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**ENHANCING CULTURAL HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING
AMONG HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
IN GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION
THROUGH PARTICIPATING IN DALANG
DANCE PERFORMANCES**



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2025



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DALANG DANCE PERFORMANCES

WEIZIXIN

DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO QUALIFY FOR
A MASTERS OF ARTS (RESEARCH MODE)

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of Dalang Dance, an intangible cultural heritage of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in strengthening cultural identity and safeguarding practices within secondary education. The study aims to understand how Dalang Dance can be effectively preserved and promoted among high school students by examining its cultural significance, identifying barriers to transmission, and exploring strategies for increasing awareness, appreciation, and participation. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining survey responses from 103 students with interviews involving four teachers and four cultural experts, alongside four direct observations of Dalang Dance performances. Findings reveal that Dalang Dance embodies Zhuang cultural identity through its agricultural symbolism, ritual functions, and collective aesthetic, while also serving as a medium of intergenerational learning and community cohesion. However, the research highlights a critical gap in awareness and perception: many students reported limited familiarity with Dalang Dance, a weak sense of cultural connection to the Zhuang heritage, and a preference for modern entertainment forms. Teachers similarly faced challenges due to insufficient training, scarce resources, and difficulties in contextualizing the dance for contemporary learners. These gaps in awareness and perception represent significant barriers to safeguarding efforts, as they reduce the capacity of Dalang Dance to function as a living tradition. At the same time, observations indicate that when students and teachers are exposed to the dance in festival or school contexts, their perceptions shift positively, with increased interest, curiosity, and cultural pride. This underscores the importance of meaningful exposure and guided engagement in strengthening safeguarding awareness. To address these challenges, the study proposes integrating Dalang Dance into school curricula, enhancing teacher training, leveraging digital platforms, establishing dance clubs, organizing cultural festivals, and fostering collaboration with community experts. These strategies aim not only to preserve Dalang Dance but also to transform student and teacher perceptions, positioning the dance as both a cultural marker and an educational resource for sustaining Zhuang identity in a rapidly modernizing society.





MEMPERKASAKAN PEMELIHARAAN WARISAN BUDAYA DALAM KALANGAN GURU DAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH MENENGAH DI WILAYAH AUTONOMI GUANGXI ZHUANG MELALUI PENYERTAAN DALAM PERSEMBAHAN TARI DALANG

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini meneliti peranan Tarian Dalang, salah satu warisan budaya tidak ketara di Wilayah Autonomi Zhuang Guangxi, dalam memperkukuh identiti budaya serta usaha pemeliharannya dalam konteks pendidikan menengah. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana Tarian Dalang dapat dipelihara dan dipromosikan secara berkesan dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah menengah dengan menilai makna budayanya, mengenal pasti halangan terhadap proses transmisinya, serta meneroka strategi bagi meningkatkan kesedaran, penghargaan, dan penglibatan aktif pelajar serta guru. Pendekatan kaedah campuran digunakan, melibatkan soal selidik terhadap 103 pelajar, temu bual bersama empat orang guru dan empat pakar budaya, serta pemerhatian langsung terhadap empat persembahan Tarian Dalang. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa Tarian Dalang merangkumi identiti budaya Zhuang melalui simbolisme agraria, fungsi ritual, serta ekspresi kolektifnya, di samping berfungsi sebagai medium pembelajaran antara generasi dan pemersatu komuniti. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini mendedahkan wujudnya jurang besar dari segi kesedaran dan persepsi: ramai pelajar melaporkan kurangnya pendedahan terhadap Tarian Dalang, lemahnya keterikatan budaya dengan etnik Zhuang, serta kecenderungan kepada hiburan moden. Guru pula berdepan cabaran seperti kekurangan latihan, keterbatasan sumber, dan kesukaran untuk mengaitkan tarian ini dengan konteks pembelajaran kontemporari. Jurang dalam kesedaran dan persepsi ini menjejaskan keberkesanan usaha pemeliharaan, kerana ia mengurangkan kapasiti Tarian Dalang untuk berfungsi sebagai tradisi yang hidup. Namun, pemerhatian menunjukkan bahawa apabila pelajar dan guru didedahkan kepada Tarian Dalang melalui festival atau program sekolah, persepsi mereka berubah secara positif dengan peningkatan minat, rasa ingin tahu, dan kebanggaan budaya. Hal ini menegaskan kepentingan pendedahan yang bermakna dan bimbingan terarah dalam memperkukuh kesedaran pemeliharaan. Bagi menangani cabaran ini, kajian mencadangkan pengintegrasian Tarian Dalang ke dalam kurikulum sekolah, peningkatan latihan guru, penggunaan platform digital, penubuhan kelab tarian, penganjuran festival budaya, serta kerjasama dengan pakar komuniti. Strategi ini bukan sahaja dapat memelihara Tarian Dalang, tetapi juga mengubah persepsi pelajar dan guru, menjadikan tarian ini sebagai penanda budaya dan sumber pendidikan untuk kelangsungan identiti Zhuang dalam era moden.





