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AXITIAOYUE: YI REPRESENTATIVE DANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN CHINESE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the “Axi Tiaoyue Dance” (AXITIAOYUE), one of the most representative traditional dances of the Axi branch of the Yi ethnic group in China. The study systematically examines the inheritance, development, and cultural transformation of this traditional dance within the context of modern Chinese society. By tracing its evolution from local ritual practices to recognition as an important element of intangible cultural heritage, the research highlights the dynamic relationship between ethnic culture and contemporary social development. The study divides the historical evolution of Axi Tiaoyue Dance into several important stages, including the original ritual stage, the early formation stage, the standardization stage, and the contemporary heritage preservation stage. Through the perspectives of anthropology, art studies, and cultural heritage research, the study explores how the dance reflects the Yi ethnic group’s cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, social values, and aesthetic traditions. Furthermore, the research analyzes the core artistic elements of the dance, including symbolic body movements, ritual gestures, traditional music, costume symbolism, and agricultural cultural influences. The findings reveal that Axi Tiaoyue Dance has gradually transformed from a local communal ritual into a representative cultural performance and a medium for intercultural communication in modern society. In addition, the study discusses the role of educational institutions, tourism development, and cultural preservation policies in promoting the revitalization and sustainable inheritance of Axi Tiaoyue Dance. The research demonstrates that the modernization and reinterpretation of traditional ethnic dance not only preserve cultural identity but also contribute to the creative transformation and international dissemination of minority culture in contemporary China.

Keywords: Axi Tiaoyue Dance (AXITIAOYUE), Yi ethnic dance, traditional dance, cultural transformation, heritage preservation

1. INTRODUCTION

China's 56 officially recognized ethnic groups have created a rich and diverse cultural heritage, with folk dance playing a unique role in transmitting collective memory, religious belief, and social identity across generations (Buckland, 1999; Sklar, 2000). Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, ethnic folk dances have received increased institutional attention through the intangible cultural heritage protection system, despite pressures from tourism commodification and the erosion of their original community content.

The Yi people of southwestern China, one of the country's oldest and most culturally diverse ethnic groups, demonstrate this phenomenon. The Yi, who have their own writing system, a philosophical tradition based on nature worship and ancestor veneration, and a social structure organized around agricultural civilization and clan-based community, have developed a rich performance culture in which dance serves as a ritual medium, social interaction, and cultural education (Luo Xiongyan, 2011; Wu Xiaobang, 2008). Yi folk dances are divided into two types: ritual forms, such as the Bimo Dance and the Goatskin Drum Dance, which are performed according to strict ceremonial protocols, and self-entertainment forms, which are distinguished by dynamic collective participation, stomping, kicking, and circular formations that reflect the group's collectivist social values.

At the heart of this research is Axitiaoyue, the most characteristic dance style of the Yi people's Axi subgroup, which originated in the hilly hills west of Mile County in Yunnan Province. Its name, "Axi Moon Jumping," refers to the old history of young men and women meeting under the moonlight to dance and pick mates, placing the form at the nexus of social ritual, romantic tradition, and communal identification. The dance's origins are most widely attributed to ancestral rituals of stamping on flames to extinguish forest fires, which embeds a deep cultural memory of fire worship into its signature stomping rhythms and passionate emotional register, elevating it above ordinary entertainment (Liu Qiong, 2016). Axitiaoyue is distinguished by a peculiar five-rhythm pattern, a big Sanxian three-stringed ensemble accompaniment, and a movement vocabulary of stomping, clapping, and arm swinging, culminating in the collective cry of "Yao Ho." Listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage in 2008 under the category of Yi Three-string Dance, the tradition has evolved across four historically distinct stages—from indigenous sacrificial ritual before the 1950s, through national

cultural discovery and staged adaptation in the mid-twentieth century, to tourism performance from the 1990s onwards, and finally to the present era of formalised heritage protection combined with diversified function in education.

Despite its multifaceted significance, the procedures by which Axitiaoyue emerged, as well as the mechanisms by which its performance parts produce Yi Axi ethnic imagery, have not been thoroughly investigated by scholars. This study fills that gap by looking at both the historical evolution of Axitiaoyue and the performance features through which it conveys cultural identity in modern situations.

The current state of ethnic minority folk dance in China reflects a structural tension between formal heritage protection, which seeks to preserve cultural authenticity and living transmission, and the commodification pressures of cultural tourism, staged performance aesthetics, and demographic disruption, which gradually detach traditional forms from the social contexts that give them meaning (Gesang Namgyal, 2015; UNESCO, 2003; Losang Kailu, 2007). Axitiaoyue stands at the center of these forces in paradigmatic form: within less than a century it has transitioned from intimate community ritual to national heritage object, regional tourism centerpiece, urban fitness program, and internationally presented cultural symbol — a trajectory whose benefits in terms of cultural dissemination carry corresponding risks of symbolic decontextualization and the subordination of indigenous meaning to external aesthetic expectations.

Three academic gaps drive this research. First, there is little micro-level study on the Axi subgroup's special dance history; extant literature mostly discusses Yi dancing at the level of the wider ethnic group, leaving the Axi tradition's distinguishing historical and artistic traits undocumented. Second, the performance elements that comprise Axitiaoyue's artistic identity—its movement vocabulary, musical structure, rhythmic patterns, costume symbolism, and formation logic—have not been analyzed in the systematic and culturally grounded manner required to support heritage conservation or pedagogical development. Third, the link between these performance features and the creation of Yi Axi ethnic imagery has yet to be theorized; previous accounts proclaim rather than analyze the mechanisms by which physical practice develops and modifies ethnic identity in shifting social situations.

These omissions have practical repercussions. Conservation techniques risk imposing standardized

rules that sever the ties between movement vocabulary and its founding social, ecological, and ceremonial settings if Axitiaoyue's performance aspects and cultural logic are not thoroughly documented. Dance educators lack analytically based tools to convey not only technical form but cultural value. Furthermore, the larger scholarly community lacks the geographically particular case study required to deepen theoretical knowledge of how ethnic minority cultures balance the contradictory needs of preservation and innovation in modern China.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

1. To study the history and development of the AXITIAOYUE dance series of the Yi ethnic group.
2. To analyze the performance elements of AXITIAOYUE and explore how they reflect the cultural image and ethnic identity of the Yi people.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research employs a multidisciplinary analytical framework based on five interrelated theoretical views, each addressing a different aspect of Axitiaoyue's historical evolution and current state.

