

When the Body Speaks: Multimodal Performance and Cultural Expression in Shaoyang Yao Nuo Opera

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multimodal meaning-making processes in Shaoyang Yao Nuo Opera and examines how these features shape its contemporary transmission and recontextualization. Although previous studies have focused on ceremonial functions, little attention has been paid to how bodily, vocal, spatial, and visual modalities collaboratively construct meaning within performances. Using a qualitative approach, this research applies multimodal discourse analysis to secondary sources, including historical texts, visual materials, and performance videos. It adopts a multimodal framework to analyze how symbolic resources such as gesture, sound, image, and spatial organization interact in ritual contexts. Findings reveal that core ritual elements—bodily choreography, bamboo constructions, rhythmic soundscapes, and color symbolism — have been preserved across generations while being adapted for secular festivals and tourism performances. These transformations highlight the flexible social functions of multimodal designs in maintaining cultural continuity. The study offers a methodological model for studying traditional practices when direct fieldwork is limited.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the cultural meaning-making of Yao Nuo Opera through a multimodal analysis framework. This study documents how symbolic resources such as movement, sound, and spatial design collaboratively shape ritual transmission, offering new insights into the embodied semiotics of intangible cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

Shaoyang is an important hub for trade and transportation, and has been a center of politics, economy, and culture in Southwest Hunan, China for many centuries (Lei, 2014). As early as in the Shang Dynasty, there were residents living Shaoyang, and it was established as a county in the Western Han Dynasty (Mao, 2022). Later, it was named as *Zhaoling*, *Shaoyang*, *Baoqing*, it was finally renamed Shaoyang (Lei, 2014). As a multi-

ethnic settlement, Shaoyang has nurtured a diverse and vibrant folk music culture over its 2,500-year history (Mao, 2022). The inheritance and development of Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* exhibit a distinct local character, with the local society or community serving as the nurturing environment, foundational conditions, and parent entity for the opera to thrive, take root, and endure (Zhou, 2009).

Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* is spread in the two Yao townships of Malin and Huangjin in Xinning County, Shaoyang city, as well as in the surrounding Eight-Dong region. This area, located at the western edge of Xinning County in Hunan Province, covers approximately 920 square kilometers and includes eight major mountain ranges. The region borders Chengbu, Wugang, and parts of Guangxi, forming a unique cultural enclave for the Yao people, who are known for preserving distinctive ritual traditions (Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008). Locally, the people do not refer to themselves as Yao but instead identify as *A-li*, and their language as *A-li language*, in order to distinguish themselves from other Yao linguistic groups (Li, 2014). The Yao people in the Eight-Dong region of Shaoyang City are descendants of the ancient Yelang ethnic group, who were assimilated into the Yao ethnicity due to historical processes (Baoqing County Annals, Wanli Period, Ming Dynasty). Although this branch of the Yelang descendants merged with other ethnic groups during their migration, they have preserved the Yelang tradition of revering the *Bamboo King* and brought it to Xinning County in Shaoyang (Hunan Provincial Annals Compilation Committee, 1997).

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has received more attention recently, which has rekindled interest in Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* among academics. However, most of the available research has been on ceremonial purposes or ethnographic narratives; few studies have been done on how meaning is created through multimodal semiotic exchanges during performances (Zhang, 2018; Liu, 2016). There is still a tremendous deal to learn about the ways that visual, somatic, and aural modalities contribute to the mechanics of cultural transmission in *Nuo opera*, especially in the modern digital setting. This study seeks to close this gap by employing the theoretical framework of multimodal analysis to explore how meaning is created and cultural values are conveyed in the performance process of Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera*. According to multimodality theory, meaning-making uses a range of semiotic resources that are culturally accessible, including language, image, body movement, sound, and spatial design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). These modalities are braided into particular performance and social settings to create intricate semiotic systems (Norris, 2004). This study moves beyond text-based interpretation and more thoroughly connects with the embodied and situational aspects of performance when this framework is applied to study *Nuo opera*. Consequently, this research focuses on the following questions:

- i. How does Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* mobilise multimodal resources, such as body, voice, space, and image, in its meaning-making processes?
- ii. How do these multimodal features shape the contemporary transmission and recontextualization of the opera?