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APPENDICES

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ICH	Intangible Cultural Heritage
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization





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- A Zhuang Intangible Cultural Heritage
- B Questionnaire
- C Interview Guide For Cultural Experts
- D Interview Guide For Dance Teachers
- E Observation Guide





CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Introduction

In the rich tapestry of cultural heritage, the Dalang Dance is a vibrant thread woven deeply into the cultural fabric of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. As an intangible cultural heritage, the Dalang Dance embodies centuries of tradition, symbolism, and communal identity, serving as a reservoir of cultural memory and artistic expression. In the face of modernity and globalization, preserving and promoting such cultural treasures becomes imperative, especially in education, where the seeds of awareness and appreciation are sown. This thesis examines the intricate relationship between the Dalang Dance and the cultural heritage preservation of high school students and teachers in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. With a focused lens, this study aims to understand how Dalang Dance can be effectively preserved and promoted within high school educational settings by exploring its role in portraying and reinforcing Zhuang cultural identity, identifying and addressing challenges to its practice, and facilitating active participation among students and





teachers while balancing traditional values with modernisation. Through a comprehensive examination of these elements, this research attempts to illuminate pathways toward enhancing cultural heritage safeguarding and fostering a deeper connection with the intangible treasures of Guangxi's cultural heritage. This introductory chapter sets the stage for the subsequent exploration, outlining the objectives, significance, and theoretical framework that underlie this study.

1.2 Backgrounds

Preserving cultural heritage is crucial for maintaining historical awareness, fostering cultural pride, supporting tourism, and enhancing community resilience—especially in rural areas. Communities that preserve their cultural legacy tend to collaborate with local governments to develop their villages rather than abandoning traditions due to urbanisation pressures (Trcek, 2022; Ghahramani et al., 2020; Harbiankova et al., 2023).

Among the many cultural expressions, dance represents both tradition and heritage. Framing dance as a cultural heritage—rather than a mere tradition—can sustain its relevance in everyday life and challenge stereotypes that associate traditional ethnic practices with backwardness (McConnell, 2022). Beyond general benefits such as tourism and pride, dance plays a significant role in shaping national identity in pluralistic societies. This contribution aligns with Cultural Identity Theory (Collier & Thomas, 1988), which considers cultural expression, such as dance, a vital medium through which communities construct, express, and reinforce their collective identities.





However, the preservation of dance traditions often faces substantial challenges. Philosophical perspectives regard dance as an ephemeral art form, one that is only transmissible from body to body (Wittrock, 2020; Whatley, 2022). Additionally, dancers often face negative societal perceptions, further hindering the intergenerational transmission of dance heritage (Khan, 2022).

In China, the majority Han ethnic group comprises 91.11% of the population, while 55 officially recognized minority groups make up the remaining 8.89% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). The Zhuang people, the largest minority group with 16.93 million members, predominantly reside in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, where they constitute over 31% of the local population (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Sato & Wang, 2021).



The Zhuang community has a distinct belief system and artistic culture. They adhere to the Shigong religion and possess rich cultural assets, including Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art, bronze drums, and brocade weaving (Hou et al., 2022). One of their key intangible cultural assets is the Dalang Dance, typically performed at festivals such as the great festival of the 3rd Day of the 3rd Month of the Lunar Calendar (*Sam Nyied Sam Fwen*) (Ruiyun & Mahamed, 2022).



Figure 1.1*Location of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China*

Image source: Shun and Boonsrianun, 2023

Dalang Dance involves rhythmic movements using wooden pestles and troughs—traditionally used for threshing and pounding rice (Hongyu, 2023). These performances are commonly seen at festivals, weddings, and public celebrations, highlighting cultural identity and social cohesion. The dance originated from agricultural practices and later evolved into a symbolic and spiritual activity through which the Zhuang people expressed gratitude, communicated with deities, and celebrated communal life (Yongshun, 2022; Ziji, 2022; Ming, 2014).

