Dynamic writing of "boat living" culture: a study on dance in Tanka wedding culture in Beihai, Guangxi

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Abstract

This study focuses on the dance in the Tanka wedding of Beihai, Guangxi, exploring its symbolic significance and social functions as a dynamic medium for "boat-dwelling" culture. Through field investigations, video documentation, and analysis of dance movements, the research finds that the Tanka wedding dance, through body language, ritual structure, and spatial fluidity, reenacts the identity and cultural memory of the water-dwelling community. The dance movements center around "wave-like" trajectories and simulated rowing motions, metaphorically representing the symbiotic relationship between the Tanka people and the sea; the dynamic performance of the wedding ceremony, through the transition from "boat to shore," reinforces the dual nature of ethnic boundaries and social integration. This study provides theoretical references for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the study of maritime ethnic cultures.

Keyword : Tanka wedding; dance research; boat living culture; dynamic writing

Introduce

The Tanka people of Beihai, Guangxi, as a typical maritime ethnic group in southern China, have shaped a unique "boat-dwelling" cultural expression through their lifestyle of "living by the sea and using boats as homes." Weddings, as a core scene for the transmission of ethnic culture, are rich in cultural information, with dance playing a crucial role in narrating rituals and conveying emotions. This study uses dance as a starting point to reveal the dynamic logic of its cultural symbols, delving into the social structure, belief system, and aesthetic concepts of the Tanka people, exploring the diversity of maritime culture, and providing new perspectives for the protection of ethnic culture.

Purpose of research

This study aims to analyze the action characteristics and cultural metaphors of Tanka wedding dance, explore the dynamic writing function of dance in ritual space, and explore its unique cultural value.

Research technique

I. Research Methods

This study adopts the methods of literature research, field investigation, in-depth interview and semiotic analysis to deeply explore the cultural connotation, dynamic writing function and inheritance and development of Tanka wedding dance in Beihai area of Guangxi. The details are as follows:

(1) Literature research method

The system reviews and collects academic literature, monographs, journal articles, theses, historical documents, and folk customs records related to the Tanka culture, wedding customs, dance art, and maritime culture of Beihai, Guangxi. It aims to comprehensively understand existing research findings, trace the historical development, cultural background, and

theoretical foundation of Tanka wedding dance culture, analyze previous studies on Tanka weddings and dances, and provide a solid theoretical basis, research starting point, and historical context for future studies.

(2) Field investigation method

Delve into the Tanka settlements in Beihai, Guangxi, participate in Tanka weddings, and observe the local Tanka wedding dance performances on-site. Record details such as dance movements, rhythms, costumes, and props to understand the cultural significance, inheritance, and role of the dances in weddings. Collect firsthand data to vividly experience the authentic scenes and cultural atmosphere of Tanka wedding dances under the "boat-dwelling" culture. At the same time, observe the wedding ceremony process and document dance movements and spatial movement paths. Record the entire performance process, including actions, formations, costumes, props, and other details, as well as the wedding ceremony procedures and related cultural customs. Obtain first-hand "living" data to avoid fragmented captures of cultural phenomena. Ensure a comprehensive, in-depth, and genuine understanding of the dance culture.

(3) In-depth interview method

Conduct semi-structured interviews with key informants, such as organizers of the Tanka wedding ceremony, dance performers, and elderly Tanka residents (including open-ended questions and situational recall methods). This helps understand the origin, evolution, transmission methods, cultural symbolism, historical memory, and their views and feelings about Tanka wedding dance culture. It also aims to uncover the implicit knowledge system behind the movements, reveal the subjective interpretations of cultural bearers, compensate for observational limitations, and obtain deeper cultural information.

(4) Semiotics analysis

Using the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics, interpret and analyze the collected dance movements, costumes, formations, and other materials. Deconstruct the cultural symbolic meanings of dance movements, costumes, and props. Unearth the cultural metaphors, values, and life wisdom embedded in these symbols, revealing the significant role of dance as a cultural symbol in inheriting and expressing Tanka culture.

Data acquisition

(1) Interview method

Interviewees: including performers (professional dancers, folk artists), organizers (wedding planners, community cultural leaders), audiences (local residents, tourists) and key informants (folk culture experts, scholars, community elders).

