Research on the Artistic Forms and Connotations of Folk Witchcraft Culture in terms of Visual Representation: A Case Study of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" in Yixing

Yan Lin $^{1,a}$, Niu Li $^{2,b}$

$^1$School of Art Design of Jiangnan Film & TV Arts Vocational College, Wuxi, Jiangsu;
$^2$ School of Design Jiangnan University, Wuxi, Jiangsu.

$^a$ 2926321532@qq.com, $^b$ 421227198@qq.com

Abstract. "Nan Huan Nü Xi" is a representative traditional folk dance in Yixing, which also holds significant importance in Nuo ritual ceremonies. Through centuries of evolution and inheritance, it has developed into an aesthetic manifestation that combines historical culture with modern trends, with its performance costumes being particularly representative. This paper aims to analyze and summarize the expressive costumes, artistic features, and inherent folk culture of the current inheritance of "Nan Huan Nü Xi," delving into its geographical attributes, social background, and religious beliefs. The research demonstrates that while preserving the core elements of inheritance, the costumes of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" in Yixing constantly adjust themselves to the aesthetic tendencies of the era, reflecting the profound historical significance and vitality of folk dance represented by "Nan Huan Nü Xi," as well as the transition of traditional folk art from being "god-centered" to being "human-centered."

Keywords: Jiangnan folk dance, Nan Huan Nü Xi, costume art, folk culture, Nuo dance.

1. Introduction

Nuo dance is one form of Nuo opera and it is the oldest art form among the Han ethnic group used for worshiping deities and seeking blessings. It is an important part of the Chinese civilization. Originating from the primitive totem worship in ancient times, Nuo dance is deeply rooted in the soil of totem worship, nature worship, shamanism, ghost and deity worship, and ancestral spirit worship. It nurtures a profound folk belief culture."Nan Huan Nü Xi," also known as "Diao Yang Wang," is a form of paired Nuo dance and a rare cultural heritage in the Jiangnan region, primarily passed down in the Yixing area. From the late Yuan Dynasty to the early Ming Dynasty and the period before and after the liberation, "Nan Huan Nü Xi" experienced periods of prosperity, decline, and revival. It transitioned from Nuo rituals to folk art, becoming a popular form of entertainment for the masses. The dance portrays the deep love and blissful life of a couple through scenes such as "rowing a boat on the lake," "picking mulberry leaves," "buying rouge," "running a shop," "lighting a lamp," "serving tea," "opening a window to admire the moon," and "chasing butterflies."

Nuo dance costumes belong to performance attire and are based on the everyday clothing styles and fashion trends of different periods. Craftsmen add their own thoughts and creativity to create costumes that are in line with the preferences of the people and exhibit distinct artistic styles. As an important component of the inheritance of folk culture and traditional stage performances, the research on folk Nuo dance costumes is currently relatively weak, mainly relying on oral transmission in folk communities. By analyzing and organizing the costumes of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" characters, the artistic patterns can be clarified, supplementing and enriching the internal inheritance of Nuo dance in Yixing.

2. Presentation and Artistic Features of the Costume in Yixing's "Nan Huan Nü Xi" Nuo Dance

The performance costumes of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" exhibit diverse characteristics in terms of their structure, colors, materials, decorations, and even craftsmanship. There is a clear distinction
between the costumes of male and female characters in "Nan Huan Nü Xi." The male character, "Nan Huan," emphasizes a gallant and handsome demeanor, showcasing a heroic aura in his gestures and movements. On the other hand, the female character, "Nü Xi," focuses on portraying a graceful, diligent, and lively image. The portrayal and differentiation of character temperament are reflected in the application of colors, styles of clothing, and pattern decorations in the costumes. The costumes in "Nan Huan Nü Xi" consist of five parts: masks, hats, tops, bottoms, and shoes. The research on costumes can be categorized into three aspects: headwear, clothing, and props.

