

The Decorative Features of Guangxi China 'Maonan Nuo' Mask and the Contemporary Significance of Role Images

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ABSTRACT

Maonan, as one of China's many less populous mountainous ethnic groups, mainly distributed in Guangxi Huanjiang County in the south, central and southern mountainous areas, but also in Guizhou Pingtang County and Dushan County junction of the Kapu River, six holes in the river basin area is also distributed, but the main settlement is still in Guangxi. This nation has a long history of breeding a unique culture, in which Nuo culture is particularly significant. Nuo face as an important form of expression of Nuo culture, not only decorative features distinctive, but also contains the Maonan deep historical memory, religious beliefs and unique artistic aesthetic value. However, with the accelerated process of modernization, the protection and inheritance of traditional culture is facing serious challenges. For the Maonan Nuo culture, how to maintain its vitality and charm in contemporary society has become an urgent problem. Through the combination of modern aesthetics and the needs of the times, the research results of this topic can make Nuo culture in contemporary society with new vitality. This not only promotes the inheritance and development of Maonan culture, but also allows more people to understand and recognize this unique cultural heritage. At the same time, the inheritance and development of Nuo culture can also provide new cultural resources and inspiration for contemporary society, promote cultural exchanges and integration, add a touch of colour to the common cultural heritage of mankind, and has far-reaching significance and value.

Keywords: MaonanNuo mask, decoration, inheritance.



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1 INTRODUCTION

The Maonan ethnic group, nestled in the mountainous regions of southern China, particularly in Guangxi Huanjiang County and extending into Guizhou's Pingtang and Dushan Counties, has cultivated a rich and unique cultural heritage. Among their diverse cultural practices, the Nuo culture stands out prominently, with the Nuo face serving as a vivid embodiment of their historical memories, religious beliefs, and distinct artistic aesthetics. However, the rapid pace of modernization poses significant challenges to the preservation and continuation of such traditional cultures.

The purpose of this article is to delve into the exploration of innovative strategies for the protection and inheritance of Maonan Nuo culture. By adopting a modern aesthetic perspective and aligning with the needs of the contemporary society, this research aims to rejuvenate the Nuo culture, ensuring its vitality and charm in the present context. Through this endeavour, we seek not only to

promote the inheritance and development of Maonan culture but also to enhance public awareness and appreciation of this distinctive cultural heritage. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to the preservation and enrichment of the global cultural landscape by safeguarding the Maonan Nuo culture for future generations.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Nuo culture as one of China's ancient traditional cultures, after thousands of years of development, has a profound history and cultural deposits. In contemporary design and art education, the elements of Nuo culture through innovative applications, showing the integration of traditional culture and modern design, education concepts. The researcher collected fifteen pieces of literature related to the topic of this paper to develop a specific analysis.

2.1 The Integration of Nuo Mask Elements with Guochao Fashion Design

Zhang and Wang (2024) explored the application of Nuo mask elements from Xiangdong, Pingxiang in Guochao fashion design. They argue that Nuo masks not only showcase the unique personality of Chinese mask culture but also embody rich historical and cultural values. By integrating the structure, colours, and patterns of Nuo masks with Guochao fashion design, designers can imbue the clothing with a deeper cultural meaning, thereby promoting a more localized Guochao style (Zhang & Wang, 2024). Liu and Zhu (2024) further examined the use of Nuo masks from Western Hunan in cultural and creative product design, focusing on the visual symbols of the masks. They incorporated these elements into the design of chess pieces, redesigning traditional cultural symbols to better align with the aesthetic preferences of modern youth (Liu & Zhu, 2024).

2.2 Innovative Applications of Nuo Culture in Cultural and Creative Product Design

Nuo masks serve as highly valuable cultural materials in the design of cultural and creative products. Xu et al. (2024) analysed the decorative elements of Nuo masks from the Maonan ethnic group in Huanjiang, Guangxi, and explored their application in cultural and creative products. They categorized Maonan Nuo masks and enriched the design of cultural and creative products through direct application, exaggeration, and abstract innovation, promoting the spread and development of Maonan Nuo culture (Xu et al., 2024). Luo (2024) studied the stage presentation of Zhanjiang Nuo dance, a traditional intangible cultural heritage from the Lingnan region, emphasizing the necessity for traditional culture to move from rural villages to the stage in contemporary society. Using Zhanjiang Nuo dance as an example, Luo explored innovative forms of stage presentation, further enriching the means of expressing traditional culture (Luo, 2024).

