

Article

From Subordination to Empowerment: The Journey of Yi Women in Daliangshan

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of Yi women's social status in Daliangshan, Sichuan Province. It analyzes historical practices—including child marriage (*wawaqin*) and the tradition of high bridal gifts—along with the role of education, economic modernization, and cultural advocacy initiatives. The study situates these developments within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on gender equality, poverty alleviation, and equitable development. Field interviews, observations, and community-based projects inform this analysis, which highlights both progress and persisting challenges for Yi women.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Equality

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1. Introduction

In China, the historical position of women has long been subordinated, particularly during ancient times. Gender inequality remains a persistent issue across the country, with certain regions and cultural groups facing especially pronounced disparities. One area of significant interest in this regard is the status of Yi ethnic minority women in Daliangshan, which merits careful examination within the local context. Over the course of millennia, Daliangshan has undergone profound transformations, and as a result, the status of Yi women has been gradually evolving. It's important to note that China encompasses a diverse tapestry of 53 ethnic groups, with the Han being the largest. Among these groups is the Yi ethnic minority, primarily concentrated in the heart of Daliangshan, where they uphold their unique cultural heritage and traditions (Harrell, 2001; Yale Human Relations Area Files, 2020) [1,2].

Daliangshan is distinguished by its lush, dense forests that set it apart from the rest of the world. This geographical isolation has played a pivotal role in preserving the time-honored ways of life and distinct cultures of the various ethnic groups residing in this region (Harrell, 2001) [1]. The Yi people possess a wealth of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing elements such as clothing, songs, and rituals. Within the Daliangshan region, the Yi ethnic group stands as a vibrant and distinctive component of China's diverse cultural tapestry, contributing significantly to the nation's multifaceted and culturally rich landscape.

However, rooted in the unique culture and traditions of the Yi ethnic group, Yi women once faced various constraints and limitations. Historically, they were subjected to practices like arranged childhood marriages orchestrated by their parents, limited access to education, and confinement to domestic chores and agricultural labor (Kennerly, 2019) [3]. Nevertheless, as the region has undergone economic development and increased interactions with the outside world, contemporary Yi women have encountered new opportunities and freedoms. This study investigates these transformations through

qualitative fieldwork, including interviews, site visits, and community observations, situating local experiences within broader frameworks of gender and development.

Today, they have the autonomy to select their own life partners, breaking free from prearranged unions. Moreover, they have expanded access to education, enabling them to acquire greater knowledge and explore diverse career paths beyond the confines of their homes.

2. Evolving Yi Bridal Gift Customs

Throughout thousands of years, the Yi ethnic group has undergone significant developmental changes: the evolving customs surrounding bridal gifts among Yi women have played a pivotal role in altering their social standing within the Yi community. The practice of giving bridal gifts, a local tradition representing compensation for the labor lost to the bride's family, has been instrumental in shaping the dynamics of Yi marriages.

Upon my arrival at Siga Village in Daliangshan, I had the opportunity to interview a Yi ethnic man who shed light on the historical context. In the past, when a Yi man married a Yi woman, the bridal gift given was exceptionally substantial, often reaching amounts of 500,000 to 600,000 yuan (Chen and Pan, 2023) [4]. However, for many in rural areas, such expenses were simply unaffordable. Typically, the groom's family would pool their resources to assist him in marrying his bride, but in reality, this money was handed over to the bride's family, with the bride herself receiving none of it. Upon her marriage, the bride would then become responsible for repaying this debt alongside her husband, a practice widely regarded as outdated and regressive.

A quantitative study based on 275 survey responses from Liangshan (BKLIB, 2023) [5] revealed that bride price amounts in many Yi areas ranged from "hundreds of thousands" down to "tens of thousands" of yuan, and were significantly influenced by factors such as the bride's education level, occupation, and regional economic background. In addition, official statistics from the Liangshan Civil Affairs Bureau (2023) [6] show that the average bride price has decreased from approximately 500,000 yuan a decade ago to 150,000–200,000 yuan in recent years. This significant reduction was driven by a combination of targeted local government policy interventions and public campaigns discouraging excessive betrothal payments, which together helped to reshape marriage customs across the region.

Over the past decade, efforts have been made to remedy this custom, with a significant turning point occurring approximately five years ago when a concerned individual wrote a letter to the government highlighting the issue of bridal gifts. This prompted a series of official responses and community-level initiatives, resulting in a gradual and sustained improvement of this antiquated practice. The amount of the bridal gift has since decreased significantly from its original substantial sum. As a direct consequence of these policy and social shifts, brides today are no longer burdened with the responsibility of repaying large marriage debts, as the bridal gift provided by the groom's family no longer requires borrowing from relatives. Additionally, brides now have the opportunity to receive some bridal gift items, such as jewelry and silverware, marking an important step toward recognizing their agency within marriage. While remnants of this outdated custom still persist, its prevalence has diminished significantly in contemporary Yi society.

