

Evolutionary Features, Content Characteristics, and Inheritance Strategies: A Study on Nanfeng Nuo Dance¹

Chen Yuxuan²

Jantana Khochprasert³

Chusak Suvimolstien⁴

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² Doctorate student, Ph.D. (Visual Arts, Art of Design and Cultural Management), Faculty of Fine and Applied Art, Burapha University; e-mail: 1455427499@qq.com

³ Assistant Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Burapha University, e-mail: jantanakh@go.buu.ac.th

⁴ Lecturer, Ph.D., Art and Cultural Administration, Faculty of Fine and Applied Art, Burapha University, e-mail: chu2544@yahoo.com

Abstracts

Nanfeng Nuo Dance is a traditional folk dance originating from ancient Chinese sacrificial rituals, specifically from Nanfeng county in Jiangxi province, China. This study aims to examine the evolutionary features, content characteristics, and inheritance situation of Nanfeng Nuo Dance. Through literature review, field research, and interdisciplinary analysis, this research explores the evolutionary features and content characteristics of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, while proposing strategies for its inheritance and development. The findings indicate that the evolutionary trajectory of Nanfeng Nuo Dance has transformed from a witchcraft ceremony into a form of cultural heritage, with each phase displaying distinct evolutionary features. In terms of content characteristics, the dance is primarily characterized by the expression of primitive desires, diverse deity worship, and unique local belief legends. However, regarding its inheritance, Nanfeng Nuo Dance faces challenges such as the deterioration of its cultural ecosystem, a shortage of successors, insufficient funding, and inadequate institutional support. The study suggests that to ensure the sustainable transmission of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, it is crucial to foster a supportive cultural ecosystem, cultivate inheritors, increase investment, and improve policies. In practical terms, the research proposes the establishment of a Nuo Dance Learning Center focused on education, performance, exhibition, and academic exchange. These measures aim to create new avenues for the protection and transmission of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, ensuring that its unique charm continues to thrive in contemporary society.

Keywords: Nanfeng Nuo Dance / Folk Dance / Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission

Citation

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การวิจัยลักษณะการ วิวัฒนาการ เอกลักษณะเนื้อหา และกลยุทธ์การสืบทอดระบำ หนัวนานเฟิง¹

เจิน อวี๋ชวน²

จันทนา คชประเสริฐ³

ชูศักดิ์ สุวิมลเสถียร⁴

รับบทความ: 8 สิงหาคม 2567 / แก้ไข: 20 กันยายน 2567 / ตอรับตีพิมพ์: 25 กันยายน 2567

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² นักศึกษาปริญญาเอก สาขาทัศนศิลป์ ศิลปะการออกแบบ และการจัดการวัฒนธรรม คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์, มหาวิทยาลัยบูรพา, e-mail: 1455427499@qq.com

³ ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. วิทยาลัยดนตรีและการแสดง มหาวิทยาลัยบูรพา, e-mail: jantanakh@go.buu.ac.th

⁴ อาจารย์ ดร. สาขาการบริหารศิลปะและวัฒนธรรม คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยบูรพา, e-mail: chu2544@yahoo.com

บทคัดย่อ

ระบำหน้าพนานเพิงเป็นการแสดงพื้นบ้านโบราณจากอำเภอพนานเพิง มณฑลเจียงซี ประเทศจีน งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาการเปลี่ยนแปลง ลักษณะเฉพาะ และการสืบทอดของการแสดงนี้ จากการทบทวนวรรณกรรม การวิจัยภาคสนาม และการวิเคราะห์แบบสหวิทยาการ งานวิจัยนี้ได้ศึกษาเชิงลึกเกี่ยวกับลักษณะการวิวัฒนาการและเอกลักษณ์เนื้อหาของระบำหน้าพนานเพิง พร้อมทั้งนำเสนอกลยุทธ์การสืบทอดและแนวทางการพัฒนา ซึ่งผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าเส้นทางวิวัฒนาการของระบำหน้าพนานเพิงได้ผ่านการเปลี่ยนแปลงจากพิธีกรรมทางไสยศาสตร์มาเป็นมรดกทางวัฒนธรรม โดยแต่ละช่วงมีลักษณะการวิวัฒนาการที่แตกต่างกัน ในแง่ของเอกลักษณ์เนื้อหา ระบำประเภทนี้มีจุดเด่นอยู่ที่การแสดงออกถึงความปรารถนาแบบดั้งเดิม การบูชาเทพเจ้าที่หลากหลาย และตำนานความเชื่อท้องถิ่นที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ อย่างไรก็ตาม ในด้านการสืบทอด ระบำหน้าพนานเพิงกำลังเผชิญกับความท้าทายต่าง ๆ เช่น การเสื่อมถอยของระบบนิเวศทางวัฒนธรรม การขาดแคลนผู้สืบทอด การขาดแคลนเงินทุน และการขาดการสนับสนุนที่เพียงพอจากสถาบัน ดังนั้นการวิจัยนี้จึงเสนอให้สร้างระบบนิเวศทางวัฒนธรรม พัฒนาผู้สืบทอด เพิ่มการลงทุน และปรับปรุงนโยบาย เพื่อให้เกิดการสืบทอดระบำหน้าพนานเพิงที่ยั่งยืน นอกจากนี้ ยังแนะนำให้จัดตั้งศูนย์การเรียนรู้ที่เน้นการศึกษา การแสดง นิทรรศการ และการแลกเปลี่ยนทางวิชาการ เพื่อเปิดแนวทางใหม่สำหรับการอนุรักษ์และสืบทอดระบำหน้าพนานเพิง และรักษาเสน่ห์อันเป็นเอกลักษณ์ของการแสดงนี้ต่อไปในยุคปัจจุบัน

