



Cultural Identity and Musical Heritage: The Role of Dai Folk Songs in the Water Festival of Xishuangbanna

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The Water Festival in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, is a central cultural and spiritual event for the Dai ethnic group, during which traditional Dai folk songs play a critical role in expressing cultural identity. This study aims to examine the role of Dai folk songs in representing the cultural identity and musical heritage within the Water Festival of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province.

Methodology: This research employed a qualitative ethnographic approach combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, audio-visual recordings, and document analysis. Fieldwork was conducted with 26 informants on local musicians, cultural custodians, educators, and festival participants. Thematic analysis was used to identify key cultural, ritual, and educational functions of folk songs.

Results: Cultural representation—songs reflect local myths, Buddhist teachings, and historical consciousness; Ritual function—music accompanies sacred ceremonies such as almsgiving and the bathing of Buddha statues; Intergenerational transmission—songs are taught orally, through schools, and on digital platforms, balancing tradition with modern outreach. Figures and tables documented the integration of music in festival life and cultural preservation strategies.

Conclusion: Dai folk songs are vital in sustaining the cultural identity and musical heritage of the Dai people. Their adaptability across generations and platforms demonstrates resilience and offers a model for preserving intangible heritage in changing social contexts. These findings contribute to broader discussions in cultural preservation and ethnomusicology by illustrating how traditional music can remain meaningful and adaptive in the face of modern pressures.

Keywords: Dai Folk Songs; Water Festival; Cultural Identity; Musical Heritage; Ethnomusicology

Introduction

Xishuangbanna, a culturally diverse region in China, is home to the Dai ethnic group, an indigenous community deeply connected to nature, religion, and traditional art. The Water Festival, Pi Mai or Songkran, is the most significant annual event for the Dai people, symbolizing

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purification, renewal, and spiritual rebirth (Intason et al., 2023; Minqi & Meiyu, 2024; Zeng, 2018; Zeng, 2019). Music plays a crucial role in this festival, with Dai folk songs being integral components of religious and social ceremonies. These songs accompany various activities, carrying centuries of oral tradition, Buddhist teachings, agricultural symbolism, and moral narratives passed down through generations (Dhaka, 2025; Lei, 2024; Tang & Sornyai, 2023).

Dai folk songs, despite their cultural significance, are facing challenges due to modernization, urbanization, and global popular culture. The rise of tourism and digital technologies has altered traditional music's performance, content, and function. This has raised concerns about authenticity, dilution, and ritual meaning (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018; Mazlan et al., 2025; Zhang & Sornyai, 2024). While several studies highlight the symbolic value of ethnic music, few have specifically examined how these changes affect the role of Dai folk songs within the ritual and cultural landscape of the Water Festival. This study addresses this gap by focusing on how Dai folk songs continue to serve as vehicles of cultural identity and communal memory amid shifting sociocultural contexts.

Rather than viewing preservation and adaptation as opposing forces, this research explores their intersection, investigating how tradition is maintained, reinterpreted, or transformed within contemporary festival practices. The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of Dai folk songs in representing the cultural identity and musical heritage within the Water Festival of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province. This involves exploring the traditional and contemporary functions of music during the festival and identifying how these songs continue to express the values, beliefs, and collective memory of the Dai people. In doing so, the research seeks to address the question: What role do Dai folk songs play in representing the cultural identity and musical heritage within the Water Festival of Xishuangbanna? To answer this, the study combines field observations, interviews with cultural practitioners, and musicological analysis to understand the depth and complexity of these performances, their symbolic meanings, and their significance within the larger framework of ethnic identity and intangible cultural heritage (Eichler, 2021; Williamon et al., 2021).

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role traditional music plays in cultural continuity and transformation. It provides insights into how traditional music can express cultural identity and bridge the spiritual and social, highlighting the interplay between sacred ritual and public celebration (Liu et al., 2024; Miao & Zhang, 2024; William & Nathalie, 2025). The study also highlights the adaptability and resilience of Dai folk songs, providing valuable reference for cultural policymakers, educators, and ethnomusicologists to support community-led efforts to sustain traditional arts in the 21st century.





