symbol. Over more than two decades of growing enthusiasm and high praise for a new approach to ICH, China has fostered an increasingly dominant ICH discourse within its cultural context. The key participants in this discourse include scholars from various disciplines, ICH administrators, heritage practitioners, media journalists, and the general public.

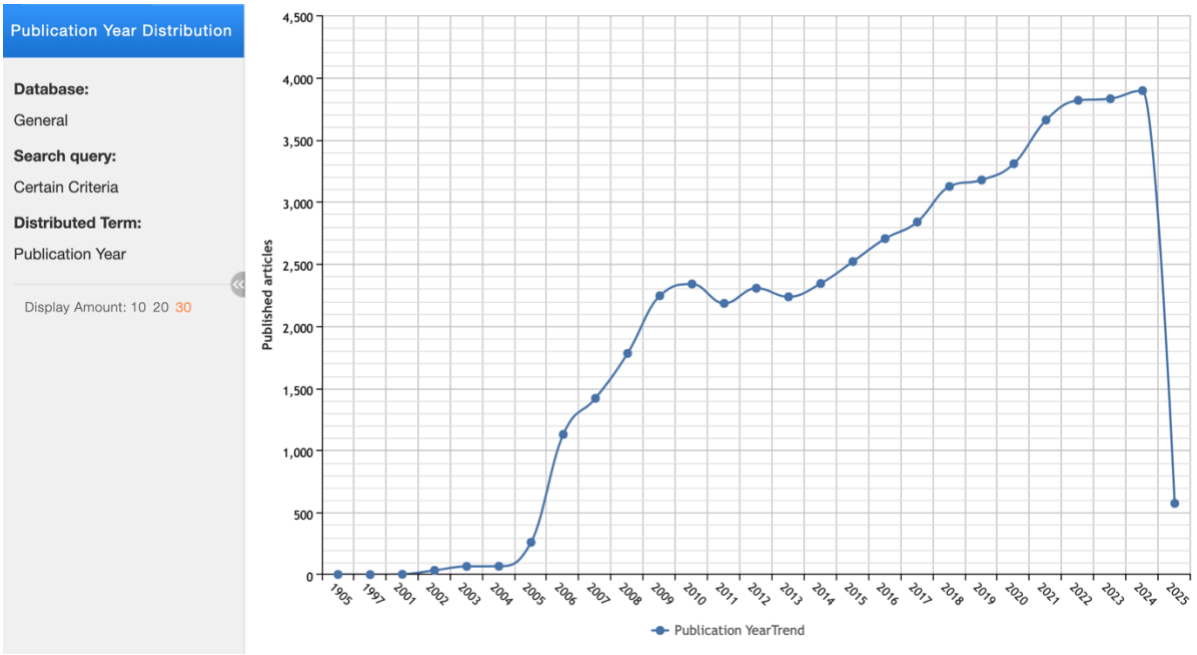


Figure 3.2: Screenshot of search results for "Intangible Cultural Heritage" documents in CNKI, a Chinese academic database. Data accessed on March 23, 2025. https://oversea.cnki.net/kns/defaultresult/index.

Since 2000, knowledge production related to ICH discourse in China has been highly active. As of 23 March 2025, the number of articles with the subject "Intangible Cultural Heritage" in the Chinese-language database Wanfang Data had reached 122,116, while the database China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) had recorded 80,437 articles. These Chinese-language publications span four main categories: newspapers, journals, conference proceedings, and master's theses and doctoral dissertations. Statistical results from the two Chinese databases (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) clearly show that, since 2004, there has been an explosion of articles with "intangible cultural heritage" in the title—what Shi Aidong (2009:13) described as being "as numerous as cow hairs" (多如牛毛), an old Chinese metaphor for extreme abundance—with the numbers continuing to grow steadily. Additionally, the discipline distribution analysis from CNKI (Figure 3.3) reveals the extensive academic coverage of ICH-

related studies, spanning at least 30 disciplines, with the highest representation in cultural studies, followed by tourism, fine arts, music and dancing.

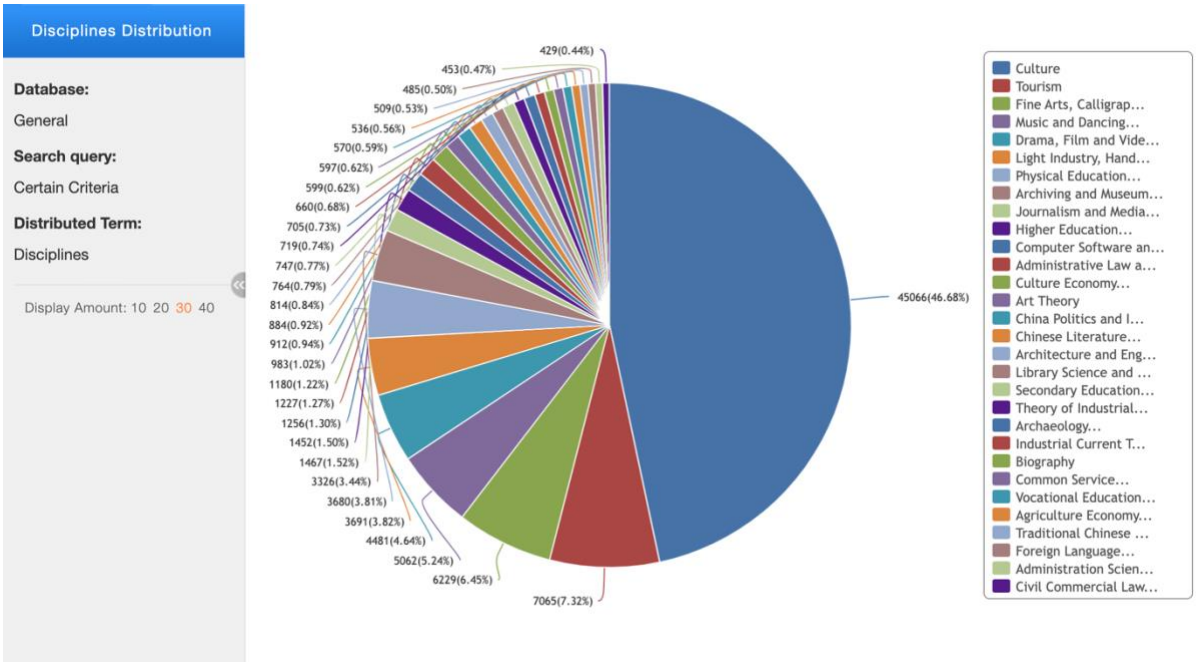


Figure 3.3: Screenshot of search results for "intangible cultural heritage" documents in CNKI, a Chinese academic database. Data accessed on March 23, 2025. https://oversea.cnki.net/kns/defaultresult/index.

ICH Policies in China

While China's ICH policies are directed at the heritage of both Han Chinese and ethnic minority citizens, they are especially deeply intertwined with the governance of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. The state's broader approach to ethnic policy has often been characterized as a domestic "civilizing project," wherein ethnic minorities are perceived as populations in need of "civilization" and "education," with their traditional ways seen as requiring "advancement" (Harrell 1995:13). This perspective drives governmental efforts to integrate ethnic minorities into the modern nation-state, encouraging their participation in the modernization process (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:7).

Aligned with the state's broader goal of nation-building, China's ICH policies carry distinct political significance, particularly when they pertain to minority regions (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:6). Scholars have often interpreted modern China's ethnic cultural policies—since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921—as evolving through distinct stages, each reflecting shifts in the Party's approach to ethnic governance. For instance, Chinese ethnic politics scholar Wu Lei (吴磊) categorizes the development of China's ICH policies for ethnic minorities into four phases. The first phase was a period of ideological preparation, stretching from the founding of the CCP in 1921 to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The second phase (1949–1978) saw the initial formation of ethnic cultural policies in the early decades of the PRC. The third phase (1978–2000) marked the comprehensive development of ethnic policies alongside China's broader reforms and the expansion of "ethnic work" initiatives. Finally, the fourth phase (2000–present) has been defined by a policy shift toward the protection of intangible cultural heritage (Wu Lei 2012:49–71).

Since 2005, the Chinese government has introduced multiple policies and measures for the preservation of ICH, with numerous documents issued by relevant departments and institutions in accordance with national political directives. Following a top-down governance approach, ICH policy formulation in China is primarily based on national-level policies, regulations, and official notices. At the regional level (such as provinces and municipalities), local governments can develop more practical implementation measures and supplementary guidelines, provided they remain consistent with national directives. For instance, Table 3.2 highlights key national-level policies, while Table 3.3 presents ICH policies formulated by Yunnan Province in response

to its specific circumstances. Table 3.4 outlines ICH policies issued by the local government and departments of Lijiang City. A comparison of these tables reveals that for the same policy aspect—such as the "identification and management of inheritors"—the national-level policy was released in 2008, followed by Yunnan Province and Lijiang City in 2010. This sequential pattern of policy issuance clearly illustrates that national-level policies are established first, followed by provincial policies, with municipal policies issued subsequently.

DOCUMENT NAME	YEAR	ISSUING AUTHORITY	SUMMARY
***Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China* (关于加强我国非物质文化遗产保护工作的意见)**	2005	General Office of the State Council	Proposes overall requirements, main tasks, and safeguards for strengthening ICH protection.
***Interim Measures for the Application and Evaluation of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Works* (国家级非物质文化遗产代表作申报评定暂行办法)**	2005	Ministry of Culture (now Ministry of Culture and Tourism)	Specifies procedures for application, evaluation, and management of national ICH representative works.
***Interim Measures for the Protection and Management of National Intangible Cultural Heritage* (国家级非物质文化遗产保护与管理暂行办法)**	2006	Ministry of Culture (now Ministry of Culture and Tourism)	Details protection measures, management mechanisms, and funding support for national ICH.
***Notice of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage* (国务院关于加强文化遗产保护的通知)[44]**	Date of Completion: December 22, 2005 Release Date: March 28, 2008	State Council	The State Council has decided that starting from 2006, the second Saturday of June each year will be designated as the "Cultural Heritage Day" of China.

[44] For further details, see the official website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China at the following link: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-03/28/content_5926.htm. Accessed 23 March 2025.

Interim Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects **(国家级非物质文化遗产项目代表性传承人认定与管理暂行办法)**	2008	Ministry of Culture (now Ministry of Culture and Tourism)	Establishes criteria, rights, and obligations for identifying representative inheritors of national ICH projects.
Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage **(中华人民共和国非物质文化遗产法)**	2011	Standing Committee of the National People's Congress	Defines ICH, outlines protection principles, government responsibilities, and rights of inheritors.
Guidelines on Strengthening the Productive Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture **(文化部关于加强非物质文化遗产生产性保护的指导意见)**	2012	The Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism	Emphasizes that, while safeguarding the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage, sustainable development can be achieved through rational utilization and market-oriented approaches.
Opinions on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture **(关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见)**	2017	General Office of the CPC Central Committee, General Office of the State Council	Emphasizes the importance of ICH protection in inheriting and developing excellent traditional Chinese culture.
Plan for the Revitalization of Traditional Chinese Crafts **(中国传统工艺振兴计划)**	2017	Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Finance	Aims to revitalize traditional crafts and integrate ICH with modern life.
Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage **(国家级非物质文化遗产代表性传承人认定与管理办法)**	2019	Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China	Specifies the criteria and procedures for identifying inheritors, their rights and obligations, as well as management measures; emphasizes that inheritors should possess representativeness in specific fields and exert

			significant influence within a certain region.
***Notice of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on Issuing the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage"* (文化和旅游部关于印发《"十四五"非物质文化遗产保护规划》的通知)**	2021	The Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism	The framework outlines six key tasks, including strengthening ICH documentation, enhancing project protection, improving inheritor management, promoting regional holistic conservation, expanding public engagement, and fostering socio-economic contributions. It also highlights eight critical initiatives, such as advancing traditional crafts and establishing cultural-ecological protection zones.
***Notice of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on Issuing the "Measures for the Management of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Funds"* (财政部、文化和旅游部关于印发《国家非物质文化遗产保护资金管理办法》的通知)**	2021 Revision	Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Culture and Tourism	Specifically regulates the management and use of funds for the protection of national intangible cultural heritage.

Table 3.2: Key National ICH Policies in China (2006–2021).[45]

DOCUMENT NAME	YEAR	ISSUING AUTHORITY	SUMMARY
***Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of ICH Projects in Yunnan Province* (云南省非物质文化**	2010	Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture (now Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism)	Specifies criteria, rights, and obligations for identifying and supporting ICH inheritors.

[45] For the full text of relevant documents and laws, visit the official website of the Chinese government: https://www.gov.cn/. Accessed June 6, 2025.

遗产项目代表性传承人认定与管理办法)			
***Regulations on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Yunnan Province* (云南省非物质文化遗产保护条例)**	2013	Standing Committee of the Yunnan Provincial People's Congress	Defines ICH, outlines protection principles, government responsibilities, and measures for safeguarding.
***Measures for the Management of Special Funds for ICH Protection in Yunnan Province* (云南省非物质文化遗产保护专项资金管理办法)**	2014	Yunnan Provincial Department of Finance, Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture (now Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism)	Regulates the source, use, and supervision of special funds for ICH protection.
***Measures for the Management of ICH Inheritance Bases in Yunnan Province* (云南省非物质文化遗产传承基地管理办法)**	2016	Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture (now Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism)	Establishes standards for the establishment, management, and evaluation of ICH inheritance bases.

Table 3.3: Selected Provincial ICH Policies in Yunnan Province, China (2010–2016).[46]

DOCUMENT NAME	YEAR	ISSUING AUTHORITY	SUMMARY
***Regulations on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Lijiang City* (丽江市非物质文化遗产保护条例)**	2015	Standing Committee of the Lijiang Municipal People's Congress	Defines ICH, outlines protection principles, government responsibilities, and measures for safeguarding.
***Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of ICH Projects in Lijiang City* (丽江市非物质文化遗产项目代表性传承人认定与管理办法)**	2016	Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Press (now Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism)	Specifies criteria, rights, and obligations for identifying and supporting ICH inheritors.

[46] For the full text of relevant documents and laws, visit the official website of China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network: Yunnan: http://yn.ihchina.cn/; additional implementation rules are available at the official website of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Center of Yunnan Province: http://ynfy.yn.gov.cn/. Accessed June 6, 2025.

***Measures for the Management of Special Funds for ICH Protection in Lijiang City* (丽江市非物质文化遗产保护专项资金管理办法)**	2017	Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Finance, Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Press (now Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism)	Regulates the source, use, and supervision of special funds for ICH protection.
***Measures for the Management of ICH Inheritance Bases in Lijiang City* (丽江市非物质文化遗产传承基地管理办法)**	2018	Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Press (now Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism)	Establishes standards for the establishment, management, and evaluation of ICH inheritance bases.

Table 3.4: Selected Municipal ICH Policies in Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China (2015–2018).[47]

Table 3.2 includes the implementation of the 2005 *Notice of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage*, which declared that starting in 2006, the second Saturday of June each year would be designated as China's "Cultural Heritage Day." In June 2006, to celebrate the country's first Cultural Heritage Day, the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with the Chinese National Academy of Arts, organized a series of vibrant events (Wu Bing'an 2007:4). The celebrations lasted for several days, with a special gala held on June 9 at the Minzu Theater in Beijing. This event was broadcast nationwide on June 10 by China's state-run media, CCTV Channel 3. On the same day, China's first national-level online platform dedicated to intangible cultural heritage protection—the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network and Digital Museum—was officially launched (https://www.ihchina.cn/) (Xu Lian

[47] Data on Lijiang's local ICH management measures were collected during fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, provided by local ICH protection units and staff as internal documentation.

2006). Since then, except for disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2021, ICH centers and relevant institutions across China have been required to organize various activities on Cultural Heritage Day, including exhibitions, performances, and other promotional events showcasing intangible cultural heritage.

China's enthusiasm for intangible cultural heritage is further exemplified by the establishment of the International Festival of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2007, a joint initiative between UNESCO and the Chinese government as part of its state-level festivals. Held biennially, this festival is recognized as the only thematic ICH festival in the world. With a permanent base in Chengdu (Figure 3.4), the festival grounds are organized into five thematic districts: Intercontinental Friendship, Century Dances, Architecture Stories, Time Travel, and Folk Plays (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:8–9).



Figure 3.4: International Intangible Cultural Heritage Park in Chengdu, China. Photograph by the author, January 2024.

In Table 3.2, another key "milestone policy in the progress of protecting China's intangible cultural heritage" (Li Xiaolin and Li Jing 2011) is the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China, enacted in 2011. On March 1, 2011, during a seminar on the implementation of the law organized by the Ministry of Culture, experts highlighted the fact that "The promulgation of this law reflects distinct Chinese characteristics. It was developed based on years of practical experience, making it dynamic rather than rigid, formulaic, or dogmatic" (ibid.). Wang Wenzhang (王文章), a renowned expert in intangible cultural heritage, stated in the *People's Daily*,

> The official implementation of this law marks a significant step forward in the protection of China's intangible cultural heritage, guiding it along a conscious and scientific path. . . . This law provides a comprehensive framework for heritage protection, establishing the foundation for scientific, standardized, and sustainable development in China, and marks the start of legal protection for intangible cultural heritage in the country. (June 7, 2013)

To sum up, since the beginning of the 21st century, the development of China's ICH policies can be broadly divided into two phases, with the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (November 2012) serving as a key turning point (Huang Yonglin and Li Yuanyuan 2023:6). The first phase was primarily characterized by the recognition and adoption of UNESCO-style ICH value logic, alongside the production of a uniquely Chinese ICH discourse. This period marked a significant shift in the state and the Communist Party's approach toward traditional culture and folk customs. Policies during this stage focused on "surveys," "rescue-oriented" measures, and the "protection and transmission" of heritage. Key initiatives included establishing multi-level ICH inventories at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels; implementing the representative inheritor recognition system;

enacting the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law; designating China's "Cultural Heritage Day"; and introducing the concept of "holistic protection" of cultural spaces through the creation of Cultural Ecological Protection Zones (文化生态保护区). Since 2007, China has established a total of 23 national-level cultural ecological protection pilot zones, with sixteen of them officially approved and recognized as national-level cultural ecological protection zones after three rounds of evaluation.[48]

The second phase of China's ICH policies has primarily focused on promoting the revitalization and utilization of heritage. This marks a shift from earlier policies, enacted during the later years of the first phase, of emphasizing the economic value of ICH under the framework of "productive protection"; the more recent trend has been toward a broader strategy that encourages "creative transformation and innovative development," alongside the principles of "reasonable utilization and industry development." Since 2017, a series of policy documents have been issued to support the innovative development of ICH-related cultural industries. These policies emphasize the role of heritage practitioners and artists in carefully studying ICH, extracting its most valuable and unique elements, and integrating them into modern life, production, and cultural products. Through contemporary innovation, the goal is to enhance both cultural preservation and economic growth (Huang Yonglin and Li Yuanyuan 2023:9).

[48] See the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China for the full text of the document *Letter of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on the Reply to the 1646th Proposal (Sports and Cultural Propaganda Category 151) of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (文化和旅游部关于政协十四届全国委员会第二次会议第 01646 号（文体宣传类 151 号）提案答复的函): https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zhgl/jytadf/202412/t20241224_957258.html. Release date: 24 December 2024. Accessed 24 March 2025.

Subsequently, as China advanced national policies such as rural revitalization (乡村振兴) and targeted poverty alleviation (精准扶贫), ICH was further assigned the responsibility of contributing to rural development. In 2018, the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued the *Notice on Vigorously Revitalizing Traditional Crafts in Impoverished Areas to Support Targeted Poverty Alleviation,*[49] followed by the 2021 *Notice on the Continued Promotion of ICH Workshops to Assist Rural Revitalization.*[50] These documents outlined specific measures for poverty alleviation through the establishment of ICH workshops and recognized their growing role as effective mechanisms for both heritage protection and rural development. According to *Official Reply of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to Proposal No. 1957 of the Second Session of the 14th National People's Congress* (文化和旅游部对十四届全国人大二次会议第 1957 号建议的答复), as of December 2024,

> [the] central government has cumulatively allocated 11.38 billion RMB (1.5932 billion USD) in national ICH protection funds. Additionally, the National Development and Reform Commission has designated 2.033 billion RMB (284.6 million USD) for the construction of state-level ICH protection and utilization facilities. The central government also provides an annual subsidy of 20,000 RMB (2,800 USD) per person to state-level ICH representative inheritors for activities such as apprenticeship training, skills transmission, and cultural exchange. Moreover, those evaluated as excellent in their transmission efforts receive an additional 5,000 RMB (700 USD), further incentivizing active participation. . . . By August 2023, a total of over 6,700 ICH workshops had been established across China, including more than 2,100 in formerly impoverished areas, covering 524 previously

[49] The full text is available on the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China: https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/fwzwhyc/202012/t20201206_916849.html. Accessed on 24 March 2025.

[50] The full text is available on the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China: https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zcfg/zcjd/202112/t20211216_929851.html. Accessed on 24 March 2025.

designated poverty-stricken counties and 102 key counties under the National Rural Revitalization Strategy.[51]

In recent years, concepts such as *feiyi fupin* (ICH-driven poverty alleviation, 非遗扶贫) and *yishu xiangjian* (art-based rural reconstruction, 艺术乡建) have gained prominence in academic research, drawing the attention of scholars in ICH studies, folklore, art anthropology, ethnology, and ethnic economics (see, e.g., Wang Tingxin and Li Zhi 2018; Li Renqing 2019; Xiao Yuanping and Wang Weijie 2019; Liu Shuman 2020; Ma Zhiyao and Liu Yaoyao 2020; Qu Yan 2020; Zhang Ying 2021; Xiang Li 2021; Fang Lili and Xiang Li 2022; Zhang Ben 2022; Xiao Xin, Tu Zishu, and Feng Jing 2023; Zhong Huihua et al. 2024; Liu Zhiying 2025).

The ICH Bureaucracy in China

The Chinese government places great emphasis on establishing strong organizational and leadership structures for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), as the ICH bureaucratic system to a great extent reflects the cultural will of the state (Xuan Bingshan 2014:12). According to the *Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China* (关于加强我国非物质文化遗产保护工作的意见) (hereafter referred to as the *Opinions*), issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2005, the responsibility for ICH protection was elevated from being under the jurisdiction of cultural departments to an administratively led initiative, requiring active cooperation between cultural administrative

[51] The full text is available on the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China: https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zhgl/jytadf/202412/t20241224_957297.html. Accessed on 24 March 2025.

departments and other relevant agencies. The *Opinions*[52] explicitly define a working principle of "government leadership and social participation" and state that

> Local governments at all levels must strengthen leadership, incorporate ICH protection into key work agendas, integrate it into national economic and social development plans, and include it in cultural development programs. It is essential to enhance the legal and regulatory framework for ICH protection and to formulate relevant policies and measures in a timely manner. Protection plans should be developed to clarify the scope, measures, and objectives of safeguarding efforts. . . . Governments at all levels must continually increase funding for ICH protection efforts. Through policy incentives and other measures, individuals, enterprises, and social organizations should be encouraged to contribute to ICH protection. Additionally, efforts must be made to build a professional workforce dedicated to safeguarding ICH.

Moreover, in *Appendix 2: Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference System for Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection*, the *Opinions* establish a ministerial-level joint conference system for ICH protection, led by the Ministry of Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) in collaboration with the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the National Tourism Administration, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. This system is responsible for: (1) developing national policies and reviewing protection plans; (2) coordinating critical ICH safeguarding issues; (3) evaluating and submitting the National Representative ICH List to the State Council for approval; and (4) executing State Council-mandated ICH tasks while reporting major decisions for authorization.

[52] The full text is available on the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China: https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zcfg/gfxwj/202012/t20201204_906065.html. Accessed 22 March 2025.

The Multi-Tier ICH Administrative Listing System

The management of Chinese ICH is incorporated into the national discourse system, operating through a multi-tiered ICH administrative listing system established under the state's administrative governance structure. In general, the functional authority of ICH administrative bodies diminishes progressively from higher to lower levels, while project management and nomination procedures follow a bottom-up hierarchical principle.

China's governance of ICH follows a centralized, hierarchical structure. At the top is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT), which functions as the primary authority overseeing ICH safeguarding efforts. Beneath the MCT, a vertical management system operates through successive administrative levels: provincial departments of culture and tourism, municipal cultural and tourism bureaus, and county-level ICH protection centers. In some regions, this structure is further extended to include township-level cultural stations, forming a comprehensive administrative framework for ICH management across the country.

At the top of China's four-tier ICH governance system, the MCT regularly issues ICH-related directives in formal, hierarchical language that underscores the top-down nature of administration. Many of these documents mandate swift implementation. For instance, the application process for the state-level ICH list follows a biennial cycle: in odd-numbered years, provincial ICH protection centers submit nominations through their provincial cultural bureaus to the MCT, and results are announced in the following even-numbered year. To improve their chances, local ICH centers now devote significant effort to polishing application materials and promotional videos. However, the window between receiving the ministry's notice and

completing the application process is often less than six months, revealing the pressure of this centralized model (Xuan Bingshan 2014:12). In my interviews with the staff members of several different-level ICH protection centers in Yunnan and Sichuan, I found that the lower the administrative level of an ICH protection center, the greater the difficulty and pressure faced by its staff, owing to limited funding, fewer human resources, and insufficient technical support.

Localized ICH Policy and Practice in Ethnic Minority Contexts: Yunnan as a Case Study

From both a national strategic and practical perspective, a significant portion of China's ICH is concentrated in ethnic minority regions. Ethnic autonomous areas account for 64% of China's total land area, with most of the country's border regions also belonging to ethnic minority territories. Of China's more than 20,000 kilometers of land borders, 19,000 kilometers run through these regions (Min Weixuan 2014). This also explains why China has demonstrated such strong enthusiasm for and financial commitment to ICH protection, even going so far as to establish the entirely new top-down policies and bureaucratic management system for its safeguarding. The effort is not only about cultural preservation—it is also closely tied to maintaining national security and stability.

Yunnan Province is located in southwestern China, between 21°8' and 29°15' north latitude and 97°31' to 106°11' east longitude. As a mountainous transition zone connecting the southeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with the Indochina Peninsula, it serves as China's

vital gateway to South and Southeast Asia.[53] Yunnan shares borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, with a total land border exceeding 4,000 kilometers, making it the second-longest provincial land border in China after Xinjiang. Additionally, although Yunnan does not directly border Thailand and Cambodia, it is closely connected to them through the Lancang-Mekong River system. The province has twenty-five border counties (or cities), the highest number among all Chinese provinces, playing a crucial role in border governance (Jiang Shiyi and Zhu Qiang 2021:155–156). Yunnan is also positioned as a key hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a "radiation center toward Southeast and South Asia" (see, e.g., Li Zhihuan and Shao Yuanyuan 2018:89). Owing to its unique status as a frontier province, Yunnan has historically been a vital corridor for deep and continuous cultural exchanges (Qian and Zhu 2024:711). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party has placed great emphasis on the governance of Yunnan, particularly concerning ethnic issues, cultural policies, and economic development in this multi-ethnic region.

The Localized ICH Preservation Practice in Yunnan

Yunnan Province, known for its rich ethnic and cultural diversity, is home to twenty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups in addition to the Han, fifteen of which are unique to the province. Ethnic minorities in Yunnan exhibit an "interwoven pattern" (互嵌) in their geographic distribution, where most live in mixed communities while some reside in more

[53] For details, refer to the official website of the People's Government of Yunnan Province: https://www.yn.gov.cn/ynsq/. Accessed on March 27, 2025.

concentrated settlements, and this interwoven characteristic is also reflected in their cultural traditions (Yang Rong 2015). As the frontier province with the highest concentration of ethnic minorities in China,[54] Yunnan boasts an exceptionally diverse array of ICH resources and is regarded as a "testing ground" for ICH protection and development in the country (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:138–139).

While many of Yunnan's rural ethnic minority communities face economic underdevelopment, they are considered a "cultural treasure trove" (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:137), making the province a key area for ICH preservation and a national model for heritage protection (Bao Rong and Zhang Li 2017:28). Spatially, officially recognized ICH in Yunnan is widely dispersed across different cities and regions, "most of which have more than five kinds of ICH" (Qian and Zhu 2024:711). By October 2023, Yunnan Province had more than 9,000 ICH items across three tiers of protection (provincial, municipal, and county-level lists), with more than 11,000 representative inheritors. Among them, traditional Chinese tea-making skills (Dian black tea making skills, Gong tea making skills, Daye tea making skills, Xiaguan Tuo tea making skills, Deang sour tea making skills, Bai Sandao tea making skills), Chinese paper-cutting (Dai paper-cutting) and the Tibetan *Gesar* epic were included in UNESCO's "Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" (ibid.:710). This wealth of

[54] According to the 2020 Seventh National Population Census of China, the Han population totaled 1,286.31 million, accounting for 91.11% of the total population, while ethnic minorities numbered 125.47 million, representing 8.89% (Ning Jizhe 2021:93). In Yunnan Province, the Han population was approximately 31.57 million, with ethnic minorities comprising 15.64 million. Nationally, the total ethnic minority population stood at 125.47 million. Yunnan ranks as the province with the second-largest ethnic minority population in China (Guangxi being first with 18.81 million minority inhabitants), accounting for 12.47% of the national minority population (Guowuyuan diqici quanguo renkou pucha bangongshi 2021:34).

ethnic cultural resources not only underscores the central role of Yunnan's minority cultures in the broader cultural landscape of China but also makes ethnic cultural industries—particularly heritage tourism—a pillar of the province's economic development.

Yunnan was one of the first provinces in China to develop ICH tourism. Since the 1990s, the Yunnan provincial government has prioritized ethnic cultural tourism as a key area for support. By the late 1990s, after officially designating tourism as one of the province's four pillar industries, Yunnan launched tourism initiatives in places like Lijiang and Dali, emphasizing ethnic minority culture and natural heritage (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:138). In 2018, the Yunnan provincial government identified the cultural tourism industry as one of the three world-class "flagship industries" and one of the "eight key industries" driving the province's economic and social development. Without a doubt, ethnic cultural heritage—particularly intangible cultural heritage (ICH)—serves as a vital resource for Yunnan's tourism sector (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:139; Su 2023:1). In August 2020, the Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism introduced ten ICH-themed tourism routes, actively promoting the concept of "ICH-integrated tourism" across the province (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:140).[55]

As one of the first provinces in China to implement ICH protection, Yunnan incorporated the safeguarding of ICH (then referred to as "ethnic and folk culture," 民族民间文化) into its overall economic and social development planning as early as 2000 (Su Junjie and Zhao Juan 2021:146). Following the enactment of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Law in 2011,

[55] "Yunnan Announces Ten ICH-Themed Tourist Routes" (云南公布十条非遗主题旅游线路); the full text can be accessed via China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network: https://www.ihchina.cn/news2_details/21425.html. Accessed June 6, 2025.

Yunnan took the lead in establishing provincial-level ICH protection policies by introducing the Yunnan Provincial Regulations on Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection in 2013 and become the first province in China to protect traditional culture through legislative procedures (Hu Yuanhang 2013; Bao Rong and Zhang Li 2017:28). Below is a list of major ICH-related policies issued in Yunnan since 2000 (Table 3.5):

DOCUMENT NAME	ENACTMENT YEAR	MAIN CONTENT
Regulations on the Protection of Ethnic and Folk Traditional Culture in Yunnan Province **云南省民族民间传统文化保护条例**	2000	First regulation defining concepts, recognition criteria, procedures, transmission modes, research protection, and support measures for inheritors of ethnic folk culture. Pioneered local legislation for ICH protection in China, marking the legalization of inheritor protection in Yunnan.
Interim Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of ICH Items in Yunnan Province (Trial) **云南省非物质文化遗产代表性项目代表性传承人认定与管理办法（试行）**	2010	Detailed provisions on recognition criteria, legal obligations, identification procedures, and withdrawal mechanisms for provincial-level ICH inheritors, enhancing practical operability.
Regulations on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Yunnan Province **云南省非物质文化遗产保护条例**	2013	Proposed nationally pioneering measures including establishing special funds, strengthening professional teams, and maintaining benefits/honorary titles for inheritors unable to fulfill duties due to objective reasons (e.g., illness/old age). Provided important references for improving national ICH protection laws.
Management Measures for Special Funds for ICH Protection in Yunnan Province **云南省非物质文化遗产保护专项资金管理措施**	2014	Regulated funding sources, usage scope, management requirements, and established supervision/evaluation mechanisms for special funds.

Management Measures for ICH Transmission Bases in Yunnan Province **云南省非物质文化遗产传承基地管理办法**	2016	Established standards for the establishment, management and evaluation of transmission bases, emphasizing their role in ICH safeguarding and transmission.
Opinions on Further Strengthening Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Work **关于进一步加强非物质文化遗产保护工作的意见**	2018	Proposed comprehensive protection system by 2025, emphasized integration with tourism and poverty alleviation, introduced dynamic assessment for inheritors, and promoted digital preservation and ecological conservation areas.
Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of ICH Items in Yunnan Province (Draft for Public Comment) **云南省非物质文化遗产代表性项目代表性传承人认定与管理办法（征求意见稿）**	2022 (public consultation)	Optimized support measures and rights protection based on 10-year experience, aligned with national requirements, while repealing the previous trial measures.

Table 3.5: Timeline of Major ICH Policies Issued in Yunnan, China (2000–2022).[56]

The provincial-level ICH policies were formulated by the government and experts based on Yunnan's provincial needs and practical experience, ensuring more precise and specific protection measures while aligning with national-level requirements (Wang Guangjie and Guan Bo 2024:54). In addition to provincial-level policies, several cities in Yunnan have also developed corresponding municipal-level ICH policies, such as Lijiang (Table 3.4). Such localized ICH protection and implementation policies not only serve as a response to the top-down administrative framework of national ICH policies but are also an inevitable outcome of

[56] For the full text of relevant documents and laws, visit the official website of China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network: Yunnan: http://yn.ihchina.cn/; additional implementation rules available at the official website of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Center of Yunnan Province: http://ynfy.yn.gov.cn/. Accessed June 6, 2025.

the bottom-up nomination processes and list-making mechanisms within China's ICH protection system.

Heritagizing Naxi Nursery Rhymes: China's ICH List-making practice in Lijiang

Anthony Seeger (2015:269–270) has highlighted that while UNESCO's "Representative Lists" are defined in the abstract language of the 2003 Convention, the process of selecting nominations and implementing measures to protect them varies across different levels (national, provincial, or local) of government, in different countries, each with its own history, government, and cultural policies, countries, and their unique history, government, and cultural policies. In 2006, 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2021, five batches of national-level project lists were announced in China. The first three batches were named "National-level Intangible Cultural Heritage List" (国家非物质文化遗产名录), and after the implementation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国非物质文化遗产法) in 2011, the fourth batch was renamed "National-level Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage List" (国家非物质文化遗产代表性目录). By 2021, a total of 1,557 representative items of national intangible cultural heritage had been announced. The government-led evaluation of the National-level ICH Representative List is primarily conducted by the Ministry of Culture and provincial/municipal cultural departments. Former Vice President of the Chinese Folklore Society, renowned Chinese folklorist Tao Lifan (陶立璠 2008:16) has commented on the application and review system of China's National-level ICH Representative List, noting that "Although this form is in line with

China's national conditions, it has to some extent formed the pattern of [moving from] 'government-led' to 'government-arranged.'"

The year 2006 witnessed a boom in Chinese cultural heritage, known as the Cultural Heritage Year (文化遗产年) (Liang Wenda 2017:112), which coincided with the introduction of several key policies: together with the promulgation of the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage List and the Interim Measures for the Declaration and Evaluation of Representative Works of National Intangible Cultural Heritage (国家非物质文化遗产代表作申报评价暂行办法), the *Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage* (关于加强我国非物质文化遗产保护的意见) were successively promulgated, proposing the establishment of a four-tier (national, provincial, municipal, and county-level) ICH management system (Tan Hong 2016:66). In order to attain inclusion in the Representative List of ICH at a higher level, a project/item must first obtain recognition at a lower level and become subject to protection on the list (the same goes for ICH inheritors). The stratification (from state, province, city, to county, and even village) produces a hierarchical distribution of values. Hierarchical management incorporates intangible cultural heritage that represents local or national values and characteristics into a screening and evaluation system, resulting in a classification of values. The process of grading is actually a process of value judgment.



Figure 3.5: Naxi folk singers He Huiqiong (和慧琼, left) and He Liyuan (和丽元, right) performing traditional ballads at Yunnan's 2024 International Museum Day celebration, Kunming Museum. Photograph by author. Event organized by Yunnan Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center. May 18, 2024.

Another defining feature of China's ICH movement is the establishment of a government-supported, hierarchical management system aligned with the four-tier ICH list. These agencies, named "X [administrative area] ICH Protection Center," operate as public institutions (事业单位)[57] under the jurisdiction of cultural authorities. The China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (中国非物质文化遗产保护中心, CICHPC), a key national institution, was founded in 2006, marking a peak in China's state-led ICH protection efforts. Following this model, regional centers emerged at different administrative levels, typically under the Bureau of Culture and Tourism. Since 2006, the movement has shifted toward practical implementation and nationwide expansion. Notable examples include the Yunnan ICH Protection Center (provincial

[57] In China, a public institution is a type of organization that is owned and funded by the government at various levels, including central, provincial, municipal, and county governments. These institutions typically operate in the areas of education, healthcare, culture, science and technology, sports, and other public services. Public institutions are often characterized by their non-profit, public-interest-oriented nature, and their mission to serve the needs of the people.

level, established 2011) (Figure 3.5) and the Lijiang ICH Protection Center (city level, established 2013) (Figure 3.6).



Figure 3.6: The Jun Yin Tang (钧音堂) music ensemble performing Lijiang Dongjing music during 2024 Cultural Heritage Day celebrations, hosted by Lijiang Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center. June 8, 2024. Photograph by author.

Moreover, Lijiang City has established fourth-tier intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection centers across all four of its subordinate counties and its one county-level district,[58] with specific establishment dates as follows (Table 3.6)：

INSTITUTION NAME	ESTABLISHED	GOVERNING BODY
Gucheng District ICH Protection Center 古城区非物质文化遗产保护中心	2010	Gucheng District Culture and Tourism Bureau

[58] In 2002, after the State Council approved the abolition of the former Lijiang Prefecture and the establishment of the prefecture-level Lijiang City in Yunnan Province, a comprehensive administrative division adjustment was implemented: the original Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County (county-level) was divided into Gucheng District (inheriting the original county seat and surrounding urban areas) and Yulong Naxi Autonomous County (governing western townships, with the county government relocated to Huangshan Town), while the remaining three counties—Yongsheng, Huaping and Ninglang—were incorporated under the jurisdiction of the newly established prefecture-level Lijiang City. For detailed information, refer to the official website of Lijiang Municipal People's Government: https://www.lijiang.gov.cn//ljsrmzf/c101853/202108/e5cb5f0dd2f74fa9862aff316f98f161.shtml. Accessed on March 29, 2025.

Yulong Naxi Autonomous County ICH Center **玉龙纳西族自治县非遗中心**	2012	Yulong County Culture and Tourism Bureau
Yongsheng County ICH Protection Center **永胜县非物质文化遗产保护中心**	2015	Yongsheng County Culture and Tourism Bureau
Huaping County ICH Protection Division **华坪县非遗保护部**	2016	Huaping County Cultural Center
Ninglang County ICH Protection Office **宁蒗县非遗保护办公室**	2014	Ninglang County Culture and Tourism Bureau

Table 3.6: Institutional Development of ICH Protection Centers in Lijiang (2010–2014).

In May 2021, the Naxi nursery rhymes of Lijiang, Yunnan, were included in the "Fifth Batch of National Representative Items of Intangible Cultural Heritage," announced by China's State Council, among 325 listed items. The project is overseen by the Lijiang Old Town District Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (GDICHPC). Here, I take the retrospective and critical reflections of He Dongmei (和冬梅), a provincial inheritor of *Naq xi ssiul ssiuf bee* (Naxi nursery rhymes, 纳西族童谣), on the heritagization process as a compelling case of China's bottom-up ICH listing mechanism.[59]

ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL	INCLUSION DATE	BATCH
Gucheng District-Level	April 2015	4th District-Level List
Lijiang Municipal-Level	August 2016	5th Municipal-Level List
Yunnan Provincial-Level	June 2017	4th Provincial-Level List
National-Level	May 2021	5th National-Level List (I-78)

Table 3.7: Accreditation timeline of Naxi nursery rhymes as ICH representative items (data provided by GDICHPC).

[59] The biographical data and other information mentioned here derive primarily from a formal interview with He Dongmei (和冬梅) conducted in her Lijiang residence on February 24, 2024, supplemented by multiple informal conversations during 2024–2025.

Judging solely by the accreditation timeline of Naxi nursery rhymes (Table 3.7), from their placement at the lowest tier of China's ICH list in 2013 to attaining national-level recognition in 2021, one might assume a "rapid and efficient" heritagization process. However, long before their official inclusion in 2013, He Dongmei—now a provincial-level inheritor—had already been working to revive these nearly forgotten rhymes since 1999.

He Dongmei (Figure 3.7), was born in 1970 in a small village in Shuhe, Lijiang, in the shadow of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, the towering peak sacred to the Naxi. Her childhood was steeped in the splendor of mountains, rivers, and vast pastoral fields, but above all, it was woven with the melodies of nursery rhymes that echoed through her earliest memories. Her father, the leader of the local production team, and her mother, toiling in the fields, left her in the care of the team's nursery, where teachers filled the days with song and laughter, singing Naxi nursery rhymes as they played with the children. At home, too, the music never ceased—her grandparents and parents carried on the tradition, their voices lulling her into the world of numbers, birds in the trees, and creatures burrowing in the soil.



Figure 3.7: He Dongmei (和冬梅) performing a Naxi-language skit at the Naxi Culture Public Welfare Workshop, Fuhui Middle School, Gucheng District, Lijiang. August 2024. Photograph by author.

As she grew older, He Dongmei followed a path shaped by her love for these early songs. After graduating from a kindergarten teacher training school, she became a kindergarten teacher at Huangshan Kindergarten in what was then still Lijiang County (later Yulong County). In 1997, she was transferred to Bailongtan Primary School (白龙潭小学) in the Old Town District, where she took up the role of music teacher. As she told me (Interview, February 24, 2024),

> In 1999, Lijiang was designated as a National Demonstration County for Rural Arts Education by the Ministry of Education. That same year, the Lijiang Education Bureau received a research project from the Ministry of Education and assembled a team, which included cultural experts, authoritative educators, and frontline teachers from subjects like art, physical education, and music. Among them was Zhang Xingrong (张兴荣) *laoshi* (老师, teacher),[60] who had been collecting folk music in Lijiang since 1988 and had even created the famous children's choral work *Han Yueliang* (Calling the Moon Out, 喊月亮) based on Naxi nursery rhymes. I was very honored to be included in this team as a frontline music teacher. This team . . . you could say it led me down a different path.

The primary goal of the project was to publish a set of textbooks suitable for first to ninth graders and to establish four training centers, as well as an ensemble called the "Naxi Children's Arts Troupe" (纳西娃娃艺术团). As both a frontline teacher and a native Naxi, He Dongmei was tasked with searching for materials for the textbook compilation:

> I flipped through all those books, but I couldn't find the songs I sang as a child. I had sung so many songs and played so many games growing up, but now, looking through music books and literature books, I found almost nothing. Even in *The History of Naxi Literature*, compiled by He Zhonghua (和钟华) and Yang Shiguang (杨世高), there were only a few nursery rhymes passed down from the Naxi tradition.

[60] Zhang Xingrong (b. 1941), native of Baoshan City, Yunnan Province, is a renowned Yunnanese ethnomusicologist and traditional musician. He began teaching at the Yunnan Art Institute (云南艺术学院), later Yunnan Arts University (云南艺术大学), in 1965, beginning intensive fieldwork on Yunnan's folk music in 1984. With his team, he undertook extensive audio, photographic, and video recordings of Yunnan's ethnic minority music and dance traditions over a period of over thirty years (Zhang Xingrong 2006: Preface). His musical adaptations based on Naxi traditional melodies remain widely popular in Naxi communities.

One day, because Zhang Xingrong, who was responsible for the Naxi Children's Arts Troupe (纳西娃娃艺术团), was attending another event at the Cultural Bureau, He Dongmei substituted for him and taught a class for the children's choir. She casually picked a Naxi nursery rhyme, and was met with an unexpected response—the children loved it:

> After I finished teaching that Naxi nursery rhyme, three teachers—two Han teachers and one Bai teacher—stood at the door in amazement. They said, "He Dongmei, we've lived in Lijiang for so many years, but we never knew that the Naxi people had such beautiful nursery rhymes." In that moment, I knew exactly what I needed to do next. It was a mission—it had already become a mission. I had to do this. . . .
>
> And then I started recording, writing down memories from my childhood. Back then, I didn't know Naxi pinyin. I didn't know it, so I just wrote things down randomly—just as long as I could understand it myself, that was enough.

In 2003, Lijiang introduced mother-tongue classes in primary schools (Jiang Shizhen 2007). He Dongmei's case study on integrating Naxi nursery rhymes into music education won second prize from the Ministry of Education. Inspired by this recognition, she proposed a research project on Naxi nursery rhymes to Principal He Wenjing (和文静). Together with two colleagues, He Shunlin (和顺林) and Yang Cenbing (杨岑炳), they formed a four-person fieldwork team, spending weekends collecting nursery rhymes from villages around Lijiang. Reflecting on this period, He Dongmei recalls both the rewards and hardships of their work. They endured a car accident, financial struggles, and external criticism. In 2005, she secured funding from Yunnan's 11th Five-Year Plan (十一五规划) for the research project, easing financial constraints.

Between 2006 and 2007, while preparing to publish their first collection, they faced unexpected setbacks beyond translation and digitization. In Mangshi, He Dongmei's cash was stolen at a hotel. On their return to Lijiang, they suffered another car accident, resulting in a

fatality. Principal He Wenjing was penalized and transferred, and He Dongmei fell into a prolonged depression (Interview, February 24, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the book's publication in 2007 sparked local recognition: "Our Naxi people actually have nursery rhymes!" That year, on Teachers' Day, Lijiang's Old Town District Education Bureau awarded Bailongtan Primary School 20,000 RMB (2,760 USD) for the book's impact. It quickly became a standard reference in local schools for mother-tongue and music classes.

In 2007, He Zhonghua (和钟华), president of the Yulong County Association for Ethnic Culture and Gender Studies (玉龙县民族文化与社会性别研究会), encouraged He Dongmei to continue her research. Between 2009 and 2012, she collaborated with three other primary and secondary school teachers, He Hong (和虹), He Jiezhen (和洁珍), and Zhao Xuemei (赵雪梅), to complete two major projects: the Visualized Mother Tongue Project (母语可视化项目), funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and an early childhood mother-tongue education project supported by the Hong Kong Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation (香港陈一心家庭基金) (Interview, February 24, 2024).

By 2012, their documentation of Naxi nursery rhymes had grown from 200 to nearly 400. A major milestone was the 2010 release of *Children's Songs Accompany Our Growth* (儿歌伴我们成长), the first officially published audiovisual collection of Naxi nursery rhymes, funded by IFAD and distributed freely across Lijiang. The Hong Kong-funded project resulted in a three-volume mother-tongue curriculum, incorporating nursery rhymes and a demonstration DVD of

educational games. In 2014, *Naxi Nursery Rhymes* was published by Yunnan People's Publishing House.

