



## Research on the Problems and Strategies of Yi Traditional Dance and Intangible Cultural Heritage “Axi Dancing under the Moon”

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### Abstract

The Yi people hold a deep respect for fire, which is central to their culture and exemplified by the "Torch Festival" and the dance "Axi Dancing under the Moon." This dance, an intangible cultural heritage recognized worldwide, was traditionally performed by young Yi couples to express love and facilitate marriage. However, contemporary developments pose challenges to cultural preservation. The commercialization of the dance has led to a shift away from its traditional roots. To address this, it is crucial to maintain its connection to "sacrificial fire" activities while adapting to modern market demands. Social changes, including the Cultural Revolution and modernization, have affected the dance's relevance. Collaboration between dance professionals and technology experts is essential to address the talent gap in cultural transmission. Additionally, recognizing the "Torch Festival" as an official holiday could help restore its significance. To enhance the role of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" in love and marriage, promoting its integration into the daily lives of the Yi people is vital. By honoring the roots of Yi fire culture while embracing contemporary influences, we can ensure the dance remains vibrant and relevant today.

**Keywords:** Yi nationality, Fire, Axi Dancing under the Moon, Problems, Strategies.

## 1. The Birth and Development of Axi Dancing under the Moon is Closely Related to the Fire Culture of Yi Nationality

Fire, revered by many ethnic groups worldwide, is also significant among the Yi ethnic group, known as "Fire". The Yi people are mainly located in southwest China, Vietnam, Laos and other places. In the Yi language, the word for "fire" is represented by Chinese characters, meaning "lighting up the sky". The Yi people consider fire as paramount, akin to "heaven" (Qu Biaguo, 2009)<sup>[1]</sup>. This establishes the primitive religious beliefs and sacrificial rites of the Yi people, centered around the worship of the "Fire God", and the transmission of the traditional Yi festival known as the "Torch Festival". Legend has it that on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth lunar month, the Yi hero Etilaba rallied the villagers to ignite ninety-nine torches and battled for three days and nights, ultimately vanquishing the locusts spawned by the demon En Tiguze, rescuing the villagers. To commemorate this victorious day, the Yi people ignite fires and hold celebration activities every June 24th. After centuries of inheritance and development, it has formed the unique "Torch Festival" of the Yi people (Shao Peng, 2019)<sup>[2]</sup>. The Torch Festival is the "carnival" of the Yi people and also the "Valentine's Day" for young Yi men and women. During the Torch Festival, the Yi people hold activities such as wrestling, bullfighting, horse racing, sheep fighting, cockfighting, pole climbing, sheep snatching, shooting, singing competitions, beauty pageants, costume contests, catching chickens by eagles, performing the "Axi Dancing under the Moon", playing with torches, and igniting love fires. As the festival concludes, individuals of all ages within the Yi community raise torches in unison, celebrating the harvest, praying for peace, and invoking auspiciousness.

Among the various festivities of the Torch Festival, the dance known as "Axi Dancing under the Moon" stands out as the most popular and pervasive. "Axi" is a branch of the Yi ethnic group, living in the area around Xishan Town, Mile City, Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The Axi people call "Axi Dancing under the Moon" as "Gaosi Bi", "Abo Bi", or "Axi Pou". These names all mean "everyone is happy to dance together" and originate from traditional Yi dances with a history of over a thousand years (Li Yanchao, 2010)<sup>[3]</sup>. According to the "Xishan District Chronicle of Mile County", "Li Xiao, the eldest sister of Fuhei Village in the west of Mile Xisan District,

went out to sell labor, went to Saime in the east of Dongshan District of Mile, saw the Miao Nationality's people dancing "the reed pipe dance", and got inspiration. After returning home, she incorporated her strengths and improved the local traditional 'dancing and music', unified the form of dance movements<sup>[iv]</sup>. Therefore, there are written records of the history of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" dating back about two hundred years (Li Yunyu, 1990)<sup>[v]</sup>. The genesis of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" is enveloped in five legends, namely the "Fire God Legend"<sup>1</sup>, "Labor Legend"<sup>2</sup>, "Love Legend"<sup>3</sup>, "War Legend"<sup>4</sup>, and "Fire Extinguishing Legend"<sup>5</sup>. It can be seen that "Axi Dancing under the Moon" comes from "fire", and its most characteristic feature is the "jumping" and "flipping" movements. The arm-raising and clapping movements are inseparable from "celebration", so "fire" and "celebration" are always its main factors. During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" retained its circular dance form, involving participants of all ages and genders. Subsequently, during the Republic of China era, bamboo flutes diversified, and wooden small three-string instruments supplanted gourd three-string instruments. Young men and women conveyed their emotions in the face-to-face row dancing, becoming the cornerstone of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" <sup>[vi]</sup> (Li Yunyu, 1994). In 1921, after Duan Xianwang, a villager of Fenghuang Village in Xishan, Mile, made the first large three-string instrument, the dance music form of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" stabilized, and the present dance style was formed, with the large three-string instrument becoming the standard equipment of "Axi Dancing under the Moon"<sup>[vii]</sup>. In 1936, Zhang Chong, a Yi general from Mile, organized the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" team to Kunming for publicity and performance, marking the first time that "Axi Dancing under the Moon" went out of the mountain village<sup>[viii]</sup> (Chang Hanlin, 2003). In the 1940s and 1950s, influenced by the democratic trend from the outside world, young Axi people transformed the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" which was previously concealed in the mountains at the junction of the two villages, and boldly infused it with new era spirit and interest, dancing out of the mountains, out of the villages... <sup>[ix]</sup> (Liu Jinwu, 1997). In the 1940s, scholars such as Wen Yiduo and Fei Xiaotong led some students from "Southwest Associated University" to collect folk songs in Yunnan, and inadvertently discovered this dance. Inspired by their dancing under the moonlight, student Liang Lun named it "Axi Dancing under the Moon"<sup>[x]</sup> (Liang Lun, 1945), which has been used since then. On October 3, 1950, the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" performed by the Southwest Ethnic Minority Representative Team was presented as a gift to the National Day celebration for the first time, marking the first time that "Axi Dancing under the Moon" appeared in Beijing. In 1952, the "Axi Dancing the Moon" went to North Korea to visit the volunteers and was received by Kim Il Sung. In 1954, under the leadership of Mr. Liang Lun, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" came to Warsaw, Poland, to participate in the Fourth World Youth and Student Festival and won the gold medal. In the following five years (1953-1957), "Axi Dancing under the Moon" participated in the Fifth World Youth and Student Festival, the First Yunnan Provincial Literary and Art Festival, and welcomed foreign guests, not only conveying joy and enthusiasm, but also showing the positive spirit of the Axi people. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" was considered "harmful" and listed as one of the "Four Olds", suffering from severe repression. In 1980, after ten years of repression, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" once again jumped into Beijing to participate in the first National Ethnic Minority Arts Performance, regaining its glory. Mr. Ushiyama Junichi, from the Japanese Image Recording Center, visited Xishan, Mile in 1984, inspired by the performance of "Axi Dancing under the Moon," subsequently producing a documentary on the dance and Axi folk customs. It was well received in Japan, and director Ichigaka Koko won the "Annual Television Grand Award · Outstanding Individual Award" because of this. In 1986, the music of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" became one of the top ten most popular songs in the American music industry and became the music for the White House's lunch break <sup>[xi]</sup> (Zhou Keyu, 2017). In June 2005, "Axi Dancing Under the Moon" appeared at the "Seventh Asia Arts Festival", and in October 2006, it appeared at the "Ninth Beijing International Tourism Culture Festival". From 2006 to 2008, governments at all levels, academic circles, and tourism departments actively discussed the protection of "Axi Dancing under the Moon". In June 2008, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" was included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists (Heritage No.: III-