The interview covers the origin and meaning of dance movements, the design and symbolism of costumes and props, the process and cultural connotation of wedding ceremonies, and the community's cognition and evaluation of dance.

Interview method: semi-structured interview is adopted, which has a certain interview outline and allows flexible adjustment of questions and in-depth questioning according to the actual situation of the interview to ensure the acquisition of rich and in-depth information.

(2) Observation method

Observation object: Tanka wedding dance performance in Beihai, Guangxi.

Observation content: record in detail the movement characteristics, formation changes, costume details, prop use, etc., as well as the whole process of the wedding ceremony, including the performance form and function of the dance in the wedding ceremony, such as the bride welcoming, the hall worship, the wine offering, etc.

Observation Method: A combination of participatory and non-participatory observation is used. With permission, researchers can appropriately participate in dance performances or wedding ceremonies to personally experience and feel the cultural atmosphere of the dance; at the same time, maintaining an objective observational perspective, recording the entire

process and relevant details of the dance performance.

(3) Collection of image data

Collection objects: including professional shooting of dance performance videos, folk spontaneous recording of wedding dance images, and related documentaries, news reports, etc.

Collect content: Obtain high-quality video materials of dance performances, ensuring that they cover different scenes and angles of dance performances, so as to comprehensively analyze the movements, formations, costumes and other elements of dance, as well as the dynamic development and cultural expression of dance in wedding ceremonies.

Collection method: Collect existing video materials through cooperation with local cultural departments, community organizations, folk artists, etc.; at the same time, professional photography equipment is used to shoot the whole process of dance performance during field investigation to ensure the clarity and integrity of video materials.

Finding

1、The change of "boat living" culture and the dynamic nature of dance

1.1 Transformation of cultural space

With the advancement of modernization, the traditional "boat living" lifestyle has been gradually replaced by land settlement, and the wedding dance has been transferred from the actual ship space to the land stage, and the dynamic movement of the action has also changed.

Early Tanka people lived on boats, spending long periods of time on the water. Boats were not only their means of transportation but also tools for production and living quarters. Families often lived on a single boat, moving as their living environment changed and to meet the needs of survival. Later, some Tanka people gradually settled ashore, building simple huts or houses along the shore, forming a settlement pattern that combined both aquatic and terrestrial aspects. Today, more Tanka people have fully migrated to land-based settlements, constructing modern residential buildings such as brick-wood houses and reinforced concrete structures, with their living spaces increasingly aligning with those of land-dwelling residents. During the period when they lived on the water, Tanka cultural activities mainly took place on boats or within the water community, such as singing saltwater songs and holding water-based weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. These cultural activities were highly inward-looking and unique. After settling ashore, their cultural activity spaces gradually shifted to land communities, blending with local terrestrial cultures. On one hand, they continued to preserve and pass down traditional customs, like organizing Tanka-style artistic performances during festivals; on the other hand, they actively integrated into local terrestrial cultural activities, participating in various community cultural events and folk festival celebrations, sharing and creating culture together with land-dwelling residents.

During the water-based living phase, Tanka dance was mostly associated with aquatic labor and life scenes, such as dances that mimic rowing, casting nets, and fishing. These dances were relatively simple and straightforward, directly reflecting fishing activities and the emotions of water-based life. As cultural spaces transformed, dance forms became increasingly diverse, incorporating more elements and techniques from land-based dances, like adding some distinctive local folk dance steps and movements to the dances. In terms of content, while still showcasing traditional fishing life, the dances began to depict the new lives and appearances of the Tanka people after they settled on land, as well as the integration of Tanka culture with land-based cultures, making the dances more contemporary and culturally rich. For example, in the "Dianchuan" dance, the action of simulating the swaying of a boat relies more on the dancers 'physical control rather than real boat movement when performed on land. This transformation not only changed the visual presentation of the dance but also influenced the interaction between dancers and the audience. On the boat, the dance movements are closely linked to the real marine environment, with the dancers' body language

directly responding to the boat's sway and the waves. On the land stage, this direct environmental interaction is severed, and the dance relies more on the performers' skills and stage design to convey the imagery of the sea.