2.3 The Integration of Nuo Culture into Art Education

As traditional culture increasingly permeates the modern educational system, Nuo cultural elements have gained growing attention in art education. Mo and Wei (2024) researched the living transmission and teaching innovations of Huanjiang Nuo folk culture in vocational art education. They pointed out that Nuo culture, as a form of ethnic traditional culture, holds significant value in art education. However, current teaching content is relatively outdated, and teaching methods require innovation. Through modern teaching approaches, student interest in Nuo culture can be effectively enhanced, driving the teaching of traditional culture in vocational education (Mo & Wei, 2024).

Additionally, Zhao (2024) explored the significance of integrating artistic practice into general education courses for arts majors. She argued that artistic practice is a crucial means to enhance students' self-directed learning and innovation capabilities. Through experiential teaching, traditional culture can be effectively integrated with contemporary art education, enhancing students' understanding and practice of cultural arts (Zhao, 2024).

2.4 The Application of Traditional Culture in Public Art Courses

The incorporation of intangible cultural heritage into public art courses in higher education has also received increasing attention. Yuan and Xia (2024) focused on the application of Changzhou's intangible cultural heritage in public art courses, proposing that campus activities and extracurricular programs can deepen students' understanding and experience of intangible cultural heritage (Yuan & Xia, 2024). Li (2024), using the "Tibetan Folk Dance—Reba Dance" course at Tibet University as an example, explored the practice of intangible cultural heritage in public art education, emphasizing the role of dance courses in promoting the transmission and innovation of traditional culture (Li, 2024).

2.5 Future Development Trends

In summary, Nuo cultural elements not only showcase their unique cultural charm in Guochao fashion design but have also been widely applied in cultural and creative product design and art education. As society continues to recognize the value of traditional culture, the integration of Nuo culture with modern design is expected to deepen. In the field of education, innovative teaching methods and practical courses will incorporate more traditional cultural elements, promoting both cultural transmission and innovation. The unique value of this review lies in its focus on the decorative characteristics and role images of the Nuo masks of the Maonan ethnic group, gradually exploring the contemporary significance of Nuo culture.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Literature analysis method

Through reading and analysing existing literature, books, academic papers, archives, etc., to understand the results, theoretical frameworks and perspectives of existing research, to provide a basis for research. This method is usually used to summarise and sort out previous research.

3.2 Field research method

By going deep into the cultural or design phenomenon of the place of occurrence, field observation, interviews, filming, recording, etc., to obtain first-hand information. The field investigation method is especially commonly used in the study of national culture and intangible cultural heritage, which can directly contact the local Nuo cultural practices and inheritors. The results of the study, to identify the gaps in the study or points of contention, to provide theoretical support for further research.

3.3 Comparative Study Method

By comparing the similarities and differences between different regions and cultures of similar or related phenomena, to find out its inherent laws. For example, you can compare the visual performance of different Nuo mask elements to explore the diversity and commonality of culture and design.

3.4 Image and Symbol Analysis Method

Especially when it comes to visual culture and design research, image and symbol analysis is used to analyse the symbols and visual elements in art works, design works, and interpret the cultural significance they imply. For example, the analysis of Nuo mask shape, colour and pattern, to explore its symbolic meaning and aesthetic value.

4 THE COLOUR OF MAONAN NUO MASKS

Professor Gu (1997) believed that the artistic characteristics of Guangxi Maonan Nuo mask is the colour of the masks. The colour of Maonan Nuo masks in Guangxi, China, mostly uses plant and mineral pigments in ancient methods. Although, not as diverse as modern pigments, but in the Guangxi Nuo mask craftsmen carefully grinding, boil, colour appears rich, simple and full of charm. There is a very important principle in the colouring of ancient Nuo masks in Guangxi is "apply colour with the class", But it also has two meanings, First, according to the types of nuo mask, "good phase mask, evil phase mask, ugly phase mask", good mask has more white face and red lips, light yellow mask, light brown face, The fierce phase is mostly black mask, green mask, purple mask, gold mask, ugly phase is mostly green mask, besides, The crown decoration of nuo mask is manifested as a simple and simple colour concept in the principle of applying colour, Such as crown decoration with red flowers, green leaves, rattan man decoration; Black eyes, red lips, and yellow, greyish skin, There are not so many levels of diverse change, However, it can present the original artistic beauty of the ancient nuo mask in Guangxi.



