

# How Media Defend Schooling Opportunities for the Yi Girls in Liangshan Minority Area of Southwest China

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**Abstract:** Some Yi girls in remote mountainous areas are losing schooling opportunities. For some reason, many families are so poor that the girls had to quit their schooling to help their parents raise the livestock and have an early arranged marriage. The patriarchal social environment has undermined the Yi girls' rights to school education. The research focuses on how the Yi girls were marginalized by the patriarchy that dominated the Yi girls' fate. It will benefit from setting an appropriate report agenda for them and creating a proper media environment to gain equal rights to receive an education. There is a long way to mobilize families, ethnic groups, and communities to fully value the Yi girls' right to have quality education. A sound environment will benefit more Yi girls and raise awareness of women's rights. The media's mission is to defend the education rights of the Yi girls to help them fulfill their potential in their youth and future. The educational inequalities research would benefit from engaging with sociological concerns, theories, and concepts such as gender and socioeconomic class. How media influences the public opinion of the girls' right to school could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the rationale of the educational inequalities.

**Keywords:** Liangshan, The Yi Girls, Marginalised Status, Schooling Rights, Trilingual Education, Media Environment

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## 1. Introduction

The Yi ethnic minority (also known as Nuosu or Nosu) inhabits Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Southwest Sichuan Province of China. Liangshan, consisting of seventeen counties within its territory, is home to the largest population of Yi people in mainland China, with approximately 2.94 million Yi people in the region by the end of 2021. [1] Nearly 45.5% of the Yi people live in compact communities, and the rest live in rural mountains. The former poverty-stricken region declared victory against poverty, announcing its last seven former severely impoverished counties had shaken off the poverty at the end of 2020.

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture covers 71.7% of mountainous areas, with most peaks over 4,000 meters above sea level. According to the fourth national population census in 2021, the Yi population is 2,936,500, 54.56% of the people in Liangshan. [1] The Yi minority inhabits 17 counties (cities), especially in Zhaojue, Butuo, Jinyang, Meigu, Leibo, Ganluo, Xide, and Yanyuan counties. Before 1950, Liangshan was still a slave society. The prefecture capital of Liangshan is Xichang,

known for the satellite launch centre, the nice weather, and scenery. The Qionghai Lake had entranced Marco Polo in the 13th century. "It contains many cities and castles, and the capital city, standing at the entrance of the province, is likewise named Kaindu. Near to it, there is a large lake of salt water, in which are found an abundance of pearls, of a white colour, but not round." [2]

The Yi people are China's fourth largest minority. Most Yi people still live by the clan's traditions and lived an appalling poor life before the government-led national poverty alleviation movement lifted them out of poverty. Most Yi people in the remote mountainous areas cannot even speak Mandarin – the country's leading national dialect. The Yi clans, based on patriarchal blood ties, are somewhat a system formed by the ancestral lineage of fathers and sons, which plays an essential role in the social life of the Yi minority. However, the Yi girls are still the marginalized group whose right to education has not been protected well, and some drop out of school.

There are few news reports about the education environment of the Yi girls and little research on the related media cultivation agenda. However, there are only about 20 more academic papers on the Yi girls' rights to education on the website of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), most of which interfere with the Yi girls' education from the aspects such as geographical environment, economic condition, and cultural traditions. Moreover, very few studies have been conducted on the media environment and monitoring.

## 2. A Focus on Dilemma of the Yi Girls' Schooling Opportunities

Some of the Yi girls in remote mountainous areas are losing schooling opportunities. For some reason, many families are so poor that the girls had to quit their schooling to help their parents raise the livestock and have an early arranged marriage. Less than 30% of them had the chance to receive primary education 20 years ago. They had no choice but to leave school with too little knowledge to catch up with the fast pace of modern society. The dilemma of girls' education reflects the hot issues of equality, schooling rights, and women's rights, which are critical topics in women's liberation.