These transformations in bridal gift practices among Yi women signify a profound shift in the status of Yi women within their community. The exorbitant bridal gifts demanded in the past placed a heavy economic burden on women and reinforced traditional gender roles (Wan, 2024) [7]. However, due to government intervention and progressive social attitudes, the amounts of bridal gifts have gradually decreased, allowing Yi women to receive a share of these gifts and alleviating financial pressures. This pivotal transformation not only reflects changing cultural attitudes toward marriage but also symbolizes a broader shift toward gender equity and women's empowerment.

While remnants of this custom may still exist, the fact that it has become increasingly rare over the past decade marks significant progress toward gender equality in Yi society. The successful transformation of the Yi ethnic group's dowry practices stands as a significant factor influencing the improved social status of women within the community.

3.领导干部、党员、公职人员、企事业单位人员、村干部及财政供养人员和人大代表、政协委员、先进模范人物、社会公众人物要带头严格执行规定的彩礼标准上限，凉山州婚嫁彩礼最高不得超过10万元（原婚嫁彩礼标准低于10万元的县（市）或地方严格按之前的规定执行），舅舅、叔叔、兄弟、媒人等各类婚嫁民俗礼金合计不得超过1万元，向所在党组织、单位和村（社区）的纪检监察部门或监督管理机构做出抵制高价彩礼深化移风易俗承诺，并严格落实彩礼报备制度，县级以上领导干部要在个人有关事项报告表上进行填报，党员领导干部和党员要在民主生活会和组织生活会上进行说明。领导干部、党员、公职人员、财政供养人员、人大代表、政协委员等违反相关公约和承诺时，由所在单位或乡村书面移送同级纪委监委、组织部门处理，情节特别严重的移送司法处理。各县（市）要严格控制随礼标准，不得高额随礼还礼，切实解决份子钱高且多、巧立名目大操大办、相互攀比炫富、相互设宴收礼等“人情味”变成“人情债”的习俗异化问题，回归优秀传统文化礼仪，践行社会主义核心价值观。

Interception of official Government documents

The Civil Affairs Bureau of Liangshan Prefecture, the State Commission for Discipline Inspection and other multi-departmental organizations jointly issued the "Guidelines for Governing High-Priced Bridal Price and Deepening the Shifting of Customs in Liangshan Prefecture", leveraging the synergistic role of multi-departmental organizations, and focusing on the solicitation and payment of high-priced bridal price.

"The maximum wedding dowry in Liangshan Prefecture shall not exceed 100,000 yuan [counties (cities) or localities where the original wedding dowry standard is less than 100,000 yuan are strictly enforced in accordance with the previous regulations]."

Figure 1. Interception of official government documents

3. The Obsolescence of *Wawaqin* (Child Marriage)

Another local tradition, *wawaqin*, reflected the evolution of Yi women's social status. Historically, it involved prearranged marriages between children, often at very young ages. During a visit to a local pottery workshop in Daliangshan, I interviewed a Yi ethnic woman who shared that in the past, Yi women would marry shortly after completing their education, typically around the age of 17 (which often meant finishing just primary and middle school). Some marriages even occurred as young as 11 or 12, a practice known as *wawaqin* or child marriage (Kennerly, 2019) [3].

These child marriages were primarily arranged based on parental preferences, often disregarded the children's own wishes. Marital compatibility was determined by factors such as social class and ethnicity. As described in the book *阿嫫妮惹*, the author lamented the exploitation of daughters, stating: "The blood of daughters is turned into wine to drink; The fat of daughters is turned into meat to eat; The bones of daughters are traded for silver" (p.73). Clearly, during that feudal era, women had little said in their marriages, as they were wed primarily to acquire dowry for their families.

However, the Yi ethnic group has since experienced a significant shift towards marriage freedom. Women now have the autonomy to choose their own life partners, with less emphasis on social class considerations. While vestiges of the traditional background-matching concept still persist, it is diminishing significantly. Generally, women have the opportunity to pursue education before marriage and starting a family.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that residual practices of *wawaqin* have not disappeared entirely. In some remote and economically underdeveloped villages in Liangshan Prefecture, informal or symbolic child betrothals occasionally persist, often influenced by family pressure, poverty, and limited educational access. Although these

Overall, improved education has fostered a shift in mindset, promoting gender equality among Yi ethnic women and offering them diverse career opportunities in society.

