

## Investigation on the Use of Yi Language in Xichang

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**Abstract:** Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture is China's largest Yi-inhabited area. There are more than 2.5 million Yi people, and a considerable number of Yi people still do not speak Chinese (including Mandarin Chinese and local Chinese dialects), they mainly use Yi language to communicate. With a registered population of 800,000, Xichang is the capital and also the political, economic and cultural center of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, and there are Yi people living in every town. In recent years, a large number of Yi farmers have poured into Xichang from rural areas, as a result, the proportion of urban citizens who speak Yi language has been changed. In order to have a further investigation on the use of Yi language in Xichang, in this article, questionnaires, field research, interviews and comprehensive analysis methods are involved, and places like state organizations, enterprises and institutions, schools, hospitals, factories, shopping centers, stores, and street stalls in Xichang are investigated to conduct a survey on the use of Yi language in political, economic and cultural fields, showing the use of Yi language in Xichang and the author's thoughts.

### 1. Introduction

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture is China's largest Yi -inhabited area, Xichang is the capital of Liangshan Yi Prefecture, and Yi language is one of the main languages in Xichang. According to statistics, by the end of 2013, the registered population in Xichang was 645,600, and among them, the minority population accounted for 147,700, that was 22.9% of the total population. The Hui and other ethnic minorities accounted for 0.3%. So from the data, we can see that the Yi population accounted for 22.6% of the total population. In recent years, according to incomplete statistics, due to the national hydraulic and hydropower construction, highway construction and urban construction, about 800,000 immigrants have moved to Xichang and caused an increase in of Xichang's population. Concerning administrative jurisdictions, Xichang has 6 streets, 8 towns, and 29 townships (including 12 Yi townships, 2 Hui townships, and the rest are mixed townships of Han and Yi ethnic groups): Streets in Datonglou Ancient City of Xichang include: Beicheng Street, Xicheng Street, Dongcheng Street, Chang'an Street, Xincun Street, Changning Street. Towns include: Madao Town, Lizhou Town, Anning Town, Chuanxing Town, Huanglianguan Town, Youjun Town, Taihe Town, Anha Town. Yi ethnic townships include Sihe Township, Minsheng Township, Xiangshui Township, Kaiyuan Township, Daqing Township, Luogubo Township, Qiaodi Township, Mopan Township, Baru Township, Yinchang Township, Baima Township, Ma'anshan Township. Hui Ethnic Townships: Yulong Hui ethnic Township and Gaocao Hui Ethnic Township (See Figure 1). However, due to the rapid urbanization of Xichang, superior weather conditions, and the people's needs for schooling and employment, a large number of Yi rural population have poured into the city, and the number of unregistered people is far greater than that of the registered people. They come from counties of Liangshan, Yunnan Xiaoliangshan area, Ebian, and Mabian counties. They do various informal jobs in Xichang, most of them are free workers. Now in places like shops, hotels, restaurants, sanitation centers, buildings, farmhouses, supermarkets, and stations in Xichang, we can see many Yi people, and many of them are taxi drivers, motorcyclists, repairmen, barbers, vegetable sellers and street cleaners. There are more and more people speaking Yi language in Xichang.

## 2. Government Level

Government's support is decisive to the vitality and ecology of a language. Xichang Municipal Government supports Yi language in the following aspects: The first is the formulation of language policies, the second is the enforcement of language laws and regulations, the third is supervision and management, the fourth is the reward and punishment mechanism, and the fifth is legal responsibility. Speaking of language policy, because Liangshan Prefecture has formulated the "Regulations on the language and language of the Yi people in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture" which involves all levels of departments, so Xichang didn't develop its own policy and system for the use of Yi language. On the enforcement of the language law, it is stipulated in Article 24 of this Regulation:

Information on official seals, names, logos, document headlines, licenses, certificates, announcements of government organizations, social organizations, enterprises and institutions and public welfare advertisements, permanent slogans, signboards of individual industrial and commercial households, and public plaques, light boxes, traffic signs, buildings, boundary posts, plaques, light boxes, traffic signs, guideposts, significant inscriptions, car door badges should all be bilingual, Yi language and Chinese version should both appear. The nameplates, licenses, advertisements, light boxes and other social characters that appear in civil aviation, railway, postal service, telecommunications, finance, insurance, chain stores and other service organizations of the central and provincial administrative organizations should be presented in both Yi and Chinese characters. The prefecture encourages Yi language services. The commodity names and commodity specifications of industrial and agricultural products that are produced in autonomous prefectures can be presented in either or both Yi language and Chinese.