"Everyone has a stake in education – parents, teachers, employers, the state, and of course, children themselves. The interests of all are affected by the quality, nature, and outcomes of education systems. However, the rights and needs of children within the system can easily get forgotten... Everyone would subscribe to the need for high standards, served by well-qualified teachers, an appropriate curriculum, and adequate resourcing. Nevertheless, education needs to go beyond academic attainment." [3]

Poverty has constrained the improvement of the living standards of the segregated minority villages in remote mountainous areas, in which some parents neglect the girls' rights to have an education. What shall the individuals, organisations and governments do to maintain the education for the vulnerable groups of the Yi girls to get rid of their socially and economically marginalised status?

The government and nongovernment have made a great effort to guarantee the Yi girls' schooling opportunities in the Liangshan Yi nationality area. By the end of 2021, "the enrollment rate of school-age children is 99.15%, including 102.06% of school-age children from ethnic minorities." [1] The media are not only the social supervisor but also the disseminator of the cultural heritage, the public opinion monitor of agenda-setting.

Article 29 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* elaborates on the obligation to promote each child's fullest possible development by helping them acquire values, skills, and confidence. [4] And Ministry of Education of PRC regulates that "all school-age children and teenagers must receive nine-year compulsory education." [5]

How is the age of a child defined? Article 1 of *Convention*

*on the Rights of the Child* states, "A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." [4] According to Article 2 of *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors* and other laws, minors mean "citizens under the age of eighteen." [6] The age of 18 is when Chinese children receive their primary education from kindergarten to high school.

Due to the harsh natural conditions, most areas are constrained by obsolete ideas, resulting in low enrollment and high drop-out rates for girls' nine-year compulsory education. A drop-out is a student at any stage who leaves school early for some reason at school-age. In 1996, the average enrollment rate of school-age girls (including Yi and Han) was 81.96% in the prefecture, while the enrollment rate of the Yi girls was only 60.27%. In some Yi inhabiting counties, the enrollment rate of the Yi girls is meager in the six national-level poverty-stricken counties Meigu, ZhaoJue, Butuo, Jinyang, Puge, and Xide are 32.42%, 21.77%, 28.11%, 27%, 42%, and 36.7% separately. [7]

In the remote mountainous areas, the primitive culture and conservative customs seriously confine the Yi girls from going to school. Less than 30% of the Yi girls complete junior high school. They have no choice but to leave school with too little literacy. Most girls had to quit schooling to help their parents raise the livestock or have an early arranged and bought marriage which is an old custom surviving from the slave society of Liangshan before March 1950, when Xichang was liberated, and the Xichang Regional Commissioner's Office was established at the end of the year. In April 1952, the State Council of China set up the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Region.

Before 1950, young men and women of the Yi ethnic nationality did not have the right to decide their marriages but had to be determined by their families. It was under the pressure of the system of marriage that monumental literary works such as "Ashima," "Zhige Alu," "The Beauty Ganmo Aniu," and the narrative song "Ayi Azhi" were created. After the democratic reforms, the state guaranteed freedom of love and marriage politically, economically, and legally. But in the countryside, the stereotypes are still the obstacles. "The old forms of marriage affected the access of school-age girls to school education. The traditional belief is that girls will eventually marry into other families and that only sons are the legatee who is worth spending on them." [8]

*The National Medium-term and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)* states that "necessary measures will be taken to ensure that children who have reached school age do not miss school due to family financial difficulties, school attendance difficulties or learning difficulties. Moreover, efforts will be made to eliminate the problem of school drop-outs". [9] Most rural regions are featured with harsh ecological environments, isolated geological locations, and insufficient public services and infrastructures. There is a long way to mobilize families, ethnic groups, and communities to fully value the Yi girls' right to have quality education.

### 3. Creating Media Environment to Guarantee the Yi Girls' Rights to School

From all over China, Liangshan Prefecture is relatively poor and backward. The delightful thing is that Liangshan, one of the “poorest corners of China” in Sichuan Province, was freed from poverty in November 2020. However, many families are still very “poor” when it comes to the education of girls. For example, patriarchal preference for boys prevents girls from going to school, and female drop-out rates are mainly related to the parents’ resisting sending girls to school.

