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Evaluating the Contemporary Cultural Value of Nuo Rituals in Zhanjiang through Bodily Language: A Review of *Entering the Realm of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Decoding the Bodily Language of Nuo Rituals in Lingnan region*

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Abstract: In *Entering the Realm of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Decoding the Bodily Language of Rituals in Lingnan region*, Zeng Huamei adopts bodily language as the central analytical lens to examine the cultural meanings embedded in Nuo rituals. The author argues that, in terms of operational mechanisms, Nuo rituals construct a multilayered spatial system, including material, symbolic, imagistic, and interactive spaces. Within this framework, participants' bodily movements, together with ritual implements and costumes as symbolic media, collectively produce and enact communal systems of belief. From the perspective of cultural origins, Nuo culture is interpreted as the result of a long-term syncretic process involving Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, and shamanistic traditions. As for its essential meaning, Nuo rituals are understood as an early human response to fundamental existential concerns, particularly how to survive and how to live a better life in a dangerous and uncertain world. With its interdisciplinary methodology, innovative bodily perspective, detailed cultural analysis, and open scholarly attitude, this monograph makes an important contribution to the study of culture, especially in the context of Zhanjiang, Guangdong. It not only enriches the

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academic understanding of ritual performance and embodied belief, but also offers valuable insights into the interpretation and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary society.

Keywords: Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang; bodily language; cultural value

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题目: 以身体语言评估湛江傩仪的现代文化价值——评《走进非遗：解读岭南傩舞文化的身体密码》

摘要: 曾华美《走进非遗：解读岭南傩舞文化的身体密码》一书以傩舞为研究对象，以身体语言作为切入视角，探讨傩舞仪式中的文化内涵，旨在探求湛江傩仪的身体语言特色以及文化根源。作者研究发现，在运作机制方面，通过构建物质空间、象征空间、意象空间、互动空间，傩仪通过仪式参与者的身体语言以及器具、服饰等符号共同塑造、表演人们的信仰；在文化根源方面，傩文化是儒、道、佛文化和巫术相融合演变的产物；在傩文化本质方面，通过举行傩仪来驱鬼、祈福，这是原始时代的先民们对于如何“活着”以及更好地“活着”问题的回答。该著作凭借跨学科的研究方法、创新的研究角度、详细的文化分析、开放包容的研究态度对傩文化研究，尤其是广东湛江傩文化研究做出了重要贡献。

关键词: 广东湛江傩文化；身体语言；文化价值

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Entering the realm of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Decoding the Bodily Semiotics of Lingnan Nuo rituals, authored by Professor Zeng Huamei, represents a significant contribution to the field of Nuo culture studies. Focusing on Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang, the book adopts bodily expression as its primary analytical lens to explore the cultural meanings embedded in ritual performance, with the aim of uncovering both the distinctive features of bodily language in Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang and their deeper cultural roots.

Employing an interdisciplinary and multi-method approach, including textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, the study offers in-depth research of Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang. It demonstrates that, in terms of operational mechanisms, these rituals construct and integrate material, symbolic, imaginative, and interactive spaces. Within these overlapping spatial dimensions, participants' bodily movements, together with ritual objects and costumes, function as semiotic resources that collectively shape and perform communal belief systems. In terms of cultural origins, the book argues that Nuo culture emerges from the syncretic interplay of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and shamanistic traditions. Besides, regarding its psychological mechanism, Nuo rituals, centered on exorcism and the invocation of blessings, are early human responses to the fundamental question of how to live, and how to live well.

The monograph is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the history, current conditions, and cultural origin of Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang. Chapters Two and Three analyze the cultural connotations and psychological underpinnings of the rituals from spatial and corporeal perspectives, respectively. Chapter Four traces the cultural sources of Nuo practices, while Chapter Five examines their significance and value in contemporary society. This review highlights the book's major scholarly contributions in four respects: the interdisciplinary methodology, the innovative analytical perspective, the detailed cultural interpretation, and the open and inclusive research attitudes.

To begin with, the study adopts a diversified and interdisciplinary methodology tailored to its research needs. In its fieldwork, it draws on anthropological ethnography, employing audio recording, photography, video documentation, and interviews to capture the full range of processes and details involved in Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang. In the historical inquiry, it utilizes textual analysis to examine local gazetteers, genealogies, and classical sources, thereby reconstructing the historical development, geographical distribution, and cultural origins of these rituals. In addition, the researcher incorporates a linguistic analytical framework to examine the distinctive features of bodily expression of Nuo culture in Zhanjiang.

