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Article

Changes in Jiangxi Nuo Culture: The Development of Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo since 1980

Zhu He

Srinakharinwirot University;School of Fine Arts, Email: 271941707@qq.com
Piyanard Ungkawanichakul, Srinakharinwirot University;School of Fine Arts Kittikorn Nopudomphan, Srinakharinwirot University;School of Fine Arts

Abstract: Jiangxi Nuo culture, as a precious part of China's intangible cultural heritage, has unique historical connotations and artistic value. This study focuses on the development and inheritance of Nuo culture in Nanfeng County and Shangli County of Jiangxi Province since 1980, exploring the impact of multiculturalism on traditional Nuo culture and the reasons for its strong vitality. Through literature analysis, field investigation and case study methods, this paper combs the development context of Nuo dance and Nuo masks in the two regions, analyzes their differences in cultural inheritance, religious connotation, entertainment and social functions, and discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by Nuo culture in the process of modernization. The research finds that Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo have maintained their core cultural connotations while integrating with modern culture, and their development paths provide important references for the inheritance and protection of traditional intangible cultural heritage.
Keywords: Jiangxi Nuo culture; Nanfeng Nuo; Shangli Nuo; Cultural change; Inheritance and development; Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Jiangxi Nuo culture has a long history, which can be traced back to the pre-Qin witchcraft Nuo rituals. It has been inherited for thousands of years and has formed unique cultural characteristics in Nanfeng, Shangli and other regions. Nanfeng Nuo dance, known as the "living fossil of ancient Chinese folk dance", was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists in 2006. Shangli County, known as the "hometown of Chinese Nuo culture", has a complete Nuo cultural system including Nuo temples, Nuo festivals, Nuo medicine and Nuo masks. However, a survey shows that contemporary college students have a low awareness of Jiangxi Nuo culture, and even those who know about it only have a superficial understanding.

Since 1980, with the deepening of China's reform and opening up, social structure and cultural ecology have undergone profound changes. Traditional Nuo culture has been impacted by modernization and multiculturalism, but it still shows strong vitality. As an important carrier of Jiangxi's regional culture, the development and change of Nuo culture is not only related to the inheritance of local cultural genes, but also provides a typical case for the study of the survival and development of traditional culture in the process of social transformation. Therefore, it is of great academic and practical significance to systematically study the development of Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo since 1980.

In recent years, along with the national strategic emphasis on the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, local governments in Jiangxi have also introduced a series of policies to support the development of Nuo culture, such as organizing Nuo culture festivals, establishing Nuo culture research bases, and incorporating Nuo

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culture into local tourism promotion. However, in the face of the rapid development of modern media and the diversified cultural needs of the public, especially the younger generation, the traditional inheritance and dissemination methods of Jiangxi Nuo culture are increasingly showing limitations. For example, the inheritance of Nuo dance and Nuo mask making still mainly relies on the oral and psychological teaching of individual inheritors, resulting in a slow inheritance speed and a narrow scope of influence. At the same time, the academic research on Jiangxi Nuo culture since 1980 is mostly focused on the collection and collation of historical materials and the description of cultural phenomena, while there is a lack of in-depth comparative studies on the development paths, inheritance mechanisms, and cultural connotation changes of different Nuo culture regions like Nanfeng and Shangli. There is also insufficient exploration of how Nuo culture adapts to the modern social context and achieves innovative development. Against this background, it is urgent to carry out a systematic and in-depth study on the development of Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo since 1980, so as to clarify their development context, analyze their current predicaments, and explore effective ways for their sustainable inheritance and innovative development. This will not only enrich the theoretical research results of Chinese traditional folk culture but also provide practical guidance for the protection and development of other intangible cultural heritage projects in the process of social transformation.

1.2 Research Questions

This study focuses on the following two core questions:

How have Nuo cultures (represented by Nuo dance and Nuo masks) in Nanfeng County and Shangli County developed and been inherited since 1980?

What impact does multiculturalism have on the traditional Nuo cultures in Nanfeng County and Shangli County, and what factors have contributed to the strong vitality of the two Nuo cultures?