Cultural Ecology Theory presents a macro-level paradigm for comprehending Axitiaoyue as an integrated cultural system formed by the interactions of the natural environment, economic conditions, and social institutions (Steward, 1955). According to research conducted on Axitiaoyue using this framework, the dance's origins, movement patterns, and social functions are heavily influenced by the agricultural livelihood and fire worship traditions of southeastern Yunnan's mountainous areas, and its evolution follows a trajectory through four ecological phases: traditional worship, stagnation, cultural revival, and tourism prosperity (Yunnan Normal University Research Group, 2015). This framework also identifies current threats such as cultural assimilation, capacity shortages, declining sanctity, and authenticity erosion through staged performance, providing a conceptual foundation for evaluating conservation strategies that respect the integrity of the cultural ecosystem rather than treating the dance as a standalone artefact.

Intangible Cultural Heritage Conservation Theory gives guiding ideas for understanding the current heritage processes at Axitiaoyue. Ge Shurong, Xue Yan, and colleagues (2012) proposed a systematic three-pronged conservation model that includes "multi-channel conservation" — combining field documentation, digital recording, and support for

both static and dynamic inheritors; "multi-level development" — coordinating the roles of communities, schools, research institutions, and government agencies; and "multi-pronged utilisation" — supporting the creative transformation of cultural values into tourism. This paradigm immediately influences the study's research of Axitiaoyue's institutional inheritance processes, as well as the conflicts between authenticity preservation and adaptive evolution (UNESCO, 2003; Blake, 2009).

Cultural Symbolism Theory provides an analytical framework for understanding the levels of meaning hidden in Axitiaoyue's performance parts. Xi Haiyan (2014) analyzed Axitiaoyue as a comprehensive cultural symbol system integrating sports, dance, music, and cultural memory, distinguishing between tangible material cultural symbols—including the distinctive three-stringed Sanxian instrument, bamboo flute, and ethnic costumes—and intangible cultural symbols encompassing the five-rhythm pattern, core movements of stomping and jumping, the ritual scene of dancing under the moon, and the fire worship culture. This paradigm allows the research to progress beyond descriptive movement analysis and into interpretation of the cultural metaphors and symbolic meanings buried in Axitiaoyue's body lexicon, musical structure, and material culture (Ness, 1992).

State Presence Theory investigates how governmental authority influences the current transmission trajectory of Axitiaoyue via regulations, institutional recognition, financial backing, and cultural efforts. Qian Weisheng (2021) contends that the state transforms its will to power into visible cultural form by organizing and intervening in social performances, public cultural projects, and commemorative events, resulting in what he refers to as the "performance perspective" of state power, in which public authority operates as ritual performance, continuously creating and reproducing legitimacy. Luo Fan's (2015) research of the Diaochang festival in Guizhou's Stone Miao hamlet reveals how state symbols and local ethnic traditions coexist in the same ritual space, competing and integrating. When applied to Axitiaoyue, this framework reveals how the dance's national intangible cultural heritage listing in 2008, campus integration programs, state-organized cultural festivals, and cultural tourism policy have collectively repositioned it within narratives of ethnic unity and Chinese community consciousness, as well as reshaping its performance contexts and aesthetic standards (Howard, 2016; Reyes & Wang, 2025).

Performance Theory Positions Axitiaoyue is defined as a dynamic cultural performance practice whose meaning is constantly constructed via actual performance events in specific social situations (Bauman, 1975). According to Chen Junyu (2023), performance theory focuses on the processes of "decontextualization" (separating a cultural practice from its original context) and "recontextualization" (integrating it into new performance situations such as tourist stages, school classrooms, and fitness programs). This framework is particularly useful for analyzing the heritage and transformation of Axitiaoyue across its various contemporary performance contexts, revealing how the dance's meaning, function, and aesthetic character are constantly reconfigured through the interaction of performers and audiences in settings ranging from village ritual to international cultural exchange (Buckland, 1999; Sklar, 2000).

2.2 Related Research

2.2.1 Domestic Studies

Scholarly interest to Yi ethnic dance has resulted in a collection of research on movement characteristics, cultural symbolism, historical memory, and present inheritance, which serves as the empirical and methodological underpinning for this study.

In terms of movement and cultural analysis, Li Xiao'ou's (2024) study of the "Duhuo Dance" of the Liangshan Yi in Sichuan provides an exemplary methodological approach, analyzing the distinctive "reverse walking" movement and linking it to the evolving social roles of Yi women using a "thick description" approach that combines physical movement analysis with cultural interpretation. This merger of kinetic and cultural analysis serves as a direct methodological model for the current study's investigation of Axitiaoyue's movement vocabulary. Li Yongxiang (2009), focusing on the cigarette box dance of the Yunnan Yi subgroup from a dance anthropology perspective, places dance within its broader social and cultural context through an interdisciplinary approach that examines the complex interactions between ethnic dance, state power discourse, cultural policy, political-economic restructuring, and ethnic identity construction—demonstrating the analytical possibilities of treating folk dance as both aesthetic and He Longguang (2010) investigates Yi flower drum dance using the theoretical frameworks of "ritual function" and "historical memory," revealing through fieldwork that the dance serves as a physical reenactment of ancestral worship ceremonies, establishing the methodological precedent for interpreting

Axitiaoyue's fire worship origins as embodied historical memory rather than mere choreographic convention.

In terms of conservation and inheritance research, Ge Shurong *et al.* (2012) conducted a systematic field investigation of Axitiaoyue in both its origin and surrounding areas, developing a standardized "Axitiaoyue Dance Training Set" as a specific framework for pedagogical inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage project — providing empirical grounding for evaluating the outcomes of institutionalized transmission. Xing Jue (2012) examined the artistic characteristics of Axitiaoyue as refined by modern dancers using sports science concepts, revealing how the dance's rhythm, movement intensity, and health value have been reconceptualized within contemporary physical education frameworks, shedding light on the expansion of folk-dance functions beyond ritual and community contexts. The Yunnan Normal University Research Group (2015) used cultural ecology theory to trace Axitiaoyue's evolution through four developmental stages in the specific cultural ecosystem of Qiayi Village, Xishan District, Mile City, demonstrating the profound impact of socioeconomic conditions and policy interventions on the tradition's survival and adaptation. Extending this institutional analysis, an anonymous researcher (2020) used state presence theory to investigate how national power participation in intangible cultural heritage protection shapes Axi community members' attitudes and cultural self-understanding toward their own tradition, addressing the complex interaction between official heritage discourse and popular cultural practice that is central to the current study's inquiry.

