

## Literacy Preservation of the Zhuang Ethnic Group's Folk Song "Fwen Sam Ngued" in Pingguo, Guangxi, China

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the literacy preservation of the Zhuang ethnic group's folk song "Fwen Sam Ngued" in Pingguo, Guangxi, China, which is critical for maintaining cultural identity and legacy. This preservation endeavor is centered on understanding and conserving the Haleu song, which is an important component of Zhuang folk music culture. The Haleu song, with its distinctive melody and duet style, serves as the principal expression in the performance of "Fwen Sam Ngued." Singers' varied interpretations of the melodies in "Fwen Sam Ngued" demonstrate the dynamic nature of oral tradition and knowledge transfer. Zhuang folk music knowledge preservation strategies emphasize the importance of lyrics, oral transmission, and singing in various aspects of life. Furthermore, the modern-day growth of Zhuang song fairs highlights the importance of proactive preservation efforts in the face of societal change. By supporting literacy and cultural preservation projects, the Zhuang people's unique musical history can be preserved for future generations.

**Key words:** Literacy, Preservation, Zhuang, Fwen Sam Ngued

### INTRODUCTION

"Fwen Sam Ngued" is a crucial element of the cultural legacy of the Zhuang ethnic group in Pingguo, Guangxi, China. The folk song tradition contains diverse melodies, lyrics, and subjects that vividly capture the essence of life in the region, particularly during the lively spring season (Bodomo, 2010; Ning & Dayuan, 2019). "Fwen" is a term derived from the Zhuang language that specifically refers to a song or folk song. On the other hand, "Sam Ngued" is the name given to the third lunar month, which corresponds to the month of March. Therefore, "Fwen Sam Ngued" encompasses songs that celebrate the significant events and experiences of this fortunate period, characterized by the flourishing of spring, festivals, agricultural endeavors, and displays of affection (Sybesma, 2008; Yang, 2022).

In the past, the transmission of "Fwen Sam Ngued" depended on the handwritten manuscripts of Ancient Zhuang Characters, which ensured the preservation of its lines and melodies between generations. This collective expression, consisting of numerous brief songs interwoven into a coherent narrative, is commonly presented as a duet, symbolizing unity and harmony within Zhuang culture. The poem Fwen Sam Ngued weaves together themes of springtime renewal, agricultural ceremonies, and courtship, symbolizing the recurring cycle of life and the profound ties to the land. As singers move through the verses, they create a feeling of shared experience and communal identity, promoting connections

of understanding and affection. Although outdoor song fairs continue to play a crucial role in the performance of Fwen Sam Ngued, contemporary versions of this art form have extended their influence to modern platforms, demonstrating the changing dynamics of cultural expression in the digital era (Wu & Boonsrianun, 2023; Wei, 2018; Liu et al., 2023).

The "Fwen Sam Ngued" corpus is vast, consisting of numerous concise pieces that create a broader musical narrative. Typically performed as pairs, male and female vocalists explore different topics and patterns, vividly depicting the complexities of life in the spring season. Although "Fwen Sam Ngued" holds great historical and cultural value, it encounters difficulties in modern society. The transformation brought about by modernization and evolving performance settings has significantly impacted traditional singing venues. Additionally, the decline in the use of old Zhuang characters to transmit these songs has become a major challenge to the preservation of this priceless cultural heritage (Zhang et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2007; Gong et al., 2024).

According to the information provided above, the preservation of the folk song "Fwen Sam Ngued" among the Zhuang minority in Pingguo, Guangxi, China, is an urgent problem in the face of modernity and the degradation of traditional cultural traditions. This research will use multidisciplinary research methodologies, drawing on ethnomusicological theory and fieldwork methodology, to thoroughly investigate the literacy, preservation, and knowledge of

Fwen Sam Ngued. This will examine its music and the cultural changes influencing the tradition of song fairs associated with Fwen Sam Ngued.

