



Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Musical Characteristics and Contemporary Status of Naxi Chinese Folk Songs

Ying Liao¹ and Noppon Chaiyason²

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

¹ E-mail: yingliao.msu@outlook.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9641-1241>

² Email: noppon.c@msu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0672-3206>

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The musical heritage of the Naxi people, an ethnic minority in Yunnan Province, China, embodies a unique blend of traditional and contemporary influences, serving as a vivid example of cultural resilience. The aim is to analyze the socio-anthropological aspects of the musical characteristics and contemporary status of Naxi Chinese folk songs.

Materials and Methods: A qualitative research approach was employed, integrating ethnographic fieldwork in Tacheng Township, Yulong Naxi Autonomous County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China, semi-structured interviews with three key informants, and participant observation. The data were collected in Tacheng, a region known for its rich Naxi musical culture. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the interactions between the Naxi community and their musical traditions, focusing on how cultural practices are transmitted, adapted, and sustained in contemporary settings.

Results: The study revealed that Naxi folk songs, particularly the genre "Guqi," are not only artistic expressions but also crucial carriers of community memory and identity. Adaptation strategies such as incorporation into cultural festivals and modern media were observed. Challenges include a generational gap in the transmission of knowledge and the impact of economic development on traditional practices.

Conclusion: Naxi folk songs demonstrate significant resilience through adaptation and continuity, reflecting broader themes of cultural sustainability and identity negotiation. Recommendations for enhancing youth engagement and leveraging digital media for cultural preservation are proposed to ensure the longevity of these musical traditions.

Keywords: Naxi Folk Songs; Cultural Preservation; Ethnomusicology; Socio-anthropological Analysis; Digital Media

Introduction

The musical traditions of the Naxi people, an ethnic minority residing primarily in the Yunnan province of China, have diverse demographics, lifestyles, and socio-economic systems. They maintain distinct cultural identities through traditional practices and modern industries, showcasing adaptation and resilience despite cultural preservation efforts, and serve as a vibrant illustration of the interweaving of cultural heritage and socio-anthropological development. Naxi music, particularly its folk songs, encapsulates a rich history of cultural exchange, adaptation, and survival, providing a unique lens through which to examine the broader dynamics of cultural preservation and change within minority communities in modern China (Boyu, 2019; Schoppa, 2019; Klitgaard, 2020; Rees, 2021). The Naxi's geographical positioning at the crossroads of Tibetan, Han, and other ethnic influences has historically made their musical expressions a focal point for cultural and anthropological studies. However, despite considerable attention to their traditional Dongba religious texts and rituals, less focus has been accorded to the socio-anthropological aspects of their musical life, especially the musical characteristics and contemporary status of Naxi folk songs—a gap this study aims to fill (Klitgaard, 2020; Shi, & Nicolas, 2023; Guo & Karin, 2024; Luo & Suanmonta, 2024).

The conservation of Naxi music faces challenges typical of many minority cultures in rapidly modernizing societies. While some aspects of Naxi culture have been well-documented and even celebrated in festivals and academic circles, the everyday musical practices that permeate local life in Tacheng, a notable Naxi locale, risk diminution or transformation under pressures of economic development, cultural tourism, and digital media proliferation (Arcones, 2015; Helen, 2016; Howard, 2016; Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024). This research sets out to document and analyze the contemporary status of Naxi folk songs, which are not only artistic expressions but also carriers of community memory and identity. The ongoing transitions in the socio-economic landscapes of Tacheng have spurred both adaptations and





innovations within the Naxi musical tradition, raising questions about the sustainability of these cultural practices and the role of folk music in maintaining community cohesion and continuity (Zerbe, 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2023; D'Amico, 2024).

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the dual themes of musical characteristics and the contemporary status of Naxi folk songs through a socio-anthropological. By examining how these songs negotiate the complex interplay of traditional values and modern influences, the research will highlight the mechanisms through which Naxi communities maintain their cultural uniqueness in the face of globalization (Baranovitch et al., 2024; Dong & Wang, 2024). Specific attention will be given to the roles of various stakeholders including local singers, cultural practitioners, and the youth, whose engagement or disengagement with folk music practices provides insights into broader trends of cultural transmission and adaptation. Moreover, the study will consider how institutional supports, such as local cultural festivals and educational programs, impact the vitality and transmission of folk music traditions (Hallam et al., 2017; Kuang & He, 2022; Gong et al., 2024).

