

The National Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Dai Peacock Dance in Yunnan: Formation and Development

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Abstract: The Yunnan Dai peacock dance is one of the first intangible cultural heritages to be selected for inclusion in the national intangible heritage representative list, as well as one of the most traditional ethnic folk dances among Yunnan's minorities. This paper traces the historical and cultural origins and development of the Dai peacock dance in Yunnan, represented by the Ruili region, and analyses the changes in the art of the Dai peacock dance in modern times from the perspective of ethnic culture.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Dai Minority; Peacock Dance; Formation; Development

Over the years, the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has been widely recognized as the Chinese government has made great efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage. Studies and discussions on ICH in academic circles have covered a variety of aspects, including the cultural value of ICH, the connotation of the definition of ICH and its extension, the protection of the legal system in the protection of ICH, its importance, and the ways and means of protection. In terms of the formation of ICH, Ma and Dai (2012) put forward the theory of “entering group” to “extracting”, and argued that ICH can generally be understood as the “entering group”, “extracting” and innovative development of everyday cultural matters.

1. The Historical and Cultural Origins of the Dai Peacock Dance in Yunnan

The Dai minority is one of the more numerous ethnic groups in Yunnan, and the Dai ancestors were among the “Bai Yue” group in ancient China. The “Yue” was a very important ethnic concept in ancient China. The “Yue” minority first originated in the Changjiang River valley in China. In 355 B.C., the Yue state was destroyed by the Chu state, and the Yue were scattered in the process of moving southwards into the two provinces, Fujian, Sichuan and the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, gradually forming the “crescent-shaped” distribution pattern of the ancient Baiyue people, and reaching as far as South and Southeast Asia (Huang, 1990). During the Qin and Han dynasties, the Baiyue people of Yunnan were known in historical texts as the “Dian Yue”, and their distribution area included Dehong and Baoshan in western Yunnan and the Shan State region in northern Myanmar. In the Han dynasty, the “Dian Yue” ethnic group had many links with the central dynasties of the mainland. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms took over the rule of Yunnan and brought the Dai region under their rule. In 1253, Kublai led the Mongol Yuan army to quickly conquer the Dali state and pacify Yunnan, and soon established the Yunnan province. With the incorporation of the ‘Golden Tooth and Hundred Yis’ region into the boundaries of the Yuan Dynasty, more frequent cultural exchanges between the Dai and the mainland Chinese took place. In the Ming Dynasty, the Dai were known as Baiyi, followed by the Qing Dynasty, when they were renamed “Baiyi”. After the founding of New China, they were officially named “Dai” according to their own wishes, and mainly live in Yunnan's Dehong Dai Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yuanjiang Hani Yi Dai Autonomous County, Jinping Miao Yao Dai Yi Autonomous County, Gengma Dai Wa Autonomous County and Shuangjiang Lahu Wa Brown Dai Autonomous County.

The Baiyue people in ancient China were the direct ancestors of the Dai people, who in turn originated in part from the Dongyi people in ancient China. It is recorded in the Records of the Grand Historian and other documents that the Dongyi people had the custom of bird totem worship, for example, calling the hundred officials by the names of the hundred birds. Influenced by their own traditional culture and ancient Indian culture, the traditional belief culture of the Dai people worships the peacock extremely. In the traditional beliefs of the Dai people, there is a simple concept of “everything has a spirit”, and the deification and spiritual worship of the peacock is rooted in the fear, reverence and gratitude for the power of nature, the fear of nature, the love of nature for thousands of years, and the initiative of ecological conservation, which is an important part of Dai culture (Ma, 2011). According to Jian (2013) ‘s research on the rock paintings of Canyuan painted with hematite powder more than three thousand years ago, one of them has a set of short lines painted on the upper part of the arm, forming a humanoid pattern similar to the decoration of a bird’s wing (or called a feathered man), and behind such figures there are fan-shaped objects in the pattern, which is most likely related to the ancient cult of faith. This is similar to the cultural meaning of the Dehong Dai folklore where the Buddha makes a pendulum swing and a hundred birds make a pilgrimage to form a peacock dance, for example the dance of a human simulating a sacred bird to convey respect for the gods and Buddha. The transformation of the worship of nature gods expressed through dance forms in the Dai traditional religion into reverence for the Buddha is a manifestation of the fusion of the Dai traditional religion with the foreign Southern Theravada Buddhism.

