

## Preservation Literacy in Yi Ethnic Wedding Folk Songs by Axi Axi

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the preservation literacy and cultural transmission of Yi ethnic wedding folk songs, focusing on the contributions of Axi Axi. Through a combination of fieldwork, this research examines how Axi Axi has safeguarded, revitalized, and disseminated Yi wedding folk songs, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society. Yi wedding folk songs are the crying wedding tune, which serves as an emotional and ritualistic expression of a bride's transition into marriage, and the narrative tune, which functions as a medium for historical storytelling and cultural continuity. Axi Axi's vocal mastery, including her modal and falsetto transitions and improvisation, has been essential in preserving these traditions' emotional depth and authenticity. Her mentoring of young singers and utilizing digital platforms demonstrate how modern tools can effectively complement oral transmission. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on ethnomusicology, cultural sustainability, and the evolving role of folk music in a globalized world.

**Key words:** Yi Ethnic, Wedding Folk Songs, Preservation Literacy, Chinese Folk Song

### INTRODUCTION

The Yi ethnic group, one of China's major minority groups, has a rich cultural legacy closely linked to oral traditions and musical performances. Wedding folk songs are particularly important in these cultures, acting as both a cultural activity and a source of emotional expression. Wedding folk songs are preserved in Xide County, called in the Yi language "Xi Duo La Da"—meaning "the place where armor is made"—to highlight the community's historical, linguistic, and cultural continuity. The county is also home to the standard pronunciation of contemporary Yi, making it a significant hub for linguistic and musical history (Long et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2015).

Music is important in Yi wedding traditions because it expresses emotions, tells stories, and upholds traditional practices. The "crying wedding songs," in which the bride and her female relatives express their pain and desire via singing, are a distinct component of these customs. This custom is firmly established in matriarchal social legacy and symbolizes the bride's emotional tie with her family. Practices like the well-known "Amonire" wedding song reveal Yi women's views on marriage, their place in society, and their capacity to shape their own futures via music (Zhu et al., 2008).

The Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Project "Amonire" is a prime example of how wedding folk songs build and perpetuate Yi's identity. Axi Axi, a highly proficient folk singer from the Yi nationality's northern

linguistic area (focused in Liangshan Prefecture), has been instrumental in preserving and spreading this musical legacy. Axi Axi, named the representative inheritor of "Amonire" by the Sichuan Provincial Department of Culture in 2012, has played an important role in propagating and renewing Yi wedding folk music. Her performances and interpretations mix classic poetic narratives with current inspirations, eliciting strong emotional responses from audiences while ensuring the continuation of these cultural manifestations (Jincheng et al., 2023; Guocheng et al., 2022).

Despite the richness of Yi wedding folk songs, their preservation and transmission confront modern-day obstacles. The influence of urbanization, shifting social structures, and waning interest among younger generations pose substantial dangers to this intangible legacy. The transition from traditional oral transmission to digital and institutionalized knowledge distribution poses critical challenges in effectively maintaining and adapting these folk traditions for current and future generations (Zhu et al., 2006).

This research looks at Axi Axi's function as a transmitter of Yi's wedding folk songs, including her singing techniques, creative interpretations, and contributions to cultural preservation. The research intends to provide practical techniques for maintaining and renewing Yi's ethnic wedding music by examining her life, musical manifestations, and the transmission of wedding folk songs. This research contributes to broader concerns about cultural heritage preservation, identity affirmation, and the importance of music in

conserving ethnic traditions in contemporary China by providing thorough evidence of Axi Axi's singing abilities and performance habits.

### Research Question

- How has Axi Axi preserved literacy in Yi Ethnic wedding folk songs?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Folk Songs for Weddings in Xide County

Daliang Mountain, situated in the southern section of Sichuan Province, is a significant area populated by the Yi ethnic group. Wedding folk songs are integral to the cultural and social life of the Yi people, especially in counties like Yuexi, Xide, Mianning, and Zhaojue (Wang & Thotham, 2024). The "Ayi Azhi" custom is a well-known sobbing wedding folk song used as an emotional goodbye ceremony for brides. The preminent "Ayi Azhi" performances in the region occur in Xide County, where wedding songs fulfill artistic and pedagogical purposes.