### Research Question

- How is the literacy of the Zhuang ethnic group's folk song "Fwen Sam Ngued" preserved in Pingguo, Guangxi, China?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### General Knowledge of the Zhuang Ethnic Group in Pingguo

The Zhuang ethnic group, consisting of approximately 20 million individuals spread across 56 minority groups in China, primarily resides in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. They also have significant populations in the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong, Hunan, and Sichuan, as well as in various northern and northwestern provinces of Vietnam. The Zhuang population of Pingguo County, which had a total population of 507,820 as of 2010, accounts for 90.3% of the total, making it the dominant ethnic group in the region. The Zhuang people identify themselves with several local names, such as Boux Doj, Boux Mbanj, and Boux Rung in Pingguo. From a linguistic perspective, Zhuang is classified as a member of the Tai language branch within the Kra-Dai language family. It exhibits dialectal differences, including northern Zhuang and southern Zhuang, which are further divided into 12 subdialects. Zhuang possesses distinct writing systems, such as Ancient Zhuang Characters, derived from Chinese character components, and the contemporary Zhuang romanization spelling system, formally endorsed by the Chinese government in 1957 (Sun & Bao, 2006; Du et al., 2020; Mao & Xie, 2022).

Pingguo Prefecture is located in the southwestern part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, along the middle section of the Youjiang River. It has a total area of 2,485 square kilometers, with the urban area covering 33.1 square kilometers. Pingguo is distinguished by its topography, which consists of highlands in the north that gradually give way to lowlands in the south. The region features low ranges and hills in both the southern and northern areas and karst formations in the central part. The region has a subtropical monsoon climate characterized by extended summers, brief winters, abundant sunshine, and plentiful rainfall. The average annual temperature in the region is 21.5°C. Pingguo is situated 118 kilometers away from Nanning City, the seat of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and 129 kilometers from Baise City. It borders Wuming County, Mashan County, Long'an County, Tiandeng County, Tiandong County, Bama Yao Autonomous County, and Dahua Yao Autonomous County. Pingguo was formerly a county but was elevated to the status of a county-level city on December 26, 2019, and was officially created on May 18, 2020. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region government has direct control over its operations, while the Baise City government effectively manages it. The city consists of 9 towns and 3

townships, including 183 administrative villages and communities (Wu et al., 2008; Qin et al., 2011).

### General Knowledge of the Folk Song of Zhuang

Zhuang folk songs are a fundamental part of the cultural legacy of the Zhuang people. They are mostly found in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as well as in Yunnan Province, Guizhou Province, Guangdong Province, and northern Vietnam. These songs are primarily sung in the Zhuang language, with some versions including Chinese dialects. They are found in two forms: oral tradition and written records employing ancient Zhuang characters. Zhuang folk songs are known by several names, including fwen, sei, ga, beij, and lwenx, which are commonly used in different dialectal locations (Yi et al., 2023; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023).

Historical documents from more than a thousand years ago portray the singing practices of the Zhuang people during the rice ripening seasons and communal meetings, illustrating the enduring history of song in Zhuang culture. Zhuang folk songs cover a wide range of topics related to traditional life, including labor, agriculture, seasons, history, storytelling, love, marriage, education, hospitality, customs, and other characteristics. Their diverse line and word constructions distinguish Zhuang folk songs. These songs follow certain rhyme and rhythm patterns, with foot-waist and foot-foot rhyme schemes commonly used. Regional musical features exhibit substantial variation, with prevalent storytelling elements, exuberance, and ceremonial melodies (Xu & Karin, 2020; Quan & Chonpairot, 2023).

Seasonal song fairs, especially on the third day of the third lunar month, are important events for communal singing and socializing, which facilitate choosing wives during the spring plowing season. Specific genres of Zhuang folk songs have been officially recognized as China's national intangible cultural heritage due to their significance in preserving and enhancing traditional Zhuang culture and promoting societal development in contemporary times (Hou & Seekhunlio, 2023; Wang & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

### Research Theory

This study focuses on the literacy preservation of the Zhuang Ethnic Group's folk song "Fwen Sam Ngued" in Pingguo, Guangxi, China. It uses ethnomusicology as its fundamental framework. Ethnomusicology provides a thorough perspective for examining the diverse facets of this cultural legacy, including its musical, linguistic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The research projects the intangible cultural heritage in "Fwen Sam Ngued" by employing ethnomusicological approaches, including fieldwork, prosody analysis, and comparative studies. This interdisciplinary approach enables a detailed comprehension of the song's musical attributes, literary complexities, and cultural importance within Zhuang society. By working with local practitioners and community members, the study aims to guarantee the ongoing strength and significance of "Fwen Sam Ngued" as a valued part of the Zhuang cultural legacy in Pingguo and beyond (Dirksen, 2012; Wang, 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative techniques to comprehensively investigate the literacy preservation of the Zhuang ethnic group's folk song "Fwen Sam Ngued" in Pingguo, Guangxi, China. The research methodology encompasses document analysis, fieldwork, interviews, and data analysis techniques rooted in ethnomusicology, linguistics, and cultural studies.

