

# Knowledge of the Musical Context of Yao Wedding Music in Jinxiu, Guangxi, China

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## Abstract

This study focused on the musical context and characteristics of Yao wedding music in Jinxiu, Guangxi, China, to use a qualitative research methodology. The objective was to 1) examine the musical context of Yao's wedding music. 2) Analyze the musical elements of the Yao wedding music. The research designed the interview and observation forms that were used throughout the interviews and observations. By key informant, the interviews were divided into three groups. The results of the study are as follows: 1) Jinxiu Yao wedding music is related with the culture, religion, language, and history of the nation. While preserving its traditional culture, it has important national cultural significance. 2) The music of Jinxiu Yao has the most intricate musical characteristics and is performed alone or in a group with percussion instruments. With the main melody in pentatonic mode and played in a flexible rhythm, the relatively fixed wedding music is simple and simple to understand. The music and ritual of the Jinxiu Yao wedding are complementary, representing the Yao's traditional culture and preserving the transmission of music from their ancestors through the ceremony.

**Keywords:** Yao musical context, Yao wedding music, Characteristics of Yao music.

## 1. Introduction

The Yao people are one of the oldest groups in China, with a distinctive culture and customs. Various Yao branches have different wedding customs. The Yao wedding ceremony is complicated and, at the same time, simple in various forms. Since the Yao society has the custom of both male and female marriage, they treat both male and female children equally, and there is no preference for male or female children (Litzinger, 2000; Schein, 2000; Jinshan & Jianqiang, 2006; Alberts, 2006). The Yao people have distinct differences in life traditions and cultural customs. Their culture is rich and colorful, and their marriage custom is well known, which is the “living fossil” of Yao culture. The Jinxiu Yao people retain a few ancient marriage customs, but they have also preserved a large number of handwritten daily life documents. The characteristics of their marriage customs truly reflect their livelihood, economic development level, identity, and historical and cultural tradition (Litzinger, 1998, 2000; Shih, 2007; Jinshan, 2015).

The marriage customs of the Yao are inseparable from their music. At their weddings, there are rich musical accompaniments. Some are mainly instrumental accompaniments, and in some there is singing. Many suona songs, for example, dominate the PanYao’s wedding for the married man (Shufeng, 2016, 2017; Tong, 2017; Wang & Liu, 2020). At present, many young Yao people work outside the country all year. Their aesthetics and marriage concept are impacted by Han culture. Their traditional and modern culture, marriage concept, and custom are gradually fading from their consciousness. In addition, the musicians of Yao wedding ritual music in some areas have died of old age, which makes the transmission of folk culture more difficult. Therefore, it is urgent to preserve and document the Yao wedding ritual music (Meiwen, 2015, 2016; Zhang & Li, 2020; You, 2020). The practices in the wedding ceremony of the Jinxiu Yao are gradually changing. One reason is that, with the changes in young people’s wedding concepts, most opt for Western wedding ceremonies. They no longer wear national costumes at their weddings, but white wedding dresses. The ceremonies are not held in the village but in a larger city with a banquet in the hotel. Another reason is that there are more and more intermarriages between the Jinxiu Yao and foreign nationals, and many wedding ceremonies are becoming more and more simplified and more Chinese. All these have caused the wedding music to gradually shrink and disappear (He et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study is primarily focused on the musical context and characteristics of Yao’s wedding music in Jinxiu, Guangxi, China. It examines the musical context of Yao’s wedding music, analyzes the musical elements of the Yao wedding music and explore its significance to the local community.

## 2. Literature Review

The Yao nationality is a nationality with frequent migration in Chinese history. The Yao people have not only created extremely rich cultural resources and material wealth, but also inherited their long history, customs, cultural forms, and religious beliefs of different

branches of Yao. Located in the DaYao Mountain Area in the east of Central Guangxi, it is the county with the most Yao branches in China. It can be divided into five branches: Pan Yao, Cha Shan Yao, Hua Lan Yao, Shan Zi Yao, and Ao Yao (Fei, 1992). Jin Xiu Yao has its own language, but there is no common use of its own national characters. Their cultural symbols are lack of written records, which are usually reflected in traditional national art or festival sacrifice. Due to the differences between traditional art and modern aesthetics, the intangible cultural heritage of Yao nationality in Jin Xiu has been severely impacted, and some traditional folk arts are on the verge of extinction. The complexity of handicrafts requires the time and human resources of craftsmen. High cost and small consumer market make it difficult for Jin Xiu Yao cultural resources to be widely spread (Zhu & Yu, 2019).