2. Literature Review

The earliest origins of *Yao Nuo* culture in Shaoyang can be traced back to mythological traditions during the Western Zhou Dynasty, particularly to the Yelang Kingdom. Three large bamboo segments reportedly floated to the feet of a stranded woman on the river's

bank. She tried to push them away, but they wouldn't budge, and she discovered a crying baby boy inside. She raised the child, who later became a talented and courageous leader, founding the *Yelang* tribe with *Bamboo* as their surname (Chang, 1987). Worshiping the *Bamboo King* as a cultural totem became a defining feature of *Yelang* culture, reflecting the belief that their ancestors were born from bamboo (Lin, 1997). In the early Western Zhou period, the *Yelang* people already practiced a form of *Nuo dance*. Historical records in the *Huayang Guo Zhi-Nanzhong Record* describe how King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty attacked King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty and received military support from Ba and Shu. The soldiers of Ba were brave and inspired by their singing and dancing, believing that spirits aided them in warfare, which overwhelmed the soldiers of the Shang Dynasty. This formation of preceding song and following dance was known as the military *Nuo dance* and served as a spiritual force to boost military morale (Chang, 1987). During the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang sent the descendant of the Ba people, Cong, to lead the vanguard in attacking the central plains. Cong inherited the military *Nuo dance* of his ancestors, which combined preceding song and following dance to boost military morale, and was invincible in battle. Liu Bang loved the heroic posture of the military *Nuo dance* and ordered his musicians to learn it. Over time, this martial dance evolved into the *Bayu dance*, which was named for the Cong people's residence — the banks of the Yushui River in Ba County — and featured musical pieces like *Mao Yu Ben Ge Qu* and *An Nu Yu Ben Ge Qu*. Once the dance was combined with plot and lyrics and performed on stage, it gradually transformed into early forms of *Nuo Opera* (Yuanling County Annals Editorial Committee, 1705). During the Shaoxing period of the Song Dynasty, a group from the ancient *Yelang Kingdom* traveled to Xinning Eight-Dong (which includes Malin Mountain, Huangbu Mountain, Luorao Mountain, Shenchong Mountain, Taopen Mountain, Chapin Mountain, Zhenyuan Mountain, and Dajuan Mountain) through Liping in Guizhou, Yizhou in Guangxi, and Mizhu in Hunan, and they kept the *Nuo opera* of honoring the *Bamboo King* alive through the generations (Wugang County Annals Editorial Committee, 1590s; Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008). During the Ming and Qing periods, the Yao people of Eight-Dong lived near the Han people, resulting in extensive cultural integration. The Yao retained their *Nuo dance* dedicated to their ancestral *Bamboo King* hero while also adopting Han beliefs, such as the worship of *Pangu*, the mythological creator figure (Zhang, 2005). They were fearful of ghosts and believed in witches. Whenever they encountered diseases or disasters, they often believed that events were caused by evil spirits, so they asked witches to perform *Nuo opera* to exorcise them (Wugang County Annals Editorial Committee, 1590s).

In the modern era, *Nuo opera* took on political and revolutionary functions. For instance, in the 16th year of the Daoguang Emperor's reign (1836), Lan Yuankuang led a rebellion of the Eight-Dong Yao people and held a flag-offering ceremony rooted in *Nuo* traditions at Jiulong Hall (Hunan Provincial Annals Compilation Committee, 1997). Similarly, in 1917, the Yao people celebrated the Three Principles of the People by performing the *Tiao Gu Tan* ritual, a kind of *Nuo opera*, to honor the *Bamboo King* (Hunan Provincial Annals Compilation Committee, 1997). After 1949, Yao communities incorporated elements of *Tiao Gu Tan* into secular festivities such as the *Waist Drum Dance* and transformed this kind of *Nuo dance* into the *Yangge Song - Waist Drum Song*, that is, *Suo Na Suo Na Duo Na Duo*, and so on; some melodies spread throughout the country and were renamed the *Bu Bu Gao* tune (Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008).

