

Historical Development and Literacy Transmission of the Poya Songbook

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ABSTRACT

The Poya Songbook, an integral part of Zhuang traditional culture, embodies rich music and folklore passed down through generations. This study aims to examine the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook for education and literacy studies in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. Drawing upon a combination of ethnographic methods and semiotic analysis, the research delves into the intricate journey of the Poya Songbook, contrasting its state before and after the pivotal year 2006, when it received official recognition as an intangible cultural heritage. Three key informants, deeply rooted in the local cultural milieu, provide valuable insights into the songbook's transformation, its role in education, and the challenges of preserving its authenticity amidst modern influences. The data analysis discerns shifts in transmission methods, content, and performance, shedding light on the evolving relationship between tradition and cultural identity. The findings underscore the importance of balancing preservation with adaptation to ensure the continued vitality of this cherished cultural heritage. Suggestions for the sustained safeguarding of the Poya Songbook include innovative educational initiatives that integrate its teachings into contemporary curricula, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Zhuang cultural identity.

Key words: Poya Songbook, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Preservation, Education, Yunnan Province, Literacy Transmission

INTRODUCTION

The preservation and promotion of indigenous cultural heritage are paramount in education and literacy studies (Jacob et al., 2015; Wu & Bhengsri, 2023). This imperative is particularly salient when examining the rich tapestry of traditions and oral narratives that have sustained diverse communities throughout history. The Poya Songbook, an integral part of Zhuang minority culture in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, stands as a testament to the enduring power of folk music and oral traditions in nurturing education and literacy within ethnic communities (Davis, 2005; Campbell, 2017; Mahoney, 2020; Sun, 2023).

The Poya Songbook, an embodiment of the Zhuang cultural heritage, is a unique form of artistic expression that has played a pivotal role in recording and transmitting the production and life modes of the Zhuang people. This traditional songbook, rooted in the heart of rural Zhuang society, has defied the test of time, persisting from the traditional Zhuang farming society to the modern era. Its significance lies in its artistic value and its profound potential to contribute to education and literacy in the Zhuang community (Shi et al., 2017; Yunchuan & Miaoyu, 2020; Sun, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Despite its cultural significance, the Poya Songbook faces several challenges that warrant in-depth exploration. Rapid societal changes, evolving educational systems, and

the encroachment of modernity have spurred transformations in this cultural treasure's transmission, preservation, and adaptation (Bortolotto, 2007; Bearman & Geber, 2008). Furthermore, while there has been a growing focus on protecting intangible cultural heritage, more research should delve into the social consequences of such initiatives, particularly in anthropology and art anthropology. This research problem underscores the need to investigate the historical development and transmission of the Poya Songbook and its implications for education and literacy studies in Funing County (Lin & Xing, 2019; Stefano, 2021).

The primary research objective of this study is to examine the historical development and transmission of the Poya Songbook for education and literacy studies in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. Through a comprehensive exploration of the Poya Songbook's evolution and its role in the Zhuang community, we aim to shed light on how this traditional art form has contributed to education and literacy within the ethnic group (Quan & Mi, 2013; Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

This research holds significant implications for education and literacy studies and the broader context of cultural preservation. By unraveling the historical journey of the Poya Songbook, we can glean valuable insights into the dynamics

of education within Zhuang communities, where oral traditions and folk music have long served as vehicles for transmitting knowledge and cultural values. Additionally, this study provides a noteworthy case study in art anthropology, offering a unique perspective on the impact of intangible cultural heritage initiatives on local communities and social dynamics (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021; Eichler, 2021). Ultimately, our findings aim to underscore the importance of safeguarding and celebrating indigenous cultural expressions as vital components of education and literacy development.

Research Question

- How have the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook within the Zhuang community in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook are paramount for education and literacy studies, especially in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. This literature review explores key theories that underpin the study and shed light on the significance of the Poya Songbook within education, literacy, and cultural preservation. Two primary research theories, the Semiotic Theory and the Anthropological Theory of Music, provide valuable frameworks for analyzing this cultural artifact.

Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory, as developed by scholars like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, offers a lens through which the cultural symbols, signs, and meanings embedded in the Poya Songbook can be comprehended (Peirce, 1931; Saussure, 1959). This theory emphasizes the role of signs and symbols as conveyors of cultural knowledge and values (Eco, 1976). Within the context of the Poya Songbook, semiotics allow researchers to investigate how patterns, lyrics, and melodies serve as semiotic elements that carry profound cultural meanings (Bouissac, 1998). By applying semiotic analysis, the study seeks to understand how these elements facilitate the transmission of knowledge and literacy within the Zhuang community (Cobley, 2010). Moreover, this theory highlights the significance of interpreting cultural symbols and signs in the context of education and literacy studies (Peirce, 1931).

Anthropological Theory of Music

The Anthropological Theory of Music, rooted in ethnomusicology, provides a holistic framework for examining music's cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions within a community (Merriam, 1964). In the case of the Poya Songbook, this theory enables researchers to explore the multifaceted role of music as a cultural practice (Nettl, 2005). Music, including its melody, rhythm, and performance, is not merely an aesthetic expression but a dynamic tool for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge (Titon et al., 2009). By applying

the Anthropological Theory of Music, the study aims to uncover how music functions as a bridge between individuals and their cultural heritage, contributing to education and literacy development among the Zhuang people (Rice, 2014). This theory underscores the importance of considering the socio-cultural context in which music is created, performed, and passed down through generations (Merriam, 1964).

By employing Semiotic Theory (Peirce, 1931; Saussure, 1959) and the Anthropological Theory of Music (Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 2005), this study endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. These theories will guide the analysis of how this cultural artifact has played a pivotal role in education, literacy, and the preservation of Zhuang heritage within the local community (Cobley, 2010; Eco, 1976; Bouissac, 1998; Titon et al., 2009; Rice, 2014). Through a multidisciplinary approach, this study sheds light on the intricate interplay between culture, music, and education, contributing to the broader education and literacy studies field.

METHOD

Selection of Research Site

The research site selection for this study is based on the historical and cultural significance of Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, the primary location for preserving and transmitting the Poya Songbook. Funing County serves as a representative community deeply rooted in the Zhuang cultural tradition and is known for its rich heritage related to the Poya Songbook. The choice of this site allows for an in-depth examination of the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook within its authentic cultural context, as shown in Figure 1.

Selection of Key Informants

The selection of key informants for this research involves a purposive sampling approach aimed at identifying individuals with expertise, knowledge, and experience related to the Poya Songbook. Three key informants will include older members of the Zhuang community who have actively participated in preserving and transmitting the songbook. Namely, local scholars, cultural experts, and Poya Songbook inheritors will be selected for their valuable insights into the cultural and educational aspects of the songbook. Including a diverse group of informants ensures a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Research Tools

To gather data for the study, a combination of qualitative research methods will be employed, as shown in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be conducted following a thematic analysis approach. The collected interview transcripts, observational



Figure 1. Map of research site
 Source: Travel China Guide (n.d.), Chinafolio (n.d.)

Table 1. Research tools

Research Tools	Description
In-Depth Interviews	Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants to elicit their personal experiences, knowledge, and perspectives regarding the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook. These interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis
Participant Observation	Researchers will engage in participant observation within the community, attending cultural events, gatherings, and performances where the Poya Songbook is practiced and shared. Observational notes and field diaries will be maintained to document observations and insights
Archival Research	Archival materials, such as historical records, documents, and photographs related to the Poya Songbook, will be reviewed to provide historical context, and support the findings

notes, and archival materials will be coded and categorized to identify recurring themes, patterns, and narratives related to the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook. The analysis will involve a qualitative interpretation of the data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the cultural, educational, and literacy dimensions within the context of Funing County. Triangulation of data from multiple sources will enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

RESULTS

The Poya Songbook, a significant cultural treasure of the Zhuang people in Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, is a unique representation of their rich heritage. The Poya Songbook is an intricate repository of native Zhuang traditional culture, primarily emphasizing the preservation of local folk music culture. Its origins date back several generations, with the local inheritors such as Nong Fengmei and Nong Liying being instrumental in passing down this cultural gem to subsequent generations, as shown in Figure 2.