Figure 1 "Maonan flower god"

Source: Provided by Huanjiang China Museum
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5 HAT DECORATION

Guangxi, China is a multi-ethnic region, where there is a brilliant decorative culture. Miao embroidery, Zhuang brocade, flower and bamboo hats are all treasures of decorative culture. Nuo culture is no exception. In addition to the pattern on the costumes of Nuo drama, Nuo mask itself also has rich decorative elements. Guangxi nuo face adornment in addition to the old phase "knot horse tail for beard" decoration, other such as helmet, flower, comb bun decoration are from nuo mask itself,

that is to say the same piece of wood chisel out decoration components and facial features, because the role of the Guangxi nuo face image is more, so each nuo mask helmet crown, flowers, or comb bun type have obvious difference and symbolic significance.

5.1 Flame Decoration on the Cap of the ‘SanJie’ Gods

The ‘Anjie’ is a god with a strong regional colour. In most other Nuo culture areas in Guangxi, the gods of the ‘SanJie’ are described as "meeting the eight immortals and becoming immortals". In the Nuo culture legend of the Maonan people, the ‘SanJie’ were the heroes who led the people to resist the harsh actions and died from torture in the oil pan. When the author interviewed Fang Zhenguo, the inheritor of the Maonan Nuo mask, he emphasized that more than once many images of Nuo masks of the Maonan people were derived from folk tales. Therefore, when designing and making the mask, the Maonan ancestors designed their cap into a black pot, and the decorative patterns on the hat symbolized the burning fire.

5.2 ‘WanSui’empress and The Crown Decoration

Among the many Maonan Nuo gods, the empress and the official crown are the most gorgeous, and the Maonan people regard flowers as the symbol of children. In the legend of Maonan, ‘WanSui’ empress in charge of the heavenly flower circle, the young flower forest fairy official full face, her duty is to help long live the empress to cultivate flowers and help the empress together with the human birth and reproduction.

‘WanSui’ empress and ‘Flower empress’ give which golden flower is representative to bear the boy, give honeysuckle represent will birth girl, therefore, their cap carving with different expression in the middle of the baby mask, it is worth noting that baby mask outer circle is the sun grain, contains the Maonan people hope descendants in the healthy growth under the sun. Compared with the crown decoration, the official crown decoration is more rich, which can be roughly divided into five parts, namely: auspicious clouds, green leaves, gold branches, the sun, gold, silver flowers (children). Among them, the sun pattern and auspicious cloud pattern on the top of the cap is the meaning from the fairy world, the green leaves at the bottom symbolize the lush forest, symbolizing the vigorous production of future generations, the bottom is the baby mask and decoration, which is the core, but also a symbol of the responsibility of the ‘Flower empress’ to send children to the world.

5.3 ‘Sanyuan’ God Crown Decoration

Sanyuan gods in Guangxi folk spread widely, and with a strong Taoist colour, Maonan Nuo drama masters borrow Taoist tang, ge, zhou, sometimes also called the ‘Sanyuan’ church ", but ‘Sanyuan’ is three immortals, so in the specific crown helmet decoration and character features with symbolic technique to specific generalization, ‘Sanyuan’ crown decoration is mainly incense burner design, represents the Maonan as a god to worship.

5.4 Yao king and Yao Queen Hat Decoration

Yao king, yao queen, in Maonan folklore with kind plain, helpful image, not only for the gods, but also as ‘WanSui’ empress send road guarantor, Maonan a childless people in the process of beg to ‘WanSui’ empress flowers accidentally lost flowers, yao king found after the flowers and care to the people home, to help it complete the desire of the child. Therefore, there is no redundant decoration of yao king and Yao woman, which is decorated with their own bun.

5.5 SanNiang' and 'Mother God' Hat Decoration

In one of the few women gods, SanNiang' and mother god cap decoration is more similar, SanNiang' and mother god in Maonan myths and legends are amorous feelings of affectionate woman, the former and 'Wei TuDi (maonan legend) martyr, mother god is toast officer, hero QinSanJiu, skilful craftsman god ban god lover, and strong fertility. However, the role they play in the Maonan Nuo drama culture is the god of fortune and fortune, because the people take the prosperity of the family, so the crown hat pattern of the 'SanNiang' and 'mother god' are bird patterns.

5.6 The Hat Decoration of the Gods in charge of The Land

In charge of the land of the gods in maonan folklore has several versions, some say with Sanniang martyr maonan youth, some legend for zhuang youth, but the version is described as a good plain, industrious and brave, courage, well by the people love, incense, so the crown of soil, land and tomb stone grain, represents the moral of the party in charge of the land.

