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Research Article

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# Ethnic tourism and Folksongs: A case study among the Blang (Bulang) of Yunnan, China

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**Abstract:** In 2008 "Blang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" (*Bulangzu tanchang*) was listed as China's intangible cultural heritage protection. The creation of ethnic parks, cultural villages, and ecomuseums in Southwest China raises some questions about the ethnic minorities' traditional cultural/musical heritage and its sustainable development: What is the impact of ethnic tourism development on local minorities and what is the role played by government cultural policy in the preservation and dissemination of Blang musical heritage? How is this ethnic group's identity represented in staged performances for tourists and in mass media? And what is the agency of Blang culture bearers officially appointed 'cultural heritage inheritors' in constructing, defining, and representing their own ethnic/musical identity? This article deals with a research project conducted mainly among the Blang of Manxi village in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna), Yunnan Province, Southwest China, in the Spring of 2017. The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze the current interplay of ethnic tourism, government policy, mass media and culture bearers among an ethnic group considered a "minority among the minorities" in China and the effects of this interplay on the sustainability of traditional musical heritage.

**Keywords:** Blang (Bulang); China; cultural commodification; ethnic tourism; ethnomusicology; minority group; sustainability

In 2006 the "Blang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" (*Bulangzu tanchang*) was listed in Yunnan province as the first batch of intangible cultural heritage protection and in 2008 it was listed as China's intangible cultural heritage protection (Xi/Li 2016). The main effect of this official recognition was the re-appropriation of the song and instrument traditions by the villager musicians as means for participating in the modernizing process upheld by the state and facilitated by the market of

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ethnic tourism (or ethno-tourism).[1] As highlighted by Sofield and Li, "only in recent years as China has begun to aggressively market its ethnic tourism has the world realized that in fact China does have an extraordinary richness of ethnic minorities culture" (2007: 278).

In China, after Deng Xiaoping's "open-door" policies of 1978, cultural tourism (*wenhua lüyou*) played a pivotal role in the linking of cultural heritage (*wenhua yichan*) and traditional culture (*chuantong wenhua*) to economic development, particularly for underdeveloped ethnic minority[2] regions where the tourism industry oriented to ethnic cultural heritage became a driving force of an 'ethnic culture boom' (Oakes 1998; Walsh/Swain 2004, Wen/Tisdell 2001; Yang/Wall 2008). Since the early 1990s, traditional ethnic cultural heritage has come to be recognized as a significant regional development resource in China (Wang 2001, 2003; Oakes 2006; Jackson 2006; Bruckermann 2016).[3] In 2007, Yunnan became one of the most popular tourist destinations and the most popular ethno-tourism site in China (Wang 2012).[4] Nevertheless, ethno-tourism in Yunnan, and particularly in the "exotic" Xishuangbanna, raises issues of the commodification of ethnic culture, representation of ethnic identity in mainstream

1 The term "ethnic tourism" was first used by Valene Smith, who defined it as the component of cultural tourism which is "a form of recreation combining cultural and natural resources that is marketed to the public in terms of the 'quaint' customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples" (1977: 2). According to Erik Cohen, "Ethnic tourism may be defined as a variety of "site-seeing" tourism that targets groups that do not fully belong culturally, socially, or politically to the majority population of the state within whose boundaries they live and that are touristically "marked," owing to their alleged ecological boundedness or cultural distinctiveness, uniqueness, or "otherness" (Cohen 2001: 28). There is a substantial and growing literature on ethnic tourism (MacCannell 1973, 1984; Cohen 1988; Wood 1993; Smith 1996; Picard 1996; Walle 1996), and on the impact of tourism commodification among ethnic minorities in China (Eberhard 1982; Swain 1989; Toops 1992; Oakes 1992, 1997, 1998; Li/Hinch 1997; Lau 1998; Rees 1998; Sofield/Li 1998, 2007; Li 2004; Walsh/Swain 2004; Jackson 2006; Donaldson 2007; Yang/Wall 2008; Cornet 2009; Chio 2014; Bruckermann 2016; Ingram/Wu 2017; Su 2019; Fraser 2020).

2 According to a current definition of the ICTM *Study Group on Music and Minorities*, «the term minority means communities, groups and/or individuals, including indigenous, migrant and other vulnerable groups that are at higher risk of discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, disability, political opinion, social or economic deprivation» (http://www.ictmusic.org/group/music-and-minorities, last accessed May 25, 2022).

3 In 2001 the "culture industries" (*wenhua chanye*) were officially recognized among those economic sectors in which there would be a withdrawal of state capital, to be replaced by private investment (Oakes 2006). In the last years, tourism has become one of the four "pillar industries" for the "modernization construction" of the national economy (Zhang and Lew 2003).

4 According to the Yunnan Provincial Tourism Administration data provided by CEIC Data, 9.331.868 tourists visited Yunnan in 2019 (https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/tourism-yunnan, last accessed 21/04/2023)

culture and in nationally distributed media in China and the sustainability of ethnic traditional cultural heritage.

The creation of ethnic parks, cultural villages, and ecomuseums in Xishuangbanna raises some questions about the ethnic minorities' traditional cultural heritage: What is the impact of ethnic tourism development on local minorities, and what is the role played by government cultural policy in the preservation and dissemination of Blang musical heritage? How is this ethnic group's identity represented in staged performances for tourists and in mass media? And what is the agency of Blang culture bearers officially appointed "cultural heritage inheritors" in constructing, defining, and representing their own ethnic (musical) identity? In raising these questions, I do not purport to provide all the answers. In this article, I examine a case study focused on a Blang community that reveals different ways in which village musicians considered tradition bearers and officially named as "cultural inheritors" have adopted strategies to reinvigorate and revitalize their musical heritage, each with different outcomes.

This case study focused on Blang music culture was undertaken in Menghai County, located in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) Dai Autonomous Prefecture in southern Yunnan. (Map 1) Administratively, Xishuangbanna ("Banna", as it is locally known) is divided into three counties: Jinghong County, with Jinghong as the prefectural capital; Menghai County to the west, bordering on Burma; and Mengla County to the east, bordering on Laos. The Blang ethnic group has a relatively small population of around 119,639, mainly dwelling in Yunnan province,[5] of which 52,500 people live in Xishuangbanna.[6]

Scholarly sources about Blang music, in either Chinese or English, are extremely limited, with the exception of the monographic essay written in Chinese by ethnomusicologist Yang Minkang titled *One Dimension and Two Thresholds: Musical Culture History of the Bulang Nationality* (2012).[7] Therefore, the primary data used in this article have been drawn from fieldwork research conducted on several occasions over a period of one month in the spring of 2017, when I was an Adjunct Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at Yunnan University, with my colleague Zhang Hai, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the same university who studied Blang

5 National Bureau of Statistics of China, The Sixth Population Census Report (2010). http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2019/indexeh.htm (last accessed April, 19th 2023).

6 Source: https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/88.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=41470 and https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/88.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=34206 (last accessed February, 13th 2023).

7 It should be emphasized that Chinese ethnomusicologist Zhang Xingrong and his wife Li Wei of the Yunnan Art Institute in Kunming made an edited research film, *From China's Southwest Borders: Minority Dances, Songs, and Instrumental Music of Yunnan* (2001). This video is a sort of compendium of ethnic minorities' music and dance of Yunnan, including a performance of the Blang (a *suo* love song accompanied by the *ding* lute).

culture for a long time. His double role as visual anthropologist and cultural/linguistic mediator was pivotal for the outcomes of this research.

The field research on Blang traditional culture and music draws on the individuals who are currently the traditional bearers of Blang musical heritage in four villages in Menghai county (Manxi, Manba, Manya, Zhanglang). Before carrying out the field trip to Xishuangbanna, we gained informed consent from the tradition - bearers involved in this research project as well as from village leaders and local cultural authorities of the Blang villages we planned to visit. In developing our inquiry onsite, we studied every musical activity we could find in these villages, employing the established ethnographic technique often referred to as participant observation implemented with interviews, conversations, observations, participations and audio-visual recordings of both performances and interviews. This study mainly focuses on the Blang people living in Manxi village, in Bulangshan (Menghai County, west of Xishuangbanna), and particularly on three musical culture-bearers from Manxi village valued as guardians of age-old musical traditions: Yu Kan La, Ai Sai Zhan and Ai Wen Lun.

Initially, my interest was oriented to the study and research of Blang music culture[8] with a particular focus on Blang folksongs and their connection with mythology and horal history. During my stay in two Blang villages in Menghai county (Manxi and Manba), I learned about traditional music – the so-called "original ecology folksongs"[9] – through mostly audio and video recordings of the performances[10] and formal and informal interviews with local folk musicians. Later, during my fieldwork, another phenomenon caught my attention: the ethnic tourism phenomenon in Xishuangbanna and the staged performances of the Blang

8 As suggested by Jeff Todd Titon, «ethnomusicologists use the term music culture to refer to a group of people's total involvement with music: ideas, behavior, artifacts and material culture, institutions, and musical product» (2009: 121).

9 The recent phenomenon called "original ecology folksongs" (*yuanshengtai min'ge*) indicates genuine, 'authentic' traditional music performed by village-born singers in traditional style and sung in the local language in their own cultural setting and natural environment, in contrast to the professionally re-composed folksongs (Rees 2016; Wang 2015). The concept of "original ecology folksongs," is broader than that of "traditional folksongs" (*chuantong min'ge*): it encompasses not only language and local dialect, traditional oral transmission, special singing style, and local ethnic flavor, but also the environment in which the singing occurs, and the interaction between the two (Qiao 1998). Concerning the concept of "authenticity" in the Chinese context, Rees pointed out that "while there is no one word used in Chinese which has all the ramifications of the English word "authentic," a term much employed in the musical context is "traditional" (*chuantong*)" (Rees 1998: 150).