2.2.2 International Studies

International scholarship contributes three important analytical perspectives absent from the predominantly domestic literature on Axitiaoyue. Blake (2009) critically examines the principle of "community participation" enshrined in the UNESCO 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, providing a conceptual framework for determining whether Axitiaoyue's formal protection empowers the Axi people as responsible decision-makers over their own cultural heritage, or whether it perpetuates top-down governance patterns that may marginalise indigenous knowledge and community agency (UNESCO, 2003). In her foundational dance anthropology study of Filipino communities, Ness (1992) demonstrates how dance functions as a "cosmological symbol and image"

embedded in community life, providing both the methodological model and theoretical precedent for analyzing Axitiaoyue as a practice expressing the Axi people's social values, gender relations, and ethnic identity, rather than just a sequence of movements. UNESCO (2009). In its evaluation of the Mongolian Biyelgee dance for the Urgent Protection List, Hafstein (2018) identifies challenges shared by nomadic and rural folk dance traditions around the world, such as ageing inheritor populations, performance simplification for tourism, and intergenerational transmission decline, providing a comparative global context for understanding the pressures facing Axitiaoyue. Taylor (2016), examining the intersection of cultural heritage, tourism, and economic development in Thai-Lao weaving communities, offers specific analytical insight into the dual character of cultural tourism adoption — simultaneously generating economic incentives and cultural pride while producing tensions around authenticity and the progressive separation of cultural practice from its originating community contexts—directly applicable to the analysis of Axitiaoyue.

2.2.3 Research Gap

When combined, existing domestic scholarship has produced valuable empirical documentation of Axitiaoyue's movement characteristics, conservation challenges, and institutional inheritance mechanisms, whereas international scholarship has provided comparative cases and critical theoretical frameworks for analyzing the politics of heritage governance and the dynamics of tourism adaptation. However, three major holes remain. First, no research has thoroughly analyzed both the historical development and performance features of Axitiaoyue under a single analytical framework, leaving the link between the dance's evolutionary trajectory and its distinctive artistic traits unexplored. Second, the methods by which Axitiaoyue's performance aspects — movement vocabulary, musical structure, costume symbolism, and formation logic — create and express Yi Axi ethnic images have not been studied in a culturally grounded and comparative context. Third, the interaction of gender, embodiment, and ethnic identity creation in Axitiaoyue performance has gotten little sustained scholarly study. The current study fills these gaps by combining the five theoretical frameworks listed above with a thorough fieldwork-based investigation of both the dance's developmental history and contemporary performance features.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design based on ethnographic and interpretive traditions, treating Axitiaoyue as a dynamic cultural practice whose meaning is shaped by performance, transmission, and social interaction in changing historical contexts (Buckland, 1999; Sklar, 2000). A multi-method approach combining literature review, in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and focus group discussion was used to ensure complementarity across data sources and analytical perspectives, thereby supporting methodological triangulation and increasing the credibility and depth of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research focuses on two interconnected areas: the historical development and evolutionary trajectory of Axitiaoyue across four stages, from indigenous community ritual to contemporary intangible cultural heritage practice, and the creative transformation of dance across multiple contemporary domains, such as school aesthetic education, stage performance, cultural tourism, and community fitness life.

3.2 Research Period and Field Sites

Field data were collected between November 2024 and November 2025. The primary field site was Mile City, Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, which is the origin and core geographical center of the Axitiaoyue tradition, as well as the primary location of its institutionalized heritage governance, cultural tourism development, and community performance activities. Data collection was expanded to include Kunming and other metropolitan places where Axitiaoyue is actively performed and transmitted, allowing the study to capture the dance's existence in both its indigenous community setting and its contemporary urban transmission environments.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were chosen using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure access to knowledge holders with a wide range of connections to the Axitiaoyue tradition, including scholarly expertise and professional inheritance, practitioner experience, and community audience reception (Patton 2015). Three participant groups were formed. **The Expert Panel** was made up of three individuals with established authority in Yi dance studies, intangible cultural heritage governance, and musical performance: a senior scholar and choreographer with decades of field experience in Yi ethnic dance

inheritance and intangible cultural heritage protection, holding extensive expertise in stage performance, dance composition, higher education, and fieldwork; a recognized intangible cultural heritage inheritor and Yi community Experts shared academically based and experientially rich insights on the cultural, historical, and aesthetic components of dance.

The Practitioner Group was made up of four active educators and choreographers who were involved in the professional teaching, staging, and creative growth of Axitiaoyue. They came from Sichuan Film and Television University and other dance schools. This group provided insider knowledge of the pedagogical, compositional, and institutional processes by which Axitiaoyue is transmitted and adapted in professional performance and education contexts — what Spradley (1979) refers to as key cultural consultants with direct embodied and professional investment in the tradition's contemporary development.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were gathered through four integrated methods, ensuring breadth, depth, and complementarity across sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The literature review methodically organized historical records, scholarly publications, policy papers, and archive materials about Axitiaoyue and the larger Yi dance culture. Documentary sources included the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), VIP Journal Database, local chronicles, and heritage documentation materials, which provided theoretical and historical context for fieldwork data.

In-depth interviews were performed with all three participant groups, using semi-structured interview guidelines customized to each group's unique relationship to the dance heritage (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The semi-structured framework enabled systematic covering of essential study issues — historical development, performance components, inheritance processes, and creative transformation — while allowing for flexibility in following emerging paths depending on participant answers. All interviews were performed with informed consent, recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Participatory observation. Axitiaoyue performances were observed in a variety of contemporary contexts, including community ritual events, school aesthetic education performances, stage productions, cultural tourism shows, and community fitness activities (square dance) in Mile City and other urban

performance venues. Direct interaction with community members and performers allowed for embodied perceptions of movement characteristics, social dynamics, and contextual significance that documentary analysis alone cannot capture (Sklar, 2000; Spradley, 1980). Field notes documented the time, location, participants, performance type, audience composition, and social dynamics of each performance environment, and were augmented with video and photographic footage where authorized by participants and community leaders. **Focus group discussions** were held with specially assembled groups representing various stakeholder perspectives on specific topics such as the experience of heritage institutionalization, the effects of tourism adaptation on cultural authenticity, and the role of school-based programs in shaping younger generations' cultural identity. The focus group approach allowed for the production of viewpoints through controlled collective debate that neither individual interviews nor observation could provide (Morgan, 1997).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis in accordance with the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021): data familiarization through repeated reading and viewing of transcripts, field notes, and video materials; systematic generation of initial codes; construction of candidate themes; review and refinement of themes against the full dataset; definition and naming of finalized themes; and production of the analytical narrative. The analysis was conducted inductively, enabling themes to emerge from the data while staying conceptually guided by the five conceptual frameworks described in Section 2: cultural ecology, intangible cultural heritage conservation, cultural symbolism, state presence, and performance theory. Video recordings of performances were subjected to systematic movement analysis using repeated slow-motion comparison, allowing for extensive documentation of movement quality, rhythmic pattern, spatial range, formation structure, and costume dynamics across various performance situations. Interview transcripts, focus group recordings, and field diary entries were analyzed as complimentary data sources, with trends across sources investigated using triangulation to reinforce analytical results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Developmental History and Performance