The advancements in Yi ethnic education have empowered Yi women to recognize disparities in career opportunities, leading to the evolution of their societal standing. According to national rural education statistics, the high school completion rate for Yi women remains approximately 15–20% lower than that of rural Han women, reflecting persistent educational disparities between ethnic groups (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). While Han women in rural areas have increasingly gained access to secondary and higher education, many Yi girls still face cultural and economic barriers to continued schooling. This gap underscores the structural challenges minority communities encounter in achieving gender and educational equity. During my visit to Siga Elementary School in Daliangshan, I engaged in a brief conversation with a third-grade girl. Through this interaction, I gleaned insights into the historical norms where women typically assumed domestic roles upon marriage, focusing on family care and child-rearing. Alternatively, they engaged in agricultural labor, with limited chances to venture beyond rural areas. Frequently, it was their husbands who would journey down the mountains to sell goods or seek employment elsewhere.

Presently, women have the freedom to select their own career paths, showcasing an increased awareness of diverse professions. During my visit to Siga Elementary School, I inquired about a young girl's aspirations, and she confidently expressed her desire to become a police officer. This clearly signifies the gradual shift towards a more open-minded mindset among Yi ethnic women.

Despite the broader career opportunities available to women, based on my observations, the primary responsibility for child-rearing still predominantly falls upon women. During my visit to Siga Elementary School, while accompanying a third-grade girl on a home visit, I noticed her assisting her grandmother in caring for 1 to 2-year-old infants, despite her being just 11 years old. Nearby, three young boys made no effort to help soothe the infants. Similarly, during the Torch Festival in Butuo County, I observed elderly grandmothers and women carrying infants and young children on their backs, with men rarely seen performing such duties. (Ran, 2022) [10].

These observations underscore the fact that, thanks to government investment in education and its development, more women now can pursue learning rather than early marriages. The Nine-Year Compulsory Education policy and related rural education reforms have been central to this shift, enabling structural changes in access to education for Yi girls. They have also broadened their horizons regarding potential careers and have developed aspirations for the future. The improvement in education has not only catalyzed significant changes in the social status of women but has also opened doors for them to explore diverse professions and lifestyles beyond traditional agricultural work and rural confinement. However, it's important to acknowledge that traditional gender roles still persist, particularly in the realm of childcare and nurturing, highlighting the persistence of gender disparities and the ongoing necessity for further societal reform.

5. Economic Stimulation

The economic growth within the society plays a pivotal role in elevating the social status of women. Daliangshan, home to over 3.8 million Yi people, has a history marked by challenges such as dynastic rule and a social system that contributed to widespread impoverishment among its inhabitants. Even after political reforms, many continued to live well below the poverty line. However, with the advent of modernization, Daliangshan's economy has flourished, driven by tourism and commercial trade. This economic transformation is now stable, and my observations during home visits reveal tangible improvements in the quality of life for the Yi ethnic community (Wan, 2024) [7].

For instance, the government has extended WiFi and internet connectivity to every household, providing residents with the opportunity to access the internet and connect

with the broader world. Housing conditions have seen significant enhancements, with more durable roofs and improved facilities. Additionally, the government offers subsidies for student tuition fees, rendering education much more affordable for children.

As the economy continues to advance, women are presented with a wider array of job opportunities, leading to a significant reduction in the unemployment rate. Women can now pursue careers aligned with their aspirations, transcending traditional roles centered on household chores and childcare. This phenomenon signifies a gradual elevation of women's status, affording them employment opportunities on par with men.

Furthermore, this thriving economy brings forth increased educational resources, creating a positive feedback loop wherein a more educated populace contributes to a pool of highly capable laborers, further stimulating economic growth.

However, the process of modernization also brings potential challenges. The rapid expansion of tourism and commerce, while economically beneficial, can accelerate the erosion of traditional Yi cultural practices. Younger generations—especially women who enter the urban workforce—may become increasingly detached from their ethnic language, rituals, and artisanal crafts. In addition, economic development is often uneven, favoring urbanized and touristic areas over remote villages, which can deepen disparities within Yi communities. This tension between economic growth and cultural preservation underscores the complexity of modernization, revealing that while it offers women new opportunities, it may also reshape or weaken traditional structures that once defined community identity.

6. Ongoing Challenges

There are also several potential challenges facing the Daliangshan region. One pressing issue is the high unemployment rate among young people in China, which exceeds 20% (Das Gupta, Ebenstein, and Sharygin, 2012) [11]. This trend has a disproportionately significant impact on less developed regions like Daliangshan. The Yi people not only contend with limited resources and weakened career aspirations but also face external pressures from the broader economic environment. Moreover, the scarcity of educational resources for students in this region results in unequal access to education compared to their urban counterparts, thereby reducing their opportunities for college enrollment. This educational disparity further limits women's employment prospects.

