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TRANSMISSION, RITUAL STRUCTURE, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF THE "KAOBING" NUO DANCE IN JIUXIANVILLAGE



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XIE ZHIYU



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ABSTRACT

"KaoBing" is a traditional ritual folk dance practiced in Jiuxian Village, Mazhang District, Zhanjiang City, with a history tracing back to the Southern Song Dynasty (AD1127-1279). Performed by inheritors wearing masks and carrying props to represent generals and earth gods, the dance serves to ward off evil spirits and invoke blessings. It integrates community customs, religious beliefs, and artistic expression, and carries profound historical and cultural significance. The ritual is held twice a year, presided over jointly by Taoist priests and cultural inheritors, and consists of ceremonial segments, among which the Nuo Dance performance is central. In recent decades, however, the transmission of this tradition has faced severe challenges due to modernization and social transformation. The outmigration of young people has led to a shortage of successors. The performers are aging, the transmission system has become fragmented, and the influence of modern culture is evident. This study has three main objectives: to examine the status of inheritance of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village, to analyze its structure, symbolism, and performance, and to explore its cultural and social relevance in contemporary society, alongside the challenges it faces. Employing ethnographic methods, the research includes participant observation of the whole ritual process, in-depth interviews with six core inheritors and multiple villagers, and multi-dimensional data collection through video, audio, and mobile recording devices, with subsequent analysis using specialized software. Through detailed analysis of the ritual, this study clarifies the dance's artistic features and symbolic connotations, while also revealing its social functions and the challenges to its contemporary survival. It fills a critical gap in dance anthropology and ritual studies, stimulating stage creation. The findings provide valuable insights for academia and hold practical significance for cultural heritage preservation, education, and sustainable revitalization.





TRANSMISI, STRUKTUR RITUAL, DAN CABARAN KONTEMPORARI TARIAN NUO "KAOBING" DI KAMPUNG JIUXIAN

ABSTRAK

"KaoBing" ialah tarian rakyat ritual tradisional yang diamalkan di Kampung Jiuxian, Daerah Mazhang, Bandar Zhanjiang, dengan sejarah yang bermula sejak Dinasti Song Selatan (1127 –1279 Masihi). Tarian ini dipersembahkan oleh para pewaris yang memakai topeng dan membawa prop bagi mewakili jeneral serta dewa bumi, bertujuan untuk menghalau roh jahat dan memohon keberkatan. Ia menggabungkan adat komuniti, kepercayaan agama, dan ekspresi seni yang mendalam, menjadikannya warisan budaya yang amat berharga. Upacara ini diadakan dua kali setahun dan diketuai bersama oleh pendeta Tao serta pewaris budaya, melibatkan sepuluh segmen upacara dengan persembahan Tarian Nuo sebagai terasnya. Namun, dalam era pemodenan dan perubahan sosial yang pesat, pewarisan tradisi ini berdepan cabaran besar. Penghijrahan golongan muda menyebabkan kekurangan pewaris baharu, penari semakin berusia, sistem pewarisan menjadi terpecah, dan pengaruh budaya moden semakin ketara. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk (1) meneliti status pewarisan Tarian Nuo "KaoBing" di Kampung Jiuxian, (2) menganalisis struktur, simbolisme, dan persembahannya, serta (3) meneroka kaitan budaya dan sosialnya dalam masyarakat kontemporari serta cabaran yang dihadapi. Menggunakan kaedah etnografi, penyelidikan ini merangkumi pemerhatian penyertaan terhadap keseluruhan proses ritual, temu bual mendalam dengan enam pewaris utama serta beberapa penduduk kampung, dan pengumpulan data pelbagai dimensi melalui rakaman video, audio, dan peranti mudah alih, diikuti analisis menggunakan perisian khas. Dapatan kajian memperincikan ciri-ciri artistik dan makna simbolik tarian tersebut, serta menonjolkan fungsi sosialnya dan cabaran terhadap kelangsungannya dalam konteks moden. Kajian ini mengisi jurang penting dalam bidang antropologi tarian dan kajian ritual, sambil memberikan sumbangan bermakna kepada usaha pemeliharaan warisan budaya tidak ketara, pendidikan budaya, serta pemulihan lestari komuniti setempat.





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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Nuo 傩", also known as "ghost opera", is one of the oldest Han Chinese rituals, featuring performances that involve deity impersonation and ghost expulsion. These performances are intended to drive away evil, ensure peace, and entertain the gods. In Nuo Dance, performers wear costumes, wield weapon-like props, and do sacred masks that symbolize spiritual possession. There is a folk saying: "Without the mask, you are human; with the mask, you are a god".

The performance begins with rhythmic hand and foot movements to dispel evil spirits, seeking national peace, favorable weather, and the well-being of the people. Nuo Dance forms the dance component of Nuo rituals, which also includes a

series of sacrificial ceremonies—both the rituals and the dance performance share the central purpose of driving away plagues and evil forces.

The origins of Nuo Dance can be traced back to primordial hunting practices, totem worship, and shamanistic beliefs. According to historical records, Nuo Dance was incorporated into the state ritual system during the Zhou Dynasty (AD 1046-256), over 800 years ago. Over time, Nuo rituals underwent significant transformations, persisting in folk traditions and blending with religion, art, and local customs. This evolution gave rise to various forms of Nuo Dance and Nuo opera (傩戏), which became popular across different regions of China. Today, Nuo traditions are primarily found in provinces such as Jiangxi (江西), Hunan (湖南), Hubei (湖北), Shanxi (陕西), Sichuan (四川), Guangxi (广西), and Guangdong (广东).

