Making “Yi Culture” Recognizable: Public Display and Internal Diversity in Liangshan

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Abstract

Public displays often give the impression of a single Yi culture, although practices across Liangshan differ in their histories, meanings, and everyday uses. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Xichang and surrounding areas in 2024, together with existing academic literature, this paper analyzes the ways in which local cultural practices become recognizable representations of a broader Yi identity. Using specific display cases, the study explores the relationship between public visibility, commonality, and internal diversity. The findings suggest that certain visual and performative features circulate more easily in public settings, contributing to a relatively unified cultural image built on existing historical and cultural connections. However, the effects on local diversity are different, as greater public visibility does not directly imply the continuity and changes in practices in local communities. These findings highlight the importance of examining public visibility and the continued practice of culture separately when discussing cultural preservation and change.

Keywords: Yi culture, Liangshan, public display, internal diversity

Introduction

"Yi culture" is often presented as a single, unified concept in public, but in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, it actually includes many local differences. Communities classified as Yi differ in language, local names, writing systems, and ways of life. Even among the Nuosu, practices vary from one area to another. Public displays often give less attention to these differences. On signs, in shops, and at festivals, local practices become recognizable as Yi to audiences who may know little about the communities in which they developed.

Based on the researcher's own fieldwork and interviews conducted in Xichang and surrounding areas of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in 2024, alongside studies by scholars such as Harrell, Bradley, and Kraef, this paper takes the Yi script, lacquerware, Yi embroidery, festivals, and the Bimo rituals as its main case studies. This study examines the question: When cultural practices that contain local variations and serve specific social functions are transformed into publicly recognizable forms of "Yi culture," how does this process affect cultural recognizability, commonality, and internal diversity?

Historical and Theoretical Background

Cultural Continuity and Local Variation in Liangshan

Liangshan's mountains and river valleys have shaped where people live and how they interact with neighboring communities. The Nuosu population is relatively concentrated in the core of Greater Liangshan, whereas the Anning River Valley and western Liangshan have more mixed populations. Nuosu communities have long inhabited the mountains, and some

began migrating westward across the Anning River in the middle of Qin Dynasty. Although the terrain kept some settlements relatively separate, migration and contact with neighboring groups continued to change local populations and social relationships (Harrell, 2001).

Lineages help maintain social ties across Nuosu communities. In the study of Xiao Liangshan, Hill and Diehl (2001) describe patrilineal lineages connected through marriage alliances and linked to social organization in particular geographical areas. Ma Erzi (2001) shows how clan names, generational names, and oral genealogies allow people to identify their relationships and trace connections to earlier generations. These practices help explain continuity in Nuosu society without implying that life is the same throughout Liangshan.

Local Ethnic Boundaries and Cultural Markers

To understand this kind of community, one cannot rely solely on an official ethnic classification. Local ethnic boundaries are mainly created and maintained by daily social interactions. The ways people refer to themselves and others, the languages they speak, the groups with which they intermarry, and the cultural differences they choose to emphasize can all influence where these boundaries are drawn. Dress, food, housing, and rituals can also become “ethnic markers.” Their importance depends on where people use them and their relationship with respect to whom they are used. Thus, the same cultural marker might carry different meanings depending on situations and contexts (Harrell, 2001).

One was culturally and residentially separate from nearby Han communities. Another lived alongside Han residents and shared much of their way of life, although both groups still regarded themselves as distinct. In the third, residents preferred the name “Shuitian people” to “Yi people.” This illustrates that official classifications, observable cultural differences,

and the self-identification of local residents do not necessarily align.

Yi as a Broader Ethnic Category and Identity

Nuosu and Yi refer to different levels of identity. Yi is a broader category that includes Nuosu, Nasu, Nisu, and other groups, with further linguistic variation within them. In Liangshan, the Shynra Nuosu dialect spoken around Xide was chosen as the basis for the standard pronunciation. A standardized Yi script was developed for textbooks, newspapers, and other publications (Bradley, 2001). Standardization gave education and public communication a more consistent written form. However, the term "Yi script" still covers differences in writing systems, pronunciation, and use. A public display of the standardized form can leave those differences difficult to see.

Scholars differ in how they explain the development of a broader Yi identity. Harrell (1995) examines how scholars in different periods brought geographically dispersed groups into a shared Yi history through accounts of language, origins, historical records, and social structure. By contrast, Li Shaoming (2002) gives more weight to connections that already existed among these groups. Based on ethnic surveys from the 1950s, Li points to shared ancestral legends, genealogical systems, languages, scripts, and other cultural forms. In this account, later classification and social interaction just strengthened an existing sense of commonality.

