

Constructing Neo-Lusheng in Miao Society as a Means of Local Cultural Preservation

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Abstract

The preservation and evolution of local indigenous cultural practices are paramount in understanding societal shifts and identity negotiations. This investigation aimed to unravel the complexities of traditional and contemporary intersections within the Miao Lusheng dance, emphasizing its significance in cultural sustainability. Utilizing a qualitative approach that combined interviews with purposively selected Miao dance practitioners and observation of Lusheng performances, we examined the fusion of traditional and modern elements in a Lusheng composition. Data analysis was using typological analysis and analytic induction. The results revealed that while the core essence of the Lusheng dance remains rooted in indigenous practices, the incorporation of contemporary features illustrates an adaptive strategy, ensuring cultural relevance and resonance in a changing world. This adaptation signifies the dance's resilience and the importance of contextual fluidity in safeguarding indigenous cultural identities.

Keywords: Construction, Local Culture, Lusheng

Introduction

The Miao people of China have a rich heritage (Chen, Ren & Zhang, 2021). Their love for singing, dancing, music, and drama is deeply rooted and passed down generations, constantly evolving and inspiring the creation of new songs and melodies (Zhitao, Karin & Sensai, 2023). The Lusheng dance is a heavily ritualized and self-accompanied performance prevalent in provinces like Guizhou, Guangxi, Hunan, and Yunnan (Mao, Zhang, Ma & Jia, 2022). It is a traditional folk performance characterized by the graceful and flexible movement of the lower limbs, including the waist, knees, and ankles (Huo & Mei, 2008). The Lusheng performances weave together elements of clothing, posture, music, and performance, which reflect the significance of the Miao people over thousands of years. The choreography has matured to depict individual and collective resilience, underscoring the Miao tenacity and resolve (Wang, 2022). The Lusheng dance maintains an irreplaceable cultural position, showcasing regional and national styles, and becoming a prominent example of Chinese folk dance heritage.

However, modernization poses significant challenges to the preservation and propagation of traditional Chinese performing arts such as the Lusheng dance. The global trend of urbanization and the societal drift towards uniformity threaten to erode the distinctiveness of these cultural expressions, reducing them to mere echoes of their original vibrancy (Yu & Karin, 2022). This risk of homogenisation is ever-present, despite efforts

to protect minority identities and practices. It is against this backdrop that the present research assumes crucial significance.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the nature of the Lusheng dance and the role of traditional local practices and contemporary influences in its evolution.
2. To analyze incorporation of modern elements within indigenous Lusheng and explore themes of reinterpretation, cultural adaptation and identity.

Literature Review

1. The Evolution of Indigenous Dance

Indigenous communities often practice homogenous invention, morphing traditional celebrations into new dance forms through creative reinterpretations (Solomon, 2018). The foundational culture of the dance acts as fertile ground for unique innovation. However, some scholars argue that cultural creativity is not an independent process, but one intrinsically linked to societal constraints. Thus, homogenous invention may not entirely be the product of internal cultural dynamics, but rather a reflection of society's external influences (Aterianus-Owanga, 2019). Hybridization similarly epitomizes the fusion and exchange between disparate dance traditions, a testament to cultural fluidity in our globalized world (Swain, 2015). However, in this model, indigenous dance forms often meld with other traditions, crafting entirely new genres (Vermeyden, 2017). The ballet Manora exemplifies this by integrating Thai dance and ballet elements (Nikhonrat & Thongkum, 2021). This aligns with Hannerz's (1992) theory of cultural complexity, which posits that cultures become more complex through globalization. Nonetheless, there remains a risk of erasure of indigenous cultures and identity through such cultural mixing (Appadurai, 1990).

In the context of indigenous dance, external influences such as socio-political dynamics, market forces, and community norms significantly shape the evolution of dance forms. The process is cyclical: as dances are produced, disseminated, consumed, and then reproduced, they are continuously influenced by these external factors. The reception and perception of these evolving dance forms by the community is an equally important aspect. As the community consumes these forms, the meanings ascribed to them may shift and evolve. This dynamic process of consumption contributes to the transformation and sustenance of indigenous dance traditions (Mabingo, 2021). Exploring the topic of creativity in dance evolution, theorists such as Swain (2020) suggest a work's structure carries new meanings independent of the idea that produced it. This encapsulates the transformative power of dance (Felagai Taito, 2022).