Guangdong is one of the regions in China where Nuo Dance culture has flourished. The Guangdong Nuo Dance includes traditions from cities such as Yangjiang (阳江), Maoming (茂名), and Zhanjiang (湛江), with Zhanjiang being one of the largest repositories of Nuo Dance culture in the province. Zhanjiang Nuo Dance is a traditional performance that originated as a ritual to worship the Thunder God, dispel disasters, and pray for peace and divine protection. However, much of Zhanjiang's Nuo Dance culture was introduced from Jiangxi and later preserved locally. Despite this shared origin, the form and style of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance differ significantly from those in Jiangxi. Historical records suggest that during the Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1127–1279), some officials from Jiangxi were relocated to govern the Zhanjiang region, bringing with them Nuo Dance traditions. Over



time, these traditions took root and evolved within Zhanjiang's unique cultural landscape.

Zhanjiang Nuo Dance is practiced across various county-level regions, including Leizhou, Wuchuan, Potou, and Mazhang. It encompasses a variety of dance forms such as "ZouQingJiang (走清将)", "WuLiuJiang (舞六将)", "WuErZhen (舞二真)", and "KaoBing (考兵)". While these dance forms differ in style and artistic elements, they share the same historical roots, cultural beliefs, and ritual procedures. Zhanjiang Nuo Dance is distinguished by its rich cultural history, complex sacrificial rituals, unique performance styles, and artistic elements, all of which hold profound cultural significance. In 2008, Zhanjiang Nuo Dance was inscribed in the second batch of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2008). This study explores the historical background, ritual structure, and performance forms of Zhanjiang's "KaoBing" Nuo Dance through in-depth analysis. "KaoBing" literally means "inspecting soldiers" or "testing the troops". In the Zhanjiang Nuo culture, it symbolizes the divine review, where the gods inspect and command the divine soldiers to protect the community. Therefore, the "KaoBing" Nuo dance is more than just a performance; it is a sacred ritual that embodies the villagers' collective faith in divine protection, harmony, and prosperity.

The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance originates from Jiuxian Village in Huguang Town, Mazhang District, Zhanjiang City, a village with centuries of cultural history. Jiuxian Village still preserves traces of ancient architecture and is rich in legends of heroic deeds dating back to the Warring States period. "KaoBing" Nuo





Dance is a performance centered on themes of heroism and divine protection. According to tradition, the dance commemorates heroes and deities believed to repel evil and safeguard the community. Historically, these heroes were individuals who performed wondrous deeds for the people and, over time, became revered figures. As a result, Zhanjiang's "KaoBing" Nuo Dance evolved into a form of prayer, where participants honor these heroes and generals through traditional dance, seeking their protection and blessings for the community's well-being while driving away misfortune (Chen, 2017).

This dance is particularly unique for its rich historical significance and precise ritual elements, making it a focal point of research within the region's Nuo Dance culture. Jiuxian Village's "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is renowned for its solemnity, simplicity, and profound cultural symbolism. Unlike certain forms of Nuo Dance that have evolved into broader entertainment, the "KaoBing" dance retains its essence as a ritual performance, remaining deeply intertwined with the community's spiritual life.

The entire "KaoBing" Nuo Dance event begins with Nuo rituals. A Taoist priest sets up an altar in front of the temple, offering candles, incense, burnt paper money, and food to the deities. The ceremony proceeds with the issuing of orders, the presentation of talismans, and the assembly of the flag team, parade participants, drummers, and Nuo Dance performers. The ritual begins with a military-like drill and worship at the altar, followed by a procession through households to drive away evil spirits and ensure peace and safety.





The first two days focus on activities involving the entire community, including processions through the village streets. These processions are not merely festive events but are considered essential rituals designed to cleanse the village of malevolent forces and prepare for the main sacrificial activities. On the third day, the focus shifts to more solemn ceremonies held in the village temple. These include opening the altar, offering sacrifices to the gods, and performing symbolic rituals such as scattering grains, performing Nuo Dance, and walking across a thorn bed. Each action carries profound meaning, symbolizing the community's collective prayers for protection, prosperity, and the elimination of illness and misfortune.

The Nuo Dance event is held twice annually, on the 15th day of the first lunar month and the 25th day of the third lunar month. A three-day ritual, the "KaoBing"

Nuo Dance follows a complex ritual structure, integrating sacred performance, spatial order, and symbolism. Each stage of the ritual is imbued with profound symbolic meaning. The entire process embodies the cyclical transformation from chaos to purification and renewal and represents the community's aspirations for prosperity and harmony. On these days, villagers gather in the square to watch the performances, creating a lively and festive atmosphere. Over the past decade, Zhanjiang Nuo Dance, as an intangible cultural heritage, has participated in central cultural performances, showcasing its unique charm to audiences across the country. However, with the passage of time and the rapid economic development of society, the advent of the digital era and China's transition into a dynamic new media age have posed significant challenges to the preservation and continuation of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance. The clash between traditional culture and modern cultural trends has further intensified these difficulties.





In recent years, the transmission of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance has faced considerable obstacles, severely impacting its survival and development (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2020). According to recorded data, Zhanjiang Nuo Dance began participating in various performances in 2007. From 2008 to 2018, it took part in no fewer than four performances each year. However, between 2019 and 2023, the number of external performances declined significantly, with some years seeing only one or even none (see Appendix C). This decline was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the cancellation of all group activities and a substantial reduction in the number of practitioners.