1.2 Reconstruction of time rhythm

The tidal cycle used to be an important benchmark for wedding ceremonies, but modern weddings are more based on calendar time, leading to a disconnect between dance rhythms and natural rhythms.

In the past, boat living was primarily centered around fishing and rowing, with a relatively slow and regular pace, heavily influenced by natural factors. For instance, fishermen would set out to sea in the early morning and return in the evening, maintaining a steady rhythm throughout their workday. The dance rhythms often matched this, characterized by their gentle and smooth nature. Traditional boat culture festivals, such as water weddings and Fishermen's Day, were usually held on specific lunar dates, with fixed schedules. Dance performances, as a crucial part of these celebrations, also had stable times and content. Traditionally, wedding ceremonies were closely tied to the tides, for example, "sending off the day" required choosing an appropriate tidal time to ensure the smooth departure of boats. However, with modern scheduling and standardized time management, this close connection with natural rhythms has gradually been disrupted. On one hand, some traditional festivals have adjusted their timing to align with the peak tourist seasons, attracting more visitors. Consequently, the timing and format of dance performances have changed, not only during holidays but also irregularly during off-peak tourist periods based on visitor needs. Modern weddings now prioritize the convenience of participants and social schedules over the rhythm of the natural environment. This reconfiguration of time rhythms not only affects the flow of wedding ceremonies but also alters the function and significance of dance in these rituals.

2、The cultural connotation and symbolic significance of dance form

2.1 Ritual expression of Marine faith

In the boat-dwelling culture dance, movements often mimic those of fish, seabirds, and other marine creatures. For example, dancers swing their hands up and down, resembling the tail fin movements of fish swimming in water; they extend, bend, and swiftly wave their arms, as if sea birds are flapping their wings to fly. These actions not only vividly depict the forms of marine life but also symbolize the boat-dwellers' reverence and worship for these creatures. In their beliefs, marine life serves as messengers of the sea deities. By imitating their movements, the dancers attempt to establish a connection with the sea deities, seeking their protection and blessings to ensure that fishermen return from fishing trips laden with catches.

In the dance, there are also movements that mimic natural ocean phenomena. For example, the action of depicting wave undulations involves dancers swaying from side to side and their arms moving in a wavelike motion, as if waves are crashing against the shore one after another. Such movements not only express reverence for the power of the sea but also symbolize the adaptation and reliance of boat-dwelling people on the ocean. Waves are one of the typical features of the sea, representing its dynamism and vitality. Through these movements, the dance conveys the relationship between boat-dwelling people and the sea, emphasizing their respect for the laws of the sea. Just as they adapt to the rhythm of the waves, they strive to live within the embrace of the sea.

The "casting the net" and "offering wine" movements in the "Sea Worship" dance have clear blessing functions. Dancers engage in symbolic dialogue with sea deities through their body movements. These actions not only serve as a ritualized presentation of maritime faith but also express reverence and dependence on natural forces. For example, the "casting the

net" movement symbolizes fishermen's reliance on marine resources and their wish for a bountiful harvest. The casting motion is large in amplitude and has a strong rhythm. Dancers mimic the scene of fishermen working, conveying gratitude for the generous gifts of the sea. The "offering wine" movement involves sprinkling wine into the sea, where dancers symbolically offer sacrifices to the sea god, praying for favorable weather, safe voyages, and forgiveness and blessings from the sea deity to ward off disasters and ensure smooth sailing. This movement is usually accompanied by solemn music and a serious expression, reflecting respect for the sea deities.

The costumes of boat-dwelling cultural dances often feature various patterns related to the ocean, such as fish, shrimp, crabs, shells, and other marine life, as well as natural elements like waves and seashells. These patterns are not only decorative but also carry deep maritime religious significance. For example, fish patterns symbolize abundance and harvest, as they are abundant in the sea and are the primary source of income for fishermen; wave patterns represent the power of the sea and the cycle of life. Boat-dwellers believe that these patterns can bring good luck and protect them from dangers at sea. Wearing costumes embroidered with these patterns during dances is like wearing the blessings of the sea deities, making the dancers more sacred in their performances and expressing their reverence for the ocean and their longing for a better life.