Yi females generally acquire the skill of singing wedding folk songs throughout their adolescence. The most commonly performed work is "Mother's Daughter," a composition that honors parental love and sacrifice. These songs, predominantly performed by women, seek to cultivate appreciation and reverence for family while emphasizing the emotional transformation associated with marriage. "Ayi Azhi" is specifically done on the eve of the wedding by esteemed women in the village rather than by the bride's parents, serving as a symbolic reminder for the bride to value and appreciate the love and care bestowed upon her by her family (Tian & Woramitmaitree, 2023; Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023).

### Historical and Societal Context of Yi Wedding Folk Songs

Before the 1956 democratic revolution, the Liangshan Yi area had a slave-based social structure, significantly influencing marital traditions and family life (Jincheng et al., 2023). In Yi culture, marriage was strictly controlled by rules based on social rank and clan. These rules included strict traditions like marriage within a clan, marriage based on rank, and marriage restrictions between different social classes and family branches. Types of marriage include planned weddings, cousin marriages, sales marriages, transfer marriages, and son-in-law marriages, with monogamy being the norm. There were both matriarchal elements from ancient cultures and patriarchal elements from the slave system in these rituals. In the slave system, women had limited freedom and were often seen as economic assets rather than people with free will (Fang & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Wang, 2018).

In light of these historical circumstances, sobbing wedding folk songs became a potent vehicle for emotional expression and defiance. Tracks such as "Mother's Daughter" offer profound insights into the lived realities of Yi women under repressive marital conventions, illustrating their hardships

and yearning for liberation. These songs, which mourn the plight of women coerced into marriages, function as a musical protest against historical injustices. The songs frequently challenge matrimonial transactions, gender disparity, and patriarchal subjugation while articulating women's wishes for love, autonomy, and an improved existence (Wang, 2023; Sen & Sondhiratna, 2024).

### The Development of Yi Wedding Folk Songs in Modern Society

Historically, crying wedding folk songs expressed sadness and difficulty; however, their purpose has transformed in contemporary times. These songs do not only mourn pain; they commemorate Yi cultural identity and support traditional values. They are currently executed as a mode of creative expression and a cultural rite, contributing to preserving Yi musical history and oral traditions (Liu et al., 2022; Chonpairot, 2024).

The preservation and transmission of Yi wedding folk songs are essential for sustaining intangible cultural resources, particularly when urbanization and modernity jeopardize traditional customs. Axi Axi, acknowledged as a principal inheritor of the Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Project "Amonire" in 2012, is instrumental in renewing and modernizing ancient folk songs for present-day listeners. By integrating traditional melodies with contemporary interpretations, she guarantees that Yi wedding folk songs retain their relevance and flourish in modern culture (Zhang & Sornyai, 2024; Dai, 2020).

### General Knowledge of Chinese Folk Song Singing Techniques

A fundamental concept in vocal performance asserts, "Whoever knows how to breathe can sing," emphasizing the importance of breathing in folk singing practices (Xia, 2022). Among the numerous approaches, simultaneous chest and abdominal breathing is considered the most sophisticated and scientifically sound for national folk singing. This approach provides increased air volume, improved breath control, and better control over voice dynamics. The breath intensity and exhalation must be modified in folk singing to meet the song's needs (Wang & Zhao, 2024). This flexibility is especially important in Yi ethnic singing since expressive vocal approaches necessitate careful breath control and resonance management.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Chinese folk music is high-pitched falsetto singing, often known as treble singing. Folk genres, ranging from southern mountain songs, fishing songs, and labor horns to northern mountain songs like "Xintianyou," extensively employ this approach. The high-pitched range serves several purposes: it is frequently used as an introduction to draw attention or during the climax of a song for dramatic impact. Successful performance of this method requires deep breathing, robust breath support, and well-developed head cavity resonance (Zhu & Suanmonta, 2024; Yarong et al., 2023). Yi folk singers, particularly those from the Liangshan region, regularly use this

technique to improve expressiveness and emotional impact. However, incorrect execution—such as yelling or using too much force—can cause voice strain and damage, making appropriate techniques vital for long-term success (Zhang & Chonpirot, 2024).

### Research Theory

Ethnomusicology is an important foundation for maintaining Yi ethnic wedding folk songs by examining their historical, social, and cultural relevance, oral transmission, performance techniques, and current changes. This research investigates how Axi Axi, a renowned transmitter, preserves and revitalizes these traditions using vocal methods, breath control, and high-pitched singing. Ethnomusicology promotes preservation literacy via fieldwork, digital archiving, and teaching initiatives, ensuring that Yi wedding folk songs continue to be performed. Axi Axi's novel approaches—blending traditional tunes with new inspirations and participating in institutional projects—show how folk music may change while being culturally authentic. This study presents practical solutions for preserving Yi wedding folk songs in contemporary culture by recording her performance tactics, instructional methods, and cultural transmission function (Wang, 2022; Morgenstern, 2018).

### METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach incorporating ethnomusicological methods to examine the preservation literacy and transmission of Yi wedding folk songs by Axi Axi. The methodology captures the musical, cultural, and social dimensions of Yi wedding folk songs while analyzing Axi Axi's role as a cultural transmitter and educator (Table 1).

### RESULTS

#### Axi Axi's Transmission of Yi Singing Culture

An important turning point in Axi Axi's life came in 2008 when she was recognized as the representative inheritor of

the Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Project "Amonire." Meaning "mother's daughter, a goddess, or a wise woman who honors the Yi people," "Amonire" is more than just a title—it symbolizes wisdom, beauty, and courage in Yi culture. This accolade acknowledges Axi Axi's artistic excellence and is a powerful testament to her dedication to preserving and transmitting Yi cultural heritage. As the current interpreter of this ethos, she safeguards and promotes the rich traditions of Yi wedding folk songs, ensuring their deep cultural significance for future generations (Figure 1).

Axi Axi's active engagement in academic, cultural, and artistic activities has earned her a considerable reputation for her creative skill as a prominent champion for preserving and transmitting Yi traditional culture. Understanding that conserving intangible cultural legacy depends on future generations' involvement, she has committed herself to mentoring and educating aspiring singers, particularly those with a strong interest in Yi culture.

To preserve the survival of Yi wedding folk melodies, Axi Axi began teaching apprentices traditional oral transmission techniques, stressing technical skills and cultural spirit. She regularly reminds her kids, "Singing is our language and the bridge between our hearts. Every song conveys our history, culture, and feelings. Only by genuinely understanding and loving our country can we sing the most emotional songs." Her commitment has raised a new generation of Yi folk singers—15 now independent teachers, with ten more in training—ensuring that the heritage lives on.

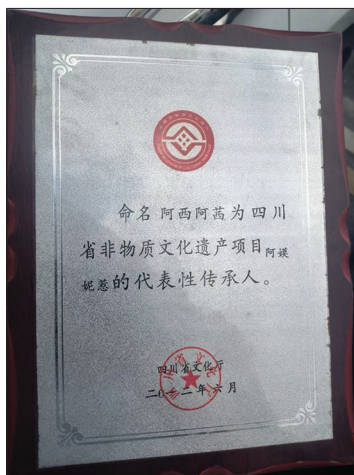
Axi Axi has used contemporary technologies to broaden the accessibility of Yi folk music in addition to face-to-face education. She has created instructional lessons online content, making Yi traditional melodies available to a worldwide audience via social media and digital learning platforms. Her pioneering internet use has enabled Yi wedding folk music to transcend geographical borders, boosting admiration and involvement beyond the Liangshan region.

Yi wedding songs have been preserved and modernized thanks to Axi Axi's efforts, serving as a bridge between tradition and innovation, past and future. Her work shows how any determined individual may become a cultural steward,

**Table 1.** Methodology

| Methodology component                 | Description                                                                                                                        | Purpose                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Data collection methods               | - Various qualitative research approaches to gather information on Yi wedding folk songs and Axi Axi's role in preservation.       | - To understand the transmission, preservation literacy, and evolution of Yi wedding folk songs.    |
| Fieldwork and participant observation | - Direct observation of Axi Axi's performances, teaching methods, and Yi wedding ceremonies in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. | - To document oral transmission practices, cultural context, and performance techniques.            |
| Interviews and oral histories         | - Semi-structured interviews with Axi Axi, her apprentices, local Yi musicians, and community elders.                              | - To gain insights into preservation literacy, musical teaching methods, and cultural significance. |
| Archival and literature review        | - Review of ethnomusicological research, folk song collections, academic articles, and historical documents.                       | - To analyze existing knowledge of Yi wedding folk songs and preservation literacy theories.        |
| Data analysis methods                 | - Approaches to interpret collected data and identify patterns in the transmission and adaptation of Yi wedding folk songs.        | - To categorize findings and generate meaningful insights.                                          |





**Figure 1.** A representative transmitter certificate from the Sichuan Provincial Department of Culture  
Source: Shuo Li



**Figure 2.** Axi Axi lessons online content  
Source: Shuo Li

making substantial contributions to the preservation and renewal of their history. Axi Axi’s trip, like a lasting folk song, pushes more people to find, appreciate, and pass down their cultural traditions, ensuring that Yi wedding folk melodies live on for future generations (Figure 2).