คำสำคัญ: ระบำหน้าพนานเพิง / ระบำพื้นบ้าน / มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องไม่ได้

วิธีอ้างอิง

เงิน อวีชวน, จันทนา คชประเสริฐ และ ชูศักดิ์ สุวิมลเสถียร. (2567). การวิจัยลักษณะการวิวัฒนาการ เอกลักษณ์เนื้อหา และกลยุทธ์การสืบทอดระบำหน้าพนานเพิง. *วารสารศิลป์ พีระศรี*, 12(2), 145-174. <https://doi.org/10.69598/sbjfa272661>



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Background of the Study

With the rise of industrial and technological culture in the late 20th century, traditional folk cultures such as Nanfeng Nuo Dance have faced unprecedented challenges. Originating from the Nanfeng region of Jiangxi Province, China, Nanfeng Nuo Dance (Figure 1) boasts a long history and is hailed as the "living fossil of ancient Chinese dance" (Li & Li, 1999). This dance, known for its vigorous and uninhibited style, is deeply rooted in the local culture and reflects the lifestyle and spiritual beliefs of the people of Nanfeng (Figure 2). However, in society, few people are aware of this remarkable traditional culture, and relevant research is relatively scarce, leading to significant difficulties in its transmission. Preliminary investigations reveal that most local young people lack interest and understanding of Nanfeng Nuo Dance. This situation underscores the urgency of researching Nanfeng Nuo Dance.

This study employs methods such as literature review, field investigation, and interdisciplinary research to comprehensively explore the evolutionary features, content characteristics, and current state of inheritance of Nanfeng Nuo Dance. The research seeks to uncover the position of this traditional art form in modern society, analyze the challenges and difficulties it faces, and propose innovative conservation and inheritance strategies tailored to these issues. The aim of this research is to raise awareness of the valuable culture of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, fill the gap in existing studies, and revitalize it in the new era.

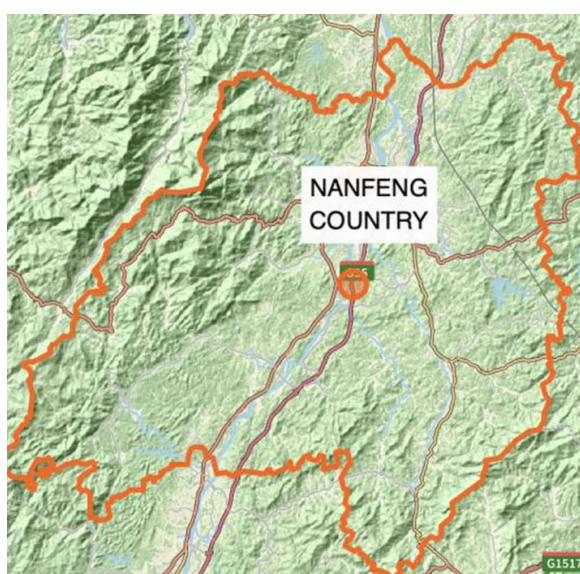


Figure 1

The topographic map of Nanfeng area

Note. From *Nanfeng* by Open Street Map, n.d., (<https://www.openstreetmap.org/export#map=13/27.2153/116.5195&layers=P>). Copyright by OpenStreetMap contributors.



Figure 2

Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Note. From “The first batch nationwide, Nanfeng Nuo Dance is on the list!”, 2023, Sohu (http://society.sohu.com/a/647613921_121124407). in the public domain

Research Objectives

1. To investigate evolutionary features, content characteristics, and inheritance status of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance.
2. To study the inheritance challenges faced by the Nanfeng Nuo Dance and propose guiding principles for its protection and development.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this article encompasses several key areas: First, to provide a systematic review of the evolution, content, and general profile of the inheritance of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance. Second, to examine the evolutionary features exhibited by the Nanfeng Nuo Dance throughout its development. Third, to investigate the content characteristics of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, encompassing three core aspects: themes, roles, and stories. Fourthly, it focuses on the current state of transmission of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, revealing the challenges and obstacles in contemporary society through field investigations. Lastly, the study proposes guiding principles and operational models for the preservation and development of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, addressing the difficulties encountered in the process of transmission.

Research Methods and Conceptual Framework

To ensure the depth and breadth of the study, the following methods and theories will be employed:

1. Literature Review Method

The literature review serves as the foundation of this study, involving a comprehensive review of documents related to Nanfeng Nuo Dance and its cultural context. The goal is to obtain extensive and detailed information on the historical evolution, content, and transmission of Nanfeng Nuo Dance.

2. Field Investigation Method

This study will employ fieldwork methods to conduct an on-site investigation in the Nanfeng County area. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, a comprehensive collection of information and primary data regarding the Nanfeng Nuo Dance will be gathered, encompassing various aspects of the dance, roles, masks, procedures, and associated activities.

3. Interdisciplinary Research Method

This study will employ an interdisciplinary research approach. By integrating theories and methods from multiple disciplines such as folklore, anthropology, history, and dance studies, it aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the cultural significance and transmission strategies of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance. Through an interdisciplinary perspective, this research seeks to uncover the adaptability and transformative nature of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance in modern society, as well as its role in cultural diversity and sustainable development.

