

A Literature Review of Dalang Dance as a Cultural Medium: Exploring its Role in Portraying and Sustaining Zhuang Identity

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Abstract

This study investigates the significance of Dalang Dance as a cultural expression that embodies and sustains Zhuang identity, highlighting its reflection of core values such as agricultural heritage, community cooperation, and tradition preservation. Through an exploration of its ties to rice cultivation, the dance exemplifies the integral relationship between the Zhuang people and their environment. The study demonstrates how the Dalang Dance fosters social cohesion through synchronized movements, mirroring the collaborative spirit of agricultural practices. Moreover, it serves as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations while adapting to contemporary contexts. The findings underscore the dance's educational potential, instilling an appreciation for agricultural traditions and environmental sustainability among younger audiences. The research advocates for culturally responsive educational frameworks that integrate Dalang Dance, supporting local cultural expressions amid globalization's pressures. It emphasizes the need for flexible cultural preservation policies that allow innovation while safeguarding traditional practices. Additionally, the study aligns with China's multiculturalism policy, suggesting that government initiatives, including national festivals and cultural tourism, can enhance the visibility and economic viability of Dalang Dance. By promoting a sustainable worldview and connecting with nature, the Dalang Dance emerges as a vehicle for environmental advocacy. This paper also identifies areas for future research, including a broader examination of Dalang Dance's variations across regions, its adaptation to globalization, and its role in multicultural education. Ultimately, Dalang Dance stands as a vital component of Zhuang cultural heritage, crucial for fostering intercultural dialogue and preserving intangible cultural legacies in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Dalang Dance, Zhuang Identity, Cultural Preservation, Agricultural Heritage, Environmental Sustainability

Introduction

Zhuang culture plays a vital role in Chinese society, serving as both a symbol of ethnic identity and a crucial contributor to cultural diversity. The significance of preserving and celebrating traditions, such as the reverence for Buluotuo (Chaisingkananont, 2020), the expressive performances of Zhuang Opera (Jian, Nicolas, & Karin, 2022), and the use of traditional instruments (Wang, Chuangprakhon, Liu, Jian, & Santaveesuk, 2024), underscores the enduring relevance of this rich heritage. The fusion of modernization with technological advancements and tourism has further facilitated the preservation and dissemination of these cultural elements (Guo et al., 2022), showcasing their adaptability while safeguarding their core essence.

Among these cultural practices, the Dalang Dance, or Lang Dance, holds particular significance as one of the 24 intangible cultural heritage dances of the Zhuang—the largest minority group in China, mainly residing in the Guangxi-Zhuang autonomous region. The repertoire of traditional Zhuang dances also includes the banxie dance, bronze drum dance, dabiandan, fusui bird dance, and the guodiao (bee drum) dance, among others (Chinese Cultural Studies Center, 2024). The Dalang Dance stands out for its distinctive use of pestle and mortar as instruments, embodying the historical and cultural essence of the Zhuang community, especially during local festivals in rural Guangxi.

The significance of the Dalang Dance is further amplified during major celebrations like the March 3rd Festival, where it is performed alongside bamboo dances and copper drum dances (Ruiyun & Mahamed, 2022). Such performances highlight its role as a crucial expression of communal unity and ethnic pride. Moreover, tourism initiatives have utilized the Dalang Dance to introduce Zhuang culture to a wider audience, combining heritage preservation with economic growth through engaging cultural festivals (Lei, 2024).

The importance of studying the Dalang Dance extends beyond mere appreciation of its artistry; it is an educational and cultural conduit that transmits traditional values to younger generations and fosters community connection. In an era shaped by globalization and modernization, understanding the significance of the Dalang Dance emphasizes the resilience of these cultural practices in maintaining ethnic identity and social cohesion.

For cultural preservationists, educators, and policymakers, recognizing the significance of the Dalang Dance reveals its utility as a medium for cultural education, strengthening the role of heritage within academic and policy contexts. Highlighting its presence in educational and community initiatives showcases how the dance supports ethnic identity amid the pressures of modernization. The insights from this study are vital for crafting strategies that preserve cultural heritage and reinforce community bonds.

The exploration of the Dalang Dance thus offers a comprehensive perspective on how traditional practices can be integrated into modern educational and community programs. It underscores the significance of such practices in maintaining Zhuang ethnic identity while

demonstrating the broader importance of preserving cultural arts to support diversity and resilience.

Dalang Dance as a Performance

Dalang Dance is a rice-pounding dance. The diversity of rice-pounding dance across different cultures is astonishing. They reflect a shared cultural practice with meaning, style, and context variations. While connected through the common act of pounding rice, these dances serve different cultural, social, and religious functions depending on the community. In Nagaland, India, the "Paansou Laam," a rice-pounding dance of the Rongmei tribe, is performed during certain ritual festivals. It involves mortars placed in line with pestles, symbolizing preparation for a festive drink (Singh & Panmei, 2020). This dance is deeply tied to ritualistic and communal celebrations, where pounding rice becomes a ceremonial gesture connecting the community to their spiritual beliefs. The use of traditional dress and coordinated group performances suggests a deep connection between this activity and cultural identity, especially during harvest festivals or cultural showcases. Also, from India, there is a rice-pounding performance at the annual Thalfavang Kut festival in Mizoram (Sitlhou, 2018).