Evolution of Axitiaoyue

4.1.1 Stage One: Primary and Germination Period (circa 1000 BC – Early AD)

The early version of Axitiaoyue was firmly ingrained in the Axi people's primordial beliefs and survival traditions, emerging as useful communal ritual rather than formalized artistic performance. The "slash-and-burn legend" describes how Axi ancestors were forced to sow seeds on scorching fields while alternating their feet rapidly over burning ash in a reflexive stomping motion that became the prototype of the dance's core footwork (Mile County Bureau of Culture, Sports, and Radio and Television, 2012). This narrative demonstrates two fundamental conditions: mountain agricultural production directly created the dance's dynamic principles, and the complicated emotional bond with fire — both adored and relied upon — rendered the dance inextricably linked to fire worship rituals from its beginning (Figure 3).



Figure 1 (Early form: people gathering around a fire to dance)

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search> (2026)

At this point, the style was known as "jumping music" or "campfire dancing," and it was played without any specialized instruments, relying solely on synchronized stomping, clapping, and collective cries to keep rhythm around a central bonfire (Figure 4). The formations were circular, travelling anticlockwise around the fire, representing communal togetherness and a cyclical worldview (Figure 5).



Figure 4 Jumping over the bonfire
Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)



Figure 2 Example of early formation of the Axi Jumping Moon dance team

Source: <https://www.bilibili.com/>(2026)

Fire worship rituals, harvest celebrations, emotional release, and, most importantly, a platform for young men and women to participate in social interaction and partner selection (Long Shan, 2019; Wang Xiaoying & Yang Zhengcai, 2013). Clothing was completely functional, consisting of everyday hemp clothing with no specialized performance features (Figures 6).



Figure 3 Aksai ethnic costume illustration

Source: <https://img0.baidu.com/>(2026)

With greater socioeconomic stability and more inter-ethnic cultural contact, the tradition began to diverge internally. A milder form with controlled motions arose, the "Elderly Dance" (Gasi Bi in Yi language, also known as the Small Sanxian Dance, Figures 17), alongside the energetic "Youth Dance" (Axibi, or Grand Sanxian Dance, Figure 19). This internal divergence characterised Axitiaoyue's transition from a homogenous community celebration to a body art system with unique aesthetic standards and complementing social roles.



Figure 4 Elderly Dance (Xiaosanxian Dance)
Source: <https://www.bilibili.com/>(2026)



Figure 5 Youth Dance (Daxianxian Dance)
Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search(2026))

The elderly dance emphasizes "ritual propriety" and "historical heritage," with mid-to-low register sanxian melodies, steady two- or four-beat patterns, circular formations, and restrained body postures (Figures 21). It serves as a cultural repository and social stabilizer, embodying authority, tradition, and the sacred past. The youth dance embodies "emotion" and "strength," with the high-pitched small sanxian's distinctive five-beat rhythm, expansive leaps, spins, kicks, and spontaneous partner dances (Figures 22), serving as the community's lifeblood and a public platform for emotional expression and social bonding. During key ceremonial rites, both perform a predetermined sequence of "elderly dance opening — youth dance climax," which collectively represents the entire lifespan of Axi culture, from historical inheritance to ancestral reverence to continuing societal expansion.

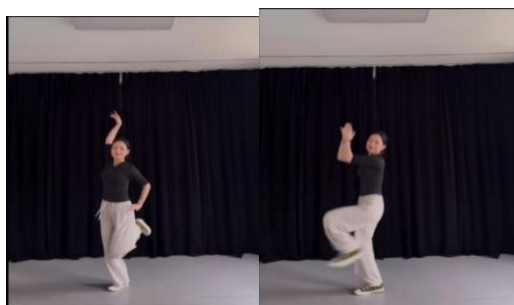


Figure 6 Three steps with one push-off
Source: [https://www.bilibili.com\(2026\)](https://www.bilibili.com(2026))



Figure 7 Three steps with one push-off
Source: Zhangshumeng(2026)

4.1.2 Stage Two: Standardization Period (1945–2008) and Intangible Cultural Heritage Era (2008–Present)

The year 1945 marked a pivotal turning point when faculty members of Southwest Associated University, including dancer Liang Lun, conducted systematic fieldwork in Yunnan's Xishan Mountain, and scholar Wen Yiduo proposed the poetic designation "Axitiaoyue" — replacing the original term "Tiaole" and endowing the dance with fresh cultural symbolism as a romantic and joyful national artistic identity (Ma Jinglin & Teng Fen, 2016). Following the formation of New China in 1949, professional artists carried out extensive collecting and standardisation: music was notated, dances were polished and defined, and a new "youth dance" version (Lika Bi) with quicker rhythms and more aggressive motions was produced (Long Shan, 2019). Axitiaoyue won a gold medal at the World Festival of Youth and Students in Poland (Figure 25), with its function shifting from internal community integration to national cultural symbol (Figure 26).



Figure 8 AXITIAOYUE on stage
Source: [https://www.bilibili.com\(2026\)](https://www.bilibili.com(2026))



Figure 9 (AXITIAOYUE performing in Dubai)
Source: [https://www.bilibili.com\(2026\)](https://www.bilibili.com(2026))

In 2008, the Yi Ethnic Sanxian Dance was added to China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, establishing a four-tiered inheritor system at the national, provincial, municipal, and county level. Inheritors progressed from folk artists to state-certified practitioners with formal responsibilities including as mentorship, school teaching, and

organized performance. This milestone resulted in a systematic transformation of both performance form and transmission mechanism, but it also introduced standardization tendencies in which the leaping

amplitude of youth dance was increased while the ritual context of elderly dance was gradually weakened (Figures 87).



Figure 10 Learning the Axi Jumping Moon Dance
 Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search> (2026)

Table 1 summarizes the evolution of performance form across all four stages, highlighting a fundamental shift from endogenous community ritual to outward-oriented stage art in five

dimensions: function, participation structure, formal characteristics, meaning generation, and inheritance power.

