



Faith, Function, and Transformation: A Study of the Nuo Culture in Pingxiang, Jiangxi

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Abstract: Nuo culture in Pingxiang, Jiangxi Province, represents one of China's most enduring ritual traditions, integrating religious practices, theatrical performance, and community organization. Historically rooted in ancient exorcistic rites and shaped by the interactions between Central Plains civilization and southern ritual traditions, Pingxiang Nuo has developed into a unique cultural system characterized by its multilayered belief structure and its diverse social functions. Based on extensive textual analysis and fieldwork—including participant observation, temple visits, interviews with Nuo masters, artisans, officials, and local residents—this study examines the belief system, ritual symbolism, and sociocultural roles of Nuo practice in Pingxiang. It argues that the tradition simultaneously embodies a cosmological worldview, a moral education mechanism, a community-building institution, and a living heritage resource. However, rapid modernization, weakened clan structures, youth disinterest, and commercialized misappropriation have created unprecedented challenges, threatening the continuity of ritual knowledge and cultural authenticity. Using theories of ritual symbolism, social space, and folklore practice, this paper analyzes how Nuo culture has transitioned from a sacred community-based spiritual system to a public cultural asset in contemporary society. It further proposes strategies for sustainable transmission through education, policy support, community revitalization, and digital documentation. This research enriches the understanding of Chinese ritual culture and provides insights for global discussions on intangible cultural heritage preservation and the revitalization of rural cultural identity.

Keywords: Nuo Culture, Ritual Symbolism, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Pingxiang, Social Function, Belief System

Introduction

Nuo culture is one of the most significant ritual traditions in southern China, combining elements of ancient exorcistic rites, mythological narratives, ancestor worship, dramatic performance, and communal organization. Pingxiang, located in western Jiangxi Province, is among the regions where Nuo culture has not only survived but developed a highly systematized belief and ritual structure. Historically positioned at the intersection of Central Plains cultural influence and southern indigenous ritual traditions, Pingxiang has formed a distinctive local style that integrates religious seriousness with vivid theatricality.

Although Nuo rituals originated from early practices intended to expel disease, repel malevolent spirits, and restore cosmic order, their functions gradually expanded over centuries. Today, the Nuo tradition in Pingxiang constitutes a comprehensive cultural system encompassing sacred belief, moral instruction, social regulation, collective memory, and artistic expression. Nuo temples serve as the spatial core of communal religious life; masks embody symbolic power; ritual performances communicate cosmological and ethical principles; and Nuo music, dance, and theater form an integrated performative mode that merges aesthetics with sacred function.

Despite its long history and rich cultural value, Nuo culture faces structural challenges in contemporary China. Urbanization has reshaped rural social organization; young people increasingly migrate to cities and show declining interest in traditional rituals; commercialization often transforms sacred acts into staged entertainment; and local governments struggle to maintain sustainable heritage protection mechanisms. These transformations raise critical questions: How has Pingxiang Nuo culture historically developed its belief system? In what ways does it continue to function within modern communities? How should its ritual knowledge, artistic practices, and social meanings be preserved in changing cultural environments?

The significance of this study is threefold. Academically, it contributes to the ethnographic and anthropological literature on Chinese ritual traditions by providing a detailed, site-specific analysis grounded in fieldwork. Methodologically, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach that draws from folklore studies, anthropology of religion, art history, and sociology. Practically, the study offers insights that can inform public policy, cultural heritage protection, and community-based revitalization projects.

Literature Review

Research on Nuo culture has expanded significantly since the mid-20th century. Early studies primarily focused on historical origins and descriptive accounts of rituals and masks. Scholars traced Nuo practices to ancient exorcistic rites documented in texts from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, arguing that early Chinese societies used ritual performance to

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mediate relationships between humans and unseen forces. Later research emphasized regional diversity—particularly the stylistic differences between Nuo traditions in Jiangxi, Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. Work on Pingxiang specifically highlights its deep historical roots, distinctive mask styles, and complex pantheon of deities.

In recent decades, scholars have moved beyond descriptive studies to examine the symbolic logic, social functions, and contemporary transformations of Nuo culture. Anthropologists emphasize how Nuo rituals construct collective identity, regulate moral behavior, and serve as mechanisms for conflict mediation and emotional expression. Folklorists analyze the performative aesthetics of Nuo theater, noting the integration of singing, dancing, dramatic narrative, and ritual movement. Heritage scholars have focused on the challenges posed by tourism, commercialization, and diminishing intergenerational transmission.