Indonesia is rich with rice-pounding dances. In Aceh, rice-pounding dances are part of the region's vast array of traditional music and dance forms. The cultural diversity in Aceh, driven by its geographical isolation, has fostered a variety of local expressions, where rice-pounding dances may also symbolize communal cooperation and celebrations, contributing to the cultural identity of the region (Kartomi, 1981). In the Dayak Kenyah tradition in Kalimantan Island, the rice-pounding dance is part of the "Mecaaq Udat" tradition. This dance serves as a closing ceremony in ritual sequences, blending religious significance with communal celebration. Here, pounding rice is not just a physical act but also a symbolic gesture of abundance and gratitude (Istianingrum, Sumiyadi, Iskandarwassid, & Permadi, 2020). The Gentar Dance also originates from Kalimantan and mimics the movements of rice planting. It is typically performed to welcome guests. The dancers use a wooden tool for pounding, along with other props like seeds and bamboo, symbolizing rice seeds and their containers (Warni, Arifin, Setiabudi, & Finahari, 2022). In Yogyakarta, there is Gejog Lesung, known as the traditional rice-pounding dance from Girisekar Village, Gunungkidul. It involves rhythmic movements performed while using wooden tools, traditionally used for pounding rice, to create percussive sounds. This cultural art form is part of the rich heritage of the village, which also includes various other traditional dances, music, and ceremonies. It reflects the local community's connection to their agricultural roots and contributions to the village's efforts in promoting cultural tourism (Listianto, 2023). In Sundanese, there is the Seren Taun ceremony (Adisaputri & Widiastuti, 2015). Seren Taun ceremony is an expression of gratitude for the joys and sorrows of their experience, especially in the field of agriculture. It is held every 22nd of the month of Rayagung, which is the last month in the calculation of the Sundanese calendar. Besides the ritual being sacred, arts and entertainment are also held. This ceremony begins with the ngejayak ceremony (picking up rice) on the 18th Rayagung, followed by the rice-pounding ceremony and as the highlight of the event on the 22nd Rayagung.

In the Philippines, regular rice-pounding competitions are held in many places, such as Lubuagan (Naganag, 2013). This event showcases a competitive aspect of rice pounding, where participants demonstrate speed, coordination, and rhythmic precision. These competitions are festive and emphasize skill in using traditional rice-pounding tools.

Participants worked in teams or groups to pound rice using large pestles and mortars. The rhythmic nature of the pounding creates a communal and celebratory atmosphere, highlighting the cultural importance of rice in the region. There is also the Munbayu dance, known as the rice pounding is connected to indigenous Ifugao cultural practices related to rice harvest festivals. The dance or performance emphasizes gratitude for the harvest, with participants using traditional tools and rhythms to mark the occasion (Roxas-Lim, 1973). In Luzon, there are Igorot tribes, and one of their songs is chua-ay, a rice-pounding song (Aguilar, 1994).

In Cambodia, there is the Bok Angre dance, which integrates rice-pounding movements with storytelling elements. The dance usually involves both men and women holding long pestles, dressed in traditional attire, and performing synchronized movements around the circular mortar, symbolizing the hard work and unity of agricultural life (Simana & Preisig, 2006). Meanwhile, in Vietnam, there is a Dam Duong dance from the Muong ethnic group (Forbes & Henley, 2012). Local men from Thanh Ba district usually perform banh day rice cake pounding skills to entertain tourists.

In Japan, while rice pounding is not a central theme of the Nomai dance drama, the performance itself integrates communal, sacred, and economic elements of life. Nomai dance drama is a performance art that integrates sacred, communal, economic, and cultural aspects of life in Higashidorimura. The pounding of rice, often linked to agricultural festivals, reflects the importance of rice in spiritual and community life (Asai, 1999). There is also the Mochitsuki dance. Mochitsuki is a Japanese New Year tradition involving the pounding of glutinous rice to make mochi (rice cakes). The process involves a person pounding the rice with a mallet while another person swiftly kneads it between strikes. It is a highly synchronized and festive event, blending physical skills and cultural rituals (Morita, 1998).

Rice-pounding dances across various cultures serve not only as expressions of labor but also as vital symbolic acts tied to festivals, rituals, and community cohesion. These variations showcase the dance's adaptability to different social and religious contexts while maintaining its foundational connection to rice, a key staple and symbol of prosperity in many societies. Similarly, rice pounding plays a vital role in the daily lives of the Zhuang people, serving as both a cultural practice and a means of identity formation. Rice-pounding activities have played a significant role in Zhuang people's daily lives, reflecting their cultural identity and connection to nature through traditional practices and rituals, as described in the Epic of Baeuqloxdoh (布洛陀史诗), a canon text of the Zhuang people (Zhu & Guan, 2014). The "Epic of Baeuqloxdoh" is an ancient Zhuang cultural narrative that holds significant importance in Zhuang mythology and religious traditions. It conveys stories related to the creation of the world, humanity, and the Zhuang people's connection to nature, emphasizing themes like heroism, spirituality, and the guidance of deities. The epic also serves as a key to understanding Zhuang identity, their spiritual beliefs, and their cultural preservation efforts, particularly as they seek to maintain these traditions amidst the modernization date of composition as it is an orally transmitted story that has evolved over many centuries. Like many epics in traditional cultures, it was passed down through generations by word of mouth before being written down early spiritual beliefs. However, it was not formally recorded until modern ethnographers and historians started documenting Zhuang cultural heritage (Wang et al., 2024).