10 Further audiovisual materials related to Blang musical performances collected previously by Zhang Hai in Manya and Manxi villages have been integrated into this research project as well as in the final editing of the film *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars*.

traditional musicians outside the villages of origin. My research focus shifted to the significant role played by ethnic tourism, government policy, musical heritage and minorities representation in mass media communication to increase the economic development of the region through the promotion of ethnic minorities' performing arts, and the impact of this phenomenon on the local traditional musicians whose very subjectivity is fashioned and commodified in the tourism industry and in popular TV programmes such as talent shows. On that occasion, I also shot a documentary titled *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* (2023),[11] with the support of Zhang Hai as second cameraman, which can also be as an illustrative and complementary audiovisual implementation of this written essay.

Documentary film *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* by L. D'Amico.

QR n.1 (pw: "Leonardodamico1!").

This paper represents a first step toward *understanding music*[12] of the local reality of Manxi village and its culture bearers, and the processes of preservation, sustainability, continuity and changes of the local musical heritage in contemporary China. It does not claim to be an in-depth analysis of the situation but rather hopes to open new perspectives from which to make sense of the collected data. It is also an overview of a moment in time, a period of economic development that may serve as a comparison with future changes and may lead to future research on more specific issues.

# 1 The Blang: culture and geographic location

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a multi-ethnic state founded jointly by 56 ethnic groups identified by the central government.[13] Xishuangbanna's population

11 The film is available on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/814870942; password: "Leonardodamico1!".

12 As explained by Timothy Rice, "*Understanding music* simply means that we find some of it orderly rather than chaotic, pleasant rather than unpleasant, predictable rather than unpredictable, meaningful rather than meaningless; and familiar rather than unfamiliar" (Rice/Wilson 2022).

13 The government of the People's Republic of China extends official recognition to fifty-six "nationalities" (*minzu*), – categorized through the *minzu shibie* (ethnic identification project) launched in the 1950s – including the Han ethnic majority, now making up about 92 percent of the population. Most Chinese government departments and public sectors have used the word "nationalities" in English translations of the term *minzu* instead of "ethnic group" or "ethnicity" (Li 2015). These fifty-six

of approximately 1.1 million encompasses 13 of the 55 ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*),[14] making Xishuangbanna a favourite destination for ethnic tourism in China (Li 2004; Yang/Wall 2008).[15] Blang ethnic group (*Bulangzu*), an officially recognized ethnic minority in China,[16] is a tiny ethnic group compared to most other ethnic minorities in China, with only 119,639 people,[17] dispersed in the mountainous areas along the middle and lower reaches of the Lancang River (Mekong) in the west and southwest of Yunnan Province (Maps 2).[18] Blang ethnic minority group is considered a "minority among the minorities" in Yunnan.

The Blang language spoken in Xishuangbanna is a Palaungic branch of the Mon-Khmer language family (Renard 2015). Some Blang people can also speak the Dai language, Wa language, or Mandarin Chinese language (*putonghua*). The dissemination of Blang communities in the mountainous areas and the consequent proliferation of different dialects make mutual linguistic understanding very difficult and complex, which is why they use Mandarin Chinese as a *lingua franca* to communicate between people coming from different mountainous regions (Xi et al. 2012; Su et al. 2020; Wang/Hatoss 2021).

The Blang are considered the world's earliest tea cultivators and many villages contain old-growth tea gardens planted nearly a millennium ago by their ancestors. Menghai County in Xishuangbanna is famous for its Pu'er brand tea – a variety of fermented tea – and tea plantations cover much of the cultivated area in the hills.

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ethnic groups have been identified by the central government based primarily on the existence of a common language, territory, economy and psychological nature manifested in a common culture (Harrell 1995).

**14** According to the official website of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, which contains data from the 2021 Population Survey, the total registered population is 1,018,100, of which 792,800 are ethnic minorities (Dai, Han, Hani, Yi, Lahu, Blang, Jino, Yao, Miao, Hui, Wa, Zhuang, and Jingpo), accounting for 77.9 % of the total registered population. Blang ethnicity counts 52,500 people, representing 5.2 % of the population of Xishuangbanna. Source: https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/88.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=41470 and https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/88.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=34206 (accessed February, 13th, 2023).

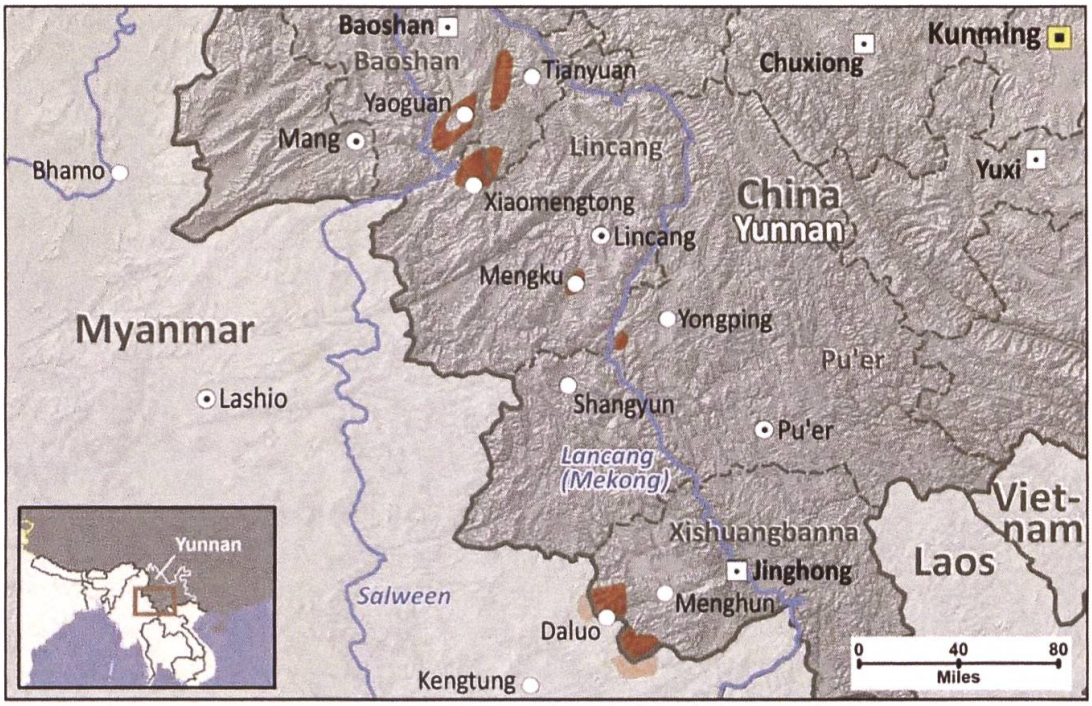
**15** In Xishuangbanna, the number of visitors and tourism revenue has expanded substantially since the 1980s, growing from just over 5,365 visitors in 1985 to nearly 2.8 million in 2005 (Yang/Wall 2008: 528).

**16** While Blang people share a history with the officially recognized Wa and De'ang (Ang or Palaung), the national ethnic classification system in China has successfully constructed them as an independent ethnic minority with a unique culture (Li Daoyong et al. 1986: 2).

**17** Statistics from the Sixth Population Census conducted in 2010. See: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm.

**18** Chinese historical annals (《尚书·牧誓》 and 《华阳国志》) mention the Blang as descendants of an ethnic group known as the "Pu Man" (浦蛮), one tribe of Bai Pu (白浦), who lived in the Lancang River valley since the XII century (Zhang Hai, Professor of Anthropology at Yunnan University, personal communication, 2022).


**Map 1:** Location of the study area.




**Map 2:** Map showing the distribution of Blang in Yunnan in Xishuangbanna.

Although tea has been grown here for hundreds of years, it was only in the early 2000s that the rapid growth of the market for Pu'er tea profoundly changed the economic conditions of many ethnic minority communities in the highlands of southern Yunnan. Numerous villages have abandoned subsistence agriculture and have instead expanded commercial tea plantations. With the rapid growth of the tea economy, many Blang communities have become collectively much richer than they were during the preceding period of self-contained swidden agriculture (Ma 2018; 2021). Tourism based on "ethnic heritage" – recently defined "cultural heritage tourism" (CHT) when related to ecotourism sustainability (Huibin et al. 2012; Weng et al. 2019) – has brought considerable economic benefits to many towns and villages in Yunnan, which used to be a largely poverty-stricken province (Donaldson 2007).[19] Nevertheless, the marginalization of some ethnic groups living in mountainous areas such as the Blang reflects the existing imbalance in power between the dominant Han people and the subordinate minorities (Chow 2005; Donaldson 2007).[20]

Villages are often located on hillsides. Houses are traditionally built on wooden pillars and are constructed from bamboo, mud, wood, and stone. Blang houses usually consist of two floors. The first floor is designed as a warehouse for food and a stable for livestock animals, such as chickens, whereas the second is designed to house the family. The chimney is located in the center of the house. Nevertheless, some changes have been introduced with the recent prosperity, and nowadays the Blang use brick rather than wood to build their houses.[21] Everyone from the village lends a hand when a new house is built, and they hold a celebration when construction is completed. The building of a new house is an event that brings the community together to bless the bride and groom and celebrate the new house. On this occasion, songs of making up the house would be sung in antiphonal form, such as the *zaiwa* song:

> We sing "zaiwa" when we carry the wood to build the houses; as you know, most of our houses are built with wood. Everyone must carry just one wood by himself, and everyone sing: men sing their own part and women sing their own part. We can hear all of them singing together (Yu Kan La, personal communication, 2017).

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**19** In 2001, the Chinese government issued "China's Outline for Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program (2001–2010)", a guiding document of national poverty alleviation in which 267 ethnic minority areas were identified as key target for assistance (Mackerras 2003; Sofield/Li 2003).

**20** According to the *Situational Analysis Report: Xishuangbanna Autonomous Dai Prefecture Yunnan, China*, "the Dai and Hani are the wealthiest ethnicities, followed by the Han and Yi. The Blang and 'Other' are the poorest – over 50 % of the Blang and 'Other' are below the province-defined poverty line" (Hammond et al. 2015).