### Document Analysis

- Collection of texts, books, and online materials related to Zhuang folk songs, including "Fwen Sam Ngued," from libraries, archives, and reputable online sources for the purpose of literacy and preservation.
- Examination and synthesis of existing literature to establish a theoretical framework and contextual background for the study.

### Fieldwork

- Conducting interviews with key informants, including renowned musicians or singers of "Fwen Sam Ngued" in Pingguo Prefecture, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, to gather firsthand insights for the literacy and preservation efforts.
- Utilizing ethnographic methods to observe and document "Fwen Sam Ngued" performances in traditional and contemporary contexts, contributing to the literacy and preservation of the song tradition.
- Recording audio and video samples of performances for further analysis and as part of the preservation initiative.
- Conducting ethnographic interviews with singers, elders, and other stakeholders within the Zhuang community to gather insights into the cultural significance, historical context, and transmission practices associated with "Fwen Sam Ngued," with a focus on literacy and preservation. These interviews provided valuable qualitative data to complement and contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

### Data Management

- Organizing and categorizing research data, including textual documents, audio recordings, video footage, and field notes.
- Transcribing interviews and translating texts from ancient Zhuang characters, aiding in preserving and disseminating cultural knowledge.
- Developing a comprehensive database to store, manage, and analyze research findings effectively, supporting ongoing literacy and preservation initiatives.

### Data Analysis

- Employing ethnomusicological analysis to examine the musical characteristics of "Fwen Sam Ngued," including melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, and tonalities.
- Utilizing qualitative analysis techniques to identify

themes and patterns in the collected data, including musical characteristics, lyrical content, and cultural context.

- Applying ethnomusicological theories to analyze the structural elements, stylistic features, and cultural significance of "Fwen Sam Ngued," contributing to its literacy and preservation for future generations.

## RESULTS

### Fwen Sam Ngued: Preserving Cultural Identity Through the Haleu Song

The cultural context of the melody "Fwen sam ngued" is crucial for its conservation and comprehension. When vocalists perform "Fwen Sam Ngued," they strictly follow a predetermined melody, typically the Haleu song, which is widely used among the Zhuang ethnic group in Pingguo Prefecture, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. This song, categorized by the Chinese ethnomusicology research community as a component of the Haleu Songs of Zhuang, is distinguished by its unique concluding note, "Haleu." The Haleu song is intricately intertwined with the cultural identity of the Zhuang people, with distinct locations having their own exclusive designations. The Haleu song in Pingguo is generally known as "fwen," indicating the strong association of this particular melody with the local population. Nevertheless, there are differences in the duration and musical arrangement of the Haleu song among various townships, exemplifying the diverse nature of Zhuang folk music customs.

The extensive propagation of the Haleu song, especially in Pingguo Prefecture, highlights its cultural importance and general appeal among Zhuang populations. Traditionally, the song "Fwen sam ngued" was predominantly performed after nighttime, following tight guidelines for specific events and locations. Nevertheless, current practices have witnessed a transition towards performances during the day, broadening the song's leisure and entertaining purposes. Notwithstanding these alterations, the essential attributes of the Haleu song persist, as distinguished by the participation of two men and two women in duet performances. The duet format of "Fwen Sam Ngued" amplifies its musical richness and appeal through the beautiful interplay between the treble and bass vocals (Table 1).