In the contemporary era, the Eight-Dong Yao people (self-identified as *Ali people*) continue to perform *Nuo opera*, such as *Tiao Gu Tan*, referred to in their native language as *Jishe Yangsuo Tan* (Li, 2014). This form of *Yao Nuo Opera* preserves the ancient integration of *Bamboo King* worship, military oath rituals, and agricultural prayers (Li, 2014). It became increasingly systematic, involving incense rituals, spell recitations, talismanic nailings, *Nuo dance* performances, rain prayers, and the lighting of seven-star lamps. Local flag chiefs organized these ceremonies every three or five years, depending on their scale, and funded them with community donations (Zhang, 2005). It serves not only as a living cultural tradition but also as a vivid theatrical expression of the Yao people's history, beliefs, and collective memory.

Although the rich historical and cultural development of *Yao Nuo Opera* exists, scholarship has primarily focused on its ritual functions, historical narratives, or ethnographic descriptions of ceremonial practice (Zhang, 2005; Li, 2014; Xinning County Annals Compilation Committee, 2008). These studies offer valuable documentation but often adopt descriptive or preservationist approaches, rarely addressing how meaning is constructed through embodied performance or how various semiotic resources interact during rituals. As a result, little attention has been paid to the multimodal mechanisms through which cultural knowledge is transmitted, negotiated, and recontextualized across time and space. Especially in contemporary settings—where video documentation and media representations proliferate—there remains a theoretical and methodological gap in analyzing *Yao Nuo Opera* as a semiotic system that integrates gesture, sound, spatial arrangement, and visual symbolism. To address this gap, this study uses secondary data sources, including video recordings of performances, historical texts, and visual documentation. It aims to reveal the cultural logic and symbolic patterns ingrained in the opera's performative parts by incorporating multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal analysis is a potent method for examining how meaning develops over time and modalities, as highlighted by Lemke (2007) and Goldman et al. (2007). This is especially true for studies that use video as a representational and analytical tool. This study not only advances our understanding of *Yao Nuo Opera* but also offers an argument for the use of multimodal techniques in the study of ICH assets.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of secondary sources. To enhance its interpretive robustness, data source triangulation was employed by incorporating three distinct types of secondary materials: (1) historical texts, including regional chronicles and ethnographic records related to the Yao communities in Shaoyang; (2) visual documentation, such as ritual artifacts, talismans, mask designs, and ceremonial announcements preserved in local cultural archives; and (3) video recordings of ritual performances, particularly the *Tiao Gu Tan* ceremony, drawn from publicly available documentation and archival materials maintained by local cultural institutions. Although the research relies exclusively on secondary data, the combination of these diverse material forms allows for the cross-verification of cultural meanings expressed across different temporal, visual, and performative modalities. As Denzin (1970) suggests, triangulation techniques can help reduce researcher bias and improve the validity, reliability, and interpretive depth of a study.

Multimodality serves as both the theoretical framework and the analytic methodology for this study. As a theory, it emphasizes that meaning is constructed through the

interaction of multiple semiotic resources — including language, gesture, voice, image, and spatial organization — each offering distinct communicative potentials (Kress, 2000, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Lemke, 1998). This theoretical perspective aligns closely with the expressive nature of *Nuo performance*, which integrates bodily movements, vocalization, symbolic props, and ritual space to communicate spiritual and social meanings. Mitchell's (1994) notion of the *Pictorial Turn* further supports this framework by highlighting the growing importance of image-based and performative meaning-making in contemporary and traditional cultural practices. A multimodal framework addresses this shift by attending to the interplay between modalities in constructing culturally situated meanings.

As a methodology, multimodal analysis enables the examination of how such semiotic resources operate in context (Eggins, 1994; LeVine & Scollon, 2004). It incorporates all communicative modes observable in performance — including gesture, prosody, visual symbolism, and proxemics — and understands them as mutually shaping and co-constitutive (Norris, 2004). This integrative approach is particularly suited for analyzing video documentation of ritual performance, where meaning unfolds across time and modality. As Lemke (2007) suggests, video data allows researchers to track meaning-making processes temporally, while Goldman (2007) emphasizes the need for rigorous standards in analyzing such multimodal material. However, as Mondada (2006) notes, studies that treat video not just as representation but as embodied social practice remain limited — making this study's approach both timely and relevant.