To this day, the "Nuo" dance is often regarded as a superstitious belief, a persistent remnant of feudal thinking held by the older generation, who seek to connect with the spiritual realm through rituals to exorcise ghosts and fulfill their spiritual needs. However, there are compelling reasons to conduct an in-depth investigation and study of Zhanjiang's "KaoBing" Nuo Dance: As an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance carries a profound historical heritage. It should be continuously passed down and promoted as a key vehicle for China's intangible cultural heritage. It is not only a core cultural symbol of Zhanjiang but also plays a crucial role in shaping community cultural identity and fostering group cohesion. With its breathtaking artistic expression, unique performance format, and intricate ritual structure, it is a highly valuable subject for research into cultural creativity.

Currently, there is a lack of systematic documentation of the movements and ritual structure of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance ritual, and a discrepancy exists between



online videos and in-person Nuo Dance rituals. This study fills a critical gap in the study of dance anthropology and ritual structure. The researcher discusses the aesthetic shifts in the costumes and movements of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in contemporary society, promoting interdisciplinary cultural exchange and inspiring dancers to innovate their work. With the rapid development of the digital age, the development of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance culture has been hampered by the impact of modern culture. Researchers analyze the challenges it faces in the contemporary era. This research provides practical guidance on protecting and preserving cultural heritage and offers insights into revitalizing community culture and sustainably developing intangible cultural heritage.

In this study, the researcher conducted an in-depth examination of the cultural and historical background of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance, analyzing its historical evolution and exploring the current state of its transmission. This investigation reflects broader trends and transformations in traditional Chinese culture. Additionally, the study includes a comprehensive review of existing literature on Nuo Dance, analyzing scholarly discussions on its development from various disciplinary perspectives. Through this literature analysis, the researcher aims to offer a fresh perspective on the status of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance culture and identify gaps in existing research.

The research employs ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jiuxian Village, the home of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. The investigation included participant observation of rituals and performances, visits to symbolic artifacts related to "KaoBing", and informal conversations with residents. Interviews with inheritor Peng

Jinchun further enriched the data collection. By analyzing the gathered data, this study aims to present reliable and authentic conclusions.

1.2 Background Research

Background research includes the historical background and modern background of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance.

1.2.1 Historical Background of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance

Guangdong was called "BaiYue (百粤)" in ancient times. It was a barren land in the south, prone to many natural disasters. In addition, science was backward at that time, and some strange phenomena could not be explained by science.

Therefore, many people in Guangdong believed in ghosts and gods. Explain. It is recorded in "Hanshu. Suburban Sacrifice Chronicles": "Cantonese people believe in ghosts", and this Nuo Dance provides a living space (Lu, 2014).

In the 14th year of Jiajing's reign in the Ming Dynasty (AD1535), Volume 18, "Customs", of "Guangdong General Chronicles" records: "In October, Nuo people dressed in red and holding gongs and drums enter homes to drive away evil" (Zeng, 2015). It is recorded in "Leizhou Fuwang" in Zhanjiang, Guangdong:

From the 12th day of the first lunar month, which is called turning on the lanterns, until the night of the 15th day of the first lunar month, there are colorful lanterns every night in the city. There are teams of three to four hundred people, or teams of five or six hundred people, who set off firecrackers, burn fireworks, dress up as ghosts, play gongs and drums, and attract visitors to the temple, which is called Nuo. (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum, 2008).

All this shows that during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD 368-1912), many cities in Guangdong already had Nuo Dance activities, and they were very lively. In contemporary Zhanjiang, different towns and villages have their own unique Nuo Dance names and performance styles, such as "ZuoQingjiang (走清将)", "KaoBing (考兵)", "Wu Liujiang (舞六将)", and "Wu Erzhen (舞二真)".

Regardless of its name, Nuo Dance has historically been a folk tradition among the people of Zhanjiang for worshiping thunder, warding off disasters, and praying for blessings. Nuo Dance is mainly practiced in Huguang Town, Taiping

District, and Mazhang District, as well as in Nanxing, Songzhu, Yangjia, Baisha, Fucheng, Shentang, Huangpo, Bobu, and other towns in Wuchuan City.

This study focuses on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village, Zhanjiang, exploring the evolution of folk Nuo Dance within this tradition. Historically, this ritual was performed to ward off evil spirits and illness and to pray for a safe and bountiful harvest. Jiuxian Village is in Huguang Town, Mazhang District, Zhanjiang City. It is a community where both residents and immigrants



coexist. These immigrants not only settled in new areas but also brought their own customs, religious practices, cuisine, and other cultural traditions, enriching the village's cultural landscape.

According to historical records, Jiuxian Village served as the administrative center of Tiequa County and Suixi County for more than 380 years, from the Sui Dynasty to the Song Dynasty. In the third year of Hongwu in the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644), the Qichuan Inspection Department was relocated to Jiuxian County, where it remained until AD 1732, when it was moved to Donghai Island (Fan & Zhou, 2020, p. 35). During the Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1127-1279), Jiuxian Village was an important political and economic hub in western Guangdong. It was also during this period that the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance was introduced from Longxi via Jingfang Village (now Jishui County, Jiangxi Province) by an ancestor of the Peng family.

The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village has a long and rich history. The village is home to Taishan temple (泰山庙) (Figure 1.1), which enshrines deities such as the Dongyue Holy Emperor (东岳天齐人圣), Yufeng Taoist Kang Huangzhenjun (御风康皇真君), and Hui Alliance Leader Yufeng Banshuai Xianju Houwang (御风班帅仙居侯王). Another significant site is Jingzhu Temple (净珠庙), which is dedicated to figures such as Jingzhu Yinduo Hunter Liu Erlangjun (刘二郎君), also known as Liu Qing and Liu Hong; Jingzhu Chengtu Dedao General Li (成土德道李将军); Jingzhu Dedao Zhengtai Peng Zhenren (彭真人); and Jingzhu Tianfei Narcissus (天妃水仙). The gods and legendary figures



honored in the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance are ancient heroes who embody the region's cultural and spiritual heritage. Their veneration reflects the deep historical roots and unique evolution of the Nuo Dance tradition in Jiuxian Village.

