

# *An Analysis of Yi Language Development Issues: A Case Study of Xingye Township*

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**Abstract:** The Yi ethnic group is an ancient minority in China, with a rich and splendid cultural history. The Yi language, as the language of the Yi people, is the most significant manifestation in politics, economics, culture, philosophy, and art, embodying the diligence and wisdom of the Yi people. However, its gradual decline in contemporary times is a significant cultural loss. This paper conducted a survey among villagers of the Yi ethnic group in Xingye Township to understand whether they use the Yi language in daily life, whether they want their children to learn and use the language, and whether they can speak it fluently. The survey revealed signs of the Yi language declining in the area. Based on this, the paper analyzed the factors influencing the development of the Yi language and proposes practical suggestions from three aspects: educational concepts, bilingual teachers, and means of dissemination.

**Keywords:** Yi ethnic group, Yi language, Xingye township, bilingual education

## **1. Introduction**

The Yi ethnic group resides in the mountainous regions of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan in southwestern China, and is one of the oldest ethnic groups in China. Presently, the Yi people are the sixth largest minority ethnic group in China. According to the statistics from the Seventh National Population Census in 2021, the population of the Yi ethnic group is 9,830,327. Their native language is Yi language.

The Yi ethnic group uses ideographic script as their writing system, which is an ancient script of their creation [1]. The original settlements of the Yi ethnic group were far from the central dynasties, with challenging transportation and limited cultural exchanges. Throughout history, they were referred to by official historians as “barbarians from the southwestern outskirts of Ba and Shu” [2]. This has also resulted in the Yi script retaining its distinct ethnic characteristics up to the present day. According to Yi script experts, there are still over ten thousand ancient Yi characters, with over a thousand being in regular use. Existing studies suggested that the ancient Yi script can be ranked alongside the Chinese oracle bone script, Sumerian script, Egyptian script, Mayan script, and Harappan script, making it one of the six major ancient scripts in the world and a valuable cultural treasure [3].

In recent years, with the continuous development of society, especially the impact of the market economy and various types of foreign cultures, Yi language ancient texts are rapidly being lost and

damaged. Furthermore, a portion of valuable Yi language ancient texts has been lost overseas and collected by foreign cultural institutions. For instance, the Paris School of Oriental Languages possesses 30 volumes, the Paris Museum of the East has 4 volumes, the Foreign Missions of Paris has 20 volumes, the National Library of France in Paris has 17 volumes, the Museum of Ethnography in Paris has 2 volumes, and the British Museum in London has 8 volumes [4]. These circumstances significantly increase the difficulty of rescuing Yi language ancient texts. In addition, the rate of disappearance of the Yi language and script is astonishingly high. The number of elderly Yi people who can recognize Yi script is decreasing rapidly, and most of them cannot translate Yi language texts due to a lack of proficiency in Chinese [5]. The scarcity of research teams specializing in ancient Yi script is a serious concern, and the urgency to train inheritors of Yi cultural traditions is also evident. The decline of Yi culture is a substantial loss to the treasure trove of Chinese national culture. Swift action is needed to rescue this cultural gem of the Yi ethnic group [6].

Previous research on the Yi language largely focused on its grammar and the variations in Yi dialects across different regions [7] [8]. Given the scarce availability of information regarding the current status of the Yi language, this paper aims to investigate the present situation of the Yi language and contemplate the issues surrounding it. Considering the substantial population of the Yi ethnic group and their dispersed settlements, this study is centered around a representative Yi township – Xingye Township.

This work may uncover commonalities with neighboring language groups, which holds significant implications in typological linguistics.

## **2. The Current Status of Yi Language in Xingye Township**

### **2.1. Methods**

In this study, a Yi ethnic village in Xingye Township, Tianquan County, Ya'an City, Sichuan Province, was selected as the research subject. Through methods such as interviews and questionnaires, the local status of the Yi language was investigated, the challenges in its development were analyzed, and relevant measures for preservation and inheritance were proposed based on the local context.