Naxi nursery rhymes first gained recognition as ICH in 2013, when the Old Town District ICH Protection Center granted 10,000 RMB (1,370 USD) during the preparation of a revised edition of *Naxi Nursery Rhymes*. The connection arose through He Shunlin, a member of the original fieldwork team, whose cousin happened to be the center's director (Interview, February 24, 2024).

After the publication of the revised edition in 2013, He Shunlin actively collaborated with the Old Town District ICH Protection Center to initiate the process of listing Naxi nursery rhymes as a district-level ICH project. In our interview (February 24, 2024), He Dongmei recalled,

> Then, I felt like it quickly became a municipal-level ICH item. And right after that, the following year, it seemed to have immediately advanced to the provincial level. When applying for district- and municipal-level ICH status, they never consulted us. It wasn't until the provincial-level application that they seemed to have reached out once. Later, Zhang Guihua, the person in charge at the time, mentioned applying for national-level recognition. They brought it up briefly, but all the materials were obtained from He Shunlin. Then, He Shunlin came to me to request my materials and articles. So, many of the explanations about nursery rhymes that appeared in their application weren't there originally; they were later taken from my writings. . . .
>
> The whole process felt very fast. But everything was handled entirely by the ICH Protection Center. So, in reality, there was no proper communication between the protection center and us, the inheritors. At the time, we even felt somewhat disrespected. We were the ones doing the collecting and passing down of the nursery rhymes, yet now the achievement belonged to them. Last year, the Lijiang Municipal Government awarded 200,000 RMB specifically for the nursery rhymes—but the reward went to the ICH Protection Center, not us. But none of this has anything to do with me, and it's not something I can control. I can only continue doing what I can. After becoming an ICH project, all I received was the title of "ICH Inheritor." . . .

> The success of the ICH designation is certainly inseparable from the work of the ICH Protection Center. But for those of us who have truly been inheriting, excavating, and safeguarding this heritage, from our perspective, they should have communicated with us properly before applying. They should have gathered everyone who had contributed to the nursery rhymes and given us a report on what was happening. But they didn't do that. I feel they fell short in this regard, which also led to many misunderstandings. But regardless of everything that has happened along the way, I believe my goal has been achieved—there were just some trivial disputes in between. We should focus on the bigger picture.

In December 2024, with support from the National Publishing Foundation's public welfare project, the Old Town District ICH Protection Center produced a digital audiovisual collection titled *Rescue Documentation of the Living Performance of Naxi Nursery Rhymes in Yunnan* (云南纳西族童谣活态演述抢救性影音记录). Spanning seven hours and fourteen minutes, the collection features 67 nursery rhymes alongside commentary from ten Naxi cultural and music experts. He Dongmei was interviewed as one of the experts and attended the donation ceremony for the collection.

The heritagization of Naxi nursery rhymes encapsulates key features of China's ICH list-making system:

- **Bottom-up, tiered application process**: The progression of Naxi nursery rhymes through the ICH hierarchy reflects China's structured approach. As stipulated in Article 24 of the National ICH Law, the process follows a four-tier system—district/county → municipal → provincial → national—requiring heritage to remain listed at each level for at least two years before advancing. However, as He Dongmei recalled during our February 2024 interview, exceptions are made for critically endangered items—a status applied to Naxi nursery rhymes during their accelerated progression from district to provincial-level recognition.

- **The muted inheritors**: At every stage of ICH application, investigations, documentation, evaluations, and nominations—including inheritor qualifications—are largely managed by ICH protection center officials, particularly at lower administrative levels. While this method once addressed the needs of rural culture-bearers with limited formal education or Mandarin proficiency, Naxi nursery rhymes present a unique case. As both a practitioner and an early researcher, He Dongmei possesses the expertise to articulate and analyze her own heritage. Yet, she remained excluded from the decision-making process, reduced to a byproduct of heritagization rather than an active participant in it.
- **Restricted access to funding and benefits**: Even after an item gains ICH status, cultural practitioners often see little direct benefit. Control over financial resources and policy implementation rests with ICH protection centers, sidelining those who actually sustain the tradition—not just in heritage-related events, but also in shaping protection initiatives.

Cultural heritage undergoes a far longer and more arduous journey before earning official recognition, and achieving that status should never be the ultimate goal. Through my many conversations with He Dongmei, I've witnessed laughter and tears, dedication and struggle. But as she herself put it, we must look beyond—toward the bigger picture.

CHAPTER FOUR

NAXI FOLKSONG IN THE AGE OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A RESTUDY

> When everything changes, from the small and immediate to the vast and abstract—the object of study, the world immediately around it, the student, the world immediately around him, and the wider world around them both—there seems to be no place to stand so as to locate just what has altered and how. (Geertz 1995:2)

Geertz captures a fundamental challenge faced by scholars who adopt ethnography as their primary research paradigm, particularly in fields like ethnomusicology and anthropology (Kloos 2004:133). I view ethnography as a "record of time," marked by its irreproducibility and non-replicability. Scholars have long recognized the constant interplay between external forces and the internal processes of their subjects, as well as their own evolving engagement with these dynamics. In response, many have turned to ethnographic restudies and revisits, striving to grasp and document these shifting realities (e.g., Merriam 1964, 1975; Shelemay 1977, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2022; Jairazbhoy 1991; Rice 1994, 2004; Geertz 1995; Seeger 2004, 2008; Buchanan 2006; DjeDje 2008).

This chapter revisits my earlier ethnographic study of Naxi folksongs in Lijiang, Yunnan, based on intermittent fieldwork from 2005 to 2010. In 2023, after a thirteen-year absence, I returned to Lijiang and surrounding regions for a restudy and new fieldwork. The Naxi still live beneath the mystical Jade Dragon Snow Mountain described by Joseph Rock (1947), but their cultural landscape has shifted dramatically with the rise of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) movement. When I first conducted research, the ICH initiative was just beginning and not central to my focus. Now, several songs I documented have been designated as ICH, and some of

the singers I interviewed have become official ICH inheritors—though not all. This restudy allows me to create a dialogue between myself as a scholar straddling ethnology and ethnomusicology, and to compare past and present observations. I also seek to offer new understanding and cultural interpretations by tracing how the "same" sites and practices change across time.

For my restudy plan, I draw inspiration from the highly acclaimed Bake Restudy (*Bake Restudy*, 1990) in the field of ethnomusicology by revisiting the sites and musicians I studied between 2005 and 2010. At the same time, I place particular emphasis on Types III and IV of Michael Burawoy's (1947–2025) four revisit methodological approaches. Type III revisits focus on internal processes of change, examining how transformations unfold from within a cultural system. Type IV revisits incorporate external forces—their emergence, disappearance, and dynamic interactions—into the analytical framework (Burawoy 2003:667).[61] By integrating these perspectives, this chapter seeks to capture both the internal evolution of Naxi folksongs and the broader sociopolitical currents shaping their development.

The chapter first addresses the changing ecosystems of Naxi folksong under ICH policies and against a background of rampant tourism development in Lijiang; next, it moves on to a detailed examination of "strategic inauthenticity" in the heritagization of folksong, with an in-depth case study of one of the most famous Naxi folksongs of all, *sseiq mei co*, and its

[61] Michael Burawoy (1947–2025), the British-American sociologist renowned for his work on labor, ethnography, and public sociology at UC Berkeley, proposed a typology of ethnographic "revisits" in his 2003 article. Among these, his Extended Case Method—which bridges ethnographic fieldwork with macro-social theory—remains particularly influential (Burawoy 2003).

transformations under the ICH regime. Finally, the chapter addresses the different types of singers who run the gamut today between ICH recognition on the one hand and vernacular practice on the other.

Changing Ecosystems of Naxi Folksong Under ICH Policies

In Chapter Three I discussed the localization of UNESCO-style ICH protection in China, focusing on the construction of a distinct Chinese discourse on ICH and how Yunnan Province has adapted national heritage policies to the local context. As one of China's most ethnically diverse provinces, Yunnan began state-led ethnographic and cultural surveys early on and was among the first regions in China to have sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In the 1990s, under the provincial strategy to develop Yunnan into a major destination for ethnic cultural tourism, Lijiang quickly emerged as a key tourism hub both locally and nationally, with the World Heritage sites a huge draw. Tourism soon became a primary source of revenue for the region, and ultimately a key context within which local ICH projects have developed.

Tourism and Folk Performance in Lijiang, 1990s–Early 2000s

Lijiang County (now Yulong County) opened to the outside world in 1985 (Wang Ruo 1986:50; Rees 2000:34). In the very first year of its opening, around 700 foreign tourists and visitors from Hong Kong and Macau traveled to Lijiang, marking the beginning of a trickle of international visitors (Wang Ruo 1986:50). In the late 1980s, as policies gradually liberalized, the region's stunning landscapes and unique ethnic culture attracted an increasing number of Western

backpackers to Lijiang (Rees 2000:34). In 1992, Yulong Snow Mountain was designated a provincial-level tourism development zone, signaling a shift toward an industry-oriented tourism model (Tang Tingting 2013:76). The then-Governor of Yunnan, He Zhiqiang (和志强, 1934–2007), a Naxi from Shuhe village, played a key role in advancing heritage tourism. At the 1994 Northwest Yunnan Tourism Planning Conference (滇西北旅游规划会议), he called for accelerating the nomination of Lijiang Old Town and the Three Parallel Rivers (三江并流, i.e., the magnificent gorges of the Salween, Mekong, and Jinsha rivers) for World Heritage status, famously declaring that the Old Town should be "protected like one's own eyes."[62] In 1995, after an expert assessment by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, Lijiang was added to China's tentative list for World Heritage status. In July, the provincial government approved the Lijiang Historic and Cultural City Conservation Plan, and a nomination task force was established in December.

However, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Lijiang on February 3, 1996, causing severe damage and halting the application process. After nearly two years of restoration, Lijiang Old Town was officially inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on December 4, 1997.[63] To celebrate the second anniversary of the restoration and reconstruction of the Old Town of Lijiang

[62] *Yunnan Daily* (云南日报), December 5, 1994, front page, "和志强在滇西北考察中强调: '要像保护自己的眼睛一样保护丽江古城'" (He Zhiqiang emphasizes "Protecting Lijiang Old Town like our own eyes" during Northwest Yunnan inspection), Microfilm Collection of Yunnan Provincial Library (call number: YN-Daily-1994-12-05).

[63] On Lijiang's UNESCO bid, see Yunnan Broadcasting Television's 2021 documentary 丽江古城申遗成功记! (Lijiang's Journey to World Heritage Status): http://www.wenlvnews.com/p/606544.html. In 1998, the Gucheng Management Station was set up to administer the environment, and in 2005 was reorganized as the World Heritage Old Town of Lijiang Protection and Management Bureau (丽江世界文化遗产古城保护与管理局, the LPMB) (Shao Yong 2012:8).

and the successful application of Lijiang for World Cultural Heritage status, the Lijiang County Party Committee and County Government organized a series of cultural events in Lijiang, commencing with the "Voice of Lijiang" (丽江之声) Southwest Regional Celebratory Singer Television Competition (西南地区青年歌手电视大赛圆满结束) held from January 16 to 20, 1998, as a flagship initiative. The competition, organized through provincial and regional nominations, brought 49 contestants to Lijiang for the semi-finals and finals. Awards were distributed across three categories—bel canto (美声), ethnic (民族), and popular singing (通俗)—with 3 gold, 9 silver, and 17 bronze medals awarded, plus recognition for twenty emerging music talents. Seven Lijiang-based singers won awards: Hong Hong (洪宏) (bel canto); He Jinhua (和金花), Zhang Guihua (张桂华), and Li Ruishan (李瑞山) (ethnic style); and Guo Xiufen (郭秀芬), Wen Jun (和文军), and He Zhiqiu (和志秋) (popular style) ("Lijiang zhi sheng" 1998:18). On February 3 the same year, another series of cultural and artistic celebration events titled "Echoes of Lijiang" (丽江回音) was held. Among them, the music activities accounted for a large proportion. The event specially invited many renowned Chinese singers, such as Yan Weiwen (阎维文), Jiang Dawei (蒋大为), and Qubi A'wu (曲比阿乌)[64] and the Central Nationalities Dance and Song Troupe (中央民族歌舞团) to participate (Chen Xu and Hong Wei 1998:22).

[64] Yan Weiwen (阎维文, 1957–) and Jiang Dawei (蒋大为, 1947–) are renowned Chinese tenors. Yan is celebrated for his military-themed songs, such as "说句心里话" (Speaking from the heart), which expresses soldiers' nostalgia for home. Jiang, one of the most representative vocalists of the early reform-and-opening era, is best known for "在那桃花盛开的地方" (Where the peach blossoms bloom). Qubi A'wu (曲比阿乌, 1963–), a celebrated Yi soprano, popularized neo-folk songs like "远方的客人请你留下来" (Please stay, guest from afar), a Yunnan Yi-style song.

In these early-stage initiatives, indigenous Lijiang performing arts and traditional culture were not yet prioritized as core elements. Municipal strategies for destination branding still predominantly featured celebrity guests and musicians imported from elsewhere in China. The strategic integration of tourism with indigenous cultural preservation initially prioritized two emblematic traditions: *dobbaq* ritual practices (rooted in Naxi animistic ritual heritage) and Lijiang's *Dongjing* music, now colloquially termed "Naxi ancient music" in tourism contexts. Between 1999 and 2003, Lijiang authorities launched several flagship tourism programs that featured these traditions (Table 4.1):

YEAR	MAJOR EVENT	DATE
1999	a) '99 Kunming World Expo (Lijiang Sub-Venue)	May 1 – Oct 31
	b) 1st China Lijiang Int'l Dongba Culture & Art Festival	Oct 16 – 20
2000	a) China Kunming Int'l Tourism Festival (Lijiang Sub-Venue)	May 10 – 20
	b) The First China Lijiang International Dongba Culture Tourism Festival	May 1 – 5
2001	a) Beijing-Lijiang Cultural Week	May 1 – 7
	b) 2nd China Lijiang Int'l Dongba Culture Tourism Festival	May 1 – 7
	c) Asia-Pacific Conf. on Cultural Heritage Management	Oct 8 – 17
2002	a) 3rd China Lijiang Int'l Dongba Culture Tourism Festival	May 1 – 7
	b) Large-scale ethnic performance *Lishui Jinsha* (丽水金沙)	May 1 – 7
	c) 1st Lijiang Snow Mountain Music Festival (Pop)	Aug 17 – 18
2003	a) Celebration of the Demotion of Lijiang County to City Status	Sep 20 – 24
	b) 2nd China Lijiang Int'l Dongba Culture & Art Festival	Sep 25 – 27

Table 4.1: Major tourism and cultural events in Lijiang (1999–2003).

Between 2000 and 2002, Lijiang hosted three consecutive May Day tourism festivals under the banner of "Dongba Culture."[65] At the inaugural festival, performers from Kunming

[65] The three lexemes—Chinese pinyin Dongba (*dongba*), Naxi romanization *dobbaq*, and Sinograph 东巴—represent parallel designations for Naxi ritual practitioners, with all forms actively circulating in academic and community contexts.

presented a large-scale show titled “The Charm of Dongba” (东巴魂) in a plaza near the Dongba Dynasty restaurant at the foot of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Although the festival featured anAcademic Seminar on Dongba Culture and Lijiang Tourism (东巴文化与丽江旅游学术研讨会), discussions largely centered on tourism development rather than *dongba* culture itself. By the second and third festivals, activities had even less direct relevance to *dongba* culture (Dai Guangquan 2004:83). Naxi ancient music and folk dances were often showcased as exotic local highlights. For instance, the 1999 Kunming International Tourism Festival (Lijiang sub-venue) staged a multicultural arts program rooted in Naxi culture, featuring Naxi music, *dobbaq* exhibitions, folk customs at Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, and ethnic performances in the Old Town square—all emphasizing Naxi traditions.

The tourism industry in Lijiang has witnessed a remarkable development since the 1990s, with visitor numbers growing from 96,000 in 1990 to 841,000 in 1995—a 53.1% annual increase—while tourism revenue surged by 70% yearly to 326 million RMB (US$39 million). By 2000, arrivals exceeded 3 million, generating over 1.5 billion RMB (US$181 million) in revenue, with an average annual growth rate of 35%. Post-2000, tourism became Lijian’s most dynamic economic driver (Zhang Yumei 2001). In the late 1990s (1996–2002), Lijiang emerged as Yunnan’s fastest-growing international tourism destination, exceeding both national growth rates and the performance of Kunming (provincial capital) and Xishuangbanna (Dai Guangquan 2004:84).

By the late 1990s, Lijiang’s *Dongjing* music (usually represented by Dayan Ancient Music Association, led by Xuan Ke) had achieved international fame through its concerts for foreign

backpackers that had begun in 1988 and its international tours, the first of which, to England, took place in 1995. As late as the mid-1980s the tradition had retained its primarily local significance, but barely ten years later it played a major role in attracting outside attention to Lijiang County (Rees 2000:141).

The Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association was reestablished in 1984, initiating monthly musical gatherings for members' entertainment and practice. Xuan Ke first proposed public performances in 1986, collaborating with local musician and cultural official Yang Zenglie (杨曾烈)[66] to prepare this transition. Elected president at the 1987 annual meeting, Xuan Ke subsequently led the ensemble on tour to Kunming universities for both performances and scholarly exchange (He Jielei 2011:37). The association formally debuted public concerts in 1988 (Yang Zenglie 1998:103; Rees 2000:152; He Jielei 2011:37), and adopted the new name Dayan Naxi Ancient Music Association (大研纳西古乐会) in the early 1990s following Xuan Ke's popularization of the term "Naxi ancient music" (*Naxi guyue,* 纳西古乐) (He Jielei 2011:37). The ensemble became a cultural landmark after Lijiang's 1997 UNESCO designation, with its 8:00 PM concerts evolving into a staple of tourist itineraries. This commercialization culminated in 2000 with its incorporation as Lijiang Xuan Ke Naxi Ancient Music Culture Co., Ltd., with the charismatic English-speaking leader Xuan Ke as chairman, marking its transition into cultural industrialization (Yang Jiehong 2009:38).

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[66] Yang Zenglie (杨曾烈, b.1939), is a renowned musician in Lijiang, and a core member of the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association (丽江大研古乐会). He is celebrated for his performance and research on *Dongjing* music and many other Naxi genres. Born in nearby Heqing County into a Han Chinese family, he was sent to work in Lijiang as a teenager and has stayed there the rest of his life (liner notes to CD *Naxi Music from Lijiang: The Dayan Ancient Music Association* [1995]).

Another premier ethnic performance group in Lijiang at the time was the Dongba Palace (东巴宫)—not merely a venue but a folk performance organization integrating performances, research, and cultural preservation. Officially registered under two names (Lijiang Dongba Folk Art Troupe [丽江东巴艺术民间艺术团] and Dongba Palace Co., Ltd.), it was established in 1998 as Lijiang's first privately owned enterprise operating under a corporate structure (Yang Jiehong 2009:39). Located in the Old Town (directly across the street from the Dayan Ancient Music Association), its entrance often featured a senior *dobbaq* priest dressed in traditional ritual attire, drawing tourists for photos. True to its name, the Dongba Palace specialized in showcasing Naxi *dobbaq* culture, including *dobbaq* dances, pictographic script recitations, and religious chants, alongside *leq bbaq* dances and Naxi folk songs—all performed by local folk artists and experienced *dobbaq* practitioners.

Western attention surged during this period, marked not only by overseas performances of groups like the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association but also by an influx of foreign scholars, media, and even long-term expatriates settling in Lijiang (Rees 2004:149). The 1990s tourism boom—driven by growing numbers of international and domestic visitors—drew increasing numbers of Naxi people into the industry, including folk musicians like my early research informants: Jinjia Jinsong (金甲劲松) (who migrated from Tacheng to sing Naxi folk songs at the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association as it diversified the genres offered), He Jinhua (和金花) (a professional singer at Yulong County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe, who also performed at the Dongba Palace), and He Wenguang (和文光) with his wife He Guofang (和国芳) (who staged irregular folk performances across the Old Town). These artists became

key figures in Lijiang's cultural tourism scene, with the industry providing Naxi folk music and singers their first significant platform within tourism's consumerist cultural field (Tang Tingting 2013:80).

Naxi Folksongs in Lijiang: Social-Cultural Dynamics (2000–2010)

As noted above, between 2000 and 2010, China launched the Western Development Strategy (西部大开发) to boost its western regions, including Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangxi, and Inner Mongolia.[67] Supported by the state, Yunnan took the lead in developing a "cultural province," becoming the first to industrialize ethnic cultural resources. In 2000, it introduced the "building a strong ethnic culture province" (建设民族文化强省) objective to turn these resources into cultural industries. By 2003, Lijiang was named a national pilot zone for cultural reform, with new policies on staffing, taxation, and investment aimed at revitalizing performing arts, handicrafts, and the creative sector (Chen Lifang 2022:68–69). This shift redirected state-employed artists, such as Naxi musician He Wenguang (和文光) (a key figure in my 2005–2010 fieldwork), into cultural tourism and private creative ventures.

He Wenguang (b.1963), a native of Xiapa Village (下爬村), Tacheng Township, in Yulong County, began his career as a primary school teacher after graduating from Lijiang Normal School in 1981. While teaching, he collected and organized local folk traditions, integrating

[67] The Western Development Strategy (西部大开发) was first proposed at the Fourth Plenary Session of the 15th CPC Central Committee in September 1999 and fully launched in January 2000. Initially covering 12 provinces/autonomous regions/municipalities (including Yunnan and Sichuan), it later expanded to incorporate Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and others, eventually encompassing 20 provincial-level administrative units (71% of China's total land area).

dobbaq culture, folk songs, and *leq bbaq* dance into the school curriculum. In 1985, he passed a recruitment exam and joined the Lijiang County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe (丽江县民族歌舞团) (now the Yulong County Ethnic Cultural Work Team, 玉龙县民族文化工作队) in 1987. Alongside performing, he studied composition and set out to become "the Naxi Wang Luobin,"[68] composing neo-Naxi folksongs. By the 1990s, with China's growing tourism industry, He Wenguang left the troupe in 1995 to perform independently with his wife, He Guofang, touring tourist hubs like Hainan. He returned to Lijiang in 1998 and gained recognition during the 1999 First China Lijiang International Dongba Culture and Art Festival (首届国家东巴文化艺术节). That year, he released his self-funded debut cassette *Soul of the Naxi* (纳西魂), which became popular with both locals and tourists. In 2003, as the troupe underwent a transformation from a cultural institution model to enterprise management model (文化体制改革), He transitioned from a state-employed artist to an independent performer. Earlier, in 2001, he had co-founded the Lijiang Folk Artists Association (丽江民间艺人联谊会), securing regular performances in tourist venues such as Square Street (四方街) and Dongba Palace. During my many visits in Lijiang, I was invited by He Wenguang on several occasions to take part in events and performances organized by the association.[69]

[68] Wang Luobin 王洛宾 (1913–1996), widely regarded as China's foremost folk song scholar-composer, systematically documented and reinterpreted numerous of ethnic minority melodies, primarily from Xinjiang and northwestern regions. He was also a pioneer of the *xin min'ge* (neo folksong, 新民歌) movement. His later years were dogged by controversy and criticism by many Xinjiang ethnic groups for allegedly profiting off "their" songs (Harris 2005).

[69] The primary data and ethnographic materials cited herein derive from interviews and field notes collected during longitudinal participant observation with He Wenguang (2005–2009).

Following the inscription of Lijiang Old Town as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 1997, the region achieved further international recognition: in July 2003, the Three Parallel Rivers (三江并流) were designated a World Natural Heritage site, and in August 2003, the Naxi *dobbaq* manuscripts were added to the Memory of the World Register. This made Lijiang the only city in China to hold UNESCO's triple crown of cultural, natural, and documentary heritage distinctions. Lijiang Airport expanded in 2003 to support international flights. It is convenient and attractive for more domestic and foreign tourists to visit Lijiang for sightseeing and vacation.

In 2005, Yunnan Province launched its "Second Wave of Tourism Development" (旅游二次创业) strategy, shifting focus from mass tourism to high-value cultural and leisure experiences (Zhang Minglei 2011:41). That same year, the Yunnan Tourism Development Ordinance emphasized integrating ethnic culture with tourism. As a flagship destination, Lijiang received strong national and provincial funding—not only for preserving Lijiang Old Town but also for developing nearby villages like Shuhe and Baisha. The city promoted a distinctive "slow living" (慢生活) lifestyle, which contrasts with urban China's rapid modernization, to establish its tourism brand (Zhang Wenyin and Jiang Ming 2011:25). Bars, guesthouses, and cafés quickly filled the Old Town, and many locals rented out their properties while relocating to modern apartments, avoiding tourist crowds and earning stable rental income.

However, such a tourism boom merely introduced a limited set of Naxi performing arts into the field of tourism consumption, and raised questions about authenticity. It did not play a significant role in protecting and encouraging the transmission of Naxi folk songs. Aside from cassette tapes and CDs of "Naxi ancient music," local music shops offered few Naxi folk

recordings (Li Xin 2001:74). During my fieldwork in Lijiang from 2005 to 2009, tourists typically encountered Naxi performance arts through three main avenues: (1) cultural tourism projects like the Dayan Ancient Music Association, Dongba Palace, and staged productions like *Lijiang: River and Gold Sand* (丽水金沙) (2002), *Impression Lijiang* (印象丽江) (2006), and *Lijiang Eternal Love* (丽江千古情) (2014); (2) bars, cafés, and restaurants playing Naxi neo-folk and Naxi-language pop songs (Yang Shuo 2014:35; Rees 2021:343); and (3) local tourism festivals and events (Tang Tingting 2013:80).

Naxi folksong performances in these various settings ranged from traditional tunes to neo-folk and pop adaptations, forming what I call "the reproduction of Naxi folksongs across four distinct cultural fields" (Tang Tingting 2013:79–105) in my previous studies:

1. *Tourism consumption field*: Naxi folksongs were reproduced in fixed formats for tourist consumption. Some Naxi musicians transformed the highly improvisational nature of traditional songs into scripted performances, even blending traditional, neo-folk, and pop styles into hybrid forms. Tourists often mistook these stylized adaptations for authentic tradition.
2. *Naxi mass culture field*: As modern life accelerated the decline of traditional customs, folk songs lost their original performance contexts. New media—cassettes, CDs, and MP3s—replaced live singing, and entertainment overtook ritual in local folk activities. While older generations still appreciated traditional tunes, younger people favored lively, carnival-like dances—*dal laq li* (Chinese: *datiao*, 打跳).

3. *Traditional ethnic culture field*: In remote rural areas, traditional folk songs still survived, but generational gaps posed a challenge. As young people migrated to cities for work, the oral transmission of folk songs was disrupted, leaving few inheritors of these traditions.
4. *Elite cultural field*: During my 2007–2009 fieldwork, I identified a distinct "elite cultural field" that emerged within Lijiang's tourism-driven cultural landscape. This field developed alongside the professionalization of Naxi musicians. Some Chinese scholars refer to these individuals as "professional indigenes" (职业土著) (Zhao Hongmei and Li Wei 2010:59)—figures who present themselves as cultural elites and stewards of Naxi tradition. They play a key role in deciding which musical forms are showcased to outsiders and actively shape the aesthetic direction and development of contemporary Naxi music.

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork data from 2005 to 2009 and contemporaneous scholarly publications by Chinese researchers, "tourism-oriented cultural industries" emerged as the central socioeconomic and cultural paradigm in Lijiang and broader Yunnan Province during this period. Within Lijiang's tourism economy, Naxi musical expressions of all genres and themes became commodified as vehicles for differentiated tourist consumption and exoticized experiences. The Naxi people, deeply embedded in what was heralded as China's pioneering "Lijiang model" (丽江模式) of ethnic cultural ecotourism, demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm for cultivating "world-renowned cultural brands" (e.g., Nian Jiwei 2004; Liu Jianfeng, Wang Guiyu and Zhang Xiaoping 2009; Yang Jiehong 2009; Sun Buzhong, Zi Tao and Zeng Yongmei

2010; Zhao Hongmei and Li Wei 2010).[70] This phenomenon subsequently sparked intense academic debates about the "onstage" versus "backstage" authenticity of traditional music performances tailored for tourist consumption (e.g., Zhao Hongmei 2008). These discussions gradually shifted public and scholarly attention away from mere fascination with "unmediated authenticity" (原生态) (e.g., Rees 1998; Weng Naiqun 2010; Zhu, Yujie 2012; Ji Rutian 2014) toward more nuanced concerns about the living continuity and sustainable preservation of cultural heritage (e.g., Li Jia 2009; Pan Hongyi 2009; Meng Jie 2010; Opschoor, Hans, and Lina Tang 2011; Li Chao 2012).

As China's ICH policies extended from central to local governments—like capillaries reaching the body's smallest vessels—the number of recognized heritage items and inheritors steadily increased. This gave rise to a new social group: ICH inheritors, now the official bearers of Naxi musical traditions. Meanwhile, other practitioners continued "informal" transmission within or beyond the official system. It is now necessary to include these inheritors within the fourth cultural field of elites I previously outlined. Although some overlap with earlier "professional natives," this group represents a distinct cultural and social value in the ICH era.

[70] The Naxi music industry has systematically promoted cultural icons such as world music figure Xuan Ke (宣科), the Naxi musical dynasty of He Wenguang's family (和文光家族) (Shi Xiaoliang 2006), "living national treasure" Xiao Rulian (肖茹莲), and hunter-singer Jinjia Jinsong (金甲劲松). The Lijiang Snow Mountain Music Festival, initiated in 2002 by Chinese rock pioneer Cui Jian, became a government-sponsored cultural brand featuring mainstream pop/rock stars that attracted young tourists. Its second (2007) and third (2008) editions were held in Shuhe Ancient Town (束河古镇). By then, the festival had evolved into a mature Lijiang music label, expanding from pure rock to folk, pop, and electronic genres (Wang Ying 2016). In 2008, the duo Naxi Sisters (He Jinhua [和金花] and Dapo Maji [达坡玛吉]) won the silver medal in the Original Ecology Folk Song category (原生态唱法) at the 13th CCTV Young Singers Grand Prix (青年歌手大奖赛), representing the highest national recognition achieved by Naxi folk music in China's professional vocal competition history at that time.

Naxi Folksong in Transition: Early ICH Recognition and Its Discontents (2005–2016)

> Generally speaking, in China great emphasis is placed on validation from the perceived political and/or cultural center. There is a range of national- and province-level festivals, prizes, and competitions in all artistic spheres, and people express a rightful pride in their achievement if they win one of these. International awards are also highly valued. (Rees 2000:161)

What Rees observed during her 1990s fieldwork—well before mine—has been consistently reaffirmed through my own studies and restudies in the decades that followed, with the Naxi music tradition offering a particularly persuasive example.

Starting in the early 1990s, growing national and international recognition of Lijiang's traditional music—along with expanded performance opportunities—brought prestige to participating musicians and cultural capital to both Lijiang County and the Naxi people (Rees 2000:162; 2002). This increased visibility, especially of *Dongjing* music and its prominent advocate Xuan Ke (head of the Dayan Ancient Music Association), shaped local government policy and funding priorities, including efforts to revive lost repertoires with rural elders (Zhang Yumei 2001). A significant milestone came in 2004 with Lijiang's Regulations on the Protection and Management of Naxi Folk Music (纳西族民间音乐保护与管理条例) and Yulong County's parallel ordinance to institutionalize preservation through state-supported documentation, UNESCO nominations, talent development, and international collaboration (Sang Yuehua 2016:14).

Following China's success in securing UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity designation for *Kunqu* opera in 2001, the culturally astute Naxi people had already begun preparing to nominate their own traditions for the same honor by 2003—two years

before China formally established its national intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection system in 2005. Among the key figures driving these early efforts was Li Zhidian, who assumed the role of Director of the Lijiang Old Town District Cultural Bureau in May 2003 and became a leading organizer of this proactive nomination campaign.



Figure 4.1: Li Zhidian, former Director of Yulong County Cultural Affairs Bureau and head of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Declaration Working Committee. Lijiang, August 21, 2021. Photo by author.

In an August 21, 2021 interview, I spoke with Li Zhidian (李之典, Figure 4.1), then president of the Lijiang Heritage Protection Association and former director of the Yulong County Cultural Bureau. As head of the ICH declaration working group, he recalled that before the formal system of naming national-level ICH inheritors was implemented, artists with exceptional folk skills were simply recognized as folk musicians or folk artists (民间艺人). He noted that Gucheng District's government officially launched the application process for ICH

recognition of *sseiq mei co* and "Naxi ancient music" (both *Dongjing* music and *bbe sheeq xil li*)[71] in 2003, establishing a dedicated working group to lead the effort. Li Zhidian recalled:

> Back then, we were really inexperienced. Our initial plan was to bundle Naxi ancient music (纳西古乐) and *sseiq mei co* together as a single package for the ICH nomination. But unfortunately, that was exactly when Mr. Xuan Ke and Professor Wu Xueyuan (吴学源) from the Yunnan Academy of Arts were locked in that high-profile lawsuit over the Naxi ancient music controversy. . . . There is a fundamental difference between Baisha xiyue (*bbe sheeq xil li*) and *Dongjing* music—*Dongjing* music is not unique to the Naxi, it was introduced to Lijiang by the Han people. But, Baisha Xiyue originated from Naxi culture, while what Xuan Ke's ensemble performed as "Naxi ancient music" (纳西古乐) was two traditions, but under the same lable. . . . When organizing the nomination of such ICH projects, primary consideration must be given to their existing international and academic influence. By that time, both Naxi ancient music (*Naxi guyue*) and *sseiq mei co* had already been extensively documented by domestic and foreign scholars. Since each locality could only submit one nomination, we bundled them together as a combined application. The proposal passed the provincial-level evaluation without any objections. . . . Unfortunately, despite Xuan Ke eventually winning the lawsuit, Professor Tian Qing (田青)—a leading authority on the national ICH review committee— maintained disagreement with the outcome. . . . In the end, our entire bundled proposal got rejected at the national level. . . . Years later, when we reapplied for national-level ICH status, we split them up. Given the lingering controversy around *Naxi guyue* and Tian Qing's influence on the expert panel, we strategically prioritized *sseiq mei co*—and that time, it succeeded. (Interview August 21, 2021)

The table below outlines key dates and milestones in the application process for *sseiq mei co* and Naxi ancient music as representative items of ICH (Table 4.2).

DATE	APPLICATION LEVEL	RESULT	SUMMARY
July 2003	UNESCO	Unsuccessful	Application for Naxi ancient music (including *sseiq mei co*, *bbe sheeq xil liq* 白沙细乐, and *Dongjing* music) as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.
March 2005	District-level (Gucheng)	Successful	*Sseiq mei co* included among 85 items in Gucheng District's first ICH protection list.

[71] *Bbe sheeq xil liq* (白沙细乐, Baisha Xiyue) and *Dongjing* music (洞经音乐) constituted the foundational repertoire of the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association. They were collectively branded as Naxi ancient music (*Naxi guyue*, 纳西古乐)—a conceptual synthesis pioneered by Xuan Ke.

July 2005	National	pending	*Sseiq mei co* and *bbe sheeq xil liq* submitted for China's 2nd National ICH List.
2006	Provincial (Yunnan)	Successful	Dadong Township (birthplace of *sseiq mei co*) named "Hometown of Naxi *sseiq mei co*" by Yunnan government.
June 2008	National	Successful	*Sseiq mei co* officially listed in China's 2nd National ICH List.
2011	National	Successful	Dadong Township awarded "Hometown of Chinese Folk Culture and Art" by Ministry of Culture.
2016	National	Successful	Dadong Township reaffirmed as "Hometown of Chinese Folk Culture and Art."

Table 4.2: Key milestones in the ICH nomination process: Naxi ancient music and sseiq mei co (2003–2016).

In conversations with Li Zhidian, we agreed that the heritagization of Naxi performing arts in Lijiang began with the UNESCO nomination efforts for Naxi ancient music and the ritual song-and-dance *sseiq mei co*—despite their initial failure—marking a pivotal moment in institutional recognition. The official framework and atmosphere for ICH in Lijiang began to take shape in 2008, when *sseiq mei co* was successfully included in China's second National ICH List.

From Oral Tradition to Heritage Regime: Naxi Folksong and Its Practitioners in Transition

Restudy—as a methodological approach to evolving research subjects and their social contexts—carries significant revisionist potential when scholars return to the same issues or communities. In *After the Fact*, Clifford Geertz (1995) reflects on four decades of fieldwork in Indonesia and

Morocco—two Islamic societies shaped by different trajectories of modernization and political change. Yet the book is more than a chronicle of field experience; it interrogates the historicity, contingency, and reflexivity at the heart of anthropological knowledge production. Similarly, Yunxiang Yan's long-term restudies of individual agency and institutional change in Chinese society, both rural and urban, since his first fieldwork in 1989 (Yunxiang Yan 2009:1, 3, 5), have progressively refined his conclusions about the individualization of Chinese society in the early 21st century (Yunxiang Yan 1994; 2009; 2010).

In my own case, from revisiting my 2005–2009 field site in 2022 to conducting a restudy over 2023–2024, I have become increasingly aware of how the ICH movement, as the dominant external force and research variable, has triggered institutional transformations in Chinese society over the past ten to twenty years. Its impact on the motivations and meanings ascribed by individual actors (performers or audiences) within this "social movement" (Alexander 2006; Blee and McDowell 2012; Malacarne 2021) is far from homogeneous. Drawing on audience studies and through re-interviewing previous participants alongside new research subjects, I now examine how their actions and outcomes reflect their roles as audiences of the ICH movement—shaped by, yet also navigating, a state-managed cultural regime.

"Strategic Inauthenticity" in Naxi Folksong's Heritagization

In previous chapters, I have devoted substantial attention to the formation and structure of China's institutional discourse on ICH. In this section, I shift the focus from state-led texts and policies to the performers and audiences of ICH—those who engage with and respond to these

institutional frameworks. As Bratich (2005: 245) argues, studying audiences requires us to consider the production of subjectivity on its own terms. In exploring how ICH practitioners navigate the commodification of heritage within tourism and the broader entanglement of heritage and economic development, Su Junjie (2023: 20) proposes a "practitioners-based approach." This approach, both critical and interpretive, views social reality as constituted by multiple, interacting subjectivities. It aims to understand how meaning is produced through individuals' lived experiences and their interactions with the surrounding world (Hesse-Biber 2010:104).

The term "authenticity" is frequently invoked in discussions of the performing arts and has long been a key criterion—alongside sustainability—for evaluating forms, styles, and even the responsibilities of heritage bearers in the context of cultural heritage, including ICH. In China, the concept of authenticity (原生态) is often emphasized during the expert review process for ICH list-making, particularly when distinguishing or ranking the cultural value of various practices. However, the act of inscription—whether at the local, national, or international level—is inherently selective and exclusive, involving processes of meaning-making (Smith et al. 2006:3–4). Thus, a folk tradition's perceived authenticity is often linked to decisions about which forms, genres, performers, regions, or ethnic groups are included or left out. Authenticity can become the justification for state funding, textbook inclusion, or cultural prestige, as it legitimizes particular traditions, lineages, and individuals (Terada 2007:1). Yet, the pursuit of "authenticity" is not inherently rational or universally justified. As tourism theorists Steiner and Reisinger (2006:299) note, authenticity is a complex and context-dependent concept—"a

meddled amalgam of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual ideas"—that often defies clear definition (Golomb 1995:7). More importantly, traditions designated as cultural heritage are not static; they are constantly in flux, shaped by evolving cultural, political, and social contexts.

The concept of authenticity first gained formal recognition in heritage discourse with the 1964 Venice Charter[72] and was later adopted by UNESCO by 1978.[73] Initially focused on the static material qualities of cultural heritage, authenticity became central to the "authorized heritage discourse" promoted by UNESCO (Smith 2006),[74] and was eventually codified as a requirement for World Heritage inscription (UNESCO 2015, Art. 79).[75] However, when UNESCO introduced the concept of intangible cultural heritage through the Masterpieces Programme in 1998, the notion of authenticity was deliberately excluded from the draft framework (Schmitt 2008). Similarly, the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2015, Art. 8) do not apply the term "authenticity" to ICH. Hafstein (2004) even argues that authenticity was not merely sidelined but actively shunned within the ICH Convention framework. Ahmed Skounti (2009) reinforces this view, stating that ICH, by its nature, lacks authenticity because it is always changing, fluid, and never performed in exactly the

[72] The full text of the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter 1964) is available through the official ICOMOS Civvih portal: https://civvih.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Charter-of-Venice_1964.pdf. Accessed June 22, 2025.
[73] The full text is available through the UNESCO: The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention: https://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide78.pdf. Accessed June 22, 2025.
[74] Theorized by Laurajane Smith (2006:29), "The authorized heritage discourse (AHD) focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material object, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and reverse so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for 'education,' and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past."
[75] The full text is available through the UNESCO: The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention: https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines (2015: 17). Accessed June 22, 2025.

same way (Skounti 2009: 92). To this day, even beyond UNESCO, there is no universally accepted definition of authenticity in the broader heritage field (Su Junjie 2023:22).

Yet in China, "authenticity" (原生态; later, 原真性; 真实性) has become a specialized and central term within the official ICH discourse. From the outset, as China sought to integrate into the UNESCO-led ICH value regime and to craft a localized, sinicized heritage narrative modeled on UNESCO's list-making practices, authenticity was uncritically highlighted as a core evaluative standard. Many Chinese scholars, particularly those who transitioned from folklore studies into ICH research, have been enthusiastic proponents of authenticity (Gao Bingzhong 2017; An Xuebin 2020). Drawing on the earlier domestic popularity of the term *yuan shengtai* (原生态, literally "original ecology"), which dominated Chinese mainstream cultural discourse in the early 2000s (Rees 2016:54), these scholars have rebranded *yuan shengtai* into the ICH framework's valorization of "authenticity" (Gao Bingzhong 2007; Liu Xiaochun 2008). In practice, however, the notion of authenticity occupies an ambiguous position in China's official ICH discourse—invoked at times as a guiding principle, at others as a desired outcome (Xin Chunying and Huang Wei 2011). It continues to be upheld by mainstream scholars as a key criterion for evaluating ICH (Yao Weijun and Wang Shengpeng 2013; Gao Bingzhong 2017:60), a primary justification for its safeguarding (Xiang Yunju 2021:30–31; Su Junjie 2023:21), and even as a foundation for enhancing China's cultural soft power (Liang Wenda 2017).

The Naxi people and their folksongs have undergone a dramatic transformation—from being seen as a backward oral tradition in need of reform, to becoming commodified tourist products in the 1990s and 2000s, and eventually reclassified as precious ICH worthy of state

recognition and protection from 2005 onward. This profound shift in social status occurred against the backdrop of historical ruptures caused by political and social upheavals, the rapid expansion of urbanization in contemporary China, and the accelerating forces of globalization in the digital media age. How, then, have today's Naxi people—both as audiences and, at times, as performers within China's ICH movement—responded to these changes?

To explore this question, I draw on Timothy Taylor's concept of "strategic inauthenticity"—a response mechanism he identifies in the work of African musicians such as Youssou N'Dour (Senegal) and Angélique Kidjo (Benin), who resist Western expectations to remain musically premodern and culturally "natural," a demand rooted in racism and the West's fetishization of authenticity (2007:126). I adopt this concept to analyze how the Naxi navigate the competing demands of state officials, heritage experts, and their own self-perceptions, particularly in relation to "authenticity"—a key criterion in securing ICH inscription. In this context, strategic inauthenticity becomes a lens through which to understand the nuanced negotiations and performances Naxi practitioners engage in under the official ICH regime.

Building on this perspective, I turn to the IC-ification of the iconic Naxi folksong *sseiq mei co*. This is regarded as a milestone in the history of Naxi performing arts, marking the first time that any Naxi genre has been inscribed at the state level of China's ICH lists. By analyzing its strategic inauthenticity—using what Bratich (2005:243) refers to as "audience ethnography"—I aim to foreground the perspectives and meaning-making processes of active agents within the ICH movement. This bottom-up lens not only reveals how subjectivities are constructed and

negotiated, but also underscores the contested nature of knowledge production within the evolving discourse of ICH in China.

The ICH-ification of *sseiq mei co*

Sseiq mei co, also known as *wo sseiq sseiq*, *sseiq sseiq co*, or *mvl bvl sseiq* (Chinese: *remeicuo*, 热美蹉), is a genre of Naxi folk song with multiple names reflecting regional dialect variations. These names are not just linguistic differences—they also signal subtle distinctions in melody and vocal style across different Naxi-speaking communities, though the lyrical content tends to remain relatively consistent.

The term *sseiq mei co* originates from Dadong Township in the Old Town District of Lijiang City. Among Naxi communities, the version of this folk song from Dadong is widely regarded as the most distinctive and best-preserved in terms of melody and singing technique. For example, in Tai'an Township of Yulong County, a similar genre of folk song is still performed but is locally referred to as *we sseiq sseiq* or *sseiq sseiq co*. While its melody and vocal delivery differ noticeably from the Dadong version, the performance context and lyrical themes are largely the same. For this reason, Naxi people often regard these as regional variants of the same musical tradition.

Sseiq mei co (or *we sseiq sseiq*) is one of the most prominent and important folk song genres in Naxi funeral rituals. It is especially popular in the mountainous areas of eastern Lijiang, such as Dadong, Daju, and Baoshan townships. By the time I conducted fieldwork in the Lijiang region in 2009, the custom of singing this genre during funerals had largely disappeared

in many Naxi communities. However, during several return visits between 2021 and 2024, I witnessed *sseiq mei co* being sung again at funeral ceremonies. This may have been coincidental, as the funerals I attended were either for well-known cultural figures or for individuals whose family members were involved in Naxi performing arts or ICH safeguarding initiatives.

Beyond funerals, *sseiq mei co* has also historically been sung during agricultural labor, such as rice transplanting and weeding. Its lyrics and tempo are often adapted depending on the performance context. During the state-supported ethnographic and ethnic identification projects from 1958 to 1991, Naxi folk songs were documented as part of the national efforts to classify and study minority cultures. In a survey of Naxi folk arts published in 1963, these songs were categorized as two distinct genres:

- *Wu re re* (乌热热): This version circulated in pastoral areas. According to local legend, poor herders once lost sheep they were tending for a feudal lord. Fearing punishment, they banded together, mimicked sheep calls, and managed to retrieve the flock. The melody is said to resemble bleating, with a strong rhythmic quality akin to work chants. Typically sung collectively during labor—especially threshing—it celebrates the joys of work. After the founding of the People's Republic, the song was adapted to praise Chairman Mao. (Zhang Yunqing 2009 [1963]:43)
- *Wu yu yu* (乌玉玉): This version is an elegy sung at funerals. Outside such rituals, it is rarely performed. Unlike the labor version, this one often features antiphonal singing between male and female voices. It is more melodically complete, retains elements of *dongba* musical style, and features rich ornamentation. Its circulation is limited, mostly along the Jinsha River. (Zhang Yunqing 2009 [1963]:44)

Sseiq mei co is primarily performed during funeral rituals and contains rich lyrical content related to ethnic migration, funerary customs, and religious mythology. The following is a excerpt of the lyrics from *sseiq mei co* (also called *mul bvl sseiq*, meaning "funeral *sseiq mei*") sung during funeral ceremonies (Lijiang shi Gucheng qu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu guanli zhongxin 2012:38) (Transcription 4.1).