2.1 Concise and Abstract Headwear Presentation

In Nuo rituals, Nuo opera, and Nuo dance, the headwear holds special significance and is typically composed of masks, hair accessories, and hats. Masks originated from the primitive Nuo culture and serve as the core props and symbolic representations of Nuo rituals. "Masks" refer to various grotesque, comical, heroic, or benevolent character symbols created by using natural or artificial materials to imitate human faces or animal heads. They are often endowed with supernatural powers and used in ritual ceremonies or related performances to bridge the gap between humans and gods and to entertain and please the deities.

The headwear in "Nan Huan Nü Xi" follows a consistent basic structure and form. The front edge of the hat is folded upward, forming a right angle with the overall brim. The mask is fixedly connected to the hat, creating a three-dimensional space with a relatively large volume to cover the performer's face. In the headwear of "Nan Huan," the decoration adheres to the principle of central axis symmetry. The black hat body is bordered with gold. At the front center, a high-standing orange-yellow hat wing is inserted, with pink wide ribbons fixed on both sides, hanging down and forming curved shapes. Around the back edge of the hat, there is a row of yellow tassels sewn, which sways and sways during movements, showcasing agility (as shown in Figure 3). The headwear of "Nü Xi" shares the same decoration of tassels and ribbons as "Nan Huan." The red hat body is bordered with gold and has a pink velvet ball as the hat's centerpiece. The folded brim is wider, and the yellow ribbon is longer, creating a visual effect of embellishing the mask's forehead when it hangs down in curves (as shown in Figure 4). The masks of both "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi" are depicted with concise lines. The arched eyebrows, downturned eye ends, and raised corners of the mouth, along with the evident contraction of the lip muscles, collectively create an expression of close familiarity and a joyful, excited mood.

![Fig.1 The overall pattern of costumes of the roles of "Nan huan" in Yixing Nuo Dance "male huan and female huan"](image_url)
2.2 Complex and Colorful Costume Combinations

The performance costumes in "Nan Huan Nü Xi" exhibit a complex and intricate design, incorporating elements of historical clothing while also featuring exaggerated aesthetics. The application of colors and the design of decorations highlight the artistic characteristics. The main costumes for both "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi" consist of a top, pants, and a waist accessory. In the past, the costume for "Nan Huan" included a black wide-sleeved robe with a round collar, and red trousers with tied cuffs. A yellow belt, both functional and decorative, was worn on the outside, along with black boots. The costume for "Nü Xi" consisted of a blue-green top, red trousers, and a white or red underskirt, paired with black embroidered shoes. After centuries of evolution and transmission, the present-day costumes for "Nan Huan Nü Xi" have become more complex and refined. "Nan Huan" wears a short red shirt with a white collar and black patterns. It is decorated with cloud-shaped gold ornaments on the shoulders. The sleeves are tailored in a flat-cut style with
decorative wristguards featuring twisting patterns resembling auspicious cloud motifs. The lower body still wears red trousers with tied cuffs. The waist accessory, made of golden yellow silk fabric, has transformed from a single belt to a more intricate design, replacing the traditional robe's hem. It is embellished with beadwork, gold thread embroidery, silver trim, blue ribbons, and yellow tassels. A final blue wide-bordered ribbon is crisscrossed around the neck, hanging naturally on both sides, creating a layered decorative effect in relation to the waist accessory. The costume for "Nü Xi" leans toward a more aesthetic focus, with a soft and modern interpretation. The main colors are in the light pink spectrum, transitioning to white and gradually fading. The round-collar and short-waisted top feature wide pleated lace edges. The sleeves are tailored to fit the shoulders more ergonomically, with lace-edged openings and red ribbon decorations. The front piece is a blue chest wrap, adorned with embroidered patterns and a red flower accent, echoing the design of "Nan Huan." The lower body wears wide pants with a gradient effect, featuring a composite waist accessory with a yellow silk base and semi-circular wave-like patterns along the lower edge. The outer layer is made of irregular blue silk satin fabric, embellished with lotus flower motifs and vine patterns, with pointed and wavy edges adorned with pearl chains and yellow tassels. The waist accessory is fastened on the side and tied with a satin ribbon at the back.

