

Investigation and Research on the "Gunshanzhu" Lusheng Dance of the Miao Ethnic Group in Guizhou from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: This paper deeply explores the current development status of the traditional sports culture of the Miao Lusheng Dance "Gunshanzhu" in Nayong County, Guizhou Province. Through the fieldwork method and from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage protection, it analyzes the evolution, inheritance challenges, and protection measures of the project. The conclusions are as follows: First, the government has joined hands with civil forces to commit to the inheritance and protection of the "Gunshanzhu" culture; second, drawing on foreign experience in intangible cultural heritage protection, the protection of "Gunshanzhu" has been incorporated into villagers' conventions and introduced into school classrooms, while comprehensive medical security systems have been provided for inheritors; third, efforts have been strengthened to protect the original ecological "Gunshanzhu" culture and reduce the negative impact of foreign cultures; finally, reasonable commercial operations of the "Gunshanzhu" culture have been carried out to promote its inheritance and development.

Keywords: Traditional ethnic sports culture; Lusheng Dance; Miao ethnic group; Intangible cultural heritage; Guizhou Province

1. Introduction

UNESCO cultural anthropology experts note that a culture risks decline or disappearance if people's mindsets become rigid and lose interest in it, a disaster for traditional ethnic cultures.^[1] China's rich traditional ethnic cultures have gained growing attention, among which the "Gunshanzhu" culture—a Miao Lusheng Dance work originating from the "Xiaohuamiao" branch in Nayong County, Guizhou, with a hundreds-of-year history—was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2005 in line with national ICH protection policies. Since then, it has attracted widespread social attention, laying a foundation for the protection, development and promotion of Miao culture. From the perspective of ICH protection, this paper analyzes the causes, current dilemmas and sustainable development of "Gunshanzhu" to provide references for in-depth discussions on Chinese traditional ethnic cultures.

2. The Origin and Characteristic Analysis of the "Gunshanzhu" Culture

2.1 The Origin of the "Gunshanzhu" Culture

During the Yuan Dynasty, the imperial court's ethnic discrimination and political oppression triggered suppressed rebellions among ethnic groups like the Miao. As recorded in Geographical Records of the Yuan History, Miao and other groups rebelled but were massacred and driven southwest, mainly settling in Heiyang Daji (now parts of Bijie City). During the southward migration, one Miao branch (Xiaohuamiao) settled in Nayong County; young people cleared rugged, thorny paths for the vulnerable, which became the original movements of "Gunshanzhu" dance, embodying Miao youth's perseverance.^[2] Later, these movements were exaggerated in harvest and sacrificial activities, forming a unique culture. Today's performances, evolved through generations of adaptation, include high-difficulty moves where performers rotate props while playing the lusheng, demanding great skills and stamina.

2.2 Characteristics of the "Gunshanzhu" Culture

The characteristics of the "Gunshanzhu" culture include its ancientness, rusticity, vitality, difficulty, and elevation: it has a long history dating back to 2550 BC, rooted in the Miao people's migration and hunting traditions, with a heritage of hundreds of years integrating historical legends and ethnic culture;^[3] it boasts a strong rural atmosphere, originating from remote villages in Nayong County, mainly inherited locally by the "Xiaohuamiao" people, and has long remained a folk art due to limited promotion; it is flexible in performance forms, with no strict restrictions on the number and age of performers, continuously refined while retaining authentic movements, and its accompanying lusheng melodies have been standardized; it requires high physical strength and coordination from performers, with intense performance rhythms and demanding choreography, and needs continuous difficulty improvement for competitions; it also absorbs modern aesthetics, forms an artistic style with appreciative and competitive value, records the Miao people's historical changes and life passions, and becomes an elegant and concrete artistic work in Chinese culture.

3. Analysis of Musical Instruments and Costumes in the "Gunshanzhu" Culture

When lusheng players take the stage for the "Gunshanzhu" dance, the lusheng not only serves as a musical instrument but also conducts the entire performance. The performance team adjusts their movements with the changes of lusheng melodies, and the notes are closely integrated with the dance steps.