Naq xi we sseiq pieq,	The Naxi people love Sseiq Pieq,	纳西人喜爱*Sseiq Pieq*，
Neeq nil a seeq mul,	Mourning a father's passing—	伤心父的去世，
Me mul neiq me ddu;	for no life lasts forever.	人不会永远不死，
Mee leel ji perq zhul,	All things under the sun and sky:	蓝天白云间的万物，
Go leel mul ddu ye,	Even the white crane grows old,	白鹤也会老去，
Gel leel mul ddu ye,	Even the eagle grows old.	老鹰也会老去，
Mee leel mul ddu ye,	The blue sky must fade;	蓝天也会老去，
Ddiuq leel mul ddu ye;	The earth grows weary.	大地也会老去，
Ai naq jjeq me jjuq,	The old black cock, too slow to run,	黑色的鸡老了跑不动了，
Aiq nee jjiq nieq sal,	knocks over the water bowl.	踢翻了装水的碗，
Jjiq kual lee nieq sal,	The bowl's poured water covers the ground,	碗里的水泼在地上，
Jji sal mee nieq tail,	Covering the starlight,	遮住了星光，
Geeq mieq teiq aiq yil;	The dimmed stars lose their glow.	星星也不亮了，
Mee la teiq mul heq,	The sky has aged;	蓝天也老了，
Ddiuq la teiq mul heq.	The earth has aged.	大地也老了。

Transcription 4.1: Excerpt from the lyrics of mul bvl sseiq (funeral sseiq mei, 热美).

As a result, both Naxi communities and academic researchers have tended to focus on its significance within the context of Naxi funerary music. In nearly all published studies on *sseiq mei co* and *we sseiq sseiq* (e.g., Zhou Guoxing 2016 [1982]; He Yunchun and Tan Hua 2010; Tang Tingting 2013; Cao Yimei 2013; Zhang Juexuan and Zhang Juejun 2013; Zhang Lilan 2014; Zhao Yunzhu 2015; Qin Jixian 2016; Chen Guo 2018; Sang Yuehua 2018; Yang Yan 2021; Shi Liting 2022; Yang Jinjie 2023), including those by prominent Naxi musicians and scholars such as Xuan Ke (2016 [1986]) and He Yunfeng (Sangde Nuowa 1989), the genre is overwhelmingly discussed in relation to its funeral function, with little mention of its performance in other contexts. This funerary framing is echoed in local cultural norms as well. Naxi communities have traditionally emphasized strict taboos around the performance of *sseiq mei co*, reserving it exclusively for actual funeral ceremonies. In my early interviews with Naxi

folk artists and musicians (e.g., He Wenguang, He Jinhua, and Jinjia Jinsong), as well as in other scholarly accounts, I encountered consistent reports of these taboos: *sseiq mei co* must only be sung during real funerals; any performance outside of this context is considered extremely inauspicious (Xuan Ke 2016 [1986]:97; Azami Keiji and Bai Gengsheng 2016 [1996]:121; Cao Yimei 2013).



Figure 4.2: Promotional poster for sseiq mei co displayed at the LOTICHPC entrance. The text describes it as an ancient folk ritual song-dance tradition preserved in Naxi ethnic communities. Lijiang, September 2021. Photo by the author.

However, in the official nomination dossier for *sseiq mei co* submitted to China's national ICH list in 2007—publicly released by the Lijiang Old Town Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (LOTICHPC) in 2016—its funerary context was deliberately omitted, and its ritual origins were significantly downplayed. In both September 2021 and November 2024, during follow-up visits to the LOTICHPC, I noted that the institution's promotional materials on *sseiq mei co* persistently avoided any mention of the tradition's connection to funerary practices

(Figure 4.2). Despite the existence of a dedicated *dobbaq* scripture translated as *The Origin of sseiq mei co* (热美蹉的来历), and a longstanding scholarly discussion on its connection to funeral customs, the inscription process selectively excluded this dimension. For instance, Sangde Nuowa (He Yunfeng), the first Naxi scholar to earn a PhD in ethnomusicology, discusses the funerary aspect of the genre in his study of *dobbaq* ritual music. In a section titled "On the *we sseiq sseiq* (Soul-Deliverance) Song and Dance Ritual" (1995:35), he writes:

> *We sseiq sseiq* is a funeral song and dance widely practiced in Naxi communities and documented in *dobbaq* scriptures. In some regions, this genre is referred to as *sseiq mei co*. According to customary norms recorded in the scripture *The Origin of sseiq mei co,* this song-dance form may only be performed at funerals for elders who have died natural deaths. It is strictly prohibited in ceremonies for those who died prematurely or by unnatural causes. Typically, *we sseiq sseiq* is sung and danced on the second day of the funeral, the night before cremation. In addition to prescribed ritual texts, the lead singer chants verses recounting the deceased's life, virtues, and the mourners' sorrow and remembrance. Even today, many Naxi—especially the elderly—firmly believe that performing *we sseiq sseiq* at funerals is a sacred and mysterious act passed down from their ancestors and closely tied to ancestral totems.

Sangde Nuowa's account aligns closely with findings from my own fieldwork. In 2008, I interviewed He Zhenqiang (和振强, 1938–2012)—then the only national-level *sseiq mei co* bearer—and his son He Hongliang (和红亮), who has since inherited his father's role as a national representative inheritor. Additional interviews conducted during two actual funerals—one in August 2021 in Baishui Village, Dadong Township, and another in June 2024 in Huayin Village, Tai'an Township—produced similar perspectives among ordinary villagers and *sseiq mei co/we sseiq sseiq* performers.

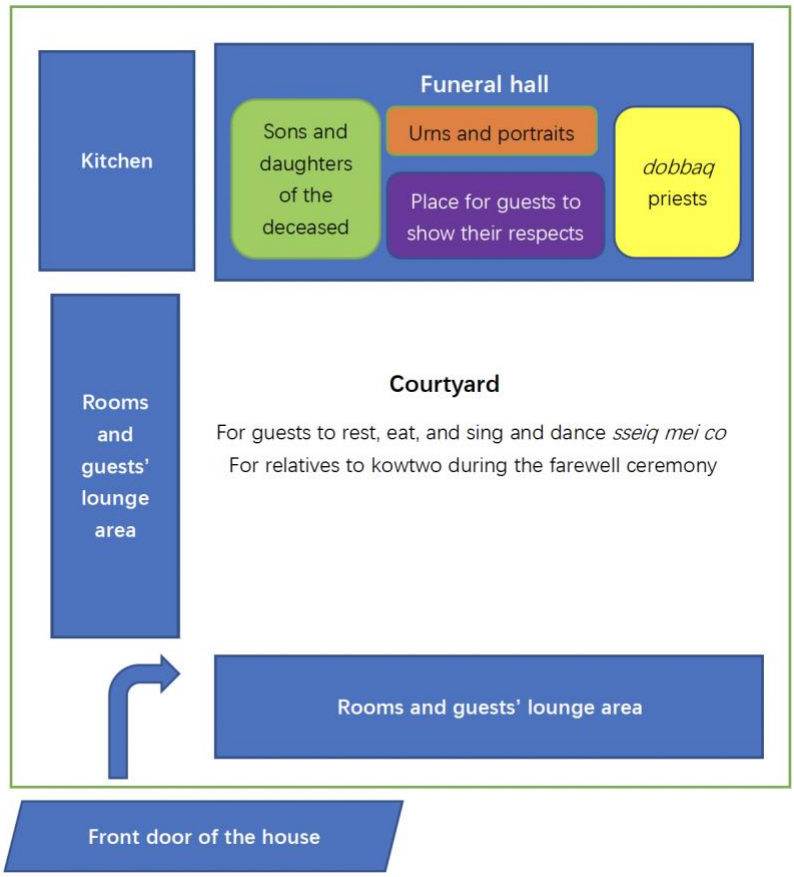


Figure 4.3: Layout of the funeral ritual in the deceased's family courtyard, Reshuitang Village, Dadong Township, Yulong County, Lijiang.

Figure 4.3 shows the funeral set-up from August 20–22, 2021, held in the courtyard of the late Mr. He, who passed away at the age of 75. Figure 4.4 depicts the altar, where his body lay behind a black-and-white portrait surrounded by fresh flowers, vigilantly attended by *dobbaq* priests and close family members. Relatives wore white hemp headbands, while other guests—ranging from local helpers to friends who had traveled from afar—came to pay their respects. Throughout the day and into the night, guests continuously arrived to offer condolences. The hosts were expected to provide refreshments, lunch, dinner, and late-night snacks. From nightfall until dawn, guests took turns singing and dancing *sseiq mei co* in front of the deceased. On the

evening of August 21 (the second day of the funeral), a group of guests, led by the deceased's nephew He Xiangjun (和向军)—known locally by the stage name Jinhulu (Golden Gourd, 金葫芦) and recognized as a prominent folksong inheritor—formed an open circle and began performing *sseiq mei co* (Figures 4.5 and 4.6).



Figure 4.4: Mortuary tableau showing the deceased in vigil position (center), framed by ancestral portrait and ritual flora, with dongba practitioners maintaining ceremonial watch. Reshuitang Village, Dadong Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. August 21, 2021. Photo by author.



Figure 4.5: Grandchildren kowtowing to sseiq mei co performers to express gratitude, following local funeral custom. Reshuitang Village, Dadong Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. August 21, 2021. Photo by author.



Figure 4.6: The deceased's second son (wearing a red coat and standing at the front right of the group; stage name: Golden Gourd, in Chinese 金葫芦, Jinhulu), a professional Naxi song-and-dance performer based in Lijiang, leads village sseiq mei troupe members and relatives in performing sseiq mei co to pray for his father's blessings. Reshuitang Village, Dadong Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. August 21, 2021. Photo by author.

From June 6 to 9, 2024, I participated in the funeral of Mr. He Maoxian (和茂先) (aged 68) in Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County of Lijiang (Figure 4.7). Since 2008, He Maoxian had served as the head of the village's Folk Culture Transmission Association and also worked at the cultural station of the Tai'an Township government. His nephew, He Liyuan (和丽元), is currently the deputy director of the Yulong County ICH Protection Center and one of the leading figures in the preservation of *haq wo wo*, a local folksong ICH project in Tai'an Township.



Figure 4.7: The funeral altar in the main hall of the deceased's home, where the body rests in a coffin awaiting cremation on the third day of the ritual cycle. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 7, 2024. Photo by author.

In the Huangshan area of Tai'an Township, the funerary song and dance genre is referred to as *sseiq sseiq co*, which—like *sseiq mei co*—is performed on the second day of the funeral. On the first night, participants gather to sing and dance *weif mef ddaq*[76] as a group. On the second day, in addition to *sseiq sseiq co*, other genres such as *ssei huq co* and *shiq shiq co* are also performed (Figures 4.8 and 4.9). All of these songs are dedicated to mourning the deceased and guiding their soul toward the ancestral place of origin as described in *dobbaq* scriptures. On the third day, after *dobbaq* priests conduct the final rituals, male relatives and community members perform a dirge known as *mul bvl* (Figure 4.10). Following the lament, the coffin and body of the deceased are carried up the mountain for cremation (Figures 4.11 and 4.12).

[76] *Weif mef ddaq* is widely circulated folk narrative melody is typically performed through collective song-and-dance. Its lyrical content and performance contexts are highly adaptable. It may be performed during agricultural labor, work breaks, festive celebrations, and funeral rituals.



Figure 4.8: Kin and community members perform weif mef ddaq for the deceased during daylight hours on the second day of the funeral rites. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 7, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 4.9: Kin and community members perform sseiq sseiq co for the deceased during the night on the second day of the funeral rites. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 7, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 4.10: Male kin and villagers sing the funeral dirge mul bvl to guide the deceased's soul back to the ancestral homeland of the Naxi migration. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 8, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 4.11: Male kin and villagers carry the deceased's coffin uphill to the clan cremation site for the funeral pyre. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 8, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 4.12: Funerary pyre at the clan's sacred cremation grounds. Huayin Village, Tai'an Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. June 8, 2024. Photo by author.

Despite the rich ritual context, none of this funerary significance is mentioned in the official nomination submitted to the national heritage review. There is only one sentence in the declaration where it states that "*sseiq mei* is a winged demon believed to feed on the tears and eyeballs of the dead, reflecting elements of nature worship and primitive ghost worship in Naxi beliefs" (Li Zhidian 2016:280). It does not mention *sseiq mei co*'s connection to funerary customs and *dobbaq* religion at all.

Yet this is a crucial issue of "authenticity." On one hand, the Naxi people strategically avoided politically sensitive topics in their official application texts to align with national discourse. On the other hand, within the context of tourism, they adapted this song-and-dance performance for the stage. The act of moving *sseiq mei co*—a song long subject to ritual taboos—onto the public stage initially provoked intense debate within Naxi society. By

emphasizing its cultural significance in other performative settings (such as labor-related contexts, as mentioned earlier), they sought to give new ways of representation to this tradition. Since 2008, with support from national ICH funding, Dadong Township in Gucheng District, Lijiang, has held the *Sseiq Mei* Culture and Arts Festival (热美文化艺术节) every few years. To ensure a steady and growing number of participants, the GDICHPC organizes *sseiq mei co* training workshops annually or every few years. These workshops invite national- and provincial-level inheritors as well as Naxi *dobbaq* scholars to train members of *sseiq mei* heritage groups from various villages. Contemporary Naxi people's attitude toward *sseiq mei co* has undergone significant change.

He Minda (和民达, Figure 4.13), former head of the Yulong County Song and Dance Troupe, is widely acknowledged among Naxi communities as the musician who most successfully adapted *sseiq mei co* for the stage while preserving the vocal style and techniques specific to the Dadong tradition. His version remains highly respected for its musical arrangement, lyrics, and vocal ornamentation and is now considered a benchmark for stage adaptations. When I interviewed him in November 30, 2024, he openly embraced the innovation of tradition, stating,

> We learn folk traditions to develop them in the future—to preserve, promote, and innovate. Traditions shouldn't be learned rigidly, as if they're museum relics. After mastering the fundamentals, we must create something new. Only then does this art hold real value.



Figure 4.13: Interview with Naxi musician He Minda (和民达) at his residence. Lijiang. November 30, 2024. Photo by author.

One of the earliest influential Naxi figures to conduct in-depth fieldwork and publish on *sseiq mei co* was the renowned Naxi cultural promoter and researcher Xuan Ke (宣科). During my fieldwork, many Naxi scholars, musicians, and local officials remarked that "Xuan Ke was the first Naxi to recognize both the artistic and commercial potential of Naxi folk music." Xuan Ke's mother was from Dadong, which drew his early attention to the distinctive singing style and melodies of *sseiq mei co* in the region. In the early 1980s, Xuan Ke—already in his fifties—began a six-year period of documentation and research on *sseiq mei co* in Dadong.[77] Through the advocacy of Xuan Ke, by 1992, Reshuitang Village in Datong Township had formed a *sseiq mei* art troupe composed of 24 local folk performers. Since then, the group has participated in numerous cultural events throughout Lijiang and other Yunnan cities such as Kunming, Yuxi, and Dali, receiving significant media coverage (Li Zhidian 2016:290).

[77] Yunnan Television. *Naxi! Naxi!* Directed by Yunnan Television. Aired July 29, 2022. YouTube video, 25:44. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjCXdgvhoN4&t=2017s. Accessed April 21, 2025.

Several of Xuan Ke's key arguments about *sseiq mei co* continue to influence scholarly discourse today: (1) that it is a song used to ward off evil spirits and guard the body of the deceased; (2) that it is a remnant of the Naxi's nomadic past, thus possessing a kind of "primitiveness"; and (3) that it is a "living fossil" or "living specimen" of human musical and dance traditions. However, in the national ICH nomination materials, only the latter two perspectives—its "primitiveness" and "fossil" value—are selectively retained. The ritual performance context is obscured, with *sseiq mei co* simply described as

> a collective song-and-dance performance involving anywhere from a dozen to several hundred participants, male and female, young and old, who join hands and sing and dance in a clockwise circle around a fire. The movements are large and simple, which is characteristic of primitive dance traditions. (Li Zhidian 2016:280)

Another noteworthy aspect of the nomination text is the complete absence of the term "authenticity" (原真性). Instead, the text repeatedly emphasizes the concept of "primitiveness" (原始), a term that might carries pejorative and colonial connotations in ethnomusicological and anthropological contexts, yet remains inconsistently regulated within Chinese academic discourse.[78] Beyond the official documents produced by local Naxi ICH protection centers, many Chinese scholars and media outlets also commonly use the term "primitive" to characterize *sseiq mei co*.

As early as the 1990s, however, Japanese scholar Azami Keiji (生明庆二) cautiously questioned this characterization in his research. His essay, translated into Chinese by Bai

[78] For example, in the 2016 article "The Primitive Aesthetics of the Naxi Dance *sseiq mei co*" (纳西乐舞"热美蹉"之原始审美) by scholar Qin Jixian (秦继仙), the Chinese contextual usage of the word "primitive" (原始) primarily conveys a sense of ancient origins and historical longevity, carrying no evident negative connotations in this specific scholarly context.

Gengsheng (白庚胜)—then a Naxi government official who had studied in Japan and was a researcher at the Institute of Ethnic Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences—was published in 1996 in a special issue on "Naxi ancient music" of the local Lijiang journal *Yulongshan* (玉龙山：纳西古乐特辑). In the essay, Azami Keiji recounts his observations of the 1987 performance of Naxi *sseiq mei co* in Tokyo (Azami Keiji 2016 [1996]:121, 123):

> They [the Naxi people] only sing and dance this at the death of an adult and never casually in other settings. . . . Although *sseiq mei co* was originally a solemn ethnic ritual, it has now lost that meaning and been reinterpreted as an upbeat, urban-style performance—such as what was staged at the National Theatre in Tokyo in April 1987. The Lijiang Naxi performance of *wo sseiq sseiq* exemplifies this transformation in musical structure. In the village, its customary context evolved organically, but the fault lies with cultural workers who, in their self-assurance, altered it. This polyphonic funeral song-and-dance, which once reflected a short emotional structure inherent to the ethnic group, has—since the founding of the PRC—been hybridized with entirely different long-form structures, transforming into something "healthy" and cheerful through the loss of its original feminine melodic genes.

As Azami Keiji observed, *sseiq mei co* has undeniably undergone transformation—whether in terms of historical development or through spatial and contextual shifts, such as its movement from funerary contexts to the stage. These changes are real and complex. However, during the process of heritage recognition and in the on-stage context, Naxi cultural actors have often resorted to ambiguity and strategic inauthenticity to navigate these tensions. They chose to use "primitiveness"—strategic inauthenticity—to avoid acknowledging the inevitable and already existing changes that would occur in their musical tradition.

When *sseiq mei co* was first brought onto the stage, there was considerable opposition. For instance, when the Gucheng District UNESCO World Heritage Application Group visited Dadong to record performances of *sseiq mei co*, many villagers were hesitant to participate. As

Li Zhidian, then the director of the Application Group, later recalled: "At the time, we had no choice but to pay villagers labor fees to encourage cooperation" (Interview August 21, 2021).

Over time, the success of obtaining ICH status at various levels gradually shifted villagers' attitudes. A performance genre once deemed inappropriate outside its ritual context is now regularly staged in public settings. Riding the momentum of the ICH protection movement, Dadong—branded as the "hometown of *sseiq mei co*" (2006)—has established 13 *sseiq mei co* teaching and training centers (*chuanchengdian*, 传承点) to offer long-term and irregular training programs to local residents. According to He Xuemei (和雪梅), official of the Ancient Town Community ICH Protection Center:

> The *sseiq mei co* inheritors recognized at different levels are required to fulfill certain annual obligations for transmission and performances. However, as some inheritors are either elderly, ill, or occupied with farming seasons, fixed schedules for transmission activities cannot be strictly enforced. . . . The outcomes observed over years of organizing the *Sseiq Mei* Cultural Festival (热美文化艺术节) demonstrate that the inheritance has yielded positive results. Participation of local villagers and others from nearby townships has grown consistently, with some villages now fielding not only one performance troupe, but two or more. (Interview August 20, 2021)

In this post-heritage context, the Naxi people's attitudes toward *sseiq mei co*'s public performance have also shifted. Its stage adaptation is now widely accepted, with cheerful, contemporary lyrics and themes replacing the traditional funerary content to reflect present-day life and performance settings.

Between Authenticity and Strategy: Who's Really Paying Attention?

When it comes to the issue of authenticity—so central to many Chinese ICH experts—each actor involved in this conversation has offered their own response. For the Naxi people, what seems to

matter more than "authenticity" is whether their traditions receive state recognition, support, and opportunities for continuation and transmission. In practice, they are actively reshaping and innovating their own traditions, even as authenticity continues to be invoked as grounds for critique.

At the level of localized institutional implementation, there is also clear evidence of a shift toward more flexible, strategically inauthentic approaches—especially in how the term "authenticity" is adopted (or not). For example, the Yunnan Province Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Regulations (2013) (云南省非物质文化遗产保护条例) still prominently feature the term "authenticity" (真实性). Yet by 2022, when I conducted fieldwork, the Interim Measures for the Declaration and Evaluation of ICH Items in Yulong Naxi Autonomous County (玉龙纳西族自治县非物质文化遗产项目申报评定暂行办法)—a document shared with me by the local ICH center (YLICHPC)—had already omitted the term from its detailed evaluation criteria altogether.

This disappearance of the term "authenticity" from official language mirrors broader discursive shifts in national cultural policy. In 2022, Chinese state leaders issued important directives on ICH protection work, calling for the "creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture" (创造性转化)—a formulation that effectively replaces "authenticity" with "creative transformation," emphasizing ICH's "contemporary value" (当代价值).[79] In this context, "authenticity" has become something of a

[79] For the full text, refer to the official website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/12/content_5731508.htm; https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5633447.htm. Accessed on April 15, 2025.

niche metaphysicsal term—marginalized within policy but still fervently debated by ICH scholars.

Beyond the Title: Singing Careers Between ICH Recognition and Vernacular Practice

The effects and transformations brought about by the ICH system and the broader heritage protection movement in China—on individuals, ethnic groups (especially minorities), and society at large—are, in my view, comparable to what Yan (2009) describes in his analysis of the rise of individualization in China. One of his key examples is the process of disembedment that began in the mid-1980s, marked by the loosening of the household registration (*hukou*) system and the introduction of personal ID cards for all citizens, regardless of rural or urban status (Yunxiang Yan 2009:276–278). In a similar way, being listed as an ICH project or inheritor provides official recognition and legitimacy, functioning like a new kind of identity card within the cultural sphere. Minority traditions, once condemned as backward and in need of reform or elimination, were analogous to rural *hukou*—stigmatized, restricted, and lacking in prestige. This social stigma helps explain why many young people previously rejected their cultural heritage.

Growing up in Yunnan, a province known for its ethnic diversity, I witnessed many of my minority peers unable to speak their native languages—let alone write them—and largely unfamiliar with their traditions. Expressions of pride in ethnic identity were rare. Based on personal experience and long-term observation, a visible resurgence of ethnic pride only began with the rise of ethnic tourism and the state-led ICH movement. After the launch of the ICH initiative, many traditional practices that had once been banned or survived only in secrecy

began to reemerge publicly—signaling a loosening of constraints around cultural expression. At the same time, the formal recognition of ICH inheritors affirmed and legitimized individuals' roles and identities within their traditional cultures. These designations have come to represent a form of state-managed social capital. Yet, as Alexander and Taylor (2024:15) remind us—echoing Geertz's (1973a) analysis of the Balinese cockfight—while much symbolic meaning is attached to these recognitions, in material terms, little may "actually" happen or "really" change.

Yan notes that "Social labeling is important because it defines the individual's rights, status, and identity in society. The social category of peasant, for example, had a negative connotation in modern China and was used to push rural people down the socialist hierarchy, and to discriminate against rural migrants in the cities or migrant workers" (2009:281). The title of "ICH inheritor" clearly operates as such a social label—an official recognition of folk artists' identities. As a new form of social capital generated by the ICH movement, this designation has elicited varied responses among Naxi musicians: some actively seek the title, others have been excluded, and some appear largely indifferent. During my restudy fieldwork from August 2023 to November 2024, I revisited several "old friends"—Naxi musicians such as Dapo Maji (达坡玛吉), Jinjia Jinsong (金甲劲松), He Jinhua (和金花), He Ruixin (和瑞新), and He Jiansong (和建松)—whom I first met in 2006 and have remained in contact with ever since. This opportunity to observe the evolution of their careers renewed my interest in how each has navigated the state-led ICH movement and related to the label of "ICH inheritor" in different ways.

All of these musicians, born mostly in the 1970s (with the exception of He Jiansong, born in 1983), began performing Naxi music in their teens. Yet the ICH movement has shaped their

trajectories in distinct ways. Today, they are all well-known Naxi musicians, each with a unique career path. In interviews, a common thread emerged: none of them view the ICH inheritor title as the driving force behind their creative work, nor as the primary reason for preserving and transmitting Naxi musical traditions. Indeed, none of them has ever been granted the title of ICH inheritor. In interviews, they explained that according to local regulations in Lijiang and Yunnan Province, government employees, public institution staff, and professional folk singers are ineligible for the title. This explanation was later confirmed by my interviews with staff members at the Yulong County, Gucheng District, Lijiang City, and Yunnan Provincial ICH Protection Centers.

The Five Singers

Dapo Maji (born He Qiuxiang 和秋香, b.1979) stands out among all the Naxi musicians I have revisited as the only one who actively participated in the application for ICH recognition and clearly expressed her concern about the title of ICH inheritor. As the eldest daughter of renowned composer He Wenguang, she grew up in Tacheng Township, Yulong County before moving to the urban center of Lijiang, where her artistic journey began with dance training. After graduating from teachers' school, she pursued formal music education at Music Department of the Central Minzu University (中央民族大学), and later worked in the Yunnan Provincial Federation of Literary and Art Circles (云南省文艺家联合会) in Kunming, balancing administrative duties with frequent performances. She is also a member of the China Democratic League and currently holds the prestigious title of National Class I Performer. In 2008, she and

her cousin He Jinhua gained national recognition after winning a silver award for traditional singing at the 13th CCTV Young Singers Grand Prix.

Dapo Maji's long career in the state system has shaped her strong interest in the ICH inheritor title as a form of official recognition. As early as 2017, she began compiling materials to propose the traditional wedding lament *mil bvl bee* (Chinese: 嫁女调) for provincial-level ICH designation. In 2021, she formally submitted the application through the Yulong County ICH Protection Center. It was approved as a Yunnan provincial-level ICH item in 2022, with her mother He Guofang (和国芳) named as its inheritor in 2023. Neither her 90-year-old grandmother (renowned Naxi singer Xiao Rulian, 肖茹莲) nor Maji herself (as a state institution employee) could qualify as ICH inheritors due respectively to limitations on age and occupational status. In the past one or two years, her administrative work has seen her assigned to positions related to ICH. This has also prompted her to pay more attention to and become more familiar with the policies concerning ICH than the other interviewees (Interview with Dapo Maji, April 13, 2025).

He Jinhua (b.1971), selected for her talent in singing the folksongs of Tacheng, joined the Yulong County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe as a professional performer at age sixteen. When I first met her in 2007, she was performing not only with the troupe but also at the Dongba Palace. Today, the troupe has been reorganized as the Yulong County Ethnic Cultural Work Team, and He Jinhua now holds the title of National Class I Singer. Born and raised in a multiethnic region inhabited by the Naxi, Tibetan, and Lisu peoples, where both Tibetan Buddhism and Naxi *dobbaq* religion are practiced, Jinhua grew up working alongside village

elders and developed a deep love for the local folk songs of various ethnic groups. Since becoming a professional singer and moving to Lijiang, she has gained extensive performance opportunities both in China and abroad, winning numerous awards in Chinese folk singing competitions (Interview with He Jinhua September 23, 2024).

In 2018, He Jinhua collaborated with ethnomusicologist Helen Rees to record an album, *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*, at UCLA. The CD was released by Smithsonian Folkways in 2022, and is the first such recording of Naxi folksong produced outside China. More recently, in the first half of May 2025, she was invited to tour Portugal with Naxi *guzheng* virtuoso Huang Limei (黄丽梅), with Helen and myself guiding, interpreting, and co-presenting for performances, workshops, lectures, and another CD recording. As part of this tour, Jinhua and Limei participated in the 8th Lisbon Conference on Chinese Music and Musical Instruments (Expanding Horizons: Embracing the Wide Variety of Asian Music and Dance), where they gave a captivating performance and co-presented a research paper with me on "Folksongs of the Naxi of Southwest China."[80]

Jinjia Jinsong (b.1978), also from Tacheng, began his career as a folk singer with the Dayan Ancient Music Association in Lijiang. Troupe leader Xuan Ke often introduced him onstage as "the most handsome Naxi hunter," though he had never actually been a hunter—he became instead a "professional native" within Lijiang's booming cultural tourism market. Around 2008, thanks to his musical talent, he was specially admitted to work at the Gucheng

[80] See Chapter 7 for further details on He Jinhua's career.

District Cultural Center as a professional singer. Over the past decade, he has continued to build his musical career, releasing albums and leading music education outreach programs in rural areas (Interview with Jinjia Jinsong, September 13, 2024).

His younger brother, **He Jiansong** (b.1982), moved to Lijiang after completing military service in 2003, just as the tourism industry was flourishing. Starting as a bar waiter, he eventually became a resident singer, performing urban folk songs with Lijiang and Tibetan influences. When we met again years later, He Jiansong had reinvented himself as a music therapist. Deeply inspired by his rediscovery of Naxi traditional music and cosmology, he now creates largely improvised music shaped by specific moments and settings, seeing music as a fluid energy that transcends fixed social labels (Interview with He Jiansong, June 5, 2024).

The last musician I revisited was **He Ruixin** (b.1974), a Naxi from Labo Township in eastern Lijiang, now a performer with the Yulong County Ethnic Cultural Work Team. Known as "Labo Axin" for his mastery of local styles such as Labo *gguqqil* and *we sseiq sseiq*, he became a regular performer on provincial and national television. In 2019, he performed the new Naxi folk song "Eternal Happiness of the Naxi" on CCTV's Mid-Autumn Festival Gala. Today, he balances his roles as a professional singer and owner of a performance bar in Lijiang's Old Town. Each time we meet, he warmly invites me to visit his hometown to experience its "authentic" folk music traditions (Interview with He Ruixin, September 20, 2024).

An Update from the Family of a National-Level ICH Inheritor

Meanwhile, the only national-level ICH inheritor I interviewed back in 2008, **He Zhenqiang** (和振强), passed away in 2012. His son, **He Hongliang** (和红亮), has inherited his father's title and remains actively involved in ICH preservation and performance in 2018.

He Zhenqiang (1938–2012) was posthumously designated in 2012 as a national representative inheritor of Naxi *sseiq mei co*, part of China's fourth group of nationally recognized ICH practitioners. My 2008 fieldwork notes show that three generations of his family were accomplished folk artists in Dadong Village, with his grandfather and father being particularly renowned for their command of Naxi traditions, proverbs, and *dobbaq* scriptures. Immersed in this cultural environment from childhood, He Zhenqiang had mastered Naxi oral literature and *dobbaq* epics by his teenage years, while developing exceptional skills in lyrical improvisation. This foundation established him as both a leading folk singer and the preeminent chant leader for *sseiq mei co* performances in his community. His artistic achievements were recognized in 1992 when Lijiang County selected him to lead a 24-member delegation from the Dadong *Sseiq Mei* Art Troupe for performances in Japan. From 2004 until his passing, he served as advisor to the Dadong *Sseiq Mei Co* Association under the Lijiang Ancient District ICH Center, dedicating himself to training new practitioners across rural villages and cultural stations (Interview with He Zhenqiang, August 10, 2008).

He Hongliang, inheriting this legacy, was born and raised in Dadong Township, the cultural heartland of *sseiq mei co*. His artistic training began at age fourteen under his father's guidance, learning the intricate chants, dances, and traditional instrumentation (including the

flute and mouth organ) during breaks from agricultural work. By 1978, he had assumed the dual roles of lead chant singer and principal instrumentalist for village performances ("He Hongliang" 2023). During the 1980s, He Hongliang's reputation grew through numerous performances across Lijiang and participation in film productions featuring traditional Naxi arts. His formal recognition came in May 2018 when he was officially designated as the national-level ICH inheritor for Naxi *sseiq mei co*, continuing his family's multigenerational commitment to cultural preservation (He Lizhen 2022).

Authenticity and Individual Creativity

If judged strictly by the standards of "authenticity" promoted by Chinese ICH experts, the five professional Naxi musicians I discussed earlier would all be considered "non-compliant," as their performances have become more stage-adapted and aligned with mainstream aesthetics. As Yunxiang Yan notes, "a simple marker of the rise of individual identity in China is the shift in public discourse from using 'we' to 'I'" (2009:280). Each of these musicians expresses a distinct sense of individuality through their invocation of "my" musical works and the crafting of personalized soundscapes. For example, from May 12 to 13, 2025, I had the privilege of participating in and witnessing the recording process of He Jinhua's second folksong album in Lisbon. Among the tracks was a local Naxi *we muf ddaq* tune from Yanjing, which we had collected together during our fieldwork in the Naxi Ethnic Township of Mangkam County, Tibet, in June 2024. For this album, Jinhua reworked the lyrics and made slight adjustments to the song structure to better suit her identity and singing style. On one hand, she transformed the lyrics

from a grandfather singing to a grandmother into a younger sister singing to her beloved elder brother. On the other hand, she appropriately supplemented the incomplete melody remembered by the elderly man from Yanjing based on her personal understanding, making the entire song more complete and easier to popularize.

The individualization Yunxiang Yan observed in broader Chinese society also manifests in the artistic realm of ethnic minorities, as seen in the increasingly personalized reproduction of Naxi musical traditions by each musician. In contrast, the discourse of heritage protection frames ICH as a collective concept—an embodiment of the shared wisdom of the Chinese nation. With this in mind, can we understand the music production of these Naxi musicians—deeply rooted in folk traditions yet continually developing their individual styles—as a form of "strategic inauthenticity" in response to the meaning-making of the ICH era?

Final comments

This chapter's restudy has reviewed the shifting external environment surrounding Naxi folksongs since the 1990s. First came the rise of Lijiang's tourism industry (beginning in the late 1980s), fueled by the party-state's and Yunnan Province's policies promoting a "tourism-oriented cultural industry" model for local economic development. During this period, Naxi folksongs adapted to the growing tourist market, producing a wave of new compositions tailored to consumer tastes. Performance spaces catering to tourists became the primary venues for Naxi music, leading to the emergence of professional performers—and even the phenomenon of the "professional native." Since 2005, the vigorous promotion of national ICH protection policies,

especially in Lijiang and Yunnan Province, has introduced new, globally connected forms of legitimacy for traditional culture. Under the social label of "ICH," traditions gained greater opportunities to move beyond rural villages—and even beyond China's borders. The phrase "what is national is global" became a fashionable and proud slogan among Naxi people.

As Malacarne (2021:21) reminds us, "Existing structures of power and authority shape who can access discourses and who has the standing to interpret them." In response to the shift in the cultural ecosystem from oral traditions to heritage-making, different actors within Naxi society adopted diverse strategies and levels of engagement, resulting in a complex landscape of "strategic inauthenticity": (a) ICH administrators subtly adjusted project applications and narratives to align with national standards; (b) ordinary Naxi people recalibrated their attitudes toward traditional taboos and musical content in light of heritage recognition; and (c) professional singers, though excluded from the title of ICH inheritor, rearticulated their relationship with Naxi musical traditions and future aspirations through individualized musical reproduction.

Yet this does not mean they stand entirely outside the ICH phenomenon. All participate in ICH-related activities to varying degrees when needed—they simply choose not to engage in the competition for official titles. These musicians represent only a few examples; in my interviews with folk artists still living in rural areas, most expressed interest in the ICH inheritor's title but felt powerless to compete for it. They knew they lacked *guanxi* (关系)—the personal networks necessary to have someone advocate for them during the nomination and evaluation processes.

More importantly, each was able to point to concrete examples from their own experiences to illustrate this reality.

I imagine that Geertz would call for a "thicker description" (1973c) than what I offer here: a deeper excavation into each story—the characters, the struggles, and the layers of meaning embedded in their musical works. In the Naxi case, the actions taken by different actors in the era of heritage-making ultimately reflect what Yunxiang Yan (2009:275) observes:

> Society has become further differentiated and diversified. Yet this does not mean that tradition and social groups no longer play a role; instead, they remain important if they serve as resources for the individual. The key difference, in my view, is that individuals no longer believe they ought to work for the sake of preserving tradition; instead, they use selected traditions to work for their own lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

REGIONALISM IN THE HERITAGIZATION OF NAXI FOLKSONG: TWO CASE STUDIES AND A VIGNETTE FROM PERIPHERAL NAXI SUBGROUPS

China's relationship with its inner periphery—regions historically inhabited by ethnic minorities—blends longstanding hierarchies with modern state-building goals. While the ancient concept of the "Middle Kingdom" (the literal meaning of the country's name, *Zhongguo* [中国]), served to distinguish both external others and internal non-Han populations, contemporary policies in these autonomous regions reflect a tension between cultural centralism and the rhetoric of national integration. The governance of minority areas remains a core strategy of the PRC, framed as a progressive alternative to imperial domination, yet still marked by underlying unease (Potter 2007:240–241). China's ICH protection policy, as a continuation of this "improvement," has from the outset been framed as a key expression of the Party's commitment to ethnic and cultural equality. The heritagization of intangible cultural traditions is shaped in part by political forces. National policies and the regionalist administrative management system influence these processes in multiple ways, and in turn, tradition-bearers become embedded within political and administrative management structures—often in ways that are not apparent.

While regional ICH protection measures established in response to China's national ICH policies should be seen as echoes of the state's oft-stated commitment to ethnic equality and minority autonomy, the reality of southwest China's complex, multiethnic, and intermingled population geography gives rise to new center–periphery cultural negotiations at the local and

micro level. These intergroup dynamics are now expressed to some extent through the recognition of ICH items and the selection of official inheritors. Control over, and competition for, these symbolic heritage titles reveals ongoing regionalist negotiations of cultural identities—both between and within ethnic groups. I believe that ethnographic studies of communities living as "minorities" among other ethnic majorities—and the ways their ICH is represented and heritagized—offer concrete insights into the structural challenges embedded in the micro-cultural negotiations of China's ICH protection system.

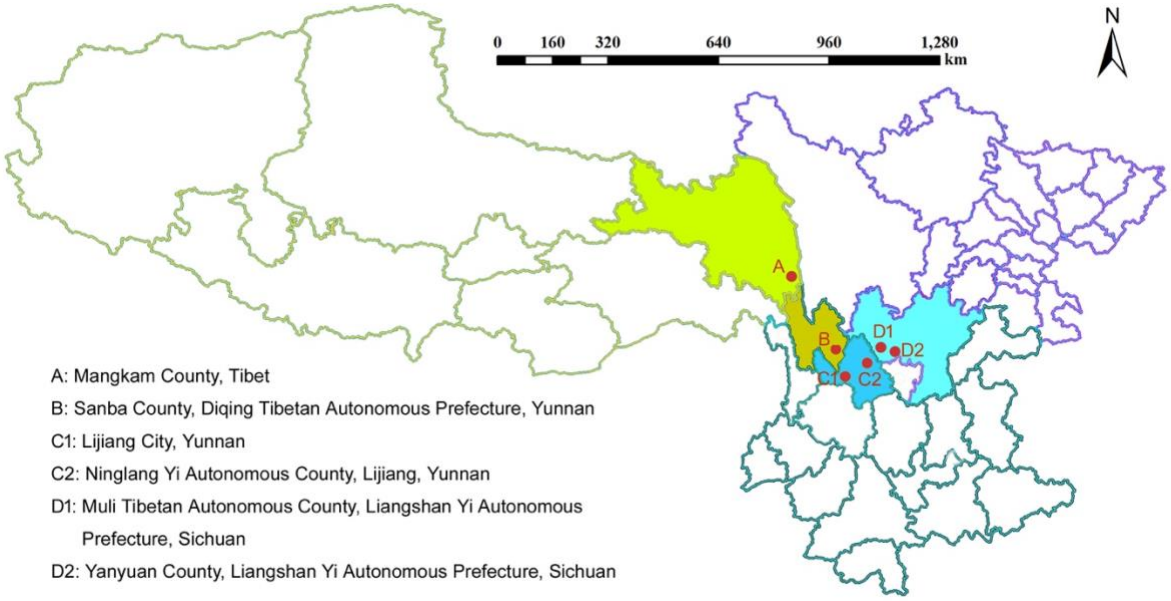


Figure. 5.1: Distribution of fieldwork sites (A–D2) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Base map generated in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志)

In this chapter, I situate my discussion within the macroscopic order of China's ICH preservation system, while turning attention to the micro-level tensions shaped by regionalism. Specifically, I focus on communities belonging to the lesser-known Naxi subgroups, located on the periphery of what is commonly regarded as the cultural heartland of Naxi tradition—Lijiang,

Yunnan, home to the largest Naxi population in China. Over the course of fourteen months of fieldwork, I conducted in-depth research in Sanba Township of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan), the only officially recognized Naxi township in Mangkam County (Chamdo, Tibet Autonomous Region), and the Lugu Lake at the border between Sichuan and Yunnan. To examine how regional intergroup dynamics play out through the designation of ICH items and the selection of official inheritors, I focus primarily on two case studies: Diqing Prefecture and Mangkam County (Figure 5.1).

Case Study 1: Cultural Expressions in the Cracks: *al ka bba laq* in Sanba Township, Shangri-La, Yunnan

When discussing Naxi traditional music and religious practices, most immediately think of Lijiang, the cultural heartland of this Tibeto-Burman group. Less known, however, is Sanba Township in Shangri-la County,[81] Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, recognized as the birthplace of the Naxi *dobbaq* priest tradition and considered a sacred ancestral land. Long embedded in a Tibetan cultural sphere, the Naxi of Shangri-la have selectively absorbed Tibetan elements while preserving distinct ethnic traits. Their position at the intersection of two dominant cultural centers—Tibetan and Lijiang-based Naxi—reflects how geography and administrative boundaries shape peripheral cultural identities.

[81] Zhongdian County (中甸县) was renamed Shangri-La County (香格里拉县) in 2001 (State Council Approval No. 348 [2001]; see https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61350.htm, accessed on May 22, 2025). It was elevated to county-level city status as Shangri-La City (香格里拉市) in 2015 (Ministry of Civil Affairs Document (民函) No. 375 [2014]); see http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0215/c1001-26572046.html, accessed on May 22, 2025).

Background: The Distribution of Naxi in Yunnan

As noted above, historically the Naxi have been mainly distributed in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, with Yunnan hosting the largest population. Within Yunnan, the majority of Naxi people reside in Lijiang, while a smaller portion live in the adjacent Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

Diqing, also known as the Sub-Tibetan Zone (Wang Lei 2015:18),[82] is located in the northwest corner of Yunnan, bordering Sichuan and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Geographically, it forms part of the transitional belt between the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the longitudinal valleys of the Hengduan Mountains on the eastern slope of the Himalayas (Guo Jiaji and Bian Mingshe 2012:2). Diqing has long been a multiethnic region. As early as the pre-Qin period (before 221 BC), southbound Tubo peoples (ancestors of today's Tibetans) intermingled with the region's indigenous populations. Through successive waves of migration, conflict, and cultural integration, Diqing developed into an ethnically diverse area. Today, it is home to eleven ethnic groups, including Tibetan, Naxi, Han, Yi, and Lisu, with Tibetans forming the dominant group (Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou 2021).

[82] For a detailed discussion of this concept, see the explanation in Wang Lei's (王蕾) MA thesis in tourism anthropology (2015:18): "The term 'sub-Tibetan' (次藏) is a conceptual framework developed by Chinese scholars to reconsider the idea of Tibet's borderlands. . . . More specifically, the sub-Tibetan zone refers to secondary-level Tibetan communities. Although these areas are sacred sites of Tibetan Buddhism and feature standardized Tibetan symbols, their natural environment, demographic makeup, and social customs reveal a complex integration of autonomous Tibetan governance texts and localized administrative practices. The sub-Tibetan zone is also shaped by historical contestations among ethnic groups and by the tensions between contemporary ethnic and cultural discourses. Whether it is the Hui people living in Tibetan areas, the 'Naxi caught in between,' or the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-belief modes of survival in river valleys, all these phenomena reflect a highly entangled condition—produced by globalization, modernization, and informatization—of ethnic integration and the dense overlap of rights, cultures, societies, and daily practices in these multi-ethnic localities."

According to the *Diqing Prefecture Yearbook* (Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou 2021:3), the region had a registered population of 387,500 at the end of 2021. Of these, 134,199 were Tibetan (36.18%), 112,385 were Lisu (30.3%), and 46,795 were Naxi (12.61%), making the Naxi the third-largest ethnic group in the prefecture. By contrast, as noted above, the largest Naxi population is concentrated in Lijiang. According to figures from the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC, as of 2010, what had until 2003 been Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County (now encompassing Lijiang Gucheng District and Yulong County) had a Naxi population of 201,066 (National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC[83])—approximately 4.29 times the number of Naxi recorded in Diqing in 2021.

Historical, Social, and Cultural Position of the Naxi in Diqing

The Naxi people in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture are not recent migrants but have lived in the region since at least the Tang Dynasty. In 680 AD (the eighth year of the Tang emperor Zhenguan), the Tubo Empire established Shenchuan Prefecture (神川都督府) and built Iron Bridge East City (铁桥东城), the earliest documented reference to modern-day Shangri-La City. Sanba, now a Naxi ethnic township in Shangri-La City, fell under the jurisdiction of this Tubo prefecture. At its peak, Shenchuan governed a broad region including present-day Diqing Prefecture, Lijiang, Lanping (in present-day Nujiang Prefecture), Jianchuan and Heqing (in

[83] For population figures of the Naxi people in Lijiang, refer to the 2010 national Naxi demographic data published on the official website of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC: https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/ztzl/nxz/gk.shtml. Accessed July 12, 2025.

present-day Dali Prefecture), and parts of Yanyuan in Sichuan (Pan Fasheng 1994:72; Zhao Xinyu 2003:120–121; Yang Fuquan 2005b:77–85; Wang Lei 2015:16).

In 1499 (the 13th year of the Ming emperor Hongzhi), the Naxi Mu chieftain (木氏土司) took control of Zhongdian (中甸, modern Shangri-La), placing it under Lijiang's jurisdiction. Zhongdian remained administratively subordinate to Lijiang for almost five centuries. Though the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was officially established in 1957, Zhongdian (now Shangri-La) continued under Lijiang's oversight until 1973, when full jurisdiction shifted to Diqing. In 2001, the county was renamed Shangri-La City by State Council approval. Today, Shangri-La governs eleven townships, including Sanba, a key site for Naxi culture (Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou 2021:49–51).

Historically, Sanba—located at the intersection of Naxi, Tibetan, and Lisu communities—was contested by various polities, including the Tibetan kingdoms, the Nanzhao Kingdom (南诏),[84] and the Tang dynasty, before coming under Qing rule in 1723. Following its incorporation into the PRC in 1950, Sanba was administratively placed under Zhongdian County. This division created a structural divergence: while the Naxi of Sanba and Lijiang share ethnic roots, they have developed under distinct political and cultural jurisdictions.