Another ancient folk is Liao songs. Liao songs are an ancient form of folk music from the Zhuang ethnic group, originating in Pingguo County and dating back to the Tang and Song Dynasties. They express various aspects of Zhuang life, including production, love, marriage, and history. As part of China's national intangible cultural heritage, Liao songs carry significant cultural meaning for the Zhuang people. Written in ancient Zhuang script, researchers have discovered that many of these characters are distinct from Chinese characters, highlighting their unique linguistic heritage (Han, 2019).

Rice-pounding activity is deeply intertwined with their agricultural heritage and social customs. Rice pounding is a communal activity that fosters social bonds among the Zhuang, reflecting their collective identity and cultural memory (Bing & Xueming, 2022). It is often associated with rituals and celebrations, marking important agricultural milestones and reinforcing community ties (Lin & Liu, 2021).

The practice has evolved, integrating modern techniques while preserving traditional methods, thus contributing to the local economy through the production of rice-based foods like raw squeezed rice noodles (Bing & Xueming, 2022). Tourism has also leveraged this cultural heritage, promoting the ecological and cultural authenticity of rice farming in regions like Longji (Yi, 2012).

The Zhuang people's identity is closely linked to their rice cultivation practices, with rice serving as a symbol of sustainability and cultural pride (Lin & Liu, 2021). The preservation of rice pounding amidst modernization traditions highlights the resilience of Zhuang cultural identity (Bing & Xueming, 2022). While rice pounding is a cornerstone of Zhuang culture, some argue that modernization poses challenges to its traditional practices, potentially diluting the cultural significance and communal aspects of this vital activity.

Performance art serves as a vital medium for sustaining culture through the lens of cultural identity theory by embodying and expressing the nuances of cultural heritage. Performance art can sustain culture by embodying cultural identity theories through visual representation, symbolism, and archetypes, fostering a connection between tradition and contemporary artistic expression (Pop, 2016). This interplay fosters a deeper understanding of identity and community. Performance art allows artists to reflect on their cultural heritage, using archetypes and personal narratives to enrich their work (Protska, Pastushok, Kaplun, Gunder, & Hudakova, 2024). By engaging with cultural symbols, performers can articulate their identities, creating a dialogue between tradition and contemporary expression (Protska et al., 2024).

Artistic expressions, such as rituals and ceremonies, serve as embodiments of cultural legacy, facilitating the transmission of values and beliefs across generations (Mirnalini & Brinda, 2024). The integration of local narratives in performances helps maintain cultural specificity, promoting awareness and appreciation of diverse identities (Mary, Kennedy, & Uwa, 2019). Moreover, performance art can unite diverse ethnic groups by fostering a shared sense of identity, which is crucial for national cohesion (Mary et al., 2019). By celebrating cultural diversity through entertainment, communities can enhance their collective identity and promote peace (Mary et al., 2019). While performance art significantly contributes to cultural sustainability, it is essential to recognize that globalization poses challenges to local identities,

potentially diluting unique cultural expressions. Balancing global influences with local traditions remains a critical task for artists and communities alike.

The preservation of traditional cultures amid globalization and modernization presents significant challenges, as highlighted in recent literature. Globalization often leads to the commodification and standardization of cultural practices, overshadowing local identities and traditions (Mathew, 2024; Suharyanto & Wiflihani, 2024). The influence of new media has also complicated the dissemination of traditional culture, with outdated methods failing to engage younger audiences, resulting in a disconnect from cultural heritage (Lyu, 2024).

There are also several key challenges to the preservation of traditional culture, such as cultural homogenization, digital disparities, and urbanization and modernization. For example, global food corporations and mass production prioritize uniformity, threatening local culinary identities and traditional practices (Mathew, 2024). Globalization marginalizes local ingredients and culinary practices, risking cultural diversity and sustainability (Mathew, 2024). The lag in digital preservation efforts hampers the transmission of traditional arts and crafts, leading to a shortage of skilled inheritors (Lyu, 2024). Meanwhile, rapid urbanization and the allure of modern conveniences often marginalize local cultures. This overshadows them with convenience and information influx, compelling individuals to choose between modernity and tradition (Suharyanto & Wiflihani, 2024).

Despite these challenges, there are strategies for cultural preservation, such as community involvement, cultural education, and supportive policies, which can help maintain cultural diversity in a globalized world (Hiswara, Adit, & YenikPujowati, 2023). However, the tension between preserving traditional values and adapting to modern influences remains a critical area of concern (Акаев, 2023). This tension will manifest in many aspects, including performing arts.

Method

This study uses a literature review as a method of data collection. The keywords "Zhuang culture" and "rice" are used to find literature related to Zhuang culture related to the use of rice. These keywords are used in the Google Scholar search engine. Google Scholar is used as it allows users to search the body text of scientific articles. The search yielded 114 results, which were then manually checked to determine their relevance to the Dalang Dance. The search results are then described as research results.

The analysis was conducted by comparing the relevant Zhuang culture with the symbolism in the Dalang Dance in its versions. The author recorded videos of Dalang Dance performances in four versions. The first version is a simple version collected from dance activities performed by young people in a rural setting. The second version is a mass dance performed by many people on stage (the second version of the March 3rd Festival 2024). The third and fourth versions are even more massive and performed in a large field with more participants.

The first version is several groups of four males and four females around a long mortar. Everyone holds a pestle and circles around a board attached to the ground. They start to create rhythmic sounds by pounding the mortar or hitting each other on the top or bottom actively and rhythmically while standing. The sound in the dance comes from the pestle and

mortar. Sometimes, one of the group will shout encouragement. Men and women have different costumes.

