

The Change of Nuo Culture in Pingxiang under the Transformation of Contemporary China(1978-Present)

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The Change of Nuo Culture in Pingxiang under the Transformation of Contemporary China (1978–Present)

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Abstract

Nuo is a religious ritual of exorcism dating back to the Prehistory of China, in which people wear unique masks and dance to expel ghosts and pray for peace and prosperity. After three thousand years of rising and falling in the popularity of the custom, Nuo has evolved from a traditional religious ritual into a culture. This study examines the change in Nuo culture under the transformation of contemporary China using first-hand data from 3 months of fieldwork. Using the Nuo culture in Pingxiang (Jiangxi, China) as an example, I illustrate the changes in Nuo culture regarding the connotation, manifestation, transmission, and management, successively, and analyze the reasons for these changes. I show that the influence of Nuo as a religion has been weakened, but its influence as a culture has been strengthened. Accordingly, the manifestation, transmission, and management of Nuo culture have also changed. These changes can be explained by internal and external factors. The internal factor is that Nuo is a secular culture with compatibility and flexibility. External factors include the marketization of the Chinese economy, granting of religious freedom but strengthened supervision, and increased attention to culture development.

Keyword

Nuo culture, Pingxiang, change, contemporary China

現代中国社会の転換期における萍郷傩文化の変遷（1978－現在）

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要旨

傩は中国先史時代の宗教儀礼から発生し、人々は頭部に仮面を装着して踊ることで邪鬼を追い払い幸福を享受しようとしてきた。三千年の消長興廃を経て、傩は一種の宗教儀礼から文化へと変わっていった。本論文では三ヶ月にわたる現地調査で得た一次資料を用いて現代中国社会の転換期における傩文化の変遷について考察するものである。(中国江西)萍郷の傩文化を例として、傩文化の内容、表現形式、伝承、管理などの4つの側面から傩文化の現代中国社会の転換期における変遷を闡明し、変遷を引き起こした原因について分析する。本研究では、傩の宗教としての影響が徐々に弱まっていく一方で、文化としての影響は徐々に強まっていることを明らかにした。

それと呼応するように表現形式、伝承と管理の面でも大きな変化が生じている。儺文化変容の原因は内的な原因と外的な原因とに分けることが出来る。儺文化変容の内的な原因としては儺文化自体の世俗性、包容性、柔軟性がある。そして外的な原因としては中国経済の市場改革があるほか、政府が民衆に宗教の自由を与えるとともに宗教活動の監視を強化し、社会各界が文化の発展を日に日に重視するようになったという3つの側面が指摘できる。

キーワード

儺文化、萍郷、変遷、現代中国

1. Introduction

Nuo is a religious ritual of exorcism originating from the Prehistory of China (Kang, 2011). It was initially employed by ancient Chinese people to expel ghosts and pray for peace and prosperity due to their low capability to resist natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and plagues (Tuo, 2007). The written record of Nuo appears in the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256B.C.). "The wizard dressed up as a ferocious beast by wearing bearskin and masks to expel evil spirits" (The Rites of Zhou). Despite the suppression during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), this religious ritual has been passed down and remains active in many rural areas and minority regions of China.¹ After three thousand years of rising and falling in the popularity of the custom, Nuo has evolved from a traditional religious ritual to a comprehensive culture, consisting of Nuo temples, Nuo religion, Nuo masks, Nuo dance, and Nuo drama (Qu & Qian, 2006). Nuo culture interacts with the three major denominations in China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Chen et al., 2008). It is an external manifestation of Chinese secular society and is now regarded as a living fossil of Chinese culture by academia and the government (Qu, 1987). Therefore, studying Chinese Nuo culture is of great significance for understanding Chinese culture, particularly the

rural society, folk religion, and folk art.

The study of Chinese Nuo culture has begun in the 1950s and has become a research hotspot in China's academia since the 1980s (Qu & Qian, 2006). The literature in Chinese Nuo culture mainly focuses on Nuo drama, Nuo rituals, the historical evolution of Nuo culture, and the folklore value of Nuo culture. In terms of Nuo drama and Nuo rituals, Tuo (2007) studies the Nuo drama and Nuo rituals in southwest China; Zhang (2014) introduces the history of the Chinese sacrificial rite system and clarifies the historical development of Nuo drama, from the Shang Dynasty to modern times; The rural sacrificial Nuo drama in China is also studied by a Japanese professor, Tanaka (2008). In the aspect of the historical evolution and the folklore value of Nuo culture, Li (1991) systematically studies the emergence, formation, and development of Nuo culture in Guizhou province; Wang and Lv (2017) introduce the Nuo culture in 18 provinces using numerous pictures, covering Nuo witchcraft, folklore activities, and drama; Qu and Qian (2006) introduce the history and evolution of Nuo culture in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. On top of these studies, several books study the Nuo artists and the role of Nuo in contemporary Chinese politics. Zeng (2018) focuses on the artists of Nuo in Jiangxi province and explores the close connection between the Nuo artists' identity and

local memory under the social transformation. Li (2015) studies the relationship between religion and modern Chinese politics by taking Nuo as a case study. These studies help us to understand the history of Nuo culture, the artists of Nuo, and the relationship between the state ideology and Nuo.

However, most of them do not consider the change of Nuo culture in contemporary China. It is well known that culture evolves with social changes. Therefore, the Nuo culture is also expected to change a lot in the past forty years because China has witnessed a tremendous social transformation. Furthermore, few studies investigate the evolution of the Nuo culture systematically in one area. Pingxiang in Jiangxi province is a vital hometown of the Nuo culture in China, known for its three treasures, including Nuo temples, Nuo masks, and Nuo dance. The Nuo mask-making techniques and Nuo dance in Pingxiang were recognized as the Chinese National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 and 2021. Despite its abundant cultural resources, there is no systemic research on the Nuo culture in Pingxiang. Most of the related materials are introductory brochures or collections of proses. Some papers also study the Nuo culture in Pingxiang. Still, they mainly focus on the connotation, characteristics, and significance of Nuo culture, including the origin of Nuo, Nuo gods, Nuo temples, Nuo rituals, and the artistic elements of Nuo dance (Deng & Quan, 1996); the distribution, historical development and main features of the Nuo temples in Pingxiang (Chen, 1994); and research value, aesthetic value, and economic value (Luo & Wu, 2008). These studies are either outdated or not based on in-depth field investigations, which do not consider the rapid change of Nuo culture in contemporary society.