Figure 1.1

Taishan Temple



The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village is a deeply rooted cultural tradition, primarily performed during the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month and again on the 25th day of the third lunar month. Centered around Taishan temple, the village's main temple, this ritual serves to ward off evil spirits, dispel disasters, and bring blessings to the community. The event is led by the village's Nuo Dance inheritor, with active participation from the entire village and organizational support from the village committee secretary and director. Having been passed down since the Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1127- 1279), this sacred ritual remains an integral part of Jiuxian Village's cultural heritage, with the role



of Nuo Dance performers being inherited across generations. The tradition of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is rooted in a family inheritance system that emphasizes purity and continuity. Traditionally, ritual knowledge was passed down within the Peng family, the guardians of Jiuxian Village. The tradition of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is primarily passed down through two channels: family inheritance and master-apprentice transmission.

Historical records indicate that the Pengs in Jiuxian Village are descendants of Peng YanNian, a Dali Temple official during the Northern Song Dynasty. His son later held an official position in Gaozhou, Guangdong, leading many of his descendants to settle there and in Zhanjiang (Fan & Zhou, 2020, p. 35). Over its 700-year history (AD 1325), the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance has endured numerous challenges. During the Cultural Revolution, it was banned, and villagers were forced to hide Nuo Dance masks and costumes in fields to prevent them from being destroyed. These artifacts were later unearthed and preserved by future generations. Performances resumed after the Cultural Revolution, ensuring the continuation of this cultural heritage.

The lineage of national-level inheritors includes the 25th-generation inheritor Peng Yingfang, followed by his son, the 26th-generation inheritor Peng Qiufang. The 27th-generation inheritor, Peng Aiwen, passed the tradition down to his nephew, Peng Jinchun, the 28th and current inheritor. Through the dedication of these successive generations, the essence of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance has been preserved and presented to the public.



In the 1980s, the Chinese art community launched efforts to excavate, collect, and document nationally representative works of traditional folk art, including dance, culminating in the publication of the collection of Chinese National Folk Dances (Zeng, 2015, p. 23). The art community in Guangdong responded to this initiative, and with government support, similar work was carried out across the province.

In 1996, the collection of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dances: Guangdong Volume was published, featuring 41 traditional folk dances, including nine from Zhanjiang, four of which were Nuo Dances. Before this publication, many dance researchers in China, including well-known scholars in Guangdong, believed that Nuo Dance did not exist in the province. However, during excavations conducted by Pangdeyi (former director of the Regional Cultural Center), it was discovered that Zhanjiang has a rich dance legacy (Zeng, 2015, p. 12). As a result, Zhanjiang's Nuo Dance was introduced to the world and was officially included in the second batch of Chinese intangible cultural heritage in 2008.

Since then, Zhanjiang Nuo Dance has been invited to participate in numerous large-scale cultural festivals, attracting the attention of traditional culture enthusiasts.



1.2.2 The Modern Background of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance

In recent decades, there has been a renewed focus on preserving and revitalizing traditional cultural practices, including the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. This resurgence is driven by a growing awareness of the value of intangible cultural heritage and an increasing desire to stay connected to historical roots. Literary texts, cultural organizations, and academic institutions have played a crucial role in documenting, promoting, and sustaining the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. Their efforts include organizing performances, festivals, and educational programs to highlight the dance while also supporting local practitioners and communities to ensure its continued practice and transmission. In the era of rapid technological advancement and artificial intelligence, the preservation and continuity of traditional culture depend on its capacity to adapt to contemporary audiences and to resonate with them. This process embodies the modern interpretation of "transmission". The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance of Jiuxian Village, performed twice annually, serves not only as a medium for intergenerational inheritance but also as a vital channel for promoting cultural dissemination at both national and global levels through its participation in various cultural activities.

According to the Chinese State Council's 2005 Notice on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage, the State Council emphasized the need to safeguard the nation's cultural heritage and promote its traditional culture. As part of these efforts, the government designated the second Saturday in June as "Cultural Heritage Day," beginning in 2006, as a clear demonstration of its commitment to preserving intangible cultural heritage (General Office of the State Council, 2005).





Since 2015, the Chinese Ministry of Culture has organized the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival" seven times, showcasing the country's rich array of intangible cultural heritage projects. The festival has become a grand celebration of these traditions, with participation from regions across China. Zhanjiang Nuo Dance has been a prominent feature at this festival for five consecutive years, displaying its artistic brilliance. Its participation has garnered admiration from scholars, cultural enthusiasts, and the media, further highlighting its cultural significance and artistic excellence on a national stage. At the same time, Zhanjiang Nuo Dance culture has also been highly valued by the local government, with frequent invitations to participate in cultural exchange performances across various regions. Additionally, music and dance departments at local universities have shown strong interest in this art form. This intangible cultural heritage has sparked creative inspiration among professional dancers on stage. The original dance piece "Nuo Feng 雉风" was co-directed by Pang Dexuan, art director of Zhanjiang Cultural Center, and Zhu Peike and Wu Baoping from the School of Music at Zhanjiang Lingnan Normal University. The work won a silver award at the 3rd Guangdong Lingnan Dance Competition held in December 2012 (Lingnan Normal University, 2015).

