

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF NAXI FOLK MUSIC: TRADITIONAL WISDOM IN TRANSITION*

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Abstract

This research article aims to investigate the development of Naxi folk music through an interdisciplinary perspective of traditional wisdom in transition in Lijiang, Yunnan, China. The research study collects data from ten purposively selected people, including provincial-level heritage inheritors, music educators, and community elders; analyzes the data using thematic coding based on a qualitative research design and ethnographic fieldwork.

The research results found that:

1) Naxi folk music has evolved through five distinct socio-historical stages, beginning with the Foundational Era where music served as a sacred medium for Dongba rituals and ancestral lore.

2) The Era of Intercultural Exchange along the Ancient Tea Horse Road transformed the music into an oral museum by absorbing new instruments, linguistic elements, and melodic scales from neighboring cultures.

3) During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the integration of Han literary traditions introduced sophisticated poetic structures and Mandarin lyrics, reflecting a scholarly transition in Naxi traditional wisdom.

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4) The 20th century introduced radical socio-political shifts that forced traditional songs into the private sphere for survival, demonstrating the resilience of hidden transmission during times of crisis.

5) In the modern era, the transmission of Naxi music has transitioned toward institutionalized safeguarding through specialized ethnic schools, which serve as contemporary sites for passing down traditional wisdom.

Keywords: Naxi Folk Music, Traditional Wisdom, Interdisciplinary Study, Lijiang, Cultural Resilience

Introduction

Lijiang has been part of the UNESCO list of world heritage since 1997. It has been a settlement for many different people of the ancient Yunnan province. One of the most notable of these ancient people in the Present Days of Yunnan is the Naxi people. The people of Naxi pronounce Naxi in their native language as Nakhi (Li et al., 2022; Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022). It is highly believed that the Nakhi have their own language as well as their own native folk songs, especially with the frequent folk-like song festivals like the Sanduo Festival as well as the Torch Festival. The folk songs of the Nakhi in essence are meant to hand down the heritage or the legacy of the Nakhi people to future generations (Bihari, 2023; Boro, 2024). Also of equal importance is the folk song narratives that elicit the audience to eulogize good deeds, affection, faith, desire or the said ideal.

Naxi folk songs are affected by modern challenges, such as rapid urbanization and modernization, despite their long history. Once affected by local culture, these songs have been completely changed as Lijiang has developed into one of the biggest international tourist cities. Although the expansion of the tourism industry has led to economic growth, it has greatly affected the history of these folk songs. The music is performed for tourism instead of for the local communities (Tang, 2025; Su, 2019). The commodification

of ethnic culture has led to concerns regarding music authenticity. Also, the music has commercial performance rather than community ritual. There are many worries that the people's experiences of the music have been ruined and that the music has lost the meanings it once had (Barbeau & Mantie, 2019; Mokgachane et al., 2021). The songs were meant to remind local communities of their history and to provide people with the wisdom of the community, but as the songs have lost their community and their sense of purpose, the people's history and moral wisdom have also been lost (English & Davidson, 2020; Harahap et al., 2018).

The growing generational gap in the Naxi community presents further challenges. Mainstream global media and the demands of modern life cause the younger generations to disconnect from their culture. The modern educational and social context make transmission of Naxi folk music through oral traditions ineffectual. Young people are more receptive to pop and electronic music genres. People who appreciate folk music do so, but many see it as a dead entity (Chen & Sensai, 2024; You & Prathumchan, 2024). The psychological and cultural separation leads to the diminishing of folk music traditions and the loss of knowledge of the technical prowess of elderly predecessors to play these songs.

The fact that Naxi folk music is in a state of emergency, answering these systemic threats demands studying Naxi folk music from a multi-disciplinary approach. Protection of these forms of cultural heritage become of no use if left untouched and isolated. Naxi folk music needs to appreciate the post-modern state of shifting, transitioning positionality of folk standards (Li & Zhou, 2021; Liu & Song, 2025). For the purpose of this study, the transition and socio-cultural positions of Naxi folk music will be examined by the lens of musicology, sociology and cultural anthropology. The lines of folk music as practitioners and performers, transition from open-field and altar ritual ceremonial music to stage and digital festival music. The lines of folk music provide a need for appreciation

along with the balancing of folk music heritage, protection and relevance in the state of a globalized world.