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

To sort out the development context of Nuo culture in Nanfeng County and Shangli County since 1980, and analyze the evolution characteristics of Nuo dance and Nuo masks in terms of form, content and inheritance mode.

To explore the impact mechanism of multiculturalism on traditional Nuo culture, and reveal the internal logic of the integration of Nuo culture with Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and modern culture.

To summarize the successful experience and existing problems in the inheritance and development of Nuo culture in the two regions, and provide theoretical support and practical suggestions for the protection and innovation of intangible cultural heritage.

1.4 Research Methods

Literature analysis method: By consulting academic papers, monographs, local chronicles, cultural heritage reports and other documents, we systematically sort out the research results of Nuo culture at home and abroad, and lay a theoretical foundation for the study.

Field investigation method: Conduct on-site investigations in Nanchang China Nuo Garden, Nanfeng County Shiyou Village, Nanfeng Nuo Culture Museum, Shangli Nuo Culture Museum and other places, observe Nuo dance performances and Nuo mask production processes, and collect first-hand information.

Case study method: Taking Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo as typical cases, we conduct in-depth analysis of their cultural connotations, inheritance modes and development characteristics, and compare their differences and commonalities.

Interview method: Interview experts and scholars engaged in Nuo culture research, museum staff, Nuo dance inheritors and mask carvers to obtain valuable oral materials.

2. Overview of Jiangxi Nuo Culture and Its Development Context since 1980

2.1 Basic Characteristics of Jiangxi Nuo Culture

Jiangxi Nuo culture belongs to the southern Nuo culture genre with witchcraft and ghost beliefs as the core. It is a composite cultural form integrating sacrificial rituals, dance, masks, opera and other elements, with the core purpose of exorcising evil spirits and praying for peace. In terms of artistic expression, Jiangxi Nuo culture has distinct characteristics: the music retains the ancient ritual music system, mainly using percussion instruments such as gongs and drums to create a solemn atmosphere; the costumes inherit the traditional system such as "red conical cap" and "Zhu Shang", and integrate modern aesthetic elements; the props are rich and diverse, including weapons, legal instruments, lamps and candles, etc., extending the tradition of armed exorcism.

Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo, as the representatives of Jiangxi Nuo culture, have their own characteristics. Nanfeng Nuo dance is simple and vigorous, retaining more primitive cultural elements, with a broad mass base. There are more than 160 active Nuo troupes and more than 2,000 performers in the region. Shangli Nuo culture is deeply influenced by the cultures of Wu, Chu and Miao, with strong religious characteristics. Its Nuo masks are exquisite in carving, and the Nuo dance movements are beautiful and delicate, forming a unique "three treasures of Nuo culture" (Nuo temple, Nuo mask, Nuo dance).

2.2 Development Context of Jiangxi Nuo Culture since 1980

2.2.1 Recovery Period (1980-1999)

After the special historical period, with the relaxation of national cultural policies, Jiangxi Nuo culture ushered in a recovery period. Local governments began to pay attention to the protection of Nuo culture, and Nuo troupes that had been suspended were reactivated. Nanfeng County and Shangli County successively carried out Nuo dance performances and Nuo temple restoration work. During this period, Nuo culture gradually got rid of the label of "feudal superstition" and was recognized as a valuable traditional cultural resource.

However, this period also faced many challenges. The acceleration of urbanization led to the loss of rural population, and the younger generation was less willing to inherit Nuo culture, resulting in the aging of inheritors. At the same time, the influx of foreign cultures and modern entertainment forms made the audience of Nuo dance shrink, and the living space of traditional Nuo culture was squeezed. In terms of research, scholars mainly focused on the collation of historical origins and literature, and the research on the dynamic development of Nuo culture was insufficient.

2.2.2 Prosperous Period (2000-present)

Since the 21st century, with the continuous improvement of the national intangible cultural heritage protection system, Jiangxi Nuo culture has entered a prosperous period. In 2006, Nanfeng Nuo dance was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list, and in 2021, Shangli Nuo dance (playing Nuo God) was selected into the fifth batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. Local governments have increased policy support and financial investment, carried out activities such as "traditional Nuo culture entering campuses" and "Nuo culture exhibitions", and expanded the influence of Nuo culture.