3.1 The Musical Instrument in "Gunshanzhu" - Lusheng

The lusheng, a reed-pipe wind instrument composed of a wind chest, pipes, reeds and resonators (Figure 1), features pipes crafted from over-three-year-old white bamboo ideally cut between Winter Solstice and Beginning of Spring for durability and insect resistance, sorted by pitch into five graded lengths; its brass reeds in various shapes sit where pipes connect to the spindle-shaped windbox—preferably made of Chinese fir, hollowed out to hold four to eight pipes, bound with bamboo strips and coated with tung oil to form the "Golden Lusheng"—while adjustable bamboo resonators fitted on the pipes amplify sound, requiring coordinated fingering during performance to maintain clear tones.



Figure 1 The Lusheng Musical Instrument

3.2 The Saying of "Miao People Inseparable from Lusheng"

The lusheng holds an irreplaceable, supreme status in Miao culture, serving as both emotional carrier and spiritual pillar in daily life. As recorded in ancient documents, the Miao traditionally play the lusheng and dance during festivals. Locals use lusheng music to express joy on occasions including festivals, weddings, house-building and receptions.^[4] It also acts as a cultural matchmaker, enabling young Miao men and women to interact, fall in love and marry through singing and dancing. Furthermore, the lusheng functions as a sacred ritual instrument for worshipping ancestors and deities, believed by the Miao to possess the spiritual power to communicate with the divine world.

3.3 Costume Culture of the "Gunshanzhu" Project

3.3.1 Traditional Costume Culture of the Xiaohuamiao

During "Gunshanzhu" performances, Xiaohuamiao young men and women wear traditional costumes, which, like other Miao costumes, consist of upper garments, lower garments, capes and headwear^[5]. Historical records, though simplistic, note similarities between ancient and modern

Xiaohuamiao attire, such as colorful embroidery and appliqué cloth^{[6][7]}. Local Xiaohuamiao costumes have four parts with distinct gender and marital differences. Unmarried women coil their hair with white, yellow and red wool, wear white undershirts with embroidered cuffs, red-yellow capes, blue flowered belts and mid-length batik-pleated skirts, with legs wrapped in blue cloth. Married women tie their hair into a back bun and have green-trimmed skirts, as the saying goes: "Young girls wear braids, married women wear buns." Men braid hair with red wool, add pheasant tail feathers and red cloth wraps for festivals, wear white linen short jackets and blue or white trousers. Footwear has evolved from straw/cloth shoes to rubber shoes.

3.3.2 Cultural Impression of the Xiaohuamiao "Embellished Back"

The "embellished back", the core of Xiaohuamiao costume art (Figure 2), serves as cold protection and carries unique cultural memories; its abstract geometric patterns, refined from natural elements, embody ethnic history, landscape, life joy and ancestor totem worship, with its pattern development reflecting advancing craftsmanship, and its delicacy symbolizing women's manual skills and being a key factor in attracting spouses, representing the overall style of Xiaohuamiao costumes. Sewn on a linen vest, the colorful "embellished back" is worn with a crossed white linen shirt tucked into a high-waisted pleated skirt, creating a balanced visual effect that shortens the upper body to highlight long legs; though small in proportion, it is visually striking, and when paired with multi-layered blue-dyed pleated skirts, it adds color depth and fluffiness, forms a harmonious aesthetic, and becomes a key part of the Xiaohuamiao's elegant appearance on grand occasions.



Figure 2 The Embellished Back of Xiaohuamiao

4. Analysis of the Main Movements in "Gunshanzhu" Performances

Since being inscribed as a national intangible cultural heritage, "Gunshanzhu" has evolved from traditional folk movements with upgraded performing skills. It integrates sports, dance and acrobatics, raising higher requirements for performers' physical fitness, coordination and flexibility, while its early artistic elements have gradually weakened. Original simple low-difficulty moves, such as crouching rolls and handstands with obscure implied meanings, have been refined into symbolic gestures commemorating and honoring ancestors.