**21** The rapid decline of traditional architecture has drawn the attention of scholars and officials. Nowadays, tourists prefer to visit reconstructed tourist ethnic villages instead of real ethnic villages: "Indeed, several villages were closed as tourist attractions because of the loss of traditional architecture" (Yang et al. 2006: 763).

A video with a *zaiwa* song, performed by Blang folk singer Yu Kan La, is available by scanning the QR code.

*Zaiwa* song performed by Blang singer Yu Kan La in Manxi village, 2017. Video by the author.

QR n.2

The Buddhist temple is the most significant place where people communicate and interact through music during religious festivals. From the tenth century, Blang communities converted to Theravada Buddhism – the primary religion of Dai introduced in Xishuangbanna in the XIV century (Huang / Huang 2014) – under the influence of the Dai who ruled the area for centuries before the Han moved in ("Pazhao" is the name for Buddha in both Blang and Dai language). Since Blang and Dai share the same religion, both need to learn the Dai script of the Buddhist temples, as well as the Dai oral literature, and the Buddhist sutras written in Dai. The religious songs are used in Buddhist temples to worship Buddha and are sung in the Dai language. There are two kinds of religious songs: *zaimu*, performed by a soloist without accompaniment, and *zaibeng*, performed by women and men dancing in concentric circles while singing in responsorial form (call-and-response pattern: soloist-chorus) with the accompaniment of percussion instruments (*xiangjiaogu* drum, gongs and cymbals).

Buddhist temples can be found on the top sites of almost every village, and each temple has its own "big drum" (*dagu* in Chinese), a red barrel drum made of wood with two cow skins, usually placed outside the main hall of the temple. A goblet single-headed drum, called in Chinese *xiangjiaogu* ("elephant-foot drum", named for its shape) and *keng* in Blang, is used to accompany the ritual dance (*zaibeng*) – "beng" means playing drums – during religious festivities (Figure 1). The elephant-foot drum, widespread in the Xishuangbanna and Dehong regions, is not peculiar to Blang musical culture but it may have been borrowed from the Dai people. During the performance in the temple courtyard, the male dancers-percussionists usually carry the elephant-foot drum on their left shoulder and beat the head of the drum with their hands and fingers. The other two male percussionists play the gongs and a pair of cymbals. The performers are arranged in two concentric circles: the inner circle is made up of male percussionists who rotate counterclockwise, while in the outer circle, the female dancers rotate clockwise, waving their arms upwards. A video with a *zaibeng* ritual song, shot in the courtyard of the Buddhist temple of Manxi village, is available by scanning the QR code.

In Yunnan, and particularly among the ethnic minorities in Xishuangbanna, banquets are an important means of maintaining and negotiating social relationships

QR n.3

**Figure 1:** *Zaibeng* ritual song. The circle dance is performed by Blang female dancers and male percussionists playing *xiangjiaogu* (goblet drum), gongs and cymbals in the courtyard of the Buddhist temple of Manxi village (2017). Video excerpt from the documentary *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* by *L. D'Amico.*

and represent one of the main occasions for music-making. Dinner with neighbors and friends is an opportunity to socialize and strengthen the ties of friendship. Singing and toasting are customary habits on convivial occasions. The toast during a banquet is a way of showing *zunzhong* (Chinese term for "respect", or "esteem") towards a guest, a householder, or an authority and it is also a way to reinforce the social connections (*guanxi*) that are an important goal in Chinese banquet culture (Figure 2). During family or social gatherings, "toasting songs" (*jiuge* in Chinese, *niu bu lai* in Blang languge) consist of lyrics made up on the spot when welcoming guests (Schein 1999; Li 2016; Chen 2017; Gibbs 2020). Among the Blang people, toasting songs are sung on the *suo* melodic line (*suo niu bu lai*) or on the *zai* melodic line (*zai niu bu lai*) to welcome or praise the guest. Occasionally, they are sung in the form of a duet (*duige* in Chinese, *ki kuo duo bo di* in Blang), in which a man and woman face off and improvise verses to a pre-existing local song melody tradition in call and response pattern. The following video, available by scanning the QR code, is an excerpt from my documentary film *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* (2023).

QR n. 4

**Figure 2:** Blang folk musicians Ai Wen Lun, Ai Sai Zhan and Yu Kan La singing toasting songs accompanied by the *ding* lute during a dinner at Zhan's house in Manxi village (2017). Video excerpt from the documentary *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* by L. D'Amico.

## 2 Blang musical culture

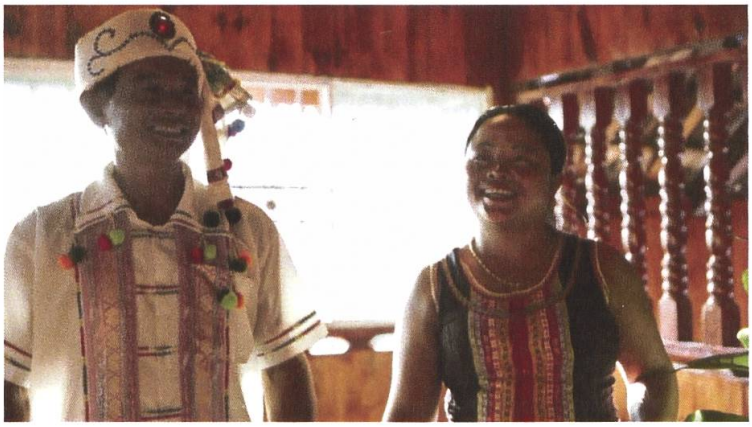
The word "music" does not exist in the Blang vocabulary; instead, they use the term *suo* (索) for "singing" and *ding* (玎) for both "musical instrument" and "instrumental music". As for most ethnic minorities in Yunnan, for the Blang, folksong (*min'ge*, an abbreviation of *minjian gequ* in Chinese)[22] is the most important art form and a primary means of expression. A feature common to all Yunnanese ethnic minorities is the high communicative function of singing to express feelings that are not expressed through spoken language; in other words, people "speak with songs" (*yi ge daiyan*), especially with love songs (*qingge* in Chinese, *Suo ki kuo, Zai ki kuoor, Zhuai ki kuo* in Blang), which make up the bulk of the vocal music repertoire. These songs are usually performed during farm work in the fields or around the household hearth. In the past, love songs were aimed at finding a suitable marriage partner and it was often hard to find a mate if a young Blang could not play and sing love songs. That's why Blang people usually view traditional songs as matchmakers.[23] On the other hand, the traditional custom that Blang women cannot sing in public after marriage also limits the inheritance of female vocal repertoire. These are the lyrics of a *jingde*, a melody-type of *suo* love song, sung by Ai Wa Luo (Figure 3):

> Together we need to live as one heart
> with the same desires
> We can sing the same song
> only if we get together
> We will not separate
> if we will make a family
> Together we will be more powerful
> We Blang are not divided by villages,
> nor differences, one heart one soul.

In Blang language, "*zai*" also means 'singing' and folk songs are the most relevant of the Blang musical forms and repertoires. Blang folk songs consist of songs that are not

22 This translation is questioned by Tuohy who claims: «The English-language "folksong" translates into different Chinese terms, with the most frequently-used being *min'ge*. Though the two terms share a scope of meaning, folksong and *min'ge* are not equivalent, and both are multivalent because people define them differently» (Tuohy 1999: 40). In Blang language, there is no term for "folksong", but they use the names of the type of songs, such as "Suo" and "Zai" (Yu Kan La, personal communication, 2023).

23 As pointed out by Mackerras, «in Yunnan, there are many nationalities among which courtship is a rather public affair, so love songs become an important means of expressing affection» (1984: 198). Yang Mu highlights the eroticization of minorities defining "erotic musical activity" (EMA) those vocal or instrumental musics whose purposes and goals are lovemaking and possibly marriage among ethnic minorities in China (Yang 1998: 199).



QR n. 5

**Figure 3:** Blang folk musician Ai Wa Luo performs a duet love song (*jingde*) in Manya village (2016). Video by Zhang Hai.

accompanied by any musical instruments, such as *zhuai, zai, tong ma*, or songs, like the *suo* and *sheng*, accompanied by a four-string plucked lute (*ding qin*, commonly called *ding*), a guitar-like wooden lute with two double strings (usually tuned Bb and Eb) (Figure 4).

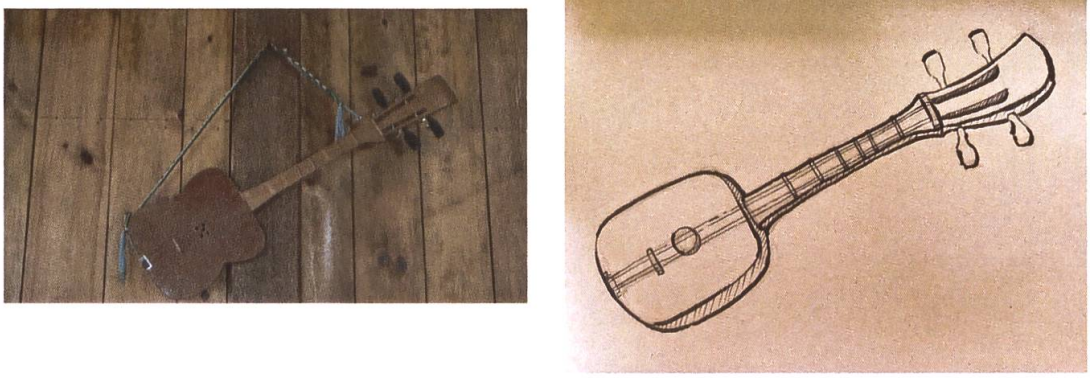


**Figure 4:** The four-string plucked lute *ding* (photo by Zhang Hai).

The *ding* is peculiar to the Blang musical culture, but it is similar in shape to the *chiben* used by the Lisu, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group who inhabit mountainous regions along the border of Myanmar in Yunnan Province.[24] The singing form is generally one person solo, two people duet (a man and a woman) alternating with each other or singing together (in homophonic style), and occasionally two choirs (men and women) in antiphonal form. At present, due to the influence and impact of urban popular music, young people are beginning to sing Han pop songs, and many

24 See the documentary *Treasure of the Lisu: Ah-Cheng and his Music* by Yan Chun Su (2010) focused on Ah-Cheng, a master musician and tradition bearer of the Lisu minority people, the only person in his village who can still make the *chiben* (D'Amico 2017).

young people no longer learn to sing and play the *ding*. Blang folk singer Yu Kan La was the only one of ten siblings who continued to preserve a considerable corpus of Blang traditional songs that nowadays is vanishing due to Han pop songs dissemination through mass media:

> My eldest sister and I are the ones who love to sing, but she doesn't sing anymore. She used to sing duets with young boys but now she doesn`t sing anymore. My second sister likes to sing pop songs, Chinese songs. She is the best, she used to sing all the songs of Mao Zedong. My little sister also prefers singing Chinese songs rather than Blang songs. The only one who loves Blang songs is me. I learned Blang songs with my mom years ago. I remember I followed her wherever she went, just like a little shadow, until I became an adult (Yu Kan La, personal communication, 2017).

