

Research on the Reconstruction of the Cultural Significance and Stage Practice of the Huangni Drum Dance of the Yao Ethnic Group in Guangxi, China

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Abstract: As a national intangible cultural heritage of China in Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, Guangxi, the Huangni Drum Dance is deeply rooted in ritual contexts such as the worship of Pan Wang and funeral blessings, carrying multiple cultural significances including religious symbols, community memories, and ethnic identity. However, under the dual background of tourism development and the productive protection of intangible cultural heritage, the Huangni Drum Dance is undergoing a profound transformation from ritual to stage performance. Based on field research in Jinxiu County, this study explores the mechanism of cultural meaning reconstruction and the operational logic of stage performance during this transformation process. Firstly, the article restores the ritual context of the Huangni Drum Dance, revealing its symbolic system and meaning structure. Secondly, it classifies the stage performance into three types: original display, adapted performance, and educational exhibition, and analyzes their reconstruction paths in terms of time, space, personnel, and narrative dimensions. Then, it examines from the aspects of meaning selection, translation, and recreation which traditional connotations are strengthened or weakened, and how new meanings are generated. Finally, it focuses on the core tension between ritual, performance, and commerciality, and investigates the adaptation strategies of inheritors and local communities between “authenticity” and market logic, including stratified performance, retention of ritual bottom lines, and income feedback mechanisms. The research shows that the stage performance of the Huangni Drum Dance is not a simple cultural distortion, but a selective reproduction of meaning and the construction of a composite text.

Keywords: Huangni drum dance; Ritual reconstruction; Stage practice

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1. The original context and cultural significance of the Huangni Drum Dance

The Huangni Drum Dance is mainly distributed in the six villages and Xiangxiang Town of Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County in Guangxi Province. It is a highly distinctive long drum dance of the Yao ethnic

group and was listed as one of the third batch of national intangible cultural heritages in China in 2011. The Huangni Drum Dance is the core content of the Yao ethnic group's sacrificial activities to Panwang ^[1]. The performance of the Huangni Drum Dance runs through the entire "Returning Panwang's Prayer" ritual. The sacrificial activities are usually held after the autumn harvest and can be independently organized by one village or jointly by several villages, or even by individual households. The Panwang sacrificial ceremony itself has a complete set of ritual procedures, including offering sacrifices, chanting scriptures, inviting deities, and sending off deities. The Huangni Drum Dance is not only an important means of entertaining the deities but also a key carrier for uniting the community and conveying ancestral memories.

From the perspective of the performance program, the Huangni Drum Dance has its fixed structural characteristics. The Huangni Drum Dance is divided into male drums and female drums. The male drum has a slender waist, while the female drum has a thick and short waist. Before playing the drum, the drum skin must be smeared with the yellow mud from the Greater Yao Mountain to tune the pitch. Therefore, the Huangni Drum Dance is named for this reason. The dance is centered around the female drum, with the male drum circling the female drum. The drum beats of the female drum control the rhythm of the entire dance, so the person playing the female drum is usually an old artist in the village, while the male drum plays in harmony with the rhythm of the female drum. The drummer's steps are steady and forceful, with a relatively small stride, often characterized by a "pause after each step" ^[2]. While playing the drum dance, a singer leads the young girls in wearing festival costumes to sing the Panwang song, and the bamboo leaf is played in between. The content of the songs is mostly about reflecting the origin of ancestors and labor life.

Furthermore, from the multiple dimensions of cultural significance, the Huangni Drum Dance carries three functions: religious, social, and historical. In the religious dimension, it is a ritual dance used to communicate with deities and drive away evil spirits during the Panwang sacrifice, and it is the most visually impactful part of the entire "Returning Panwang's Prayer" activity. In the social dimension, the inheritance and performance of the Huangni Drum Dance is the centripetal force of the village community, and the process of passing on the drum skills from elders to young people is also a practice of intergenerational transmission of ethnic culture. In the historical dimension, the drum sounds and dance postures condense the migration memories and heroic narratives of the Yao ethnic ancestors, making this traditional dance not only a current ritual performance but also a body-written ethnic history. The Huangni Drum Dance embodies the traditional style, living habits, ethnic psychology, ethnic customs, and ethnic aesthetics of the Yao people, and is a symbolic cultural symbol of the Yao people.