To clearly present the research concepts and approach, the researcher has developed a conceptual framework (Figure 3).

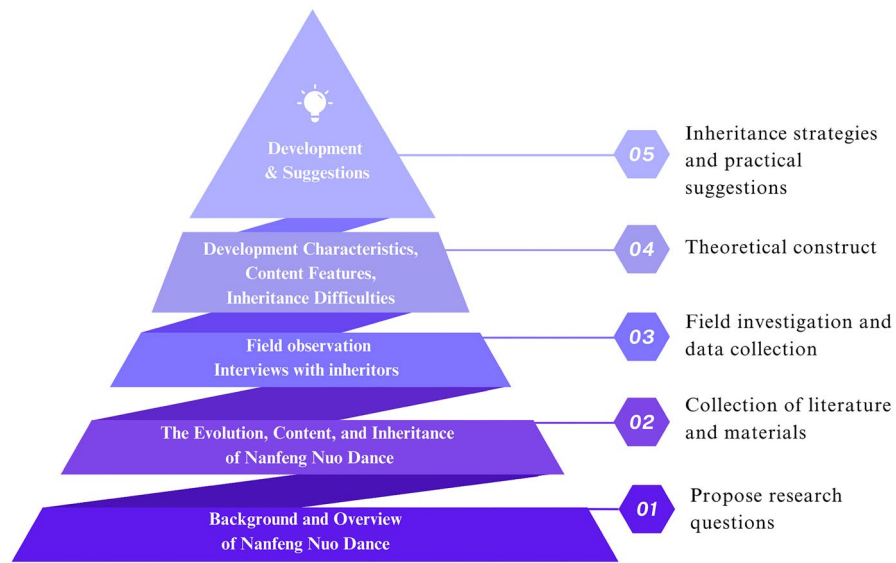


Figure 3
Conceptual framework of this study

Literature Review

1. Nanfeng Nuo Dance

The Nanfeng Nuo Dance is a folk traditional dance that is disseminated and inherited in the Nanfeng area. It originated from the sacrificial activities of primitive times (Nuo), was first introduced to Nanfeng during the Western Han Dynasty, and gradually formed a Nuo dance with strong regional characteristics. (Nanfeng County Chronicles Compilation Committee [NCCCC], 2006: 21) The Nuo dance derives from "Nuo," an ancient sacrificial activity in China, aimed at expelling disasters and praying for peace. Luo Bin describes the Nuo dance as follows: the Nuo dance is a Nuo activity primarily based on human body movements, involving the wearing of masks and having the function of expelling epidemics and driving away evil spirits. (Luo, 2007: 9) (Figure 4) Folklorist Qu Liuyi considers the Nuo dance to be one of China's oldest, most tenacious, and most historically rich oral and intangible cultural heritages. (Qu & Qian, 2006: 1)



Figure 4

Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Note. From *Writing poems on the red earth Gansu countryside exhibition scroll*, by CGTN, 2023, Sina (<https://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2023-04-17/doc-imyqtcpz1530184.shtml>). in the public domain.

The Nanfeng Nuo Dance is distinct from Nuo dances found in other regions, characterized by its strong regional identity and primitive aura. This uniqueness may stem from Nanfeng's long history and rich local culture. With the cultural impact of the new era, many forms of Nuo dance in China have vanished. Fortunately, a small group of individuals in Nanfeng still carry on the tradition. However, influenced by the broader environment, the transmission of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance remains pessimistic. Yao Yuan lamented, "As the world continues to modernize, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, as a living fossil of Chinese dance, will face significant cultural shocks and severe tests of inheritance" (Yao, 2016: 28).

2. Evolution of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance

The "Nuo" activities, which later evolved into the Nuo dance form, were introduced to Nanfeng as early as the 2nd century BCE. During the Northern Song Dynasty, with the development of Taoist culture, new mythological figures were incorporated into the Nuo dance scripts (Yu, 1993: 64). In the Southern Song period, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance further developed and became widely popular, emerging as an important activity in the lives of the people. During the Yuan Dynasty, Nuo dance activities in Nanfeng were interrupted for a time, with many Nuo temples falling into disrepair. After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, Nuo dance activities gradually resumed and flourished (Xie et al., 2007: 223). In the Qing Dynasty, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance experienced even greater development, with the creation of many new programs in addition to traditional performance content.

During the Republic of China period, due to the anti-superstition movement and political circumstances, the troupes performing the Nanfeng Nuo Dance were disrupted, and the ceremonial processes of the Nuo dance were diluted. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance received attention from government departments, but during the "Cultural Revolution," it was considered a feudal dross culture, and activities were forced to stop (Zeng, 2019: 52).

After 1978, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance was given renewed attention and was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006. Today, the Nuo dance has become a cultural calling card for the Nanfeng area (Liu & Zhu, 2012: 142).

3. Content of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance

The performance content of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance is rich and diverse, encompassing aspects such as dance, music, characters, and masks.

In terms of dance, Luo Xiongyan believes that it exhibits a primitive and simple style. It can be divided into four types: the Grand Nuo Dance, the Bamboo Horse Dance, the Harmony Dance, and the Eight Immortals Dance (Luo, 2006: 87). Common dance steps include walking, spinning, running, and jumping, in addition to many specific step positions. In terms of hand gestures, apart from the general changes in palm shapes, hand mudras are the most characteristic and prominent part of the Nuo dance (Figure 5).