The Haleu song, known for its duet structure and the harmonious interplay between male and female voices, is the main musical expression used in Fwen Sam Ngued. The duet form and the diatonic quality of the Haleu song amplify the

**Table 1.** Traditional villages in pingguo preserve the haleu song

Town	Villages (community)
Taiping	Xinxu, Baolie, Taiping, Buyang, Yanshan, Gu'an and Longzhu
Guohua	Burong, Narong, Nalong and Shanying
Matou	Longlai, Natang, Jiuping, Yalong, Liansha, Tongren, Nali, Leigan, Longju, Chengdong, Chaoyang, Jiangbin, Xinxing and Chengbei

song's melodic complexity and auditory appeal. By comprehending the cultural milieu and the musical subtleties of the Haleu song in the literacy and preservation of Fwen Sam Ngued for forthcoming generations.

### Interpretations and Knowledge Transfer in the Performance of Fwen Sam Ngued

The Haleu song is the predominant choice for performing Fwen Sam Ngued. The researcher traveled to Pingguo with the purpose of documenting the 24 songs of Fwen Sam Ngued performed by 14 vocalists. It has been discovered that literacy and knowledge transfer the melodies performed by many vocalists, or even by the same vocalists at different points in time and in different situations, are not immutable melodies. In other words, the melodies are not fixed and unchangeable. The phenomenon exhibited by the singers is that the remaining melodic patterns differ apart from sharing the same initial and final notes. The singer's interpretation of some melodic forms is inconsistent when performing the same phrase at different times and under different conditions. A vocalist has the ability to modify specific melodic notes while singing the same phrase on separate occasions, in varying circumstances, or with various collaborators (Figure 1).

A prominent solo voice in the higher register (treble or soprano), characterized by a powerful and distinct vocal quality, initiates the first segment of the composition. A duet then performs the second and third segments, with both voices singing in unison. The literacy and knowledge composition comprises three phrases and adheres to the musical structure in terms of creative techniques, characterized by seamless growth and a robust presentation. Each phrase draws its musical material from the first, allowing unrestricted variations. Additionally, each phrase's concluding note rests on the tonic note sol, which is quite stable. The musical performance is characterized by enthusiasm and liveliness.

In Zhuang folk music, the melodies performed by Zhuang singers lack a definite, standardized tune. Instead, they sing the melodies within a consistent melodic framework and basic pattern. Singers can subtly alter the melodic notes in

the middle based on their own inclinations and recollections, their partners' unique circumstances and tendencies, and various situations and temporal contexts, resulting in a diverse range of unrestricted variations. Folk singers' literacy and knowledge transfer modifications to the framework of melodies differ from individual to individual, and there is no definitive benchmark or data standard. However, these modifications must remain within the acceptable range.

### Preservation Strategies for Zhuang Folk Music Knowledge

The lyrics are given priority, and the melody complements and enhances the meaning of the text. Within Zhuang culture, communicating through song was deeply ingrained in the past, serving as a means to impart knowledge and insights about different facets of existence. Consequently, the melody is subordinate to the lyrics, and individuals are more receptive to the tune when they get the information conveyed by the lyrics. While the melody may be altered within the framework of the song, people will not consider it significant as the focus is on the lyrical content. The cultural emphasis on oral history underscores the significance of literacy in safeguarding the intricate connotations buried in the songs (Figure 2).

The use of notation or specialized music score is absent, and the learning and mastery of melodies depend on the accumulation of experience and memory through self-study, teacher training, and oral transmission. Zhuang folk music lacks dedicated musical notation for the melodies of folk songs. Instead, it depends on oral tradition and the transmission of knowledge through personal recollections and lived encounters. Consequently, the instruction and spread of melodies might generate novel components and give rise to fresh structures under varying situations. The emphasis on oral tradition highlights the significance of preservation endeavors in order to protect traditional musical knowledge (Figure 3).

Singing accommodates the requirements of various elements of life and, in the past, functioned as a means



Figure 1. Singing forms of Fwen Sam Ngued  
Source: Jingliu Liu



Figure 2. Lyrics in the manuscript of Fwen Sam Ngued  
Source: Jingliu Liu



**Figure 3.** Lyrics and notation manuscript for Zhuang Folk Music

Source: Jingliu Liu

of expressing emotions and facilitating communication. Historically, Zhuang folk singing activities were characterized by a spontaneous, relaxed, adaptable, and authentic nature. They aimed to depict life and evoke emotions rather than being focused on stage presentations or scholarly investigations. The dynamic and ever-changing nature of folk singing highlights the necessity of proactive preservation endeavors to uphold cultural continuity and avert the erosion of ancient customs.