Another version of this dance performed at the March 3rd Festival 2024 involved more complex movements. They gathered around five mortars, each consisting of four dancers, two men and two women. The dancers hit the mortar with pestles in a squatting and standing position. This is because the mortar used is higher, up to knee-length. In addition to the movement of hitting the hole in the mortar from above, there is also the movement of hitting the edge of the mortar from the side and the movement of scooping the contents of the mortar upwards, side by side or facing each other. The dancers also do not only hit the mortar. The female dancers then stand in a row in front while carrying pestles and using the pestles as handles to perform graceful dance movements using one free hand. The male dancers continue to hit the mortar until it is time for them to come forward and move rhythmically in pairs with the women to hit each other's pestles or hit the floor with the pestles. The costumes of the male and female dancers are the same, and the dance is accompanied by music other than the sound of the pestle being hit.

The third version is even more massive, with many dancers, each six people playing one mortar. The initial dance activity is hitting the mortar with a pestle. The hitting movements are more varied in body movements, the dynamics of the hits, and the interaction between dancers. After hitting, the dancers face the audience and move one hand as if starting to tell a story. They then show movements, such as spinning something with a pestle in waves. After that movement, they return to the mortar and do new hitting movements with variations such as taking something to put in the mortar, occasionally returning to face the audience to do the storytelling movement. All dancers wear the same costume, only different colors.

Finally, the fourth version involves a group of dancers who do not use mortars. First, a man on a stage that is a lying drum shows a kind of object like a trumpet up and then down, replaced by a group of female dancers. This group of dancers is in the middle and depicts women who are winnowing rice in the middle, while around the dancers come female dancers. The pestle and mortar dancers are initially in the outermost circle, hitting the pestle, then finally moving to the edge while shifting the mortar. The male dancers stop to watch the female dancers in the middle, which includes their mortar dancing partners. The female dancers in the middle dance by shouting while occasionally covering their mouths. The men then join in while carrying the pestle. Then, they bow in front of the dancing women. Next, women and men pair up together, holding one pestle. After that, they then dance the mortar from the edge and bring it to the middle. Men and women together hit the mortar. On the middle stage comes a man who hits the drum and then climbs on it while carrying an object shaped like a nekara. The man dances with the nekara, surrounded by male dancers holding pestles. They then rejoin the women to beat the pestles together.

The description above shows that Dalang Dance adapts to modernization without losing its traditional elements in several ways. In various versions of Dalang Dance, there are more complex movement developments, such as position variations and how to hit the mortar. For example, dancers not only stand but also squat and use various positions, which shows innovation in dance techniques while maintaining traditional basic movements.

Despite changes in the composition of the dancers, the use of costumes still reflects the Zhuang cultural identity. In some versions, the costumes for female and male dancers are different, and in other versions, their costumes are uniform with different colors. This shows the balance between modern aesthetics and traditional symbolism.

In addition to the traditional sound of pestle beating, the performance is accompanied by additional music that can create a more dynamic and interesting atmosphere for modern audiences. In the simple version of the dance, the sound comes entirely from the pestle beating, which offers a more mystical impression. Meanwhile, in the more massive and modern version, there is traditional Chinese music accompaniment. This helps to attract the attention of the younger generation without neglecting the audio element, which is an integral part of the dance.

In some versions, the dancers interact with the audience through storytelling movements and facing them, creating a more direct engagement. This not only makes the performance more interesting but also brings the story to life. The story basically consists of the activities of the Zhuang people, such as sowing, planting, harvesting, and processing rice, which are carried out collectively by men and women.

In more modern versions, such as those involving dancers who do not use mortars, there are new elements integrated into the performance, such as the use of other objects that symbolize tradition. This shows creativity in maintaining cultural themes and values while incorporating new, relevant elements. Through these methods, Tari Dalang has successfully adapted to modernization, maintaining its traditional essence while responding to the challenges of the times and attracting the attention of a new generation.

Results and Discussion

Zhuang Cultural Values

Zhuang cultural values are deeply embedded in various aspects of their society, including language, proverbs, song traditions, agricultural practices, and religious beliefs. The evolution of the Zhuang writing system exemplifies the community's adaptability and resilience in preserving their linguistic identity. According to Li and Huang (2004), despite external pressures, the Zhuang people have maintained a strong connection to their written traditions. This underscores their commitment to communication, knowledge preservation, and cultural continuity.

Proverbs play a pivotal role in Zhuang culture, encapsulating moral and practical wisdom. Yanxian (2016), demonstrated how Zhuang proverbs reflect agricultural practices, social relationships, and ethical conduct. For example, the proverb "Raise fish in a pond of one acre and get both fish and rice" highlights resourcefulness, ecological harmony, and the symbiotic relationship between people and the land. It reflects the community's sustainable and collective approach to life.

Music, particularly singing, is a central cultural practice for the Zhuang, especially during festivals and communal gatherings. Chen (2020), emphasized that singing not only expresses joy and creativity but also reinforces the Zhuang connection to agricultural life, often

featuring themes of rice planting and communal well-being. This highlights the value of the Zhuang place on togetherness, tradition, and the continuity of cultural expression.

The agricultural foundation of Zhuang society is most evident in their reliance on wet-rice cultivation. As Kaup (2001), noted, wet-rice farming has shaped both their societal structure and cultural practices. The agricultural calendar and festivals celebrating harvests and fertility underscore the community's reverence for the land and the natural cycles. Zhuang agricultural proverbs often emphasize diligence, reflecting a work ethic intrinsically tied to their livelihood (Unseth, 2017). Unseth (2017), also found that the word "rice" is dominant in two thousand Zhuang proverbs, indicating the economic importance and cognitive salience of rice.