The music of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance includes two categories: ceremonial music and dance music. Ceremonial music covers eight types: inviting the deities, communicating with the deities, welcoming the deities, gongs and drums for expelling epidemics, shouting for expelling epidemics, sending off the deities, pacifying the deities, and communicating with the deities (NCCCC, 2006: 60). These musical elements add a sense of mystery and solemnity to the performance of the Nuo dance, aiding in the conveyance of its religious and cultural significance.



Figure 5

The hand mudras of Nanfeng Nuo Dance (From left to right are “Xianghuo”, “Huaguang”, Dark hand mudras)

The Nanfeng Nuo Dance encompasses a multitude of characters, primarily divided into two main parts: Nuo deities and Nuo masks. The Nuo deities are used for worship and mainly include Qingyuan Miaodao Zhenjun, Nuo God Prince (Figure 6), and Nuo Gong and Nuo Po (NCCCC, 2006: 76). Hiroko Hirota suggests that these characters play significant religious and cultural roles in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance. Dancing with masks is a key characteristic of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, where performers adopt different roles by wearing various masks. The Nuo masks represent a diverse range of characters, mainly including deities for exorcising evil spirits, deities for bestowing blessings, deities from myths and legends, characters from novels, and demons (Hirota, 1997: 51).

The performance process of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance is divided into four steps: Qi Nuo, Yan Nuo, Qu Nuo, and Yuan Nuo. Each step corresponds to a different purpose, namely invoking the deities, entertaining the deities, expelling epidemics, and sending off the deities (Huang, 2009: 32). These steps form a complete Nuo dance ritual, reflecting the religious and cultural significance of the Nuo dance (Figure 7).



Figure 6
Nuo God Prince

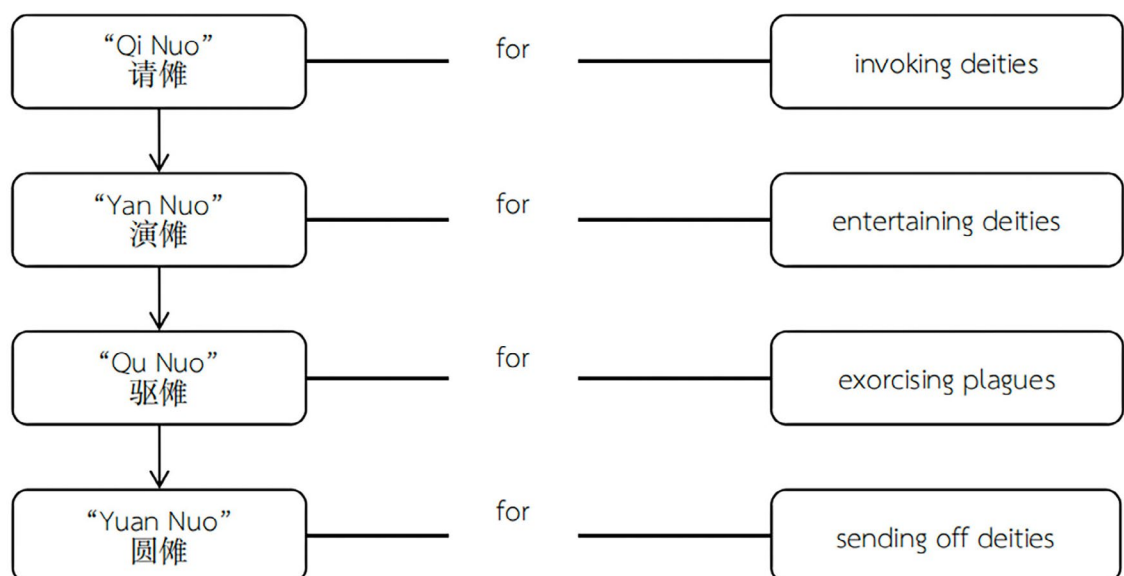


Figure 7
The traditional performance process of Nanfeng Nuo Dance

The programs of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance can be categorized into five major types: Grand Nuo Dance, Bamboo Horse Dance, Eight Immortals Dance, Harmony Dance, and other dances. The Grand Nuo Dance can be further divided into two categories: ceremonial dances and entertainment dances (NCCCC, 2006: 54, 119). The classic programs of the ceremonial dances include "Sou Nuo," "Sou Jian," "Sou Chu," and "Zhuang Tiao," which are solemn and mysterious, carrying a strong sense of oppression. The entertainment programs include "Kai Shan," "Zhi Qian," "Lei Gong," and "Nuo Gong Nuo Po." These entertainment programs are typically derived from myths or novels, with an overall style that is humorous and interesting, entertaining both the deities and the people (Zheng, 2021: 121).

In summary, the performance content of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance is rich and diverse, encompassing various aspects such as dance, music, characters, and masks. Through its unique artistic form and rich program content, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance demonstrates its profound cultural heritage and strong artistic vitality.

4. Heritage of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Since the introduction of Nuo to the Nanfeng region in the 2nd century BCE, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance has gone through several developmental phases, which can be summarized as the Dissemination Period (Han and Tang Dynasties), the Development Period (Song Dynasty), the Prosperity Period (Ming and Qing Dynasties), the New Nuo Period (Republic of China), and the Heritage Period (Modern Era) (Huang, 2009: 29). Despite historical fluctuations, the overall trend of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance has been positive.