2. Aesthetics of Indigenous Dance

Dance aesthetics are not only centered on a harmonious blend of beauty and form but also encapsulate the intricate movements and symbolic expressions inherent in these dances (Mabingo, 2021). This can take on additional nuances when viewed through foreign perspectives. However, aesthetic appreciation is not

universally applied. Some reactions may not hold aesthetic value, introducing a level of subjectivity in the aesthetic appreciation of indigenous dance forms (Abakporo, 2019). Furthermore, the concept of psychic distance (the perceived difference or distance between objects) implies that the appreciation of indigenous dance aesthetics is also contingent on the observer's proximity to the dance and their cultural understanding (Prichard, 2022). Indigenous dances and their beauty resonate with philosophical discourse on aesthetics, indicating deep roots in cultural traditions (Swain, 2015). Indigenous dances, therefore, occupy a space within broader discussions on aesthetics, and those seeking to protect the dance must consider the full meaning in traditional performances (Abakporo, 2019).

Cultural events like national festivals play a pivotal role in perpetuating natural diversity. The Miao people's song and dance serve as a medium embodying their cultural heritage (Yang & Bin Saearani, 2021). Their festivals embody the blending of cultures, especially evident in the Miao and Dong ethnic groups in Guizhou. At its core, ecological aesthetics stems from ecological philosophy, emphasizing a dynamic equilibrium in the world. This philosophy suggests that while specific realities might seem unbalanced, the overarching system leans towards balance. The Miao people's practices encapsulate this ecological beauty and the dance acts as a mechanism through which societal values are propagated (Weilin, 2022).

Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation using data gathered from both documentary review and field research. In the field, data was collected from observations, surveys, discussions, and interviews. These results were combined with analysis of academic literature and video materials. The research scope concentrated on the reproduction of Miao ethnic dance. The researchers delved into the cultural heritage and development of Miao dance and its evolution, along with the cultural value of this intangible cultural heritage. First-hand accounts from individuals closely associated with the Miao community offered indispensable insights into these areas.

The study began in August 2022 and the researchers identified Nanmeng Village in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture as a suitable research location. Key informants were purposively selected based on their role as inheritors of the dance. The two primary inheritors (who provided informed consent to the publication of their identities) were Mr. Yang Bingfang and Mr. Yang Bingfu. Information was gleaned through formal, semi-structured interviews. 20 local villagers and audience members were also consulted through informal, unstructured interviews. Following triangulation to validate data from multiple sources and using different instruments, the data was analyzed using an inductive method. All data was summarized and analyzed typologically.

Results

Understanding the Nature of the Lusheng Dance

The dance structure subdivides into a two-step pattern complemented by a left arm swing, and a four-step pattern. These dances are complex and derive their name from the incorporation of the Lusheng (a

bamboo mouth organ) as a core element of the dance and self-expression (Figure 1). It is popular among various ethnic communities including the Miao, Dong and Yao, and is prevalent in Guizhou, Guangxi, Hunan, and Yunnan. It is performed during festivals, with three functions: self-entertainment, competition, and etiquette.



Figure 1 Local Miao people performing a traditional Lusheng dance (Hu Rong, 2023)

According to local legend, to solve the problem of capturing birds and wild animals, a young man cut down trees and bamboo in the forest to create instruments that could imitate their calls and lure them into traps. Since then, Lusheng was developed to honor this innovation. Another tale, the Legend of Ah Mao, attests that during early migrations, those who crossed the river first would blow the reeds and light a bonfire to gather people together. It was during these times that people would dance to the melody.