[84] The Nanzhao Kingdom existed in what is now Yunnan province of southwest China, as well as parts of modern-day Burma and Laos. It was founded in 649 AD by the Yi ancestor, and its capital was Dali. The Nanzhao Kingdom was eventually conquered by the Tang Dynasty in 902 AD (Xu Jun 2000:192)



Figure. 5.2: Bba perq dder (White Water Terrace, 白水台), sacred site of Naxi dobbaq religion, Sanba Township, Shangri-La City, Yunnan Province. January 2024. Photo by author.

As the capital of Diqing Prefecture, Shangri-La represents the cultural core of Tibetan identity in the region. Sanba, under its jurisdiction, inevitably operates under the institutional umbrella of Tibetan culture. Nevertheless, with overt Tibetan cultural features less prominent in Sanba itself, the area preserves what is considered a relatively unadulterated form of Naxi tradition. Wang Lei, a researcher in tourism anthropology, argues that Sanba represents a zigzag zone between Tibetan and Naxi cultures, rather than a smooth transitional space (Wang Lei 2015:21). This tension is reflected not only in governance and economic structures but also in religion. The local *dobbaq* religious tradition—an animistic Naxi belief system—originated in Sanba and was later influenced by Tibetan Bon. Sanba's *bba perq dder* (White Water Terrace, 白水台), also called Baidi (White Ground, 白地), is revered as a sacred site in the *dobbaq* tradition (Figure 5.2) (Zhao Xinyu 2003:184–191; Yang Fuquan 2005b:156–166; Mu Shihua 2016:30–35). To this day, *bba perq dder* remains a profoundly sacred site in the spiritual consciousness of the Naxi people across all regions.

Sanba's distinctive historical position in the sub-Tibetan zone, combined with its cultural centrality to Naxi religion and identity, as well as administrative and policy divergences from

Lijiang, has fostered a Naxi community that continually negotiates layered, and often contested, identities.

Naming/Renaming the *al ka bba laq* in the Process of Heritagization

Al ka bba laq is a traditional folk song and dance form well preserved within the Ruerka (汝卡), a culturally distinct subgroup of the Naxi people. The Ruerka retain distinctive cultural features that differ from those of other Naxi branches, including their language (i.e., the Ruerka language), music and dance, religious texts (e.g., part of the *dobbaq* script and chanting used by the Ruerka differ from other Naxi groups), and soul-sending routes for the deceased (He Genmao 2021:3-4).

Al ka bba laq stands out among Naxi folk song-dances as one of the few featuring lively rhythms and uninhibited dance movements (He Genmao 2021:39). During performances, two groups typically form two incomplete semicircles, holding hands while moving clockwise. Each group comprises roughly equal numbers of men and women (though exact parity isn't required). The groups engage in call-and-response exchanges: one group initiates with song and movement, while the opposing group answers—retaining the melodic framework but introducing lyrical variation. The cheerful melody follows a binary structure: the first section, sung by women with relatively slow steps, contrasts with the second section where men sing while performing high-legged jumps and stomps.

As one of the most representative folk music and dance traditions of the Naxi in Diqing Prefecture, *al ka bba laq* blends elements of local religion, music, dance, oral tradition, and

agrarian culture. Performed annually on the eighth day of the second lunar month, it serves as the prelude to the "dragon worship" ceremony of the *heiq jje hol ni* (二月八节, Festival of the Eighth Day of the Second Lunar Month) at *bba perq dder*, the most important ritual event for the Naxi in Sanba (Figures 5.3 and 5.4).[85] Other performances, including folksongs and dances, must follow this opening act. In September 2005, *al ka bba laq* was listed as a prefecture-level ICH project; in 2014, it was recognized as a representative project of Yunnan's provincial-level ICH, through the efforts of the Diqing ICH Protection Center (DQICHPC).



Figure. 5.3: Naxi incense rituals at bba perq dder during the heiq jje hol ni, Sanba Township, Shangri-La. March 2024. Photo by Author.

[85] The 8th day of the 2nd lunar month is traditionally observed as a Naxi ritual day. While known as the *said do shul* (三多节) in Lijiang, my fieldwork confirmed that Naxi subgroups in Sanba Township (Yunnan) and Eya Township (Sichuan) do not use this nomenclature, instead referring to it simply as *heiq jje hol ni* (二月八, Festival of the Eighth Day of the Second Lunar Month).

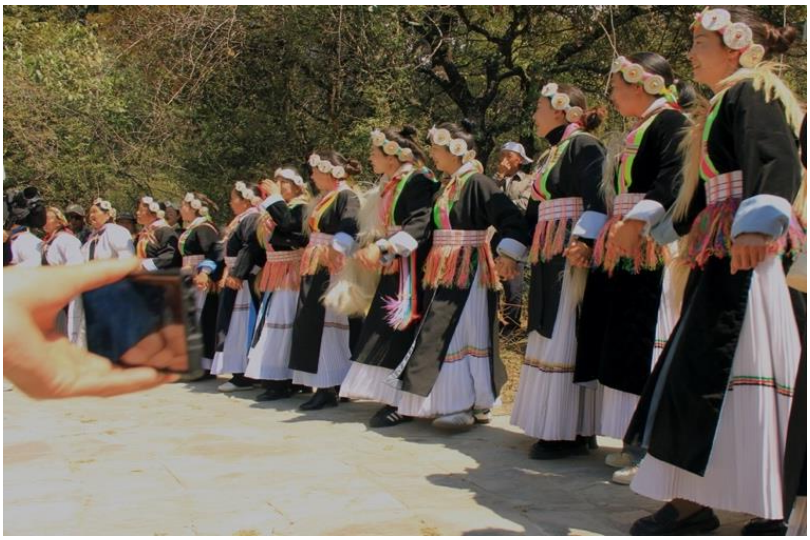


Figure. 5.4: Naxi villagers from Wushuwan performing al ka bba laq song-dance at bba perq dder during the heiq jje hol ni, Sanba Township, Shangri-La City, Yunnan Province. March 2024. Photo by Author.

What remains largely unknown, however, is that the name *al ka bba laq* was not originally used by the local community. Instead, the folk performance underwent a process of naming and renaming during its heritagization.



Figure. 5.5: He Shurong (和树荣), director of Wushuwan Village's Al Ka Bba Laq Art Troupe and principal of Sanba Township Dobbaq Culture School. Sanba Township, Shangri-La City, Yunnan Province. September 4, 2022. Photo by Author.

The tradition is primarily practiced in Wushuwan (吴树湾) Administrative Village, one of the eight Naxi settlements under Baidi (白地) Village Committee in Sanba Township, where the

most complete version of the 28 dance suites—including music, lyrics, and choreography—is preserved. Wushuwan is inhabited by the Ruerka branch of the Naxi, while another subgroup, the Nahan, resides nearby. According to He Shurong (和树荣) (Figure 5.5), head of the village's *Al Ka Bba Laq* Art Troupe, a local legend holds that the song and dance were created by the Ruerka ancestors after witnessing two dragons—a male and a female—leap from the water during a water deity ceremony at *bba perq dder*. Since then, it has been customary for Wushuwan villagers to lead the *al ka bba laq* performance during the annual ritual.[86]

Locally, the tradition was originally known by two names. The first, *wa sheq ddaq lvl keeq*, derives from the name of the site where the performance was first created. The term *keeq* in Naxi refers to "ramping" or "dancing." The second name, *ya li li keeq*, comes from the frequent appearance of the phrase *ya li li* in the lyrics. Both names remain in use among villagers today.

During interviews (September 4, 2022) conducted in his home, He Shurong recounted that the term *al ka bba laq* was introduced externally in the late 1970s or early 1980s. While no villager could recall the exact origin of the name, many reportedly resisted the change and even contemplated petitioning the township government—though they ultimately refrained from doing so. He explained that the new term, like earlier designations, derives from the song's backing lyrics, which incorporate both *ya li li* and *al ka bba laq*. However, during the ICH application process, authorities sought a name that would be more linguistically accessible

[86] Fieldnotes, March 2024. During the "2024 First Shangri-La Baishuitai Dongba Cultural Tourism Festival" (2024年香格里拉白水台东巴文化旅游节), a newly created government-sponsored event framing traditional *heiq jje hol ni* rituals, multiple Naxi informants from Dongba Village contested Wu Shurong's interpretation. They asserted that (1) the Ruerka branch historically constituted the laboring class within local Naxi society; and (2) *al ka bba laq* was performed specifically for tribute ceremonies during the *heiq jje hol ni* festival. These oral accounts, while representing two different local perspectives, lack corroborating documentary evidence in extant literature.

within a Han Chinese framework and distinct from the widely recognized Naxi folk song *a li li* from Lijiang. Consequently, *al ka bba laq* was formally adopted as the official title.

As a result, the tradition's name shifted from *wa sheq ddaq lvl keeq* and *ya li li keeq*—both rooted in local place and linguistic practice—to *al ka bba laq*, a term shaped by external recognition and bureaucratic needs. Although now used in official documents and by outsiders, most Naxi villagers in Sanba continue to refer to the dance by its original names in daily life, underscoring the disjuncture between local cultural practice and state-led heritage discourse.

Al ka bba laq Folk Artists in the Cracks

In the summer of 2022, I conducted short-term fieldwork in Wushuwan, focusing on the everyday realities of safeguarding and transmitting *al ka bba laq* in Sanba (Figure 5.6). Wushuwan has 98 households and 479 residents, all Naxi, most from the Ruerka subgroup. As a major *dobbaq* spiritual center, Sanba began restoring traditional *dobbaq* rituals and culture in the late 1990s. On March 16, 1998, the Sanba Township *Dobbaq* Culture School was founded in Wushuwan. Later, on August 24, 2009, the Naxi *Dobbaq* Culture Training Hall of Diqing Prefecture was established, building on this foundation.[87]

[87] He Shurong (personal communication, August 4, 2022); "23rd Anniversary Report on Dongba Cultural Transmission in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" (迪庆州东巴传习馆东巴文化二十三周年汇报材料) (unpublished institutional document), Sanba County, Shangri-La City, Yunnan Province.



Figure 5.6: He Shurong (和树荣, right first) directing members of the Al Ka Bba Laq Art Troupe in a rehearsal at Wushuwan Village Community Center, Yunnan Province. September 4, 2022. Photo by Author.

In spring 2001, drawing on the organizational experience of the *Dobbaq* Culture School, He Shurong, the school's principal, founded the Sanba Naxi Folk *Al Ka Bba Laq* Art Troupe, which now has 104 members across three age groups: youth, middle-aged, and senior. The troupe's mission is to preserve, organize, and perform local Naxi folk songs and dances. Since its formation, the troupe has performed in ethnic culture festivals and official events across Diqing, Lijiang, and beyond. In 2008, they were invited to perform at Yushui zhai (玉水寨) in Lijiang,[88] a major tourist site and home to the Lijiang *Dobbaq* School. Their performances—rooted in the distinctive music and dance style of *al ka bba laq*—were well received by both tourists and Naxi audiences in Lijiang.

[88] Yushui zhai (玉水寨) is a Naxi culture-themed modern tourist site located at the foot of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (Yulong Xueshan, 玉龙雪山), approximately 15km from Lijiang Old Town in Baisha Town (白沙镇), Yunnan Province. Established in 1997, it serves as a key demonstration center for *dobbaq* culture in Lijiang. The site was designated among China's first batch of AAAA-level tourist attractions in 2006 and hosts annual *dobbaq* ritual ceremonies and the *said do shul* (三朵节 or 三多节 in Chinese).

In my 2022 fieldwork, I interviewed He Shurong and Zhao Jun (赵军), former director of the DQICHPC, about the troupe's engagements in Lijiang.[89] Both recalled that in 2009, the owner of Yushui zhai invited the troupe not only to perform but also to teach *al ka bba laq* to local performers. Zhao Jun recounted (Interview, September 2, 2022),

> He came to me to discuss it. We were worried. If Lijiang Naxi learned the al ka bba laq, would they still invite us to perform? Would there be future disputes over who represents this tradition in ICH projects? Once it spreads to Lijiang, others might change it without consulting us. The goal of ICH protection is to preserve original forms. If altered, we may not be able to correct it—and regret it later.

Zhao ultimately encouraged He Shurong to perform and observe the situation before deciding whether to teach. That year, the troupe performed at Yushui zhai's *dobbaq* Dharma Ceremony and, after some hesitation, began teaching. However, He Shurong later reflected (Interview, September 4, 2022),

> They couldn't really learn it. Our dance includes big, middle, and small jumps—they could only imitate the small ones, and even those lacked the right sensation. They don't speak our dialect, and the singing must be in it. They could only memorize phrases without understanding them. In the end, we decided we could no longer continue teaching, (because) we felt a responsibility to our traditions.

He Shurong is among the foremost representatives of Sanba Naxi folk artists in governmental and cultural advocacy. As head of both the *Dobbaq* Culture School and the *Al Ka Bba Laq* Art Troupe, he has long participated in Naxi cultural circles across Diqing and Lijiang. His voice is regularly seen in WeChat groups run by Naxi scholars in Lijiang, Kunming, and Beijing. In a recent "23rd Anniversary Report on *dobbaq* Cultural Transmission in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" (迪庆州东巴传习馆东巴文化二十三周年汇报材料)

[89] Fieldwork conducted in Shangri-La (August–September 2022), including interviews with: Zhao Jun (赵军); He Shurong (和树荣); staff of Dêqên Prefecture ICH Protection Center; and folk artists from Wushuwan Village, Sanba Township.

submitted to the DQICHPC, he outlines both the challenges facing cultural preservation in Sanba and his hopes for the future. He advocates for a nationwide vision that treats the Naxi people across Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet as a whole, urging the government to establish a "Chinese Naxi *Dobbaq* Cultural Ecological Protection Area."

He Shurong noted that Lijiang is now preparing to declare its own "Lijiang Naxi Cultural and Ecological Protection Area." In his view,

> Naxi culture includes diverse subgroups and subcultures. If declarations are made along administrative lines, without broader coordination, it will harm both the protection and identity of Naxi culture, and disrupt the balance of interests among its branches.

He Shurong emphasizes that Sanba remains a vital center of Naxi *dobbaq* culture and a key part of Diqing's multicultural heritage. And he hopes the prefectural government will give more support to Sanba and other Naxi regions in Diqing as they develop the Diqing Ethnic Cultural Ecological Protection Zone.[90] In our later interviews in 2023 and 2024, He also expressed a strong desire for more scholarly attention to local Naxi music culture, lamenting that no professional researchers have yet studied it in detail in his region.

[90] The Diqing National Ethnic Cultural Ecology Protection Zone originated as an experimental zone approved by the Ministry of Culture in November 2010, covering Shangri-La City, Weixi Lisu Autonomous County, and Dêqên County. After 13 years of development, it passed the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's evaluation in July 2023, becoming a fully accredited national-level protection zone. https://www.ihchina.cn/experimental_detail/15752.html. Accessed on May 22, 2025.

The Impenetrable Predicament Between the Cracks

Cracks Created by the Country's Administrative Planning

As noted earlier, since 1950, Sanba Naxi Township has fallen under the jurisdiction of what is now Shangri-La City, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Historically, however, Sanba's administrative affiliation has shifted repeatedly. Between 1724 and 1950, Sanba underwent repeated administrative realignments due to evolving frontier governance policies under successive Chinese regimes—most notably the *gaitu guiliu* (改土归流) reforms in Lijiang and Zhongdian (present-day Shangri-La City) initiated in 1723 to replace native chieftains with state-appointed officials. This jurisdictional ambiguity persisted until 1950, when the Communist liberation of Zhongdian County formally established Sanba as an administrative township (Wang Lei 2015:17).

Sanba's location at the intersection of Naxi and Tibetan spheres of influence has long made it a contested space—administratively, culturally, and symbolically. Yet, through this instability, the Sanba Naxi have managed to retain distinct traditions. As the spiritual heartland of *dobbaq* belief, Sanba continues to draw Naxi pilgrims from across regions. A common saying among the Naxi people underscores this: "A *dobbaq* priest who has not been to Baidi (a sacred *dobbaq* site in Sanba) is not a real *dobbaq*" (He Shaoying 1992:33).

Linguistically, the Sanba Naxi speak a dialect markedly different from that of Lijiang. It preserves older lexical and grammatical features that have disappeared elsewhere. As He Shurong remarked, "Our dialect is very different from Lijiang's—we can understand them, but they can't understand us."

Since being administratively placed under Diqing Prefecture in the 1950s, Sanba's political, judicial, economic, and cultural governance has been firmly defined. This alignment has also reinforced an invisible but growing divide between the Naxi of Sanba and those of Lijiang.

Cracks Created by the ICH Protection Movement and System in China

As outlined in previous chapters, in 2003, facing the rapid erosion of traditional culture and influenced by UNESCO's initiatives, China launched the National Folk Culture Protection Project (中国民族民间文化遗产保护工程); this marked the beginning of a nationwide push to safeguard ICH. The following year, China ratified UNESCO's 2003 Convention, and from 2005 to 2009, conducted a nationwide ICH survey. Between 2006 and 2021, the State Council released five national ICH lists. In 2011, China passed its first law on ICH, providing formal legal protections for traditional arts and customs.

As part of this sweeping effort, each province and autonomous region established ICH Protection Centers (ICHPC) at multiple levels—county, city, and province. These centers are responsible for surveying, evaluating, and organizing ICH items for recognition across different levels of government. More recently, their work has expanded to include overseeing certified ICH inheritors, providing training, conducting evaluations, and issuing official credentials.

Under this system, every ICH item must be submitted by the ICHPC of its corresponding administrative region. For Sanba, this means all heritage applications and recognitions must go through Diqing's ICHPC. Even though Sanba and Lijiang Naxi share a broader cultural heritage, the Lijiang government and its ICHPC have no authority over Sanba's ICH matters. This rigid

division of administrative jurisdiction makes joint applications—such as for shared Naxi cultural traditions—nearly impossible.

Based on the data I collected in 2023 and 2024, there are currently three nationally recognized Naxi music ICH items, all attributed to Lijiang. Even the *dobbaq* sacrificial dance—widely acknowledged to have originated in Sanba—was formally credited to Lijiang. This reflects how China's ICH system, despite its preservationist aims, can reproduce administrative boundaries that fracture ethnocultural continuity and marginalize historically significant communities like the Sanba Naxi.

Cracks Created by Cultural Differences

The Tibetan population in China spans several provinces—Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan—and Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture lies at the southeastern edge of this vast cultural zone. Diqing, particularly its capital Shangri-La, sits at the transitional boundary between Yunnan and the Tibetan plateau. In Shangri-La, the influence of Tibetan culture is unmistakable: from the iconic Ganden Sumtseling Monastery (dubbed the Little Potala Palace) to the world's largest prayer wheel in Dukezong Ancient Town, Tibetan religious and aesthetic elements dominate the cityscape.

Over more than seventy years of governance, Diqing has developed a distinct religious-cultural identity centered on Tibetan Buddhism. Some scholars, such as tourism study scholar Wang Lei in his MA research on tourism anthropology (2015:18–20), argue that Diqing should be viewed not as Tibet's periphery but as a "sub-Tibetan zone"—a region where Tibetan culture

has been formally institutionalized and symbolically emphasized. Historically, however, Diqing has been shaped by multi-ethnic interactions and political contestation, which have created disparities in cultural influence and representational power, both with respect to Tibet proper and within the region itself.

This institutional emphasis on Tibetan culture has consequences for non-Tibetan groups within Diqing—particularly the Naxi of Sanba. Despite their being culturally and linguistically closer to the Naxi in neighboring Lijiang, their home area of Sanba is administratively classified as part of a Tibetan autonomous region. Many Naxi residents in Sanba expressed frustration during my fieldwork and revisiting from 2022 to 2024 over the lack of official support for their traditions.[91] This unequal cultural recognition is evident in Diqing's ICH designations. As of 2014, among the nine national-level ICH items in Diqing, Seven were Tibetan, one Naxi, and one Lisu (Table 5.1). On the provincial list, of the 19 items in the folk dance category, eleven were Tibetan, three Naxi (Table 5.2), and five Lisu. In the music category, ten were Tibetan, two Naxi, two Lisu, and one Han Chinese.

APPOCAL YEAR	NAME	CATEGORY	PROTECTING INSTITUTION
2006	Tibetan Epic Tradition of Gesar ("格萨尔"史诗传统)	Oral Literature	Diqing ICHPC

[91] Fieldnotes: Mr. H, a local *dobbaq* priest from Sanba (pseudonym used with consent), exemplifies this dilemma. He has actively applied for recognition as an inheritor of Naxi *dobbaq* culture over several years. While township-level evaluations were relatively smooth due to local acknowledgment of his expertise, he faced prolonged delays at the city and prefectural levels. According to H, Tibetan candidates and projects often receive priority in evaluations. In 2024, he sought provincial-level recognition in Yunnan, but because his administrative affiliation is with Diqing—not Lijiang—he anticipated being disadvantaged, as Lijiang Naxi are often favored. As of May 2025, H had yet to receive provincial recognition. His experience reflects the structural challenges faced by Naxi subgroups outside the cultural center in Lijiang.

	Tibetan Guozhuang Dance (Diqing Style) (藏族锅庄舞-迪庆锅庄)	Traditional Dance	Diqing ICHPC
	Lisu *Achimugua* Dance (傈僳族阿尺木刮)	Traditional Dance	Weixi County Culture and Sports Bureau (here after CSB)
	Naxi Handmade Papermaking Skills (纳西族手工造纸技艺)	Traditional Handicrafts	Shangri-La City CSB
	Tibetan Opera (Deqen Style) 藏戏-德钦藏戏)	Traditional Opera	Deqen ICHPC
	Tibetan Black Pottery (藏族黑陶烧制技艺)	Traditional Craft	Shangri-La City CSB
2011	Tibetan Medicine: Tibetan Orthopedic Therapy – Traditional Medicine (藏医药：藏医骨伤疗法)	Traditional Medicine	Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Hospital
2014	Tibetan Worship Rituals of the Meili Sacred Mountain (梅里神山祭祀)	Traditional Folklore	Deqen ICHPC
	Tibetan Reba Dance (藏族热巴舞)	Traditional Dance	Diqing ICHPC

Table 5.1: National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage Items in Diqing

APPROVAL YEAR	APPLICATION LEVEL	NAME	CATEGORY
2006	National Level	Naxi Handmade Papermaking Skills (纳西族手工造纸技艺)	Traditional Handicrafts
2009	Provincial Level	Naxi Traditional Hemp Spinning Skills (纳西族传统纺麻技艺)	Traditional Handicrafts
2013	Provincial Level	Naxi *al leq* Ancient Song (纳西族阿勒古歌)	Vocal Music
	Provincial Level	Naxi *al ka bba laq* (纳西族阿卡巴拉)	Dance with Vocal Accompaniment
2023	Provincial Level	Naxi Heaven Worship Ritual (纳西族祭天习俗)	Folk Festival
	Provincial Level	Shangri-La Mouth Organ Dance (香格里拉葫芦笙打跳)	Dance with Instrument Accompaniment

			(Jointly applied for by the Lisu, Yi, and Naxi)

Table 5.2: The ICH Items of the Naxi in Diqing on the Lists

Government institutions involved in ICH protection and cultural promotion in Diqing clearly favor Tibetan projects, reflecting both the demographic weight of the Tibetan population and the prefecture's identity as a model of Tibetan cultural representation. As a result, minority groups like the Sanba Naxi—despite their deep cultural heritage—remain marginal within the broader discourse of cultural preservation in the region.

Summary: Singing in the Shadows

This case study began with my exploration of the music and dance tradition *al ka bba laq* among a lesser-known subgroup of the Naxi people living in sub-Tibetan areas—communities I had never encountered in my previous fieldwork. Like most researchers, when we think of the Naxi in China, we instinctively think of Lijiang, their cultural and demographic center. I spent most of summer 2022 conducting in-depth research on funeral songs and dances in Lijiang's Gucheng District and Dadong Township. The insights and recordings I gathered revealed significant regional variations in Naxi funeral traditions.

This discovery sparked my deeper curiosity about musical practices among Naxi communities outside Lijiang. I was particularly drawn to *al ka bba laq* for its upbeat melodies and infectious dance rhythms—so striking different from the sorrowful, restrained tones and slow, heavy steps typical of most Naxi funeral performances. Given its origins at the cultural

intersection between the Naxi and Tibetan communities, I initially wondered whether *al ka bba laq* had been significantly shaped by Tibetan influences. However, during my fieldwork in Sanba Township in the summer of 2022 and again in January (Figure 5.7) and March of 2024, I was surprised to find that this tradition exists exclusively among the Naxi in Sanba. Few Tibetans in Diqing—apart from the ICH-related officials I interviewed—had ever heard of it, let alone expressed any familiarity or engagement with it.



Figure 5.7: He Shurong (和树荣, right) hosted his eldest son's wedding at their Wushuwan family home, with performances by the Al Ka Bba Laq Art Troupe showcasing traditional Naxi song-dance. Yunnan Province. January 22, 2024. Photo by author.

Conducting this investigation was exceptionally challenging, as it touched on sensitive issues—particularly in a region widely promoted as a national model of ethnic harmony and stability. In Diqing, the official narrative of peaceful multicultural coexistence is not only deeply entrenched but also a source of local pride. As a result, residents were often hesitant to discuss interethnic tensions or perceived inequalities. Yet, as the case of *al ka bba laq* reveals, cultural

imbalances do exist. These are not solely the product of geographic marginalization resulting from administrative boundaries, but also stem from intra-ethnic competition within China's ICH protection system. The institutionalization, politicization, and regionalization of ICH governance have further amplified power asymmetries and cultural hierarchies, deepening the divide between dominant and peripheral expressions of Naxi identity.

Case Study 2: From Cultural Adaptation to Representation: The Naxi in Tibet and the Tibetan *Piwang* (Fiddle) of Mangkam County

As mentioned above, while the majority of Naxi live in Yunnan Province, a small number reside in Sichuan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region. In previous studies on Naxi culture, apart from research on the history of the Naxi (e.g., Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu 1999; Zhao Xinyu 2003; Yang Fuquan 2005b), little attention has been paid to the Naxi population in Mangkam County (Tibetan: སྨད་ཁམས་རྫོང་; Chinese: 芒康县), which comes under the jurisdiction of Qamdo/Chamdo City (Tibetan: ཆབ་མདོ; Chinese: 昌都市) in eastern Tibet. The Naxi Ethnic Township (纳西民族乡) in Mangkam County is home to a community of approximately 1,169 Naxi (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:3; 262). This Naxi ethnic township in eastern Tibet is the only Naxi settlement in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Under its jurisdiction lies Yanjing Village (literally "Salt Well" in Chinese, 盐井) (Figure 5.8), an administrative village that hosts the highest concentration of Naxi people in the entire township.



Figure 5.8: The salt fields in Yanjing Village, June16, 2024. Photo by author.

Mangkam County is situated in eastern Tibet Autonomous Region, at the tri-junction of Tibet, Sichuan, and Yunnan within the watersheds of the Jinsha (Yangtze) and Lancang (Mekong) Rivers. It borders Batang County (巴塘县) in Sichuan Province across the Jinsha River to the east and adjoins Dêqên County (Tibetan: བདེ་ཆེན་རྫོང་; Chinese: 德钦县) in Yunnan Province to the south, covering a total area of approximately 11,635 square kilometers (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:3). Historically a key site on the Tea-Horse Road[92] and a major center for salt production, Mangkam saw the arrival of the Naxi around 1509, during the Ming dynasty and at the time of the Mu chiefdom (1382–1723). The Naxi arrivals in Mangkam developed livelihoods centered on female-led salt-making and male-led horse caravanning (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:368), and are referred to as *Jiang* (Tibetan: འཇང་; Chinese: 绛) in the Mangkam Tibetan

[92] The Tea-Horse Road (茶马古道), sometimes called the "second Silk Road", was an extensive network of trade routes across Asia, centered on tea transportation. Its most densely traversed zone formed a triangular hub between Zhongdian (now Shangri-La) in Yunnan, Qamdo/Chamdo in Tibet, and Kangding in Sichuan—where merchant caravans (马帮) were most active. Mangkam (芒康) served as a critical high-traffic node along these routes. Caravans primarily transported tea to exchange for Tibetan horses, mules, wool, musk, and medicinal herbs, sustaining Sino-Tibetan trade from the Tang to Qing dynasties (Chen Baoya 1992:70–73).

dialect. Centuries of coexistence with Tibetans led to deep cultural integration, and the Naxi of Mangkam are now largely assimilated: most speak Tibetan, observe Tibetan customs,[93] and have contributed significantly to preserving the Mangkam *piwang*, a renowned Tibetan fiddle tradition. Designated as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, the *piwang* (Tibetan: དཔྱང་; Chinese: 哔旺) is now closely associated with the local Naxi community, who serve as its principal inheritors. This case study introduces Yang Pei (杨培) (Figure 5.9), a contemporary Naxi practitioner of the *piwang*, and examines how this tradition has been adopted, adapted, and recontextualized within Naxi musical heritage and identity in Tibet.



Figure 5.9: Yang Pei (杨培). Mangkam, June 2024.Photo by author.

[93] Although many of the living habits and language of the Naxi people in Markam have changed, they still maintain their Naxi ethnic identity. This persistence is reinforced by three key factors: their concentrated settlement in the Naxi Ethnic Township of Mangkam County, the continued observance of traditional festivals such as the *Naqpal* Festival (纳帕节, described below), and perhaps most significantly, the differential ethnic policies implemented by the government towards Tibetan and Naxi groups. These policy distinctions serve as constant reminders of their distinct ethnic identity.

Tracing the Naxi in Tibet: A Brief History

Situated in southeastern Tibet at the intersection of Tibet, Sichuan, and Yunnan, Mangkam County is a historical gateway to eastern Tibet and a strategic node in Qamdo's external relations. It lies along the ancient Tea-Horse Road and is part of the contemporary "golden tourism route" and the Shangri-La Eco-Tourism Area. As a cultural and geographic center of Khamba Tibet, Mangkam is connected by National Highways 318 and 214, linking it to Qamdo, Lhasa, Chengdu, and Kunming. The county spans 11,635 square kilometers, with an average altitude of 4,300 meters (the county seat sits at 3,870 meters). According to 2000 census data published in the *Markam County Annals* (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:17), the county at that time comprised 2 towns and 14 townships, including one ethnic township—the Naxi Ethnic Township. As of 2000, Mangkam had a resident population of 73,155, including Tibetan (70,416), Han (1,467), Naxi (1,169), Hui, and Bai ethnic groups (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:263).

Human habitation in the Mangkam region dates back to before the Warring States period (c. 500 BC). During the Tang and Yuan dynasties, it was governed by the Tibetan empire (Tubo). From 1509 to 1639, during the Ming dynasty, the Naxi Mu chieftains from Lijiang occupied the region and established administrative control under the name *Chawadami Zong* (Tibetan: ཚ་བ་དྷ་མི་རྫོང་; Chinese: 察哇打米宗), centered in Yanjing. During this period, many Naxi in Mangkam were serfs under Mu authority, engaged in agriculture, construction, and military service (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:4). In 1639, the Mongolian army defeated the Mu chieftains,

ending their 130-year rule.[94] Some Naxi returned to Lijiang, but others remained and gradually integrated with the local Tibetan population, adopting Tibetan customs and practices (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:368–369).

Place names in the area evolved across successive dynasties. In 1908, shortly before the end of the Qing dynasty, the region was designated Yanjing County. On October 12, 1950, the People's Liberation Army entered the area, and on April 9, 1960, Yanjing County was merged into Ningjing County. The county was renamed Mangkam (芒康县) on November 3, 1965. In 1986, the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region formally established a Naxi Nationality Township in Mangkam County, then home to 1,086 Naxi residents (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:4, 266).

The Tibetan *Piwang* of Mangkam

The *piwang* (Tibetan: དཔྱང་; Chinese: 哔旺), a general Tibetan term for string instruments, is one of the most iconic traditional Tibetan musical instruments, encompassing various types such as single-string, two-string, and three-string variations. Instruments like the *erhu* (二胡) from Han Chinese regions and the cow-horn fiddle from the Khamba region of Tibet belong to the "two-

[94] During the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, political instability allowed Mongol tribes to advance southward. In the early seventeenth century, Güshi Khan (固始汗), leader of the Khoshut Mongols, secured victory for the Gelugpa sect in its rivalry with the Kagyupa (the two major Tibetan Buddhist schools) and gained control over access routes to Tibet (Xiao Liangzhong 1997:70). By the early Kangxi reign, Tibet had become a direct domain of the Khoshut Mongols (Ma Guojun 2011:123).Meanwhile, the Mu chieftains (木氏土司) of Lijiang in northwest Yunnan, with Ming court support, expanded their territory. During the Wanli reign (1573–1620), Mu Zeng (木增) extended his domain northward from Weixi's Tacheng to include Zhongdian (now Shangri-La) and parts of Sichuan's Litang and Batang. At its peak, Mu influence reached as far as Mangkam and Yanjing in Tibet. The Mu chieftains and Khoshut Mongols engaged in prolonged conflict over Zhongdian, with the Mu eventually losing ground (Xiao Liangzhong 1997:70–71). In 1639, Güshi Khan's forces captured Jyekundo (江卡) and Yanjing, ending 130 years of Mu rule in these areas.

string *piwang*" category. Despite their shared classification, the craftsmanship and playing techniques of the *erhu* and Tibetan *piwang* differ significantly owing to variations in culture, history, and aesthetics, resulting in distinct artistic characteristics and styles. Tibetan musical instruments are broadly categorized into string, wind, and percussion instruments, with string instruments further divided into *dranyen* (Tibetan: དྲྙན་སྒྲ་, Wylie transliteration: *sgra snyan*) and *piwang* (bowed string instruments). The name *piwang* combines *pi*, referring to the leather membrane on the instrument's soundbox, and *wang*, imitating the resonant sound it produces. Traditional *piwang* instruments are diverse, including the widely played two-stringed "Khamba *piwang*" in areas like Qamdo, eastern Nagqu, Garze, Diqing, and Yushu; the three-stringed "Dingri *piwang*" popular in Xigaze; and the "Zada *piwang*" prevalent in Ngari. Additionally, less common variants, such as the one-string and four-string *piwang*, can be found in certain regions of Tibet (Juega 2015:101–104). The names of the component parts of the *piwang* are given in Table 5.3.

Tibetan Term	Chinese Term	English Equivalent
rdzing	琴筒 (*qin tong*)	Body
srog shing	琴杆 (*qin gan*)	Shaft
rgyud	琴弦 (*qin xian*)	Strings
skud bsdoms	千斤 (*qian jin*)	String loop
Sga	琴码 (*qin ma*)	Bridge
gzhu	琴弓 (*qin gong*)	Bow
theb thag	钩带 (*gou dai*)	Hook strap

Table 5.3 The component parts of the Khamba piwang (Juega 2015:102–104)

The Khamba Piwang

The Khamba *piwang* is primarily associated with eastern Tibetan regions where the Khamba dialect is spoken. It is most commonly used to accompany song and dance performances known in Tibetan as *gzhas* (གཞས་རྡེད་) and in Chinese as *xianzi* (弦子) (below I shall refer to it by the Chinese name, since that is most widespread in published literature). Representative regions include Batang and Derong in Sichuan, Mangkam in Tibet, and Deqin in Yunnan. The instrument spread beyond its core areas through the itinerant performances of Tibetan *reba* (Tibetan: རྒྱུ་གར་) troupes and the movement of pastoralists and traders along the historic Tea-Horse Road.[95] As a result, it reached central and southern Tibet, including Lhasa, and parts of Aba and Hongyuan counties in Sichuan (Ma Chengfu 1998:24–25).

In Mangkam, the Khamba *piwang* is valued for its organic tonal quality, which blends smoothly with the human voice. The instrument is typically tuned to a perfect fifth interval—commonly in Re-La, with the tonic pitched around B flat. Because the *piwang* is primarily used to accompany singing and dancing, it is most often played while standing or walking. Seated playing is reserved for casual or informal settings. Performance technique emphasizes the left hand, with an expressive focus on glissandi, trills, and other ornamentations. Notably, Khamba

[95] The *reba* dance tradition primarily flourished in the Kham dialect region, originating from Tsawarong (Tibetan: ཚ་བ་རོང་; located in Chawalong Township, Zayü County, at the Tibet–Yunnan border) before spreading to Qamdo, Pombor, Kongpo, and Batang. Historically, numerous itinerant *reba* and *xianzi* artists made their living through performances across Kham. These traveling troupes—often entire families—migrated annually through regions including Deqen, Zhagyab, Mangkam, Batang, Yushu, Gyalthang (Shangri-La), Lijiang, Jianchuan, and Dali. These performers strategically followed the Tea-Horse Road trade routes, timing their appearances at major trading posts when merchant caravans (马帮) stopped to rest. This created a symbiotic relationship between performers and caravan traders along the ancient route. The caravan drivers, enduring the harsh monotony of high-altitude trade routes, adopted the *xianzi* lute as self-entertainment to alleviate fatigue and loneliness. Eventually, the instrument was adopted and perfected by *reba* performers, becoming essential to their livelihood (Gongbu Duojie 2017:10-12).

piwang technique does not involve hand-position shifting along the neck, which distinguishes it from modern Han Chinese bowed instruments and accentuates its distinct stylistic features (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:227; Jue Ga 2015:106).

Mangkam Xianzi

Xianzi is a Tibetan performance tradition that integrates singing, dancing, and instrumental accompaniment. In Tibetan, it is called འཁོར་རྩེད་, meaning "circle dance" (Hu Yunhua et al. 2007:227). Widely practiced as a form of collective folk entertainment, *xianzi* is especially popular in Qamdo, Qinghai, Gansu, and other parts of the Tibetan plateau. Among its regional variations, the *xianzi* traditions of Mangkam, Dêqên, and Batang are recognized as the most representative (Wang Dan 2024:132).

The *xianzi* dance traces its origins to *gzhas bzhad* (Tibetan: གཞས་བཞད་; Chinese: 歌卓), a Bon-po sacrificial dance from ancient Tibet that evolved during the Tubo Kingdom (7th–9th century) into a communal celebration for seasonal festivals and life-cycle events. Its modern form took shape along the historic Tea-Horse Road, where Mangkam became a hub of artistic innovation. Characterized by undulating sleeves and tremulous steps that mirror the vibrato of the *piwang* fiddle, the dance mimics auspicious animals such as peacocks and hares.

Often referred to nowadays as the "charm of the ancient road" (*gudao shenyun*, 古道神韵), the Mangkam *xianzi* is closely linked to this historic trade route (Li Jinxing and Hong Tao 2022:132). As *xianzi* spread along the Tea-Horse Road, it was adopted and adapted by various ethnic communities (Wang Dan 2024:132). What distinguishes the Mangkam tradition is its use

of the *piwang* as the primary accompanying instrument and the improvisational nature of its folk songs. Performances typically alternate between fast and slow rhythms and are usually led by male *piwang* players. The lead performer, known as the *gzhas dpon* (Tibetan: གཞས་དཔོན; Chinese: 谐本), is skilled in both composition and choreography, guiding the group through improvised *gzhas*-style lyrics that cycle through three central themes: hospitality and reunion, ancestral homage, and courtship. The *piwang*'s expressive range allows the dance to be performed by groups of varying sizes, in diverse settings—from rooftops and courtyards to open grasslands, often around bonfires. Dancers typically form concentric circles, with men leading through *piwang* melodies and women swirling colored sleeves (*Changdu diquzhi* 2005:797). A local saying encapsulates its spirit: "A true *xianzi* dance has no finale"—a testament to its rhythmic fluidity, building from lyrical openings to euphoric crescendos.[96]

Within the broader Mangkam *xianzi* tradition, distinct substyles have emerged, including Yanjing *xianzi*, Xuzhong *xianzi*, Sodoxi *xianzi*, and Qudeng *xianzi*, each reflecting local musical, choreographic, and geographic characteristics (Li Jinxing and Hong Tao 2022:132). In Yanjing, the Naxi community plays a central role in preserving and transmitting the Yanjing *xianzi* tradition. The *piwang* player occupies a pivotal position in performance, guiding rhythm, melody, emotion, and dance movement. Among the Naxi in Mangkam, Yang Pei (杨培)—widely known as the "King of Mangkam *Piwang*"—is a celebrated figure and an important bearer of this cultural tradition.

[96] Data provided by Mangkam County Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, June 2024.

Yang Pei (杨培): King of Mangkam *Piwang* and Naxi Cultural Ambassador

Born in 1978 into a local Naxi family in Mangkam, Yang Pei (杨培) is a renowned *piwang* performer and key cultural figure in the transmission of Mangkam *xianzi*. His Naxi wife and their two daughters continue the family tradition of speaking Naxi at home. His father, a horseman involved in regional trade, traveled extensively along the ancient Tea-Horse Road—from Lhasa to Golmud, Nepal to Dali, and Ya'an to Baoshan—often accompanied by the *piwang*. Yang Pei joined these journeys from a young age, assisting in the salt trade and gradually developing a deep interest in the *piwang*. Exposure to folk artists across diverse regions further enriched his musical skills and sensibilities.[97]

At 19, Yang Pei lost his father, just as the salt trade began to wane. To support his family and ensure his younger siblings could attend school, he turned to the *piwang* as a source of livelihood at age 23. Over the next decade, he performed in dance halls and *nangma* halls[98] throughout Yunnan, Lhasa, Shigatse, and Nagqu.

While in Lhasa, Yang Pei observed the rising popularity of Batang *xianzi* (also known as *Ba xie*) in the commercial music scene. Inspired, he studied this style and, with friends, raised 40,000 yuan to produce his first Mangkam *xianzi* VCD album, *Xia Bu* ཧཱ་བོ (Good Brothers 夏布), which sold 15,000 copies. A second album followed, selling out 10,000 copies in just ten

[97] All data in this section derives from the author's formal and informal interviews with Yang Pei (杨培) in Mangkam County, June 2024.

[98] *Nangma* means "court" in Tibetan. "*Nangma* hall" is a popular term for dance halls and entertainment venues in Lhasa.

days. Unfortunately, production halted during the Chinese New Year holiday, limiting further distribution. Despite piracy—pirated copies sold for as little as 3–5 RMB compared to the original 20–30 RMB—Yang Pei remained central to the dissemination of Mangkam *xianzi* through his continued album releases. Reflecting on his prominence, he remarked, "It's not necessarily because I'm the best, but I have experience in this process."

Over the following years, more than thirty albums featuring the *piwang* as the lead instrument were produced (e.g., Figure 5.10). Yang Pei recalled that before these efforts, Mangkam *xianzi* was scarcely known in Lhasa. His recordings and live performances helped elevate the tradition's visibility in public spaces—from *nangma* halls and open-air squares to schools and workplaces. "Even school gymnasts liked to dance to Mangkam *xianzi*," he noted. His most innovative project was སྨན་ཁམས་སྒོང་ལྷིན་རིག་སྒྲ་སྒྲིག *I* (*The Sound of Mangkam I*, 芒康岗之声 *I*), a collaborative album that brought together multiple singers, each contributing a song linked in sequence—an unprecedented format in Tibetan music production. The album's success laid the groundwork for future volumes.



Figure 5.10: Commercial albums produced and performed by Yang Pei, June 2024. Photo by author.

Yang Pei's growing reputation earned him the title "King of Mangkam *Piwang*," attracting numerous students eager to learn the instrument. However, his performance troupe saw frequent turnover, as many young learners left after a year to pursue solo performance careers. In 2013, Yang Pei joined the newly established Qamdo Mass Art Centre (昌都市群艺馆), a public institution dedicated to cultural preservation. This transition marked the end of his freelance career and enabled him to focus on performing, teaching, and innovating Mangkam *xianzi* with institutional support.

Following his appointment, Yang Pei co-released སྨན་ཁམས་སྒོང་སྒྲིན་དེཀ་ཐྲྭ་སྐྱན། *III* (*The Sound of Mangkam III*, 芒康岗之声 *III*) and, on January 6, 2025, launched སྨན་ཁམས་སྒོང་སྒྲིན་དེཀ་ཐྲྭ་སྐྱན། *IV* (*The Sound of Mangkam IV*, 芒康岗之声 *IV*), a teaching video on *xianzi* dance techniques. Known for his openness to new platforms, Yang Pei embraced mobile and social media, creating video accounts on Douyin (TikTok in China) and WeChat[99] to promote Mangkam *xianzi* and connect with wider audiences. Through these platforms, he reconnected with Naxi communities across China, fostering musical and cultural exchange among different subgroups of the Naxi people.

I was introduced to Mr. Yang by Xia Hang (夏航), a young Naxi man from Eya Township in Sichuan's Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture, who had connected with Yang Pei through Douyin and WeChat. Interestingly, Xia Hang had never met Yang Pei in person—they were simply online acquaintances. While I was conducting fieldwork in Mangkam, the three of us had

[99] WeChat (微信) is popular multipurpose social media platform in China, which integrates messaging, social networking, and mobile payments.

an enjoyable video call, which unexpectedly opened the door for me to a meaningful engagement with one of the most influential figures in Mangkam's contemporary musical scene.

Like many others, I was surprised that Yang Pei—an undisputed disseminator and exemplary practitioner of Mangkam *xianzi* and *piwang*—has not been designated as an ICH bearer. Currently, Mangkam *xianzi* has only two officially recognized state-level inheritors, both Tibetan: ཚེའིང་དབང་འདུས་ (Tsering Wangdui 泽仁旺堆, b.1956), and རྒྱ་མཚོ (Jangtso 江措, b.1957), both natives of Mangkam County.[100] During our interviews, Mr. Yang never expressed a desire for the ICH title. Rather than pursuing formal recognition, he emphasized tangible contributions to preserving Mangkam *piwang*. This ethos has sustained his decades-long dedication to his musical ideals despite adversity. His reflections revealed profound gratitude for his current role at Qamdo's Mass Art Center, where he transitioned from freelance musician to institutional staff—a privilege he values for amplifying his hometown's musical traditions.

Summary: From Cultural Adaptation to Representation

Over generations, the Naxi sub-group residing in Tibet has gradually adapted to and integrated with Tibetan culture. This adaptation is evident across many facets of daily life, including dress, diet, religion, architecture, language, and music. Such assimilation is closely tied to their long-term cohabitation within a shared geographic and socio-economic environment. The Naxi community of Yanjing preserves a unique ritual festival known as the *Naqpal* Festival (纳帕节).

[100] Data provided by Mangkam County ICH Protection Center, June 18, 2024.

The formal *Naqpal* Festival is observed annually on the fifth and eighth days of the Tibetan New Year. *Naqpal* (literally "pig-slaughtering ancestor worship") is also termed a "sky-offering" ceremony (Xu Siqi 2015). Recognized as a cultural synthesis of *dobbaq* Naxi traditions and Tibetan influences, it has evolved into a collective regional celebration jointly participated by both Naxi and Tibetan communities in the Yanjing area.[101]

During my fieldwork, I occasionally encountered dismissive attitudes from some Naxi individuals in Lijiang—home to the Naxi majority—who remarked, "Those Naxi people in Tibet have long since become fully Tibetan." The implication of such comments is that the Lijiang Naxi regard their counterparts in Tibet as having diverged too far from what they perceive as "unadulterated" Naxi culture. Consequently, there appears to be a hesitancy to fully acknowledge the Tibetan Naxi as part of the broader Naxi ethnic identity.