For instance, through meticulous historical investigation, Zeng (2024) traces the cultural transformations of several major branches of Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang and challenges prevailing scholarly claims regarding the origins of the “kaobing” (ritual inspection performance) tradition in Jiuxian Village. By comparing masks, costumes, movements, and rituals, and by cross-referencing local gazetteers, the researcher argues that this particular branch likely originated in the Fujian region rather than Jiangxi. This research offers a new perspective on the study of Nuo culture's historical roots.

Among the interdisciplinary methods, the most notable one is the use of ethnographic fieldwork to collect first-hand empirical materials, which lend authenticity and authority to the study. The researcher conducted in-depth investigations in villages that plays crucial role in spreading Nuo culture, collecting oral testimonies from principal inheritors, documenting each stage of the rituals through video recordings, and photographing ritual objects such as masks and costumes. Thus, the study systematically records and synthesizes the structure and procedures of Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang, including schedules, ritual sequences, and incantatory formulas. It provides a rich body of material for future scholarship and makes a substantial contribution to the preservation of Zhanjiang Nuo practice as an item of intangible cultural heritage. Overall, this combination of interdisciplinary methods furnishes the study with appropriate analytical tools and ensures the rigor and depth of its research.

Moreover, the book adopts an innovative analytical perspective by approaching Nuo rituals through the lens of the body, a perspective grounded in profound philosophical traditions and aligned with current scholarly trends in the humanities, where increasing attention has been paid to embodiment, affect, and lived experience.

Since René Descartes advanced the proposition “I think, therefore I am (1641/1996)”, Western

philosophy has largely posited a stable, coherent, and self-identical subject, centered on cognition and rationality. Immanuel Kant (1781/1787/198) further consolidated this conception by positioning the mind, the rational subject, as the organizing center of all experience, while the body and sensory experience were often relegated to a secondary, even negligible status. In this way, a binary opposition privileging reason over emotion gradually took shape, with rationality supplanting religion as the dominant spiritual authority.

However, the rationalist ethos did not ultimately fulfill the promises of freedom and emancipation proclaimed by Enlightenment thinkers; rather, within the development of capitalism and technology, it has been seen to perpetuate, and even intensify, the alienation of human beings. Friedrich Nietzsche was among the first to perceive this crisis. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1872/1967) challenged the supremacy of reason by revalorizing the Dionysian, thereby affirming the significance of instinct, irrationality, and the body in cultural creation.

In the twentieth century, the phenomenological tradition further deepened the critique of the rationalist subject. Edmund Husserl, through his analysis of the intentionality of consciousness, redirected philosophical inquiry back to lived experience itself, while Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), in *Phenomenology of Perception*, elevated the body to the very center of perception and meaning-making, granting embodied, sensory experience a genuine philosophical status. In this sense, phenomenology constitutes a crucial reflection on, and challenge to, the rationalism and scientism that have long dominated Western world.

Phenomenology has provided an important body of theoretical resources for contemporary humanities and social sciences in China, particularly in fields such as literary studies, cultural studies, aesthetics, and anthropology. This influence is most clearly manifested in a renewed scholarly attention to the body, affect, and ecological experience. In this regard, the book likewise resonates with current academic trends in China by approaching Nuo rituals through the dual lenses of spatial construction and participants' bodily expression, thereby enabling a more nuanced observation of the role of the body in traditional ritual practices. For example, in analyzing the ritual movements of Nuo master(daogong), the author examines the spatial orientation and trajectory of their actions, revealing that such movements embody the traditional Chinese cosmological concept of the "Five Directions", closely associated with Daoist notions such as the Five Elements, the Five Emperors, and the Five Deities. This perspective offers a renewed interpretation of the cultural meanings and humanistic spirit embedded in Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang, and provides an innovative point of departure for future research on Nuo culture.