This paper aims to fill the mentioned gaps by systematically studying the change of Pingxiang's Nuo culture in contemporary China and analyzing the potential causes of these changes. It contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it comprehensively studies the change of Nuo culture during urbanization and modernization, which is beneficial for preserving this popular religion and culture. Second, it is likely to be the first systematic study in the literature that analyzes the contemporary changes of the Nuo culture in Pingxiang from the perspective of anthropology. Finally, this research is featured with many in-depth field investigations and analyses of the local society and human environment in which the Nuo culture lives.

In a broader sense, the case study of Nuo culture also relates to the studies of general cultural heritage, especially the studies of cultural heritage in China. One prominent fact in cultural heritage studies is that the notion of cultural heritage changes from focusing mostly on the past and tangible cultural heritages into emphasizing the identity and memory of common people and intangible cultural heritages (Butler, 2006; Shen, 2012).² Through this case study, one may trace the role of the changing notion of cultural heritage on the evolvement of cultural heritage across the heritagization of Nuo. The change of Nuo during the great transformation of Chinese society also provides a good opportunity for studying how cultural heritage is shaped by power relations and national power since cultural heritage is regarded as a political resource shaping national stereotypes and regional identity according to some scholars (Smith, 2010; Nilson & Thorell, 2018).³ Furthermore, the Chinese government has made great efforts to preserve and protect

cultural heritage since the end of the Cultural Revolution through different policies and laws at national, provincial, district, and county levels (Svensson, 2011; Huo, 2016). The movement of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in China has been regarded as a cultural self-healing mechanism, which alleviates potential social, economic, and ideological conflicts and provides an opportunity for Chinese people to gain cultural self-confidence (Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Zhou, 2017). The case study of the revival, revitalization, and restoration of Nuo culture illustrates how such a process of cultural self-healing works and the role of the government, communities, and common people during the process. The development of Nuo is a unique case because Nuo, as a feudal, primitive, and superstitious culture, cannot be recognized as a cultural heritage in the past (Wang, 2000). In particular, the change and transmission of Nuo culture provide a practical example for countering the tension between heritagization and industrialization of traditional culture plaguing the development of cultural heritage in the post-industrial era. Other problems in the development of Nuo culture also have important implications for cultural heritage protection in China, for instance, the conflict between the protection of cultural heritage and cultural tourism, the implementation of policies, and the preservation of traditions and modernization.

I first illustrate the changes of Nuo culture regarding the connotation, manifestation, transmission, and management, successively, and then analyze the reasons for these changes. In doing so, I adopt a comparative analysis method and compare the Nuo culture in Pingxiang horizontally and vertically based on the first-hand data collected from fieldwork. I show that the influence of Nuo as a religion has

been weakened, but its influence as a culture has been strengthened. The manifestation of Nuo culture has also become more modern and emphasized the cultural elements for catering to market demand and the government's requirements. Nuo culture also spreads into schools and museums. Meanwhile, the transmission of Nuo culture faces the crisis of a shortage of successors. In dealing with it, Nuo villages have started to transmit Nuo dance among women and students. Finally, the management of Nuo culture has also changed with more involvement of the local government and officials. These changes in Nuo culture can be explained by internal and external factors. The internal factor is that Nuo is a secular religious culture with compatibility and flexibility. The external factors include economic, political, and cultural aspects. First, the marketization of the economy changes the economic environment in which Nuo culture lives. Second, the grant of religious freedom has given the development space for Nuo, but the strengthened supervision has brought more rules. Finally, the increased attention to culture development has stimulated the development and promotion of Nuo culture.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the research methods used for this study. Section 3 elaborates on the change of Nuo culture in Pingxiang, and Section 4 analyzes the reason for these changes. Finally, Section 5 concludes.

2. Research Methods

The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze the contemporary change of the Nuo culture in Pingxiang and the reasons behind these changes. Therefore, I adopt a comparative

analysis method and compare the Nuo culture in Pingxiang horizontally and vertically. I contrast the Nuo in the past with the Nuo in recent decades from the historical dimension and compare the Nuo inside and outside the Nuo villages from the horizontal dimension. For this purpose, both the fieldwork investigation method and the literature research method are used to obtain first-hand and historical data.

First, I employ the standard fieldwork methods used in cultural anthropology for obtaining first-hand data, including participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation is a primary research technique in modern Western anthropology initiated in the early twentieth century, through which researchers can gain many profound insights and interpretative materials. Researchers should go to their field sites and live with the locals for a relatively long period to learn the targeted research object through personal participation (Li, 2015). The main field sites of this study are three villages of Pingxiang, namely, Wenquan, Chexiang, and Fengquan. These villages are chosen because they are outstanding representatives of the Nuo culture in Pingxiang. The Nuo temples and Nuo dance in these villages have a long history. The whole fieldwork lasts three months in total. In particular, I penetrate the locals' lives and record the temples' basic layout in the three villages using the participant observation method. For instance, through participating in the Nuo god's birthday banquet in Wenquan village and the traditional Nuo dance performance in Shidongkou Nuo Temple, I learn about the customs, religious beliefs, and organization of the Nuo culture in the rural society.

On top of participant observation, I carry out in-

depth interviews, including four parts. The first part is to interview six Nuo masks craftsmen in four Nuo mask-making workshops to study the characteristics and production methods of Nuo masks. The second part is to interview relevant persons of the village committee and cultural management department for gaining information about the management of Nuo temples and related state policies. The third part involves interviewing Nuo dancers and Nuo masks craftsmen to learn about the transmission of Nuo culture. The last part is to interview two teachers from an elementary school and a director from the Pingxiang Museum to understand the roles of school education and museums in the transmission and promotion of the Nuo culture in Pingxiang.

Besides the fieldwork methods, I also use the literature research method for obtaining historical data concerning the Nuo in the past. Thus, the classic literature, historical documents, and books are systematically reviewed. In addition, second-hand data from two sources are also used: government documents and image data on Nuo culture. The government's official documents are analyzed to understand the background of contemporary social transformation and related policies on cultural heritage protection. The image data on Nuo culture are provided by Pingxiang Museum and the database of Japan⁴. They are used to sort out the essential characteristics of the Nuo culture in Pingxiang over the past thirty years.

3. The Change of Nuo culture in Pingxiang

According to historians, contemporary China starts from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, few official documents are left for studying the development

of the Nuo culture from 1949 to 1977, during which Nuo culture suffers devastating damages due to the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Therefore, I focus on the changes of Nuo culture from 1978 to the present, the post-Mao era when China has undergone tremendous social-economic transformations due to the reform and opening-up policy. In the following, I will successively illustrate how the Nuo culture in Pingxiang changes with these social-economic transformations in four respects, namely, the connotation, manifestation, transmission, and management.