Religious beliefs in Zhuang culture are closely aligned with their connection to nature, particularly through rituals linked to rice cultivation. Yen (2005), and Kao (2014), illustrated how these practices embody a holistic worldview, where material and spiritual aspects of life are interconnected and where harmony with the environment is a core principle.

The transmission of cultural practices, such as the Bronze Drum Dance, illustrates the importance of generational continuity in Zhuang culture. Wang, Gu, Lu, and Zhu (2018), in their study on the inheritance of twelve sets of bronze drum dances of the Zhuang nationality, noted that this dance is a symbol of cultural essence. It was passed down to honor ancestors and preserve collective memory, reflecting the Zhuang's commitment to cultural cohesion and historical identity.

Zhuang medicine also reflects a pragmatic approach to knowledge and healing, blending traditional wisdom with modern needs. Farquhar and Lai (2014), highlighted how Zhuang national medicine demonstrates their resourcefulness and adaptability. It ensures the survival of traditional practices while embracing new knowledge forms.

Rice holds significant symbolic and spiritual importance in Zhuang culture. According to Long (2017), five-color glutinous rice, commonly used in festivals, symbolizes cultural unity and prosperity. In Zhuang folk songs, rice often represents the community's relationship with nature, their agricultural heritage, and their emotional expressions through folk music and oral literature (Yang, 2021). The centrality of rice in daily meals and social gatherings further underscores its role in Zhuang life (Ban, 2020).

Zhuang rituals and symbols, such as the frog—viewed as a symbol of harvest and fertility—demonstrate their deep connection to nature. Zhuang worship frogs because frog symbolizes harvest and offspring (Yan, Mayusoh, Inkuer, & Puntien, 2024). Yan et al (2024), explained that natural motifs (including butterfly patterns), such as those seen in Zhuang brocade patterns, reflect a reverence for the natural forces that sustain life. It also illustrates a value system that emphasizes harmony, sustainability, and respect for the environment.

Folktales, particularly those related to rice cultivation, further reinforce Zhuang cultural identity. Zhang, Lv, Jing, and Lin (2020), discussed how local fauna, like frogs, appear in Zhuang stories, symbolizing the interdependence of agriculture and the environment. The frog worship performed by Zhuang people at least dated from AD 916-1125, as depicted in the

Changshan Site of Northeast China (Zhang et al., 2020). Beauchamp (2010) added that the Zhuang people have shown resilience in the face of external influences, adapting their cultural narratives—such as their version of Cinderella—while maintaining a strong sense of identity, for example, by including terraced rice fields.

Zhuang cultural values emphasize resilience, community cohesion, respect for nature, and preserving traditions. These values are expressed through their agricultural practices, proverbs, rituals, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Central to these practices is the cultivation of rice, which serves not only as a staple for sustainability but also as a symbol of cultural identity and continuity.

The Role of Rice in Zhuang Culture

Rice holds a central place in Zhuang culture, functioning not only as a staple food but also as a symbol embedded in social, religious, and cultural practices. Its cultivation is deeply intertwined with Zhuang folklore and is often celebrated through folk songs, reflecting the community's agricultural foundation (Lin & Liu, 2021). These songs, particularly those associated with rice, are emblematic of cultural materialism, illustrating how agricultural practices shape Zhuang cultural transmission and social structure.

The distinctive five-colored glutinous rice is an important marker of Zhuang ethnic identity. According to Guo et al (2022), this rice, dyed with natural ingredients, is integral to various traditional festivals and rituals, further exemplifying the Zhuang community's agricultural roots. The use of this rice in cultural expressions underscores its symbolic role in representing the Zhuang's agricultural heritage. Yahao (2023), identified the cultivation of multi-colored rice seeds in the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village as central to the cultural "representativeness" of the Zhuang people. These rice varieties are often highlighted during festivals, reinforcing cultural identity and heritage preservation.

The five-colored glutinous rice also serves as a cultural and artistic symbol, particularly in festivals where it embodies Zhuang traditions and artistic expressions (Hou, Jin, & Wu, 2024). Beyond its role in sustainability, the rice reflects the Zhuang community's aesthetic values and social identity, integrating ritualistic and symbolic elements into their cultural heritage. This rice consumption also carries health-related connotations. Chen, Cao, and Fang (2020), discuss its use in health preservation practices during the "March 3rd" festival, where it is believed to enhance well-being, with its natural colors symbolizing balance and harmony in Zhuang cultural and spiritual life.

Lu and Guo (2021), emphasized the role of five-colored sticky rice in maintaining and transmitting Zhuang culture, particularly among younger generations, including university students. During festivals such as "March 3rd," the rice acts as a tangible connection to ethnic heritage, symbolizing more than nourishment. It signifies identity and cultural pride, fostering a sense of belonging within the community.

Rice cultivation is further linked to Zhuang mythology. The Buluotuo oral tradition, a key aspect of Zhuang culture, attributes rice cultivation to the cultural hero Buluotuo, underscoring the sacred role of rice in Zhuang cosmology (Chaisingkananont, 2020). This

integration of mythology and agriculture highlights rice as a pivotal element in both subsistence and spiritual practice.

Additionally, rice plays a central role in Zhuang festivals and rituals. Wu and Champadaeng (2024), noted that rice is integral to practices such as seedling transplantation, often accompanied by nursery rhymes and songs. It serves as both entertainment and educational tools for passing down agricultural knowledge. The Zhuang's long-standing tradition of wet-rice agriculture is not only vital for sustainability but is also a cornerstone of their cultural and religious identity (Widman, 2019). This connection between rice cultivation and animistic religious practices positions rice as a central figure in Zhuang cosmology and worldview.