5.7 Local King and Kitchen King Crown Decoration

The local king has a high status among the gods of the Maonan folklore. He is the god of peace and the prosperity of the people and livestock; the kitchen king is the god of health and fireworks. Therefore, the crown hat decoration is rich and bright, with the decoration of heaven and earth auspicious clouds, and the crown hat decoration of the kitchen king is very intuitive: there are flames, triangle stove, fireworks, grey pattern.

5.8 LiangWu God's Crown Decoration

Liangwu oversees the gods of animals, and there are also many legends between the Maonan people and the cattle. With the folk word of mouth, it gradually evolved into the god in charge of human poultry and livestock. Therefore, its cap is mainly decorated with vines, branches, gourds, green leaves.



Figure 2 MAO Nan LiangWu god
Source: provided by Huanjiang China Museum
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6 ROLE IMAGE

6.1 Name

Scholar Wei Wenhuan (2019)'s study of the types of masks in Guangxi Nuo laid the foundation for this study. There are many roles of Nuo mask in Guangxi, but it is surprising that the roles of Nuo gods in many places are very similar, especially in Guilin, Guigang, Huanjiang and Luocheng, where the roles of Nuo gods in these areas are all based on the 36 gods. In some places, there are far more than 36 Nuo roles, and this specific quantification is sometimes used to describe the meaning of many, so there is 36 gods and seventy-two phases in Guangxi “Nuo” culture.

6.2 Image

There are various types of Maonan Nuo masks. According to their image characteristics, they can be divided into three different types: good nuo mask, evil nuo mask and ugly nuo mask. Good phase nuo masks are common and abundant in the images of nuo gods in various regions of Guangxi. If subdivided, it can be divided into young literary phase, old literary phase, young martial arts phase, old martial arts phase, young female phase, old female phase and so on. The old language is generally carved with helmet, crown, cap, and paint to describe, and most of the old language meet with ponytail to beard, from the expression characteristics of the whole old language, it is a gentle face; the old language in the face is solemn and solemn, although carved wrinkles to show the age of the role but still show a sense of heroic. This kind of Nuo masks in the Maonan people are mainly: Sanyuan, Sanguang, SheWang, ZaoWang, Cao, and so on (Liu & Tian, 2017).

Youth mask is handsome and gentle, headdress with a scarf, combed hair bun; white lips, on behalf of the god has SanGuang, GuangTong, etc.

The old general mask is powerful and brave, upright, not angry from the power, more thick eyebrows, big eyes, beautiful beard. Black, white, red, some carved through the eye (the third eye). On behalf of nuo face gods, there are Pangu, Mo Yi King, Linggong, Guan Gong, Guangfu King, Zhao Gongming and so on (Xu & Fan, 2024).

Compared with the old general, the young general looks more heroic, eyebrows raised, but no beautiful beard; the representative god of Huaguang, Erlang god, etc. Elderly female masks, many carved with corolla and combed hair bun, white cheeks, red lips fine eyebrows; plump face, rich, wrinkled but full of spirit, showing a kind and kind look, this kind of representative gods, such as Guanyin, Wu Po (Wu Zetian), earth, Yao woman and so on.

Among the many “Nuo” masks of Maonan nationality, the young women are handsome and charming, with willow leaves and curved eyebrows, pink face and red lips, representing the white horse three aunts, Ling niang, SanNiang, and so on.

The second category is the fierce mask. The masks are generally grinning and angry; some have fangs and veins; the faces are mainly black, blue, gold and purple. Those with crown helmet have office; those with horns or ears are demons and ghosts. On behalf of the gods, Cao, King Lei, Lei Bing, Lord god, LuXian, etc.

The third category is the ugly mask. Most of this kind of nuo shows funny, humorous and even witty characters, which plays a harmonious role in the nuo of Maonan nationality. According to research analysis, Maonan “Nuo” play myths and legends from people in the transformation of nature, nature, generation created in the process of reproduction, careful taste analysis actually these images are from the general public, they are part of the ecological social life, although these nuo face ugly image features ugly, some even present physiological defects such as grin, one-eyed, squint, but no sinister evil.