Recognized at various governmental levels between 2007 and 2010, the Dalang Dance holds official status as an intangible cultural heritage of Guangxi (Li-Yun, 2015). However, it faces practical barriers: it requires large physical spaces and equipment, features complex choreography, and is largely absent from formal school curricula (Xin et al., 2023; Yongshun, 2022). Many Zhuang teachers

are unfamiliar with the dance; students typically encounter it only through extracurricular events. Meanwhile, raising awareness among the younger generation is crucial. High school students are well-positioned to inherit dance traditions, and their collaboration with teachers facilitates the cross-generational transmission of these traditions and cultural recognition.

Figure 1.2

Zhuang ethnic Dancing, the Dalang dance at the Frost's Descent Festival



Photo source: Hongyu, 2023

Given the significance of Dalang Dance within Zhuang cultural life and the importance of youth engagement, it is essential to assess the current levels of awareness and participation among the school community in Guangxi. Additionally, identifying the perceived benefits of dance heritage preservation provides insights into how education can serve as a mechanism for safeguarding intangible culture. These dimensions—collective identity construction, community-based participation, and the symbolic meaning of cultural expression—are analyzed through the lens of Cultural Identity Theory.



While existing research has focused heavily on digital preservation strategies (Reshma et al., 2023), a gap remains in understanding how human agents—students and teachers—contribute directly to cultural continuity in their everyday contexts.

1.3 Statements of the Problems

The technical complexity of the Dalang Dance poses significant challenges for high school educational institutions. Its intricate, labor-intensive movements are complex to teach and learn, especially for students unfamiliar with traditional dance techniques. In addition, the dance requires large props, ample space, and specific equipment, all of which may exceed the infrastructural capabilities of most schools.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the dance also struggles to engage younger audiences. Dalang Dance traditionally relies on the rhythmic sound of rice pounding without melodic musical accompaniment, making the auditory experience appear monotonous and unappealing to students accustomed to modern musical dynamics. These combined technical and aesthetic limitations often discourage teachers and students from actively engaging in its preservation as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

One possible response is to adapt the Dalang Dance into more practical and modern forms, incorporating simplified choreography, enhanced musical integration, or digital components. However, this raises critical questions: Does





such adaptation dilute the cultural authenticity of the dance? Can it still be seen as a genuine representation of Zhuang cultural identity? These concerns highlight the importance of critically examining how the Dalang Dance conveys and preserves cultural meaning in contemporary settings.

The gradual erosion of Zhuang cultural identity further amplifies the urgency to preserve the Dalang Dance. Rapid urbanization has led many young Zhuang individuals to migrate to cities in search of better economic opportunities, often at the expense of their cultural practices and traditions (Wen, 2022). The prioritization of technological advancement and efficiency over ethnic diversity contributes to the erosion of cultural identity among the Zhuang people. Furthermore, despite constitutional protections for minority languages, the Zhuang language is often perceived as having low socioeconomic value, diminishing its use and transmission among younger generations. The disconnect between government policies and local practices further exacerbates the challenges of maintaining Zhuang cultural identity (Grey, 2021).

Many ICHs face the risk of extinction due to a decline in interest among younger generations, a challenge echoed by Sun et al. (2021). The Dalang Dance is no exception. Xia and Chaomeng (2015) note that dance is increasingly perceived as irrelevant to modern lifestyles, even among Zhuang youth. Furthermore, Xin et al. (2023) reveal that many teachers—despite belonging to the Zhuang ethnic group—are unaware of the dance's cultural significance, further weakening its transmission across generations.





This situation highlights the importance of documenting current awareness and participation levels among teachers and students. Understanding their perceptions and identifying the barriers they face in engaging with the dance are critical first steps toward designing effective preservation strategies. By addressing these challenges, stakeholders can be empowered to take a more proactive role in safeguarding Dalang Dance.

Including high school students and teachers as research participants allows for exploring the tensions between tradition and modernisation in the inheritance of the Dalang Dance. Students representing a younger generation may be more open to artistic innovation and modernisation, while teachers—often more deeply rooted in traditional values—may prioritize cultural preservation.