The linguistic ties between rice and Zhuang culture further illustrate its significance. Luo (2022), highlighted that the Zhuang language contains specific terminology related to rice paddies, demonstrating how deeply integrated rice cultivation is in Zhuang's daily life and cultural expression. Wu (2019), pointed out that the Zhuang ancestors were pioneers of wet-rice farming. This practice continues to shape their cultural identity and connection to the land, particularly in northern Guangxi.

The historical and economic importance of rice cultivation in Zhuang society is well-documented. Jackson, Jackson and Lau (2012), noted that, like other Taic groups, the Zhuang have long practised wet-rice agriculture. It has had a lasting influence on their economy, social organization, and cultural identity. Dong and He (2015), emphasized that the Zhuang were among the first ethnic groups in China to engage in wet-rice farming, with archaeological evidence pointing to early rice agriculture in the Guangxi region. This long history underscores rice's role as a cultural and economic cornerstone of Zhuang society.

The integration of rice cultivation with ecological and cultural practices is also notable. Yang (2020) described how the Zhuang people's ecological knowledge, such as using frogs to protect rice crops from pests, illustrates their sustainable agricultural practices. These practices reflect a balance between rice farming, biodiversity, and cultural preservation, ensuring the longevity of Zhuang agricultural traditions. The significance of frogs is that they have their place in Zhuang mythology. They view frogs as the sons of the thunder god, the creator of the world (Yang, 2020).

Rice also plays a spiritual role in Zhuang rituals. Lu and Zhou (2023), discussed the "Redemption of the Soul of Rice" in the Baeu Rodo scriptures, where priests perform rice-centered ceremonies that reinforce the spiritual significance of rice as a life-giving force. This ritual procession is a traditional Zhuang practice to restore the spirit of rice, reflecting ancient religious beliefs. A boomo troupe performs the ceremony to avert disaster when the harvest is lacking. The boomo recites scripture detailing the history of grain cultivation. Ritual steps include a Taoist priest leading the procession, setting up lanterns, singing with gongs and cymbals, arranging rice seedlings, and moving around them. The priest finishes by calling the rice spirit back while holding a seedling. This connection is further highlighted by Han (2019), who traced the origins of Zhuang rice culture to the ancient Luoyue ethnic group, positioning rice as a cultural symbol of historical achievement and agricultural innovation.

Moreover, the communal and social role of rice is reflected in Zhuang festivals and ceremonies. During the "March 3rd" festival, rice takes on a ritualistic role, symbolizing prosperity, gratitude, and cultural continuity (Liu, 2024). Similarly, Liu (2024) described the "Xiangshan Board" performance as one that celebrates the rice harvest and strengthens social bonds within the community through shared cultural traditions. The "Xiangshan Board" is a tool traditionally used by the Zhuang people for tasks such as mixing sauce, managing poultry, and scaring birds away from crops. The performance showcases Zhuang youth striking these boards in rhythmic patterns, producing alternating soft and lively sounds that evoke the joyful atmosphere of a harvest. This vibrant scene, accompanied by the crisp sounds of the boards, artistically reflects the energy and cultural richness of Zhuang life, highlighting its harmony with nature and community spirit (Liu, 2024).

Rice's significance extends into modern contexts as well, including its role in cultural tourism. Xiang and Bachimon (2018), found that rice-related traditions attract tourists, thereby reinforcing Zhuang identity and cultural heritage in contemporary settings. In their study on Liu Sanjie (Guilin, Guangxi region), they found that 35% of tourists chose the place because of the Zhuang culture. Zhao et al (2022) further argued that preserving traditional rice cultivation practices using sustainable agricultural development models is crucial for maintaining Zhuang cultural heritage while adapting to modern agricultural challenges.

Rice in Zhuang culture functions as a multifaceted symbol, deeply integrated into folklore, spirituality, festivals, and cultural practices. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, between the material and spiritual, and between community identity and cultural continuity. Its enduring presence reflects the Zhuang people's connection to their land, environment, and heritage, making it an essential element in their cultural narrative.

Dalang Dance and Zhuang Cultural Values

The Dalang Dance is a significant cultural expression embodying key aspects of Zhuang cultural values, particularly those linked to agriculture, community collaboration, and preserving cultural traditions. Central to the dance is its association with rice pounding, a vital agricultural practice in Zhuang society. This connection highlights the crucial role of rice cultivation in their economic and spiritual lives, reflecting the communal effort in agricultural activities (Chen, 2020; Kaup, 2001). Rice is not only a staple food but also a potent symbol of social cohesion and cultural identity within Zhuang culture (Long, 2017).

The structure of the dance, characterized by the coordinated movements of male and female participants working rhythmically together, exemplifies Zhuang's emphasis on community cohesion and collaborative effort (Yanxian, 2016). The interactive nature of the performance, with participants encouraging each other, aligns with traditional Zhuang proverbs that emphasize resourcefulness and harmony (Yanxian, 2016). This mirrors the collective nature of rice cultivation, where communal labor strengthens social bonds and reinforces shared cultural experiences (Lin & Liu, 2021). The synchronized movements of the dancers symbolize unity and reflect the importance of collective action in both agriculture and cultural expression (Lu & Guo, 2021).

