

Original Paper

Charm of Nuo—Nuo Opera “Dongdongtui” of Dong Minority

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Abstract

“Dongdongtui”, a kind of original sacrificial Nuo opera, was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage protection list in 2006. It only exists in Tianjing village, Xinhuang Dong autonomous county, Hunan province. Previously, the researchers only focused on the study of the intangible cultural heritage value of “Dongdongtui” and the exploration of its inheritance and development. However, due to the internal and external resistance, the government has not achieved good results in the implementation of the action, and the people with insight are unable to protect it. The national inheritor is 90 years old. His disciples are not capable enough to take up the mantle. There are few new students, and the influence of “Dongdongtui” is very limited in the region. “Dongdongtui” is spiritually lack of attraction, penetration, social acceptance and so on. It is facing with a dilemma of inheritance and development. Based on these, we went to the village and got close to “Dongdongtui”, personally felt the charm of masks, costumes and performances, and inquired about its value. Finally, combining with local geography, culture and tourism resources, we tried to propose a new region-wide tourism strategy which is suitable for the development of “Dongdongtui”.

Keywords

Wu culture, Nuo culture, Dong minority, “Dongdongtui”, region-wide tourism

1. Introduction

Wu culture is a regional culture which has a form of astrology and augury. It includes fishing and hunting method and its results in the middle and late paleolithic period dominated by animism and totem worship. In the agricultural age, Wu culture evolved into Nuo culture. Nuo culture is an advanced Wu culture, a lifestyle dominated by the concept of god Nuo, a polytheistic belief system and a behavioral system based on the worship of god, and a comprehensive activity of enshrining god Nuo in the process of farming. This article mainly introduces the ancient and legendary Dong Nuo opera “Dongdongtui” in southwest China. “Dongdongtui” is one kind of Nuo opera with unique feature, which is popular in Tianjing village, Gongxi township, Xinhuang Dong minority autonomous county in the border area of Hunan province and Guizhou province. “Dongdongtui” is the result of the long-term historical accumulation of Chinese primitive farming civilization in the Dong minority, and it specifically reflects the ancient customs of agricultural production and sacrificial activities. It has a unique national feature and strong characteristic of primitive farming culture. It is mysterious and peculiar, bold and unrestrained, plain and unadorned. These features show the original nature, mysticism, uniqueness, simplicity, boldness and uninhibitedness, harmony and other remarkable characteristics, highlighting the particular charm of Nuo.

1.1 Background of Nuo Culture

The Dong culture is full of gods. Dong people are amazed by the various phenomena of nature, such as the sound of wind, rain, thunder and lightning, the burning in the forest, the running of the sun and moon, the growth of animals and plants, the transformation of cloud and rainbow and so on. That kind of amazement cannot be explained, so they consider those phenomena as kind of soul-carried things just like themselves, and call them gods. They worshipped not only the sun and the moon, but all manners of animals and plants, and even things as small as grasshoppers. These deities are influencing people's existence and development all the time, and thus forming a system of Wu cultural concepts which include revering ghosts and praying for gods.

Triggered by the instinct of survival, cultural form of nature and god worship, animism and its original myth are the first appearance in the history of Dong minority. The appearance of new culture form marked the beginning of Dong people emphasizing “will existence”—transforming from unconscious ignorance to conscious half-civilized state, from in-itself existence to for-itself existence. Nature worship, pantheism and its primitive mythology were born in the childhood of human beings. Thinking over questions of the universe, nature and human is the important content of ontology philosophy. The emergence of the new culture form marks the beginning of the separation of human beings from the natural world without distinction, so as to find a cultural form of human will. This separation is the first milestone in the development history of human culture.

In the agricultural age, Wu culture evolved into Nuo culture. Nuo culture is an advanced stage in the development of Wu culture. The practical basis formed by the original collection, fishing and hunting work gradually transferred to farming work. It produces a series of obvious changes in the way of work, the concept of gods, the objects of sacrificial activity, the method of sacrificial activity, the content of prayer and so on. The object of labor shifts from natural beings to small areas of land. Working conditions changed from relying on dense forests, grasslands, fowls, beasts and numerous aquatic animals to relying on good weather and free from disasters and epidemics. Pantheism that dominated people developed into monotheism.