Public presentation adds another layer to this history. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) calls the incorporation of cultural practices into heritage systems "metacultural production": practices are selected, reorganized, and assigned new value. The form of a heritage display therefore helps shape what its audience understands the culture to be.

Therefore, the “Yi culture” discussed in this paper is constructed upon existing shared connections, local variations, and later processes of public presentation. The following analysis will approach public representations of “Yi culture” considering both these histories and local difference, and examine which features become recognizable in wider public settings and how much of their regional variations and social context remains visible.

Making Yi Culture Recognizable

Yi Script in Public Space

Yi script appears on street signs and in schools in Xichang. Even someone who cannot read it may recognize the characters as a sign of “Yi culture.” In this way, the script can mark a place as Yi while communicate written information at the same time. Nevertheless, its visibility tells us little about how many people can read or write it.



Figure 1. Yi script in public spaces in Xichang, 2024. Photographs by the author

When interviewing local students, some said that they could speak the Yi language but could not read or write the script. They said that their high-school teaching had covered only basic characters. During a visit to Siga Elementary School, principal Riga Axi also felt that learning Yi script had become less important, as the bonus points related to it in the college entrance examination (gaokao) had been gradually reduced. These accounts cannot

represent every school or family in Liangshan, but they show why public signage is a poor guide to everyday literacy. Professor Qubi Wolong raised a related concern: some cultural and creative products used Yi characters that were upside down or incomplete. On such packaging, the script supplied a recognizable Yi appearance even when its meaning had been misunderstood.

The script can also be absent from displays of "Yi culture." As pointed out by Harrell (2001), there was a coffee-table book about Liangshan containing images of traditional clothing, utensils, Bimo, and other cultural subjects, but its captions were in Mandarin and English, with none in Nuosu script. The book addressed a wider readership in languages that audience was more likely to understand. This example shows how the intended audience can affect whether Yi script is displayed at all.

Lacquerware and Embroidery in Everyday Life and Commerce

The changing uses of lacquerware show how a craft can become a public marker of identity. Red, yellow, and black lacquerware in Liangshan was once made mainly by particular lineages in certain villages for use as tableware, including rice and soup bowls. By the 1980s, factories had emerged in Xide and Zhaojue, later producing beer cups and lidded teacups suited to urban use. Some urban Nuosu families continued to eat from lacquerware while also displaying it in cabinets as an expression of ethnic identity (Harrell, 2001). Growing demand also changed production. Machine lathes could shape the wooden forms more quickly, and many surface patterns continued to be painted by hand. In some Yi restaurants the researcher visited, industrially produced tableware carried similar lacquerware colors and designs. Traditional craftsmanship is no longer the priority here, yet the most

easily recognizable characteristics have been preserved in order to create an overall atmosphere associated with “Yi culture.”

At Ayingmo, a shop selling handmade Yi embroidered clothing, owner Ayingzi described a less standardized way of working. The designed patterns are all taken from nature, daily life, and the embroiderers’ own ideas, so each piece differed slightly. A relatively simple garment took at least a month to make; a complex one could take a year or two. The time involved and the resulting prices limited the shop’s customer base. The garments were also hung closely together, making the detailed embroidery difficult to see from outside. The shop also had few promotional channels beyond the premises themselves.

CHINAYI worked differently. Brand manager Shama Youyou explained that the brand collaborated with embroiderers using standardized design specifications. Garments within a product category had to be consistent in size and pattern. Online sales brought this work to a wider customer base, making Yi embroidery easier to find and buy as well as giving embroiderers access to markets that were otherwise harder to reach.

In the wider fashion market, companies may use selected motifs or color combinations without adopting the full craft process. Machine embroidery and printing allow these features to appear on many more garments. Buyers can recognize the designs as Yi, but the products reveal less about the work of a particular embroiderer or the local experiences behind a pattern.

Festivals and Rituals in Public View

Starting from 1993, the Liangshan Prefectural Government launched a modern International Torch Festival with sports competitions, song and dance performances, and

beauty pageants. Several ethnic groups in Southwest China, including Han communities, celebrate the Torch Festival. Nonetheless, the modern Torch Festival is explicitly identified as an “Yi festival” (Harrell, 2001).

Moving Bimo rituals into public entertainment raises more contentious questions. Bimos are ritual specialists who mediate between people, gods, and spirits. They undergo long periods of training to master ritual texts and practices, and conduct ceremonies connected to specific needs in local life, including healing and funerals. Professor Qubi described performances of Bimo rituals and chanting in a hot pot restaurant. Some cultural tourism practitioners viewed such performances as a way to introduce Bimo culture to more people, but Professor Qubi regarded the dining setting as disrespectful to the rituals’ sacred character. This disagreement concerned how Bimo culture should be presented. Restaurant audiences might notice the chanting and movements without understanding the needs that the rituals address in community life.