In 2016, Mangkam *xianzi* was officially recognized as part of the first cohort of China's national intangible cultural heritage, sparking wider acclaim and growing scholarly interest. While existing research on this tradition has largely overlooked the unique relationship between the Naxi community in Mangkam and the *piwang* as well as *xianzi*, it is noteworthy that key figures in its preservation and transmission—particularly Yang Pei, a foremost advocate of Mangkam *xianzi*—have consistently emerged from within the Naxi community itself.[102]

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[101] According to internal survey data from the Mangkam County Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, the the Nagpal Festival (སྔ་དུས་སྐྱེ།) was listed as a county-level ICH item in 2013. Local Naxi informants emphasize its origin as ancestor worship (not sky worship), linking it to a 1387 sacrificial rite commemorating Mu Ganwang (木竿王), a Ming-era Naxi leader. The ritual simultaneously functions as a sanguinary divination practice, using animal omens to predict harvests and fortune (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2023; data provided by Mangkam ICHPC).

[102] One of the few online news reports documenting Naxi people's transmission and performance of Mangkam *xianzi* dance is a June 5, 2025 *Tibet Daily* article titled "Qamdo's Markham County: Elegant Xianzi Dance, Strong

The contributions of the Naxi community in Tibet to the performance, inheritance, and development of Mangkam *xianzi* should not be overlooked. While some may interpret their involvement as a form of cultural appropriation, I argue instead that it represents a complex and reciprocal cultural integration. The Yanjing Naxi have not only embraced Tibetan musical traditions but also actively shaped and revitalized them. From my perspective as an ethnomusicologist studying the diverse cultural layers of the Naxi people, Mangkam *xianzi* has emerged as a cultural emblem for the Naxi in Tibet—one that distinguishes them from other Naxi communities and affirms their distinct local identity.

This cultural dynamic is deeply rooted in the historical survival strategies of the Naxi people. As a relatively small ethnic minority, they have long faced pressures from dominant cultures and political forces. In response, they developed a cultural ethos characterized by acceptance, flexibility, and inclusiveness. Today, the Naxi in Tibet continue to draw strength from this legacy of adaptability, transforming it into a source of cultural pride. Their engagement with Tibetan traditions like *xianzi* is not merely a case of assimilation, but rather a vivid example of how minority communities can navigate, contribute to, and redefine cultural heritage on their own terms.

Ethnic Flavor" (昌都市芒康縣：典雅弦子舞 濃濃民族風), available at http://xz.people.com.cn/BIG5/n2/2025/0605/c138901-41250505.html. Accessed July 13, 2025.

Ethnographic Vignette: How Regionalism Reshapes a Heritage Festival

In Yongning Township of Ninglang Yi Autonomous County (eastern Lijiang, Yunnan) and the Zuosuo (左所) area of Yanyuan County (Sichuan), there resides a group of people historically self-identified as the Na (Yang Qichang 1994:27; He Hu 2017:95). Today, most are officially recognized as the Mosuo, with communities centered around Lugu Lake, which straddles the Yunnan–Sichuan border.



Figure 5.11: Yanyuan County's 2024 Mountain-Lake Pilgrimage Festival and ICH Exhibition, August 28. Photo by author.

The Mosuo represent a unique case in China's ethnic classification system. During the 1954 national ethnic identification campaign, the State Council designated Mosuo communities in Yunnan's Yongning County and Sichuan's Yanyuan County as part of the Naxi ethnic group, while those in Sichuan's Liangshan Yi Automous Prefecture were classified as Mongols (Yang Fuquan 2013:65). Consequently, Mosuo individuals in Yunnan carry ID cards stating "Naxi (Mosuo)," whereas their Sichuan Liangshan counterparts are labeled "Mongol (Mosuo)." Yet,

debates persist among the Mosuo themselves regarding whether they belong to the Naxi, the Mongols, or constitute a distinct ethnic group (e.g., Yang Qichang 1994, 1998; Yang Fuquan 2013; Li Hongying 2016; He Hu 2017).



Figure 5.12: Ninglang County's 2024 Mountain Pilgrimage Festival and evening song-and-dance gala, August 28. Photo by Pingcuo Zhuoma (平措卓玛).

From August 26 to 30, 2024, I attended the annual *geqmu ggua* (转山节, Mountain Pilgrimage Festival), observing celebrations in both Yanyuan County, Sichuan (Figure 5.11) and Ninglang County, Yunnan (Figure 5.12). According to Dorje (多吉), director of the Yunnan Mosuo Museum, the festival's revival began with Yunnan's Mosuo communities. Interviews with organizers of both sides revealed that cross-provincial collaboration has never occurred—2024 marked the first year Sichuan's Yanyuan County government funded the event. To differentiate its programming, Sichuan's cultural tourism bureau rebranded it as the *geqmu ggua herq ggua* (转山转海节, Mountain-Lake Pilgrimage Festival), adding boat races to the traditional rituals (Figures 5.13 and 5.14).



Figure 5.13: Yanyuan County's 2024 Mountain-Lake Pilgrimage Festival Promotion Poster, August 27. Photo by author.

Three Sichuan-born Mosuo informants—Liu Erche (刘二车), Yang Bajin (杨八斤), and Yang Sanda (杨散打)—noted that locals freely participate in festivities on either side of the lake, choosing based on vibrancy.[103] In past years, Yunnan hosted more events, so the locals went there, they explained. Liu Erche said, "This year, I'll join and perform at the celebration event in Sichuan first, then cross to Yunnan for the evening song-and-dance gala and the conference on Mosuo studies."

[103] Three individuals were interviewed separately: Liu Erche (刘二车), a prefectural-level inheritor of the ICH *al haq baq laq* tune of the Mosuo people (摩梭人啊哈巴拉调) (recognized in 2024); Yang Sanda (杨散打), a provincial-level inheritor of the same tradition (recognized in 2021); and Yang Bajin (杨八斤), a key organizer and performer of the local *jiaqcool* bonfire party (甲搓篝火晚会) in Yanyuan County. Field interviews conducted in August 2024, Yanyuan County, Sichuan.



Figure 5.14: Women's boat team competing in the boat race during the "Mountain-Lake Pilgrimage Festival" in Yanyuan County on August 28, 2024. The mountain visible in the distant lakeside backdrop is Gemu Goddess Mountain. Photo by author.

Traditionally held on the 25th day of the seventh lunar month, the festival now spans 3–5 days to accommodate tourism. Its core rituals involve circumambulating *Geqmu* Goddess Mountain (格姆女神山) (Figure 5.14), hanging prayer flags, building *mani* stone piles, and engaging in collective incense offerings led by *daba* (Mosuo priests related to the Naxi *dobbaq*) (Li Hongying 2016:95). The iconic *jiaqcool* dance (甲搓舞) remains a highlight. Since Lugu Lake's designation as a 4A-grade tourist site in November 2009, local governments and Mosuo communities have intensified its development. Improved accessibility—notably the 2015 opening of Lugu Lake Airport—has drawn growing numbers of visitors. As Li Hongying (2016:96) notes, the festival has become synonymous with the lake's identity: "A trip to Lugu Lake is incomplete without experiencing Mountain-Circumambulation Festival."

Tourism Development Disparities and Divergent Programming Strategies

Yunnan's Lijiang City began developing tourism around Lugu Lake earlier than Sichuan, and as one of Lijiang's flagship destinations for showcasing ethnic culture, the Ninglang County section enjoys far greater visibility and visitor capacity than the Yanyuan County side in Sichuan. During our interview, Feng Yin (冯银), Director of the Yanyuan County Culture and Tourism Bureau, candidly remarked (Interview, August 27, 2024),

> There exists an order-of-magnitude gap in tourism development between the two regions. Key attractions like the Walking Marriage Bridge (走婚桥) and Lovers' Beach (情人滩) are technically on our side, but due to inferior infrastructure, most tourists stay overnight in Yunnan.[104]

In an effort to address this imbalance, the Yanyuan County government allocated one million RMB (approximately 137,700 USD) in 2024 to organize the inaugural Mountain-Lake Pilgrimage Festival—Sichuan's first government-sponsored event of this kind, which also became my primary field site. The festival featured interethnic ICH performances, craft and food workshops, boat races, and guided museum tours.

Yunnan's 2024 events provided a sharp contrast with those on the Sichuan side, including a women's hiking competition around Lugu Lake, a sacred mountain music gala, Buddha-thangka sunning rituals, and an academic symposium on ethnic interactions in the Yunnan-Sichuan borderlands (Figure 5.15). Notably, as revealed by Dorje (Director of Yunnan Mosuo Museum), this year's festivities received no government funding. The program was nearly canceled until private sponsors intervened—notably the newly opened LanYue Hotel (岚岳酒店), a luxury

[104] Data sourced from an interview with Feng Yin (冯银), Director of the Yanyuan County Culture and Tourism Bureau, conducted in August 27 2024, Yanyuan County, Sichuan.

property designed by a renowned architect, which covered the symposium venue and VIP accommodations.[105] Such high-end hospitality investments remain absent on Sichuan's side of the lake.



Figure 5.15: Renowned Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan, a researcher at Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, delivering his keynote address at the Symposium on Ethnic Interaction, Integration, and Exchange in the Lugu Lake Borderlands, Ninglang County, August 29, 2024. Photo by author.

Since the two sides of the lake held their respective festivals during almost the same period, I couldn't be physically present at both locations at the same time. So, I alternated between events depending on which was more active on any given day and supplemented my observations by following social media livestreams and gathering photos, videos, and firsthand experiences shared by my Naxi and Mosuo friends. Comparing the two, I observed that: (a) several friends from the Sichuan side—three or four—attended both the Yanyuan and Ninglang

[105] Data sourced from an interview with Dorje (多吉), Director of Yunnan Mosuo Museum, conducted in August 29, 2024 at LanYue Hotel (岚岳酒店), Ninglang County, Yunnan.

events, whereas only one friend from Yunnan did the same, with most Yunnan participants staying local; (b) from my own experience, Yunnan's event had noticeably more experience in organization, larger scale, and stronger publicity (notably, Yunnan's festival invited scholars and ICH representatives from Sichuan, while I didn't see any Yunnan guests at the Sichuan event); (c) in my informal conversations with organizers and scholars from both sides, many expressed interest in co-hosting ICH-related tourism events, but agreed that such collaboration is not currently feasible owing to administrative constraints.

The Paradox of Heritage as Identity Within Regionalist Frameworks

Identity is a fluid and relational process (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), constructed through the dialectic of "Them" and "Us" and demarcated by symbolic boundaries—yet it remains a negotiable and subjective construct (Eriksen 1993:31). As Holland et al. (1998:270) emphasize, identities represent "the sets of actions they organize, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectivities." Individuals often articulate multiple, context-dependent identifications, as this study demonstrates: respondents variously identified themselves as Naxi in general, or more specifically as Lijiang Naxi, Sanba Naxi, Sichuan Naxi, Eya Naxi, or Mosuo, depending on the situation. The relationship between heritage and identity has been extensively theorized in heritage studies (e.g., Ashworth et al. 2007; Anheier and Isar 2011; Macdonald 2014; Akagawa 2015; Bourdeau 2015; Wei Aitang 2015; King 2017; Kenny 2018; Rozwadowski and Hampson 2021; and Shu-Li Wang 2025). Like history, heritage fosters a sense of belonging and continuity (Lowenthal 1985:214), while its material forms lend these

feelings a tangible, embodied and "re-embodied" (Smith 2006:47) reality. Heritage plays a fundamental role in shaping human existence by reinforcing notions of enduring values and continuity, which in turn strengthen collective and individual identity.

Farida Shaheed, former UN Special Rapporteur on cultural rights, observes a critical shift in heritage discourse: from preserving cultural heritage for its "outstanding value for humanity" to protecting it as "crucial for individuals and communities in relation to their cultural identity."[106] This relational approach—where heritage safeguards identity—has gained prominence in international law, partly driven by the rise of ICH as a framework. As Vaivade (2018:165–166) notes, identity concerns have played a particular role in conceptualizing ICH.

Recent Chinese heritage studies have also begun to focus on local-level (especially grassroots) identity construction (e.g., Chen Qian 2015; Wei Aitang 2015; Jiang Mingzhi 2021), while I argue for a critical examination of how heritage shapes and communicates cultural identities within multicultural contexts. How are the links between identity and heritage developed and maintained within the framework of actual social governance in China?

As Lucas Lixinski, a prominent scholar of cultural heritage law, notes,

> The purposes of the Convention, as determined in Article 1, are four: (1) to safeguard ICH; (2) to ensure respect for the ICH of communities, groups, and individuals; (3) to raise awareness; and (4) to provide international cooperation and assistance. This provision lays down the foundations of the safeguarding system created by the Convention. This system comprises a set of lists, some institutional machinery, and a fund. (2018:18–19)

[106] United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert in the Field of Cultural Rights*, Farida Shaheed (United Nations Report on Cultural Rights 2011), Doc. A/HRC/17/38, of 21 March 2011, para 20. http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?Open&DS=A/HRC/17/38&Lang=E, accessed May 18, 2025.

In China, the implementation of the Convention has been driven not only by the obligations of a UNESCO signatory but also by broader national cultural strategies. From the very beginning of its ICH protection framework, the Chinese state has positioned itself as the central force behind the system, embedding cultural negotiations into the meaning-making of heritage. What has emerged is a model characterized by state leadership with social participation—a model that is now largely institutionalized. Traditional, folk, and organically evolving forms of intangible cultural heritage have been subsumed under the administrative apparatus of cultural governance. In many actual ICH protection settings in China, government officials and scholars alike often interpret safeguarding practices in highly standardized and bureaucratic terms, revealing the enduring influence of state cultural administration (Ma Guoqin and Zhu Wei 2018:74–79).

While China, as a UNESCO member state, has adopted the 2003 Convention and the list-making framework—which, as Lixinski (2018:21) argues, aim to raise global awareness of ICH but may inadvertently hierarchize it—it has also developed a distinctly localized legal and institutional structure for ICH protection tailored to national cultural policy. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese model has always centered the power of the state. At the same time, given the country's vast administrative scale (34 provincial-level divisions, including 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities, and two special administrative regions), its ethnic diversity (56 officially recognized ethnic groups), and the uneven distribution of heritage resources, each province, city, and even county has devised its own regulations and evaluation criteria for ICH and ICH bearers. Yet, this regionalized governance approach, while having undeniable

advantages, also comes with evident drawbacks—chief among them, the lack of consistent national or international oversight and the resulting disparity and fragmentation in practice.

Moreover, compared to the universal values and broad framework promoted by the UNESCO model, China's more segmented, regionally based ICH management approach is often expected to offer greater specificity and practical applicability. As Lixinski (2018:15–16) states, regional organizations benefit from proximity to local cultures and shared regional identities, enabling stronger, more culturally attuned heritage protection measures than global bodies like UNESCO. Their homogeneous membership allows for more ambitious regulatory frameworks, avoiding the "lowest common denominator" compromises inherent in universal systems. However, the two case studies and one ethnographic vignette I present reveal a more nuanced story about regionalism, showing that this regionalist system also gives rise to more complex intergroup dynamics—particularly in the recognition and evaluation of ICH and its representatives—alongside intensified competition over cultural resources and symbolic capital. As a marker of shared ethnic identity, ICH can paradoxically become a field of negotiation, competition, and tension under regionally structured ICH governance systems.

CHAPTER SIX

SONIC PRACTICE:

NAXI SOUNDSCAPES AND THE PARADOX OF "ICH + LIVE-STREAMING"

> Today, our sight has dimmed; it no longer sees our future, having constructed a present made of abstraction, nonsense, and silence. Now we must learn to judge a society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics. By listening to noise, we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is leading us, and what hopes it is still possible to have.
>
> (Jacques Attali 2012:29)

R. Murray Schafer's foundational concept of the soundscape—conceived as a sonic environment—arose from 1970s ecological awareness, expressing concern over auditory "pollution" in a rapidly industrializing world (1994: 274–275). Expanding this framework, the historian of sound and technology Emily Thompson situates sound historically, arguing that the modern soundscape was not a passive backdrop but an active agent that reshaped how people listened. To recover the auditory texture of the Machine Age, she contends, we must examine both "the technologies that produced those sounds, and the culture that consumed them" (2012:127), revealing how sound mediated technological change. Jacques Attali pushes further, proposing that sound's political economy involves decoding its material and ideological stakes. Listening, then, becomes a critical interpretive act. Following these scholars, I hear in Naxi sonic practices not merely "echoes of history" (Rees 2000), but the acoustic aftershocks of modernity colliding with tradition.

In this chapter, I investigate how rural Naxi villagers in the remote mountainous township of Eya, southwest Sichuan Province, practice their traditions in the digital age through New Year livestreaming activities. Drawing on my evolving "listening" position as an ethnomusicology-trained researcher, I analyze how streamers' voices in Eya's modern soundscape oscillate between signal and noise across online and offline contexts. Building upon my fieldwork, I explore how China's "Internet + ICH" initiative—part of the nation's soft power strategy—is being practiced in ethnic minority communities like Eya, where young livestreamers navigate and negotiate the tension between cultural tradition and platform logic.

Why Eya?

Guided by the spirit of decentralization—the starting point of my doctoral research—I arrived in Eya Village in November 2023. Located in neighboring Sichuan Province, Eya is another community situated outside the "Naxi cultural center" of Lijiang, Yunnan. This remote Naxi settlement is revered among the Naxi people, scholars, cultural photographers, and explorers as both a mystical land and a "living fossil" of Naxi culture (e.g., Li Junxuan 2023; Zhou Ping 2023). It is said that Eya best preserves the remnants of ancient Naxi traditions, encapsulated in the local promotional slogan, "The Naxi ancient city is in Lijiang, but the Naxi ancient village is in Eya" (纳西古城在丽江，纳西古寨在俄亚) (Shui Xiaojie 2007; Guang Yingjiong et al. 2013:71) (Figures 6.1 and 6.2). The village has also gained online notoriety as "China's last polyandrous community" (e.g., Liu Li 2018; Wenren Jianshi 2023). Notably, Eya remains one of

the few places where the traditional Naxi New Year is still celebrated, a festival long vanished in other Naxi regions.



Figure 6.1: Commemorative plaques at Eya Main Village entrance, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 7, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.2: Honeycomb architecture of Eya Main Village, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. February 27, 2024. Photo by author.

I deliberately timed my fieldwork to coincide with Eya's traditional Naxi New Year celebrations, participating in almost all the rituals and events (including government-sponsored new traditions) during the New Year. Days later, while reviewing my field photos and videos, I

was startled to find the ubiquitous presence of live-streamers infiltrating various scenes (Figures 6.3 and 6.4). It was at this moment that I began to realize that these "peculiar" local youths are my unavoidable subject, and they had already become the most significant and characteristic cultural phenomenon in Eya. According to Chen Xingguo (陈兴国), Party Secretary of Eya Township, the Eya Main Village (where I conducted concentrated participant fieldwork) hosts approximately 168 livestreaming influencers, arguably making it "China's Number One Internet Celebrity Village" (Interview, January 7, 2024).

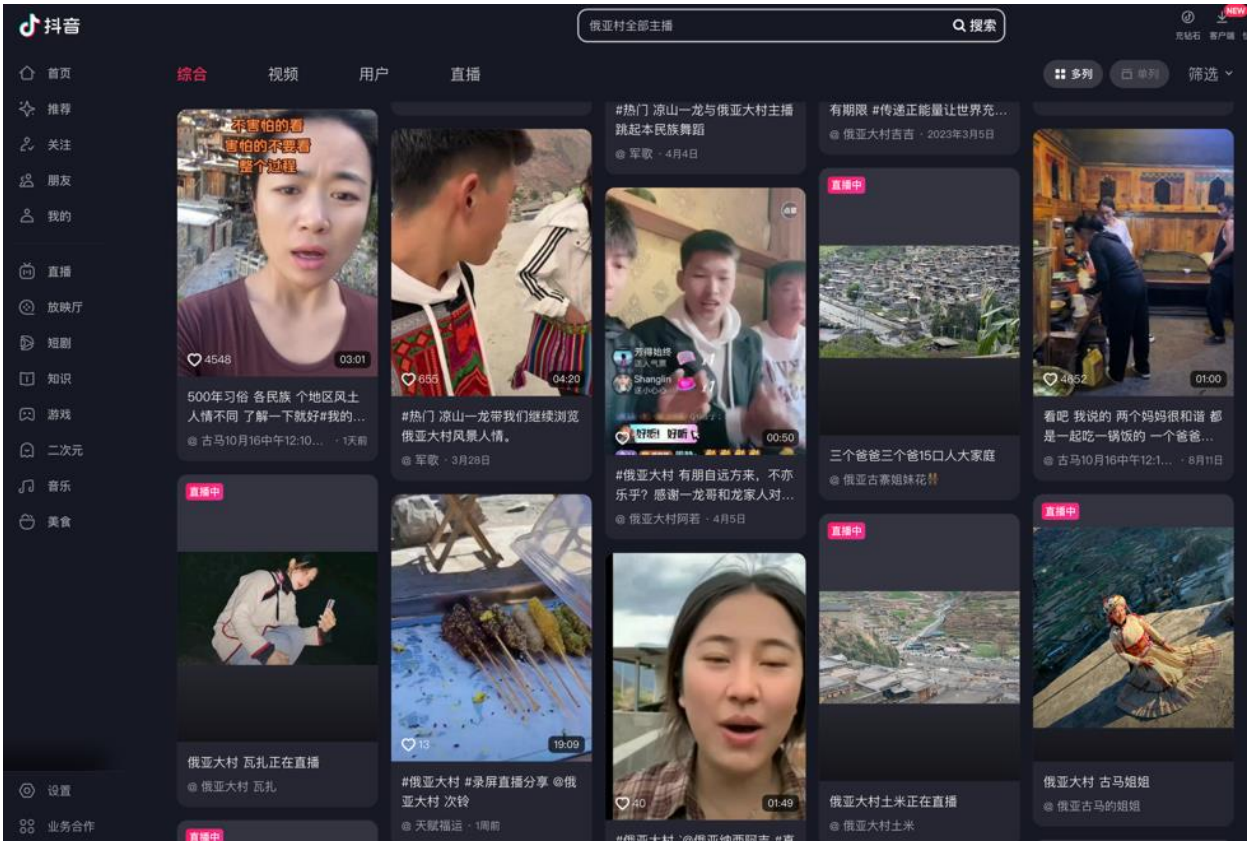


Figure 6.3: Screenshot of Douyin (TikTok) search results for "Eya Village all livestreams" (关键词：俄亚村全部主播). Captured October 6, 2024. Image by author.



Figure 6.4: A Naxi livestreamer in Motion, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 8, 2024. Photo by author.

Residing in a geographically remote village, these return-home[107] young people are caught at the nexus of modernity, intangible cultural heritage, and live-streaming. As a result, these young Naxi are enacting an oddly parasitic relationship with their traditions through digital platforms. Though not personally adhering to all local traditions, they selectively commodify those aspects that attract digital attention and mark cultural distinctiveness for financial purposes. In this chapter, I explore this parasitic dynamic by contrasting the soundscapes—both in

[107] Following China's reform and opening policy, rapid urbanization and infrastructure development generated massive demand for migrant labor, triggering large-scale rural-to-urban migration. By 2009, approximately 200 million workers had transitioned from agriculture, forming a substantial demographic group (Li Qiang and Long Wenjin 2009:46). The term return-home population (返乡人群) initially referred to migrants who failed to settle permanently in cities. Later, it expanded to include rural-origin students who returned home after completing urban education (university, vocational school, or high school). In 2018 alone, about 8.2 million college graduates faced intensifying urban employment pressures, with rural-origin students experiencing greater competitive disadvantages than their urban counterparts—a growing socioeconomic challenge (Zhang Yanyan 2018:160). This disparity has driven some graduates back to rural areas.

traditional cultural settings and virtual livestreaming spaces—through a lens of subjective experience.

Mapping the Concept of the Soundscape

The concept of the "soundscape" was originally coined to study the intricate relationship between humans and their sonic environment (Grinfeder et al. 2022). Michael Southworth introduced the concept in 1969 while studying the perception of urban acoustic environments, and defined the soundscape as "the quality and type of sounds and their arrangements in space and time," The term gained widespread recognition through R. Murray Schafer's work in the 1970s, particularly his World Soundscape Project, which aimed to document and analyze all sounds constituting the global sonic environment. Schafer conceptualized the soundscape as a sonic environment comprising both natural and human-made sounds (1994 [1977]:227; 2012:100–101). To analyze its defining features, he introduced the framework of "keynote" (background tones), "signal" (foreground sounds), and "soundmarks" (culturally significant sounds).

The soundscape concept has been employed in various scientific contexts over the past few decades (Schafer 2012:95; Kang and Aletta 2018:1). Schafer's work highlighted the emergence of noise pollution as a threat to human health and culture, framing soundscapes within an ecological perspective concerned with the "polluted" nature of modern sonic environments. He defined a soundscape not just as a collection of sounds, but as an auditory or aural landscape that is both a physical environment and a cultural construct (Schafer 1994: 9; 2012:95). This dual

nature means that soundscapes are shaped by the physical sources of sounds and the cultural and social contexts in which they are heard.

To date, the term "soundscape," although still ambiguous, has various applications that intersect with many other disciplines. The field of soundscapes intersects, to varying degrees, with acoustics-related areas such as sound quality, human acoustic comfort in buildings, and music, as well as with non-acoustic fields like wilderness and recreation management, urban and housing design, and landscape planning and management. Soundscapes encompass diverse fields of practice, approaches, and disciplinary interests (Brown 2012:73).

In this chapter, I draw inspiration from A. Lex Brown (2012) and Emily Thompson (2012) to combine Schafer's classical definition with Alain Corbin's idea of soundscape as an auditory or aural landscape (Corbin and Thom 1998:159). A soundscape, like a landscape, is the acoustic environment perceived and understood by people in context. It reflects evolving community identities through listening practices that negotiate environment, aesthetics, and social power. Consequently, a soundscape is constantly under construction, reflecting more about civilization than nature itself, and is always subject to change and reinterpretation (Thompson 2012). Building on Brown's emphasis on the experiential contexts of acoustic environments, Thompson's historiography of soundscape transformation, and Mantle Hood's contextual framework (1971:285)—which situates musical practices within networked systems of communication—I examine the mediated soundscape of Eya Main Village as it unfolds through Douyin (TikTok) livestreaming during Naxi New Year celebrations.

A Concise Overview of Noise

Let me clarify from the outset that "noise" is not the central concept of this chapter. However, since my analysis emerges from ethnographic fieldwork—where I position myself not only as observer but, more crucially, as a participant immersed in the soundscape—I cannot avoid engaging with binary classifications like "good/bad sound," "foreground/background" or "soundmarks/noise." Here, I will briefly review key scholarship on noise to establish a theoretical foundation for my experiential analysis that follows.

Sounds—whether classified as music, noise, or otherwise—and listening practices exist within specific cultural and historical frameworks. I fully concur that definitions of noise vary across cultural traditions and contexts. Exemplary scholarship includes extensive research on noise in Japanese culture—its definitions, genealogies, embodiments, manifestations, and tolerance thresholds (e.g., Edwards 2011:89–102; Hankins and Stevens Service 2018; Plourde 2019; Smith 2023:101–123). Collectively, these studies demonstrate how the sensory experience of noise—whether individual or collective—structures and restructures active listening practices within sound environments. Crucially, as Paul Hegarty argues, noise exists only through subjective cultural frameworks (2007:4, 15). Noise's subjectivity necessitates analysis through individual, social, and cultural frameworks rather than purely technological approaches to sound (Smith 2023:115).

While definitions vary, labeling sound as "noise" invariably constitutes an active value judgment imbued with sonic, social, and aesthetic preferences. Jacques Attali historicizes noise as "destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages"

(2012:27), a formulation that underscores how both the sounds so categorized and their producers become collectively marked as undesirable and disruptive by listeners. This negative ontology is further elaborated by Hegarty, who asserts that noise operates through negation: it is "negative: it is unwanted, other, not something ordered" (2007:15). Caleb Kelly similarly frames noise as fundamentally transgressive—"often heard as excessive . . . loud and disruptive" (2009:4). Together, these definitions reveal noise as a discursive construct that reinforces cultural hierarchies through exclusion.

However, I consciously resist fully aligning with Attali's assertion that noise functions primarily as an expression of societal power relations (Attali 2012). In my analysis, the designation of live streamers' voices as "noise" within ceremonial contexts arises not from absolute classification, but from the subjectively perceived disruptions of semantic listening (Chion 2012:48), where sounds fail to conform to expected or culturally legible codes of meaning. In offering these interpretations, I consciously avoid positioning myself as an authority wielding absolute discursive power or occupying a privileged position above local social orders. I remain open to divergent listening practices and interpretations, acknowledging that my analysis constitutes not an objective totality but an embodied account of "being-there" (Geertz 1988:5), filtered through personal sensory and cultural contingencies.

As Attali notes, noise "does not exist in itself, but only in relation to a system within which it is inscribed"—specifically, a system of "emitter, transmitter, [and] receiver" (2012: 26). This relational quality means noise reveals more about its listeners than about any intrinsic properties. The fluidity of this category will become evident in my subsequent discussion, where human

voices alternately occupy foreground and background positions depending on listeners' situated perspectives at particular moments. Accordingly, within the specific context discussed in this chapter, and shaped by my own anticipatory stance as a participant-observer immersed in the soundscape of a traditional ritual, I employ the term "noise" with deliberate theoretical intent.

Tradition in Digital Flux: China's Digital Leap Forward

Before unveiling the mysteries of Eya's soundscape, I feel compelled to retrace how China—a country whose leaders once debated whether to even allow Internet access—became a society that now worships at the altar of digital connectivity.

From the post-Mao era onward (1976–present), China has undergone a series of sweeping reforms that have proudly reshaped its global economic, political, and cultural standing. Among these transformative changes, the export-led "reform and opening" policy triggered rapid economic growth. In 1985, China officially became a signatory to the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Soon after, by the late 20th century, China faced the complex—but not necessarily difficult—decision of whether to connect to the global Internet. The complexity stemmed from the tension between the modernizing potential of Internet technology and the uncertainties it posed, while the relative ease of the decision reflected the government's clear vision for the country's path toward informatization. The launch of the "Golden Projects" (三金工程) in 1993 marked the beginning of China's national strategy for informatization. Since fully connecting to the global Internet in

1994, China's distinct approach to Internet development has evolved into a key component of its broader strategy for global competitiveness (Xie Xinzhou and Zhang Jingyi 2025:22).

Since the turn of the millennium, China has systematically implemented what Roche (2017:224) terms a "multi-mega-event" strategy, marked by several watershed moments: joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 (which catalyzed unprecedented trade and economic growth); becoming the sixth nation to ratify UNESCO's 2003 Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention in 2004 (launching large-scale preservation initiatives that enhanced its global image); and hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo. This strategic approach entered a new phase in 2013 when China's nationwide 4G network deployment ushered in the high-speed mobile Internet era ("China Enters 4G Era" 2013). As Roche (2017:226) observes, this approach reflects not only China's strategy to engage international audiences and project "soft (cultural/symbolic) power" in global affairs, but also its domestic cultural messaging around consumerism, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and urban quality of life.

Building on the concept of "internetization" that emerged in 2007, the notion of "Internet Plus" (互联网+) was first proposed in 2012, fundamentally emphasizing deep cross-sector integration between Internet technology and traditional industries. The concept gained national prominence in 2015 when it was formally introduced in the Government Work Report, which outlined plans to "develop an 'Internet +' action plan to integrate mobile Internet, cloud computing, big data and the Internet of Things with modern manufacturing, promote healthy development of e-commerce, industrial Internet and Internet finance, and guide Internet

companies to expand into international markets."[108] This policy declaration sparked widespread attention across sectors. With strong state support, "Internet +" has evolved into a defining strategy for China's economic upgrading through digital transformation. The vision aspires to usher Chinese society into a new era characterized by "ubiquitous Internet connectivity—linking every individual, every object, and every industry" (Zhongguo wangxin wang 2015)[109].

Following this trend, China has since witnessed the widespread adoption of the "Internet +" paradigm—a digital ecosystem in which virtually any social practice or cultural form becomes subject to online mediation and promotion. This techno-cultural phenomenon exhibits striking synergies with state-led cultural preservation initiatives. In 2017, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Guidelines on Implementing the Project to Inherit and Promote Fine Traditional Chinese Culture* (关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见), which explicitly mandated leveraging Internet technologies and new media platforms to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.[110] This policy framework aims to consolidate

[108] Since its formal introduction as a national strategy in China's Government Work Report (March 2015) (for the full report, see the official website of the State Council of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-03/16/content_2835101.htm, accessed June 12, 2025), the "Internet +" (互联网+) paradigm has proliferated rapidly across economic, cultural, and educational domains. Examples include: "Internet + education" (Zhang Yan 2016; Feng et al. 2019), "Internet + elder care" (Sui and Peng 2016; Yu and Sun 2017), "Internet + traditional industries" (Li Xiaohuahua 2016), "Internet + tourism" (Xu and Wang 2016; Zhang Xinghai 2022; Li Yan and Xinghai 2025), and "Internet + intangible cultural heritage" (Quan Xi 2017; Wang Long 2017; Pan Binbin 2019; Wang and Li 2019).

[109] For the report, see the Official Website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-03/07/content_2829193.htm. Accessed August 9, 2025.

[110] General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, Guidelines on Implementing the Project to Inherit and Promote Fine Traditional Chinese Culture (关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见), January 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-01/25/content_5163472.htm. Accessed June 2, 2025.

national cultural soft power while enhancing the global influence of Chinese culture (Chen Yiru 2021:1).

The global COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in 2019 significantly accelerated Internet penetration and usage in China, particularly through smartphone access (Shi 2024:231, 257).[111] As of June 2024, China's Internet penetration reached 78% of its population—equivalent to approximately 1.1 billion users (Xie Xinzhou and Zhang Jingyi 2025:21). This represents 20% of global Internet users, or one in five worldwide (International Telecommunication Union 2024), positioning China's digital ecosystem as a subject of both policy relevance and public interest across international contexts (Shi 2023:1). For experienced users, the Internet has transcended its utilitarian functions as a work tool or entertainment medium, evolving into what scholars term an information ecosystem—a complex, interdependent network shaping daily knowledge acquisition and social participation.

When Tradition Goes Viral: Douyin (TikTok)'s Meteoric Rise

China's leading short video platforms—Douyin (TikTok), Kuaishou (快手), WeChat Channels (微信视频号), Bilibili (哔哩哔哩), and Xiaohongshu (小红书)—have transformed digital engagement nationwide, with Douyin emerging as the most globally successful. In Eya's Naxi

[111] As of December 2022, China had 1.065 billion mobile Internet users, including 308 million rural users (28.9% of the total user base). The 2020–2022 period saw 12.4% growth in mobile Internet users (986 million → 1.11 billion), with mobile data traffic surging 35.7% year-on-year during the pandemic. Device usage patterns showed 99.8% of users accessing the Internet via smartphones, followed by smart TVs (25.9%), desktops (34.2%), laptops (32.8%), and tablets (28.5%). Data from The 51st Statistical Report on China's Internet Development (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2023), https://f.sinaimg.cn/finance/3bfedf11/20230324/Di51CiZhongGuoHuLianWangLuoFaZhanZhuangKuangTongJiBaoGao.pdf. Accessed June 12, 2025.

community, where I have observed their livestreaming practice firsthand, Douyin dominates as the primary platform (with Kuaishou a distant second). In this section, I aim to unpack this paradox by exploring three issues: first, how Douyin evolved from a music app to rewriting China's digital rules; second, why ICH livestreaming resonates so deeply here—it's not just preservation, but a survival tactic for traditions; and third, how rural areas have engaged with and benefited from the platform economy.

Douyin (抖音), known internationally as TikTok, is a short-form video platform developed by ByteDance and first launched in China in September 2016. Initially focused on music and creative content, it rapidly gained popularity domestically before expanding globally under the TikTok brand in 2017 (Stokel-Walker 2021:55–56; Boffone 2022:2). Its international growth accelerated significantly after ByteDance merged with Musical.ly—a competing lip-sync and video-sharing app—in 2018, consolidating its user base and expanding its global reach (Stokel-Walker 2021:68). In an unprecedented four-year rise, TikTok has captured the U.S. social media landscape, paralleling its international growth trajectory (Boffone 2022:2).

Undoubtedly, while expanding globally, ByteDance has consistently intensified its domestic market dominance. As noted in the "2019 White Paper on the Development of Influencer E-commerce" KOL Radar (2019)[112] states,

> If 2018 was the year of "influencers," then in 2019, the scope of "influencers" has been further expanded. From self-media to short-video influencers, from social media platforms to e-commerce trading venues, from short-video content to live streaming.

[112] KOL Radar (克劳锐) is a leading Chinese social media analytics firm (est. 2016) specializing in influencer economy research.

ByteDance recognized the potential for integrating e-commerce into the engaging video platform early on. In 2018, Douyin began allowing users to link to e-commerce sites like Taobao in their videos (Xia Xue 2019:132). By 2019, it expanded these features, enabling users to open Douyin stores directly within the app. The rise of live-streaming e-commerce was a game-changer, allowing influencers and brands to showcase products and interact with viewers in real-time (Guo Peilin and Lian Yueqi 2020:77).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, Douyin's user base in China experienced explosive growth. Moreover, in addition to its social functions, the platform's online sales capabilities were significantly enhanced (Zhao 2024:481). When Wuhan was locked down in January 2020, the city's residents turned to their phones, with the average user spending an extra five hours daily on Douyin. A week and a half later, average daily use jumped to 7.5 hours, totaling over three billion hours in a week—a 130% increase from 2019 (Stokel-Walker 2021:103). By 2020, these shopping features of Douyin had evolved to allow users to make purchases directly from videos (Liu Yi 2020:6).



Figure 6.5: Screenshot of "ICH Livestreaming" (关键词: 非遗直播) search results on Douyin. Captured October 6, 2024. Image by Author.

Metric	2023 Data
Total e-commerce live broadcasts by ICH bearers	Over 100,000 hours
Total views of e-commerce live broadcasts	Over 250 million views
Views of short videos featuring ICH trailers	Over 2.4 billion times
Sales increase from live streaming goods	193% year-on-year
Increase in share of state-level ICH-related videos	36% year-on-year
Increase in share of endangered ICH-related videos	33% year-on-year
Turnover growth of ICH bearers	142% year-on-year
Sales growth of ICH bearers	249% year-on-year
Growth in number of ICH businesses earning income	549% year-on-year
Consumer orders for ICH by post-00s	338% year-on-year
Consumer orders for ICH by post-90s	241% year-on-year
Consumer orders for ICH by post-80s	234% year-on-year
Consumer orders for ICH by post-70s	255% year-on-year

Table 6.1: Economic and Cultural Engagement Metrics for ICH on Douyin (2024).[113]

The rise of multifunctional super apps like Douyin/TikTok has established livestreaming—defined by real-time dynamic visual communication—as the dominant medium for ICH dissemination and e-commerce in China (Figure 6.5). This transformation began in 2016 when over 200 livestreaming platforms emerged, a watershed moment dubbed "the inaugural year of livestreaming" (Chen Jing 2016:213). Pioneering this movement, Tsinghua University's Academy of Fine Arts launched its "We Livestream ICH" initiative, broadcasting traditional craft processes on Taobao Live (淘宝直播) (Zheng Xinyu 2016). The following year,

[113] As of June 10, 2021, Douyin featured over 140 million videos on state-level ICH, covering 97.94% of the 1,557 state-level projects (*China Daily*, June 11, 2021). According to Douyin's 2024 data (https://www.donews.com/news/detail/4/4280639.html), e-commerce live broadcasts by ICH bearers in 2023 totaled over 100,000 hours and attracted more than 250 million views. Data sourced from "2024 抖音电商非遗发展数据报告" (2024 Douyin E-Commerce Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Data Report) available at: https://www.douyin.com/note/7377048738793049378. Accessed July 29, 2025.

Guangming Network (光明网) partnered with Douyu Live (斗鱼直播) to document 30+ mobile livestreams featuring national/provincial ICH inheritors across 14 regions, reaching 173 million viewers (Li Xiang 2018:86)—an effort that earned 2017 the title "year one of ICH livestreaming" (Peng Yang 2017). By 2020, China's livestreaming ecosystem had matured into what iiMedia Research (2021) termed an "era of ubiquitous broadcasting," with 587 million users. Within this landscape, short-video giants Douyin and Kuaishou (快手) have become pivotal ICH platforms, with Douyin particularly capturing younger demographics (Liang Lili and Bu Ruifeng 2022). Douyin's 2023 ICH metrics reveal explosive growth across commercial and cultural engagement, with ICH bearer sales up 249% and content views exceeding 2.4 billion (Table 6.1). During 2024, Douyin added 200 million-plus state-level ICH videos (+31% year on year) engaged 14 million users in ICH sharing, generated 749.9 billion video views, and hosted 65,000 daily ICH livestreams (Dou Xin 2025:003).

Globally, livestreaming emerged contemporaneously with China's boom. In April 2016, Facebook launched Facebook Live—yet its adoption diverged markedly from Chinese patterns. Unlike China, Facebook Live streamers of all ages primarily used the platform to communicate with family/friends and share experiences, followed by entertainment (Skjuve and Brandtzaeg 2020:599). While users reported heightened feelings of presence than more traditional social media, the platform functioned as an enhanced social tool rather than a transformative commercial space (Skjuve and Brandtzaeg 2020:600).

In contrast, China's livestreaming phenomenon remains unparalleled. It has not only transformed social norms around interaction and privacy but also spawned an entire commercial

ecosystem (e.g., livestream commerce) and created new professions such as professional hosts and Internet celebrities.[114] Notably, a 2016 study revealed that over half (54%) of Chinese youth born after 1995—including students and young adults—ranked "livestream host" (主播) or "Internet celebrity" (网红) as their top career aspiration (Chen Jing 2016:214). This trend finds vivid embodiment in Eya's young livestreamers. The female streamers I interviewed—all of whom began their careers after completing elementary or middle school—epitomize the growing movement of youth returning to their hometowns to make a living through livestreaming (Figures 6.6 and 6.7).



Figure 6.6: Synchronized livestreaming of Naxi New Year folk performances, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.

[114] The rapid growth of livestreaming in China has been accompanied by regulatory challenges, including illegal content involving pornography, violence, criminal solicitation, and violations of social morality. In 2016 alone—the first year of large-scale platform proliferation—the Ministry of Culture sanctioned 26 livestreaming platforms operated by 23 cultural enterprises, shutting down 4,313 severely non-compliant virtual performance rooms and penalizing 16,831 violating performers (Chen Jing 2016:214–215).



Figure 6.7: A livestreamer narrating Naxi New Year traditions, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.

This digital shift has proven especially transformative for both urban and rural communities in China. In rural areas, livestreaming not only creates new job opportunities (e.g., Zhang Kun 2018; Wang Chenyuan 2023) but has also become a solution that local governments prioritize and support to address agricultural product sales, poverty alleviation, and rural revitalization (e.g., Zhao JunYa and Xu Xiaoyan 2020; Li Xiaoyi 2021; Yang Wenjuan 2021; Chen Ying 2024). Young graduates struggling with urban employment, returnees displaced by the pandemic, and migrant workers facing job pressures have embraced livestreaming as an accessible and viable industry. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, fueling the rise of rural promotional livestreams, such as agricultural sales with real-time viewer interaction, as both an economic lifeline and cultural practice (Zhao Xudong 2020:481). Eya—a traditional Naxi community in southwestern China's remote highlands—has emerged as an unlikely hub in

China's livestreaming economy, where left-behind women[115] and returning youth have successfully transformed into Internet celebrities through platforms like Douyin.

Livestreaming Naxi ICH: Sonic Practices in Eya Main Village

Building upon the chronological trajectory of China's Internet and livestreaming culture outlined in the previous two sections, it becomes evident that rural and remote communities in China are being inexorably swept into this inescapable tide of modernity. What makes Eya's livestreaming phenomenon extraordinary is precisely its dramatic nature—a place long shrouded in geographical isolation now riding the crest of this digital wave as "China's Number One Internet Celebrity Village" (Yang Feng et al. 2024). During my fieldwork in Eya and surrounding villages, nine visitors (myself included, alongside two groups of eight photography enthusiasts) constituted nearly the only outsiders lodging overnight throughout the entire Naxi New Year period. This modest presence stood in stark contrast to the astonishing reality of over 160 local streamers broadcasting their homeland's traditions, daily life, and agricultural specialties to invisible audiences across the digital void (Figure 6.8). At almost every crossroads in Eya Village, and every few households, I encountered young women engaged in livestreaming with their smartphones (Figures 6.8 and 6.9).

[115] The term "left-behind women" (留守妇女) refers to wives of migrant workers who remain in their rural household registration (*hukou*) locations while their husbands engage in urban employment, business, or other productive activities. These women primarily shoulder domestic care responsibilities, providing familial stability for absent spouses. This phenomenon has created the distinct social group of "left-behind families" (留守家庭) in rural China—comprising wives, children, and elderly parents of migrant laborers (Wei Cuini 2006:1).



Figure 6.8: Livestream commerce at an Eya Village food stall, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 12, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.9: A female livestreamer at Eya Village entrance, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. January 8, 2024. Photo by author.

Eya: A Historical Overview and Landscape Exploration

The Naxi Ethnic Township of Eya sits on the southwestern edge of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County. Its southern border faces Lijiang City and Ninglang Yi Autonomous County across the Jinsha and Chongtian Rivers in Yunnan Province, while its western and southwestern boundaries

connect with Shangri-La County through shared mountain ranges and waterways. To the northwest, it borders Daocheng County of Sichuan's Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Encompassing six administrative villages (Eya Main Village 俄亚大村, Suda 苏达, Libi 立碧, Ebi 俄碧, Kawa 卡瓦, and Lusi 鲁司), the township spans 587 square kilometers. Its population of 6,047 people across 1,124 households primarily comprises four ethnic groups: Naxi (3,823), Tibetan (1,566), and Han (658).[116]

Eya Main Village—the township's political center and a celebrated ancient settlement of Naxi culture—belongs to Muli Tibetan Autonomous County in Sichuan's Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Situated at 1,924 meters above sea level in the township's central area, the village administers five community groups with 243 households totaling 1,510 residents. It lies approximately 298 kilometers from Muli's county seat.[117]



Figure 6.10: Xia Hang (夏航) posing before his newly designed Naxi New Year gate installation at Eya Village's entrance, Sichuan. January 7, 2024. Photo by Author.

[116] Data provided and updated by the Eya Township Government, July 30, 2025.
[117] All data and basic information about Eya in this section were provided by the Eya Township Government (internal documents).



Figure 6.11: Eya's top livestreamer, Gu Ma (古马), narrating village history, Sichuan. January 7, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.12: Shui Hong (税鸿, far left) filming alongside horse handlers in Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 9, 2024. Photo by author.