4. Results

This section presents the findings derived from a multimodal discourse analysis of Shaoyang Yao *Nuo Opera*, with a focus on two themes: the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge among Eight-Dong Yao wizards and the multimodal structure of the *Tiao Gu Tan*, a kind of *Yao Nuo Opera*. Based on secondary sources — including ethnographic records, temple inscriptions, and full-length video recordings archived by the Xinning County Cultural Center — this section reveals how multimodal elements such as movement, sound, spatial configuration, and sacred objects coalesce to shape a three-day ceremonial performance.

4.1. Transmission of *Nuo Opera* among the Eight-Dong Yao Wizards

The Eight-Dong *Yao Nuo opera* was passed down by the head wizards of the Eight-Dong Yao ethnic group. The wizards believe in *Fu Jiao* because Xinning was the location of the Fu Yi Principality during the Han Dynasty (Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008). The head wizard is responsible for sacrificial instruments, spells, and talismanic incantations, passing them only to their most trusted disciples when they are too old to continue their duties. Although head wizards are allowed to marry and have children, their offspring do not automatically become wizards. Each head wizard holds a *Zu shi Fu Jiao* talisman as proof of their legitimate succession (Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008). For example, one such talisman, carved in the winter of 1718 during the 39th year of the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, more than 300 years ago, bears the inscription listing disciples like Lan Falin, Jiang Fayan, Shu Fafu, Dai Faming, Xiao Fulong, and Lei Fatong — each having the character *Fa* in their names, passed down through six generations of masters.

4.2. Multimodal Structure of *Tiao Gu Tan*

The *Tiao Gu Tan*, a kind of *Nuo opera*, is a distinctive and elaborate performance within the broader tradition of *Nuo culture* practiced by the Yao ethnic group in the Eight-Dong region of Xinning County, Hunan Province (Zhang, 2005; Lin, 1997). It integrates singing, chanting, recitation, whispering, hand gestures, *Nuo songs*, *Nuo dances*, and *Nuo plays* into a continuous three-day and three-night event, starting on the 15th day of the lunar calendar and concluding on the 17th (Xinning County Annals Compilation Committee, 2009). Shamans and clan leaders initiate the performance through *Qikuan*, a traditional form of communal deliberation, to finalise the performance schedule. After the *Qikuan* is completed, yellow bills are posted within the Eight-Dong Yao area to announce the details of the *Tiao Gu Tan* ceremony. The ritual is analyzed in chronological order, from divine invitation to ancestral tribute and cosmic closure (Zhang, 2005).

4.2.1 Divine invitation (Day 1)

Creating a sacred environment and inviting the divine are the main goals of the first day. The sequence of the performance exhibits a layered multimodal logic that intertwines objects, dress, music, movement, and spatial arrangement (Norris, 2004).

The first step is to set up the performance altar. The top head wizard selects a performance location in a bamboo forest near mountains and water, designates three sturdy, new bamboo poles as the altar's support structure, binds the tips of the three poles together, and shaves the bamboo into tiles before constructing a bamboo hut as the altar. Thereafter, community members cultivated a site to honor the *Bamboo King* by clearing away weeds and other bamboo. After that, 72 vines are used to create barriers, 36 bamboo columns are positioned across the area, and four gates are positioned in the southeast, northwest, and west directions. Three sacred stones form a platform in the centre of the room, where a large cauldron is waiting to boil (Lin, 1997). Statues of the *Bamboo King* and other deities adorn the altar. This arrangement of areas, surrounded by living bamboo, enacts cosmological order (Lemke, 2007).

The second phase is calming the spirits (*An Shen*). The highest-ranking wizard stands at attention, wearing a ceremonial hat and holding three incense sticks in front of his chest. He begins by half-squatting and doing a left-leaning step with the incense in front of his chest. Then, he takes a step back and goes in a circle, hooking his left foot for three steps to the left and his right foot for three steps to the right. Third, he moves forward with his left foot and does another left-leaning step half-squat, shifting his weight to his right leg and slipping his left foot out to the side. Fourth, he does a left-leaning step half-squat, touching his waist from left to right. Finally, he takes three steps to the left, hooks his left foot behind him, spins in a circle, then drops to one knee with his right leg, bowing his head in respect while holding the incense high above his head with both hands. This sequence is performed three times (Li, 2014). During this phase, the big drum and gong create a forceful, rhythmic pulse, while the large cymbal contributes a resonant tone that heightens the solemn and mysterious atmosphere of the *An Shen* ceremony. In preparation to become an extraordinary medium capable of communing with the Guardians and invoking ancestral spirits and deities, the highest head wizard sounds a horn, offers incense, conducts divination with oracle bones, calculates using ritual finger movements, and chants sacred mantras (Mondada, 2006).