<sup>1</sup> Legend of the Fire God: According to ancient legend, in a time when people lived in caves, wore clothing made of leaves, and consumed raw meat, the tribal leader Mudeng inadvertently attracted lightning strikes to a tree during a thunderstorm, resulting in fire. Footwear was nonexistent, and when individuals attempted to extinguish the flames in the forest, the ground became too hot to bear. They could only alternate between their left and right feet to hop and extinguish the fire. After the fire was extinguished, they feasted on the animals that had perished in the flames and discovered that cooked meat was not only more palatable but also less likely to cause illness. Delighted by this revelation, they thereafter revered Mudeng as the Fire God. The hopping motion used to extinguish the fire gradually evolved into the contemporary "Axi Dance under the Moon."

<sup>2</sup> Legend of the Laborer: In ancient times, before the advent of modern agricultural techniques, slash-and-burn farming was a common practice. Using fire to clear land for cultivation was deemed more labor-efficient than other methods. However, immediately after burning, the ground would be intensely hot, making it impossible for individuals to stand still. They had no choice but to alternate between their feet while working. Nevertheless, despite the challenging conditions, people eagerly proceeded with planting, as they understood that sowing seeds was necessary for future harvests. Over time, the repetitive motion of laboring evolved into the contemporary "Axi Dance under the Moon."

<sup>3</sup> Legend of the Love: Once, there lived a couple named Aze and Age. One day, ten suns appeared in the sky, causing everything on the ground to ignite. Amidst the inferno, the couple was separated. Aze climbed to a high mountain and shot down nine of the suns, extinguishing the flames. Once the fire was extinguished, the couple reunited, and the Earth regained its vitality. People rejoiced and celebrated, clapping their hands in jubilation. However, the ground was still hot, so everyone had to continuously switch feet while jumping. From then on, whenever there was a joyous occasion, people would engage in this jumping ritual, gradually evolving into the contemporary "Axi Dance under the Moon."

<sup>4</sup> Legend of the War: During the era of Nanzhao, predecessors of the Axi people, when the Man tribes attacked the strategic town of Tiegiao, which had been occupied by the Tibetan Tubo forces, they drove flocks of sheep with torches tied to their horns into the city. Wherever the sheep went, fire followed, causing heavy casualties among the Tubo soldiers. Soon after, Tiegiao fell into the hands of the Man tribes, who celebrated their victory. However, the fire had not completely extinguished, and the ground remained hot. Therefore, while celebrating, they had to hop on one foot to extinguish the flames. Subsequently, similar jumping celebrations were performed after victorious battles, gradually evolving into the contemporary "Axi Dance under the Moon."

<sup>5</sup> Legend of the Extinguishing Fires: In ancient times, wildfires were common occurrences in Axi villages. Young couples Aze and Age, along with other villagers, bravely fought to extinguish the fires. However, due to the scorching ground, they had to alternate between their feet while jumping to prevent burns. This jumping action resembled a dance. Later, in commemoration of these ancestors who helped the community overcome adversity and to celebrate the victory of extinguishing fires, the tradition gradually evolved into the contemporary "Axi Dance under the Moon."

75). Thus, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" began to move from the edge villages of Yunnan to the international stage, becoming a renowned dance at home and abroad, and welcomed by people all over the world.

The development of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" can be divided into three stages. The first stage occurred around the mid-Qing Dynasty, taking place in social settings for courtship between young men and women, often referred to as the "Youth Dance"(Figure 1). Typically, it involved young men and women dancing together, with the women slightly bending their waists and performing a series of steps involving crossing and tapping their feet, with one step accompanied by clapping.



Figure 1. The Axi Dance under the moon statue.