There are 7 towns and 5 townships under the jurisdiction of Nanfeng County, totaling 176 villages (NCCCC, 2006: 1). The current state of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance heritage is divided by the Xu Jiang River, with the west bank being the gathering place for the old Nuo troupes and the east bank for the new Nuo troupes (Figure 8). During the Republic of China period (1912-1949), due to war and other reasons, many villages' old Nuo troupes were damaged, leading to the formation of many new Nuo troupes in that period and later. Nie Bingxin suggests that people at the time, influenced by anti-feudal thoughts, diluted traditional Nuo rituals and focused more on entertainment dances (Nie, 2013: 61).

Park Yongguang believes that in the modern era, the heritage of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance faces challenges and opportunities. Although the old Nuo troupes on the west bank are fewer in number, they have preserved a more complete form of traditional Nuo dance. In contrast, the new Nuo troupes on the east bank are more numerous and have integrated more modern entertainment elements (Park, 2017: 70).

Nowadays, Nuo dances in many regions have disappeared. However, it is gratifying that a small group of people in Nanfeng are still passing on the Nuo dance. Yao Yuan lamented, "As the world continues to modernize, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, as a living fossil of Chinese dance, will face significant cultural shocks and severe tests of heritage" (Yao, 2016: 28).



Figure 8

Topographic map of both sides of the Zhujiang River in Nanfeng County

Note. From *The high-definition version of the topographic map of Nanfeng County*, by BIGEMAP, n.d. (<http://www.bigemap.com/source/terrain-1634.html>). Copyright 2014-2022 by BIGEMAP

Research Results

1. Evolutionary Features of Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Research indicates that the Nanfeng Nuo Dance has evolved from a witchcraft ceremony to a cultural heritage, with the entire process divisible into three distinct stages, each exhibiting its own evolutionary features.

1.1 Originating from Witchcraft and the Formation of Local Characteristics of Nuo Dance.

This stage spans from the 2nd century BCE to 1279 CE. That is, it originated from the Han Dynasty and further developed during the Song Dynasty, becoming an important entertainment activity in people's lives. Therefore, the characteristics of the origin and early development of Nanfeng Nuo Dance can be summarized as the popularity of the exorcism activities and the gradual formation of the local characteristic Nuo dance.

1.2. Prosperity During the Ming and Qing Dynasties and Differentiation During the Republic of China Period

This stage spans from 1368 CE to 1912 CE. After being banned during the Yuan Dynasty, the Nuo dance experienced even greater development during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. During the Republic of China period, the transmission of the Nuo dance underwent changes, dividing into new and old forms. The ritual process of the new Nuo dance was diluted or even abandoned, with a greater emphasis on entertainment performance. (Figure 9)



Figure 9
"New" Nuo dance of Nanfeng

1.3 Modern Revival and National Intangible Cultural Heritage Recognition

This stage spans from 1949 CE to the present. In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Nuo dance was valued and developed. Although it encountered interruptions, it was given renewed attention after 1978 and was listed as one of the first batch of national intangible cultural heritages in 2006.

In summary, the evolution of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance demonstrates its transformation from a sorcery ritual to a cultural heritage. Researchers have summarized this process in the following table (Table 1). Against the unique geographical and cultural backdrop of Nanfeng, the Nuo dance has continuously adapted and developed. Despite historical turmoil and changes, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance has tenaciously been passed down, becoming an important cultural heritage of the Nanfeng region.

Table 1
The Evolution Process of Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Stage	Time Period	Development Characteristics
Origin and Early Development	Han Dynasty to Southern Song Dynasty	Originating from Witchcraft, and then form a local characteristic Nuo dance
Prosperity and Change	Yuan Dynasty to the Republic of China period	Flourishing of Nuo dance during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, changes during the Republic of China period, division into new and old Nuo troupes
Modern Revival	1949 to 1978	After the founding of the People's Republic of Cina, the dance was valued but interrupted during the Cultural Revolution
National Intangible Cultural Heritage Recognition	1978 to Present	Listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, becoming a cultural calling card of Nanfeng

2. Content Characteristics of Nanfeng Nuo Dance

The study reveals that the content of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance is marked by three core characteristics. Thematically, it demonstrates expressions of primitive desires, in roles it reflects diverse deity worship, and in its stories, it showcases unique local belief legends.

2.1 Theme: Expression of Primitive Desires

The Nanfeng Nuo Dance originates from ancient sacrificial culture, with its earliest purpose being to expel evil spirits, pray for bountiful harvests, and fertility expressions of the most primal human desires.

Firstly, exorcism is one of the most primitive and fundamental functions of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance. This desire is rooted in the ancient fear of natural disasters and diseases. Ritual dances such as "Sou Nuo" and "Sou Chu" primarily serve the purpose of exorcism (Figure 10). For instance, Nuo dance masks like "Kai Shan" and "Zhong Kui" vividly embody the primitive religious concept of "expelling evil with malevolence." By wearing these masks in the Nuo dance rituals, performers seem to bear the power of the divine, capable of expelling evil spirits and malevolent forces from the village. This ritual is not only a religious act but also a psychological defense mechanism of rural society against disasters and epidemics, symbolizing the aspiration for a peaceful life and resistance to external threats.



Figure 10

Nanfeng Nuo Dance program with exorcism function

Second, the bestowal of blessings is another significant theme in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, bearing the people's prayers for a happy life. The mask characters in the Nuo dance, such as "Guan Gong" (Guan Yu), "Buddha" and the "Eight Immortals" are all roles for bestowing blessings. These divine figures symbolize not only justice, courage, and wisdom but also wealth and auspiciousness. Through the ceremonial dances, villagers hope to gain the protection of the deities, bringing harvests, health, and prosperity.