On my first day in Eya, my local Naxi friend Xia Hang (夏航, b.1986)—a descendant of the village's former Naxi chieftain lineage and now a township government official—shared insights about the village's origins (Figure 6.10). "Eya means 'big rock' in our Naxi language," he explained, gesturing toward the settlement (Figure 6.11). The Main Village was strategically constructed on a massive mountain rock by Naxi chieftains as a defensive stronghold against neighboring ethnic groups, and eventually lent its name to the entire township. Consequently,

when people refer to “Eya,” they typically mean this iconic village. Its distinctive architecture, dramatic topography, and preserved traditions make it the primary destination for visitors. During my conversations with Shui Hong (税鸿) (Figure 6.12), a passionate photographer from the prefectural capital of Xichang (and chair of Liangshan’s Ecological Photography Association), he reflected,

> This is actually my fourth trip to Eya; . . . my first was ten years back. What you see today might feel underdeveloped, but back then? Honestly unimaginable. Back in those days, no cars could even reach these mountains—no proper roads existed, just rough trails for horse caravans. Tourists? Forget about it. You saw that the village paths were paved with horse droppings? . . . Horses are still vital transport here even now. But that very isolation . . . that’s what kept Naxi traditions so authentic, you know? Although in my eyes, a lot has changed compared to ten years ago. Each visit, I document the subtle transformations through my camera lens. It’s like documenting living history (Interview, January 9, 2024).

According to Xia Hang’s introduction, Eya Main Village (俄亚大村) is home to nearly half of the entire Naxi population within Eya Township and stands as the largest among its six administrative villages—hence its designation as the “Main Village.” The settlement’s cultural significance has been recognized through multiple official designations (Table 6.2), such as:

YEAR	DESIGNATION NAME	ISSUING AUTHORITY	BATCH
2014	中国少数民族特色村寨 (Chinese Ethnic Minority Characteristic Villages)	State Ethnic Affairs Commission	First Batch
2021	四川最美古村镇 (Sichuan’s Most Beautiful Ancient Towns & Villages)	Sichuan Provincial Dept. of Culture and Tourism	Third Batch
2025	四川省历史文化名村 (Sichuan Provincial-Level Historically and Culturally Significant Villages)	Sichuan Provincial Government	Sixth Batch

Table 6.2: Official Designations of Eya Main Village (俄亚大村).[118]

[118] Official documentation and additional details can be accessed at http://www.tnshz.com/gllsdongtai/22.html; https://www.sohu.com/a/453827791_320137; and https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/zfwjts/2025/5/28/11d63149951444789021ce29afd14830.shtml, accessed June 14, 2025.

Chinese scholarship, especially by Naxi researchers like Guang Yingjiong (光映炯) and He Jiquan (和继全) (2013), generally agrees that Eya's Naxi population originated from migrants from Lijiang's Jinshan Township some 400–500 years ago.[119] The settlers included tribal chieftains, *dobbaq* ritual specialists, and enslaved individuals. Isolated from Lijiang's central authority, the local Eya chieftain, Mu, forged an alliance with the Tibetan chieftain of Muli to consolidate power. This political arrangement was formalized in September 1675 when the Fifth Dalai Lama designated Eya and neighboring villages as part of Muli's territory—a jurisdictional status that persisted until 1949. The contemporary administrative identity of Eya was established in November 1984, when Sichuan Province officially ratified its reorganization as Eya Naxi Ethnic Township (*Sichuansheng muli zangzu zizhixian zangzu naxizu shehui lishi diaocha* 2009:128; Guang Yingjiong et al. 2013:72).

Eya's remote geography and inadequate transportation infrastructure long constrained both economic development and scholarly access. Between 1924 and 1929, Austrian-American botanist-explorer Joseph F. Rock (1884–1962) made three expeditions to Muli but abandoned plans to reach Eya after fracturing his leg crossing the snow mountains (Rock 1947:378–381). Chinese researchers first documented the area around 1981, though one expedition left three scholars with fractures and another with a concussion (Song Zhaolin 2003:2–3). Only in 2007 did road construction connect Eya to external networks, slowly increasing its visibility, yet

[119] As native Naxi researchers, Guang Yingjiong (Yunnan Minzu University) and He Jiquan (Xi'nan Minzu University) bring insider perspectives to studying Eya's historical development. Their collaborative work (2013) remains foundational for understanding Eya's migration history and socio-religious structures.

academic studies remain scarce. This isolation historically positioned Eya at the periphery of Naxi cultural and economic systems (Guang Yingjiong et al. 2013:78).

Yet, as photographer Shui Hong (税鸿) observed, this very isolation helped preserve more local traditions and customs. To this day, one can still find elderly residents in Eya who practiced polyandry or group marriage (where sibling groups from two families married collectively)—a system Chinese ethnologist Song Zhaolin (宋兆麟, 1936–2020) terms a "social living fossil" (2003:3). Naxi ethnologist Guang Yingjiong (光映炯) notes in her writings that during her 2016 fieldwork, "Eya still preserves various marital practices, including fraternal polyandry (brothers sharing a wife) and polygynous unions" (2020:139). During my fieldwork, I met one such family residing in Eya's main village (who requested anonymity) and obtained their kind permission to photograph most family members (Figure 6.13).[120]



Figure 6.13: A Naxi family in Eya Main Village that has maintained fraternal polyandry across three generations, Eya Naxi Ethnic Township, Sichuan. January 12, 2024. Photo by author.

[120] Based on my 2024 fieldwork data, no adults under the age of forty in Eya currently practice these marital systems. However, young local livestreamers strategically perform narratives of enduring polyandrous customs—despite China's compulsory monogamy laws—to cultivate viewer fascination with Eya's "exotic" tradition.

Despite being widely regarded by the Naxi as their best-preserved cultural stronghold, Eya has secured only two official ICH designations to date: the Naxi folk dance *ji zzoq zol* (Chinese: 金佐措) as Sichuan Provincial ICH[121] and Muli's *dobbaq* paper-making technique as Liangshan Prefecture-level ICH,[122] with no national-level recognitions. However, Eya's unique Naxi New Year customs, exclusive to the region and currently under ICH review, have become a focal point of cultural safeguarding efforts. Township Chief Chen Xingguo and local official Xia Hang both stressed to me their determination to institutionalize these traditions through government channels, evidenced by the township's active organization of the 2024 New Year celebrations as a strategic step toward establishing it as a flagship tourism event (Figure 6.10).

Listening to Eya: The Naxi New Year Soundscapes

Echoing Schafer's original call for attention to background sound and Corbin's (1994) idea of the soundscape as an aural landscape, this section examines how Douyin mediates the contemporary soundscape of Eya through traditional Naxi New Year rituals. My analysis focuses specifically on culturally rooted practices—coming-of-age ceremonies, New Year visitations,

[121] In February 2022, the Naxi folk song and dance *ji zzoq zol* was included in the "Provincial ICH Representative Project List" in Sichuan, under the traditional dance category, number SC-III-43 (3). See https://baike.baidu.com/reference/60256145/533aYdO6cr3_z3kATPGNya-kNSzGNtj977PTUOdzzqIP0XOpX4LxFJsxrtAw6LlkGkTYs49udJkShe-tFUlF7PUPc_I0SqonmnD5UDPLwbywrYs1n9UVqtxKW_wT1vf0tUavgSve266W7nm-yA, accessed October 9, 2024.

[122] In April 2022, the "Naxi *dobbaq* paper-making technique of Muli" was included in the seventh batch of the prefecture -level ICH list of Liangshan Prefecture. It falls under the category of traditional skills and is numbered LSZ-VIII-93(7). See https://www.lsz.gov.cn/xxgk/zcwj/zzfbgsh/202204/t20220415_2200634.html, accessed October 9, 2024.

and incense-offering rituals—while deliberately excluding government-organized modern additions like basketball games or *mabu* (麻布, hemp fabric) galas (Figure 6.14).[123]

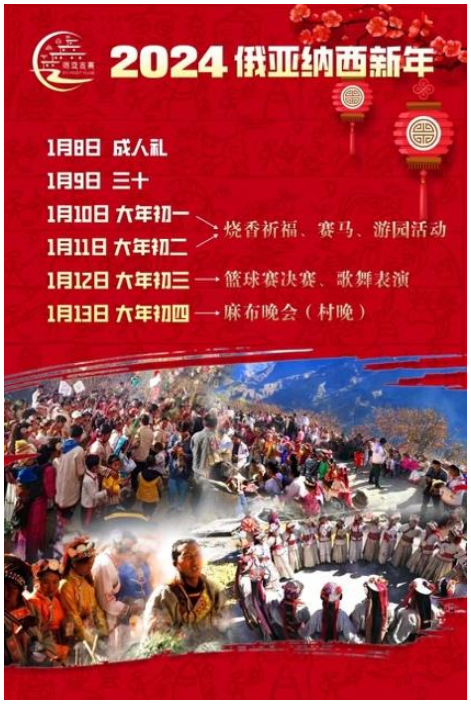


Figure 6.14: Official 2024 Naxi New Year Event Poster, issued by Eya Township Government, designed under Xia Hang's supervision.

Schedule of 2024 Naxi New Year Celebrations in Eya

The Naxi New Year date in Eya Main Village is determined annually through collaborative astronomical calculations by senior *dobbaq* priests versed in the traditional Naxi calendar—a 12-month lunar system alternating between 30-day "big months" (odd-numbered months plus the eleventh and twelfth months) and 29-day "small months" (even-numbered months other than the twelfth month), yielding 355-day years (extended to 384/385 days in leap years by adding a month) (Guang Yingjiong 2020:139). Beginning each October, *dobbaq* priests observe the moon

[123] The *mabu* (麻布, hemp fabric) gala—a government-organized event during the 2024 Eya Naxi New Year—showcased village-based performances of Tibetan *guozhuang* (གྲོ་ཆོག་) circle dances, a cultural practice reflecting the region's Naxi-Tibetan symbiosis. While the event's name derives from traditional Naxi hemp-cloth (Cannabis sativa) clothing, its content diverged from core Naxi ritual traditions, placing it beyond this chapter's focus.

and 28 lunar mansions while referencing ancestral migration chronologies (locally termed *nil wa zee zeeq*)—a process culminating in 2024's January 10 designation by *dobbaq* Yingzha Cili (英扎次里, Figure 6.15).[124]



Figure 6.15: Yingzha Cili (英扎次里), an Eya-born Naxi dobbaq, has achieved transregional renown, with regular ceremonial invitations extending to Lijiang and other Naxi communities. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 10, 2024. Photo by Author.

Per the 2024 New Year date determined by *dobbaq* divination, the Eya Naxi New Year celebrations—jointly organized by traditional leaders and township authorities—were structured as follows (Table 6.3):

DATE (Gregorian Calendar Dates)	**EVENT**	**DESCRIPTION**
Jan 8	*Terq geel lei geel* (成人礼, Coming-of-Age Ceremony)	Traditional rites for adolescents transitioning into adulthood
Jan 9	Naxi New Year's Eve (no Naxi term)	Family reunions and preparations for the new year
Jan 10	*Cei ddoq ddee ni* (大年初一, Naxi New Year's Day)	Incense offerings, ancestral prayers, horse racing, and garden fairs
Jan 11	*Cei ddoq ni ni* (初二, 2nd Day of Naxi New Year)	

[124] Eya's five satellite villages each set independent dates through inter-village *dobbaq* consultations, creating staggered celebrations across the region.

Jan 12	*Cei ddoq seeq ni* (初三, 3rd Day of Naxi New Year)	Basketball championship finals and cultural performance
Jan 13	*Cei ddoq lu ni* (初四, 4th Day of Naxi New Year)	*Mabu* Gala (Village Evening) – Traditional textile arts and community performances

Table 6.3: 2024 Eya Naxi New Year celebration schedule[125]

When I first sketched my fieldwork plan for Eya's Naxi New Year, I carried Seeger's *Why Suyá Sing* (2004) in my mental backpack like a well-thumbed guidebook. The parallel between Eya's adolescent coming-of-age ceremonies and Seeger's documentation of the Suyá's Mouse Ceremony—where boys learn ritual songs and perform in communal spaces to mark their social maturation—directly inspired my approach. Through seven diary-style essays written in the ethnographic present, Seeger (2004) situates Suyá singing within socially defined spatiotemporal frameworks, a method that resonated deeply with my own aspirations. As I prepared to observe Eya's Naxi rites, I envisioned my work as a cross-cultural dialogue: where Seeger's Suyá ethnography meets China's Naxi ceremonial traditions.

Yet, my carefully planned observation of the ceremony was upended the moment the Naxi family's eldest daughter raised her smartphone to livestream. The rite had begun around 4 am (January 8, 2024) with the rooster's first crow—a signal answered by conch blasts echoing through the entire village. I'd rushed to the first household hosting a girl's coming-of-age ceremony (Figure 6.16).[126] My equipment—trusty Canon, backup iPhone, Zoom recorder, and

[125] Fieldwork-verified schedule combining township government publicity posters (Figure 6.14) with the author's participant observation of actual event sequencing.

[126] Owing to the synchronized scheduling of coming-of-age ceremonies for all eligible village youth on a single day—coupled with limited *dobbaq* availability—families must prearrange ritual sequences through consultations with the *dobbaq* in advance.

extra batteries—and I stood ready like a soldier preparing to document what I dreamed would be a "culturally pristine" ritual moment. Instead, I spent the morning dodging the influencer's selfie stick and her shouting over commentary streams (Figure 6.17). I couldn't salvage a single clean recording—the girl's livestream narration bled into every microphone. By midday, my notebook held more frustration than fieldnotes.



Figure 6.16: A thirteen-year-old girl's coming-of-age ceremony, traditionally known as the "Dress-Wearing Ceremony," Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 8, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.17: The eldest daughter of the family hosting the coming-of-age ceremony is conducting a livestream of the event, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 8, 2024. Photo by Author.

Then Xia Hang reframed everything. “Of course this happened!” he laughed when I shared my dismay that afternoon. “Haven’t you noticed? Eya is China’s latest livestream hotspot. They stream everything” (Informal interview, January 8, 2024). After talking to Xia Hang, I shifted my focus entirely: during the third day’s incense-offering rituals, I began documenting the new soundscape of Eya—where livestreamers’ commentary intertwined with ancient chants—while observing and interviewing the young livestreamers themselves, whose smartphones had become as integral to the ceremony as the sacred smoke rising from the altars.

A Sonic Ethnography in Sacred Space

In Eya Main Village, the first two days of the New Year are devoted to incense offerings and ancestral worship. This practice reflects the Naxi tradition of collective burial—all deceased family members (except those who died abnormally or prematurely) are interred in shared family graveyards rather than individual plots, making tomb visits an inherently communal and solemn ritual.



Figure 6.18: Ritual ceremony with incense offerings at the ancestral tombs of Eya’s tusi (local chieftain) family. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.

The two-day division reflects Eya's unique historical geography: two ancestral burial grounds crown the village's central hill. The older, elevated cemetery belongs to the former chieftain's lineage—my informant Xia Hang's ancestors among them—whose descendants (comprising most households) conduct their worship at dawn on January 11, 2024 (Gregorian calendar) during the 2024 Naxi New Year (Figure 6.18). The second site, established by the 19th-generation chieftain's wife's family (renowned as the village's dominant horse caravan operators), holds its rites on January 10, 2024. This intentional calendrical separation persists today.[127] By coincidence, Gu Ma (古马)—currently Eya Main Village's most famous livestreamer—descends from this very family. I documented her family's ceremony, observing significantly fewer participants and smaller-scale rituals compared to the chieftain lineage's rites the following day (Figure 6.19).[128]



Figure 6.19: Ritual ceremony with incense offerings at the ancestral tombs of the 19th-generation Eya chieftain's matrilineal family. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 10, 2024. Photo by author.

[127] All data cited above derive from the author's fieldwork and interviews conducted in Eya Village during January 2024.

[128] While ancestral worship at the respective family cemeteries is strictly segregated by lineage under normal circumstances (chieftain descendants on January 11, 2024; caravan-family descendants on January 10, 2024), an exception applies when an individual's zodiac sign (生肖) clashes with their clan's designated date—deemed inauspicious according to Naxi calendrical divination. In such cases, participants may join the other family's ceremony without violating taboo.



Figure 6.20: Following the village head's cousin (carrying a child) and his family to participate in the ancestral incense-offering ceremony. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.21: Livestreamers introducing the ceremony onsite. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.22: Livestreamers introducing the ceremony onsite. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by the author.



Figure 6.23: Family members sequentially presenting ritual offerings at ancestral gravesites. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.24: Family members sequentially presenting ritual offerings at ancestral gravesites. Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.

At dawn on January 11, 2024, families trekked uphill to their ancestral graveyard carrying ritual provisions—food, snacks, grain liquor, and offerings. While some rode, most walked, yet all arrived by 10:30 am sharp. Accompanied by the village head's cousin (Figure 6.20), I reached the site by 10 am to find young livestreamers broadcasting every ritual moment seamlessly on Douyin (Figures 6.21 and 6.22). Households sequentially presented offerings and kowtowed at gravesites (Figures 6.23 and 6.24) before the *dobbaq*-led ceremony (Figure 6.25) commenced. Conch blasts marked the opening of spirit communication (Figure 6.26), followed by scripture chanting and blessings (Figures 6.27 and 6.28). The formal rites transitioned to a communal picnic where families symbolically dined with ancestors, toasting with liquor (Figure 6.29). The event concluded with final incense offerings (Figure 6.31) and celebratory folk performances (Figure 6.32).



Figure 6.25: The dobbaq-led ritual ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.26: The dobbaq sounding the ritual conch shell during the ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by the author.



Figure 6.27: The dobbaq chanting scriptures to bless all participants during the ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.28: The dobbaq chanting the ceremony's exclusive ritual photographic scriptures, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.29: Ritual participants sharing celebratory drinks after ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.30: Eya's youth persistently livestreaming throughout the event, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.

Although I had already adjusted my research plan at that time, nevertheless, my prior fieldwork had conditioned me to assume the privileged outsider's role—(in most cases) the sole observer-documentarian at folk music events, freely participating in, observing, and recording performances. Yet as China's intangible cultural heritage gains protected status and tourism expands, the demographics of documentarians and cultural participants have diversified. More importantly, this shift has also complicated the soundscape of these cultural spaces. The pivotal acoustic distinction in my recorded video clips lies in the "intrusion" of livestreamers' voices. Their Internet slang—"666", "Fam" (家人们) and "OGs"(老铁们) —interlaces with the mountain graveyard's natural acoustics (Figure 6.30), *dobbaq* chants (Figure 6.28), and traditional folk performances (Figure 6.32), generating Eya's emergent modern soundscape—one where digital vernacular and ancestral sound space forcibly converge.



Figure 6.31: The final incense offerings at the ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 6.32: The traditional folk performances at the ceremony, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 11, 2024. Photo by Author.

Schafer's acoustic ecology framework—originally developed to critique industrial society's "noise pollution" and the erosion of pastoral soundscapes—distinguishes between signal

(meaningful information) and noise (disruptive interference) (Kelman 2010:216). This dichotomy illuminates the dual role of livestreamers' voices in Eya:

a. As signal

   For Douyin audiences, these narrations provide essential cultural translation, decoding visual and auditory stimuli that would otherwise remain opaque to outsiders.

b. As noise

   As a participant-observer at the event, I experienced these voices as technological intrusions—a form of digital pollution colonizing the ritual's acoustic space. The streamers' Internet slang and performative commentary overlay Eya's traditional soundscape with platform-driven cacophony.

Standing in that graveyard, I felt the contradiction vibrate (signal-noise) as the acoustic embodiment of modernity's paradox: livestreamers' voices that democratize cultural access for global audiences simultaneously disrupt the very sonic traditions they claim to preserve.

The irony was inescapable: of all present, I—the trained ethnomusicologist—felt most unsettled by this livestreaming frenzy. Never before in my fieldwork had I witnessed such paradoxes. Eya, long romanticized as the most culturally conservative Naxi settlement, defied all expectations. Villagers who typically avoided formal interviews now laughed freely among swarming smartphone cameras, their comfort with peer documentation contrasting starkly with their wariness of outsider researchers. Here, "truth" seemed secondary to agency—they clearly preferred having their own community members narrate their stories, however embellished. Livestream content bifurcated: some clips documented rituals faithfully, while others wove

curated personal dramas to hook viewers. Behind this lay calculated economics—the gifts, virtual tips, and agricultural sales flashing across screens weren't just cultural exchange; they were a new subsistence strategy masquerading as digital storytelling.

The voices of local livestreamers transcend Schafer's simplistic noise/signal binary, operating instead as polysemous cultural texts: for distant Douyin audiences, they function as essential interpretive guides to otherwise opaque rituals; for Eya's youth, they represent an innovative economic platform enabling monetary gifts and agricultural sales; meanwhile, for dissenting natives like Xia Hang—who derided them as "low-quality denigrations" that would "backfire on Eya's reputation"—they epitomize cultural distortion.

During my time in Eya, I relentlessly pursued meaning through dual dialogues—with the livestreamers themselves, and within my own ethnographic conscience. This ongoing negotiation between signal and noise laid bare how profoundly digital capitalism has reconfigured local value systems around performative cultural production.

Digital Storytellers of Eya: Producing Sound, Meaning, and Value Under Douyin's Algorithmic Logic

Eya is not the only Internet-connected locality, nor are its youth unique in embracing livestreaming culture. Yet it remains distinctive for how it crystallizes the fundamental tension in China's ethnic minority regions: the collision between ICH preservation and its commodification; between cultural values and economic imperatives; and—as Timothy D.

Taylor (2024) might frame it, between music's *use value* in sustaining community bonds versus its *exchange value* in platform capitalism.

Digital marketplaces may not fundamentally change the cultural logics; rather, these digital tools amplify preexisting behaviors through new channels. Behind Douyin's rosy economic metrics lie its algorithmic governance and consumerist logics—video brevity, streamer charisma, fandom cultivation—all optimizing for engagement rather than cultural integrity. Equally significant are broader socioeconomic pressures: rising unemployment rates and the pendulum swings of government policies oscillating between promotion and restriction.

Going Home, Going Viral: Digital Labor in Eya

After China's 1980s reform and opening, rural-to-urban migration dominated village life until recent urban-rural integration policies—reallocating public resources—triggered a modest but measurable return flow of migrant workers (10%, or ~20 million people by 2016 data), partially reversing the "urban-rural dual system" (Liu Youfu and Li 2017:26; Yang Faping 2020:97). The pandemic exacerbated this trend as urban job losses pushed returnees toward digital entrepreneurship, particularly "livestreaming + e-commerce" (Xue Fang 2023:100). Smartphones now serve as "new farm tools" (新农具) (Zhang Dianbiao 2020:54; Zheng Li et al. 2023:32), transforming farmers from narrated subjects to self-representing agents in short videos, actively reshaping rural development narratives.

Persistent transportation inaccessibility and limited tourist reception capacity have long constrained Eya's tourism growth. Despite recent government efforts to promote its natural

landscapes, traditional villages, and ethnic culture, these bottlenecks remain unresolved. Basic homestays and restaurants now cater to the modest visitor stream—predominantly photography enthusiasts. Zhou Ping (周平), a photographer from Luzhou whom I interviewed, was making at least her third trip to Eya when we met (Interview, January 10, 2024). Drawn by plans for a photographic exhibition on local funeral/wedding customs and natural scenery, she always self-drives, granting her uncommon familiarity with Eya's core and periphery.[129] Her commentary proved revealing:

> Honestly, only Eya Main Village has the real character . . . with other villages, I only go if I've already set up photo subjects in advance—like last week when someone called to say an elder was about to pass, so there'd be a funeral . . . that's why I came to shoot . . . this place barely gets tourists, even finding a nice place to stay is a battle.

To my relief, during my second visit to Eya in late February 2024, the village head, Ga Ruo (呷若), invited me and a few friends to dine at a restaurant next to the construction site of what would become Eya's "best" hotel. At the time, three or four other guesthouses and hotels were also under construction or in the planning stages. Ga Ruo believes such efforts will help attract more visitors to Eya.

Unlike many other rural Chinese villages I've visited, Eya stands out for its visible population of young people—especially young women. From my very first day in the village, I encountered women livestreaming throughout the community. As it was Lunar New Year, many young men working elsewhere had also returned home. Yet in all three households I interviewed,

[129] This photographer's wish was fulfilled in October 2024 when she held her exhibition, "Living Fossils: Eya," in Chengdu. For coverage of the exhibition, see: https://sichuan.scol.com.cn/ggxw/202410/82631624.html. Accessed June 16, 2025.

the gendered division of labor persisted: sons worked the family fields while daughters, in addition to farmwork and household chores, regularly engaged in livestreaming.



Figure 6.33: Jia Ami (甲阿米, b.2004), Eya native ex-streamer, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 12, 2024. Photo by author.

Several of these women had previously worked outside the village—Gu Ma (古马), Eya's most famous Internet celebrity, for instance, had been a hotel manager in Muli—but ultimately chose to return. Some had only completed primary school locally before staying home; others attended junior high in Muli County (or even the prefectural capital, Xichang), only to come back after graduation. One of my interviewees was 19-year-old Jia Ami (甲阿米, b. 2004), who had returned after junior high to pursue livestreaming (Figure 6.33). "All us young people say the same thing," she told me. "Finding work outside is too hard now, and the pay isn't much better than farming at home." Then she added thoughtfully,

> But to be honest, I've never actually left. I'd like to find an opportunity to try working away from home, because livestreaming is exhausting too—you have to broadcast daily or your follower count stagnates. And if your content isn't interesting, no one gives likes or gifts . . . the earnings are actually quite meager. (Interview, January 12, 2024)[130]

[130] During my interview with Jia Ami (甲阿米), she mentioned borrowing travel expenses from friends to seek work outside Eya. By March 2024, when I contacted her via WeChat, she had relocated to Dezhou, Shandong

As Jia Ami explained during our January 2024 interview, livestreaming in Eya serves primarily as a means of entertainment and social connection for local youth. While few creators utilize Douyin (TikTok) for direct agricultural sales, most generate income through fan interactions—including likes, digital "red envelopes," and virtual gifts—supplemented by platform revenue-sharing programs. Notably, Jia Ami emerged as the only livestreamer in my research who publicly criticized fellow creators for misrepresenting or disparaging traditional marriage customs and local practices in their broadcasts.

According to conservative estimates from multiple local government officials, the village has 168 livestreamers (fewer than 10 of whom are male), with at least thirty to forty young people engaged in full-time content creation. While livestreaming has not completely replaced traditional agriculture-based livelihoods, it has undeniably become the preferred low-barrier entrepreneurial venture for most young villagers—particularly women—and a crucial source of income. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly common across rural China.

Since 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and the party state have advocated the policy initiative to "make smartphones the new agricultural production tools" (让手机成为新农具).[131] This call catalyzed nationwide enthusiasm for livestreaming as a means of rural revitalization and employment generation (e.g., Zhang Dianbiao 2020). The movement gained institutional

Province, where she worked at an electrical switch factory. As of June 15, 2025, she confirmed via WeChat (while granting permission to use her photos, real name, and age) that she remained employed at the same factory and was doing well.

[131] The full text of the policy initiative "make smartphones the new agricultural production tools" (让手机成为新农具) is available on the official website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China: http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/qg/202004/t20200427_6342468.htm. Accessed June 16, 2025.

support through initiatives like the 2022 “National Farmers’ Mobile Application Skills Training Week” (2022 年度全国农民手机应用技能培训周) held in Beijing.[132]

Women—particularly rural women—have emerged as pivotal actors in this digital economy. Their self-representation on platforms like Douyin, evolving self-awareness, and changing social status (e.g., Lai Yanling 2024) have become significant subjects in Chinese gender studies. However, ethnographic research by Huang et al. (2024:5) reveals a paradox: while e-commerce livestreaming appears to enable social mobility through digital entrepreneurship, it simultaneously reinforces gendered constraints and exacerbates structural urban-rural disparities—a phenomenon they conceptualize as “mobile immobility,” adapting Wallis’s (2013) original framework.

Livestreaming has now become an integral part of Eya Village’s landscape and soundscape. During my fieldwork, I observed that the other five nearby villages had far fewer livestreamers—only a handful of individuals engaged in the practice. By 2025, the local government in Eya had shifted its stance from initially intervening in livestream content to actively promoting and celebrating the “She Power” (她力量) narrative through livestreaming (Figure 6.34).[133]

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[132] The full text of the 2022 “National Farmers’ Mobile Application Skills Training Week” (2022 年度全国农民手机应用技能培训周) is available on the official website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China: http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/bmdt/202206/t20220622_6403118.htm. Accessed June 16, 2025.

[133] Additional images and content related to livestreaming in Eya Village and its “She Power” (她力量) narrative are available at: https://www.asianewsphoto.com/articles/Picture_Story/2025/20250314/162/2504383.html. Accessed June 16, 2025.



Figure 6.34: Screenshot of a March 12, 2025, news report by Liangshan Prefecture's official media, marking the first documented use of the term "She Power" (她力量) in coverage of Eya Village's livestreaming practices. Captured on March 13, 2025.

Algorithmic Echoes: Douyin's Platform Logic and Sonic Survival Strategies

China's digital economy—including its booming live-streaming and platform industries—has flourished under the party-state's strategic integration of top-down initiatives, from the early push for "internetization" (2007) to recent campaigns like the Belt and Road Initiative. Over the past decade, Chinese culture has undergone rapid digitization and commercialization, with digital platforms now framed as vehicles for "cultural empowerment" (文化强国), a state-endorsed concept synonymous with soft power (Keane and Yu 2019:4630). Among these platforms, Douyin (TikTok) stands out not only for popularizing commodities and fashion trends but also for reshaping the heritage economy. By building on earlier models of heritage tourism, Douyin has turned live-streaming into a dominant channel for commodifying ICH, positioning mobile social media at the heart of China's modern cultural marketplace.

As Yazmin How, TikTok's UK editorial lead, notes, "Anyone can go viral on TikTok—whether you have one follower or a million" (Stokel-Walker 2021:1). This low barrier to entry

has enabled ICH practitioners—often rural farmers in China—and youth to rapidly join the digital economy. Douyin's success stems not from chance but from its engineered algorithmic logic, which prioritizes content with eye-catching narratives, high engagement (likes/comments), and consistent fan interaction.

Under this system, ICH has shifted from being merely "exhibited" in tourism to being actively "marketed" (Liang Lili and Bu Ruifeng 2022:137). Local cultural values now adapt to marketing strategies, which involve crafting audience-resonant language, developing models to convert viewers into customers, and optimizing delivery timing and costs. Live streamers have transformed from cultural producers into product creators and sellers. Leveraging e-commerce systems and promotional strategies, they deploy intangible cultural heritage—and its practitioners—as tools or backdrops to meet audience expectations and profit goals. Consequently, "culture becomes a resource for exchange and a key cue triggering such exchange" (Zhao Xudong 2020:58).

To become Internet celebrities with substantial fan bases and earning power on social media and live-streaming platforms, many rural live-streamers and bloggers share aspects of rural life, supplemented with familiar content to attract large audiences (Xue Fang 2023:102). In such a marketing environment, the ontological meaning and value of some cultural heritage items are often exaggerated, reinterpreted, or fabricated. For instance, many young Eya livestreamers deliberately circumvent traditional constraints on romantic relationships in Naxi culture and vulgarize its historically persistent polyandry (brothers sharing a wife) and polygynous marriage customs.

As reported by Cover News journalist Hu Qian (胡倩) et al., their findings align closely with my own observations: “Streamers’ live broadcasts sometimes receive takedown notices. One of Eya Village’s Internet celebrities explained that this occurs because ‘some people always use polyandry marriage topics to attract traffic,’ or fabricate sensational stories about the village to chase views. Many small streamers have built their following this way” (Hu Qian et al. 2024). By attracting a large enough fan following, they can secure more promotion and exposure opportunities through the platform’s algorithms, ultimately boosting product sales.

In this public digital arena where Mandarin dominates as the lingua franca, with comments flooding in as Chinese characters and emojis, I participated in a livestream documenting Gu Ma (古马) and her younger sister paying New Year’s respects to their grandfather and parents. Additionally, as an online observer, I engaged with multiple Douyin livestreams from Eya. Through this dual participant-observer approach, I analyzed how local streamers perform cultural intimacy through strategic disclosures. A representative case featured one broadcaster casually introducing his father’s two wives—“Elder Mother” (大妈妈) and “Younger Mother” (小妈妈)—which prompted devoted followers to inquire about specific wives’ whereabouts with disarming familiarity. In these moments, human voice and soundscapes transcend acoustic dimensions to become curated content that commodifies cultural privacy. While linguistic analysis could further unpack these interactions, I choose not to venture too far beyond my current scope.

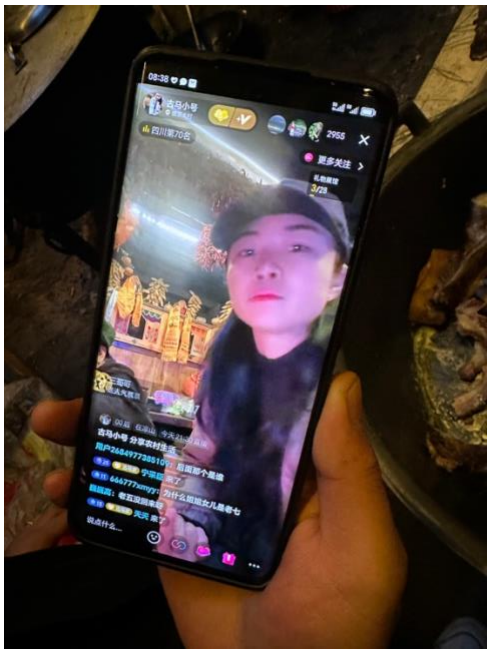


Figure 6.35: My documentation of Gu Ma's (古马) livestreaming session through her smartphone screen, Eya Main Village, Sichuan. January 9, 2024. Photo by Author.

The most renowned livestreamer in Eya Big Village, Gu Ma, has successfully cultivated her fan base and customer network through these methods. During a January 9, 2024 interview, she disclosed annual sales reaching 800,000 RMB (approximately $110,000) for local produce and Naxi handicrafts—her peak earnings to date (Figure 6.35). The products she markets include premium traditional Chinese medicines (such as cordyceps), gourmet mushrooms (morel mushrooms, for instance), free-range poultry and organic pork from black-haired pigs, and other organic agricultural products.

When I randomly asked villagers if they knew anything about ICH, most were at a loss. Only a few young people had heard the term, but none could explain its specific meaning. My interviews revealed that while many were aware of government efforts to promote traditional culture preservation, the primary motivation for participation was the economic benefits gained through livestreaming. Today, locals are deeply cautious of outsiders carrying cameras. Filming

or interviewing folk activities in Eya now requires prior consent, and financial compensation has become essential. Villagers increasingly recognize their cultural heritage's economic value and refuse to let outsiders "exploit" it randomly.

While livestreaming may seem to offer expansive avenues for self-expression, "the realities of platform politics and digital cultures mean that those possibilities are also contested and far from limitless" (Cunningham, Craig, and Lv 2019). I draw upon Ortner's synthesis of Foucault's power paradigm—"There is no 'outside' of power" (Ortner 2006:6)—to frame digital platforms as factories producing digital labor. Within this algorithmic regime, local traditions, including Naxi music, have been reconfigured as marketing tools. Both auditory and visual cultural elements are reduced to foreground decorations on digital platforms, becoming mere cultural symbols for economic gain. This transformation has little to do with protecting or transmitting these traditions. Unfortunately, among all the villagers I interviewed, not a single person under twenty could perform a complete Naxi folk song independently.

Summary: The Thin Line Between Culture and Noise

> There is no sound, no noise, no silence, even, without listening. . . . But listening is more than physical and is something often striven for by humans, but with difficulty. . . . Listening is what authentic being-in-the-world should be, because listening is not under your control, is largely undirected, and is capable of working over long distance, but this is made inauthentic in industrialized society, which, they would, I'm sure, both agree, imposes a blanket of noise that prevents listening.
>
> (Hegarty 2007:197)

A fundamental and enduring mission of traditional ethnomusicology and sound studies—one that I prefer to frame, borrowing Geertz's conceptualization (1973b)—is interpreting how communities across cultural contexts "listen" to the world and articulate their world through sound. Listening here denotes reflective, conscious hearing— an act of noticing and directing attention and interpreting what is heard (Hegarty 2007:197–198). As Sherry Ortner asserts, "we wanted to understand the ways in which such systems were 'grounded' in various kinds of social relations, and, I would now say, social practices" (2006:4).

As a listening body or subject, I perceive the voices of Eya's young livestreamers dissolving into a fragile boundary between culture and "noise." Through their voices and curated narratives, intimate knowledge, private content—and particularly Eya's traditional marriage customs (which my fieldwork confirms most families now avoid discussing publicly and no longer practice)—are repackaged as viral "traffic catalysts" on social media. This performative commodification actively dismantles what Ortner (2006:2) identifies as the "constraint" inherent in traditional cultural frameworks.

As Ruberg et al. (2023:11) observe regarding livestreaming's subversion of visual paradigms,

> In an age of surveillance panic, the immersive, intimate nature of streaming manages to create a previously unimaginable bridge between the public and private spheres, bucking societal norms about what it means to see and be seen in the world when millions of people are regularly inviting strangers to visit their bedrooms virtually.

Does the "constraint" nature of culture in the digital economy era inevitably rely on algorithmic curation? These livestreamers, as knowing or partially knowing subjects capable of some degree of reflexive awareness regarding their circumstances, predominantly choose to adhere to Douyin's algorithmic logic—trading manufactured virality for income. My intention is not to condemn their actions, but to underscore that such economically rational choices are fundamentally driven by structural forces: the vast urban-rural disparity, employment pressures, and constrained mobility.

Livestreaming is more than just digital entertainment—it is many things at once, simultaneously reflecting and reshaping the cultural contexts from which it emerges (Ruberg et al. 2023:6). Faced with their own traditions and the accelerating heritagization of culture, the Naxi young generations might want to ask: Within the framework of nation and ethnicity, how many types of value coexist? And crucially, which value holds greater weight?

CHAPTER SEVEN:

(RE)FRAMING TRADITION: THE VALUE(S) OF NAXI FOLKSONG IN THE ICH ERA

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of the soundscape and the questions of value I articulated on the part of the younger Naxi generation, this chapter turns to the exploration of how traditional culture is valued in China's ICH era and how Naxi folksongs are (re)framed within that context.

Yet, as Taylor bluntly put it in his study of value, such discussions risk becoming "nebulous"—"it is necessary to ground theories of value in theories of what social actors actually do" (2024:10). This methodological challenge was also underscored by my advisor, Helen Rees, who consistently reminded me throughout my writing process that one cannot decode a music tradition without cracking open the music itself. I now fully recognize that understanding the value(s) of Naxi musical tradition requires confronting the gatekeeper—the musician, and their music.

To navigate this nebulousness, I borrow a move from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986), following "the social life of an individual object" to observe how value shape-shifts in people's hands. Here, my focus settles on Naxi singer He Jinhua (和金花) and her repertoire. By following her trajectory—from a village girl who went only as far as second grade to becoming one of the Naxis' golden-voiced icons—I track how her repertoire and hits circulate across competing value regimes: (1) as a state-affiliated singer, she performs state-mandated ideological songs as salaried labor; (2) in tourist venues, she converts economic capital

by selecting commercially viable "entertainment" pieces; (3) within ICH frameworks, her labor creates conditions for state-sanctioned ICH nominations of already-individualized folksongs, while she herself is excluded from ICH inheritor candidacy; (4) her commercial recordings and rock collaborations, meanwhile, embody the most fluid form of cultural capital, blending artistic independence with "everyday nationhood" (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008a; 2008b)—the interplay of national identity and creativity. Jinhua often told me in our talks that everything she does is about keeping these musical traditions alive.

To build my map, this chapter begins with a brief revisiting of value theories and work that has fundamentally shaped my thinking. Next, I argue it is essential to carve out critical space to examine how ICH has been elevated as a nation-state symbol in contemporary China's socio-cultural context. This "regime of value" (Appadurai 1986) structures both Naxi musicians' artistic practice and their audiences' aesthetic sensibilities. Finally, I anchor my theoretical discussion of Naxi folksong's value through the case of He Jinhua. Through her, the "value(s)" of Naxi folksong transcend abstract debate; it's alive, contested, and singing back.

Value: The Theories and Works That Shape My Lens

I chose value theory as the framework for this chapter's examination of Naxi cultural practitioners' creative reinterpretations of their musical traditions—a decision deeply influenced by Timothy Taylor's seminar "Music and Value" (Ethnomusicology 292B at UCLA) and his inspiring works on musical commodification and value (e.g., Taylor 1997; 2012; 2016; 2020;

2023; 2024), alongside a series of seminars at UCLA Department of Anthropology that expanded my perspective.

Though I first became interested in the semiotic consumption of folk art as early as 2015—conducting preliminary research on how ICH designation accumulates symbolic capital for folk artists, and how Chinese consumers increasingly prioritize semiotic meaning in folk art commodities—I long struggled to find a theoretical lens capable of untangling these complex "webs of significance" (Geertz 1973b:5). What I have long sought to understand is why these symbolic meanings (both economic and non-economic related) matter so profoundly to folk artists and their consumers, and how the meaning turns into motivation and desire for action. Questions like these, ultimately, compelled me to consider theories of value. As anthropologist David Graeber theorized,

> Value, I'll suggest, can best be seen in this light as the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality—even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor's imagination. (2001:xii)

The dominant values of a society determine and give meaning to actors' actions. Grounded in this understanding, I employ anthropological value theory to examine the forms of value embodied in Naxi folksong. While this theoretical domain constitutes an expansive intellectual terrain, I concentrate here on select frameworks most directly relevant to my analysis.

As Lambek (2013:142) notes, "value is both substance and relation, absolute and relative," and as Taylor puts it, music's value can take both "economic" and "non-economic" forms. In terms of the economic form of value, Karl Marx's classic discussion of capitalist value forms remains indispensable. In his critique on the production of value within capitalist commercial

markets for commodity (Marx [1867] 1934), he identifies the dual character of commodities—use-value (utility of a thing) versus exchange-value (market equivalence for exchange)—and theorizes value as emerging from abstract, undifferentiated labor (Taylor 2024:2).

However, post-Marxist anthropologists and sociologists have significantly expanded value theory into non-economic domains and non-capitalist societies. Marshall Sahlins (1976), for instance, reconceptualizes use-value by introducing semiotic value—the cultural meanings that shape human practices irrespective of material utility (Lambek 2013:142). Another anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, in his work *The Gift*, provided an extreme form of exchange (gift exchange) that people practice in all societies (Taylor 2024:2). Mauss defines gifts as the system of *total prestations* which are "obligatory" (1966:2). Here, gifts serve as a means of establishing social relations, fostering alliances, and creating obligations between people or groups who might not have interacted otherwise.

Appadurai's theory expands the discussion of value to non-capitalist systems, which also involve some form of exchange. He argues that it is not necessary to view "commoditization" as exclusively tied to capitalism. The transformation of any object into a commodity occurs when it is predominantly perceived as something that can be obtained in exchange for other things or willingly relinquished to obtain something of desired more strongly (Appadurai 1986:13). By following the social life of an individual object which moves back and forth between different "regimes of value" (1986:14–15), Appadurai offers a fresh perspective on understanding the motivations and significance of individual actors in various types of exchanges, irrespective of societal structures.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital significantly expands conceptions of value beyond economic forms with three additional types: cultural capital (e.g., education, skills), social capital (e.g., networks and connections), and symbolic capital (e.g., prestige and recognition). For Bourdieu, scarcity constitutes the foundation of value, inevitably generating competition and exclusion (Lambek 2013:145). Symbolic capital, which has the power to legitimize social realities, relies on institutional authority. Authorized agents wield what Bourdieu asserts, this is "the performative magic of the power of instituting, the power to show forth and secure belief or, in a word, to impose recognition" (Bourdieu 1991:51).

Both Bourdieu and Appadurai view "gift exchange" as driven by self-interested calculations (Appadurai 1986:12). While Bourdieu emphasizes the accumulation of "symbolic capital" through gift-giving, Appadurai's concept of "politics of value" expands on Bourdieu's work by shedding light on the social struggles arising from elites attempting to control and shape the flow of exchange. Additionally, Appadurai highlights how existing cultural norms constrain the possibilities of exchange (Graeber 2001: 32).

Later anthropologists, notably David Graeber and Michael Lambek, synthesized threads from Marx and Mauss to bridge economic and non-economic regimes. Both of them adopted the same approach, viewing actions as the source of value. Graeber specifies that actions generate value—a value that reflects and even transcends the actions' original significance. As he writes, "Value is the way our actions take on meaning or importance by becoming incorporated into something larger than ourselves" (Graeber 2005:451).

Lambek complements this by distinguishing between action (doing) and production (making) as dual generators of value (Lambek 2013:155). Analyzing Mayotte ceremonial reciprocity cycles, he shows how ethical value emerges through human action, arguing that "the most purely performative acts are valuable simply in, of, and for themselves" (2013:148). Lambek's framework shifts analytical focus from "human nature" to what he terms "the human condition"—the expressive and extensional dimensions of human capacities, intentions, and mutual acknowledgment (2013:155).

Timothy D. Taylor, likewise an actor-centered practitioner, stands among the few ethnomusicologists and anthropologists to systematically apply value theory to the study of music. His "value-in/as-action" (2024:150) approach—particularly his works on the production of value of world music, ICH, and cultural goods—has profoundly illuminated my thoughts. Taylor's conception of "sociality" as "media of value" (2024:150) proves especially salient for examining Naxi folksong's multiple regimes of value. Through immersive study of and participation in Irish traditional music sessions—most of which involve non-ethnically Irish musicians (including himself)—Taylor reveals how non-economic value circulates among participants. He identifies sociality as the meaningful action that sustains these musical gatherings (2024:142).

In his analysis of the value production of cultural goods, Taylor integrates Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital with anthropologist Anna Tsing's framework of "supply chain capitalism" (2015) to examine how cultural products are commodified through their traversal of the supply chains. As Taylor argues, "Supply chains can produce other forms of value apart from

capitalist forms, and in the realm of cultural production, unquantifiable forms of value often coexist with (quantifiable) capitalist forms" (2024:24). Moreover, the entire ICH system established by UNESCO—epitomized by practices like proclaiming an intangible cultural practice as a masterpiece—is itself a "symbolic capital supply chain" (2024:35). By demonstrating scarcity through labels like "urgent safeguarding," applicants can undergo the process of heritageization and utilize bureaucracies such as UNESCO—which "can confer a prestigious form of value that creates a halo effect (symbolic capital) over a particular cultural practice" (2024:41) to create value.

In addition, Taylor extended his research on regimes of value in music to the micro-level. For example, drawing on Graeber's argument that value must be stored in concrete tokens (such as money) or manifested through rituals and performances as mediums of value, Taylor examines how musical performance—as an act of "doing"—facilitates the transformation and consumption of value through social interaction (Taylor 2024:153, 156–157).

I greatly appreciate how these scholars' insights (both those highlighted above and others to be addressed in my analysis) provide practical theoretical methodologies that enable me to trace their critical pathways and navigate complex lines of thought. In later case studies, I will endeavor to adapt these approaches to interpret the value-creation processes of Naxi folksongs in contemporary China. While I anticipate that in the subsequent section I might be critiqued for reverting to what Taylor calls "the norm in many music studies" (Taylor 2024:142)—repeating the predictable narratives of music as identity and music reinforcing solidarity—my purpose here extends beyond merely providing another case study that validates these established functions.

My central concerns are: What musical (re)productions or (re)inventions emerge when actors must savvily navigate meaning across hierarchically structured forms of value? And how do the Naxi strategically make their tradition shine sustainably by accentuating particular values across different regimes of value?