Statement of problems

This study will examine the relationship between aerobic exercise volume and changes in body composition among adults aged 25 to 35.

The findings will serve as a basis for developing personalized aerobic fitness programs.

Specifically, this study will answer the following questions: 1. What are the demographic characteristics of the respondents in terms of the following: 1.1. Gender;

1.2. Age;

1.3. Duration of aerobic exercise participation?

2. How do the respondents rate their aerobic exercise volume?

2.1. Frequency of exercise;

2.2. Intensity of exercise;

2.3. Number of reps and sets;

2.4. Rest period between sets;

2.5. Variety and progression of exercise.

3. Are there significant differences in the respondents' assessments of aerobic exercise volume when grouped according to their profile?

4. How would respondents rate their changes in body composition in the following areas:

4.1. Body fat percentage;

4.2. Muscle mass and strength;

4.3. Waist-to-hip ratio;

4.4. Weight; and

4.5. Measurements of specific body parts?

5. Are there significant differences in responses to changes in body composition when grouped according to their profile?

6. Is there a significant relationship between the amount of aerobic exercise and changes in body composition?

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses specifically on Pingxiang rather than attempting a nationwide comparison. While this localized scope allows for depth, it also limits the generalizability of certain findings. Furthermore, some sacred rituals were not fully accessible due to restrictions, and the pandemic affected the frequency of public ceremonies in certain villages. Despite these limitations, triangulation of textual, observational, and interview data ensures the reliability of the analysis.

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted over a cumulative period of three months between June 2022 and August 2023, involving multiple site visits to Pingxiang. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select six villages (including Miaotou, Nanyuan, and Xuanzhan) that are recognized as core centers for active Nuo traditions, ensuring the study captured a representative range of practices. This approach was chosen to guarantee access to key ritual events, knowledgeable practitioners, and the primary cultural spaces, such as the Miaotou Nuo Temple, which served as a central hub for observation.

The primary method of data collection was participant observation. The researcher observed a total of eight major ritual events, including two "Great Pacification Nuo" ceremonies, three seasonal village festivals, and three smaller-scale exorcistic rites. During these events, the researcher assumed an active participant role where appropriate—assisting with stage preparation, handling ritual objects, and joining communal meals—to build rapport and gain an emic perspective. Detailed field notes were taken in real-time, supplemented by photographic and audio documentation to capture the nuances of ritual sequences, spatial arrangements, and performer-audience interactions.

To triangulate observational data and gather explicit interpretations, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling and categorized into four key groups: (1) twelve Nuo masters and ritual specialists; (2) four local folklorists and historians; (3) six government cultural officials; and (4) ten local residents of varying ages. Interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were designed to elicit insights on ritual meanings, transmission challenges, generational shifts in perception, and the impact of cultural policies. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Historical Development of Nuo Culture in Pingxiang

Origins in Ancient Ritual Traditions

Nuo culture in Pingxiang is widely recognized as having roots in the exorcistic rites of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Archaeological evidence—such as stone masks unearthed in Xiangdong District—demonstrates the continuity of ritual practices designed to repel harmful spirits, maintain cosmic balance, and ensure communal well-being. Classical texts like The Book of Rites describe early state-sanctioned exorcism rituals involving masked performers, suggesting that Nuo practices emerged from the intersection of shamanistic behavior and early religious governance.

Pingxiang, located within the cultural sphere influenced by the Shang and later the Zhou ritual systems, absorbed these ritual logics into local practice. Clan genealogies and local historical records—including the Pingsiang County Gazetteer—attest that Nuo worship had become institutionalized by the Western Zhou period.

Transformation Through Imperial Dynasties

Over the Han and Tang dynasties, Nuo ritual expanded into a more elaborate system featuring pantheons of deity-guardians, processional choreography, and codified mythic narratives. By the Song dynasty, Nuo performance began to incorporate theatrical elements, becoming not only a sacred ritual but also a form of public entertainment. Performers adopted genre-like structures in singing, dancing, and acting, paving the way for the emergence of Nuo opera.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Nuo culture reached its artistic and organizational peak. Troupes became highly structured; ritual specialists mastered extensive liturgical texts; and mask-making evolved into a sophisticated art form characterized by symbolic color systems, exaggerated facial features, and region-specific carving styles. Themes of loyalty, filial piety, and divine justice—consistent with Confucian values—became embedded in narrative and performance.