This process entailed a strong tendency towards a shift in language use from Blang language to Putonghua, especially among the younger generation (Wang/Hatoss 2021). This phenomenon must be seen in the broader picture of the urbanization of the Blang youth who are leaving their hometowns and cultural traditions behind to improve their economic and social situation and the consequent identity crisis (Xi et al. 2012).

## 3 Blang folksongs in Manxi village

The dialects of the Blang settlements are quite different, so the classification methods or names of the songs are also slightly different from one village to another. This article reports the classification method used by the traditional musicians in Manxi village (Daluo Town, Menghai County in Xishuangbanna). Here, we have interviewed and filmed the performances of three Blang traditional musicians esteemed by the local community as renowned local tradition bearers and cultural inheritors, and who became our key partners during our fieldwork: Ai Sai Zhan, Ai Wen Lun and Yu Kan La.[25] Ai Sai Zhan is a middle-aged traditional singer and player of the *ding* lute (Figure 5). He learned to play the *ding* when he was 10 years old from Ai Bao, a well-known local musician.[26] Yu Kan La is a respected elderly Blang singer (Figure 6); she usually performs with her husband, the *ding* player Ai Wen Lun (Figure 7), and

25 Blang people employ a particular name system. The Blang in Xishuangbanna and Lancang have only given names, but no family names. Most of the men's names begin with Ai/Yan, and most of the women's names, with Yu. And there is a "Da" or "Ya" before an old man or woman's name respectively.

26 French musician and ethnomusicologist Laurent Jeanneau recorded part of Ai Sai Zhan's repertoire in the CD *Bulang Yunnan China* published by his label Kink Gong.

occasionally with Ai Sai Zhan. They are not professional musicians since performing is not their main source of livelihood which is given by farming and animal husbandry.

**Figure 5:** Yu Kan La (singer, Manxi, 2017).

**Figure 6:** Ai Sai Zhan (*din* player, Manxi, 2017).

**Figure 7:** Ai Wen Lun (singer and *din* player, Manxi, 2017).

All these village musicians stress their desire to preserve their unique ethnic musical heritage and to keep alive Blang folksongs that are increasingly endangered by the rapidity of local culture loss, due mainly to rural-to-urban migration. Nevertheless, every year Yu Kan La, Ai Wen Lu and Ai Sai Zhan are invited to perform for Blang immigrants in Kunming to celebrate the Buddhist New Year's Eve, called *Sangkan* (from *Songkran*, the Thai New Year's Eve). They are active in social activities in their own community to preserve and transmit Blang's traditional repertoire. In her village, Yu Kan La teaches orally transmitted songs to the young generations, and her husband Ai Wen Lu is also engaged in teaching folksongs to Blang children from surrounding villages.

Blang songs are monodic and generally based on pentatonic scales. Folksongs are sung by one or two singers (male and female) in a monodic style and the vocal style is characterized by a narrow melodic range within an octave. All the songs are sung by one or two singers of opposite sex alternating, accompanied by the *ding*, whose function is to repeat and emphasize the pentatonic melody of the song. The *ding* is the only melodic instrument used to accompany traditional songs and is played only by male musicians. Blang singers compose new texts on existing tunes inherited from the elder musicians. The lyrics are new creations, while the melodies are maintained unchanged over time.

The traditional repertoire of the Blang ethnicity is mostly folk tales and myths and legends, but the repertoire of the Manxi's musicians includes a wide range of folk songs performed in village activities, Buddhist temple worship rituals, domestic entertainment occasions, or special events. The social occasions when Blang perform traditional music and dances are mainly recreational activities such as family

gatherings in private houses or social gatherings, celebrations of marriages, and occasions commemorating new houses. We can summarily list different kinds of folk songs according to the content and function of the songs:

(a) wedding songs (*zhuai*) for entering the newlyweds' new home (*shang xinfangin* in Mandarin Chinese);
(b) welcoming songs or "toasting songs" to praise the guest at the dinner table (*jiuge* in Mandarin Chinese, *Suo niu bu lai* and *Zai niu bu lai* in Blang);
(c) Solo songs of loss and love (*zaimi*) and duet love songs (*se pai zai*), usually sung by not yet married young boys and girls;
(d) Buddhist ritual songs with percussions accompanied by a circular dance (*zai-beng*) and worship songs for blessings and sacrifices without instrumental accompaniment (*zaimu*), both performed in the Buddhist temple;
(e) children's folk rhymes or lullabies (*zai muli muran*);
(f) tree-felling songs for building houses (*zaiwa*).

Music and myth are tightly connected in Blang musical culture too, although most of the mythological and epic songs have gradually disappeared with the death of the old singers. There are many myths that explain the features of different animals, and the relationship that they have with Blang people. According to the cosmogonic myth "The Story of How the Rhinoceros Created the World"[27] told by Ai Sai Zhan, in ancient times, the ancestor of the Blang clans, Zao Suo, wanted to find a rhino[28] hidden (*shēng*) in the jungle to ride and thereby acquire distinguished status. He went to the Blang people to ask for help (*zhuāi*) finding the rhino. He looked for (*suǒ*) a boy (*zǎi*) who was able to tie it (*tóng mǎ*). Some of the recurring terms in this short epic story correspond to the names of the five musical genres of the Blang of Manxi village according to the classification method used by their own ethnic group:

*Zhuāi* (拽): help
*Zǎi* (宰): boy, son
*Suǒ* (索): seek, looking for
*Shēng* (笙): hide
*Tóng mǎ* (同玛): tie

The five musical genres are defined according to the native concepts and taxonomy. In order to elicit the categories of traditional songs according to the *insiders*' point of

27 This legend could be inspired by the Dai tale "The Rhinoceros Hornbill" (Miller 1994).
28 The *li*, a mythical animal with a horn analogous to the rhinoceros.

view (the so-called "ethno-theory"),[29] we asked our culture-bearers from Manxi village to describe their repertoire through formal interviews. According to the *emic* perspective, the musical genres and repertoires may have sub-groups of songs, in particular *Zăi*, referred to ritual songs (mainly Buddhist songs), and *Suŏ*, referred to folksongs (usually love songs). These two repertoires have seven and nine sub-groups of song styles respectively. The *Zăi* musical genre includes: 1. *Zai*; 2. *Zaimu*; 3. *Zaimuli muran*; 4. *Zaiwa*; 5. *Zaibeng*; 6. *Zaimi*; 7. *Sepaizai*. The *Suŏ* genre includes: 1. *Kayou*; 2. *Jingmai* (*gao* = high); 3. *Ximei*; 4. *Sandao*; 5. *Jingmai* (*di* = low); 6. *Bengduo*; 7. *Jingde*; 8. *Katian*; 9. *Kading* (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Taxonomy of the Blang musical genres in Manxi village.


A sample of each musical genre and sub-genre was recorded in audio and video. For the occasion, an audiovisual database was created comprising 16 video clips of the performances and the related interviews with the musicians. The database is stored in the audiovisual archive of the Institute of Anthropology at Yunnan University in Kunming and it is also available online on the author's website: https://www.leonardodamico.net/research-projects.

29 The ethno-scientific approach in ethnomusicology entails the recognition of an "ethno-theory" of music, an implicit music theory or native conceptualization of music that can be elicited through the acquisition of the local vocabulary (see Zemp/Malkus 1979).

## 4 Ethnic tourism and ethnic parks

Ethnic tourism is a controversial phenomenon, raising fundamental questions of sustainable development regarding the commodification of ethnic cultures (Li/Hinch 1997; Xie 2003) and issues on the relationship between music tourism, identity, authenticity, and cultural heritage (Gibson/Connell 2005; Yang/Wall 2009; Su 2011; Krüger/Trandafoiu 2013). After China's rapid economic and urban shifts, many Chinese (mainly Han) tourists now seek out environmental beauty and prefer to travel outside of major urban centers to tour China's periphery. This desire often combines with a desire to tour the 'Others' within China's borders. China's southwestern province of Yunnan, and in particular Xishuangbanna, has cornered a large share of domestic tourists by successfully marketing itself as a land of exceptional environmental beauty as well as ethnic variety.[30]

Most of the existing studies of ethnic tourism concentrate on visits to exotic and often peripheral destinations, which involve performances, representations, and attractions portrayed or presented by small ethnic groups (Smith 1977; Moscardo/Pearce 1999). In China, this phenomenon has also been defined as a sort of "internal orientalism" (Schein 1997), as the orientalist attitudes and practices that take place inter-ethnically within China are produced when "the Chinese elite engages in domestic othering" (Schein 1997: 73). In the modernist critical tradition, culture "on stage" is viewed as culture out of context: "The moment that culture is defined as an object of tourism, or segmented and detached from its indigenous sphere, its aura of authenticity is reduced" (Taylor 2001: 15).