This intergenerational dynamic reveals a fundamental contradiction in ICH transmission: how can a dance deeply tied to the agricultural and spiritual life of the Zhuang people evolve in form while remaining true to its cultural roots? Resolving this tension requires a deliberate balancing act in which preservation and adaptation are approached with equal respect and intentionality.

Ideally, preserving ICHs like Dalang Dance should generate economic benefits, foster social cohesion, and contribute to the conservation of ethnic ecology. However, Jinhua (2019) points out that the Dalang Dance falls short of these outcomes. The dance lacks creativity, insufficient publicity, and minimal government investment, hindering its sustainability and visibility.





It is essential to raise public and institutional awareness of the dance's value—not only as a cultural artifact but as a tool for community identity, moral education, and social development. Active involvement from teachers and students in awareness campaigns, curriculum integration, and performance initiatives can gradually build momentum for broader support within and beyond the school system.

The core challenge remains: How can teachers and students play a meaningful role in safeguarding Dalang Dance, balancing the need to preserve its traditional essence with the demands of modernisation? Answering this question requires technical and pedagogical strategies and a philosophical commitment to treating ICHs like Dalang Dance as living traditions—capable of transformation yet grounded in the spiritual and cultural values that define them.

1.4 Research Objectives

This research was performed with the objectives as follows:

1. To explore how Dalang Dance serves as a medium to portray Zhuang cultural identity.
2. To identify the challenges that hinder participation in Dalang Dance safeguarding efforts among students and teachers.
3. To explore how high school students and teachers can actively participate in the preservation of Dalang Dance, ensuring it remains rooted in the





traditional culture of the Zhuang people while also incorporating modernisation aspects.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the review revealed above, this research asks three research questions as follows:

1. How does Dalang Dance serve as a medium to portray Zhuang cultural identity?
2. What challenges hinder participation in Dalang Dance safeguarding efforts among students and teachers?
3. How can high school students and teachers actively participate in the inheritance of Dalang Dance, ensuring it remains rooted in the traditional culture of the Zhuang people while also being developed to incorporate modernisation aspects?

1.6 Research Significance

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

The study contributes to cultural identity theory by examining how Dalang Dance, as an integral part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's intangible cultural heritage, influences the cultural identity of the school community. Understanding the





awareness and perceptions of Dalang Dance among these individuals provides insights into how cultural heritage influences their sense of belonging, identity, and connection to their community and region. Additionally, by examining the value attributed to Dalang Dance within the cultural identity framework, the study sheds light on how cultural practices contribute to the construction and maintenance of cultural identity among high school students and teachers in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It explores how individuals' awareness and engagement with Dalang Dance reflect their cultural roots, traditions, and heritage, thereby enriching our understanding of the cultural identity formation process.

1.6.2 Practical Significance



By examining how Dalang Dance represents Zhuang cultural identity, the research can offer insights into how cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted through traditional arts. This understanding can guide cultural preservation efforts, ensuring the dance remains a vital medium for expressing Zhuang identity. It can lead to more targeted cultural education programs, helping younger generations understand and appreciate their cultural roots, thereby strengthening community bonds and cultural continuity.

Identifying the challenges that hinder participation in Dalang Dance safeguarding efforts can help educators, policymakers, and cultural organizations develop strategies to overcome these obstacles. It may involve improving resources, training, or adjusting the curriculum to accommodate the teaching of traditional arts.





By addressing these barriers, the research can help increase student and teacher engagement in Dalang Dance, ensuring its practice and transmission to future generations.

Exploring how students and teachers can actively participate in the dance's inheritance while incorporating modernisation aspects can provide practical guidelines for adapting traditional practices to contemporary contexts without losing their cultural significance. It can make Dalang Dance more accessible and relevant to modern audiences, including younger generations, ensuring its sustainability and evolution as a living cultural tradition. It can also foster innovation in how cultural heritage is taught and preserved, making it more adaptable to changing societal values and interests.