Literature Review

The Water Festival in Xishuangbanna features Dai folk songs that represent cultural memory and religious significance. However, research on the Dai ethnic group's traditions is limited. To understand the role of music in this context, it is crucial to examine literature and theoretical frameworks in musicology, ethnomusicology, and cultural identity studies. This helps clarify how music functions as an artistic expression and a vital social and spiritual tool for the Dai people. Yet, much of the existing scholarship tends to focus either on general descriptions of Dai musical traditions or on the festival as a cultural spectacle, without fully exploring the intersection of music, ritual function, and identity construction within this specific ceremonial context. This study addresses that gap by integrating these theoretical lenses to analyze how Dai folk songs contribute to the symbolic and lived expressions of cultural heritage.

1. Musicological Foundations

Musicology is crucial in understanding the structural and expressive elements of Dai folk music. Dai festival songs often follow pentatonic scale patterns, repetitive melodic phrases, and rhythmic cycles that reflect natural and ritualistic patterns. These elements serve as expressions of cultural continuity and are purposefully designed to match specific moments within the Water Festival. Musicological analysis helps researchers understand how these songs evoke emotional responses, reinforce ritual timing, and foster shared cultural experiences. Musicology also helps in understanding how Dai folk music blends sacred and secular traditions, as many compositions are learned through oral tradition. Music theory helps identify shifts in musical language over time, particularly with modern adaptations incorporating Western harmony or electronic instrumentation, reflecting how musical heritage evolves while maintaining recognizable patterns that root the music in its traditional setting (Beibei, 2024; Prakobboon, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). However, most of these studies remain at the level of descriptive analysis, without fully connecting musical structure to community practice or its evolving significance in contemporary ritual life. This research builds on musicological frameworks by analyzing not just melodic and harmonic patterns, but also how these patterns are embedded within spiritual timing, festival symbolism, and intergenerational teaching methods.

2. Ethnomusicological Approaches

Ethnomusicology is a field that studies music within its cultural context, particularly in the context of Dai folk songs during the Water Festival. It considers music as a cultural activity deeply connected to ritual, belief, and community identity. Field-based ethnomusicological research allows for an examination of how songs are performed, transmitted, and interpreted within the Dai community. Each performance is embedded with meaning that resonates with local spirituality, communal values, and generational knowledge. Participant observation and interviews

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with local musicians, temple leaders, and community elders provide insights into the symbolic meanings of songs and their placement within the festival's ritual timeline. Ethnomusicologists also note how music serves as a tool for social cohesion, reaffirming shared heritage and spiritual purpose (Liu & Song, 2025; Pang & Sensai, 2025; Seekhunlio & Chuangprakhon, 2021). While these approaches underscore music's role in community bonding, they rarely interrogate how music reflects negotiation between tradition and innovation, especially in response to modernization, tourism, and the digital media landscape. This study contributes to the field by examining how the performance of Dai songs, while rooted in ritual, now navigates the complexities of public display, heritage commodification, and cultural adaptation.

3. Music and Cultural Identity

Dai folk songs play a significant role in the Water Festival, as they serve as vessels for cultural memory, encoding language, belief, and tradition. Singing these songs, especially in communal settings, reinforces a sense of belonging among participants and becomes an audible symbol of the Dai people's identity, beliefs, and spiritual and social expression. Music carries emotion and embodiment, allowing identity to be experienced holistically. In festival contexts, this connection is especially powerful, as people gather in public spaces to participate in ritual music-making, affirming their ethnic identity and sharing it with others, including tourists. The performance of traditional music during the Water Festival becomes a moment of cultural diplomacy, showcasing heritage and internal solidarity (Best, 2018; de Quadros, 2018; Ingalls, 2018). Despite this, few studies have explored how these musical expressions function simultaneously as acts of resistance, continuity, and negotiation in the face of external cultural pressures. This research extends the discourse on music and identity by critically examining how Dai folk songs represent not only a sense of 'being Dai' but also a dynamic process of cultural self-articulation amid evolving festival contexts.

Research Conceptual Framework

This study uses an interdisciplinary approach, combining ethnomusicology, cultural identity theory, and heritage studies (Hajimia et al., 2023; Yuan, 2025), to examine Dai folk songs as living cultural expressions. It aims to understand how music functions within the ritual structure of the Water Festival and contributes to the ongoing transmission of cultural heritage in Xishuangbanna. Each theoretical lens offers a unique perspective on the role of music in the social, symbolic, and historical life of the Dai people, as shown in Figure 1.



Ethnomusicology Perspective

Examines Dai folk songs as cultural phenomena. It emphasizes studying music in its natural context.



Heritage Studies Perspective

Focuses on music's role in preserving cultural knowledge. It explores how traditional music is maintained and adapted.



