

## Preserving and Promoting Cultural Literacy through Education of Chinese Sani Folk Songs in Kunming City, Yunnan Province

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese Sani folk songs, originating from the vibrant culture of the Sani people in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, represent a precious tapestry of musical heritage. This research aims to examine the preservation and promotion of cultural literacy through the education of Chinese Sani folk songs in Kunming City, Yunnan Province. Esteemed Sani scholars, composers, and song transmitters serve as key informants, providing valuable insights into the multifaceted process of preserving and promoting this cultural treasure. A mixed-methods approach is employed. Combining qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires, this research offers a comprehensive perspective on Sani folk song preservation. The results highlight the importance of education, legislative support, cultural promotion, and collaboration with universities in preserving Sani folk songs. Suggestions include the establishment of folk song learning workshops, youth education programs, the preservation of traditional living environments, and the creation of a Sani folk song database. Overall, this research underscores the urgency of safeguarding this unique cultural heritage and contributes to the global discourse on preserving endangered folk music traditions.

**Key words:** Chinese Sani Folk Songs, Cultural Heritage, Preservation, Promotion, Sani Culture

### INTRODUCTION

The culture of China is rich and diverse, woven from the threads of countless ethnic traditions, each contributing its own unique colors, patterns, and artistic expressions. Among these, the Sani people of Kunming City, Yunnan Province, have nurtured a vibrant tradition of folk songs that serve as an artistic treasure and play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting cultural literacy.

In recent decades, there has been a surge in interest and enthusiasm among ethnomusicologists, scholars, and composers to delve into the rich tapestry of China's minority music cultures (Zhang et al., 2022). This heightened attention is partly attributed to the global spotlight on emerging economies, which has led to a growing focus on cultural issues. For instance, in 2006, Yunnan Art University, with the support of the Yunnan Provincial Government, invested over 10 million yuan in creating a spectacular performance showcasing Yunnan's ethnic minority songs and dances, captivating audiences worldwide (Rees, 2010; Yuxin & Hirunrux, 2022; Jirajarupat & Yinghua, 2023).

The genesis of Sani folk songs, as proposed by Professor Ang Ziming, is rooted in the daily lives of the Sani people themselves. These songs serve as the creative expressions of their experiences, shaped by the trials and joys of everyday

existence. While many scholars have explored various aspects of Sani culture, including history, language, and religion, comprehensive research on Sani folk songs has been limited and incomplete. This research aims to examine the preservation and promotion of cultural literacy through the education of Chinese Sani folk songs in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, complementing the existing knowledge centered on history.

The evolution of Sani folk songs spans centuries, experiencing distinct phases from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the contemporary era. This study categorizes this journey into two pivotal periods: 1949–2000 and 2000–2023. Through a comprehensive analysis, we delve into the lyrical content, melodic intricacies, rhythmic nuances, instrumental elements, and performance dynamics of Sani folk songs (Herman, 2020; Luo et al., 2020; Lihan, 2020).

The researcher's dedication to unraveling the history, formation process, characteristics, singing techniques, rhythm, musical instruments, and overall development of Sani folk songs is crucial. These aspects have been relatively uncharted territory, and their documentation and preservation hold both practical and academic significance for ensuring the continuity of Sani folk songs, which are intrinsic to the Sani culture's identity and heritage (Zhao et al., 2010; Yang & Welch, 2016; Chan, 2022).

The urgency of this research lies in the precarious state of folk music not just in Kunming but across Southeast Asia, where the rapid pace of modernization has imperiled these treasured cultural expressions. Without comprehensive studies, there is a risk of perpetuating misunderstandings or biases against Sani folk songs, which some might perceive as monotonous due to inadequate research and appreciation (Rees, 1998; Xu, 2022).

The importance of this research cannot be overstated, as it not only contributes to filling the gaps in our understanding of Sani folk songs but also generates valuable data for their preservation and promotion. The Sani people boast a rich history and culture, and their folk songs represent a priceless jewel in their cultural crown. Preserving and promoting these songs is not just a cultural imperative but also a tribute to the diversity of China's minority music cultures (Wang, 2021; Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023).

Furthermore, this research offers a global perspective on the urgent need to study and conserve the rich folk music traditions rapidly fading away in the contemporary world. By going deeper into these folk cultures through field investigations, scholars can contribute to the preservation and revival of these invaluable cultural treasures.

In summary, this research aims to comprehensively analyze the development, characteristics, preservation, and promotion of Sani folk songs, bridging the gap in existing knowledge. It aspires to contribute to the conservation of these precious traditions, ensuring that the Sani folk songs continue to resonate through the generations, enriching China's cultural heritage.