The government has formulated policies to benefit the people regarding compulsory educational affairs. Nevertheless, for some reason, the policy could alleviate the financial burden of some families to a certain extent. Still, it cannot eliminate the difficulties in education for the Yi girls in the coming years. Education is a process requiring parents to understand and support schooling mentally and economically. Moreover, changing outdated notions of male superiority and female inferiority is not so easy. The massive media plays a role in creating a climate of respecting and valuing the girls’ dignity and right to have quality education.

The education environment refers to the learning conditions and everyday life environment of the Yi girls in remote mountainous. How to construct a pleasant media environment to improve the education rights of all the Yi girls? The media shed light on the situation for people, government, foundations, and charity organizations. The central government publicizes the nine-year compulsory education policy; people participate in the laws and policies formulation through Deputies to the National People’s Congress (NPC) and members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC); all levels of charity foundations supply education funds for the Yi girls.

It is gratifying to note that with the government’s strict administration and community support, the enrollment rate of girls of the Yi minority group in Liangshan has reached the same level as the boys. The media will continue to take on the role of policy advocacy, public opinion guidance, and education promotion in the future, maintaining a positive media environment in which the government, society, and parents cooperate to ensure quality education for all Yi girls.

The news reports shed light on the Yi girls’ right to school in the isolated area, improving their schooling situation. Radio, television, newspapers, the internet, and the new media keep concerning the condition of the Yi girls’ education, changing the idea of the parents, the attitude of the society and the government’s policy, and improving the education condition eventually.

However, the media coverage agenda of the girls’ education is not systematic, and the journalistic ethics are missing in some reports without protecting the girls’ self-respect and privacy rights. The media’s main task is to clarify the main problems in the girls’ schooling opportunities and help find

the solution. At the same time, the media must guard their schooling rights with strategic reporting plans and schedules. In other words, it is an “all media plan” calling on the whole society to support the healthy growth of the girls.

The “cultivation theory” of George Gerbner in the 1960s found that the media are gradually changing the climate of the audience with a “mainstreaming effect,” which suggests that people who are regularly exposed to media for long periods are more likely to perceive the world’s social realities and change their attitudes and behaviors. The media include society, organizations, groups, sub-groups, opinion leaders, and others. [10] In China, Liang Qichao, a renowned scholar of his time who introduced Western learning and ideology and extensively studied ancient Chinese culture, believed that communication promotes education development. He criticized those newspapers that “failed to have the slightest influence upon the nation as a society”. Then, how does the media impact the schooling climate of the Yi girls in Liangshan?

The media environment is formed by the mass media, interpersonal communication, and individual or group. It consists of local media, national media, and international media. The opinion leaders, such as the headman of the Yi clan, Bimo – the shaman in the traditional animist religion of the Yi minority and the parents, directly affect the Yi girls’ schooling choices. Hence, the old idea and customs considerably impact the Yi nationality nowadays.

### 4. Reducing the Knowledge Gap Between the Yi Girls from Different Families

With the media’s focused attention over the years, the rights of the Yi girls to receive education have been better protected. The enrollment rate is much better than it was in the past. The enrollment rate of school-age Yi girls is equal to that of school-age Yi boys. However, some Yi girls are dropping out of school at the middle and high school levels.

The outdated customs make the low-income families even worse, and more Yi girls lose the opportunity to go to school. The marital customs greatly hinder the liberation process of the Yi girls as marriage is arranged and bought among the Yi people. It is a tradition for marriages to be arranged by parents. The bride’s family often asked for expensive betrothal presents before the match. The girl’s future husband’s family has to prepare and pay a high price in advance, risking the future couple’s happy life.

At school, maybe the most significant barrier is that some Yi girls can not understand what the teacher is speaking. The language barrier may cause difficulties in their studies. In the prevailing bilingual/trilingual class, they had to handle the relationship between their mother tongue and second language. Adopting the good points and avoiding the shortcomings will eliminate the interference and make full use of the mother tongue in learning a second language. According to the principle of group dynamics, under pressure from the elders and influenced by friends, the Yi girls will seek a sense of

social belonging and may quit schooling to maintain consistency.