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of cultural preservation within minority groups and the role of music in socio-cultural resilience and identity negotiation. As the Naxi navigate the currents of cultural change, their folk songs stand as testaments to both historical legacies and contemporary challenges. Analyzing these musical expressions offers not only a deeper appreciation of Naxi cultural heritage but also informs broader discussions on the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage in the modern world (Bennett, 2017; Tang & Sornyai, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-anthropological aspects that underpin the musical life of the Naxi people, offering perspectives that may guide cultural policy and practice in minority regions globally.

Objective

To analyze the socio-anthropological aspects of the musical characteristics and contemporary status of Naxi Chinese folk songs.

Literature review

The literature review focuses on integrating theories from musicology, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology to frame the study of Naxi folk songs within a socio-anthropological context. This interdisciplinary approach provides the necessary theoretical foundation to explore how Naxi folk music, as a dynamic cultural practice, interacts with and adapts to the pressures of modernity and globalization. By examining past research and theoretical frameworks, this review identifies gaps and directs the current study toward a nuanced understanding of the musical and cultural shifts occurring within the Naxi communities.

1. Musicology and Ethnomusicology Theories: Musicology, traditionally concerned with the study of music theory, history, and performance practice, offers a structured approach to understanding the formal aspects of Naxi folk songs, such as melody, rhythm, and harmony. Ethnomusicology extends this analysis by situating music within its cultural, social, and political contexts, emphasizing how music functions as a form of social expression and identity. Ethnomusicologists often focus on the processes of musical transmission, the role of music in communal bonding, and the impact of socioeconomic changes on musical forms. This theoretical perspective is crucial for exploring how Naxi folk songs serve not only as artistic expressions but also as vital components of Naxi's cultural identity and heritage (Trehub et al., 2015; Li, 2021; Jingfang, 2023).

2. Cultural Anthropology and Sociology: Cultural anthropology provides insights into how traditions are maintained, adapted, or transformed within societies. It examines the rituals, ceremonies, and everyday practices that embed music in the social fabric of a community. Sociological theories contribute by exploring the structures and dynamics within societies that influence cultural practices. For the Naxi, this involves analyzing how factors such as migration, tourism, and economic development influence the status and function of their folk music. Together, these disciplines illuminate the interconnectedness of Naxi folk songs with broader social practices and cultural values (Nanda & Warms, 2019; Deng, 2020; Weisgrau et al., 2023).

3. Adaptation and Change in Traditional Music: This sub-topic investigates how traditional societies maintain their cultural practices in the face of modernization and globalization. It discusses the

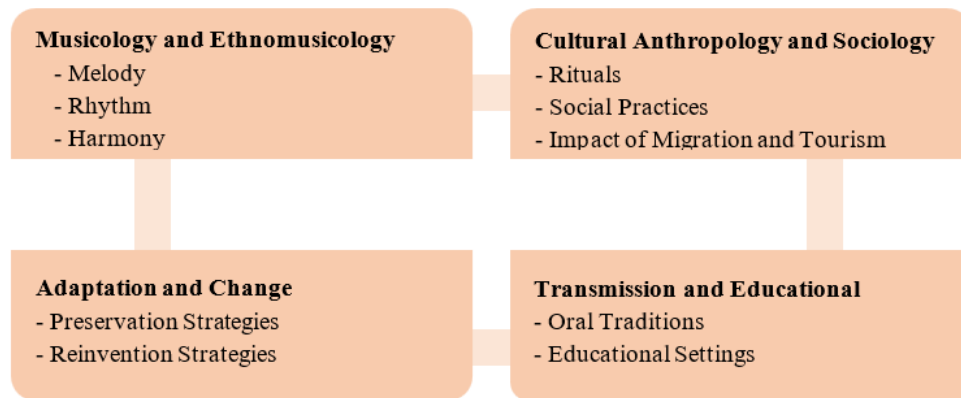


strategies used by communities to preserve, adapt, or reinvent their musical traditions as responses to external pressures and internal changes. For the Naxi, this may involve the adoption of new musical styles or the integration of traditional music into new public spheres and media. Understanding these adaptive strategies is essential for assessing the resilience of Naxi folk songs and their potential for enduring as a living tradition (Zhang et al., 2016; Emielu, 2018).