### Research Question

- What are the strategies and educational approaches that can be employed to effectively preserve and promote cultural literacy through the education of Chinese Sani Folk Songs in Kunming City, Yunnan Province?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### General Knowledge of Sani Ethnic Group

The Sani people, a branch of the Yi ethnic group in Kunming, China, are a diverse community that inhabits regions such as Shilin County, Luxi County, and Wenshan Prefecture in Yunnan Province. As of 2006, the Sani population was around 100,000, with Shilin County having 86,600 residents. However, as society and economic development progress, a growing portion of the Sani population has transitioned from traditional rural lifestyles to urban living environments, which poses a potential threat to the preservation and transmission of Sani folk songs (Zhang et al., 2022; Ping & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

The Yunnan region is a rich repository of folk music, with ethnomusicologists, dancers, painters, and artists exploring its cultural mosaic. The Sanhu, a unique stringed instrument, is central to traditional Sani musical activities and is played using a bow with divided 'bow hair'. The Mendi, a wind instrument, is also essential for Sani musical activities,

producing deep and robust tones. The Zhudi, identical to the northern flute system, is known for its bright and high-pitched tones (Wang, 2020; Xia, 2022).

The Kouxian, a small, reed-based instrument, is found widely among Yunnan's ethnic minorities and serves as a 'love communicator' among young Sani individuals. The Niupi drum, a percussive instrument, is also significant in Sani musical traditions. The tambourine is commonly used in Sani blowing and percussion music (Blum, 2001).

The Sani epic music film 'Ashima', completed in 1964, stands as a testament to Sani cultural expression but faced challenges in its journey to recognition. The film features Sani folk song material, composed by Luo Zongxian and Ge Yan, and incorporates the distinctive musical characteristics of Sani culture. This review emphasizes the need for deeper exploration and preservation of Sani folk songs, a cultural treasure facing potential extinction due to rapid modernization and urbanization.

This review underscores the need for deeper exploration and preservation of Sani folk songs, a cultural treasure that faces potential extinction in the wake of rapid modernization and urbanization.

### Research Theory

Art Theory and Ethnomusicology Theory: In the context of this study, the theoretical framework draws from Art Theory and Ethnomusicology Theory. As elucidated in Professor Du Yaxiong's "Introduction to Traditional Chinese Music," the examination of Sani folk songs is inherently intertwined with the realm of traditional Chinese music. The research methodology employed in this study aligns with the concept of 'national music,' a paradigm that emerged in China during the 1930s. However, when scrutinizing the musical composition within the film "Ashima," a distinct approach is required. In this instance, the study delves into the domain of 'new music' as conceptualized by Professor Du Yaxiong. This perspective emphasizes that the film's musical creation represents a synthesis of Western music principles assimilated by the Chinese populace, interwoven with indigenous Chinese folk song materials. Consequently, this analytical framework sheds light on "Ashima" as a Chinese musical creation, borne out of a fusion of Western music concepts and traditional Chinese folk song elements.

## METHOD

### Research Site

The Sani people constitute a distinctive ethnic minority residing exclusively in Yunnan, China. Within Yunnan, the Sani community is primarily concentrated in specific regions, including Shilin County, Yiliang County in Kunming City, Mile County in Honghe Prefecture, and Qiubei County in Wenshan Prefecture. Among these regions, Shilin County in Kunming City stands as the focal point of Sani culture, representing the most concentrated and representative area of the Sani people, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Map of research site in Kunming City, Yunnan Province  
Source: Pngwing (n.d.), Yunnan Roads (n.d.)

### Key Informants

The key informants were divided into two groups using the same selection criteria. All selected informants are recognized as national and provincial representatives in the field of Sani folk songs. They encompass Sani scholars, composers, and song transmitters, and have received prestigious national and provincial performance awards. Within this group of informants, there are scholars who have dedicated themselves to the study of Sani national culture and have authored monographs on topics such as history, language, and religion. Additionally, there are scholars actively involved in composition and dissemination, who have both created and collected a substantial repertoire of Sani folk songs, yielding significant and valuable outcomes.

### Research Tools

- 1) Interview Form: An interview form is a structured document used in qualitative research to conduct one-on-one interviews with participants. The purpose is to gather detailed information, insights, and opinions directly from individuals with expertise or experience related to the research topic. In this case, the “Sani Folk Song Preservation and Promotion Interview” is designed to collect qualitative data from key informants such as Sani folk song representatives, scholars, composers, and song transmitters.
- 2) Observation Form: An observation form is used to systematically record observations during events, activities, or situations relevant to the research. It is commonly used in qualitative and ethnographic research to document behaviors, interactions, and contextual details. In

the context of Sani folk song research, the “Sani Folk Song Performance Observation” form is designed to capture observations made during live performances and related events.