2.2 Metaphorical expression of marriage concept

Wedding dance not only conveys the cultural connotation of marriage concept, but also strengthens the emotional bond between husband and wife and the common commitment to family responsibility. These movements and symbolic meanings are constantly inherited and reconstructed in dynamic writing, providing a new way of expression for the continuation of marriage culture.

In some boat-dwelling cultural dances, male and female dancers will engage in mutual eye contact, gentle steps, and slight arm movements. These actions simulate scenes of mutual attraction between men and women. For example, the male and female dancers hold hands lightly and sway their bodies slightly, as if testing each other's feelings. This movement metaphorically represents the shyness and probing nature of early romantic relationships among boat-dwellers, showcasing their cautious approach to marriage and delicate expression of emotions. In the dance, the man may mimic rowing motions to approach the woman, who responds by gently twisting her waist and swaying her skirt, symbolizing the man's pursuit of the woman. This conveys the natural emotional attraction and mutual pursuit between men and women in boat-dwelling culture.

Some dance movements depict scenes of couples working together. For example, male and female dancers hold hands and perform synchronized rowing motions. This not only symbolizes the cooperation and harmony between spouses in their daily lives but also metaphorically conveys the idea that marital life requires joint efforts from both parties to face life's challenges. The "Tumbling Ship" dance, for instance, uses the swaying of the boat to symbolize the dynamic balance in marital life, emphasizing the metaphorical representation of couples facing life's storms together. Dancers mimic the boat's movement through the waves, expressing the ups and downs and challenges of marital life. This dynamic balance symbolizes that both partners need to work together to maintain stability in the face of life's storms, reflecting mutual support and trust in marriage. In the dance, the coordinated movements of the couple demonstrate a supportive and interdependent relationship, reflecting the importance placed on teamwork in marriage by boat dwellers, who believe that only through concerted effort can one achieve stability and happiness in maritime life.

Common props in dance, such as flower baskets and red silk ribbons, also carry rich marital connotations. The basket is filled with various beautiful flowers, symbolizing the

beauty and happiness of married life. Dancers convey bouquets to symbolize fertility and reproduction. By gently and solemnly passing the bouquet to each other, they express care for new life and hope for the future of the family. The bouquet is usually held by the bride or groom, symbolizing the continuation of life and the prosperity of the family. This gesture not only metaphorically represents reproductive ability but also conveys a beautiful wish for the continuation of the family line, symbolizing the inheritance of life and the continuation of the family. Dancers circle around the bouquet, symbolizing protection and nurturing of new life. This movement is often accompanied by cheerful music and light steps, creating an atmosphere of celebration and auspiciousness.

3、Cultural identity and community cohesion

Wedding dances are not only a vehicle for cultural heritage but also an essential means of emotional exchange among community members. By participating in the dance together, community members strengthen their sense of identity and belonging to their own culture. As dancers move and spin to the rhythm passed down from ancestors, their footsteps carve out collective memories on the sandy ground, turning each wedding into a living archive of cultural genes.

3.1 Collective participation

Wedding dances typically require extensive participation from community members, with the interaction between dancers and audience being an indispensable part of the dance. Whether young or old, male or female, everyone can join in the dance. For example, in some traditional boat-dwelling festival dances, elders often dance together with their grandchildren. Female dancers are light and graceful, while male dancers are strong and powerful. Everyone showcases their unique talents during the dance, creating a joyful and harmonious atmosphere. Dance events usually take place on important occasions in the community, such as traditional festivals like Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as special days like the harvest of fish and the launching of new boats. At these moments, dancing becomes the core content of community activities, attracting many residents' participation and attention. For instance, at the launch ceremony of a new boat, the boat-dwellers will perform dances filled with blessings and celebration, praying for safety and a bountiful harvest for the new boat. The entire community is immersed in a sea of joy, with the dance bringing people closer together and strengthening the bonds among community members.