The concept of "staged authenticity" expressed by MacCannell (1973) – and developed by Yang and Wall (2009) in their studies on ethno-tourism in Xishuangbanna – best expresses the constant dialectic tension between insider and outsider in the perception of "Otherness" in southwest China. According to MacCannell, the development of the tourism industry would lead to a "pseudo-reconstruction of 'authentic otherness'" (1999, xxi). This "authentic otherness" is constructed in a tourist space, a space that "can be called a staged set, a tourist setting, or simply, a set depending on how purposefully worked up for tourists the display is" (MacCannell 1973: 597). The commodification of minorities' heritage is accomplished through the staging, packaging, and selling of their images and sounds; lifestyles and traditions of ethnic minorities have often been romanticized and depicted as exotic and seductive. As pointed out by Edensor (2001), this cultural staging inevitably raises controversies

30 According to the data released by the Yunnan Statistical Bureau (2001), Yunnan's tourism attracted more than 1 million foreign tourists and approximately 38 million domestic visitors in 2000 (Morais et al. 2006: 193).

about the reproduction of stereotypes associated with primitivism, exoticism and eroticism.

This "game of mirrors" between *insiders* and *outsiders* can be defined as the way that traditional cultures are "re-presented" (i.e. staged) to outsiders in numerous ethnic theme parks or tourist folk villages in China (Oakes 1997; Sofield/Li 1998; Ap 2003; Nyiri 2006), and at the same time, the way that locals perceive what tourists want to see and experience. According to Li and Hinch, the paradoxes of ethnic tourism occur because of inherent contradictions between conservation and change associated with the process of development: «The tourists often expect the locals to be quaintly non-modern or "frozen" while the locals cannot avoid social/cultural change through tourism» (1997: 9).

Yunnan at the government level has been particularly active in promoting ethnic tourism, probably because out of its 46 million population, some 27 million are *shaoshu minzu* representing 25 officially designated ethnic minorities. Yunnan's tourism advertisements have always equally emphasized the beauty of its scenic attractions and minority cultures. The two elements are closely interrelated in a neo-exotic view in which the "cultural" communities are considered an integral part of the "natural" environment. Local minority cultures and folk performing arts[31] are the priority of the regional and provincial economic agendas, mainly oriented to the development of ethnic tourism:

> Ethnic heritage-based tourism initiated in Yunnan in the 1990s has helped build a wider appreciation of ethnic minority cultures in China, and at the same time has helped these communities nurture pride in their own heritage. The integration of ethnic cultures and tourism has clearly increased the awareness of the value of ethnic heritage in Yunnan amongst people in government and business, as well as artist groups. Whether ethnic cultures are perceived as a draw for tourism or valuable in their own right, this movement has clearly contributed to the flourishing of indigenous cultures (Yang 2016: 91).

Domestic tourists visit Xishuangbanna for its scenery and the lively and "colorful" ethnic minorities, often incorporated into tourist ethnic parks or "cultural villages" (Eng 1998; Yang 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2016). Ethnic tourism generally refers to tourism motivated by a tourist's search for exotic cultural experiences, including visiting ethnic villages, minority homes, and ethnic theme parks, being involved in ethnic events and festivals, watching traditional dances or ceremonies, or merely shopping for ethnic handicrafts and souvenirs (Yang 2011a). Traditional music plays a pivotal

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**31** In Yunnan, some grand-scale ethnic dance performances have emerged from the confluence of tourism and ethnic cultures. One such performance is called 'Dynamic Yunnan' (*Yunnan Yingxiang*) that incorporates the traditional music and dance of Yi, Dai, Tibetan and Wa people. It was created by the dancer and choreographer Yang Liping, a member of the Bai ethnic community. 'Dynamic Yunnan' has been regularly performed at Kunming Congress Hall in Yunnan. Since its 2003 debut on the stage of Yunnan Auditorium, there are usually 300 shows per year (Feng 2016).

role in cultural politics and economic development of the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities:

> Tourism is the method to take advantage of traditional music resources, regardless of whether there are pre-existing tourism resources in the region. If there are any, traditional music becomes one of the attractions; if there are none, private capital is used under the auspices of the government to develop resorts. This means it does not only concern the provincial government and other senior developer sectors any longer but also village leaders who see it as a tool for development. Because of this process, local folk music has become a concern of leaders at all levels (Zhang et al. 2015: 53).

In the last three decades, the Xishuangbanna government has vigorously promoted the protection of minorities' culture and inheritance. The construction of cultural villages or ethnic parks (*minzucun*) displaying several miniature villages for its visitors has become one of the main strategies to promote tourism in Xishuangbanna.[32] Ethnic village tours were originally initiated by local villagers, but today they are controlled by non-local Han entrepreneurs.[33] The Dai people and Han outsiders maintain control of the tourism industry, while the Blang remain basically a tourist object. These ethnic villages – like the Dai village of Mengjinglai – entertain tourists with ethnic foods, crafts, dances, songs, and wedding shows. Tourists can watch or participate in staged cultural performances, taste ethnic foods and even stay overnight in bamboo houses. Guided tours include showcases with craftsmen and musicians belonging to various ethnic groups that live in the region. They wear traditional costumes, work in old-style houses, dance, sing, weave, make sculptures and crafts, and engage in tourist activities in the park. According to the surveys conducted by Li Yang, most of the government officials and park managers interviewed, as well as visitors, believe that the park provides an authentic portrayal of minority images and their cultures (Yang 2011b, 2011c). Nevertheless, the representation of minority cultures through performances staged in these ethnic parks is often exoticized and modified to satisfy sensationalism-oriented commercial needs and tourists' expectations.

In the Dai village of Mengjinglai,[34] Lisu blacksmiths, renowned as skilled knife-makers, perform their show iron-forging acting as fakirs in a circus (Figure 8). Karen

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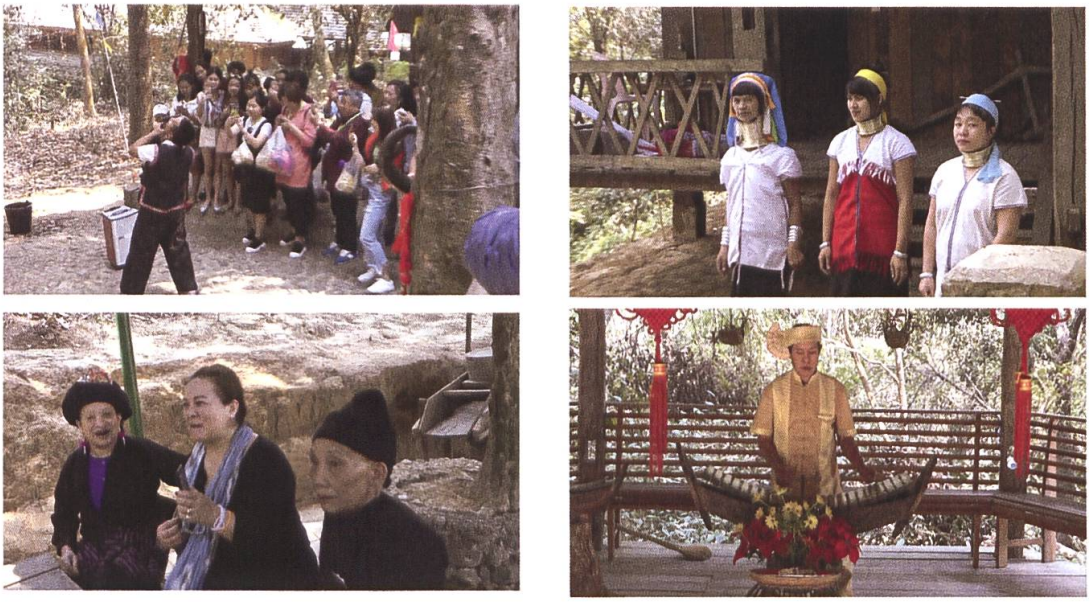
**32** One of these state-owned ethnic parks, the Yunnan Ethnic Folk Village (*Yúnnán Mínzú Cūn*), established in Kunming in 1992, displays the traditional life-style of 26 ethnic groups in Yunnan.

**33** Entrepreneurs play a powerful role in developing ethnic tourism and they are crucial to the commodification of ethnic culture (Graburn 1989; Greenwood 1982). However, most entrepreneurs in tourism businesses are not members of ethnic minorities; instead, they exploit minority resources for their own benefit (Yang/Wall 2008), giving rise to a form of "internal colonialism" (Oakes 1999).

**34** Mengjinglai, which means "the first village of China-Burma", in Daluo Township in Menghai County, southwest Xishuangbanna, at the border with Myanmar, is a remote and less-developed Dai village, consisting of 99 households and 460 people (Yang and Wall 2009). In 2005, it was promoted to the national AAA scenic spot, and in February 2010, it passed the assessment of "First 50 Rural

women, known as the "giraffe women" for wearing neck rings, are exhibited like strange animals in a zoo (Figure 9). Older Blang women, chewing betel nuts, show their blackened teeth and take pictures with tourists (Figure 10).[35] In a separate pavilion, a Dai musician plays the *roneat ek* xylophone, an instrument considered "exotic" because it is extraneous to Chinese folk music (it is an instrument used by the Thai in Thailand) (Figure 11). In promotional advertisements of tour operators based in Kunming, this ethnic park is promoted as a "pastoral landscape" that "exhibits profound primitive ethnic cultures and features as an ecological community".[36]



**Figures 8–11:** Showcases for tourists in Menginglai's ethnic park with Lisu blacksmiths performing as fakirs (fig. 8), Karen women wearing neck rings (fig. 9), Blang women showing their blackened teeth (fig. 10), a Dai musician playing the *roneat ek* xylophone (fig. 11) (Mengjinglai village, Daluo town, Xishuangbanna, 2017). Frames excerpt from the documentary *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* by L. D'Amico.