4. Transmission and Educational Practices: The transmission of musical knowledge is central to the survival of any musical tradition. This section reviews the literature on how music is taught and learned within communities, particularly focusing on oral traditions and the role of formal and informal educational settings. For the Naxi, exploring the roles of family, community elders, and cultural institutions in teaching folk songs provides insight into the mechanisms of cultural continuity and the challenges posed by generational shifts in interest and values (Gunara et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Utilizing a comprehensive review of existing literature and a mixed-methods approach, the study seeks to unravel the complex interplay between individual artistry and collective cultural dynamics. The conceptual framework for this study is structured around key components, each representing a thematic area derived from the literature review and the methodological approach.



Methodology

The methodology for this study adopts a qualitative research approach to comprehensively analyze the socio-anthropological aspects of the musical characteristics and contemporary status of Naxi Chinese folk songs. By integrating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation, the research aims to capture the rich, lived experiences of the Naxi community and their interaction with folk music. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the complex interplay between cultural preservation, adaptation, and the forces of modernization affecting the Naxi's musical traditions. The structured steps outlined below ensure a systematic collection and analysis of data, providing robust insights into how Naxi folk songs are transmitted, evolved, and sustained in contemporary contexts, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Research Methodology Steps

Step	Description	Details
1. Research Design	Definition of scope and objectives	Establish the research framework based on the integration of musicological and anthropological theories to guide the fieldwork and data collection.
2. Selection of Research Site	Identifying fieldwork location	Focus on Tacheng Township, a key area for Naxi cultural expressions, due to its rich musical heritage and vibrant cultural interactions.



Step	Description	Details
3. Participant Selection	Criteria for choosing participants	Include a diverse group of informants: professional singers, folk practitioners, cultural mediators, and community members actively involved in folk song performances.
4. Data Collection Methods	Tools and techniques for gathering data	Utilize participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-visual recordings to collect data on musical performances, cultural events, and everyday life contexts where music plays a role.
5. Data Recording	Systematic documentation	Use audio and video recordings for performances and interviews, complemented by field notes and photographic documentation to capture the context and nuances of musical expressions.
6. Data Analysis	Analyzing collected data	Employ thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to the musical characteristics and socio-cultural dynamics of Naxi folk songs. Analyze data using NVivo or a similar qualitative data analysis software to manage and code data.
7. Validation of Findings	Ensuring reliability and validity	Cross-verify the findings through triangulation, checking consistency across different data sources and feedback from community members and experts.
8. Reporting Results	Presentation of findings	Synthesize the research findings into a comprehensive format, detailing how contemporary changes influence the musical traditions of the Naxi and their cultural implications.

Results

1. The Musical Characteristics of Naxi Chinese Folk Songs

"Guqi" meaning "singing with sorrow" or "expressing inner sorrow" in the Naxi language, stands as a pivotal genre within Naxi folk songs, epitomizing the rich tapestry of Naxi musical heritage. Its slow and free rhythm, profound lyrical content, and distinct vocal range within six degrees encapsulate the essence of Naxi oral literature and folk song art. As a narrative-style song often sung solo or in duet, "Guqi" narrates traditional love stories and personal emotions, serving as a poignant carrier of Naxi culture. Its musical notes intricately mirror the fluctuations of the Naxi language, creating a natural and emotionally captivating rendition. However, due to its deviation from the Western 12-tone equal temperament, accurately notating "Guqi" remains a challenge, highlighting the reliance on traditional oral transmission for its preservation. Moreover, the diversity of "Guqi" across regions like Mingyin Township, Yulong County, and Baoshan Shitoucheng in Lijiang underscores its regional variations and linguistic nuances, further enriching its cultural significance, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Musical Characteristics of Naxi Folk Song "Guqi"

Aspect	Details
Genre	Narrative-style mountain song.
Meaning	Transliteration from the Naxi language denotes "singing with sorrow" or "expressing inner sorrow".
Rhythm and Tempo	Slow and free rhythm, resembling a free tempo.
Vocal Range	Within six degrees, characterized by a high and lofty vocal range
Melodic Features	Melodious and lyrical melody, gentle and emotionally moving, with intervals smaller than a semitone.
Musical Notation Challenges	Deviation from Western 12-tone equal temperament, difficult to accurately notate.