During the dance rehearsal process, everyone needs to cooperate with each other to complete the choreography of dance movements and formations. For example, in the "Ship Tossing" dance, the audience's cheers and the dancers' actions echo each other, creating a strong sense of community cohesion. When the boat song plays, the old fisherwoman hands over the faded rudder to her grandchildren, while young dancers step to steps that mimic tides, and the stomping of the audience forms surging waves. This physical resonance transcends language; when everyone finally huddles in a circle and shakes their bodies, the footprints on the sand have long blurred the lines of age and gender. Through this collaboration, communication and interaction among members become more frequent, and mutual understanding and trust deepen gradually. During the performance, everyone works towards a common goal, and this shared experience and emotional engagement strengthens the bonds between members.

3.2 Cultural education

In the process of participating in wedding dances, the younger generation not only learns dance moves but also deeply understands their cultural significance. This intergenerational transmission ensures the continuous inheritance of "boat dwelling" culture. Cultural education activities effectively pass on the genetic code of boat dwelling culture to the younger generation, making them the "cultural carriers" of this tradition. When young people gain a deep understanding of the historical value and spiritual essence of boat

dwelling culture, they will naturally integrate these cultural elements into their lives and work, such as incorporating boat dwelling dance elements into modern art creation and drawing inspiration from traditional boat dwelling architectural styles in building design. This achieves innovative development of boat dwelling culture in contemporary society, ensuring the sustainability of cultural inheritance.

Through cultural and educational activities organized by schools and communities, community members can systematically learn about boat-dwelling culture, gain a deep understanding of its historical origins and intrinsic values, thereby breaking the limitations of their perception of local culture and enhancing their sense of identity with boat-dwelling culture. For example, in the "Pilot Dance," the newlywed bride holds a red silk lantern, recreating the dance posture of her ancestors from a century ago; in the "Tidal Step," young people mimic the rhythm of the ebb tide, with the sandy ground under their feet bearing traces of nets once dried by their forebears. These dance movements serve as keys to interpreting history, each gesture embodying the wisdom of coexisting with the ocean.

Cultural education promotes the construction and maintenance of community cultural ecology, enabling boat-dwelling culture to flourish over the long term within communities. Schools, communities, and families collaborate in a comprehensive and multi-level cultural education network, creating a favorable ecological environment for the inheritance of boat-dwelling culture. In this ecosystem, boat-dwelling culture is continuously nourished and enriched, attracting more residents to participate in its preservation and protection, forming a virtuous cycle that ensures the sustainable development of cultural heritage. This sustains the unique charm and vitality of boat-dwelling culture.

Conclusion

This article delves into the wedding dance of the Tanka people in Beihai, Guangxi, revealing its rich symbolic significance and social functions as a dynamic medium for "boat-dwelling" culture. The study finds that with the advancement of modernization, the Tanka's "boat-dwelling" lifestyle has shifted towards land-based settlement. The space for wedding dances has moved from the boat to the land stage, and the dynamism of movements has changed. For instance, in the "Tianchuan" dance, actions simulating the swaying of the boat body increasingly rely on the dancers' physical control, and the timing rhythm has shifted from being influenced by tidal cycles to being based on calendar time. The connection between dance and natural rhythms has been redefined. The dance forms embody deep-seated maritime beliefs, such as imitating the movements of marine life, recreating natural ocean phenomena, and the "casting nets" and "wine offering" actions in the "sea worship" dance. The maritime patterns in dance costumes also carry profound religious meanings. Additionally, marriage concepts are expressed through dance metaphors, including simulations of courtship scenes, joint labor activities between spouses, and the symbolic meanings of props. Furthermore, wedding dances serve as an important means of emotional exchange among community members. Through extensive collective participation and collaboration during rehearsals and performances, these dances strengthen the bonds between community members and their sense of identity and belonging to their own culture. Cultural education activities promote the intergenerational transmission of boat-dwelling culture, making the younger generation a "living archive" of the culture, thus driving the innovative development of boat-dwelling culture in modern society. These findings provide new theoretical perspectives and practical cases for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the study of maritime ethnic cultures from a dance studies angle. They enrich our understanding of the diversity of maritime cultures, deepen and broaden cultural research, and emphasize the significant role of wedding dances in cultural transmission. This offers valuable insights for the protection and inheritance of other intangible cultural heritages, helps maintain community stability and harmony, enhances national pride, and promotes

multicultural development in society.

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