Another critical point of touristic ethnic parks is that, despite the socio-cultural changes that minority groups have undergone in recent decades, the park freezes minority culture in an older time and contrived space and provides partial, fragmented, and mostly static exhibits. This problematic issue of "freezing ethnic culture" in ethnic

Tourism Villages in Yunnan province" (source: http://www.mekong.cn/en/play/banna/59.html, last accessed 20/04/2023).

35 In the past, blackened teeth were part of ethnic identity, and considered esthetically pleasing in Blang culture. It also indicated the marital status of women. The old and obsolete custom of tooth blackening was considered effective for caries prevention (Zhang et al. 2018).

36 Yunnan Exploration's website: https://yunnanexploration.com/mengjinglai-village-in-menghai-county-xishuangbanna.html (last accessed 20/04/2023).

parks and cultural villages is particularly evident in China, where the fast social, cultural and economic changes that accompany ethnic tourism may overwhelm attempts to conserve ethnic traditions and customs. As Li Yang stated, «such parks are created as a cultural showcase or "living museum" in order to re-enact or to stage the past, which represents a trend of modern society's attempt to preserve and fossilize the traditional customs of "ancient cultures", and to construct or reconstruct aspects of lifestyles that are vanishing or have disappeared in the modern world» (Yang 2016).

The phenomenon of the ethnic parks matches the spread of ecomuseums[37] in China. Sponsored by the Norway government, four ecomuseums were built in villages of ethnic minorities in the Guizhou province between years 1998–2005 (Hong Yi 2012; Nitzky 2012; Su 2008; Wang 2012; Graburn/Jin 2017; Borrelli/Ge 2019). In order to strengthen the protection measures, in 2006 the government established the Bulang Nationality Ecomuseum, located in Zhanglang village (Xiding County, Menghai Town, Xishuangbanna), the only Blang ecomuseum in China. Noting the level of self-governance in village culture, the Xishuangbanna government in Yunnan Province held an open general meeting in the Bulang Nationality Ecomuseum, to publicize the complete transfer of the ecomuseum's administrative powers to the villagers (Su 2008).

Although the risk of a "freezing of ethnic cultures" in the ethnic parks persists in this case as well, in ecomuseums the local community itself is responsible for its own representation on the outside world. Ethnic parks should move in the same direction in order to find a sustainable solution for safeguarding minorities' cultural heritage. The research conducted by Katharina Massing in an ethnic park in Hainan concludes that essential criteria to contribute to the safeguarding of ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) are to include the ethnic minority group in the safeguarding process, for example by employing them in management positions, and to concentrate more strongly on education and transmission (Massing 2017).

## 5 Intangible cultural heritage and government policies

To rescue and revive various forms of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) including folk music, UNESCO adopted a series of ICH protection policies and regulations

37 In the article "The Concept of the Ecomuseum and its Practice in China", Su Donghai explains that "the primary meaning of the prefix 'eco' in the term 'eco-museum' as opposed to its use in such general terms of reference as 'economy' and 'ecology', is one that connotes a balanced system between society and the environment: people are central to the existence of social groupings or societies, as they are to human livelihoods and any consequent progress. This was the original meaning of the concept of the ecomuseum as invented in the 1970s" (2008: 33).

through the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. China, with its rich cultural resources and tradition, currently has 42 representative items which entered the UNESCO ICH list, including 12 items of folk music. In addition, China has also evaluated, selected, and announced four batches of national-level ICH lists and extended lists in 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2014 (Kuang /He 2022). A total of 24 Yunnan folk music items have been selected and included in the national ICH list and extended list, including 2 items from Blang ethnic group related to music ("Bulang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" of Menghai County) and dance ("Bee-barrel Drum Dance" of Shuangjiang County) (IhChina 2021).

Yunnan is the most culturally diverse region in China with 25 ethnic minority groups, each of which has largely maintained its individual, unique cultural characteristics. In 2000, Yunnan Provincial Government took the lead and enacted the *Regulations on Protection of Folk and Ethnic Traditional Culture of Yunnan Province* as the first provincial policy in China for safeguarding local traditional culture (Yang 2016; Kuang/He 2022). It was the first of a kind in China promoting Yunnanese minorities' cultural heritage through cultural policies aimed at their enhancement presenting enormous opportunities for ethnic groups to showcase their rich cultures and revive their traditions, languages, and cultural pride (Swain 1989, 1990; Chow 2005). As Kuang and He (2022) pointed out, the local government agencies are fully aware of the urgency of safeguarding the disappearing or endangered folk music in Yunnan and have taken multiple measures to address this problem:

> In addition to the formal policies and regulations, provincial, township, and county governments have included folk music protection in their annual work plan and agenda and reported their work in ICH protection on the official websites. The competent local authorities for safeguarding ICH also invest in ample funds to promote the work of folk music training and performance. With the concerted efforts, currently, most of the folk music items in Yunnan are not endangered. An increasing number of students are also learning folk music under the guidance of the local folk culture bearers (Kuang/He 2022: 5).

In June 2008, Menghai County successfully declared the "Blang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" ("Bùlǎng zú tánchàng") as a "National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Project" ("guójiā jí fēi wùzhí wénhuà yíchǎn bǎohù xiàngmù") (Xi/Li 2016). "Blang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" mainly refers to the *suo* love songs accompanied by the *ding*; in fact, in the Chinese term *tánchàng* (弹唱), the Chinese character 弹, (*tán*), refers to playing a stringed musical instrument or pluck, and 唱 (*chàng*) means "song" or "chant".

With the successful declaration of intangible heritage, the inheritance of Blang's traditional musical performances has been increasingly valued and improved by the government through the creation of training institutes and the nominations of national, provincial, and prefecture (city) level intangible cultural inheritors of music

and dance.[38] As Blumenfield observed, "in a place like Yunnan Province, where ethnic culture is a crucial economic resource deployable through the tourism process, governments at every level have a strong incentive to invest in naming, promoting and celebrating intangible cultural heritage" (2018: 172).

In April 2015, Menghai County was recognized as the "Hometown of Bulang Play and Sing Art in China" ("Zhōngguó bùlǎng tánchàng yìshù zhī xiāng") by the Chinese Artists Association. In order to carry out a long-term cultural inheritance program, in May 2015 Menghai County founded the first training institute for "Blang Nationality's Singing and Instrument Playing" ("Bùlǎng zú tánchàng chuánxí suǒ") in Manya village. The institute was run by Ai Wa Luo, the state-level intangible cultural heritage inheritor ("*guójiā jí fēi yí xiàngmù dàibiǎo xìng chuánchéng rén*") from Manya village, who was in charge of recruiting apprentices for inheriting the Blang ethnic culture. As an inheritor, the state grants Ai Wa Luo a salary every year to encourage him to continue to pass on the traditional culture. Nevertheless, although Ai Wa Luo's family mainly relies on farm work and rubber cutting, tuition is almost free, food and lodging are included, and sometimes some students from remote and difficult areas are given travel expenses (Xi/Li 2016).

The establishment of a training institute provides an important place and platform for the protection and inheritance of the Blang nationality's intangible cultural heritage. These cultural and artistic activities have enriched the cultural life of the Blang people, encouraged local traditional artists to preserve and give continuity to their musical tradition, and enhanced the sense of pride in their ethnic origins, cultural consciousness, and empowerment.

In the last decades, many traditional musicians belonging to ethnic minority groups have been nominated as national-level, provincial-level or county-level intangible cultural heritage representative inheritors. In the case of the Blang, Yu Kan La and Ai San Zhan were nominated as "province-level representative inheritors" ("Shěng jí dàibiǎo xìng chuánchéng rén") by the Chinese government in 2010, and in 2018, Ai San Zhan and Ai Wen Lun were appointed "state-level representative inheritors" ("Zhōu jí chuánchéng rén"). Nowadays, Yu Kan La, Ai Wen Lun and Ai Sai Zhan teach weekday evenings and weekends at the Bulang Nationality Playing and Singing Institute in Manxi village. Although this achievement marks the passage from an informal to formal musical education in the village, this gathering space is not a school structure in the strict sense, but an informal country cottage

**38** After the United Nations adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, China chose to use the existing mechanisms of the government system to establish a government-led national, provincial, prefecture, and county system in four parts, which now constitutes the core of China's engagement with the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list (Boyu et al. 2015).

with no public funding in which they teach folk songs for free to the children of the village. Since 1982, Yu Kan La has taught about 300–400 people without ever receiving any remuneration; at the moment she has got about 60 students – all girls, mostly Blang, but also including a few members of other ethnic groups such as Han, Dai, and Hani – called "Little Flower Group" (*Xiaohua dui*) (Figure 12).

**Figure 12:** Blang children performing traditional songs with Ai Wen Lun in Manxi village (2016). Photo by Zhang Hai.

## 6 Staged performances in Daluo

The song and dance performances of ethnic minorities are an important link in the tourism and cultural industries of various ethnic groups in Yunnan. Nevertheless, in this global "ethnoscape" (Appadurai 1990) – of which tourism is part – cultural activities in "enclavic tourist spaces" (Edensor 2000), such as stage performances in cultural villages and ethnic parks,[39] and the showcase of ethnic music to domestic tourists raise the problem of commodification of minorities' musical heritage (Li

39 In Xishuangbanna, ethnic groups are represented in 'cultural villages' (such as the Dai village of Mengjinglai, Daluo Town), a kind of theme park which brings together typical artifacts and crafts, features life-size models of rural village homes and homesteads and demonstrates various folk cultural performances for the expectant urban, Han tourists (Oakes 2006; Graburn 2015).

2013; Yang / Wall 2008; Yang et al. 2006; Su 2011). Tourism commodification, whereby "local customs, rituals, festivals and ethnic arts become tourist attractions, performed for tourist consumption and produced for market-based instrumental activities" (Gotham 2002: 1737) is an ongoing process between the ethnic tourism industry and the local musical traditions.