The Historical Development of the Poya Songbook

Before the year 2006 of poya song

Before the pivotal year 2006, the Poya Songbook had been a hidden gem within the cultural fabric of Funing County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. During this era, the Poya Songbook thrived as a quintessential embodiment of Zhuang ethnic culture. It was an oral tradition passed down through generations, characterized by its improvisational nature and the transmission of melodies through the memory method of patterns. Key findings from this period are shown in Table 2:

After the year 2006 of poya song

Following the year 2006, marked by the public display of the Poya Songbook, significant developments occurred in its historical trajectory. This period witnessed a shift from obscurity to recognition and systematic preservation. The Poya Songbook began to transition into a more prominent cultural artifact. Key findings from this period as shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Key findings before the year 2006 of poya song

Section	Key finding
Native Cultural Preservation	The Poya Songbook was deeply embedded in the local Zhuang culture, serving as a vital repository of their linguistic heritage, historical narratives, and social customs. It played an indispensable role in preserving the unique cultural identity of the Zhuang people, who predominantly relied on oral transmission to impart knowledge and tradition
Pattern Memory and Improvisation	The songbook's distinctive feature was its pattern memory system. Native cloth patterns served as mnemonic devices, aiding in the recollection of melodies and lyrics. This allowed for improvisation and creative expression within the traditional songs. It created a dynamic, evolving musical culture that retained its national characteristics
Local Inheritors as Core Carriers	The preservation of the Poya Songbook predominantly relied on the local inheritors, such as Nong Fengmei and Nong Liying. These individuals possessed exceptional talent and played a pivotal role in passing down the cultural traditions and skills associated with the songbook. They innovated while staying true to the songbook's original essence, ensuring its continuity within the local ecological environment

Table 3. Key findings after the year 2006 of poya song

Section	Key finding
Systematic Protection and Academic Recognition	Local government and cultural departments established protection groups and editorial committees dedicated to safeguarding the Poya Songbook. Its cultural significance was recognized academically, and principles from anthropology, ethnology, and culturology were applied to understand its role in national culture and art
Publication and Promotion	The Poya Songbook underwent extensive research, excavation, and publication efforts. It was documented, translated, and annotated for wider dissemination. Efforts were made to bring it to the academic forefront and to the attention of the public. This marked a shift from its secluded existence to a more accessible and visible position in the cultural landscape
Youth Engagement and Cultural Revitalization	The Poya Songbook was preserved through initiatives like study halls and cultural monuments, involving the younger generation. These efforts not only boosted cultural confidence in local Zhuang communities but also improved the ecological environment, promoting the continued development of cultural traditions.
Recreation and Innovation	To bridge tradition and modernity, the Poya Songbook underwent re-creation. Innovations were introduced, including multi-part singing, refined vocal training, and adaptations for contemporary audiences. These changes aimed to enhance its accessibility and acceptance while preserving its original cultural essence



Figure 2. Poya songbook
Source: China Daily (n.d.)

The period following the year 2006 marked a transformative phase in the historical development of the Poya Songbook, shifting from localized obscurity to broader recognition, preservation, and adaptation. These developments have profound implications for education and literacy studies, as they highlight the role of cultural heritage in promoting literacy, preserving linguistic diversity, and fostering a sense of identity within indigenous communities, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Inheritor collection of Poya songbooks
Source: Tingting Li, from fieldwork in April 2021

The Transmission of Poya Songbook

Inheritance of song books

The transmission of the Poya Songbook is deeply rooted in the local Zhuang community's traditions and cultural practices. Before the year 2006, the preservation of this unique musical heritage primarily relied on oral

Table 4. Inheritance transmission of song books

Section	Key finding
Teaching by Mouth	Local inheritors like Nong Fengmei and Nong Liying played pivotal roles in passing down the Poya Songbook to future generations. The transmission occurred through memory patterns and oral methods. During daily life and labor, bearers of the songs would sing the melodies, improvising as they went along. This process enabled others, including children, to internalize the song's melody and creative features, gradually mastering the entire song book. This mode of oral transmission became a fixed tradition in the local community, perpetuating the song book's essence
Pattern Memory	The unique feature of the Poya Village's native song book inheritance lies in its pattern memory system. Due to limited access to music recording techniques in their closed living environment, ancestors created a memory system based on native cloth patterns. These patterns served as memory aids, enabling individuals to improvise love songs and maintain the songs' fluidity and authenticity. Although the song book did not contain fixed titles or content, its improvisational nature and national characteristics remained intact
Inheritance by Inheritors	Poya Village's song book relied on the inheritors themselves, who carried forward the cultural traditions and skills related to the Poya Songbook. Each inheritor learned various tunes from their predecessors, adding their own interpretations and emotions. This innovative process allowed for the continuous development of the musical culture and traditional skills while staying true to the predecessors' expressions of thought and emotion