**跳月歌**

活泼、热情 彝族民歌

1=C  $\underline{5\ 5\ 1\ 3\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}\ \underline{1\ 1\ 5\ 3\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}$   
 弥勒西山区哩，哎 啾 西山阿西人哪，哎 啾

$\underline{3\ 3\ 3\ 1\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}\ \underline{1\ 5\ 1\ 1\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}$   
 到了今天呀哩，哎 啾 坐也一般高哩，哎 啾

$\underline{5\ 5\ 1\ 1\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}\ \underline{1\ 5\ 1\ 3\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}$   
 站也一般高哩，哎 啾 抬脚也爽快哩，哎 啾

$\underline{5\ 1\ 5\ 3\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}\ \underline{1\ 5\ 1\ 3\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}$   
 甩手也爽快哩，哎 啾 老人和青年哩，哎 啾

$\underline{5\ 1\ 5\ 1\ 3\ 3\ 0\ 5\ 0\ 3}\ \underline{3\ 3\ 5\ 5\ 1\ 3\ 0\ 0}$   
 个个笑颜开哩，哎 啾 不再受苦了哩。

跳月 彝族青年男女最喜爱的集体舞蹈。当舞蹈到高潮时姑娘们就唱起此歌来。

曲谱上传于中国曲谱网  
<http://qupu.hrbel.net>

Figure 2. The musical score of "Axi Dancing under the Moom".

The dance consisted of clockwise and counterclockwise rotations, repeated endlessly. The men played simple instruments such as the sanxian (a three-stringed instrument), bamboo flute, gourd string, and leaves to accompany the dance. The form was simple, with an ancient style, and the sanxian used was small, producing elegant tones with a slow rhythm. "Axi Dancing under the Moon" took place in public or in the forest at night, away from the sight of parents and elders, serving as a form of entertainment for courtship. The third stage occurred after the Republic of China, during which "Axi Dancing under the Moon" underwent significant changes, evolving into a widely practiced collective dance. A framework musical phrase for the song "Dancing Joyfully" was established, using the 1st, 3rd, and 5th tones. Creatively inheriting and developing traditional music such as the ancient creation poem "Xianji" and folk songs like "Xishan Yao" and "Leli," the dance movements incorporated various techniques such as single-leg bouncing, double-leg bouncing, turning with a leg raised, turning with a dragging step, stomping and clapping, and somersaults. The significant change was reflected in the use of the large sanxian, resulting in the differentiation between the dances for the elderly and the youth<sup>[xii]</sup> (Li Yunyu, 1990).

"Axi Dancing under the Moon" is a comprehensive art form that integrates singing, dancing, and music. Its core melody consists of 1, 3, 5, with a unique musical rhythm of 4/5 beats<sup>[xiii]</sup> (The musical score is shown in Figure 2). The most striking aspect of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" is the male dancers carrying a large three-string weighing seven to 8 kilograms on their backs while playing and dancing. Meanwhile, other dancers

accompany with instruments such as flutes, tree leaves, and suona. The "three-string" is a unique traditional musical instrument of the Yi ethnic group, represented by the "large three-string." The "large three-string" measures 135cm in length, 33cm in width, and 27cm in height. It also has an iron buckle piece, which, when plucked, often produces a "click, click" sound, serving as the main melody of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" dance music. The melody of the "Dancing Moon Song" has a rhythm of the fourth and fifth beats of each measure, with a melody composed of "do, mi, sol." The lyrics combine meaningful words with chorus-style lyrics, creating a responsive syntax. The music begins with a short prelude of plucked instruments and drums, depicting the gathering of young men and women. Then, the bamboo flute leads the enthusiastic and lively first theme: this theme is repeated multiple times by the high-pitched flute, plucked instruments, strings, and full ensemble in the first section, showcasing the varied dance postures. The theme segment is transposed and repeated several times, forming a sharp contrast with the previous tonality. In the third section, the music returns to the original key, played by the high-pitched flute, followed by the entire orchestra playing, reaching a climax, and displaying grand dance scenes. The short ending is an expansion of the last two beats of the main theme segment, ending the entire piece in a crescendo. The musical structure and melody are lively and vibrant, rich in emotion, and vivid in musical imagery. Dancers use the "Three-step Music" as the basis, with leg lifts, hip swings, and stomping as the main techniques, complemented by body swings, turns, and chest thrusts, with hands and feet moving on the same side. Participants follow the leading dancers, forming two large teams, dancing facing each other. Sometimes they cross each other, sometimes they form a large circle, moving freely, like the ebb and flow of the tide. After each team completes a dance, they disperse like the water in a canal. Each "Axi Dancing under the Moon" event may involve only a few people or tens to thousands of people, creating a scene of collective dancing, full of passion, lively movements, and a fiery atmosphere.

If the "Torch Festival" epitomizes the carnival of Yi "fire culture," then "Axi Dancing under the Moon" embodies the essence and spirit of the Yi community, profoundly interwoven into the fabric of daily life for the Axi people. Often, "as soon as the large three-string sounds, the soles of the feet start to itch." Wherever there is "Axi Dancing under the Moon," there is a sea of joy. People often dance until late at night, thoroughly enjoying themselves. The strong sense of cultural identity brings the Yi people together tightly through "Axi Dancing under the Moon," promoting their physical and mental health, ethnic unity, and social harmony. "Axi Dancing under the Moon" serves as a medium for Yi people to interact and also as a "dance party" for traditional young men and women to get to know each other and fall in love, becoming a link in Axi marriage customs. Elders in Fenghuang Village among the Axi community often remarked, "A young man unable to dance may struggle to find a spouse"<sup>6</sup>. Utilizing "Axi Dancing under the Moon" as a means to initiate matrimonial relations was a prevalent practice in traditional Axi marriage customs. Axi people did not hold weddings, but often could not avoid "Axi Dancing under the Moon." "Axi Dancing under the Moon" adapted to Axi marriage customs, ensuring the venue for young Axi people to choose their spouses, and this marriage culture has been passed down through generations. Employing "Axi Dancing under the Moon" as a precursor to marriage was virtually obligatory for the preceding generations of Axi, constituting an ingrained social norm. The special Axi marriage customs integrate "Axi Dancing under the Moon" with the basic marriage behaviors of humans, enhancing the intensity and scope of inheritance, regulating the inheritance consciousness of young people, connecting inheritance with personal survival and life destiny, and more effectively ensuring the continuation of inheritance.