Display of a staged cultural performance has become a profit-making opportunity for traditional musicians and dancers and marks the transition from recreational to predominantly commercial performance. This process raises the issue of the consequent professionalization of folk musicians – the essence of professionalism lies in his/her art's being a means of livelihood – and whether "the selling of ethnic music to tourists" (Su 2011) will cause the music to change to match the outsiders' (tourists, audience, authorities, etc.) expectations.

Colin Mackerras (1984) explains how policy and professionalization have influenced minority music. According to his point of view, professionalization, introduced by Han culture, raises the standards of musicianship but weakens original folksong and dance which were not professionalized before. Musicians and dancers who may have participated in musical events are no longer comfortable or willing to participate because of the dynamics created by musical professionals.

Some scholars of tourism have posited that the commoditization of previously noncommoditized culture results in a loss of meaning for the culture producers (Greenwood 1977: 135). However, it can be countered that commoditization may represent a mechanism to protect cultural resources and revitalize indigenous cultures (Li/Hinch 1997). Erik Cohen argues that «folk musicians, who play for money to an external audience, may be excited by the opportunity to present their art and proud to display their competence. There is no reason to assume that their music lost all meaning for them, merely because they have been paid for performing it» (Cohen 1988: 381). Graburn goes beyond claiming that «the authenticity of minority *minzu* village cultural expressions has no value except as a source of inspiration for entertaining and commercial performances» (Graburn 2015: 186).

The following case study draws on Gibson and Connell's (2005) claim that music as a particular cultural commodity should be analyzed in relation to *deterritorialization, commodification,* and *identity* politics. In the city of Daluo, on the border with Myanmar, a few kilometers from Manxi village, Blang music and dance performances become forms of entertainment for tourists in which formal tourist concert replaces informal domestic performance. Here, a group of Blang female singers and dancers from Manxi village led by the *ding* player Ai Wen Lun perform in front of a shopping mall located a few meters from the border with Myanmar, welcoming tourists getting off the buses. In this staged performance, the Blang music and dance ensemble is involved in "shoppertainment" (Gottdiener 1997), a sort of role-play to attract tourists as potential shopping mall customers Figures 13–14.


**Figures 13–14:** Blang female singers and dancers, led by *ding* player Ai Wen Lun, perform in front of a jewelry store on the border with Myanmar to welcome tourists who get off the bus in Daluo. Frames excerpt from the documentary *Bulang Music. From the Mountains to the Stars* by L. D'Amico.

Echoing Gibson and Connell's statement mentioned above, we witness a case of (a) *deterritorialization*, being a "staged" performance out of its original context (a private courtyard in Manxi village); (b) tourism *commodification*, whereby "local customs, rituals, festivals and ethnic arts become tourist attractions, performed for tourist consumption and produced for market-based instrumental activities" (Gotham 2002: 1737); (c) tourist-oriented performance that becomes a showcase of ethnic *identity*, in which "commodification sustains discourses of identity building and cultural revival that in turn serve to justify the pursuit of profit" (Su 2011: 496).

In their article focused on Dong/Kam's "big song" (*dage* in Mandarin Chinese, *ga lao* in Kam/Dong language), Ingram and Wu noticed many differences between "village tradition" big song in its original context and the "staged tradition" big song in terms of repertoire, lyrics, pitch, social context, and aesthetic evaluation, concluding that "the village and staged contexts for big song singing have now formed two largely distinct 'traditions'" (Ingram/Wu 2017: 78). As it relates to Blang case, although the re-enactment in Daluo was a staged performance, it was not transformed in a "show" for tourists and had no distinctive characteristics of a "staged tradition". The decontextualization of a traditional musical practice from its own domestic environment and its recontextualization in a different venue as a public staged performance did not involve any alteration of musical forms, vocal style, repertoires, and musical instruments nor in dance or traditional attires. In other words, according to my personal observations, there was no (musical) difference between the community-based performance and the staged performance. The repositioning of a community-based musical practice's production and consumption in a "showcase" for an audience of outsiders draws on the expansion of performance occasions from the village to the public space of the shopping mall.

In the case of Blang music-making for tourists in Daluo, it is relevant to notice too that the public performance of the musical tradition bearers from Manxi village in Daluo consisted of toasting songs traditionally performed in rural context to

entertain guests, hence there is no loss of meaning in their translation in this new context, as long as they maintain their social function and significance of welcoming and entertaining guests. However, we might distinguish two kinds of performances: *participatory performance,* a musical practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, and *presentational performance* referring to situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience (Turino 2008: 26). In the context of the Blang of Manxi village, the so-called "village tradition" mentioned before can be associated to the *participatory* performance, and the "staged tradition" to the *presentational* performance. In terms of ecomusicology,[40] we might say that this *participatory* performance is compatible with the ecosystem, while the *presentational* performance is detached from its original cultural context and natural environment. Dealing with the *sustainability* of traditional music, Titon (2009) alerts us to the risk of constructing staged authenticities with music treated as a market commodity when it is tagged in *presentational* forms:

> When heritage spaces emphasize music in presentational forms from the stage, packaged for tourists, with the value-added mechanisms of commerce, the effect will be to encourage thinking of music as a commodity, with consequences for the professionalization, commercialization, and a media-driven revival of music both within and outside these communities (Titon 2009: 122).

Although it might be perceived as a case of exploitation for profit, the Blang musicians previously mentioned seem to accept enthusiastically their new role as professional performers for tourists, not merely to increase their income, but also to feed their ethnic pride. In staged/presentational performances, Blang's musical activity is not considered as "backwardness" (*luohou*) anymore, but it is seen (and listened to) by outsiders as both a cultural fact and a form of entertainment. At the same time, they acquire social prestige by raising their status as folk musicians to that of professional artists recognized not only by the Han majority but also by their local community as feedback:[41]

> The local minority people [...] see themselves not as 'enacting their culture' but as acting a modern role in Chinese society, a role which happens to involve their successfully looking like

**40** Ecomusicology, as defined by Aaron S. Allen, is not "ecological musicology," but rather "ecocritical musicology" (Allen 2011a): «Ecomusicological criticism must bridge media, sound, and text, and add the complicating element of nature—essentially using words to critique and explain sounds about and influenced by actual nature and symbolic nature, all of which are infused with subjective emotions and contextualized in time, place, and power structures» (Allen 2011b: 418).

**41** While the Han Chinese were distinguished as being the most advanced, ethnic customs rituals, religions, and arts were documented and presented as visible signifiers indicating the backwardness of minorities (Gladney 1994; Blum 2001; Li 2013).

> and acting the attractive and visible parts of their traditional culture, and *learning to improve upon them*. Indeed these successful 'professionals' have come to look down on the ordinary co-ethnic members of their villages who still have to make a living practicing agricultural and other mundane occupations (Graburn 2015: 186).

According to Zhang Boyu, the differences between folk musicians becoming professionals and being granted as heritors can be seen from what fundamental change intangible cultural heritage protection entails the music and to the folk musicians:

> For the former, the professionalization of folk musicians will cause the music to change to match the path of social development, whereas the slogan of intangible cultural heritage will keep the music in traditional states. For the latter, the number of the selected professionalized folk musicians was very small, but that of the intangible cultural heritors is relatively big. Intangible cultural heritage protection brings more than just social advancement, it also comes with major economic benefits. The meager benefits from before now become much larger because the artists are famous, without changing their peasantry (Zhang et al. 2015: 54).

I asked Ai Wen Lun some questions about the performance in front of the jewelry in Daluo and his experience as a village musician who became a semi-professional musician performing for tourists:

Q: What is the motivation to perform for tourists out of the village?
A: To show our traditional culture to the tourists.
Q: Are these performances sponsored by the shop's owner?
A: Yes. Because Blang music is the most typical minority culture in Daluo, so he invites us to do the show.
Q: Do the national-level, provincial-level or county-lever inheritors receive any benefits from the government (for example for training students)?
A: It is the government that decides when to train students. And if the government wants us to teach students, then the government will give us an allowance, but not much.
Q: Do you think that performing for tourists helps to revive or to let Blang music know and appreciate Han tourists?
A: Performing for tourists not only make tourists feel good, but it's also good for cultural propaganda [dissemination].
Q: How do you feel when you perform for tourists and when you perform in the village?
A: I feel happy when I do it, because it's my own culture. I am happy to show it to them.
Q: Did your life improve by becoming a professional musician?
A: Partly improved, if we are invited to private events, they will pay us or fulfill our request; if it's an official government job, we'll get paid, but not much.

Q: Do you and the other Blang singers and dancers usually perform or have ever performed in ethnic parks, cultural villages or other venues for tourists?
A: Yes, some businessmen asked to do it, so we performed with Dai people, Lahu people together, because they were invited too. It happened more often before the COVID-19 pandemic.
Q: On these occasions, did you change anything in your performance (like changing lyrics, vocal style, musical instruments)?
A: We seldom adapt it, most of the time we follow the very traditional style.[42]

Ai Wen Lun is an example of a traditional musician, considered by his community as a culture-bearer and officially recognized as a "state-level representative inheritor", who became a semi-professional musician without losing his integrity by adapting the traditional repertoire to the needs of show business. The performances with his group of Blang female singers and dancers for tourist entertainment in Daluo are certainly de-contextualized from its intimate and informal setting (the village's household), but performers rigorously play "original" (*yuansheng*) folksongs and dances, dressed in full formal traditional Blang attire. They have demonstrated their presentational performance to be re-contextualized as both cultural heritage and show for tourists; but to them, the music is most significant not only as heritage but also because it helps them to maintain it as a living tradition.