Xingye Township has a total of 39 households and 225 people from the Yi ethnic group who have voluntarily relocated from Liangshan. Among them, 23 households comprising 132 individuals are identified as registered impoverished households. Between 1998 and 2014, they embarked on a long journey, traveling thousands of miles to leave the Daliang Mountains. They resettled in this area after relocating as families from places like Zhaojue County and Jinyang County [9]. In recent years, in order to better preserve Yi ethnic language and culture, Xingye Township had initiated Yi-Chinese bilingual education in certain Yi-inhabited areas. However, due to a series of factors such as a shortage of Yi-Chinese bilingual teachers and a lack of corresponding teaching materials, the Yi-Chinese bilingual education has gradually reached a stagnant state.

The main focus of this investigation was to visit two villages, within which only two or three households were inhabited by Han ethnic individuals. The rest of the households were Yi ethnic, and they belonged to a "small settlement" distribution pattern. A total of 50 individuals were surveyed.

The main purpose of this survey is to preliminarily understand the current situation of the use of the Yi language in Xingye Township, measure the future protection and inheritance of the Yi language, and assess the proficiency of the Yi language in different age groups to find specific problems. This paper can provide insights into the usage of the Yi language, thereby contributing to future efforts in Yi language preservation.

### **2.2. Results**

Regarding the question "Do you use Yi language for communication in daily life?", the survey results

are shown in Figure 1. Among the 50 participants, 76% of the Yi individuals can proficiently communicate in the Yi language, while a minority can understand but not speak it. When asked about their preferred language for communication with fellow members of their ethnic group, 93% of respondents chose to use Yi language for gatherings with fellow ethnic group members and conversations with family members.

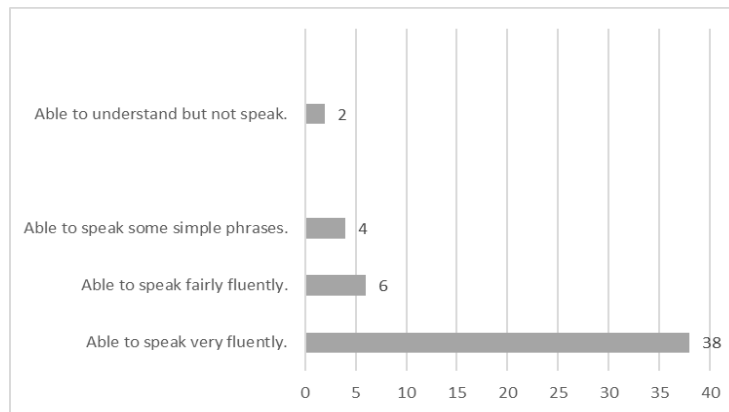


Figure 1: Usage of Yi language for communication.

Local Yi ethnic villagers also desire their children to learn and use their native language. When asked the question "If given the opportunity, would you want your children to learn and use Yi language?" the results are shown in Figure 2.

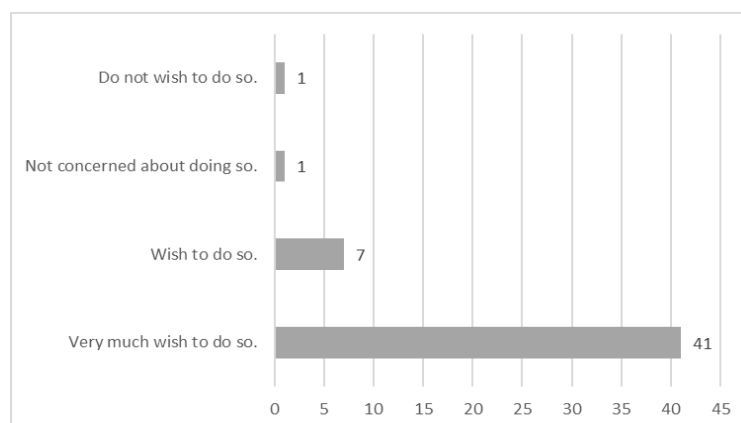


Figure 2: Number of people hoping their children learn and use the Yi language.