The third step is to purify the altar with holy water. The Badong people regard water as sacred, and they use bamboo tubes to draw water from nearby streams and chant sacred mantras. The purification team rotates clockwise around the altar, chanting mantras to bless the holy water while performing the *Nine Bang Steps*. This spatial movement around the altar not only purifies, but also symbolizes the unity of the natural world and the spiritual world (Xinning County Malin Yao Ethnic Township Chronicle Editorial Committee, 2008).

The fourth step is to build Five Layers of Four Forts. The leading wizard walks to the five directions and prays for the guardian spirit to mark the sacred boundaries. The dancers wear primitive costumes made of wild leaves and bamboo and perform scenes of farming and gathering food. They move in the directions of east, south, west, north and center, symbolizing the offering of food to the gods from various realms. The performers' bodies are transformed into visual texts, interpreting memories through action sequences with agricultural themes (Zhang, 2005; Lemke, 1998).

The fifth step is to beat the Five Constants. This exorcism dramatizes the process of capturing and expelling five evil spirits, each represented by a different colored mask (Liu, 2016). The shaman makes martial arts gestures with flags and sticks, and draws ritual symbols in midair with incense. Dancers wear masks of gods and ghosts and perform stylized combat movements to the sound of drums - leaping, crouching, circling, and imitating the pursuit. The combination of symbolic colors, gestures, sounds and props creates a vivid symbolic landscape of spiritual conflict and purification (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The sixth step is to worship Pangu King and Bamboo King. At dusk, the tribe gathers for the first worship of Pangu King and Bamboo King, the two highest gods in the Yao pantheon (Chang, 1987). Offerings, including bamboo leaf water cups, natural foods and bamboo musical instruments, are placed on the altar. Ritual gestures emphasize humility and gratitude to ancestors, including barefoot dances imitating the return of the hunt. These activities are performed simultaneously with the recitation of Nuo epics and the waving of god tablets, culminating in a narrative performance that connects the origins of the universe with contemporary spiritual needs (Lin, 1997).

4.2.2. *Re-enactment and celebration of ancestral myths (Day 2)*

The second day of the Tiao Gu Tan performance is centred on the re-enactment of ancestral myths. Through sacrifices, dances, and symbolic movements, the Yao people reaffirmed their cultural values of reproduction and harmonious coexistence and continued to pay tribute to their core ancestral spirits, such as the Bamboo King (Zhang, 2005; Hunan Provincial Annals Compilation Committee, 1997). Before breakfast, the tribesmen began to prepare for the Bamboo King performance of the day. All props used in this round are made of bamboo. Bamboo gongs, drums, wine cups, and percussion instruments symbolize the highest respect for the ancestor Bamboo King. Leaves replace flutes to make sounds, and bamboo cups are filled with water instead of wine, which strengthens the ecological concept and pure symbol of the performance. The celebratory performance officially begins at the auspicious time calculated by divination (Li, 2014). Accompanied by the rhythmic sound of copper bells, rhythmic foot movements, and chanting, twelve dancers — six men and six women — sit barefoot on the altar, wearing costumes woven from fresh bamboo shoots. The two leading dancers hold the Seven Stars Sword while the other dancers enter the stage one by one with long drums on their

backs. The performance unfolds with a high degree of rhythmic coordination. The dancers either circle collectively or confront each other in pairs; the movements are alternating in rhythm, and the gestures are echoing; the symbolic ancestral narrative is presented through body language such as hooking steps, rotating steps, and hooking and changing steps (Goldman, 2007; Lemke, 2007). Finally, all the dancers walk around the altar in small steps to the sound of drums and then exit in an orderly manner, symbolizing the siege and cooperation of the ancestral group. The main theme of this day is the ritual reproduction of the ancestral myth, strengthening the ethnic memory through multimodal movements and symbols, and evoking the collective identity passed down from generation to generation (Norris, 2004).