From our time in the field, we identified six variants of the Miao Lusheng dance. The first type, known locally as Zhu Ge, is performed during festivals. People dance to Lusheng in the field, accompanied by or led by a group of Lusheng players, and the crowd dances in a circle around them. There is no restriction on participation. The second type, Dilaobigai, is a competitive dance exclusively for men. This typically takes place during festivals. The third type is Traditional Lusheng. The traditional dance is a way for young men and women to express their love. The young women tie one end of a flower sash to the young man they like, and they hold the other end and dance together. The Golden Pheasant Dance, the fourth type of performance, is performed at ancestral worship ceremonies and weddings. Women are adorned with golden pheasant decorations, silver ornaments and ultra-short pleated skirts, while music is played using four different reeds. The fifth variant is the Drum Dragon Drum Tiger-Changshan Dragon. This has a special significance, as it is performed exclusively at funerals and rituals to worship the village gods. The dancers dress like dragons in black robes and perform. The Rolling Mountain Ball Lusheng Dance is the sixth variant and incorporates a combination of Lusheng playing, dance performances and acrobatics. It is playful and requires a high degree of balance. All the dances have unique steps, attire and music, reflecting Miao heritage and are used in a variety of social contexts.

Fundamentally, the Lusheng is slow, characterized by nuanced movements. The foundational steps rely on symmetrical alignment. The dancer gracefully arches the left foot to the left while simultaneously shifting

the right leg leftward. Rotations occasionally occur in a counterclockwise manner. Sequences often comprise three, four, or seven steps, forming an elegant interplay of intricate turns (Figure 5).



Figure 2 Technique and style of the Lusheng dance (Hu Rong, 2023)

The soaring popularity of Lusheng has given birth to international dance troupes. Enhanced government focus on intellectual property rights hints at a promising horizon for the dance's further enrichment. Nevertheless, there are concerns that the cultural practices associated with the original art may be lost to modern entertainment. With this in mind, the researchers summarized the meaning of the dance to ensure the cultural richness remains (Table 1)

Table 1 Analysis of the meaning and symbolism in Lusheng dance styles

Name	Summary	Direction	Meaning
Standard Dance	Group, circle around the stage	Circular style	For men and women to choose partners.
Troupe Dance	Collective towards center	Circle in center	Performed as a competition or dedication.
Worship Dance	Stand on sides, goods in center	Stand in lines on both sides	Performed during sacrificial ceremony. Now rare.
Ceremony Dance	Group, stand on sides, walkway in middle	Stand in lines on both sides of the stage	Content varies. Jumping, brisk movements, and a lively and joyful atmosphere.

As the dance continues to gain recognition and popularity at home and abroad, it plays a crucial role in the preservation and propagation of the unique cultural heritage of the Miao people so long as these original meanings are retained. It is a spiritual tool played during cremation ceremonies to express respect for the deceased and to communicate between the realms of the living and the dead. Each stage of the ceremony has a specific song associated with it. For instance, the farewell tune, played when the coffin is removed, triggers deep sorrow among relatives and friends. Despite its simple melody, it conveys profound emotions, making the ceremony solemn and respectful. The Miao people also use the Lusheng in ancestral worship ceremonies, where they dance, sing, and express their feelings of nostalgia for their ancestors. Today, it is increasingly popular

for young Miao individuals to hold grand events featuring the Lusheng dance. During these events, young men and women dress up and dance to the rhythm of the Lusheng. When the dance reaches its climax, men show their affection towards women they're attracted to, and women hang love tokens on the reeds of men they like.

2. The Reinterpretation of the Lusheng Dance

At its core, the dance's rhythm-based classifications remain consistent, yet contemporary adaptations, especially as shared by younger composers, have begun infusing newer styles like the four-stroke and six-stroke variants. Elderly informants reminisced about the ancient dance's distinct themes, emphasizing its clear artistic expression and group-oriented characters. By contrast, younger generations and current dancers highlighted a shift towards modern versions rife with diverse symbolic metaphors and a broader emotional spectrum. Informants highlighted linguistic expressions as an evolving component. Originally marked by simplicity, it has become more layered and enhanced. Foreign influences were occasionally mentioned as potential catalysts, pointing to the dance's adaptability. Furthermore, discussions surrounding the origins and variations emphasized its significance.