Third, the desire for offspring holds a special cultural significance in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, reflecting the importance placed on fertility and family continuation in traditional Chinese agrarian society. For instance, the program featuring the "Nuo Gong Nuo Po" (the Nuo Old Man and Old Woman) symbolizes the prosperity of the family and the flourishing of descendants. Additionally, the ancestral Master Statue in the Nuo temple holding objects like the "Yuan He" (a round lotus) or "Jiao Zi" (a traditional Chinese child figurine), these symbolic items are not only metaphors for fertility but also a spiritual sustenance for villagers praying for many children and blessings (Figure 11). The worship of fertility highlights the centrality of family continuity and the propagation of descendants in the agrarian society.



Figure 11
The ancestral master statue in the Nuo Temple

Overall, the Nanfeng Nuo Dance articulates the most fundamental living needs and spiritual pursuits within an agrarian society through these primitive desires. These desires are not only reflected in the symbolic imagery of the dance movements and masks but are also reinforced throughout the entire Nuo dance ceremony, forming a continuous transmission of ancient cultural connotations. The expression of these primal aspirations serves not only as a cultural memory of ancient society but also as a quest for identification with and belonging to traditional culture in contemporary society.

2.2 Roles: Diverse Deity Worship

The pantheon of deities venerated in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance is highly diverse and complex, reflecting the characteristic integration of the three major religious traditions in Chinese culture, as well as a rich tapestry of folklore and hero worship. The roles of deities in the Nuo dance are not only culturally pluralistic but also play significant roles in rituals and performances.

Firstly, the deities of pestilence expulsion are the most central character types in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, representing the most primitive religious function of the dance exorcising evil spirits and dispelling epidemics. Deities such as "Kai Shan", "Zhong Kui," and "Thousand-Mile Eye" are represented with mighty images to combat evil forces, symbolizing the ancient human fear and resistance to natural disasters and diseases (Figure 12). In the exorcism rituals, these deities are endowed with the power to expel evil through sacred ceremonies, becoming the spiritual support for villagers to pray for health and peace.

Secondly, the roles of folk deities play the part of bestowing blessings in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, reflecting the ancient Chinese rural society's aspiration for wealth and happiness. Masks include "Earth God", "Kitchen God", "Fortune Star", "Longevity Star" and others, symbolizing deities that protect homes and ensure the prosperity of villages. Through the performance of the Nuo dance, these folk deities are regarded by villagers as guardians of family and community life, providing cultural identity and psychological comfort.

Furthermore, Taoist and Buddhist deity roles integrate elements of Buddhism and Taoism, such as "Buddha", "Guanyin", and "Jade Emperor", among other figures. (Figure 13) These deity roles not only continue the influence of traditional Chinese religions but also

achieve further dissemination and popularization through the mask culture of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance. The Taoist and Buddhist deities in the dance often represent wisdom and benevolence beyond the mundane, becoming spiritual paradigms that people aspire to, strengthening the villagers' religious emotions and faith.

Lastly, the legendary hero roles bring the drama of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance to a climax, especially characters such as "Guan Gong" (Guan Yu), "Hua Guansuo" and "Yang Zongbao", who often appear in the Nuo opera with images of loyalty and integrity. The worship of heroic deities is not only an admiration for the heroic deeds in history and legend but also a symbol of the pursuit of social justice and loyalty.

In summary, the deity roles in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance constitute a multi-layered belief system that encompasses various functions such as pestilence expulsion, blessing bestowal, religious worship, and hero worship. Through the transformation of images, these masks not only bear a complex folk belief system but also provide scholars with important cultural clues for studying traditional Chinese religions and folk beliefs. The deity worship in the Nanfeng Nuo Dance reflects the diversity and inclusiveness of Chinese traditional culture and continues to play a role in the spiritual life of the villagers.



Figure 11
Nuo Deities Mask, "Kai Shan"



Figure 13
Nuo Deities Mask, "Guanyin"

2.3 Stories: Unique Local Beliefs and Legends

The story structure of Nanfeng Nuo Dance is deeply influenced by local Taoist culture, agricultural traditions, and the imperial examination system, reflecting unique local beliefs and legends. This belief system not only enriches the cultural connotations of Nuo Dance but also shapes its distinctive storylines and character images.

Taoist culture has a long history in the Nanfeng region. Since Taoism was introduced to Nanfeng during the Southern Tang period, the construction of Taoist temples has flourished, and religious activities have been vibrant. Taoist deities and doctrines were directly integrated into the narratives of Nuo Dance, forming a cast of characters centered on Taoist gods. For example, Taoist warrior deities such as Zhang Tianshi, Marshal Ma, and Marshal Zhao became the protagonists in driving away ghosts and expelling plagues. Under the influence of Taoist beliefs, the stories in Nanfeng Nuo Dance not only serve religious ritual functions but also convey the mysterious power and protective faith of Taoism through the plot of divine exorcism and blessings. This cultural characteristic endows the stories of Nanfeng Nuo Dance with profound religious and spiritual meaning while simultaneously showcasing local customs.

In addition, Nanfeng's agricultural culture has significantly influenced the narrative structure of Nuo Dance. As a predominantly agricultural society, Nanfeng has a deeply rooted agrarian sacrificial culture, which gives rise to Nuo Dance stories centered on themes of praying for a good harvest and warding off disasters. For instance, agricultural festivals such as the "Spring Festival of Earth Deities" are incorporated into Nuo Dance rituals, with the Nuo gods symbolically expelling diseases and blessing the fields with abundance. These performances reflect the local agricultural society's reverence for nature and their hopes for a prosperous harvest in the coming year.