Compared with their domestic performance in front of a community-based audience that I had the chance to attend in Manxi village (the members of this ensemble mostly live and perform in their original village environment), the shopping mall's staged performance shows that traditional music forms and repertoires have not changed at all, and neither have the traditional dance movements performed by the female choir. In other words, watching a traditional music performance on stage might be very different from seeing it in its domestic environment in terms of immediacy and spontaneity, but the fact that something is simply staged for outsiders/viewers does not immediately negate the validity of its integrity. On the contrary, public performances on stage can be an additional social occasion that can help reinvigorate the musical heritage. Ethnic minority groups may build an enhanced sense of value for their cultures. Undoubtedly, seeing the tourists get on stage during the show to take selfies with the Blang artists, or trying to imitate their dance movements in these staged performances packaged for tourists can potentially pose a risk of "thinking of music as a commodity" (Titon 2009: 122). Nevertheless, public performances on stage can be an additional performative occasion in the daily lives of village musicians which can help reinvigorate the local musical heritage. Staged performance reenacted under in different conditions may represent an

42 Interview translated from Blang to English by He Hua.

opportunity for ethnic minority groups to build an enhanced sense of value for their cultures. As pointed out by Edensor (2001), cultural staging inevitably raises controversies about the reproduction of stereotypes associated with primitivism, exoticism and eroticism. Paradoxically though, it may also replenish moribund local traditions (Wood 1998).

In summary, I agree with Xiaobo Su's statement (although it is referred to her study case of Naxi music in Lijiang) that: «First, commodification sustains discourses of identity building and cultural revival that in turn serve to justify the pursuit of profit. Second, commodification is variegated over time and across space. Third, commodification provides the conditions for local musicians to increase their capacity to produce local narratives of music» (Su 2011: 496). On the other side, it must be pointed out that a profound musical change happened with certain village-born musicians, officially appointed as "inheritor" singers, who used to sing in their home environment first but have later morphed into media sensations as professional stage performers. As early as the age of television, art master Andy Warhol once predicted "in the future, everyone can become famous for 15 min".

## 7 Blang music in televised style

In popular visual culture, minority cultures have been constructed and represented with a strong sense of "internal orientalism" (Schein 1997) or "domestic orientalism" (Rees 2000) with respect to Han/mainstream portrayals of minorities, in which "the minorities are presented as an exotic alternative to the more staid and sober Han" (Rees 2000: 24). Ethnic minorities with their curious customs are often depicted as exotic, joyful, entertaining in staged performances, and are usually referred as *nengge shanwu,* literally "good at singing and dancing" (Mackerras 1984: 202) in the visual culture for touristic promotion. Gorfinkel claims that "Chinese television shows have also emphasized foreigners' attraction to exotic, minority nationality cultures and ethnic minority areas of China" (2017: 180).

Chinese minority music is frequently performed on the national broadcasting network China Central Television (CCTV), as music-entertainment performances within the Chinese Party-state's notion of a 'unitary multi-ethnic state'. TV music talent shows in China, built on into the format of Anglo-American programs, have become a new setting in which viewers across the country provide visibility and audibility to ethnic minority musicians. Gorfinkel (2017) highlights the contribution of TV reality singing contests, such as *The Voice of China* (Zhejiang Satellite Television) and *Sing My Song* (CCTV3), in building the "unity of nationalities" (*minzu tuanjie*) in China. Based on five years of watching the most widespread TV music talent show in China, *The Voice of China*, Lijuan Qian's article with the meaningful

title "Which Identity Matters? Competing Ethnicities in Chinese TV Music Contests" (2017) provides comparative examples as to how ethnic minority singers and singer-songwriters create and negotiate ethnic-national, pan-ethnic and political identities.

TV music talent shows provide a colorfully illuminated professional show stage where ethnic minority musicians can express their ethnic or multi-ethnic identity through their performances; but, favored the contest format, these kinds of performances do not aim at authenticity but rather at stereotyping cultural items. In this *mise en scene,* the minority's performance becomes a show in which even top-level ethnic minority musicians manipulate their own musical tradition to balance the audience's expectations.

In March 2017, the renowned Blang singer and state-level inheritor Ai Wa Luo with his son-in-law Ai Di, were called by the Chinese national television CCTV to take part at a famous talent show (*Xingguang Dadao*, "Avenue of Stars") – in which contestants joke with hosts – to perform with his song and dance troupe called "Xi Mei". The performance announced by the captions on the screen was the Dai dance titled "auspicious peacock" (*Jixiang kongque*). For the TV talent show, Blang female dancers were dressed in colorful Dai costumes, performing choreographies, glamorously aestheticized, inspired by the Dai peacock dance (*kongque wu*) – a neo-traditional folk dance invented at the end of the 1940s (You 2016) – while Blang male percussionists performed acrobatic dances extraneous to Blang traditional culture. One percussionist was dancing and beating the "elephant-foot drum" (*xiangjiaogu*) with hands and feet (while traditionally it is played only with the hands) and in a completely decontextualized representation. This kind of percussion set (drum, cymbals and gongs) is traditionally used for ritual music (*zaibeng*) in Buddhist temples and not for entertainment purposes. Although this performance ignored nearly all sense of authenticity, the audience response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, and Xi Mei won the second prize (Figure 15).[43]

In this "game of mirrors" between insiders and outsiders, Blang artists and Han audiences/tourists are both fulfilling each other's needs and imagination (Lau 1998). But this game of mirrors can become a game of "distorting mirrors" in which the media representation of artistic and cultural expressions of ethnic minorities risks transforming into caricatures that ridicule the minorities' musical manifestations. In this case, the extraordinary (and so far, unique) opportunity by a "minority among the minorities" to show their cultural/musical heritage to millions of viewers across China was a failure in which the majority's representation of Blang people reinforce the stereotype of joyful ethnic minorities *nengge shanwu* ("good at singing at dancing").

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**43** The video of the show is available online on CCTV's website: https://tv.cctv.com/2017/04/14/VIDEHovPmQ8qhN59wCm9VQ1X170414.shtml (last accessed February 22, 2023).


**Figure 15:** Blang singer Ai Waluo performing with his troupe "Xi Mei" for a TV show broadcast by CCTV (Chinese national television) on April 4th, 2017. Frame excerpt from the documentary *Bulang Music, From the Mountains to the Stars* 2023.

# 8 Conclusions

Ethnic heritage-based tourism initiated in Yunnan in the 1990s and promoted by the Chinese government to facilitate the development and preserve heritage has helped build a wider appreciation of ethnic minority cultures in China, and at the same time has helped these communities nurture pride in their own heritage. The integration of ethnic cultures and tourism has clearly increased the awareness of the value of ethnic heritage in Yunnan amongst people in government and business, as well as artist groups.

Cultural heritage is an important attraction for tourism that can bring much-needed economic alleviation to poverty-stricken areas, but it is also a sensitive asset that can be damaged by the same tourism. In fact, finding a balance between gaining economic benefits and maintaining the core value of cultural heritage is a particularly challenging task. Promotional touristic activities, such as stage performances in ethnic parks as well as in popular TV talent shows, are adapted and modified in such ways that they can best suit the needs and the tastes of the Han tourists-audience in a sort of "game of mirrors" between insiders and outsiders, rather than preserving and enhancing the traditional musical heritage of minority cultures.

The commodification of ethnicity for tourism also creates a variety of issues, from the preservation of ethnic communities to the construction or negotiation of ethnic identities, from cultural sustainability to the changing of basic values and

cultural characteristics that are subject to threats and challenges, making intangible cultural heritage increasingly endangered (Howard 2012).

Nevertheless, many traditional musicians who are considered culture bearers by their local community and are officially recognized as "cultural representative inheritors" have a broader display platform, which not only preserves the art of the ethnic group and increases personal income, but also allows more people to understand and appreciate the music culture of their own ethnic group. In the case of the Blang musicians from Man Xi village performing for tourists in Daluo, alternative performance venues and related practices, although primarily motivated by the necessity to increase their income as semi-professional folk musicians, do not affect the integrity and continuity of their musical tradition. Furthermore, Blang musicians from Man Xi village provide an example of indigenous tourism, a subtype of ethnic tourism differentiated by the control a group exerts in marketing their own culture and territory, resulting in sustainable development.

Nowadays, the roll-out in the last few years of smartphone technology in rural China hand in hand with the development of local tourism offers a transformative possibility in relation to how to sustain and preserve intangible cultural heritage. Nevertheless, The diffusion of given repertoires through digital media platforms in China and abroad and the commoditization of indigenous musical knowledge raise issues related not only to its integrity and preservation but also to music ownership, intellectual property, and cultural rights. The actual situation urges the development of a new research framework using an action-based and collaborative approach with wide potential future transferability to other marginalized communities such as the Blang ethnic group of Manxi village in Xishuangbanna.

# Appendix

## Selected Chinese Character List: Personal Names

He Hua 何华
Yang Liping 杨丽萍
Yang Minkang 杨民康

## Selected Chinese Character List: Terms

Bulangzu 布朗族,
Bulangzu tanchang 布朗族弹唱
*chuantong* 传统

*chuantong min'ge* 传统民歌
*chuantong wenhua* 传统文化
*dage* 大歌
*dagu* 大鼓
*daibiaoxing chuanchengren* 代表性传承人
*ding qin* 盯琴
*duige* 对歌
*guanxi* 关系
Jixiang kongque 吉祥孔雀
*jiuge* 酒歌
*kongque wu* 孔雀舞
Manba 曼巴
Manya 曼芽
Manxi 曼夕
Menghai 勐海
Mengjinglai 勐景来
*minzucun* 民族村
*yuanshengtai min'ge* 原生态民歌,
Yunnan Leigui 云南雷鬼
*luohou* 落后
*min'ge* 民歌 / *minjian gequ* 民间歌曲
*minzu* 民族
*minzu shibie* 民族识别
*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结
*nengge shanwu* 能歌善舞
Pu 濮 / Pu man 濮满
*qingge* 情歌
Sangkang 桑康
*shaoshu minzu,* 少数民族
*sheng* 笙
*suo* 索
*tong ma* 同玛
*wenhua chanye* 文化产业
*wenhua yichan* 文化遗产
*wenhua lüyou* 文化旅游
*xiangjiaogu* 象脚鼓
Xiaohua dui 小花队
*yi ge dayan* 以歌代言
*yuansheng* 原声
Yunnan Yingxiang 云南映象

*zai* 宰
*zai beng* 宰蹦
*zhuai* 拽
*zunzhong* 尊重

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