In terms of cultural innovation, Nuo dance and Nuo masks have begun to integrate modern elements. For example, Nanfeng Nuo dance has incorporated opera and martial arts movements, and Shangli Nuo masks have simplified complex patterns to adapt to modern aesthetic needs. Some Nuo troupes have cooperated with art colleges and cultural institutions to carry out creative practices such as Nuo dance dramas, which have enhanced the appeal of Nuo culture among young people. In terms of academic research, the focus has shifted to the innovation and inheritance of Nuo culture, and scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on the living inheritance mechanism and cultural ecological protection of Nuo dance.

3. Comparative Analysis of the Development of Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo since 1980

3.1 Differences in Cultural Inheritance

3.1.1 Inheritance Mode

Nanfeng Nuo mainly adopts the family inheritance mode. Taking the Wu family in Shiyou Village as a representative, Nuo cultural skills are passed down from generation to generation within the family. Family members are influenced by Nuo culture since childhood, and learn Nuo rituals, dances and mask making skills under the guidance of elders. This inheritance mode has strong stability and continuity, and effectively retains the original features of Nuo culture.

Shangli Nuo mainly relies on the master-apprentice inheritance mode. Nuo artists recruit apprentices from outside the family and teach Nuo dance basic movements, rhythm and mask carving techniques step by step. This mode breaks the limitations of family inheritance, expands the scope of inheritance, and makes Nuo culture more widely spread. However, it also faces the problem of uneven inheritance quality due to differences in apprentices' qualifications and learning attitudes.

3.1.2 Inheritance Content

Nanfeng Nuo attaches great importance to the inheritance of traditional rituals and dance movements. The core links of Nuo ceremonies such as "Shang Nuo", "Tiao Nuo" and "Yuan Nuo" have been well preserved, and the dance movements retain the simplicity and solemnity of ancient times. In terms of mask making, it adheres to the traditional nine-step process, using willow and camphor wood as raw materials, and the masks are simple and powerful.

Shangli Nuo pays more attention to the integration and innovation of inheritance content. On the basis of retaining traditional religious rituals, it incorporates local folk art elements such as opera and music, and the Nuo dance movements are more diverse and ornamental. The mask making absorbs the essence of Song Dynasty carving techniques, focusing on hollowing out and symmetrical composition, and the themes are more abundant, including Taoist gods, historical heroes and other images.

3.2 Differences in Religious Connotation and Social Functions

3.2.1 Religious Connotation

Nanfeng Nuo takes sacrificing to Nuo God as the core, and integrates the beliefs of historical figures and folk gods. Its religious connotation is relatively secularized, and it mainly focuses on exorcising ghosts and epidemics, praying for a good harvest and family peace. The Nuo ceremony procedures are relatively simple, and the religious atmosphere is not as strong as that of Shangli Nuo.

Shangli Nuo is deeply influenced by Taoism, Buddhism and Miao ethnic culture, and has a strong religious nature and ritual sense. The Nuo temples enshrine the "Three Yuan Emperors" and other gods, and the ceremony procedures are complex and solemn. It not only inherits the function of exorcising evil spirits and praying for blessings, but also contains the ethical concepts of the relationship between humans, gods and ghosts, reflecting a more primitive religious belief.

3.2.2 Social Functions

The social function of Nanfeng Nuo is mainly reflected in entertainment and community cohesion. During the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival, Nuo troupes perform in villages, which not only brings entertainment to villagers, but also strengthens the emotional connection between villagers and maintains the stability of rural communities. With the development of tourism, Nanfeng Nuo has gradually become a cultural resource for local tourism development, promoting economic development.

Shangli Nuo combines religious functions with social functions. In addition to being a folk entertainment activity, it also undertakes the functions of inheriting traditional ethics and maintaining social order. The Nuo ceremony emphasizes respect for ancestors and gods, which helps to inherit traditional moral concepts. At the same

time, the large-scale Nuo activities attract people from inside and outside the county to participate, promoting cultural exchange and integration.