Figure 1. Map of Jinxiu, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

Source: <https://chinafolio.com/provinces/guizhou-province>; Litzinger (1995).

Since the Yao society has the custom of both male and female marriage and male marriage, they treat both male and female children equally, and there is no preference for male or female children. Historically, after marriage, the relationship between Yao and his wife was relatively stable, and divorce was rare. Widows remarry without discrimination. Before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Yao people generally did not intermarry with foreigners. Their marriages were generally carried out by young men and women through singing festivals or other ways to establish feelings, falling in love freely, and getting married after obtaining the consent of their parents. After the founding of New China, the country implemented a policy of equality, which eliminated estrangement, and the phenomenon of intermarriages between the Yao and outside groups continued to increase (Siu, 1990; Hinsch, 1990; Barabantseva, 2015).

It is generally believed in academic circles that the Yao people did not have their own

writings in history. Some academics believe that the Yao people have their own writing, that is, that Yao teachers, dao gong practitioners, and folk singers create their own writing by adding and subtracting or recombining Chinese characters after learning and skillfully using Chinese and use it to record their own language. This writing is called the Ancient Yao Script. To make up for the deficiency, these ancient Yao texts were mainly used by Taoist lords, masters, and folk singers when they copied the classics and songs in Chinese characters. Dao Gong, master gongs, and folk singers are the creators and disseminators of ancient Yao literature. The Yao people have distinct differences in life traditions and cultural customs. Their culture is rich and colorful, and the marriage custom of Yao is the most well-known. The Jinxiu Yao people retain a few ancient marriage customs, but they have also preserved many handwritten daily life documents. The characteristics of marriage customs truly reflect their livelihood mode, economic development level, identity, and historical and cultural tradition (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Mok & DeFranco, 2000; Barth, 2010).

Yao weddings often have many local customs of the Yao people, such as singing local songs in the local language. The folk songs of Yao show the rich national folk culture. When the folk songs of Yao were produced, there was also a whole symbiosis with folk customs. All the folk songs of the Yao mostly contain folk customs. The people of Yao often sing some related songs when they are engaged in some customary activities. For example, in farming activities, they also sing songs of vitality and songs of knowledge; young men and women often sing songs of love. There are customs of a birth song, a marriage song, and a funeral song in the three stages of marriage, marriage, and funeral (Thuy & Santasombat, 2013; Wang & Liu, 2020). Jinxiu Yao folk songs are a combination of sound curve and language expression. The style and local style of the folk songs are inseparable from the specific local language, pronunciation, and semantics of Jinxiu. The sound, rhyme, and tone of phonetics also have local language characteristics. The ancestors of the Yao sang to communicate with each other, communicate with songs, and express their inner emotions with songs. Folk songs described their daily lives, labor, and activities (Kiestler & Lew, 2006; Xu, 2021; Liu, 2022).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study uses Yao wedding music as the research object. The research method mainly adopts qualitative research. Interviews, observation, and documents are the main tools to collect data, and answers are obtained based on subjectivity. These data are explained by theories of musicology, ethnomusicology, and historical musicology (Baily, 2001).

#### *3.1 Key Informants*

The First Group: Mr. Huang Chenglin, he is a male, 71 years old, he is responsible for playing suona. A Jinxiu local resident, he is the main person in charge of the PanYao “Marry off a Son” Performance Troupe. He has participated in performances for a long time and knows the process of the PanYao wedding ceremony and the music repertoire. The criteria for selecting: 1) He was born and raised in Jinxiu County; 2) The person understands the culture and development of the Yao in Jinxiu; 3) The person knows how to perform wedding music, has been engaged in wedding performances, and has rich experience; 4) He is the main practitioner of the music.



Figure 2. Mr. Huang Chenglin

Source: Zhao Ping (2021).