Table 1 Development Process of AXITIAOYUE

	time	Performance form	function
prime perform	Endogenous period of the community (early stage-1940s)	The performance format is free and improvisational, with no distinction between professional actors and audiences, representing a collective practice involving all participants.	Its core functions lie in entertaining gods and praying for blessings, social integration and mate selection and social interaction.
	Phase of cultural integration and name establishment (1940s)	Discovered, compiled, and adapted by cultural workers, it has evolved from rural squares to national theaters.	Its function has transformed into a political and cultural symbol to display national style and construct national identity.
Current performances	The Staging and National Dissemination Period (1950s to Late 1920s)	Specialization (emergence of professional actors) and theatricalization have stripped away their original ritual context.	The standardization of performance was achieved by establishing the routines of "youth dance" and "elderly dance".
	The Period of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Development (Early 21st Century to Present)	The performance forms exhibit a diversified pattern, encompassing both standardized scenic area performances for tourists and authentic community practices, as well as experimental explorations integrated with contemporary art.	"Cultural capital" that embodies the values of protection, inheritance, and development. Performances continue to evolve amidst the interplay of political, economic, and cultural logics.

Source: Shumeng Zhang (2026)

4.2 Performance Elements and Yi Ethnic Imagery Construction

4.2.1 Belief Dimension: Fire Worship and Cosmological Symbolism

Axitiaoyue's deepest cultural origins may be found in the Axi people's holy ceremonial system centred on fire worship. The central ethnic origin legend, "Mu Deng's Wood Drilling for Fire," depicts fire acquisition as the defining act by which the Axi

ancestors transitioned from barbarism to civilisation, elevating fire from a physical phenomenon to a cultural symbol distinguishing chaos from order (Bamoai, 1994). The yearly Fire Sacrifice Festival, held on the third day of the second lunar month, serves as the principal ceremonial framework in which Axitiaoyue acquires its full cultural significance.

The festival follows a rigorously planned four-stage

ritual sequence: a village parade welcoming the new fire into every home (Figure 45); a bonfire carnival where Axitiaoyue erupts as the inevitable ritual culmination—the most vibrant offering to the fire deity and the community's affirmation of vitality and unity under divine empowerment (Figure 46); and household purification through extinguishing old flames in the village's 'Mizhilin' Sacred Forest.



Figure 11 Image of the Fire God
Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)



Figure 12 Burning Festival
Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)

The large three-stringed daxian carries this cosmological symbolism directly through its physical structure: the three strings represent heaven, earth, and humanity, respectively, from outer to inner, materializing the Yi people's ancient triple-world cosmology into auditory form (Figures 59). The most prominent aural hallmark of Yi Axi culture is the five-beat compound rhythm (3+2 structure), which serves as both a rhythmic framework for dancing and a cosmological manifestation of the Five Elements system (Wang Wei, 2015).



Figure 13 Sheepskin covering the speaker
Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)

The circular dance formation around the central bonfire is more than just a matter of spatial convenience; it encodes the Axi cosmological worldview: the bonfire represents the fire deity and ancestors, the circle represents community solidarity and cosmic cyclical patterns, and the anticlockwise movement is consistent with Yi ritual tradition. This tripartite spatial symbolism — flame, circle, three-stringed instrument — together form the dance's core symbolic architecture.

4.2.2 Lifestyle Dimension: Labor Archetypes and Emotional Expression

Axitiaoyue's movement vocabulary is methodically based on the bodily memory of mountain agriculture and pastoral practices. The fundamental "three-step stomp" immediately encodes the reflexive foot-alternating motion generated from barefoot slash-and-burn farming (Figure 49), while "running-jumping steps" abstract sheep-herding postures into powerful leaping dynamics (Figures 52). The tension created by guys lugging and playing a 7-8 kilogram daxian while doing broad hops and spins exemplifies the mountain farming realities of "coexisting hardship and optimism" — translating survival requirement into beautiful expression.



Figure 14 Stepping on fire
Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search>(2026)



Figure 15 Axi people herding sheep
Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search> (2026)

The Axi people's self-designation as the "Happy Tribe" (Liu Zhen, 2018) is not rhetorical, but structurally encoded in the dance's emotional logic: fire worship for the Axi is not a fearful sacrifice, but a celebratory reward for overcoming survival challenges, establishing a spiritual foundation in which the sacred and secular, reverence and joy, coexist harmoniously. In dance, emotional expression is expressed by highly stylized collective body language rather than nuanced facial expressions: men's forceful playing-while-jumping demonstrates robust physicality, whilst women's sharp applauding reactions maintain rhythmic energy (Figure 56). The quick response — "the moment the fiddle sounds, feet itch" — depicts dancing as a natural manifestation of inner living drive rather than a performance art (Wang Wei, 2015). This emotional dimension gives rise to three ethnic traits: community cohesion, with coordinated movement and smooth formation transitions requiring full integration into collective rhythm, strengthening ethnic identity and social solidarity; bold yet socially structured group personality, with passionate collective expression operating within ancient communal norms of collective values (Long Shan, 2022); and resilient optimism, expressed through constant leaps and powerful rhythms symbolizing unyielding spirit tempered by arduous mountain life (Zhou Xiaoping, 2018).

4.2.3 Cultural Dimension: Material Symbolism and Social Structure

Axitiaoyue's costume system is a complete cultural text that combines historical memory, cosmological principles, and social structure. The color palette has systematic philosophical connotations: black, as the dominant hue, represents nobility, the earth, and the origin of life, which is rooted in Yi totemic worldview; red in embroidery and ornaments represents fire, blood, and vitality, directly echoing fire worship tradition; white represents purity and auspiciousness; and blue represents sky and eternity. These four fundamental colors together create a visual cosmology of "heaven-earth and life" (Shi Haiyan, 2018; Figures 63).



Figure 16 Black Bag Head

Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)

The women's headdress "Ludu"—named after rock grass native to high mountain outcrops to symbolize the Axi people's resilience—features densely arranged silver bubbles representing celestial stars, which shimmer during jumps and rotations, transforming the national character of resilience and optimism into luminous visual effects (Figure 77). During festive ritual contexts, the chicken-feather hat worn by unmarried girls represents protection from evil and the attraction of good fortune (Figure 67), whereas the entire ceremonial attire collectively creates a sacred cultural space in which garments become "epics worn on the body," embedding individuals into their ethnic group's collective history and cosmic order (Shi Haiyan, 2018).