Thus, this study answers the problem of the need to document and assess the positional changes of folk songs of Naxi in order to provide a solid basis for the resiliency and longevity of Naxi. The problem of focusing on folk songs of Naxi from the state of changing and shifting indigenous forms of wisdom, this study aims to establish a solid understanding of cultural resilience. Lastly, this work endeavors to participate in the improvement of minority heritage in China by demonstrating for other stagnant forms of the minority heritage that the preservation of the minority heritage requires a state of active equilibrium between the preservation of the historical essence, artistic, and social innovativeness.

Objectives

To investigate the development of Naxi folk music through an interdisciplinary perspective of traditional wisdom in transition in Lijiang, Yunnan, China.

Literature Review

Yunnan Province in southwestern China includes a stunningly diverse population. It is an important area in relation to the study of indigenous cultures as well as the social dynamics that develop in those cultures. Lijiang, a city in Yunnan, is the epicenter of one of the most concentrated ethnic areas, home to over 26 ethnic clans, amongst the most notable being the Naxi.

1. The Dongba Religion as the Spiritual and Musical Foundation

The Naxi's connection to their past is due mostly to Naxi Dongba religion and the other aspects of Naxi culture that are associated with the Naxi Dongba religion. Naxi Dongba religion and culture is a shamanistic religion and is actually

the only religion that is a closed religion in the world. With the exception of some of the Naxi culture and religion, the Naxi Dongba Culture is primarily documented through the use of pictographic symbols that are created from a number of symbols. It is one of the only pictographic systems that are used, and is still heavily used, to document religion, history, and the ancestral lore of the Naxi. From a musical dimension and in the field of musicology, the Naxi Dongba Tradition is the root of the Naxi music culture (Rees, 2021; Tian & Ding, 2025). The music derived from the chants of the Dongba priests and the chants used in the sacred rites, and the music derived from the chants of the Dongba priests, form the aesthetic that is the basis for the Naxi folk song system.

2. Cultural Hybridity through the Ancient Tea Horse Road

For centuries, the Naxi people of Lijiang, the Yunnan Province, have thrived in what some may argue is left isolated because of the myriad surrounding mountains. Lijiang and the Ancient Tea Horse Road have played a big role in the development of Naxi folk music and are the primary subjects of the ancient music. Once Lijiang and the Naxi grew their trading network through Tibet, Sichuan, and the majority of Southeast Asia, a new network was created for the commerce of people, goods, and ideas. With this, Naxi folk songs absorbed new linguistic elements, and new scales/modes were created (Chen & Hung, 2019; Sigley, 2020). Naxi music is an oral museum because of the multitude of new things that absorbed and combined into the existence of Naxi music, while new ideas and trade relations were created.

3. Interdisciplinary Theoretical Frameworks in Ethnomusicology

The analytical basis of this study combines ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology. Both disciplines enable us to transcend the mere technical examination of music and treat it as a behavioral phenomenon and a product of social context. Ethnomusicology provides the means to understand the rationale of Naxi folk songs within the context of different community activities (e.g. farming and songs performed during marriage and seasonal festival) and cultural

anthropology provides a means for interpreting these folk songs as the Naxi's community means of social and historical expression, particularly reflecting the Naxi's transition from the agrarian society to the urban society (Liao, 2024; Yunying & Tho-ard, 2025). This study aims to reconstruct the social meaning of sound from the artist's viewpoint and explore how the Naxi folk songs enable the Naxi to perform their artistic self while consolidating their cultural identity.

Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is rooted in a qualitative research design (Ping et al., 2024; Yu & Chuangprakhon, 2025), specifically utilizing ethnographic fieldwork to capture the lived experiences and cultural nuances of the Naxi community. The investigation was primarily conducted in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, a strategic location chosen for its status as the primary cultural hub where Naxi folk songs have been preserved as national intangible cultural heritage.