In recent years, the rapid development of tourism within the framework of a market economy, coupled with advancements in information technology, particularly the Internet, has infused new vitality into the inheritance and development of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon." While these developments present significant opportunities, they also bring inevitable challenges. First, due to life pressures and the allure of opportunities beyond their native regions, many young Axi individuals choose to leave the mountainous areas to pursue education, work, and permanent settlement elsewhere. This migration has resulted in a loss of potential successors for the "Axi Dancing under the Moon." Second, the modernization of society has substantially transformed lifestyles, leading to a diversification of leisure and entertainment activities. In the face of foreign cultural influences, the enthusiasm of the Yi people, especially the younger generation, for the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" is gradually diminishing. Third, the infusion of capital driven by the market economy has shifted the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" from its roots as a spontaneous, folk-based, ecological dance to a staged performance. This transition not only dilutes the sacredness of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" but also erodes its authenticity. Consequently, after experiencing a period of "glory," the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has gradually lost its prominence and now faces the risk of cultural erosion. In light of these challenges—arising from market economy dynamics, social transformations, advancements in information technology, and the trend toward staged performances—the urgent question is how to effectively protect, inherit, and develop the Yi fire culture, as embodied in the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" in the current context.

## **2. Research Method**

### *2.1. Research Object and Region*

The focus of this study is the Yi ethnic dance "Axi Dancing under the Moon." The research scope encompasses the cultural customs of the Yi ethnic group, particularly those associated with fire, and the traditional "Torch Festival" celebration. The Yi ethnic group (彝) primarily inhabits the southwestern region of China, with smaller populations dispersed in Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam and Laos, totaling over 90 million individuals (as of 2010). As of 2020, mainland China is home to 9,830,327 Yi individuals, constituting the seventh largest ethnic minority in the country. The Yi ethnic group primarily resides and concentrates in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou in China, although scattered populations are also present in other provinces and cities (Figure 3). In Vietnam, the Yi ethnic branch is referred to as the "Lolo" (Vietnamese: Người Lô Lô), with a population of 3,307 individuals (as of 1999). They are officially recognized as one of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam and are distributed in regions near the Sino-Vietnamese border, including Hejiang, Gaoping, and Lao

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Bimo

Cai. Additionally, there are small Yi populations in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and various other locations, with some areas preserving inscriptions and ancient Yi scripts<sup>7</sup>.



Figure 3. Distribution map of the Yi ethnic group in China.

## 2.2. Case Study

This study centers on Keyi and Fenghuang villages in Xisan Town, Mile City, Yunnan Province, renowned as the birthplace of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" dance, chosen as distinct case studies. Xisan Town, situated in the northern part of Mile City, Yunnan Province, spans altitudes ranging from 1455 meters to 2142 meters. It covers an area of 288 square kilometers, extending 23.8 kilometers from north to south and 24.8 kilometers from east to west (refer to Figure 4). Within this 288-square-kilometer area, there are 8,246 households with a total population of 23,934, predominantly comprising the Axi ethnic minority, a branch of the Yi ethnic group, constituting 83.4% of the populace. It serves as the birthplace of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" and "Axi Xianji"<sup>[xiv]</sup>. Keyi Village (refer to Figure 5) lies 35 kilometers from Mile County. Established over 360 years ago, it stands as an ancient settlement embodying the essence of Axi culture.

<sup>7</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BD%9D%E6%97%8F>, (source: Wikipedia - Yi people).



**Figure 4. Xisan Town, Mile City, Yi Autonomous Prefecture.**

Source: [http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztl/2019cgh/201904/t20190402\\_6177867.htm](http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztl/2019cgh/201904/t20190402_6177867.htm).

Presently, Keyi Village comprises 199 households accommodating 737 residents, with 99.6% belonging to ethnic minorities, predominantly Axi, a subgroup of the Yi ethnic community. The village spans an area of 12 square kilometers, ranging in altitude from 1680 meters to 1700 meters. The customs, language, and traditions observed in Fenghuang Village align closely with those of other Axi communities across the county.



**Figure 5. The entrance of Keyi Village of the Yi Nationality in Yunnan (Photo taken by the author)**

### *2.3. Interviews*

In this study, the primary subjects of interviews and investigations are the Yi ethnic group and their dance "Axi Dancing under the Moon." To delve into the history and current development of this dance, the author conducted field visits to Keyi Village in Yunnan Province, China. The author interviewed various individuals including Yi ethnic priests like Bimo (refer to Figure 6), performers of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" (see Figures 7), three-string instrument players (depicted in Figure 8), as well as ordinary villagers. The objective was to uncover the origins of "Axi Dancing under the Moon," grasp its present state of development, contemplate the challenges and opportunities it encounters, and personally experience the dance movements and the accompanying instrument, the "da sanxian."



**Figure 6.** The author and Bimo, a Yi priest from Keyi Village, Xisan Town, Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Photo taken with the author's consent).



**Figure 7.** Female members of the author's "Axi Dancing under the Moon" performance team (Photo taken with the author's consent).

### 3. Research Results

Culture evolves alongside human production and life, perpetuated through successive generations' mutual transmission and continuous development."Cultural inheritance encompasses the stability, integrity, continuity, and rejuvenation of culture, governed by internal mechanisms as it integrates with the subject, showcasing regenerative traits throughout social development."<sup>[xv]</sup> It entails more than mere culture transmission; rather, it constitutes "a longitudinal handover process among social members within the ethnic community"<sup>[xvi]</sup>.The rapid development of modern society, especially the rapid development of the market economy represented by the tourism industry and modern information technology, along with the support of local governments, has led to the folk activities of Yi ethnic "fire culture," represented by "Torch Festival" and "Axi Dancing under the Moon," to be inherited, disseminated, and developed vigorously. However, it has also encountered new problems and challenges.