As the language reflects the culture, the local textbooks are helpful for the Yi girls to get some knowledge and be self-esteemed and self-confident. The local textbooks contain historical, humanistic, and customary contents of the Yi people, especially the popular myths, legends, folk tales, and other classics. For example, the folk stories make the girls more dignified and confident to brave for their future. "Ashima," tells a story of a beautiful girl named Ashima and a brave young man named Ahei who bravely pursues love despite money and power. "The Beauty Ganmo Aniu" tells the story of a beautiful Yi girl who had engaged to an excellent fellow but was robbed by a bully landlord, then she defended her dignity by fighting against the bully.

Some girls feel the class is boring for bilingual/trilingual education teaching. Before 1978, as a Yi-dominated region, most of the population merely communicated in the Yi language. Now the Chinese language has achieved the status equal to or even superior to the Yi native language. Moreover, in the late 1970s, English became a major at schools all over China as the government enacted reform and opening-up policy. Bilingual/trilingual education became a standard curriculum program, but the problem lies in rural schools' lack of qualified English teachers. Many children from low-income families can not get assistance from their parents, relatives or friends. Therefore, their language learning barriers are much more significant than those in ordinary Han areas. Many first-year students from remote areas never chat with people who speak Chinese. Therefore, they cannot keep up with their studies and need a transition and adaptation period. Research finds that bilingual education has failed to adapt to changing linguistic landscapes in Liangshan; some programs suffered from inadequate teacher training, outdated textbooks, and omission of the Nuosu language from entrance examinations. [11]

Some girls cannot keep up with the teaching progress and fail to reach their potential. They usually do not have good grades in the exercises or exams and dislike school. Their poor-literacy parents cannot tutor the homework. Some of them drop out of school and follow their parents or villager to get odd work. Besides, some girls in single-parent families, left-behind girls, orphans and others in Liangshan are still at risk of dropping out of school.

## 5. Defending the Yi Girls' Schooling Rights Against Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes sustain education culture, which limits the Yi girls' educational rights and employment opportunities when they grow up. The girls are vulnerable groups in highly unfavorable circumstances, just as Simone de Beauvoir described the French peasant woman:

The fact that governs a woman's actual condition is the obstinate survival of extremely antique traditions into the new civilization that is just appearing in vague outline... Parents still bring up their daughter with a view to marriage rather than

to furthering her personal development; she sees so many advantages in it that she herself wishes for it; the result is that she is often less specially trained, less solidly grounded than her brothers, she is less deeply involved in her profession. In this way, she dooms herself to remain in its lower levels, to be inferior; and the vicious circle is formed: this professional inferiority reinforces her desire to find a husband." [12]

In the remote mountainous areas of the Yi people, the media arrival rate was low ten years before, and the girls were almost isolated from the world. External information rarely reaches them and their familiars in the village. Nowadays, cell phones are widespread in China, even in very remote Yi villages. The access to knowledge for the girls seems to be in their own hands. However, it is not. For example, the "Sesame Street" program was initialled in 1969 in America, aiming to decrease the knowledge gap between children from wealthy and low-income families. However, the project failed to reduce the knowledge gap. It projects that "as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease." [13]

The new knowledge is scarce in the remote village, which causes the Yi girls to lack the capability to get adequate information. Whether they eager to break away from the patriarchy? What role does media play in their educational environment? If most of the media can not reach them directly, can different news media influence the people, especially the opinion leaders around them? How does the media construct the environment to defend the Yi girls' education rights from cultural and gender stereotypes? Their rights need to be guarded by the media, which influence public opinion at national, local, and individual levels. Here are some suggestions as follows:

### *(1) To have bilingual/trilingual education consonant with students' language foundation*

The gap between rural and urban schools lags their study and blocks them from high-quality schools, colleges or universities. Language usage directly influences students' effects and grades of study. It is urgent to develop preschool education in minority areas to increase bilingual/trilingual education teaching. The problems need to be addressed urgently through the media. Popular education should employ teaching methods consonant with students' language foundation.