"Nuo Feng" encapsulates the essence of Zhanjiang Nuo Dance culture and has been recognized as a classic piece in the repertoire. However, despite its success, relatively few subsequent dance works have focused on Zhanjiang Nuo Dance, highlighting a gap in the continued creative interpretation of this cultural heritage.





The year 2020 brought an unexpected and harsh reality with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strict government control measures forced Zhanjiang Nuo Dance to an abrupt halt, and for two years, this ancient art form slipped further into obscurity as the pandemic's impact deepened. However, by 2022, as the crisis eased and daily life resumed, China's media landscape underwent explosive growth. Short videos quickly became a dominant form of public entertainment, particularly among younger audiences who embraced the fast-paced, engaging content that flooded online platforms. This shift toward digital entertainment has further marginalized traditional cultural practices, including Nuo Dance, pushing them even further out of public attention.

The inheritance and development of Nuo Dance culture now face immense challenges under the influence of modern multiculturalism and the fast-paced nature of digital media (Bu, Chen, & Ma, et al., 2015). While retaining its traditional essence, the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance has adapted to contemporary settings, being performed not only during traditional festivals such as the Lantern Festival but also at cultural events, tourism festivals, and heritage exhibitions. This integration helps keep Nuo Dance relevant, attracting younger generations and tourists alike. However, striking a balance between preserving its authentic customs and evolving to meet modern expectations remains a significant challenge.

Additionally, modernization and urbanization have profoundly impacted the practice of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. Shifts in lifestyle, the pervasive influence of modern media, and the rise of new forms of entertainment have contributed to its diminishing role in specific communities. Traditional spaces for these dances, such



as village squares, temple courtyards, and communal gathering areas, are being increasingly replaced by modern infrastructure. This shift makes it challenging to preserve the original settings for these rituals.

This transformation necessitates finding new venues and performance settings, which can sometimes alter the dance's original context and cultural experience. As Nuo Dance is increasingly showcased at festivals, tourist events, and urban stages, it risks losing some of the spiritual and communal essence that was deeply rooted in its traditional settings. This shift highlights the challenge of preserving Nuo Dance's authenticity and significance while adapting it to contemporary spaces and audiences amid modernization.

Historically, the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance has been passed down through generations via family inheritance and the master-apprentice relationship, ensuring the continuity of its traditions. In Jiuxian Village, the Peng family, as the traditional guardians of Nuo Dance, has established strict rules of transmission. According to these traditions, knowledge of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance can only be inherited by male family members, while women are excluded from the process (Liu, 2014).

Moreover, the inheritor must be a direct male descendant of the Peng lineage. However, this role is not automatically granted; candidates must undergo a rigorous selection process, which limits the number of qualified inheritors.



The inheritance and continuation of Zhanjiang's Nuo Dance culture, especially the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance of Jiuxian Village, largely depend on the perseverance of its inheritors. Research shows that most participants in the ritual's preparation and performance are middle-aged men aged 40-50, while some elders in their seventies coordinate specific tasks. A small number of participants in their twenties and thirties are also involved. Because the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance movements are highly dynamic and physically demanding, the performers must possess great stamina. Each of the five lead dancers has specific duties and must perform designated movements, making the three-day ritual an actual test of physical endurance. This situation also reflects a broader social phenomenon, the aging of Nuo Dance inheritors within the community.



In the face of demographic changes, the transmission of ethnic culture requires the active participation of younger generations. However, the current methods of transmission remain largely undocumented. Although it is known that the tradition is restricted to male family members, the details of the selection process, training system, and teaching methods remain unclear. Under the backdrop of rapid social transformation, the absence of formal documentation has created uncertainty about the long-term preservation of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the inheritance methods of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village, particularly the selection, training, and educational mechanisms of its inheritors. At present, there are no systematic records of its transmission, nor are there comprehensive studies of its succession and teaching methods. Therefore, one of the key objectives of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding and analysis of the current state of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance inheritance.





Furthermore, although scholars have conducted systematic research on the ritual practices, performance forms, and mask artistry of Zhanjiang's Nuo Dance culture (Chen, 2017; Zeng, 2015; Zhu, 2014), there remains a lack of detailed documentation on the whole three-day process of the "KaoBing" ritual. For instance, no literature records the specific routes of the first- and second-day processions, the villages visited, or the detailed content of the sacrificial rites. Likewise, the third day's ceremonial performances lack in-depth analyses of their artistic components, symbolic meanings, character design, dance movements, and formations. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to protecting cultural heritage and preserving systematic knowledge. The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is a highly complex ritual imbued with profound spiritual meaning. Each step is meticulously designed, embodying the villagers' deep connection with the divine.

The performance integrates multiple artistic elements, including the Nuo troupe, genealogies, masks, costumes, props, music, and dance movements, all of which carry rich symbolic significance. These elements are deeply rooted in the community's customs and beliefs, underscoring Nuo Dance's indispensable role in rural life. This study aims to analyze the structure, symbolism, and performance forms of the "KaoBing" Nuo ritual dance, addressing the academic gap concerning its ritual structure. Through systematic documentation and analysis, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance culture.

Existing research on Nuo Dance mainly focuses on the challenges it faces and offers suggestions for its preservation and development (Fan, Zhou, & Zhou, 2020; Zhu, 2014). However, despite the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance's rich artistic and cultural value, its social role and impact within the community have received little scholarly





attention. With modernization, this tradition has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Due to shifting values, many young people today perceive traditions such as "KaoBing" as outdated or superstitious. They often regard these rituals as symbolic acts providing spiritual comfort to villagers rather than practical responses to real social needs. Economic pressures and the tide of urbanization have further distanced the younger generation from traditional culture, as most prioritize financial stability over participation in ritual activities. Consequently, the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance inevitably faces greater challenges in its inheritance process.