#### 3.1. The Market Economy

In the contemporary globalized and culturally diverse landscape, China has adopted a market economy, evidenced by escalating consumerism and cultural interests. Consequently, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has evolved into a tourist attraction. Keyi Village in Mile County, Yunnan Province serves as a case in point, establishing a tourism management committee in September 2001, with "Axi Dancing under the Moon" listed as a tourism development project. Within the market-driven economy, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has emerged as a focal point in Yi ethnic tourism locales, invigorating its evolution.To accommodate contemporary stage requirements and the aesthetic preferences of tourists, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has undergone notable modifications in both its choreography and musical accompaniment. Regarding instrumentation, the shift from the original small sanxian to the current large sanxian has enhanced the musical impact and influence(Figure 8). In certain instances, modern electronic music supplants traditional instruments. Regarding movements, traditional collective circle dance steps have been creatively adapted to heighten pace, refining hand clapping, bouncing, and turning maneuvers for increased agility and grace, apt for stage presentations. It can be asserted that to meet market expectations and cater to audience and tourist preferences, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has transitioned

towards stage performances, evident in its music accompaniment, dance choreography, and stage arrangement. To accommodate contemporary stage requirements and the aesthetic preferences of tourists, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has undergone notable modifications in both its choreography and musical accompaniment. Regarding instrumentation, the shift from the original small sanxian to the current large sanxian has enhanced the musical impact and influence. In certain instances, modern electronic music supplants traditional instruments. Regarding movements, traditional collective circle dance steps have been creatively adapted to heighten pace, refining hand clapping, bouncing, and turning maneuvers for increased agility and grace, apt for stage presentations. It can be asserted that to meet market expectations and cater to audience and tourist preferences, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has transitioned towards stage performances, evident in its music accompaniment, dance choreography, and stage arrangement. Embracing the consumer market has transformed "Axi Dancing under the Moon" into a cultural commodity, contributing to the construction of local culture and economy, emerging as a novel economic driver endorsed and valued by the local government and populace. In Keyi Village, 20 households comprising 63 individuals were counted. Among them, 28 individuals across 8 households escaped poverty in 2017, while in 2018, 14 individuals from 5 households rose above the poverty line<sup>[xvii]</sup>.



**Figure 8.** The author and a young Yi man playing the sanxian (the author obtained the other party's consent to experience the sanxian and take the photo).

**Problem:** When cultural inheritance is driven by market demands, will the continuity of this culture be interrupted during economic downturns? Will the cultural heritage function weaken as "Axi Dancing under the Moon" becomes increasingly stage-oriented? If utilitarianism is lost, will the Axi people still have the enthusiasm and motivation to continue inheriting "Axi Dancing under the Moon"?

**Strategies:** In the modern market economy, the inheritance of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" inevitably carries a certain utilitarian aspect (li xianguo, 2012)<sup>[xviii]</sup>. Grassroots village organizations have recognized this issue and have taken positive measures. For instance, cultural performances organized collaboratively by village groups and cultural teams during the Spring Festival attract individuals returning home for the holidays due to work, fostering conducive conditions for facilitating mutual exchanges among villagers. As villagers congregate in the square, collective consciousness and shared ethnic values naturally emerge. Despite some returning villagers not participating in "Axi Dancing under the Moon", they are still exposed to the traditional culture of their ethnic group through observation and auditory experiences. Stage-oriented performances and cultural interactive experiences can to some extent integrate Yi people and villages, consolidating ethnic sentiments and thereby fostering the Axi people's affection for "Axi Dancing under the Moon." Undoubtedly, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has endured for centuries due to its ethnic and cultural traits and its cultural significance to the ethnic group. Excessive deviation from the original folk sports culture could result in "Axi Dancing under the Moon" losing its essence, hindering its ability to find conducive conditions for sustained development, and ultimately eroding its broad support base (li xianguo, 2012)<sup>[xix]</sup>. Encouragingly, within the solemn sacrificial activities of the Yi people, the traditional dance form known as "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has been faithfully preserved in its original form. Enhanced by the melodious and beautiful accompaniment of the small sanxian, the dance movements remain simple and unadorned, rendering the entire sacrificial activity solemn and reverent. In that moment, the hearts of all Axi people are unified. As all the extravagant and ostentatious elements gradually dissipate, the authentic "Axi Dancing under the Moon" re-establishes the connection between today's Axi people and their ancestors, emerging as an essential national sentiment and bond.

Confronting the influence of the market economy, the Axi people adopt a strategy that involves a certain degree of compromise while retaining perseverance: in response to the demands of foreign tourists, stage performances become imperative. This strategy can maximize the commercial value of "Axi Dancing under the



Moon," concurrently increasing income and fulfilling the objective of cultural dissemination, thereby yielding both economic and social benefits. During sacred ancestral commemorations or self-entertainment activities within the ethnic group, villagers spontaneously perform the traditional "Axi Dancing under the Moon." The culture of the ethnic group will unknowingly persist in sacred occasions such as sacrifices, with inheritance and development striking a balance within the framework of the market economy.