From the middle of the Spring and Autumn period to the Eastern Han period, when the ancient Yunnan civilization was highly developed socio-economically, peacocks and peacock-like forms appear in a large number of the bronze wares cast in the ancient Yunnan state, represented by shell receptacles. For example, in some of the scenes of the shell receptacles there are dancers with feathers in their heads, the hem of their clothes decorated with feathers radiating out to the sides, much like a peacock opening its screen, and the dancers’ arms spread out and their upper limbs twisted in a manner similar to the traditional ‘three bends’ of the modern Dai dance. According to the New Book of Tang, in the 16th year of the Tang Dynasty (800), a musical and dance troupe from the ancient state of Phylo, which exists in present-day Burma, came to Chang’an to present a performance to Emperor Dezong of Tang, in which a programme called “Peacock Peach Terrace” was performed. “In the ancient Chinese language, “peacock peach platform” meant a peacock performance, most likely the ancient peacock dance. In reality, the peacock dance in Burma today is also very close to that of the Dai people in Yunnan.

In the Hindu and Buddhist mythology prevalent in South and South-East Asia there are several deities with human faces and bird bodies, such as the “Jalapika”, known in Buddhism as the Bird of Wonderful Sound. Kinnara and Kinnari are also known as the “Heaven of Music” or “Heaven of Music”, and are deities who are responsible for music and communication between the heavenly realms and the earthly realms. In Buddhist beliefs the peacock is the mount of Amitabha, while in Hindu beliefs it is the mount of the god of war, which clearly has a cultural connection with the Dehong Dai legend of the peacock fighting the demon king and producing the peacock dance.

To sum up, the formation of the Dai peacock dance is a product of the unique natural geographical environment and the continuous intersection and fusion of the traditional culture of the ethnic group with that of Southeast Asia during the millennium of migration and development.

2. The Artistic Style and Development of Modern Yunnan Dai Peacock Dance

There is a huge difference between the traditional peacock dance and the modern form of stage performance we see today. Traditional performances are performed by men only, with only a few percussion instruments such as the point gong, elephant foot drum and cymbals, and no musical melodies accompanying the performance. During the performance the performer wears a crown in the shape of a bamboo pagoda, a mask with the face of a male and female Bodhisattva, a lotus petal-shaped cloud-shoulder drape and a costume. The most distinctive feature of the traditional Dai peacock dance is that the performer wears a bamboo frame made of bamboo gabions and tied with coloured silk to imitate the tail of a male peacock, which is why the traditional peacock dance is also known as the “frame peacock dance”. The dance is usually performed as a single dance with a female bodhisattva mask, and as a duo dance with a male performer but a male and a female bodhisattva mask.

The frame of a true traditional peacock dance is very heavy, as it includes the body and wings of the peacock, the form of the tail, and is decorated with a large amount of coloured paper or cloth. The modern, modified frame simplifies the form of the frame representation, highlighting mainly the tail and tying on very light quality coloured silk. Except for a small number of performances, the peacock dance is generally performed only during important religious events, when the dancers wrap silk thread around their hands to connect the peacock's wings and tail, mainly to imitate the peacock's habits and gait. In some large-scale performances, the dancers also imitate the posture of other birds such as the roc, the little sparrow and the heron, showing not only the status of the peacock as the king of all birds, but also the intention of the hundred birds heading towards Buddha, signifying the shining of Buddha's light, peace and prosperity.