Singers and listeners are individuals who engage in singing, but they are also regular individuals in everyday life, who do not possess specialist skills in music education. In the realm of folk music, the singers are regular individuals, most of whom were previously peasants. They primarily depend on their personal recollections and life encounters when it comes to using, instructing, and performing melodies. The emphasis on practical learning underscores the significance of fostering musical literacy in upcoming generations to guarantee the ongoing preservation of classic melodies and customs.

### The Evolution and Preservation of Zhuang Song Fairs in the Modern Era

Song fairs are traditional cultural events in which Zhuang people come together to sing folk songs for the sake of love, friendship, or amusement. The term used for this in the Pingguo Zhuang language is “haw fwen” or “hae fwen,” whereas in Chinese, it is referred to as “Wei Song Fair.” Historically, the dissemination of Fwen Sam Ngued, a cultural tradition of the Zhuang minority in Pingguo Prefecture, primarily occurred through song fairs.

Song fair is a vital component of the customary cultural existence of the entire Zhuang community, encompassing those residing in Pingguo, and serving as a prominent manifestation of their cultural heritage. Nevertheless, due to urbanization, faster-paced lifestyles, and the emergence of the Internet and big data era, its representation has undergone a significant transformation. The traditional song fair

culture of the Zhuang people is currently at risk of extinction and requires immediate efforts for its preservation. It is crucial to methodically examine the implied meaning of the Zhuang song fair, breaking it down and organizing its fundamental components. Furthermore, embracing a materialistic dialectical viewpoint is essential for acknowledging the presence of song fair culture as a combined social and musical occurrence, guaranteeing its literacy and long-term preservation.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The literacy preservation of the folk song “Fwen Sam Ngued” of the Zhuang ethnic group in Pingguo, Guangxi, China, is closely connected to the cultural importance of the Haleu song. The Zhuang people, especially those in Pingguo Prefecture, have a strong cultural connection to this traditional song, which is distinguished by its distinctive final note, “Haleu.” To ensure the preservation of “Fwen Sam Ngued,” it is crucial to comprehend the cultural backdrop and intricate musical elements of the Haleu song (Lihan & Thothum, 2020; Ye et al., 2023). The Haleu song is the main musical representation in “Fwen Sam Ngued,” characterized by its duet format and the harmonious interaction between male and female voices, which enriches the song’s melodic intricacy and attractiveness. Although the time and musical arrangement of the Haleu song may fluctuate throughout several townships, its cultural significance stays constant. Pingguo’s traditional villages uphold the preservation of the Haleu song, which is a testament to its extensive adoption and cultural importance within the Zhuang community (Nguyen, 2020).

Interpretations and knowledge transfer significantly influence “Fwen Sam Ngued” performance. Singers adjust melodies according to their inclinations, recollections, and situational conditions. The flexibility of melodic patterns permits limitless variations, enhancing the dynamic quality of Zhuang folk music. Efforts to promote literacy and transfer information are crucial for documenting and conveying these variances, so guaranteeing the preservation of musical history for future generations (Jian & Nicolas, 2021; Lam, 2008). Furthermore, the development of Zhuang song festivals in contemporary times poses difficulties and possibilities for conservation. Although the way song fairs are presented has changed due to urbanization and technological improvements, their traditional cultural relevance has not been lost. It is crucial to thoroughly examine the fundamental aspects of song fair culture and employ a materialistic dialectical perspective to lead preservation efforts properly (Wu & Boonsrianun, 2023; Chen & Sensai, 2024).

In conclusion, the preservation of the folk song “Fwen Sam Ngued” of the Zhuang ethnic group to this day necessitates a complete plan that includes cultural knowledge, literacy initiatives, and community involvement. Fundamental to “Fwen Sam Ngued,” the Haleu song represents the Zhuang people’s cultural identity and requires accurate documentation and transmission to maintain its fidelity. However, preservation efforts must go beyond simple transmission and actively involve the community in preserving these practices.

While the expansion of song fairs poses obstacles, it also creates opportunities for cultural adaptation and expression. Stakeholders may maintain the vibrancy of Zhuang folk music by adopting a comprehensive strategy that includes both tradition and innovation, thus protecting cultural heritage for future generations.

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