In the Nuo culture of Dong minority in west Hunan province, gods are named “Father Nuo” and “Mother Nuo”. The worship mode for the gods formed a “god Nuo system” centering on monotheism, with the worship becoming routinizing, divining becoming standardized, sacrifice becoming formalizing, activities becoming entertaining. The organizations, specialized places and full-time personnel for sacrificial activity gradually appeared, and formed a wide variety of Nuo culture among people, countryside, troops, temples and large-scale palaces. The purpose of worship is diverse, in addition to frighten off the ghosts and disease, to avoid hard disasters, it includes inviting god (As a classic clip “Land Jumping” shows, farmers pray for the Earth God to get rid of disasters, in the end, it comes true.), entertaining god (In a classic “Dongdongtui” episode “An amusing bodhisattva”, a story goes: On the top of Mount Dingtian, with the declining on tourists number, a Bodhisattva finally has nothing to live on, so he asks someone to carry him down the mountain and find another place to live. He then moves to “Lion cave”, but is still not satisfied. Finally, the bodhisattva takes the people on his back and keeps going on the way of migration.), thanking god and praying for good weather and good harvests, etc. These changes make Nuo culture become a system of cultural ideas and a systematic and orderly process of operation, making it a universal social activity from the court to people. This kind of activity integrates production, life, sacrifice, entertainment and education and becomes a comprehensive activity mode for people.

1.2 The Geographic Background

Xinhuang Dong autonomous county is located in the westernmost part of Hunan province, on the “nose tip” of Hunan’s “human head” shaped territory, in the middle stream of wushui river which is a tributary of Yuanshui river. It has a long history, and was called as “Huang state” or “Huang county”. According to archaeological findings, 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, there were human beings living and reproducing in Xinhuang. During the Qin and Han dynasties, it was located in Yelang state. It was called Yelang county in the Tang and Song dynasties, existing for 287 years. After that, it was successively governed by Lu Yan, Yuan zhou (Note 1) and so on. However, the county is always an important place on the border of Hunan and Guizhou province. Profound cultural was accumulated in Yelang, so Mr. Fei Xiaotong (Note 2) praise it as “楚尾黔首夜郎根” (Note 3).

The ancient hamlet of Tianjing village is located in Silu village, Gongxi Township, Xinhuang county. It is on the north side of the Mount Dingtian at the border of Hunan and Guizhou province, which is at the end of the Miaoling mountains on the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau. It is about 27 degrees north latitude and 108 degrees east longitude, and has an altitude of 650 to 700 meters. It is 2 kilometers away from Gongxi township government and 48 kilometers away from Xinhuang county seat. Old residents of Tianjing village take agricultural civilization as the background, paying attention to ecological environment and landscape pattern according to the needs of production and life, giving full play to their artistic talent, and create the ancient village with diverse culture and rich characteristics. Despite hardships and wars, it has been preserved till now and become a precious cultural heritage. It has gradually formed the basic pattern of “primitive architecture, profound culture and mellow folk customs”.

During the evolution of Nuo culture, the historical profundity and cultural accumulation of Xinhuang Dong autonomous county and the unique topography of Tianjing village provide the abundant cultural soil and geographical advantages for the evolution and development of the migration of Nuo opera “Dongdongtui”. Therefore, the uniqueness of “Dongdongtui” is engraved with the exclusive brand of Xinhuang village.

2. The Basic Features of “Dongdongtui” of Nuo Opera

First of all, the whole process of “Dongdongtui” is not mainly performed by means of singing, but in the process of jumping, and therefore it is also known as “jumping opera”. “Land Jumping” is the most important play of “Dongdongtui”, which conveys the agricultural culture of ancient Dong people. The origin of farming lies in the land, thus was born the Earth God. The “Tianjin” area is full of particularly designed temples. The earth temple among the fields and land is often made of three stones. Farmers hope to receive the blessings of the Earth God and the gift of a good harvest. “Land Jumping” shows the pious prayer of peasants and the generous gift of the Earth God by a dialogue between peasants and the Earth God.