Among them, 60% of the survey participants chose "Very much wish to do so", 25% chose "Wish to do so", while the number of those who chose "Indifferent" or "Do not wish to do so" is extremely low. This also reflects the locals' strong sense of identity and deep emotions toward their native language. Many strongly oppose comments that dismiss the usefulness of the Yi language or consider learning it a waste of time. It's undeniable that the Yi language is crucial.

Despite the Yi ethnic people's desire for the next generation to learn and use the Yi language, hoping for its enduring inheritance, it is undeniable that, due to the development of society, frequent cultural exchanges, and the need to acquire more knowledge based on Mandarin Chinese, a significant proportion of the younger generation cannot speak Yi language proficiently. The survey results are shown in Figure 3.

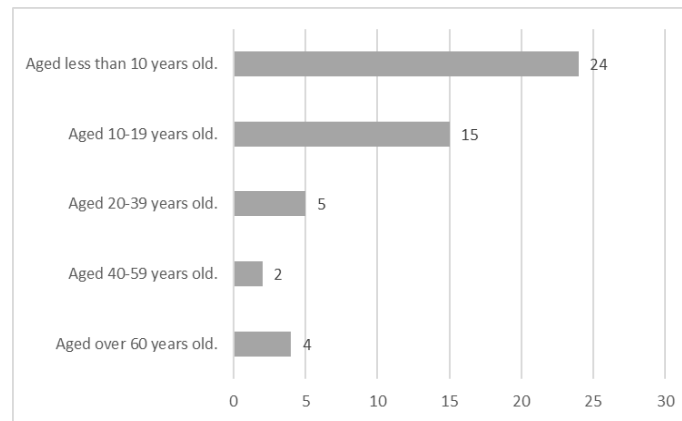


Figure 3: Age distribution of people who cannot speak or speak Yi language poorly.

Hence, it is evident that despite the older generation's hope for the enduring preservation and inheritance of the Yi language, various reasons have led to the phenomenon of decline in the Yi ethnic language.

### 3. Analysis of the Reasons for the Decline of Yi Language

Firstly, the development of the Yi language is influenced by external languages. With the continuous improvement of the economy and education levels, an increasing number of Yi people are venturing out for work and education, leading to enhanced communication between Yi villages and the outside world and fostering greater cultural exchange [10]. With the increase in communication, the mutual influence of different languages, especially Mandarin Chinese, is increasingly impacting the lives of the Yi people. Additionally, within the context of economic globalization, other foreign languages and cultures are also making their way into China to facilitate further communication and exchange. In recent years, the economic and cultural levels of ethnic minority areas have significantly improved, leading to broader adoption of Mandarin Chinese among these groups. Mandarin Chinese holds a distinct advantage in cultural exchange, and in the competition for language use and functionality, ethnic minority languages are at a disadvantage. Over time, this can lead to their gradual decline.

Secondly, insufficient investment in Yi-Chinese bilingual education has hindered the development of the Yi language. The Yi language is not only a treasure for the Yi people but also a valuable asset for China and the world. The loss of the Yi language would result in the loss of a carrier for the corresponding culture. The most effective way to ensure its continuity is through school education. In Sichuan Province, there are only a few dozen Yi-Chinese bilingual teaching points due to factors such as the shortage of teachers, teaching materials, and funding. Therefore, to promote the inheritance of the Yi language through education, it's necessary to first increase the efforts in Yi language education, which unavoidably requires more funding. The insufficient funding allocated to Yi-Chinese bilingual education and the development of bilingual teaching materials has led to a lack of such materials and a severe shortage of bilingual teachers. These issues collectively impact the preservation and development of the local Yi language.

Thirdly, the shortage of teaching staff has led to low efficiency in bilingual education, restricting the development of Yi-Han bilingual education. Influenced by career perceptions, many minority graduates who are proficient in their ethnic languages are unwilling to engage in bilingual education. Bilingual schools struggle to recruit suitable teachers, often relying on temporary instructors to handle teaching responsibilities. Due to issues such as employment status and compensation, the motivation and proactiveness of substitute teachers can be easily affected, resulting in unstable teaching staff. Additionally, in some regions, teachers responsible for Yi language instruction have discontinued

their involvement in Yi language teaching for various reasons, contributing to the loss of teaching resources.