4.1 "Golden Pheasant Frolic and Chase" in Gunshanzhu

Derived from the Miao ancestors' mountain migration and forest pheasant hunting, this scene reflects how ancient people made plume hats from pheasant tail feathers. Young men wearing these hats once cleared thorny paths and guided the clan forward. Today, male performers still wear plume hats on stage to inherit this cultural symbolism (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Golden Pheasant Frolic and Chase

4.2 "Scouting" in "Gunshanzhu"

The "Scouting" movement originates from the Miao ancestors' long migration. Facing constant threats and harassment, they stayed vigilant, gripping trees to watch for dangers. This real scenario later

inspired the creation of the "Scouting" technique (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Scouting

4.3 "Carry on Shoulders" in "Gunshanzhu"

The "Carry on Shoulders" movement vividly depicts the hardships and warmth of the Miao ancestors' migration (Figure 5). During the long journey, strong young men carried exhausted children on their shoulders, embodying care for the young and reflecting the Miao people's noble spirit of respecting the elderly, cherishing children, and bravely overcoming hardships.



Figure 5 Carry on Shoulders

4.4 "Human Bridge Building" in "Gunshanzhu"

During the migration of the Miao ancestors, crossing mountains and rivers was common. When rivers posed a challenge—strong young adults could wade through, but the elderly and children could not—young, strong adults formed a "human bridge" with their bodies to help the vulnerable cross, which later evolved into the "Human Bridge Building" movement technique in today's performances, embodying the Miao people's self-sacrifice and dedication spirit.(Figure 6).



Figure 6 Human Bridge Building

4.5 "Earth Dragon Rolling Through Thorns" in "Gunshanzhu"

During the Miao people's migration, dense jungles and rough terrain blocked their journey; strong young men rolled through thorny woods to clear paths for the group. Later, the core "Rolling Mountain Pearl" performance was created to honor their courage and great contributions (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Earth Dragon Rolling Through Thorns

4.6 "Jade Pillar Holding the Sky" in "Gunshanzhu"

The technical movement of "Jade Pillar Holding the Sky" is like a vivid scroll, showcasing the indomitable spirit of the Miao ancestors in the face of adversity (Figure 8). When confronting difficulties, they advanced bravely, fearing no hardships or obstacles. No matter how rugged the road ahead, they stood firm and unyielding like a jade pillar supporting the sky. This movement technique praises the heroic spirit of the Miao ancestors.



Figure 8 Jade Pillar Holding the Sky

4.7 "Camp Building" in "Gunshanzhu"

During the migration of the Miao ancestors, after a long and arduous journey across harsh terrain, the group finally settled in the jungle valley area of Heiyang Daqing in Nayong, Guizhou. In their spare time, they gathered to share happy moments, and later created the symbolic "camp-building" movement combination based on their arduous migration history, which embodies the pioneering spirit of the Miao ancestors and inspires awe and respect (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Camp Building

5. Principles for the Inheritance and Protection of "Gunshanzhu" Culture

5.1 People-Oriented Principle

Unlike non-renewable tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage relies on inheritors for continuity. Qualified inheritors must master performances and craftsmanship and be capable of passing skills to future generations. Shifting from tangible heritage protection models, the conservation of "Gunshanzhu" prioritizes skilled inheritors with dedication and perseverance to teach its difficult movements and lusheng techniques.

5.2 Integrated Protection Principle

Given its complex performances, "Gunshanzhu" requires holistic inheritance to retain its core features. Both its natural and humanistic living environments in Nayong County have been affected by economic development and population mobility, bringing external cultural impacts. Comprehensive environmental protection is essential to avoid cultural distortion and preserve its original ecology.

5.3 Dynamic Protection Principle

Distinct from the static preservation of relics, this heritage is passed down through live performances, dance movements, and lusheng music. Protection keeps it active among local communities rather than freezing it as museum specimens, maintaining the organic integration of music and dance in folk life.

5.4 Principle of Civil Affairs Handled by the Public

While government guidance and support are necessary, external intervention may distort the culture rooted in the Miao migration history. Local communities lead inheritance, with the government promoting awareness and sustainable development to maintain the culture's authenticity.

5.5 Uniqueness Principle

Following UNESCO's cultural diversity framework, "Gunshanzhu" is historically and environmentally unique and irreplicable. Protecting its distinctive identity strengthens the diversity and integrity of China's ethnic cultural heritage.