The connotation of Nuo

In the very beginning, Nuo was a religious ritual to expel ghosts and pray for blessings in the ancient time when people could barely resist natural disasters and thus resorted to witchcraft (Tuo, 2007). As mentioned above, the official record of Nuo first appears in the Zhou Dynasty. According to this record, Nuo was a crucial national sacrificial ceremony by the imperial court. It then had spread very quickly from the imperial court to the ordinary people and become a common folk sacrificial ceremony. In the Song Dynasty, Nuo further secularized and developed towards an entertaining activity (Zhang, 2014). Since then, Nuo has stayed active in the folks by keeping its religious rituals and integrating with Chinese folklore.

However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Nuo culture, accompanied by other traditional cultures, was treated as superstition and suffered a devastating blow. Most historical Nuo temples were damaged, Nuo masks were burned, and Nuo dance was forbidden. In this period, Nuo culture was almost eradicated in China.

Fortunately, China ended the ten-year Cultural Revolution in 1976 and instead initiated the reform and opening-up policy and focused on economic development. Nuo also ushered in the dawn of growth as the government relaxed the restriction policies on religions.

The evolution of Nuo in Pingxiang can be reflected by the following story of the Huang family and the Wenquan Nuo temple in Pingxiang. The Huang family is a historical Nuo inheritor. According to the genealogical records, the Huang Family's ancestor in the late Tang Dynasty (618–907), Qiaogong, was a faithful believer of the Nuo gods. At that time, Qiaogong was the ministry of Works of the imperial court. Someday, he was accused of treason by some opponents. The emperor believed the false accusation and decided to kill Qiaogong's whole family. Fortunately, Qiaogong fled overnight with his family after hearing the secret information from a friend and his eldest son settled in Ji'an, a city of Jiangxi province near Pingxiang. In the early Ming Dynasty, the Huang family moved to the Wenquan village of Pingxiang and brought eight masks of the Nuo gods. For worshipping these masks, the family then built a small Nuo temple at the foot of Wenquan Mountain in 1436. After several renovations and reconstructions in 500 years, this temple flourished to its peak during the Guangxu period of the Qing Dynasty. The Nuo temple then covered an area of over 600 square meters and had 108 Nuo masks. The influence of the Wenquan Nuo temple was also expanded to a large extent. However, this historical Nuo temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), so were some Nuo masks and Nuo dance costumes. Other ancient Nuo masks have been stolen in recent years. After the end of the Revolution, the temple was restored with

the support of believers in 1986. Eleven new masks and several Nuo dance costumes were also bought during that time.⁵ According to the government's religious policy, the Wenquan Nuo temple was legally listed as a place for religious activity in 1998. The temple gained its fame and became known to more people after the national television of China CCTV filmed a documentary of Wenquan Nuo dance in 2006.

So far, it is not hard to notice that the religious function of Nuo is fading, even though many religious rituals are still active in the Wenquan village. The influence of Nuo belief, Nuo dance, and Nuo medicine is weakened. First, with the popularization of nine-year compulsory education, the younger generation learns more scientific and cultural knowledge in schools rather than Nuo beliefs from their seniors. Fewer people learn and know the Nuo religious rituals as the influence of lineage in rural society is weakened.⁶ Many young people have left the village and moved to the cities, making the Nuo rituals challenging to transmit. Second, fewer younger people watch the ritualized Nuo dance performance with the permeation of modern entertainments. In the past, the Nuo dance performance lasted all night during the Spring Festival, but now only a few programs are performed. Finally, the role of Nuo medicine is also weakened. In the past, the Nuo temple had the function of the divine by drawing lots. Believers who seek medicines draw the lots of medicine in the Nuo temple and find the prescriptions according to the lots in a prescription book. The medicine prescriptions are left by previous famous local doctors. With the popularization of modern medicine and the improvement of rural medical conditions, people now are less likely to seek prescriptions in Nuo temples except for fatal diseases.

However, the influence of Nuo as a culture becomes more robust. Take Nuo masks for example. They used to be placed in the temples or people's houses only for worship or put on by dancers for exorcism. However, now they are also exhibited in the museums as cultural relics without religious function. Furthermore, various museums of Nuo culture have been built in Pingxiang in recent years, including the official museums supported by the government, the private museums supported by enterprises or craftsmen at their own houses, and the exhibition halls built inside or near Nuo temples. For enhancing amusement, some of these museums also use advanced technologies. For instance, the Nuo Museum in Mashan town has built a virtual reality (VR) hall where visitors can watch the 3D documentary of Nuo culture.

Therefore, the connotation of Nuo has been changed under the transformation of contemporary China. The religious aspect of Nuo is weakened, but the cultural aspect of Nuo is enhanced. It has become an important folk culture in China. The cultural value of Nuo temples, Nuo masks, and Nuo dance are explored and accepted by more and more people and the government. Nuo culture now is not labeled as superstition but has been officially recognized as the "living fossil" of Chinese culture.

The manifestation of Nuo

As the connotation of Nuo changes, the manifestation of Nuo also changes in three aspects, including the external and internal renovations of Nuo temples, the innovation of Nuo dance performances, and the emergence of modern style Nuo masks.

(1) The external and internal renovations of Nuo temples

"There is one Nuo general every five miles,

and there is one Nuo temple every ten miles." This famous saying in Pingxiang reveals that there are numerous Nuo temples in Pingxiang and the worshipped gods in these Nuo temples are mostly generals (Chen, 1994). The three lord Nuo gods are three loyal and benevolent generals in the Tang Dynasty. Most of the existing ancient Nuo temples in Pingxiang are architectures from the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368 to 1912 A.D.) (Chen, 1994). The three temples in my field sites have an even longer history. The Chexiang Nuo temple is the oldest and was built in the Tang Dynasty (618 to 906 A.D.). Since the late 1980s, many Nuo temples seriously destroyed during the Cultural Revolution have been gradually rebuilt or restored. The funding for restoration or reconstruction is mainly from believers' donations. Only a few Nuo temples that have been listed as the Cultural Relics Protection Units can get funds for repair from the government. The large-scale restoration or reconstruction of Nuo temples provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the changes of Nuo Temples in the external and internal renovations. These changes are discussed in detail in terms of the investigated three temples: the Shidongkou Nuo Temple, the Chexiang Nuo Temple, and the Wenquan Nuo Temple.