Figure 17 Yi ethnic chicken comb hat
Source: <https://www.taobao.com/>(2026)



Figure 18 Ludu

Source: <https://img2.baidu.com/>(2026)

4.2.4 Contemporary Dimension: Stage Presentation and Heritage Revitalization

Axitiaoyue's spatial and symbolic logic has been changed by contemporary stage plays via three systematic techniques. Lighting reconstruction uses red illumination at the dance's conclusion to physically embody fire's cultural meaning, portraying the Axi people's burning enthusiasm and hope more effectively than verbal explanation (Figure 74).



Figure 19 Fragment of Yi Ethnic Sanxian Dance
Source :<https://www.bilibili.com>(2026)

LED narrative extension uses imagery of moonlight mountain woods and active flames to turn abstract cultural beliefs—the moonlit gathering tradition and fire worship cosmology—into easily accessible visual symbols (Figures 75). Spatial redesign has shifted forms from basic circles to intricate choreographic arrangements such as "two dragons spitting whiskers" and "crescent-shaped formations," changing spatial configuration into a visual spectacle and aesthetic icon (Figures 78).



Figure 20 Excerpts from A Xis Moon Jumping performance
Source :<https://image.baidu.com/search>(2026)



Figure 21 A Xi performing the Moon Dance on stage
Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search>(2026)

Stage costumes retain core cultural markers, such as the silver-bubble Ludu headdress and the shorter-front-longer-back women's top structure, while undergoing systematic transformation: silver bubble

density and size increase exponentially under stage lighting; color purity intensifies, with primary red, black and white becoming more vibrant; and lightweight reflective fabrics produce flowing glimmers during movement (Li Lun et al., 2012; Figures 34). This converts the dancing group into a colossal, united visual spectacle that combines individual qualities with collective ethnic identity.



Figure 22 Axi Jumping Moon Stage Headpiece
Source: <https://www.taobao.com>(2026)

Axitiaoyue has been expanded into two additional performance contexts as part of heritage revitalization efforts. In school integration, fundamental dance movements — "three-step propulsion," "running-jumping steps," and "palm-clapping turns" — were deliberately removed and introduced into playtime exercise programs, with the five-beat rhythm establishing established physical memory via daily repetition (Figure 82). At the Keyi Town tourist site, intangible cultural heritage inheritors lead daily moon dance performances in which tourists participate as co-dancers rather than passive spectators, while the Ethnic Unity Square serves as a "cultural experience space" for collaborative dance between ethnic community members and visitors (Figure 83).



Figure 23 AXITIAOYUE incorporated into the recess exercise routine
Source :https://q1.itc.cn/q_70/images03/20250606/e1f7b86fab884bc3a361c3e5b8c3b87f.jpeg(January,2026)



Figure 24 Axi people perform the Axi Moon Dance for tourists

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search> (2026)






Figure 25 Axi Jumping Moon Dance Teaching Material


Source: <https://image.baidu.com/search> (2026)

The deep logic of this revitalization is divided into three progressive layers: movement preservation through repeated bodily practice, emotional transmission of the Axi optimistic and resilient character, and identity construction that strengthens Chinese national community consciousness through participatory cultural engagement (Figure 88).

Table 2 maps core performance elements — choreographic vocabulary, musical structure, props, and costume — against their cultural functions, while Table 6 systematically contrasts past community-embedded and contemporary performance-oriented forms across six dimensions: core attributes, core functions, participation structure, formal characteristics, meaning generation, and inheritance.

Table 2 Performance Constituent Elements of AXITIAOYUE

inscape	Core Features	picture presentation
choreographic elements	The core features include the iconic "three-step pedaling" (combining steady progression with rhythmic pedaling) and dynamic "running-jumping steps" (elastic leaps). The movements originate from mountain labor, characterized by a bold and rugged style with strong rhythmicity, emphasizing collective coordination and interaction.	
Props and Music	With the sanxian (a traditional Chinese three-stringed instrument) as its soul, the sound is rich and resonant. Its unique compound rhythm in 5/4 time (often divided into "three beats before and two beats after") serves as the absolute rhythmic framework for dance movements, driving the cyclical progression of steps and emotional fluctuations.	
melody	The melody develops from a simple triad (do, mi, sol), making it catchy and easy to sing. The lyrics are mostly improvised, covering themes such as love, labor, and daily life, with simple and humorous language. This serves as a vital medium for expressing emotions directly, enhancing on-site interaction, and fostering a joyful atmosphere.	

inscape	Core Features	picture presentation
<p>dress and personal adornment</p>	<p>Clothing serves as a dynamic visual extension. (Taking women attire as an example) The front-short and back-long top design combined with lightweight construction ensures agile movement; the silver bubbles and tassels on head ornaments shimmer and flutter during jumps and rotations, transforming the resilient and optimistic national character into visible luminous effects.</p>	

Source:Shumeng Zhang (2026)

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study looked at Axitiaoyue, the representative dance of the Axi branch of the Yi ethnic group in Yunnan Province, and answered two key research questions: the dance's developmental trajectory and performance evolution over time, as well as the mechanisms by which its performance elements construct Yi Axi ethnic imagery. The findings show that Axitiaoyue has undergone a fundamental transformation from endogenous community ritual to exogenous stage art, fueled by the interaction of national cultural policy, market logic, and community adaptive agency — a transformation that has expanded the dance's social functions while also reshaping its aesthetic character and symbolic meanings.

The study finds four unique historical stages along the developmental trajectory. Axitiaoyue functioned as an integrated community practice from around 1000 BC to the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic, incorporating sacrificial ritual, social interaction, mate selection, and communal cohesion, all performed without specialized instruments and in everyday clothing. The standardization era (1945-2008) was initiated by the fieldwork and naming activities of Southwest Associated University faculty—including Wen Yiduo's designation of "Axitiaoyue"—which brought the dance into national cultural consciousness and prompted professional artists to standardize its musical notation, refine its movements, and codify its routines, transforming it from an internal community tool into a national cultural symbol (Mile County Culture Bureau *et al.*, 2012; Long Shan, 2019). The intangible cultural heritage transition phase (2008-present) established a

four-tiered inheritor system and institutional safeguards following national listing, but it also introduced standardization tendencies that increased the leaping amplitude of youth dance while weakening the ritual context of elderly dance (Hafstein, 2018; UNESCO, 2003). Throughout these stages, the progression represents a cultural transition from internal integration to outward presentation, from ethnic tale to national cultural symbol, and from participatory experience to spectator-oriented consumption (Bauman, 1975; Chen Junyu, 2023).