2. Types and reconstruction paths of stage-based practices

As traditional rituals moved to public stages, the contemporary performance forms of Huangni Drum Dance became increasingly diverse. Different types of stage-based practices vary in their performance motivations, audience positioning, and performance methods, collectively forming the basic picture of the contemporary revitalization of Huangni Drum Dance. Nowadays, ethnic musical instruments frequently make it onto the hot search list and have achieved a "comeback". Therefore, as the precious intangible cultural heritage of Jinxiu, the golden mud drum can utilize the "Internet +" model to accelerate the construction of an open digital platform for sharing the Jinxiu intangible cultural heritage of the Huangni Drum Dance ^[3].

The festival performance type is the most influential stage-based form of Huangni Drum Dance, mainly relying on large-scale festival events such as Panwang Festival, Chudianhua Festival, and Harvest Festival.

During the Panwang Festival in 2025, Jinxiu County held an opening ceremony and a blessing ceremony at the Yao Du Square. Huangni Drum Dance and Yao ethnic butterfly songs appeared on the same stage, attracting tourists from home and abroad to participate. In the Panwang Song Performance, representatives from various regions of China brought unique singing styles from different regions, integrating modern elements into traditional programs, thus rejuvenating this ethnic traditional festival. In the Farmers' Harvest Festival activities, villagers from Luoyun Village also celebrated the abundant harvest of crops and sweet tea through forms such as "Huangni Drum Dance". The characteristic of this type of performance is its large scale, wide audience, and strong festival atmosphere. In such occasions, Huangni Drum Dance mainly carries out functions of cultural display and ethnic identity.

Another type is the tourism area-based performance. It is the most market-oriented practice form of Huangni Drum Dance. Guzhan Yao Village is hailed as the living museum of folk customs in the Greater Yao Mountain area. Tourists can enjoy original ecological Yao ethnic dance performances and experience folk activities such as bonfire parties. Yao World Tourist Resort integrates folk experience and ecological sightseeing. The Panwang Sacrifice Performance in the Greater Yao Mountain Panwang Boundary Scenic Area is staged regularly every day and Yao ethnic representatives wear ethnic costumes and dance in step, showcasing the hospitality of the Yao people. This type of performance has formed a regular operation model and has become an important part of the cultural and tourism integration in Jinxiu County. Under the guidance of the rural revitalization strategy, Shangguan Chen Village ingeniously combines Huangni Drum Dance with rural tourism. The villagers form professional performance teams and wear Yao ethnic costumes, attracting tourists with their graceful dance and powerful drum beats.

In addition, community daily performances retain the original essence of Huangni Drum Dance, mainly including daily rehearsals at the cultural heritage bases, self-developed performances in villages, and campus inheritance activities. In Xiaoguanchen Village, the performance of Huangni Drum Dance still retains a relatively traditional form. Five villagers dance along with the singing, four villagers carry the public drum and constantly change their positions, placing a mother drum in the center and striking the drum surface coated with Huangni mud to produce sounds. At the Jinxiu County Ethnic Primary School, students practice the simplified version of Huangni Drum Dance on the playground, allowing the dance to take root and grow in their hearts. Chinese national-level inheritor Pan Jinhai corrects the movements of young students step by step, and the inheritance work has continued from the village to the campus. Moreover, Liuxiang Township's Liuxiang Village, as a well-known "Huangni Drum Dance Village", features the splendid appearance of Huangni Drum Dance and other dances during every festival event. It not only showcases the rich ethnic style but also attracts a large number of tourists to watch.