### The Crying Wedding Song and Its Significance in Preservation Literacy

As indicated by its name, the tearful wedding tune is sung by the bride on the eve of her wedding or the wedding day, articulating her sentiments of separation, thanks, and reluctance towards her parents, with her aspirations and apprehensions for the future. This is not only a musical genre but also a significant act of emotional release and cultural legacy. Within the framework of preservation literacy, the lamenting wedding melody serves as an oral historical document, embodying Yi women’s feelings, values, and social traditions during a significant transitional phase in their lives.

Axi Axi characterizes this practice by stating, “The lamenting wedding melody is the most poignant tune.” It is a multifaceted emotional entanglement rather than only a melancholic lament. In the song, the bride articulates her thanks to her parents for their loving support while also disclosing her profound connection to her birthplace and family. Simultaneously, she conveys her heartfelt hopes for her forthcoming wedded life alongside her apprehensions and anticipations for an uncertain destiny. By diligently transmitting and adapting these songs, Axi Axi performs a crucial role in preservation literacy, safeguarding Yi women’s profound feelings, hardships, and aspirations from being forgotten.

In Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, the regional variations of the sobbing wedding tune’s singing style are significant. However, their preservation is crucial for sustaining Yi cultural identity. In the large, middle, or small trouser leg areas, the poignant wedding music profoundly resonates with listeners, its distinctive melody and lyrics serving as a conduit between tradition and modern expression (Figure 3).

**Agazhizhi**  
The wedding crying tune of the Yi ethnic group in the Xide area of Liangshan  
Singer: Axi Axi

♩ = 75 Longing, vulnerable

**Figure 3.** The Crying Wedding Song “Agazhizhi”  
Source: Shuo Li

### Narrative Tune and Its Contribution to Preservation Literacy

In contrast to the lamenting wedding tune, the narrative tune fulfills a distinct but equally essential role in preserving literacy, tasked with storytelling, historical transmission, and cultural continuity. During the wedding ceremony, the melodic narrative conveys the Yi people’s history, folklore, and folk culture, preserving their collective memory and ancestral knowledge for future generations. Axi Axi asserts that the narrative melody is a gem inside Yi wedding folk melodies. It enables us to comprehend the history and culture of the Yi people and appreciate their wisdom and bravery.

The singing of the narrative tune is often accompanied by rich body language, symbolic gestures, and traditional attire, transforming the performance into a vivid historical reenactment. This facet of Yi wedding folk songs is essential for preserving literacy, functioning as a living repository of knowledge that enhances historical consciousness and cultural appreciation (Figure 4).

### Axi Axi’s Function in Preservation Literacy and Transmission

Axi Axi’s singing is characterized by her fluid transition between modal and falsetto registers, establishing a



**Figure 4.** Performance of Chinese Folk Song  
Source: Shuo Li

distinctive musical lexicon for the lamenting bridal melody. She starts with a profound, sincere voice, articulating the visceral feelings associated with departing from home and confronting an ambiguous future. Subsequently, she transitions into a refined falsetto, changing to a subordinate key—an innovation in musical composition and emotional development. This vocal shift intensifies the song’s emotional resonance, rendering the performance a heartfelt experience that amplifies cultural transmission.

Axi Axi skillfully employs “Runqiang,” a distinctive vocal technique of the Yi ethnic group, to save and transmit Yi history, enriching the poignant wedding tune with profound regional characteristics. “Runqiang” beyond simple technical embellishment; it represents a cultural and emotional symbol that encapsulates Yi aesthetics and traditional wisdom. “Runqiang” enhances the melodic expressiveness and emotional profundity of Yi wedding songs by the use of leaning notes, legato phrasing, and ornamental tones. This approach augments preservation literacy by embedding deep emotions and cultural importance into the song, allowing listeners to engage with the music and comprehend the emotional struggles Yi women encounter as they transition to a new life.