4.2.3. *Performance Climax and Completion of the Sacred Cycle (Day 3)*

The third day of the Tiao Gu Tan performance is the climax of the entire performance, covering the reappearance of myths, physical extreme challenges, and the concentrated display of group beliefs. Through high-intensity ritual movements and symbolic dance choreography, the Yao people completed the cultural cycle from reverence to revival (Mitchell, 1994; Mondada, 2006). The performance kicked off with the solemn Burning Incense segment in the morning of the same day. The two performers stood in front of the altar, holding bamboo incense tubes in their left hands and shaking copper bells in their right hands. With the symmetrical squatting steps, 360-degree rotation steps, kneeling, and other movements, they showed extremely high ritual precision and mental concentration (Zhang, 2005; Hunan Provincial Annals Compilation Committee, 1997). The incense was connected to the incense burner by the lamp oil attendant, and the copper bell stopped ringing, symbolizing that the gods of heaven and earth had taken their places and communicated with the gods. The next performance was the highly tense Climbing the Knife Mountain to Open the Heavenly San. This performance was only performed by the most respected chief shaman, who chanted the prophecy and climbed the three-story bamboo ladder with sharp blades barefoot. After reaching the top, he scattered rice, symbolizing a good harvest and cosmic enlightenment. Then, the shaman performed Walking Over Fire and Charcoal, walking barefoot through a Sea of Fire made of hot charcoal and iron blocks (Zhang, 2005). After applying holy water and chanting spells, he walked peacefully, symbolizing purification and divine possession. The entourage practiced ancestral boxing and martial arts on bamboo mats, emphasizing the unity of body and mind and the refinement of will. The third part was the Symbolic Sheep Hunting Sacrifice. Six men and six women simulated chasing animals with mimicry dances, accompanied by prayers, expressing sacrifice, revenge, and gratitude (Liu, 2016; Zhang, 2018). The following five steps — Dongqing, Nanxing, Zhongpan, Beigu, and Xizhuan — symbolize the complete life journey of the Yao people:

- i. *Dongqing*: The ancestors' farming and the changing of the seasons are expressed through plant fiber costumes and farming dances;
- ii. *Nanxing*: The mask dance depicts the hunting scene and the struggle with nature;
- iii. *Zhongpan*: The humorous interaction shows the love and social joy of men and women;
- iv. *Beigu*: The body entanglement movement simulates reproduction, with a primitive and direct style;
- v. *Xizhuan*: The old and the young dance together, symbolizing the continuation of the family and the prosperity of future generations.

Each movement demonstrates the Yao people's cosmology, ethical structure, and cultural beliefs through multimodal performances and progressive symbolic systems (Kress, 2003; Eggins, 1994). At the end of the performance, the shaman presided over the Burnt Sacrifice to pray for peace in all seasons and prosperity of the tribe. Twelve dancers lined up in front of the elders and sang songs of gratitude to express respect and cultural memory passed down from generation to generation. Afterwards, the shaman blessed a symbolic dragon boat, which was attached with red, green, and white Disaster Symbols, symbolizing fire, disaster, and funeral worries, respectively (Liu, 2016). Under the guidance of the Divine Duck and the escort of the spell, the dragon boat was burned, implying the elimination of disasters and a safe return. In the Oath Confirmation performance, the shaman played the role of the judge and conducted a formal question and answer session with the Wisher. Through writing and divination, he confirmed that the gods had responded to the mortals' demands (Xinning County Annals Compilation Committee, 2009). Next, they slaughtered chickens and sprinkled blood on 36 bamboo God Mailboxes to formally bid farewell to all gods and ancestors. In the Removal of the Altar stage, all sacrificial objects were burned or properly handled, and the dragon boat was also burned after circling the village, implying the expulsion of epidemics and the return of peace. The ceremony finally ended besides the bonfire in the ancient temple square. The tribesmen gathered around the fire, drinking, singing, and dancing, wearing masks and festive costumes, and welcoming the return of the ancestors with collective joy, announcing the completion of the reunion of gods and humans and the rebirth of the tribe (Zhang, 2005).