In Liangshan, large-scale school consolidation – the closure of small community schools or their mergers into larger, better-resourced schools – took place in the early 21st century. Much more than Han youth, ethnic minority youth were negatively affected by school consolidation on education access and Mandarin literacy. A research highlighted, "For both educational attainment and written language facility, penalties accruing to minority youth occurred only in poorer villages and not to minority youth in wealthier villages. In addition, penalties were generally heavier for minority girls." [14]

Due to the increasing impact of the dominant Han culture and the ever-growing communication facility for trading and marketing, Chinese became the primary working language. At school, except for the Yi language curriculum, nearly all materials, textbooks, exercise books, and tests are in Chinese. “Under the increasing impact from the dominant Han culture and language, Yis’ self-identified identity has undergone subtle changes.” [15]

*(2) To eliminate discrimination between men and women in the Yi nationality*

Gender inequality still exists in the Yi minority villages. The girls are regarded as having inferior social status since they were born. The media should adhere to the spirit of equality between men and women. The girls are always restrained by their would-be husbands’ families when they must go to school/college and have free love for marriage. When can they decide on their marriage? When will they be free from their ethnic traditions and enjoy the freedom of marriage? The media environment will move towards a culture of respect for the Yi girls’ right to education, dignity and citizenship, and free marriage. It is helpful for more Yi girls to establish an awareness of gender equality.

The Yi girls should receive a good education appropriate to their characteristics and different from the boys. The teaching must follow their age and, in particular, respect their instincts, following their lively nature and encourage them to fight for their education rights. There are differences between males and females in intellectual aspects such as perception, attention, memory, thinking, imagination and non-intellectual factors such as emotion management. They will have equal rights as the boys and depend on their intelligence and diligence; they are not “the second sex” of patriarchy in modern civilization. The media should transfer the excellent traditional culture of the Yi people while abandoning the stereotype of preventing females from having an education.

*(3) To initiate public benefit activities and draw more charity for the Yi girls*

Education endows equal family and social status for girls. “Hope Project School” and “Spring Bud Project – the Girls-Only Classes” have ensured many girls’ right to school in Liangshan. “The Liangshan local government has collaborated with nonprofit organizations to sponsor the boarding costs of Yi children at government-funded rural schools.” [16] Increasing funding through various channels will alleviate the education burden economically and spiritually. Since 2019, the number of sponsored “Spring Bud Girls” in Liangshan has reached 2,246, with 7,289,300 yuan in funds. More and more girls in Liangshan have more opportunities to receive an education supported by subsidies from sponsors. [17]

Sufficient funds will avoid the children being cheap wage earners. These girls-only classes at some schools seem to benefit the socioeconomically marginalized group. However, some scholar questions whether there is a need to set special classes for girls. “These seem to be arranged on an ad hoc basis with no clear program of support, and no systematic tracking and monitoring to establish whether they make any difference

and if so, what makes the difference.” [18] It implies that establishing girls-only classes is rational to some degree, but it lacks system consideration in education management.

## 6. Conclusions

As the Yi girls are too young to support schooling, their education rights are guarded by the joint forces of the mass media environment and opinion leaders. From a deeper level, the schooling opportunity mainly depends on the communication of Yi culture, Han culture, and global culture. A sound media system will improve the Yi girls’ education.

Creating a good education environment will make the Yi girls face the world with more courage and self-confidence. The media sheds light on every corner of the world, which advocates respecting and valuing the girls’ rights, assisting citizens and governments in formulating more reasonable policies and monitoring their performance to develop a sound education environment allowing more marginalized girls to enjoy the freedom of studying, loving, working and living.

The media’s mission is to defend the education rights of the Yi girls to help them fulfill their potential in their youth and future. Children were the future of the development of the world, and education was significant for children’s growth. Today’s girls are the mothers of tomorrow, and the education will nourish themselves and their descendants, generation after generation.

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