The Shidongkou Nuo Temple is located in the Fengquan village of Shangli county, only 4 kilometers away from the urban area of Pingxiang. It was initially built in the Ming Dynasty, covering more than 3,000 square meters at that time. It was completely restored during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. However, only a part of the temple survived the Cultural Revolution. In 2008, the Provincial Department of Culture provided funds to restore the temple. Besides the Nuo temple,

several other buildings were also built by promoting Nuo culture, including a propaganda wall, a grand archway, a rain pavilion, a Nuo dance stage, and an exhibition hall. In 2011, the local government planned to establish a three-thousand-acre Nuo Culture Park as a leisure place for locals and urban residents. However, the progress is slow so far.

The Chexiang Nuo Temple is located in the Luxi county of Pingxiang. The old Nuo temple was built in the Tang Dynasty and was damaged during the Cultural Revolution. It was restored in 1987 and listed as a base for protecting and transmitting Chinese Nuo culture in 2011. This old temple remains its traditional outlook. The local people decorated the Nuo temple's exterior wall with modern white tiles like their houses several years ago. However, the government held that the Nuo temple was an ancient cultural relic and should not use modern decoration. Then, the traditional outlook was restored by covering the white tiles with a layer of red paint. In 2018, the local people built a new Nuo temple beside the old one. The old temple is still a typical religious place, whereas the new temple is a place for worship and entertainment. The styles of the new and old temples are different. The walls of the new temple are painted with Nuo masks and moral admonitions, which is rare to appear in traditional Nuo temples. There is also a basketball court nearby the temple, and the walls of the basketball court are painted with many iconic pictures of the Nuo masks. The entire district near the Nuo temple has been transformed into a leisure square. It has become a Nuo culture-themed leisure area after the village was planned to become a local intangible cultural heritage town in 2019. Although still being under construction, it has already

attracted some self-driving tourists.

The Wenquan Nuo temple is mainly funded by local villagers because it is not a Provincial Cultural Relics Protection Unit and does not have financial support from the government. Therefore, the locals have much freedom to change the Nuo temple. Through the fieldwork from August 2018 to February 2019, I find that the Wenquan Nuo temple changes a lot (Figure 1). First, in terms of the exterior decoration,

the cement incense burners were replaced with new iron ones. A golden dragon, representing majesty and power, was also installed in front of the temple since the local people thought the gorgeous facade was significant. A national flag was also installed, which was rare to see in a religious place. As told by a 78-year-old villager, the reason is that young people believe religions should not conflict with patriotism. Second, in terms of the interior decoration, the locals have

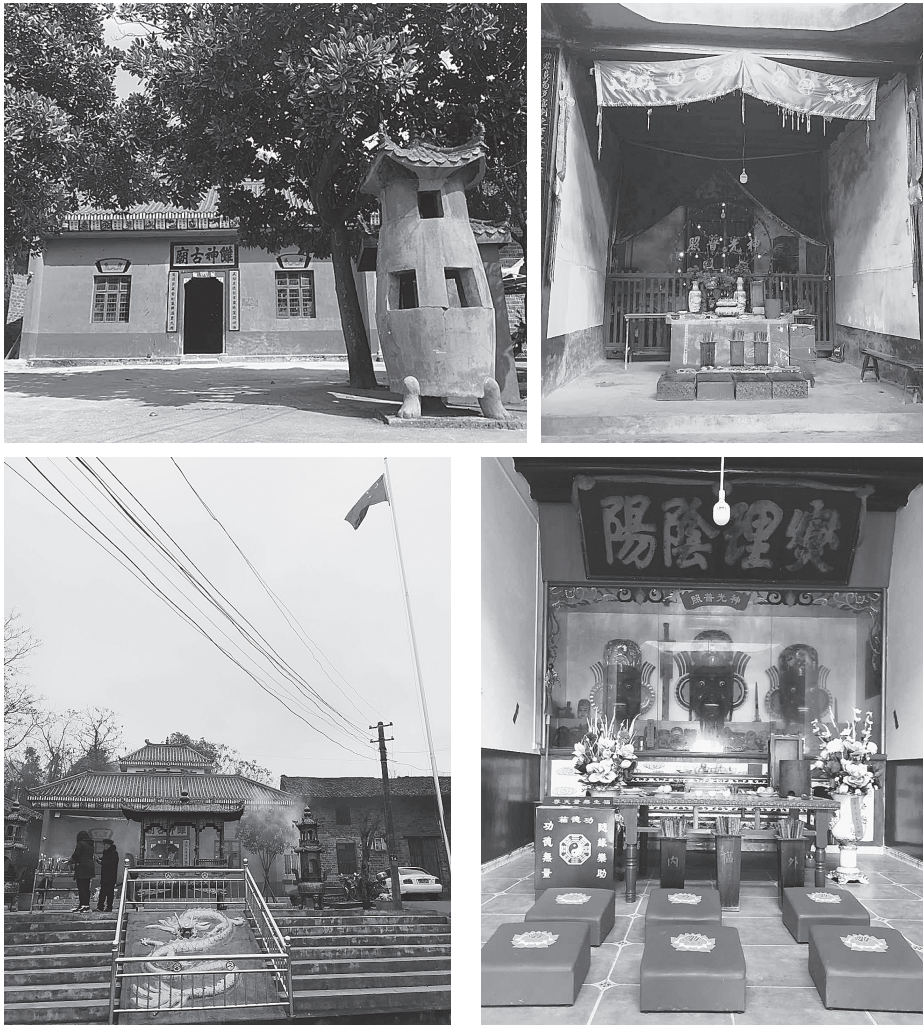


Figure 1. The Wenquan Nuo Temple

(Notes: the two pictures above show the temple in August 2018 and the two pictures below show the temple in February 2019; source: taken by the author in August 2018 and February 2019)

replaced the shrine cabinet, masks, and other facilities because they think that the newer, the better. The cement floor has been replaced by a porcelain tile floor. The walls and ceilings have also been repainted.

(2) The innovation of Nuo dance performances

Nuo dance originates from the ancient rituals of witchcraft and its primary function is to drive away ghosts and pray for good harvests (Qu & Qian, 2006). Nevertheless, since Nuo spreads to rural areas, Nuo dance has become a vital entertainment that pleases gods and people. As for the religious Nuo dance in rural areas, the spaces of ritual and art performance are usually overlapped (Zeng, 2018). Performing Nuo dance is still an essential custom, but some changes occur in modern society in Pingxiang. In the past, the ritualized Nuo dance must follow strict rules and be only performed during the Spring Festival and on the Nuo gods' birthdays. Nuo dancers were usually the farmers in the village and unpaid. They must be male, even when there were female roles in some scripts. As a religious ritual, the Nuo dance featured many

movements and very few lines.