Dalang Dance also plays a critical role in the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge. It serves as a medium through which cultural identity is sustained and passed

down through generations, much like the way Zhuang cultural traditions and agricultural practices are preserved through folklore (Zhang et al., 2020). The dance's adaptability—evolving with different interpretations over time—demonstrates the resilience of Zhuang cultural expressions in the face of changing circumstances (Beauchamp, 2010).

Festivals, such as the "March 3rd Festival," provide a context for the performance of the Dalang Dance, which celebrates not only rice cultivation but also the communal joy of Zhuang gatherings (Luo, 2022). These festivals are essential to maintaining cultural pride and serve as opportunities for generational knowledge exchange, where elders teach the younger generations about the cultural significance of rice and related practices (Wu & Champadaeng, 2024). This ensures the continuity of Zhuang cultural identity and the values that underpin it (Long, 2017).

The focus on rice as a central element in Dalang Dance reflects the Zhuang's deep respect for nature and their understanding of the interdependence between human activities and environmental sustainability (Yan et al., 2024). The dance often follows the agricultural calendar, symbolizing the planting, growth, and harvest of rice and thus demonstrating the community's intimate connection with the rhythms of nature (Wu & Champadaeng, 2024). This alignment with natural cycles promotes a sustainable worldview, highlighting the importance of environmental stewardship for food security and cultural continuity (Yang, 2020).

Moreover, the Dalang Dance reflects the Zhuang's belief in the interconnectedness of life. By honoring rice as a symbol of life and prosperity, the dance acknowledges the intrinsic link between human well-being and the health of the environment (Kao, 2014; Yen, 2005). This cultural practice integrates spirituality and ecology, with the performers expressing reverence for the natural elements—such as soil, water, and climate—that sustain agricultural success (Wu, 2019). As environmental conditions shift, the dance adapts, showcasing the community's resilience and ongoing commitment to harmonizing human activities with nature (Lu & Zhou, 2023).

The spiritual dimension of the Dalang Dance is further emphasized through its connection to agricultural deities. In Zhuang culture, rice is seen not only as sustenance but as a sacred symbol of prosperity and divine blessing (Yan et al., 2024). The rhythmic movements and sounds produced during the dance, whether through instruments or vocalizations, serve as offerings or tributes to these deities, invoking their favor for continued agricultural success. This ritualistic aspect reinforces the Zhuang's respect for agricultural practices and the spiritual forces that govern them (Luo, 2022).

In addition to its spiritual significance, the Dalang Dance educates younger generations about traditional agricultural practices, reinforcing respect for the environment and sustainable land management (Wu & Champadaeng, 2024). The performance acts as a cultural tool for imparting agricultural knowledge and fostering a broader appreciation for biodiversity (Lin & Liu, 2021). Through its focus on rice cultivation, the dance encapsulates the Zhuang community's holistic understanding of environmental interdependence (Yahao, 2023).

Finally, the varied costumes and movements in Dalang Dance showcase the cultural richness and diversity of the Zhuang people, particularly in relation to their agrarian lifestyle (Wu, 2019). Certain movements within the dance hold symbolic meaning, representing the cycles of planting and harvesting, gratitude for successful harvests, or spiritual connections to ancestral practices (Yanxian, 2016). This narrative, expressed through the dance, intertwines Zhuang spirituality with their agricultural heritage (Ban, 2020).

The Dalang Dance is a multifaceted cultural practice that encapsulates key Zhuang values, including the importance of agriculture, community collaboration, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship (Unseth, 2017). It serves as both a vibrant artistic expression and a crucial mechanism for preserving and transmitting Zhuang cultural identity to generations (Wang et al., 2018). Through its adaptability and resilience, the Dalang Dance continues to be a vital part of Zhuang heritage, reflecting its deep connection to both nature and the community (Zhao et al., 2022).

Discussion

The findings regarding the use of Dalang Dance as a cultural medium for the Zhuang ethnicity align with the broader role of performance art in sustaining cultural heritage, as discussed through the lens of cultural identity theory. Dalang Dance functions as a vital means of preserving and articulating Zhuang cultural values, much like how performance art embodies and expresses cultural heritage, as noted by (Protska et al., 2024). By incorporating traditional symbols, narratives, and movements, the dance reflects Zhuang identity, allowing performers to explore and express their cultural roots while engaging with their community.

Similar to how Protska et al (2024), described the dialogue between tradition and contemporary expression, Dalang Dance integrates historical and cultural elements, enabling the Zhuang people to connect with their past while adapting to modern contexts. This interaction between cultural preservation and innovation ensures that the dance remains relevant, bridging generational gaps and fostering a collective sense of identity.

As with other forms of performance art that embody cultural legacy, Dalang Dance plays a key role in transmitting Zhuang values and beliefs across generations, in line with Mirnalini and Brinda's (2024) assertion about rituals and ceremonies. The integration of local narratives within Dalang Dance highlights its importance in maintaining the cultural specificity of the Zhuang, promoting awareness and appreciation of their ethnic identity. This echoes the findings of Mary et al (2019), who emphasized the role of performance in fostering a shared sense of identity among diverse communities, contributing to cultural cohesion and continuity.

However, as globalization continues to challenge local identities, there is a need to balance global influences with the traditional expressions embodied in Dalang Dance. While the dance remains a powerful medium for sustaining Zhuang culture, navigating the pressures of modernization and cultural dilution remains critical for the preservation of its unique ethnic expressions, a concern similarly highlighted by Mary et al. (2019).