Ultimately, the study's findings have practical implications for cultural tourism and economic development in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. By showcasing the cultural richness and diversity of Dalang Dance and other intangible cultural heritage elements, communities can attract tourists and visitors interested in experiencing authentic cultural traditions, thereby stimulating local economies, creating employment opportunities, and promoting sustainable regional development.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.3. The chart begins with the Zhuang Cultural Identity, which produces Dalang Dance, illustrating that Dalang





dance is a concrete and ritualistic representation of the Zhuang ethnic cultural identity. The concept of cultural identity originated from the cultural identity theory proposed by Collier and Thomas (1988). The theory explains the degree to which a person internalizes the values, beliefs, and attitudes of a cultural group they associate with, whether intentionally or not (Yeboah-Banin & Quaye, 2021). Cultural identity is the range of beliefs a person shares with community members. Individuals adopt local, global, or both identities in constructing their identity. Local identity originates from the development of individual culture and society in general (horizontal determination), while global culture originates from global identity becoming absolute (vertical determination) (Chen & Fomina, 2022).

Dalang Dance faces a dilemma between maintaining its original form and adapting to the modern context to remain relevant. This dilemma gives rise to a dialectic between tradition preservation and modernisation, as seen in the concept of Dalang Dance. In addition, Dalang dance also faces aesthetic and technical problems, which pose challenges to modernisation and influence the existing dialectics.

The success of preservation depends on awareness (attitude/cognition) and participation (action/behavior). Awareness includes knowledge and understanding of the cultural meaning of Dalang Dance—the psychological foundation of preservation motivation. Participation reflects real actions such as attending training, performing dance, or engaging in cultural promotion activities.