### 3.2. State Influence

Government policies have a profound impact on ethnic cultures, and the Yi people are no exception. "Keyi Village" serves as a compelling example of this influence. From the 1950s to the 1970s, during the "Great Leap Forward"<sup>8</sup> in mainland China, the political orientation of literary and artistic activities intensified throughout society. As a result, cultural activities unique to the Yi people in the village were gradually supplanted by revolutionary model operas. Religious practices were redefined as superstitious activities and subsequently banned. The Yi priests, known as Bimo, were labeled as exploitative figures who profited without labor and were subjected to criticism. Even ethnic festivals and performances were dismissed as manifestations of left-leaning political agendas, leading to a significant disruption in the transmission and development of Yi culture<sup>[xx]</sup>. During "the Cultural Revolution"<sup>9</sup>, state policies further influenced grassroots literature, festivals, and daily life through various social interventions. The reform and opening-up period brought about considerable changes in the villagers' production methods. The customs, festivals, ceremonies, and daily entertainment that had been integral to village life underwent substantial transformations under the influence of state policies. Following the reform and opening-up, the state's focus shifted progressively from "politics" to "economics." As local economic conditions and living standards improved, the local government undertook extensive efforts to excavate, preserve, and promote ethnic culture. This led to the restoration and continuation of folk activities, such as the Yi people's "Torch Festival" and "Axi Dancing under the Moon," which began to develop further within the framework of the socialist market economy. For instance, in 2006, the Yunnan Provincial Government played a leading role in or contributed to several key initiatives, including the launch of the "Axi Town Tourism and Cultural Development Plan" and the seminar on the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" Tourism and Cultural Protection and Development Plan. They also organized the opening ceremony of the first Yunnan Ethnic Minority Games and the evening show "Axi Dancing under the Moon and the Charm of the Red River." On August 25, 2007, the Yunnan Provincial People's Government approved the establishment of a provincial "Axi Dancing under the Moon" cooperative. Additionally, on May 11, 2008, the Honghe Prefecture Culture, Radio, Film and Television, Press, and Publication Bureau approved the creation of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" national intangible cultural heritage inheritance base. In October 2009, Keyi Village was recognized as one of the first "National Ecological Cultural Villages" and "National Forest Tourism Demonstration Villages." Concurrently, Mile County TV Station produced a special program on "Axi Dancing under the Moon" to promote the cultural brand of Mile County and vigorously publicize "Axi Dancing under the Moon." The inheritance and development of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" have thus reached unprecedented heights in recent years, largely due to supportive government policies. Moreover, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has been incorporated into primary and secondary school music textbooks (People's Music Publishing House, 2019) and university Chinese textbooks (Fudan University Press, 2021). This inclusion has significantly contributed to the preservation and transmission of Yi culture as represented by the "Axi Dancing under the Moon."

**Problem:** In light of the inevitable influence of state will and government policies—characterized by "democratic centralism"—on the historical and contemporary development of ethnic culture, how should Yi culture, as represented by the "Axi Dancing under the Moon," be inherited and developed?

**Strategy:** The principle of "concentrating forces to accomplish major tasks" is a key advantage of countries governed by "democratic centralism." In recent years, the inheritance of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has rapidly progressed, grounded in the Yi "fire culture" and bolstered by national policies. As a cherished element of Yi culture, the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has become deeply embedded in the hearts of the Yi people. Regardless of the changes in social and political circumstances in modern times, as long as the foundation of Yi "fire culture" and the determination of the Axi people remain intact, the development of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" will persist uninterrupted. Wherever there are Yi people, there will be the "Axi Dancing under the Moon."

### 3.3. The Modern Information Technology

In today's society, characterized by "information technology," the development of modern media technology, such as digital media, not only increases the dissemination of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" but also expands the ways and means of protecting and inheriting it. This transformation has shifted from the previous silent inheritance method dominated by individuals to include tangible inheritance using information technology as a carrier, thus broadening the inheritance model of "Axi Dancing under the Moon." Particularly, the use of digital media (such as hard disks) technology allows the complete preservation of textual and image materials related to "Axi Dancing under the Moon." The storage function of information technology allows people to appreciate and learn "Axi Dancing under the Moon" without being restricted by time, location, or the availability of participants, making the inheritance process more flexible. For example, in the Yi ethnic village of Fenghuang in Yunnan, with over 400 households, every household possesses CDs and hard drives containing various Axi songs and dance performances, including the prominent "Axi Dancing under the Moon." During the author's visit, residents played

<sup>8</sup> Great Leap Forward: Mao Zedong proposed the goal of China "surpassing Britain and catching up with the United States" at the Moscow Conference in November 1957. Among the "satellites" launched by the literary and artistic circles in 1958, the "New Folk Song Movement" and "New Mural Movement" launched at that time were the most eye-catching. Quoted from: The "Great Leap Forward" in Literature and Art in 1958\_National History Network (cssn.cn) [http://hprc.cssn.cn/gsyj/whs/wxyss/201503/t20150317\\_4106257.html](http://hprc.cssn.cn/gsyj/whs/wxyss/201503/t20150317_4106257.html)

<sup>9</sup> Cultural Revolution period: The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, commonly known as the Cultural Revolution, or simply the Cultural Revolution [Note 1], was a nationwide political movement in the history of the People's Republic of China that took place in mainland China from May 16, 1966 to October 6, 1976. Source: Great Leap Forward - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (wikipedia.org) <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%A4%A7%E8%B7%83>

CDs of "Axi Dancing under the Moon," some recorded by themselves or their family members participating in performances, some excerpts from grand events related to "Axi Dancing under the Moon," and others programs choreographed by local art teams. In recent years, CDs of events like "Torch Festival" and "Axi Dancing under the Moon" have appeared in the consumer market and online. The rapid development of modern Internet technology has provided the possibility of long-distance communication of "Axi Dancing under the Moon". About 14,600,000 results (0.19 seconds) were found on Google with the keyword "Axi Dancing under the Moon", of which about 305,000 were video (0.35 seconds) (8.22.2024)<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, travel enthusiasts can learn about the unique Yi ethnic dance "Axi Dancing under the Moon" remotely through internet surfing. Dance enthusiasts can learn the dance and music of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" online. Modern information technology participation in inheritance enables "Axi Dancing under the Moon" to adapt and adjust itself in a modern way, seeking new space for survival and inheritance, and avoiding losing its foundation in the context of modernization and global cultural integration.