- 3) Questionnaire: A questionnaire is a structured set of questions designed to gather quantitative data and opinions from a larger number of respondents. Questionnaires are commonly used in survey research and are ideal for collecting data from a diverse group of participants. In the context of Sani folk song research, the “Sani Folk Song Preservation and Promotion Questionnaire” aims to collect information, opinions, and feedback from a broader audience, including Sani community members and enthusiasts.

### Data Analysis

The data for this study was analyzed using a mixed-methods methodology to investigate the preservation and promotion of Chinese Sani folk songs in Kunming, Yunnan Province. Identifying recurring patterns and themes in qualitative data from key informant interviews about cultural literacy and the transmission of Sani folk tunes. Key informants will include those who represent Sani traditional tunes, as well as scholars, composers, and transmitters. The data acquired through closed-ended questionnaires will be analyzed descriptively and inferentially to provide participants’ viewpoints. The incorporation of qualitative findings will provide comprehensive knowledge of the current condition of Sani folk song preservation and promotion in Kunming. This mixed-methods approach offers sound, data-driven conclusions and practical recommendations for educational

and cultural programs focused on preserving this unique cultural heritage.

## RESULTS

### Development of the Chinese Sani folk song

This study delves into the development of Sani folk songs in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, with a specific emphasis on cultural literacy and education. The research encompasses five distinct aspects, each scrutinizing various facets of Sani folk songs and their evolution during different historical periods.

- 1) **Development of Lyrics:** Sani folk songs have consistently maintained a distinctive ‘five-syllabic’ rhythm within their lyrics. The Sani people modified their folk song lyrics to reflect the shifting sociopolitical landscape between 1949 and 2000, a significant period in Chinese history that saw the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy. A prominent illustration of this adaptation is “Sani’s Heart to the Red Sun,” composed by Gao Yinghua in 1972, which embodies the prevalent themes of the era, featuring lyrics referencing the “red sun,” “class struggle,” and “hardship.”
- 2) **Development of Melody:** Between 1949 and 2000, various historical contexts had an impact on the melodies of Sani folk songs, which led to their change. During the initial phase from 1949 to 1959, characterized by hardship and struggle, Sani folk songs retained the traditional styles inherited from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Melodies predominantly composed in D major, F major, and A major were prevalent, and these three tones formed the basis for the melody lines of songs like “Bimo,” “Lidi song,” “Muyang song,” and others. The subsequent decades saw a significant shift, with the period from 1979 to 2000 witnessing increased creativity as more musicians, teachers, and composers contributed to the folk song repertoire. This era brought about an enriched melodic landscape characterized by notes derived from Do, Mi, So (Tonic Sol-fa) and further developed by Do, Re, Mi, So, La, Do (Tonic Sol-fa), leading to more expressive and aesthetically rich melody lines.
- 3) **The Development of Rhythm:** From 1949 to 1980, Sani folk songs experienced limited external influences, preserving their original rhythmic styles rooted in animism and orderliness. Sani culture places great importance on musical abilities, particularly singing and dancing, which are even considered criteria for choosing a spouse. Sani folk songs have pronounced rhythms, and the dance movements frequently mirror the song’s rhythm. Notably, songs like “kuhou song,” “Lidi song,” “Muyang song,” and “Qingge songs” maintained an older ‘rhythm tradition,’ with rhythm patterns consistently

running through Sani folk song performances, as shown in Figure 2.

- 4) **Development of Musical Characteristics:** Throughout this period, the musical characteristics of Sani folk songs remained faithful to their origins, exhibiting little change compared to the songs from the Ming and Qing periods. Elements such as folk song genres, singing techniques, and traditional instruments continued to reflect the distinct Sani culture. However, the development of these characteristics was influenced by changing living environments, highlighting the adaptability of Sani folk songs while preserving their core traits.
- 5) **The Development of Music Performance:** Sani folk songs, initially performed in various settings without fixed locations, could be experienced in mountains, fields, forests, villages, and more. However, performances were subject to specific cultural taboos, such as performing directions in Bimo only during funeral ceremonies. Over time, three primary modes of performance emerged: labor-related singing, natural performances in diverse settings, and organized public stage performances supported by the government. These public stages were equipped with modern equipment and served as venues for cultural events like folk song competitions.