Making People Believe, and ICH as A Potent National Symbol in China

Placing Naxi folksong within the socio-political context of China's ICH movement, I inevitably engage with self-evident themes like identity, nationalism, and solidarity—their inextricable intertwining with ICH exhaustively confirmed across disciplines from political science to cultural sociology, while the state-orchestrated, elite-defined top-down approach forms the very foundation of the ICH list-making system. Yet, rather than merely repeating such conventional conclusions, I ambitiously aim to reinterpret this dynamic through the dual lenses of "banal nationalism"[134] (Billig 1995) and "everyday nationhood"[135] (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008a; 2008b), and to reveal the stratified value production of Naxi folksong within China's socio-political sphere: first, by analyzing how the ICH bureaucracies construct a symbolic regime of

[134] Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism (1995) describes how nationalism is unconsciously reproduced through mundane, everyday practices rather than overt political displays. As Skey and Antonsich (2017:40) clarify, it operates in "non-political spheres of social life (entertainment, sports, mundane conversations, and practices), as opposed to the field of political activities more narrowly understood (state institutions and policies, political parties, movements, and international relations)."

[135] Building on Michael Billig's concept of "banal nationalism," Fox and Miller-Idriss develop the idea of "everyday nationhood" to emphasize how ordinary people enact and engage with the nation and national identity in their daily lives. This approach shifts the focus toward bottom-up expressions of national belonging, highlighting how nationalism is reproduced through routine practices and social interactions.

nationalist values, then by tracing how actors (Naxi musicians) dynamically (re)interpret the values of their music tradition through everyday practices.

Engineering Banal Nationalism in Early Socialist China

State control and nationalization of artistic production constitute neither China's unique innovation nor a socio-political feature exclusive to non-capitalist systems. As Jacques Attali's analysis of France's musical financing system during the late-18th-century revolutionary period demonstrates, the revolutionary government pursued music nationalization through the "rational organization of musical production": "In 1793, the National Convention created the National Institute of Music in a move to give the revolutionary state rights over musical production still more totalitarian than those the royal State had at its disposal" (1985:54–55). Within this framework, music's primary function shifted to glorifying the Republic during public celebrations. This transformation fundamentally reconfigured musicians' socio-economic status and political relations with power, causing them to evolve into a distinct class of state-remunerated cultural entrepreneurs (1985:57).

Bulgaria is another country whose relationship to music has been exhaustively investigated. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice analyzed the nationalization of Bulgarian music under socialism (1944–1989), demonstrating how, within its hierarchies of power, the Bulgarian communist government transformed music into a symbol of state nationalism and patriotism (Rice 2001). In the post-communist period (after 1989), this trend gradually showed signs of change. Media deregulation fostered new hybrid genres like *popfolk* and *chalga* (a genre

dominated by Roma musicians), attenuating folk music's role as nationalist art. Similarly, ethnomusicologist Donna Buchanan analyzed the intersection of sport and music in mid-1990s Bulgaria, revealing how national consciousness has been formed through the government's championing of sport, and how the legacies of state socialism continued to influence governmental policy as well as the lives of everyday citizens (Buchanan 2002:23–25). As Rice has pointed out, music always means something to someone, and therefore its meanings are inevitably multiple and contestable and, in some instances, controllable (Rice 2001).

China's approach of transforming performing arts like music into patriotic symbols through state appropriation and institutionalization exhibits certain parallels with the aforementioned examples. Several years before achieving the final victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution, in May 1942, Mao Zedong declared in his famous *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), "Our literature and art serve the popular masses, primarily workers, peasants, and soldiers; they are created for workers, peasants, and soldiers and are used by them" (Mao Zedong 2024:16 [1943:72–73]). These words have since been upheld as the guiding principles of socialist art and literature. Countless local operas, neo-folksongs, neo-national operas, novels, reportages, and new woodcuts labeled the "red classics" emerged, all praising the workers, peasants and soldiers of that time. Ethnomusicologist Bell Yung, for example, observes how the prioritization of revolutionary Beijing (Peking) opera as an artistic model often results in the sacrifice of indigenous provincial operatic styles. This phenomenon is illustrated by the Cantonese adaptation of *Shajiabang* (沙家浜), where the

original native operatic traditions were subordinated to revolutionary aesthetic (Yung 1984; Ng 1986:341).

Furthermore, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), there emerged the party state, which was more interested than any government before it in documenting, overseeing, and making propaganda use of its citizens' performing arts. As ethnomusicologist Frederick Lau comments (1996:113),

> The 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution marked a significant turning point in the history of modern China. The attempt to establish a populist ideology based on the thoughts of Marx, Lenin and Mao has led to massive reforms in all domains of society. Essential to the establishment of images of national unity in socialist China was the use of emblematic cultural forms intended to articulate and maintain links between the party and the masses. Consequently, traditional cultural forms and styles associated with the "common people" were promoted largely by the creation and legitimization of new cultural genres by the State after 1949. . . . Once new styles in domains such as music, literature, painting and dance were defined and materialized in practice, they clearly functioned as emblems for the State in representing itself and indeed creating itself in the popular perception. . . . This trend undoubtedly affected musical practice and gave new meaning to the definition of "traditional music" [传统音乐].

In the post-1949 period, the Chinese government implemented its cultural policy by establishing state-sponsored conservatories and professional troupes nationwide to centralize performing arts production under socialist ideology to meet the urgent demands of the new era and rapidly cultivate much-needed artistic talent. Leaders in both educational administration and the music community had already decided—even before the official founding of the PRC in 1949—to establish two conservatories in Beijing and Shanghai. These became the Central Conservatory of Music (中央音乐学院) and its "Shanghai Branch" (上海分院), which was renamed the "East China Branch" (华东分院) in 1952 before receiving its permanent designation as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (上海音乐学院) in 1956 (Wang Liyang et

al. 2014:136).[136] This institutional consolidation continued with the founding of the Central Experimental Opera Theater (中央实验歌剧院) in May 1953 as an independent entity, directed by Zhou Weizhi (周巍峙, 1916–2014), a Yan'an veteran and cultural policymaker (Wilcox 2019:94).

It was during this period of vigorous state promotion of banal nationalism that the Naxi people also joined the prestigious mission of repurposing their folk performing arts to serve politics, the state, and the masses. A representative example occurred in 1956, when the county government organized an amateur music ensemble to study what is now the renowned Naxi instrumental repertoire *Baisha xiyue* (白沙细乐), preparing it for the Yunnan Province Amateur Song, Dance and Opera Festival (云南省业余歌舞戏曲汇演大会) held in Kunming (Mao Jizeng 1964:19; Rees 2000:127). Even Naxi folksongs that had once been banned were appropriated as effective tools for state propaganda, as Rees summarizes in her research (2000:127–128):

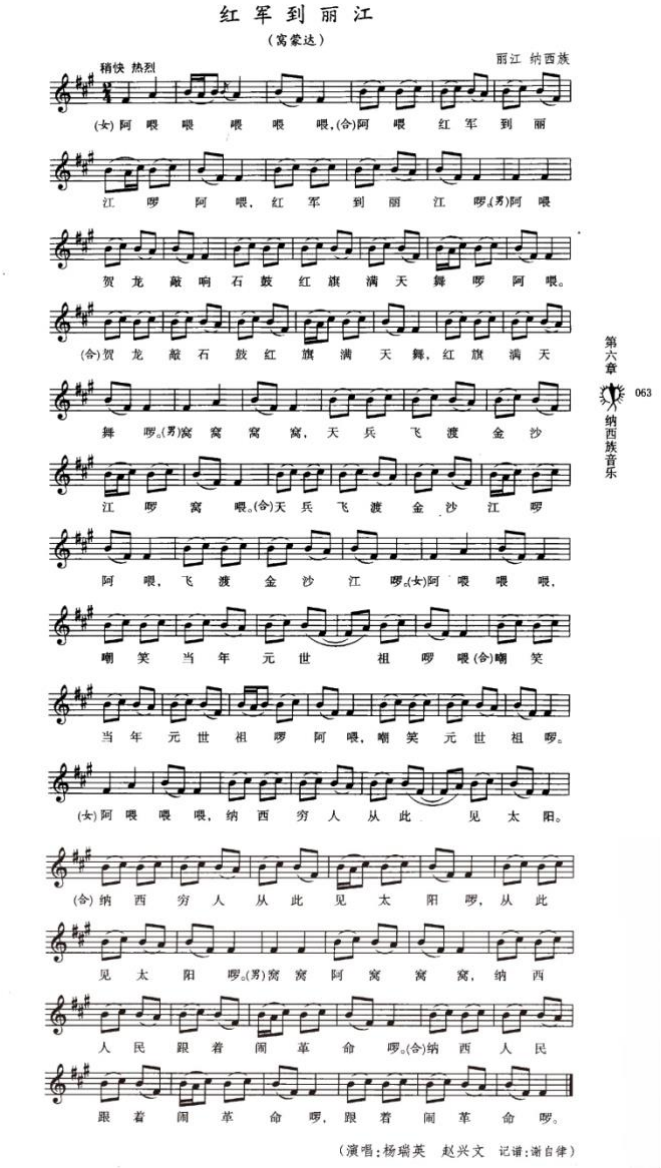
> As in other parts of China, folk song, with its linguistic potential, became a potent means of propaganda in Lijiang. One Naxi folk singer commented to me that the famous melody *Gguq gil* was just as suitable for singing propaganda words as for traditional content; and in an anthology of Naxi folk songs collected in 1956, thirty-one of the eighty-three songs are "new songs" (*xin'ge* [新歌]) with revolutionary content (Liu Chao 1959). . . . After 1949, some old people used "old people's songs" (*laoren'ge* [老人歌]) to express their bitterness at the old society, which proved very useful: the local Party and agricultural leaders organized the elderly singers into an "old people's song group" with about three hundred members, mostly poor peasants and farm laborers over the age of fifty. From about 1952 on, for every political "movement" (*yundong* [运动]), these singers were used to spread propaganda in favor of whichever policy was being enacted.

[136] It should be noted, however, that the precursor to what is now known as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music was the National Conservatory of Music (国立音乐学院), established in 1927, making the Shanghai Conservatory the oldest modern-style music conservatory in China (Ding Shande 1987:1–2).

Beginning in 1956, state-sponsored music specialists from across China arrived in Lijiang to study and arrange local music. As with other minority groups during this period, "the Naxi were drawn into the increasingly numerous regional and national arts festivals promoted by the government" (Rees 2000:128). This institutionalization reached a milestone in 1965 with the founding of Lijiang County National Song and Dance Troupe (丽江县民族歌舞团), the first state-owned professional performing arts troupe in Naxi region (Song Jiao 2015:12). Notably, several of my key interlocutors—including representative Naxi musicians He Minda (和民达, b.1945), He Wenguang (和文光, b.1957), He Jinhua (和金花, b.1971), and He Ruixin (和瑞新, b.1974)—developed their careers as professional musicians within this troupe.

This nationwide cultural movement and institutional establishment simultaneously transformed three aspects: the content of musical production, its social value, and the relationship between musicians, musical production and money. As Rees observed, "contemporary sources on Naxi folk song tended to emphasize the revolutionary content of the songs" (Rees 2000:128). Beyond the musical practices of everyday life, professional musicians within the state-sponsored system—engaged in performance, education, and research—have reoriented their artistic production from serving local traditions toward advancing patriotic ideals. One of the political missions of these state-owned troupes (such as the Lijiang Song and Dance Troupe) is to rearrange the traditional tunes and melodies to put them on stage. For instance, when the Naxi funeral song *sseiq mei co* (热美蹉) was performed for Chairman Mao in Beijing in 1964, it marked the first bold breakthrough of Naxi traditional taboos surrounding this repertoire and its adaptation for the stage (Interview with He Minda by He Jinhua, June 28,

2025). Besides, numerous Chinese-language political terms characteristic of the era (such as socialism [社会主义], the Communist Party [共产党], and people's communes [人民公社]) were incorporated into "new songs" performed with traditional tunes and melodies. For example, "The Red Army Arrives in Lijiang" (红军来到丽江) (Transcription 7.1)—a Naxi folksong reset with new lyrics adapted from the traditional narrative melody *we muf ddaq*—was documented by Chinese musicologist Xie Zilü (谢自律) (Xie Chongshu and Xie Zilü 2012:63–64).



Lyrics transcription:

The Red Army arrives in Lijiang town, He Long's drums on Stone Drum sound.
Red banners dance across the sky; celestial troops cross the Golden Sand high.
Laughing at Kublai's ancient might, the poor finally see sunlight.
Naxi people rise with one accord, marching forward with the revolutionary horde.

Transcription 7.1: "The Red Army Arrives in Lijiang" (红军来到丽江), by Xie Zilü (谢自律) (Xie Chongshu and Xie Zilü 2012:63–64).

In his analysis, Xie specifically notes that the song employs the Naxi traditional *we muf ddaq* melodic framework, while its lyrics were recreated by Naxi folk singers to reflect contemporaneous historical events (Xie Chongshu and Xie Zilü 2012:62).

Individuals gifted in traditional music and dance were recruited as music workers (e.g., He Minda [和民达], from the generation growing up in the 1950s), or as trainees who became music workers (e.g., He Jinhua, recruited in the 1980s). Later on, as the Lijiang County Ethnic Dance Troupe became increasingly professionalized, its recruitment increasingly favored musicians with training at state-run music conservatories (e.g., composer and *erhu* performer He Zhong [和中], b.1963, who earned a four-year degree from the Yunnan Art Institute before being allocated a job in the county song and dance troupe). Joining these state-owned troupes and ensembles as professional performers guaranteed stable salaried employment of a highly respectable nature from the 1950s on. Through the state-owned institutional agents, the training (reproduction) of music workers, along with the reproduction of music itself, became processes of manufacturing standardized cultural products aligned with state ideology. In this system, musicians functionally resemble Marx's factory laborers: they receive wages for reproducing their labor power by selling their labor. If I may temporarily set aside the regimes of value tied to individual artistic

styles or the aesthetic dimensions of the music itself in these banal nationalist productions, the *use-value* of many such works becomes undifferentiated: they serve primarily as symbols of Chinese patriotic artistic achievements.

Amplifying Banal Nationalism in the ICH Era

By the 1980s, China's reform and opening-up policy catalyzed deeper multilateral engagement with the West. As part of its reform-era opening, China actively forged relations with an expanding number of Western countries and international organizations, seeking to enhance and refine its global image across the Western world through both intensifying the frequency and depth of its international engagements and promoting cultural dissemination (Meng Xiangfei 2014:22).

As the most authoritative guardian of cultural diversity, UNESCO has consequently become a real space for nationalist representations, which "various nation states and other groups mobilize in pursuit of their own nationalist agenda" (Ichijo 2017:264). Since the adoption of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, UNESCO has been positioning itself at the forefront of promoting cosmopolitanism through its regime of value. The Convention operates on the idea that "the world's most prized natural and cultural sites belong to all of us, entailing a shared responsibility for their care" (Brumann 2014:2177). At the national level, world heritage is seen mainly as an opportunity to project a positive image of a country to promote tourism and possibly trade (nation branding) and/or to increase its influence on the world stage (soft power) (Ichijo 2017:265). As of October 2024, 196

States Parties have ratified the Convention. Recognizing this potent tool for national image projection, China formally became a signatory to the UNESCO Convention in 1985.

UNESCO's 1998 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage program marked a pivotal shift toward safeguarding living traditions through community participation (Kurin 2004:75). China, seeking to enhance its global cultural profile, secured recognition for *Kunqu* opera among the program's inaugural nineteen masterpieces in 2001. Following UNESCO's adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, China ratified the convention in 2004 as one of its most proactive early signatories. The country swiftly initiated domestic discourse around constructing a regime of value for intangible cultural heritage (see Chapter Three). As noted by Chinese sociologist and ICH expert Gao Bingzhong (高丙中) (2017:56),

> In China, ICH safeguarding transcends a mere cultural initiative—it represents a nationwide social movement. Centrally planned by cultural ministries, implemented through local government collaboration, passionately supported by interdisciplinary scholars, and actively practiced by grassroots communities.

Richard Kurin, the long-serving director of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution and a UNESCO jury member, summarized the 2003 Convention's transformative significance as follows:

> [The Convention] reinforces the idea that the practice of one's culture is a human right. It seeks government recognition and respect for the varied cultural traditions practised by people within its jurisdiction. It seeks to bolster the idea that all cultures give purpose and meaning to lives and thus deserve to be safeguarded. It privileges the culture bearers over the state. (2004:75–76)

The incorporation of the "intangible cultural heritage" concept via UNESCO's 2003 Convention facilitated what Ichijo (2017:265) term the entry of "something banal [into] the

realm of culture." This sparked a consequential interaction between the banal and international governance. UNESCO, as the global cultural authority, has defined culture as fundamentally constituted by the everyday through ICH frameworks—shifting focus from elite traditions to how ordinary communities live (Ichijo 2017:2677). Yet, as Billig's *Banal Nationalism* reminds us, states remain key actors in naturalizing national consciousness (Billig 1995). These dynamics align precisely with China's post-millennial "multi-mega-event" strategy (Roche 2017:224), where ICH gets conscripted as infrastructure for banal nationalist production.

From the outset, the protection of ICH in China has been guided by a state-led policy evaluation system. In the early stages of China's ICH movement, the 2005 *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage* explicitly established that ICH protection must adhere to the principle of government leadership with societal participation.[137] Additionally, the *Opinions* emphasize the long-standing history of the Chinese nation and the significance of ICH as a vital cultural resource. The document also specifically underscores the political functions and necessities of ICH in maintaining national unity, embodying the spiritual values of the Chinese nation, and safeguarding cultural identity and sovereignty:

> Intangible cultural heritage is both a witness to historical development and a precious cultural resource of great value. The diverse and rich ICH created by the people of all ethnic groups in China through long-term production and daily practices is the crystallization of Chinese wisdom and civilization. It serves as a bond connecting national emotions and a foundation for national unity. . . . The unique spiritual values, ways of thinking, imagination, and cultural consciousness embedded in China's ICH constitute the fundamental basis for safeguarding our cultural identity and sovereignty. Strengthening ICH protection is not only

[137] The full text is available on the official website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_63227.htm. Accessed on 24 March 2025.

> essential for national and ethnic development but also an inevitable requirement for international cultural dialogue and the sustainable development of human society.

Furthermore, Article 6 of *Provisional Measures for the Application and Evaluation of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Works* (国家级非物质文化遗产代表性项目保护与评估暂行办法), released as an appendix alongside the *Opinions*, further clarifies the evaluation criteria for national-level ICH representative projects. It explicitly states that projects must demonstrate "outstanding value in showcasing the creative capacity of Chinese culture" and "a role in fostering cultural identity, enhancing social cohesion, promoting national unity and social stability, and serving as an important bridge for cultural exchange."

It is worth mentioning that in the original text of the 2005 *Opinions*, ICH is defined as being created by "all ethnic groups in China," while UNESCO seeks to grant the ultimate power of recognition to "communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals" (UNESCO 2003, Article 2) (Su 2023:11). China has cleverly replaced UNESCO's concept with a notion of "collectivity." The characterization of the ICH of various ethnic groups as the crystallization of collective wisdom, collective memory, and national identity within China's ethnic framework of "pluralistic unity" (Lin Jifu and Tang Erya 2024:1) forms the underlying logic of ICH as a national symbol in China. In China's officially sanctioned heritage discourse, the heritages of different ethnic groups are praised as the "crystallization[s] of the wisdom" of their peoples (Luo 2005). The protection of ICH is a crucial component of China's national cultural strategy, serving as a key approach and implementation mechanism that contributes to safeguarding China's national cultural security and cultural sovereignty (Wang Wenzhang and Chen Feilong 2008:81). In 1997, renowned Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通)

introduced the concept of "cultural self-awareness" (文化自觉), calling on Chinese people to "accurately recognize China's cultural identity and social position within the global framework" in the era of globalization (Gao Bingzhong and Zhao Xuan 2014:1). This idea became closely intertwined with China's ICH protection, serving as a vital bridge between ICH and national cultural confidence, as well as as a key theoretical foundation rooted in domestic discourse. At the same time, the ICH movement ignited a large-scale social campaign that Chinese ICH expert Gao Bingzhong (高丙中) described as marking "the end of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese society" and as having "replaced China's cultural-political logic" (Gao Bingzhong 2013:143, 147, 151).

On the international stage, China has been implementing a national strategy of cultural soft power (see, e.g., Kurlantzick 2008; Fiskesjö 2010; Liang Wenda 2017). The protection of ICH is regarded as a means to reshape China's global image, counter negative perceptions, and foster cultural exchange between Chinese and Western civilizations (Song Junhua 2023:7). Additionally, ICH preservation plays a crucial role in strengthening cultural identity and pride among Chinese communities worldwide, particularly within the broader Sinophone cultural sphere, thereby contributing to the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Wang Wenzhang 2006:153; Wang Wenzhang and Chen Feilong 2008:81–82). In the process of UNESCO's ICH nominations, China has actively engaged in strategic competition with other East Asian countries, such as South Korea and Japan, leveraging ICH as a tool for national cultural soft power (Bai Songqiang 2017:64). A notable example is the controversy surrounding the inscription of South Korea's *Gangneung Danoje* Festival on UNESCO's Representative List of

the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on November 25, 2005. Given the shared cultural origins between *Gangneung Danoje* Festival[138] and China's *Duanwu Jie* (端午节),[139] this decision sparked strong reactions in both countries. Among the Chinese public and scholars, it fueled widespread debate, nationalist sentiment, and reflection, with many believing that South Korea had preemptively claimed a cultural heritage that rightfully belonged to China (see, e.g., Ye Chunsheng 2005; He Xuejun 2006; Yang Linxi 2007; Guo Jiangyong 2011). In response, China renamed *Duanwu Jie* the Dragon Boat Festival (龙舟节) and successfully secured UNESCO recognition in 2009, formally inscribing it under the project name "Dragon Boat Festival" (Liu and Du 2010:217).

On the domestic stage, since the protection of ICH in China involves a large number of ethnic minorities, the country has incorporated the textual expressions of safeguarding the cultural rights of minority communities from the outset (Wang Wenzhang 2006:146–148). This is a strategic national approach, as human rights are a core principle underlying the efforts of UNESCO and the UN. However, in the process of localization, China's discourse on ICH has taken a path distinct from UNESCO's. This divergence is evident in how ICH is defined and

[138] The Gangneung Danoje Festival is an annual South Korean cultural heritage event derived from traditional rituals, held in the city of Gangneung. Celebrated around the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (Dano Day, typically falling in May or June on the Gregorian calendar), it was designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage by the South Korean government in 1967 (Saeji et al. 2019:161). Originally a shamanic ritual dedicated to the Mountain Spirit (Sansin), the festival served to ensure regional protection and prosperity through rain rituals and fertility ceremonies (Saeji et al. 2019:162).

[139] The Dragon Boat Festival (端午节, Duanwu Jie) is a traditional Chinese holiday observed annually on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (typically falling between late May and late June in the Gregorian calendar). Originating from pre-Qin dynasty summer solstice rituals for warding off evil and toxins, its significance evolved through diverse cultural interpretations, eventually incorporating activities like epidemic prevention, ancestral worship, recreational games, and health preservation. In its primary regions of origin—Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangsu provinces—Han Chinese communities traditionally culminate celebrations with dragon boat races (Gao Bingzhong 2004:23–25). Chinese folklorist Gao Bingzhong (高丙中) notes that the festival "originated in China, . . . later spreading to multiple Asian countries including Vietnam, Korea, and Japan" (Gao Bingzhong 2004:23).

recognized, the values attributed to it, and the underlying principles guiding its safeguarding, adaptation, and evolution (Su 2023:11).

Furthermore, China has highlighted the value of "harmoniousness"[140] and associated behavioral norms embedded in ICH as integral to its preservation efforts (Wang Wenzhang and Chen Feilong 2008:83). The official recognition of non-Han heritage sites reinforces China's self-conception as a multicultural nation with an unbroken history spanning thousands of years (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013:6). Likewise, the formal acknowledgment of ICH has further solidified this national self-awareness. The philosophy of diversity and harmoniousness inherent in China's approach to ICH are considered effective means of fostering cultural identity among different ethnic groups, contributing to the construction of a shared spiritual home for the Chinese nation. The "harmonious" development of multi-ethnic ICH is also viewed as a cultural resource that strengthens China's cultural soft power by promoting the notion of "harmonious culture" (和谐文化) (Liang Wenda 2017:25–27). As a key mechanism for constructing and maintaining personal, cultural, and national identity, ICH protection has evolved into an academic discourse known as "cultural heritage studies" (文化遗产学). It has become an integral part of China's (higher) education and academic knowledge system (see, e.g., Meng Yu

[140] As articulated by Chinese leadership since the 18th Party Congress (2012–present), the state's theoretical framework of "harmoniousness" emphasizes the "great family of the Chinese nation" (中华民族大家庭), the "Chinese national community" (中华民族共同体), and the imperative to "forge a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation" (铸牢中华民族共同体意识) through institutional development. This consciousness-building is defined as the central theme for the Party's ethnic work in the new era and the guiding principle for all ethnic regional affairs, reflecting the CPC's current core doctrine on ethnic governance. See Xi Jinping (习近平), "Strengthening the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community to Promote the High-Quality Development of the Party's Ethnic Work in the New Era" (铸牢中华民族共同体意识推进新时代党的民族工作高质量发展) (Xi Jinping 2024).

2023), serving as a foundational pillar in upholding China's value system and cultural identity (Zhang Juwen 2021:18–19).

The current president of China, Xi Jinping, has put forward the political directive of "forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation" (铸牢中华民族共同体意识) (Xi Jinping 2019, 2020) and emphasized its deep alignment with both ICH protection and the values of scientific socialism (Xi Jinping 2022).[141] As a cultural vehicle for reinforcing ethnic equality, unity, mutual support, and harmony, ICH has been positioned as a key source of national cohesion and a spiritual bond that strengthens the collective identity of the Chinese nation (Hu Zhaoyi and Lin Jifu 2020; Wang Dan 2022; Li Ya and Wang Yong 2024; Lin Jifu and Tang Erya 2024). Xi further asserts that "China's outstanding traditional culture has become the genetic foundation of the Chinese nation, deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, subtly shaping their ways of thinking and behavior" (Xi Jinping 2023). As an essential component of this cultural tradition, ICH carries the distinct and rich cultural genes of the Chinese civilization (Huang Yonglin 2024:114).

Since the advent of Xi Jinping's era of "Chinese-style modernization" (中国式现代化), China's ICH protection system and its role as a potent national symbol have been further emphasized. Key concepts such as *hexie* (harmony, 和谐), *tongyi* (unity, 统一), *chuangzaixing zhuanhuan* (creative transformation, 创造性转换), and *jiazhi* (value, 价值) have become

[141] "Scientific socialism" was a key concept for Marx and Engels: "In the 1880s, Marx and Engels formally named their theory scientific socialism and used it as the core framework for constructing their theoretical system. In its broad sense, scientific socialism is synonymous with Marxism, and some even directly use the term as a substitute for Marxism. In its narrow sense, however, scientific socialism refers specifically to socialist theory as one of the core components of Marxism, alongside Marxist political economy and Marxist philosophy, together forming the theoretical system of Marxism" (Yan Yan 2015:78).

particularly prominent. Guided by Xi Jinping's thought on "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era," China's ICH preservation and transmission efforts have been assigned a new cultural mission (Lin Jifu 2024:98), aiming to break new ground and serve as a "postcard" representing China's national image (Hu Yan 2024:1, 5). Additionally, the proponents of an increasing number of ICH elements are now collaborating with economic enterprises, and the model of "ICH + multiple industries" (非遗+多种产业) (Huang Yonglin and Li Yuanyuan 2023:17) has emerged as a new approach and driving force for the mutual transformation of cultural and economic value in China's ICH sector in recent years.

The institutionalization of ICH protection systems and bureaucratic mechanisms has effectively become a vehicle for cultivating banal nationalism in China, where everyday cultural practices are now valorized through both domestic and UNESCO listing systems. By granting and legitimizing ICH as symbolic capital, the Party-state claims to foster strong cultural pride among communities (particularly ethnic minorities) while promoting state-framed "cultural consciousness" (文化自觉) within the ICH regime of value—a process that essentially transforms traditional cultures into abstracted symbolic capital. Through such heritage designations, nationalist practices become both banal and unconscious, effectively advancing the political goal of reinforcing state-promoted nationalist narratives under the broader construction of Chinese identity. Based on my observations, the Party's aim of embedding nationalism into unconscious daily practice has been successfully achieved in many cases. Thus, participation in the ICH movement has emerged as one of the important forms of everyday nationhood.

The "Social Life" of Naxi Folksong: Singer He Jinhua (和金花) and Her "Way"

I couldn't agree more with Taylor's analysis of the complexities of ICH with respect to the question of value (Taylor 2024:35). As the foremost international authority on culture, UNESCO not only facilitates banal nationalism through the ICH list-making mechanisms but also, as Taylor conceptualizes it, operates as a "supply chain" (2024:35) that endows everyday practices with the "halo effect" (2017). Taylor elaborates as follows (2024:36):

> A practice could be a commodity before it is formally recognized as a masterpiece; something could be a commodity and be consecrated as intangible cultural heritage and gain the "halo" while not only retaining its status as a commodity but also having its economic value increase. Or something may not be a commodity (though still with the economic value) and then become a commodity in the tourist economy.

In the following discussion, I draw upon three main methodological approaches. First, I employ Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2014) "from below" perspective on everyday nationhood—namely, a bottom-up approach. Second, I take inspiration from Appadurai's ethnographic method of following "the social life of an individual object" (1986: 3–63). Third, adopting Taylor's actor-centered methodology, I trace the evolution of performer He Jinhua's musical career to illuminate how contemporary Naxi communities dynamically engage with the ICH regime of value.

Building a State-Sponsored Artist

He Jinhua (和金花, b.1971), a widely admired Naxi singer who has garnered multiple accolades, was born in Tacheng, a rural township at the northwest tip of Yulong County, bordering Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, an area where Naxi, Tibetans and Lisu ethnic groups live

intermingled (Figure 7.1). The multi-ethnic environment and rural lifestyle of her youth had a profound influence on the traditional singing techniques and musical style Jinhua exemplifies.

As with many children in Naxi mountain villages, Jinhua's childhood revolved around herding and planting. While working with grown-ups, she heard different Naxi tunes from time to time. Among the adults, there were an elderly man and an elderly woman whose songs particularly fascinated her. She often followed them, doing farm work together while listening to and learning folk songs. Jinhua vividly recalls those unforgettable years: "In the countryside at that time, there was no electricity, no TV or tape recorder. My greatest joy was to learn songs by ear from the elderly, and to chat and sing songs with my family while sitting around the fire eating copper-pot-cooked rice" (Interview, February 14, 2022).



Figure 7.1: Portrait of He Jinhua during interview in her parents' home, Tacheng Township, Yulong County, Lijiang. September 24, 2024. Photo by author.

When Jinhua was thirteen, an event called "The Lijiang Peasant Literature and Art Show" (丽江县农民文艺调演) gave her the chance to perform in the county seat for the first time. Her touching performance of a Tibetan marriage lament, referred to in Naxi as *ggv zzeeq mil bvl bee* (Chinese: 出嫁以后想妈妈), completely changed Jinhua's future, ultimately leading to an

invitation to join Lijiang' first state-run art group: the Lijiang Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe (丽江县民族歌舞队/团) in the following year. Recruited as a state-sponsored apprentice, Jinhua performed the Tibetan folksongs she learned in Tacheng while receiving on-the-job training in music and dance (even saxophone). To this day, whenever reflecting on this life-altering crossroads, Jinhua marvels at how her younger self barely comprehended the significance of this choice, only recognizing the privilege of steady income despite her profound homesickness—her journey from an out-of-school village girl to "state-cultivated" (国家培养) professional musician had begun.[142]

It was during her first six months as a state-trained "music laborer" that Jinhua's passion for Naxi folk music truly ignited, when she was selected to represent the Naxi on a concert tour of Japan in August 1987. She recounted this experience in an interview (February 14, 2022),

> The head of the cultural bureau, He Peigen (和培根), who was in charge of selecting performers, came to me with a stack of cassette tapes, including recordings by the Naxi folk singers He Yaoshu (和耀淑) and Li Xiuhang (李秀香). "Little Jinhua," he said, "if you can learn these Naxi songs in one week, you'll go to Japan." My heart sank. In my village, we spoke Naxi but sang Tibetan songs—I'd barely performed Naxi music onstage. Still, I practiced day and night. . . . When the bureau chief returned a week later, I sang *we muf ddaq* and *gguqqil* for him.[143] He burst out laughing, clapped his hands, and immediately added me to the Japan delegation. The songs' enthusiastic reception abroad made me

[142] In November 1986, shortly after becoming an apprentice (temporary worker), Jinhua received a monthly stipend of 35 RMB (approximately $9.50 USD at 1986 official exchange rates). Following her return from the Japan tour in August 1987, she was promoted to full performer status with an increased salary of 80 RMB/month (approximately $21.60 USD). Jinhua noted this was considered an enviable income when compared to the standard 50–60 RMB (approximately $13.50–$16.20 USD) earned by most state employees in Lijiang County during this period (Interview with He Jinhua, July 7, 2025).

[143] *We muf ddaq* is a widely circulated traditional narrative song among the Naxi, performed during festivals, communal events, and everyday occasions. *Gguqqil* is another narrative melody, typically sung as an antiphonal duet between men and women, often featured in singing contests or courtship contexts. These two songs, along with the previously mentioned Tibetan marriage lament *ggv zzeeq mil bvl be*, have become signature pieces in He Jinhua's repertoire and are included in the 2022 Smithsonian Folkways album *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*.

reconsider: Should I focus more on my own ethnic music? That tour became a turning point—when I first grasped the power and beauty of Naxi music tradition.

Before becoming a state-supported musical laborer, Jinhua and the songs she performed belonged to what Taylor (2024:43) refers to as things "outside" of capitalism. The state-run performing arts troupe functioned as a kind of supply chain, transforming Jinhua—who did not originally make a living through musical production—into a productive laborer of cultural commodities. At the same time, through her concrete labor, she engaged in cultural production that resulted in a specific use-value.

Although Lijiang during this historical period had not yet encountered the notion of "scalability" (2024:45)—which Taylor identifies as essential for transforming musicians into productive laborers in commercial music industries—the Party-state, as the official authority on value, nevertheless imposed standardized quality controls on musical production. These requirements curiously paralleled Taylor's observations about capitalist cultural industries. As state-cultivated ethnic minority performers, they were required to not only visually present their ethnic identity through traditional costumes but also undergo standardized musical training influenced by Soviet pedagogy, including vocal techniques and the performance of political propaganda works like the "red classic" song "On the Golden Mountains of Beijing" (北京的金山上)[144] that Jinhua mastered. These state-mandated standards became the foundational

[144] Based on my own knowledge and experience growing up in China, "On the Golden Mountains of Beijing" (北京的金山上) is a Chinese ethnic minority-themed song composed in the 1950s, stylistically modeled after Tibetan folk music. It represented the equivalent of "popular music" with ethnic flavor during that era. The lyrics, written from the perspective of Tibetan people, praise Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, reflecting the contemporary themes of "ethnic unity" and "all ethnic groups supporting the central government." Rendered famous by renowned Tibetan singer Tseten Dolma (Chinese: Caidan Zhuoma, 才旦卓玛), the song is regarded as a classic exemplar and representative musical work of 1950s Chinese cultural production.

production model for professional art troupes (Figure 7.2), embodying the dominant "values in the sociological sense" (Graeber 2001:1–2) that structured artistic creation during this period. Traditional music production (including its public aesthetic tastes) under collective ownership represented a profound alignment between individual values and national values.



Figure 7.2: Professional state-affiliated performers of the Lijiang Ethnic Culture Work Troupe (formerly Lijiang Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe) deliver a rendition of the political propaganda piece "Ode to the Motherland" (歌唱祖国) during an official government engagement. He Jinhua (front row, green costume) appears as a participating vocalist. September 19, 2024. Photo by author.

Performing for Tourist Audiences and the Wider World

Beyond her selection as a professional performer in a state-run troupe, He Jinhua acquired another identity shortly after arriving in the county town: she became one of Lijiang's earliest local singers to enter the tourism industry. In 1990, she joined performances with the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association (大研古乐会), then the most popular ensemble among tourists, whose principal repertoire was the local *dongjing* music, which combines a large instrumental ensemble with singing. After finishing her daytime work at the state unit, she spent evenings performing with the ensemble for tourist audiences.

As documented in Helen Rees's ethnography (2000), Lijiang had been open to foreign visitors for three years by 1988. On July 22, 1988, with government approval, the ensemble—co-

founded by Xuan Ke (宣科, later director of the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association), a Naxi intellectual educated by missionaries and fluent in English—launched its first concert targeting international and Hong Kong tourists (2000:151). Rees's fieldwork provides meticulous documentation of the ensemble's early success:

> The price of admission was set with the permission of the local Price Commission at 4 yuan, later raised to 5 yuan (4 yuan was worth a little less than U.S. $1.00). The concerts at this time were held in a picturesque old mansion in the old part of town, which housed the Dayan Town Cultural Office (文化站). . . . By 30 March 1992, 339 performances had been given, or about three a fortnight on average, and the total audience had reached 8,705 people from more than thirty countries (Dayan Guyuehui 1992: 5). Such was the growth in Lijiang's popularity with backpackers, and the renown of the music, that by early 1993 attendance had climbed to 13,213 people from fifty-two countries (Li and Yin 1993: 27). By summer 1993, the ensemble was performing every other evening, each time to an audience of at least thirty; by summer 1996, the concerts were nightly and drew crowds of fifty or more; by summer 1998, these had swelled to two hundred or three hundred per night. The first time I saw substantial numbers of mainland Chinese tourists in the audience was in 1996; many of them were on holiday, or traveling on business, from the newly wealthy city of Canton. Ticket prices have risen steadily, reaching 35 yuan, or around U.S. $4.25, in July 1998. (2000:151–152)

Jinhua recounted her touring years with this ensemble in our interviews (February 14, 2022),

> This place was completely different from my usual performance venues—the audience diversity expanded dramatically, bringing together people from all walks of life and every corner of the world. . . . Traveling with the troupe opened new doors: I performed in America, Norway, Denmark, across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, even presenting the "golden key" (a gift) to state leaders and hosting foreign royalty. . . . Through these international exchanges, I continuously came to understand the significant cultural differences between ethnic groups and nations.

He Jinhua collaborated closely with the Lijiang Dayan Ancient Music Association for a decade until 2000, when she joined Dongba Palace (东巴宫)—another renowned folk performance group in Lijiang's cultural tourism industry. Unlike her recent decades' focus on collecting and performing traditional Naxi folksongs, her performing repertoire during that

period primarily catered to tourists. She recorded some details in our interview (February 14, 2022),

> Back then, I mostly sang Naxi pop songs with ensemble accompaniment. Songs like "On the Golden Mountains of Beijing" (北京的金山上) and "On the Fields of Hope" (在希望的田野上)[145], and later also "*Saiseeq jjiq*" /"Beautiful White Clouds" (*Saiseeq jjiq / A lil lil jiq perq* [Chinese: 三思吉、美丽的白云]) from ancient Naxi music suites. We frequently performed He Wenguang's (和文光) compositions too—"Dreaming of Shangri-La" (梦中的香格里拉) and "Naxi Toasting Song" (纳西祝酒歌)[146]—exactly what tourists wanted.[147] *Yuanshengtai* (authentic) folksongs (原生态民歌)? Rarely performed. . . . Tourists preferred loud music for dancing and merrymaking. They were there for instant joy and festive vibes. It wasn't until later that I began singing the "Rice Transplanting Song" more often. Sometimes "Wedding Lament" too, but cautiously—its sorrowful melody could kill the party mood that tourists wanted.

Jinhua's career trajectory clearly mirrors China's sociopolitical transformations, seamlessly aligning with the nation's post-1980s reform and opening policies—from Lijiang's initial tourism development in the late 1980s to its emergence as a global heritage destination. Unsurprisingly, local musicians and folk artists with linguistic advantages (English/Mandarin) or exceptional talent were drawn into the value-exchange systems of cultural production and consumption through tourism's "supply chain." At this stage, scalability became an unavoidable

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[145] "On the Fields of Hope" (在希望的田野上), composed and popularized in early 1980s in China as a contemporary art song (艺术歌曲), depicts scenes of people celebrating harvests and enjoying prosperous lives through its lyrics. It expresses Chinese people's aspirations for and praise of national strength and social wellbeing. Achieving nationwide popularity, the song became a staple item of repertoire at major national events and celebrations, standing as one of the most representative musical works of China's early reform and open period (Dai Junchao 2015:6–9).

[146] The two contemporary Naxi-style songs composed by He Wenguang (和文光)—"Dreaming of Shangri-La" (梦中的香格里拉, performed entirely in Mandarin) and "Naxi Toasting Song" (纳西祝酒歌, alternating between Mandarin and Naxi language verses)—both carry exclusively Chinese-language titles.

[147] He Wenguang (和文光 b.1957), a renowned Naxi musician and composer from Tacheng Township, Yulong County, Lijiang, is known for his systematic collection and documentation of traditional Naxi music and dance from Tacheng and surrounding ethnic regions. During the 1990s and early 2000s, he composed a series of neo-folk songs that blended distinctive Naxi musical elements with contemporary pop arrangements, gaining widespread popularity among both Naxi communities and tourists. His performed works "Dreaming of Shangri-La" (梦中的香格里拉): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOoE4uKoojI and "Naxi Toasting Song" (纳西祝酒歌): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ddFYjs1bDo became particularly influential examples of this genre. Accessed July 5, 2025.

challenge for both the musicians and their agents (notably, both troupes Jinhua joined outside her day job at the county song and dance troupe were privately owned enterprises, not state entities).

Regarding the smart and practiced strategies (developed through years of performing for foreign audiences) used to address this, Helen Rees—who served as an ethnomusicological consultant, translator, travel guide, and observer during the Dayan Ancient Music Association's first UK tour—offers a vivid and insightful ethnographic description:

> In deciding how to present Naxi Ancient Music on stage to a British audience, the musicians had seven years' experience of tourist concerts to fall back on. Over the years, they had developed a winning format, in which their charismatic English-speaking leader, Xuan Ke, interspersed witty and informative commentary on the music, musicians, and instruments with performance of several pieces of four to twelve minutes in length, all played in a quite traditional style that Western backpackers, who in those days formed the bulk of their audience, found very attractive. . . . This attention to detail extended to the visual as well. Traditional secular music groups will sometimes array themselves round a long table, of ten forming a kind of closed circle, with extra players sitting off to the sides. Such an arrangement is clearly unsuited to performances with an audience, and for the tourist concerts the Dayan Ancient Music Association had developed a seating style in which musicians sat face or sideways on to the audience. For the British tour, however, they created a new and still more audience-oriented seating format, with two ranks each of five musicians, the back row higher than the front row. This allowed all musicians and instruments to be clearly visible to the audience—not always the case in the rather cramped spaces they used at this time for the tourist concerts [see Figure 7.3]. Costuming, too, was carefully thought through. While today's informal secular music groups in Lijiang typically play wearing everyday clothes, for the tourist concerts of the early 1990s, the performers usually wore old-fashioned long blue gowns and plain black jackets (*shanzi magua* [衫子马褂]) in imitation of the traditional Chinese literati [see Figure 7.4 for the rather more splendid version of this outfit developed specially for the UK tour, which featured a dark red gown and a vibrantly patterned jacket]. This had been the costume of the ritual Dongjing associations before 1949, and helped contribute to the desired ambience of solemnity and antiquity at the concerts. (2002:440, 442)



Figure 7.3: Naxi musicians executing their meticulously planned performance strategy at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester. 12 October 1995. Photo by Helen Rees.



Figure 7.4: Naxi musicians performing at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham. Naxi musician Wang Chaoxin (王朝信, first from left) interacts with an audience member after the concert. 15 October 1995. Photo by Helen Rees.

These strategies have become textbook marketing classics—now a standardized fixture in Naxi performing arts. Initially developed to overcome the "nonscalability" (Taylor 2024:48) barrier in foreign markets, they ultimately played a key role in securing their ICH nominations and remain influential to this day.

ICH-Listed Melodies, ICH-Excluded Singers

> [T]he silence greeting the musicians was what created music and gave it an autonomous existence, a reality. Instead of being a relation, it was no longer anything more than a monologue of specialists competing in front of consumers. The artist was born, at the same time as his work went on sale. (Attali 1985:47)

The twelve years following 2000 marked a critical period when China actively embraced UNESCO's ICH safeguarding concepts while establishing its own domestic ICH value system and bureaucratic protection framework. Following the trend of ICH movement of its early arrival in China, numerous programs featuring "original ecology folksong" (原生态民歌)[148] musical elements or focusing on such folksongs emerged across national media like CCTV and provincial satellite channels (see Table 7.1). This momentum intensified when China's Ministry of Culture launched the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Cultural Heritage Protection Project (中国民族民间文化遗产保护工程) in January 2003, triggering a nationwide surge in ICH nominations. The subsequent "authenticity" boom in folk music in the 21st century was by no means a coincidental phenomenon (Lu Jiahui 2013:9), but rather a byproduct of China's institutionalized cultural governance, in which banal nationalism and ICH became mutually reinforcing values in the sociological sense.

[148] Regarding the term "original ecology folksong" (原生态民歌), Helen Rees offers an insightful definition based on her research and field observations. She writes, "One of the most ubiquitous phrases in Chinese musicological circles today is the curious neologism *yuanshengtai min'ge*, or 'original ecology folksong.' Invented by educated urbanites, this term became widespread in print publications starting in 2004, and ten years on continues to saturate both scholarly and popular media discussion of China's traditional music." She further explains: "The broad sense of the term is clear: it refers to folksongs sung in unvarnished local village style and dialect by local tradition-bearers, in contrast to the professionally re-composed folksongs that dominated the airwaves in the latter part of the twentieth century" (Rees 2016:54).

YEAR	EVENT	NAME/DESCRIPTION	ORGANIZER/PRODUCER
2000	TV Program	Music Tribe (音乐部落)	Inner Mongolia Satellite TV
2002	Competition	Zhejiang Xianju First North-South Folk Song Competition (浙江仙居首届南北民歌擂台赛)	Zhejiang Satellite TV
2002	TV Program	Charm 12 (魅力 12)	CCTV Western Channel
2004a	Competition	2nd China North-South Folk Song Competition (第二届中国南北民歌擂台赛)	Shaanxi Provincial Government
2004b	TV Program	Folk Songs of China (民歌中国)	CCTV Music Channel
2004c	Competition	Qingying Jiaxue Cup CCTV Western Folk Song TV Competition (轻盈佳雪杯 CCTV 西部民歌电视大赛)	CCTV Western Channel
2006	Competition & TV Series	Original Ecology Singing (原生态唱法) added to CCTV Young Singers TV Competition (CCTV 青年歌手电视大奖赛)	CCTV
2007	Competition & TV Series	China Original Ecology Folk Song Competition · Discovery Journey (中国原生态民歌大赛・发现之旅)	Ministry of Culture & Shaanxi Provincial Government (produced by Shaanxi Satellite TV)

Table 7.1: Selected Landmark Events of Chinese Folksong Revival in Media and Competitions (2000–2007) (Cui Yingjie 2013:12–14; Lu Jiahui 2013:9–10).