3. Reconstruction of cultural significance: Screening, transliteration and recreation

The traditional significance system of Huangni Drum Dance has undergone active or passive reconstruction as it moves from the ritual field to the stage-based product. This is mainly achieved through two mechanisms: screening and transliteration. At the level of significance screening, the contents that are strengthened and retained focus on ethnic identity symbols and celebratory welcoming imagery: the collective prayer scene at the opening ceremony of the Panwang Festival elevated Huangni Drum Dance from the village ritual to the representative cultural symbol of the entire Yao ethnic group. Meanwhile, the solemn atmosphere in

traditional sacrificial ceremonies was transformed into themes such as harvest joy and ethnic unity, which were characterized by lively and cheerful narratives. At the same time, the specific religious sacrificial connotations, strict gender and identity taboos, as well as the sacredness of communicating with ancestors, were deliberately weakened or even deleted due to their difficulty for tourists to understand or conflicts with the stage atmosphere. At the level of significance transliteration, the symbolic system and interpretive framework underwent cross-cultural transformation: the drum sound of Huangni Drum Dance was reconstructed from a sacred medium that calls upon deities into an aesthetic object for rhythm appreciation, and the yin yang symbolism of the male and female drums was simplified to the formal beauty of the coordination of high and low pitches. The traditional protective function of the dancers' costumes was translated into the visual display of ethnic style; the scenic area host introduced Huangni Drum Dance as "the traditional dance welcoming distant guests", attaching the meaning of welcoming to it through meta-narrative, thereby completing the reconstruction of the interpretive framework.

In addition to screening and transliteration, the stage-based practice has also given rise to completely new meaning dimensions that did not exist in the traditional rituals, achieving meaning recreation. First, the cultural card meaning: Huangni Drum Dance has been systematically shaped as the core symbol of cultural integration in Jinxiu County, playing a representative role in official publicity and external exchanges. Second, the heritage value meaning: after becoming a national intangible cultural heritage, Huangni Drum Dance gained the new identity of needing protection as a precious heritage, and the heritage discourse endowed it with scarcity and the necessity of inheritance. Third, the consumption experience meaning: in the tourism market, Huangni Drum Dance is packaged as an original ecological cultural experience, providing tourists with an aesthetic illusion of "other cultures" that conforms to their imagination. This experience itself becomes the core value of consumption. In summary, the interweaving of screening, transliteration and recreation has expanded the significance structure of Huangni Drum Dance from a single religious and community dimension to a composite significance system that includes ethnic symbols, aesthetic objects, heritage resources and tourism products. This reconstruction is both an inevitable choice to meet the demands of the stage-based practice and lays the foundation for subsequent discussions on the tension between ritualism and commercialism.

4. Tension and adjustment: The battle among ritualism, performance, and commodification

During the transformation of Huangni Drum Dance from a ritual to a product, it has always been confronted with the inherent tension among three attributes: ritualism points to the sacred, tradition, and the boundaries of the community; performance points to viewing, aesthetics, and audience acceptance; and commodification points to the market, benefits, and consumption logic. This battle among the three elements runs through all aspects of the stage-based practice and has also given rise to various adjustment mechanisms. Due to various factors such as geographical location and the performance venue, the number of audience members who can enjoy the Huangni Drum (a type of drum) performance each time is limited, making it difficult to achieve the goal of spreading more Huangni Drum Dance culture to the outside world ^[4].

The tension between ritualism and performance is the most prominent. The traditional Huangni Drum Dance was dedicated to the religious purpose of "Returning King Wang's Wishes", with strict norms for movements, drum beats, and lyrics that could not be changed at will. However, for stage performances aimed

at achieving an entertaining effect, the duration had to be shortened, the rhythm intensified, and formations varied, and even lighting and stage effects were added. The inheritors hoped to maintain the “original flavor”, but they also knew that presenting it on stage in its original form would make visitors feel bored. An interviewed old artist said, “Dancing for an hour according to the old rules, the tourists would leave early; but if it were too flashy, they would be afraid that the ancestors wouldn’t recognize it.” This dilemma is a true reflection of the tension between ritual norms and performance needs.