Moreover, the book analyzes the constructed nature of Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang through participants' bodily expressions and symbolic systems, a perspective that demonstrates a high degree of theoretical intertextuality with Judith Butler and Bertolt Brecht. By examining the spatial organization of ritual settings and the symbolic meanings embedded in various ritual elements, Zeng (2024) interprets Nuo performance as a structured practice through which belief is produced—exploring how rituals shape communal faith and

achieve the aims of exorcism and blessing. This approach resonates closely with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Just as gender is understood as a constructed effect, faith and belief, too, are created and strengthened by ritual performance. Under the constraints of social norms, gender is "performed" through the repeated enactment of behaviors, discourses, and embodied practices (Butler, 1990). Similarly, during the enactment of Nuo rituals, Nuo masters (daogong) are required to follow prescribed procedures, don traditional costumes, and perform at fixed times each year. While ritual practices vary slightly across different villages and regions due to local beliefs, they cannot be arbitrarily altered. As the book recounts, in one Zhanjiang village, a Nuo master was criticized by local elders for conducting a ceremony in a direction that deviated from tradition; he was ultimately required to repeat the ritual in accordance with the proper orientation. Clearly, deviations from established norms can provoke anxiety and unease among believers, and only when normative order is restored can communal equilibrium be reestablished. Gender norms function in a comparable way: when conventional boundary between masculinity and femininity are disrupted, social panic may ensue. Gender minorities are often marginalized or stigmatized until they are excluded from what is deemed the "normal" social body, thereby restoring a semblance of stability (Butler, 1990).

This suggests that performativity is not confined to the domain of gender, but extends more broadly into the realm of social and cultural life. Zeng (2024) argues that such performativity is especially evident in the process of Nuo ritual performance, where participants oscillate between human and divine states: upon donning masks, they are transformed into deities; upon removing them, they return to ordinary humans. Given that Nuo rituals may last for several days and require performers to visit households to expel evil and bestow blessings, a physically demanding process, participants must intermittently remove their masks to eat, drink, and recover their strength. The contrast between these two states is striking: masked, they embody powerful, heroic exorcists; unmasked, they are indistinguishable from ordinary villagers. This transformation closely resembles the distinction between actors on stage and off stage.

Such dynamics also echo the metatheatrical techniques in drama, whereby playwrights expose the very process of storytelling, disrupting the audience's immersive experience and prompting reflection on the boundary between reality and performance. Extending this further, Bertolt Brecht (1948/1964) put up the theory of alienation that seeks to break the audience's identification with characters, using theatrical form as a means of political critique. The function of metatheatre, in this sense, is to make the audience aware that what they are witnessing is a constructed performance, thereby encouraging critical reflection.

Yet, in contrast to theatrical contexts, the metatheatrical dimension within Nuo performance does not diminish its authority or sacredness. On the contrary, it often deepens villagers' reverence toward the performers. This, in turn, reveals the enduring and vitality of Nuo rituals, grounded in the continuous construction and reinforcement of communal belief.

In addition, the researcher approaches Nuo rituals from a rigorously objective and analytical standpoint,

examining their cultural essence and spiritual core, and offering a compelling clarification of their value in a modern cultural context. The study argues that Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang fundamentally embody the primordial worldview and survival philosophy of early human communities—namely, how to endure and reproduce life in a perilous and unpredictable world. On the one hand, deities associated with bravery and virtue are venerated and worshipped, as people seek blessings and protection; on the other hand, through a series of ritual practices, participants invoke divine power—mediated by ritual implements, costumes, and masks—to exorcise malevolent forces and avert misfortune. Ritual performances such as Wuchang Expelling Evil (Wuchang Qu Xie), Opening the Mountain (Kaishan), and Zhong Kui Exorcising Demons (Zhong Kui Da Gui) vividly exemplify these underlying spiritual principles.

This interpretation resonates with Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1962/1966) argument in *The Savage Mind* that so-called “primitive” and modern modes of thought are not hierarchically ordered, but rather differ in kind. Contrary to the common assumption that early human thinking is intuitionist or mythical, Lévi-Strauss contends that it is in fact highly rational, systematic, and classificatory. Such thought operates through symbols and categories to make sense of the world, constituting a form of “concrete science”. He famously likens this mode of thinking to bricolage—a process of assembling heterogeneous, pre-existing elements (symbols, images, materials) into new configurations capable of addressing immediate problems. For instance, in his study of the Caduveo of South America, Lévi-Strauss (1955/1973) observes a society marked by rigid social hierarchies and limited mobility, conditions that threaten social cohesion. Yet, Caduveo women create intricate, symmetrical geometric patterns on their faces. Through this artistic practice, ideals of equality, harmony, and fluidity—unattainable within the social structure—are symbolically realized upon the body.