The dance movements of the Peacock Dance are a concentrated expression of the essence of Dai national art and culture, which is soft and soothing, with outstanding features and a strong style, and the artistic form is extremely plastic. In the dance performance, the face, hands and legs are all highly expressive, with the lower limbs generally kept in a semi-squatting position and the waist in a horizontal rhythm. As the dance is generally performed by men, the feet are widely separated, with the knees rising and falling gently to form a distinctive rhythm, and the bending of the arms and body to form the "three bends" that are so characteristic of Dai dance. The dance does not focus on strong and powerful expressions, and the main principle of the dance is to move gently and slowly. The upper body movements and hand gestures are particularly rich, and each different dance posture and gesture contains a unique cultural meaning and corresponds to a unique image of dance art. In particular, through the unique "three bends" body posture of the Dai peacock dance, together with the facial expressions and eyes of the dancers, the rhythm of rigidity and softness is used to bring to life and simulate the movement and stillness of the peacock.

The "Three Bends" is a dance with a horizontal, static body gesture that demonstrates the unique charm of peacock dance. As the Dai people of Yunnan are located at the intersection of the South East Asian Buddhist and Chinese cultural spheres, they have borrowed and absorbed a large number of dance postures and gestures from Indian and Burmese dance forms, thus giving the Dai Peacock Dance a strong South and South East Asian cultural flavour.

Before the 1950s, the artists represented by Mao Xiang were making preliminary arrangements and playing on the basis of tradition, a "preliminary transformation" based on the aesthetics of the masses in ethnic areas. The most significant feature of this period was the abandonment of the traditional peacock dance of the Dai people, which represented the cultural significance of the Tusi power, and the inheritance and innovative development of the Dai people's original freehand peacock dance. After the 1950s, dance artists, represented by Dao Meilan, further refined the ethnicity of the peacock dance while adding more modern artistic colours to the melody and rhythm, so that it not only maintained its strong ethnic characteristics but also could meet the aesthetic needs of the general public. After the 1980s, the art of peacock dance was sublimated with Yang Liping's "Spirit of the Bird", whose most prominent feature was the incorporation of a large number of highly sophisticated modern dance techniques, which effectively increased the artistic expression tension and appreciation value of peacock dance.

3. Reasons for the change and development of the Dai peacock dance in Yunnan

First of all, a glance at the process of change in the art of peacock dance shows that the Dai peacock dance has an extremely strong cultural plasticity, which is closely related to the tolerant and open-minded attitude of the Dai people. Since ancient times, the Dai have been a people who are good at learning, open and tolerant. They have constantly absorbed the essence of various cultures from the Central Plains and South and Southeast Asia, constantly creating folk myths and legends, and quickly integrating the cultures of other ethnic groups into their own culture by explaining or elaborating on the social narrative of their history and culture. For this reason, some scholars have referred to the Dai ancestors as the cultural 'brokers' between India and China or between China and South and Southeast Asia. As early as the Ming Dynasty, the Dai region, such as Dehong, had a variety of musical and artistic cultures co-existing. According to the Baiyi Zhuan, there are three types of music: pipa, huqin, flute, ringing jan and so on, following the sound of the Central Plains, the Great Baiyi music. The music of the Mainie is also the music of the Mainie. Bronze cymbals, bronze drums, rattling boards and long leather drums of all sizes, patted by hand, were quite equal to the music of the monks and Taoists (Jiang, 1980).

A second point is that modern Dai culture is extremely inclusive and malleable. In the 1950s, the Communist Party of China (CPC) carried out a democratic revolution of peaceful and negotiated land reform in accordance with the specific conditions of the Dai region in Yunnan, and gradually and completely abolished the feudal lords' ruling system in the Dai region through very mild measures of social change. The reform and opening up from the 1980s onwards, on the other hand, brought about sweeping economic and social changes in the Dai region, with huge achievements in socio-economic construction and development, causing the traditional Dai society to move from closed to open, which had a huge impact on the traditional ethnic culture of the Dai people. Profound changes have taken place at both the material and ideological levels. In particular, the social and institutional culture has changed from the monolithic Southern Theravada Buddhism of the past to a pluralistic one, and the concept of equality between men and women has gradually taken root in people's hearts, thus bringing about a huge change in the art form of peacock dance, and women have begun to become an important part of the peacock dance performance group. More modern aesthetic dances and melodies have entered the peacock dance performance form, and peacock dance as a traditional ethnic culture is facing great opportunities and unprecedented challenges.

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