However, some of these restrictions were broken when Nuo dance troupes began to participate in various commercial performances in the 1990s. Nuo dance troupes and dancers can usually make money from commercial performances. For example, they can earn 1080 or 1888 yuan from a performance in the opening ceremony of factories and 1000 yuan from being recorded by some media outlets. Attracted by the profits, more and more Nuo dance troupes take commercial performances. The commercial Nuo dance market has also become increasingly competitive. Thus, all troupes try to get more recognition by showing their uniqueness and innovation.

For instance, the Chexiang Nuo dance troupe obtained a license for commercial performance issued by the Jiangxi Provincial Department of Culture in 1991 (Figure 2). However, the local government mandates that they should not innovate but keep the Nuo dance's original flavor. To follow the government's order and gain an edge in the commercial performance market, the Chexiang Nuo dance troupe has

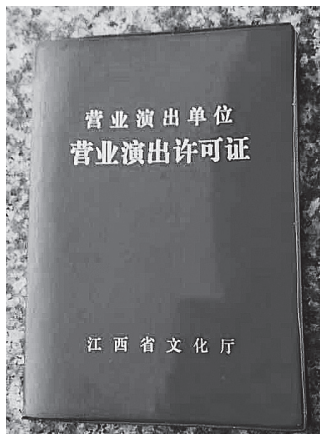


Figure 2. The Chexiang Nuo dance troupe

(Notes: the left picture is a license for commercial performance, the right one shows Nuo dance with stilts; source: provided by the village party secretary of Chexiang, Mr. Li.)

created two Nuo dance sets. One preserves the original flavor and the other shows innovations. This arrangement has made several innovations, including creating new scripts, adding modern music into Nuo dance, and combining Nuo dance with stilts. The head of the Chexiang village emphasizes that the Nuo dance on stage should not be the same as the dance for religious rituals. Otherwise, people would not be willing to watch. For the urban people who do not have Nuo beliefs and cultural backgrounds, the primitive Nuo dance is far from their aesthetics. Thus, innovations are necessary to survive in the commercial performance market. Nevertheless, a few successors have made some innovations that cater to market demands and result in the loss of Nuo dance's original flavor.

(3) The emergence of modern-style Nuo masks

Nuo masks are regarded as essential tools

endowed with magical power in Nuo villages. By wearing them, people believe that they can convey secular information to the gods. Nuo masks are generally used for worship or as props for performing Nuo dance (Figure 3). There are four categories of Nuo masks in Pingxiang: natural gods, exorcism gods, auspicious gods, and ghosts (Ye, 2015). Making Nuo masks for rituals must follow certain customs and rules. First, before making a Nuo mask, craftsmen should pray for the Nuo gods' blessing by lighting candles, burning paper, and speaking spells. After the mask is finished, they apply chicken blood to the mask's eyes and put a small wooden box behind the mask with rice, tea, and herbs. Only in this way can the Nuo mask have life and soul. Second, they should abide by this industry's recognized standard, such as using the "Luban size" and five specific colors, corresponding to the concept of "five



Figure 3. Traditional Nuo masks

(Source: taken by the author in August 2018.)

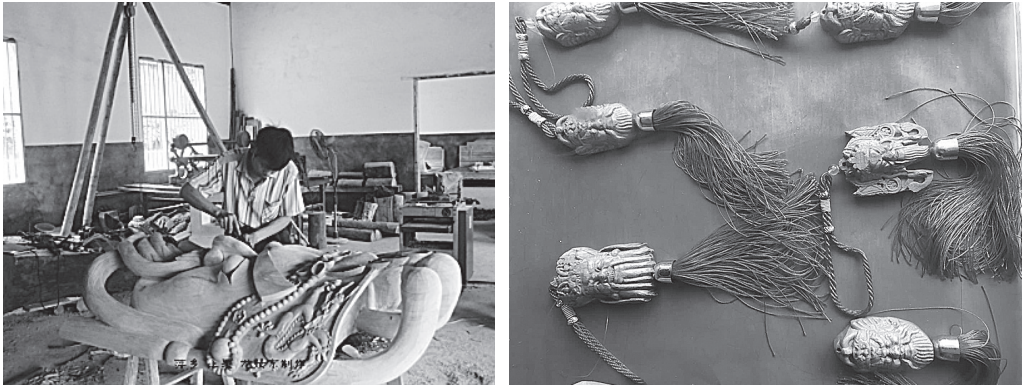


Figure 4. Modern-style Nuo masks

(Source: provided by the craftsmen Mr.Long (the left one) and taken by the author in 2019(the right one).)

elements" in the Taoism theory. Besides, they should also follow customs and rules in different rural areas. For instance, some villages require that the new mask look the same as the old one. Third, there are some special requirements in raw materials for Nuo masks. For example, they only use camphor woods as the raw materials because camphor trees are "sacred trees" in the view of locals. The beard of some crucial Nuo gods should be made of the older people's hair.

In contrast, contemporary Nuo masks used for decoration and collection are free of these rigid regulations. Craftsmen have enough room for innovations. First, they change the outlook of Nuo masks and make them in line with modern aesthetics. For example, Mr. Peng makes Nuo masks as replicas of antiques for businessmen or overseas Chinese. He uses the original color of the wood rather than the traditional five colors, adds more decorations, and makes more friendly Nuo faces. Second, they also learn from each other for innovation and increase the variety of Nuo masks. For instance, Mr. Long has made 600 masks for museums. His masks highlight the characteristics of Pingxiang Nuo masks and incorporate the exaggerated element of Guizhou masks. Third, the Nuo masks in Pingxiang also

change in size and raw materials, such as large masks used for decoration on ancient buildings, small Nuo masks pendants, and jade Nuo masks (Figure 4).

The transmission of Nuo

Cultural transmission is a social reproduction process for communicating and acquiring the culture's technological knowledge, behavior patterns, and cosmological beliefs (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza, 1986). During the process, cultural elements are passed onto and taught to individuals and groups, including attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavioral scripts (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2011). The transmission of Nuo in Pingxiang was mainly handed down between men within the family or lineage, especially between fathers and sons. There are three main changes in the transmission of Nuo: the emergence of female Nuo dancers, the spread of Nuo dance into schools, and the coexistence of traditional and modern craftsmen.