It can be seen from this regulation that bilingual model is promoted in an all-round way. That is, the Yi language and Chinese should not be separated. When there is Yi language, there must be Chinese and vice versa. The Yi language is used in occasions like state agencies, social organizations, enterprises, institutions and other organizations, as well as individual merchants, central and provincial administrative units in the prefecture and various service organizations, besides, Yi language can also be seen on the names and specifications of industrial and agricultural products that are produced in this prefecture. And Yi language can also be spotted in public places, administrative borders, door badges, etc., ubiquitous and widely used.

Details about management and supervision are presented in Article 27 of this Regulation. In this provision, it is clear that the managers and supervisors of the Yi language serve as an individual language department. In addition to manage and supervise, they also need to play a planning and guiding role. They propagate the party and the country's language policies, laws and regulations, organize and promote the standardized Yi language, and they are responsible for the collection, sorting, protection, editing and publishing of ancient books that were written in Yi language as well as the translation of official documents, conference materials and related materials of higher-level organs, they also need to do the translation of various documents in conference that held by the same-level departments, and organize the compilation and publication of scientific books, coordinate the business relationship between the Yi language departments and take charge of business contacts, manage the evaluation of the qualifications of the professional and technical positions of the Yi language. Every county government in Liangshan has established a language committee, which makes an important contribution in the promotion of Yi language, and the Xichang Language Committee is also one of them.

Reward and punishment measures are listed in Article 4 of the Regulations. It is regulated that Yi language and Chinese are both universal in Yi autonomous prefecture. State organizations at all levels in this prefecture advocate and encourage citizens of all ethnic groups to learn each other's language. And Yi officials are encouraged to learn and speak the nationally accepted Mandarin while learning and speaking their own language. While Han officials are encouraged to learn and speak Yi languages or other local minority languages. Yi officials can get awarded for their excellent Mandarin and local Chinese dialect in activities such as speech contests. Similarly, Han officials can also get material award for Yi language speeches. Penalties are also stipulated in this

regulation. According to Article 35, units and individuals who violate Articles 24, 25, and 26 of the regulation shall be ordered by the language department to make rectification within a time limit. Those who do not make rectification within the time limit may be fined for 50 yuan to 1,000 yuan per day. For those who refuse to pay the penalty, the total amount will increase at the rate of 3% day by day. There is a time limit for rectification, and if it is overdue, there will be punishment. If the punishment is not accepted, the penalty will be increased. Although this kind of punishment is strict, it is also humane. For illegal non-operating activities, the total fine shall not exceed 1,000 yuan. For illegal operating activities, the fine shall not exceed 5,000 yuan. It can be seen that this kind of punishment has an upper limit of 5,000 yuan and a lower limit of 50 yuan. These measures are not to collect fines, a period of time is given for rectification, and those who make rectifications will not be punished; otherwise, they will be fined. According to Article 36, for those who refuse to make rectification, language departments shall request the relevant departments to impose administrative sanctions on the supervisors and persons in charge. Obviously, in the promotion of Yi language, if the language departments do not supervise and manage the promotion of Yi language, do not follow the regulations, abuse power, deliberately misunderstand regulations, and engage in malpractices for personal gain, then their acts constitute duty-related crimes.

With the implementation of the regulations, the office signage and official seals of various government departments at all levels in the municipal districts have been designed bilingually as required. Ethnic middle schools and schools in ethnic towns have adopted bilingual teaching model. Yi language as a single subject is added into all admission examinations. The National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference have provided Yi language translation, the Public Security Bureau, the Procuratorate and the Court are all equipped with Yi language translators, and the news propaganda departments has opened a Yi language channel to translate films. The government not only supports the Yi language from a legal perspective, but also supports it in specific aspects. These are the basis and premise of the promotion of Yi language. And with the government's support, there is great hope for the use of Yi language.