Secondly, although the ethnic minorities are now deeply Sinicized (tend to be in line with the Han nationality’s value), the language used in Dong’s performance is still Dong’s own language—Dong language. The music of Dong Nuo opera “Dongdongtui” is mostly local Dong folk songs, such as Gaaliu, Gaxiao, folk songs and so developed. Commonly used are Yo-yo music, Stone music which is also called Miao music, Chant music, Base song, and a variety of folk songs.

Thirdly, unlike other Nuo operas, the actors who perform “Dongdongtui” are not wizards, but ordinary local people who want to learn how to perform.

In addition, the god worshiped by “Dongdongtui” is different from other kinds of Nuo operas. Other Nuo operas usually consecrate gods such as the holy god of Dongshan mountain and the holy god of

Nanshan mountain, but “Dongdongtui” worship Pangu, the hero who created human and the national hero Yang Zaisi in the history of Dong. “Dongdongtui” is developed from religious sacrifice. Theoretically, the plays performed should be more about promoting various gods and worshipping wizards, but the reality is that there are many plays in “Dongdongtui” that suppress witch and praise medicine, from which we can see some simple materialist thoughts of Dong ancestors.

3. The Ancient and Magical Active Beauty of “Dongdongtui”

3.1 Mask

3.1.1 The Process of Making a Mask

“Dongdongtui” mask is made from local material Nanmu (Note 4) after a tedious process.



Figure 1. Steps of Making Masks

- 1) Saw down the Nanmu
- 2) Intermediate to split
- 3) Take a half and make a mask
- 4) Cut the blank
- 5) Chisel blank
- 6) Digging concave hole
- 7) Rough carving
- 8) Meticulous carving
- 9) Scrape the back of the mask
- 10) Coloring
- 11) Japanning
- 12) Some Dong masks

3.1.2 The Beauty of Masks' Color

Colors of the masks are mainly yellow, red, black and white, with blue and green as auxiliary colors.

Table 1. The Connotation of Mask Color

	A status symbol	Personality traits	Foil atmosphere
Yellow	Supremacy and dignity	Calm, diplomatic, faithful, earnest	Solemnity, tranquility, and harmony
Red	Holding power, especially military power	Loyal and brave, rigorous and strict, self-discipline and strict	Serious, warm, cheerful, lively
Black	Subordination	Ferocity, simplicity, frankness or roughness, ferocity, evil, etc	Conflict and contradiction
White	Distinguished	Simple, kind, quiet, talented or cunning	Cold, clean, or peaceful
Blue	powerless	Insidious, rebellious	Vagrant and rough
Green	free	Stubborn, straightforward, chivalrous	Self-reliance, and harmony



Figure 2. Masks

The color beauty of Nuo masks can be divided into two patterns. One is a sheer color beauty, such as bright red color: Father Nuo and Guangong (Note 5) are wearing big red face, together with the sword shaped eyebrow, long beard and so on, showing the brave, integrity and valor of the face. Yellow is the colorific option of the honorable god or people such as the Earth God and some officials. The other is the compound color, using one color as the main color, another as a supplement, infiltration, or slightly embellishment, highlighting a certain aesthetic characteristics, such as a yellow and red dignified beauty. Some concentrate color is compound in the mask, showing gorgeous beauty.

Because of the different colors, mask colors have different aesthetic characteristics, such as martial, solemn, dignified, lively, cheerful and gorgeous, and also give people different aesthetic feelings.

3.2 Performing Form

“Dongdongtui” pays attention to singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting, focusing on the transmission of god’s mind instead of showing simple and extensive beauty by acting carefully. The performance of “Dongdongtui” is less strict on the facial expression during performing since performers wear masks. “Speaking” in the performance has a form of dialogue. The tone of speech comes from daily life, appropriate exaggerating to highlight the stage effect. The performance stresses

on clear articulation in order to let the audience hear clearly. Most of the spoken words come from production and life, sacrificial activities, interpersonal communication and other colloquial language. They are not carved or polished, but are blurted out and rarely used in written mandarin, which not only shows the popular and cordial beauty, but also shows the simple beauty of farmers. In the “singing” method, it follows the singing mode of the main figure, and does not abide by the stereotypes, but more restricts the performer’s own tone, paying attention to the elasticity and flexibility in singing.