The integration of Taoist beliefs and agricultural culture imbues Nanfeng Nuo Dance with unique regional characteristics in its storytelling. Under the protection of Taoist deities, the agrarian sacrificial stories in Nuo Dance are not only prayers to the gods but also serve as an essential means for the local people to maintain their community's spiritual life. Through these distinctive beliefs and stories, Nanfeng Nuo Dance reveals its rich and diverse cultural connotations, offering a unique perspective for the study of Chinese folk beliefs and regional culture.

Furthermore, the imperial examination culture occupies an important place in the narrative composition of Nanfeng Nuo Dance. The Jiangxi region has long held the imperial examination in high regard, and deities and legends related to the examination system are also represented in Nuo Dance. One typical example is "Kui Xing", the deity presiding over scholarly success (Figure 14). The story of Kui Xing is often performed in Nuo Dance, depicting his arduous journey to becoming a top-ranked scholar after numerous hardships and setbacks. With his unique image and narrative, Kui Xing symbolizes the struggles and glory of the imperial examination path, becoming a significant spiritual pillar for the scholarly youth in Nanfeng. These stories not only reflect the social realities of the imperial examination era but also embody the common people's aspirations for success in life.

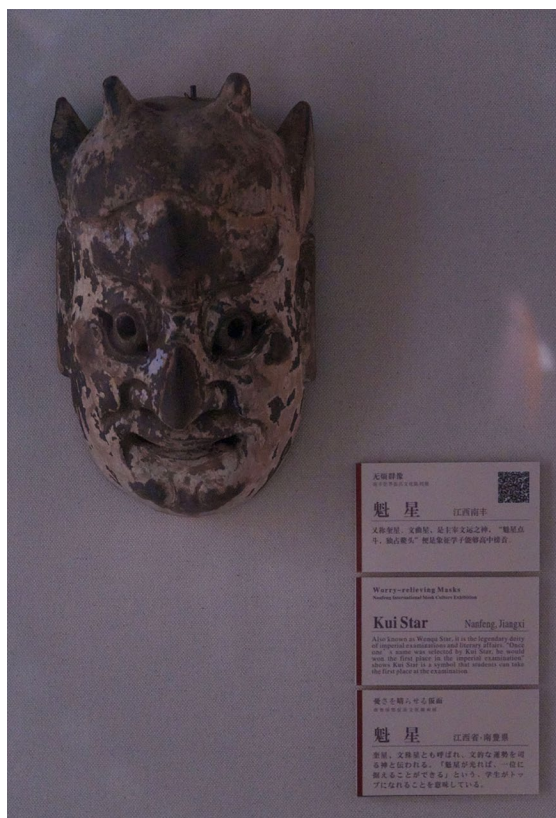


Figure 13

Nuo Deities Mask, "Kui Xing"

Overall, the content of Nanfeng Nuo Dance presents three core characteristics: the expression of primitive desires, diverse deity worship, and unique local beliefs. Thematically, Nuo Dance reflects the fundamental needs and spiritual pursuits of agrarian society through elements such as exorcism, blessings, and fertility prayers. In terms of characters, the dance showcases a diverse deity worship system, including deities responsible for expelling plagues, folk gods, Taoist and Buddhist deities, and legendary heroes, highlighting the diversity of traditional Chinese religious beliefs. In story construction, Nanfeng Nuo Dance integrates local Taoist culture, agricultural traditions, and the imperial examination culture, creating unique regional beliefs and legends that reflect a complex system of folk beliefs and the broader socio-cultural context.

3. The Mutation and Dilemma of the Heritage of Nanfeng Nuo Dance-Taking Shanggan Village as an Example

Research findings indicate that the Nanfeng Nuo Dance underwent certain mutations during the Republic of China period, leading to a differentiation between old and new forms of Nuo dance in its heritage. The old Nuo troupes, mostly established before the Republic of China, focus on traditional Nuo rituals and ancient Nuo dances, characterized

by a primitive and simple style. The new Nuo troupes, established during and after the Republic of China period, have diluted the traditional Nuo rituals, emphasizing entertainment dance and adopting forms closer to opera performances. This change is not only a transformation in performance form but also a mutation in cultural heritage and belief systems.

Therefore, to prevent the decline and disappearance of traditional Nuo dance culture, it is necessary to study, protect, and develop the old Nuo dance. The old Nuo troupes on the west bank of the Jiujiang River adhere to tradition, and their performance forms and content are closer to the original style. In particular, the Nuo dance of Shanggan Village, due to its antiquity and orthodoxy, has extremely high value and urgently needs protection and heritage because of its fragile transmission.

After investigation and analysis, taking Shanggan Village as an example, the dilemmas of heritage are mainly reflected in four aspects.