A similar logic can be observed in Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang. The lines and symbols inscribed on ritual masks, as well as the roles assumed and movements performed by participants, embody early communities' aspirations for an ideal social order. Nuo masks are often modeled on five renowned divine generals from local history, characterized by broad faces, round eyes, prominent noses, and wide mouths, projecting an aura of righteousness, strength, and magnanimity. The roles enacted by performers likewise draw on historical figures—generals from the Leizhou region (the historical name for present-day Zhanjiang) who defended their countries. Through movements in Nuo rituals, these figures symbolically expel malevolent spirits and safeguard the social order.

These symbolic forms reveal the social ideals of early inhabitants of the Leizhou region: when contradictions or forms of oppression arise within real social structures, the “divine order” enacted in Nuo performance functions as an imaginative mediation. It offers a more just and morally ordered world that compensates for and soothes the inequalities of lived reality. Moreover, this “divine order” is continually reinforced and reaffirmed through the ritual process itself. Within Nuo rituals, masks, gestures, and spatial arrangements together constitute an integrated system of meaning. Performers do not merely represent a

preexisting order; rather, through repeated ritual enactment, they endow this order with a sense of reality and authority. In other words, order does not exist as an abstract principle, but is continually realized through embodied participation and collective witnessing.

Meanwhile, the “exorcism–protection” structure embedded in Nuo rituals can be understood as a symbolic reaffirmation of social boundaries. By concretizing “evil spirits” and ritually expelling them, the performance effectively distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable forces, thereby delineating the boundary between order and chaos at the cultural level. The repeated reinforcement of this boundary not only responds to uncertainties in lived reality, but also subtly consolidates collective values and shared identity. In this sense, the Nuo ritual is not merely an expression of religious imagination; rather, it constitutes a symbolic practice that integrates historical memory with contemporary concerns. Through the interplay of heroic figures, divine order, and embodied performance, it constructs a system of meaning that is both interpretive and regulative in function. From this perspective, so-called “primitive thought” should not be seen as a deficiency of rationality, but as a mode of cognition grounded in concrete experience and symbolic association—one whose complexity and internal logic merit serious consideration.

Therefore, the concreteness and complexity of such modes of thought effectively challenge the assumptions of linear historical development and the intellectual arrogance of Western centrism. Lévi-Strauss (1966) even suggests that so-called “primitive” peoples may possess a deeper understanding of nature than that afforded by modern utilitarianism: plants and animals are not first known because they are useful; rather, they are deemed useful because they have already been known. Likewise, as a concrete manifestation of this mode of thinking, Nuo rituals call for a shift in modern perspectives—from narrow and dismissive judgments to a more objective and equitable engagement with the historical significance and spiritual value embedded in this cultural tradition, as well as a respect for cultural diversity.

In fact, Zeng (2024) further observes that Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang play an important role in moral cultivation and spiritual sustenance within local communities. The performance of such rituals fosters social cohesion among villagers, strengthens interpersonal bonds, reinforces familial and communal identity, and cultivates a sense of reverence that encourages ethical conduct and respect for social norms. Accordingly, the study argues that in contemporary society, efforts to preserve and transmit Nuo rituals must respect local beliefs and aesthetic values (Zeng, 2024). They should neither be crudely dismissed as “feudal superstition” nor reshaped according to external forces, whether official or ideological, or modern aesthetic standards. This position effectively dispels common misunderstandings and prejudices, offering a strong defense of the cultural value of Nuo rituals.

Through its innovative analytical perspective, rich body of first-hand research materials, detailed cultural interpretation, and objective scholarly stance, Professor Zeng Huamei’s work opens up new avenues for understanding Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang. By foregrounding the often-overlooked dimension of bodily expression in the formation of belief, the study both inherits the philosophical legacy of phenomenology and

aligns with contemporary academic trends, while demonstrating a high degree of theoretical intertextuality. Equally noteworthy is the researcher's commitment to an objective and inclusive intellectual ethos, approaching Nuo rituals in Zhanjiang from an egalitarian perspective and proposing practical pathways for their preservation, transmission, and revitalization in modern society. Through its in-depth case study, the book also provides a valuable model for the study of Nuo culture across China, making a significant scholarly contribution to the field.

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