Aspect	Details
Regional Variations	Different names and melodies across regions like Mingyin Township, Yulong County, Baoshan Shitoucheng, and Tacheng and Ludian Township, Yulong County, showcasing linguistic nuances.
Lyric Characteristics	Written in a five-character poetic style, organized into quatrains with a two-sentence structure, utilizing unique grammatical modifiers for harmonious connection.

The singing techniques employed in performing the Naxi folk song "Guqi" are deeply rooted in the cultural and artistic traditions of the Naxi ethnic group, reflecting a unique socio-anthropological perspective on vocalization methods and special techniques, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Singing Techniques of Naxi Folk Song "Guqi"

Aspect	Details
Vocalization Accessibility	"Guqi" allows individuals with varying vocal abilities to sing melodiously, emphasizing smooth and emotionally expressive delivery over intense vocal expression.
Chanting-like Style	Characterized by a nasalized start, prolonged nasal hum, and consistent vocal position, maintaining a rounded mouth shape throughout the performance, akin to the bel canto concept in Western music.
Special Techniques	Include slow vibrato alternating between notes, pitch deviations resembling gradual vibratos, glissandos, and downward glissandos, reflecting nuances from the Naxi language and cultural expressions.

2. The Contemporary Status of Naxi Chinese Folk Songs

The Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Musical Characteristics and Contemporary Status of Naxi Chinese Folk Songs delves into a multifaceted exploration of the Naxi culture, focusing on Tachengg County as a vibrant locus of historical, geographical, and cultural significance. The rich history of Tachengg County, dating back thousands of years, unveils a tapestry of ancient human sites, including remnants of the Hongshan and Shanrong cultures, showcasing the deep-rooted heritage embedded in the region. Over the centuries, pivotal events during the Qing Dynasty, such as administrative reforms and symbolic renamings, have contributed to shaping the unique historical and cultural identity of Tachengg County.

Geographically, Tachengg County occupies a strategic position within Yunnan Province, characterized by diverse landscapes and ecological features. Its location at the confluence of different townships and counties, coupled with its proximity to the Jinsha River and neighboring Tibetan areas, underscores its geographical significance as a melting pot of cultural exchanges and interactions. Understanding the geographical context provides essential insights into the environmental influences that have shaped Naxi cultural practices, including their musical traditions.

The historical trajectory of the Naxi people, intricately intertwined with their self-designations and ethnic identities, reflects a complex mosaic of cultural affiliations and historical narratives. From ancient designations like "Maoniu Zhong" and "Moshu Yi" to the official recognition of "Naxi" as their ethnic name in the 1950s, the evolution of Naxi identity underscores the dynamic interplay between historical records, linguistic variations, and external perceptions. This historical backdrop lays the foundation for understanding the cultural ethos that informs Naxi's musical expressions.

Naxi dance encompasses a diverse range of genres, from song and dance performances like "Remei Shuo" and "Hey Mo Da" to musical dances accompanied by instruments such as the "Diao" and the ancient music dance in "White Sand Fine Music." Performative dances like the Qilin Dance, Lebashu, and Kucai/Lucai represent a fusion of music, dance, drama, and religious symbolism, showcasing the



intricate tapestry of Naxi artistic expressions. The Dongba dance, a significant religious dance performed during ceremonies and rituals, boasts over 300 dancing methods, highlighting the depth and complexity of Naxi cultural heritage in the realm of performing arts, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Naxi Dance