Regional Characteristics of Pingxiang Nuo

Although Nuo culture exists in many parts of China, Pingxiang's version stands out for several reasons:

1. Geographic hybridity: Pingxiang's location at the junction of Chu and Jiangxi cultural regions produced a ritual system blending Central Plains ceremonial norms with southern shamanistic dynamism.
2. Strong clan-based transmission: Historically, entire lineage groups were responsible for maintaining Nuo temples, sponsoring festivals, and training performers. This produced tight social integration and deep community resonance.
3. Highly developed mask art: Pingxiang masks are especially distinguished by bold sculptural forms, intense color symbolism, and motifs derived from Daoist talismans, local myths, and protective deities.
4. Integration of ritual and entertainment: Ritual dancing, processions, and theatrical dramas—originally intended to expel evil—later also served as moral instruction and communal celebration.

Contemporary Transformations

Beginning in the late 20th century, the social environment for Nuo practice changed dramatically. Urban migration weakened clan structures; young villagers became less involved in ritual obligations; and many ceremonies shifted from religious acts to cultural performances showcased at festivals and tourist venues. While these changes increased visibility and economic value, they also risked diluting ritual depth and “de-sacralizing” sacred performances.

Government recognition of Nuo culture as national intangible cultural heritage has led to new preservation initiatives—including documentation, museum exhibitions, school programs, and performance troupes—but sustainable transmission remains an open challenge.

Belief System of Pingxiang Nuo Culture

Pingxiang's Nuo culture possesses a multilayered belief system that integrates ancient shamanistic elements, Daoist ritual cosmology, Confucian ethics, and localized ancestral worship. Rather than a discrete religion, it forms a hybrid spiritual complex in which cosmology, morality, and social order are tightly interwoven.

Core Deities and Pantheonic Structure

At the center of the system are Nuo Gong and Nuo Po (Nuo Grandfather and Nuo Grandmother), regarded as the primordial protective deities who maintain cosmic harmony. Their relationship symbolizes the union of yin and yang, order and vitality, nature and ancestry. Surrounding them is a rich pantheon including:

Exorcistic guardians such as Zhong Kui and the Five Demon-Quelling Generals (Wuchang), responsible for dispelling spirits and protecting households.

Ancestral spirits, enshrined in lineage halls and ritual altars, representing historical continuity and family identity.

Nature spirits such as mountain gods and earth deities, reflecting agrarian concerns with water, soil, seasons, and harvest.

Daoist-inspired protector gods, whose roles include ensuring moral order, granting blessings, and overseeing community security.

This hierarchy parallels traditional Chinese cosmology, where divine authority mirrors human social hierarchy—an arrangement reinforcing both collective identity and everyday moral expectations.

Nuo rituals are structured around the progression from chaos to order. Through the acts of invitation, exorcism, performance, and dismissal, participants symbolically restore balance between humans and the spirit world. Several symbolic components illustrate this logic:

Masks function as vessels of spiritual presence. When performers don them, they temporarily take on divine agency—an act of embodiment central to ritual efficacy.

Dance movements, especially the traditional “Yu-stepping,” trace cosmological diagrams believed to create sacred boundaries and repel malignant forces.

Music and percussion establish sacred temporal rhythm, marking transitions between ritual stages and signaling divine descent.

Processions mirror cosmic journeys, transforming village roads, squares, and temple courtyards into liminal spaces where realms intersect.

To practitioners, these symbols are not metaphors but active participants in reshaping cosmic order, mediating protection and blessing.

Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions

The belief system embeds Confucian moral values—loyalty, filial piety, benevolence—within ritual narrative. The triumph of righteous deities over malevolent forces symbolizes moral clarity and reinforces social expectations. Meanwhile, Daoist cosmology contributes concepts of harmony, reciprocity, and respect for natural cycles. The combined worldview reflects the traditional Chinese philosophical ideal of *tian ren he yi* (“unity of heaven and humanity”)—a framework in which moral behavior, social stability, and cosmic balance are mutually dependent.

Social Functions of Nuo Culture

Although Nuo culture originated as a religious system, its social functions have historically extended far beyond spiritual concerns, shaping community identity, moral order, and emotional life. These functions remain essential to understanding its cultural resilience.