With China's rapid economic development, traditional culture must adapt to the growth of the tourism industry. At present, the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is only performed during the Lantern Festival and annual village celebrations, attracting mainly residents and a few intangible cultural heritage enthusiasts. Integrating it with tourism development will undoubtedly be a significant challenge. Moreover, in the age of artificial intelligence, traditional culture may appear old-fashioned and less appealing. Many young people are drawn to modern, trendy culture, while new technologies make contemporary life more engaging and convenient. If intangible cultural heritages like the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance fail to adapt to the AI era, they risk gradual disappearance. The final objective of this research is to explore the cultural and social significance of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in contemporary society, as well as the challenges it faces in its transmission and preservation.

1.4 Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows.

- 1.To identify the current status of inheritance of the "KaoBing" in Jiuxian village.
- 2.To analyze the structure, symbolism, and performance of "KaoBing" Nuo Dance rituals.
- 3.To examine the cultural and social relevance of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in contemporary society and the challenges it faces.

1.5 Research Question

The research question are as follows.

1. What is the current status of inheritance of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village?
2. What are the structure, symbolism, and performance elements of the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance rituals?
3. Why is the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance culturally and socially relevant in contemporary society, and why does it face certain challenges?



1.6 Study Limitations

Fieldwork on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village offers a unique opportunity to explore a rich cultural tradition. However, it also entails a range of limitations that the researcher must navigate carefully. The researcher grew up in Zhanjiang. As an insider, the researcher encountered certain limitations during their fieldwork. These limitations can affect the depth of the research and the validity of the findings. Below are some key challenges that fieldwork in this context may face:

There are several types of Nuo Dance in Zhanjiang: "ZouQingJiang (走清将)", "KaoBing (考兵)", "WuLiuJiang (舞六将)", and "WuErZhen (舞二真)".



However, the researcher focused only on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village and did not compare it with other Nuo Dances. Conduct a detailed comparative study of types, such as the historical background, mythological stories, development process, ritual process, performance characteristics, artistic and cultural value, and significance of each Nuo Dance in Zhanjiang.

One of the most significant limitations in fieldwork on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is gaining access to the inner workings of the rituals. Many aspects of the Nuo Dance are deeply embedded in local customs, religious beliefs, and family traditions, all closely guarded by the community. In many cases, the rituals and performances may be considered sacred, and only local insiders, particularly the elders or ritual leaders, may fully understand or participate in them. Outsiders, including researchers,





may face challenges gaining the community's trust and obtaining permission to observe or participate in these ceremonies. Without full access to these rituals, researchers may miss key insights into the dance's spiritual and symbolic significance, leading to an incomplete understanding of its role in the community.

Jiuxian Village is part of a region with a distinct dialect and local customs. Even if researchers are fluent in Mandarin or other major Chinese languages, local dialects and cultural nuances may still pose challenges. This can limit the researcher's ability to fully understand conversations, oral histories, and informal interactions, which are key to ethnographic research. Important details regarding the rituals, the oral transmission of the dance's history, and the specific cultural meanings behind various dance movements may be lost or misunderstood due to language barriers.

Additionally, misinterpretation of local customs could affect the accuracy of the findings and interpretations.

The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance rituals occur only twice a year, during the first and third lunar months. This means the researcher can conduct participant observation only during these two time periods, and there are certain time restrictions. The researcher will carry out work plans during these two time periods, including observing the Nuo Dance "KaoBing" ritual activities and the entire Nuo Dance performance, interviewing relevant personnel, and conducting questionnaire surveys. The researcher's plan needs to be very tight to collect the desired data. Fieldwork aimed at capturing the entirety of these rituals must be timed precisely to coincide with these annual events.





Additionally, these rituals span multiple days, requiring the researcher to be present throughout the ceremonies to observe the full range of performances and activities. This seasonal restriction means that the researcher has limited opportunities to conduct their fieldwork. If logistical or timing issues prevent attendance at these rituals, it could severely limit the amount of data that can be collected. The researcher may need to plan field visits over several years to gather comprehensive data.

Although the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance follows a general ritual structure, the performances can vary from year to year, depending on the participants, local conditions, and community needs. The dance may change in form, the number of participants, or the ritual's focus depending on external factors such as community events, local leadership, or economic conditions. These variations can pose challenges for the researcher seeking to draw general conclusions from a single set of observations. The researcher observing the dance at a single point in time may record a version of the performance that differs significantly from its traditional form or from its form in other years. This variability can make it difficult to discern which aspects of the dance are core to the ritual and which are contingent on local circumstances.

Conducting fieldwork in Jiuxian Village entails a host of ethical considerations. Since the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is closely tied to local religious beliefs and community identity, any perceived intrusion or misrepresentation by researchers could damage the relationship between the researcher and the community. Additionally, issues around informed consent, particularly when





documenting sacred or culturally sensitive rituals, are paramount. Careful attention must be paid to obtaining permission from community leaders and participants before observing, recording, or publishing findings about the dance. Failure to navigate ethical considerations properly could lead to tensions with the community and hinder future research opportunities. Additionally, ethical concerns may limit the researcher's ability to fully document and share their findings, particularly if parts of the ritual are deemed too sensitive for public dissemination.