Cultural Identity Perspective

Views music as a medium through which communities define themselves. Folk songs affirm ethnic identity and cultural continuity.



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Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

1. Ethnomusicology: Music as Cultural Practice

Ethnomusicology is used to study Dai folk songs as cultural phenomena, focusing on their natural context in ceremonies, beliefs, and social behavior. Field-based methods like observation, performance analysis, and interviews are used to understand the creation, performance, and reception of these songs during the Water Festival. This approach emphasizes music as an expressive and participatory act.

2. Cultural Identity Theory: Music as a Symbol of Belonging

The second pillar of the framework is cultural identity theory, which emphasizes music as a crucial medium for defining identity and community. For example, the Dai people's folk songs during the Water Festival affirm their ethnic identity and cultural continuity, transmitting shared history, moral narratives, and unique linguistic features. Collective music-making helps participants express belonging, reinforce community bonds, and differentiate themselves from other ethnic and cultural groups.

3. Heritage Studies: Music as Intangible Cultural Heritage

This study explores the role of music in preserving and transforming cultural knowledge, particularly in the context of Dai folk songs. It examines how traditional music is adapted and reinterpreted in response to contemporary forces like tourism, technology, and youth engagement. It provides a nuanced understanding of the tensions between cultural preservation and innovation, especially in festival contexts.



Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic methodology. The research prioritizes contextual understanding through immersion, observation, and direct engagement with community participants by employing field-based methods (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020; Roque et al., 2024; Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020). The methodology is organized into three main components: research design and data collection, participant selection, and tools and techniques for data analysis. Tables are included to summarize research procedures and key informant groups.

1. Research Design and Data Collection

The fieldwork was conducted over five months from September 2024 to January 2025, encompassing the lead-up to, during, and after the Water Festival. The goal was to capture the whole arc of preparation, performance, and reflection surrounding the use of music in the festival context. Multiple data sources were utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the musical and cultural dynamics, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Data Collection Techniques Used in the Study

Method	Description
In-depth Interviews	Conducted with musicians, monks, educators, and cultural heritage holders
Participant Observation	Attended rituals, musical rehearsals, and public performances
Audio-visual Recordings	Captured live performances of Dai folk songs during the festival
Questionnaires	Distributed to local participants and audience members
Document Analysis	Reviewed cultural policy materials, songbooks, and local archives

These methods enabled the triangulation of data, ensuring validity through cross-verification and allowing the researcher to interpret not only the structure and content of the music but also the context and meaning attached to it by the community.

2. Selection of Participants and Research Sites

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that individuals chosen had in-depth knowledge and direct involvement in the musical practices of the Water Festival. The primary research site was Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, a culturally significant region where the Water Festival is celebrated with large-scale community participation. Three categories of informants were identified to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, as shown in Table 2.





Table 2 Categories and Criteria for Informant Selection

Informant Type	Criteria
Three Key Informants	Dai folk musicians, singers, composers, or cultural custodians with over 20 years of experience
Three General Informants	Educators, youth practitioners, and long-time observers familiar with musical traditions
Twenty Casual Informants	Festival attendees, local audience members, or volunteers with relevant cultural knowledge

Informants were interviewed in natural settings, temples, cultural centers, rehearsal spaces, and public festival sites to observe responses within authentic contexts.

3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data gathered through interviews and observation were transcribed and organized thematically using a coding and categorization method. The themes were derived from theoretical frameworks and emergent patterns in the field data, including motifs such as ritual function, communal memory, and musical adaptation. Audio-visual materials were also analyzed for recurring musical forms, instrumentation, and performance practices, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Key Themes Identified for Analysis

Theme	Description
Ritual Function	How music is used in religious ceremonies and spiritual symbolism
Cultural Transmission	The role of folk songs in intergenerational learning and heritage preservation
Musical Adaptation	Integration of modern instruments, media, and performance formats

Results

The analysis of fieldwork data revealed that Dai folk songs play a multidimensional role in the Water Festival of Xishuangbanna, serving as more than just musical expressions. Through observations, interviews, and documentation of performances, three central themes emerged that highlight the cultural, spiritual, and educational significance of these songs within the festival context. Each theme reflects a distinct but interconnected function of Dai folk music in shaping and sustaining the community's identity and heritage. These findings are organized into the following categories: cultural representation, ritual function, and intergenerational transmission.