“Dongdongtui” performance team has a whole performing procedure. It is characteristic related and virtual. There is sacrifice before the opening of the show. People use sacrificial activity to express the following tips: Firstly, performers playing the roles of god are not an offense. Secondly, performers need to apologize in advance since the joke played on god is not done on purpose. Thirdly is to bless the play a complete success and make their best wishes of the show comes true. Usually, the opening play is “Land Jumping”, which highlights the personality of the roles played. Some episodes are played by one person, while others are played by several people. However, their teacher asks them to act vividly and should not make mistakes during the performance. “Dongdongtui” is also very “virtual” from the following perspective: The first is the virtual characters, such as the Earth God, Yanwangye, Guanyin bodhisattva (Note 6) and so on. The second is the virtuality of the plot. For example, in “Laizi stealing the cow”, a play in “Dongdongtui”, Laizi opened the door in the virtual house and looked around and then went out to untie the ox rope on the ox’s bolt. The actors on one stage performed the transformation from inside the house, outside the house, the cowshed and the yamen (Note 7). Thirdly, the virtuality of the performers’ actions. For example, the virtualized action of the bodhisattva carrying the person back in “An amusing bodhisattva” is acted by binding the jackstraw’s two sleeves on the person while the fact is that the person is stooping down and walking. When performing, emotions of actors are not totally true. The emotions are virtual. Performers pursue real voice and entertaining the audience.



Figure 3. A Still Photo of a Nuo Opera Performance

3.3 The Origin of the Dance Steps

The classic dance step of “Dongdongtui” is called the plum dance: that is, jumping three times into a closed figure. This act derived from the imitation of the step of bird foraging and fake bird sleeping. Birds are often close (or open) their eyes, standing on left or right foot in rotation when they are taking a fake sleep. When searching for food, birds jump on both feet. “Dongdongtui” is exactly like this: one left foot (alone), one right foot (alone), and then one jump of both feet with the drum, and then a unit action is completed.

4. Value Inquiry and Development Status Quo

4.1 Value Inquiry

4.1.1 Ethnological Value

“Dongdongtui” belongs to a culture inherited by the Dong people, from which we can get some information about the production, life, development or decline of the Dong people in ancient times. From “Dongdongtui”, we can learn some important events in the history of the Dong minority and understand some of the thoughts, pursuits and beliefs the Dong people had in the ancient times. These can inspire the ethnographer or the enthusiast of ethnology, and provide them with the subject of study.

4.1.2 Tourism Development Value

Nowadays, all regions are making full use of the local cultural resources as a guide for tourism development. The Nuo opera “Dongdongtui” and the interdependent Tianjing village of Xinhuang can be built into a tourism brand with sufficient resources to attract tourists from all over the country to appreciate the charm of this mysterious culture, increasing the economic income of local people and providing new ideas for the development of local economy.

4.1.3 Fitness and Entertainment Value

During the performance of “Dongdongtui”, actors can get exercise and make themselves healthier. At the same time, some plays in “Dongdongtui” are very humorous, either watching the performance of “Dongdongtui” or performing in person can we have fun from it.

4.1.4 Research Value

“Dongdongtui” is of great value in studying opera. “Dongdongtui”, which is called the fossil of Chinese Nuo opera, is produced by attaching to religious sacrifice, and the transition from Nuo dance to Nuo opera can be seen from some of its plays, which provide vivid examples for the study of the occurrence of Chinese opera and have great value for the study of opera genesis. Singing is the complicated and confusing looking back of the history of the Dong people. From the epochal Pangu, the sacrifice of the ancient hero Feishan taigong (Note 8) of the Dong people reflects the psychological state of them when they enter the farming society. “Dongdongtui” is a living material for the study of human development.

4.1.5 Ecological Cultural Value

As one of Dong culture which has rich ecological culture wisdom, “Dongdongtui” reveals the religious culture, Dongzhai (Note 9) culture, ethnic culture and ecological culture of the three elements—ecological consciousness, ecological behavior, corresponding to the ecological system, forming a “trinity” of ecological culture with the characteristic of Dong, including religious culture (ecological consciousness) as the foundation level, Dongzhai culture (ecological behavior) as the second level, and ethnic culture (ecological system) as the highest level.