The research findings shed light on the intricate development of Sani folk songs, which have been shaped by historical occurrences and cultural transformations. The significance of cultural literacy and education in the preservation and promotion of the distinctive musical heritage within Kunming City, located in Yunnan Province, is emphasized. Educators and cultural advocates can enhance their program design efforts to sustain the cultural richness of Sani folk songs by gaining a comprehensive understanding of how these songs have adapted and endured over time. This tradition has evolved and can be categorized based on different time periods, as shown in Table 1.

### Education as the Cornerstone of Sani Folk Song Preservation

- 1) **Establishment of Folk Song Learning Workshops:** In modern times, preserving Sani folk songs requires us to build upon the traditions of ‘folk song learning workshops.’ These workshops have been instrumental in safeguarding this heritage for millennia. Prioritizing the education of younger generations in Sani folk songs is crucial to ensuring that they retain the memories of their national ancestors and musical heritage. Economic imbalances, which drive many young people to leave their hometowns for economically developed areas, pose a significant threat to this preservation effort. Therefore, the focus must be on youth education and local economic development.



Figure 2. The rhythm of Chinese Sani folk songs

**Table 1.** Development of the Chinese Sani folk song

Period	Key Characteristics
Pre-1949	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Five-syllabic rhythm in lyrics</li> <li>- Traditional melodies rooted in Ming and Qing Dynasty styles</li> <li>- Orderly and ritualistic rhythm, influenced by animism</li> <li>- Agriculture-based society</li> </ul>
1949-1959	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adaptation of lyrics to historical events, including the founding of PRC</li> <li>- Continued use of traditional melodies</li> <li>- Preservation of original rhythm traditions, despite socio-economic challenges</li> </ul>
1959-1976	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited information provided for this period</li> <li>- Cultural stagnation due to political reasons</li> <li>- No specific details on lyrics, melody, or rhythm</li> </ul>
1976-1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited information provided for this period</li> <li>- Cultural stagnation during the Cultural Revolution</li> <li>- No specific details on lyrics, melody, or rhythm</li> </ul>
1979-2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lyrics reflecting contemporary themes and policies</li> <li>- Enrichment of melodies with more musical elements</li> <li>- Continuation of established rhythm patterns</li> <li>- Overall vitality and development in folk songs</li> </ul>

- 2) **Youth Successor Education:** Preserving Sani folk songs necessitates a multifaceted approach. The Sani singer, folk song transmitter, and the director of the Sani Culture Museum in Dapingdi Village advocate a comprehensive strategy. This approach centers on three aspects: government involvement, youth engagement, and support for local folk song transmitters. The local government should prioritize preserving Sani culture while promoting economic development. Youth education methods should be optimized to incorporate Sani folk songs into the curriculum, ensuring their transmission to future generations. Additionally, special funds should be allocated to encourage and support Sani folk song transmitters in every Sani village.

### Comprehensive Preservation Measures

To ensure the preservation of Sani folk songs, several key aspects of the Sani lifestyle and cultural elements should be protected:

- 1) **Preserve Sani Traditional Living Environments:** Sani dwellings and villages are vital components of their culture. In the face of modernization, it is imperative that the government support the transformation of dwellings to maintain both modern functionality and Sani characteristics. This helps preserve the cultural essence of the Sani people.
- 2) **Protect Agricultural Practices:** Sani folk songs are deeply intertwined with agricultural labor, grazing, and other activities. The modernization of society should not erode the traditional way of life for the Sani people. Efforts should be made to preserve the fields for growing food crops, ensuring that land remains dedicated to

food production. Pastures should also be allocated to preserve Sani's productive labor practices and related folk songs.

- 3) **Establish a Sani Folk Song Database:** Collaborating with universities and research institutions, the government should leverage modern technology to create a comprehensive database and information center for Sani folk songs. This repository should include literature materials, videos, audio recordings, and documentaries, ensuring the availability of authentic Sani folk song materials for scholars, students, and enthusiasts.
- 4) **Increase Funding for Folk Song Transmitters and Workshops:** Government funding for Sani folk song transmitters and 'folk song transmission workshops' should be significantly increased. Existing funding is insufficient to support the preservation efforts adequately.