#### **Axi Axi’s Mastery of Breath and Emotion in Narrative Transmission**

Axi Axi’s capacity to rapidly alter emotions in her performances animates personalities and historical events, rendering each lyric and note vibrant. This talent is essential for cultural transmission, enabling the listener to engage with the narrative personally rather than only listening.

The utilization of extended breath and regulated breath transitions is among the most demanding strategies in narrative tone, essential for sustaining melodic flow and emotional intensity. Due to the melody’s uneven phrasing, vocalists must excel in breath control to maintain the song’s fluidity and engagement. Insufficient respiratory control diminishes the song’s efficacy and cultural relevance. Axi Axi shines in this regard, effortlessly maintaining extended melody lines

while smoothly transitioning between breath phrases, showcasing technical proficiency and a profound comprehension of narrative storytelling.

Her meticulous management of micro-breathing shifts characterizes Axi Axi’s narrative tone. She discerns the optimal moments to modify breath placement, guaranteeing the melody’s continuity while enhancing its expressiveness and dynamic variations. This technique demonstrates her advanced musical literacy and her capacity to convert the narrative melody into a very immersive experience for her listeners.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The preservation literacy of Yi ethnic wedding folk songs, particularly as practiced and transmitted by Axi Axi, is a complicated process that includes music ontology and cultural connotation, as described in ethnomusicological research (Li et al., 2019). Folk songs serve as an effective channel for cultural transmission in Yi wedding traditions, reflecting the procedural, historical, and emotional components that distinguish Yi marriage ceremonies (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023). Axi Axi’s contributions to this field are critical since she uses traditional oral methods and current digital means to ensure the longevity and accessibility of Yi wedding folk music.

From an ethnomusicological standpoint, the sobbing wedding melody represents an important musical and emotional legacy that must be carefully interpreted and preserved. It is more than just a musical representation of grief; it is a complex performance that captures Yi women’s feelings, ambitions, and social duties. Axi Axi’s mastery of Runqiang voice methods, breath control, and improvisation allows her to pass this heritage to future generations, preserving its emotional and cultural depth (Ye et al., 2023). Furthermore, her ability to combine traditional Yi features with modern teaching practices helps to ensure the oral tradition’s long-term viability.

Furthermore, in Yi wedding folk songs, narrative tunes function as oral history records, conveying ancestral wisdom, myths, and marital rituals (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024). These songs help to comprehend better Yi social structures and values, such as the importance of matchmaking and marriage rites (Gong et al., 2024). Axi Axi’s performances keep these cultural myths alive, confirming their relevance in contemporary circumstances while maintaining their historical purity.

An essential aspect of preservation literacy is the definition and authenticity of folk music. Ren and Thotham (2023) assert that the debate around “original folk songs” vs staged performances persists in influencing the discourse on the preservation of folk music. Axi Axi’s work preserves a balance between authenticity and adaptability, ensuring that Yi wedding folk songs retain their historic importance while accommodating the preferences of contemporary listeners (Zhang & Bhengsri, 2024). Her works demonstrate that folk songs may thrive when deliberately conserved and altered, rather than confined to their native ecological context. Axi Axi illustrates the necessity for preservation literacy to adapt in response to contemporary technological advancements

and shifting cultural dynamics (Wang & Thotham, 2024). Her guidance of emerging vocalists, digital educational materials, and global engagement exemplify excellent cultural preservation, guaranteeing that Yi wedding folk songs remain a vibrant and evolving tradition.

## CONCLUSION

Axi Axi's commitment to preserving literacy and transmitting Yi wedding folk melodies exemplifies the relationship between tradition, cultural continuity, and modern adaptation. As a representative inheritor of "Amonire," she plays a critical role in preserving and reviving Yi musical legacy, ensuring that these songs are a living tradition rather than a relic of history. Her command of the wailing wedding song and the storytelling tune maintains the emotional depth of Yi women's experiences and ancient wisdom. She has broadened the reach of Yi folk music by combining traditional oral transmission with digital platforms, making them more accessible to new generations while retaining authenticity. Her work also tackles the controversy over the authenticity of folk songs, demonstrating that deliberate modification does not lessen but enriches cultural significance. Most significantly, Axi Axi has built a long-term paradigm for cultural preservation by mentoring emerging singers, developing instructional tools, and utilizing internet platforms. Her technique guarantees that Yi wedding folk songs continue to flourish and thrive, underscoring the importance of preservation literacy in influencing the future of cultural heritage rather than simply safeguarding the past.

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