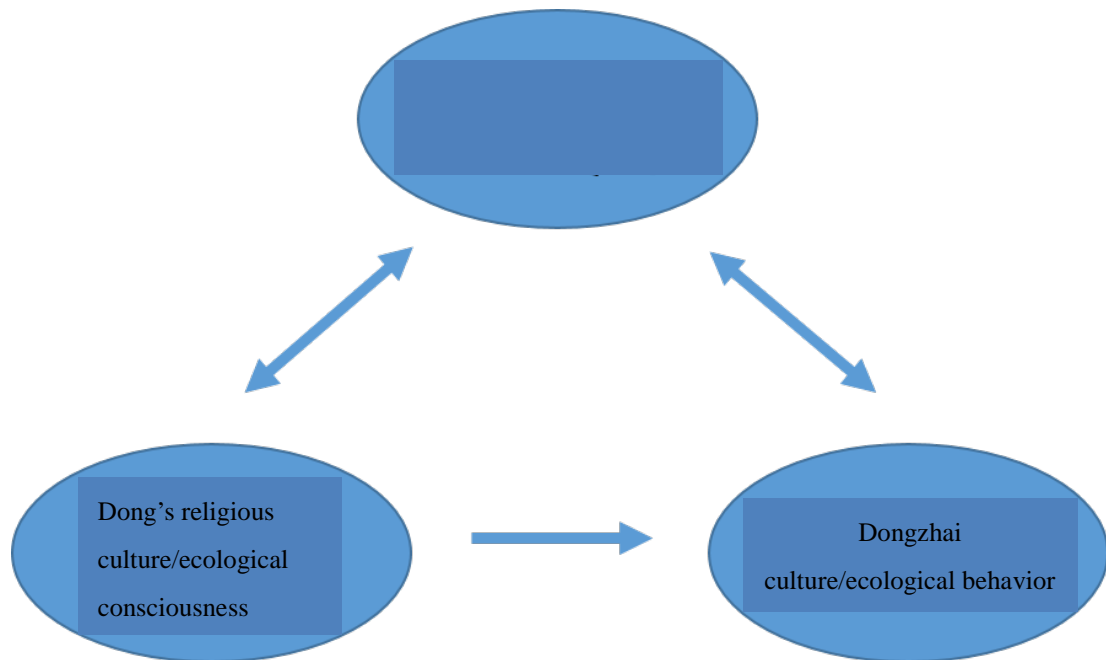


Figure 4. Connotation Value and Ecological Culture Are Trinity

4.2 An Assumption on Region-Wide Tourism

With the acceleration of globalization and modernization, the cultural ecology of our country is deteriorating day by day. It is obvious that there is a lack of adequate understanding and preparation for its connotation and value, especially for the regularity, long-term and arduous nature of protection. Because of the ambiguity and one-sided understanding of its diversity value, it leads directly to passive and reactive protection. Due to the lack of in-depth and systematic thinking and careful deployment of its cultural attributes and “intangible cultural heritage” protection, it presents as passive protection of static type and closed type.

The active inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is particularly important.

An important trend in the change of hot demand in tourism market is the transformation from sightseeing to performance and participatory experience. So-called active inheritance strategy, is refers to the tourism resources in the first and second development, paying attention to content of dynamic display and participatory tourism activities. Renovating ancient relics, repairing original constructions, displaying the static content graphically, making intangible culture “theatrical” and “materialized”, paying attention to the design of the content of the tourists participatory tourism project, and building a rich-contents, various forms of tourist experience system to strengthen the participation and experience of tourism activity.

The courtyard village is a typical natural ancient village, which is the best choice for the development of region-wide “slow city” strategy.