Table 5. Cultural inheritance transmission of song book

Section	Key finding
Heritage Protection Measures	The Poya Songbook, an intangible cultural heritage, was safeguarded by local government and cultural departments through protection groups and editorial committees. The book was excavated, deciphered, and published, and was officially recognized in 2011. Departments also invested in financial support and established cultural centers to showcase local culture, attracting younger generations
Cultural Integration	The government and local authorities worked to integrate the Poya Songbook into broader cultural activities and poverty alleviation efforts. This was achieved through infrastructure development, such as road construction, cultural monuments, and stage squares, creating an environment that encouraged the villagers to continue developing their cultural traditions
Recreation and Adaptation	Recognizing the need for the Poya Songbook to adapt to contemporary aesthetics, artists engaged in re-creation. They introduced multi-part singing, enriched the acoustics, and standardized the songs' structure. The original language mode of the Zhuang nationality was preserved, spreading the Zhuang culture through competitions and performances

transmission, reflecting the natural evolution of music within the community. Key aspects of this inheritance, as shown in Table 4.

The cultural inheritance transmission of song book

Following the discovery of the Poya Songbook in 2006, local scholars and cultural authorities recognized its significance as an integral part of Zhuang folk songs. To protect and promote this cultural heritage, as shown in Table 5.

In conclusion, the transmission of the Poya Songbook reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, oral transmission, and cultural recognition. This cultural treasure has thrived, both within the local community and on the larger stage, as it inspires and resonates with audiences, preserving its essence for future generations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research findings align with several theoretical principles explored in the literature review. Firstly, the application of Semiotic Theory, as discussed by Peirce (1931) and Eco (1976), provided a valuable framework for understanding the symbolic and cultural significance of the Poya Songbook. The symbols and icons within the songbook

represent a rich cultural heritage, and their transmission over generations underscores the semiotic nature of this heritage. Furthermore, the Anthropological Theory of Music, as discussed by Merriam (1964) and Nettl (2005), helped contextualize the Poya Songbook within the broader field of ethnomusicology. The study's findings shed light on the role of music in cultural identity and education, consistent with the anthropological perspective on music.

The research objectives were centered on understanding the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook in Funing County. The findings clearly distinguished the Poya Songbook's evolution before and after 2006. Before 2006, the songbook was primarily a local tradition with limited visibility beyond the community. However, after 2006, concerted efforts by local authorities and cultural departments resulted in its recognition as an intangible cultural heritage. This transition aligns with the research objective of examining historical development. Despite the achievements in preserving and promoting the Poya Songbook, challenges remain. The impact of external influences on traditional cultural practices, as discussed by Campbell (2017) and Davis (2005), was evident. The transition from oral transmission to more structured forms of preservation raises questions about the authenticity and spontaneity of the songbook's performance. Balancing the

need for preservation with the risk of cultural commodification is a critical challenge.

In conclusion, this study delved into the historical development and literacy transmission of the Poya Songbook in Funing County, Yunnan Province, China. The research findings revealed a dynamic process of cultural preservation and transformation. The Poya Songbook, deeply rooted in Zhuang traditional culture, has transitioned from a local tradition to a recognized form of intangible cultural heritage. The study's alignment with semiotic theory and anthropological theory of music provided a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the cultural significance of the songbook.

However, challenges persist in balancing preservation with authenticity and addressing external influences on traditional practices. The study underscores the importance of education and literacy studies in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, as Yunchuan and Miaoyu (2020) and Wu and Bhengsri (2023) discussed. Promoting cultural education and literacy can be pivotal in preserving the Poya Songbook and similar traditions.

In conclusion, the research findings contribute to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage and provide valuable insights into the preservation and transmission of traditional music cultures. The Poya Songbook's journey from local tradition to cultural heritage exemplifies the complex interplay between tradition, modernity, and cultural identity, highlighting the need for thoughtful and sustainable preservation efforts.

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