1. Cultural Representation



Dai folk songs performed during the Water Festival are deeply embedded with cultural meanings that reflect the myths, historical consciousness, and collective memory of the Dai ethnic group. Many of these songs are orally transmitted and performed in local dialects, using poetic metaphors and traditional narratives that speak to the people's beliefs and values. Informant Yan Han'en, a renowned Dai singer and composer, emphasized during an interview that "each line of a festival song contains a story of our ancestors—whether it's about the rivers, the Buddha, or the seasons—we are singing our past to the future."

Songs such as "Blessings of the River" and "Bathing the Buddha Melody" are commonly performed during both spiritual and social events throughout the Water Festival. These songs illustrate the relationship between humans and nature, especially the reverence for water as a life-sustaining and purifying force. The lyrics often reference local geography, seasonal cycles, and Buddhist teachings, making the songs recognizable cultural signatures of the Dai identity. According to general informants, the performance of these songs fosters a sense of cultural pride and unity, especially when sung collectively during processions or temple visits.

Figure 2 shows a vibrant image of participants engaging in the water-splashing ritual. In the background, musicians perform traditional songs using instruments such as the hulusi, gongs, and hand drums. This image captures not only the celebratory nature of the event but also the integration of music into every layer of the ritual. One elder informant shared that "when the music starts, you don't just hear it—you feel who you are. You remember your family, your faith, your history."



Figure 2 Splashing Water

Source: The researcher, from research fieldwork in April 2024

The lyrics of Dai folk songs often carry ethical teachings and reinforce moral expectations within the community. Themes such as harmony, compassion, diligence, and filial piety are interwoven with melodic storytelling. In this way, the songs act as a cultural mirror, reflecting and reinforcing the shared values that guide everyday life, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Cultural Elements Found in Dai Festival Songs

Cultural Element	Description
Mythological Themes	Stories of river spirits, ancestral heroes, and legends
Religious Teachings	Songs referencing Buddhist scripture and karma
Historical Events	Narratives of the Dai people's past and migration
Social Values	Emphasis on unity, family, and respect for elders

2. Ritual Function

The second theme that emerged is the ritual function of Dai folk songs. Music is a crucial component of spiritual ceremonies during the Water Festival. It accompanies sacred activities such as bathing Buddha statues, offering alms to monks, and honoring nature spirits. These rituals are symbolic acts and deeply spiritual experiences where music elevates the atmosphere, regulates the ceremony's rhythm, and invokes emotional and spiritual engagement.

Figure 3 illustrates monks walking toward the main temple during the festival. According to key informants, traditional chants and folk melodies are often played during this procession to accompany the footsteps of monks and laypersons. One temple musician described, “We use slow songs that follow the walking pace of the monks. It helps create calmness and a meditative state. It connects the body to the spirit.”



Figure 3 Xishuangbanna Buddhist Temple

Source: The researcher, from research fieldwork in April 2024

Songs such as “Rain Offering Song” and “Chant for the Ancestors” are performed during rituals designed to bring good fortune, wash away bad karma, and bless the community. These songs follow traditional scale systems, using minor pentatonic melodies with subtle dynamic shifts to express solemnity and devotion. Instruments such as bells, bronze drums, and bamboo flutes add to the ritual ambiance, often mirroring the actions performed.

Figure 4 depicts a key moment when monks and devotees escort Buddha statues through the streets. Music played during this time includes chants and hymns composed for the festival. The melodic patterns align with the statue's movement and are believed to generate positive energy for the community. Ritual music thus acts as a spiritual vehicle, carrying the people's intentions through sound and ceremony.



Figure 4 Xishuangbanna Escorting Buddha Statues

Source: The researcher, from research fieldwork in April 2024

Almsgiving, another core ritual, is accompanied by specific Dai melodies played by community musicians. These songs serve both a functional and spiritual purpose—signaling the start of the offering, creating a reverent environment, and reinforcing the meaning of generosity and merit-making. General informants noted that children are taught these melodies early on as part of their religious education, further linking musical practice with spiritual formation, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Ritual Contexts and Corresponding Songs

Ritual Activity	Song Example	Function of Music
Bathing the Buddha	Bathing the Buddha Melody	Symbolic cleansing and spiritual renewal



Ritual Activity	Song Example	Function of Music
Almsgiving	Blessing Chant	Enhancing the atmosphere of gratitude and merit
Escorting Buddha Statues	Walking Hymn of Light	Guiding procession and invoking community unity
Ancestor Offerings	Chant for the Ancestors	Remembering and honoring lineage and tradition

3. Intergenerational Transmission

A third significant finding concerns the transmission of Dai folk songs across generations. Informants consistently emphasized that these songs are not only inherited through families and temples but also actively taught in schools, community centers, and local cultural organizations. This integration of oral tradition into formal and informal education highlights the adaptability and resilience of Dai musical heritage.