1. Data Collection and Informant Selection

The study engaged a total of ten informants, categorized to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on how traditional wisdom is maintained and transformed across different social strata.

The first group consists of three Key Informants, who are recognized heritage inheritors or experts possessing extensive knowledge regarding the cultural development and specific vocal lineages of the Naxi people. The second group includes three General Informants, comprising music educators, cultural practitioners, and veteran performers with direct experience in either teaching or practicing Naxi folk songs. Finally, the study engaged four Casual Informants, including local historians, community elders, and active members of the community who maintain an everyday familiarity with Naxi musical culture and the nuances of local social life.

2. Research Tools and Procedures

2.1 In-depth Interviews: Conducted using structured and open-ended questions to organize and record historical data, cultural values, and the transmission processes from the ten informants.

2.2 Field Observation: Employed to systematically collect data regarding performance settings, social functions, and environmental contexts during community celebrations, such as traditional festivals and communal gatherings.

2.3 Document Analysis: Reviewing historical records, local archives, and existing ethnomusicological and anthropological studies to establish a robust historical baseline for the Naxi folk music tradition.

Results

The findings demonstrate that Naxi folk music is not merely a collection of melodies but a living system of traditional wisdom that has transitioned through various socio-historical phases. The results are categorized into five transformative stages, highlighting how the music has moved from sacred rituals to contemporary institutionalized preservation.

1. The Foundational Era

The origins of Naxi folk music are deeply embedded in the Dongba religion, a shamanistic belief system that serves as the spiritual bedrock of Naxi society. Historically, music was the primary medium through which Dongba priests communicated with the divine, using rhythmic chants and pictographic scripts to document the laws of nature and ancestral history. In this era, traditional wisdom was perceived as a sacred gift, and music functioned as a vital tool for maintaining the balance between the human and spiritual worlds.

One key informant, a recognized expert in Naxi culture, stated during an interview:

In the old days, our music was not for performance; it was for the soul. Each chant was a conversation with the mountains and the spirits. The wisdom of our ancestors was not written in books that everyone could read, but it was sung in the rituals that everyone could feel.

This foundational period established the vocal archive of the Naxi people, where music served as the primary vessel for communal identity and ethical guidance.

2. The Era of Intercultural Exchange

The development of Naxi folk music underwent a significant transition when Lijiang became a major hub on the Ancient Tea Horse Road. This era marked the first major interdisciplinary shift, as the geographical isolation of the Lijiang plateau was bridged by trade and migration. The influx of Han, Tibetan, and Bai merchants introduced new aesthetic values and musical elements to the indigenous Naxi repertoire.

The physical landscape and domestic spaces of the Naxi people played a crucial role in this cultural synthesis. The traditional Naxi houses, characterized by their unique courtyard structures, became the primary setting for these musical exchanges.

A local historian and casual informant explained:

The Tea Horse Road brought more than just tea and horses; it brought voices from different worlds. In these very courtyards, our ancestors listened to the Han poets and the Tibetan traders. We took their rhythms and instruments, like the pipa and erhu, and made them our own. This was the moment our traditional wisdom learned to be inclusive and adaptive.

This period transformed Naxi folk music from a purely ritualistic form into a more diverse oral museum that reflected a broader regional identity.

3. The Integration of Han Literary Traditions

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the transition of Naxi traditional wisdom was characterized by the deep integration of Han cultural elements. As the Naxi elite embraced Chinese classical literature, folk music began to adopt more sophisticated poetic structures and Mandarin lyrics. This stage represents a scholarly transition where musical expression became a bridge between ethnic identity and the broader imperial culture.

A general informant, who is a music educator, mentioned:

Our traditional songs started to reflect the elegance of classical poetry. The wisdom being transmitted was no longer just about survival or spirits; it became about philosophy and social order. This shows that Naxi music has always been a platform for intellectual transition.

This phase solidified the role of music as a social tool for status and education within the community.

4. The Socio-Political Transformations of the 20th Century

The 20th century introduced the most radical transitions in the history of Naxi folk music. Following the political reforms of the mid-century, traditional wisdom was re-coded to align with patriotic and collective values. However, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) represented a period of severe crisis. Traditional songs were often marginalized as "old customs" and were forced into the private, domestic sphere to survive.