In the past, the main colors of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" costumes were black, red, blue, yellow, and white. On one hand, this choice resonates with the concepts of "Five Directions" and "Five Elements" in the Yin-Yang theory, symbolizing auspicious and prosperous meanings. On the other hand, it represents the ancestral belief in ghosts, deities, and shamanism. According to the ancient belief, ghosts are associated with Yin, while fire belongs to Yang. Yang is used to expel ghosts and epidemic diseases. This is evident in folk customs such as hanging red couplets and red lanterns to ward off evil spirits and epidemics. The present-day costumes for "Nan Huan Nü Xi" have adjusted the color combinations, brightness, and saturation, while still adhering to the principles of the past. They can be summarized into five colors: sapphire blue, golden yellow, ink black, emerald green, and pale pink. The application of colors emphasizes strong visual contrast and maximizes the representation of different.

Fig.5 The Costume Expression and Color Selection of Yixing Nuo Dance "Male Joy and Female Joy"

2.3 Continuity of Prop Usage from Ancient to Modern Times

In the system of performance costumes, besides headwear, masks, and clothing, the design and application of props are equally important in shaping character images and conveying the choreographic significance. In "Nan Huan Nü Xi," there are two typical props. One is the "fake belly," which was more commonly used in traditional gatherings and performances in culturally
conservative regions. It was made of cotton or bamboo strips and worn as part of the "Nan Huan" costume. The "fake belly" carried profound symbolic meaning, mainly related to concepts of procreation, fertility worship, and the consciousness of life. These concepts were closely linked to the social background and creative intention during the early development of this performance. However, with the passage of time and long-term social changes, these ideas gradually weakened and were even replaced. The shift in modern views on reproduction and improvements in the birthing environment diminished the symbolic significance of the "fake belly," and it gradually disappeared, remaining only in a few performances as a lingering vestige.

The other prop is the fan dance, which has been used since the early stages of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" and has undergone only minor changes in terms of color and material. Its function remains essentially the same. The dance fan adopts the traditional folding fan form, using silk fabric for the fan surface, with a wide fabric border at the top. During the performer's movements, the fan demonstrates a dynamic extension and a sense of elegance. The dance fan is used in multiple dance segments in "Nan Huan Nü Xi." Each character, male and female, holds a fan and performs actions such as opening, shaking, closing, and kicking the fan. These actions involve the fan border, surface, ribs, handle, and other parts, enriching the dance movements and showcasing the different temperament characteristics of the male and female characters. Additionally, the dance fan plays an important role in completing interactive actions between the two performers.

3. Folk Cultural Significance of the Costume in Yixing's "Nan Huan Nü Xi" Nuo Dance

As one of the representative folk performances in the Yixing region, "Nan Huan Nü Xi" has a high frequency of performances in the local area. According to local historical records, in the past, there were more than twenty large-scale gatherings in Yixing annually, attracting people from all directions, making it a grand event. During these gatherings, "Nan Huan Nü Xi" would accompany the ceremonies to ward off disasters, bring blessings, expel ghosts, and drive away epidemics. These events usually lasted for three to five days, fulfilling people's beliefs and spiritual aspirations. Based on the needs of the community, "Nan Huan Nü Xi" has been able to be passed down, and its costumes have absorbed local characteristics and individual recognition through long-term transmission, reflecting the three aspects of regionalism, heritage, and aesthetics.