7 CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROLE IMAGE OF THE MAONAN NUO MASK

7.1 Shifting the Focus from Pleasing God to Satisfying Human Desires

"Nuo" is a religious sacrificial ritual of the Chinese nation. It has obviously had the role of exorcising ghosts and entertaining gods since the Tang Dynasty. With the development of the society, people's cultural level gradually increased, although Maonan retained such as "fat" religious ceremony, but has been from the solemn, solemn sacrifice atmosphere gradually turned into the Maonan festival activities, such as held in May, people not only prepared such as five-colour glutinous rice, steamed meat, also with various characters of nuo mask singing and dancing, entertainment atmosphere. Among them, the image of Nuo mask has original serious, dignified, fierce, cartoon and charming, and even some young people combine it with cartoon animals, contemporary sports stars, entertainment stars, or their own cartoon image, colour is more colourful, advertising pigments, propylene paint, and original ecological plants and ore pigments. For convenience, the material of these nuo masks also changed, in the celebration of the dragon festival, the prestige also wears the traditional wooden nuo face, many young people and children wearing paper nuo masks. At this time, the character image and function of Nuo mask have changed and become an entertainment prop with the brand of contemporary life (Mo & Lü, 2019).

7.2 From Religious Belief to cultural and Creative Design

Fei Tao Festival is the most important festival of the Maonan people. Maonan' FeiTao' section of use a variety of props, need to display various "table", take the altar, on the altar "floor", hanging idol, ceremony activities are presided over by a teacher male class, division master's holding knife, sword, bronze, wearing wooden mask, dressed in costume chanting wu language, sing nuo God, dance nuo God dance play 36 road god, "god" ceremony. Maonan "Nuo" mask is one of many sacrificial props. And the author had an in-depth communication with Fang Wenzhan, the inheritor of Maonan "Nuo", during the investigation of Huanjiang. Today, as sacrifice props nuo mask almost extinct, but in the museum, cultural centre to create nuo mask is more and more, some "Nuo" mask specific amount 5 to 10 times larger than ever, at the same time, in Guangxi nuo culture developed area of scenic spots with nuo face image of national costumes, backpack, folding fan, pendant, jewellery, furnishings and even U plate, etc. The identity and image of "Nuo" mask are also gradually changing from religious belief to cultural and creative economy.

7.3 From the Single to the Diverse

Maonan "Nuo" masks are mostly made of wood, carved with 30 cm long half wood. The wood is made of local oxtail trees and wood. Although there are 36 fairy masks, they are single in material land display mode. With the rapid development of modern science and technology and artificial intelligence, maonan nuo face gradually to the diversified development, in addition to the diversity of nuo material, integration, the role of nuo mask image history pedigree figure also began in the form of animation, virtual, and more intuitive, from this level, also marks the development of nuo culture in Guangxi has entered a new era mode.

CONCLUSIONS

Maonan Nuo culture, as a treasure trove of Guangxi's national culture in a bright pearl, not only profoundly embodies the Maonan people's wisdom and creativity passed down from generation to generation, but also through the baptism of the long river of history and the intangible cultural heritage has been precipitated. This unique cultural phenomenon, with its distinctive regional colour and deep cultural heritage, has become a study of the Maonan history, social structure, religious beliefs and artistic aesthetics of valuable information. Nuo masks, as an integral part of Nuo culture, not only carries a rich symbolic meaning, but also its unique decorative features and role image, showing the Maonan people for nature, the universe and the supernatural power of understanding and reverence.

In contemporary society, although the Maonan Nuo has gradually faded from the traditional Nuo opera performance stage, no longer serve as the main ceremonial props role, but its figure has frequently appeared in the museum's exhibition cabinets, cultural museums in the showroom, as well as major tourist attractions in the cultural merchandise shelf. This shift not only marks the Maonan Nuo culture in the context of the new era of inheritance and innovation path, but also reflects the new thinking on the protection and use of cultural heritage. Nuo, from a religious ritual symbol, transformed into a connection between the past and the future, traditional and modern cultural bridges, has become an important carrier for the dissemination of Maonan culture and promote national cultural exchanges (Li, 2012).

More importantly, Nuo Maonan is not only a historical relic or cultural symbols, but it also contains the essence of Maonan original ecological life and philosophical thinking, is the Maonan people's spiritual world and the direct embodiment of aesthetic taste. Therefore, in the face of the wave of globalisation and modern aesthetic diversification trend, we should actively explore the Maonan Nuo culture and modern design concepts, scientific and technological integration of new ways, such as digital means of preservation and dissemination of information, the use of modern materials and technology recovery and innovation Nuo mask production process, as well as the development of cultural and creative products to meet the preferences of contemporary consumers, so as to make this ancient Cultural heritage has a new vitality.

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The first author led the whole study and collected most of the research material; The second author as the supervisor provided the research idea for the first author.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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