“Slow city development” refers to “slow city” tourism development. Slow region tourism is a kind of leisure tourism that people can experience the beauty of ecology and enjoy themselves in a slow pace. Obviously, the courtyard village goes deep into the mountains and woods, which is a natural scenic spot with lush trees and blooming willows. It fully reflects that tourism is life, experience, perception and leisure. On this basis, taking Dong opera “Dongdongtui” as the breakthrough point, the creative brand of ecological study tour is used, and the new model of study tour is taken. Within the limited scope between Gongxi village and Pingxi river, the industrial restructuring will be carried out centering on ecological construction. Visitors can not only see the pure natural green oxygen bar, but also hear the historic Nuo opera, and more importantly, once they integrate into the traditional village, they will find the ecological concept of “harmonious coexistence between human and nature” everywhere. Viewing scenery, watching opera and caring about ecology is not only a tourism experience, but also a potential enhancement of tourists’ awareness of protecting and inheriting intangible cultural heritage, ecological awareness and national cultural self-confidence.

In addition, the “slow city” development of courtyard village cannot be separated from the creative development. Creativity is an essential element in tourism protection and development. In particular, the tourism development of the ancient “Dongdongtui” culture must be creative in order to add more powerful attraction on the basis of the existing attraction. In the creation development, we can learn from the successful experience of Zhangjiajie’s story “Tianmen fox fairy” in creating beautiful fine works according to the traditional culture, and make the traditional cultural resources of Nuo opera “Dongdongtui” into the unique fine works of Xinhuang, such as creating a Chinese Dong Nuo cartoon drama and a landscape stage play. We can use modern scientific and technological means to carry out creative development of Nuo culture on the premise of not changing the cultural characteristics of Nuo opera “Dongdongtui”, so as to make it maintain the characteristics of Dong Nuo, and have modern style to increase its attraction.

Lastly, it is plausible to design virtual tourism proactively in Tianjing village, Xinhuang Dong autonomous county. By using virtual reality technology, geographic information system, and satellite positioning system, etc., through the simulation of the surreal landscape of the courtyard village, to build a virtual courtyard village of three-dimensional tourism environment software, potential visitors will have access to visit Tianjing village online. With this kind of virtual tour of the courtyard village, tourists can freely choose the identity and the way to tour, such as the identity of god Nuo, the chief of the village and artistic performers by walking, jampan, trolley, electric car and many other ways. If a visitor is attracted by a specific scenic spot, he/she can take pictures with the scenic spot by clicking the mouse online. Virtual tourism in Tianjing village can be combined with “slow city tourism”, as well as whole-region tourism products.

5. Conclusion

The culture of a nation is fundamental to its survival and development. A nation can be proud of its prosperous and colorful national culture, and it can be closely connected with its people through cultural ties. Nuo opera “Dong dongtui”, a precious spiritual treasure, is struggling to survive in the land where it was once conceived and nurtured. We explore its knowledge system from a theoretical level, grasp its historical changes from a historical perspective, analyze its concrete existence from a spatial dimension, and fully display its unique artistic life, charm and unique artistic characteristics as well as extraordinary forms of expression. Only by paying attention to the connotation value of “Dongdongtui”, exploring its unique artistic beauty, and taking the road of “active inheritance”, can it be better protected and inherited. “The more it belongs to the nation, the more it belongs to the world”. It is not only the responsibility of the Dong people and the local government, but also the responsibility of every Chinese people. At the same time of worrying about the future development of “Dongdongtui”, we call on more and more people to join in the concern and protection of it. We also hope “Dongdongtui” can get everyone’s attention and support, find a way of development, grow day by day, and better inherited.

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Notes

Note 1. Two small towns in Huaihua city, Hunan province.

Note 2. A sociologist of China.

Note 3. The sentence means Xinhuang Dong autonomous county, located on the border of Hunan and Guizhou province, is called “Yelang” in the ancient time. So the county is a culture heritage.

Note 4. It is a subtropical evergreen tree, particularly exists in China and South Asia.

Note 5. A historical figure of Shu Han dynasty in The Three Kingdoms period, who is excel at fighting and has a character of loyalty.

Note 6. Guanyin is the symbol of compassion and wisdom in Buddhism.

Note 7. A working place for officials in ancient China.

Note 8. An imaginary person who is named Yang Zaisi by local people.

Note 9. A place Dong people live in.