

The Nuo Culture of the Tujia People in Enshi: Inheritance, Present Situation and Protection

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Abstract: The Nuo culture of the Tujia people in Enshi has evolved for more than 3,000 years and become an extremely rich cultural heritage. As a particular indigenous cultural phenomenon, it is worthy of in-depth research and proper protection.

1. Introduction

The Nuo culture of the Tujia people in Enshi has evolved for more than 3,000 years and become an extremely rich cultural heritage. As a particular indigenous cultural phenomenon, it is worthy of in-depth research and proper protection.

2. The Historical Origin of the Nuo Culture of the Tujia People in Enshi

The culture of Nuo was originally a shamanistic culture for the purpose of defeating enemies by the Tujia ancestors. During the battle, the general of the ancient Ba people, ancestors of the present Tujia people, will lead his army while wearing a fierce mask. The shaman also assisted in the battle by wearing a mask among a band of dancers, in order to intimidate and disintegrate the enemy's will to fight. Later on when war became less frequent, Nuo's function as the war dance was gradually weakened, and exorcizing demons became its main purpose. In order to cater to the secular needs, the Nuo exorcism has gradually turned into the Nuo Opera, and continues to be passed down. As a medium between the world of humans and the world of ghosts and gods, the mask of the Nuo became the totem worship of the Tujia people.

The Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Enshi is located in the Wuling Mountain Area. It has always been a Tujia inhabited area, the ethnic psychology of the Tujia shamanistic culture, the ethnic segregation policy during the pre-modern period, and the particular geographical and transportation factors become an advantage for the preservation and inheritance of the Nuo culture, and provide rich materials and basis for its study.

3. The Current Situation of the Nuo Culture of the Tujia People in Enshi

The Nuo Culture of the Tujia People in Enshi mainly includes Nuo exorcism, Nuo opera, Nuo masks, and Nuo pagoda, testifying to the inheritance and development of the Nuo culture.

3.1 The Nuo Exorcism and the Nuo Opera

The original form of the Nuo culture was exorcism, a religious activity held to welcome gods to exorcise ghosts. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, exorcistic ritual is very common. After the 1950s, the Nuo exorcism was banned as a feudal superstitious activity, resulting in the disappearance of Nuo exorcism, which can only be accessed from the fragments of the Nuo opera.

The Nuo opera is a kind of evolution of the secularization of the Nuo exorcism. It also shows the evolution from the original religious ritual to popular drama that the general public loves. This evolution has enabled the Nuo culture to gain enduring vitality among the local people.



Fig.1 the “ Returning to the God of Altar “

In 2008, Enshi Nuo opera was included in China's first list of national intangible cultural heritage. The Nuo opera in Enshi is represented by two schools-the Sancha-Township of Enshi City and the Huanyan-Beach of Hefeng County. These two have many things in common, such as the “Scroll of the Three Pure Ones” hanging in the middle of the stage. Although the gods are different, they all strongly reflect the diversified characteristics of the shamanistic, Taoist, and Buddhist cultures. There are also many differences between these two, mainly in that the Sancha-Township (the “ Returning to the God of Altar “) still preserves the original traces of the Nuo exorcism (Fig. 1), such as the stage arrangement of “Returning to the God of Altar” retains the altar arrangement of the exorcistic ritual to a considerable extent. The Nuo opera in Yangtan Beach of Hefeng has added a large number of humorous and entertaining words in the speech. The performance form also includes a large number of operatic arias and dances, while the exorcistic ritual element is rare. From the differences between the two, we can see the evolution from the Nuo exorcism to Nuo opera, from thanking gods to entertaining humans, from the sacred to the secular, from the serious to the entertaining, from religion to culture, from fulfilling human wishes to satisfying the social needs.

3.2 The Nuo Mask and Nuo Pagoda

The Nuo mask is the mask worn by the shaman during the exorcism. It is mostly an exaggerated image of gods and demons. It is the medium of the communication between the Tujia people and the gods, and the totem of the Tujia Nuo culture. With development of the Nuo culture, Nuo masks have also undergone many changes. The material is changed from the original bronze to wood; the image has been expanded from mere gods and demons to include human characters; and its function is also transformed from religious totem to arts.