Community aspirations for the dance's future centered on preservation and promotion. There's a palpable, collective yearning to protect and honor cultural heritage sites in Guizhou. Younger community members articulated the need for effective documentation, advocating promotion through diverse modern media. There is a burgeoning interest in socio-cultural dynamics affecting folk culture. This understanding, they hope, could serve as a bedrock for future initiatives aimed at fortifying and amplifying Chinese culture and folk arts.

Conclusion

This investigation into the Miao Lusheng dance highlights the interplay between traditional practices and modern influences, underscoring the dance's role in cultural preservation. The integration of contemporary elements within the traditional framework illustrates a dynamic form of cultural adaptation that honors heritage and embraces change. This helps sustain local cultural identities and facilitates the transmission of these traditions in increasingly globalized contexts. The research objectives of understanding this blend and exploring its implications for cultural transmission have been met, revealing how traditional dances like the Lusheng can thrive and adapt, thus contributing to local development while continuing to enrich cultural diversity. These findings advocate for a balanced approach to cultural preservation, one that incorporates innovation within tradition, ensuring the vitality and relevance of indigenous cultural expressions in the modern world.

Discussion

Grounded firmly in the paradigms of homogenous invention, hybridization, modification, and even radical innovation, the new composition is a tangible embodiment of dance's natural progression (Wirunrak, 2000). This embraces change and innovation, ensuring the dance remains relevant and resonant in contemporary contexts. At the same time, by upholding the core elements of the Lusheng tradition, it serves as a vessel for cultural

preservation. This balance between adaptation and preservation demonstrates the dance's resilience and adaptability. These findings therefore align with Wirunrak's (2000) proposed methods of dance evolution. The Lusheng performance exhibited characteristics of homogenous invention, rooted deeply in Miao traditions while showcasing adaptability and creativity (Solomon, 2018). This reiterates the notion that indigenous communities draw from traditional celebrations, blending them with newer interpretations to create dance forms that evolve. This balance becomes particularly relevant when considering the role of societal influences, underlining the external societal factors shaping the evolution of such dance forms (Aterianus-Owanga, 2019).

This findings validate the notion that the aesthetic appreciation of such dances depends on cultural context, prior understanding, and the observer's psychic distance (Prichard, 2022). The interconnectedness of sound, rhythm, and dance aligns with perspectives suggesting the critical roles these elements play in constructing aesthetic values of indigenous dances (Akas, 2019). The way the Miao people incorporate ecological philosophy into their daily life supports discussions on ecological aesthetics. The findings further corroborate Weilin's (2022) interpretation that Miao dances signify a harmonious coexistence of humans with their environment.

The importance of Lusheng as a cultural symbol shows that indigenous dance acts as a mechanism for sustaining societal values. Miao performances echo the sentiments that indigenous dance is imbued with meanings, historical context, and societal values. The findings also highlight the potential for dance to serve as a medium for cultural exchange. Modern interpretations showcase elements of hybridization, implying a synthesis of styles (Vermeyden, 2017). This resonates with the belief that blending different dance styles can lead to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of aesthetic beauty.

Discoveries or New Knowledge

This investigation enables understanding of the relationship between traditional practices and contemporary influences in the evolution of Lusheng dance, emphasizing its role in cultural preservation amidst changing social landscapes. It also presents the integration of modern elements within the framework of Lusheng components and broader issues of cultural adaptation and the dynamics of cultural transmission. The paper provides insights into broader discourses on conservation and transmission, highlighting the balance between maintaining traditions and embracing innovation.

Suggestions

Future research should incorporate anthropological, sociological, and neurological perspectives to grasp the full impact of blending traditional and modern dance elements. It would be valuable to extend the study to other indigenous dances, offering a comparative analysis to discern common patterns. Engaging with local communities can provide deeper insights into the subjective experience of performing these evolved compositions. Surveys or questionnaires distributed to audiences might gauge the reception and perceived

authenticity of these dances. Finally, it is crucial for future studies to observe how online platforms might shape the evolution of indigenous dances.

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