Source: Sohu News, https://www.sohu.com/a/116614575_516112

Traditional musical instruments play a pivotal role in Naxi musical traditions, each instrument possessing unique characteristics and historical backgrounds. The Naxi drum, known for its deep and resonating sound, adds rhythm and vigor to festivals and traditional dances. The Naxi two-reed, with its clear and sweet tones, contributes to playing traditional melodies with finesse. The dragon head huqin, percussion instrument, and celestial flute further enrich the musical landscape, offering a diverse range of sounds and textures that captivate audiences and reflect the cultural essence of the Naxi people, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Naxi Pipa

Source: Ying Liao, from fieldwork in August 2023

The contemporary status of singers in Tacheng unveils a dualistic landscape categorized into professional and folk singers, each offering unique insights into the socio-anthropological dimensions of Naxi Chinese folk songs. Professional singers, primarily employed in cultural departments, demonstrate a refined understanding of musical nuances, exemplified by luminaries like Wenguang and the four-generation music family of Taxianxiapu Village. Wenguang, a nationally recognized composer, has significantly influenced Naxi music through his compositions and affiliations with cultural institutions like the Tacheng Township Cultural Station and Lijiang County Cultural Troupe. Noteworthy is the impact of Wenguang's family members, He Qiuxiang (Dapomaji) and He Qiushi (Dapoabo), both accomplished



graduates from the Central University for Nationalities School of Music, contributing to the national cultural scene through their roles in esteemed institutions like the China National Song and Dance Ensemble and the Yunnan Provincial Literary Federation.

Furthermore, a cadre of outstanding singers has emerged within various cultural units in Lijiang, particularly in Tacheng Township, showcasing a profound connection to Naxi traditional culture. These singers, adept at folk songs, actively promote and safeguard Naxi heritage, earning accolades both domestically and internationally. This phenomenon highlights Tacheng's unique cultural soil, situated at the confluence of the Jinsha River and the Tibetan region, enriching the tapestry of Naxi folk music.

In contrast, folk singers, deeply embedded in the rustic landscapes of Tacheng, contribute significantly to the socio-anthropological fabric of Naxi folk songs. Singing, integral to their daily lives, serves as a conduit for relieving fatigue from labor and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature. Despite their pivotal role in preserving Naxi folk songs, these singers often remain unnoticed by the external world, as folk songs seamlessly integrate into their rural existence. The author's observations reveal that while representative professional singers enjoy recognition and rewards through performances, most folk inheritors lead contented lives, reserving their musical talents for special occasions such as ceremonies, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between Naxi folk songs and everyday rural life.

The socio-anthropological analysis of Naxi Chinese folk songs delves into the intricate tapestry of musical characteristics and their contemporary status within Naxi culture. This analysis aims to explore the socio-cultural dynamics, transmission processes, and the role of individuals like Mr. Yang Chensheng in the preservation and evolution of Naxi folk songs. By examining the experiences and practices of individuals deeply rooted in folk song inheritance, this study sheds light on the broader socio-anthropological dimensions of Naxi Chinese folk music.

Table 4 Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Naxi Chinese Folk Songs

Aspects	Description
Folk Song Inheritance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Learning process from mentors and peers- Mastery of folk song tunes and lyrics- Use of traditional instruments and techniques
Cultural Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Tacheng Township as a hub of Dongba culture- Unique folk songs like "Ganlu Diao"- Role of gatherings in cultural preservation
Regional Variations and Exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Understanding of Naxi folk songs across different towns- Similarities and differences in song tunes and themes- Exchanges with folk singers from diverse backgrounds
Performance and Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Role of folk singers in community events- Appreciation and recognition from local communities- Traditional instruments and performance settings
Documentation and Research Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Collection, recording, and sorting of Naxi folk songs- Involvement of research teams and institutions- Use of digital platforms for song preservation
Challenges and Changes in Folk Song Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Decline of young folk singers- Adaptation to modern media and digital platforms- Challenges in sustaining traditional song practices

Discussion

The findings from this study on the socio-anthropological aspects of Naxi Chinese folk songs reveal a complex interplay between traditional cultural expressions and contemporary societal changes. The research results are consistent with theoretical principles drawn from musicology, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology, demonstrating how Naxi folk songs serve both as artistic expressions and as vital components of cultural identity and heritage.