The Second Group: Mr. Hu Zongchuan, a male Yao from Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, Guangxi, majored in ethnology at Guangxi University for Nationalities. Now he works for the Guangxi Materials Group as the deputy secretary general of the Guangxi Yao Association. As an expert of the Yao, he has studied the culture and customs of the Jinxiu Yao for a long time and has also deeply studied Yao marriage. The criteria for selecting key informants are: 1) was born and raised in Jinxiu County and understands the local language; 2) is an expert on Yao culture and is familiar with the culture and development of the Yao in Jinxiu; 3) as a professional researcher, he has been engaged in professional theoretical research for a long time and has a systematic research method; 4) now that she lives in Nanning, the same city as the researcher, it is easy to visit.



Figure 3. Mr. Hu Zongchuan

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

The Third Group: Mr. Chen Xiaorong, Mr. Zhao Ping, Ye Fei, and others. The criteria for selecting the key informants are: 1) They are all Jinxiu Yao residents with extensive knowledge of the area culture of Jinxiu; 2) They took part in the wedding of the Jinxiu Yao people; 3) They participated in Jin Xiu Yao's wedding, saying, "Marry off a son."

### *3.2 Research Tools*

The research tools used in this dissertation are mainly interviews, observation, and document collection. To obtain data for the study, the researchers conducted several field surveys.

(1) Observation: visit and observe the museums of the five Yao branches of Jinxiu Yao and a comprehensive Jinxiu Yao Museum. Visit and observe Pan Yao's wedding, "Marry off a son."

(2) Interviews: purposeful interviews with three key groups of informants.

(3) Document collection: refer to relevant literature at home and abroad, summarize, and sort out.

### *3.3 Data Collection*

Researchers gathered data by reading books and going out into the field. The data they got came in the form of written data, audio data, image data, and recorded data.

(1) Literature data: To conduct in-depth research, researchers refer to literature materials in libraries and cultural centers and collect literature data by using network platforms such as CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) to complete document analysis.

(2) Acoustic data: Researchers went to the study site for field investigation. Use recording equipment to collect audio data at the wedding site.

(3) Image data: Researchers went to the study site.

(4) Field investigation. Use camera equipment to collect image data at the wedding site.

### *3.4 Data Analysis*

The researcher analyzes the data to follow up on the goals and definitions. Use conceptual and theoretical terms, literature analysis, qualitative research methods, and field survey data. The researcher went to Jinxiu, Guangxi, for a field visit to the museum, interviewed my main informants using observation methods to obtain experience and relevant information, and investigated and analyzed the musical context of Jinxiu Yao wedding music. and used field research, interviews with informants, and recordings of suona music and oercussion music in wedding music to complete the practical analysis of the musical elements of Jinxiu Yao wedding music.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 The Musical Context of the Yao Wedding*

The wedding ceremony of the Jinxiu Yao is distinguished from the perspective of music. The most musical element is the wedding ceremony, "Marry off a son." In the wedding ceremony

of the Jinxiu Yao, the music is mainly in the form of suona playing. The researcher looked at it according to its structure, mode, and tonality, melodic style, and rhythmic characteristics.

The suona was introduced into the Yao area from the Central Plains with the migration of the Yao in the late Qing Dynasty and was widely used. Among the Jinxiu Yao, there is only one ensemble that can play wedding music, as few people can play the suona. In 2021, the researcher interviewed an ensemble that played frequently in Panyao, Fenzhan Village, and Jinxiu County. The ensemble is composed of two suonas, one small drum, one small cymbal, one big cymbal, and one gong. The music played by the two violins is the soul of the ensemble. The drum is responsible for coordinating the tempo. The drum, small cymbals, big cymbals, and gongs are percussion instruments and are played intermittently throughout the wedding.



Figure 4. The musical instruments

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

The musicians are all men, all over 45 years old, and they are all villagers from FenZhan Village in Jinxiu County. They do farm work during the day and gather to perform when they need to perform during the wedding ceremony. I learned from interviews that the performers' skills were learned from their masters, learned through word of mouth, and consolidated in

practice. There is no record of any sheet music. The performance of the members is as follows:

Table 1. The musicians of the suona ensemble

Name	Age (years old)	Music instrument
Mr. Zhao Chengming	61	suona 1
Mr. Huang Chenglin	71	suona 2
Mr. Feng Wenzhou	66	small drum
Mr. Pang Fushou	65	small cymbals
Mr. Ye Zuliang	45	big cymbals
Mr. Zhao ChengHan	72	gong



Figure 5. The musicians of the suona ensemble

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

The Yao suona wedding music has two forms: a walking performance in procession and a seating performance. The walking performance in a procession is usually on the way to meeting the bride or groom. The suona players are in the front; the gongs, drums, and cymbals are in the back. They lead the procession of the bride and groom’s loved ones, playing as they walk.