5. Discussion

5.1. Multimodal Meaning-Making in Shaoyang Yao Nuo Opera

Bodily movements function as a major semiotic resource in Shaoyang Yao Nuo Opera. Modes such as gesture and bodily movement possess their grammar of meaning and operate alongside linguistic and visual modes to create composite semiotic structures (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the *Tiao Gu Tan*, specific bodily actions — such as leftward steps followed by a spinning turn and a one - knee kneeling posture — visually and kinetically evoke cosmological principles central to Yao belief systems, notably the connection between human beings, ancestral spirits, and natural forces. Higher-level actions that integrate multiple modes — movement, spatial organization, and ritualized object interaction — are key to multimodal meaning-making in performative contexts (Norris, 2004). The collective movement around the altar, where performers encircle the sacred space while chanting and gesturing, simultaneously organizes spatial relations and activates symbolic meanings of communal unity and cosmic order. Meaning is distributed across modalities, emerging through their dynamic interplay over time (Lemke, 1998). The Shaoyang Yao community transmits ancestral narratives and encodes spiritual worldviews through structured bodily performances, extending beyond reliance on verbal language alone. In *Tiao Gu Tan*, the choreography of movement — repeated, stylized, and spatially anchored — thus serves as a living semiotic text that sustains cultural memory across generations.

Sound, like visual and bodily modes, constitutes an independent semiotic resource (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The *Tiao Gu Tan* ritual mobilizes an intricate soundscape where vocal chants, ritual incantations, drumming, gong beats, and natural environmental sounds collaboratively generate a multisensory sacred environment. Meaning unfolds temporally across multimodal semiotic chains (Lemke, 1998); the large

drums, gongs, and cymbals produce a rhythmic acoustic layer that organizes the temporal flow of the ritual, marking transitions between ritual phases and synchronizing collective bodily actions. Prosody and vocal quality operate as modes that communicate affective and interpersonal meanings beyond verbal content (Norris, 2004). The head wizard's chanting of mantras, whispering during divination, and vocalized incantations during spirit invocation not only deliver verbal messages but also activate embodied spiritual presence through sound modulation. The tonal shifts, breath patterns, and cadence of chants contribute to evoking reverence, summoning ancestral spirits, and affirming communal solidarity. Moreover, each mode contributes to a holistic sensory experience (Kress, 2000). The performance space — typically located near bamboo groves and streams — introduces ambient sounds of rustling leaves, flowing water, and bird calls, which blend with human-produced sounds to extend the sacred atmosphere.

Spatial arrangements are not neutral but actively participate in multimodal meaning-making, shaping social interactions and symbolic structures (Norris, 2004). In the *Tiao Gu Tan*, the performance space is carefully constructed: three bamboo poles bound together form a sacred altar, surrounded by 36 bamboo pillars and four symbolic gates positioned according to cardinal directions. A three-stone tripod at the center anchors the cosmological axis, materializing the connection between heaven, earth, and the human realm. Performers move clockwise around the altar, a spatial trajectory that symbolizes harmony with natural cycles and the flow of cosmic energy, encoding narrative and social relations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). *Tiao Gu Tan* aligns physical performance with ancestral worldviews through the integration of constructed space and ritualized movement.

Visual modes — such as objects, color, and spatial composition — possess structured grammars of meaning, operating as potent semiotic resources alongside gesture, speech, and sound (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the *Tiao Gu Tan*, masks and *Deity Plaques* (*Shen Pai*), often crafted from bamboo and painted in vivid colors such as red, black, and white, dominate the visual landscape. Each color encodes specific ancestral mythologies and ritual functions: red is associated with life, vitality, and ritual blood sacrifice, prominently featured in hunting reenactments and fertility dances; black symbolizes the spiritual unknown, ancestral realms, and protective forces, often seen in exorcism masks and ritual boundaries; and white signifies purification, mourning, and cosmic renewal, particularly in costumes worn during transitional rites. These color codings are not arbitrary but are deeply embedded in Yao cosmology, serving to visualize mythic narratives such as the ancestral hunt for sheep or the primordial agricultural scenes enacted during the performance. Through the stylized features of masks and the emblematic inscriptions on plaques, performers visually embody the presence of deities, rendering otherwise intangible spiritual beings perceptible. Visual representation thus complements bodily movement and vocal performance in materializing the sacred cosmos, illustrating Lemke's (1998) argument that meaning in multimodal texts emerges through the orchestration of signs across different semiotic modes.