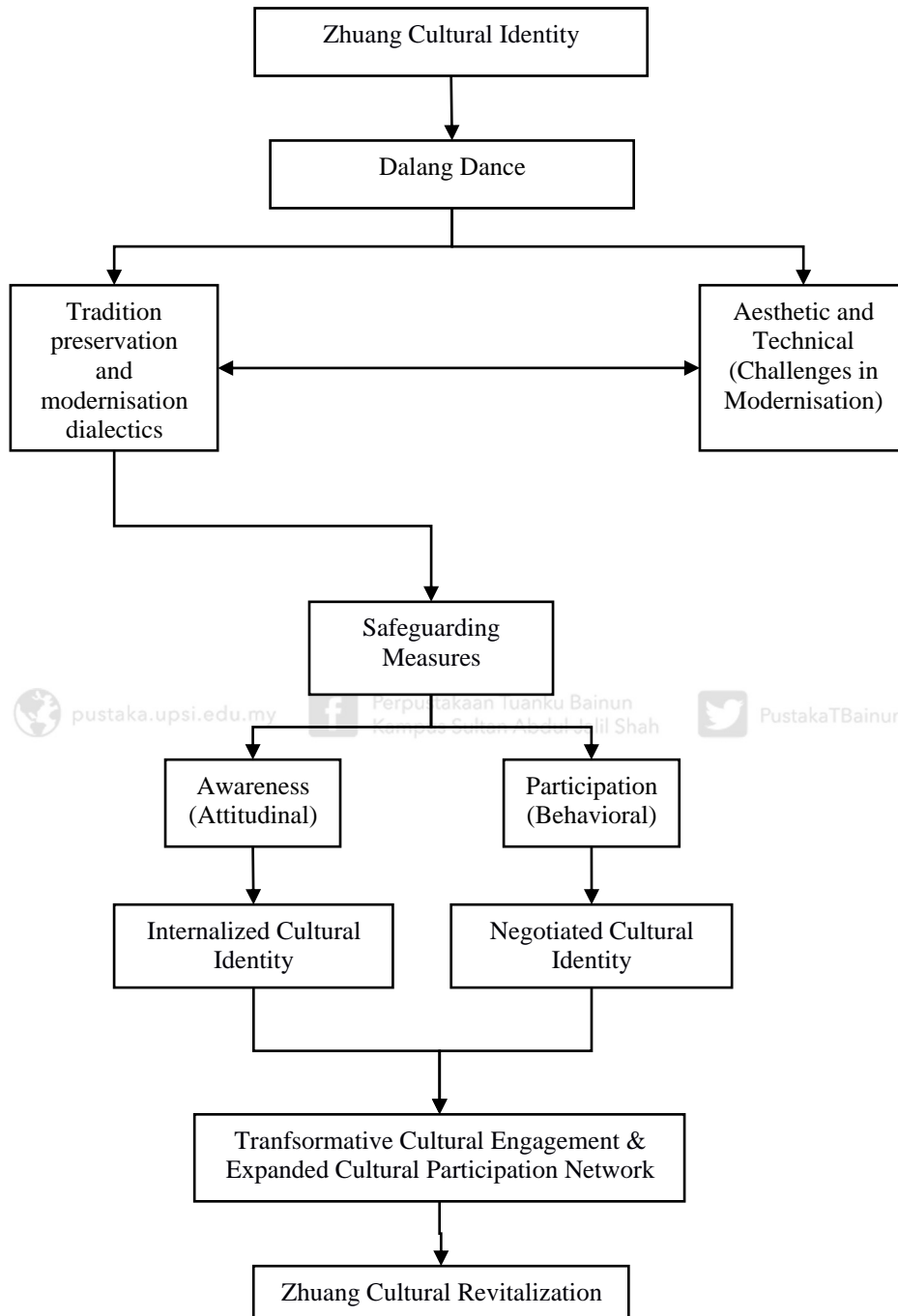


Cultural identity emphasises how individuals and groups internalize values, beliefs, and practices that shape their sense of belonging to an artistic community. It also highlights the dynamic process of negotiation when identity is not fully internalized or when external factors influence it.



Figure 1.3

Conceptual framework





In this thesis, two forms of cultural identity are distinguished. Internalized cultural identity refers to actors who are already aware of and actively engaged in artistic practices—such as teachers, students, dancers, and cultural experts—who demonstrate strong commitment and solidarity in safeguarding Dalang Dance. Negotiated cultural identity, on the other hand, represents those who are less aware or have not yet participated, including general students, non-Zhuang teachers, members of the wider community, and even local government stakeholders who have not been fully active.

The framework illustrates that awareness leads to the development of internalized cultural identity, where shared values and active participation strengthen cultural continuity. Meanwhile, participation also fosters negotiated cultural identity, in which less-involved groups begin to recognize, adapt to, and potentially embrace the tradition. Both pathways contribute to Transformative Cultural Engagement, namely a shift in cultural participation patterns that broadens the preservation network and ultimately supports the revitalization of Zhuang culture.

1.8 Scope

This study has a geographical focus on the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China. The participants included high school students and teachers from various schools within the province, as well as cultural experts on Zhuang culture. The primary aim is to understand how Dalang Dance can be effectively preserved and





promoted within high school educational settings by exploring its role in portraying and reinforcing Zhuang cultural identity, identifying and addressing challenges to its practice, and facilitating active participation among students and teachers while balancing traditional values with modernisation. The study assesses the challenges of involvement in safeguarding measures related to the Dalang Dance. Furthermore, it explores how high school students and teachers can actively participate in the inheritance of Dalang Dance, ensuring it remains rooted in the traditional culture of the Zhuang people while also being developed to incorporate modernisation aspects.

1.9 Study Limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged in this study. Firstly, due to its specific focus, the findings may not be generalizable beyond the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Sampling bias may also influence the results if certain schools or individuals are disproportionately represented in the sample. Time constraints may limit the depth of exploration and data collection, while subjectivity in perceptions could affect the reliability of findings. Additionally, resource limitations, including funding and access to research materials, may constrain the study's scope.

1.10 Concept Definition

1. **The Dalang Dance** is a folk dance from the Zhuang ethnic group in Guangxi, which is listed on the list of intangible cultural heritage of the



Guangxi Autonomous Region and has been passed down for more than 1,300 years, which is used for rewarding gods, returning wishes, sacrifice, and entertainment (Xia, 2015). This dance is performed by many people in pairs with various position patterns, utilizing the main prop, namely the pestle, which is manipulated through pulling, hitting, pounding, and other methods, whether attached to a mortar or not (Wenyu, 2021).

2. **Intangible Cultural Heritage** comprises the customs, depictions, manifestations, insights, and abilities – alongside the tools, items, relics, and cultural venues associated with them – recognized by communities, collectives, and sometimes individuals, and form an integral part of their artistic legacy. This intangible cultural legacy, passed down from generation to generation, is consistently reimagined by communities and collectives in response to their surroundings, engagement with the natural world, and past experiences. It grants them a feeling of belonging and persistence, fostering an appreciation for cultural variety and human ingenuity (UNESCO, 2003).
3. **Safeguarding** is an effort focused on securing the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing a range of actions and measures. These actions involve recognizing, recording, studying, conserving, protecting, advocating for, enriching, passing down, primarily through structured educational methods, and rejuvenating the diverse facets of this heritage (UNESCO, 2003).
4. **Cultural identity** is how individuals identify with a particular cultural group and the values, beliefs, and behaviors associated with that group (Zhang et al., 2023).



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