3.1 The influence of Jiangnan fashion and Wu culture

Costumes form the soil for folk artistic activities, and folk dances are born, preserved, transmitted, and developed within the context of folk customs. The Jiangnan region, known for its abundance of fish and rice and its cultural richness, is characterized by its beautiful landscape and elegant folk dances that exude grace, softness, and lyrical style, transcending time. The unchanging geographical factors provide the foundation for the style of folk dances in the Jiangnan region, while historical and cultural factors add refinement and cultural qualities to them. Influenced by Wu culture, rice culture, and the culture of farming and education, the rich historical accumulation and cultural heritage bestow unique temperament and charm upon Yixing. In the infiltration of the diverse ideological factions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and primitive beliefs that have been accumulated over thousands of years, the Jiangnan region has developed its distinctive and prominent religious characteristics and systems, integrating the concept of "belief in witchcraft and spirits and the importance of sacrificial ceremonies" into the daily lives of the people. Chen Zuolin, a scholar from the late Qing dynasty, stated in his book "Bingzhuli Tan": "The people of Wu believe in ghosts, hence the grandest festivals are held in the Jiangnan region." This has also deeply influenced the inheritance of Yixing's Nuo dance and the fashion of its costumes.

Immersed in the rich "water culture" and "boat culture," the costumes of "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi" showcase the influence of Jiangnan fashion in terms of color, decorations, and more. The light blue of the old female costume and the light pink of the present day are derived from the imagery of
lakes and lotus flowers, effectively conveying the artistic qualities of the water towns in Jiangnan to the viewers. The light and delicate colors of the "Nü Xi" costume contrast with the bold and vibrant colors of Nuo dance costumes in the Central Plains and northern regions, highlighting the regional characteristics of Jiangnan. The prominent totem patterns in the "Nan Huan" costume to some extent reflect the profound primitive worship genes, corresponding to the diverse beliefs and religious history of Wu culture.

3.2 Historical Continuity and Adaptation to the Times

Performances originate from daily life, and the same goes for performance costumes. The ancient male robes, female gowns, double-winged hats, black boots, and cloth shoes can all find their reference prototypes in the costumes of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. In the artistic interpretation, they recreate the "elevated" design of ceremonial attire that the people of that time wore for important occasions. This elevates the "status" of the performers and reflects the significance attached to such folk customs as Nuo rituals and ceremonies. The costumes have undergone various modifications, becoming increasingly aligned with modern aesthetics. However, details such as the hat decorations still retain the form of the large hats from the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Other recognizable elements include the cross-collar design, connected shoulders, cloud-shaped decorative elements in "Nan Huan," and wide-legged pants in "Nü Xi," which demonstrate an intention to stay true to historical roots. Whether in the past or today, the design of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" costumes inherits elements from the costumes of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The right-over-left form of the garment's front, cuff guards symbolizing rolled-up sleeves, prominent waist accessories, and traditional auspicious patterns placed strategically on various visual focal points not only introduce the origin to the audience but also show respect for and adherence to history.

Nuo rituals, enriched with diverse cultural elements, encompass grand court ceremonies known as "Da Nuo" and "Guo Nuo," as well as temple or folk Nuo rituals, Nuo dances, and Nuo plays closely associated with folk festivals and beliefs. As an important component of ancient Chinese civilization, "Nuo" initially referred to "rites," but as the significance of rituals waned, it catered to the changing aesthetic preferences of the people, becoming more entertainment-oriented. Around the Ming Dynasty, entertainment programs, including Nuo plays (Nuo Xi), were incorporated into the procession of Nuo rituals. Nuo dances, including "Nan Huan Nü Xi," as the main Nuo dance originated from local welcoming ceremonies for deities, have various folk legends pointing to the period of transition between the Yuan and Ming dynasties. According to research, the "Nan Huan" headwear adopted the Yuan Dynasty hat to cover the Ming Dynasty hairstyle, which indirectly confirms that the ritual was dedicated to deceased individuals from the Yuan Dynasty.