(1) The emergence of female dancers

In the past, Nuo dancers must be male due to several reasons. First, most roles of Nuo dance are men with weapons. Women cannot carry the heavy Nuo masks and weapons for a long

time and complete many martial art movements required by Nuo dance. Second, according to Confucianism's ethical norms, married women should not show up quite often in the lineage or have any physical contact with other men. Third, women were considered unclean. For a long time, they were not allowed to enter Nuo temples or participate in any Nuo religious rituals.

However, more and more women have joined Nuo dance troupes and transmitted Nuo dance in the past decades. The Chexiang Nuo Temple even has set up a female Nuo dance troupe with seven women. The reason is that the concept of gender equality has been accepted in rural areas. Young and middle-aged men cannot perform Nuo dance regularly because they do not have time or work outside. Although women are allowed to perform Nuo dance, there are still some limitations. First, only the middle-aged and older women who end the menstruation can become Nuo dancers. The local people still believe that young girls are unclean and would desecrate the Nuo gods.

Second, female dancers cannot participate in Nuo rituals but only perform commercial Nuo dance. For example, the Chexiang female Nuo dance troupe participated in the Spring Festival Gala of Jiangxi Province in 2019.

(2) The spread of Nuo dance into schools

Some schools in Pingxiang have started to teach Nuo dance, responding to the "folk culture entering campuses" proposal by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Among them, F Elementary School and N Secondary School were regarded as "the Teaching Bases of Chinese Nuo Culture." The funding sources vary across schools. N Secondary School receives the government's funding with a total of 5,000 yuan every year. The school provides teaching places, whereas the Nuo lineage dispatches Nuo dancers as teachers. N Secondary School has launched Nuo dance teaching for more than ten years and trained thousands of juvenile dancers. In contrast, the W Elementary School and M Elementary School are self-funded or partly funded by NGOs. Take the



Figure 5. The juvenile Nuo dance troupe of M Elementary School
(Source: provided by M Elementary School in 2019.)

M Elementary School for example. It set up a Nuo dance troupe with the assistance of a local voluntary association in Pingxiang in September 2016 (Figure 5). The association pays for Nuo masks and costumes, the Nuo lineage provides a teacher, and the school offers classrooms and two teacher assistants.

Although the funding sources might vary, the promotion of Nuo dance in Pingxiang's schools has a lot in common. First, dance teaching is mainly conducted in elementary and secondary schools since students are flexible and face less pressure in study and examination. Second, most dance teachers are farmers from the local Nuo lineage. They teach for free with only free lunch provided by schools. Third, the training time is mainly in physical education classes or at weekends ensuring that the dance teaching does not affect the schools' teaching plan. Finally, there are no textbooks for dance teaching. The teaching contents are some basic movements and making up several plays every year. The teaching aims to perform Nuo dance inside and outside the schools for critical occasions, such as the New Year Festival and the National Day.

(3) The coexistence of traditional and modern craftsmen

The transmission of traditional Nuo mask-making was only among the men within the family. Mr. Lai, a recognized national holder of Nuo mask-making, is the 75th-generation successor of the Nuo mask-making technique in his family. He imparts Nuo mask-making techniques to his two sons, following the ancestor's rules that the transmission should be limited to the men in the Lai family. According to Mr. Lai, the craftsmen of Nuo mask-making were called "Chushi" in the past, referring to those who had both virtue and talent but chose

to live in seclusion rather than as officials. Traditional Nuo mask-making craftsmen should follow many rules. They need both excellent skills and lots of tacit knowledge transmitted in the family. For instance, only bamboo nails and glue rather than iron nails can be used in production. The female masks are usually decorated with phoenixes, while the male masks are decorated with dragons. The official hats of the Tang and Song Dynasties are different and should not be confused. The transmission of the Nuo mask-making relies on both oral transmission and ancient texts. However, most ancient texts for Nuo mask-making are not public. For instance, the Lai family hands down an ancient book that has 1240 pictures of Nuo masks with a detailed introduction of the appearances, colors, and stories. He keeps it private for family transmission.

Although traditional Nuo mask-making is still transmitted within families, the increased demand for Nuo masks from museums, schools, and collectors has attracted many modern craftsmen who used to be carpenters or painters. Thus, traditional and modern craftsmen coexist in the market. Traditional craftsmen acquire their techniques inside the family and make all-handmade masks following the standards of ancient texts. They respect tradition regarding materials, size, and color. However, the modern craftsmen without ancient texts have more freedom in innovations. They usually seek assistance from machines. They are entirely craftsmen and willing to pass down their techniques to apprentices regardless of their gender and family background.

The management of Nuo culture

Nuo culture is passed down based on Nuo temples. Nuo temples are autonomously

managed by Nuo Temple Committees, consisting of male volunteers with high reputations among the villagers. The committee manages cultural relics, organizes ritual activities and Nuo dance performances, and finances. The Nuo Temple Committee also hires a guard responsible for daily cleanup and the preparation of sacrifices like candles, wine, and meat. In the past, the temple's guards lived on the donated food from villagers. In recent years, they get a minimum wage of 400 yuan to 1000 yuan every month. The fund of most Nuo temples is still raised from the donation of local people and rural enterprises' owners or performing Nuo dance. It is often used for renovating the temple and buying Nuo masks, dance props, and costumes. A few Nuo temple managers who are awarded recognized holders of Nuo culture can get some money from the government due to their contribution to promoting Nuo culture.

As some ancient Nuo temples are listed as cultural heritage, they are no longer owned by lineages. In theory, they are now the state property, but the ownership of some Nuo temples is not evident in the actual operation. Thus, the management of Nuo temples has also changed. Take Chexiang Nuo temple as an example. All members of the Nuo Temple Committee were from the Nuo lineage in the past. Now, local officials from the County Cultural Bureau have also joined the committee. The committee still has a high degree of autonomy. Local officials do not interfere with Nuo religious rituals but promote Nuo culture to help get funds and boost local tourism. For instance, to attract tourists, the government would ask the villagers to change the name of a Nuo god's birthday banquet into a Nuo culture festival. Besides promoting Nuo culture, the government also supervises Nuo affairs and

ensures that Nuo activities are in line with laws, the state ideology, and the latest government policies. For instance, the government has propagated regulations on religious affairs and core socialist values on the wall of Nuo temples. The government has also demanded the temple install surveillance systems at their own expense in case of being stolen. The locals usually would do as asked by the government. However, sometimes, they are reluctant to cooperate, especially when the government requires them to hand out ancient Nuo masks or Nuo dance scripts regarded as family heirlooms.