### Legislation and Cultural Promotion

- 1) **Formulate Regulations on Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sani Folk Songs:** To safeguard Sani folk songs, it is essential to create specific regulations and laws for their preservation and promotion. An organization like the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation Association should be established to oversee the protection and transmission of Sani folk songs.
- 2) **Incorporate Sani Folk Songs into the Education System:** Sani folk songs should be integrated into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools, becoming an integral part of the educational system. This approach will ensure that Sani youth are exposed to their cultural heritage from an early age.
- 3) **Festivals and Competitions:** The government should organize various festivals, competitions, and music events to promote Sani folk songs. Incentives such as awards, certificates, and bonuses can encourage broader participation and promote the preservation and promotion of these songs.

In conclusion, the preservation and promotion of Chinese Sani folk songs require a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that emphasizes education, cultural protection, legislation, and public engagement. By implementing these strategies, we can ensure that the rich tapestry of Sani folk songs continues to thrive, educating future generations about their cultural heritage and contributing to the preservation of this unique aspect of Chinese culture.

### The Role of Universities and Folk Music Research Institutions in Sani Folk Song Transmission

- 1) **Significance of Educational Institutions:** In the context of China, the involvement of universities and related ethnic music research institutions holds significant importance in the transmission of Sani folk songs. Among the numerous universities in Yunnan, Yunnan University of the Arts emerges as a pivotal player in promoting the transmission of ethnic minority folk songs, including the cherished Sani folk songs. By collaborating with art

- colleges from various universities, it actively contributes to the preservation and promotion of ethnic music.
- 2) Yunnan University of the Arts: This institution boasts specialized music schools, the Institute of Ethnic Arts, and various music-related departments such as the Department of Music and the Ethnic Musical Instruments Exhibition Hall. These departments play a crucial role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Yunnan University of the Arts frequently hosts events that bridge the gap between intangible cultural heritage and the campus. It invites practitioners and experts from diverse regions in Yunnan, such as Dali, Lincang, Pu, Chuxiong, Shilin, Honghe, Dehong, Xishuangbanna, Nu River, and Lijiang, to impart their knowledge to teachers and students. These events have successfully enriched the understanding of Yunnan's minority music and allowed young learners to master various forms of ethnic music.
  - 3) A noteworthy example is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cross-border Ethnic Music and Culture International Forum held from November 22 to 23, 2021, at Yunnan University of the Arts. During this forum, a group of performers was invited to showcase Sani-style works, allowing teachers and students from across the country to experience the musical allure of Sani folk songs and promote Sani folk song culture to a broader audience.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The discussion of Chinese Sani folk songs for the preservation and promotion of cultural literacy through education in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, complements the existing knowledge centered on history.

Firstly, the historical development of Sani folk songs revealed how these musical traditions adapted to changing socio-political landscapes. The evolution of lyrics, melodies, rhythms, musical characteristics, and performance dynamics demonstrated the resilience of Sani folk songs while accommodating contemporary themes. This aligns with the theoretical principles of cultural adaptation, where traditions evolve to remain relevant in evolving societies (Blum, 2001).

Secondly, the pivotal role of education emerged as a cornerstone in preserving Sani folk songs. The establishment of folk song learning workshops and youth education programs signifies an active effort to transmit this intangible cultural heritage to future generations. This aligns with educational theories that emphasize the role of formal education in heritage preservation (Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023).

Thirdly, the comprehensive preservation measures proposed, including preserving traditional living environments and protecting agricultural practices, reflect a holistic approach to cultural preservation. These measures acknowledge the interconnection between cultural elements and the environment, consistent with the idea that cultural heritage is embedded in the landscape (Herman, 2020).

Fourthly, the legislative and cultural promotion recommendations align with established principles of cultural policy and preservation. Formulating regulations for intangible

cultural heritage protection and integrating Sani folk songs into the education system are consistent with best practices in cultural heritage conservation (Wang, 2021).

Lastly, the role of universities and research institutions in Sani folk song transmission highlights the synergy between academia and cultural preservation. This collaborative approach mirrors global efforts to involve educational institutions in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (Zhang et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the research on Chinese Sani folk song preservation and promotion aligns with established theoretical principles and offers valuable insights into cultural heritage preservation. The historical development of Sani folk songs underscores their adaptability and resilience, ensuring their continued relevance. The emphasis on education as a cornerstone for preservation reflects a commitment to transmitting cultural knowledge to future generations. The proposed comprehensive preservation measures address various facets of Sani culture, recognizing the interconnectedness of cultural elements and the environment. Legislative and cultural promotion strategies provide a framework for formalizing and promoting Sani folk songs as part of China's cultural heritage. Finally, the collaboration between universities and research institutions exemplifies the importance of academia in cultural preservation efforts. Overall, this research contributes to the broader discourse on preserving and promoting endangered folk music traditions, serving as a model for cultural heritage conservation efforts worldwide.

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