Dalang Dance functions not only as a cultural performance but also as a medium for articulating and sustaining Zhuang identity, fostering community cohesion, and transmitting

cultural values across generations. The interplay between tradition and modernity in this context reflects broader challenges and opportunities in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

Conclusion

This article highlights how Dalang Dance serves as a cultural expression that reflects Zhuang identity and supports the preservation of their culture. Dalang Dance depicts Zhuang cultural values, particularly those related to agriculture, community cooperation, and the preservation of traditions. The dance is closely related to agricultural practices, particularly rice pounding, reflecting the importance of rice cultivation in the economic and spiritual life of the Zhuang. The dance structure, which involves synchronized movements between male and female participants, illustrates the importance of cooperation and social ties in Zhuang society, similar to the collective efforts of agriculture. Dalang Dance serves as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge from generation to generation, preserving Zhuang cultural identity through adaptation and evolution in accordance with the context of the times. The dance highlights the close connection between Zhuang people and nature. It demonstrates a sustainable worldview by adjusting the rhythm of the dance to natural cycles such as the agricultural calendar. Dalang Dance has a strong spiritual dimension, reflecting the Zhuang's reverence for agricultural gods and belief in the interconnectedness of human well-being and the preservation of nature. The dance also serves as an educational tool to instil an appreciation for agricultural traditions and environmental sustainability in the younger generation. Overall, Dalang Dance plays an important role in preserving Zhuang cultural identity and maintaining the continuity of community traditions and values.

This study has important implications for the preservation of traditional Zhuang culture and the relevance of cultural policy in China. Dalang Dance, as a representation of Zhuang culture, emphasizes the importance of preserving local cultural expressions rooted in agricultural practices and community. By showing how this dance reflects core Zhuang values, such as collaboration and connection with nature, this study highlights that preserving local traditions, such as the Dalang Dance, can strengthen local cultural identities that are threatened by globalization. The implication is the importance of creating preservation programs that focus on engaging communities in preserving and passing on their own cultural knowledge.

Dalang Dance serves as an educational tool that not only transmits artistic skills but also environmental knowledge, spiritual values, and agricultural traditions to the younger generation. This suggests that the preservation of traditional culture should be integrated with formal and informal education systems so that the younger generation can understand the relevance of these traditions in a modern context. From a policy perspective, government programs can support culture-based curricula in schools in ethnic minority areas, such as the Zhuang, to ensure the continuity of these traditions.

The study also highlights that Dalang Dance is not static but rather adapts to social and cultural changes. This reflects that cultural preservation does not have to be trapped in rigid traditional forms but needs room for innovation and adaptation. From a policy perspective, this supports a flexible approach to cultural preservation, where traditional arts such as Dalang Dance can develop and adapt to the context of the times without losing their essence.

In the context of cultural policy in China, this study is relevant because it supports the multiculturalism policy that aims to preserve and celebrate ethnic diversity. This policy can be further strengthened by supporting cultural practices such as Dalang Dance through national festivals, such as the "March 3rd Festival," and cultural tourism programs. Dalang Dance, as part of the Zhuang cultural heritage, also has the potential to attract tourists and raise awareness of the importance of cultural and environmental sustainability, providing economic opportunities for local communities.

Dalang Dance's emphasis on connecting with nature and sustainability creates an opportunity to promote environmentally friendly practices through cultural policy. The government can use the dance as a symbol in environmental awareness campaigns relevant to rural and indigenous communities. This is important as environmental policy in China is increasingly geared toward sustainability and the protection of natural resources.

This study also has implications for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, as stipulated in China's national policy and UNESCO's program. Dalang Dance, as a form of cultural expression rich in social, spiritual, and ecological values, meets the criteria for intangible cultural heritage that needs to be protected. Cultural policies can focus on providing financial and administrative support to the Zhuang community to maintain this tradition.

Several limitations limit this study. The study focused on a specific region in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The tradition of Dalang Dance may have variations and differences in practice in other Zhuang regions, which were not accommodated in this study. Although globalization is mentioned in the context of threats to cultural preservation, the study lacks depth in explaining the concrete impacts of globalization on Dalang Dance, such as how the dance may change in the face of modernization and external cultural pressures. While there is discussion of the importance of Dalang Dance in education, the study lacks a detailed exploration of how multicultural education can play an active role in integrating this dance into national or international curricula, as well as its long-term impact on broader cultural understanding.

Future research could expand the geographic scope by studying regional variations of Dalang Dance in other regions with Zhuang populations. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of how the dance is practised and preserved in different communities, as well as facing different challenges. Research that looks at the changes and adaptations of Dalang Dance over a longer period of time would be beneficial, especially in understanding how globalization has affected this cultural expression over time. This could involve the younger generation and how they interact with cultural heritage in the context of an increasingly modern world. In-depth research into how globalization has affected Dalang Dance in both positive and negative ways is needed. This includes how social media, tourism, and outside cultural influences are changing the way dance is performed, promoted, and understood by global audiences. Further research should explore how Dalang Dance can be used effectively in multicultural educational contexts, both locally and internationally. This could include the development of a culture-based curriculum that incorporates Dalang Dance as a tool to increase understanding and respect for cultural diversity among students, especially in multiethnic educational settings. Finally, future research could focus on international collaborative efforts to preserve Dalang Dance, whether through cultural exchange programs,

international festivals, or cross-border educational cooperation. It also covers how Dalang Dance can bridge intercultural dialogue in an increasingly connected global context. By exploring these limitations, future research will be able to provide broader and deeper insights into the role of Dalang Dance in cultural preservation in the modern era and its relevance in multicultural education at the national and international levels.

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