To address these issues, practical solutions are essential. One promising approach involves expanding vocational training programs that equip young Yi women with marketable skills in fields such as tourism, digital services, and healthcare, industries that are already growing in the region. Additionally, increasing access to government or NGO-sponsored scholarships and mentorship initiatives could help bridge the educational gap between rural and urban communities. Collaborations between local governments, private businesses, and educational institutions could further create pathways for job placement and career development. These structural strategies would not only alleviate unemployment pressures but also empower women economically and socially.

However, it's important to note that there are promising signs that these issues can be addressed. Through my research, I have witnessed the transformation of Yi women, who now harbor dreams and exercise their own choices. I have observed the remarkable strength of Yi women during my interviews with individuals of various ages and professions, and I have captured their essence in portraits that represent the women of Liangshan. These experiences have deeply inspired me to advocate for positive change in this region.

7. Social Justice Action Plan

My field investigation in Daliangshan, Sichuan, provided valuable insights into the United Nations' Social Development Goals (SDGs) and their local implications. Of the 16

global goals, I identified five that are particularly relevant to the Yi ethnic community in this region:

- **Goal 1: No Poverty** – End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- **Goal 4: Quality Education** – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **Goal 5: Gender Equality** – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- **Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth** – Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- **Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities** – Reduce inequality within and among countries.

The transformation of women's roles within the Yi community emerges as a pivotal factor for achieving these goals. My observations highlight the necessity of linking local development efforts with broader frameworks such as the UN SDGs, with particular emphasis on education, economic empowerment, and gender equality.

Although China has made significant progress in poverty alleviation, challenges remain in rural and ethnic minority regions such as Daliangshan. To ensure long-term improvement in the quality of life for Yi women, the establishment of a robust educational and economic framework is essential, with human capital serving as its foundation.

Two proposed strategies may contribute to this objective:

1. Preserving Yi Ethnic Cultural Heritage through Handcraft Academies

During fieldwork, I interviewed female Yi embroiderers who emphasized that traditional handcraft provides higher income than farming. However, this craft—integral to Yi culture—is gradually declining as younger generations lose interest. Partnering with local merchants and government institutions to establish a Handcraft Academy could ensure the preservation of Yi cultural traditions while providing Yi women with sustainable livelihoods.

Timeline & Feasibility:

This initiative could begin with a pilot program within 12 months, focusing on a single village to test curriculum design and local interest. Within 2–3 years, the program could expand to neighboring villages, incorporating collaborations with cultural preservation NGOs and municipal cultural bureaus. Funding could come from local government cultural grants, private craft businesses, and tourism development funds. The Academy could offer short-term training programs that combine craft skills with marketing strategies, ensuring both cultural preservation and economic viability.

2. Expanding Access to Higher Education through Scholarships and Financial Aid

Despite improvements, traditional practices such as *wawaqin* (child marriage) and burdensome bridal gift customs continue to limit opportunities for women. Some families, unable to afford tuition or unconvinced of the value of education, still hesitate to support girls in pursuing higher education. To address this, financial aid and targeted scholarships specifically for Yi girls are essential. NGOs, local governments, and community organizations could collaborate to provide tuition support and promote awareness of the long-term benefits of education for women and their families.

Timeline & Feasibility:

Scholarship programs could be launched within 1–2 years in partnership with local education bureaus and regional universities. Initial funding could be sourced through existing ethnic education support programs, CSR partnerships with private companies, and international NGOs focused on girls' education. A simple application process and local awareness campaigns can help ensure accessibility for rural Yi families. Over time,

the program could be scaled up regionally, with annual reporting to assess impact and reach.

Through these initiatives, the Yi ethnic community can progress toward reducing gender disparities, creating economic resilience, and ensuring that women and girls are empowered to make independent life choices.

8. Conclusion

The journey of Yi women in Daliangshan—from enforced subordination to growing empowerment—reflects both the progress and the ongoing struggles of gender equality in rural China. Economic growth, educational reform, and cultural advocacy have advanced women's status, yet traditional roles and systemic barriers persist. By situating local transformations within global development frameworks, this research underscores the importance of sustained, multifaceted interventions to ensure Yi women's empowerment continues to evolve.

Looking ahead, future research could explore the long-term impact of current education and economic policies on Yi women's social mobility, as well as examine how modernization interacts with cultural preservation in shaping gender roles. In addition, comparative studies with other ethnic minority communities could offer a broader understanding of how gender, culture, and development intersect in rural China.

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