Three basic processes fueled this development. National logic was the dominant force of morphological transformation: by organizing, naming, standardizing, and institutionally recognizing Axitiaoyue, the state transformed its cultural will into visible cultural form, constantly producing and reproducing legitimacy through what Qian Weisheng (2021) refers to as the "performance perspective" of state power. From the 1990s onwards, market logic became more prominent as tourism development integrated Axitiaoyue into the "intangible cultural heritage + tourism" model at Keyi Town and other scenic sites, driving theatricalization, refinement, and commercialization: expanded movement ranges, increased costume color saturation, and simplified ritual elements designed to satisfy tourist desires for "cultural spectacles of exoticism" (Yang Qiong, 2020; Taylor, 2016). Critically, our study demonstrates that national and market logics coexist rather than compete: the state confers orthodox status through heritage legislation, while the market uses that identity to package the dance as a consumer

commodity. The third mechanism is community dynamics, which sustains cultural identity through adaptive negotiation: in Keyi Village, cultural inheritors simultaneously lead tourist performances and teach traditional techniques at intangible cultural heritage workshops, while the Fire Sacrifice Festival and Torch Festival remain preserved within the community in their traditional forms, demonstrating the Axi people's active agency in navigating complex external pressures.

On ethnic imagery building, the study proposes a four-tiered method that includes ceremonial themes, labor transformation, material symbolism, and media reconstruction. At the spiritual level, the fire worship tradition rooted in the legend of "Mu Deng making fire by drilling wood" embeds ancestor veneration and cosmological belief directly into the dance's choreographic structure, while the large three-stringed daxian carries the symbolic weight of "Three Elements" cosmology — Heaven, Earth, and Humanity — constructing a cultural identity in which humans and deities intertwine with fire as the spiritual core (Shi Haiyan, 2014). At the labour transformation level, signature movements such as the "three-step stomp" and "running-jumping steps" originate from slash-and-burn farming traditions, with the physical tension between men's heavy daxian carrying and agile dancing vividly capturing the mountainous agricultural reality of "coexisting hardship and optimism" — demonstrating the folk-dance principle of "rooted in life yet transcending it" (Ge Shurong et al. 2012). In terms of material symbolism, the daxian's workmanship, the five-beat compound rhythmic pattern, and the symbolic significance of silver embellishments in women's "Ludu" headdresses constitute an integrated cultural network that may be perceived through sound, vision, and touch (Xi Haiyan, 2014). Media reconstruction, stage design, lighting effects, costume innovation, and the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage all contribute to a confident, dialogic ethnic identity that maintains traditional roots while actively engaging with modern civilisation and external aesthetic expectations (Ness, 1992).

This study's key new conclusion is the identification of Axitiaoyue's "dual complementarity" internal structure — a feature neglected by prior studies that viewed the dance as a single unified form. A systematic comparison reveals that elderly dance (Gasi Bi / Xiao Sanxian Dance) and youth dance (Axibi / Da Sanxian Dance) constitute complementary yet distinct cultural functions: elderly dance carries ethnic historical memory and

social authority through steady, solemn steps and ancient, low-pitched melodies, functioning as cultural "memory banks" and social "stabilisers"; youth dance demonstrates vitality and communal dynamism through leaping movements and crisp, resonant tones, functioning as cultural "power engines" and social "catalysts." During festivals, both perform the established ceremonial sequence of "elderly dance opening — youth dance climax," which collectively represents the entire life cycle of Axi culture, from historical inheritance to ancestral reverence to continuing societal expansion. This discovery shifts our view of Axitiaoyue from a "single artistic form" to a "culturally integrated system with clear internal division of labour and complementary functions."

The paper also presents a tripartite spatial symbolism theory that combines "bonfire — circle — three-stringed instrument" and significantly extends existing studies. Previous research limited performance space to a physical backdrop for dance events (Yang Qiong, 2020; Shi Haiyan, 2014). Using Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production, this study demonstrates that Axitiaoyue's performance space is not a neutral physical container but a symbolically constituted field: the bonfire represents the sacred symbolism of fire worship, transforming each dance into an ongoing ritual honoring the fire deity; the circular formation represents community solidarity and cosmic cyclical patterns; and the three strings of the daxian symbolize the cosmic order of the daxian symbolize the cosmic order of heaven, earth, and humanity. When Axitiaoyue moves from the village square to the theatre stage, the spatial production logic changes fundamentally — from unbounded participatory space to segmented spectatorial space, from ritual identity confirmation to theatrical aesthetic presentation — revealing that spatial reconstruction is more than just a change of venue; it is a fundamental restructuring of the mechanisms through which the dance produces cultural meaning (Bauman, 1975; Channuwong et al., 2018; Ness, 1992).

The question of whether images Axitiaoyue creates — self-expression or created tradition for external consumption — cannot be answered using simple binary opposition. The study demonstrates a dynamic struggle between "self" and "other" in which the Axi people consciously prioritize features that express real ethnic identity while also ensuring outward acknowledgement. The "authentic core" — rooted in historical memory, survival practice, and the bodily expression of the "resilient and optimistic" national character — coexists with "other-oriented"

adaptations that satisfy tourist aesthetic expectations by increasing visual impact through expanded leaps, denser silver ornamentation, and fire-symbolizing lighting. This strategic negotiation, in which the Axi people use the striking visual appeal of the daxian and the distinctive five-beat rhythm to facilitate cross-media cultural dissemination while retaining community-controlled ritual forms, demonstrates sophisticated cultural agency that goes beyond the passive "commodification" narrative that dominates heritage tourism scholarship (Hafstein, 2018; Taylor, 2016).

Taken together, these findings provide four significant contributions to scholarship. The study theoretically constructs a four-tiered image formation process, giving fresh analytical tools for understanding cultural identity development in ethnic dance that go beyond existing symbolic classification frameworks (Shi Haiyan, 2014). The advent of spatial production theory fills a systematic vacuum in ethnic dance research by arguing that space is an important feature that actively participates in meaning formation rather than simply providing a physical background (Lefebvre 1991). The study reveals that traditional culture adapts to contemporary society through "functional superposition" — simultaneously activating diverse functional dimensions across different contexts — rather than "functional replacement," a finding with global implications for understanding the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003; Blake, 2009). Methodologically, the integration of movement analysis and cultural interpretation, based on Li Xiao'ou's (2024) approach to Yi dance studies, demonstrates how bodily vocabulary can be read as evidence of cultural formation mechanisms, providing a model for ethnic dance research in general.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND FUTURE STUDIES

6.1 Recommendations

Intangible Cultural Heritage Conservation. A tiered performance classification framework is recommended that explicitly distinguishes ritual performances, which preserve traditional ceremonial procedures such as Fire Sacrifice Festival and Torch Festival practices without modification, from explanatory performances at cultural events that allow for moderate interpretation, and commercial stage productions that require mandatory labelling of adapted source material (UNESCO, 2003; Blake, 2009). This framework addresses the central risk identified in this study: that standardization demands of institutional heritage governance and

tourism commodification gradually erode the ritual context of elderly dance while amplifying the visual spectacle of youth dance, producing a culturally impoverished version of the tradition that satisfies external aesthetic expectations while severing the dance from the community meaning-making processes that sustain it (Hafstein, 2018; Taylor, 2016). Conservation policy should expressly maintain community authority over ritual performance environments, ensuring that top-down governance does not undermine the Axi people's adaptive negotiation between self-expression and outward presentation (Luo Fan, 2015).