The Chinese government's strong support for traditional culture and the arts gave folk artists and ethnic performers across the country an excellent opportunity—one that no one wanted to miss—to gain the "halo." He Jinhua, having honed her craft through extensive stage experience, began participating in provincial and national minority folk song competitions, where she quickly stood out as one of the best (Table 7.2)

YEAR	EVENT/COMPETITION	PERFORMANCE/AWARD
2000	CCTV "56 Blessings" Spring Festival Gala (CCTV 五十六个祝福春节歌舞晚会)	Songs performed: *xiq dvq bee* (Planting Song 栽秧调) and *sal wa bbaq xuq bbaq* (March Flowers Bloom 三月百花开)
2004	CCTV Western Folk Song TV Competition (CCTV 西部民歌电视大赛)	Won **Silver Award** (with He Minda 和民达); Songs performed: *xiq dvq bee* (Planting Song 栽秧调) and *we sseiq sseiq* (哦热热)

2006	3rd National Minority Arts Festival (第三届全国少数民族文艺会演)	Won **Group Gold Award** & **Individual Excellence Award** for adapted *xiq dvq bee* (Planting Song 栽秧调)
2006	1st CCTV Chinese Folk Music Gala (首届 CCTV 中国民族民间歌舞盛典)	Song performed: *we meq ddaq* (哦蒙达) (Received comment：contribution to ICH preservation & ethnic unity)
2007-	Yunnan Large-Scale "Original Ecology" Music Series – Sounds of Yunling (云南大型原生态民族音乐集：云岭天籁)	Recurring performer
2008	13th CCTV Young Singers TV Competition (Original Ecology Category) 第十三届 CCTV 青年歌手电视大奖赛个人单项决赛	Won **Silver Award** (as Naxi Sisters duo with Dapo Maji 达坡玛吉) for *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song 嫁女调) and *xiq dvq bee* (Planting Song 栽秧调)
2009	China "Original Ecology" Folk Song Exhibition (60th PRC Anniversary, Ministry of Culture) (中国原生态民歌展演)	Performed as Naxi Sisters duo
2009	1st Wuding International Folk Song Festival (首届武定国际民歌节)	Won **Achievement Award** (Naxi sisters duo)
2010	15th National "Qunxing" Award (全国第十五届群星奖)	Won **"Qunxing" Award** (群星奖) for *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song 嫁女调)
2011	China "Original Ecology" Folk Music Gala & 10th "Shanhua Award"	Won **Outstanding Inheritor** & **Performance Gold Award**
2011	"Guardians of Homeland, Expressions of Culture: A Chronicle of Local Traditions" Performance (ICH Law promulgation) ("守护家园，文化表情——风土纪述" 展演)	Participated
2011	10th "Shanhua Awards" Series Events of Chinese Folk Literature and Art (中国民间文艺第十届"山花奖"系列活动)	Won **Shanhua Award** (山花奖)**& Folk Performance Award** for *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song 嫁女调)
2012	4th National Minority Arts Festival (第四届全国少数民族文艺会演)	Won **Group Gold Award** & **Best New Artist**

Table 7.2: He Jinhua's Major Competition Participations and Awards (2000–2012) (Source: He Jinhua's unpublished personal memoir, compiled by He Hong [和弘] in 2022).

These state-sponsored and officially endorsed competitions brought Jinhua a widely recognized reputation, helping her accumulate both commercial performance experience and cultural capital. In July 2008, she was certified as a National Class-II Performer, and in 2010, she

was admitted as a member of the Chinese Musicians' Association—one of the few Naxi musicians to receive this distinction. In August 2015, she was further recognized as a National Class-I Performer. Alongside this elevation in social capital and cultural capital came a strengthened confidence in the value of Naxi folk traditions. As Jinhua reflects,

> After being recognized as a National Class-II Performer, I became even more devoted to safeguarding our ethnic heritage—collecting, archiving, adapting, and studying ancient Naxi folk songs. . . . Now I know exactly which path to take and which songs to sing. (Interview with He Jinhua, February 14, 2022)

The vigorous promotion of traditional music—often framed as "unprocessed" and closer to people's daily life—by the state, cultural authorities, and media powerfully reshaped public perception across China. During this period, a group of authoritative Chinese scholars actively voiced their opinions and published articles emphasizing and advocating the significant value of "original ecology" (原生态). Rees (2016:56–59) provides detailed documentation and analysis of this heated discussion among China's social elites between 2004 and 2006, citing for example the influential perspectives and publications of Qiao Jianzhong (乔建中, one of China's most renowned ethnomusicologists), scholar-official Tian Qing (田青), and ethnomusicologist Zhang Xingrong (张兴荣) regarding the meanings, aesthetics and social values of the "original ecology" and "original ecology song/folksong." Their arguments, as documented by Rees (2016:58), established two key premises:

> 1. The term "original ecology folksong" draws inspiration from scientific and environmental concepts. It has wider implications than the phrase "traditional folksong"—it emphasizes the environment in which the singing naturally occurs, as well as traditional singing style, dialect, subject-matter, etc. Invention and use of the term are implicitly tied to rising concern for intangible cultural heritage preservation, and to a recognition that absolutist value judgments derived from the norms of European classical music cannot be applied indiscriminately to other traditions.

2. “Original ecology folksong” may be equated with “folk style” and “authenticity,” and while some commentators note the historical connections between different styles, it is generally characterized as being the opposite of “national singing style,” “conservatory style,” “stage folksongs,” and “created” works.

“Original ecology” (原生态) music became an elite aesthetic taste, elevating folksongs’ cultural value. As Rees (2016:61) notes, both academic and popular commentators generally viewed this development positively—albeit with varying levels of comfort regarding the necessary adaptations when locally rooted songs were repackaged for national platforms. This shift not only endowed singers with heightened social, cultural, and economic capital—manifested in increased performance opportunities and fees—but also integrated folk music into capitalist market logic, achieving what Taylor terms “scalability.” Through media supply chains (television, radio, newspapers), both musical production standards and audience tastes were systematically rebuilt.

For a long time, most minority singers aspired to attend state-sponsored conservatory programs—even short-term workshops—as a mark of prestige. As I observed in interviews (e.g., with Yang Erche [杨二车], a Mosuo *ahabala* genre ICH inheritor), Chinese singers are inclined to attach great importance to whether they have received “professional training.” Those with formal training generally exhibit greater confidence and uniformly highlight this credential in their professional profiles. He Jinhua, however, belonged to the untrained category.

During preparations for the 2008 CCTV Young Singers Competition, tensions emerged within the Yunnan delegation’s advisory team over the contrasting vocal approaches of Jinhua and her duet partner Dapo Maji (达坡玛吉), a conservatory-trained singer. When I observed their rehearsal in Beijing just days before the competition, their voices still lacked the cohesive

blend the team demanded. Liu Xiaogeng (刘晓耕), a respected Yunnan Arts University professor and composer serving as music consultant, intervened decisively. “Forget your conservatory training,” he instructed Dapo Maji with uncharacteristic sternness. “We need the raw authenticity of your natural voice, not polished technique” (Informal fieldwork, April 2008).

“Competition pieces are fundamentally different from folksongs in daily life,” Jinhua explained to me. “For stage appeal, we had to combine the most representative Naxi melodic motifs and vocal techniques, while strictly adhering to time limits” (Interview, July 7, 2025). As she noted, traditional Naxi folk singing features call-and-response duets (male-female or group) but, to the best of my knowledge, lacks two-part female harmonies. For this competition, the music consultants discreetly arranged *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song, 嫁女调) with composed harmonies and structural edits—professional modifications meant to evade lay detection.[149] Their performance caused a national sensation, winning the silver medal (Table 7.2). This strategic adaptation of folk material established a replicable model that was continually reproduced and applied by subsequent Naxi musicians.

At the same time, Jinhua continued honing her signature repertoire. She systematically adapted traditional elements—freely rhythmic patterns, improvised lyrics, and short repetitive melodies—into polished performance pieces, distilling them into what became recognized as her personalized interpretations (Transcription 7.1). *Xiq dvq bee* is an improvised a cappella Naxi

[149] The rearranged versions, adapted under the guidance of composers and consultants from Yunnan Arts University, incorporate distinct Western compositional techniques and harmonic structures. Audio recordings of these adaptations are available online: *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song, 嫁女调): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcL49ZMf4AU; *xiq dvq bee* (Transplanting Song, 栽秧调): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgQoKoQWDyA. Accessed July 5, 2025.

folksong with flexible structure, traditionally sung solo or collectively by young men and women during rice transplanting in Jinhua's hometown (Tacheng, Lijiang). Its sole lyrical content—*lei hu* and *ngeq lei hu*, meaning "please wait" and "please wait for me"—is sung when slower workers become trapped by surrounding seedlings in muddy fields. The call-and-response singing is punctuated by playful banter in Naxi language between verses.

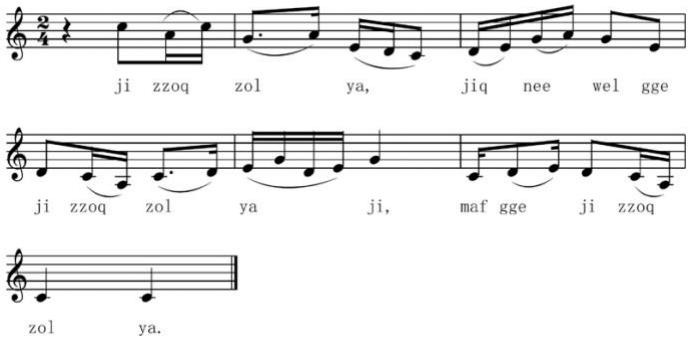
Jinhua told me she spent years adapting this traditional folksong for stage performance, considering her collaborative album with Helen Rees to represent her "most comprehensive vocal and compositional techniques" (Interview, July 7, 2025). She preserved the original folk melody (measures 1–22 and 34–68) while introducing several key innovations: creating an ABA structure by adding a new section B (measures 23–33) featuring the Naxi proverb *ddee jjeq me neiq nee, ddee zaq neiq me ddu we* (meaning "without enduring some hardship, how would we obtain happiness?"), and concluding with an *al huahua* mountain call accompanied by a waving gesture—a dramatic departure from the song's normally endless cyclical form in fieldwork contexts. Her signature technical contributions included regularizing free rhythms into fixed meter, extending sustained notes to 6–7 beats (significantly increasing difficulty), and developing distinctive techniques of emotional expression and breath control that became hallmarks of her acclaimed interpretation (Interview, July 7, 2025).



Transcription 7.2: Xiq dvq bee (Transplanting Song, 栽秧调), from CD He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China (Smithsonian Folkways, 2022), track 2.

Moreover, I want to highlight a case where Jinhua's musical adaptation was subsequently embraced and perpetuated by local communities: the Naxi folksong *ji zzoq zol* (金佐措) from Eya Township. This song represents one of the most iconic traditional melodies among the Naxi

subgroup of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The original composition comprises merely seven melodic measures (see Transcription 7.3). In performance, singers repetitively cycle through this brief structure while improvising new lyrics, continuing until the narrative or emotional expression reaches completion. During my January 2024 fieldwork in Lusi Village, Eya, *dobbaq* Zhaxi (扎西) sang the song to me following this original form. The general meaning of this section of lyrics is: "The clouds create a bridge, they build my bridge of clouds" (In Chinses: 云彩来搭桥呀吉，搭起我的云桥).



Transcription 7.3: Eya ji zzoq zol (金佐措), collected by the author, January 7, 2024.



Transcription 7.4: Eya ji zzoq zol (金佐措), from CD He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China (Smithsonian Folkways, 2022), track 11.

He Jinhua's nuanced adaptation of this song features a repeated final phrase with subtle note variations (see Transcription 7.4). As she explained, this modification emerged organically from her musical intuition—the added repetition serves both as a cadential resolution and as a means to extend this characteristically concise Naxi folk melody (a hallmark of most Naxi traditional songs). During post-fieldwork discussions, when I played Jinhua a recording of *dobbaq* Zhaxi (扎西) and villagers performing *ji zzoq zol* in Lusi Village (Eya, January 13, 2024), she immediately recognized the village version of her adapted song being sung locally. In live performances, Jinhua typically interweaves *ji zzoq zol* with other regional melodies, flexibly adjusting repetitions and lyrics based on time constraints. She does the same on her Smithsonian Folkways CD, combining *Yuleiq bee* and *Ji zzoq zol* ("Songs from Yongning and Eya," 永宁调、俄亚搭云桥调) to create one longer song (*He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*, Track 11).

As Jinhua and her repertoire garnered increasing acclaim in competitions, Naxi folk songs gained broader exposure and acceptance among audiences. While accumulating symbolic and economic capital through her performances, Jinhua also enhanced the songs' intrinsic value and market potential through her charisma, distinctive vocal style, and artistic labor. Her adapted and personalized renditions of *xiq dvq bee* (Transplanting Song, 栽秧调) and *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song, 嫁女调)—once nearly extinct folk melodies—were revitalized through her and Dapo Maji's interpretations, growing in popularity nationwide. By 2016 and 2018, respectively, these songs were inscribed on Yulong County's ICH list.

Yet, neither Jinhua nor Dapo Maji could be designated as ICH inheritors owing to their status as state-employed artists. Ultimately, the provincial ICH inheritor's title for *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song, 嫁女调) was granted to Dapo Maji's mother, He Guofang (和国芳, b.1956)—an accomplished Naxi folk singer—highlighting the bureaucratic constraints shaping heritage recognition.



Figure 7.5: He Jinhua teaching Naxi folksongs to elementary students during a weekly free workshop at Lijiang Youth Palace (丽江市青少年宫). September 21, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 7.6: He Jinhua coaches Jiang Shufan (蒋舒帆), a Naxi folk music enthusiast from Jiangsu province, during a private lesson, in the rehearsal studio of Lijiang Ethnic Culture Work Troupe (丽江市民族文化工作队排练室). August 11, 2024. Photo by author.

Despite lacking official recognition as an ICH inheritor, Jinhua never hesitates to teach Naxi folksongs freely to eager learners whenever possible (Figure 7.5). During a break in tutoring Jiang Shufan (蒋舒帆), a Han student from Jiangsu (Figure 7.6), she offered some reflections (Interview, August 11, 2024),

> Teaching others forces me to refine my adaptation methods. Take Shufan (舒帆): she's not Naxi and doesn't speak our language. The songs I choose for her must have stable rhythms and catchy melodies. . . . Traditional folk styles? Impossible to teach! Endless melodic repetition bores listeners quickly, and the improvised lyrics change with every rendition—how could anyone learn that?

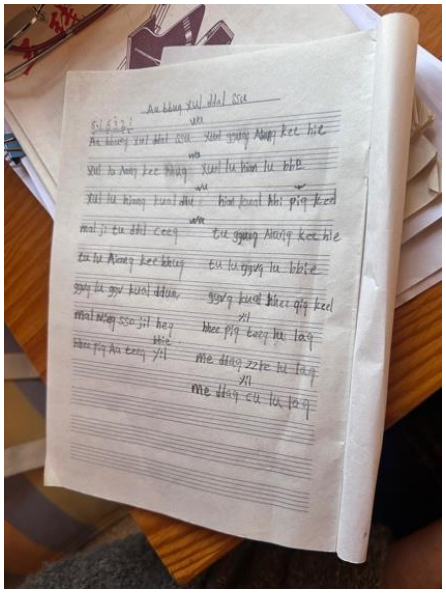


Figure 7.7: He Jinhua's hybrid notation system: documenting recomposed lyrics (in Naxi pinyin) and melodic incipit (in numbered musical notation) for a Naxi folksong collected in Yanjing, Tibet. Lijiang Ethnic Culture Work Troupe office. November 28, 2024. Photo by author.

Jinhua shrugged. "So, what I teach—and what I perform onstage—are thoroughly processed versions, nothing like the raw songs collected from villages." To demonstrate, she showed me her self-invented notation system documenting these adaptations (Figure 7.7).

The exclusion of Jinhua and Dapo Maji from the ICH representative inheritor roster exemplifies a systemic paradox—one that echoes Taylor's foundational critique of the complexity of UNESCO's ICH regime of value (2024:35). Following Taylor's analytical

framework, while heritagization has undoubtedly brought a greater "halo" to Naxi folksongs and symbolic capital to officially recognized ICH inheritors, the case of these two artists reveals the crucial valorization phase that takes place before daily practice officially listed: the singers' musical labor and artistry add value to the musical works and their potential for ICH inscription.

Here, I argue that value-adding occurs not only through the bureaucratic supply chain of ICH but also through musicians' pre-heritage creative work. Ironically, the very value produced by the musician's labor—which aligns perfectly with UNESCO's criteria of outstanding "universal value"—ends up being completely disconnected from the artist. The system that rewards objects with heritage status simultaneously excludes the agents who made them worthy of that status. This situation with Jinhua and Dapo Maji arguably represents a form of Marxist alienation—where the ICH bureaucracy's valorization process severs the artists from their creative labor. Unlike everyday knowledge circulating in the public domain, these two adapted works occupy a paradoxical position: while the original folk versions had nearly disappeared from communal practice, their current musical contents bear highly personalized reinterpretations and rearrangements.

Voicing the Naxi, Sustaining Futures

As discussed in Chapter Four, not all Naxi musicians are preoccupied with pursuing the symbolic capital conferred by ICH designation. Among the musicians I revisited, each engaged with cultural industry value-exchange through distinct strategies—many operating outside the

ICH field. Yet China's ICH value regime has undeniably become embedded in what we might call the "everyday nationhood" of many performers.

Nationhood and cultural confidence through the valorization of heritagization also give meaning to Naxi musicians' everyday actions/music reproduction activities. The designated traditional practices as national symbols are "neatly packaged distillations of the nation: they are the linchpins that connect people to the nation" (Cerulo 1995; Smith 1986). Crucially, this performative nationhood predated China's adoption of UNESCO's ICH framework. This is evidenced in Rees' (2002) textual analysis of tour diaries by He Jiaxiu (和家修), the Lijiang Prefecture Propaganda Department official who came with the Naxi musicians to England in 1995 and even learned some basic percussion to be able to perform with them. His account of the tour was published in a local journal. Rees summarizes as follows:

> [In He's account,] the British tour is conceived of as bringing benefits on a number of different levels: to the Naxi as an ethnic group, to their homeland, Lijiang, and to the international image of their nation, the People's Republic of China, and its government. (2002:436)

When sharing her reflections on collaborating with Lijiang-based death metal band Juwuxing (俱五形)[150] to win third prize at Germany's Wacken Open Air Festival, He Jinhua recounted that

> When the announcer called "China" during the awards ceremony on stage, we couldn't believe it—we didn't even hear it properly at first. But we were so excited! As the only band representing China, we actually placed among 30 bands from around the world. We felt

[150] Juwuxing (俱五形) is a Lijiang-based death metal band formed in 2014, composed of four Naxi musicians in their early thirties. As explained by band leader Yang Zhenjiang (杨振江) during our interview (August 12, 2024), the name Juwuxing originally referenced Juwuxing (俱五刑), a brutal execution method from ancient Chinese history. Since all official performances in China require prior approval from local cultural and tourism authorities, the band was compelled to modify their original name after failing to pass the mandatory textual content review. The character for "punishment" (刑, *xing*) was replaced with its homophone "form/shape" (形, *xing*)—a phonetic wordplay that secured official approval while retaining the name's edgy historical allusion.

> incredibly proud. Rock music is originally a foreign genre—all those bands had such strong traditions and history. For us Chinese, especially as ethnic minorities doing this, it was definitely challenging. (Interview, September 26, 2024)

This sense of nationhood—the honor of representing both their ethnic group and their nation—is vividly embodied in He Jinhua and many other Naxi musicians. During my multiple informal conversations with Jinhua, she often reflected with gratitude on her good fortune to live in an era when China's transformations coincided with global recognition of Naxi culture's value. In Jinhua's written memoir, she comments on this:

> Over the years, I've performed in so many places—not just mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but abroad too. . . . In 1999, I received an invitation from the King of Norway to perform in Norway and Denmark. What left the deepest impression was an elderly Norwegian artist. That day, with the help of a translator, we sat knee-to-knee talking intimately. When I sang *mil bvl bee* (Wedding Song,嫁女调), she began quietly weeping along with the melody. Long after the song ended, she remained emotionally overwhelmed, saying she'd never imagined such exquisite music existed in the world.
>
> Then in 2005, Connecticut College invited me to the U.S. for over a month of lectures and cultural exchange. I visited arts centers at universities across thirteen states—every single event was packed to capacity. . . . Once, while touring a university in the American West, I stumbled upon a museum exhibition entirely dedicated to our Naxi *dobbaq* religion! I was stunned by how deeply they valued our culture. It made me realize: as children of the Naxi people, we must cherish and protect these endangered cultural treasures even more fiercely.
>
> In 2013, I represented China at the Berlin International Trade Fair and cultural exchange program across Germany, Britain, France, Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg. That same year, I performed in Switzerland for "Perceiving China: Beautiful Yunnan," where at Geneva's UN headquarters, I engaged with ambassadors worldwide on safeguarding minority cultural heritage. To speak for my people on such prestigious platforms was the highest honor. . . . These international performances constantly remind me: I must excel in my mission to bring our culture onto the global stage. My goal is to ensure more people see, value, and protect this endangered art through my teaching and advocacy—a lifelong commitment I'll never abandon.
>
> Now, I envision establishing a Naxi cultural workshop in Lijiang. There, I'll systematically pass down my knowledge and that of elder artists through education, inspiring the next generation to join this sacred work. Only by revitalizing our culture at its birthplace—where Naxi traditions first flourished—can our youth truly cherish their unique heritage. This cultural rootedness will become their competitive edge in an increasingly

globalized future. (He Jinhua's unpublished personal memoir, compiled by He Hong in 2022)

In November 2018, over a year's meticulous preparation, Jinhua traveled to Los Angeles to record her debut international album at UCLA's Evelyn and Mo Ostin Music Center (Figures 7.8 and 7.9).[151] While rooted in traditional Naxi folk songs, the album was intentionally crafted to showcase Jinhua's multicultural artistry, featuring twelve tracks of unaccompanied Naxi folksongs from multiple regions, two of Tibetan-language songs (tracks 4 and 10), and two new song arrangements (tracks 18 and 19) with accompaniment created by Grammy-winning composer Daniel Ho. There are also three jaw harp tunes (tracks 15, 16, and 17) and one impromptu self-introduction in spoken Naxi (track 20).



Figure 7.8: Post-recording review session at UCLA's Evelyn and Mo Ostin Music Center. Participants: second row (left to right): Helen Rees, He Jinhua (wearing cap); first row: audio engineer Stuart Schenk (center). UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. November 2018. Photo by Mei-Chen Chen.

[151] For the complete album recording and liner notes, see *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*/纳西族民歌—和金花演唱) (2022).



Figure 7.9: He Jinhua during recording sessions at UCLA's Evelyn and Mo Ostin Music Center. November 2018. UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. Photo by Helen Rees.

With many "firsts" to its credit, the album *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*, released in 2022 by Smithsonian Folkways, is a milestone in the transmission and dissemination of Naxi folksong. It is the first commercially produced album in Naxi history to demonstrate the huge geographical and stylistic diversity of folksongs across the Naxi homeland. It is also the first foreign-produced album of Naxi folksong, and the first album in which a native Naxi singer, He Jinhua, performs traditional genres entirely in her native language, presenting the distinctive vocal technique of traditional Naxi folksongs without added instrumental accompaniment. Finally, thanks to the cooperative efforts of He Jinhua, Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan (杨福泉), and ethnomusicologist Helen Rees, it is the first album to feature line-by-line transliteration of the Naxi-language lyrics into Naxi pinyin as well as English and Chinese translations, a boon to scholars and Naxi song-learners alike.

It took seven years for this album to take shape, from Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan's initial suggestion in 2015 to final publication in March 2022. Jinhua's entire family enthusiastically

supported the project and appear in the photographs taken specially for the album by Helen Rees in March 2019, visibly connecting Jinhua's love of family to her love of Naxi folksong. Jinhua is grateful for this CD:

> In my 40-year singing career, this is my second solo album, more than twenty years after my first solo magnetic tape in 1999. The meaning of this album is extraordinary, whether for my personal pursuit or for the inheritance of Naxi culture. It is urgent to preserve the ancient culture I have learned over these years. Because the elderly still carrying these traditions are gradually leaving us. (Interview with He Jinhua, February 14, 2022)

The album's release made a major impact in three distinct spheres: China's ethnic music scene, ethnomusicological academia, and the Naxi community itself. This groundbreaking album represents the first solo Naxi folksong recording produced and published internationally by a partially non-Chinese team. Ethnomusicologist Helen Rees (producer/content editor) and Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan (consultant/Naxi script translator) shaped it into a musically-anchored ethnography, featuring trilingual lyrics (English, Chinese, Naxi phonetic), detailed artist biographies, and cultural notes, elevating its value as both scholarly resource and historical artifact. Its release sparked intense Naxi community discourse as only the second overseas-published Naxi album since Nimbus Records' 1997 CD *Naxi Music from Lijiang* by the Dayan Ancient Music Association (大研古乐会). Among its tracks, Jinhua and Grammy-winning composer Daniel Ho's improvised piano-accompanied rendition of *xiq dvq bee* (Transplanting Song, Track 18) emerged as a standout favorite with Chinese audiences.[152] The album also boldly confronted cultural taboos by including two funeral-related pieces: *ail jiuq bbv ddaq pil*

[152] Regarding He Jinhua and Daniel Ho's improvised piano-accompanied rendition of *xiq dvq bee* (Transplanting Song, Track 18), my informal discussions with Jinhua, other Naxi musicians, and amateur listeners revealed a clear preference pattern: while most interviewees cited this track as their favorite across the entire album, a minority explicitly favored the a cappella version (Track 2).

(Dawn Lament, Track 12), a traditional Naxi burial song, and *saiseeq jjiq / a lil lil jiq perq* (*Saiseeq jjiq /* Beautiful White Clouds, Track 13)—this work comprises two ritual pieces from the Naxi funeral music suite *Baisha xiyue*, traditionally performed as a conjoined medley (Mao Jizeng 1988:23).

The album's impact took an unexpected turn when a Lijiang-based death metal band, Juwuxing (俱五形), comprising four Naxi youth, approached Jinhua (Figure 7.10). Bandleader Yang Zhenjiang (杨振江) recalled in our interview that

> We were awestruck by Professor Jinhua's interpretation of *saiseeq jjiq*—its depiction of post-battle bloodshed in Naxi legends perfectly aligned with our thematic focus on mortality. Tentatively, we proposed fusing its melodies with our sound. . . . To our surprise, she agreed immediately after hearing our demo at the studio. (Interview with Yang Zhenjiang, June 24, 2024)



Figure 7.10: He Jinhua (second from the left) with Juwuxing members. Left to right: Niu Hua (牛骅), Yang Zhenjiang (杨振江), Peng Guanglong (彭光龙), Qiao Zhisen (乔治森), during a folk-metal fusion rehearsal. September 26, 2024. Photo by author.

After months of collaborative experimentation, Jinhua adapted her vocal style to merge with the band's metallic intensity. Their groundbreaking fusion ultimately earned third prize at

Germany's heavy medal festival Wacken Open Air (2024),[153] marking the first time Naxi traditional music conquered the global metal stage.

Through her steadfast preservation of traditional Naxi vocal aesthetics, while simultaneously challenging the rigid "authenticity" paradigms imposed by ICH frameworks and performing ethnic identity on increasingly transnational musical stages, Jinhua engages with everyday nationhood in her own way. Based on my long-term observation and understanding of Jinhua, her daily musical practice conveys both Naxi ethnic identity and Chinese nationhood. For Jinhua, these identities often merge into one. I believe this is the result of the banal nationalism that the Party has promoted for years through education and propaganda under the unifying concept of "the Chinese nation." On domestic stages, she represents the Naxi in contrast to other ethnic groups in China, while internationally, she serves as a cultural ambassador for both the Naxi people and China as a whole. This was exemplified in her advice to fellow Naxi performers preparing for international stages:

> When performing abroad, singing well isn't enough—your stage presence, costumes, and behavior all matter. I've actually told others [name withheld], "Your performance outfits must be immaculate. And never spit in public! Overseas, that's unacceptable. People would question how Chinese artists could act like that!" (Interview, August 10, 2024)

The symbolic and economic capital generated by Jinhua's 2022 U.S.-released album created a ripple effect. In September 2024, Yunnan TV documentary director Sun Yuzhao, inspired by both the album's success and Jinhua's award-winning collaboration with the Lijiang metal band at Germany's Wacken Festival, featured them in the series Yunnan Music Meets the World

[153] Wacken Open Air (WOA) began in 1990 as a grassroots initiative and has since evolved into a global heavy metal mecca (Schöwe 2012; Wojcik 2019), becoming a pop-culture phenomenon through numerous books and documentaries (Bohn and Bernardi 2022:117, 123).

(Episode 11: Snow Mountain Melodies 雪山天籁),[154] chronicling their individual careers and groundbreaking partnership (Figures 7.11 and 7.12).



Figure 7.11: Yunnan TV documentary crew filming at He Jinhua's parents' home in Tacheng township, Yulong County, Lijiang. September 24, 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 7.12: Yunnan TV filming a documentary about Juwuxing and He Jinhua. Lijiang, September 23, 2024. Photo by author.

[154] Episode 11: "Snow Mountain Melodies" (雪山天籁), Yunnan Music Meets the World (云南音乐遇见世界), dir. Sun Yuzhao (孙玉钊) (Yunnan TV, 2024). Aired on Yunnan Satellite TV's prime-time cultural slot, achieving 100,000+ official platform views.



Figure 7.13: The East Sea Metal Festival (东海重型音乐节) scene, Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province, October 19, 2024. Photo by author.

International festival recognition catapulted Juwuxing to prominence in China's rock scene. While maintaining their underground roots, the band began securing more and more mainstream performance opportunities during windows of relaxed state cultural policies. They undertook a historic performance at China's premier East Sea Metal Festival (东海重型音乐节, October 12–20, 2024), which is the first outdoor music festival specifically organized for heavy metal in China (Figure 7.13).[155] One month later, at the Yancheng Dayang Bay Milu Festival (盐城大洋湾遇见迷鹿音乐节, November 8–10, 2024),[156] Juwuxing's reunion with Jinhua marked the first

[155] The inaugural East Sea Metal Festival (东海重型音乐节) was held in Quzhou, Zhejiang Province, China, on October 19–20, 2024. The lineup featured prominent Chinese metal bands alongside international acts like Caliban, MAKE THEM SUFFER, DEXCORE, and SABLE HILLS. Although the event marked China's first large-scale outdoor heavy metal festival, its 2024 debut faced significant challenges, including multiple postponements and a near-cancellation. Notably, there was almost no official media coverage or published attendance statistics. As Niu Hua (牛骅), drummer of the band Juwuxing (俱五形), emphasized in our interview on October 18, 2024, "This was a historic breakthrough in China's heavy metal scene." While official documentation is scarce, some content from the organizers remains available on their official Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/EastSeaFestival/?locale=zh_CN. Accessed August 6, 2025.

[156] The Yancheng Dayang Bay Milu Festival (盐城大洋湾遇见迷鹿音乐节), held at Dayang Bay Tourist Resort in Yancheng, Jiangsu, was launched in 2024 as a new cultural tourism initiative designed to boost local tourism. This genre-inclusive event welcomed all music styles and enthusiasts, featuring two performance stages (main and secondary). Based on my on-site observations, the closest audience proximity to any stage was approximately three meters. He Jinhua and Juwuxing (俱五形) performed on the smaller secondary stage, which allowed for greater interaction with fans. Its 2025 successor, the Yancheng Dayang Bay Manghe Festival (盐城大洋湾遇见芒禾音乐节), attracted 54,000 attendees during its two-day run from June 14 to 15 (Yan Hui and Li Chi 2025).

public live performance of Naxi folk-metal fusion to Chinese audiences after they win the Wacken's award (Figure 7.14).

During informal interviews with four rock fans at the venue (all preferring anonymity), one devoted Juwuxing follower admitted, "I've attended multiple Juwuxing shows hoping to witness their collaboration with Jinhua—today I finally got my chance"; the other three randomly approached audience members expressed fascination with their first exposure to Jinhua and Juwuxing, finding their hybrid performance surprisingly accessible (Interviews, November 8, 2024). Though this musical form and performance remain marginal and non-mainstream within China's cultural industries, these niche music genres and intimate live offerings create value fundamentally distinct from recorded musical commodities (Taylor 2024:155): they facilitate ritualized communal experiences and spiritual resonance among strangers.



Figure 7.14: He Jinhua performing with Juwuxing at the Yancheng Dayang Bay Rock Festival (盐城大洋湾摇滚音乐节), Jiangsu, China. Visible performers (left to right): He Jinhua, Peng Guanglong (彭光龙). November 8, 2024. Photo by author.

Being excluded from the "halo" of ICH designation, Jinhua—through her distinctive artistic talent and the inherent symbolic capital she carries as one of the Naxis' most accomplished contemporary vocalists—approaches her performances and creative work as an offering to both her community and the nation. I eagerly anticipate her second internationally produced Naxi folksong album, recorded in Lisbon in May 2025 (Figure 7.15) and slated for release in the coming years. This deeply personal project will showcase the diverse regional styles of Naxi music traditions.



Figure 7.15: Recording session for He Jinhua's second album at Namouche Studios. Left to right: producer Helen Rees, recording engineer Jorge Gonçalves, artist He Jinhua, and guzheng musician Huang Limei (黄丽梅). Lisbon, Portugal. May 12, 2025. Photo by author.

For years, Jinhua has diligently studied, collected, and adapted Naxi folk songs from different regions. She shared with me her heartfelt aspiration: to leverage her musical talent and accumulated social capital—the recognition and resources she now commands—to grant these

vanishing melodies more opportunities to be known, cherished, studied, and even researched by diverse audiences. She reflected,

> With my growing visibility, I think my reinterpretations—my own stylized versions of these folksongs—might make them easier for new audiences to appreciate. The raw, unadapted folk melodies . . . they're hard to spread as they are. I want to help share the music from all the different Naxi communities. I'll blend tunes from different places, but I'll always credit where each one comes from. . . . That's why I want to release albums abroad too—to preserve these songs more holistically, to give more people in the world a chance to hear them. (Interview, September 24, 2024)

Yet her collection journey hasn't always been smooth sailing. During informal conversations, Jinhua revealed instances where influential figures within certain Naxi subgroups prohibited her from learning or performing local folksongs, asserting that these local folksongs should not be sung by outsiders, subtly implying that those cultural resources should remain exclusive to community members. Jinhua countered this perspective directly: "Your thinking is too conservative. It will only limit the development of the local Naxi culture" (Interview, January 22, 2024).

Similarly, not every adaptation or collaborative performance by Jinhua has been universally praised—her work with the band Juwuxing stands as one such example that initially faced skepticism, until their international third-place victory silenced critics. Jinhua remarked,

> I don't dwell on others' judgments—I know my purpose. So long as others share my commitment to sustaining Naxi traditions, I'll keep an open door. For every worthy collaboration, you'll have my full dedication. (Interview, September 24, 2024)

Summary

The inscription of traditional practices and practitioners onto ICH lists constitutes a dual process of valorization, functioning simultaneously as a bureaucratic supply chain and a liminal threshold (Gennep 1960 [1909]). This ritualized transformation converts the secular and everyday into collective creations endowed with universal value, now recast as national cultural resources. Socially, it effects a metamorphosis: mundane traditional practices and ordinary practitioners cross this threshold to become "sanctified" entities adorned with institutional halo effects, while simultaneously serving as vessels of state identity. Economically, it transmutes previously non-commodified cultural practices—once valued primarily for communal use—into cultural commodities imbued with symbolic capital that circulate within cultural industries, accruing market value. Practitioners likewise undergo this conversion; through nomination, their labor gains enhanced economic and symbolic valuation.

My fieldwork data reveals three distinct value manifestations of ICH-recognized practices: (1) in lived community contexts, the ICH traditions primarily sustain "sociality"—the glue of interpersonal and social bonds; (2) on state-sanctioned heritage stages, they perform ritualized solidarity and nationalism; (3) within commodity circuits (tourism, recordings, livestreams), their economic value becomes predominant.

While previous sections framed Jinhua's career through everyday nationhood representation (voicing the Naxi), I didn't elaborate on her daily musical interactions with other Naxi musicians, folk artists, and community elders. During my fieldwork, I had multiple opportunities to participate with her in non-performance-oriented Naxi secular music activities, including

funerals, dinners, and informal gatherings. At a funeral ceremony held in Baishui Village, Dadong Township between August 20 and 22, 2022, Jinhua spontaneously joined the mourning song ensemble, collaborating with local villagers to commemorate a friend's deceased father through music and dance. During our joint fieldwork in Mangkam County, Tibet, in June 2024, she engaged in antiphonal singing with local musicians, taught folksongs from other Naxi regions, and learned indigenous folksongs and Tibetan dance traditions from them. In Naxi practice, music functions as Maussian gift-exchange—a non-economic currency that cements kinship and communal ties. During life-cycle rituals (weddings, funerals), spontaneous singing groups form not to perform but to participate, transforming melodies into social glue where relational maintenance trumps artistic virtuosity.

Naxi anthropologist Gao Zhiying (高志英), a professor at Yunnan University, shared her personally resonant yet thought-provoking reflections in her WeChat moments on May 28, 2025 (Figure 7.16):



Figure 7.16: Content of Gao Zhiying's (高志英) WeChat post, May 28, 2025. Author's screenshot.

The journey of cultural cognition from cultural subject to anthropologist: What we considered in childhood as "our own (ethnic) traditions" were in fact "shared heritage of us all (the Chinese nation)," and increasingly so. This holds true for festival celebrations as much as for wedding and funeral rituals.

Ultimately, China's ICH apparatus operates as an enormous supply chain for banal nationalism. Through everyday nationhood, it seeks to habituate traditional practices into the internalization of state-guided national identity, thereby achieving the political goals of the Party and reproducing national cohesion. However, the bottom-up perspective adopted in this section, supported by multiple cases throughout this dissertation, reveals significant gray areas within China's ICH phenomenon. Among the various actors are shrewd cultural agents who strategically navigate bureaucratic systems and policies, aspiring inheritors eager to secure a place in the ICH registry, and idealistic practitioners who tirelessly sustain and transmit their traditions—regardless of whether they are formally recognized by the ICH framework.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

The Plural Naxi: Beyond the Monolithic Public Imagination

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to reconstruct a vision of the pluralistic Naxi community. Early Western scholarship on China's Naxi people—exemplified by ethnographer and botanist Joseph Rock's works (e.g., 1947, 1963)—offered documentation of their geographical distribution and cultural diversity. Paradoxically, as we navigate the 21st century, public perception has increasingly narrowed to focus singularly on the Naxi of Lijiang in Yunnan Province. Three primary factors contribute to this monolithic public imagination of the Naxi:

(1) Post-1949 state-led ethnic classification: The nationwide ethnic identification surveys and legal status determinations conducted by the state after 1949 assigned different ethnic classifications to Naxi groups across regions, with some classifications (e.g., Naxi and Mosuo people classified as Mongols in parts of Sichuan) remaining controversial to this day. They also subsumed numerous ethnic subgroups, especially in Yunnan Province, under the single moniker "Naxi," allowing for no official admission of subgroup diversity.

(2) Geopolitical fragmentation: Administrative borders fractured Naxi cultural totality and continuity, elevating Lijiang (the demographic/political center) as the singular reference point while marginalizing peripheral Naxi communities, despite their vital roles in shaping Naxi ethnicity, culture, religion, and history.

(3) Asymmetric development: After China's opening-up, Lijiang gained earlier access to outsiders (such as foreign backpackers, Chinese mass tourists, and Chinese and a few foreign scholars) compared to other Naxi regions, generating a feedback loop: Chinese and international visitors amplified Lijiang's reputation through their accounts in multiple languages, cementing Lijiang's dominance in the global imagination.

China's reform and open policy, initiated in the late 1970s and expanded during the 1980s and 1990s, not only reinvigorated the national economy but also introduced transformative reforms in population mobility, traditional cultural preservation, and the development of the tertiary sector (service industries, including tourism). Within this context, Lijiang emerged as the primary beneficiary of Yunnan's ethnic cultural tourism policies. Lijiang rapidly commodified Naxi traditional culture to meet the growing tourism that prized both spectacular natural landscapes and exotic ethnic cultural experiences.[157] This commercialization significantly enhanced the domestic and international profile of Naxi folk arts (notably the local Dongjing repertoire, renamed "Naxi ancient music") and religious practices (rebranded "*dongba* culture"). As ethnomusicologist Helen Rees documented in her study of the 1980s–1990s Naxi ancient music boom, "Naxi musicians have taken advantage of China's political and economic liberalization to leap into the artistic marketplace" (2000:195). The economic pull of this tourism transformation proved so powerful that it drew folk artists and *dobbaq* ritual specialists from peripheral Naxi communities (e.g., Sanba and Eya) to perform in Lijiang's commercial venues.

[157] Prior to China's reform and opening-up period, restricted population mobility meant that most Chinese citizens—particularly the Han majority—had limited exposure to ethnic minority cultures, rendering them objects of novelty and curiosity, and sometimes of fear and disdain.

This migration has effectively created a cultural funnel, concentrating what was once a geographically diverse tapestry of Naxi traditions into the single locus of Lijiang.

Marked by China's formal accession to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, the two-decade-long ICH preservation movement has represented the most significant historical opportunity for reviving traditional cultures that had suffered severe disruption and fragmentation during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The ICH campaign in China has achieved remarkable institutional growth—establishing specialized legislation, academic disciplines, and a vast bureaucracy for heritage designation and administration. Yet paradoxically, China's state-dominated ICH system—structured around government administrative hierarchies—has not only failed to redress preexisting cultural inequities but also given rise to a new phenomenon of cultural centralism. By tethering heritage recognition to regional governance frameworks, the system inherently privileges certain areas while marginalizing others, replicating the very imbalances it purports to correct.

Hierarchies of Heritage: Naxi Individuals and Communities in ICH Systems

China's ICH protection system operates through four key practices: (1) list-making and evaluation, (2) recognition of ICH bearers, (3) administration of ICH projects and practitioners, and (4) cultural display, research, and promotion. These activities are all managed by state-established ICH protection centers—public institutions organized strictly according to China's administrative divisions and operating under local government oversight. This regionally based institutional framework inherently creates unequal access to cultural capital. As demonstrated in

Chapter Five, Naxi communities and musicians located outside the recognized cultural core area (i.e., non-Lijiang regions) face systemic disadvantages: they receive less government funding and have significantly lower chances of securing ICH designation or inheritor status compared to their Lijiang counterparts.

The ICH system is, by its very nature, a value-laden process of inclusion and exclusion—one that inherently produces authority through selective recognition. Given the extensive existing scholarship on ICH evaluation criteria and value systems, which I discussed in Chapter Three, I will not revisit those debates here. To secure early inclusion in the ICH protection framework and access state funding, the Naxi of Lijiang strategically employed various tactics and ultimately succeeded in listing their traditions (see Chapter Four)—a clear benefit to their community.

However, selection inevitably breeds competition. Across my fieldwork sites in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet, Naxi communities outside Lijiang—such as those in Sanba (a Tibetan-majority area) and Mangkam (also Tibetan-dominated), or Eya (populated primarily by Tibetans and Yi)—faced dual competitive pressures: not only against other ethnic groups but also against Lijiang's dominance as the Naxi cultural core. Consequently, these peripheral Naxi communities had to expend significantly greater effort and resources than their Lijiang counterparts to gain recognition as "representative Naxi ICH," a form of symbolic capital that remains unevenly distributed.

Furthermore, the ICH list-making process has institutionalized a class of professionalized heritage bearers. Traditions once practiced organically in daily life are now mediated through the

formalized selection of "ICH inheritors," who gain both symbolic capital and tiered government stipends. In the cultural consumption market, this official title often translates into higher economic returns compared to unrecognized practitioners. Yet the system remains constrained by cultural centrism—a logic that embeds hierarchical valuations at every societal level. As evidenced in my fieldwork, peripheral ethnic identities face disproportionate barriers to recognition compared to the Lijiang Naxi. The criteria also systematically exclude state-employed professionals (e.g., He Jinhua and Dapo Maji, both professional performers) and government staff, as codified in Yunnan's policies. Rare exceptions—such as He Dongmei, the primary school teacher recognized as a provincial inheritor of Lijiang's *Naq xi ssiul ssiuf bee* (Naxi nursery rhymes, 纳西族童谣)—only prove the rule.

The ICH system, structured around administrative borders, has effectively redrawn cultural boundaries among the Naxi. This has led to subtle tensions between different Naxi subgroups, as exemplified in Chapter Five by the Mosuo *geqmu ggua* (Mountain-Circling Festival). Despite sharing historical origins, Mosuo communities on either side of Lugu Lake—divided between Sichuan and Yunnan—now hold separate celebrations owing to provincial borders and administrative constraints. This division has even fostered competition for tourist revenue between the two groups. The state's push to commodify culture and transform ICH into economic capital has placed tradition-bearers in a dilemma: they sometimes find themselves torn between the binding force of cultural practice and the pressures of economic rationality.

Performing Chineseness: Negotiating Diversity and Institutional Collectivity

> It is heritage in its most holistic of meanings, however ambiguous, that people use to create social and cultural identity that both the individual and corporate levels. It is a sense of culturally imbued geography, sometimes without real bounds, that tethers people to the places they repetitively use, in which they dwell, and in which their memories are made. (Morgan et al. 2009:113)

Over the past decades, the traditional performing arts of the Naxi, like those of other ethnic groups in China, have experienced a value orientation revolution shaped by national politics at multiple levels since 1949. In the 1950s and 1960s, during the early years of the People's Republic, these cultural elements were documented and used as evaluative criteria for identifying and classifying ethnic identities, becoming part of the state's epistemological framework for understanding and categorizing minority groups. During the 1960s–1970s, traditional culture and folklore were simultaneously denounced as dross and remnants of the old social system, requiring revolutionary eradication. After the 1980s, certain selected traditional performing arts were adapted to the Soviet-style artistic reforms and redefined as people's art, serving both the people and national political goals. In the 1990s, these cultural elements underwent a dual transformation in China: they were repackaged as commercial commodities within Lijiang's tourism economy, becoming vital resources for local economic development, while also serving as potent symbols of Naxi cultural identity that attracted both international visitors and domestic admirers. Following the turn of the millennium and the advent of the ICH era, these traditional performing arts were systematically redefined within China's ICH framework, becoming institutionalized within a new value system that prioritized collective representativeness over individual creativity.

China's UNESCO-inspired ICH system, while creating new opportunities for Naxi artistic traditions and their bearers—both communities and individuals across Naxi subgroups—has simultaneously constrained spaces for autonomous cultural expression. This study asserts that individual expressions of identity and agency hold analytical significance equal to collective cultural processes. Through examining Naxi communities in diverse social positions alongside their nuanced engagements with state heritage institutions, I trace how Naxi musicians' career trajectories, artistic experiments, and innovations mediate between ethnic belonging and bureaucratic frameworks. This approach reveals the context-dependent values of Naxi folksong as it circulates through different spheres of practice.

The compromises made by young Eya live-streamers, who use traditional culture to attract followers and ensure economic survival, and the elite preservation efforts of artists like He Jinhua represent divergent responses within the same social structure. Yet both reflect the political-authoritarian expectations embedded in China's ICH framework: the simultaneous demand to serve heritage economics, the state's soft power, and nationalism. The Naxi case demonstrates the inherent tension in balancing these priorities—a challenge that persists as China's ICH movement continues to evolve, compelling communities and individuals to constantly renegotiate between cultural diversity and creativity and the demands of institutionalized collectivity.

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