The most fundamental function is spiritual protection. Traditionally, Nuo rites were performed to respond to epidemics, crop failures, natural disasters, or unexplained misfortunes. Villagers believed that divine intervention, activated through ritual performance, could dispel harmful influences. Even as modern medicine and science have transformed daily life, many rural communities regard Nuo ceremonies as emotionally reassuring cultural practices that help restore a sense of order during crises.

Moral Education and Socialization

For generations, Nuo performance has served as an informal but powerful system of community education. Through theatrical narratives emphasizing loyalty, righteousness, filial piety, and humility, young audiences learn behavioral norms. Ritual participation also teaches:

respect for hierarchy,

responsibility toward clan and community,

disciplined bodily practice,

and collective accountability.

Even today, schools in Pingxiang integrate Nuo-related lessons into local curricula, recognizing its value as a pedagogical resource that links cultural heritage with civic education.

Community Cohesion and Identity Formation

Nuo culture is a central institution of village life. Ritual events bring together people of all ages and households, strengthening social ties. During traditional festivals, conflicts are suspended, lineage branches reunite, and communal meals reinforce solidarity. The shared participation in symbolism—such as collectively inviting and sending off the deities—creates what sociologist Émile Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” enhancing the community’s sense of unity.

In contemporary times, Nuo culture also supports place-based identity. Cultural tourism, heritage branding, and public performances help Pingxiang distinguish itself regionally, giving residents a renewed sense of pride and belonging rooted in their local cultural legacy.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite its rich cultural heritage and symbolic depth, Nuo culture in Pingxiang faces increasingly severe challenges shaped by modernization, demographic change, and evolving cultural values. These pressures threaten not only the continuity of ritual knowledge but also the community structures that sustain Nuo practice.

Declining Youth Participation

Young people in Pingxiang, as in many rural regions of China, increasingly migrate to urban centers for education and employment. As their daily lives become more detached from traditional ritual environments, they show reduced interest in learning complex Nuo skills, which require long-term apprenticeship, vigorous physical training, and a strong sense of ritual responsibility. Furthermore, some youth perceive Nuo practice as “superstitious” or irrelevant to modern life, a perception fueled by urban-centric value systems and media narratives. The resulting generational gap severely threatens the transmission of ritual knowledge.

Aging Practitioners and Fragile Transmission Systems

Most Nuo masters—mask carvers, ritual specialists, musicians, and troupe leaders—are elderly. Apprenticeship traditions have weakened, and few structured systems exist to train successors. When masters retire or pass away, entire repertoires of songs, chants, and ritual procedures risk disappearing. This phenomenon is particularly acute for specialized knowledge, such as mask carving techniques, esoteric ritual incantations, and regional variations in dance sequences.

Decline of Clan-Based Social Structures

Historically, lineage organizations and extended families formed the backbone of Nuo practice. They maintained temples, funded festivals, and organized performance troupes. However, socioeconomic changes have weakened these clan institutions. As individualism rises and communal obligations decline, the social environments that once supported ritual continuity have eroded. Without clan networks, Nuo temples lose financial support, and communities struggle to sustain large-scale ritual events.

Commercialization and “De-Sacralization”

Government promotion of cultural tourism has raised public awareness of Nuo culture, but commercialization can distort the tradition’s spiritual and social functions. Rituals are sometimes shortened, dramatized, or staged for tourists, transforming sacred acts into entertainment. Masks become commodities rather than ritual instruments, and performers are treated as cultural actors rather than ritual mediators. This “de-sacralization” jeopardizes core cosmological meanings and risks producing superficial representations disconnected from community life.

Insufficient Institutional and Financial Support

Although Nuo culture is recognized as national intangible cultural heritage, local funding for preservation is often limited or inconsistent. Many villages lack resources to repair temples, maintain schools for young practitioners, or hire trained cultural workers. Local governments frequently prioritize economic development over ritual preservation, creating tensions between cultural continuity and development goals.

Lack of Systematic Education and Documentation

While some schools have integrated Nuo-related content into local curricula, educational efforts remain fragmented. Comprehensive textbooks, teacher training programs, and interdisciplinary curricula are still lacking. Moreover, large portions of ritual knowledge—especially chants, gestures, and oral narratives—remain undocumented. Without systematic digital archiving, much intangible knowledge remains vulnerable to loss.