4. The reason for the change of Nuo culture

The change of Nuo culture in contemporary China can be explained by several reasons, including internal and external factors. The internal factor is that Nuo culture itself is secular, compatible, and flexible. The external factors include economic, political, and cultural aspects. First, the marketization of the economy changes the economic environment in which Nuo culture lives. Second, the grant of religious freedom gives more room for the development of Nuo culture, but the strengthened supervision brings more rules. Finally, the increased attention to culture development stimulates the development and promotion of Nuo culture.

A secular culture with compatibility and flexibility

Nuo is a secular culture. It has been spreading for thousands of years due to its tenacious vitality and cohesion (Tuo, 2007). Compared with Buddhist temples and Taoist temples built in the mountains far from the secular society, most Nuo temples are adjacent to villagers' houses (Ye, 2015). Nuo temples are not only the place for worship and religious rituals but

also for entertainment activities (Chen, 1994). Most Nuo gods are well-known historical figures. Villagers regard Nuo gods as their local protectors. The rural society is stable and closed and ruled by rituals (Fei, 2011). It provides a favorable social environment for the transmission of Nuo. As a result, Nuo has been deeply rooted in secular society and integrated into the daily life, customs, and traditions of locals.

Furthermore, Nuo is compatible and flexible. Nuo religion has no strict and uniform doctrine, unlike the world's major religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Nuo is Polytheistic and keeps accepting gods from other religions, like Taoism, Buddhism, and even Islam and Catholicism (Deng & Quan, 1996). Gods from other religions can also be enshrined in the Nuo temples without conflict, meeting people's different needs. The fate of Nuo has long been intimately bound up with the state ideology (Li, 2015). Due to its compatibility and flexibility, Nuo was able to survive, no matter which religions the ruling class advocated or suppressed in feudal society.

Therefore, it is natural that Nuo culture would change with socio-economic transformation in contemporary China. For instance, it has changed from a pure religion into a religious culture. Although Nuo still keeps its religious function, the cultural aspect of Nuo has become more prominent. The ritualized Nuo dance can be adapted into commercial Nuo dance performances. Traditional Nuo masks that follow rigid rules coexist with creative modern Nuo mask crafts. Hence, the secularity, compatibility, flexibility of Nuo culture are crucial for its change in contemporary China.

The marketization of the economy

Since the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the focus of China has been shifted from "class struggle" to "economic development". China has also given up the planned economy and started to develop a socialist market economy. As the market stimulates economic vitality, thousands of farmers who leech on the land flood into cities and work for factories, known as "migrant workers". According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the total number of migrant workers amounts to 285.60 million in 2020, accounting for over half of the rural population.⁷ The decrease of the rural population, especially the young male laborers, results in the change of transmission of Nuo dance. This is why Nuo villages start to transmit Nuo dance among women and students.

Meanwhile, farmers' incomes also increase rapidly. The per capita disposable income of farmers increases over 100 times, from 134 yuan in 1978 to 17131 yuan in 2020.⁸ Similarly, the annual income of Pingxiang's farmers reaches 19756 yuan in 2019.⁹ Also, the government has launched a "New Socialist Rural Construction" campaign since 2005. The primary goal of this campaign is to integrate the nation's rural and urban economic society, improve the rural environment, enrich farmers' spiritual and cultural life, and reduce poverty. Thus, the government puts great efforts into improving rural infrastructures and promoting rural tourism. Pingxiang planned to invest around 301.5 million yuan and build 1046 ecologically livable new rural construction sites in 2019, aiming to benefit 166,500 farmers from 461 villages.¹⁰ Therefore, most Nuo temples in Pingxiang are restored and renovated partly because villages have enough money and the government supports them. The government

also wants to combine Nuo culture into rural revitalization. Thus, some traditional Nuo villages have changed from under-developed villages to the new countryside with intangible cultural heritage. Alongside the development of Nuo culture tourism, Nuo dance is changed into commercial performances, and some innovations are made to meet market demands. A group of modern craftsmen also join Nuo mask-making industry and create various Nuo mask crafts.

The grant of religious freedom but strengthened supervision on religious activities

Nuo was labeled as feudal superstition since the 1950s. It was banned until the 1980s when the government empowered people with the freedom of religion. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government restored and implemented the policy on freedom of religious belief. On July 7, 2004, the *Regulations on Religious Affairs* were passed at the 57th executive meeting of the State Council.¹¹ Article 2 stipulates that Chinese citizens have the freedom of religion. Therefore, the Nuo culture has gradually recovered from the Cultural Revolution. As many Nuo rituals come from Taoism, Nuo has been classified into Taoism and officially approved by the government. However, Article 18 also stipulates that the government should strengthen the management of religion to ensure the smooth progress of religious activities by the law. Thus, the government would delegate officials to the Nuo Temple Committee and supervise Nuo temples and Nuo activities. Furthermore, the government stipulates that religious propaganda is not allowed to enter the national education system. As most children go to schools for education, few of them have a chance to learn Nuo. This means that Nuo dance must be taught in schools

as a folk culture rather than a religion.

The increased attention to culture development

With the development of the economy, more and more attention are paid to culture development. The government has successively introduced several cultural policies for protecting tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

In 1982, China issued *the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics*. This law stipulates that "ancient architectural structures, valuable works of art and handicraft, important documents dating from various historical periods, manuscripts, books, and materials.....are under protection". Therefore, many Nuo temples destroyed during the Cultural Revolution were rebuilt or restored. Some of them have been listed as Cultural Relics Protection Units due to their value of relics. For instance, the Xiaojian Nuo Temple and Shidongkou Nuo Temple in Shangli county were listed as the Provincial-level Cultural Relics Protection Units in 2001 and 2004, respectively. Therefore, these Nuo temples do not belong to any families or villages. They are now national assets.

Furthermore, China officially ratified *the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2004. In line with the central government's move, the local governments start to draft intangible cultural heritage lists, recognize intangible cultural heritage holders, and set up intangible cultural heritage museums. Also, China provided legal protection for intangible cultural heritage in China by promulgating the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China* in 2011. In particular, the Jiangxi Provincial Department of Culture advocated establishing "20 intangible cultural

heritage towns" to alleviate poverty in rural areas through cultural tourism. Meanwhile, it also initiated the revitalization plan of traditional crafts in Jiangxi to carry forward craftsmanship.¹²

Therefore, Nuo culture has become a crucial intangible heritage in Pingxiang, highly valued and promoted by the government. In 2006, the Nuo mask-making technique of Pingxiang was listed in the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Nuo dance of Pingxiang was recognized as the Chinese National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2021. Pingxiang has four provincial-level recognized holders of Nuo culture: two holders of Nuo mask-making techniques and two holders of Nuo dance. Pingxiang also has established some bases for Nuo mask-making and Nuo dance. Also, to promote Nuo culture, the government has encouraged Nuo dance troupes to perform outside the lineage. Meanwhile, the Nuo villages combine Nuo culture with rural tourism to attract tourists and generate income.