**Problem:** While "Axi Dancing under the Moon" in digital media format allows the long-term preservation of this dance through recording, conversion, and duplication, watching videos cannot replace the real experience and emotional resonance of participating in or witnessing the dance firsthand. "Nowadays, young people aspire to the outside world and disdain staying at home all day dancing and singing"<sup>[xxi]</sup> (Li Xianguo, 2012). The question is whether the transition to inheritance methods based on "digital media" information technology will lead to a loss of talent among the inheritors of "Axi Dancing under the Moon".

**Strategy:** Modern media technology offers the potential for the permanent preservation of ethnic cultures, such as the "Axi Dancing under the Moon," in a stable, non-transitory format. This technological advancement reduces the reliance on oral and physical transmission traditionally used by the Yi people, thereby expanding the methods of cultural inheritance. Historically, the spontaneous participation in "Axi Dancing under the Moon" activities facilitated the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge. However, the decline in such informal, communal activities has led to a reduction in young people's exposure to the dance. In response, local governments have implemented targeted educational initiatives through art troupes and cultural centers. These programs involve designated inheritors teaching select young people, marking a shift from the previous collective learning methods to more structured instruction. Although this approach incorporates a degree of compulsory participation, it represents a continuation of traditional inheritance practices. In parallel with supporting traditional "folk inheritors," the development of modern digital information technology necessitates a redefinition of cultural inheritors. Beyond individuals who are adept in performing the "Axi Dancing under the Moon," there is a growing recognition of the role played by information technology professionals. These experts are crucial for creating digital platforms such as the "Axi Dancing under the Moon" digital museum, virtual representations of the Yi people's fire culture, and online tourism initiatives for Yunnan Yi. Thus, integrating traditional cultural practitioners with contemporary information technology experts can provide a more comprehensive framework for the protection, inheritance, and development of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon." This interdisciplinary approach ensures that the dance remains relevant and accessible in the digital age while preserving its cultural significance.

### *3.4. The Weakening of Marriage and Love Function*

In traditional village life, people were limited to closed environments and often turned to folk activities like "Axi Dancing under the Moon" for entertainment (Figure 9). However, in contemporary society, various multimedia entertainment options like television, smartphones, and the internet are more attractive, leading to a decline in the popularity of traditional practices like "Axi Dancing under the Moon". Consequently, villagers have lost their enthusiasm for participating actively in "Axi Dancing under the Moon". Unfortunately, with the changing times, the marriage customs of the Axi people have also evolved, and the traditional practice of finding a wife through "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has disappeared. The avenues for Axi youth to find partners have become more diverse, and Axi youth no longer rely on "Axi Dancing under the Moon" to find partners. This change in marital customs has affected the inheritance structure of

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=%E9%98%BF%E7%BB%86%E8%B7%B3%E6%9C%88&sca\\_esv=2b87a7951bc7ea46&sca\\_upv=1&prmd=ivsnmbtz&xsrf=ACQVn0-8W7dNo96aebj7GD0rQpd5WQjshQ:1711120550421&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjE-8zklIiFAxUYGtAFHWaCBDAQ0pQJegQIAhAC&biw=1350&bih=598&dpr=1](https://www.google.com/search?q=%E9%98%BF%E7%BB%86%E8%B7%B3%E6%9C%88&sca_esv=2b87a7951bc7ea46&sca_upv=1&prmd=ivsnmbtz&xsrf=ACQVn0-8W7dNo96aebj7GD0rQpd5WQjshQ:1711120550421&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjE-8zklIiFAxUYGtAFHWaCBDAQ0pQJegQIAhAC&biw=1350&bih=598&dpr=1)



**Figure 9.** Young men and women of the Yi ethnic group dancing the "Axi Dance of the Moon" (Photo taken with the consent of the other party).

"Axi Dancing under the Moon" in the village, leading to a gradual fading of emotional attachment among the youth, and a decrease in "Axi Dancing under the Moon" activities. The lack of participation by the youth poses a significant challenge to the inheritance of "Axi Dancing under the Moon", and this challenge is directly related to the change in marriage customs. As Grosz pointed out, apart from entertainment, the only social mission left for dance is to facilitate intimacy between genders. However, even this functionality has become doubtful over time<sup>[xxii]</sup>. In the development of "Axi Dancing under the Moon", the core content linking marriage customs has gradually disappeared from Axi traditional society, leaving behind only its entertainment function. The loss of the marriage function is indeed a natural result of social development.

**Problem:** With the loss of marriage customs as the carrier of "Axi Dancing under the Moon", does it also lose its dependent soil, thereby weakening its influence and inheritance among the people?

**Strategy:** Traditional marriage customs were indeed one of the driving forces behind the inheritance of "Axi Dancing under the Moon". However, with the development of society, the diversity of entertainment brought by multimedia, and the change in traditional marriage customs, the impact on Yi youth is significant. But it does not mean that "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has lost its survival ground. "Axi Dancing under the Moon" is the "root" and "source" of Yi culture, and cultural identity is the foundation for the reproduction and continuation of Yi culture. Although young people no longer need "Axi Dancing under the Moon" for courtship, it is still a common occurrence in the daily lives of Yi people, such as in rituals, weddings, and folk festivals. The widespread, integrated, and normalized presence of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" in Yi people's daily lives to some extent compensates for the loss of "inheritance" caused by changes in marriage customs.