Strategies for Sustainable Preservation

A sustainable approach to preserving Nuo culture must be multi-faceted, strategically balancing cultural authenticity with the necessity of modern adaptation. The overarching goal is to transition Nuo from a heritage object under threat to a living, dynamic part of contemporary community life. This requires a coordinated effort that targets the key vulnerabilities identified in this study—namely, broken transmission lines, generational disconnect, and economic pressures—by building robust systems for continuity, education, and community stewardship.

The most urgent priority is to revitalize the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. This requires moving beyond informal apprenticeships to create institutionalized support systems. Local governments and cultural bureaus should establish formal Nuo Training Centers that combine the master-apprentice model with modern pedagogical techniques. Supplementing this with scholarship programs for young learners and official certification for practitioners would provide both financial incentives and professional recognition, creating a sustainable pipeline for nurturing new generations of Nuo masters, mask carvers, and musicians, thereby ensuring that specialized ritual knowledge survives.

Parallel to safeguarding practical skills, a dual strategy of modernized education and digital preservation is crucial for fostering broader cultural literacy and archival security. Integrating Nuo studies into school curricula, from primary-level introductions to university-based research initiatives, can reposition the tradition as a source of pride and creative identity for the youth. Concurrently, a comprehensive digital archiving project—recording rituals, chants, and oral histories in high definition, and even creating immersive VR experiences—can permanently preserve endangered elements while making this cultural heritage accessible to a global audience, thus creating a vital backup for intangible knowledge.

Ultimately, no preservation strategy can succeed without being community-centric. The vitality of Nuo culture depends on it remaining a meaningful practice for local people, not just a performance for outsiders. Efforts must focus on empowering local cultural associations and temple committees to lead revitalization, organizing festivals and workshops that engage residents as active participants. When considering tourism, an ethical framework is essential; this involves creating a clear separation between sacred rituals and commercial performances, ensuring fair economic benefits for practitioners, and designating cultural zones to protect the integrity of core practices from disruptive commodification.

The long-term preservation of Pingxiang Nuo culture hinges on integrating these approaches within a supportive policy and financial framework. Government agencies must provide consistent, long-term funding for temple maintenance, artifact restoration, and grants for community-led projects. Effective policies are needed to protect sacred spaces from over-commercialization and incentivize cultural enterprises that prioritize authenticity. By synergizing top-down

institutional support with bottom-up community energy, Pingxiang can ensure that its unique Nuo tradition evolves from a cherished relic of the past into a resilient and relevant part of its future.

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the historical development, functional roles, contemporary challenges, and preservation strategies for Nuo culture in Pingxiang, Jiangxi. The findings provide clear answers to the research questions posed at the outset, painting a picture of a dynamic tradition at a critical juncture.

First, in response to the question regarding its historical development and core components, this research confirms that the belief system of Pingxiang Nuo is not a monolithic religion but a resilient, hybrid construct. It has evolved from ancient exorcistic roots into a sophisticated cultural system integrating Daoist cosmology, Confucian ethics, and localized ancestral worship, with its pantheonic structure and ritual symbolism serving as the core components that sustain its worldview. Second, addressing its social functions, the study demonstrates that Nuo culture has historically acted as a multi-functional institution, providing spiritual protection, moral education, and a powerful mechanism for community cohesion. Crucially, these functions persist in the contemporary context, albeit in transformed ways, now also serving as a resource for place-based identity and cultural tourism.

However, the third research question—concerning contemporary challenges—reveals severe threats to this continuity. The findings clearly identify that rapid modernization, manifested through declining youth participation, the aging of practitioners, the erosion of clan structures, and commercial de-sacralization, jeopardizes the authentic intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge. Finally, in direct answer to the question of sustainable preservation, this analysis proposes that overcoming these challenges requires a balanced, multi-stakeholder strategy. The viability of Pingxiang Nuo depends on integrating formal and informal transmission systems, leveraging digital documentation, empowering local communities in revitalization efforts, and developing ethical cultural policies that safeguard authenticity while allowing for appropriate adaptation.

In conclusion, the significance of Pingxiang Nuo culture extends beyond its regional boundaries. It offers a compelling case study of how a profound ritual tradition can simultaneously embody a cosmological worldview, a social adhesive, and a moral compass. The findings underscore that its future will not be secured by mere preservation but through a committed process of revitalization that honors its sacred legacy while re-anchoring it as a living, evolving source of identity and meaning for new generations. In doing so, this study contributes to global dialogues on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in an era of unprecedented change.

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