In the context of the new era, it is imperative to pay attention to the development of Yi-Han bilingual education. Scientific and precise preservation of minority language resources is of paramount importance.

#### **4. Measures to Address the Decline of the Yi Language**

The survey revealed the overall decline and loss of the Yi language. Yi language has been accumulated and developed by the Yi people through their long labor history, encompassing their ways of life and thinking. If lost, it would not only be a loss for the Yi people and their culture, but also a loss for Chinese and global cultures. Therefore, to protect and inherit the Yi language and culture, this article proposes the following recommendations.

Firstly, there is a need for a shift in educational perspectives. In order to preserve the Yi language and culture, it is essential to change people's educational mindset, making them realize that subject learning is as crucial as the preservation of the Yi language. Protecting language equates to safeguarding culture; abandoning one's mother tongue means letting go of traditions, history, and cultural heritage. To achieve this goal, measures must be taken from multiple angles. On one hand, township educational authorities should incorporate Yi language and cultural education into after-school programs for primary and secondary schools, with clear requirements for the inclusion of Yi language courses in the curriculum. On the other hand, in enrollment exams for areas with ethnic minority populations and civil servant recruitment, some preferential treatment should be given to minority candidates, such as implementing Yi language testing in Yi-dense regions. By conducting language tests, minority regions can identify individuals with linguistic strengths that are better suited for local development. Similar supplementary exams could also be promoted in other minority areas to enhance the motivation to learn their respective ethnic languages. Various approaches can be employed for this purpose, with the ultimate goal of increasing the enthusiasm and awareness of the Yi people, reshaping their generational educational perspectives, and fostering the protection, inheritance, and development of the Yi language.

Secondly, there is a need to cultivate bilingual teachers with strong professional capabilities. The preservation and development of the Yi language are inseparable from the regulation and enhancement of bilingual education efforts by relevant educational authorities [11]. On one hand, it's important to encourage the younger generation of Yi ethnic individuals to learn the Yi language, fostering future bilingual teachers who can teach in Yi areas. On the other hand, teachers already proficient in both Yi and Han languages, working within schools, should also undergo enhanced training to elevate their professional skills and remuneration. This will ultimately facilitate substantial and effective development of bilingual education in Yi regions.

Lastly, relevant authorities should utilize various media channels reasonably and legally to promote the Yi language. The rapid development of online platforms has provided a path for language dissemination. Promoters of the Yi language can use new media platforms to sensibly and lawfully share healthful and practical videos, images, etc. [12], attracting individuals interested in the Yi language and gathering them together. This group of people, once united, can generate a certain level of influence, facilitating the spread of the Yi language and culture. Unique Yi events, like the Torch Festival, have captured the attention and participation of numerous individuals. Such activities can be disseminated through live-streaming videos, not only promoting the expansion of Yi culture but also aiding in the protection and inheritance of the Yi language and culture.

## 5. Conclusion

Almost all multi-ethnic and multilingual countries in the world face bilingualism issues. Language plays a significant and profound role in safeguarding the rights of minority groups and preserving their cultures.

This paper summarized the current trend of gradual decline in the Yi language, analyzed the underlying issues, and ultimately proposed corresponding measures. The first point is to shift societal educational perspectives to encourage the conscious preservation of the Yi language and culture. The second point involves motivating the younger Yi generation to learn the language, and cultivating bilingual teachers who can later teach in Yi areas. Lastly, utilizing new media platforms to promote and amplify Yi culture is recommended, in order to attract more people to learn about and engage with it.

The on-site investigation conducted in Xingye Township, Sichuan Province, focused on a single randomly selected Yi village, which limited the comprehensiveness of the scope. Additionally, the study's limited number of questions did not capture the complete landscape of Yi language development. As a result, future research will involve a broader population base, selecting a wider range of more representative issues for examination.

The protection of our country's multilingual resources is an effective way to achieve a balanced linguistic ecosystem, with a focus on the dominant national language. In the future, it is necessary to alter education perspectives, innovate bilingual education models and cultivate high-quality bilingual teachers.

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