Adaptation and Resilience: Consistent with the theoretical insights of Emielu (2018) on the adaptation of traditional music in modern contexts, this study highlights how Naxi folk songs have adapted





to contemporary influences such as tourism and digital media. This resilience supports the theory that traditional societies find innovative ways to maintain their cultural practices, even when facing significant external pressures (Zhang et al., 2016). The diverse adaptation strategies observed, from the incorporation of new musical styles to participation in cultural festivals, illustrate the dynamic nature of Naxi music as a living tradition that is continually evolving.

Cultural Transmission and Educational Practices: The findings align with the works of Gunara et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2024), which emphasize the importance of transmission through oral traditions and educational settings. The active role of family and community elders in teaching Naxi folk songs is crucial for the preservation of these traditions, corroborating the sociological theories on the mechanisms of cultural continuity. This study further reveals that while traditional transmission pathways are robust, there is a generational shift where younger members of the community are less engaged with traditional music, posing a potential risk for future preservation.

Socio-economic Impacts: The research corroborates Deng's (2020) analysis of how socio-economic factors, such as migration and economic development, impact cultural practices. Tacheng's development into a cultural tourism hub has both supported and threatened traditional music practices by commodifying certain elements while neglecting others. This dual effect highlights the nuanced impacts of economic development on intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the socio-anthropological aspects of Naxi Chinese folk songs, documenting their musical characteristics and contemporary status within the broader context of cultural preservation and adaptation. By examining the interplay between traditional values and modern influences, the research underscores the complexity of maintaining cultural uniqueness in the face of globalization. The resilience of Naxi folk music, evident in its adaptive strategies and robust transmission practices, speaks to the broader themes of cultural sustainability and identity negotiation within minority communities. However, the challenges identified, particularly the waning interest among the youth and the pressures from economic development, indicate that the sustainability of these cultural practices is not guaranteed.

To ensure the longevity of Naxi folk songs, it is recommended that stakeholders, including cultural practitioners, educational institutions, and policy-makers, invest in strategies that engage younger generations and integrate traditional music into broader cultural and educational programs. Such efforts should aim to balance the preservation of authenticity with the need for cultural evolution, ensuring that Naxi folk music remains a vibrant and relevant part of their cultural heritage. This research contributes to the understanding of how music functions as a medium of socio-cultural resilience and negotiation, providing valuable insights that can inform cultural policy and practice in minority regions globally. Further studies could explore the impact of digital media on traditional music forms and the potential for new media to facilitate cultural transmission to younger audiences.

Recommendation

1. Enhancing Youth Engagement in Naxi Folk Music: To ensure the sustainability and transmission of Naxi folk songs, it is crucial to actively engage younger generations who are increasingly distanced from traditional cultural practices. Educational institutions, cultural organizations, and community leaders should develop innovative programs that integrate Naxi folk music into the educational curriculum and extracurricular activities. These programs could include interactive workshops, digital storytelling projects, and collaborations with young local artists to modernize and popularize Naxi music among the youth. Such initiatives would not only foster a deeper appreciation and understanding of Naxi cultural heritage among younger community members but also ensure its transmission to future generations.

2. Leveraging Digital Media for Cultural Preservation: Given the widespread influence and accessibility of digital media, harnessing these platforms can play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting Naxi folk songs. Cultural practitioners and media specialists should consider creating online repositories that feature recordings, documentaries, and educational materials about Naxi music. Additionally, social media campaigns and virtual concerts could be employed to raise awareness and keep the music accessible to a global audience. These digital strategies would help document and preserve the rich musical heritage





of the Naxi people while making it more accessible to the community at large, including the diaspora and international audiences interested in ethnomusicology and cultural studies.

3. Globalization and Commodification: The study explores the socio-anthropological aspects of Naxi folk songs, highlighting their significance in cultural heritage and adaptation. However, it suggests further research on the commodification of culture and the transformational impacts of globalization on cultural practices. Future research should focus on tourism and global consumer demand, examining the economic aspects of cultural adaptation, and analyzing how Naxi folk music adapts to changing global trends. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of intangible cultural heritage and contribute to the development of robust strategies for cultural preservation and sustainability.

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