Education and artistic creation. Pedagogical programs that incorporate Axitiaoyue should use a three-dimensional model that includes kinaesthetic training, movement analysis, and cultural interpretation, allowing students to understand the movement vocabulary as a culturally determined bodily narrative rooted in slash-and-burn agricultural history, fire worship cosmology, and communal social values (Ge Shurong et al., 2012; Bauman, 1975). Teaching should clearly address both the elderly and juvenile dance components as a complimentary system rather than treating the dance as a single form, keeping the intrinsic structural logic that previous curriculum has largely flattened due to standardization. Choreographers working creatively with Axitiaoyue should conduct extensive fieldwork before adapting, focusing on core distinguishing features such as the daxian's cosmological symbolism, the five-beat rhythmic pattern, and the bonfire-circle spatial logic, while avoiding adaptations that separate movement vocabulary from ritual and labor archetypes.

Digital preservation and dissemination. A multidimensional digital archive containing dance movements, musical scores, clothing patterns, production procedures, and oral histories should be constructed to carefully document Axitiaoyue in both its original ceremonial forms and current adaptive interpretations. High-quality documentary and short-video production should be encouraged to capitalize on the dance's "joy without translation" cross-cultural accessibility on new media platforms, while also ensuring that digital dissemination communicates cultural depth rather than reducing the tradition to visually appealing surface elements (UNESCO, 2009).

Policy Evidence Base. Cultural authorities should commission systematic evaluations of existing heritage governance instruments—examining whether inheritor certification genuinely rebuilds transmission chains, which ritual elements are most

vulnerable under tourism commercialization, and whether campus-based programs translate technical learning into durable cultural identity—generating the evidence base needed to transition from experience-driven to evidence-based heritage governance.

6.2 Research Contributions

Theoretically, it establishes a four-tiered image construction mechanism — encompassing ritual motifs, labor transformation, material symbolism, and media reconstruction — that goes beyond existing symbolic classification frameworks (Shi Haiyan, 2014) by revealing not only which symbols are present in Axitiaoyue, but also how those symbols collaboratively and mechanistically construct multi-dimensional Yi ethnic identity across performance contexts. The incorporation of Lefebvre's (1991) spatial production theory into ethnic dance scholarship fills a systematic gap in existing research by demonstrating that performance space is not a neutral physical backdrop, but rather an important dimension actively participating in meaning production — a theoretical perspective applicable across ethnic dance traditions beyond the Axi case.

The paper presents two novel empirical results. First, it identifies the dual complementarity structure of elderly and youth dance within Axitiaoyue, revealing an internal division of cultural labor — "memory bank and stabilizer" versus "power engine and catalyst" — which previous scholarship obscured by treating the dance as a single unified form. Second, it proposes a three-part spatial symbolism theory that combines a bonfire, circle, and three-stringed instrument to form a coherent cosmological field that serves as the dance's fundamental symbolic architecture, demonstrating how physical spaces are imbued with cultural significance and become embodied expressions of Yi ethnic cosmology.

At the applied level, the discovery that traditional culture adapts to modern society through functional superposition rather than functional replacement—simultaneously activating various functions across ritual, pedagogical, touristic, and fitness contexts while retaining community-controlled authentic forms—offers a workable framework for heritage governance that opposes both the uncritical commercialization of living cultural traditions and their museumization (UNESCO, 2003; Hafstein, 2018). The study offers a replicable model for ethnic dance research that interprets physical movement as evidence of historical memory, ecological adaptation, and social value rather than just aesthetic form. Methodologically, it shows the

analytical productivity of integrating movement analysis with cultural interpretation, following Li Xiao'ou's (2024) approach to Yi dance studies, to reveal how bodily vocabulary encodes cultural formation mechanisms (Ness, 1992; Sklar, 2000).

6.3 Future Studies

Four research directions emerge from this study's findings and limitations.

Cross-cultural comparative research comparing Axitiaoyue to functionally analogous collective dances of other ethnic groups, such as Mongolian Andai and Tibetan Guozhuang, would shed light on how different ethnic cultures achieve spatial production and image construction through dance, as well as the similarities and differences that emerged during modernisation. This comparison would determine if the four-tiered image formation process and dual complementarity structure revealed in this study are generalizable as analytical frameworks for ethnic minority dancing, or if they represent conditions unique to the Axi situation.

Digital humanities and new media research should look at how short-video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou are reconstructing Axitiaoyue's methods of dissemination and meaning production in digital space. They should also analyze the interplay between virtual and physical performance contexts and determine whether digital visibility enhances or detracts from community-based ritual transmission. Motion capture technology and standardized movement parameter annotation applied to Axitiaoyue would support posture-recognition-based assistive teaching systems that address style distortion in non-native transmission environments and produce repeatable empirical data for stylistic comparison.

A longitudinal study of the elderly dance and youth dance relationship using diachronic observation and oral history interviews should examine whether the visual dynamism of youth dance is gradually encroaching upon the spatial and temporal domain of elderly dance within festival ritual sequences, and what this generational shift reveals about evolving cultural values and the changing mechanisms of communal identity formation within Axi communities (Spradley, 1979).

Ecological anthropology research should be extended by ecological anthropology research to investigate how the disappearance of slash-and-burn agricultural practices affects the preservation of the "labor archetypes" encoded in Axitiaoyue's movement vocabulary, how the development of eco-tourism and contemporary ecological civilization

discourse reshape the dance's natural imagery, and how land-use transformation and climate change affect the ritual spaces, especially fire-worship

festival environments, which provide the dance its cosmological foundation (Steward, 1955; Yunnan Normal University Research Group, 2015).

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