Moreover, Chinese traditional culture has received unprecedented attention under the Xi Jinping administration. President Xi emphasizes the importance of the Chinese traditional culture in strengthening our nation's confidence and cohesion several times. In 2014, the Education Ministry proposed integrating the Chinese excellent traditional culture into schools' curriculum. Local schools also responded to this proposal actively. Since then, Nuo dance has been highly valued and introduced into some elementary and secondary schools in Pingxiang.

5. Conclusion

The Nuo culture of Pingxiang has changed under the rapid transformation in contemporary

society. First, the influence of Nuo as a religion has been weakened, but its influence as a culture has been strengthened. While the religious function of Nuo is not as popular as before, it still has a solid foundation among the elderly in rural areas. For other people, especially those living in the cities, Nuo is no longer a superstition but an intangible cultural heritage. Second, Nuo culture was rooted in rural communities in the past but now goes toward schools and museums. In these places, Nuo is treated as a traditional culture rather than a religion. Third, the transmission of Nuo culture faces the crisis of lack of successors. In dealing with it, Nuo villages have started to transmit Nuo dance among women and students. Nevertheless, some essential rules for rituals remain unchanged. Besides, many craftsmen have also joined the Nuo mask-making industry and cultivated apprentices outside the family. Finally, the management of Nuo culture has also changed with more involvement of the government.

These changes of Nuo culture can be explained by internal and external factors. The internal factor is that Nuo is a secular religious culture with computability and flexibility. Nuo culture will change with socio-economic transformation naturally. The external factors include economic, political, and cultural aspects. First, the marketization of the economy changes the economic environment in which Nuo culture lives. Second, the grant of religious freedom gives Nuo more room for development, whereas the strengthened supervision also brings new rules. Finally, the increased attention to culture development stimulates the development and promotion of Nuo culture. The local government now plays a more prominent role in supervising and promoting the development of Nuo culture.

Meanwhile, the locals cooperate with the government, hoping that Nuo can help them gain recognition and increase their income.

From the case study of Nuo culture, it is not hard to notice that the focus of cultural heritage development in China has shifted from tangible cultural heritages (Nuo temples) to intangible cultural ones (Nuo dance and Nuo mask-making techniques), which is in line with the changing notion of cultural heritage in the literature (Butler, 2006). Meanwhile, the role of the Chinese government in cultural heritage development is important, such as granting religious freedom, recognizing Nuo as cultural heritage, and issuing laws and policies relating to cultural heritage. However, the government is primarily driven by economic motivations and attempts to use industrial policies for developing cultural heritage and promote economic expansion, planning Nuo cultural squares and promoting Nuo cultural tourism, for instance. The cultural aspect of cultural heritage is much dependent on villagers' autonomy. The government does not interfere much with the specific development and transmission of Nuo culture as long as it fits with the main national ideology reflected by laws and regulations. Such a development pattern led by the government is common in the development of cultural heritage in China (Fu & Chen, 2010). Furthermore, the change of Nuo culture also provides a solution for preserving traditions and meeting the need for modernization, i.e., differentiating traditional Nuo from modern Nuo culture. Both traditional and modern Nuo coexists without conflict. This might be a win-win solution for the development and protection of other similar cultural heritages in China.

This study is subject to several limitations, which point to the direction of future research. First, this paper focuses on the changes of

Nuo culture and the reasons for these changes. However, it does not consider the possible problems or conflicts in the transformation of Nuo culture. For instance, the villagers and the government might have conflicting interests. Traditional and modern craftsmen might compete with each other. Second, this paper does not investigate enough small temples and small Nuo dance troupes in danger of disappearance. Therefore, I plan to explore the problems related to the development of Nuo culture in Pingxiang and pay particular attention to three critical relationships, the relationships between government and villagers, transmission and innovation, and economic benefits and religion. In doing this, I will investigate more ordinary Nuo temples, Nuo dance troupes, and Nuo mask-making workshops to show the whole picture of Nuo culture in Pingxiang.

Notes

- ¹ Under the slogan of “clearing away the evil habits of the old society” during the Cultural Revolution, lots of the religious temples and statues were destroyed. The Nuo in Pingxiang was not spared. Fortunately, the local people preserved some old temples, masks, costumes, and scriptures. They turned some Nuo temples into schools or factories and hid the masks, costumes, and books in their houses or in the mountains.
- ² “Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either Intangible or Tangible Cultural Heritage” (ICOMOS, 2002). “Tangible cultural heritage includes the built environment,

natural environment and artefacts, whereas intangible cultural heritage refers to the customs, practices, artistic expressions and values of a community” (Iossifova, 2014).

³ Some scholars believe that cultural heritages become important in China because the government attempts to foster a cultural and national identity (Svensson, 2016) .

⁴ Source: the online database of Chinese religious opera.

http://124.33.215.236/cnsaigisaienchigi/cn_query_open.php. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

⁵ The history of the Wenqun Nuo temple is based on the public information from the Wenqun Nuo Temple Management Committee and the *Brief introduction of the places for religious activities in Pingxiang* published by the Pingxiang Religious Affairs Administration (2005).

⁶ According to Barfield (2009), lineages are unilineal descent groups organized on the basis of common descent from a known ancestor. Freedman (1966) is the first person who studies lineage communities as a regional phenomenon in China and establishes the Chinese lineage theory. Johnson (1983) argues that the lineage consists of the ancestral hall, genealogy, and corporate property. Zhou (2003) points out there are five criteria for judging whether it is a lineage or not, including a blood relationship based on patrilineal descent; living together in a specific area; having common properties; having a regular ancestor worship ceremony; having their own lineage concept, lineage rules and laws. Village is a geographical concept, while lineage is a concept concerning social relations, especially, a blood relationship.

⁷ Source: the National Bureau of Statistics. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202102/t20210227_1814154.html. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

⁸ Ditto.

⁹ Source: the Pingxiang Bureau of statistics. http://tjj.pingxiang.gov.cn/art/2020/4/14/art_1849_397019.html. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

¹⁰ Source: the Pingxiang Municipal Government. http://xxgk.pingxiang.gov.cn/szbxgk/snyj/gzdt/zwdt/201906/t20190618_1835045.htm. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

¹¹ Source: <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-religious-affairs>. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

¹² Source: the People's Government of Jiangxi Province. Last visit date: March 31, 2021.

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