Figure 6. The Musicians perform at the village ceremony procession

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

The seating performance is held during the formal wedding ceremony and banquets. The suona players sit around a square table arranged by the host for playing, eading the progress of the wedding ceremony.



Figure 7. The musicians perform inside the house

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

After a long period of historical development, the Guangxi Jinxiu Pan Yao suona wedding music has formed a wedding suite performed during the wedding ceremony. Each melodic piece has its own specific content and meaning. The Guangxi instrumental music lacks the

completeness of its form and content. It is also in an ancient state from the perspective of music style, which is very precious. During the wedding ceremony, folk musicians mainly played the following ten pieces: sometimes it's an ensemble of all the instruments, sometimes it's just the suona playing solo.

Table 2. The list of songs of wedding ceremony

Name of melody	Play the Occasion	While playing	Percussion Accompaniment
1. Meeting the Groom	The bride's procession meets the groom and his procession halfway and escort them to bride's home for wedding	Walking	Yes
2. Tea Ceremony	The bride's procession serves tea (and cigarette) to groom's procession to greet them.	Walking	No
3. Taking the Groom Home	The groom's close relatives and bride's close relatives escort groom to the bride's home	Walking	Yes
4. Performing the Formal Wedding Ceremony	The groom kneels and bow to the heaven and the earth firstly, and then bow to the bride's ancestors and parents, finally groom and bride bow each other	Seating	No
5. Preparing a Banquet	Preparing a banquet in honor of the guests. The bride's family preparing a banquet	Seating	Yes
6. Inviting Guests to the Banquet	Music sounded on behalf of the host to welcome all the relatives attending the wedding, will be used to treat everyone	Seating	No
7. Sitting Around the Table	All the guests sat around the table	Seating	No
8. Taking a Sip	Taking a sip of the fine wine and tasting gourmet food. To amuse the guests at the banquet, tell them to take their time and enjoy themselves	Seating	Yes
9. Banquet Finished	At the end of the banquet, the staff cleared the table	Seating	Yes
10. Seeing the Guests Off	The ensemble and the host sense the guests off to the entrance of the village.	Walking	Yes

Each piece is played repeatedly in certain situations, representing different meanings. For example, playing "Taking a sip of the fine wine and tasting gourmet food" repeatedly during the meal has the meaning of persuading guests to eat slowly and has the meaning of persuading guests to eat in a civilized manner. For example, playing "Meeting the Groom" represents the greeting of the newlyweds. Before the banquet, similar music is also played when welcoming guests to represent the new friends and friends who greet the newlyweds. Generally, some concerts are played 3-5 times indefinitely, according to the actual situation, to coordinate with the whole wedding ceremony. In the actual performance process,

according to the situation at the time, the main part can be played repeatedly to coordinate with the wedding ceremony.

#### *4.2 The Characteristic of the Yao Wedding Music*

In the ten pieces of wedding music, there are the following characteristics: 1) Most of the pieces are short, mainly consisting of 20-30 bars; 2) All pieces have a prelude and main body, and some have a postlude; 3) Melodic style: Many songs end with the pattern “EGDED”. The melody is mainly progressive; the second, third, and fourth intervals are more common. There are occasional big jumps of sixth and seventh degrees, and the melody is smooth and smooth. The music vocabulary mostly uses pentatonic tri-tone groups, such as “DEC, DEG, EGD, GAC”, and others; 4) Most of the songs have 2 or 4 beats; only one (Preparing a Banquet) has 3 beats; 5) Characteristics of percussion rhythm: The rhythm of the prelude is free. The rhythm of the music is relatively free, with a folk-song flavor. The speed is mostly between 66 and 88 beats per minute, and the rhythm is smooth; 6) The mode tone sequence: Most of the pieces are mainly based on the five-tone mode (CDEGA); 7) Of the four percussion instruments, the function of the drummer is very important, and he plays a guiding role. Surprisingly, although there is no sheet music, with a good sense of music, the cooperation between percussion and suona is very evident. Since the characteristics of the songs are similar, this article will only present one song, as follows:

## Meeting the groom

(迎亲)

PLAYER: Huang Chenglin

RECORDER: Huang Xiaohuan

1  
Percussion plays fast

2  
★Percussion 1

3  
★Percussion 2

9  
★Percussion 3

14  
★Percussion 4      ★Percussion 5

20  
★Percussion 6

24  
Percussion plays fast

Percussion plays fast      ★Percussion 1-6

Drum

Small Cymbal

Cymbal

Gong

Figure 7. Music notation of “Meeting the groom”

Source: Huang Xiaohuan (2021).