6. The Continuity of "Gunshanzhu" Culture

Intangible cultural heritage is rooted in ethnic and regional traditions and relies on dynamic inheritance and protection bodies for sustainable development. Cultural continuity depends on generational transmission.

6.1 Subjects of Inheritance

Inheritors act as living carriers of intangible cultural heritage, directly participating in performances and craftsmanship and passing on authentic skills without reservation. For "Gunshanzhu", qualified inheritors must master the Miao migration history, proficiently grasp its difficult performing techniques, and undertake the responsibility of inheriting national spirit and traditional ethics.

6.2 Protection Subjects

External supporting forces include governments, businesses, and media. Long-term government support has enabled "Gunshanzhu" to be performed globally and gain worldwide recognition. The business sector promotes its spread through tourism, cultural crafts, and film-and-video production. Modern mobile media further expands its influence, breaking the original limits of local folk performances and enhancing public awareness of this traditional culture.

7. Current Dilemmas in the Inheritance of "Gunshanzhu" Culture

7.1 Shortage of Inheritance Talents

A severe talent gap threatens inheritance. Elderly masters have aged and can no longer perform difficult skills; most local young people migrate for work and abandon the tradition. Many trainees taught by the first-generation inheritor no longer pass on the craft, as it brings limited economic benefits. Young generations only value stage performances while ignoring cultural connotations, leaving the heritage barely sustained by a few elders and children.

7.2 Gradual Dilution of Cultural Connotations

Originally created to honor ancestral migration hardships, modern adapted performances emphasize entertainment and visuals.^[8] Great changes in the natural and cultural living environments have weakened its original spiritual meaning. Many young Miao people lack recognition of its core values, risking the gradual loss of authentic cultural heritage.^[9]

7.3 Shortage of Development Funds

The project lacks stable funding for costumes, instruments, venues and daily training. The national inheritor provides free teaching and personally covers supplies with limited subsidies. Training conditions remain poor; practices are held at home with worn facilities, restricting standardized inheritance and professional development.

7.4 Cultural Impact and Assimilation

In multi-ethnic settlements, frequent cultural exchanges cause assimilation. External cultural influences weaken the uniqueness of "Gunshanzhu", making it difficult to maintain its original characteristics within a blended cultural environment.

7.5 Confusion between Individual and Community Inheritance

Only one national and one provincial official inheritor receive support, while other participants volunteer out of passion. Reliance on individual dedication weakens overall continuity. Rigid evaluation standards favor individual recognition over community-based inheritance, resulting in slower talent growth compared with collectively inherited folk arts.

8. Countermeasures and Suggestions

8.1 Government Collaboration with Civil Forces

Local governments should act as service-oriented guides, adhering to the philosophy that "folk culture originates from the local community". A "civil-led, government-supported" model is recommended—civil forces take primary responsibility for cultural affairs, while the government provides support to maximize collaboration, ensuring the preservation of "Gunshanzhu"'s original ecology.

8.2 Learning from International Experience

Drawing on Japan and South Korea's cultural heritage protection policies, four measures are proposed: integrate "Gunshanzhu" protection into village regulations to define villagers' responsibilities; include it in local primary and secondary school curricula with specialized courses to cultivate young people's inheritance awareness; provide medical security for practitioners to address potential training injuries; and develop ethnic village tourism to promote the sustainable integration of "Gunshanzhu"'s protection, development and utilization.

8.3 Strengthening Protection of Original Culture

As original ecology represents the most authentic traditional culture, local governments should promptly introduce policies to protect "Gunshanzhu" from external cultural impacts. Simultaneously, call on all sectors of society to pay more attention to the protection of intangible cultural heritage's original form, laying a solid foundation for "Gunshanzhu"'s long-term preservation.

8.4 Expanding Commercial Development Channels

To promote market-oriented development, formulate policies to standardize "Gunshanzhu"'s commercial operations—require outgoing performance teams to consist of inheritors or professionally trained personnel to balance inheritance and development. Integrate this development concept into local cultural conventions, encouraging residents' participation to achieve a win-win between commercial benefits and cultural protection.

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