One of the elderly key informants recounted the challenges of this period:

There were years when we could only sing our traditional songs in the mountains where no one could hear us. It was a dark time for our wisdom, but it survived because it was carried in our hearts. We didn't sing for the public; we sang to keep the memory of who we are alive.

This era highlights the resilience of Naxi traditional wisdom, proving that even under political pressure, folk music serves as an enduring pillar of ethnic survival.

5. The Modern Era

In the contemporary period, the transition of Naxi folk music has entered a phase of institutionalization and global recognition. Since Lijiang's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the focus has shifted from oral domestic transmission to formalized academic and institutional preservation. Traditional wisdom is now being re-contextualized to meet the demands of modern education and the tourism industry.

A pivotal finding in this study is the role of specialized ethnic schools in ensuring the continuity of Naxi traditions. These institutions serve as the modern Dongba altars where wisdom is passed to the next generation in a structured environment.



Figure 1 Naxi Dongba School

Source: The researcher, from research fieldwork (2024)

As illustrated in Figure 1, a key informant involved in the school's leadership stated:

We cannot expect the young people to learn music while plowing the fields like our grandfathers did. The context of labor has changed. Now, we must bring the music into the classroom. By teaching the songs in school, we are giving our traditional wisdom a new life in the modern world.

This institutional transition ensures that while the functional context of the music has changed, its role as a carrier of identity remains intact.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Naxi folk music serves as a dynamic oral museum, a concept that resonates with the observations of Sigley (2020), who highlighted how the Ancient Tea Horse Road functioned as a mobility narrative for cultural exchange. The transition of traditional wisdom from the Foundational Era to the Era of Intercultural Exchange confirms that Naxi music is not a stagnant relic but a resilient system capable of absorbing external aesthetics.

However, the current Modern Era presents a critical shift toward commodification. The results indicating that music is increasingly performed for tourism rather than community ritual support the concerns raised by Su (2019) and Mokgachane et al. (2021) regarding the loss of music authenticity. While the institutionalization of music in schools like the Naxi Dongba School (Figure 1) ensures technical survival, it marks a departure from organic oral transmission. This transition is inconsistent with the traditional shamanistic roots described by Tian and Ding (2025) but aligns with the necessity of "active equilibrium" proposed in the introduction. The study finds that by re-contextualizing folk songs within formal education, the Naxi community effectively bridges the generational gap,

a strategy suggested by Chen and Sensai (2024) to maintain literacy and cultural interest among the youth.

This research concludes that the development of Naxi folk music is a continuous trajectory of adaptation. From its spiritual origins in Dongba chants to its current status as a UNESCO-protected heritage, the music has functioned as a primary vessel for Naxi social values and collective memory. The interdisciplinary analysis proves that cultural resilience is achieved through a state of "wisdom in transition"—where the core historical essence is preserved even as performance contexts shift from altars to digital stages. Despite modern threats of urbanization and the disconnect of younger generations, the institutionalization of ethnic music provides a sustainable framework for heritage longevity.

Recommendation

The findings of this study suggest that the sustainability of Naxi folk music requires a strategic shift toward active equilibrium, where historical essence is preserved through modern institutional frameworks. It is highly recommended that local educational authorities in Lijiang further formalize the integration of folk music into school curricula, moving beyond mere vocal performance to include the transmission of the moral and social wisdom embedded in Naxi lyrics. This institutional approach, as demonstrated by the Naxi Dongba School (Figure 1), effectively bridges the generational gap and ensures that traditional wisdom remains a relevant cultural force rather than a stagnant relic of the past (Chen & Sensai, 2024; Sigley, 2020).

For future research, it is essential to investigate the impact of digital transformation and social media platforms on the authenticity and transmission of ethnic minority music. Further studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of school-based heritage programs on students' cultural identity. Additionally, conducting cross-cultural comparative

analyses with other ethnic groups along the Ancient Tea Horse Road, such as the Tibetan or Bai people, would provide a broader understanding of musical hybridity and cultural resilience in Southwest China (Wen et al., 2025).

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