Public Visibility and Local Diversity

Hall (1997) argues that representation itself helps produce meaning. The cases in Liangshan show how this happens through choices about what to put on a sign, sell in a shop, or perform for an audience. Each setting makes some features of a practice more apparent than others. Taken together, these choices shape a shared image of “Yi culture,” although local differences do not all fit equally well within it.

What Becomes Recognizable as "Yi Culture"?

Yi characters, the red-yellow-black lacquerware, embroidery patterns, and festival dress all share one important feature: they can be quickly noticed and repeated across different media and occasions. Understanding other aspects requires much more knowledge and context. An outside viewer may not hear the differences between regional dialects or know how an embroidered pattern relates to its maker's experience. The family and religious needs behind a Bimo ritual are also unlikely to be apparent from watching a short performance.

Walters (2023) similarly describes Nuosu script in Xichang's public spaces as a cultural marker whose significance can exceed its practical use. Alongside the fieldwork accounts, this suggests that people may recognize the script as Yi without being able to read it or judge whether it has been used correctly.

Thus, public recognition depends largely on the audience and the setting. A feature that is easy to reproduce on packaging or identify at a festival has more opportunities to circulate, and that ease of circulation does not necessarily reflect its importance in local cultural life.

Producing Commonality Through Display

When similar features recur across displays, audiences can begin to associate practices from different places with one shared Yi identity. This association draws on historical and cultural ties among Yi communities, as well as the effects of ethnic classification, education, and everyday interaction. Public display gives those connections a visible form.

Harrell (2001) uses “ethnic color” to discuss publicly presented cultural forms in Liangshan, including dress, performances, and festivals. Such displays offer ways for local people to express pride and introduce their culture to outsiders. Yet the resulting image is selective. Embroidery from different areas may vary in design, technique, and how garments are worn. When products are sold under the same Yi embroidery label, familiar patterns and colors can become more prominent than these differences.

Repeated displays can strengthen expectations about what represents “Yi culture.” As certain forms become familiar, they are more likely to be treated as typical. Less familiar local versions then have less influence on the image that outside audiences encounter.

Internal Difference: Uneven Visibility

A difference that is absent from public display may still matter in community life. Hafstein (2009) emphasizes the selection involved in heritage-making, through which practices are placed in new systems of presentation. Although this argument cannot explain every case in Liangshan, it helps distinguish a practice’s public standing from its continued local use. Limited visibility alone is insufficient evidence that a local variation has disappeared.

Commercial requirements affect variation more directly. The contrast between Ayingmo and CHINAYI illustrates how production requirements can influence the space for individual variation. CHINAYI helps bring embroidery to a wider market, although they limit interesting nuances in the garments produced. Here, standardization changes how garments are made as well as how they appear to buyers.

For Bimo, the shift concerns religious authority and meaning. According to Kraef (2014), the Bimo were initially ritual specialists of the Nuosu religion. However, beginning in the late 20th century, academic research, local cultural policies, and tourism development generalized related practices as “Bimo culture” and shaped the Bimo into important representatives of Nuosu culture and, by extension, the broader “Yi culture.” Their religious role was increasingly interpreted in heritage terms. The restaurant performance described by Professor Qubi brings this tension into a specific setting. Tourism practitioners valued the chance to reach audiences, while Qubi questioned whether that setting respected the practice. Greater visibility did not settle whose interpretation should guide its presentation. Instead, the performance made that disagreement apparent.

Conclusion

The cases examined above show how a recognizable public image of “Yi culture” takes shape through signs, products, and performances. Features that are easy to identify and reproduce recur across these settings. They give visible form to existing historical and cultural connections, and the choices involved in displaying them influence what audiences come to regard as representative.

Internal diversity is affected in several ways. Some differences may continue in community life even when outsiders rarely encounter them. Others may narrow when commercial production requires consistent designs. Bimo performances show how a practice can also acquire new interpretations that its practitioners or other observers contest. None of these changes can be understood from visibility alone.

For discussions of cultural preservation, this means looking beyond how often a symbol appears. The Yi script examples raise questions about literacy and correct use; the embroidery cases direct attention to production methods and the choices available to producers. The dispute over Bimo performances concerns the setting and meaning of ritual. These are distinct questions that a general claim about greater cultural awareness cannot resolve.

However, the fieldwork in this paper was concentrated in Xichang and nearby areas, so the selected cases cannot represent all of Liangshan. Comparisons with other parts of the prefecture and Southwest China could show how these processes vary by place in a greater scope. More detailed work with residents, cultural practitioners, and outside audiences could also clarify how they interpret the same symbols and whose views influence public presentations of “Yi culture.”

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