Fig.2 The Mask of God(Tang Seng)

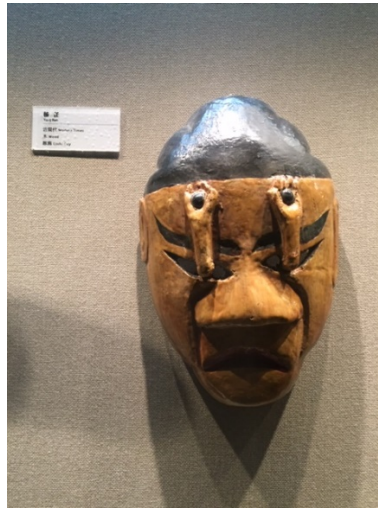


Fig.3 The Mask of God (Yang Ren)



Fig.4 The Mask of the Fierce God (Green Dragon)

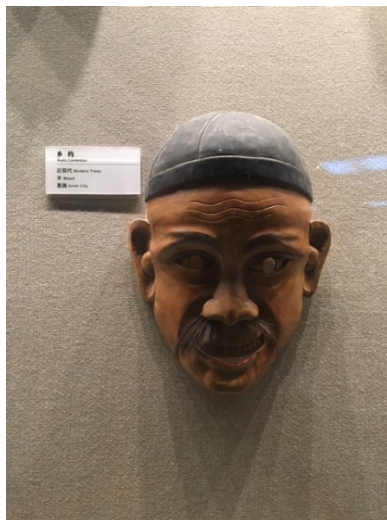


Fig.5 The Mask of Folk (the Chief of Township)

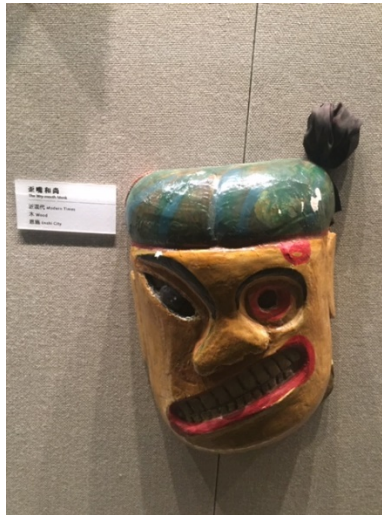


Fig.6 The Mask of Harlequin (Pouting Monk)

Due to historical reasons, ancient Nuo masks have rarely survived. The modern Enshi Tujia Nuo masks are made of local boxwood; they have undergone drying, carving, polishing and coloring. There are more than one hundred kinds of masks in four major categories: benevolent gods (Fig. 2,3), fierce gods (Fig. 4), folks (fig.5) and clowns (fig.6). Although they look simple and rough, they are full of primitive power and life, testifying to the awe for gods and love of life.

Since the modern times, especially after the late 1990s, in order to strengthen the inheritance, spread and protection of the Nuo culture, there appears a kind of pagoda of masks added on top of each other. Some of the pagodas are simply wooden masks piled upon each other, which are more common in exhibitions; there are also stone-based pagodas for a part of landscape and cultural display.

4. The Inheritance and Protection of the Nuo Culture of the Tujia People in Enshi

With the progress of society, development of economy and the merging of ethnicities, there is a crisis of the loss of the Nuo culture of the Tujia people in Enshi, and it is necessary to properly protect it.

4.1 Strengthen Research and Publicity on the Tujia Nuo Culture.

At present, the insufficiency of in-depth research can be said to remain on the surface. There lacks research on its evolution and rationality. To conduct in-depth research is the basis for targeted and effective protection.

At the same time, it is necessary to integrate the Tujia Nuo culture into development. Just as the transformation from exorcism to the opera demonstrates, innovative forms and increased publicity are much needed to cater to the general public.

4.2 Increase the Training and Protection of the Inheritors of the Tujia Nuo Culture.

Whether it is a theatrical performance or masks doing, it depends on people. They are the inheritors of traditional culture. We must consciously create conditions to protect outstanding inheritors and train new inheritors, especially those who are young.

4.3 Use Technical Means to Protect.

Ancient traditional folk culture has its inevitable vulnerability. With the continuous advancement of science and technology, we can use advanced technology to protect traditional culture. For example, high-definition digital audio and video technology can be used to record the Nuo opera and masks. Network technology can be used instead of the traditional the master-disciple oral transmission in order to solve the difficulties brought by human mobility. High-tech means can be used to protect the transmitted Nuo masks to prevent its deformation and discoloration (Fig.6,

although it is a modern work, the mask has already seen discoloration). New materials can be used to make masks that are lighter, more durable, and easy to preserve. These are worthy of our attempts, and will certainly play a major role in the inheritance and protection of traditional ethnic culture.

5. Note

This article has included advice from professor Yang Zhaohua of Columbia University.
The above Figures were taken by the author at the Enshi Prefectural Museum.

6. Conclusion

The Nuo culture of the Tujia people in Enshi is a traditional culture of ethnic minorities with its own characteristics, and has evolved through a long period of time. As a particular indigenous cultural phenomenon, it is worthy of our study and protection.

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