### **3. Social Level**

#### **3.1 Communicative Occasion**

The Yi people in Xichang use different languages according to their own language ability and their communicative partners, normally two kinds: inner-ethnic communicative partners and inter-ethnic partners. For inner-ethnic communication, they usually speak Yi language. However, due to dialect differences of Yi language and poor Yi language of those brought up in cities and other reasons, some of them use Chinese to communicate. If the inter-ethnic communicative partners are from Han and other ethnic groups, they generally speak Chinese. Those who have received a certain level of education may occasionally speak Mandarin when communicate with people from other ethnic groups. Very few people can speak foreign language and talk to people from foreign countries, mainly in English, but other foreign languages are also involved. Those who can't speak Chinese usually communicate with people within the ethnic group, and only speak Yi language when making friends. In the past, the Yi people made acquaintance with new friends through weddings and funerals. The range of making friends was not very large, usually within a radius of tens of kilometers. And the places of making friends were usually homes or villages and often by ways of wrestling, sikezhi, horse racing, singing contest, drinking, etc. Now the scope of making friends has expanded, and the places and ways of making friends have changed. The places to make friends can be streets, restaurants, farmhouses, karaoke bars, and tea houses people now make friends through drinking tea, playing mahjong, playing cards, chess, drinking, playing basketball, volleyball, rugby, swimming, singing, Those with the same hobbies and interests will form a fixed circle of friends. When making friends by ways of entertainment, Chinese words, such as general, bagan, cross-eyed, three-pointer, slam dunk may appear in Yi language context.

### 3.2 Trading Venues

In every street and township of Xichang, there are markets for trading. The township markets mainly deals with agricultural products and non-staple foods trade, and there are also shops and purchase stations. The township markets are managed by the state and equipped with managers and cleaners. While the shops and purchase stations are private. The market managers and cleaners can speak their own language, being it Yi language or Chinese. Generally, there are more Yi people. In shops and purchase stations both Yi language and Chinese are used. Chinese is generally used in Han villages and towns, and most Han people do not speak Yi language. The urban market can be divided into farm produce fairs, supermarkets, department stores, pharmacies, and companies. The farm produce fairs specialize in vegetables and fruits. Ten years ago, there were many Han sellers and almost no Yi seller. Now, there are more Yi people and fewer Han people now. Take Ningyuanqiao Farm Produce Fair as an example, there are 43 vegetable stalls in this market, of which 28 are owned by the Yi people. These Yi farmers barely attended schools, and they speak Yi language, sometimes they also speak Chinese with a strong Yi accent for the needs of trading. Han vegetable sellers can also speak some simple Yi words and sentences. There are also many Yi-speaking employees in supermarkets, department stores, pharmacies, and companies. They speak Yi language when they receive the Yi customers and speak Chinese when they receive Han customers. But when the clerk speaks Yi language, some goods will be directly pronounced as Chinese, such as detergent, soap, mouthdoleak, cephalosporin, amoxicillin, pencil box, leather bag, etc.