### 3.5. Legal Festivals and National Traditional Festivals

With the establishment of statutory holidays in China, including the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and National Day, these traditional Han festivals have become national holidays, providing a 7-day break even in Yi ethnic areas. In Fenghuang Village, the Yi people leverage the extended Spring Festival holiday to host a unique "Rural Spring Festival Cultural Activity," where the "Axi Dancing under the moon" plays a central role, showcasing its significance and integration into local cultural celebrations. Every year, Fenghuang Village hosts distinctive "rural Chinese New Year cultural activities," showcasing traditional ethnic arts and popular modern arts, with "Axi Dancing under the Moon" being an indispensable program. There are two main reasons for this: Firstly, the guiding role of national policies. During the Chinese New Year holiday, workers from various industries have enough time to return to their hometowns. People from Fenghuang Village who work elsewhere also return during this time, especially middle-aged and young people, adding vitality to the village. Secondly, the Chinese New Year is a leisure time for the Yi people, and villagers have plenty of entertainment time. Therefore, "Axi Dancing under the Moon" shines brightly during the Chinese New Year period. The popularity of national legal holidays indirectly highlights the decline of the Yi traditional festival "Torch Festival." In recent years, with the transformation of the agricultural development model in the western Sichuan region, people mainly grow tobacco and corn. The Torch Festival coincides with the harvest season of tobacco, and many villagers are busy harvesting tobacco leaves, leaving no time for entertainment such as "Dancing under the Moon." For example, during the Torch Festival in Fenghuang Village on June 24, 2009, it was quiet and deserted, with only a few Axi women busy tying tobacco leaves on the basketball court, and there was no lively atmosphere of "Axi Dancing under the Moon."<sup>[xxiii]</sup> The decline of the Torch Festival means that the significance of Yi traditional festivals in the hearts of villagers has begun to decline, and the space for collective performances of "Axi Dancing under the Moon" has also been lost. Villagers unintentionally isolate festivals from "Axi Dancing under the Moon," gradually

distancing the two from their daily lives, and weakening their adaptability to the original living environment. Moreover, the disappearance of the unique Axi ritual of "fire worship" in Fenghuang Village is directly related to the decline of the Torch Festival. Unlike Keyi Village, "Different from Keyi Village, "Fenghuang Village also had a fire offering ceremony in the past, and the dense forest in front of the village used as a fire offering is still well preserved<sup>11</sup>," according to an elderly villager, Duan Zhengrong, whose father used to be the priest for the fire worship. After the fire worship ceremony, villagers spontaneously danced "Axi Dancing under the Moon on the square. Now, with the disappearance of the fire worship custom in Fenghuang Village, "Axi Dancing under the Moon," which was dependent on it, has lost its inheritance soil in this village.

**Problem:** Folk festivals are the carriers of ethnic traditional customs. The Torch Festival of the Yi ethnic group is undoubtedly the "soil" for the "Axi Dancing under the Moon". What impact will the neglect of the Yi traditional festival "Torch Festival" have on the inheritance and development of the "Axi Dancing under the Moon"?

**Strategy:** The Torch Festival is a crucial carrier of Yi nationality culture, and its neglect in recent years within Yi villages has adversely affected the inheritance and development of the Axi Dancing under the Moon. While it is understandable that the Axi Dancing under the Moon is performed during the Spring Festival, its absence from the Torch Festival, where it traditionally holds significant cultural importance, is problematic. The erosion of this cultural context threatens the foundational "fire culture" integral to the Axi Dancing under the Moon, potentially leading to a disconnection from its roots and diminished cultural relevance. To address this issue, it is recommended that, in addition to national statutory holidays, the local government formally designates the Torch Festival as a statutory holiday for the Yi nationality. This designation should be accompanied by a revival of traditional practices, including respecting the role of the "Bimo" (ritual priest) and restoring traditional fire sacrifice activities. Promoting the traditional Axi Dancing under the Moon and other related activities during these solemn occasions will help rekindle cultural pride and confidence among the Yi people, reinforcing their cultural identity and continuity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Axi Dancing under the Moon, a quintessential representation of Yi nationality culture, integrates "fire" and "celebration" with a rich tapestry of singing, dancing, and music. Since the mid-Qing Dynasty, it has evolved from a dance primarily performed by young men and women into a broader "old man dance" and "popular dance," characterized by its distinctive Yi "three-step" style. This evolution has propelled the dance from local villages in southwest China to international prominence, reflecting both the passion and cultural depth of the Yi heritage. In the contemporary era, the Axi Dancing under the Moon benefits from the open, diverse, and inclusive social environment, which offers significant development opportunities. However, this environment also presents several challenges for its cultural inheritance.

Firstly, the influence of the market economy has led to a shift in the Axi Dancing under the Moon, incorporating elements from various dance and music traditions, which has altered its traditional form. Balancing market demands with the preservation of traditional customs is crucial to maintaining its authenticity.

Secondly, historical political upheavals such as the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, and Reform and Opening Up have impacted the dance's development. Despite these challenges, the foundational Yi "fire culture" continues to support the dance's continuity and potential for further growth.

Thirdly, the advent of modern digital media technology has transformed the traditional "people-based" inheritance method into a "people + digital" approach, allowing for a more comprehensive preservation and development of the dance. This integration of dance and technology offers a robust framework for its ongoing protection and evolution.

Fourthly, the modern social environment and media have reduced the role of the Axi Dancing under the Moon in courtship, shifting its function from marriage and love to entertainment and daily life. This shift reflects broader societal changes and the evolving role of traditional practices.

Fifthly, changes in agricultural development in Yi areas have contributed to the neglect of the Torch Festival, a key cultural context for the Axi Dancing under the Moon. To counter this, it is recommended that the Torch Festival be established as a statutory holiday, alongside national festivals, to bolster Yi cultural confidence and support the dance's preservation.

In conclusion, as traditional cultures navigate the challenges of development and innovation, integrating modern elements while preserving core traditions is essential. The Axi Dancing under the Moon, with its rich cultural heritage, must maintain its traditional roots—such as the Torch Festival, folk songs, and traditional dance forms—while embracing contemporary influences. This approach will ensure that the dance remains relevant, widely appreciated, and a vibrant part of both Yi culture and global heritage. By adhering to these principles and adapting to market and technological demands, the Axi Dancing under the Moon can continue to thrive and contribute to the cultural richness of humanity.

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<sup>11</sup>The author interviewed the Phoenix village of the old man Duan Zhengrong, his father is presiding over the sacrifice of the fire Bimo

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