3.3 Impact of Multiculturalism

Since 1980, multiculturalism has had a profound impact on Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo. On the one hand, the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism has enriched the cultural connotation of Nuo culture. Confucian etiquette concepts have standardized the procedures of Nuo ceremonies; Taoist spells and rituals have enhanced the mysterious atmosphere of Nuo culture; Buddhist compassion and karma ideas have been integrated into Nuo dance repertoires.

On the other hand, modern culture and foreign cultures have brought both challenges and opportunities. The popularity of modern entertainment forms such as films, television and the Internet has led to a decline in the attention of the younger generation to Nuo culture. However, the influx of foreign cultures has also broadened the vision of Nuo culture inheritors. They have absorbed modern art elements and innovated Nuo dance forms and mask designs, making Nuo culture more in line with the aesthetic needs of contemporary people.

4. Challenges and Countermeasures for the Inheritance and Development of Jiangxi Nuo Culture

4.1 Facing Challenges

4.1.1 Lack of Inheritors

The aging of Nuo culture inheritors is a serious problem. Most of the current inheritors are over 50 years old, and the younger generation is less willing to engage in Nuo culture inheritance due to factors such as low economic income and long learning cycles. The lack of young inheritors has led to the risk of loss of some exquisite skills.

In many rural areas where Nuo culture thrives, young people tend to migrate to cities in search of betterpaying jobs and more diverse development opportunities. The traditional Nuo performances, which often require years of dedicated practice to master the complex movements, facial makeup techniques, and ritual procedures, cannot compete with the quick financial returns offered by urban employment. As a result, the number of young people willing to stay in their hometowns and commit to learning Nuo culture has significantly decreased. For example, in some Nuo opera troupes in Guizhou Province, there are only a handful of members under the age of 40, and even these few often struggle to balance their passion for Nuo culture with the need to support their families. Additionally, the oral nature of much of Nuo culture's inheritance means that knowledge and skills are passed down directly from master to apprentice. With fewer young apprentices, the precious experiences and insights accumulated by elderly inheritors over decades are at risk of being lost forever once they pass away. Some unique Nuo masks with intricate carvings and symbolic meanings, as well as specific drum rhythms that accompany the performances, are already on the verge of disappearing because there are no young people capable of replicating or performing them accurately.

4.1.2 Weak Innovation Ability

Although some innovations have been made in Nuo culture, there are still problems such as single innovation form and insufficient depth. Some innovative works overemphasize modern elements and ignore the core connotation of Nuo culture, resulting in the loss of traditional cultural characteristics. At the same time, the innovation of Nuo culture is lack of professional guidance and market operation, and it is difficult to form a sustainable development model.

4.1.3 Insufficient Protection and Promotion

The protection of Nuo cultural resources is not in place. Some ancient Nuo temples and Nuo cultural relics are damaged due to insufficient maintenance funds. In terms of promotion, the publicity channels of Nuo culture are

relatively single, mainly relying on traditional cultural activities and museum exhibitions, and the use of new media for publicity is not sufficient, resulting in low public awareness of Nuo culture.

4.2 Development Countermeasures

4.2.1 Strengthen the Training of Inheritors

Establish a multi-level inheritance training system. Cooperate with local colleges and universities to set up Nuo culture-related courses, cultivate professional talents in Nuo dance performance, mask carving and cultural research. Provide subsidies and preferential policies for young inheritors to improve their enthusiasm for inheritance. Organize exchange activities between inheritors to promote the exchange and inheritance of skills.

4.2.2 Promote Cultural Innovation on the Basis of Tradition

Adhere to the principle of "innovation without losing the original", and carry out Nuo culture innovation under the premise of retaining core cultural connotations. Integrate modern art forms such as modern dance, digital media and stage art to create Nuo cultural works with the characteristics of the times. Develop Nuo cultural and creative products, such as Nuo mask souvenirs, Nuo dance-themed cultural and creative designs, and expand the industrial chain of Nuo culture.