### 3.3 Cultural Venues

There are two important festivals in a year, one is the Torch Festival, the other is the Yi Festival, and there are also some small festivals. During the festivals, the Yi language is fully presented. In the Torch Festival, there are a variety of activities from rural to urban areas, including beauty pageants, sheep fighting, rooster fighting, bullfighting, wrestling, singing contests, horse racing, and various folk rituals, people all actively participate. The Torch Festival in Xichang used to be held in the downtown, and now it is held in the surrounding towns and villages of Xichang. The scenes are spectacular. During the day, there are various activities, and at night, people can light the torches and dance, all programs and award ceremonies are hosted in Yi language. Traditionally, weddings are very grand in Yi ethnic group, usually held at home, and generally between October and March of the next year. There are many rituals that symbolize various meanings in weddings, due to cultural differences, it is difficult to express them in Chinese, even those who can speak Chinese will use the Yi pronunciation to describe these rituals. However, in Xichang, people in the city are not much limited by the traditional wedding customs as people in the countryside. The venues change from home to farmhouses, hotels, guesthouses and restaurants. People can choose the venue and time according to their own needs and no longer follow the old customs. Some people choose to celebrate briefly at home or other places according to the custom of the Yi people, and then grandly hold the ceremony in the city, they will invite relatives and friends to the wedding banquet, and some even hire a wedding host, and the wedding will be held bilingually in both Yi language and Chinese. The funeral is the last journey of one's life. The Yi people take the funeral very seriously, and that is what people often say "easy birth, solemn death". And funerals often held at home. In Yi people's funerals, Bimo must be invited to perform various rituals, to release the soul of the dead, and relatives will sing funerals songs to express memorial, and all ceremonial links are indispensable. The old funerals traditions are also followed in the rural areas of Xichang, but in the city, the dead will be sent to the funeral home, and the relatives will come to cry for the loss, but there are not as many people crying as before. Many young people no longer cry. In particular, men generally only scream, and there are not many rituals except blasting, drinking, and playing cards. If the dead is a civil servant, the leader of his organization would preside over the funeral in Chinese. If the dead is ordinary people of Yi ethnic group, then the funeral will be presided in Yi language. In addition, Xichang has a special Yi-language TV channel that broadcasts Yi-language films or Yi-language translated movies, and published and produced many Yi-language music CDs.

#### 4. Family Level

Seeing from the structure of families, the families in Xichang can be divided into three types: government officials' family, citizens' family and rural family. The frequency of Yi language in these three families is different. There are also several types of government officials' family, one is Yi family, one is Yi-Han mixed family, and another type is made up by people from Yi and other ethnic groups. Yi families are the most in Xichang. Both parents in the family are Yi people, and they can speak Yi language in daily life. There are also two types in Yi-Han mixed families. One is the father is the Yi people and the mother is the Han people, which is referred as the Yi father- Han mother family. The other is the opposite, that is, the father is the Han people and the mother is the Yi people, which are referred as the Han father-Yi mother family. The children of the Yi father- Han mother family generally cannot speak Yi language or only speak poor Yi language, while the children of the Han father-Yi mother family can speak Yi language, but the Yi parent from both families must speak Yi language themselves, otherwise, the children won't speak Yi language. However, according to the survey, for children who do not speak Yi language, only a few think that it's ok not to speak Yi language, most of them think that they should learn Yi language, indicating their linguistic recognition of Yi language, but they do not have the opportunity to learn and speak Yi language. There is a declining trend of Yi language speaking between generations in government officials' families. Families made up by people from Yi and other ethnic groups means that the other parent comes from other ethnic groups other than Yi and Han. This kind of family only takes a small proportion in Xichang, and their children are generally identified as Yi people and can speak Yi language. Citizens' families refer to residents who live in the city but don't have formal occupations, they are relatively free. There are more such families in Xichang, and they basically speak Yi language for daily communication. Rural families are located in Yi-inhabited towns, and Yi language is very well spoken there. People from other ethnic groups who have married there are basically assimilated and can speak Yi language fluently.

#### 5. Individual Level

From the individual level, the use of Yi language is related to occupation and environment. Civil servants are administrative staffs of party and government agencies, their work involves education, guards, science and technology, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, justice, and security. Most civil servants that from Yi ethnic group in Xichang have a certain grasp of Yi language, and some even graduated with a major of Yi language. They have good command of Yi language and have no problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing. They can speak both Chinese and Yi language. Those civil servants are favored by local people. Civil servants have more opportunities to contact the Yi people. Even if they don't speak Yi language, they can learn from the local people. For some Han civil servants who are willing to learn Yi language can speak it fluently in a few years. Especially for civil servants in Yi villages and towns, Yi language is irreplaceable. However, Yi language is not wildly spoken among civil servants in Xichang. Their main working language is still Chinese. Only in some departments such as the Language Committee, Yi language can be regarded as working language.