The music is composed of a prelude, the main body, and a postlude. The overall structure is simple and easy to remember. The whole piece is 25 bars long and very short. The loose part of the first bar is the prelude, bars 2–24 are the main body of the music, and bar 25 is the postlude. The main body of this music runs from bars 2 to 24. The melodic scale that appears is CDEGAB, and F does not appear. It is a combination of the five-tone mode and a biased tone, or six-tone scale. The entire piece of music appears several times for AEG and AED. The melody is beautiful. The music is in the form of an ensemble. The suona plays the main melody, and the percussion instruments accompany it. But since they are not performed at the same time, there are percussion pauses and breaks. At first, the percussion plays fast, then appears six times in a regular rhythmic pattern. Finally, they play fast again, ending with the suona. The rhythm is a 4/4 beat. The prelude and the postlude are free.

In the traditional Yao wedding ceremony, the vocal music examples are rich in variety, especially the Zuotang Song, which is sung in the evening. The singing hall is set up in the bride's home, and the singers are the relatives and friends who come to attend the wedding. The antiphonal singing is in the form of “question and answer” or “chat” between the host and guests. The content of the antiphonal singing is generally related to the surroundings or people's moods while they are singing, such as expressing their heartfelt thanks to the host for his hospitality and so on. As it were, people use antiphonal singing to replace chatting. It is a natural singing style, so the melody is not strong, and the rhythm is determined by the change in their mood, usually drawn out in the last tone. However, as the times changed, more and more local youths began to walk out of the mountains; technology has brought more leisure and choices to people, and the traditional ways of communication, such as singing all night long, have disappeared for many years.

## **5. Discussion**

Yao wedding music is a precious form of music culture, which thrives in the Yao area and develops in the Yao area, spreading Yao folk customs and religious culture. It is thus an important legacy to make it the precious wealth of the nation. The Yao wedding ceremony music is gradually declining because the youth cannot play the suona (Yantian et al., 2021). The transmission of suona was inherited from the masters and disciples and then slowly developed through transmission through the family lineages. However, today's youth have neglected to learn traditional culture, preferring to play western guitars, drum kits, and other instruments rather than the suona. Now, the suona musicians are getting older and older, and they are getting tired of it.

The lack of music notation makes it difficult to pass down the music. So far, suona music is still passed on by oral transmission, and there is no written notation. The researcher has found in the survey that some artists have a certain ability to recognize notated music, and they also hope that suona music can be recorded. The suona musicians are now getting older, and fewer and fewer young people are willing to learn suona instruments. Due to the convenience of transportation, which has strengthened communication between the Yao people and the outside world, the people's living standards are improving. They have cars, so it is no longer necessary to spend a lot of time picking up relatives on foot, and there is no need to stay

overnight in the bride and groom's home during the wedding ceremonies. Therefore, a lot of procedures are omitted; the banquet time is the main part, and sometimes the worship and reception parts are omitted. The rapid development of society has changed the way weddings are held. People have simplified the process of traditional weddings, so the corresponding music has lost its function. Young people yearn for western wedding ceremonies, which are affecting the transmission of suona music, and even the transmission of the music is broken. They rarely speak their own language, not to mention singing in Yao. They also don't have as much time for three-day weddings because they prefer to play with their phones. All of these are so regrettable.

The Yao wedding music is precious and special, which is the legacy and heritage of the Yao people's music culture in past dynasties. Therefore, for the better dissemination of Yao wedding music, the researchers propose the following recommendations: First, with the help of professionals, the video, audio, and music of the wedding should be documented and recorded, and the data should be preserved in an archive. Second, encourage and reward young people to learn Yao music and traditional instruments. Third, create an environment for speaking Yao so that more people can learn the language and sing Yao songs.

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