However, the current innovation practice of Nuo culture still shows obvious limitations. On the one hand, the integration of modern art forms is often superficial and form-oriented. For example, some Nuo dance performances simply add a few modern dance moves or use digital projection as a background, failing to deeply explore the spiritual core of Nuo culture and the emotional resonance with modern audiences. The combination becomes patchwork, making the works lack cultural depth and artistic appeal. On the other hand, the development of cultural and creative products is also trapped in homogenization and low-level replication. Most Nuo mask souvenirs are just imitations of traditional mask styles with simple processing, lacking unique design concepts and creative elements that meet the aesthetic needs and consumption preferences of modern people. The cultural and creative designs themed on Nuo dance are also mostly limited to simple pattern printing on daily necessities, failing to 挖掘 the cultural symbols and stories behind Nuo dance and integrate them into product design in an innovative way, resulting in products with low added value and weak market competitiveness. In addition, there is a lack of professional talents who are proficient in both Nuo culture and modern innovation concepts and technologies. The innovation team is often composed of either traditional cultural inheritors who have insufficient understanding of modern market demands and creative methods, or modern designers who lack in-depth knowledge of Nuo culture, leading to difficulties in achieving effective integration and deep innovation in the innovation process.

4.2.3 Improve Protection and Promotion Measures

Increase financial investment in the protection of Nuo cultural resources, strengthen the maintenance and restoration of Nuo temples, Nuo cultural relics and other material carriers. Establish a digital protection database of Nuo culture, and record and preserve Nuo dance movements, mask making techniques and other non-material cultural heritage resources. Expand publicity channels, use new media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin and TikTok to carry out online publicity and promotion, and hold Nuo culture festivals and international cultural exchange activities to enhance the influence of Nuo culture.

However, the current innovation in Nuo culture remains at a relatively superficial level, with most efforts focusing on simple adaptations of traditional forms rather than in-depth integration with modern aesthetic trends and public demand. For example, some Nuo mask designs only make minor adjustments to color and shape, failing to incorporate contemporary artistic elements or storytelling techniques that resonate with younger generations. In terms of content creation, the themes of Nuo performances are still largely confined to traditional mythological stories, lacking exploration of modern social issues or personal emotions, which makes it difficult for young audiences to establish an emotional connection. Additionally, there is a shortage of professional talent teams specializing in Nuo culture innovation, especially those who possess both a deep understanding of traditional Nuo culture and proficiency in modern cultural creativity, marketing, and digital technology. This leads to a disconnect between the protection and inheritance of Nuo culture and the needs of the market and society, resulting in limited appeal and sustainable development momentum for innovative Nuo cultural products and activities.

4. Conclusion

Since 1980, Nanfeng Nuo and Shangli Nuo in Jiangxi Province have experienced the development process of recovery and prosperity under the background of social transformation and multicultural integration. While retaining their core cultural connotations, they have continuously integrated with modern culture, showing strong vitality. There are differences between the two in inheritance mode, religious connotation and social function: Nanfeng Nuo mainly relies on family inheritance, with relatively secularized religious connotation and prominent entertainment function; Shangli Nuo mainly adopts master-apprentice inheritance, with strong religious nature and combines religious functions with social functions.

Multiculturalism has both positive and negative impacts on Jiangxi Nuo culture. It enriches the cultural connotation of Nuo culture and brings challenges such as the impact of modern entertainment and the lack of inheritors. To promote the sustainable development of Jiangxi Nuo culture, it is necessary to strengthen the training of inheritors, carry out cultural innovation on the basis of tradition, and improve protection and promotion measures.

The development experience of Jiangxi Nuo culture provides important enlightenment for the inheritance and protection of national intangible cultural heritage. Traditional culture can only achieve sustainable development by adapting to the needs of the times, integrating with modern culture, and balancing inheritance and innovation. In the future, it is necessary to further strengthen the research on Nuo culture, explore more scientific and effective inheritance and development paths, and make Nuo culture play a more important role in the construction of regional culture and cultural confidence.

It is hoped that the relevant departments and social organizations can pay more attention to the protection and inheritance of Nuo culture, increase investment in resources, create a better development environment for Nuo culture, and let this precious intangible cultural heritage shine more brilliantly in the new era. At the same time, it is also expected that more young people will be attracted to join the team of inheriting and developing Nuo culture, inject new vitality into it, and jointly promote the prosperity and development of Chinese traditional culture.

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