Teachers of Yi ethnic group are common in all schools in Xichang, from universities to Zhongtong Primary School and kindergartens. In terms of universities, there are now three universities in Xichang, namely Xichang College, Sichuan College of Applied Sciences and Sichuan national Kindergarten Teachers College. In these three universities, some Yi teachers can speak Yi language, but not many. Many Yi teachers in township schools, primary and middle schools in cities, and Sichuan Yi language school can speak Yi language. However, their levels of Yi language are different, therefore, teachers that in charge of basic education and early childhood education need to improve their Yi language.

Big hospitals in Xichang include The First People's Hospital of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, The second People's Hospital of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, State Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Xichang People's Hospital, Xichang People's Second Hospital and

other public hospitals. There are also some public community hospitals. According to the survey, many doctors and medical staffs, medical assistants, nurses are from Yi ethnic group. They can speak Yi language, but the hospital has no Yi language service window. And in private-owned hospitals, such as Liping Hospital, Wang's Orthopedic Hospital, Kowloon Hospital, West China Hospital, Tongji Hospital, etc., they have very few Yi doctors, only a few Yi nurses and medical assistants. And in military hospitals, there are fewer Yi medical staffs. In general, the use of Yi language in hospitals is not popular, and only a few doctors speak Yi language.

In Xichang, there are many Yi workers. According to the investigation, the Yi workers are mainly hotel attendants, teahouse waiters, restaurant waiters, construction workers, car mechanics, car washers, taxi drivers, motorcyclists, supermarket waiters, drugstore clerks, bus conductors, cashiers, accountants, street cleaners, city inspectors, security guards, insurance salesmen, real estate salesmen, sewing workers, hairdressers, cleaners, property managers, chefs, takeaway couriers, expressmen and buskers. People from Yi ethnic group participate in all walks of society. They hardly speak Yi language at work, but they speak Yi language when making phone calls, chatting, talking with relatives and friends, and discussing important matters.

## **6. Conclusion**

Yi language is one of the most typical characteristics of Yi culture. The Yi people used this language to record their history, write their own stories, and tell their own experiences and knowledge. It is hard to imagine a Yi culture without Yi language. It is also natural to improve the status of the Yi language with state's recognition, because it is indispensable to the Yi people. Through investigation, the use of Yi language in Xichang is basically good. The Yi language is used in all aspects of social life, such as, government agencies, enterprises and institutions, individual merchants and ordinary citizens. Thanks to the national attention, there is a trend of further development of Yi language. Yi-Chinese bilingual teaching model is constantly improving, and people of ethnic groups here obviously support their own language. In the investigation, many difficulties and problems are also found in the use of Yi language. At the government level, although policies and laws are introduced, there is no supervision department so it's hard for people to follow these regulations. In the process of promoting the norms, standards and healthy development of Yi language, there are phenomena such as brand names written in wrong Yi language, or stores with no Yi language names. These phenomena are not supervised by the relevant departments, they only turn a blind eye, and the staffs are still passively perform their duties. The ethnic affairs departments is merely a megaphone for announcing government documents, they don't actually fulfill their functions. At the social level, all sectors of the society ignore the wrong use or non-use of the Yi language, no one reports this phenomenon to relevant departments, because they have poor legal awareness for language. At the family level, most families speak Yi language well, but due to exam-oriented education and other reasons, parents only care about students' scores and do not care much about the use of Yi language. The use of Yi language shows a declining trend between generations. The state is implementing targeted poverty alleviation policy in Xichang, Yi-Chinese bilingual teaching and one village and one kindergarten are one of the strategies. The village kindergartens and primary and middle schools in townships have been equipped with some Yi language teachers. However, the academic level and language skills of many teachers are not up to the standard, and they only focus on forms instead of contents, that may cause vicious circle in some way. Yi language is one of the main languages in this area. It should not be limited to the internal use within Yi ethnic group. It should be one of the languages of inter-ethnic communication and working languages. The sound use of Yi language needs strong support from the state, society, family and individuals.

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