The tension between ritualism and commercialism is more fundamental. Huangni Drum Dance originally was a sacred practice within the community with exclusivity and nontransactiveness; but once it became a tourism product, it had to be subject to the dictates of market logic. The performance time had to be adjusted to match the itinerary of tour groups, the content had to be tested for visitor satisfaction and the labor of the inheritors was converted into performance compensation. When a manager said, “Tourists like excitement, then add more interactive elements, and don’t do those things like chanting and worshipping gods,” the contradiction between ritualism and commercialism was exposed. The relationship between performance and commercialism is not entirely consistent. High-level performance seeks artistic integrity and cultural depth, while commercialism often tends towards fast food and fragmented highlights. Some scenic areas have broken down Huangni Drum Dance into several “check-in” segments such as drumming, circling, and dancing, which, although they increase visitor participation, undermine the artistic logic of the entire dance as a whole.

In response to these tensions, various actors have developed multiple adjustment mechanisms. Layered performances are the most common strategy: retain a relatively complete ritual process in official occasions like the Panwang Festival, and present it to scholars or cultural officials; adopt a highly simplified version in daily performances in scenic areas, and present it to ordinary tourists. This “one performance for two purposes” approach partially caters to the expectations of different audiences. The retention of ritual bottom lines is another important strategy. Some inheritors insist on adding a minimalist sacrificial ceremony before each stage performance; although it lasts only a few seconds, it is regarded as a symbolic marker of “cultural authenticity”, used to soothe the ritual anxiety in their hearts.

The income feedback mechanism alleviates the tension at the material level. The economic benefits from stage performances are partially used to support traditional rituals within the village, purchase offerings, repair ancestral halls, and hold the real “Returning King Wang’s Wishes”. This forms a virtuous cycle: commercialization not only does not eliminate the ritual but provides an economic foundation for its continuation. Some young people are willing to systematically learn traditional drum techniques because of the income from performing Huangni Drum Dance in the scenic area, objectively promoting intergenerational inheritance.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study conducted a systematic examination of the transformation of Huangni Drum Dance from its ritual domain to a stage-based product in Jinsu Yao Autonomous County of Guangxi. It revealed that this process is not a simple loss or alienation in the traditional sense, but rather a complex selective reconstruction and reproduction. In the original ritual context, Huangni Drum Dance fulfilled three functions: religious sacrifice, community cohesion, and historical memory. It was the physical practice of the Yao people to communicate

with deities and pass on clan memory. After entering the contemporary performance context, its meaning system underwent selection, translation, and reproduction: the ethnic identity symbols and festive welcoming imagery were strengthened, the religious sacrifice connotation and gender taboos were weakened, the sacredness of the drum sound was translated into aestheticity, and new meanings such as cultural brand, heritage value, and consumption experience were created. The resulting composite meaning system enables Huangni Drum Dance to simultaneously carry traditional remnants, ethnic identity, artistic aesthetics, and commercial functions.

The contemporary revitalization of Huangni Drum Dance has formed three coexisting stage-based forms: festival performance type, tourist attraction type, and community daily life type. These three types correspond to different functional positioning of cultural display, market operation, and grassroots inheritance. During this process, the internal tension among the three elements of ritualism, performance, and commercialism runs through. The dilemma of the inheritors, the market logic of the scenic area operation, and the consumption expectations of tourists continuously engage in a game. However, the tension is not irreconcilable: the mechanisms of stratified performance, retention of ritual bottom lines, and income feedback indicate that moderate commercialization will not necessarily lead to the disappearance of rituals, but may provide an economic foundation and generational impetus for their continuation. The practice in Jinsu County shows that when the stage-based benefits are partially returned to the holding of traditional rituals, a virtuous cycle of “product nourishing rituals” is formed.

Based on the above conclusions, this study proposes the following recommendations: First, establish a dual track parallel mechanism for ritual protection and product development, clearly distinguishing the core ritual protection area from the stage based product development area; second, enhance the meta narrative ability of inheritors, enabling them to master the strategy of embedding key cultural symbols in stage performances; third, design experiential participation projects for tourists, forming an advanced path from watching stage performances to participating in simplified rituals, while meeting consumption demands and conveying cultural depth. The case of Huangni Drum Dance indicates that the contemporary revitalization of cultural heritage is not a zero-sum game between authenticity and commercialization, but a process of seeking dynamic balance in multiple power negotiations. This discovery has important theoretical value and practical implications for the protection, inheritance, and rational utilization of intangible cultural heritage in ethnic regions of China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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