Overall, the multimodal resources mobilized in Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* — including bodily movement, vocalization, spatial structuring, and visual symbolism — work collaboratively to construct a richly layered semiotic environment, not only materializes ancestral cosmologies but also sustains cultural memory across generations.

5.2. Multimodal Features in Contemporary Transmission and Recontextualization

The historical evolution of Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera*, as traced through its origins, migration, and transformations, reveals a dynamic process of multimodal preservation and recontextualization. From its mythological foundations during the Western Zhou Dynasty to its integration with Han cultural elements in the Ming and Qing periods, the performance has consistently adapted its multimodal structures — bodily movement, vocalization, spatial organization, and visual symbolism — to changing socio-cultural environments (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Norris, 2004). The core features of *Tiao Gu Tan* — such as the bodily choreography honoring the *Bamboo King*, the use of sacred bamboo constructions, the rhythmic soundscape of drums and chanting, and the symbolic deployment of color — have been preserved across generations, supporting what Lemke (1998) describes as the temporal unfolding of multimodal meaning. However, these elements have also been selectively recontextualized. During the modern era, multimodal ritual forms were appropriated to express political resistance and collective identity, while in contemporary contexts, these same multimodal resources have been adapted for secular celebrations and tourism-oriented performances. This ongoing recontextualization process illustrates the flexible social functions of multimodal designs (Kress, 2000), thereby enabling the Eight-Dong *Yao Nuo opera* to maintain a living connection to ancestral cosmologies while simultaneously embedding their traditions within evolving contemporary frameworks (Mondada, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This study regards Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* as a cultural performance form with multimodal expression as its core, and its development is deeply influenced by historical changes, cultural integration, and the evolution of symbolic systems. This study systematically sorted out the cultural path of *Yao Nuo Opera* from its original form of *Panhu Ji* totem worship to its gradual integration of *Yelang Bamboo King* and Han *Pangu* beliefs, revealing the multi-level meaning construction process of this drama. This study takes multimodal analysis theory as the core framework, emphasizing how symbolic resources such as sound, body movements, masks, costumes, colors and stage space work together to form a cultural meaning system in ritual performances. The multimodal perspective helps reveal the dynamic interaction between vision and hearing, language and non-language, and material and symbol in *Yao Nuo Opera*, showing the complexity of local opera as a cultural practice in multiple dimensions of seeing, listening and performing.

The theoretical contribution of this study is to apply multimodal analysis methods to the study of local intangible cultural heritage, breaking through the previous research paradigm that only focuses on text and language and expanding the status of visual, auditory and physical performances in the production of meaning.

Methodologically, a non-interview analysis path that integrates historical archives and symbolic interpretation is constructed, which is suitable for traditional cultural fields where in-depth field work are difficult to conduct.

Empirically, this study deeply analyzes the multimodal collaboration mechanism of Shaoyang *Yao Nuo Opera* in masks, music, dance postures and stage space, providing a new path for understanding the symbolic system and cultural functions in local opera.

Although this study attempts to reveal the mechanism of cultural meaning generation from a multimodal perspective, it still has certain limitations. First, the research materials are mainly historical documents and video materials, which fail to cover the audience experience or the subjective feelings of the performers, limiting the understanding of the interactive level. Second, this study focuses on a single case in Shaoyang and lacks comparative analysis with other regional or ethnic drama traditions. Future research can further explore the role of multimodal elements in audience perception, combine sensory ethnography with body performance theory, and expand the understanding of the multisensory characteristics of local opera. Moreover, with the help of digital technology, multimodal elements such as masks, music, and movements can be modeled, visualized, and interactively designed to explore new paths for the digital preservation and dissemination of traditional drama.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study is based entirely on secondary data, including historical texts, visual documentation, and video recordings of performances. It did not involve human participants, interviews, or any personally identifiable data. Therefore, ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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