Academic and written resources are scarce on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. Much of the knowledge about dance exists in oral traditions and has been passed down through generations without written documentation. The researcher must rely heavily on interviews, participant observation, and other ethnographic methods to gather information. The limited availability of scholarly resources makes it challenging to situate current findings within a broader academic framework. The reliance on oral histories and the lack of written documentation can make it challenging for researchers to verify their findings or compare them with other studies. This lack of resources may also lead to incomplete historical understandings or gaps in the research narrative.

The researcher's presence within the community can alter how locals perform or approach the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance. Participants might adjust their behavior or the performance itself due to the awareness of being observed or recorded. This phenomenon, known as the "observer effect", can skew the authenticity of the data collected during fieldwork. Alterations in the dance's





performance or the way participants interact with researchers can compromise the authenticity of the findings. The researcher needs to be mindful of how their presence influences the community and strives to minimize their impact to capture the most accurate representation of the ritual.

Over time, society and culture have been developing in a globalized, diversified direction. Under this trend, people's ways of producing and entertaining themselves have undergone significant changes. These changes have impacted people's value concepts and, in turn, have had a tremendous impact on the inheritance and development of the Nuo Dance "KaoBing" (Fan, Zhou & Zhou, 2020). Younger generations may be less interested in participating in or learning the dance, and the community may prioritize modern forms of entertainment or spiritual expression. Additionally, economic factors, such as work-related migration, can affect the availability of participants for the dance. These shifts may also influence the dance's continuity and its performance in modern times. The researcher may encounter difficulties in studying the dance in its traditional form if modernization continues to erode the community's commitment to the ritual. Additionally, younger participants may not have the same depth of knowledge about the ritual's historical or spiritual significance, potentially impacting the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Finally, one of the most subtle but pervasive challenges in fieldwork is the researcher's own biases. In qualitative research, data interpretation is heavily influenced by the researcher's perspectives and experiences. When studying a tradition as deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs as the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance, there is a





risk that the researcher may impose their own interpretations on the rituals or fail to fully grasp their significance from the perspective of local participants. Personal biases and subjectivity can color the research findings, leading to misinterpretations or oversimplifications of the complex cultural meanings behind the dance. The researcher must remain aware of their own biases and actively work to mitigate them by seeking multiple perspectives and engaging with local experts.

Fieldwork on the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance in Jiuxian Village is fraught with challenges, from gaining access to the inner workings of sacred rituals to navigating the cultural, temporal, and ethical complexities of the research. Despite these limitations, however, fieldwork remains a vital tool for understanding the intricate relationships between cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, and community life. By acknowledging these challenges and carefully planning their research methods, the researcher can minimize the limitations and contribute valuable insights to the study of intangible cultural heritage.

1.7 Importance of Research

Zhanjiang Nuo Dance, with its rich history and cultural heritage, stands as a vital aspect of the traditional art forms rooted in southern China. The preservation and study of this unique tradition, particularly the "KaoBing" variant, serve to safeguard it from the threat of extinction amid modernization and changing societal values. By carefully documenting the evolution, practices, and rituals associated with the





"KaoBing" Nuo Dance, we not only ensure its continuity but also strengthen the cultural fabric of the communities where it thrives.

The "KaoBing" Nuo Dance is not just a performance; it is an integral part of the cultural identity of the people of Zhanjiang, particularly in its old counties and villages, such as Jiuxian Village. For the local community, this dance goes beyond entertainment, representing a blend of religious belief, spiritual practice, and social cohesion. Through in-depth research, we can gain insights into the values, beliefs, and traditions that shape these local communities. Understanding the significance of "KaoBing" is essential for preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the Zhanjiang region.



One of the significant benefits of studying "KaoBing" is its ability to strengthen and celebrate the area's cultural identity. It provides a sense of pride and belonging among community members, particularly those who have inherited these traditions from their ancestors. The ritual and performance serve to reinforce communal bonds, reminding people of their shared history and heritage. In many ways, the preservation of Nuo Dance serves as a vehicle for fostering intergenerational connections, as older generations pass down knowledge and practices to younger members of the community.

However, the cultural practice of "KaoBing" faces challenges in the modern world. The pressures of urbanization, modernization, and the global spread of mainstream entertainment threaten the relevance of traditional rituals like Nuo Dance.





Younger generations may see these traditions as outdated or irrelevant in the context of their rapidly changing lives. Understanding the challenges facing the "KaoBing" is essential for its revitalization. By conducting comprehensive research on the dance's historical context, ritual significance, and contemporary role, we can identify the areas where preservation efforts are most needed.

Simultaneously, studying "KaoBing" opens opportunities for innovation within the traditional dance framework. While it is essential to retain the core elements that define Nuo Dance, introducing new approaches to its performance, promotion, and transmission can ensure its relevance to future generations. This can involve incorporating modern technology to record and disseminate performances or developing educational programs that engage younger audiences. By bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, "KaoBing" can continue to thrive in contemporary society.

The rituals associated with "KaoBing" play a crucial role in shaping the community's social fabric. These rituals are deeply symbolic, representing both the spiritual and social well-being of the people. In Jiuxian Village, where "KaoBing" is regularly performed, it is believed to drive away evil spirits and disasters, ensuring prosperity and harmony. The symbolic act of invoking the gods and heroes through dance is not only a religious practice but also a way to address communal concerns about health, safety, and stability.

Researching "KaoBing" allows the researcher to explore the cultural value this dance brings to the local community. Its rituals, steeped in centuries-old beliefs,





serve as a unifying force that strengthens the village's collective identity. The role of the Nuo Dance in addressing societal issues, such as disease, drought, and other natural disasters, also reflects its deep integration into the community's daily life. By examining the existential significance of these rituals, the researcher can uncover layers of meaning that contribute to the community's cultural resilience.