Figure 5 portrays a powerful visual of a cultural procession where young and old participate. Informants noted that many of the young participants have been trained in Dai music through school programs or mentorship by elder musicians. One teacher shared, “We don’t just teach the notes; we teach the stories, the meaning, and the feelings. The song only becomes alive when you know why it was sung.”

Modern transmission also includes digital platforms. Artists like Yan Han’en have popularized Dai folk songs on platforms like Douyin and YouTube. While contemporary in sound, these adaptations still maintain key lyrical and melodic structures, ensuring that younger audiences stay connected to their heritage. This reflects a balance between preserving traditional forms and embracing contemporary formats for broader accessibility.

Figure 1 and Figure 5 collectively illustrate how performance creates intergenerational bridges. Youth involvement is not only encouraged but celebrated, and community performances often become teaching moments. The call-and-response structure of many Dai songs naturally involves multiple voices, making it ideal for teaching and shared participation.





Figure 5 Monks' Procession

Source: The researcher, from research fieldwork in April 2024

In addition to live instruction, institutions in Xishuangbanna have started to document and archive festival songs. Songbooks, video recordings, and digital audio files are now being compiled for local heritage preservation efforts. This ensures that even if oral transmission becomes less dominant, the knowledge is still protected and accessible for future generations, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Transmission Methods for Dai Folk Songs

Method	Description
Oral Tradition	Learning through family, temple, and community participation
Formal Education	Curriculum in local schools and music programs
Digital Dissemination	Online performances and educational content
Cultural Documentation	Songbooks, recordings, and local heritage archives

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Dai folk songs play a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining the cultural identity and musical heritage of the Dai people during the Water Festival in Xishuangbanna. As highlighted in the introduction, the festival is both a sacred and social event, and the integration of music into its rituals and celebrations underscores the enduring power of traditional music in connecting people to their history, environment, and spirituality (Intason et al., 2023; Zeng, 2019). The research reveals that Dai folk songs are not merely musical performances but are vital tools of cultural representation, spiritual practice, and intergenerational transmission. This aligns with earlier theoretical principles in cultural identity theory, which view



music as a key medium for expressing belonging, memory, and communal values (de Quadros, 2018; Best, 2018).

The literature review identified musicology and ethnomusicology as essential frameworks for understanding the structure, function, and cultural context of Dai folk songs. The field data supports these frameworks, particularly in observing the ritual function of music. Songs performed during religious ceremonies—such as “Bathing the Buddha Melody” or “Chant for the Ancestors”—not only follow traditional melodic patterns but also embody spiritual symbolism and guide ritual timing. These observations are consistent with Williamson et al. (2021) and Liu & Song (2025), who argue that ritual music constructs sacred experiences and reinforces cultural continuity.

Moreover, this study found that intergenerational transmission of folk songs occurs through both traditional and modern channels. Formal education, family instruction, and digital dissemination on platforms like Douyin and YouTube collectively support the sustainability of Dai musical heritage. This demonstrates the adaptive capacity of traditional music systems in response to modernization and supports Hajimia et al. (2023), who highlight the value of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding cultural resilience. However, this finding also complicates earlier concerns raised by Hesmondhalgh & Meier (2018) regarding digitalization’s potential to dilute ritual authenticity. In the case of Dai folk songs, digital platforms appear to facilitate preservation rather than distortion, provided the lyrical and melodic structures are retained.

In conclusion, the research findings are largely consistent with existing theoretical principles and prior scholarship. They affirm that Dai folk songs serve as dynamic cultural expressions that sustain identity, spirituality, and collective memory. These findings emphasize the importance of community agency and adaptability in preserving intangible cultural heritage amid the pressures of tourism, globalization, and generational change.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Applying the Research Findings

1.1 Integrate Dai folk songs into local school music curricula to strengthen cultural identity among youth and support heritage education.

1.2 Encourage community-led performances and digital archiving projects to promote intergenerational transmission and cultural tourism in authentic ways.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

2.1 Conduct comparative studies with other ethnic festivals in Southeast Asia to explore regional patterns in music and cultural identity.



2.2 Investigate the long-term impact of digital adaptation on the preservation and transformation of traditional music.

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