"Nan Huan Nü Xi" has undergone changes and adaptations from the Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republican eras to the present day. Its long-lasting existence and development are inseparable from continuous improvements and adjustments to the times. The costumes for male and female performers have been modified in response to changes in political regimes and shifts in popular culture. For example, during the early Ming Dynasty, to avoid suspicion from the ruling class, the folk designed a scenario involving the character "Wang Lingguan" who wore Ming Dynasty attire and pursued "Nan Huan" dressed in Yuan Dynasty clothing. This was a way to accommodate the preferences of the ruling class and ensure the continuation and performance of this Nuo dance. Today's performance costumes for "Nan Huan Nü Xi" also incorporate elements of traditional folk costumes and trends of modern popular culture. In particular, the design of the "Nü Xi" costume in terms of silhouette, style, and sleeve openings has been influenced by Western tailoring techniques, emphasizing the modern vitality of traditional Nuo dances.

3.3 Religious Beliefs and Aesthetic Expression

Since traditional agricultural society, people have had a strong sense of awe towards deities. During the Ming Dynasty, Nuo dances began to move to the streets and stages, incorporating folk
legends, dramas, and novels, making them more story-driven and entertaining. It transitioned from solely entertaining the gods to entertaining both the gods and the people. The performers of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" are ordinary people with regular jobs and daily lives, but the performance costumes serve as a clear boundary, completely transforming their characters and personalities. The masks, divine robes, and accessories allow the performers to "change their faces" and "separate themselves from the world," entering a new state and stepping into a sacred realm. Wearing the mask is equivalent to becoming the embodiment of a deity, and every word and action is carried out in accordance with the will of the gods. The performers exist on the edge between the sacred and the secular. They perform to entertain the gods, express gratitude for the protection of the deities, ward off evil and illness, and communicate with the divine for blessings and well-being. Belief in religion and deities runs through folk art, especially in witchcraft and Nuo art.

The Nuo culture, which has both vertical historical inheritance and horizontal social diffusion, is a fusion of oral literature, folk art, secular beliefs, ethical education, and spiritual entertainment. The costumes of "Nan Huan Nü Xi" incorporate the artistic desires and aesthetic concepts of the people. Their continuity and evolution convey progress in people's perception, with a greater focus on entertainment and designs that cater to people's aesthetic preferences. The combination and emphasis of festive and auspicious elements in the costumes, such as the use of golden silk fabric commonly seen in the worship of gods and buddhas and the incorporation of auspicious patterns, essentially reflect the people's expectations and aspirations in their everyday lives. In comparison, abstract concepts such as deities and evil spirits gradually fade into the background. The evolution of the Nuo form reveals the transformation of the inner forces of humans, ghosts, and gods, metaphorically witnessing the changes in the relationship between humans, ghosts, and gods, no longer presenting a fixed and unchanging system. Additionally, the addition of accessories such as tassels, velvet balls, and artificial flowers in the costumes reflects people's aesthetic positioning of traditional folk art. It includes rich layers of clothing, vibrant color combinations, and a clothing style that aligns with the background of the characters. On one hand, it clearly separates performance costumes from everyday clothing, and on the other hand, it highlights the ceremonial sense of folk customs through this pronounced expression.

4. Summary

The Yixing Nuo dance "Nan Huan Nü Xi" serves as a representative of the inheritance of traditional folk dances and Nuo culture in the Jiangnan region. Its unique dance form and choreography, along with the performance costumes of "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi," reflect the fashion and cultural characteristics of the Jiangnan region. The design of the costumes pays attention to the primitive style of the historical background, incorporates modern color trends, and highlights the exaggerated personality and auspicious symbolism of the performance costumes through decorations. The present-day costumes of "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi" blend traditional craftsmanship with contemporary aesthetics. They not only continue the regional characteristics of the Jiangnan region but also embrace the spirit of the times, ensuring the sustainable inheritance and vitality of historical folk culture. At the same time, they record and affirm the progress in self-awareness and the relationship between humans and deities. Local Nuo dances represented by "Nan Huan" and "Nü Xi" are condensed carriers of folk culture, and the cultural connotations reflected in their elements, including costume art, deserve in-depth understanding, analysis, and extraction. They serve as important references for the dynamic inheritance of traditional folk culture and the practice of modern costume art.

References