Performers of "KaoBing" often play a vital role in local festivals, ceremonies, and social gatherings, helping preserve and promote the dance form. These performers, many of whom are community elders, are regarded as the custodians of this cultural treasure. They bear the responsibility of passing down the knowledge and rituals of Nuo Dance to the next generation.

By conducting research into "KaoBing", the researcher gain valuable insights into the practices and processes of cultural transmission within these communities. Engaging with practitioners, community members, and stakeholders is critical to understanding the challenges they face in maintaining the tradition. Interviews and fieldwork allow the researcher to collaborate with these cultural stewards, learning about their experiences, the difficulties of preservation, and their hopes for the future of the tradition.

Furthermore, engaging with other scholars and interdisciplinary perspectives can deepen the analysis of "KaoBing". The researcher from fields such as anthropology, history, religious studies, and performance arts bring different perspectives that enrich our understanding of the historical background and development of Nuo Dance. By pooling knowledge from various disciplines, the



researcher can provide a more comprehensive account of the cultural and artistic significance of "KaoBing".

Beyond its cultural and social value, Nuo Dance culture, particularly "KaoBing", holds great potential as a tourist attraction. The unique visual spectacle of masked performers, the deep-rooted symbolism of the rituals, and the historical narratives embedded in the dance can appeal to visitors seeking an authentic experience of Chinese traditional culture. If promoted thoughtfully, "KaoBing" could attract tourists interested in exploring Zhanjiang's local traditions, boosting the local economy through cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism not only brings economic benefits but also promotes cultural exchange between communities. Visitors from other regions or countries can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese folk traditions, while locals can experience renewed pride in their cultural heritage. However, careful management is necessary to avoid the commercialization of the tradition, which would dilute its cultural integrity. Sustainable tourism strategies that prioritize the preservation of KaoBing's authenticity are crucial for ensuring that this cultural treasure is passed down responsibly.

Researching and promoting "KaoBing" also holds immense educational value. By incorporating Nuo Dance into local educational curricula, seminars, and cultural projects, students can gain a deeper appreciation of traditional Chinese culture. The study of "KaoBing" can enrich students' understanding of the role of ritual



and performance in society, as well as the values of communal harmony, heroism, and spiritual protection.

Moreover, promoting "KaoBing" in educational settings can inspire younger generations to engage actively with their cultural heritage. This can help counteract declining interest in traditional arts among youth, fostering a sense of connection to their ancestors and cultural roots. Educational programs can also encourage cross-cultural exchange, as students from other regions or countries may be introduced to Nuo Dance, leading to a greater appreciation of China's diverse cultural landscape.

The Zhanjiang Nuo Dance, and specifically "KaoBing", represents a profound cultural legacy that bridges the past and present, connecting the people of Jiuxian Village to their spiritual and cultural roots, by studying and preserving this art form to ensure its survival for future generations while also uncovering new possibilities for revitalization and innovation. "KaoBing" offers rich cultural, social, and educational value, making it a vital aspect of both local and global heritage.

Through continued research and collaboration with community members, scholars, and cultural practitioners, "KaoBing" can transcend traditional performance boundaries and emerge as a powerful symbol of cultural resilience in contemporary society. Its potential for tourism, education, and cross-cultural exchange highlights the multifaceted importance of safeguarding this unique art form. Ultimately, by understanding and appreciating the "KaoBing" Nuo Dance, we





contribute to the broader effort to preserve China's intangible cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

1.8 Summary

This chapter conducts a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the cultural background of "KaoBing," examines its development history and the structural steps of traditional performance forms, and explores the true meaning of its ritual activities. Analyze the development of "KaoBing" in modern society. "KaoBing" has undergone significant transformations, adjustments, and protective measures throughout its history. These efforts help maintain the cultural significance of the dance and demonstrate its inherent artistic, spiritual, and social values, deeply rooted in Zhanjiang society.

However, Nuo Dance is produced, inherited, and developed within a specific environment, and changes in that environment have a significant impact on it (Zhu, 2014, p.170). According to research, "KaoBing" is currently facing an inheritance dilemma (Bu et al., 2016). In addition, there is relatively little literature on the performance form, nature of movements, and symbolic meaning of rituals in "KaoBing". Through fieldwork in the Zhanjiang area, the researcher found that the local community will not delay the ceremonies, regardless of whether it is windy or rainy, because of the great significance of "KaoBing" to local people. Based on these findings, the purpose of this study is firmly established. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the historical background,





development process, and ritual structure of the "KaoBing"; explore the performance form of the "KaoBing"; and think about its significance in the social context. Therefore, corresponding research questions are derived from these research purposes; various research methods are used to address the problems; and, finally, conclusions are drawn. During the research process, the researcher also gained a comprehensive understanding of the current development status of Nuo Dance "KaoBing". Specific challenges and limitations may arise during my conduct of fieldwork. However, strategies and methods to overcome these challenges will be carefully considered and implemented. With a sincere heart, building trust with the local community, establishing partnerships with local practitioners and experts, and actively engaging with the Zhanjiang Nuo Dance community will be the key to gaining deeper insights and conducting comprehensive research. This research is of great significance. The study of the "KaoBing" culture can help cultivate local community cultural pride, strengthen community connections and cohesion, and exert a particular influence on contemporary society. This research can promote a broader understanding and appreciation of the rich connotations of Chinese traditional culture among the people. It is hoped that the community's belief and love for the "KaoBing" will continue, and that the virtues of traditional Chinese culture will be promoted.