First, the cultural habitat is deteriorating. The impact of the market economy and multiculturalism makes it difficult to maintain the traditional living environment, leading to the inability to continue the original ecological style of Nuo dance. Second, there is a lack of successors. The aging of artists and the scarcity of young inheritors make it very difficult to attract outsiders to inherit the Nuo dance. Third, there is a lack of special protection funds. Limited financial support affects the protection of Nuo dance and the carrying out of related activities. Fourth, the heritage protection system is not perfect. The identification and support mechanism for representative inheritors are insufficient, failing to fully mobilize the enthusiasm of the artists. Fifth, due to Shanggan Village's remote location and lack of publicity skills, the situation of heritage and dissemination is not as good as other villages. Researchers choose Shanggan Village as a case study for heritage research precisely because of its important position in the heritage of Nanfeng Nuo Dance and the severe dilemmas it faces. (Table 2)

Table 2

The Evolution Process of Nanfeng Nuo Dance

Inheritance Dilemmas	Specific Manifestations
Cultural Habitat Deterioration	Reduction in traditional beliefs and rituals, impact of modern culture
Lack of Successors	Aging artist, scarcity of young inheritors
Insufficient Support Funds	Limited government funding, affecting protection and inheritance activities
Incomplete System	Inadequate identification and support for representative inheritors, lack of effective incentives
Low Visibility	Remote geographical location, less effective inheritance and dissemination compared to other villages

4. Guiding Principles and Operational Models for the Protection and Development of Nanfeng Nuo Dance-Taking Shanggan Village as an Example

Synthesizing the above research and taking Shanggan Village as an example, the following guiding principles are proposed for the protection and development of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance:

1) Cultural Ecological Reconstruction

Reconstructing the cultural ecological environment of Nuo dance is of vital importance. Public awareness, especially among the younger generation, about the cultural value of Nuo dance should be enhanced through education and media outreach.

2) Successor Cultivation Mechanism

Establishing an effective mechanism for the cultivation of successors is key to the intergenerational transmission of skills. Governments and social groups should support young people in learning Nuo dance and provide professional training and artistic exchange opportunities for inheritors, while also protecting and supporting the elderly artists in Shanggan Village.

3) Financial Security and Policy Support

The government should increase financial investment in the protection of Nuo dance, establish special funds for the collection of materials, training of artists, and performance exchanges. At the same time, policies should be enacted to provide legal protection for the transmission of Nuo dance.

4) Innovation and Development Model

Explore new models that combine Nuo dance with modern cultural industries, such as developing Nuo dance-themed cultural tourism and crafts, integrating traditional culture with the modern market.

5) Community Participation and International Exchange

Encourage community participation in the protection and transmission of Nuo dance in Shanggan Village, making it a part of cultural life through community activities and festive celebrations. Strengthen international exchanges and promote Nuo dance through art festivals and other platforms to enhance its global influence.

Regarding specific operational models, researchers believe that a Nanfeng Nuo Dance Learning Center could be established in Shanggan Village. This center should include functions such as Nuo dance education, performance, exhibition, and academic exchange, with a particular emphasis on the originality and orthodoxy of Shanggan Village's Nuo dance. Through these measures, the unique cultural heritage of Shanggan Village's Nuo dance will be protected and transmitted, providing solid support and protection for its development in the context of the new era.

Discussion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the evolutionary trajectory, content characteristics, and current state of inheritance of Nanfeng Nuo Dance through a combination of literature review and field investigation. The findings reveal that as a traditional art form with profound cultural heritage, the transmission and development of Nanfeng Nuo Dance are constrained by multiple factors. The degradation of the cultural ecosystem, a shortage of skilled successors, insufficient funding and policy support, and low community participation are the primary reasons for the challenges faced in the preservation of Nanfeng Nuo Dance.

In the discussion, we observe that the variations in the transmission of Nanfeng Nuo Dance are not an isolated phenomenon but rather a common challenge encountered by traditional culture amid modernization. The division between the old and new forms of Nuo Dance during the Republican era reflects the natural selection process of traditional culture adapting to societal changes. However, this adaptation is not always positive. While the new Nuo Dance may be more vibrant in form, it risks losing the deep-rooted values of the traditional Nuo Dance in terms of content and spirit.

Overall, the strengths of this study lie in its systematic analysis and field investigation, deeply exploring the evolutionary features, content characteristics, and inheritance strategies of the Nuo Dance. However, the limitations include the restriction of regional samples and incomplete data collection, which may affect the universality of the conclusions.

In summary, the protection and development of Nanfeng Nuo Dance necessitate a comprehensive and multi-tiered strategic framework. It is hoped that this study will offer useful insights and practical solutions for the preservation of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, as well as for other traditional cultural forms facing similar transmission challenges.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned research findings and discussions, the researcher draws the following conclusions:

This study, based on extensive field research and multidimensional analysis, thoroughly examines the evolutionary trajectory, cultural characteristics, and challenges to the inheritance of Nanfeng Nuo Dance, while proposing innovative strategies for its conservation and development. The findings confirm that Nanfeng Nuo Dance has evolved from shamanistic rituals to cultural heritage, with each phase exhibiting distinct evolutionary features. Its content, rooted in the expression of primitive desires, diverse deity worship, and unique local belief legends, underscores the profound connections to traditional Chinese religion and social culture. However, the preservation of Nanfeng Nuo Dance remains vulnerable, as it continues to face challenges such as a deteriorating cultural ecosystem, a lack of successors, limited funding, and insufficient institutional support.

In response to these challenges, the researcher proposes strategies for the protection and development of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance, including cultural ecological reconstruction, successor cultivation, financial security and policy support, innovation and development models, and community participation and international exchange. These recommendations aim to strengthen the heritage and innovation of the Nuo Dance, ensuring its continued development in modern society.

The researcher believes that future research can focus on comparative studies of Nuo dances in different regions and explore how to effectively combine modern technology with the cultural industry to enhance the global influence of traditional art forms. This will further promote the protection and development of the Nanfeng Nuo Dance and similar cultural heritages.

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